NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong

Clear and compassionate teachings on insight meditation and the Brahma Viharas

Guy Armstrong

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Contents

GAIA HOUSE RETREAT

Self Acceptance	59 min	15
From Ego to Expansiveness	47 min	32
Fear	59 min	46

VIPASSANA RETREAT

The Nature Of Awareness	56 min	63

NOVEMBER 2003 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

Judging Ourselves	57 min	79

NOVEMBER 2004 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

Fear and Fearlessness	1h03	97

THREE-MONTH RETREAT - PART 2

Kamma & The End of Kamma	1h02	115
Right Attitude	31 min	134
First Noble Truth: Dukkha	55 min	143
Working With Difficult Emotions	1h00	158
Second Noble Truth: Craving	1h00	176
Third Noble Truth & Nibbāna	1h00	193
Loving-Kindness and Gratitude	1h01	210
An Attitude of Mindfulness	54 min	228
Working With Difficult Emotions	1h01	244
The Five Aggregates Are Not Self	1h00	262
From Ignorance Come Impulses	1h01	279

Kamma and the End of Kamma	59 min	297

NOVEMBER 2005 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

Working With Difficult Emotions	57 min	315
Mudita, Joy and Gratitude	55 min	332

MIND LIFE RETREAT

Closing Talk - Mind and Life Retreat	17 min	349

VIPASSANA INTENSIVE

Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpānasati)	52 min	355

IMS AUDIO FILES

Working With Difficult Emotions	57 min	371
Money as Dhamma Practice	16 min	388

INSIGHT MEDITATION 1-MONTH RETREAT

An Attitude of Mindfulness	52 min	394
Mettā, Tenderness And Connection	59 min	410
Consciousness, Awareness And Nibbāna	1h03	428

FROM AWARENESS TO WISDOM: EXPLORING THE MIND

The Attitude of Awareness	53 min	446
Awareness Is Like The Unconditioned	1h01	462

LIVING FREEDOM: INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT

The Pure And Luminous Mind	1h00	479

DZOGCHEN RETREAT

A Brief History of Buddhism in India - Part 1	56 min	496
A Brief History of Buddhism in India - Part 2	1h12	513

METTA

Mettā: Near and Far Enemies	55 min	534

INSIGHT MEDITATION FEBRUARY

The Seven Factors of Awakening - Part 2	1h01	551
From Ignorance Come Impulses	1h01	570

TWO-MONTH RETREAT

Impermanence	1h01	587

THREE-MONTH RETREAT - PART 1

Starting A Long Retreat	54 min	605
The Sources of Happiness	58 min	621
Working with Difficult Emotions	1h01	637
The Seven Factors of Awakening (Bojjhaṅga)	1h03	655
Unentangled Knowing	1h00	673
Keys To A Long Retreat	58 min	690
Working with Difficult Emotions	1h03	707
Five Aggregates: Self and Emptiness	1h02	726
Unentangled Knowing	59 min	745
Mettā: Tenderness and Connection	1h01	763
Kamma and the End of Kamma	1h04	779
Day One Instructions For the Three Month Retreat	40 min	798
Morning Instructions - Intentions	2 min	802
Morning Instructions - Intention or Cetanā in Pali	44 min	804
Working With Fear	1h01	808
The Five Aggregates Are Not Self	1h01	826
Seven Factors of Enlightenment	1h00	844
Impulses Come From Ignorance	56 min	863
Joy and Happiness	59 min	880

Mindfulness of Breathing	58 min	897
Morning Instructions	43 min	913
Morning Instructions: Thought Game	47 min	916
Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention	47 min	921
First and Second Noble Truths	1h00	927
The Five Aggregates Are Not Self	1h02	944
The Third Noble Truth and Nibbāna	1h05	962
Transcendent Dependent Origination	1h02	980
Mindfulness of Breathing	58 min	998
Morning Instructions	1h01	1014
Morning Instructions - Thoughts	1h00	1021
Working with Difficult Emotions	1h00	1032
Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention	1h00	1051
Seven Factors of Awakening	1h03	1061
The Five Aggregates Are Not-Self	1h03	1080
Forgiveness Meditation	49 min	1098
Kamma and the End of Kamma	1h00	1106
Morning Instructions	55 min	1124
Mindfulness of Breathing: Ānāpānasati Practice and Its Central Role in Buddhist Meditation	57 min	1134
Morning Instructions: Mindfulness of Sensations in the Body, with Special Attention to Bodily Pain	1h00	1151
Concentration	1h03	1163
Choiceless Attention	1h01	1182
Seven Factors of Enlightenment (Satta Bojjhaṅga)	57 min	1193
Working With Difficult Emotions	1h03	1210
Q&A on Noticing Non-Self and Selfing	14 min	1229
Kamma and the End of Kamma	1h01	1234
Q&A on Kamma	21 min	1253

EMPTINESS: A MEDITATION AND STUDY RETREAT

Introduction to Emptiness Retreat	49 min	1260
Formation of Self-View	1h11	1273
Morning Instructions on Dhammavicaya (Investigation)	39 min	1293
The Emptiness of Phenomena	57 min	1298
The Empty Nature of Awareness	1h08	1314
Emptiness and Karma	1h00	1331

FEBRUARY MONTHLONG INSIGHT RETREAT

Where Does Happiness Come From?	55 min	1347
The Seven Factors of Awakening	1h02	1363
Mettā: Tenderness & Connection	1h01	1380
Nature of Awareness	56 min	1398
Unentangled Knowing	58 min	1412

METTA RETREAT

Loving Kindness; Reflecting on our Goodness	36 min	1429
Mettā: Near and Far Enemies	59 min	1434
Loving Kindness, Movement of the Heart	46 min	1452
Brahmavihāra: Equanimity	58 min	1459
Mettā and Connection	59 min	1471

JULY INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT

Working with Difficult Emotions	1h03	1489
Unentangled Knowing	1h00	1509

SUTTA STUDY CLASS SERIES WITH GUY ARMSTRONG & RICHARD SHANKMAN

Week 1, Part 2: Introduction to the Suttas	1h01	1527
Week 1, Part 1: Introduction to the Suttas	43 min	1544

INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT, FEBRUARY MONTH LONG

Patterns of Becoming 1: Introduction	1h02	1557
Patterns of Becoming 2: The Five Aggregates	1h00	1575
Patterns of Becoming 3: Unentangled Knowing	1h03	1592
Patterns of Becoming 4: Kamma and Rebirth	1h04	1611
Patterns of Becoming 5: The End of Karma	57 min	1631

INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT FOR SCIENTISTS AND EDUCATORS

The Three Characteristics	1h01	1649
Morning Instructions - Choiceless Attention	52 min	1667

AWARENESS AND WISDOM: AN INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT

Working with Difficult Emotions	1h01	1675
Factors of Awakening	59 min	1693

EMPTINESS: A MEDITATION AND STUDY RETREAT

Formation of Self-View	1h12	1710
The Emptiness of Phenomena	57 min	1731
Morning Instructions: Big Mind	42 min	1747
Emptiness and Karma	59 min	1749

FEBRUARY INSIGHT MEDITATION - 1 MONTH RETREAT

Brahmavihāras: Mettā	58 min	1766
Self and Proliferation	1h01	1777
Morning Instructions	15 min	1795
Morning Instructions, Day 7 - Mindfulness of Thoughts	29 min	1799
Morning Instructions Day 12	45 min	1804
Afternoon Brahmavihāra Practice - Compassion	46 min	1809
Unentangled Knowing	1h02	1817
Brahmavihāra Practice	45 min	1835

THE NATURE OF AWARENESS: INSIGHT MEDITATION RETREAT FOR EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

The Attitude In Awareness	55 min	1842
Morning Instructions	54 min	1858

THREE MONTH - PART 1

The Five Hindrances - Part 1	1h02	1864
The Five Aggregates Are Not Self	57 min	1882
Seven Factors of Awakening	1h02	1900
Unentangled Knowing	1h00	1917
Joy and Happiness	1h02	1935

FEBRUARY MONTH LONG RETREAT - 2014

The First Noble Truth	59 min	1953
Morning Instructions Day 5	17 min	1970
Morning Instructions: Day 9 - Mindfulness of Thinking	17 min	1974
Morning Instructions: Day 14	13 min	1979
Morning Instruction - Expansive Awareness	43 min	1983
Connection to Life	58 min	1985

FEBRUARY MONTH-LONG

Delighting in the Wholesome	58 min	2002
Day 3 Morning Instructional Sit	43 min	2019
Day 6 Brahmavihāra Instructions: Mettā for Self, Benefactor and Dear Friend	55 min	2023
Day 7 Morning Instructional Sit	44 min	2034
The Power of Loving-kindness	58 min	2038
Day 11: Morning Instructional Sit - Choiceless Attention	43 min	2056
Day 14 Brahmavihāra Instructions: Mettā - All Beings-Pervading Mettā in All Directions	46 min	2061
The Five Aggregates Are Not Self	58 min	2068

Day 16: Brahmavihāra Instructions: Compassion: Suffering person, benefactor and dear friend	47 min	2086
Unentangled Knowing	1h01	2093
Big Mind Meditation	42 min	2112
Day 20: Brahmavihāra Practice: Muditā for the neutral person and the difficult person	44 min	2115
Muditā for the Neutral Person and the Difficult Person	31 min	2123

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS: A RETREAT FOR EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

Four Noble Truths: An Overview	56 min	2127
Third Noble Truth & Nibbāna	57 min	2144

THREE-MONTH PART 1

Entering the retreat: refuges and precepts	56 min	2161
Morning Instructions—Mindfulness of Moods and Emotions	46 min	2178
Working with Difficult Emotions	1h02	2184
Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention	46 min	2203
The Five Aggregates Are Not Self	1h02	2209
The Power of Mettā	1h01	2228
The Five Aggregates Are Empty	1h01	2246
Transcendent Paticcasamuppāda	1h01	2264

FEBRUARY MONTH-LONG RETREAT

First and Second Noble Truths (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	1h00	2282
Kamma and the End of Kamma (Retreat at Spirit Rock)	59 min	2299
Brahmavihāra Instructions	46 min	2316

MONDAY AND WEDNESDAY TALKS

Suññatā: A Practical Introduction for Meditators	1h03	2321

IMCB REGULAR TALKS

Emptiness is Everything	1h06	2339

JUNE 2019 AT IMS - FOREST REFUGE

Chanting And Morning Instructions: Mindfulness of Breathing	45 min	2359
The Power of Loving-kindness	1h01	2363
Morning Instructions: On Mettā Practice	40 min	2381
Morning Instructions: The Practice of Compassion	47 min	2387
Morning Instructions: Practice of Muditā	43 min	2394
An Appropriate Response: The Brahmaviharas as a Roadmap of the Heart	1h01	2400
Morning Instructions: Pervading Mettā for All Beings	45 min	2417
Morning Instructions: Objects, Space, and Awareness	42 min	2423
The Nature of Awareness	1h02	2429
Nature of Awareness, Part 2	1h01	2446
Morning Instructions: Natural State	41 min	2462
The Aggregates Are Empty	1h02	2464
Morning Instructions: Abiding in Emptiness	44 min	2481
Morning Instructions	42 min	2486
Emptiness and Kamma	1h06	2489
Morning Instructions	48 min	2508
Taking the Practice Home	1h00	2515

JUNE 2022

Mindfulness of Breathing	55 min	2530
Mindfulness of Breathing Combined with a Body Scan	49 min	2546
Mindfulness of Breathing: 3 Sensations in Inbreath & Outbreath	56 min	2553
Awareness: Turn, Recognize, Rest	52 min	2560

UNIFICATION OF MIND: CONCENTRATION RETREAT

Tranquility and Insight	50 min	2571

THE NATURE OF AWARENESS: A RETREAT FOR EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

Morning Instructions	59 min	2586
The Nature of Awareness, Part 1	1h01	2596

SEPTEMBER 2024

Instructions: Energetic Impact of Breathing	50 min	2613

STANDALONE TALKS

Facing Our Fears: Living With A Courageous Heart	1h01	2620
Refuge in Calmness	48 min	2635
Our Karma Is Our Dharma: Family Course 1997	47 min	2647
Seeing Deeply Into Experience	47 min	2659
Dharma in the Workplace	2h03	2669
Trust & Courage	59 min	2707
Karma, Forgiveness & Equanimity	55 min	2720
The Spiritual Warrior	45 min	2734
The Courage To Live Your Aspirations	56 min	2746
The Five Hindrances	1h00	2761
Death and the Three Characteristics	48 min	2780
Accepting Life's Characteristics	49 min	2794
Accepting Ourselves	1h01	2809
Relating Wisely With Anger	55 min	2827
Relating Wisely With Fear	53 min	2844
Healing and Freedom	49 min	2860
Mettā & Concentration	1h00	2876
Faith (Saddhā)	50 min	2895
The Five Hindrances	46 min	2910
Dharma in the Workplace	2h03	2926
Uncovering Ego: Renunciation and the Hindrances	53 min	2965
The Five Aggregates - Part I	58 min	2981

The Five Aggregates - Part 2	1h00	2997
Renunciation	52 min	3016
Purification of the Heart	59 min	3032
The Three Characteristics	57 min	3049
Karma	54 min	3066
The Practice of Loving Kindness	1h00	3083
Motivation In Practice	59 min	3100
Faith and Awareness	56 min	3117
The Five Aggregates (Pañcakhandha)	59 min	3133
Renunciation	51 min	3150
Mettā: Effort and Fruits	1h01	3166
Paṭiccasamuppāda: Dependent Origination	1h02	3185
Transcendent Dependent Origination	59 min	3204
Purification of the Heart	50 min	3222
The Buddha Knows the Dhamma	1h02	3236
The Eight Worldly Conditions	57 min	3255
Cascading Pools of Mettā	45 min	3272
Cascading Pools of Mettā	45 min	3286
The Power of Mettā	48 min	3300
The Fruits of Mettā Practice	50 min	3315
Vicissitudes of Life	1h05	3330
Vicissitudes of Life	31 min	3348
Meditation in the Noble Eightfold Path	57 min	3358
The Four Noble Truths	56 min	3374
Dependent Origination	1h00	3390
Faith and Awareness	50 min	3407
Since Feeling Is First: The Role of the Brahmavihāras	58 min	3422
The Joy in Renunciation	56 min	3438
Empty Knowing	57 min	3455

Living in a World of Change	55 min	3471
Faith as a Spiritual Faculty	50 min	3486
The Three Characteristics	55 min	3501
Transcendent Dependent Origination	54 min	3518
The Power of Mettā: Is Insight Enough?	59 min	3536
Purity and Purification	52 min	3553
Relating With Emotions; Plus Mindfulness, Consciousness And Awareness	1h04	3569
Bodhisattva Path: Plus Rigpa & Nibbāna	1h03	3586
Non-Dual Awareness: Bridging Theravāda and Vajrayāna Understanding	1h02	3603
Integrating Vipassana & Dzogchen	48 min	3620
Delighting in the Wholesome: The Power of Mindfulness	53 min	3635
Awakening Concentration	56 min	3650
The Power of Mettā	58 min	3667
Mettā: Purity And Purification	1h01	3684
Healing and Freedom	59 min	3703
Brahmavihāras and the Vicissitudes of Life	53 min	3721
Anicca: A Characteristic of Existence	1h00	3738
Impermanence	59 min	3755
Mettā: Its Near & Far Enemies	56 min	3773
An Appropriate Response	55 min	3792
The Five Aggregates	58 min	3809
Mindfulness	50 min	3827
Concentration	1h03	3842
The History of Buddhism in India - Part 1	44 min	3862
The History of Buddhism in India - Part 2	1h04	3876
Practicing Rigpa - Part 1	54 min	3894
Practicing Rigpa - Part 2	46 min	3910
Rigpa Consciousness and Nibbāna	1h14	3924
Taking the Practice Home	55 min	3944
Working with Difficult Mind States: The Third Foundation of Mindfulness	1h00	3961

The Practice of Joy and Gratitude	1h02	3980
The Benefits of Mettā	53 min	3999
Mudita: Practicing Joy and Gratitude	1h01	4015
The Five Aggregates Are Empty	1h02	4032
Sutta Study Class: The Honeyball Sutta (part 2)	1h12	4050
Sutta Study Class: The Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (part 1)	1h30	4070
Sutta Study Class Series: Majjhima Nikāya; All the Taints, Part 2 of 2	1h07	4090
Sutta Study Class Series: Majjhima Nikāya; All the Taints, Part 1 of 2	1h02	4109
Deepening in Emptiness	1h06	4126

CHAPTER 1

Self Acceptance

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines self-acceptance as a fundamental factor in both psychological and spiritual development. He explores how the universal feeling of "I'm not okay" develops from childhood experiences - whether through parental criticism, lack of affection, or overwhelming emotions we couldn't handle as children. Armstrong describes how suppressing difficult emotions creates lasting inner division, manifesting as constant self-judgment, need for external approval, defensiveness, and relationship difficulties.*
>
> *The talk traces how this inner split affects our meditation practice, making it impossible to truly accept the present moment when we cannot accept ourselves. Armstrong draws on insights from Gestalt therapy's "top dog/underdog" dynamic and the cycle of perception-view-action that perpetuates our conditioning. He addresses how self-rejection continues through school competition, young adult transitions, spiritual idealism, and aging.*
>
> *Offering practical guidance for healing, Armstrong emphasizes awareness as the primary tool, alongside cultivating personal joy, remembering our strengths, engaging in service to others, and maintaining meditation practice. He concludes by noting that integration at the ego level - achieving self-acceptance - is necessary before the deeper spiritual work of letting go of self can truly begin, quoting the Zen text Xinxinming on developing the "trusting mind."*

I'd like to talk tonight about the factor of self-acceptance in life. I mentioned a few days ago that this practice really operates on two different levels. One is the psychological—the level of our emotions, thoughts, our personality, what makes us individual. The other is the level of the spiritual, the level where we feel our connection with all life, where we find what in us is shared by all living beings, where we find that relationship to life itself.

This feature of self-acceptance, I feel, is one of the root issues in working on the psychological level and for many of us lies at the core of many of the problems that we encounter in living. So I'd like to go into this area and see where this difficulty arises, how it manifests, and how to work with it.

When we talk about a lack of self-acceptance, it's as though somewhere along the way in our lives, we've picked up a belief that if we were to express it, takes the form of something like, "I'm not okay. There's something wrong with me." This is the basic feeling when we're not able to accept ourselves fully. And it's as though we look around the world and we think, well, everyone else seems to be getting by okay, and I guess it's just me that's having this problem, this difficulty. Because what we don't realize is that virtually everyone, to some degree or another, feels that they're not okay either. And so we're all sort of not okay in the same boat, if we knew the truth of it.

But when we come to believe in this way, when we take up this view and hold on to it, subscribe to it, it's the source of a lot of conflict in our life and the ground for a lot of suffering. To some extent, it's something that we all share. I don't think there's anyone who's grown up, certainly in this sort of culture, who hasn't come away with a bit of this self-doubt, lack of self-acceptance on some level.

And so I'd rather think of it not in black and white terms. It's not a case of "Do I accept myself or do I not accept myself?" Rather, it's working with different degrees of self-acceptance. So for all of us, I think there are many ways to work with this issue wherever we're at, coming to greater and greater self-acceptance in life.

I think the universal nature of this problem is shown by the sales of a book that came out a few years ago in America. I think it's also been quite popular in England. The title of the book is *I'm OK, You're OK*. It was written by a psychologist who was interested in a type of therapy called transactional analysis. He looked at all these different combinations of how we relate to others based on whether we feel we're OK or not OK, and the other person is OK or not OK. These different combinations of interactions make up a lot of our different relationships with the world, as it turns out.

This book, which is in the field of psychology, hit the bestseller list in the United States and sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Most books on psychology sell 1,000 or 2,000, and this was in the hundreds of thousands. I think that shows that it was hitting something in people. There was a real response to that theme.

Another testimony to the universality of this problem lies in the popularity of a particular American comedian who is sort of the apostle of self-rejection. I wonder if you know who I'm thinking of? Exactly, Woody Allen. One of whose famous lines was, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member."

This sense of not accepting ourselves, not accepting aspects of ourselves, comes, I think, from encountering somewhere in life, somewhere along the path of our life, some emotion that we couldn't handle. It was too strong for us. It was overwhelming. And this, I think, is why the emotional life is so central to spiritual practice. I feel that it really needs to be considered an integral part of spiritual development.

Because for many, many of us, somewhere along the way, in coming into contact with an emotion that was simply too strong for us at the time, we've stopped our growth. Our growth has been blocked in some way. It may be a feeling of fear. Maybe an insecurity in life. Maybe a feeling of loneliness that we didn't feel we could live with. Maybe a sense of unworthiness that we came across. Maybe a degree of anger that we just felt we couldn't handle, couldn't cope with.

What we have tended to do, not understanding, being young, not knowing how to work with these difficult emotions, when one came along that was too much for us, the only way we could see to keep going was to push it down, to suppress it, to try to block it from our consciousness so that we could get on with the business of living. We hoped in that way that we would become free of it, that we would get out of it.

But the difficulty is that anything that we suppress, anything that we push down into the psyche, unfortunately tends to stay on and on and on. So whatever strong emotion is pushed down, pushed under, begins to pervade our mind, pervade our being, pervade our life. So that suppression is no escape. Rather, it prolongs the particular state of mind.

When we try to suppress fear, for instance, our lives become full of fear. If we try to escape from the fact of loneliness, our lives become full of loneliness. There's a constant struggle to keep that emotion from surfacing, to keep it suppressed. And that constant struggle begins to take a lot of our energy. So we're no longer able to respond to life fully.

So the personality splits, creating a perpetual inner drama between the critical parent and the defensive child within us. This division manifests clearly in our meditation practice as well. If we cannot fully accept ourselves, how can we accept the present moment? Our experience is simply a manifestation of ourselves, and when self-acceptance is absent, we remain in constant conflict with whatever arises. The moment is never good enough, never quite right, never feels complete. There is no peace in meditation, no rest, no natural settling, because there is always this underlying struggle with what is.

Living without a fundamental sense of our own worth creates an unbearable situation. No one can truly sustain feeling fundamentally unlikable or unacceptable. The mind simply cannot settle into such a painful self-perception. When we cannot generate this essential sense of okayness from within ourselves—when we cannot feel genuine affection for the full range of our being—we become driven to seek it from external sources.

This creates a desperate dependency on others for validation and approval. We begin organizing our lives around gaining acceptance from the outside world, constantly looking for signs that we are worthy, lovable, or acceptable. Our actions become motivated not by authentic expression or genuine response to circumstances, but by this underlying hunger for external confirmation of our worth.

This external seeking becomes compulsive because it can never truly satisfy the deeper need. Even when we receive approval or praise from others, it provides only temporary relief. The fundamental wound of self-rejection remains untouched, continuing to generate this restless searching for something that can only be found within. We become trapped in cycles of performing, pleasing, and positioning ourselves to gain the acceptance that we cannot give to ourselves.

The tragedy is that this external validation, no matter how abundant, cannot heal the split within us. It cannot restore the natural wholeness that was disrupted when we first learned to reject parts of ourselves. Only by turning toward what we have pushed away, only by learning to meet our own experience with kindness and acceptance, can this fundamental healing begin.

And so our relationships with other people revolve very much around a need and a search for affection and approval. We look for this in our friendships, we look for this in our intimate relationships, we look for it in our work situation, we look for it in school—anywhere we think that people might be able to like us or approve of us. We work very hard to convince ourselves that this validation is real, that it can be true.

Unfortunately, it never works. Deep down we believe it can't be true. Deep down we feel that we're not likable, we're not lovable, and so the message from outside that we may be likable, that someone may like us, can never really go very deep. We can never really believe in it.

So no matter how much affection, how much approval we get from outside, it doesn't satisfy this inner need. And we're committed to look for more, always looking for more. That need really can't be satisfied from outside, although we keep looking for it, keep wanting it.

Also in our relations with others, we feel we're not okay. We can't let other people see what we're supposedly really like. We can't really be honest with people because we know deep down that if you really let them see what you're like, they won't like you.

So we build a sort of false persona, a mask. We put on our mask in the morning and we go out and we present the mask to the world, and we hope that at least maybe they'll like the mask. We know they won't like us.

In this way, we're always hiding our true selves. Living like this, we can't really come in direct contact with the world because we can't let our true self out. The risk of rejection is too high. So we always have to pretend to be something we're not. And in that, there's a great deal of strain, a great deal of effort.

There's also great risk in this approach. When we live this way, any new person we meet is a threat, because anybody we meet has the potential to see through our disguise. We always live in fear that somebody's going to come along and say, "You're just putting that on. I know you're not really like that. I can see exactly what you're like, and you're nothing like that." We're always afraid of being unmasked, as it were, of having what we think is the true side of ourselves come through. We always live in anxiety of that.

Because of this, if we can't accept ourselves, we're overly sensitive to criticism. If you really can't accept yourself, then you can't acknowledge, fully acknowledge any of your weaknesses. And we all have weaknesses. Everybody on this earth has strengths and weaknesses.

But if we really are very concerned that maybe we don't have any strengths and it's all weakness, we cover it over with this exterior that's all strengths and no weaknesses. Then as soon as someone sees a weakness, we're afraid that the whole structure is going to collapse. So any criticism becomes threatening to the whole being that we have built up, the superstructure of self-image. And we can't take it.

Generally our response in that situation tends to be defensive. If you look at your defensive responses to criticism in life, it generally comes because the whole sense of worthwhileness is getting rattled, is getting shaken—it's fragile.

In our close relationships, in our friendships and in our love relationships, because we finally found some sort of affection that we can trust in a little bit, those relationships come to be very, very important. They become like a lifeline for our emotions. Without that lifeline to love, to affection, we feel we shrivel up inside.

So those relationships become extraordinarily important, and we depend very heavily on them. And where there's dependency, there's fear. There's the fear of loss, the fear that that relationship might be taken away, and with it our lifeline, our whole source of affection.

If we don't feel good about ourselves, still on some level we really wonder how other people can feel good about us. We're sure that there are a hundred thousand more people out in the world who are much more desirable than we are. And if our friends, and especially our relationship partners, start meeting all those people, they'll leave us like a shot. As soon as they find out what great people there really are out there, we know they'll get away from us as soon as they can.

So jealousy comes in, clinging, holding on to that lifeline.

Also, if there's a low sense of self-esteem, if we have a low regard for ourselves, people can easily take advantage of it. They can treat us in unkind ways, inconsiderate ways, and we think, "Well, that's only what I deserve. It's just what I deserve in life to be treated in this way." We at times lack the faith in ourselves to stand up for ourselves, to assert our own human rights and need for consideration in those situations.

Also frequently, with a low appreciation of our inner being, a lot of emphasis gets put on the outer. So a lot of care and attention goes into things like clothing and cars and the appearance of the house and the style of haircut and all these outer displays, hoping that the outer beauty can make up for the inner lack in some way.

These are the results, these are the manifestations of a mind that's divided, that isn't at one with itself. And they begin to percolate through our whole life to fill up almost all our relationships. Almost all the areas of our life are affected by this conflict, by this frustration, by this lack of satisfaction, where it seems that nothing can quite come right for us.

How did we get in this position? How did this arrive for us?

There are really many, many sources. And it can happen virtually at any point in our lives.

Let's take our life as very small children, as infants. I think probably almost all of us at that time got some sense of not being okay. And it's almost a necessity, being a very small child. Children come into this world with wild energy, no inhibitions. They don't know the social rules yet. So we've all done things like emptied the honey jar out on the

new carpet and taken our crayons and painted all over the clean wall in the living room, or gone into our mother's closet and pulled down all the dresses and cut them up with scissors. And then we're surprised that that's not okay.

So we get these messages when we're very small that the things we're doing aren't okay. And we start to feel, well, maybe there is something wrong with me. I'm always being corrected. Maybe there is something wrong. And, of course, our parents seem like the ones who are really okay. Our parents are really in charge. They're in charge of the world. They can do these amazing things like walk and open doors. They can actually reach the doorknob and pull it open. They can drive cars. They can go into stores and walk out with things. Nobody stops them or shouts at them. So our parents are definitely okay. But we as little kids—there are a lot of questions about that.

Other people may have a relationship with their parents that doesn't have much love, doesn't have much affection. This is pretty common. Coming into this world, not getting affection or caring or love expressed very openly, we come to form the view that we're not really lovable. If we were more lovable, well, I'm sure my mother would pick me up and hug me more often. I'm sure my father would give me a kiss every now and then if I were really lovable. And because they don't do those things, I must not be a very likable person. There must be something wrong with me that the world isn't being affectionate.

This is especially true if our parents tend to be very critical, as many parents do. Many adults want their world ordered just so. And children to such a world are only a disturbance, only a disruption. So some parents are always criticizing their children. Their children can't do anything quite right. If we grow up with such parents, we really come away with the feeling that we can't do anything right. Not only are we not lovable, we can't even behave properly, can't do anything right.

This, of course, is a real mistake. To ever conclude that we're not lovable is a complete mistake, because this quality of lovableness has much more to do with the mind of the beholder than it does with the mind of what or who is being beheld. In other words, the ability to love comes foremost. After that comes what it's turned toward. So there's no one on this earth who can't be loved. There's no one on this earth who isn't lovable. We begin to see that it was just the limitation in our parents' own hearts and minds that kept them from feeling and expressing that love. But we believe in it. We have believed in it.

It's interesting how this idea is starting to really filter through the whole of society. I work in Totnes, just a few miles away, in an office that's above a shop where they sell electrical goods—televisions and tape recorders and things like that. The owner of the

shop was having some renovation done, so some workmen were in: carpenters and plumbers working on the bathroom in the shop. These were just very ordinary guys, dressed in blue jeans and beards. I can guarantee they weren't reading the best-selling psychology books from the United States. I overheard a conversation between two of them one day while they were working. The owner of the shop was named Adrian. One of the workers said to the other, "You know, Adrian's problem was he didn't get enough cuddles when he was a baby."

Just at that point, Adrian walked into the room, and the worker called out, "Isn't that right, mate?"

Adrian looked puzzled. "What's that?"

"You didn't get enough cuddles when you were a baby, did you?"

Adrian was embarrassed but laughed it off, saying, "Oh no, we never get enough of that. Never get enough of that."

I found it wonderfully healthy that ordinary men could joke about such things so openly. It really delighted me.

When we begin to mature and see the effects of our childhood—recognizing how our parents' treatment shaped us—resentment often arises. It's common to go through periods of deep resentment when we realize our parents weren't very affectionate, that we didn't truly feel loved, and we see the lasting marks this has left on us. This resentment can become a driving force in our lives for some time.

I met someone earlier this year who was going through this intensely. She was a lovely person—sensitive, emotionally deep, very much in touch with herself in many ways, committed to peace work and social action. Really a wonderful human being. But she was consumed by resentment toward her parents. Because this resentment ran so deep, she couldn't open to love—neither to loving others nor being loved herself. The resentment reached to the very core of her being.

It's important to accept resentment when it arises. But at a certain point in our development, we must realize that whatever happened in the past, and whoever was at fault, the present moment is a different matter. In this present moment, there's only one person who can move us out of the situation we're in right now—ourselves.

When working with this kind of resentment, we eventually must let go of past blaming and begin taking responsibility for the present moment. No amount of blame or resentment will free us from this particular bind, this particular situation.

After working with these feelings enough and coming to some degree of self-acceptance, we may find ourselves able to forgive our parents for those hurts. At a certain point, we might even appreciate everything they've done for us.

As I've grown older and watched friends raise children—I haven't had children myself—I've begun to see the incredible amount of work involved in raising a child. Just keeping a child clean, clothed, and fed for sixteen years is a full-time undertaking. It's truly a complete job in itself. I've gained a real sense of how much my parents gave to me, how much all our parents have given us through that work.

When we clear ourselves of resentment, there can emerge a genuine appreciation for all those years of what was, in many ways, selfless giving. Even if love wasn't felt, even if we didn't perceive it clearly, those actions expressed tremendous caring. The love may have been present even when we couldn't feel it clearly.

In this relationship with our parents—or any relationship, for that matter—it's important to tune into the interplay between outer and inner that I mentioned earlier. There's a cycle that affects not only self-acceptance but many areas of our lives. It's helpful to become aware of this cycle: from perception to view to action.

Perception means noticing something in the outside world. View is what happens inwardly—we form opinions or conclusions about ourselves or the world. Action is our expression back into the world, emerging from our inner life.

Take the example of feeling unloved in childhood. We perceive the world a certain way—we see our parents as unloving. Whether they actually were is another question, but that's our perception. Instead of letting each perception simply come and go, we tend to form conclusions about it. The conclusion becomes: "They don't love me, therefore I'm not lovable."

We hold onto this conclusion, this view, and it becomes part of our inner world, shaping our inner life. This inner view then determines how we relate to the world. If we truly feel we're not lovable, we act and relate to the world as though this will always be true.

For instance, we enter a relationship expecting rejection because our inner view tells us we're not lovable. We form friendships expecting them to end. We meet new groups expecting no one will like us.

In all these new relationships, there's opportunity for fresh perception to arise. We might notice, "That person likes me."

But that fresh perception comes into conflict with a long-held view, which is that I'm not likable. So we've got a conflict. There's the perception that someone may like me. There's the deep-held view that nobody could like me. Which do you think we give up? The fresh truth, the living truth, or the old view?

More often we toss out the fresh perception. We invalidate that feeling of affection because we're convinced, we believe that it couldn't be true. We cling to that inner view.

So it's important to see this interplay between the perception of the world outside, the view we form inwardly as a result, and then how that view conditions our behavior, which expresses itself in our outer relation to the world. There's an ongoing interplay in every area of our life, from the outer to the inner and back again. This is why people like Krishnamurti have made the comment, there truly is no inner and no outer. He says this is all one movement. All one movement.

So we come through infancy and find ourselves in school. Now, virtually every school that I've seen, except for a few alternative schools, are characterized by a real atmosphere of competition. One person is matched up against another to see who's going to come out ahead. Whether it's in academics, or in sports, or in beauty, or in popularity. Always this sense of competition.

And what that sets up is the mind that compares. We're always comparing ourselves to others. And all you have to do is meet—if you're into this comparison game—all you have to do is meet one person who's better than you, and you feel badly. One person who's better. And it hurts.

So we can say, I am not as blank as someone else. And you can fill in the blank with any positive quality that you like. I'm not as pretty. I'm not as handsome. I'm not as intelligent. I'm not as funny. I'm not as popular. I'm not as talented. I'm not as rich. I'm not as good in sports. I'm not as well dressed. I'm not as cool.

And you just meet one person who's better than you in any of those areas and you feel badly. It's crazy. Sooner or later, we always meet someone who's better than us in any area of life. And this comparison is so unnecessary.

You know, in the middle of it, we never stop to ask the question: How pretty do you have to be to be okay? How handsome do you have to be to be acceptable? So that people don't sort of run away from you when they see you coming—"Here comes that ugly man again." We never stop to see if there's any sort of real standard, which of course there isn't.

It's as though whenever we were to go look at a flower, we'd see a red tulip that's in bloom in the springtime. It's a beautiful red tulip with its brilliant colors, throbbing with life. And we'd look at it and say, "Well, the rose is really nice. I wish you were a rose. You're not quite as good as a rose." And we'd discount it.

We all are individual. We all have different expressions. We all are different expressions of life. We have unique strengths and unique weaknesses. And we all have those strengths and weaknesses. There's nobody who doesn't.

And when we compare ourselves to another through these facets—just these fragments of ourselves—we pick on a little fragment and say, "Oh, but somebody else's fragment is better than mine, therefore I'm no good." We destroy ourselves through this activity of thought, this activity of comparing.

And it's not necessary.

This message was really brought home to me in the early seventies. I was hitchhiking in California in 1973, and the hippie ideal was still in swing. That's really where it was at—basically living out the hippie dream. I was hitchhiking on a freeway when I was picked up by a couple who were about my age or a little older, between twenty-five and thirty. They were clearly not taking up the hippie dream, and as far as I was concerned, this couple looked like they could have come from another planet.

They were driving this old Ford Falcon convertible that was about fifteen years old at the time. It was sort of falling apart—the paint was really chipped, some chrome was falling off, and the fender was dented. The couple were not of the standard conforming to the image of beauty or handsomeness. They were the sort of people in my high school who probably wouldn't have gotten dates to the senior prom. They were both quite overweight. The fellow had on a set of old overalls and a cowboy hat. Their car wouldn't go over about fifty miles an hour. We're on a California freeway and everybody's whizzing by us at seventy in these brand new Fords and Lincolns, and he was pottering along at fifty miles an hour in a car that sounded like it could die.

It suddenly struck me that these people had looked at the whole area of competition in life and they'd dropped out of it. They'd looked at what happened if they wanted to play that game of competition, and they'd said, "No thanks." They had gone beyond comparisons and were just living their lives. They had such a nice relationship. I had such a good time in the car with them because they were cheerful, they'd laugh with each other, you could tell there was a lot of affection between them. Having dropped

out of the whole thing, they weren't obsessed with this madness of living up to some phony kind of standard. It was a really beautiful contact, actually, and a real lesson for me.

If we survive our infancy and childhood and school, then we come to the stage of young adulthood. This is the time in life where we have about three months to go from being a kid to being an adult. Remember that period? One minute you're being taken care of by mom and dad and everything's provided, and a few months later you're supposed to be completely on your own and a grown-up.

Within a few months, you really may have to enter the field of employment. You're supposed to go out and support yourself, get all the money you need to live. And owning a car—then you have to learn about changing the oil and testing the spark plugs and what kind of petrol to buy for it. And relationship—you may move in with someone, even get married at this time. For many people, this is when you start to have children, so you become parents. Get an apartment on your own, get your own flat, and start to learn to cook for yourself. All this goes on within a few months. You're supposed to make this transition just like that, overnight. Not so easy.

That can be a very rocky patch of life, that particular bit of growing up. A lot of us get sort of a few dents in the old self-image about that time. I remember when I was twenty-one, I got into my first serious relationship. I was leaving university, and a woman and I decided to live together. It was a disaster. First time I tried to live with anyone, it was a disaster.

Relationships are great. They can really bring out the very best sides of ourselves. When we're in love, we just see absolutely the nicest parts of our personality unfolding moment after moment for a while. And then the process of falling out of love may take place, and then we see just the worst parts of ourselves. I was amazed at what came out for me in that relationship. It took me a long time to get over it, basically.

Someone said that self-knowledge is no good news. That's the way I felt in that period. I'd seen sides of myself that I didn't know I was capable of, and it shook me quite deeply, actually. It took me about a year to kind of get over having seen those parts of myself.

So if we make it through young adulthood, we start to find some maturity in life. And it's very helpful, but it can be a source of more difficulty. We start to see that there may be a way to live without so much self-centeredness. We start to discover some of our human potential. We start to have experiences for shorter or longer periods of time

where we're free of a sense of conflict, where there's a real sense of well-being, being deeply in tune with life, and we feel what it would mean to live with clarity without being so self-centered, without being angry or uptight.

And these are wonderful insights. Very important to contact these sides of ourselves. But the trouble is, we can easily, so easily, turn these into new ideals. And then we begin to compare ourselves to the new ideals and think things like, "Well, I should always be loving. I should always be open. I should always be completely generous and giving." And it's not very realistic. And this is where the should-be comes in and forms a conflict. And basically we compare ourselves between what we feel we are in this moment and what we feel should be.

And of course this can come in in our meditation as well. When we're given a goal like meditation on the breath, we can easily take up the idea, "I should be with the breath all the time." And if we have that ideal—I should be with the breath 100% of the time—none of our meditation periods are going to be satisfying. Anytime we're not with the breath, we feel we're not doing well enough.

So we have to let go of that ideal in the breathing meditation, that we're supposed to be there all the time, and just be with the reality of it. Sometimes we're with the breath, sometimes we're not. When we're with the breath, then awareness is being developed. And whatever we do in that situation is actually fine. We do as much as we can and that starts the meditation working. No need to compare it to an ideal.

So we need, all along the whole spiritual path, to balance some degree of critical awareness, some degree of judgment, with a degree of acceptance. Most of us would never even start on meditation or self-knowledge if there wasn't some degree of goal for it, if we didn't have some degree of ideal that we wanted to move toward—a degree of being more open, wiser, a more loving sort of person. So that goal propels us along the spiritual path.

At the same time, to keep moving with some degree of harmony, there has to be acceptance of the reality of this moment, acceptance of what is. So this interplay, this dynamic between the goal and the reality is sort of an ongoing seesaw in walking the spiritual path. And you have to acknowledge and work with both halves of it—both the ideal and the reality.

And so then we may think, "Well, we've got life sort of sorted out. We've come into our maturity. We're working with ideals." And then we become aware of the process of aging. And self-acceptance can move on to the physical level, concerned with the physical.

One morning about our mid-30s, we sort of wake up and look in the mirror and we realize, "Hey, I'm not young anymore." And then how does that feel? So much emphasis is placed on youth and the idea that beauty really goes with youth and not with age.

I don't know if you've really taken a look around cosmetic shops and seen how many of the things that are on sale there have to do with aging—all sorts of creams and lotions and potions to take away wrinkles and make the skin young and soft, and colors to dye the hair, to hide the streaks of gray or whatever. Even special—I know there's this chain in England called The Body Shop. It's all natural ingredients, so it's very good. It hasn't been tested on animals, so it's very good to buy there. And they have a special lotion designed for these wrinkles around the eye, which are called crow's feet in English, because they're like the feet of a bird. So there's a special lotion you can get for the wrinkles around the eyes at these shops.

And we may look in the mirror one morning and notice that, hey, the stomach's getting a little more rounded than it used to be. When did that come in? All these different signs of aging. And if it's not the stomach, it's the hair. The gray hair starts to come in, as you may have noticed.

And this really came home to me a couple of years ago. I went to a seminar at Amaravati, this Buddhist monastery up near London, and some speakers were giving talks on the theme of Buddhism and social action. And I listened to the talks, and afterwards a few of us were sitting around discussing what the speakers had said and the idea of Buddhism and social action. I was giving my comments on various speakers and their themes. And then I got up and walked off. And there was a fellow, I didn't know, who was sitting next to my wife, who was on my right.

And after I'd walked off, he turned to my wife, Sally, and said to her, "Who was that man?"

And she said, "What man?"

And he said, "That middle-aged man who was sitting on your left."

It was only a couple of years ago. I didn't realize I'd gotten there so quickly.

And if your hair's not going gray, it's probably falling out, right? The other thing we men face. I had a good friend who was almost totally bald when he was about twenty-eight. By that age he just had a little fringe left around here—a little blonde fringe. Fortunately, he kept his sense of humor about it. He said the hardest thing about being bald was when he washed his forehead in the morning, he never knew where to stop.

So there's no retirement from this self-acceptance work. It can strike at any age, any time.

How do we work with it? How do we get through this difficulty, this lack of self-acceptance?

The first and most important thing is the quality of awareness. Bringing awareness to the situation and seeing where we come up against this feeling of self-rejection, how it manifests in our life, where it came from, how it makes us feel, and so forth. When we begin to see how it influences us, when we begin to see how the mind reacts to that sense of not being worthy or not being loved, then we start to understand its mechanism. And when we start to understand it, we can get to some degree free of it. We understand our motives and our reactions to life. We begin to understand this interplay between the outer and the inner and our own responsibility in that play. We stop seeing ourselves just as victims of circumstance.

In addition, I think it's important in life to find ways to develop a sense of joy. Basically, this means finding things that bring you pleasure, finding things you like to do—but don't depend so much on other people to fill you up. Find things that you yourself like to do, possibly alone.

Many people have hobbies that they've really been into for a while, and often we let those slip away. We say, "Well, my life's too busy. I don't have time for that anymore." But in giving those things up, we really give up an important source of nourishment for ourselves. I feel it's important for us to find those activities that really bring us pleasure, whether it's painting or music or cycling or walking in nature. So many things to get involved with. And if you don't know of anything, look around, take some classes, try a few things out. Look to cultivate that sense of enjoyment in life.

Also, keep in mind your strengths and your talents. Don't forget the good sides of yourself. We all have lots of strengths, lots of good points. But when we're caught up in self-doubt, we only look at the negative side of ourselves. So easily, thought can just dwell on one tiny part of the picture, and we forget about all the rest. So don't forget about that. Keep in mind what you're good at, where your strengths are.

Something else I feel can be very helpful in working with a sense of unworthiness is service to others. Often our psychological problems can make us self-absorbed. All our energy and all our thoughts and all our activities can revolve more and more around myself, me, myself, and I. This becomes a kind of self-enclosing circle, and in many ways, the noose can just get tighter. It's important to begin to see beyond that cycle.

One way of doing it—very, very helpful—is to work in a way that helps others. It can be through your livelihood, whether you work as a nurse or counselor or therapist, physiotherapist or whatever. It can be through volunteer work. Almost everywhere that I know of, there's plenty of need for volunteers to help with old people or disabled people—many different kinds of needs in the community. Being able to give to others, finding that one actually has something to offer to others, really gives one a sense of contributing, a sense of making a difference. It can offset this sense of unworthiness, of not mattering.

And finally, keep up your practice. The practice in itself leads to a greater sense of harmony in life. We're working here to develop directly wholesome qualities of mind like attention, like oneness of mind, like equanimity, openness, loving-kindness, and so forth.

All these wholesome qualities of mind, as they come through more and more in the meditation, start to be felt and experienced in our life. There's already a growing sense of well-being, greater sense of harmony in life. And this is one of the strong features of meditation as opposed to, I would say, many kinds of therapy that provides a real boost to growth and development. The practice itself will bring more harmony, will bring healing.

As that healing starts to take place and our mind starts to come together, we don't feel so divided within ourselves, we don't feel so split. Then the mind can rest within itself. When the mind's in conflict with itself over a key issue—like whether we like ourselves or not—the mind can't really settle. Always looking for some way around this problem, around this conflict. When we start to understand and heal this division, then the mind can begin to settle in itself, naturally.

This oneness of mind, this state of samadhi, doesn't have to be striven for. We don't have to exert ourselves with great effort in the breathing meditation to bring the mind together. It comes together naturally. And as that natural coming together happens, then the doors start to open for really working, really seeing on the spiritual level of life.

You may think this is a bit of a contradiction to say something like, "I must accept myself." Especially in Buddhism, which is supposed to teach you there isn't a self. How can a self accept itself when there's no self to begin with? And somebody summed up this dilemma quite neatly when they said that you have to be somebody before you can be nobody.

Basically pointing to the fact that we have to come to an integration within the realm of the ego, on the level of self. That has to be integrated and harmonious before we can let go of it. Because without that sense of harmony, there's not the trust, there's not the faith to really let go of self. And that's what's really required in opening on the spiritual path—not a destruction of self, not an annihilation of self, but a surrender, a letting go of self. And that letting go requires a lot of faith, a lot of trust. And that trust, I feel, can only come from a mind that has healed these deep kinds of divisions.

I'd just like to close with a quote from a book called the Hsin Hsin Ming. It was written by the third patriarch of Zen, well before 1100. Hsin Hsin Ming means "treatise on the faith mind." It's a discourse on the mind that can trust. And in it, the author, the third Zen patriarch, talks about what he calls "the non-dual." The non-dual is that in life which is without a second, which cannot be compared, which is the ground of all existence, which is the unconditioned aspect in the universe. And of this he said: "The non-dual is one with the trusting mind. The non-dual is one with the trusting mind."

May all beings live with self-acceptance. May all beings live with affection. May all beings develop the trusting mind.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 2

From Ego to Expansiveness

Guy Armstrong · 47 min

> *Guy Armstrong offers a profound exploration of the meditative journey from ego-bound consciousness to expansive awareness. Drawing from both Buddhist psychology and Zen teachings, he examines how our sense of 'I' manifests through constant wanting and avoiding—what he identifies as the fundamental movements of ego. Armstrong explains how these patterns create what Buddhist tradition calls saṃsāra, the wheel of cyclic existence, understood both in terms of rebirth and moment-to-moment arising of different selves.*
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> *The talk traces how meditation practice gradually loosens identification with thoughts and desires, leading to what Armstrong calls a 'reducing process' where personality structures dissolve into their basic components. He emphasizes how retreat environments facilitate this breakdown by removing external hooks for our habitual patterns. Through patient awareness, practitioners discover the insubstantial nature of ego—not as something to be destroyed, but as a quality of holding that creates the illusion of solid selfhood.*
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> *As self-concern diminishes, consciousness naturally expands, returning to what Freud called the 'oceanic sense of self.' Armstrong illustrates this with stories from Krishnamurti and Zen tradition, showing how expansive awareness can accommodate both stillness and movement simultaneously. The journey culminates in seeing ego's demands within the vast context of existence—like a tiny whirlpool in an infinite ocean—allowing practitioners to live with greater equanimity and freedom while remaining fully engaged with life.*

Nice to see you all again. I'd like to talk tonight on the topic of from ego to expansiveness, which is a description of the unfolding of the meditation practice, the development of insight over time. The talk, in a way, is a complement to the guided meditation that we did this morning on developing an expansive awareness.

So we start off working with this question of ego. This term ego is very central to meditation practice and a very fertile ground for inquiry, looking into what constitutes the ego. And I'll say just right now what I mean by this word ego. It's really the sense of self or the sense of I that we have in life. We express it many, many times during the day. "I feel this. I want that. My body is this way. My mind is that way." So we use this I, me, my sense incessantly, without in the beginning ever stopping to think what it means, where it comes from.

So I'd like to talk about this sense of self, the sense of I, how it manifests in the practice, and how the experience of it changes over time in meditation.

First of all, I'd like to look at the nature of the ego on what I'd call a fairly gross level. On the gross level of the ego, it expresses itself by movements of mind—movements of mind generally expressing, to some extent, self-concern, self-interest. And so we find, as we come to sit in meditation, that we have sort of endless tapes of desires and wants and hopes and worries and doubts and fears and likes and dislikes. All these movements of mind have been built up over years and years of habit.

If we start looking into these movements of mind and what they're all about, they're basically expressing a very simple principle. They incline us toward pleasure and away from pain. So all the movements of our thoughts are toward achieving more of what we consider to be pleasant and away from trying to avoid or have less in our life of what we consider painful or unpleasant. You could say that the movement of self, the movement of ego on this gross level is marked by the factor of wanting, of desire, of volition, or will, or motive. All these terms are more or less synonymous and point to the I manifesting itself in some movement of mind.

What all of these movements are expressing, whether it's the positive movement of wanting or the negative movement of not wanting, is a preference. We carve out a preference for ourselves and we try to make it a reality in the world. And this is perhaps our great mistake.

There's a text, an old Chinese Zen text, written by the third Zen patriarch, a master called Seng-ts'an. He was called the third patriarch in the Chinese tradition of Zen. His book is called the Xin Xin Ming, which means discourse or treatise on the faith mind, on the mind that knows faith or trust. He begins this little treatise in this way: "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind."

So it's this fundamental discrimination between what we like, what is pleasant, and therefore what we propel ourselves toward, versus what we dislike, what we term unpleasant, which we try to move away from. Around these two movements, our whole life is lived. If you look at the activities of ninety-nine percent of the minds in the world, they're revolving around these particular poles.

So our life is really driven by this wanting and avoiding. And it's incessant. We find the incessant nature of it when we come to sit quietly, and we find that the wanting and not wanting doesn't stop, even though we can't do anything about it. We're sitting still

for forty-five minutes. We can't satisfy any of those desires. We can't move away from any of the things that are arising. And yet, the mental mechanism goes on and on and on.

There's a constant sense when we first come to meditation of spinning. It feels like the mind is always spinning, churning, going round and round and round. It's a bit like getting on a carnival ride—one of these rides with the painted horses. You climb on one and it goes around and around and around, only on this one you can't get off. You only paid for one ticket, but you can't find the way off. So you keep going round and round.

There's a term in the ancient Asian traditions for this phenomenon, for this way of living, and the term is samsara. This is the realm of samsara. Samsara is usually translated as the wheel of cyclic existence.

Old Pali term and a Sanskrit term, the wheel of cyclic existence, implying that our life is somewhat like a wheel that keeps going round and round and round.

In the East, they tend to understand this wheel in terms of reincarnation, the doctrine of rebirth—that we are born into this life having been born many, many times before in different existences. We live out this life, we die, and as long as there's still some mental motion, that gives rise to another birth, another existence in the future. This wheel of being born and dying, being born and dying, goes on and on until we understand freedom, until we discover where freedom lies. We're bound, say the Asian traditions, to continued rebirth, reincarnation.

Frankly, I don't think it matters one bit for your meditation practice whether you believe in reincarnation or not. It makes absolutely no difference to your practice. So you can take this view up and cherish it, or you can leave it at the door as you leave the retreat, and your mind will be a little bit freer.

But there's another way to understand this wheel of birth and death from a moment-to-moment perspective: every time a new desire arises, a new self is born. That self persists for as long as the desire is in force, and when it ends, that self dies. Then, a few minutes later, or a few seconds later—however strong your practice is—another self is born that goes through its own lifetime, and it dies. So we can understand this cycle of birth and death on a moment-by-moment level, that the "I" is being born again and again in different forms.

First there's the wanting "I"—the "I" that's sitting and wanting the bell to ring at the end of a sitting. Then there's the angry "I"—the "I" that is resentful that the pain in the knee has come just now when the mind was starting to get calm, and that lasts for a

while. Then there's the hungry "I" that waits for the tea to be served at 5:30 when it's a minute late. All these forms of "I" are coming up again and again and again, lasting for a while and then dying.

The thing we find when we come to meditation practice is we're not able to get off this wheel either. There's no end to these repeated cycles of desire and aversion, liking and disliking. With each new one that arises, there's more sense of unrest, more sense of being pulled along by our desires and aversions. So again, we're trapped, caught on this wheel, the wheel of samsara.

Over many years of our lives, these incessant arisings of wanting and not wanting can develop into quite a tangle because they tend to get interconnected and conflict often develops. One of your desires will conflict with one of your fears—a very common experience. We want something, but at the same time we're afraid. So the tangle of emotions begins to build as these impulses and drives get interconnected.

Let me give you an example of how this can work. Let's say we have someone in their teens who doesn't feel very good about themselves. There's a certain degree of non-self-acceptance in that person. And if one doesn't accept oneself, one doesn't necessarily have the belief that others will accept one either. So, expecting that other people won't like one, having contact with others comes to be uncomfortable—somewhat threatening. We expect to be rejected or put down. Because of the pain involved in those relationships, we may tend to withdraw.

So we've already had a movement of volition. There's a belief in us that we won't be likable, therefore we tend to withdraw from relationships by our own volition, our own motive. This is a movement of ego, of the self.

But that withdrawal is painful. It leads to loneliness. Not wanting to live with the loneliness, not being willing to accept that, we tend to try to escape it. So we develop, perhaps as an escape, an interest in something else—a sport, our studies, or a musical instrument. There's another element of volition: wanting to get away from the loneliness, we take up another activity.

Then we see that some skill is possible with that activity. We develop it more fully, and we find that we become well known for it. This is very gratifying. People begin to respect us for our skill, whether it's on the football field, or playing the guitar in a rock band, or getting straight A's at school. Then, out of that sense of inferiority, we tend to build ourselves up based on that platform. We say, "Ah, I'm not no one. I'm actually good at something." And there arises pride—another movement of wanting to be recognized, wanting to feel superior.

As we become more proud, unfortunately we're stuck in a withdrawn position from our earlier habits, and we tend to become more arrogant toward people. We want to show our superiority, so we start acting in a prideful way, and then people begin to withdraw from us.

So another movement of volition expresses the need to feel superior, and it too has a reaction in the outside world. We find ourselves more and more isolated, and that can become increasingly painful. In time we may take to other escapes such as exploitative sexual relationships, drugs or alcohol, or the quest for more power and status.

Over time, what initially began as simply a certain degree of lack of self-acceptance gets built up into a whole persona, an entire personality woven around these different impulses that have accumulated. If we look into our own development, we can see that for each one of us there are probably a number of such threads—various ways that our personality has developed along similar volitional lines. We have created much of our own personality, not knowingly or intentionally, but volitionally through our will.

We come into meditation and bring along with us this whole web of what we call our personality, what we call the "me." As we begin to develop the quality of awareness, that web of personality starts to be illuminated. We begin to shine a light within on that web. The tangle that has developed over many, many years starts to unravel under the patient light of awareness—sort of a thread at a time, bit by bit.

This is one of the truly healing aspects of meditation practice: we really can come to see ourselves clearly on that psychological, emotional level. Awareness shines the light of understanding throughout our personality, and then some of this tangle starts to unravel. With that comes a greater sense of freedom.

This process can't really be rushed or forced. The knots that we've built up have to come out of their own accord. We just have to be there, patient and attentive. Over time, given that sort of attitude, the knots will untie. Our attitude basically has to be one of non-interfering—not making any more attempts with our will, with our volition, with our ego, with our motives to alter that process, but rather simply letting it take place. Just let it happen.

Then we move in meditation to a more subtle level, a more subtle manifestation of ego. We find that thoughts and impulses continue to go through consciousness, but a change starts to take place: the degree of our identification is reduced. We don't identify so strongly with each movement of mind that occurs. This is a major change.

Earlier, when we came to sit in meditation, if our mind moved to some form of wanting, we felt as though we moved with it. This is the state of being identified with our thoughts, with our desires. As awareness becomes stronger, there's a sense that we can be still and the thought can move through without affecting us so much.

As the identification is reduced, there's a sense of stillness, even though movements of mind still come, even though desire still arises, even though annoyance may still appear. There's more a sense of being still within and observing that movement. We don't feel so tied to it. This is a step back from this wheel—the first step back from being taken around and around on this wheel of samsara. It's an important change.

One of the reasons that the environment here is created the way it is, as I mentioned earlier in the retreat, is to take away some of the external stimuli that make up our daily lives. You notice one of the characteristics of the retreat environment is that there's not much going on outside ourselves that we have to relate to. We're thrown back again and again on our own experience. This is very useful for the transformative process.

Outside, the way we kept our patterns, this web of personality, the way we kept that ball together was by constantly hooking it on things in the outside world. We'd say, "Well, naturally I have desire because there are so many attractive things here. I want a new car and a new house and a new stereo and a new boyfriend. Of course that desire is natural." Or, "Well, of course I get angry. There are so many silly people around. This person did that to me and then this person did that. Well, of course I get angry."

We come into a situation like this and we don't find it so easy to hook our patterns on outside influences. We start to realize the absurdity of some of these movements of mind. Of course, it's not that those movements stop because we come in here—I'm sure you recognize that by now. Just because there's no good reason for them doesn't mean they go away. Because unfortunately, or fortunately, it's the same mind. Same mind.

So we go in for our lunch one day and we're patiently standing in the queue like a good boy or girl. And then we see the person in front of us get to the dessert and go, one, two, three, four. And we think, "How could they? How could they do that? Don't they know there are ten more people still to come? And look, that's the best dessert we've had all week." And this incredible rage can boil up. Incredible. And take us over for the rest of the afternoon every time we see that person.

We begin to see that maybe our response wasn't appropriate to the situation. Maybe it was an exaggerated response that we had to that person. And what we're seeing is the movement of mind without the hooks, without the external situation to pin it on.

What is happening in this kind of process is that the personality is undergoing a reducing process. I don't mean this like a weight loss clinic, that it's getting slimmer, but more in the sense of a chemical reduction. A reducing agent is something that breaks molecules down into their constituent parts, into their atoms. And so our personality is getting broken down into its basic components, without these threads of thought and justification to tie it all together.

Really, we come here in order to go through a breakdown. That's part of what we're about here. I'm sure you recognize it by now. And this can be a little bit disturbing. I came here to get together. I didn't come here to fall apart. And it can seem like the whole structure of our personalities is dissolving in this experience. Everything that we've taken for granted about ourselves suddenly starts coming into question. Well then, who am I really? What kind of person am I? A good person or a bad person? An angry person or a thoughtful person?

So the structure of our self is starting to actually open up. It's starting to unfold a bit. We need to have at this time, at this particular time in the practice, we need to have a good bit of faith to see this process through, because it's a little bit unnerving. Everything that we thought was solid and real and that we could take a stand on in life starts sliding out underneath our feet. And we have to have faith that that process is to be trusted. We must have faith to trust and allow that process to continue, because it's very helpful.

Really what it's a movement from is from complexity to simplicity. Our personalities have gotten built up into very complex forms by our interactions, this web that we've woven over years and years. And when we come into a situation like this, they're getting taken back to the very simple forms. Just the bare emotions are coming up. Anger. Wanting. Loneliness. Unworthiness, lack of love, guilt, joy, happiness. Just these very basic emotions start coming through without necessarily any justification, any reason for being there.

At times it feels like we're quite naked, quite raw in this process, as though all the layers of masks have been peeled aside and we've just opened our heart and can be reached right in and felt. Just a bare grief or anger, loneliness, whatever. Those very bare emotions start coming through.

And then we see that all the movements of mind that we built up around that personality don't really matter so much. That's not really important. All the justifications that we've made for these feelings, we start to recognize that those mental states are just our basic nature, that we don't have to tie them together with any threads of explanation or volition or motive. And we start to see that what we took to be ourselves

isn't as solid as we thought it was. We start to see that the ego, what we think is me, isn't really a solid entity. It's just these different mental states and thoughts arising and passing, arising and passing. We start to see there's really nowhere solid in ourselves where we can take a stand. Nothing firm.

Now, you may have heard that the aim in doing meditation practice is to destroy the ego.

This is one of the common buzzwords that floats around when you talk about meditation practice: "I'm going to get in there and really destroy that ego."

There's a writer who goes under the name Wei Wu Wei who had something illuminating to say about this. Wei Wu Wei is a beautiful Chinese name composed of three characters. The first is wei, which means "do" or "act." The second is wu, which means "not." And the third is wei again, which means "do." So his name literally translates as "do, not do"—pointing to a way of acting without motive, acting without trying to act. He's indicating a way of living in the world based on pure spontaneity: wei wu wei, act without trying, act without acting.

Never mind that he's actually an English writer whose real name is Terence Gray. It's a brilliant pen name, and he publishes his books through Hong Kong University Press, so he rather gets away with it.

Here's what Wei Wu Wei had to say about destroying the ego: "Hound the ego and cook its goose—all well and good. But first you have to catch it. And that's the problem, because no such thing exists."

How can you destroy an ego when there isn't one? What he means, of course, is there isn't an ego as a solid entity. You can never destroy your ego because you'll never find one as a solid thing.

If we look more closely, we discover that what constitutes the ego is simply a quality of holding. It's only the holding in our mind that gives any sense of solidity to self. And we hold in so many different ways.

We hold to the past—to memories, to experiences. We hold to the future—to ideas of what I will do, what I want to do, what my plans are. We hold to people: our parents, lovers, friends, sons and daughters. We hold to views: "I know what life is about. I have my philosophy. I have my opinions." We hold to our self-image: "I'm this sort of person. I'm not that sort of person." We hold in many, many ways.

In all these different areas of holding—that's all that creates this sense of "I." That's all there is to it.

If you want to discover where your sense of "I" is located, if you want to find out what you're holding on to, simply look at what's in your thoughts in the middle of a sitting. Here we are, just sitting in the middle of a summer afternoon—well, sort of a summer afternoon in England—in the middle of nowhere, doing nothing. Why should there be anything going on at all? Why should there be anything there at all?

Whatever is there exists as a result of our holding. The key to seeing where our holding lies is simply looking at our own thoughts. What thoughts fill our head? Especially, what thoughts recur? What thoughts come again and again? That's what we're trying to stand on. That's where we're trying to make our stand.

As we begin to see this insubstantial quality of self, we can start to let go of some of these unnecessary movements of mind. We start to realize it really doesn't matter in the middle of a sitting whether I think about that beach I was on in Spain a year ago or not. It really doesn't matter if I think about the job I'm going to take up the month after I leave this retreat. It really doesn't matter whether those thoughts come into my mind or not.

And as we start to invest less in all that structure of past and future, we come upon a new element in our meditation practice, a new element in the experience, and that is the quality of space.

This, again, is an important discovery. We come upon the actual experience of spaciousness in the mind. In fact, the more we let go of these concerns of the self, the more we're willing to let go of our hopes and fears and worries and doubts and likes and dislikes, the more they're replaced by nothing. Nothing takes their place. And so we come to sit and we find there's nothing happening. There's nothing going on. There's nothing here.

Now this can also be a disquieting experience. You've heard probably many times that what we're really all about in developing our meditation practice is coming upon peace. The Buddha said there is no higher happiness than peace. And yet the first time that most of us begin to taste some peace in our practice, we go, "What? Not this." Because it's not comfortable at first. It's scary. Peace is supposed to—you know, little white doves are supposed to fly through and flowers rain down upon you. It's not supposed to be this vacancy, is it?

Because in that kind of space, there's nothing to support the ego. There's no support for self in that. And we've always, throughout our life, we've looked for something that gave support to I, to me. So it takes some adapting to appreciate the quality of peace, to appreciate this quality of space. It's not something that comes naturally for us. But we just have to keep going into that state again and again for it to start feeling more comfortable. For us to realize that we don't have to fill that space with I, with me, with self. And there's actually nothing threatening at all in it. How could there be? How can there be anything threatening in nothing?

So it's just really a matter of becoming comfortable with that spaciousness, with that emptiness. And then it leads into another phase of the meditation, which is the development of this quality of expansiveness.

With this quality of expansiveness, the first thing we notice is a widening of the awareness, a widening of the attention. So in the meditation particularly, you start to realize that there are other people in the room. There are sounds going on outside. We can spend hour after hour so absorbed in our own thoughts and feelings and body sensations that we forget that we're in the middle of a room with twenty-five other people, that there are still things happening outside, that there's life beyond the meditation room door.

So we start, once we come upon this quality of spaciousness, naturally the consciousness starts to widen, starts to broaden. And we realize something that Freud talked about. He mentioned that when a child is very young, as an infant, it has what he called an oceanic sense of self. The baby doesn't have any boundaries to its sense of self. Its consciousness is limitless.

We start to realize that over the years of our growing up, we've retreated, we've shrunk down that original infinite consciousness to become smaller and smaller and smaller until it's just focused on this body and this mind. And what has caused that shrinking of consciousness has been self-concern, has been the repeated movements of the ego, wanting this, not wanting that. It's this preoccupation with self that causes consciousness to shrink down until it focuses on such a small corner of its whole extent.

As we start giving up some of these forms of self-concern, consciousness starts to return to its broader, original basis. And we find then that we're able to take in more of the universe with a balanced state of mind. We can be with more things. We can be open to people. We can hear the sounds, see the background sight, can listen to a person without the mind being swayed by any of it. There's steadiness in it.

There's a nice little story about Krishnamurti that illustrates this quality. It was related to me by someone who used to teach at his school in Hampshire called Brockwood Park. A woman was getting very angry with Krishnamurti. They were standing outside near the vegetable garden of the school, and she was really letting rip at him. She was getting angry with him at the top of her voice.

For minute after minute, I don't know the content of what she was saying, but she was being very vocal and abusive with him. She kept on talking for some time, and then she started to calm down, and he replied. They had a little bit of a discussion, and then that dialogue ended.

As soon as it ended, he said, "Quick, come over here." He took her over to a bush that was growing against a wall and said, "I think there's a bird's nest in here." They looked behind the bush, and sure enough there was a little nest with three little eggs in it.

She said, "How on earth did you know that?"

He said, "Well, while you were talking to me, I noticed that there was a little gray sparrow that flew into that bush three different times. Two of the times he had little pieces of feathers in his mouth, which I thought he was probably using to pad the nest."

That's a spacious mind.

Someone said about expansive consciousness that events don't cause the same kind of disturbance in an expansive awareness. It's like the difference between putting a teaspoon of salt into a glass of water and putting the same teaspoon of salt into a lake. When you put a teaspoon of salt into a glass and stir it up, the water tastes very strongly of salt. When you put that same teaspoon into a lake, you can't even tell it's there.

Similarly, an expansive awareness that holds anger—you can hardly taste its presence. But when consciousness is very narrow, when it's tight and confined, and anger comes into it, it feels like it could explode under that influence.

This expansive awareness allows us to accommodate both the inner and outer changes of life without being so shaken by them, without being so disturbed. This lends greatly to the accommodating quality of mind. As we become more grounded in this sense of spaciousness, we're less influenced by the changes that life presents, by the different pleasures and pains that come our way. This brings a degree of steadiness and equanimity into living.

Another very valuable thing about this expansiveness is that as consciousness broadens out, what we took to be our self is relatively smaller. This mind and this body are relatively less of the whole of consciousness. This means that, in a way, the sense of self is getting weaker, getting smaller. As you develop this quality of expansiveness, at times this sense of self may slip away entirely. If it does, it's a very useful time because understanding and insight can come from such an experience of not having this burden of self.

There's one thing you can be sure of if an experience like this comes your way, and that is that in fairly short order, the self will return. Not to harbor any illusions on that score.

There's a nice story from the Zen tradition that illustrates this. There was a Chinese monk who had been practicing Zen all of his life. He'd been in the monastery for about forty years, and he was now getting old. He hadn't come upon the freedom that his teacher spoke about and obviously manifested. He hadn't come upon that discovery and he was getting discouraged.

"I've tried so hard for all my grown life. I haven't found it. It's just not going to happen for me this lifetime." So he decided to leave the monastery. He gave up, basically. He left the monastery and started to walk up by himself into the mountains behind.

At this time, a bodhisattva, one of these mythical beings in the Mahayana branch of Buddhism, became aware of his plight and decided to manifest himself to see if he could work with the old monk. This happened to be the Bodhisattva Manjushri, a bodhisattva of discriminating wisdom. He manifested himself in the form of an old man who was walking down the mountainside with a heavy load of firewood on his back. The old man was bent double under the weight of this firewood and was walking down the hillside with great difficulty, pain at each step.

This old monk was coming up the path and saw this man. He just exchanged a short glance with him and thought, "There's something different about this man. This person knows." He just saw it in his eyes.

So he stopped and said, "What is it then?"

Manjushri, in the form of the old man, shrugged off the bundle of firewood that was on his back. He stood up straight and tall like a young man, like a man in his twenties. At that moment the monk saw. He had that insight that brought him the freedom, the understanding that he was looking for. He saw what it was to live without the weight, the burden of self, which is what Manjushri was trying to teach him. He got it.

And so at that moment he said, "Oh, and then what?"

And at that point Manjushri reached down, picked up the firewood, put it back on his back, bent double under the weight and walked off slowly down the hill again, taking up again the burden of self, but no longer believing in it—no longer feeling that it's solid, that it's a solid entity. Because when we have the mind of expansiveness, we see the self in a new light.

And with this expansive awareness you may come upon a different kind of experience, a different quality than you might have thought was possible. For instance, it's possible in developing this expansive awareness to feel a great sense of calm. Because with this widening of consciousness one taps into just the underlying stillness of existence.

At the same time, the mind can keep moving. Desires can arise, fears, likes, dislikes, and so forth. So there can be at the same time a sense of great calm from the expansiveness and a sense of agitation from the fact that the emotions are still alive and working. So this is an unusual thing. I wasn't quite prepared for it when I first came upon it. I didn't know that you could be both calm and agitated at the same time. So it threw me for a minute.

Now, if this comes about, one has a choice. One can stay with the calmness in its breadth or one can focus on the agitation. And I'd say what is most helpful at these times is to stay with the calmness. Keep the focus open and wide with that underlying sense of stillness and just let the agitation exist within that.

Because what has happened in the past is that time and time again, though we may have felt a moment of peace, the self has arisen and called out. It calls out with its worries, with its fears, with its hopes, with its wants, with its dislikes. And every time it's called, we've come running. Like an attentive mother who's attending to her fragile baby, we've answered to the ego's cries with our care and attention. And what that has done is to reinforce that sense of need, of wanting, of fearing, and so forth.

Seeing the ego's call from this point of expansiveness, we can develop a new relationship to it. We can let the cries be there, but we don't have to take them so seriously. Because we start to see that it's not a matter of life and death—these wants and hopes and fears, past and future and so forth. We don't have to respond with agitation, with more self-concern to these cries.

And it's as though the ego and all of its movements, seen in this context of expansiveness, are like one tiny whirlpool on a whole ocean of life. There's the whole ocean of existence, vast and infinite. And all we've gotten concerned about, ninety-nine percent of the time, is this one tiny whirlpool in this one small corner of the ocean of wanting.

When we start to see it in this way, we can see the ego's needs and its wants with a quality of dispassion. We no longer feel passionately about them. We're no longer compelled to respond, to answer them. Nor do we have to change them. And this is the beauty of this kind of seeing. We don't have to make every form of desire or fear or anger go away. We just have to see it in perspective and to see it for what it is. And then we're no longer bound by it. We can accommodate those movements of mind while still being grounded in an overall sense of expansiveness and calm and peace.

This movement begins in meditation with being completely enwrapped in this web of personality that we've woven through our wanting—the center that we've put together through our will and our volition and our thoughts. Moving away from that exclusive emphasis on self-concern to seeing that movement in the context of the whole of existence, so that our life truly becomes grounded in a broader perspective on life. It's one of the major transformations in any real spiritual path.

May all beings see into the nature of self. May all beings come upon spaciousness. May all beings live with an expansive awareness.

CHAPTER 3

Fear

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines fear as one of the two fundamental movements of mind, alongside wanting, that shapes our entire approach to pleasure and pain. Drawing on insights from Krishnamurti's teaching that "thought breeds fear," Armstrong reveals how we create our own fears through imagination of unpleasant future scenarios, and how attachment (upādāna) to people, possessions, views, and self-image perpetuates the very insecurity we seek to escape.*
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> *Armstrong offers practical guidance for working with fear in meditation practice, emphasizing the importance of directly investigating and accepting fear rather than avoiding it. He explores how fear manifests in both body and mind, sharing techniques from co-counseling and personal experiences of confronting deep-seated terror during intensive retreats. The talk includes compelling stories from the Thai forest tradition, particularly Ajahn Mun's methods of having monks practice alone in tiger-inhabited forests to confront the ultimate fear of death.*
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> *Concluding with a powerful Zen story illustrating complete fearlessness, Armstrong demonstrates how understanding the mechanics of fear and developing the courage to face it directly can lead to genuine liberation and the natural arising of love and compassion.*

I'd like to talk tonight about the emotion of fear and the factor of fear in our lives. I feel that it's one of the most fundamental things that we need to come to terms with, both in our life and in our practice.

I could say that there are really two fundamental movements of mind: fear, on the one hand, and wanting, on the other. They arise in relation to the two main poles of our feeling life, which are pleasure and pain. When you look at the activities of humans all around the world, over centuries and centuries, our movements, our activities, our whole thrust in life is basically ninety-nine percent of the time a move to create more pleasure and to avoid pain in life. As you see the kind of thoughts that come up in a few days of a meditation retreat, you'll find that the thoughts also tend to revolve around these two factors of pleasure and pain.

Of course the desire, the wanting force arises in relation to pleasure. We want to bring into our lives that which is pleasurable. Fear arises in regard to that which may be painful. So between these two poles, our thoughts go. And because our thoughts go

that way, our motives go that way. Because our motives go that way, our intentions go that way. Because our intentions go that way, our actions go that way. Because our actions go that way, our lives go that way—around these two factors.

Fear is one of our deepest conditionings. It's present in many forms in our life, from small to big. There are the little fears that come up in life, like, "I hope they remember to put honey out with the tea today," and "I hope the car will start on a winter's morning," or "I hope that pain in the knee won't come up again during this sitting." And then there are the big fears: fear of pain, physical pain; fear of rejection, close friendship or relationship; fear of failure—many aspects of our lives. Fear of unhappiness. Fear of never finding contentment in our lives. Fear of dying. And maybe the biggest of all, really for most of us, is the fear of life—fear of all the complexity involved in this process of living.

When fear is present in the mind, it really casts a very dark shadow. It's as though we live with fear, we live under a dark cloud of anxiety, worry, apprehension. When the fear is there, even though it may be bright and sunny out, that somehow can't come into the heart. The heart can't really open to the beauty and the joy that life can bring. The fear leads to a sense of contraction, of closeness. Our whole spirit kind of shrinks under the influence of fear.

There was a science fiction book that was very popular in the late sixties called *Dune*. It was written by Frank Herbert, and in it he describes life on another planet and a band of warriors who train by working with their minds through mind-altering drugs—very appropriate for the late sixties. You can imagine it received a cult following in the hippie era. One of the key lessons that these warriors had to learn to work with was the factor of fear. They expressed it in this way: they said that fear is the great mind-killer. When fear is present, it keeps the mind from flowering, from opening up.

So in our lives, in our practice, it prevents each one of us from unfolding as people, from opening up the positive strengths that are within—the stability of mind and openness, affection and so forth. All of that is blocked under the influence of fear. It also leads us to a sense of isolation. We can't open to other people acting under this influence.

Some people consider that the opposite of love is hatred. But I would say rather that the true opposite of love is fear. When fear disappears in the mind, even for a brief period, when fear is absent, love is naturally there. Love comes naturally. We don't have to do anything in our practice to create love and affection. Rather, in dealing with the negative mindsets, working through them, understanding them...

coming to some freedom from them, the positive qualities are automatically present. Love is there within each of us and would naturally emerge if it weren't for the cloud of fear obscuring it.

There's a fascinating book you may have encountered called *A Course in Miracles*, which had quite an extraordinary origin. A psychologist in America, a woman in middle age, suddenly began hearing thoughts streaming through her mind. She found this peculiar—these weren't her usual mental patterns. She was simply a clinically trained psychologist with no spiritual inclinations whatsoever.

As these thoughts persisted, she decided to write them down, thinking perhaps a page or two would clear her mind. Eleven hundred pages later, she found herself with what became *A Course in Miracles*. The writing flowed automatically, as though she were serving as a conduit for another voice. Whether this was actually the case, I cannot say, but this was her experience. She didn't particularly believe in such phenomena and didn't even want to transcribe the material, but the thoughts were so persistent she felt compelled to record them.

When she finished and read the complete work, she discovered it contained profound wisdom and genuine dharma teachings. Though expressed in Christian terminology, it offers what I consider a universal expression of the dharma. An American psychologist has since distilled these thirteen hundred pages into a more accessible format, creating a bestseller that captures part of the central message: *Love is Letting Go of Fear*. This approach to human development centers on working with our fears and learning to release them, allowing love to flower naturally. Love is always present within us.

Fear, I believe, also lies at the root of aggression. If you observe people who carry much anger or hostility, who express violence either physically or psychologically, you'll discover that beneath this behavior lies fear. The contracting quality of fear creates a sense that our very existence is threatened, as though we might be squeezed out of being entirely. Under such imploding energy, when it becomes extreme, the only apparent relief sometimes comes through explosion—through some form of violence. This explosive energy typically represents a reaction to fear's contraction, making aggression another fundamental movement of mind closely aligned with fear.

So this evening I'd like to explore how to work with fear in our practice. How can we become free from it? True freedom from fear requires understanding. Only insight, only wisdom, can effectively remove fear from our lives.

In seeking to understand fear, I find that Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher who died last year, offered some of the most penetrating observations. He summarized his understanding of this problem in one concise phrase: "Thought breeds fear." If we want to discover fear's origins, we must examine our thoughts.

You can observe this in your own practice—the emotion of fear is typically preceded by imagining some unpleasant future circumstance. This recognition holds tremendous liberating potential. We create our own fears, generating them through our thoughts. Life itself is not inherently frightening. While life may be uncertain and insecure—while we cannot find any fixed outer security because everything changes—this doesn't mean we must approach existence with fear. Even amid uncertainty, we need not bring a fearful mind to our experience.

There's no reason to be afraid of something we don't know. How can we be afraid of the unknown? We have to begin to see the influence of our own mind in creating fear for ourselves. We need to begin to take responsibility for it.

What happens in this breeding of fear is that we are looking for security in our lives. We want our lives to be safe and secure. So in order to make that happen, we think about the worst things that could happen to us. We want to make the future really safe, so we dwell on all the things that could go wrong. And then, of course, we try to figure out strategies for working with each of them. These strategies sometimes work, but sometimes don't.

There's a little story that illustrates the effect of strategies. In the jungle, a camel was going for her morning walk, approaching the edge of this jungle. Inside the jungle was a tiger. The tiger saw the camel coming and heard her chomping. The tiger thought, "Ah, this she-camel is going to walk into this jungle. When she gets close to me, I will spring out at her and catch her, and she will be my breakfast." So the tiger's waiting there, strategy figured out for the morning, waiting to pounce on the camel.

But up above in a tree is a monkey, and the monkey sees the camel walking and sees the tiger moving into position. He thinks, "Ah, the camel is going to walk into the jungle, and then the tiger is going to jump out and eat her. But I have this coconut, which I will drop on the head of the tiger when it starts to jump, and it won't be able to get the camel." So the monkey's waiting there with his coconut, ready to drop it on the tiger's head.

But there's a little squirrel on a branch a few feet away from the monkey, who sees the camel coming into the forest. The tiger is getting ready to jump on her, but that monkey is holding the coconut to drop on the tiger so that it won't be able to get the camel. The squirrel thinks, "Just before the monkey is going to drop the coconut, I'm going to bite the monkey so that he can't drop the coconut."

The camel, meanwhile, is still walking slowly towards the jungle. There's a bird, a very large bird, flying over the jungle at this point. He sees the camel coming, sees the tiger's ploy, sees the monkey with the coconut, and sees the squirrel about to bite. And he thinks, "Ah, the camel's going to walk in. Just before the squirrel goes to bite the monkey, I will swoop down and pick up the squirrel and fly off with it so it can't bite the monkey. The monkey will drop the coconut on the tiger's head, the tiger can't get the camel, and the camel will have her walk through the forest."

Meanwhile, the camel's still walking slowly toward the start of the jungle path. She gets just to the opening of the jungle, and she thinks, "I think I've had enough of a walk today." And she turns around and walks back the other way. So much for strategy.

We think of all these complications that can arise in our life, and often they get that complicated, don't they? We think of all the things that could happen and go wrong, and we make plans for each of them, and we think we've got the future worked out. But what we ignore is what we're doing in the present. The future may be a little more secure, but what about right now? The present is becoming filled with fear. We're filling it up with anxiety.

When can we ever stop doing that? When can we get to the secure future? When can we stop worrying about the future? Can we ever? Or is there always something else that can go wrong? Don't we always need to keep planning ahead if we're going to live in this way? This particular strategy becomes self-defeating. We need to see how we create this fear for ourselves. In seeing this generation, then we can start to do something about it. When these thoughts come along, we can see where they lead and say, "No, no thanks, I won't go into that right now."

The second understanding that needs to come in working with fear is that truly the root of fear in the mind is attachment, holding, clinging. We hold, we depend on many different objects in our lives. We hold on to people. We hold on to possessions. We hold on to money. We cling to views and opinions. We hold on to a self-image.

Wherever there's holding for security, there's going to be fear. There's inevitably fear because we always know that we can lose that thing. We pick something up in the beginning because we're frightened, and holding onto that thing makes us feel safe—whether it's a relationship or an object, a view or whatever. But as long as we're holding it in order to feel safe, there's always a fear of loss. There has to be.

So holding for security doesn't eliminate fear. It makes sure that the fear goes on and on and on. It perpetuates fear. Clinging is no way out of fear. Finding security in anything outside ourselves only makes the fear go on.

When there's attachment in the mind, it creates the possibility of shakiness, mental shakiness. The Buddha often referred to this in discussions during his lifetime. Northern India at the time of the Buddha was rich with a diverse range of spiritual views. It was rich with spiritual characters, some real eccentrics. Christina mentioned last night that Jain who was standing on his leg, hoping to work through all his karma in that way.

Another approach to working with karma was carried on by other sects in northern India. People were afraid that even though they had a human life this time, the next time—they believed in reincarnation—they were worried that they might be born as an animal. This is one of the teachings of reincarnation. The idea being that if their karma, if their actions in this life weren't so pure, they would have to be born in a lower level and then suffer the consequences of that unwholesome karma.

So some people thought they would get around this by living out their dog karma in this life. There were actually people who went around behaving like dogs for the course of their lifetime, hoping they could get it out of their system and then be free of that particular karma.

The Buddha often had discussions with these people who came to question him about his views. He would often say afterwards, "I saw in that person's mind, as he discussed his view, there was wavering. Because of that wavering in his mind, I could tell there was attachment." But he said, "You, oh monk, I watched you in that discussion. I could see there was no wavering in your mind. There was no attachment to the view that you were talking about."

So wherever we find in our life this quality of wavering, of hesitancy, of uncertainty, doubt, fear, anxiety, we know that someplace there's holding, there's attachment. We really can't become free of fear until we become free of these various forms of holding. In the long run, that's the key to getting free of fear.

This whole issue of attachment and the creation of thought through fear is brought out in a discussion that Krishnamurti had with someone who was dying. This fellow was dying, he knew he was dying, and he was very concerned about what was going to happen to him after his death. He was convinced that Krishnamurti had the answer—absolutely certain that Krishnamurti knew, but just wasn't telling him.

The man's question was: "Do I continue after death, or is there nothing left when the body dies?"

Krishnamurti said, "What is this 'me' that your mind clings to and that you want to be continued? The 'me' exists only through identification with property, with a name, with a family, with failures and successes, with all the things you have been and want to be. You are that with which you have identified yourself. You are made up of all that. And without it, you are not. It is this identification with people, property, and ideas that you want to be continued even beyond death. And is it a living thing? Or is it just a mass of contradictory desires, pursuits, fulfillments, and frustrations with sorrow outweighing joy?"

Clinging is the root of the fear.

But in the meantime, while we find we have these attachments, while we find there is holding in the mind and the fear is arising, how to work with it in a more practical day-to-day way in our meditation practice? What to do with fear when it comes up?

The really important thing in working with fear in meditation is to come to know it, first of all, and secondly, to accept it. When fear comes up, we really have to investigate: what is fear? I wonder if you've ever really looked into this question. Have you ever hung out with fear long enough to find out what it really is? Or every time fear comes, do you seek to find something else to take its place, to distract yourself from the experience?

Through meditation we have this wonderful opportunity of getting directly in touch with fear. You may think that you've come to a meditation retreat to be calm and clear and peaceful, and the last thing you want is to be sitting on your cushion and be full of fear.

But actually you're very lucky if that arises for you. You're very lucky. Because it's only when an emotion comes up in the present moment that we have any chance to work with it, to understand it. We can't really understand emotions at a distance. We can't sit here with our books and papers and figure out how we're going to be free of fear. We have to work with the living reality.

And the zafu is a very good place to do it. Because basically, when fear comes up in a sitting, nothing's really going to happen to you. You're going to get up at the end of that sitting and walk out of the room. You're not going to be any poorer or worse off or in any danger. It's a pretty safe place, right? So it's a very good place to start coming to terms with fear, to start to experience it.

So fear arises and we look in and we want to find out: what is it? What is fear? It really has two components. It's an expression in the body, a certain manifestation in the body, and it has another expression in the mind. So we need to come to terms with, to come to understand both those expressions.

In the body, often we first feel fear in the pit of the stomach. There's a sort of very shaky, fluttery feeling in the stomach. The whole body may begin to feel light and kind of trembly throughout. There may be an increase in the heartbeat. Heart starts going faster. The breath may become jerky. There may be perspiration under the arms. All these are the various physical sensations that tell us fear is coming up, that we're experiencing fear.

Now, are any of these sensations intolerable? Are there any of them that we can't handle? Can you handle a fluttery stomach? Yeah, no big deal. Can you handle your heart going a little faster? That's okay. It's happening. Can you handle some sweat under your arms? Yeah. No one's too close to you. So on the physical level, there's really nothing that difficult about fear. We just have to get comfortable with these physical sensations.

On the mental level, again, there's an emotional tone in the mind. There's this sort of fleeing quality. It comes up and we kind of want to run the other way. It's a kind of restlessness, a kind of moving away. But we can get to know that too, just as you probably found in the early days—you can sit through restlessness. You can take it. You can experience it. And it's okay.

We can bring the same kind of willingness to fear if we're just willing to be there for it and experience it. And eventually, we find that we can accept it. We find that it's really okay for that fear to be there. And then we have a whole new relationship to it. We can accommodate the fear. We can have it be present and we don't have to react to it.

Because normally, what's the first thing that we do when we experience fear? What's the first emotion that we feel at the arising of fear? Isn't it generally more fear? We're afraid of fear itself. So when fear arises, we don't want to experience it, we're more afraid. And this leads to a chain reaction.

Then we're in a greater state of fear and it starts escalating into panic. Then we're really overwhelmed.

R.D. Laing, who was a Scottish psychoanalyst, had a book called "Knots"—a little short book that he wrote in the early seventies, which illustrated the various kinds of binds that we get into through the complication of our thinking, the way we tie ourselves into knots. About fear he had this to say: that we are afraid of the fear that is afraid of the fear that is afraid of the fear that is afraid. One may perhaps speak of infinite regression.

Once we're not afraid of fear, then when it arises, we don't generate any more fear in relation to it. We can have the fear be there, and yet there's an underlying sense that it's okay. So there's an underlying trust and faith with the fear. And when that gets strong, when that accommodating power gets strong, then the fear can be present and it doesn't really disturb our actions.

You know, if you're feeling afraid and you have to act, you have to relate, you have to do something in the world, often the actions that come out of fear are not very skillful. The fear generates a kind of panic quality and often the confusion comes through in the action. But as our ability grows to accommodate fear, we can have fear in the mind and still act with some clarity, still act with some wisdom.

Now, in working with fear in this way, it has to be a real acceptance. It means you really have to open your heart to the fear. You really have to be willing for it to be there. And it can't be a sort of halfway acceptance, which is really a kind of subtle resistance where you sort of catch a glimpse of fear out of the corner of your eye and go, "Right, fear, that's okay. Fear. Yeah, fear." You can't handle it that way. You really have to be open. Openness to it.

And that openness is really what starts cutting through the power that fear has over us. When we're no longer afraid of fear, when it really doesn't matter to us if it's present or if it's absent, its whole strength, its hold over us starts to go. It's exercised its magic over us. We've been enchanted by it for years and years and years because we couldn't handle it. When we find that we can accept it, it starts to lose its power.

And as it loses its power, the whole force of its conditioning starts to fall away. And we go into situations where we generally have felt fear, and we suddenly ask ourselves, "Why do I need to feel fear in this situation? There's no reason for it. It doesn't do any good. Why is it here?" And it starts to fall away, in situation after situation.

When this happens, it opens up real new possibilities in our lives. As it is, most of us are willing to live to some degree within the barriers that fear creates for us. We may think about doing something. We may hear about something that interests us. It might be meeting some new person, taking a class, or coming to a meditation retreat. And we think, "That would really be good for me to do. That would be very worthwhile. I can see the growth in it. I can see the value for myself. But it's scary." You know, I think about it. It's scary. I better not go too close to that one.

And often we make a decision, not even consciously, but we just sort of move our minds away from that area. We stop really considering it. Because it's scary. And then we block ourselves from that growth, from the potential in that experience—meeting the person or going through the experience, whatever it might be.

When we become willing to experience the fear, then we're willing to go beyond that barrier. We don't let the fear put us off. We say, "Right, I can see the value in that. I can see that if I do it, I'm going to be afraid, but I've been afraid lots of times before. I've experienced it many, many times, and I know that's okay. So I'm willing to go through that barrier of fear and work with that experience and find that value."

And then we find, as we work in this way, that our life starts to open up.

Our life feels more expansive, and we're able to take on more challenge. We grow in this way, taking in more of life. As we expand our field of living, our frontiers naturally expand as well. We come up against another barrier—something we've never even considered doing before becomes a possibility for us. Once again, the fear arises. But we have developed more and more faith to just go through that fear, not to let fear deter us from the experience.

If we continue to live in this way, continuing to work with these seeming barriers, life becomes a series of increasing challenges and increasing growth—with no end to the growth in that way. Whereas if we simply give in to the fear and let it put us off, we reinforce our belief in it. We give it more strength in that way. So it's very important, both in meditation and in living, to confront these fears and come to terms with them.

The finest tradition of this is found in Buddhist meditation practice. There was a teacher in northeast Thailand in the early part of the century named Ajahn Mun. He came from the Thai forest monastic tradition—the community of monks and nuns living in the forest, practicing in the forest. In the early part of this century, life for forest monks and nuns was quite tough. It wasn't in any way easy. The villagers were not rich, there wasn't a lot of food to go around, and medical treatment was scarce. So it was a tough life.

But Ajahn Mun was completely devoted to it. He loved the forest style of practice. Here's what he would do: Monks are pretty portable beings. All they really need to get by is their begging bowl so they can collect food in the morning, and in Thailand, this instrument called a glot. A glot is like a big umbrella—a big round umbrella with a hook on the end. If you're living in the forest, you stick this big umbrella over the limb of a tree and hang your mosquito net from it. It becomes your portable hotel room. At night when it's time to sleep, you crawl under your mosquito net draped over your glot, and you have a place to sleep.

In the morning, you take your begging bowl and walk to the nearby village. You go through the village and people put rice and curry in your bowl. You return to your forest, eat your single meal, and then the rest of the day is free for meditation. You sit and walk and sit and walk in the forest.

This is what Ajahn Mun did for many years—it was his preferred way of life. As he became well known in northeast Thailand, he gathered a number of followers and disciples, one of whom was Ajahn Chah. Ajahn Chah was the teacher of Ajahn Sumedho, who is the abbot of the Amaravati and Chithurst monasteries in this country. There's another teacher called Ajahn Maha Bua who is still teaching in northeast Thailand in this tradition.

Ajahn Mun was apparently a very inspiring guide, but he was also a tough monk—one tough-willed fellow. For instance, if his monks had malaria, they were still required to sit in meditation. If you know malaria, it's a very unpleasant disease—you're wracked with fever and chills, extremely gruesome. The monks would just have to keep sitting in meditation through that. He felt this built character.

Another of his teaching methods was to encourage all of his monks to go and live in the forest, to take their bowl and their glot and just settle into practicing in the forest. At this time in northeast Thailand, there were still quite a lot of tigers in the forest there.

So these young monks, they might be 20 years old, 25 years old, would go out into the forest to practice, and not far away they'd hear the gigantic roar of a tiger in the middle of the night. That brings fear. Real fear. So they'd be shaking, knowing that at any time this tiger could simply take a few steps over and eat them. Literally. Now that's real fear. You think you have troubles? That's real fear.

But Ajahn Chah basically forced them to stick it out and confront their fear directly. He said, if you can go through your fear in that situation—your fear of death, of really being eaten alive—then you have truly dealt with fear in your practice. So the teaching was not to avoid it.

But sometimes, to tell the truth, there are things we do need to avoid. Sometimes there are aspects of life that are too intense or too dangerous. For instance, there are parts of New York City I would not want to walk through at midnight. So you have to use some common sense. I might be right to feel uneasy in certain parts of the city at that hour.

Also, on an emotional level, I think you have to know your limits. In the mid-70s, I was living in California, and the concept of the open marriage was very much in vogue—the open relationship. There's no possession, there's no attachment, there's no such thing as jealousy. It's just a figment of your imagination. So basically, the way it operated in the group of people I was around at that time was that there was no idea of being committed to any particular sexual partner. One basically slept with whoever one felt like sleeping with on any particular day or night.

As I look back, I see this was not very skillful. We had good intentions. We wanted to become free of our jealousy, free of possessiveness, but we didn't have much wisdom. And instead of freeing us from jealousy and attachment, what I see is that it made those patterns more intense, because we weren't actually able to work with them effectively. It resulted in quite a lot of suffering for most of us in that group.

So instead of getting free of the conditioning by confronting the fear, it reinforced it because it simply wasn't a workable situation. You have to know your own limits. You need to bring wisdom into this area too.

There are a few practical ways to work with fear when it comes up in meditation. I'll suggest a couple of practical approaches right now.

One way is to decondition the energy. In this approach, it's best to pick a quiet place like your room at home, someplace you feel quite safe. When fear comes up, work with relaxation. This works best if there are certain experiences or events that can trigger the fear easily for you.

What you do is lie down and begin to work with deep breathing to bring a sense of relaxation throughout the body. Deep in-breath, deep out-breath. Just relaxing. Then when you feel quite relaxed and comfortable, bring to mind the images of things that bring fear for you. It might be flying on an airplane. It might be meeting someone new. It might be performing as an artist or something like that.

When that situation comes up in your mind, it will bring fear along with it. That's the conditioning. Even when you think of it, even though it's not actually real, the fear will arise. The thing to do then is to keep working with the breathing and the relaxation to decondition that response. So even while holding the image, keep relaxing, breathing, relaxing, breathing.

Soon you can have the image in your mind without a reaction to it. The image can be there and there's still the sense of relaxation. The next time you think about actually doing that thing, there won't be as strong a reaction of fear. In this way, you're taking some of the charge off the pattern itself.

Another approach that I found useful came out of my experience with a kind of therapy called co-counseling, which I know is starting to be popular in England now as well.

I don't know if it's spread to other parts of Europe.

In co-counseling you take a series of classes with a group of other people where you learn the techniques of this type of counseling. Then you get together once a week with someone from the class and you take turns. First one of you is the client and they work on their areas of difficulty while you're the counselor, providing support and suggestions. Then you switch roles - they become the counselor, you become the client.

Co-counseling emphasizes, in working with difficult emotions, this idea of discharge. We become free from emotion by discharging physically the feeling - sort of letting it out, expressing it. They say, for instance, if you're embarrassed, the way to discharge it is through laughing. If you're sad, the way to discharge it is through crying. And if you're afraid, they say, the way to discharge it is to shake it.

This makes sense, really. When fear comes up, we feel this kind of shaky energy throughout the body. What they suggest is to go with that - really let yourself get into that shakiness and just let it take you over. Just shake with it.

At this time I was working in California for Hewlett Packard, an electronics company. We had just brought out this really interesting new product - sort of the first handheld computer, quite a revolutionary product. What twenty years ago filled a whole room with vacuum tubes, we had brought down to something that could be held in the palm of your hand.

There was a lot of interest in the technology and I was asked to give a talk at a local college about it with some students. At that time I was not at all comfortable with public speaking. The idea of standing up in front of thirty-five people and giving a talk for forty-five minutes filled me with fear, with nervousness. I said I would do it because I felt I should, but I really was not looking forward to it.

I had about a forty-five-minute drive up the freeway to reach the college from where I worked. As I was driving along, I started to feel nervous. "Oh, God, I've got to stand up in front of all those people and talk." I started to feel that shakiness, that lightness coming into my body.

Well, what does co-counseling say about this? They say to just get right into it. Okay. So I just really did. I was driving up the freeway and I just started to shake. I was driving along at seventy miles an hour and just shaking like mad for the whole forty-five minutes. I don't know what people thought who passed me.

I started to appreciate the humor of the situation while I was in it. So I'd shake for a while and I'd laugh for a while. The talk actually went very well. But also in going over the experience enough times and just going through the emotion, it just released. It released that mental dread about it.

So I do recommend shaking, actually. If you're really feeling fearful, just shake. Whether it's here or outside on the grounds or whatever. If you want to do it in town, I'd be a bit more cautious. We might get known as some strange religious cult known as the Shakers or something. But it does help. It does help.

The last way of working I'm always a little bit reluctant to talk about because it's so different from the rest of Vipassana practice. It's an approach that I call getting tough with fear. I think actually that there is a spiritual precedent for it. Somewhere in the Chinese tradition of Buddhism, I've heard of this philosophy called the guest and the host. Basically it comes down to the question of, as you're living your life with this body and this mind, whose home is it really? Who's the host here? Who really lives here?

If there are some guests that aren't particularly welcome, who come in when they haven't been invited, and they hang around longer than they're welcome for, and they're a great inconvenience to the host, there's only one thing, finally, to do with such guests - and that is very firmly show them the door.

And you have to, before you can do that, you have to really realize whose house this is? Whose living room? And not being willing to be victimized any longer by these mindsets. Just not being willing to take it.

I came upon this quite spontaneously, actually, in my own practice during one of the month-long retreats I mentioned. I was sitting here in England about seven years ago. I'd been practicing for a couple of years at that time. In the course of this month-long retreat, some deep place of fear in me just got triggered. Something triggered off a lot of fear, and for several days during that retreat, I was just full of fear. No matter what I did or where I went, the fear just kept arising. It was quite unpleasant.

I thought about all the things that people had told me to do with it—you know, just watch it, just accept it, just experience it—and it just kept going on and on. After this had gone on for about two and a half days, I was doing standing meditation, and I realized I was really getting sick of it. I was getting absolutely fed up with it. I remember saying to myself, right at that time, I said, "Fuck it. I'd rather die than live like this." And I meant it. I was really angry at that time. I meant it.

That resolve broke the back of the fear. It just broke its back. I could literally feel it draining out of my body into the ground. The fear just sort of drained out of me. I didn't know at all that that was possible. I didn't know I had that kind of strength. But it was sort of like the fear had pushed me to a limit—to a limit of what I was willing to take. And at that limit, some deeper strength came up that could just deal with that fear totally.

So I hope you never reach that limit with fear in your own practice. But if you do, realize that we all have within us depths of strength and resolve and firmness that we don't usually touch, we don't usually tap into. Since that time, fear has come up a number of other times in my practice and in my life, but it's never had the hold on me again that that did. In that real strong resolve, in that firm resolve, something changed in my relationship with fear. Something changed between me and it. And it has never returned with that kind of strength again.

Now, the reason I say I hesitate to recommend it is because it's in sort of the entire opposite direction from Vipassana. You know what this is about. This is about gentleness, receptivity, acceptance, passivity, just observing, not interfering. This is a completely different approach where you just realize, you take the situation in hand and you exert your will. You exert your will.

But I think if we look into it, there actually are spiritual traditions that talk about this kind of approach. If you've read the books by Carlos Castaneda, where he describes his teachings from Don Juan, the Mexican Indian shaman and man of knowledge, they're often speaking about the way of the warrior. Over and over again, Don Juan will put Carlos in the situations that just call up the most incredible fears for him. You know, he'll tell him how much the ally, this strange sort of demonic being, wants to get to grips

with him and wrestle him, and then he'll send him out into the desert at night alone, saying, "The ally's waiting for you out there." That brought up Carlos' fears. At the end of one book, he made him jump off a cliff. So finding, through being pushed to these limits, that warrior-like quality.

Another spiritual tradition that has it is the tradition of Rinzai Zen. Now Soto Zen, which is the school of Suzuki Roshi, which I read from today, is very much like Vipassana. Soto Zen and Vipassana are very close. But Rinzai Zen, on the other hand, is more the warrior Zen in Japan. And it has this fierceness. I did a retreat with a Rinzai Zen master a number of years ago named Kusaki Roshi.

And I must say he's one of the most impressive individuals I've ever met in my life. He still teaches, mostly in California, and he's a very impressive man. He embodies everything a Zen master is supposed to be—he's funny, he's wise, he's unflappable, and he can be extremely ruthless.

When you come in for an interview with one of us Vipassana teachers, we're just all sort of gooey sentimentality—warmth and compassion and all that easygoing stuff. But you go in for an interview with Sasaki, and he doesn't hesitate to put you in your place. Some of his comments are things like, "Hmm, stupid answers," or "Too much thinking, go away." He often says about coming for interviews in his tradition: "When you come for sanzen"—which is what they call the interview situation—"come prepared to kill or be killed."

So when you feel your practice is at that stage, go see Sasaki Roshi. He's an excellent teacher.

I want to close with one story that illustrates the other end of the spectrum entirely. We've talked quite a lot about fear, but in spiritual tradition there's always the awareness of the possibility of the other extreme altogether—this state of real fearlessness, of total fearlessness, having overcome all forms of fear and trembling. And again, a story from the Zen tradition.

In medieval Japan, there was in many ways a state of real lawlessness. Individual warlords with their bands of samurai would control neighboring territories, and often one would invade another, try to conquer it, then that warlord would regroup and try to take that territory back. So there was a lot of invading and fighting all over medieval Japan.

This one warlord had come into a certain area with his samurai, and nearby villagers heard they were coming. They knew that if these samurai came, they would all be put to death, because they were loyal to another warlord and his samurai. So they knew they would be put to death, and they all fled.

Just outside the village there was a Zen monastery. The monks also heard that the warlord was coming, and they too fled so that they wouldn't be put to death. Everyone left except the Zen master. He just stayed in the monastery and went about his daily routine. He took his morning meal, had a sitting, cleaned up his bowls—just living his life.

The warlord came into the village and heard that everyone had left except this one Zen monk. He was furious. He said, "Who is this person who would not run away from me? Who does he think he is anyway? I'm going to go out and see him."

So he went straight away to the monastery with several of his samurai and found the Zen master sitting on his zafu, just calmly practicing his meditation. The samurai warlord draws his sword, charges into the zendo and says, "You! Don't you know who I am? Don't you know that I am one who could run you through with this sword without blinking an eye?"

And the Zen master says, "Is that so? And do you know that I am one who can be run through with a sword without blinking an eye?"

At that, the samurai warlord placed his sword in front of the Zen master, bowed to him, and asked to become his student.

The power of fearlessness.

May all beings see into clinging. May all beings understand fear. May all beings live with fear.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 4

The Nature Of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong investigates the nature of awareness from the perspective of the Thai Forest tradition. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching on the totality of life - the six sense doors and their objects - he examines how consciousness arises and passes with each object while pointing to something deeper: the deathless awareness that illuminates all experience.*
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> *Armstrong distinguishes between vijñāna (consciousness) which is impermanent, sati (mindfulness) which has intelligence, and awareness as spontaneous knowing. He shares teachings from Thai Forest masters like Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mahāboowa, and Ajahn Jumnian who point to pure awareness as our true nature - beyond the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and not-self.*
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> *Using vivid analogies including sunlight pervading space and mirrors reflecting without attachment, Armstrong shows how this unbounded space of knowing accommodates all arising phenomena while remaining untouched. He guides practitioners to shift identity from temporary formations to this deathless dimension, finding refuge in non-grasping awareness. The talk emphasizes that this freedom is available now through letting go, not after lifetimes of practice. When we rest in this spacious cognizance, all wholesome qualities naturally unfold - compassion, wisdom, loving-kindness - appropriate to each situation.*

The talk tonight is on the nature of awareness.

One of the things I appreciate about the retreat situation is how simple it is. When things are so simple like this, it brings us back in touch with the basics of our human life. I really would like to look tonight at some of the basic conditions of our existence as human beings. What is our situation? And as always in the Buddhist teachings, we want to look at it with an eye to finding where there is freedom within it.

As a way of framing this, I think a poem from Rumi is quite helpful. He said, "Where did I come from and what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea."

I sometimes feel like that on retreats. No idea what I'm supposed to be doing. You know, you can say, oh, I'm a yogi, I'm practicing Vipassana meditation and this technique and that technique—but it's just another role. Really, what are we here for?

One small caveat about this talk. You may know that when the Buddha was enlightened, he sat near the Bodhi tree for 49 days, enjoying what was said to be the bliss of deliverance. He thought of not teaching. Finally, a being came down from the heavenly realms and implored him to teach out of compassion for all beings, so he did. But he thought to himself, when he considered not teaching, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and hard to understand. If I were to teach it and no one understood, that would be a vexation for me."

So I can't claim that the talk tonight will be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. If that's the case, don't worry about it too much. Let it come in one ear and out the other, and not get stuck in the middle where things tend to whir around.

I'm going to talk about one particular view of freedom. This is the view from within the Thai forest tradition of Buddhist practice. Not all schools may agree with this, but it's one view. Please don't take it out and get in deep arguments with your Burmese friends over it. It's just one view.

So let's take a look. What does it mean to say that we're a conscious being, that we're a sentient being? What is it like to be conscious? I think to understand that, we might ask ourselves, well, what is it like when we're unconscious? When we're in deep sleep, or if we fainted, then the experience is there are no arisings. Nothing is happening. There's no sense stimulation taking place.

So by contrast, being a conscious being means that we are experiencing things that arise at our six senses—the five physical senses and the sense door of the mind. We take a look at our conscious experience through the retreat, and we see that we're aware of the breath, of body sensations, of sounds, of tastes, of thoughts and emotions, sights, smells, and so forth. This is, I think, what it means to be a conscious being: that we have experience of things arising at the senses.

The Buddha gave one discourse to the monks in his time. It's called the Discourse on Totality. I'd like to read a section of it:

"Monks, I will teach you the totality of life." Isn't that brave? Someone is going to teach the totality of life. No Western philosopher ever dared make a statement like that. But the Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully, and I will speak. What is the totality of life? It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and objects of touch, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called the totality of life."

It's simple, isn't it? There are just 12 things on that list. But take a look in your experience. Is there anything that's outside that list? Sights and sounds and smell and taste and touch, mental phenomena—basically thoughts and emotions. Is there anything missing?

We like this list because it fits really well, mapping beautifully onto our meditation. As the instructions have unfolded over the days together, you've seen that we've basically brought mindfulness into almost every one of these areas. And so we relate directly with the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, thoughts, and emotions in our experience. In this, we're really examining the whole of life. Through these simple objects, we cover the totality of life.

But there's one other piece that I want to put into the list, one that I really want to draw out, and that is this function of consciousness itself. When we talk about being conscious beings, there's a sense in there that we are conscious of all these things arising. So in the Buddha's list, consciousness is one of the mental phenomena. It's not excluded. They didn't draw it out specifically. It is a mental phenomenon. And of course what we're conscious of are all these different arisings at the sense doors.

So let's take a specific example. When you are mindful of a breath, you're paying attention to an in-breath, you're conscious of it, aren't you? There's the physical sensation of the in-breath, and you're conscious of that. If you were a corpse, the same physical movements might be happening, but the consciousness wouldn't be there. When you think about it, when we breathe, the lungs expand, the diaphragm presses down, the abdomen swells outward. You could make that same movement happen on a corpse. You could stand beside it. You could press down on the lungs. This is what happens in CPR. The diaphragm would move down. The belly would rise. But that being wouldn't experience any conscious knowledge of that breath, because you are conscious. You are conscious of that breath in a different way than a corpse is.

So we say there is consciousness with each of these objects—the breath, the body sensations, the sounds, the emotions, the thoughts, the sights, tastes, and smells. So we put that in the equation. Our ongoing experience of life is consciousness with all the arisings, all the sense doors and consciousness of all of them.

So, I want to ask a question. Are these phenomena permanent or impermanent? Sight, sound, smells, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions. Permanent or impermanent?

They're impermanent. Good. I was wondering if you'd been listening.

Now, what about this consciousness piece? The word in Pali for consciousness is viññāṇa. It's the fifth of the five aggregates. The Buddha said that consciousness is also impermanent. The understanding is that when you hear a sound, as the sound arises, you're conscious of it. When the sound passes away, the consciousness of that sound also passes away. So the understanding is with this term viññāṇa, that we translate as consciousness, it arises to meet the object, and when the object passes, the consciousness also passes away.

So in the classical teachings of the Buddha, consciousness is arising and passing with each sense object. As the object arises and passes, the knowing of it also arises and passes.

So we look back at our basic situation. All the objects are coming and going, and the consciousness of them is also coming and going. Everything's changing. Where is there any security in that? Where is there any refuge? Where is there any freedom?

The Buddha said it was really important to find a refuge in life, a refuge through practice, a true security in what he called nibbāna. These are some synonyms for nibbāna from the suttas: the unconditioned, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the refuge, the beyond.

So with this total human experience of impermanence, where is there any refuge? Where can we look to find it?

I want to tell a little story. A couple of years ago, I was visiting in Yosemite Valley.

My wife's sisters had come over from Australia, and it's a great place to show foreign visitors because there's nothing like it anywhere else in the world. You see a lot of great wildlife—deer and coyotes. You hope to see a bear. We didn't see a bear, but every morning we'd go out to our car in the parking lot, and there would be signs of bears because a few car windows would get punched in every night where the bears were looking for food. Fortunately, our car windows were not punched in, but they crawled over the top of our car, and the paw prints were there in the morning.

In addition to the wildlife, there's very interesting human wildlife, too. The buses pull up, and the tourists all unload—Bermuda shorts, video camera, standard outfit. The backpackers coming out of the backcountry haven't shaved, haven't bathed for about a week. Fortunately, they have their own campground. And then there are the climbers, with some of the best rock climbing in the whole world in Yosemite Valley, including a 3,000-foot vertical face called El Capitan. There's always a bunch of climbers

with their base camp down in the valley. That's a fun culture to watch, because it's kind of a cross between the U.S. Marines and the Grateful Dead. There's nothing else like climbers.

So a lot of stuff going on in the valley, but this one was new to me. We were at the parking lot of Yosemite Falls, looking up to the falls, and there was a group of about a dozen young people, young adults in their twenties. They were in a circle, and it looked like there was a leader. I soon figured out this was like a sensitivity training exercise or a team-building exercise. One person from the group would go into the middle of the circle, and at some suggestion from the leader, the person in the center would sort of throw up their hands and fall backwards. Then they would be caught by people on the outer edge of the circle. They would be there to hold them so that they wouldn't hit the ground. This is a standard practice in team building—you learn to trust the members of your team. At least every time I saw it, somebody caught them.

But it reminded me of our meditation practice. Not just because we end up falling down a lot, which we do, but because, interestingly enough, something catches us when we fall down. So I'd like to look tonight at what it means to fall down, or you might say let go, in our practice. And then also, what is it that catches us?

I was reflecting on all the things that you all have let go of this week. There's been a lot of letting go. In some ways, this is very close to the heart of the practice. We let go of old memories. We let go of plans. We come upon body pain, and we want to take hold of it and really work it out. But we learn to let go, or another phrase, let be. We take our hands off and we let it do its own thing. Same thing in coming into relation with difficult emotions. We run into fear, anger, wanting, loneliness. We don't get in and try to work it or manipulate it. We let be. We back off. In a way, we take our hands off the control.

A lot of what's happening in letting go of our thoughts is taking our hands off the control. Thoughts are used to think about the future and fix it to make it safe. Thoughts are used to bring up the past and edit it or rework it to make it less painful. When we let go of all that activity of thought, relation to pain, relation to emotion, it's a leap, isn't it? We're letting go of the ways we usually control the world. And when we do that, we open up in a way.

I'd like to invite you to try right now this process of opening up. You don't have to go into meditation, but just as you sit with your eyes open, just lightly go through your experience. First of all, let go of any holding in your body. If there's any sense that you're holding on somewhere in your body or holding on to something in your body, let that go. The body's just relaxed and it's not gripped in any way. Let go of anything you're

thinking about. Let go of any mind state that might be problematic or you might be holding on to. Let go of your breath. You're still fully present. What's it like when you go through that letting go?

For me, I always feel a certain vulnerability when I just come into the moment. I think I don't have any protection—there's no more shielding between me and this moment, no covering anymore. There's just this bare openness to whatever's arising in the moment.

I can't control what arises. In fact, in any moment, anything could happen. Anything could happen in the next moment to any of us. And so coming into the moment, we're exposed to that uncertainty. We're wide open. We're really vulnerable.

Being willing to do that, as you've done over and over and over again this week, is a huge act of trust. Where did you find the courage to let go of all the protections and just come into this experience of life, unguarded, undefended, just open?

There's some faith, isn't there, in each of us that lets us do that—that says, when I let go completely, it's going to be okay. That the moment is basically a trustworthy experience. If we can trust in that letting go, then there's some peace in the moment.

Ajahn Chah put it this way: if you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace.

The Buddha said something similar. He said, "The stilling of all formations, the letting go of all attachments—that is nibbana. That is the unconditioned, the deathless." So this sense of stillness, of letting go, of peacefulness—we're coming close to nibbana when we do that.

So let's look back again at our basic situation. We have this openness, and we contact again that truth that life is nothing but these arisings at all the sense doors. It was like this in the past. It's like this now. It's going to be like that forever into the future. Could it ever be any different? When you awaken, is it going to be any different? If you were a Buddha, would it be any different? There are still going to be things coming and going at all the sense doors. That never changes.

So it's kind of like no matter where we are along the path—a beginner or fully enlightened—it's like things are just popping up on a movie screen. You're sitting in front of a screen and the projector is showing you all the elements of your life from birth onward. So there's mother, there's body, there's father, there's grade school. There's gradu-

ation. There's career. There's income tax returns. There's mindfulness of breathing. There's the whole Buddhist path. There's Britney Spears. All the elements of life are just popping up in front of us.

Some things are really beautiful and attractive. Mother was very attractive in the beginning of our life, essential. So when things are beautiful and attractive, we tend to reach out and hold on so they don't pass away. And some things are frightening. Maybe the first day of grade school, certainly income tax returns. So we take hold of those things, we grasp them, and we push them away so we don't have to experience the pain of them.

If we hold on to what's attractive and beautiful, because it's impermanent, it's going to pass, but we're left holding on, so there's suffering. If we take hold of something that's frightening, we're suffering already from the fear of it. We've grasped it, it's scary, and we're suffering. So either way, if we get involved in grasping the beautiful or the unbeautiful, we get involved with suffering.

Existence is always a mix of the beautiful and the unattractive. And if we develop that habit of clinging, we will always be involved in suffering.

The second point is that as we make a habit of this kind of relationship to objects, we distort the mind. It almost feels like the very awareness gets bent toward objects because we're so used to clinging to them. It's almost as though it makes a crease in the mind—the mind gets bent over with time out of this habit. That crease sort of perpetuates the leaning forward into experience and perpetuates the grasping. It becomes ingrained.

What happens when we come into meditation is that we start to undo that crease in the mind. We start to restore a proper relationship to arising phenomena through the practice of not grasping at them anymore. This develops because we activate mindfulness. Mindfulness can see the object clearly, and then the wisdom part also learns to see the grasping. We start to learn that if we grasp at anything, we get involved with suffering.

Through the clear seeing of meditation, we start not to cling. The mind starts to find its natural balance and straightens out that fold, that habit of leaning into experience. As we restore this natural state of mind through non-grasping, we come back to awareness's fullness in itself, its self-sufficiency. We get more and more confidence that we can let go, that we don't need to lean into objects for security.

When I look at great spiritual beings, I get the sense that they've released a long way into this kind of awareness. Somebody like the Dalai Lama really strikes me like this. He was honored a few years ago at a gathering in Virginia for Nobel Peace Prize laureates. It was all heavyweights—His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa, Rigoberta Menchú who had done great peace work in Central America, and a few other living laureates. A very dignified and august assembly.

At some point in the conference, they were taken outside to have their photograph taken as a group. The Dalai Lama was on the upper tier, standing right behind Desmond Tutu. There happened to be a photographer with a quick hand on the lens who captured this particular moment: As they were posing for this very solemn picture, the Dalai Lama reached down and yanked the cap off of Desmond Tutu's head. The photographer snapped the picture just at that moment, so you get Desmond Tutu going, "What? What happened to my cap?" And the Dalai Lama behind him, holding the cap with his face just bursting with this big belly laugh.

What a kid. He's just a kid at heart. So much trust, so much confidence. He's released in something that's not ego. He's released into this awareness, this openness.

When we release into that, we can feel that awareness has an effortless quality. Rodney was talking about this this morning. We don't have to work to be aware. If we just sit here and we're not distracted, awareness does its thing. It reveals all the arisings at the six senses. We point to this when we give the instructions for sounds: Notice how, as you open to sounds, the hearing takes place without doing anything. We start to see the very nature of the mind is this awareness. We don't have to fabricate it. We don't have to call it up. As you just sit here, there's no way you cannot hear the sounds.

I'm using the word awareness at this point, and I've also talked about mindfulness and consciousness. At this point, people often are curious: what's the difference between mindfulness, awareness, and consciousness? I want to go into this vocabulary a little bit.

The word awareness has no counterpart in Pali. In the teachings of the Buddha, there's no word in the Pali language that we need to translate by awareness. There's the word sati, which we translate by mindfulness, and there's the word viññāṇa, which we translate by consciousness, but there's no third word that we need awareness for. So let's talk about mindfulness and consciousness, then we'll talk about how we use awareness.

The term sati or mindfulness means—I think we've said it a few times—knowing what our experience is. If you're breathing in, you know you're breathing in. If you're feeling tingling in the body, you know it's tingling. If you're hearing a sound, you know you're hearing. If you're experiencing a mood of happiness, you know it's happiness.

So we say that mindfulness has this intelligent quality. It's looking on at our experience and understanding what it is. This is actually the start of wisdom. Ajahn Buddhadasa, who we all spent time with in Thailand, used to talk about this in a word he created: *satipanya*. *Sati* means mindfulness, *panya* means wisdom. He conjoined them, hyphenated them, saying this is mindfulness-wisdom, all one word acting together. So mindfulness has this intelligent quality.

Consciousness is just the bare knowing of the sense data. You hear that snap, and just that bare registration before any word, before you're even identifying it as a sound—just the holding of that, that's consciousness. It's a mechanical thing. It doesn't have any particular intelligence with it. You could say it's stupid, if you like.

The nice thing about consciousness is it's really spontaneous. You don't have to do anything to be conscious. It just happens by itself. The nice thing about mindfulness is it has an intelligence, a wisdom aspect.

In English, we get kind of tricky around this word *awareness*. We use it to bridge mindfulness and consciousness. Sometimes we mean mindfulness, sometimes we mean consciousness. But really, the way I use awareness, I use it to mean someplace that blends mindfulness and consciousness. Because awareness has the spontaneous quality of consciousness, but it has wisdom in it too. When you say you're aware, you realize there's an intelligence there. So you can think of awareness as a spontaneous intelligence. It has both aspects.

In the Thai forest tradition, this quality is often called our true nature. This is from Ajahn Mahabua, the Thai forest master: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws." Isn't that interesting? "It knows and does not die." So awareness has a connection with deathlessness, which is a synonym for *nibbana*.

How can we connect with this in our practice? Can we discover it? Can we explore it?

For this I want to turn to one of the great philosophers of our age: Calvin and Hobbes. This strip came out around Christmas time one year. They were walking through the woods together, snow on the ground, and Calvin was saying to Hobbes,

"This whole Santa Claus thing just doesn't make sense. Why all the secrecy? Why all the mystery? If this guy exists, why doesn't he ever show himself and prove it? And if he doesn't exist, what's the meaning of all this?"

And Hobbes says, "I don't know. Isn't this some kind of religious holiday?"

And Calvin says, "Yeah, but actually I've got the same questions about God." That's good, isn't it? If there's a God, why doesn't he show himself and prove it? And if he doesn't exist, what's the meaning of all this? Good question.

When we talk about faith and trust in Buddhism, it's really helpful to ask: What is it that we have faith in? What do we trust in? You might say nature or pure nature or Dharma or God or something like that. But I wonder if it's possible to connect with it. I wonder if it's possible to feel it so that you know it directly.

I would suggest that it can't be seen through our eyes. Because if it could be seen, it would be an existing thing and it would be impermanent. And similarly, for the same reason, it can't be touched with our body. It can't be heard with our ears. Whatever is unconditioned, whatever is beyond change, it has to be invisible.

It has to be intangible. It has to be silent.

Well, awareness kind of fits that bill, doesn't it? It has those qualities.

This is from a Christian contemplative, Angelus Silesius: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear."

I'm going to read that one more time. There's a lot in it. "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear."

Two things here. The deathless is found in the here and now. Nowhere else. Always in the here and now. The second thing is that opening to it is connected with relaxing. The less you reach for it, the more it appears. So the more we relax—not striving, not doing, again as Rodney was pointing to this morning—the more it opens up, the more we touch it easily.

So what is unchanging? Again, we look at our practice, and throughout the week we've been changing the instructions: breath, body, sounds, thoughts, emotions, tastes. But there's one common theme through all the instructions, and that is paying attention. So again, maybe the awareness is kind of the thread that links all these arisings together. Maybe the awareness is the unchanging part.

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "I met my guru when I was 34, and I realized by 37. That's a good practice. Pleasure and pain lost their sway over me. I was free from desire and fear. I found myself full, needing nothing. I saw that in the ocean of pure awareness, the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside beginninglessly and endlessly. There is a mysterious power that looks after them. That power is awareness, life, God, whatever name you give it. It is the foundation and ultimate support of all that is."

Ajahn Jumnian is another living Thai master. I think he's about 65 now. He comes out to Spirit Rock every year in late May. So I've had a lot of contact with him over the years, and he is an amazing being. He has more energy than anybody I know 20 years younger, and he's always happy. I've never seen him not happy. He said, in fact, that he has not had any anger for 25 years. Impressive. And you feel that in his spirit. When you just tune into his energy, he's always energized and he's always happy.

He doesn't know a lot of English. He has a translator when he teaches, but this is one of his teachings in English. He's in front of a group and he wants to demonstrate the heart of the Dharma. And he goes, "Empty, empty, happy, happy." That's his transmission. Empty and happy.

Here's a quote from Ajahn Jumnian that he gave in a talk at Spirit Rock: "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and the word he used for great awareness was mahasati, literally great mindfulness—"The best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure awareness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away."

Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless. Again, the equation of the deathless with this pure awareness.

Again from Ajahn Mahabua: "There's no escaping this truth. Whatever arises has to vanish. Whatever is true—that is, a natural principle in and of itself—won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind. All that remains is simple awareness, utterly pure."

So we see from all these different sources the equation of awareness with the deathless, the undying, always available beyond change.

But I want to go back to something I said earlier, which was that the Buddha said that consciousness is impermanent. Consciousness arises with the object, and as the object fades, consciousness passes away. So how can we resolve these two? Awareness is the deathless, or consciousness is impermanent. This really concerned me for quite a while in my practice, and so I want to share with you the kind of resolution that I came to. It may work for you or it may not, but I'll tell you the image that came to me.

I studied physics in college, and there are a few ways to demonstrate a proof in physics. One is mathematically—if you can prove it mathematically, that stands. Another way is experimentally—if you can conduct an experiment that's reproducible, that will establish a principle. And another way is what my professor called a thought experiment, a gedanken experiment from the German. And if you could carry out an imaginary experiment and based on what you know, predict the outcome logically, that could also be a method of proof.

So I'd like us to go into a gedanken experiment tonight on behalf of the Dharma. What I'd like you to do is imagine you're in outer space. You're sort of on the edge of our solar system, and your back is to the sun. The sun's behind you. Now, let's pretend we don't have to worry about spacesuits and goggles and reflectors and all that, but you're just out there. You're looking away from the sun, and just for the purpose of the experiment, let's say you're looking into a part of the sky where there are no stars.

What do you see? Back is to the sun, looking into the sky, no stars. What's your visual experience?

Black, right? Is this the black that's light reflected off a black object? Or is this the black that's the absence of any light? It's the absence of any light, isn't it?

Is the space in front of you actually devoid of light? Your back is to the sun. No, the sun's rays are filling that space, aren't they? So it's pervaded—that space is pervaded by light—but you're not seeing any light.

Now, all of a sudden, a meteor shoots up from below you. It goes zipping across your field of vision. Do you see it? Yeah. There's like this bright flash in front of your eyes for a minute. Where's the light coming from? The sun. The sun's light illuminates the meteor, and then it creates this bright flash in your eye. And then it's gone, right? The meteor arises, flashes, and then it passes through. It's gone, and then you're back with black.

I'm going to suggest that that flashing of light from the meteor is consciousness, and that the sunlight that's continually pervading empty space is awareness, the deathless awareness. Will you buy it?

It's pervading, but you don't see it. The unconditioned, the deathless, the ever-present is there, but we don't see it.

And the only way we know that it's there is that it's reflected when a phenomenon arises. That reflection is the proof that it was there from the beginning.

Now, sometimes it may be possible in a moment of meditation to turn back, face in the other direction, and see the full radiance of the sun directly. That may be possible. But most of the time we don't. We're surrounded, we're pervaded by this unconditioned radiance, but we only know it from its reflection.

So how can we relate with this in our practice? We start to get a sense of this true nature when the demands of the I are not so strong, when we're not so caught up in liking and disliking, desire and aversion. There's a relative sense of ease. At a time like that, you're really in the present moment. At a time like that, take a look at this quality of awareness, at what it's like when you're really undistracted.

It's been compared to vast space, which is one reason that the sunlight analogy works well. It's been compared to space in that it's very wide open. In fact, do you feel any boundaries or limits in your awareness? Is there an edge to it anywhere? No. So like space, it's unbounded. It feels limitless.

Physical space accommodates all the objects that arise. Our awareness accommodates all the phenomena of the senses that arise. But there's one key difference. This inner space has a quality that the physical space doesn't, and that is the quality of sentience, of consciousness, of cognizance. This inner space of awareness illuminates its arisings. It reveals them. The sights, the sounds, the smells, the tastes, the touch—they're revealed through this awareness. Physical space doesn't have that knowing quality. It's dumb. It doesn't have a consciousness aspect.

What we are most fundamentally is this empty space of knowing, this vast spaciousness whose very nature is cognizance. As we start to let that truth sink in, the power is that it shifts our identity.

Usually we're preoccupied with identifying ourselves with particulars. I'm an angry person, or I'm a happy person, or I'm too short, or I'm too thin, or I'm feeling lonely, or I'm feeling excited. And all these things are what Carol last night talked about as personality view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. They're all ways that we identify, and because we're identifying with things that are impermanent, we get involved in suffering when we make our personality view hook up with these impermanent characteristics.

So in this shift of identity, we unhook from the particulars. We don't grasp on to the arisings, but we let that sense of our center of gravity shift to this vast, open awareness that holds all the comings and goings, but itself is not coming and going. So we shift our identity to this deathless quality.

This quality—it's a dimension within us that's beyond change. When we make that shift, you can start to feel that in your being. It gives us a place of steadiness. It's the deathless. What else could be steadier? It's consistent. It's beyond change. What could be more consistent? And it's peaceful. It contains the arising and passing, but it itself is not arising and passing.

As we relax in that, it moves us into a place of non-grasping. We don't need to get involved with the particular arisings and passings. We simply let them take place within this vast space. We're still in touch with it. We're not denying anything. We're not out of touch. But we're not holding on to it.

And we start to see that this space of awareness is intrinsically free—free of desire, free of aversion, and free of confusion.

And this is not a freedom that we have to go a long way down the meditation track to touch. We can touch it here and now. It's available here and now because we have it already. It's not something we have to manufacture. It's our most basic nature. It is the fundamental truth of our existence as sentient beings.

So that means there's a dimension in our being that's already free right now. Not that we have to wait for many, many eons to discover freedom. There's a freedom already active within us. And the more we can realize that, the more we feel that freedom start to permeate our being. The only thing we have to do to be there is to stop grasping. We stop grasping and we're in it. It's that close to us.

So that's why we put the emphasis on elements like relaxing, trusting, ceasing from wanting, ceasing from aversion. When we move into that non-activity, we drop into the nature of mind and we're in that pure, deathless awareness.

It's sometimes compared to a mirror, because a mirror will reflect anything that's put in front of it. You put something really beautiful in front of a mirror, it reflects it perfectly. You put something really unappealing in front of a mirror, it reflects it perfectly. The mirror doesn't care. It's completely impartial. The same way with awareness. It can hold everything, and it really doesn't have a preference for the beautiful or the unbeautiful.

Anything you put in front of a mirror doesn't harm it. Anything that takes place within pure awareness never actually harms or corrupts the purity of that awareness. It can cover it over, but it can't really break it or affect it.

For me, this has been a really inspiring part of my path for the last several years, to realize that this intrinsic freedom is available in any moment when I put down grasping. It's felt here and now. And as we feel it, it furthers the path. So we don't have to wait for many, many lifetimes to touch an element of freedom.

Rumi has a poem about this state and also about how when we get identified with particulars, it leads into bondage. It's called "Tending Two Shops":

Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere and you have eyes that judge distances, how high, how low. You own two shops and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller. Checkmate this way. Checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish.

Each of us really is the free-swimming fish of awareness, but we tend to put our identity again and again in the transient. When we start to put the identity into the deathless, then we move into that place of refuge. And when I say put the identity there, we don't have to make an "I" about it. It's not like we found a new location for the self. There's no reason to put the "I" around awareness because there's nothing individual about this awareness. This awareness is completely impersonal. It's a building block of the universe. It's the same in all sentient beings.

Huang Po said that human beings and all wriggling things are possessed of this great nirvanic nature. So us and the frogs and the worms—it's the same nature. So we don't have to make an "I" out of it. It's not a Guy nature or a Carol nature or a Rodney nature. It's just nature. So just awareness.

But that's where we start to find our center of gravity. When we connect again and again with this spaciousness and cognizance, spaciousness and consciousness, and recognize it as our nature, then it's said that all the wholesome qualities of the heart and mind flower from that recognition.

And so it's said that the union of emptiness and consciousness is unimpeded warmth, unimpeded caring. So this emptiness, this knowing, is not a cold place, but it's a place that unfolds all the beautiful qualities of heart and mind. And how it unfolds them depends on the situation. If we're with someone who's suffering, the unfolding is compassion.

If we're with someone who's happy, the unfolding is sympathetic joy. If we're just with ourselves and in touch with the emptiness, the unfolding may be equanimity. If we're in a big crowd, the unfolding may be loving kindness. If we have to make a decision, the unfolding may be wisdom. All the qualities come out just as they're needed from this space of emptiness and cognizance.

Once you get the intuitive sense of this, you can make this a practice. We sometimes say that this practice is that of resting in awareness. But sometimes this is misunderstood. People think that they're going to find a destination of awareness that's separate from the comings and goings. So they look to freeze some experience that's separate from phenomena. That's not it.

The awareness continues to illuminate all the arisings. So you don't look for someplace different than that. You look for the space that holds it all. And you're still in touch with the moment and with change. All of it happens within this space, but there's a sense—there's a pervasive sense of ease, openness, relaxation, and stillness.

This is again from Ajahn Buddhadasa: "This emptiness is self-existent. Nothing can touch it, concoct it, or improve it. This is the eternal state, for it knows neither birth nor death. Once the mind is rid of delusion, it discovers its primal state, the true original mind, which is satipaññā, mindfulness wisdom."

And this expression of trust in this true nature, of openness and relaxing in the true nature, becomes a practice all of its own. It is the practice of faith in each moment, opening to that vulnerability, the bareness, the nakedness, and the trusting in life to hold us. This really is tuning our being to the flavor of nibbāna.

I'll just close with a quotation from the Buddha. He was talking to a monk named Piṅgiya, and he was talking to him about the power of the practice of faith. He said, "Piṅgiya, other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. Vakkali, Bhadravudha, and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death.

CHAPTER 5

Judging Ourselves

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

> *Guy Armstrong addresses one of the most pervasive forms of aversion we encounter in practice: self-judgment. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching on māna (conceit or comparing mind), he explores how our tendency to judge ourselves as superior, inferior, or equal creates suffering and undermines our spiritual development. Armstrong explains that this comparing mind, one of the ten fetters, stems from existential insecurity and the search for solid reference points in an inherently impermanent world.*
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> *The talk offers practical methods for working with self-judgment in meditation, including mindfulness techniques, questioning the validity of judgmental thoughts, and developing loving-kindness toward ourselves. Armstrong emphasizes that these patterns of self-criticism are mental formations (saṅkhāras) arising from causes and conditions, not fixed aspects of our identity. He draws on teachings about anattā (not-self) to show how understanding the selfless nature of experience can free us from identification with judgmental thoughts.*
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> *The discussion includes guidance on accepting our meditation practice as it is, rather than comparing ourselves to idealized standards. Armstrong concludes with a teaching from Suzuki Roshi about the four types of horses, illustrating how those who struggle most in practice may actually have the greatest potential for genuine understanding and transformation.*

Last night Kamala talked about the hindrances, and in her talk about the hindrances there's one that has always fascinated me because it seems to play such a central role in my life: aversion.

One of the fascinating things about aversion is how many different forms of it there are. In retreat, one of the really common forms of aversion that arises is aversion directed toward ourselves. We find that there are ways that we don't like ourselves very much, we don't feel good about ourselves, and we judge ourselves. Especially in this context of silence and aloneness, these kinds of thoughts and the feelings that come with them often percolate right up to the top of the subconscious chatter that we don't often tune into, but in the silence we do.

So we start hearing thoughts that tell us things like: I'm not good enough, or I'm not smart enough, I'm not a good enough yogi, I'm not loving enough. Or I'm too critical, or I'm too neurotic. You may have a few more of your own.

This habit is based in a very powerful and deep-rooted tendency of mind that the Buddha called, in Pali, mana. Mana is usually translated as conceit, but an equally good translation is comparing. It's one of the ten fetters that bind us to samsara.

The Buddha said that it has three forms. This comparing mind expresses itself in three different modes. One is the mode "I'm better than someone else." This is the normal sense of conceit in English, which gives rise to feelings of pride and arrogance and superiority.

The second mode of conceit or comparing is the thought "I'm worse than" or "I'm inferior to." This is the source of a lot of suffering because basically we don't really want to be inferior to anybody. The ego wants to be the king or queen of the world. So this is a painful form of thinking or belief.

But there's a third form of comparing which says "I'm equal to." This is kind of a shock in the West to think that "I'm equal to" is also a form of conceit or comparing. Our society is so steeped in democratic ideals that we take that as a gospel truth. As the Constitution said, all humans are created equal, so I must be equal to everyone else. But in fact, this is also a projection of mind. It's an attempt to define ourselves and a projection onto reality. The sense of superior, inferior, and equal don't exist in the intrinsic nature of things. These are concepts and projections.

The source of this comparing mind seems to be something very fundamental to human existence because it's so common and so deep-rooted. I believe that it lies in an existential insecurity that we all feel. Whether we are conscious of it or not, I believe that at different points in our development, we all got the sense that the world is essentially open and unbounded and unfixed. Somewhere that came through. We talk about the unreliability of phenomena. I think we know it on a really deep level, and it's the source of our basic insecurity in life.

So in this situation of no fixed security, I think that we have tried to find security through this root of the comparing mind. It's as though we have an intuitive knowledge that I am not solid enough. That's an unsettling proposition. So I believe that we look around, and looking outside of ourselves, it looks like everybody else is much more solid. You may notice that in the meditation hall. It seems like everyone else is sitting like a Buddha, but for me. So I think we project a kind of solidity externally. Everybody else seems so together, such consistent yogis, so calm. The turmoil is in here.

Well, maybe if I reference myself to them, I'll find some solidity. This may be the source of that instinct to compare, to find a seeming security through a reference point outside of ourselves. So this comparing mind is rooted in fear and insecurity.

This particular fetter, the Buddha said, is not ended until arahantship. This tendency to form self by comparison will be with us for a long time. So it's very helpful to get familiar with the way that it works and how to work with it in practice.

This becomes a painful tendency of mind when we believe in it, when we believe that our overall value as a person can be summed up in this superior or inferior attitude. The superior side seems to offer some comfort, but the problem is because it isn't really true, it can always be undermined. So if we've clung to that view, we have to hold on and protect it. If we've fallen into the opposite view, the view of inferiority, then we are constantly feeling down on ourselves, undermining ourselves, criticizing ourselves. The view of equality is much less problematic. It doesn't really come up a lot as a cause of suffering.

So it's just to be aware when that projection is going on as well.

This is a statement from the commentaries that will give you a sense of how central this tendency of conceit is viewed in the tradition: "The world, enveloped in the darkness of the defilements, is covered by seven veils—lust, hatred, delusion, conceit, views, ignorance, and immoral conduct. Having removed these veils, the Buddha abides generating light all around."

So this factor of conceit or comparing is in quite rich company here, elevated to the same status as lust and hatred and ignorance. It's a very central part of the mind.

When we form these beliefs about ourselves, this could be a type of what's called personality view—forming a conclusion about ourselves and clinging to it as a false kind of security. It's one of the more painful kinds of views that we can form, views particularly about ourselves. It comes out of ego, it strengthens ego, and it's a painful place for ego.

When we judge ourselves, we judge ourselves on different criteria. Sometimes we get embarrassed about our mind. This happened to me when I first read about Buddhism. I was about nineteen years old, in university, and the only books I could find at the time were by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki. So I started reading all that I could find, mostly on Zen at that time.

The writings tended to be quite idealistic. They really centered on the nature of the enlightened mind—the Buddha's mind or the mind of the Zen masters, both ancient and modern. They presented the picture of these minds that were completely unruffled by any external circumstance, that always abided in freedom—no problems whatsoever, no untidy emotions, no reactive thoughts, no inner problems or conflict.

As I read this literature and got so inspired by it, I took it very idealistically. I thought that I should measure up to that kind of ideal myself. Never mind that I hadn't done any practice. Never mind that I wasn't anywhere close to enlightenment. I just thought I should be emotionally clear. I began to suppress the troublesome emotions that came up in me. That led to a deadening cycle for me until I encountered actual practice and some people who could put those emotions in a bigger context.

Don Juan, the teacher of Carlos Castaneda, had a teaching on this subject that I like. I don't have the exact quote, but it was something like: "You started out trying to convince yourself that you didn't want anything, but it ended up that you couldn't enjoy anything." That's the kind of deadening that can happen from this kind of idealism, where we think we should measure up to some archetypal way of being, but we're not really there yet.

So in dharma practice, it's always good to be skeptical about any ideal about how you should be feeling. There is no way that you should be feeling. The emotional life is so wide and so varied, and it's all fine. It's all just expressions of our nature. The only guidelines, the only "shoulds" within the path are around conduct. It's helpful to refrain from unskillful conduct. But leave the mind wide open to feel whatever is there.

Sometimes we're embarrassed about our minds, sometimes we're embarrassed about our bodies. I think this is especially difficult for women in this culture, although it's becoming more that way for men. I don't know if you've tuned into that, but the images of male beauty are also starting to pervade the media—the six-pack abs, the big biceps, and so forth. But women have had to deal with this for a lot longer.

There's a lot of influence through Hollywood, through television, through advertising—essentially through the media—where one's self-worth gets identified with one's physical appearance. Unless you look like Meg Ryan or Halle Berry or Lucy Liu, you're not okay, not good enough. Never mind all the work it took to get them to look the way they do in films.

Oprah Winfrey has a real interest in transformation, and I really appreciate a lot of the spirit of her work. In her magazine O, a couple of years ago, she did an exposé of the cover girl image. What she allowed to show in the pictures was the way she looked

before makeup, the makeup process, and the way she looked after makeup in getting ready for a photo shoot for the magazine cover. I thought that was very brave of her, because when she's in public on her TV show and in the magazine she looks great—she doesn't look her age, she looks very elegant and well turned out. But in this spread she showed the before pictures.

It was very interesting because she looked like a pretty typical middle-aged woman. And then at each step—the makeup, the hair stylist, and the clothing—all of a sudden she looked like a Hollywood personality. So what do we compare ourselves to? Usually it's the cover girl or cover boy. It's not the before shots because we don't get to see those. So it's misleading from the very beginning, and then we compare ourselves to a false ideal.

So in working with the judging mind, it's really helpful to have some faith that this self-judgment, which can be so entangling, is just a mental creation. It is not the way things are.

The Dalai Lama's response reveals something profound about how this self-judgment operates. It's not the truth of things. As the Buddha taught: "When any practitioners, on the basis of form—the body—which is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change, regard themselves thus: 'I am superior,' or 'I am equal,' or 'I am inferior,' what is that due to apart from not seeing things as they really are?"

This whole movement of conceit based on our appearance is not seeing things as they really are. The Buddha then applies the same teaching to the other four aggregates, the mental formations. We could say the same thing about mind states. When we compare ourselves on the basis of our mental states and declare ourselves superior, equal, or inferior, the Buddha asks: what is that due to but not seeing things as they really are?

Our practice of vipassana is precisely to see things as they really are. We need to trust that when we can do that, it cuts through this web of comparing. It cuts through the web of conceit. All this tangle of judgmental thinking is completely off the mark, pervaded with delusion.

The Dalai Lama came to IMS in the late 1970s and gave a public talk here. This was before he became quite so famous, though even then he had a police escort out to the center. That was the first time the chief of police of Barre really gained some respect for us—he got to provide an armed escort for an international dignitary, which kind of put us on the map in his mind.

After the Dalai Lama's talk, he took questions from the audience. Someone asked him about self-judging: "I feel so worthless in my life and in my practice. I feel like I don't really amount to anything. What can you tell me about how to work with that?"

The Dalai Lama gave a very direct answer. He looked the young man in the eye and said simply: "You are wrong." He doesn't contradict people very often, usually trying to find the germ of truth in what they're saying, but he said clearly: "You are wrong. That is not the way it is. Everything that appears on this earth, every being that appears, has value and is precious. The birds, the creatures—how could a human being not have that preciousness?"

In the Tibetan tradition, they often teach the concept of precious human birth—how fortunate we are to be in this body, to have the chance to hear the Dharma. They teach this before they'll even talk about suffering, so that when suffering comes, there's this beautiful container to hold it in, a container that values every single living being, every single practitioner.

This wasn't the last time such a question arose for His Holiness. Years later, probably in the 1990s, there was a meeting in Dharamsala, India, at his home, between Western teachers of Buddhism and the Dalai Lama. The Western teachers raised this as a persistent issue: "Your Holiness, there are many people who come to us, who meditate, who are plagued by these feelings of worthlessness, of not valuing or appreciating themselves. How can we help them work with this?"

The Dalai Lama turned to his translator and asked, "What are they talking about?" He had to have the translator go back and forth several times with the Western teachers because he really couldn't wrap his mind around this concept that people would feel their lives were not of value. Finally, when he understood, he went around the circle to each Western teacher asking, "Is this part of your experience? Can you relate to this?" And each teacher said yes, they could relate to it as part of their experience.

I think there's a real epidemic of worthlessness in the West. Our communities have broken down, our traditions have fallen apart. In our generations, we're really struggling to find our way and put ourselves back together in a way that traditional societies haven't had to do. This is new work that humans are doing, and it's really widespread.

I ran into this early on in my own practice. As I mentioned, the solitude and silence can tend to bring it out. I was on a retreat, and during walking meditation, I started to feel this self-judging reflected in my thoughts. I wasn't very comfortable with it—I was embarrassed by the fact that I was judging myself in this way.

So I went to my next interview with my teacher. He asked how things were going, and I said, "Well, I'm having some hindrances." I thought we could quickly move past that and get on to some real dharma. But he was persistent.

He said, "Oh, what kind of hindrance?"

I said, "Well, I'm having some aversive thoughts."

I thought that would take care of it, right? I named the hindrance and we would go on and talk about some real dharma. But then he said, "Well, what are the thoughts?"

And I had to say, "Well, I'm feeling like nobody likes me. Feeling really lonely and unlikable."

And he could tell that I was really feeling it. This was not just a superficial chatty conversation. He could feel the pain of it. And so he sat up very straight and he said, "What you're seeing is not the way it is. Your problem is that you don't accept yourself."

And that was mostly the end of the interview. Your problem is that you don't accept yourself.

So that theme of accepting myself became my koan for the next few years. I really didn't know what it meant because I thought in Buddhism there was no self. How can I accept myself when there isn't one? There's not a self to accept or reject. So I had to struggle with it. I thought, am I supposed to find this little guy that's deep inside me and then embrace him? Is that what's supposed to happen? I couldn't do that. Never got a hold of the guy.

And so continuing to just hang out with that question, what I came to see is that accepting ourselves really means that we accept each moment of our experience just the way it is. And it's okay that it's that way. So we do this work of acceptance moment after moment after moment when we can be with the way things are with equanimity, with some ease.

It's one reason that you often hear us say, just open to the moment, feel it directly, accept it. Accept what's happening in the mind, accept what's happening in the body, just the way it is. Acceptance doesn't mean that we have to do something active. Sometimes that's a little misleading. Then we can get into the kind of, well, how do I actually accept?

What we really mean by accept is stop resisting. Just drop the resistance to it. Drop the aversion to it. That's all you need to do. You don't have to actually do anything positive. It means to drop the resistance to your inner experience.

It also doesn't mean that you have to accept the world outside, a world that you may have been hurt by or victimized by in many different ways. It doesn't mean that we condone the harm that's going on in the world. It's very appropriate, once you engage in life again, to take action to right the injustice, to right the harms that are happening in the world where it's possible. But in this context, the inner work of acceptance means we stop resisting the experience in our hearts, the experience in our minds, the experience in our bodies. Because as long as we resist it, we're just creating more conflict. It's to take out that element of resistance in the inner life.

Looking back on my experience with those years of working with self-acceptance, I see now that at the time I thought I was unhappy because I wasn't loved or I wasn't lovable. But now I think what was happening is that I was making myself unhappy by thinking those thoughts and believing them. So the source of the unhappiness was confused. But those thoughts created a weight, created a burden in my mind.

And this kind of self-judging can be very oppressive. It's got aspects of several of the hindrances. There's the quality of disliking, first of all. We're disliking something about our experience. There's an element of fear because we're afraid that it's true. We're afraid that the judgments are true and we're afraid that other people are going to see it and see this dark secret of ours, of our inadequacy. There's an element of self-doubt. We doubt our ability to handle what we're feeling. We doubt our ability to grow beyond it. We doubt our ability to be free of it. And there's also within it a fixed view because we believe in this fixed concept about ourselves. So we're caught in all those forms of hindrance.

Underneath the thoughts, the basic feeling is something like, "I'm not good enough, I'm inadequate, I'm not lovable, I'm not worthy of love," or that there's something wrong with me. The rest of the world looks okay, but there's something wrong with me. I can feel it.

So to offset it, we often engage in a lot of searching for validation from outside. You can see that in relationship—a kind of craving for affirmation or attention, for validation. Even in retreat this can come up.

When I was in the early years of my practice, I was very self-conscious about my walking meditation. I was very diligent with my walking. I tried to do it really well, but I was also wondering if anybody else was noticing. I sort of kept hoping that somebody would someday compliment me on my walking practice. At the end of the retreat, that somebody might come up and say something. Finally, at the end of one retreat, somebody did. They came up and said, "Boy, you did a lot of walking in this retreat, didn't you?" That was as close as I ever got to a compliment.

But the problem is that even if we do get the outside affirmation, it doesn't fill the hole. It doesn't erase the doubt because we've created the view. We really are the author of that view, and we believe in it. So we really believe it's true even if people outside tell us that it's not true. Even if people tell us that we're lovable or lovely or beautiful, we can't quite take it in.

Of course, we want everybody to love us, to provide that validation, but it doesn't happen like that. It doesn't happen like that for anybody. As the Buddha said, praise and blame always alternate. These are worldly conditions that always go back and forth. I think of the Dalai Lama as one of the most lovable beings in the world, and yet there are people who do not like him.

A friend of mine teaches English as a second language in Berkeley. Some of her students are from mainland China and have been in this country not so very long. She said that she was teaching a group of them and would bring up the Dalai Lama as an example of a great person or a lot of love or a lot of compassion to try and slip a little Dharma into her English teaching. She said that she would see that these students from mainland China would kind of bristle when she would mention the Dalai Lama. And finally, one of them raised her hand and said, "Oh, you know, teacher, he is not a very good man. He is a separatist. He's a splittist." And then she understood that they had heard the news from the Chinese government that's very, very critical of him because of his political defense of Tibet and Tibet's autonomy.

So a lot of people in the world hate the Dalai Lama. I think that's probably true. That's probably a fair thing to say. So even someone like the Dalai Lama is not loved everywhere. But my friend said that over time, she tried to talk more and more about how his image had become formed that way, and these students of hers started to warm up to him and could see that there was goodness in him.

Even the Buddha was not universally loved. That seems hard to understand, but it's true—he aroused a lot of jealousy. A lot of people were jealous of his strength, of his power, of his wisdom, of the following that he attracted. His cousin tried to kill him, essentially, out of jealousy. Some people were threatened by his popularity, the way Jesus' popularity threatened some of the vested interests of his day. And some people just didn't connect.

There's a very interesting story. Just after the Buddha got enlightened and had decided to go teach, he was walking from Bodh Gaya to Sarnath, where he was going to deliver his first sermon. He passed a man on the road, and he explained to this man that he had just become fully enlightened and that he was incomparable in all the worlds in his level of understanding. The man just kind of looked at him strangely and

said, "May it be so, friend," and sort of detoured around him and just kept going. You meet a lot of sadhus on the roads in India, and not all of them are very together. That's probably what he thought.

So when there's this feeling of inadequacy, of unworthiness, it can often make us withdraw from life because of the sense of fear—the fear that it's not really safe to engage in life. Because if we really engage in life, then we're subject to criticism, we're subject to failure. The reason that criticism and failure take on so much weight with this inadequacy is that they re-stimulate this inner feeling. It's not that it's a bad thing to fail. It's not that it's such a bad thing to be criticized.

Everyone gets criticized. Praise and blame always alternate. The problem is that the criticism or the failure tends to trigger this deep feeling of inadequacy and bring it to life. And then we're right back in the thick of it, which can be a terrifying place to be. It exposes this inner void or emptiness—a carryover of that primal insecurity.

We've defended ourselves. We've found ways to defend ourselves against feeling the rawness of this insecurity. But criticism or failure tends to reignite it in its strong form, that primal form. We're afraid to feel it because we believe it might be true. We believe there might be something really missing in us or something really wrong with the way that we're put together.

As confidence grows, we find out we can feel that feeling of inadequacy and it's not so crippling. We see it's just another emotion. It arises, it persists for a while, and it passes away. It actually doesn't mean that we're inadequate. It's just a gut feeling, just a sense. As we get more confidence, we can open to it, feel it, let it arise and pass, and it's not so disturbing. There's more equanimity around it.

So how can we work with this judging mind? I want to talk really practically for a while about ways to work with it in our meditation.

The first advice always, as with any hindrance, is when it arises, note it with mindfulness. Note the presence of the judging thought. Note any emotion that comes as a result of the feeling. You might develop a label for this pattern of thinking: "judging, judging." Then tune in and see what the feeling is within. See if you can feel it in the body. See if there's any mental coloring.

In the body, you might get in touch with a sense of contraction, if it's strong. In the mind, you might notice that oppressiveness, that combination of disliking and fear that's there in judging.

Sometimes the mindfulness is enough to create a space around the judging, and it really takes the pressure off. We don't feel so caught. We don't feel so identified. It can take the suffering out just in seeing it clearly. We start to see that we don't have to get rid of all the judging thoughts—that would be more striving, more grounds for comparing. But we just need to see them clearly. Then they lose a lot of their power.

Joseph has a really nice way of deflecting the power of these judging thoughts. He said, every time you hear one, just add the phrase, "and the sky is blue." "I'm a really crummy meditator, and the sky is blue." It'll make it lighter, honest.

But sometimes this mindfulness or the simple looking at the judgment doesn't quite take away its power. Sometimes the pain of it is still really there. Then, like with any hindrance, if mindfulness alone doesn't do the trick, it's helpful to take up one of the antidotes.

Every hindrance has an antidote. For instance, with desire—let's say with sexual desire—it's considered helpful to meditate on the unbeautiful aspects of the body. With aversion, it's helpful to develop loving kindness. With doubt, it's helpful to bring in faith by reflecting on the benefits of the Dharma that you've already felt.

So I want to talk about some reflective practices that can be useful in dealing with the judging thoughts. The first is to listen really closely to what the judging thought is saying. Tune in. It may say something like, "Nobody likes me. I can't be with three breaths in a row. I'm not in the moment enough. There's something wrong with me."

With each judging thought that you've really heard clearly, ask the question: "Is that true?" Really skeptically question the thought that comes. Because what happens is that these judging thoughts may start from some rational basis, but then they can get really murky.

I work with someone who's a therapist. We were having an interview one time, and she had recently lost a client—a client had decided to leave her and go to another therapist. She reflected at the time, "Well, I just wasn't the right fit for this person. That's fine." That's easy to hear—not the right fit.

But then as she dwelt on the leaving, she thought, "Well, the problem was I didn't have enough compassion for this person. I wasn't warm enough." And then the next cycle of thinking was, "I'm really not a loving person at all." And then the final cycle was, "I've never loved anyone and no one's ever loved me." At that point, she just collapsed. That thought was too much to bear.

The first thought was very workable—oh, it's not the right fit, different personalities. But then the spiral happened and the final thought was crushing. Now what's interesting is that the final thought is really suspicious: "I've never loved anyone and no one's ever loved me." I doubt it. That's the one that's the most painful and that really weighs on us. So question that thought. It's when it gets overblown and overgeneralized that it departs from the truth, and that's where it really hurts. It's the departure from the truth.

Something else I see is that when I compare myself to other people, other practitioners, I always compare myself to somebody who's really great at a certain quality. Have you noticed that? What, you don't have the Dalai Lama's compassion? What's wrong with you? You're really undeveloped, aren't you?

Or even here, I'll compare myself: Why don't I have Joseph's clarity? Why don't I have Carol's sense of humor? Why don't I have Kamala's heart? Why don't I have Steve's precision and energy? I always pick their very best quality. I think I should match up all along the way. What a trap—instead of honoring this beautiful array of strengths, to use it to defeat myself. Not skillful.

So take a look at these thoughts and really question them. It means to doubt the self-doubt. Doubt the doubter.

A comment like "I'm not with enough breaths in a row, so I'm not a good meditator"—that's a really misleading one. I want to ask you all: what's the right number of breaths to be with if you're a good meditator? See, we set up this bar and we compare ourselves against it, but we never really make it conscious. What is the bar? Is it five? Half? Very good. Half a breath in a row is good enough.

Or another one that's really tricky is "there's something wrong with me." Really? What? Try to find a concise answer to what is wrong with you. "There's a lot of pain." Oh, really? What's the right level of pain in a human life? What's too much? We can't answer these questions.

This whole notion of something being wrong with us is really spurious. Generally—not for everybody, but generally—we felt that at some point in our life, things were okay, and then something went wrong. So somewhere we made the transition from being okay to going wrong. And what we want to do now is make the transition from it being wrong to it being okay again.

Can it be that polarized? Can it be that on and off? Is it really possible to go from being okay to being wrong? I don't believe it is. I actually don't believe that any of us are wrong in that way. Another way I could say it is, I don't really believe any of us are broken. It's another way the feeling of being wrong sometimes comes out.

If you're broken or you're wrong, then if you're in inner work, you have to want to fix it. You have to want to fix yourself. But I question whether there's anything that's ever gone wrong in that fundamental way with anyone here. Because the fundamental nature of the universe is lawful. It's lawful. It doesn't mean that it's fair. It doesn't mean that your hurts were necessarily fair. But it is lawful in the way causes and conditions unfold in life. So to say that we're wrong means the universe went wrong somewhere. And I don't believe that.

Another way to work with these judging tendencies—this gets a little psychological, but again, if you hold it in the vein of reflective practices, it can be skillful—is to work with the sense of the judge as a sub-personality and make a separate character out of the judge. It's like the judge is one corner of your mind and has a certain way of being, has a certain personality.

So give it a face, give the judge a name, dress him up in clothes if you want, make them look silly. One of the people that I work with in California calls his judge Darth Vader. That's a great image. If you hear a female voice there, Nurse Ratched from One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest might be a good image.

Once you've made that figure, that personality out of the judge, you can send metta to that person. So try sending metta to the judge and see what happens. As you start to feel into this personality, you'll notice the judge is not a very happy character and probably could use your metta. Sometimes all that's needed to quiet the judge is that they feel some metta going in their direction.

Another thing you can do if you dialogue a little with the judge is to ask the judge to restate the criticism in a truthful way. The judge says, "Nobody loves you." And you say, "Thank you very much, Darth. Could you please restate that in a way that's really true? Because what you said isn't really true."

So these are near-term ways to work. I also want to talk about some long-term ways. The practice does make huge changes in this area.

After I'd gotten ordained in Thailand, I went to visit a monastery in Chiang Mai on my way out to a forest monastery. There was a Western monk there who'd been in robes quite a while—eleven or twelve years at that point. And I hung out with him over

a couple of days. I liked him a lot. He was a big man and very full of metta, full of metta, a lot of warmth. He spoke Thai because he'd been in Thailand quite a while. The Thai people also really appreciated him a lot.

In the mornings he would meditate, sit by his pond, do his own practice. In the afternoon he would see people, and Thai people would come to him all the time. Every day he was busy in the afternoon seeing people. Everybody felt his metta.

But as we chatted a little bit about practice, he said to me, "You know, I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred." Nine years working through his self-hatred. But when I met him, great heart of loving kindness. Huge amount of warmth. And it was clear he had done a lot of inner work.

The classical antidote to aversion, and so to judging also, is loving kindness. In the long term, metta practice is a great contribution to greater self-acceptance, greater self-love.

In Asia, metta for self is taught first because it's considered the easiest. But in the West, it's often the most difficult. As you do the loving kindness for yourself, it's really helpful to include some positive reflections on your own good qualities, on kind deeds that you've done, so that you have a sense as you begin the metta of some inner goodness that you're connecting to.

Metta for the self can be difficult, but it's very important to do it if this self-judging is part of your struggle. It may not feel like much is happening at first, but just the repeated bringing of good wishes to yourself will start to change that.

It's also really helpful if you're doing metta for yourself and it's difficult to have somebody for whom it's easy—somebody like a benefactor or a friend where the affection comes in very easily. Sometimes it's not so easy to feel the juice toward ourselves. We still want to do it because it will change us over time, but the juice may come in more easily with somebody else. So do it for the person who's easy. Connect with that real feeling of liking, of affection, of love, and then kind of borrow that and come back and do the metta for yourself again. Go back and forth.

Sometimes it's really helpful to do the loving-kindness practice for yourself at an earlier age. Have an image of yourself when you were a child or a teenager. That can connect to that innocence, that vulnerability, and that purity of the child.

The other area that's really helpful in the long term is a deeper understanding of anatta, of the selflessness of things. Because we really do see that there is no self to judge one way or the other. That really becomes understood. There is no inner essence that could be superior or inferior. There's also no one who's chosen to be this way.

Before we understand anatta, I think we assume people are the way they are because they choose to be that way. We identify their personality with some core. As we understand anatta more, we see it's not like that at all. Things are just arising out of causes and conditions. That includes this body, and that includes the patterns of our personality. Those are the things we mostly identify with—the body and the personality patterns.

In Buddhism, the personality patterns are known as sankharas. This is the fourth of the five aggregates. A common translation for sankharas in this sense is karmic formations. It means the way we act through mind, through speech, and through bodily actions. This is what makes up personality.

We come to see that all the sankharas are also just arising and passing due to prior causes and conditions. There's nothing fixed within the whole flow or stream of personality. Personality is like a changing river. There are karmic patterns because of ways that we've invested our energy in the past. The sankharas arise due to grooves in the mind set up by past behavior. That's called old karma. But we have the ability to influence the karma in this new moment, and that changes the stream of personality. That's what the path is about. The path is about new karma, and that then starts to transform the whole karmic stream of personality.

So we see that nothing within us is fixed. It's all coming and going and it can all be transformed. It's empty of any kind of abiding substance or essence. There is no "I" who is there to be superior or inferior. There's no "I" who's controlling it, who's responsible for the emotions that we feel.

Sylvia Boorstein is a dear colleague that I teach with often in California. A lot of metta in her being. She asked a student one day in one of her classes, "How are you?" And the student's reply was, "I couldn't be better." Sylvia then uses that now as a teaching.

If I ask you right now how you are, could you truthfully answer that also? You could, couldn't you? We all couldn't be better because we can't change how things are in this moment. So that's a true statement for each one of us: I couldn't be better.

I am the way past causes and conditions have brought me right up until this moment. I like that sense of things. That's the way I am. So there is no one who is responsible for that. It's just the impersonal nature of past actions that are expressing themselves in this moment.

So we don't need to identify so strongly with the way this moment is. We can't change the past. We can't change those old actions. They've already happened. But where we can influence is the present and the new karma of this moment.

Over time, with the growth of insight into anatta, with the development of loving kindness, we feel more at ease, we feel more freedom, we feel more loving, and that gives us confidence in this inner goodness. That is really what offsets the self-judgment in the long run. We even get a sense it's okay not to be perfect.

Personalities never get perfected as far as I can see. That's not the place to look for perfection. But within our Dharma practice, with our imperfect personality, we can touch a place of perfection. There is an inherent purity in this mind-body process. There is a dimension of purity that we can discover and access and touch. And then we can see the imperfection as just a part of the greater perfection of things.

You see someone like the Dalai Lama who has this deep, deep self-confidence, who can sit up in front of 10,000 people, 100,000 people, 250,000 people in Central Park and still be as playful as a child, because of this deep trust in his own goodness. And that's possible from the path.

This judging tendency feeds on our outer life, but of course then we bring it into the practice—the same tendency of mind. We criticize ourselves for the way that we undertake our meditation. We may feel inadequate in the meditation the same way we feel inadequate in daily life.

There was a question the other day in the hall that related to this. It was a question about how can I accept the chaos in my practice when I know that I really want to be more concentrated. That's a pointer to the same thing. There are lots of ways to feel gloomy about our practice progress.

When you think about somebody like Dipa Ma, amazing practitioner. First time she came to IMS, she was shown around the place and she said, "Wow, it's so beautiful. Anyone could sit under a tree here and be enlightened in a week." That's a different perspective.

But for us, the chaos in our hearts and minds is pretty apparent when we sit. And we obviously would rather it be different. But the question really is, do we have a choice about it? Do we have a choice? And generally the answer is no. When the chaos is there, when we're in that cycle, that's the truth of the moment. That's the Dhamma. That's the old karma that's playing itself out in that moment.

If we resist it, it just adds to the chaos. The only way to peace is through non-resistance, non-conflict with that present moment. That is the Dhamma of it all.

We also see that the chaos that comes is part of the work of purification. The awareness basically goes through all the layers of holding and identification in the mind, brings them into consciousness so that they can be released. So there's greater and greater freedom as the chaos is held in mindfulness. But in practice, we all have our own pace of development. It's according to our paramis.

I want to close with a reading from Suzuki Roshi. This is a little long, so I'll ask for your patience. But I think it really speaks to the question of accepting our practice.

"In our scriptures"—and then he references a sutta that's found in the Anguttara Nikaya in Pali—"it is said that there are four kinds of horses: excellent ones, good ones, poor ones, and bad ones. The best horse will run slow and fast, right and left at the driver's will, before it sees the shadow of the whip. The second best will run as well as the first one does, just before the whip reaches its skin. The third one will run when it feels pain on its body. And the fourth one will run only after the pain penetrates to the marrow of its bones. You can imagine how difficult it is for the fourth one to learn how to run."

When we hear this story, almost all of us want to be the best horse. If it is impossible to be the best one, we want to be the second best. This is, I think, the usual understanding of this story. You may think that when you sit in meditation you will find out whether you are one of the best horses or one of the worst ones.

Here, however, there is a misunderstanding. If you think the aim of practice is to train you to become one of the best horses, you will have a big problem. This is not the right understanding. If you practice in the right way, it does not matter whether you are the best horse or the worst one.

When you consider the mercy of the Buddha, how do you think he will feel about the four kinds of horses? He will have more sympathy for the worst one than for the best one. When you are determined to practice with the great mind of the Buddha, you will find the worst horse is the most valuable one. In your very imperfections, you will find the basis for your firm, way-seeking mind.

Those who can sit perfectly physically usually take more time to obtain the true way of Zen, the actual feeling of Zen, the marrow of Zen. But those who find great difficulties in practicing will find more meaning in it. So I think that sometimes the best horse may be the worst horse, and the worst horse is the best one.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 6

Fear and Fearlessness

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines fear as one of the four primary afflictive emotions (along with sadness, anger, and desire) that arise from our fundamental patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "there is wavering in one who is dependent," Armstrong explores how our attempts to control pleasant and unpleasant experiences create the very fear we seek to avoid.*
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> *Armstrong maps these emotions onto a matrix of past and future: sadness and anger relating to past experiences, while desire and fear arise from future projections. He discusses various manifestations of fear—from death anxiety to fear of judgment, physical pain, and even fear of our own thoughts and emotions. The talk includes personal anecdotes from his monastic training in Burma, illustrating how fear often reveals our own areas of ethical concern.*
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> *The practical guidance centers on three key areas for investigation when fear arises: bodily sensations, mental mood/coloring, and the accompanying storyline of thoughts. Armstrong emphasizes that understanding fear's impermanent nature—that "no feeling is final"—allows us to work directly with fear rather than being overwhelmed by it. He offers various skillful means including mindfulness, mettā (loving-kindness), compassion, and sometimes the need to stand firm against fear's manipulation. The talk concludes with Chögyam Trungpa's teaching that true fearlessness comes from tenderness and the willingness to let life touch our "raw and beautiful heart."*

The subject of the talk tonight is fear and fearlessness.

I wanted to talk about fear this evening because, first, I think it's a really common experience in retreat. Second, it's one of our deepest kinds of conditionings. And when it's present, it has a very oppressive nature. Unlike any other emotion that I think we experience, it tends to cast this very dark cloud over everything. It gives a sense of deep inner contraction in our being and cuts us off from the joys and happiness of life.

So in the talk tonight I want to look at the phenomenon of fear and how to work with it, but I want to start by putting it in a context of the other emotions.

Taking a big picture view of our situation as human beings, we see that we are subjected to this mix—a very rapidly alternating mix—of pleasurable experiences and painful experiences. This is our lot in life and it's pretty much the lot of all the sentient

beings that we know, perhaps excepting those in the God realms with unremitting bliss at their fingertips. But as we can see looking around this world, this is the human condition and the condition of creatures. Our senses are being battered constantly by this alternation of pleasure and pain. This is unavoidable for an enlightened being or an unenlightened being.

But our neurosis as humans, where we get caught, is that we've succumbed to the temptation to try to control these experiences—and not just once, but in quite a chronic way. This is how we think it's wise to manage life. So we have gotten ourselves into this habit of manipulating our experience over and over to gain more of the pleasurable and less of the painful. This is the birth of craving.

This is the basis of the activity of self, or what in Buddhism is called the ego—this constant striving to enhance the pleasurable and reduce the unpleasurable. And fundamentally, the practice of meditation, our Dharma practice, is to stop manipulating. Or we could say to stop the activity of self-centered grasping.

We begin to become very familiar with these movements of mind. The Buddha described them primarily as greed for the pleasant, aversion toward the unpleasant, and the force of delusion that accompanies both. Because the basis of greed and aversion is we don't see what we're doing. We don't see the operation of these forces of reaching toward and pushing away, and the not seeing of them and their effect—which is basically suffering—is what sustains the operation. These three—greed, aversion, and delusion—are really synonymous with craving, the second noble truth, the origin of suffering. Where there is craving, there will be clinging. And where there is clinging, there will be suffering. This is really the whole point of the Wheel of Dependent Origination, where it's explained quite clearly.

The afflictive emotions that we experience in practice and in life are really just variations on these fundamental tendencies of greed, aversion, and delusion. As I look at my own practice experience, as I talk to people who are in the middle of a retreat, it seems to me there are four emotions that come again and again that cause the most difficulty for yogis and, by assumption, for people in daily life as well. As I see them, they are sadness, anger, desire, and fear.

What's interesting is when you start to look at these four—what I would call primary afflictive emotions—is that they all map quite nicely onto a matrix of pleasant and unpleasant in relationship to past and future. Notice that the activities of greed and aversion are a lot about past and future. When we go away from the present moment with our thoughts, we move into past and future, and that becomes the basis for greed and aversion.

Let me spell out this matrix. In relationship to the past: If there has been the pleasant which no longer exists, that tends to be the condition for sadness. Sadness forms around the loss of the pleasant, which was in the past and is no longer. Anger tends to arise around a past experience of hurt or pain. If someone has done or said something that's injured us, that past hurt, when it hasn't been healed, is an arising ground, a seed for anger.

In relationship to the future then, the pleasant possibility that may exist in the future is the ground for desire. And the unpleasant possibility that may exist in the future is the ground for fear. We don't want to experience that which is going to be painful in the future. So sadness and anger, largely in relation to the past. Desire and fear, largely in relation to the future.

In Tibetan Buddhism, they often use the terms hope and fear. Hope is the replacement for desire. They'll talk about the whole strategies of ego or self as being these strategies of hope and fear. And meditators are encouraged to abandon the qualities of hope and fear. I think this sometimes is a helpful way to think of it. We can think of our basic movements of mind as being around hope and fear.

This points to how deep the conditioning of fear is—a central movement in the mind, a central basis of our neurosis. What we see as we start to look in this way is that these two forces of hope and fear ultimately lead us to more suffering than they bring us happiness.

This is the message of the Second Noble Truth. Craving is essentially an unskillful activity. It leads to more suffering than it resolves. We engage in these strategies because we are hopeful that they will lead to more pleasure and deeper happiness. But in fact, the message of the Second Noble Truth—and I think the heart of the Buddha's teachings—is that this is wrong. The constant engagement with these strategies of manipulation, summed up as hope and fear, leads us into more suffering.

Really, you could say that our development of trust in the Buddha's teachings, the expression of our faith in the Dhamma, is that we allow ourselves more and more to manifest our belief in non-manipulation. That's why it's so central in meditation practice that we give up our craving, give up our hope and fear moment after moment. In doing that, in stopping this ceaseless activity of self around pleasure and pain, we abandon ourselves to life. We surrender ourselves to the flow of life and the results of our own actions, the results of our own karma.

This kind of surrender, as I understand it, is the true openness of spiritual life—the true receptivity, trust, non-doing and non-interfering that all our practice is aiming at.

Often as we look at these two forces, hope and fear, we think it would be nice to give up fear, but we want to hang on to hope. Let's see if we can try to arrange the pleasant. Hope has something kind of positive in the experience of it, but let's get rid of this fear stuff—that's not so much fun.

But in fact, desire and fear go together. They're quite intimately linked. Because as soon as we commit to a desire for something, if you look closely, there's a fear of not getting it. Fear and desire will always show up together.

The Buddha put it this way in the Majjhima: "There is wavering in one who is dependent. There is no wavering in one who is independent." That is, where there's clinging in the mind to whatever—whether of the past or the future—that very clinging creates a dependence, and that dependence creates a wavering, a shakiness, a trembling, an insecurity, a fear in the mind. There is wavering in one who is dependent.

It's interesting to look at this question, the relationship of desire and fear. I've asked myself, which is more fundamental? So I invite you to ask yourself that in your experience. Which is the more fundamental driving force in your life? Is it desire or is it fear? Do we first feel insecure in life and then want the objects that will make us feel more secure? Is that the way it fundamentally operates? Or are we more driven by desire for the pleasurable, and then fear comes as a shadow of the desire?

When the Buddha expressed the Second Noble Truth and taught that craving is the cause of suffering, he definitely came down on the side of desire as being primary. So that's one man's opinion.

But speaking as a fear type, my primary sense is that for me, fear is more compelling. At this stage in my existence and development, fear feels like a more primary and compelling force than desire. But if you talk to a greed type, you'll get a different response. That's why I just invite each of you to look at the question for yourself.

In fact, it seems to me as a fear type, when you look at the uncertainty of the world, fear seems like quite a rational response to things. It's a mess out there. There are lots of ways to get pain. Even this body has a million ways to break down and cause physical suffering. It seems quite normal to be afraid of this situation. Sometimes it seems like the only rational response to things.

But that's why it's good to have contact with people who aren't fear types. My wife is not particularly a fear type. Her personality is more what would be described as sanguine—kind of confident, kind of easygoing. She's Australian, which might have something to do with it. She'll often wring her hands in frustration and say to me, "Why do

you always have to think about all the things that could go wrong?" She's just happily trucking along and I keep popping up with all these anxieties. I say, "Well, I'm just trying to take care of us both." "I don't need you to take care of me in that way."

So it's helpful to get that reflection. There is another response possible to life. And eventually, I think, as a fear type, we have to ask ourselves: do I really want to feel this way all the time? The answer probably is no, because fear is not a very pleasant place to live from, nor is anxiety, nor is worry. So then the quest arises. You might say the dharmic quest arises: Where is the way out with fear?

The uncertainty of life is a truism—a simple fact we cannot change. This reality will not disappear for any of us. It did not disappear even for the Buddha. Throughout his life, he faced verbal and physical attacks, abuse, criticism, and blame. People attempted to kill him on multiple occasions. We can never escape life's fundamental uncertainty.

But must we respond with fear? That is truly the question.

Someone said in a recent interview something I found deeply insightful: "I can see how I'm creating fear through my own thoughts." This recognition itself opens the door to freedom—seeing that there is responsibility, an ongoing activity in the generation of fear.

Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher and teacher, expressed this quite succinctly: "Thought breeds fear." We can sometimes feel this directly in our meditations. We may sit comfortably for a period, and then suddenly thoughts begin churning, and we feel our fear level rising. Thought becomes a breeding ground for fear.

Mark Twain acknowledged this in one of his famous observations: "I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened." Most of our troubles never actually occur, yet this doesn't prevent us from imagining them and feeling their burden.

I cannot resist sharing another Twain quote I discovered while researching: "Go to heaven for the climate, but hell for the company"—perhaps applicable even for Buddhists.

In the Zen tradition, there is an image for how we create our own fear: an artist who has painted a tiger on a large canvas, working meticulously to make it lifelike. When he steps back to admire his work and sees the tiger, he jumps in terror. We become frightened of our own paintings, scared by our own imaginings. This doesn't make them real; it doesn't mean the tiger will leap from the canvas to bite us.

Through meditation, we begin discovering that perhaps we don't need to think these thoughts or conjure images of terrible possibilities. When we refrain, what becomes of our state? When we leave our condition unmanipulated—or uncontaminated—by thinking, what is that state untouched by thought? Take a look and see. Perhaps there is peace intrinsic to that state when thought isn't disturbing it.

I want to explore some specific types of fear, though in many ways the source doesn't matter. In meditation and dharma practice, we can learn to relate directly with fear in ways that don't depend on what triggered it. This understanding is crucial, but let me acknowledge various fears that arise in practice and life.

First is our fear of death. Death feels threatening to the ego, and this threat illuminates one of the primary building blocks of self—continuity. The self imagines itself continuing; without continuity over time, there is no self. I'm speaking of the fictitious self we imagine and believe in, which leads us into suffering and which we see through with insights into anatta. Death represents the ultimate insult to the ego because it presents the possibility of everything coming to an end.

Viewed differently, however, fear of death is quite irrational. What would happen if you went to sleep tonight, had pleasant dreams, and simply didn't wake up? Would that truly be such a disaster? Perhaps for the staff here, but...

It might be for the people back home. But really, what does it matter if this stream of sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touch and thoughts and emotions just comes to an end sometime? It matters only if we have a sense of ourselves as an ongoing being, an ongoing ego.

This fear of death is very natural, and I think it doesn't go away for a while. It doesn't go away easily. But curiously, they did a survey on people's greatest fears, and the fear of death came in only at number four. The number one fear that people mentioned—the highest fear on the list—was fear of speaking in public. I don't know about you, but I'd rather be speaking tonight than dying. So there's something funny about that ordering.

I have to say that I was probably first deeply inspired to practice by reading in Buddhism the possibility that one could live without the fear of death. This was just amazing to me—that in the early Buddhist readings I came upon, there were masters who had really gone beyond the fear of death and had discovered something called the deathless that they found their being to be grounded in. That was tremendously inspiring to me because the fear of death has been with me from an early age. I can remember being very young and being afraid of dying.

The Buddha said something interesting about this fear of death. He said that not everyone needs to fear death. Not everyone does fear death. He said that the fear of death is dependent on four conditions: if one has a great deal of desire for sense pleasures, one will fear death. If one has a great deal of desire for this body, one will fear death. If one has done a lot of unwholesome actions and hasn't done wholesome actions, one will fear death. And if one has not developed a faith in the Dhamma, one will fear death.

But the converse of those statements are also true—that one need not fear death if one is not so desirous of sense pleasures, not so desirous of the body, has done good actions, and has faith in the Dhamma. I mean, that's a high bar. How many of us do not desire sense pleasures? Probably not too many. How many do not have desire around this body? Probably not too many. But it shows a way. It shows a path of practice that is really open for us and the possibility of going beyond the fear of death.

In long retreats, I notice in myself a significant amount of fear of physical pain—sitting after sitting, sitting after sitting. One retreat I was sitting and just started to notice, "Oh, there's a tension in my mind. What is that tension about?" I kept looking into it and tracing it, and the only thing I could find was that there was a subtle fear of physical discomfort. That was really all it was about. Once I saw that, I could relax more. The physical pain didn't go away, but it wasn't being added to by the fear of the physical pain.

We have a fear of judgment. We are afraid of the things that people will say about us or think about us or point out to us. In a way, I think that fear of criticism triggers a deeper fear—that in some way we're not really okay. We're not sufficient or we're not adequate, that the rest of the world has got it together in a way that I don't. The criticism is really a pointing to that insufficiency in us.

One of the things that I think is beautiful about the Brahmaviharas as a practice is that as they start to come alive in us, and we look inside and feel the living quality of metta or compassion, that gives a sense of goodness. That gives a sense that there's something really trustworthy at the heart of who we are. And that goes a long way to offset this fear of not being sufficient, not being okay.

Sometimes this fear of judgment we can see really as a projection. When I was practicing recently in Burma—I think I mentioned that I ordained as a monk, which was a delight—my preceptor was a monk of about thirteen wassa, thirteen years, named Udama Saba, a Malaysian monk who was assigned to me because he speaks really good English. He's a very nice guy, a very gentle man, but he's also a good monk. He's a firm monk in terms of the discipline.

So one day I was waiting in the lunch line, standing there with my bowl waiting for the bell to be rung so we could go through and have our bowls be filled with food. My preceptor comes up to me and taps me on the shoulder and says, "Can you come to my kuti today at 5 p.m.?" I said, "Sure." And then he went off.

And then I started thinking, what does he want to talk to me about? Because normally when the preceptor calls you over for a private conversation, it's for one reason —to admonish you. So I started thinking, what have I done wrong?

All through lunch, I was in this state of paranoid reflection. Why does my preceptor want to see me? What is it I've done wrong? Have I broken the Vinaya in some really bad way? As I was dwelling on this sense of fear, three little areas kept popping up in my mind that I really didn't want to go to. When I looked into them, I saw these were the three ways in which I maybe wasn't following the rules exactly.

First, I wasn't tying my robes strictly according to the style of that monastery. I thought, hmm, is my preceptor going to criticize me for that? Second, I was eating my lunch at my kuti, and afterwards I'd have some rice and a little bit of vegetables left over, and I'd dump them out in my backyard. Way on the other end of the monastery I'd seen a sign that said, "Please do not feed the dogs. We don't really want them around." Dogs would sometimes come and eat. So I thought, is he going to criticize me for dumping out my leftover rice?

The third thing I realized I was paranoid about was that I hadn't shaved my head for the last Patimokkha, the recitation of the monks' precepts, which is the custom in this monastery. But because I knew I was going to be leaving soon, I thought it probably wasn't necessary.

When I resolved all my fears, they came down to these three things. I realized that I had a guilty conscience about each of them. That's why I went to paranoia when my preceptor wanted to talk to me. It was really interesting. The seeds of my self-judgment were in my own judgments of myself. I was just projecting onto my preceptor that he was criticizing me for things I was already criticizing myself for.

In the end, it was none of these things, and I don't think any of them were big deals. He said, "Did you receive a spare undershirt during this vassa as a gift from someone?" I said yes. He said, "Have you determined it yet as a spare requisite?" I said no. He said, "Oh, you need to do that," and he told me the formula. So we went through this little ritual where I forfeited it to him, then I went home and determined it, and then I could keep it. But it was one of the real technicalities of Vinaya that he wanted to educate me about.

I thought it was so interesting the way it called forth my own fears of self-judgment. What this led me to reflect on is the protection within sila. When we act according to the precepts—really, really fully—then our mind is free of this kind of paranoia. We don't worry that somebody is going to come to us and say, "You did this and it was wrong," because we know in looking at our own conduct that it's been virtuous, that we've been clean.

The Buddha pointed to this too. In one sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya, he mentioned that there are four kinds of happiness that lay people enjoy: the happiness of possessions, the happiness of enjoyment, the happiness of not being in debt, and the happiness of blamelessness—of not having done wrong conduct in thought, word, and speech. But he said that the other three do not measure up to one-sixteenth of the bliss of blamelessness.

I think this is a lovely phrase, "the bliss of blamelessness." When our conduct becomes more and more refined, we have that much less fear and paranoia in our lives. So a lot of the purification of fear can happen through sila.

There is a fear that we start to notice as we get quiet in meditation—a fear of our own thoughts. I don't know if you've ever experienced this in a time when there's a relative degree of calm in the mind, but we can be nervous about the arising of a thought, as though the thought shouldn't arise, or the thought is going to disturb us, or the thought is going to harm us. We're actually, at those times of quiet, afraid of our own thoughts.

There's a fear of our emotions, which is probably deeper and stronger. A lot of this talk will go into this point in more detail, so I'm not going to explore it now. I'll emphasize it around working with fear, but it really applies to all the difficult emotions.

There's a fear that's rooted in our separation from others, the separation from other humans. What's interesting when we look at this is that it brings in the sense of isolation, lack of connection, lack of community. But what we often don't see is how we create the separation through our own thoughts, through our own views.

And I think the way this works is we all tend to define ourselves by how we're special. I don't say this because we're all bad people. I think this is the way ego works. Ego separates itself by finding something special in the mind-body process. So we take special note of the fact that we're good-looking or handsome, or our parents are a certain way, or our friends are a certain way, or we're wealthy, or we're athletic, or we're artist-

ic and creative. Or it might be the absence of these—we might define ourselves as "oh I'm not this" or "I'm not that," feeling badly about ourselves. But somehow ego tends to make up stories about how we're different.

As we believe in those stories and dwell more and more on them with thought, we separate ourselves further and further from connection with the human community. We put ourselves outside it by emphasizing our specialness or our difference. What we tend to forget in this is how much we're alike. We tend to forget that we have two eyes and a mouth and arms and legs, like everybody else. We tend to forget that we have joys and sorrows, like everybody else, that we have the whole range of human emotions, that we have vulnerability, that we have the potential for happiness and for freedom, just like everybody else.

One of the beautiful things about the practices of the Brahmaviharas is they remind us of what we share. We share a wish for safety, for happiness, for health, and for ease. We share a wish to be free from suffering, a wish to enjoy good fortune. We share that we are owners of our own karma. The Brahmaviharas unite. As you go through the different beings in all the different categories, this is what you see. This is universal. This is what we all feel alike in. As you center your life more and more in the Brahmaviharas, you start to realize we're all just part of the same family. We have the same basic concerns as do all beings.

Then in meditation especially, there's fear as an edge of what is familiar. There's fear that comes when we open to something new, even if it's something delightful and ultimately freeing and liberating. There's often fear when we touch it for the first time just because it's new, and we're not sure if we can find our home there, if we can learn to be comfortable there.

This has come up, I think, a couple of times in the morning questions as people touch new degrees of calmness and absence of thought, maybe a weakening of body sensations, so that the impact of the present moment comes to be rather faint because of the degree of quiet that has been touched. Then there's a little threat to the ego in that—where do I find myself when things are this quiet? Where's the ground in a place like this? It can be unsettling.

Insights into impermanence and anatta have some of this quality. We can feel that everything's dissolving, that there's no self there, that the self is about to be dissolved or terminated. Insights into emptiness have some of this flavor of being unsettled by taking out the foundation for ego. But these are all absolutely liberating parts of the path and essential parts of the path. Very, very important to open over time and touch these places. It's an integral part of the opening of meditation. But the difficulty is also ac-

knowledged in the tradition. In Tibetan Buddhism, they talk about the process of learning to bear emptiness—learning to bear the truth of emptiness—indicating it's not so familiar to us right away on first contact. We have to learn to bear it.

So really what's needed is to recognize the space, first of all, of calm or seeing impermanence or seeing anatta, spaciousness. Notice if there's a reaction of fear or unease. Make that a meditation object. Don't even prefer the calm to the fear. This is the new arising. Be with that. Then more and more, we can just relax with the experience of the unease and the experience of the spaciousness. We find as we relax more and more, it's trustworthy. We've discovered that through our own experience. This is not a place of danger. It's not a place of harm. And so we relax more and more into it. It would be a shame if we didn't open to it, if we backed off thinking it was a fearsome thing.

My wife and I were staying in a place for a few weeks not long ago, just visiting, and there was this little stray kitty that was wandering around the neighborhood, kind of knocking on different neighbors' doors and looking for food.

And we're suckers for stray kitties, so it didn't have to wander very far after it found us. We would feed it in the morning and in the evening, but it wouldn't let us get close. We had to take a bowl of food and put it over near a garden where it could quickly run away if it got scared. If we got too close, it would just dash off into the bushes again. But if we left the food out and then backed away, it would come up and eat.

It was a beautiful, really beautiful little kitty—probably about five or six months old. It had blue eyes, a really creamy white coat, and little light brown stripes, kind of little tiger markings. We really grew very fond of it, but it would never let us get close.

What we wanted to do was catch it so that it could be neutered, so that it wouldn't go around creating more wild cats who basically don't have a very good life in this world. We assumed it was a female, and it would have been much better for the cat if it would let us approach it, catch it, and then take it to the vet and have it neutered. Because if it happened to be a mother, then it would have to feed not just itself but three or four or five little kitties. And then they would grow up and have the same kind of dukkha.

So we really wanted the cat to let us approach it, and it never would. In its fear, it was avoiding the one thing that could possibly save its life and lead to its greatest happiness and peace—developing contact with humans and being adopted. Fortunately, we were tricky, and we trapped it in a have-a-heart trap. It did go to the vet, and she is being adopted. So the outcome is good.

But this is what meditation teachers have to do. They have to tell you, "Go into that emptiness." And we're not tricking you. It is for your welfare and happiness.

I also wanted to mention there is one wholesome fear that the Buddha talked about—the fear of wrongdoing. The Pali word is hiri, and it's usually paired with another Pali word, ottappa, which we could translate as conscience. So the fear of doing wrong and the conscience, which is remorse about doing wrong—these two are really wholesome forces in the mind. The Buddha called these the protectors of the world, the guardians of the world. They are the underpinnings of our commitment to sila.

So how can we work with fear when it comes? As I talk about working with fear, I think you'll see the extension to working with any of the difficult emotions and be able to extend it. I'm going to go into some detail on fear, but I hope that the transference to the other difficult emotions is also clear.

First of all, it's really important to face these difficult emotions. They are in our psyches. They are operating sometimes consciously, but more often unconsciously in our daily lives. When they're operating in that subterranean way, there's no possibility of getting free of them. Until they can be brought into the light of awareness, they simply run our lives in a compulsive fashion, and there's no liberation.

One of the beauties of having these emotions arise in retreat is that we have nothing else to do but pay attention, so we can understand them and come into a new relationship with them. The arising of fear in a situation like this is a great gift. I know it doesn't feel like that—it feels like a torment. But it is the stage, the classroom, the lab in which we learn to be free. So if not here, where? Where else can we bring a comparable amount of wisdom and steadiness of attention to the experience of fear? We are so lucky to have it here.

That's why in Asia, teachers were fond of sending their students out in situations that provoked extreme fear. Ajahn Mun, who was the teacher of Ajahn Chah—great Thai forest master—used to send his students out into areas where tigers roamed at night. He would just send them out into the forest to meditate for days at a time and hope that they would stay long enough so that they'd hear a tiger roaring nearby. Here, where sometimes the greatest real fear we face is being late for tea, you can imagine the impact—as sensitive as your minds and hearts are—of hearing a tiger roaring nearby you in the forest. But this was considered an important part of their training: to meet their fear and to face it and to work with it.

Usually our first reaction when fear arises is more fear. We are afraid to experience the fear itself, and this puts us into a loop where fear arises, we feel more fear on feeling it, and that causes an escalation—an increasing escalation of the fear.

Our first impulse is that we need to get rid of this fear. It's not pleasant. I'm not liking it. I want it to go. But that's not usually possible.

So the shift in attitude we need to make is one of being willing and interested in understanding the fear. And this really is where the freedom comes from. When we understand the way emotions are put together, the mechanism by which they operate, the mystery is gone out of them. It's like watching a puppet show and then suddenly being able to see up above where the puppeteer is pulling the strings. When we start to see how the strings are being pulled in all the different facets of an emotion, the mystery goes out of it and really the worry goes out of it.

So all the different kinds of emotions that can come are all understandable. And an important aspect of our Dharma practice is seeing them closely enough and clearly enough that we start to see the mechanism in these things.

So when fear arises in your practice, please bring your attention close to it. Very helpful to ground the attention in the body. This was the area where I first started to come to terms with fear. Feel the body sensations that are triggered in your body with the experience of fear. And it can be a lot of different experiences. There might be a shakiness or a trembling all over, a kind of flutter in the stomach, rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, perspiration under the arms, a sense of contraction in the chest or in the abdomen, overall sense of lightness.

It's helpful to name each of these. Let your attention move throughout the body where you feel the impact of the fear. Name the different sensations that are coming so you get really familiar with them and open to feel them. Now here's an important question: Can you bear them? Can you bear those physical sensations that come with fear? Look and find out if you can bear them.

Second place to look—what is the mood or the coloring in the mind? I found it much easier to approach fear first through the body. Only after that was I kind of brave enough or subtle enough to look for it directly in the mind. What is the mood of fear as a mental state? The way sadness has a certain coloring and anger has a certain coloring and desire has a certain coloring. What's the coloring in the mind of fear? Let your attention come right up against that mood and that color.

That was even harder to do. One, because the mood or coloring is kind of vague. It's like a cloud. But secondly, because for me, what I found when I looked is that the mood of fear is escape. Escape. It was a wanting to flee from. So how do you get close to some-

thing that wants to flee? It was tricky. It was tricky to feel that fear directly. But then the question came: Can we bear that? Can we bear that mood, that color, that sense of wanting to flee?

Then the third area to look is the area of thoughts. When an emotion is strong, a difficult emotion is strong, it's often accompanied by thoughts, usually accompanied by thoughts. With fear, the thoughts are somehow related to the future. And it's something like: this moment may be bearable, but something really bad is about to happen. This moment is bearable, but the next moment is not going to be. It's going to be more than I can bear.

You could say that this is kind of the storyline of fear. If you look closely, every afflictive emotion that's a problem has got a storyline associated with it. So there are the body sensations, there's the mood, and every strong emotion that we have a problem with, as far as I can tell, has a storyline also. Some view, some thought that we've believed in about the situation.

So with desire, a sample storyline is: if I get this thing, it will make me happy. With sadness, a sample storyline is: I can't be happy because I've lost this thing. With anger, the storyline might be something like: the other person is wrong and I'm right. And with fear, it's something like: something disastrous is about to happen. This moment's okay, but the next moment won't be.

As long as we believe in the storyline, we're sustaining the emotion.

The trick to coming out of these emotions is to step out of the storyline—which always concerns past and future—and come into the present moment. When we arrive here, we discover there are only body sensations, mood, and thoughts coming and going. That's it. That's all there is to fear.

When we see the mechanism this clearly, it loses some of its power. We realize that the presence of fear doesn't mean something disastrous is about to happen. It simply means my armpits are sweating, my stomach is tight, and I have this fleeing feeling. That's all it means.

When we examine the details this way, we find we're actually able to accommodate the presence of fear. We can bear it and come out the other side. We always emerge because fear is impermanent. All emotions are impermanent, and that's why it's safe to feel them. We can open to them because none will last.

Here is a poem by Rilke. To set the context, he imagines a creator God who, after creating each being, gives a little pep talk before launching them into life. This is God's pep talk just before sending a being into existence:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand.

Experience everything—beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. That's why it's safe to feel the whole range of what we experience as human beings. No feeling is final. None have to get stuck.

When we see this way—the emotion's mechanism, the lightness of its expression through the body, this fleeting and insubstantial coloring in the mind, the conditioning created by phantasmagoric thoughts and images—what we're really seeing, what wisdom opens us to, is the emptiness of the emotion. There's nothing there. There's not really anything to these emotions.

When we can see that it's just an arising and passing that doesn't really mean anything, it loses its hold over us. It may arise many more times, but it doesn't have to dominate us. It doesn't have to control us.

Even if we lose sight of that emptiness, if we've seen it clearly, that insight remains with us as a form of faith. Even when the emotion comes and we may get lost in it again, something in us knows this is not the final truth—this being lost. There is a deeper truth, a truer way of seeing.

Because fear is difficult and we may get lost in it many times, it's also helpful to have other skillful means. Mindfulness and the opening of mindfulness into wisdom are our primary means of freedom. In the longer term, successive moments of enlightenment can actually uproot the process of fear altogether. Short of that, it's helpful to have skillful means. The journey is long—pack a lunch. Pack some skillful means too.

The first skillful means, of course, is mindfulness and the understanding that comes from it. Here are others that may be helpful:

There's always refuge in awareness. You may feel that fear is engulfing, consuming, overwhelming—the only thing in your universe. But if you are knowing fear, there's another factor present: awareness and mindfulness. Take refuge there.

There is a kind of sane and sober part of yourself that's still working, that knows what's happening to you. This is not fear. This is a separate quality of mind. This is a strong and safe and secure quality of mind. Take refuge in mindfulness and awareness.

Check out the moment. I was practicing in England one time in May or June, which is a beautiful time there. I was out in the back garden practicing as night was falling, probably after the dharma talk around eight o'clock. A soft summer evening was settling in England. I was in a walled garden standing next to an apple tree. The birds were singing around. There were blossoms on the apple tree. My eyes were closed. I was doing standing meditation.

I was in this state of fear, fear, fear, feeling the body shaking, trembling. Finally, I just decided to open my eyes, and I saw that really soft evening twilight, the setting sun, listened to the birds, looked at the apple blossoms, and I thought, "Wow, it's really beautiful out here." What was I lost in? Just some huge projection, some huge papañca I'd gotten wrapped up in. Check out the moment. Open your eyes. You're in the dharma hall. You're in a dharma sanctuary.

Metta is a wonderful refuge in times of strong fear. When mindfulness and understanding and non-identification and insight don't loosen the grip and you're still caught, then it's okay to apply an antidote. And metta is the classical antidote to aversion in general and to fear in particular.

In using metta as an antidote to fear, it's really helpful to have a being in your range of beings who really lifts your heart up. It could be a benefactor, it could be a friend—somebody that when you turn to them, you feel uplifted. You feel the presence of their happiness or their wisdom or their strength or their love for you. And if you don't have anybody who exactly fits that category, let me recommend the Dalai Lama to you. He's a wonderful being to call on in times of fear.

The last of the refuges I mentioned is compassion. Sometimes when fear seems overwhelming and it's really settled in, turn to compassion for yourself. "May I hold this fear with compassion," and just try that practice for thirty or forty-five minutes and see if it shifts the feeling of the situation. I find that when I do the compassion practice for that length of time, it's like channeling Quan Yin, and some wiser, more grown-up, more parental part of myself starts to come through that can hold this difficulty like holding a child that's screaming.

Now there's one other approach to fear that I just want to mention. It's being firm with fear. Normally the experience of fear is the opposite of being firm. It's an experience of wavering, trembling, shaking, quaking, running away from, escaping—anything

but firm. But sometimes the very way to meet that fear, which has pushed us around all over the place in life, made us quake in our boots and do lots of unskillful things, the way to meet it is to become firm and essentially say no.

Sometimes in practice you may find you reach a point where you're just not willing to be pushed around anymore by fear. One yogi said in an interview a few days ago, "Fear was there but I stood my ground, and it felt really good to me. I stood my ground." This is part of the sense of this firmness.

This came one time in my practice when I was also in England, in the early years. Fear was arising quite strongly for me, more strongly than it ever had before. I'd learned about the gentle approach of opening to the sensations and accepting the mood and being with it—"Yeah, come on in. Make yourself at home. I can open to this too." And it wasn't working. It had been about three days, and I was still being really pushed around by the fear.

I was doing standing meditation again—and I think there's no coincidence I was doing standing meditation. In the middle of it, I was just ready to give up. I kind of looked at this experience of fear, which had gone on for two or three days, and I just finally said, "Fuck it."

I'd rather die than live like this.

And I meant it. I was ready to die rather than live with that fear. And as I said that, I could just feel the fear start to run down my spine and into my legs and out into the ground. I just stood there and it sort of started running down my body and into the ground.

There was a lot of energy in my body for the next day. The fear would come back, and I'd get firm again. The fear would come back, and I'd get firm again, and I'd ground it, and it would pass. So I still continued to relate with it, but somehow in that experience, it lost something of its hold over me. Something in its hold over my mind got broken then.

Although I've had fear many times since then and it's been suffering, it's never dominated me in the same way again. I've reached many points in my practice where I had complete equanimity with the fear. If the fear arose or if it didn't arise, I really didn't care. It made no difference to me one way or another. I really attribute that to the firmness and the strength to stand my ground against the fear.

When we can really open to the whole experience of fear and not feel we have to run away from it, not feel we have to shrink from feeling the fear, then we start to see the possibility of fearlessness. I would like to suggest that we can consider fearlessness not as a state where fear never arises—that may be a long way off in our practice for all of us—but that we're not afraid to work with it when it comes up. We're no longer afraid of the experience of fear itself. This is possible for us. This is not that far off for any of us.

Then it just becomes another workable condition, like body pain, like hunger, like momentary frustration that comes from time to time. Trungpa Rinpoche, a really creative and inventive Tibetan teacher, said that when we become willing to work with whatever comes up on this path of practice, this path of opening, when we're willing to work with anything that comes, this is the lion's roar of fearlessness. This is our declaration of fearlessness.

I'll close with another quote from Trungpa Rinpoche: "True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear, but going beyond fear. When we relax with our fear, we find sadness, which is calm and gentle. The sadness comes because your heart is completely exposed. There is no skin or tissue covering it. It is pure, raw meat. Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart. You are willing to open up without any resistance or shyness and face the world. You're willing to share your heart with others."

Let's just sit for a minute.

Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 7

Kamma & The End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines one of Buddhism's most central yet challenging teachings: kamma (action) and its cessation. Drawing from the Bhayabherava Sutta (MN 4), he recounts the Buddha's three-fold awakening under the Bodhi tree, highlighting how the second watch revealed the divine eye seeing beings reborn according to their actions.*
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> *Armstrong clarifies that kamma refers primarily to cetanā (volition) - the intention behind bodily, verbal, and mental actions. Wholesome actions arise from non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion (generosity, loving-kindness, wisdom), while unwholesome actions stem from their opposites. He explores five ways we experience karmic results: in the present moment, through memory, in community relationships, as habitual mind states, and mysteriously over time.*
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> *The talk addresses the relationship between kamma and anattā (not-self), using the analogy of a river to explain how personality consists of karmic patterns flowing without fixed essence. Most significantly, Armstrong discusses how the Noble Eightfold Path leads beyond both wholesome and unwholesome kamma to complete liberation - the "kamma that is neither dark nor bright" that ends all karmic conditioning through mindful non-fabrication.*

The talk tonight is called Karma and the End of Karma.

The Dalai Lama was once asked, where should the emphasis be in bringing the Dharma to the West? Should it be more on the teaching of emptiness, which is the pinnacle of Buddhist philosophy, or should it be on the teaching of karma? And he said it's more important for Westerners to hear the teachings on karma than to hear about emptiness.

I want to suggest in the talk tonight that this topic of karma is actually even more central to the Buddha's teachings than we normally think that it is. In pointing to that, I want to remind us of the sequence of insights on the night that the Buddha was enlightened. This is described in Majjhima Nikaya Sutta 4. He goes through the progression of things that happened to him that night.

Do you remember that he decided to sit under the Bodhi tree? He made a resolve not to get up until he had attained full realization. He said, even if I die here, I'm not going to get up. That's determination. You know, the next time the tea bell rings and you pop up, that's a good thing to keep in mind.

He said that in the first watch of the night he had his first insight. The watches of the night are three in number. They start at 6 p.m. and they're each four hours long. So between 6 and 10 p.m., when most of the country was watching the Brady Bunch, the Buddha had his first insight, which was the recollection of his past lives. And he said, I recollected one past life, five past lives, ten past lives, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand past lives. Here I was born of such and such a name and such and such a clan. This was my sustenance and there I passed away. Just reviewing all those many, many lives.

Then in the second watch of the night, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., he was still awake, and he had his second insight. This is a good motivation to stay up later in your practice. The second insight was about opening his eye with psychic power to the whole cosmos. He saw various beings being born and dying. And he said he saw that reappearance according to their past actions in this way: that those who had been well-conducted in body, speech, and mind were born in a pleasant destination and enjoyed happy conditions. And those who had been ill-conducted in body, speech, and mind were born in a painful destination and had difficult conditions.

Finally, in the third watch of the night, the time from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m., is when he became the Buddha with his insight, penetrating insight into the Four Noble Truths, the realization of nirvana and the destruction of the taints. At the end of that time, his mind was liberated and he was truly the Buddha, the Awakened One.

I think it's quite significant that in the second watch of the night, the insight was basically about karma. We're going to come back to that at the end of the talk, and I hope you'll see how that fits in.

It's very challenging for us to grapple with these teachings on karma because unlike most of the Buddha's teachings, we can't verify them in detail. I don't have a divine eye whereby I can see beings dying and reappearing according to their past actions. That takes a very special mind. I can't see for myself the truth of rebirth and how that relates to karma. And I don't know anyone teaching in the West who can, although there have been Asian teachers that I've met who said they were able to see this. So most of us can't verify these teachings experientially.

In the talk tonight, I don't want to tell you so much my understanding, because that's really limited, but I want to try to tell you what the Buddha said on this topic. This is the same person who gave us the four foundations of mindfulness and the direct path to realization. That gives him a little bit of credibility in my eyes, and I trust in yours. So please take the words in just as reflections of the Buddha's words, and I think this is a topic that sinks into our hearts and minds often over a long period of time. Don't struggle too much with whether you believe it all or don't believe it all right away, but just let it settle a bit.

There are four topics that I want to cover tonight in this exploration of karma. The first is what is karma? The second is what can be said about the results of karma. The third is the relationship between karma and not-self or anatta. The fourth is the end of karma. This is the general outline of the talk.

So first, what is karma? Karma is the word in Sanskrit, the Pali term is kamma. It was a very common word in the day of the Buddha and a very simple word. It just meant action. That's all it meant. But every philosophical school in northern India at that time had some twist about what action meant. Some of them said it mattered a lot. Some of them said it didn't matter. Some of them said it affected practice one way.

Some said another. The Buddha's original contribution was that he put an entirely new interpretation on the meaning of action. And he said that action refers primarily to the volition that accompanies it, the urge from which it springs.

This is from the Anguttara Nikaya: "Volition, O bhikkhus, is what I call action, for through volition one performs the action." When I use "action" in the talk tonight, the word that's being said by the Buddha is karma. So really, karma and action are synonymous, but karma has many more connotations or overtones than our word "action." So I will use it often to bring in the overtones, but they are synonymous.

Volition—so what does this word mean? The Pali term is cetanā. It's the word that we've used in the instructions that we translated by "intention." Noticing that before there's any movement of the body, there's an intention or an urge in the mind that causes that movement to take place. Other synonyms could be impulse, urge, motive, or will. The volition is the energy that drives the action. The actions are in three areas: body, speech, and mind. All of these are the fields of action.

Now what was so interesting about the way the Buddha described action is that some volitions are wholesome, some are unwholesome, and it's this quality—the wholesome or unwholesome aspect of the volition—that determines whether the action is wholesome or unwholesome. This was the Buddha's unique contribution to the understanding of action.

So specifically, when volition is influenced by greed, hatred, and delusion, that is an unwholesome kind of impulse or motivation. And these three qualities are called the roots of the unwholesome. When the volition is influenced by their opposites—non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion—then the volition is wholesome.

When we look at the meaning of these words, non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion, put more positively: non-greed is the opposite of clinging or grasping. It's the opening of the hand in letting go. So it could be called renunciation, relinquishment, letting go, or generosity. These are all aspects of non-greed. Non-hatred is essentially loving-kindness, friendliness, warmth, acceptance. And non-delusion is essentially clear seeing, or you could say wisdom.

So we could say that generosity or renunciation, loving-kindness and wisdom are the roots of the wholesome. When actions are influenced by greed, aversion, and delusion, then they are unwholesome in nature. When they are influenced by renunciation, loving-kindness, and wisdom, they are wholesome in nature. And some actions are mixed, so they have a mixture of both wholesome and unwholesome volition.

So it's not the act per se, but the volition behind it that gives its moral quality. For instance, I could ask you: if somebody cuts you open with a knife, is that a wholesome or an unwholesome action? You can't know, because if someone is trying to steal your money and they slice your stomach to make you fall to the ground, that's an unwholesome action based on greed and hatred. But if a surgeon is trying to remove your appendix because it's swollen, that's a motivation of compassion and a wholesome reason to cut you open with a knife—although it may not feel so enjoyable.

So it's not the action per se, it's the motivation behind it that determines its moral quality. And what's revolutionary about looking at action in this way is the Buddha said that there is this moral fabric woven into the universe of wholesome and unwholesome actions, because they lead to wholesome or unwholesome results. And we'll talk about that more in the section on result.

It would be difficult if we just had that teaching and no more guidance about what actions would be skillful and what would not. But the Buddha went on to provide quite a lot of detail on the actions that are to be done and the actions that are not to be done.

Tomorrow night we're going to talk on the whole area of sīla, or moral action. So I don't want to go into much detail now, but the Buddha outlined ten actions that are unwholesome in nature, driven by greed, aversion, and/or delusion, and ten actions that are wholesome in nature, not driven by those forces.

So just briefly, in this list, three of these unwholesome actions are acts of body: killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Four of them are actions of speech: lying, harsh speech, malicious speech, and idle speech and gossip. Three of them are actions of mind: covetousness, ill will, and wrong view. This is an interesting one. Wrong view is an unwholesome action of mind. So holding an assumption about the way the world works, the way things are, that is incorrect, is itself an unwholesome action. And the Buddha said it could lead to an unhappy destination.

Included in wrong view is not believing that actions have consequences. So let this be a word of warning.

I think it's very interesting when we start tuning in—and this is really where our meditation practice can ground itself—that actions of mind carry volition. And in that, they have karmic consequences. So take a look at the kinds of mental states and thoughts that you notice in your meditation practice.

Can you feel into the volition or urge that underlies different mental states and thoughts? With a thought of desire, what's the urge that's expressing itself? In some way, it's a wanting to possess, wanting to own, wanting to claim. What's the motivation in fear? It's something like escaping—escaping something or someone, trying to run away from—that's the urge expressed in fearful thought or mind state.

What's the urge or volition in metta? I think it's caring, caring for someone. What's the urge in compassion? I'd say it's to alleviate suffering. You can explore the different mind states that visit, those that seem to carry this quality of motivation or impulse, and feel into what that urge is about. Begin to recognize the wholesome kinds of motivations and the unwholesome kinds of motivations that arise in our minds.

The Buddha spelled out ten unwholesome actions, and then he outlined the ten wholesome actions, which were basically refraining from the unwholesome. This includes the first four precepts: refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, and from lying.

As you consider returning to daily life, I think the teachings on karma become even more relevant, because as you go back into daily life, you're moving back into the realm of relationship and back into the realm of action. This is why the talk on sila is so well-

timed. This is serious subject matter. We sometimes underestimate the importance of karma, the importance of clarity in conduct, but it carries significant consequences for our lives, for our practice, and for our happiness.

As you re-enter the world, this can become one of the major areas of practice. Simply practicing to observe the precepts is a very powerful way to engage with this teaching. The precepts are excellent guidelines and will carry us a long way. They form the foundation for what the Buddha called the bliss of blamelessness—that ease, comfort, and relaxation that comes into our life when our actions are aligned with the precepts and with non-harming practices.

The second aspect I want to discuss tonight is the result of action, the result of karma. Sometimes in the West, as this concept has traveled here, the two have gotten confused. The John Lennon song "Instant Karma" really ought to be retitled "Instant Vipaka," because the result of karma is actually the Pali word vipaka. It's different. Karma is the action itself, and the result is called vipaka.

The basic teaching, as I'm sure you've heard, is that wholesome actions lead to wholesome results, or happiness. Unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results, or unhappiness. This is from the Dhammapada:

"Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

This concept has entered our culture. In the Bible, you'd find it expressed as "as ye sow, so shall ye reap." It's also in the modern vernacular.

A few years ago, a friend and I were teaching a class at Juvenile Hall in San Mateo, California. We'd been invited in by a meditator who was working there as a nurse. For those unfamiliar with how the justice system works here, Juvenile Hall is where people under eighteen are held while awaiting trial—essentially a jail for minors.

We were invited to give a series of classes on meditation to the maximum security wing of Juvenile Hall. These were kids who were fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old, in jail awaiting trial for offenses like armed robbery, assault, murder, attempted murder. It was fairly serious stuff.

Now reflect back to when you were sixteen years old and think about how much self-knowledge you had about your emotional life. Then imagine being locked up in an environment that fostered aggression and fear, being put in a cell for almost twenty-

four hours a day. What do you think your mind state would be like? These kids were climbing the walls, because they didn't know what their future was going to be. In a few weeks or months, they would come before a judge, and depending on the outcome of the trial, they could be sent away to prison for years, if not their whole life.

When we went in, we wanted to teach them basically how to work with their emotions, particularly anger and fear. So we gave them the same instructions we gave you: follow the breath. I have to say, the first time I went in and told them to follow the breath, I thought, "What am I doing here?" These guys were young, they were from the street—

They were of all different ethnic groups that exist in the Bay Area. And here were these two middle-aged white guys coming in and telling them to watch their breath. I mean, they must have thought we were nuts.

But by about the second or third class, we got on to emotions. And that they could relate to. We gave them instructions specifically on how to work with fear and how to work with anger: Feel it in the body. Feel it in the mind. Don't go to the thoughts of past and future. See if you can just hang with it. See if you can just be with that experience.

They were very motivated to practice. That really impressed me. They didn't have much else to do. We were kind of entertaining on one level. And they had a lot of free time, like you all do. You know, viewed from another angle, this is quite a prison setup here if you didn't want to be here voluntarily.

So they went back to their cells. They had a lot of spare time. And a bunch of them in this group really connected with the instructions on working with fear and anger. It brought, I think, probably the first relief they'd ever had in dealing with their emotional life.

By the sixth class, the end of this series that we were giving, we'd built up some connection. We had a sense that things were working. So I said to my friend—this is James Baraz—before we went in to that last class, "I want to teach them some sīla." And he said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yeah, I'd like to try it."

So I talked about the Buddha as the scientist of happiness and how he discovered that the real secret of happiness is being kind and non-harming in the world. And if we act in that way, happiness will follow. I said, "This is kind of the idea behind karma. Do you have any sense for that?"

And one of the young guys raised his hand and said, "You mean like what goes around comes around?"

I said, "That's it, that's it."

So they had it right there. And then after we left, some other meditation teacher came in and started teaching them about the loving-kindness practice, directing them to send loving-kindness to their enemy. Well, on the streets, enemy has a very real meaning. It's not just somebody you're a little irritated with. It's somebody who might be trying to kill you.

So they all had come from—a lot of them had come from—gang cultures, and they started practicing loving-kindness to the rival gangs that they were meeting on the street. At first a couple of them said, "I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to have any feeling for those guys."

And one of the gang leaders said, "Oh, but you've got to remember, they've got mothers and sisters also. You should try this."

So it was really quite touching. It was quite a connecting experience in the end.

Something about this concept that what goes around comes around has broad currency. And I think most of us have some sense of how this works. But when we get to the equanimity practice and we state it so directly, then it gets a little harder to take in.

This is from the words of the Buddha. I think you'll recognize a part of this quote:

"Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever actions they perform for good or ill, of those they will be the heirs."

Our actions are the womb from which we are born. This is a very powerful statement. And when we start thinking of it in this way—that our happiness and unhappiness really does depend on our past actions—Westerners can have a hard time relating to this. Because it goes against our ideals. We were founded on the proposition that all humans are created equal. This country was founded on that proposition.

The democratic ideal is very widespread in Western culture. I think we believe that everybody should have an equal share in happiness and unhappiness. The teaching on karma doesn't seem to support that view, and so the teaching on karma can seem cruel and kind of like a punishment—as though you're saying that because somebody did something, they deserve to be suffering.

Actually, that's not what the teaching is saying. This concept of deserving the outcome is something extra. The Buddha never talked about deserving to suffer. And I believe wholeheartedly that if he had the opportunity to pluck the suffering out of the heart of any human, he would do it immediately.

You look at his compassion toward the murderer Angulimala, who tried to kill the Buddha. Instead, the Buddha taught him to meditate, ordained him as a bhikkhu, and shepherded him to full enlightenment. Then he counseled him when afterwards Angulimala, after his enlightenment, went out to beg for food in the villages where he was known as a murderer and was stoned because of his past deeds. But the Buddha said, "Bear it, bear it, Brahman, because this is a small price to pay. Otherwise, you would have suffered a lot more for the murders that you committed."

So the Buddha was very compassionate even to people who had done many unskillful deeds. It's not that anyone, including the Buddha, wants people to suffer, but as he expressed it, this is just a law of the cosmos—just like if you cut an apple from the tree, it will fall to the ground. If we go about harming others, unhappiness will come our way. It's just a law.

Sometimes it's the fruits of action that are the hardest thing to accept in the teachings of karma. But I want to suggest that many of the fruits of action you already know about. I think we experience the fruits of our actions in at least five ways, and I want to mention each of them.

The first is in the moment when we do the action. When we do something unskillful, it doesn't feel good in the very moment that we do it. Being in retreat, you may have noticed this. If you've done something that was slightly disrespectful to anyone here, you'll immediately feel how the heart clenches and contracts and regrets that action. It's painful to hurt.

On the other hand, when you've done something generous for someone here—think about how that feels when you hold the door open for someone, when you take someone else's dishes, when you do a little extra work in your yogi job so that your work partner doesn't have to do so much. It feels great. So in the very moment of doing the act, there is a result, an outcome of it.

There's another result when we think back on our past actions, when we reflect on the things that we've done. In the metta practice, we're encouraged to reflect on the wholesome acts that we've done as a way of building up self-confidence in ourselves and as a ground for the development of metta for ourselves. So when we remember acts of generosity and acts of kindness, it brings happiness back into our hearts.

On the other hand, as we talked about a little bit this morning, often as we get quiet for the first time, the mind starts to throw up all the unskillful things we've done in our life. We remember times we hurt people, times we were unkind, times we used people, times we killed living things unconsciously without thinking, and those can torment us. We can feel a lot of remorse and guilt as those memories come to mind. So in remembering our past actions, we feel the result of them in wholesome and unwholesome ways.

Our actions in the world come back to us anytime we live in community. If you live in community with people, then the way you treat and relate to those in your community will be mirrored back to you. If you're generous and thoughtful and kind and loving, then you'll get that kind of response from the people in your community. Not everyone—there's praise and blame everywhere, and connection and disconnection. But by and large, if you are well-behaved toward others, you're welcomed and you're respected and you're sought out. On the other hand, if your relationships in your community have been characterized by anger or pride or hurtfulness from you, then people are not so apt to be as welcoming or to seek you out. So the world in different ways gives us feedback when we're living in community.

There's another way that we feel the results of our actions, which is in our states of mind—especially in looking at our habitual states of mind. So I want to ask everybody a question: When your mind moves on the cushion, what does it move to? What direction does it move to? Maybe each of us has our top three or four or five. Maybe for some it moves to restlessness. For some it moves to sleepiness. For some it moves to spaciousness. For some it moves to calm. For some to wanting.

These habitual states of mind have really been cultivated by us over years of living. The Buddha would say lifetimes. We've practiced these different states, both wholesome and unwholesome, and as we come into quietude, these are the tunes that get played in our mind.

This is also from the Majjhima Nikaya: "Bhikkhus, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, then his mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty. If she frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then her mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

That is, by directing our mind along these channels, we incline it to land there more times in the future. So again, the result of these habitual actions is to strengthen that kind of conditioning.

The final of the results is that it's said in the text that karma unfolds in the future with results that seem very mysterious to us. How does our wholesome action bring happiness in the future? That's hard to see. And yet the Buddha said that it does. He also said that we can't figure out the details. The workings of karma is one of the four things that he called imponderables. And he said that one who tried to speculate about the imponderables would go mad and experience vexation. So, please don't.

The other three that it's not wise to speculate about—in addition to the detailed workings of karma—are the range of mind of a Buddha, the beginning of things, and the power of a concentrated mind. These are things we can't figure out rationally.

So this is a really important thing to remember. How many times in your life have you been around someone who is ill and heard a friend say to them, "Oh, it must be your karma"? This is not helpful. It's really not helpful for the sick person. And it's not helpful because nobody knows that kind of thing. If we have any inclination of belief in it, it's pure speculation. We can't know whether that's karma or not. Only someone with a mind like a Buddha mind could know that.

So in this whole area of wholesome actions lead to happiness, unwholesome actions lead to unhappiness, I take it in very broad terms. I sort of trust in it in very broad terms, but I don't try to get specific. If something specific happens in my life or a friend's life, I don't know whether that's karmic or random.

The Buddha never said everything that happens is the result of past action. He never said that. In fact, he was invited to say that at one point. There's this really interesting sutta in the Samyutta where a wanderer, I think it's a wanderer from another sect, comes to the Buddha and says, "These other teachers over here, these other ascetics and Brahmins, are stating that everything that happens to one, whether it be a pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, is the result of past action. Is that true?"

And the Buddha said two things. He said, "Those teachers overstep what they know for themselves," first of all. In other words, they don't know what they're talking about. He was not one to mince words, you may have noticed. The second thing he said was they overstep what is commonly agreed in the world.

And he went on to list something like seven causes and conditions by which we experience pleasant or unpleasant feelings. He said we can experience these feelings because of medical disorders. And using the medical conditions of the time, he talked

about disorders of bile, disorders of phlegm, disorders of wind, or a balance of all three. So in modern medical terminology, we could have many more than four to fill in that list.

So basically medical conditions, climate, diet, carelessness, assault—being attacked by someone can give rise to painful feelings. And he mentioned past karma. So there were a number of other conditions that he said could give rise to these feelings. And he declined to say everything that happens to us is the result of our past action.

I think I take that as a very cautionary instruction. If the Buddha wouldn't say that, far be it from us to say it. So trying to pass judgment on "this happened to that person as a result of their past action"—pure speculation. We simply don't know. We just don't know.

Now, when somebody says, "I don't believe in karma,"

When somebody says, "I don't believe in karma," I think it's usually this fifth kind of result that people are talking about. Because these four earlier results—the way an action feels in the present moment, the way it feels when we reflect on a past action, what we put out into the world and how it comes back to us in relationship, and then the habits of our own mind—I think these are mostly verifiable. I think we can know these through our direct experience.

It's this fifth kind usually that we don't know through direct experience and that causes us to question the teachings of karma. But I want to suggest that saying we don't believe in karma is too blanket a statement. Maybe where the real doubt lies is that we're skeptical about this fifth kind of result, vipāka karma.

So I suggest that in relating to this fifth teaching, you try not to form a conclusion about it tonight. Maybe tomorrow morning. Sleep on it. Sometimes I think these ideas have to settle into our hearts and abide there and get examined over years of practice before we get a sense of this teaching resonating with us or not.

If this doesn't resonate for you, if you don't really believe it, I suggest holding it with an open mind, but also not taking the stance of "I believe it's not true," because this closes us off from some potential wisdom.

Because what if it is true? How would you live your life if this is true? Well, you'd probably want to be really careful with your conduct. You'd probably want to really try and base your actions around non-harming, generosity, kindness, compassion, and live a life that is really in harmony and mutual respect with those around you. If this teaching is true.

Well, what if this teaching isn't true? That would still be a pretty good life, wouldn't it? Wouldn't that still be a life well lived and worth doing? Just from the point of view of being a trustworthy, non-harming individual on this planet, that would still be a great contribution.

This is really what the Buddha suggested in one of the suttas in the Majjhima, Sutta number 60. Either way, it just makes sense to live as though the teachings on karma were true. It benefits us and it benefits others. If they're true, it will benefit us big time. If it's not true, it will benefit us medium time. It's still worth doing.

The next area I wanted to touch on is karma and anattā. I want to lead into it with the teachings on rebirth because I think these connect.

So the Buddha clearly said that the actions of this life influence our next rebirth. In one of the key suttas on karma in the Majjhima, he spells out what kinds of actions lead to what kind of rebirth. I'm just going to hit the highlights so that you'll have heard it:

One who is pleasant with their speech will be born with pleasant appearance. One who is angry with their speech will be born with an unpleasant appearance. One who is generous in this life will be born with abundance in the next. One who is non-giving in this life will be born with a lack of abundance in the next. One who practices non-killing in this life will be born with long life in the next. One who practices killing living beings in this life will be born short-lived. One who practices non-injuring of living beings will be healthy in the next life. One who injures living beings will not be healthy. One who inquires from wise teachers will be born with wisdom in the next life. One who does not inquire will be born with a lack of understanding.

These are obviously very broad generalizations and it would be hard to make any specific conclusions from them because most of us have a mixture of these motives, a mixture of these kinds of karmic acts. But it's interesting that the actions that support the characteristic are the ones that lead to it. I'll just leave you to reflect on that a little bit.

Here's another comment of the Buddha's in regard to rebirth. When he said that karma is the womb from which we are born, he then made it even more explicit in this quote from the Saṃyutta Nikāya:

"Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, and dependents, none of them can you take with you when you die. You must cast them all aside. But whatever karma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your

real possession, and you must fare according to that karma. That karma will follow you just as the shadow follows its owner. Therefore, do good actions, gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings in the hereafter."

It was one of the reasons that he said that those people do not need to fear death who have done a lot of good acts.

Now the question that comes up when we contemplate karma and its connection to rebirth is: who is it that's reborn if there is no self? Another way to ask that question is, if there's no self, then who inherits the actions?

I want to talk about this topic of karma and anattā a little bit. In another sutta in the Majjhima, the Buddha actually reads the mind of a bhikkhu in the audience who is thinking the thought, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?"

So this is essentially that same question: What self inherits actions performed by the not-self? The Buddha basically said to that bhikkhu, "You haven't been listening to me."

But it does sound contradictory, doesn't it? If there's no self, then what's this continuity of karma? How does it continue?

To understand this, I think we need to look into the meaning of not-self. The first thing to say is that the concept of not-self doesn't deny our individuality. As we look around this room, there are a hundred different beings here. That difference, those individuals—there is not a denying or negating of that truth.

For instance, in the front row, there is Laura, there is Venerable Piedamo. They are not the same being. It would be very chaotic if one were to assume they were—especially chaotic if they were to assume they were! Very difficult indeed.

This understanding of our individuality is necessary for keeping the world on track. The Buddha never questioned this sense of individuality, never questioned it.

I think in looking at what makes up an individual, this is where we see the teaching on not-self. I'd like you to think about a river. If you drive forty-five minutes west of here toward Northampton, you have to cross a big river on a bridge—the Connecticut River.

If you go down to the banks of the Connecticut River and stand there, ask yourself: What is a river? The Connecticut River sounds like a big thing, a solid thing. It flows from here down into the ocean by Long Island Sound. If you look on a map, you can see it very clearly drawn. It's quite long and broad—a big geographical feature. So the Connecticut River is really something.

But if you go down and take a look at it and ask, "What is it?"—it's a little hard to figure out. I take it that the river is the body of water. It's not the banks. It's not the bed. It's not the stones in the bed. The river, I understand, is the body of water.

So what is the Connecticut River? If you look at it, is there anything constant in it? No. If what's in front of you is the Connecticut River, one minute it's there and the next minute it's gone, but something else has taken its place. There is no constancy to the Connecticut River when you actually experience it, even though it's a big geographical feature.

The individual is just like that too. There is no constancy in the individual, but everything is flowing through, flowing by the present moment.

In Tibetan Buddhism, they have this really useful concept called the mind stream. It's considered that every sentient being essentially is, in their most basic nature, a mind stream. I like this because the analogy to the river is really clear.

Our mind stream is the flow of our sense impressions, known through consciousness, and our volitional actions of thought and emotion. They're streaming by all the time. As you look closely, standing there at this moment of the now, there is nothing fixed in it. And yet there is the being. There is Laura. There is Venerable Piedamo. Each of them has their own being.

There is a continuity, just as there is a continuity to the Connecticut River, but there is nothing fixed in either of them.

So then the question arises, as we come to know them both: Where does their personality originate? But before we ask that, let's ask what we mean by personality. Personality is a very distinguishing characteristic of beings, of human beings. What is personality? Is it anything other than our habits—the way we think, the way we feel, the way we speak, and the way we act? Isn't that essentially what personality is?

You talk about somebody having a vivacious personality or a reserved personality, an outgoing personality or a very giving personality, a cool personality, a warm personality. Isn't it really just the way we think, the way we feel, the way we speak, and the way we act?

I hope this rings a bell, because these are essentially actions of mind, actions of speech, and actions of body. So I want to suggest that our personality is nothing more than our karmic patterns. Nothing more than our karmic patterns.

When you get to know somebody and discover they have a really charming personality, it starts to feel like there's something solid there. And that's the illusion. There isn't anything solid behind personality. It's just a streaming flow of these karmic actions which arise in patterns, recur in patterns, because we've practiced them, worn a groove in the mind, and our mind inclines in that direction.

So I'd say that personality is nothing more than our individual karmic patterns—built up over years of habit. Nothing else. Nothing solid there. Just the stream of habit, of karmic pattern.

It's curious. In our meditation, sometimes we touch these places of great openness, and we can feel there's really no personality in that space. Have you felt that? It's so open. It's like, where did I go? I'm not here anymore. It's just space. It's just empty space. Everything in the universe has room to live and breathe, arise and pass away. And where am I with my familiar mood and habits? Gone. Gone. Gone beyond. Not there.

But then something happens—a loud sound or a memory comes—and it's like the whole personality coagulates again. And we're back again. When we come back, one person's mind kind of forms around perhaps wanting. Somebody else's mind might form around aversion. The Dalai Lama's mind coalesces again around compassion, for example. Why? Because he's planted that seed so many times. He's practiced that over and over and over.

What we see in this way of looking is that our personality, which seems to be a self, is nothing more than a stream—a changing stream of karmic impulses. But it gives us our unique flavor, our unique expression in the world, because everybody's stream of karmic patterns is different from everybody else's. We're all unique in that. So that's what makes our individuality. But there's no solidity in it.

Yet we also know it's not that easy to change our personality. As the Buddha said: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin."

Living beings are bound by action, bound by karma. We are bound to our personality by the force of the karma that we've invested in it, the volitional urges that we've put into our actions of body, speech, and mind. That's what makes us, quote, "who we are" in terms of personality.

But the beautiful thing is, nothing is fixed in that personality. Nothing is fixed because our actions can change. This is the real principle behind Dharma practice. If we didn't have the situation both of anatta and of the changeability of karma, we couldn't

walk the path of practice. But because of this inherent fluidity in our makeup, we can walk the path of practice and we can transform who we are. We can transform our being.

Another way to say this is that the path itself is a karmic unfolding. The path of Dharma practice only works because of karma.

We've got this river flowing down a certain channel based on our past habits, largely influenced by greed, aversion, and delusion—let's be honest about that. Then we encounter the Buddha's teachings and begin to add a different volition. We introduce the intention of mindfulness, the intention of metta, of sila, of renunciation, of generosity, of determination, of patience, of energy. Each moment in which we add one of these wholesome intentions starts to steer the river in a different direction. We are influencing our whole karmic makeup one moment at a time by introducing the wholesome intentions of Dharma practice.

Over time, you can see the current of this river by looking at someone like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. You can see the possibility of transformation into a heart of compassion and wisdom—one moment at a time. The Dalai Lama didn't get that way by accident. He got that way through practice. According to him, seventeen lifetimes of practice. We have a few to go to catch up, but there's that possibility. One moment at a time, changing the karmic patterning. And it can eventually liberate us. Why? Because our ignorance is not fixed either. Therefore, ignorance can come to an end, along with greed, aversion, and delusion—that cousin of ignorance. This all relies on the unity of karma and anatta.

We reach a point described in the suttas as the end of karma. The Buddha said that for the arhat, the fully enlightened one, there is no more karma—that is, the arhat is no longer generating new karma. He never explains exactly why, but as I feel into this, my sense is that for the fully liberated one, there's no more personal self-interest to go in any particular direction, wholesome or unwholesome. Because the mind stream is free of greed, aversion, and delusion, actions spontaneously spring forth from wisdom and loving kindness. But there's no individual volition in that happening. It just comes forth more or less spontaneously.

So how did this happen to the arhat? This is where I want to return to the night of the Buddha's awakening. The first watch of the night was the recollection of past lives. Why then would the second watch be what it was? I think the Bodhisattva started wondering: how is it that beings appear and reappear? What is the cause and condition for that happening? He turned his divine eye and saw that beings dying and being reborn are due to their past actions. This is where the understanding of karma came from.

One can only read between the lines, but it may not be too far off to ask: what led to the Buddha's liberating insight in the third watch of the night? I want to suggest that the Buddha looked at the situation where wholesome actions lead to pleasant birth and unwholesome actions lead to painful birth—but he didn't want either. The Buddha was interested in ending birth altogether. Perhaps his reflection, his investigation was something like: what if I abandoned wholesome actions—the volition of wholesome actions—and what if I abandoned the volition of unwholesome actions? What then would happen in my meditation? I believe that was his path to full awakening, and it's the path that we also follow.

This is from the Anguttara Nikaya: "What karma is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, which leads to the destruction of karma? It is the volition to abandon the dark karma with dark results"—that means the unwholesome—"and to abandon the bright karma with bright results"—that means the wholesome—"and to abandon the dark and bright karma with dark and bright results"—that means the mixed karma. "This is called the karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright results, which leads to the end of karma."

What is karma that is neither dark nor bright that leads to the end of karma? It is this Noble Eightfold Path that is the way leading to the cessation of karma. The Eightfold Path leads to the ending of karma—the volition to abandon both wholesome and unwholesome actions.

Notice how this feels in your practice. When you're really mindful, strongly mindful of an act of grasping, what happens to that act? It stops, doesn't it? Or an act of aversion—when you're really mindful of it, it stops. Mindfulness is our direct pathway to the ending of action, the ending of volition. In this, it brings us as far as technique can bring us to a state of non-doing, a state of stopping, a state of non-fabrication—in Pali, *atammayata*. It leads us into a deep stillness in our being where we are no longer directing our volition in any direction.

And then out of that deep stillness, perhaps the opening to something other can come—the insight into the unconditioned and the Four Noble Truths.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

[The talk concludes with a period of silent meditation]

Through this exploration of mindfulness and the cessation of volition, we discover that our practice naturally leads us toward non-fabrication, toward that profound stillness where all directing of will comes to rest. In this space of non-doing, we find

ourselves at the very threshold of wisdom, poised for the deeper insights that reveal the unconditioned nature of reality and illuminate the timeless truth of the Buddha's teaching.

This is the gift of mindfulness—not merely awareness, but the direct pathway to liberation itself, guiding us step by step from the entanglements of reactive volition into the vast freedom of awakened understanding.

CHAPTER 8

Right Attitude

Guy Armstrong · 31 min

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses the crucial quality of right attitude in meditation practice, suggesting it may be more important than any particular technique. He explores samma-saṅkappa (right intention), the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, as defined in the suttas: the intention of renunciation, non-ill will, and non-cruelty.*
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> *Armstrong discusses the challenge of balancing dhammachanda (fervor for the Dharma) with patience and trust, warning against both excessive striving that leads to tightness in practice and excessive looseness that lacks engagement. He presents a practical threefold approach: relax, observe, and accept, emphasizing that relaxation is the starting point, not the goal.*
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> *The talk offers a simple diagnostic tool for checking one's mental attitude through three questions: Am I wanting something to happen? (greed), Am I resisting something? (aversion), Am I not knowing what's happening? (delusion). Armstrong connects this to the Buddha's teaching on the three wholesome roots: non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, noting how Sāriputta defined nibbāna as the destruction of these same three unwholesome roots. This creates an inspiring understanding where the path and goal converge - right attitude in the present moment offers a taste of the ultimate freedom.*

In many ways, discovering this quality of right attitude as you approach your meditation practice is more important than the particular meditation technique you work with or range of techniques you employ.

I want to talk this evening about this quality of right attitude—how to investigate it and learn about it in a really simple and practical way.

One of the traits of Buddhist meditation lineages is that they can lend themselves to a strong quality of striving. Throughout all the Buddhist traditions, there is this magnificent concept of enlightenment. Sometimes when people come into the actual practice, they become focused on this outcome in a rather exclusive way. This tends to dominate why we're here, why we're doing what we're doing, and influences every moment along the path. It's as though one had come in carrying a banner that says, "Enlightenment or Bust." And sometimes busting happens before enlightenment happens.

Without a certain amount of fire, the path doesn't unfold so well. So a certain amount of this quality, which we might call *dhammachanda*, or a fervor for the Dharma and for discovery, really needs to be there. Yet if it's not balanced with a sense of patience and trust in the unfolding, it can make us really tight in practice. And then that doesn't help the flowering so much.

I've been subject to some of this myself. Living in California, one is obligated to try other approaches from time to time. About ten years ago, I went to this psychic in San Francisco who'd gotten rave reviews from my friends. If you're in meditation circles in California, you're also in all these other circles. I went to see this guy in San Francisco named Manfred. As soon as I walked through the door—actually Sally and I went together; it was very experimental, so we felt we needed support—as soon as I walked through the door, he said, "Whoa. You're trying way too hard. Don't you know that God more likely shows himself to people who don't want him too much?"

For me, that was a very apt comment. I've had to work over the years of practice with this sense of striving or focus on the outcome, not to become fixated on the end result of practice.

On the other hand, if one lets go of that *dhammachanda*, that real fervor for the Dharma, then a meditation retreat can become a little too loose of a place. Here you're very much on your own a lot of the day, and someone might come into a retreat and say, "Oh, three good meals a day and a room of my own. I think I'll sleep for a week, and then if I have a single pain in my knee, I think I'll get up and leave the hall." Of course, it takes a little more determination than that to work with all the ups and downs of an intensive retreat.

Somewhere in the middle is a place where we can practice where we're really engaged and really motivated, but we're not putting extra pressure on ourselves. That kind of approach to meditation is what we're looking for in the quality of right attitude.

One Vipassana teacher summed up his approach to right attitude in three words. He said the key is to relax, observe, and accept. This is a very good reminder if you want to remember over and over the pointing of right attitude.

We begin with relaxation. Relaxation is not something that we come to after years and years of striving as a goal, but we start with relaxation. I will encourage you all—and you'll probably hear it in the instructions many times—as you begin a period of sitting or walking, see if you can find in your body and in your mind that quality of relaxation. It's not always easy, and you may not always be able to find it, but at least you can incline your practice in that direction.

One of Suzuki Roshi's early comments when he was teaching at San Francisco Zen Center was that we Westerners know how to relax our bodies, but we don't know how to relax our minds. That was one of the things his meditation was to learn about.

When we relax our body at the beginning of a sitting, it sends a strong message to our brain, to our subconscious, saying that I can relax here and now. Maybe it's through taking a few deep breaths. Maybe it's just through the sense of letting the mind fall into the body. We send the message to our whole nervous system that everything is okay, that it's safe to be calm, that nothing has to change, that things are all right just the way they are.

This is really the ground we want to have in our meditation—the sense that everything is okay the way it is. The moment is fine the way it is. This is really the basis for the quality of trust or faith. In Pali, the word is *saddhā*. It's the first of the five spiritual faculties.

We begin with that sense that things are okay the way they are. We remember that they may not be perfect. They may not be exalted. But they may be good enough. In fact, maybe this moment is good enough the way it is. And that means good enough is a basis for us to start meditating.

The second element of meditation in this threefold description is observe. Once we're established in relaxation, we simply want to notice what's happening. If we can notice what's happening, we're meditating.

This is the activity of waking up. In this moment, we want to be awake. This means we're not particularly trying to figure out what's happening to us. We're not thinking about the past or the future. We're not analyzing how it came about that our stomach feels a certain way this morning. We're just observing. We're simply noticing what the expression of life is in this moment.

This is the activity of mindfulness. Whether we're observing our breath, our body, emotions, sounds, passing thoughts, or visual sights is not so important. What's important is that awake quality of knowing this present moment.

The beauty of observing is that it starts to open the door to understanding. Another way to say this is that mindfulness is the entry point for wisdom. As we start to see the way things come and go, the way things arise and pass in our body, in our mind, in the external environment, and we look closely, we start to learn the laws of nature. We start to learn the laws of the Dharma. The only way to become free is to understand the way our own mind works. This quality of close observation is the first step to understanding.

In Buddhism generally, understanding is the highest value. It's only understanding that can lead to freedom and the end of suffering. This observation, the quality of mindfulness, is the direct route to understanding.

Then the third part is acceptance. This links back into relaxation and says: whatever's happening in my mind and body and in the environment right now, I accept it. I don't struggle with it. I don't fight. I'm not in conflict. I can find inner peace right here and right now through this quality of acceptance.

As you know, that's not easy to do. There are so many times that we don't want what's happening to be happening. We want something else to be happening. So we go back and forth, accepting and opening, and then it's not quite right. This is where we can watch the attitude, the play of attitude. The attitude of acceptance brings us into peace. The attitude of non-acceptance, or wanting something else, brings us into conflict, and suffering is born.

Sally and Sharda and I flew here yesterday and got in last night. Sally and I brought our cat with us. Our cat is sixteen years old and had brain surgery last year, so we didn't feel we wanted to leave her with a house sitter who didn't know her. We brought the cat, and IMS graciously offered to put her up along with us here.

I don't know if you've taken a pet on an airplane, but it's not a pleasant ordeal for the animal. We had her in a carrier, and she was squawking the whole time—going through check-in, going through security, lining up for boarding. When we got on the plane, we put her under the seat in front of us, and she just kept squawking. Once we got in the air, we took her out of the carrier, held her on our laps, and she calmed right down. She went to sleep and was very mellow for most of the journey.

Then partway across the country, probably around Chicago, a flight attendant came down the aisle and said, "I'm sorry, but FAA regulations do not allow pets to be outside of their carrier. You're going to have to put her back in her carrier right now."

I saw my mind start to go back and forth between acceptance and fighting. Acceptance and fighting. We had a few words of discussion, and then Sharda kindly picked the discussion up and took it further with her. At one point I remember Sharda saying, "So now you've told us the FAA regulation. It's up to us to make our choice."

The flight attendant said, "It is definitely not up to you to make your choice. You have to comply with the FAA regulation."

Here I'm going: Wait a minute, this doesn't make sense. She's on our lap. She's not disturbing anybody. She's really happy. She's not crying. She's going to sleep.

If we put her back in her carrier, she's going to start squawking and everybody else is going to get upset. But you know how there are some people whose mind is all about regulation, and the specific situation really doesn't matter? This was one of those people.

So in the end, I could either feel angry and upset with her, which I did, or I could feel understanding that this is the way her mind relates to regulation. And I can't argue because it's also a matter of law that you have to obey the flight attendants. So if I resist, I could be arrested in Boston, and I wouldn't be here with you tonight. I thought it's probably better if I'm with you tonight.

So we put her back in the carrier, and she squawked for the whole rest of the journey. She cried, and everybody around could hear her. In fact, a woman a few aisles back said, "Yeah, I heard your cat crying toward the end of the trip."

But for me, the interesting thing was—apart from caring about her experience—watching my mind go back and forth between resistance and judgment and understanding and compassion. Resistance and understanding. I wanted to argue, and then the other side would come up, and I just couldn't take it any further.

So often this will happen in relation to body pain or knee pain or an unpleasant emotion. We can open to it for a moment and really accept it and feel it and understand it, and then it persists and we're back in resistance. It's a very interesting place to observe: where is there suffering and where is there peace or ease? You can take a look at this on an ongoing basis.

So we start to see that we have in all our human minds a very, very deeply conditioned habit of making things right—in fact, of making things perfect in the moment because we don't want anything to be painful. This human tendency to constantly keep adjusting ourselves and the environment to make it just right is described by the Tibetans as the essence of samsara. They say the very essence of the mental movement that keeps us on the wheel—being born and dying, arising into suffering over and over and over—is the act of correcting. This is a very profound statement pointing to this movement of acceptance.

You could say that the whole of our practice is noticing this quality moment after moment after moment. So how do we correct? There are two fundamental ways, of course, which you know. One is we try to make things pleasant, and the second is we try to make the unpleasant disappear. So one expresses itself through the activity of

greed or wanting things a certain way, and the flip side of that coin is wanting to push away the things that don't conform to that. The fundamental movements of liking and disliking.

If we look for the phrase "right attitude" in the teachings of the Buddha, the place it seems most closely linked to me is in the second factor of the Eightfold Path, samma sankappa. This is often translated as right thought or right intention, but I think right attitude is also a valid aspect of samma sankappa.

This is how right intention is defined in the suttas: Right intention is the intention of renunciation, of non-ill will, of non-cruelty. So take a look at this, the act of renunciation. A synonym that's often used by the Buddha is relinquishment. So renunciation and relinquishment are pointing to the same thing. It's basically, in our modern vernacular, letting go—letting go of something that we would want to hold on to. Generosity is another expression of this same movement. Generosity is a form of relinquishment or letting go also.

So the first intention is letting go of what is pleasant, appealing, lovely, desirable. The second and third aspects—non-ill will and non-cruelty—are basically the opposites of... Let me say one other thing. They're both expressions of the mind state of aversion. Non-ill will is the expression of metta. Non-cruelty is the expression of compassion. So these are basically saying metta and compassion. These sum up the intention not to react with aversion.

So the heart of right intention is not being greedy and not being aversive. Now, if you want to refine it a little more, when the Buddha talks about action and karma, he talks about the roots of what's wholesome and the roots of what's unwholesome. And he says, "What is the root of the wholesome? Non-greed is a root of the wholesome. Non-hate is a root of the wholesome. Non-delusion is a root of the wholesome."

So when you put these together, it basically restates non-greed and non-aversion and adds in non-delusion. So these three together can become the core of how we look at right attitude. And I want to suggest that there's a really simple way to apply this teaching in any moment in your meditation practice.

If you're sitting, walking, in the dining room, wherever you are, you can check your mental attitude by asking three questions: Am I wanting something to happen? Am I resisting something that's happening? Am I knowing what's happening?

The first question—am I wanting something to happen?—if the answer is yes, you've identified greed. If you're resisting something that's happening, that's aversion. If you're not knowing what's happening, that's delusion.

When any of these three are present, our mind is not in the optimal attitude for meditation. It becomes fascinating to explore these qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion in an ongoing way. Keep it simple: Do I want something to happen? Am I resisting something? Am I not knowing what's happening?

Transition times in retreats offer particularly rich opportunities to observe these formations. As you enter the dining room tonight, those of you continuing might notice thoughts like: "It's really getting crowded in here," or "Why are these new people so noisy?" Perhaps: "Why didn't they serve tonight what they served last night?" or "The room's too hot or too cold." These are subtle—or not so subtle—movements of liking and disliking.

For those just arriving, many thoughts typically activate when entering a new retreat situation: Where's my room? Is it in a quiet part of the building, or am I right next to the stairs or showers? What's the schedule? Is there enough time after the work period for a shower before morning sitting? Is there anybody interesting on this retreat? What's my yogi job—do I like it or not?

All these questions revolve around: Is this new place going to be okay for me? Am I going to be safe here? Will I find my way? There's plenty of opportunity for liking and disliking. When we don't notice these movements, we're missing what's happening—and delusion is present.

If we're not knowing what's happening, we can return to the present moment quickly. Simply notice something occurring—a breath, sound, sensation, emotion, thought, or visual sight. Just notice what's happening, and you're back in touch with the present moment.

If you notice greed, see if it can be released and move into acceptance. If you notice aversion, see if it can be released and move into acceptance. Sometimes it can, sometimes it can't. But be aware that when the mind is caught in reactive formations, meditation won't be as clear as it could be—the mind is clouded by that reactivity.

For experienced practitioners, desires and aversions become more subtle, often relating to meditation itself. There's longing to repeat a particularly still and present sitting, yearning for states of concentration or the absence of thought. You can feel this in your body—it can't settle in a relaxed way to the present moment because there's straining for something else.

You may not even know what it is, but you can feel the body lifting up, moving toward something else—often a memory of some beautiful meditation state, peace, love, or rapture we want to experience again. We learn to tune into the movement of greed even as it relates to these refined states we touch.

It's worth remembering what one teacher said: we're not practicing to try to stop thinking. First, because it's impossible.

We can't do it, so that will be frustrating. But we're practicing so that we know our thoughts when they're there. Oftentimes, part of the striving in meditation is we want to stop thoughts from coming because we love peace. But now we're clinging. We're attached. We're trying to recreate something. So we need to accept just the way things are. If they're thoughts, what are they? Observe the thoughts just as easily as you would observe the breath.

But suppose I look and I'm not wanting something particular to happen. I'm not resisting what's happening, and I'm in touch with what's happening in the present moment. This is the expression of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. This is the expression of a very wholesome state of mind, and it's from this wholesome, clear, unbiased view that we can best see things the way they are, the way things really happen in our experience.

One teacher described this kind of right attitude as an unentangled knowing. This is really what we're trying to set the conditions to unfold. And this is where the persistent looking at right attitude will lead you. As you examine the movements of wanting, of not wanting, of delusion, you'll find that they will be refined. They will diminish and sometimes fall away by that very examination.

And so start to notice when you're in this place where the three are not present, and there truly is non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. This experience is a kind of balance, a kind of contentment, and a clarity—an unentangled knowing. And then this can become more the reference point that the mind will guide itself back to again and again, a very fertile ground for insight.

Sariputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples, was once asked, "What is nibbana?" He answered that it is the destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbana.

So I hope you notice that this is very close to the description of right attitude. The absence of greed, although not yet completely destroyed, the absence of hatred, and the absence of delusion, even though they're temporary, comes very close to the description

of nibbana. So what this says to me is that this right attitude, as we start to find it in our meditation experience, and it's never so far away, it's never that remote, starts to resemble very closely the very goal of the path that we're walking.

So we don't have to wait for 100,000 lifetimes down the road to get a sense of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. We can find it now in this quality of right attitude, and it gives us a little bit of a taste of the very end of the path. For me, this becomes a really inspiring way to look at practice because the path and the goal start to merge. What I am heading for is not so different than the way I'm walking. The goal comes closer, the path rises to meet it, and we can abide in this kind of contentment and fulfillment, at least temporarily.

So this is really what I wanted to say this evening on the subject of right attitude. You'll hear us talk a lot more about it as we go through the retreat. For now, I would encourage you to take up this investigation as something you direct the mind to regularly. I encourage you to look regularly at the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion, or the presence of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. And this will itself be the way to refine and develop the quality of right attitude.

So we'll touch base with you in the first couple of days. This means everyone needs to check the interview schedule tomorrow morning. During tomorrow's sitting, we'll describe where the interview rooms are located so you'll know where to find us.

For this evening, we have a walking period now, followed by our final sitting at 9:15. Since people are continuing their practice, we'll maintain that sitting this evening with chanting—the sharing of the blessings. Andrea will lead that sitting and the chanting of the sharing of the blessings.

If you've just arrived and your body is tired, you have full permission to skip that sitting tonight. Begin fresh tomorrow morning with the 5 o'clock wake-up and 5:30 sitting. We look forward to seeing you at the first sitting after breakfast.

Please rest well. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 9

First Noble Truth: Dukkha

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong offers a deep exploration of the First Noble Truth based on the Buddha's foundational teaching in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). Armstrong examines the Pali term dukkha—often translated as suffering but encompassing a broader range from intense pain to subtle unsatisfactoriness—and its universal, impersonal nature that connects us to all beings.*
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> *The talk explores the three types of dukkha: dukkha-dukkha (direct pain), viparinama-dukkha (suffering of change), and sankhara-dukkha (unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena). Armstrong emphasizes how understanding suffering as a noble truth is ennobling rather than depressing, fostering compassion and wisdom rather than despair. He discusses the Buddha's injunction that this truth "is to be fully understood" and offers practical guidance on relating to suffering without being overwhelmed by it.*
>
> *Through personal anecdotes, poetry, and classical references, Armstrong shows how suffering can become a training ground for the paramis (perfections) when met with equanimity and investigative interest. The talk concludes with the promise that wisdom—not force of will—reveals the path to suffering's end.*

The talk tonight is on suffering and the cause of suffering. You may recognize this is an abridgment of the Four Noble Truths, focusing only on the unhappy parts. So prepare yourselves. But even once when I was about to give a Four Noble Truths talk here, someone in the staff room said to me, "Do you really want to talk about that? We've really heard quite a lot about dukkha already in this retreat." But hey, that's what being in a Theravadan center is all about. So I hope you'll feel right at home.

The Buddha said at one point that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So I hope that will be your experience tonight.

I'm sure you all have heard the story of the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree near the town of Gaya. How he thought of not teaching, but was urged to do so by a Brahma who descended and said there are beings who will understand. How he then traveled across a couple of hundred miles of northern India to find five friends he had practiced with before in his ascetic period—called the group of five bhikkhus in the dis-

courses—and located them in the deer park in Sarnath near Benares, then approached them and delivered his first Dharma discourse to them. And in that discourse he laid out the basic teaching on the Four Noble Truths.

So the talk tonight is primarily based on his first discourse called the Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta, which translates as "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma." This wheel that he established almost 2,600 years ago is still transforming beings' lives even today. The rest of his 45 years of teachings until he was 80 were really just an amplification of this first talk, sort of like footnotes to this talk.

You may also remember that famous sutta of the handful of leaves, where the Buddha said, "Which is greater, O monks, the handful of leaves that I've collected in my hand or the leaves in the trees in the forest around us?" And the monks, being no simpletons, said, "Well, of course, the handful of leaves is not nearly as big as the leaves in all the forest." But what you may not know is that he went on to say in that discourse, "Just so is what I have shared with you. It is very small compared to all the things I know by direct knowledge, but what I have shared with you is enough for you to gain complete liberation, and what I have shared with you—what you are to understand—are the Four Noble Truths." So he again reiterated that as the essence of the handful of leaves that his teaching had disclosed.

I'll just mention the Four Noble Truths briefly as a way of review. The first is the truth of suffering. The second is the truth that the origin of suffering is craving. The third is the truth that the end of suffering is in the end of craving. And the fourth is that the way to the end of suffering is through the Noble Eightfold Path.

So I want to talk tonight about these first two noble truths.

What distinguishes the Buddha from simply a philosopher is that in addition to the insights of the Four Noble Truths as just outlined, he added to each one an injunction, a direction, a command, so that it was not sufficient just to hear the teachings. With each of the Four Noble Truths, there was a suggestion or a prescription that those listening needed to carry out. So from the very first days of his sasana, of his teaching, the Buddha was not simply philosophizing. He was directing people how to walk the path to liberation. So I'll talk about the injunctions or prescriptions as well as we go through these Four Noble Truths.

The way he expressed the first truth is like this: "This is the noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Sorrow, lamenting, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering."

This truth is sometimes represented, especially in the non-Buddhist world, as "Oh, the Buddha taught that life is suffering" or that "everything is suffering." And it casts a kind of gloomy pall around the notion of Buddhism. But this is not what the Buddha is saying and it's not implicit in this statement. It's not what he meant either, I don't believe.

The word, of course, that he was using throughout the Four Noble Truths, which we translate usually by "suffering," is the Pali word dukkha. But no English word is adequate to translate the range of meanings that are implicit within the Pali word dukkha. I'm going to use "suffering" as the primary translation as we go through the talk, but please be aware that it's not a very good translation, but it's such a common translation that it is the one I'll use.

Dukkha has a whole range of meanings from the most intense kind of pain imaginable, which usually carries a strong experience of suffering, down to very subtle levels of unsatisfactoriness or unreliability. And the basic sense is that this world, as available through our six senses, is not capable of providing a lasting satisfaction. So you could say that maybe the best general translation for dukkha is "incapable of satisfying." But that's kind of cumbersome. So we shorten it down to this term, "suffering." But it ranges from intense experiences of unhappiness to very subtle experiences of lack of fulfillment.

Some of the other translations that have been used that you'll read in different texts translated into English are unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, unreliability, stress, anguish. All of these convey facets of the meaning of dukkha. But when you come to any specific passage, it's helpful to try to understand which aspect or which nuance of the meaning the passage is particularly pointing to. Because some passages will point to direct experiences of pain, others will point to the more subtle manifestations of unreliability.

Overall, you can take this teaching on the First Noble Truth...

as pointing to a kind of lack, or you could say a lack of fulfillment, that is universal in the way that as humans we live our life until we undergo the training that leads to freedom.

There is a universal sense of insufficiency, of feeling that something is missing. There is not a general and constant pervasive sense of contentment throughout the human world, as you may have noticed. Even if we have everything externally—which so often these days we have in this Western paradise that technology has helped to give us—it seems that the basic level of unhappiness is perhaps even increasing in our world.

But it also doesn't mean that everything is miserable. There are people whose lives are basically happy, who have, I would say, a great deal of happiness and even contentment in their lives, ordinary people, untrained. But even for such people, where there's a baseline of happiness and contentment, there are good days and bad days. There are pleasurable experiences and unpleasurable experiences. There are times of frustration as well as times of contentment. But this pointing to an essential lack of fulfillment, I think, is a good way to remember the essence of this truth.

One of the things I appreciate a lot in the way the Buddha phrased his teaching on the First Noble Truth is how universal it is. You know, if he had come along and said, "basically, life really sucks," a lot of people would have just turned off and gone to hear somebody else, probably in California, who was painting a much rosier view of the human condition. But everything that he says, it's hard to disagree with. Birth, aging, illness, death, sorrow, and pain are all suffering. We can all relate to that. The association with what we don't like and the separation from what we like and not getting what we want—these are things that everyone can relate to as happening regularly in our lives.

The other thing that I appreciate is that in its universality, it's also very impersonal. It doesn't say, "I am suffering" or "you are suffering" or "you should realize how much you're suffering, guys." It doesn't say it that way. And when you think about it, if we take it that way, that has a really different feeling.

How often in our minds do we kind of take it that way? "Oh, I really have a lot of suffering in my life. I have a problem in this part of my life. I've had this very painful pattern of emotion in my psychology for years and years. I don't know what I'm going to do about it. I don't know when I will get rid of it." These are the kind of thoughts that tend to spin out when we phrase this as "I am suffering."

It's a very different feeling when we step back and we take a look at the universality of suffering as a noble truth. When we go on in the vein of "I am suffering," does it feel very noble to you? It generally doesn't to me. When my mind runs in those directions, it feels lowering. I feel weighted down by the burden of those kinds of thoughts. It's not uplifting. It doesn't elevate me and it doesn't give me dignity.

But when we see it as this universal psychological condition that all human beings are subject to, that to me is more what our friend Stephen Batchelor calls ennobling. That becomes an ennobling truth.

Why? For a few reasons. Number one, if we don't take our own difficulties so personally, then we might be able to accept them more easily. When we realize that what we're struggling with is part of the universal human condition, well, maybe it's not so much our fault. Maybe it doesn't invalidate us as a person.

Secondly, it can help connect us to everyone else that we meet. In this culture, we tend to put kind of a premium on being upbeat and happy and putting on a smiling face in public. And sometimes we are taken in or forget to look under the surface of the cultural appearance to recognize that everybody is dealing with these same issues of birth and aging and illness and death and being separated from what is pleasing.

When we start to go a little deeper for this universal human condition of unsatisfactoriness, then we can start to connect also with everyone we meet, knowing that somehow we're in the same boat with them. And then this kind of connectedness is the doorway to awakening compassion.

I think this is one of the great benefits of the brahmavihara practices. As we go through the phrases in either metta or compassion, we realize we all share the same deep wishes and we all have the same deep struggles in achieving them. And the brahmaviharas serve then as a way of uniting us in the human family, of allowing our compassion, our goodwill to flow out.

Sometimes the sense that "I am suffering" and the claiming it is ours has just the opposite effect. It can feel quite isolating, as though we have to be ashamed of the pain that we feel. We can't expose it and we can't share it with anyone else.

There's a lovely poem by Naomi Shihab Nye that expresses this connection. It's called "Kindness." "Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things."

Feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved—all this must go, so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you—how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans, and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows, and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, "It is I you have been looking for," and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

The line I most appreciate in this poem is where she says, "You must speak to sorrow till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is vast—universal. It includes all sentient beings, all subject to the first noble truth of dukkha.

As we start to explore the kinds of suffering we encounter—and meditation practice is the only way I know of to plumb the depths of this kind of seeing—we come upon three types that the Buddha described. The first is dukkha-dukkha. Can you guess what that is? It's like a double hit—the immediate pain of existence.

The second is viparinama-dukkha, the pain of alternation. We may have pleasurable circumstances for a while, but when they change, we feel the loss and separation, the pain of change.

The third is called sankhara-dukkha—the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena.

Dukkha-dukkha is helpful to reflect upon from time to time, recognizing it as an integral part of our world. The experiences of illness and death are clearly, for most of us, going to feel like dukkha-dukkha. When we look around the world and think of the wars and conflicts going on—the genocide and torture in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, Tibet—we see big eruptions of this kind of intense suffering.

Even in our own society, where there is not a time of war, if you really start to listen to the stories of the people you meet, you'll find instances not so far from our own lives—murder, rape, racism, and abuse of children happening in our own communities, all around us.

Living in our fairly privileged lives, as I think most of us do, we are still subject to various kinds of dukkha-dukkha. Sally and I were leading a class a few years ago of senior students who had been practicing for some time and were materially reasonably comfortable. We had been working together for months, if not years. One evening, I asked the group to talk about the pain in their own individual lives.

They spoke of a sense of isolation and lack of connection with others. They talked about still dealing with their afflictive emotions—depression, sadness, anger, anxiety. They shared about feeling pressures in their work life, the struggle to make ends meet, and fears of inadequacy or not performing well enough. Because this was a group partly of our generation, they were already feeling the effects of aging. Everyone knew the impact of illness.

Again, probably because of our age, there was much discussion of aging parents losing their capacities and declining physically and mentally—which, as you know, is a very sad thing to witness in people you're close to. These were common experiences for people even in this fairly select circle of practitioners.

Viparinama-dukkha, the pain of alternation or change, is something we're all subject to. We enjoy pleasurable conditions or experiences, and when they change, we tend to feel their loss. If there's been even the slightest inclination of grasping—even the slightest—then there will be at least some pain or friction when change happens.

Ajahn Chah compared this alternation of pain and pleasure to a poisonous snake. He said, "If you grab the head of a poisonous snake, it will bite you right away—that's dukkha-dukkha. But if you grab hold of the tail, which is the non-painful end, and you hold on, eventually the head will swing around and bite you too—that's viparinama-dukkha." So the lesson is: don't grab. It's not easy to do.

The third type of dukkha the Buddha discussed is sankhara-dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory because they are unstable—all unstable. Every state that is put together from prior causes and conditions is falling apart.

It's not like viparinama dukkha where we see that something will fall apart at some time in the future. With the insight of sankara dukkha, we bring concentrated attention to our moment-to-moment experience and see that every mind state and every physical sensation and every external sense impression is arising and passing over and over again, moment after moment after moment. When we come into that level of seeing, we truly see the unreliability of conditioned phenomena.

We had the opportunity a few years ago in California to hear the Dalai Lama. Sally and I were there. I think Sharda was there too. He was outdoors in the Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View—a place that Led Zeppelin might have played twenty years ago. It's a huge stage. If Led Zeppelin had been there, it would have been full of their speakers. But on this day, the backdrop to the stage was a huge painting. It was

like the whole stage was a painting of the Potala Palace, where the Dalai Lama used to live in Lhasa, painted in the colors of sunset. Purple and orange colors streaked the sky and reflected off the windows of the painted Potala Palace.

The Dalai Lama sat on a big throne, projected over large screen televisions so that everybody—there were several thousand people in the seats and on the grass amphitheater—could see him. It was a very wonderful feeling. It was kind of like being at a Dharma Woodstock. That's what it felt like—a festival atmosphere. Being with the Dalai Lama for three days, he was teaching on the subject of emptiness from the Heart Sutra.

What he said about these three kinds of dukkha is that each takes an increasing subtlety of attention to see and understand. Everyone can be aware of dukkha dukkha, the suffering of pain. With a little bit of thought and reflection and examination of experience, one comes to understand that even pleasurable experiences come to an end, but that takes some investigation and reflection. And then it's only with the very subtle attention of a concentrated mind that can see the moment-to-moment arising and passing that we really deeply understand the unreliability of all conditioned things. This is how the Dalai Lama explained it also. He said that if you really want to help people in this world completely become free of their suffering, you need to understand these three levels completely yourself. Only then will you be able to help others release their bondage from these forms of dukkha.

This is a quote from the Pali Canon. It's put in the mouth of a Brahma who is one of the higher gods, but it expresses a dharmic teaching: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." Sankara dukkha is a pointer to this trembling within form—that moment by moment things are not stable, even for one moment, but they're constantly being created and dissolving, being created and dissolving. Thus the wise do not cling to form.

Our problem, of course, is that we don't really see dukkha in this way. We're blinded by very deep conditioned tendencies. We have very strongly built-in biases that seek the possibility of happiness in the world, the possibility of permanence, and a self, when in fact, as you all know, the things of the world aren't capable of satisfying. They are impermanent, and they do not constitute a self. But our conditioned nature is such that we keep looking for lasting happiness, permanence, and self. It's a form of ignorance that is clouding our understanding.

So we approach spiritual practice with the same attitude that we've approached our worldly life by and large. We are all intelligent enough to have understood that lasting happiness doesn't come from external things. But when we come into the spiritual

world, we tend to think that true happiness may be found in lasting spiritual things. This is certainly true for me, and I see it still in my tendency when I'm not looking closely.

I keep thinking that if I just get my attention right and my posture right and my concentration right and my intention right, I'm going to be able to sort everything out. I'm going to find this nice plateau of peace and concentration and openness and metta, and then I'm just going to be able to hang there—for six weeks at least, hopefully the rest of my life, but six weeks would be a good start. Then every time it doesn't happen that way, I feel like I've blown it. I've got to go back and set those conditions better.

So I find in myself this tendency to look to land somewhere in some meditative state that's going to be ongoing. And meditative states are also part of compounded phenomena. Until you realize the unconditioned, meditative states before that are all put together by prior conditions. Just as they were put together, they will also fall apart.

We not only keep wanting things out in the world, but we bring this same attitude into our meditation practice, continually wanting things to unfold in a certain way.

Now, it is definitely true that there are skillful attitudes to cultivate, skillful states of mind to develop in dharma practice. And it does happen that these skillful attitudes and states of mind tend to feel better than the unskillful ones. So do you see the dilemma here?

We do want to cultivate the factors of the Eightfold Path, the seven factors of enlightenment. The factors of the Eightfold Path and the seven factors of enlightenment do feel better than their opposites. So the question becomes: are you cultivating them out of desire for pleasant experience, or are you cultivating them out of wisdom, knowing that they lead toward liberation?

This is an interesting exploration I'll return to later. But it's worth keeping an eye on this tendency.

Life throughout—both worldly and spiritual—doesn't offer cozy plateaus. It is changeable, raw, vivid, and often intense. This tends to be our experience here in practice as well as outside.

But this changeable quality, while initially disappointing, works to our benefit in the long run. I came upon a passage in the Samyutta Nikaya that caused me to ponder for some time. The Buddha says, essentially—I'm paraphrasing—if there were one speck of permanent form as big as my fingernail, then the holy life lived for the purpose of liberation would not be possible.

In other words, if there were even this small amount of permanence in the universe, it would gum up the works. We would not be able to transform our minds from their current state, clouded by ignorance, into a state of full enlightenment. It is only due to the impermanent and essentially empty nature of our own being that we are able to make this transformation.

Suffering is not stuck either.

What was the injunction that goes with the first noble truth? The Buddha said: "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood." This is the prescription for the first noble truth—it is to be fully understood.

Part of the implication is that we don't understand it now. Even after listening to this discourse, you probably do not fully understand the first noble truth. And I have to admit, I don't either.

What does it mean that we don't fully understand it now? As a practice direction, this is a wonderful instruction. To fully understand this truth, we need to keep applying it over and over in our experience until we understand its depth. We can use it as a frame to bring in again and again, looking at the way our experience unfolds.

Ajahn Sumedho said that in his own practice, he used the Four Noble Truths as his primary practice orientation throughout all the years of his development. He would bring them in and apply them, checking them out in each situation he found himself in. He calls this "a lifetime's practice"—the understanding and application of the first noble truth.

Let's talk about some of the ways we don't see it. When we're experiencing difficulty, how often do we recognize it as the first noble truth revealing itself? Is this the first thought that comes to mind? How often do we think instead, "Oh, I've screwed up again. It's my suffering coming to the fore"?

So often we see it as: there's something wrong with me, there's something wrong with somebody else, or there's something wrong with the world. The world includes this retreat center, the facility, the food, the weather, and so forth.

Notice that because we don't like to see the truth of dukkha, we have many ways of missing the point. We might deny to ourselves that it's happening: "Oh no, this isn't pain. This isn't as bad as yesterday anyway." Or we could judge ourselves: "Oh, you just did something wrong. It's your fault that there's pain now."

Because the noble truths encourage us to take responsibility for suffering and the end of suffering, one can get the impression from the Buddha's teachings that we are at fault if we're suffering. This is quite interesting. There's also a sutta where a questioner asks the Buddha, "Am I the cause of my own suffering?" I was very surprised to read that the Buddha said no. I found this very liberating.

Then the questioner continued: "Was another the cause of my suffering?"

And the Buddha said no.

And he said, well, how is it then? And the Buddha went through the chain of dependent origination: When ignorance is present as a condition, karmic formations arise. With karmic formations as a condition, consciousness arises, and so on—a sequence of twelve steps that ends in suffering. We'll probably talk about it more later.

The interesting thing to me that has made me reflect a lot is that the first step in that chain leading to suffering is ignorance. So I want to ask each of you: Did you put your ignorance there? Did you ever remember knowingly creating it? Was there an enlightened mind to start with, but you slid ignorance into the picture to cover it? No.

In fact, the Buddha said that a beginning for ignorance cannot be discerned—that we have been traveling this round since beginningless time. So if we're not responsible for ignorance, and ignorance is the primary source of our suffering, how can we ultimately say it's our fault?

This may sound abstract, but the more I came to see ignorance as the fundamental problem in my relationship to life, the less I had to say, "Oh, I made that happen." I saw that all the mistakes and blunders I'd made in life, all the suffering I'd caused, was based on that ignorance—stemmed from that ignorance. So the judgment of ourselves is off the mark of the noble truths. Many, many causes and conditions have led to the situation we find ourselves in.

Similarly, if we try to escape from the experience of pain by blaming others, we're also missing the point of the First Noble Truth. You can blame other people all day long for your suffering—does it ever alleviate it? It hasn't for me. It can keep us stuck in a resentful or blaming attitude, but it doesn't seem to lift the suffering.

So can we, when we're in difficulty, if we see a tendency to blame ourselves or blame others or blame the world, just stop for a moment and say, "Oh, this is a form of dukkha. This is the First Noble Truth." And then we might inquire a little more into it: "What is the real source of this dukkha?" But being able to name it as dukkha in its uni-

versal quality, being able to see it as one more instance of the First Noble Truth, is the beginning of this kind of insight where the noble truth of dukkha comes to be fully understood moment by moment.

Now, there's another point I want to make in relation to dukkha that is kind of delicate about opening to the First Noble Truth. As I've said, it's not an easy truth to be with. We have a built-in bias not to see it. It's part of the Buddha's teaching that goes against the stream.

If we don't stay in touch with this noble truth, then what are called vipalasa—our illusory way of perceiving the world—will lead us to believe that there is permanence, lasting happiness, and a self. We will project into the future this safe and cozy plateau, whether it be through external things or through internal meditative states, and we will aim our lives into the future to land there. So we put our happiness into the future based on an illusory wish. Clearly, this is misleading and involves us in more delusion.

But the other thing is that if we start to dwell on the concept of dukkha a lot, we can start to see the whole world in terms of dukkha. Then we really start to feel that gloom that's sometimes attributed to Buddhism, and we think, "Oh my God, everything is dukkha. Life is dukkha. My life is dukkha. My friend's life is dukkha. Everybody's life is dukkha."

But the problem with this is we have taken an insight and converted it into a belief. We are not seeing the true nature of things moment by moment. We've taken one experience, held onto that as a generalized view of the world, and then stapled it everywhere: "It's like that, it's like that, it's like that, it's like that." Basically what we're doing is clinging to a view. But when an insight is turned into a view, it's no longer true. An insight needs to be of how things are here and now.

If we form a view about the world as being dukkha, then that covers over the living reality. Because there are many, many moments in the day when there is not—I'll say it—when there is not dukkha. Generally, these moments slip by us, and we don't notice those either. But I'll talk about this when we get to the Third Noble Truth at another time.

So the intention of the First Noble Truth is not so that you'll get gloomy and develop an aversion about life.

That's not the point, and it's a misapplication—it's converting a truth into a view.

The Buddha expressed this beautifully: "A practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure." Many of the suttas that speak of developing the factors of enlightenment and cultivating the higher qualities of the path describe aspects of happiness, joy, and rapture as integral to the path's evolution.

To understand suffering, it doesn't work to be overwhelmed by it. We have to be able to—Ajahn Sumedho likes this phrase—stand under it. That means we must support it on our own shoulders while standing upright. We have to hold it, or as he says, embrace it, accept it. In order to understand suffering, we must allow it to be in our lives just as it is while remaining upright, dignified, and ennobled.

So how can we do that? Let me ask you: has suffering ever been useful in your practice? Have you ever learned anything? Has it ever opened qualities of heart or mind? What have you found through connecting with suffering?

"Compassion," someone responds. Yes, suffering is said to be the proximate cause of compassion. What else?

"Empathy—being able to feel another's suffering from feeling and opening to our own." Indeed. "Impermanence—investigation of suffering leads to seeing impermanence, so wisdom is cultivated."

"Appreciation." How so? "Experiencing the suffering can really make us experience the times that are free from that suffering." Exactly—appreciation, patience, strength, confidence. I can bear this. I can understand it. I can work with it.

In many ways, suffering becomes a training ground for the paramis. We grow, develop, and open through a wise relationship to suffering. But it depends on us not being overwhelmed by it. We must find that inner strength that lets us maintain our balance while relating to it, understanding it, feeling it, coming into contact with it. This is truly the power of equanimity—when present, it gives us the strength to learn from suffering.

I always enjoy seeing Morgan Freeman in movies. I recently read about his life story. He was born in 1937, so he turned seventy this year, and he grew up in Mississippi. Being an African-American young man in Mississippi through the thirties, forties, and fifties would not have been a primarily happy experience. And yet when you look at his character today, I feel an incredible amount of dignity and self-respect in his bearing. He was chosen in two different movies to play the character of God—quite a testament to his character.

Sally and I were in New York last fall and went to a Broadway show—Spamalot, which was not particularly dignified but a lot of fun. When we came out of the theater around eleven o'clock, there was Morgan Freeman walking down the sidewalk toward us with a woman, dressed in a black wool overcoat. He looked just like a character from his movies—tall and dignified—and you could see the crowd of people parting in advance of his wake. He has a wonderful bearing and character, and I believe much of that was learned through dealing with the adverse circumstances of growing up as a black man in a racist culture.

There are many things we can learn from suffering when we can bear it, when we are not overwhelmed by it—but we need to see it clearly, moment after moment.

One of the ways we know we haven't fully understood dukkha is that we keep chasing things. If we really understood dukkha and the true meaning of impermanence—the thoroughgoing nature of impermanence—we wouldn't chase material things, we wouldn't chase people, and we wouldn't chase meditation experiences.

So to the extent that we still chase these things, those are signs that we have a way to go in the full understanding of dukkha.

Along these lines of the ennobling quality of dukkha, Ajahn Chah offered this reflection, which you've probably heard before: "There is suffering that leads to more suffering, and there is suffering that leads to the end of suffering."

What makes the difference between these two? We see so much suffering in the world that seems to lead only to more suffering—this spiral of violence and unhappiness and endless pursuit of materialism. So what kind of suffering leads to the end of suffering? Or better, what quality of mind can transform suffering toward its end?

One aspect is this base of equanimity—we must be strong enough to bear it. The other is interest. If we cultivate an interest to learn from suffering, this brings in a profoundly wholesome factor of mind. This investigative quality is the second of the enlightenment factors. The first is mindfulness, which gets us there and puts us in touch with what's happening. The second is that we want to investigate how that suffering is arising, how it's being sustained, and how it can be ended.

If we get interested in suffering, this becomes the turning point that starts to lead us toward using it for the end of suffering. We have abundant opportunities during this retreat to see this, as I'm sure you've noticed.

That simple practice of turning attention to the attitude of mind—seeing if there's wanting, seeing if there's not wanting, seeing if there's delusion—these are pointers to conflict, to struggle, to having an agenda. They point to some way we may be in conflict with our situation and therefore experiencing some degree of suffering, either gross or subtle.

If we can take that opportunity to learn what leads to suffering—how it gets created, how it can be released, and how it can be ended—that's the investigation we're here for.

I heard a teacher giving a dharma talk recently who said, "Changing the conditions that lead to suffering is what our practice is about. There is no other practice than this."

It's only through our own wisdom that we can change those conditions—not through force of will. Wisdom alone can change those conditions. We have to look, investigate, attend, be interested, be curious, until the wisdom itself reveals to us suffering, its cause, and its end. If we are patient and stay with that experience, knowing it as the First Noble Truth, the wisdom will reveal this to us. The wisdom will unfold the way out.

I didn't get to the cause of suffering tonight—we're halfway there. We'll explore that another evening. But I want to end with the Buddha's formulation of the Third Noble Truth from this same discourse, just to point toward the direction of the teaching.

This is what the Buddha said about the Third Noble Truth: "This is the noble truth of the end of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of craving, the giving up and relinquishment of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it. That is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 10

Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong explores the third foundation of mindfulness from the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN 10) - contemplation of citta (mind-heart). He addresses how meditation practice involves understanding the full range of mental states, both difficult and beautiful, rather than trying to eliminate painful emotions. Armstrong discusses four primary difficult emotions - sadness (connected to pleasant past experiences), anger (linked to unpleasant past), desire (wanting pleasant future), and fear (anticipating unpleasant future) - and their relationship to time. Drawing on personal retreat experiences and wisdom from teachers like Pema Chödrön and the Dalai Lama, he offers practical guidance for working with emotions through three steps: recognizing what we're feeling, feeling it in the body, and understanding the storylines that sustain emotional states. The talk emphasizes that transformation comes not from getting rid of difficult states, but from developing equanimity and wisdom in relationship to them, allowing us to 'wake up in the middle of difficulties' rather than after they're gone.*

You've probably tuned into the fact by now that meditation is basically all about the mind. The body is important. The five senses are important. They're a good basis for mindfulness, and it's important to understand how we suffer in relation to hanging on to them. But really what we're here to do is learn about the mind, because it's in the mind that we suffer through difficult states—states like fear and anger, embarrassment and humiliation, loneliness and despair. And it's through the mind that we also find the beautiful states, the skillful states of mind, which is how we become liberated: states like mindfulness and wisdom, compassion, joy, contentment, and love.

So fundamentally, what we're here for is to understand this whole range of what goes through our minds, both on the affective level—the level of emotionality or feelings—and also on the cognitive level, the level of understanding. Both these levels are critical to the development of the practice.

I want to talk specifically about working with the range of difficult emotions that come into the mind. You'll see that as we go through the retreat, although we begin talking more about the difficult, as you get settled in, that's what the experience tends to be. And then after you're settled in for a while, we start to talk more about the beautiful states because that's what begins to arise more frequently. So we're still in the early stages, and the talks tend to be loaded on the difficult, but that will start to change.

When I came into meditation practice, it was because of suffering, which I think is more common than not. I was surprised to find that some people come in out of mere curiosity, because I didn't see why anybody would put up with this just out of some intellectual questioning, but apparently there are people who do. I came in because of suffering, and having read the publicity, I thought enlightenment would get rid of that. Specifically, I thought that if I could get enlightened, I'd get rid of those difficult and painful emotions that I was grappling with in my life.

It took me quite a few years to realize—I think I was a slow learner—that in fact, I had to learn to be comfortable with those states before I had any chance of becoming enlightened. So the order of things got quite reversed in my understanding. Once we're comfortable with all the different places that our mind can go, all the different states that it can move into, then we've found a huge amount of ease and comfort in living this life within this body. It's not the same as liberation, but it brings a lot of freedom.

In a kind of flippant way, you might say that this is like becoming enlightened before we're enlightened—to develop this sort of ease with the whole range of mental states that can come to us.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, grisly, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. The beautiful thing is that meditation not only gives us the method, but we find out we have the capability to do this—to investigate all the corners of the mind and to come to a degree of understanding and acceptance in relation to them. This is a big part of the joy of discovery of the path of meditation.

I don't know about you, but when I began this path, I wasn't very familiar with this inner landscape. I don't think our culture is very good at training us in this inner landscape. And I'm not talking just about how the culture didn't tell me how to develop one-pointed states of mind and achieve the third jhāna. It didn't tell me how to know when I was feeling hurt, when I was feeling angry, when I was feeling embarrassed or loving or happy, or what any of that meant.

So for me, it was not until I came into dharma practice that I was pointed to looking and inquiring into that inner landscape using the map that the Buddha provided, and coming to greatly appreciate the range that is contained within this human mind—

within every human mind. A range that includes very difficult and painful areas, but that also, as you start to open it up and become comfortable, unveils a lot of treasures: understanding of loving-kindness, of compassion and joy, and so forth.

But until we begin this exploration, there are generally, for us as adults, places where we get stuck in difficult corners of the mind. Or it could be we're stuck from clinging to beautiful corners of the mind. Both of those experiences happened to me as I was growing up, and I didn't know how to navigate my way out of them.

Children don't seem to have much of a stuckness in the range of their mind. Unless they've been abused in some way or their trust has been deeply betrayed, then children seem to definitely get stuck. But if children are treated respectfully, then they seem to have this fearlessness in relation to their emotional life.

You watch a couple of kids playing, and they'll be joyful and enthusiastic and excited one moment, and they'll be fighting the next and screaming at each other and kicking and pulling hair. And then two minutes later, they'll be playing happily together again. They just flow through all those different states without holding back. Their emotional range doesn't scare them.

But as adults, we seem to have hit some dark corners, and because of that, we've shrunk back from our emotional range. We've become afraid of some corners of our mind, and once we start to close down on one corner of the mind, it exerts a dampening effect on the whole range. So we may start by closing off some of the difficult emotions, but we find as we do that, we close the heart overall and the beautiful emotions are no longer quite so available.

So the journey of meditation is a way of reclaiming some of that terrain, that wide terrain that the heart contains that we've lost touch with given the bumps of growing up. As we start to explore the range, the first impulse, I think, for most of us is that we think spiritual practice is going to help us get rid of the difficult. We hope that through the cultivation of bliss and peace and loving-kindness, we can just kind of glide over the top and end up on some really nice spiritual plane where we don't have to deal with that other stuff anymore.

As you know, this is not the path of insight meditation. So congratulations for still being here once you found this out.

This is again from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we

run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive. Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know."

This is our encouragement to look at all the areas of the mind and find out what we can learn from them. Tonight I'd like to explore these difficult areas through the context of the Third Foundation of Mindfulness.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha outlined four areas in which we establish mindfulness: body, feeling tone or vedana, the third foundation of citta, and the fourth foundation of dhammas, or the principles of nature. The third foundation of citta relates directly to our exploration this evening.

Citta is a wonderful word in Pali that can be translated as mind, though it's sometimes rendered as heart. The reason for this flexibility lies in citta's encompassing both cognitive and affective workings of the mind. When the Buddha taught, he didn't perceive such a polarity between what we sometimes call heart and mind—the mental and the affective were united in his understanding. One translator suggested that the best way to render citta is as "psyche," a word that encompasses both sides of our mind's nature.

Here is the beginning of the description of the third foundation from the Satipatthana: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

Here are our familiar companions: desire, hatred, and delusion, along with their opposites—the absence of desire, hatred, and delusion. These three states, which the Buddha referred to as the roots of the wholesome and the roots of the unwholesome, combine to create all the different kinds of mind states that occur. You can examine any mind state that arises and discover within it some combination of these three qualities in their wholesome or unwholesome manifestations. Citta encompasses this entire range of mental experiences.

Let me clarify the language I use around this subject. I often speak of emotions, by which I mean strong experiences like joy, happiness, love, fear, grief, and depression. Then I use the word "mood" to describe emotional qualities that are less intense—perhaps waking one day with a subtle melancholy or feeling a pervasive tenderness coloring the mind throughout the day.

There's also a third term common in our tradition: mind states, mental states, or states of mind. This category includes not only emotions and moods but also the refined mental qualities we understand and develop through meditation—mindfulness, concentration, equanimity, calm, compassion, renunciation. These may not be strong enough to be called emotions, sometimes being quite subtle, but they belong to this broader category. In Buddhist language, you'll also hear these referred to as mental factors.

We'll have much more to say about wholesome states of mind later. For now, I want to mention two things. First, don't cling to them, as I think you know. Second, please be sure to appreciate them. They are wonderful visitors when they come. Don't take them for granted. Sometimes I would think, "Oh, that's contentment. Well, of course that's contentment—that's what I came for," and then I'd space out. Really take the time to connect mindfully to the beautiful states of mind as well as the difficult ones.

With difficult states of mind, we need two things primarily through meditation. First is an attitude shift that moves from wanting to get rid of them toward accepting or even welcoming them. These are the areas where we are bound. If we can develop curiosity and genuine interest in them, we can actually welcome the opportunity to see them clearly. We'd rather see the places we're caught, creating the possibility of release, than have them operate subconsciously where we're simply bound by them.

The second movement is developing greater understanding of their nature. We must cultivate wisdom, and ultimately it's this wisdom that brings the sense of freedom in relationship to difficult states.

So the first step in working with difficult mind states is to know what it is that we're feeling. This is part of that exploration that meditation leads us into.

We can become very refined in our discrimination, our ability to tell the difference between related, closely allied states of mind. Fear was my big exploration for many years in practice, and so I got familiar with the varieties—nervousness, anxiety, fear, panic, terror. There's quite a range that that word points to. Or we come to understand the subtle differences between happiness and contentment, for example. The difference between calm and equanimity.

Our inner mindfulness has a wonderfully nuanced appreciation of the whole range of qualities that come, and we just have to start exercising it to get to know what's in us. So the first step is knowing what our state of mind is as it's happening. But this is not so easy. It sounds easy, but it's not so easy.

I'll give you an example from my practice. I was practicing in this hall. It was on a three-month course some years ago. I'd come for part two, and I'd been settled in for about two weeks at that point. And so I had gotten into the rhythm of the schedule, doing my sittings and my walking. I like to walk outside, so every walking period I would go down and walk on a path that's on the grassy area at the south end of the property. So every day for two weeks during the walking periods, I'd been walking there.

The sitting ended—I think it was the 8:15 sit. I left the hall. I was walking very mindfully at that point. I was two weeks settled in: lifting, moving, placing. Walked out the back door: lifting, moving, placing. I looked down to my walking path, and there was somebody there.

And I couldn't believe it. I thought, "What is this person doing in my walking path? I've been walking there every period for two weeks. Haven't they been observing?" I go lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. I felt very present. And I kept thinking, "They didn't notice. They're not very developed, are they?" Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. And then I wondered, "Are they playing mind games with me? Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line or something today? And this is their revenge?" Lifting, moving, placing.

And what was happening is, of course, I was annoyed. I was very judgmental, and I was angry. Lifting, moving, placing. I walked down. I picked another walking path. Guess what? It worked just as well. Did my walking period near the person, and it was thirty minutes into the walking before I realized I'm angry.

And until I realized that, I was so bound up with my reactive irritation, I couldn't dislodge it. It was stuck. There was an identification. That's what was happening. That was the truth. And there was no way of moving or shifting it.

So even though I thought I was very mindful in being with my feet, I missed the biggest thing that was going on, which was I was pissed off. So this seems to be partly how we miss what's going on. These hindering qualities slip in under the radar. We have our mindfulness antennae up, but these slip in underneath, they take us over, they put a filter over our eyes and our whole view of the world, and we don't see that it's happening.

The first movement has to be to recognize that that filter is in place, that that mind state is there. As soon as I said, "Oh, anger," then it became workable. I knew how to work with anger. I knew how to feel it in my body, how to feel it in my mind, and then I could start to release it.

In fact, take note that any time you name an emotion, the simple act of naming it, there's a shift that starts to happen in your relationship to it because now it is not totally dominating the interior landscape.

There is the emotion and there is mindfulness. In the middle of that difficulty, you've brought in a very wholesome quality of mind. It is the awareness that you can trust to provide the door to wisdom, the door to spaciousness around the emotion. Even naming it makes a difference.

A few people have mentioned how mindfulness is becoming more mainstream in society, moving into stress reduction and cognitive therapy. One researcher took a group of people who had anger management issues and gave them only one instruction: every time anger came up, simply name it. They watched the subjects over several weeks and evaluated their experience, finding that their outbursts of uncontrollable anger dropped sharply just from this prescription of naming what was happening to them. This is a powerful first step—knowing what the mind state is puts us into the quality of mindfulness.

The second step is to feel it. Feel it in your body, first of all. If the emotion has any strength, it will express itself through the body. If you ground your attention in the body where you're feeling it, you can stay in touch with the sensations and also the emotion. What I'd recommend is going back and forth—feeling the sensation, which with anger might be contraction or pressure, and then touching the mood itself, the emotion itself, which is a quality of the mind.

It's one integrated experience. Body and mind are so closely related that we can't pull them apart. When a strong emotion comes, the impact is felt as one unitive experience, but it has two aspects: one physical, one mental or emotional. As you investigate the emotion, go back and forth between tuning into the physical—contraction, pressure, tightness—and then the way it feels in the mind. Get to know that mental quality of anger. For me, it was something like a burning going on in the mind. As you ground the attention in the body, it will help you stay in touch. Several people have said trying to stay with an emotion is difficult because they're cloud-like, but if it's felt in the body, that provides a good grounding point.

There's one other area you want to tune into to get the complete picture of the emotion: thoughts. Notice when you're angry what kinds of thoughts you tend to think. This starts to make up what I would call the storyline. Any difficult emotion has a storyline underneath it. In my walking path scenario, the storyline was that it was my walking path. They were wrong and I was right. Once I could see that belief, I saw that's what held the anger in, what locked it in. Once I could let go of the belief—that walking path did not have my name on it, in fact; it had not been leased to me; it was still open ground—once I saw the belief and could let that go, the anger couldn't sustain itself.

The Buddha talked about the five hindrances that can obstruct our meditation unfolding. Sharda talked about those last week in a very helpful way. These are essential to know how they manifest in your practice. On the level of difficult emotions, I work with a different list—slightly different, some overlap—of the main five strong emotions that I've worked with myself and that I see meditators working with frequently. That list is sadness, desire, anger, fear, and self-judgment. Sally talked a lot about self-judgment, so I won't spend much time on that tonight, but I do want to touch on the other four.

As I started to investigate, especially desire, fear, sadness, and anger, I found there was a very interesting relationship to past and future. Something to note about the afflictive emotions is that they are connected with time. Afflictive emotions depend on past and future in some way to sustain them. Beautiful emotions do not. A beautiful emotion can be a sense of appreciation for the present moment that expresses itself in joy, in mudita. But to sustain an afflictive emotion, there has to be a link to past or future.

I want you all to reflect on this. The other factor is whether the object is pleasant or unpleasant—pleasurable or painful. Let me ask you to reflect on a pleasurable experience that's located in the past. These are the two axes: pleasant-unpleasant, past-future. A pleasant experience that occurred in the past—and by that we assume it's no longer in the present.

What's the emotion that evokes? Let yourself feel into it. Let me put it a different way. What painful emotion could be evoked?

"Sadness."

This is the quality of loss, isn't it? There was something that was pleasant in the past. We don't have it any longer. There's a sense of loss, and that's the condition for sadness to arise. It doesn't have to, but that's the condition on which sadness builds.

What if there was an unpleasant experience in the past? What might the mind respond to in that case?

"Anger." "Judgment."

Yes, anger or judgment, which are both different forms of aversion. So anger is a link to the past, to something that was experienced as unpleasant.

Now we go into the future. What's the relationship to what's pleasurable in the future?

"Desire."

It's wanting, isn't it? And if something is unpleasant in the future, how does the mind often relate?

"Fear."

So I think that's why these are four such primal emotions. They map past and future, pleasant and unpleasant. I didn't realize that when I came up with the list, but having observed my practice and seeing lots of people's practice, it just made sense in this matrix.

So let's talk first about the quality of desire. We've talked around it. Sarda talked about it the other night. It is one of the hindrances—basically, the movement of mind that wants a pleasant experience and wants it now. This can be a very frequent visitor on a retreat. We start off and perhaps it's pleasant experiences that we left at home and we'd like to have them again. We miss people, we miss places, we miss certain food or drink or whatever.

As the retreat progresses, we find ourselves wanting the experiences of the retreat. We have a yearning, a strong wish for a pleasant sitting, comfortable body experience, a mental state of calm or peace, some particular insight that might have come along, an opening to compassion or love. So it could be external, could be internal, but let's look at the way that desire functions.

A few years ago, Carol and Sally and I went to Italy and taught a ten-day retreat there. It was a great experience. I'd never taught in Italy before. I really appreciated the yogis there because, you know all the stereotypes you have about Italians? They all seemed true on the retreat. Noble silence didn't exactly apply in the same way as it does here. People had cell phones and talked in between. One gentleman from Sicily had brought his seventy-year-old mother on the retreat. And so, of course, she was Catholic, and they had to stay in touch.

There was an espresso machine right outside the dining hall, so always after the meals, the lira were going in, the espresso was being drunk. In fact, the staff, which was from a convent—we rented a convent for the retreat—had a little different understanding of retreat than we do here. When we showed up for dinner the first night, there were carafes of wine out at all the tables. So rather reluctantly we had to tell them to put those away.

But what I really enjoyed about teaching in Italy was the emotional openness that the yogis had. We had to work through a translator because we didn't speak Italian and many people didn't speak English. So it was a little awkward. There was always a third person in the room. But I found people were very willing, in general, to open up about the difficult things that were going on in their life and also that they had a lot of fluency around their emotions. They were much more willing to dive in and be with the emotional range than I had experienced in my practice.

So there was one young guy there, probably about thirty, who came in for his first interview, and I said, "How's it going?" And he said, "Oh, having a hard time."

I said, well, why are you here?

He said, "This is our holiday time. This is August. Some friends of mine were going to the Caribbean for a vacation and they invited me to go with them. So I had to choose to go to the Caribbean or to come on this meditation retreat."

"Why did you choose to come here?" I asked.

"All the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So he definitely got the consolation prize—sitting and walking for ten days. He said, "You know, I think about my friends. They're out on the beach there. The water's so warm. It's beautiful. There are many beautiful girls in the Caribbean, and I'm here."

Well, it was no wonder he couldn't settle.

So we talked about how the force of desire works. When desire is present, is it satisfying? I think this is a very interesting question to investigate. You'll find many opportunities to investigate this.

When we're on retreat and deprived of pleasant things, one of the things that the mind does is go into fantasy or daydream or recollection about things that have brought us pleasure. And in that, there is a measure of comfort. There's a measure of gratification. This is real. We bring the memory of something pleasurable into the mind, projecting it into the future, wanting to have it.

But along with this gratifying aspect, there's also at the same time always a feeling of unfulfillment because it's not here now. And because of that inherent frustration, there's something inherently unsatisfying in wanting. When we're in wanting, we can't get settled into the present moment.

This is what I talked about with the yogi on that retreat. He went away, practiced. The next time I saw him for an interview, he had seen that. He'd let go of the Caribbean. He was in the retreat, and he was enjoying it.

So desire is largely about a willingness to see the frustrating nature, to realize the only possibility for contentment is in the direct contact with the present moment, and so in letting go of the wanting. The storyline in desire is something like, "If I had that, I would be happy." So it creates the projection of a future happiness.

One of the things that we don't often inquire into is, oh, how long will that happiness last? Somehow there's this bloom in the mind from desire that makes it seem like it's really going to be a permanent happiness. And we forget about impermanence—that either the thing changes, like an ice cream cone or like sex, or our attitude changes, like a new house or a new relationship. Eventually the bloom goes off the rose in one way or another, from without or from within.

When desire is present on retreat, I often find it first in myself—if it's toward meditation objects—by this kind of leaning forward movement in my body, a kind of tension that's like reaching out to grab some concentration or grab some peace. Sometimes it's very hard for me to notice through thoughts or images what I'm striving for in practice. But if I find the body's in some tension, then that's often a clue I'm looking for some kind of meditation experience. And if I can then tune into that, it gives a possibility of releasing.

We talked a little about anger already. Anger is one particular form of aversion. I think there will probably be another talk on aversion later in the retreat. Sharda talked about it with the hindrances. It's the basic attitude of disliking or negativity, but it has so many different forms: ill will, hatred, impatience, frustration, irritation, fear, judgment, blame, resentment, despair, resistance. So many different forms.

Sometimes the mind gets kind of stuck in a long-term habit of aversion. Nothing is ever good enough. And this can come out of a chronic sense of fear, that there's a kind of projection that the world is threatening. It can come out of a sense of cynicism, where the attitude toward things has become negative. It can come out of a habit of anger, a long-term habit of anger.

When aversion has settled in in a chronic way in the heart, the experience becomes kind of contracted and we're really shut off from an opening to joy and happiness and contentment. For myself, coming into practice, fear was a strong tendency in my mind, and my heart had become shrunken due to that.

One of the things that's especially recommended when the mind is governed by aversion is the practice of loving-kindness. In the suttas, loving-kindness is the classical antidote for aversion.

So whether it's coming out of hatred or out of fear, metta is a very useful practice for the aversive temperament.

When anger arises, take a look and see how it feels in the body. There will be contraction, tightness, constriction, tension, often felt in the shoulders, neck, chest. Take a look at the quality in the mind. See what the coloring or the mood of anger is. As I said, for myself, it was felt as some kind of burning. And then see how the thoughts go. Typically with anger, the thoughts go to blaming. The storyline, you might say, is something like "they're wrong." And by making them wrong, we get to be right.

But notice how every blaming thought adds more fuel to the fire. As we're angry and we keep thinking the same blaming thoughts over and over again, notice how the flames keep getting fed and keep flaming up. If we cut the thoughts or the storyline, then there's no more fuel being added to the fire and it'll have to die down. So either you can simply stop thinking blaming thoughts, or at an even more fundamental level, you can let go of that story, that belief that the other person is wrong.

You know, it's a judgment call. Sometimes the other person may be wrong. Awful things happen in the world. On a global level, there are murders and war and racism and oppression. Even in our personal lives, living in a fairly protected part of the world, people might steal from us or really hurt us through speech or mistreat us in some way that is really thoughtless and unkind. So sometimes people definitely are unskillful. But as long as we're hanging on to that view, who's hurting? Of course, it's us.

There's this lovely story from the Dalai Lama. He is in the habit of receiving the refugees who make their way out of Tibet and come into India. Once he was visited by a monk who had been in prison for twenty years under the Chinese in Tibet. The Dalai Lama had actually known this monk before he had fled Tibet—he'd known him back when the Dalai Lama lived there. And he thought he was a fairly ordinary monk at the time.

So this monk shows up having escaped from prison and made it over the Himalayas. The Dalai Lama asked him how he was. And the monk said, "I'm okay now, but I worried because I was in danger." The Dalai Lama said, "Well, of course, you must have been in danger of being tortured." And the monk said, "Yes, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I meant that I was in danger of becoming angry. But I didn't, because I had my practice of compassion. I didn't become angry." The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk considerably after that.

So I find it useful to reflect on things like this when somebody cuts me off on the freeway—that people who have suffered much worse are able to keep their hearts and minds clear, even in the face of aggression and mistreatment.

Once anger came up strongly for me while I was doing a metta retreat here. It was very interesting. "May everybody be happy. May everybody be peaceful. There's my difficult person. Arrgh!" And I would spin out for like thirty minutes in being angry at my difficult person who happened to be on the retreat.

It was really a wonderful opportunity to observe it because I saw that I was the one burning with the anger. I also saw that part of the anger, a component of it, was ill will. And ill will, if you look into it, means the will to have the other person feel ill—that is, to have the other person hurt. I couldn't accept the idea that I wanted to hurt somebody else, that I would enjoy somebody else's suffering. That's one of the things that motivated me to let go of the anger.

But also equally important was that I was the one suffering with it. They didn't know I was upset. They're just going merrily about their practice. So I came to see that I had this ill will with which I wanted to hurt someone else, and I understood these two analogies from the texts. One is that anger is like a lump of hot coal that we pick up to throw at somebody. But before it hits them, we burn our own hands with it. The second is that being angry at somebody is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick.

It usually doesn't work.

So can we just open to feel the feeling of anger in the body, feel that mood in the mind, look closely at the thoughts, see how the thoughts just keep adding to the fire? Through the knowing of that unpleasantness, the pain of that fire, we can let go. Let go of the thoughts, let go of the story about it.

Sally talked a lot about self-judgment, so I won't go into that - another form of aversion. Very helpful to inquire into, also through the three areas we mentioned: body, mind, and thoughts.

The next of the difficult emotions is sadness. Sadness can be an intimidating force to open into because often there's a belief that if we open to the amount of sadness that's in our life, we'll be overwhelmed by it. We'll drown in it. We won't be able to come out of it.

Everybody's had disappointments in life. Everybody can tune in to some degree of sadness if they look. But sometimes the losses are big, and it leaves this undigested mass of sadness. So as we come into meditation and begin to touch that, sometimes it's frightening. The size of it can feel frightening.

But this sense - "Oh, if I open to it, I'll never come out of it again" - is just a belief. It's just another story, and it's not true. Because all emotions, if we give them space, will exhibit impermanence. It's their nature. It's the nature of all dhammas.

So we just have to trust a little bit at a time, open to it a bit, experience it a bit, let it lighten a bit, take the mind somewhere else. A little bit at a time we open up to the quality of sadness or disappointment. Again, feel it in the body, get to know it in the mind. Take a look at the storyline.

Under sadness, it's something like: "I can't be happy now because I've lost this." That's the meaning of the story of loss. "I can't be happy now because of this particular loss."

It's so interesting that all kinds of grief - and you can read this in all the literature about death and dying - all kinds of grief have a certain timeline. They go through their own cycles, and the intense heaviness of grief, if we allow it, will in time pass. There may still be some lingering sadness, but it becomes much more bearable if we allow ourselves to open to the intensity of grief in a way that is not holding back.

The last of the major states I wanted to touch on is the quality of fear, because this was kind of my specialty for a lot of years in practice. It's one I have a special affection for.

When I first started to encounter fear in meditation, it was totally overwhelming to me. The first reaction I had when it came was more fear. I didn't know how to relate to it, and I was scared of the experience itself. So for me, it was very helpful and instructive to hear the direction: feel it in the body.

I started to open to the experience of fear in the body, and I found that there was a contraction in the belly. There was a flutteriness all through the torso, and there was a kind of shaking or light quality that didn't feel grounded and didn't feel secure. So I would investigate each of those areas, and the question I had in mind was: "Can I bear this? Can I bear this sensation?"

The storyline in fear is something like: "This moment is bearable, but the next one's not going to be. Watch out." So coming back just into the present moment diffuses that past-future stuff. That's why it's so helpful - the mindfulness just of the present moment.

So with fear, it was: don't worry about the next moment. Come into this moment. Is it bearable? And as I looked at each of the body sensations, I found: yeah, I can bear that. I don't like it. It's not pleasant, but I can bear it.

Then after getting comfortable with the body sensations, I kind of worked up the nerve to look into the mind. And that was even harder. What's the tone or the quality of the mind that is fear? It is a hard thing to describe, but for me it was a sort of panicky wanting to get away from. You could call this the flight response. The mind wanted to move away from that experience. It was hard to touch that directly because it wanted to move away from that feeling too.

But through the stability of mind that comes through meditation, I was able to bring the attention, bring the mindfulness directly into contact with that fleeing impulse and feel it. And I thought, can I bear this? Yeah, I can bear this too. And then, strangely enough, the next moment was not unbearable. The storyline was a lie. The next moment was actually easier once I started to open up.

So I kept investigating fear. It was a companion for a number of years in practice, quite a frequent visitor. And at some point, I'd made a lot of headway in becoming more comfortable, but at some point—maybe it was a talk of Joseph's, I'm not sure—the question came into my mind: am I really accepting this?

Then the reflection that came into my mind was: if I really accepted it, it would be okay with me if it lasted the rest of my life. That would be real acceptance. And I said, am I okay if this lasts the rest of my life? I said, hell no. No way. And then I had to look at that. Okay, why not?

So I looked: why would I not be okay? I can bear this feeling. And the thoughts that came to me were: if I was in fear like this, then I couldn't really enjoy music the way I used to be able to enjoy it. I couldn't really enjoy a sunset the way I used to be able to enjoy it. I couldn't really be in love the way I used to be in love. And then what I noticed was: oh, these are all the ways I used to get high.

So why was I resisting the fear? Because I wanted still to get high in that old way. I thought, is that worth it? No. No. It was more important to me to open fully to fear than to hold out some future promise of getting high. Because if I could open to the fear, I would have a mind that was unafraid of fear. I would have a mind that was rich in equanimity. And that became more interesting to me and more valuable than the highs that my mind was throwing up.

So at that point I said, yeah, it's okay if this lasts the rest of my life. And then I continued to practice quite a while like that. And so fear would occasionally come, and I developed a complete equanimity over whether it was present or whether it was absent. It really didn't matter to me either way. And when that happened, fear lost its grip on me in some way.

It's not that it doesn't return. And every time it returns, I need to refine that relationship with it. But it cannot terrorize me. And it cannot oppress me the way that it used to, as far as I know. I haven't lived a full life yet, so I'll give you a status report as we go. But I feel that something shifted so deeply in my relationship to it that I know how to relate with it. I know how to work with it when it's there.

So fundamentally, what transforms us in our relationship with these states is coming to understand how they're put together. We see the component that is physical. We see the component that is the mood or coloring in the mind. We see how thoughts build them and sustain them, and then also how the absence of the thought causes them to crumble.

Once we see how these states are put together, they don't mystify us as much and they don't enchant us as much. They arise, and we start to see them just as part of nature. Just as we observe physical nature and see it's always changing—body sensations pulsing on and off, vibrating—we see that mental nature, which we all share, also comes and goes. All these states are transitory. That's why it's safe to open.

You don't have to hold back because anyone that comes, you don't have to make it go away. It will go away on its own. It's the repression that locks them in. So as long as we open, they'll come, they'll manifest, and they'll go. They are just part of our human nature.

We all have this whole package. Everybody knows what fear is. Everybody knows what contentment is. Everybody knows what sadness is. It's not yours or mine. It's part of our human, biological, mental, emotional heritage. So we don't have to take it per-

sonally. We just allow nature to come, present itself. We understand it through our interest, through our investigation, through our curiosity, through our openness. The mind loses its conflict, loses its struggle with these states.

It takes some time because the mind is very wide and rich. So it takes time to investigate each one. This is not a transformation that happens overnight. But through the consistency of our meditation practice, through openness to the range of experiences, little by little, corner by corner, nook by cranny, we start to understand the whole terrain.

In the beginning, I thought that awakening would come after all these states had been disposed of. When I get rid of them, then I can wake up. I have to be comfortable before I can wake up. But I realized it's quite the other way around. We wake up in the middle of these states.

Every time one of these states arises, you might notice your habitual reaction is, "I don't want it. I'm going to push it away. I'm going to strive for something beautiful." Aversion and greed. We start to see this doesn't work. And then we find we have the capacity to turn on this light of mindfulness—of interest, of investigation, of acceptance, of courage, of patience, of tolerance. All these are the beautiful states of mind that we generate from this contact with what's difficult and what's painful. So as we're generating them, we are waking up in the middle of our difficulties.

In a way, these difficult states of mind are the training ground for us to unpack the box of treasures of mind—the beautiful states that support us, strengthen us, and ultimately lift the mind to liberation. So you could say that it is through knowing our delusion and the difficult emotions that we really grow the seeds of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind.

I want to close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition. This is called The Four Blessings of Gampopa. Gampopa was a disciple of Milarepa, an eleventh-century practitioner revered as one of the greatest saints in the Tibetan tradition. This quality of blessings you can interpret as you like—it could be directed toward a higher power, it could be directed toward an individual like the Dalai Lama, it could be directed toward your own inner strength and wisdom. You can make of it what you like.

These are the four blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 11

Second Noble Truth: Craving

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

In this dharma talk from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), Guy Armstrong examines the Second Noble Truth—that craving (taṇhā) is the origin of suffering. He explores the Buddha's teaching on the three types of craving: for sense pleasures, existence (bhava-taṇhā), and non-existence (vibhava-taṇhā). Armstrong discusses how craving manifests as self-centeredness and the inability to sustain contentment, drawing connections between ancient wisdom and modern culture's pursuit of gratification. He addresses the challenge lay practitioners face in balancing sense pleasures with spiritual development, avoiding both extreme indulgence and rigid rejection. The talk emphasizes understanding craving through mindfulness rather than judgment, showing how this investigation leads naturally to the Third Noble Truth. Armstrong concludes with practical guidance on observing craving's impermanent nature and the qualitative shift that occurs when greed, aversion, and delusion are abandoned, revealing the clear awareness that underlies our experience.

Earlier in the retreat, I explored the first noble truth from the Buddha's first discourse—the truth of dukkha with its wide range of meanings from direct suffering to unreliability. I discussed how each noble truth comes with a line of advice, a prescription for what to do with it. With the first noble truth, the prescription was that the truth of suffering, of dukkha, is to be fully understood.

Tonight I want to talk about the second noble truth. I'll begin by reading what the Buddha said in that sutta, *Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma*:

"Now what is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight now here and now there—that is, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence."

When I first started to hear the Buddha's teachings, this was a very meaningful teaching for me. I came into practice because of unhappiness and confusion in my life. The experience at that time was that I was suffering in this kind of dark cloud of unknowing. I had no idea which way to turn, if there was a way out, the direction of the way out, or anything.

When I heard this teaching, it was a revelation because it said there is a cause for unhappiness, and the cause is craving. So I knew that somebody had figured this puzzle out, and that gave me tremendous faith and inspiration. I wasn't just lost in this massive cloud any longer—somebody had found what was putting it together. And anytime something has a cause, that cause can be undone. This was really my doorway to freedom, hearing the second noble truth. It was very, very meaningful for me.

The Buddha's pointing to craving as the cause of suffering doesn't deny other people's analyses of causes of suffering. In the Western world, there are many other analyses of what causes suffering. Marx analyzed it and brought it down to political and economic factors—those are still valid. Freud analyzed it in terms of childhood development—those may still be valid. Franz Fanon analyzed it in terms of cultural oppression based on race—that is still valid.

So there are solutions on other levels—economic, political, cultural, racial, psychological—that are valid in their own domains. But the Buddha's analysis is so valuable because the domain that it applies in is the domain of liberation. I don't know of any other system that provides an analysis that allows for our own liberation. This is the context of the second noble truth.

The word that is almost universally translated as craving is the Pali term *tanha*. Its original meaning is simply thirst. This is not a complicated psychological term in Pali—it just means thirst. You'll see that the Buddha did this often with his terminology. He'll take a familiar word from the culture and reframe it to suit his teachings. Nirvana actually has a history within India prior to the Buddha's adopting it as well.

I like this metaphor of thirst because it points to the deeply embedded nature of *tanha*, and also its recurring feature. If we are thirsty and we take a drink, we're satisfied, we're quenched for a while. But as time passes, the mouth gets dry again, and we're thirsty again. *Tanha* is like this—it recurs again and again. The satisfaction is only temporary, and then the thirst comes back.

It's this recurrent nature of craving, the incessant quality of it, that I think explains the phrase Sally used a couple of talks ago where she talked about our human inability to sustain contentment. We are unable to sustain contentment because, if we have not examined the mind, this force comes in again and again and tells us we need something else—and we need it now.

So an initial contentment may be there. You'll find moments of deep peace and contentment in your practice. But watch—at some point, the following message will come: "It's not enough. Now you need this thing." Finding delight now here and now there.

The word desire has gotten a bad rap in Buddhism. You'd get a bad rap too if you were the cause of suffering. But we have talked about the fact that there are different kinds of desire.

There are desires that lead to suffering, and there are desires that lead in the direction of freedom.

Among the desires that lead toward suffering are *tanha* or craving, *lobha* or greed, *raga* or lust, and *kamachanda* or sensual desire. Those that lead toward wholesome states of mind include *chanda*—when connected with our practice, often translated as zeal—which serves as a foundation for spiritual success. There's *dhammachanda*, a love for the Dhamma, the truth. There's *sammasankappa*, or right attitude, right intention, including the aspiration or wish for freedom. And in all the *metta* and compassion phrases we use, the wish for others' well-being and our own well-being—these are wholesome desires.

Craving is not. Let us be clear about this: craving is always viewed as a disturbing factor in the mind and a cause of suffering, either subtle or gross. Although it's described in terms of a desire force, it's important to understand that craving doesn't simply mean the greed force, but encompasses the whole notion that things should be different than they are. So it encompasses greed, aversion, and delusion.

You can see that greed and aversion are simply two sides of the same coin. When we have an idea of how we want things to be, then we resist anything different from that. Greed and aversion depend on one another. Delusion is that we don't see how we're doing this. We don't see that we're trying to manipulate the present moment out of greed or aversion to shape it differently.

So the fundamental meaning of craving is wanting things to be different than the way they are. One of the qualities you find in craving that you don't find in wholesome desires is that it lacks wisdom because it's accompanied by delusion, and it lacks patience. Craving has an urgency that says, "I need it now." There's this immediate yearning and dissatisfaction with craving.

We can have an aspiration for freedom, but accompanied by wisdom, we understand that the path to freedom requires some duration. We have the accompanying quality of patience that lets us settle in contentment and peace, even though we haven't reached the goal. Craving doesn't have this quality of patience.

Just to highlight this mixture of the *kilesas*, the Buddha said that one should make an end to suffering without making an end to greed, aversion, and delusion. That is impossible. These three are bound up intrinsically in craving.

I like this word "craving" because it seems to apply so much to what we see in the world today. The world has changed dramatically since I was a child, and much of it, it seems to me, is not for the better. One of the things I observe—and I guess my generation has to take some responsibility—is a world where in Western society today, and in America particularly, all kinds of restraints and prohibitions have been thrown out the window. You see people involved in the naked pursuit of pleasure through many means.

Unrestrained sexuality is held up as a reasonable form of pursuit. Violence is condoned or even glamorized in our culture. Dress has moved far from the style of modesty I grew up with. The use of drugs has become so prevalent that it hardly gets noticed until somebody gets arrested, which doesn't happen all that often. There's this culture that anything goes today.

Young actresses and stars go out on the town and behave in outrageously bad ways, and it only serves to heighten their celebrity because gossip sells. They get bigger contracts than they had before. I have to say, I don't consider myself a prude by any means—I lived through the sixties and participated wholeheartedly—but I was rather shocked when the queen knighted Mick Jagger. If I can think of anyone who represents the excesses of behavior initiated by the sixties, it would probably be Mick Jagger. For him to be recognized and elevated to that status as a revered cultural icon—that was a little much. What message does that send to our children?

I started feeling a bit like a temperance preacher in the 1890s. But you have to ask the question: is this lack of restraint leading to real happiness? Or was there something in those old-fashioned standards that were called morality? I don't think they were necessarily informed by much wisdom, but maybe as they evolved over millennia, concepts like refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from the use of drugs and intoxicants that cause heedlessness—maybe there's something to those quaint old ideas.

One of the things I find interesting to observe in modern culture is the difference between the gratification of craving on the one hand and what leads to happiness on the other. As we explore the qualities of restraint through our precepts, we find what more genuinely leads to happiness.

Sometimes I reflect that you can see the outcome of someone's life in their face after a certain age. Someone said that by age fifty, human beings get the face they deserve. I don't know about that. But one photo that's very revealing to me is that of Keith Richards, the lead guitarist for the Stones.

Keith Richards was born in 1943, so he was 64 this year. His face bears the deep lines of extensive aging. Then you look at the face of the Dalai Lama, who was born eight years earlier than Richards and is now 72. You see the clarity of his skin and complexion, and you have to ask yourself: which is the wiser path to follow?

On a scale even bigger than the Rolling Stones, when we look through the whole world with a broad historical view—and I think you've probably seen this many times—the world itself is driven by the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion. As the Buddha commented in the third discourse he gave, he said, "All is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, burning with the fire of hatred, burning with the fire of delusion."

The world looks like this today, and I think it has probably always looked like this. I doubt there has ever been a time in human history when there was no war. War is the most visible eruption of the forces of greed, hatred, and confusion, but it's not the only one. Throughout the world, we see the effects of corporate greed in the destruction of the environment and levels of pollution. We see personal greed in the frauds that have occurred on Wall Street. We see the effects of racism, domestic violence, the abuse of children. The list goes on and on.

Look at any one of these phenomena and you can see the driving forces of greed, hatred, and delusion in the minds of individuals carrying out these actions. The Buddha said, "Clouded by ignorance and driven by craving, sentient beings wander through samsara." This really is the story of the world today, and I think it always has been the story of the world.

By purifying our hearts, we help to break this pattern. By reducing the force of greed, hatred, and delusion in our own individual being and taking that transformation back into the world, we help to change it just a little bit at a time.

One other comment about craving appears in this statement of the Second Noble Truth. The Buddha said, "It is this craving which leads to renewed existence." What he's pointing to here is the quality of rebirth—that it's the force of craving in our mind that leads to our being born again.

Something interesting happened on my very first three-month course. I sat here in 1977, during the second three-month course at IMS. One of my friends on that retreat came up to Joseph, who was teaching back then. You know how yogis can get very wide-eyed and innocent? The psychological term for it is "regressed," but I rather like wide-eyed and innocent people.

My friend was in this very wide-eyed and open place when she approached Joseph. I think she just found him in the lobby one time and said, "Joseph, why are we here?"

Joseph replied, "Do you mean here on this retreat, or do you mean here in this universe?"

She said, "Here in this universe."

And Joseph said, "Because you wanted to see and smell and taste and hear and touch. That's why you're here."

It is this craving that leads to renewed existence. We're all here because we wanted, once again, to see and smell and hear and taste and touch. That's rather mind-boggling, isn't it? That's the volition that brings us back to experience pleasant sensations again. It's quite wild.

Retreat is, of course, the perfect place to look at this force of craving. It happens again and again, even though you know you're not going to get very much out of it. The retreat situation is rather bare of sense pleasures, but this doesn't stop the force of craving from arising. We simply get to see its conditioned and recurring nature over and over again.

We're here not to gratify this force, but to learn about it. We turn our intention from satisfaction to understanding. Then every arising becomes a new possibility for understanding. What's important is to trust that we can learn from it without having to run after it.

If craving comes up in terms of desire, we can watch it. If it comes up in terms of aversion, we need not blame the outer situation, but again try to understand our own response. Craving arises now here and now there. It picks different objects again and again, and this is the key to its entrancement, its ability to enchant us. It keeps directing our attention to new places, so we may get bored with one object, but craving will find another. "Ah, that's really the one." It keeps the target moving.

But each new thing seems to offer the promise of some kind of lasting satisfaction. Part of the delusion within craving is that we forget about impermanence. We don't look beyond the achievement of that particular satisfaction, and we get some sense—some subconscious sense—that it's going to be more lasting than it is.

This tendency has been verified by psychological research lately. There's a researcher from Harvard named Daniel Gilbert who's published a whole book on our inability to predict what will make us happy and what will make us unhappy. The conclusion is

that in both cases we forget about impermanence. We forget how quickly happy things will fade, but we also forget that unhappy things—even things like breaking a leg—will also fade in time, and we are more afraid of them than we really need to be. There's a kind of homeostasis in our happiness level that we will return to, independent of these changing circumstances. But we don't understand that very well.

This pursuit is tiring. As you probably know, when you feel the mind in a state of agitation, it's not restful. And if it's like that all day, you probably want to go to bed about an hour before you do, compared to a time when the mind is more balanced.

There was an interesting story in Newsweek about Disneyland. Disneyland, you know, is a place where the motto is "the place where happiness never ends." The reporter was investigating that claim, and they happened to go into the staff dining room. Inside the staff dining room, the characters were still dressed in their costumes because they didn't really have time to change on their lunch break. So Mickey Mouse was sitting down at a table talking to Donald Duck. And what Mickey Mouse said was, "I've got to get some overtime. I don't have enough money to pay my therapist." So even in Disneyland...

The beautiful thing about our practice is that as this force of recurrent craving comes again and again, and we just remain willing to observe it, the mindfulness starts to slow it down. In a way, the mindfulness acts as a brake on this force which has a huge amount of momentum—what you could call mental habit of mind. When we have this wheel, this rolling wheel of desire that's turning again and again and again, mindfulness is like a brake pad applied to that wheel that just starts to wear it away, wear it away, as we keep from reactivating or reconditioning it. And that's why the quality of peace begins to come in—because the craving stops leading us by the nose quite so often.

Another way to say craving is self-centeredness. The Dalai Lama often talks in these terms—that the root problem in the world is self-centeredness. And this is really a synonym for craving. Do you notice how we don't get as upset about other people's problems? But the craving comes in around our problems.

This is one of the reasons the Dalai Lama is so lovable. I find this amazing. Somebody asked him—I think people often ask him—"Why do people like you so much? Why do people love you?" And he says, "I'm not really sure. But I think it's because I try to consider every other person as more important than myself." That's a bodhisattva of compassion. Wouldn't that be an amazing way to approach the world? Imagine just a

simple thing as going into lunch and feeling that everybody else's lunch was more important than our own. That would create such a different flavor and way to approach the table.

This is also the reason that the quality of bodhicitta, which Carol talked about the other night, is so powerful in meditation practice. Because bodhicitta puts the emphasis in our practice on the well-being of others, so that even our dharma practice comes to be an expression of our caring and moves our very motivation just a little bit away from self-centeredness. Of course we care about ourselves also, but we begin to bring other beings into the very core of our dharma practice.

Of course, this self-centeredness is a tricky thing. There was a family retreat here at IMS. These are retreats where we try to introduce whole families into dharma practice. And I think what's interesting is these retreats are creating a little bit of a Buddhist family culture in the West. So there are children of all ages from three and four on up into the early teens. And then for later teens, they have their own retreat here. And parents come with the children, so it's a whole family kind of bonding experience.

During the family retreat, one of the teachers asked a five-year-old boy, "What do you think will happen if you spend your whole life going around just trying to get what you want?" And the boy said, "Trouble."

The truth of craving. He knew it better than some of us.

So the Buddha in the Second Noble Truth said that there are three kinds of craving.

So there are three types of craving that the Buddha identified: craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

The craving for sense pleasures is the desire to have pleasant experiences through the five senses—pleasant sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Interestingly, as I understand it, the mind door is not included in this category of craving for sense pleasures.

At one point, the Buddha was talking about the pleasure that came through his practice of strong concentration in the jhana states. As he reflected on developing these states, he said, "I don't see anything to be afraid of in this kind of pleasure." What I take this to mean is that as we develop pleasant meditative states, if we have a desire for them—which we will and we do—that leads us to become more skillful in learning how to access them again and again. We discover that it is through relaxation, contentment, and acceptance that those states begin to open.

So the desire for wholesome states of mind leads us to greater skill in meditation and is not considered an unwholesome wish. However, I want to point out that any wholesome desire—whether it's the wish for liberation, concentration, or any wholesome state—can turn into craving. The difference lies in whether we demand that it happen now. If we can hold our desires with understanding that these qualities develop from proper causes and conditions, then we aren't ruffled when they're not present. But if we start demanding that they happen immediately, then that becomes craving as well.

Look around the scope of the world and you can see how much time and money are spent satisfying these five sense desires. Take taste, for example, which isn't even the most compelling force in my life. The restaurant industry in the United States had annual revenues of $476 billion in 2005, and that was less than half of the overall food industry. Food alone represents about a trillion dollars. Restaurants are particularly focused on satisfying certain kinds of tastes, and that's half a trillion dollars just in this country.

Consider smell, which also doesn't seem like a major factor in sense desire for me. Perfumes had annual sales of $15 billion—a $15 billion industry devoted to smell.

There's a wonderful video on YouTube that I encourage you to watch when you get home. It was produced by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, the son of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was a Tibetan teacher who founded a large sangha in Boulder. His son is a teacher in his own right and a very creative individual. A student or fan created a music video from one of his poems, and it's an excellent dharma teaching titled "What About Me?"

Let me read some of the lines: "What about me—that's my first thought every morning. What happened to me is my last thought every night. I say this mantra all day long: what about me. When I take a shower I think what about me. I hope this shower makes me feel happy. I hope this lunch makes me feel happy. I hope these clothes make me feel happy."

This captures the spirit of the quest for sense pleasures. We're looking for that hit of happiness again and again and again. As I mentioned, there's some indication that we want this happiness to last, which it doesn't. But there's also truth in recognizing that sense pleasures do bring a kind of happiness, and we shouldn't overlook that either.

When we think about our lives, imagine that you had no sense pleasures and also no support of meditative states. That would be like being on retreat but unable to meditate often. That would be tough, wouldn't it? It could feel pretty bleak.

So sense pleasures in daily life do bring a kind of happiness. It's limited and temporary, but there is genuine happiness there. The Buddha called this "carnal happiness" as opposed to "spiritual happiness," but he acknowledged the pleasure in it.

In another sutta—the analogy of the two darts that someone mentioned earlier—the Buddha explains how we get pierced by a painful feeling, which is the first dart. Then, as our mind obsesses and worries about that pain, we inflict a second dart of mental agitation if we're not careful practitioners. But further along in that same sutta, he makes a really interesting comment: he says that sense pleasure is the only way that an untaught, ordinary person knows to escape from painful feeling.

The only way that most people in the world know to escape from painful feeling is by going off and finding a sense pleasure to supplant it, to overcome it. This is really the base for addiction. When we are in the world and there is unpleasant experience either bodily or mental, we develop a habitual pleasure that we go to again and again, that then tends to mask or cover over or numb the painful feeling. And because it works once, when the painful feeling comes again, we're inclined to seek that same pleasure again. So it could be addiction to drugs, food, sex, social contact, television, alcohol. All these forces are very big in our world.

Now the essence of monastic life is that practitioners basically make a vow not to use sense pleasures as a routine outlet. So even in taking ten precepts, I know many of you here are practicing with eight, the tenth precept adds not using money. So that takes away your online shopping as well. We've given up sexuality, drinking drugs, eating after the midday meal, entertainment, movies, music, adornments to beautify the body.

It's very interesting as you practice in an extended way with the eight or the ten precepts - you really find that all the normal ways that we go for comfort get shut off or closed off to us. And what that does is throw us on our own inner resources, our own qualities of heart and mind, and that's what develops the deeper kinds of satisfaction and what channels our aspiration into the path.

But most of us are not monastics. In fact, I'd say about 98% of us here are not monastics. So as laypeople, we do not take those vows in daily life. That means that sense pleasures are an integral part of our life as laypeople. On retreat, it's different. On retreat, your lifestyles are much more like monastic life. Even if you've only taken five precepts, you've renounced an incredible amount of worldly activity to come here, so your life is much more like a monastic life.

In fact, just speaking from my own personal experience, spending three months in a retreat like this would be more difficult for me, more arduous, perhaps more appealing, but more arduous than spending three months in a monastic environment as an ordained monk, but not in a retreat setting. The requirement of not talking, of solitude, and the relentless practice of mindfulness that you undertake here is in itself a very, very rigorous challenge. So there are 227 vows in being an ordained monk in our tradition. I've done that a couple of times in my life. And I find that an easier practice, just speaking personally, for a limited period of time than what you are engaged in. Now, people who take long-term monastic vows reach another whole level of challenge, so I don't want to make that comparison in any way. But for short temporary ordinations, which happen a lot in Thailand and Burma, I think what you are doing is more challenging.

Now, I want to read a quotation from the Buddha, but I want to preface it with a little story. This is from a sutta that's in the Samyutta Nikaya, but it's also in the Jataka tales. I'll flesh the Jataka tale out toward the end. The Buddha tells this story of a hawk and a quail.

The quail is flying through the air. The hawk comes down from above, swoops down and catches the quail in his claws and is preparing to take the quail off to eat it. And the quail starts moaning and saying, "Oh, I should never have left my home. I should never have left my home ground. Now I'm going to be killed and eaten. I should never have left my home."

And the hawk says, "Well, what do you mean? What's your home?"

And the quail says that the earth, where there are these clumps of dirt, that's my home. And if I were there, I would be safe.

And the hawk, in a rather proud way, says, "I could catch you there, too." So he says, "I will return you to your home and I will show you that I can catch you there too." So he lets the quail go.

The quail goes back on the ground, runs around until she's right beside a clump of soil, then hops up onto the top of this clump of soil and says to the hawk, "Okay, now I'm home."

So the hawk begins a dive from the sky, accelerating very quickly, coming really fast toward the quail and is about to pounce. But just then the quail slips underneath this clump of soil. The hawk cannot break his plunge, and it shatters his breast on that clump of soil.

In the Jataka tale, it's said that this was one of the lifetimes of the Buddha. The Buddha was, guess what? The quail. Wisdom, modesty. The hawk was said to be Devadatta, who was his cousin who at a later point in his career tried to kill him. In this story, the Buddha survives.

After he told this story, the Buddha said, "This is a lesson not to leave your own resort, your own home, what is meant for you and where you are comfortable."

So he said, "Practitioners, do not stray outside your own resort into the domain of others. Mara will gain access to those who do so." Mara is the personification of the unwholesome forces of mind. Mara will get a hold on them.

"And what is not a practitioner's resort? The five chords of sense pleasure. And what is a practitioner's resort? It is the four foundations of mindfulness."

Here the practitioner is to be understood in the monastic or retreat setting. He's basically saying, for people like you, for people who are living a monastic life, your home ground is not the pursuit of sense pleasures. Your home ground is the four foundations of mindfulness. But he said there are others whose home ground is the pursuit of sense pleasures—those people are laypeople.

So this sutta made me reflect that you and we lead lives with feet in two worlds. When we come on a retreat like this, we are living in a lot of ways as monastics and spiritual contemplatives have lived over the centuries. When we go home, most of us who are not ordained, then we are living as laypeople, and all the pursuits of sense pleasures are open and available to us. So how should we relate as laypeople, both here on retreat and at home? I think this is a very interesting exploration and a big question.

This is a passage from the Udana, a small book of the Buddha's sayings, from a sutta called "The Courtesan." It came about because some laypeople in a town nearby were actually quarreling over a courtesan, competing over who would be able to win her. The Buddha was talking about two approaches to sense pleasure, and this is what he said:

"Those for whom precepts and practices are the essence of the teaching, for whom celibacy is the essence of practice—this is one extreme. Those who say there's no harm in sensual desire—this is the second extreme. Both of the extremes cause the growth of cemeteries."

Isn't that great? "Cause the growth of cemeteries." He's saying both lead to renewed existence. Both are not the way to liberation.

So one extreme holds to precepts, practices, and celibacy as the essence of spiritual life—not a useful and supportive container, but the essence. This is too rigid a view. This does not give proper place to wisdom and samadhi.

But the other extreme are those who say, "There's no harm in sensual desires." That's also an extreme view.

This is an ancient teaching, but I really see these two divergent attitudes in our community today. And perhaps you've experienced both of them in yourself, because I felt both these attitudes ripple through my own mind.

One is the attitude that says, "Any sense desire is wrong. The Buddha said sense desire was not conducive. So if I want something, that's bad. I shouldn't want anything. And even if I do want it, I shouldn't go for it because it's not nice."

Don Juan was talking to Carlos Castaneda at one point in their relationship and said to Carlos, "You began by not wanting to get attached to anything, but it ended up that you couldn't enjoy anything."

If we have this judgmental attitude that desire is wrong, the heart will shrivel up. It becomes very barren. So this is one extreme. And I see this—I've seen it in myself, I've seen it in others.

But the other extreme is to say, "There's no problem with following sense desires. Sense desires are beautiful. It's so lovely. That's not a problem."

This also is a problem, because let me just talk a little bit about what I've seen as some of the problems with the blind pursuit of sense desires.

Number one: obviously, if we can't get what we want right then and the desire is strong, we suffer.

We suffer.

Number two, how many times have you wanted something so much that you've pursued it and caused harm to other people or to yourself? Basically, causing harm to others ends up causing harm to ourselves.

The third point is that the pursuit of sense desire as relief from suffering creates grooves in the mind, which then conditions the mind to look for that same thing again. Many of the sense desires we experience on retreat are those old channels of the mind

playing out repeatedly. When I'm not feeling well, I need or want social contact, a drink, certain food, sex—these are the grooves we've worn through our own activity of looking to sense desire.

Another aspect to consider with sense desire in outside life is how much time is spent in the cultivation, refinement of taste, and pursuit of those pleasures. As I look around—and this isn't a measured opinion, I haven't done a survey—but as I observe, it's what most of the world does with what we call free time. When we don't have obligations to work or family, what we generally do in free time is find something that pleasures us through the five senses. So much of the world's time and energy, as indicated by restaurant and perfume industries, goes in this direction.

Having a judgmental attitude doesn't work. Not questioning and blindly pursuing isn't in accord with the Buddha's teachings. So what are we to do as laypeople?

Here's where I say each of us needs to make this investigation for ourselves and really look into the question with our own freedom as the most important criterion. What is going to help the development of our own liberation in the most skillful way possible? Find out for yourself.

So the question arises: A sense desire is present. It points me toward an object. Should I follow it? Should I not? What's the right thing to do? I don't want to do anything wrong. What would the Buddha tell me to do? What would Joseph tell me to do? I don't want to make a mistake.

That's not the attitude we should have with our practice. We have to be free to investigate and explore and find for ourselves. The only way I can do that is to try. So let me try, but with my eyes really open. Let's see what happens if I follow. How does that lead? How does it feel? Maybe it will be fine. Maybe no one else will be harmed. Maybe I won't be harmed. But we go into it eyes open.

If we decide, "This time, I'm not going to follow. I've followed it so many times in the past. This time, I'm curious. What will happen if I don't follow?"—that's the practice of renunciation. In a way, you could say that the practice of renunciation is the practice of the second noble truth: carrying out through our actions this abandoning of craving.

What we find when we renounce is that the desire eventually passes. It seems so strong and compelling for a while, but if we stay with it, eventually it passes. So we learn we have the capacity to just sit through its lifespan, not having to act on it.

Joseph had a very nice line about this. He said, "Restraint of sense desire enables us to verify its empty nature." So we see it's just a cloud that arises, moves us, and then passes. It's through practicing restraint or renunciation that we can verify that transitory nature.

The second kind of craving the Buddha talked about is craving for existence. The Pali term here is *bhava-tanha*. *Bhava* is a word that means existence, sometimes translated as being, sometimes as becoming. It's a very interesting term.

The basic meaning of craving for existence is that we want to be here in this body, alive in this realm, because it is this existence that allows access to the contact of the five realms of sense objects. It's because of this deep-seated longing for existence that we have a fear of dying. The fear of dying, I think, is way out of proportion to the reality of dying. That's what lets us know there's this irrational longing at the base. Because, I mean, think about dying.

Suppose you went to bed tonight and you simply did not wake up in the morning. I mean, would that really be a problem for you? And yet, if we knew that was going to happen, we'd be terrified because of this craving for existence. So, you know, the actual end—if it came to the end of this body and the end of this mind stream and the end of this flow of sense experience—what's the big deal? And yet we have a deep, deep dread of that, the greatest disaster imaginable in our life. So that's the craving for existence.

The other aspect of bhava is a craving to become something. The psychological level of bhava is becoming something. In my early years of retreat, when I was younger, I'd spend a lot of time thinking about where I wanted to live and what work I wanted to do and what kind of community I wanted to connect to, and what kind of partner I might want to connect with. And I came to see that all of that was searching for some kind of identity that would give me a security that I didn't have. I was in the middle of meditation. I was seeing the groundless nature of everything that was arising and passing. And I was thinking that becoming somebody would give me a different kind of security, a solidity, a safe identity.

So take a look. A lot of the fantasies that we go through, future fantasies that we go through on retreat, are really driven by this bhava tanha, desire for becoming something. But, of course, we need to keep in mind the advice of Lily Tomlin, who commented in one of her plays, "I always knew I wanted to be someone, but I guess I should have been more specific."

The third of the aspects of craving is called the craving for non-existence. The Pali is vibhava tanha. And the basic meaning is that although we have this deep desire to exist, which got us here in the first place, we also have at times a desire not to exist at all. Basically a desire to turn off the impingement of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, moods, emotions, and so on. We have a desire to get away from it all.

Sometimes the mere fact of living and phenomenal existence is experienced as a huge and oppressive burden, full of pain and darkness. And it's, of course, out of this mood of vibhava tanha that people commit suicide, imagining that that is really going to solve the problem. So there's a kind of aversion to life that's this manifestation of not wanting to exist, wanting not to exist.

It also means wanting to get rid of what is unpleasant. When you find a painful sensation in the knee and you find yourself thinking, "I wish I could get rid of this," that's also a manifestation of wanting it not to exist. So this is the aversion aspect of the tendency of mind.

So that's a description of the second noble truth. Then, as you know, each noble truth comes with a prescription, an advice for action. The Buddha said with the second noble truth, "This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned." So the instruction is craving is to be abandoned. This means both momentarily—each time it arises, it needs to be abandoned—and finally, that as we walk the path to its very end, we are meant to abandon it once and for all.

I think most of us know that this is a good idea, but actually doing it is not that easy. So how many times have you found yourself recognizing that there's some form of greed, aversion, or delusion going on and not being able to release it? Ajahn Chah said that 70 to 80% of spiritual life is knowing that we're clinging and not being able to let go. So if that's 70 to 80% of your experience, you're at an Ajahn Chah level.

We've talked about a lot of tools for how to let go: noting the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion, noting the feeling tone on which they're based, many ways of working with the various forms of hindrances. I'm not going to talk about that more. But what I would like to encourage you to do is, once you notice a movement of greed or aversion, to stay with it and watch its changing nature. None of them are permanent. And it's very interesting to be committed to follow one all the way through.

This is from the start of the Xin Xin Ming, Verses on the Faith Mind, which I'm sure you've heard before:

"The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.
When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised.
Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart."

That means even a slight bit of greed or aversion separates heaven from us.

Notice this. There's a big difference in feeling when aversion is strong and when aversion is weak. There's a big difference in that. Qualitatively, it's the same thing, but there's a big quantitative gap. But then watch what happens when aversion goes out of the picture altogether. That's not just a quantitative shift. That's a qualitative shift.

When greed, aversion, and delusion are all absent, there are no preferences. Heaven and earth are no longer separated. See what that feels like.

Be willing to track the diminishment of greed or aversion until it goes completely away, and see what that is like for it to pass altogether. It's really in the abandoning of these forces that we are led directly into the third noble truth. It is in the understanding of unsatisfactoriness and the abandoning of craving that we shift our whole relationship to pain and suffering in our life.

As one teacher said, our practice is to change the conditions that lead to suffering. There is no other practice.

I want to close with two quotes from the Buddha—one showing the magnitude of the situation that we're in, the other pointing the way forward. The Buddha said:

"This samsara is without a discernible beginning. A first point is not evident of beings roaming and wandering on, clouded by ignorance and driven by craving."

That is our situation. This has been our condition, the Buddha is saying here, since beginningless time. And the only way out is this third noble truth:

"This is the noble truth of the end of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishment of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

We'll talk about that in a later discussion.

So let's just sit together for a minute, please.

This samsara is without a discernible beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, clouded by ignorance and driven by craving.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 12

Third Noble Truth & Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Third Noble Truth—the cessation of suffering—and its relationship to nibbāna. He begins with the Buddha's own motivation for practice from the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta (MN 26), where the Buddha sought what is beyond birth, aging, and death. Armstrong explores various definitions of nibbāna, from Sāriputta's simple formulation as the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion, to the deeper understanding of nibbāna as both a psychological state and an unconditioned element already present within us.*
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> *The talk covers the four stages of enlightenment, from stream entry to arahantship, illustrated through the story of Ānanda's awakening and teachings from Ajahn Mahāboowa. Armstrong makes these lofty concepts accessible by offering practical approaches: observing the arising and passing of clinging, using awareness and space as approximations of the unconditioned, and recognizing what Ajahn Buddhadāsa called 'nibbāna for everyone'—moments when greed, hatred, and delusion are naturally absent. He emphasizes that peace is our natural state when we stop agitating the mind through craving, making the Third Noble Truth relevant for daily meditation practice and spiritual development.*

The subject of the talk tonight is the Third Noble Truth. I thought I would start by talking about the Buddha's description of his motivation for his own practice. This is from a sutta in the Majjhima:

"Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, I too, being myself subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth. Being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, I sought what was also subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow. Then I considered thus: Why, being myself subject to birth, do I seek what is also subject to birth? Why, being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, do I seek what is also subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow? Suppose that, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I seek the unborn supreme security from bondage, nibbāna. Suppose that, being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, I seek the unaging, unailing, deathless, and sorrowless supreme security from bondage, nibbāna."

So this becomes the frame for the Buddha's journey. Understanding the limitations of what is subject to birth and death, he started his quest looking for that which is beyond birth and death, which he called nibbāna. This was the search that culminated in his understanding in that night under the Bodhi tree, where he became fully liberated.

It's said that immediately after his realization, a poem came to him:

"Through many a birth I wandered in samsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. O house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken. Your ridgepole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of cravings."

The house that he's talking about is the house of this body, subject to birth, illness, aging, and death. The house builder is craving, which we talked about last week as the source of suffering in the Second Noble Truth. The rafters of the house are considered to be the passions of greed, aversion, and delusion. The ridgepole is ignorance, that which props the whole thing up. And then the very last statement: my mind has attained the unconditioned. Unconditioned is another synonym for nibbāna, that which was the subject of his whole quest, and reached the very end of craving.

This poetic utterance sets the stage for the discourse that he gave to his five old friends when he found them in Sarnath, after he had already explained to them the truth of suffering and the truth of the origin of suffering. Tonight I want to talk about the Third Noble Truth, or the cessation of suffering.

This is how he explained it in that first discourse: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

So he equates the end of suffering with the end of craving, as the Second Noble Truth equated the origin of suffering with the origin of craving, and describes it as the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving which was the origin of suffering.

The poem I mentioned earlier about the house builder also ties in the concept of the unconditioned. The statement of his quest equates that with nibbāna. So in the Third Noble Truth, we really get this conjoining of the end of suffering, the end of craving, and this factor of nibbāna.

So what is this quality referred to as nibbāna? I don't think there's anything in all the Buddha's teachings that's as confusing and perplexing. Even the teaching on not-self starts to seem sort of understandable when we put it next to the teaching on nibbāna. So as we talk about this quality tonight, I want to encourage you: please don't worry about it. It's not something that anyone can figure out rationally, so don't spend too many cycles trying to do that. The Buddha used it as kind of a pointer for the end of the path, and it's really enough to understand it in those terms, although I'll be trying to flesh it out a little bit more this evening.

As he himself said in the same sutta where he described his quest: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see, and hard to understand, subtle to be experienced by the wise." So the talk tonight may not be particularly subtle or profound, but it may be hard to understand. That's why you should take it all with a grain of skepticism.

One of the clearest definitions in the canon comes from Sāriputta, the Buddha's chief disciple who was said to be highly developed in wisdom. He defined nibbāna like this: "The destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbāna."

Given that greed, aversion, and delusion are pretty much synonymous with taṇhā, or craving, then we have the end of craving—end of greed, aversion, delusion—equated with nibbāna. This is a good working understanding in a simple way. So you can see that when greed, aversion, and delusion are gone from the mind, there's a state of freedom. You've been reporting this in your interviews and experiencing it at many different points during the retreat. So the Third Noble Truth is pointing to a real place of freedom.

The literal meaning of this term nibbāna in the Pali—and there was a word at the Buddha's time, he didn't make it up—is extinguishing.

It refers to extinguishing like the going out of a fire.

Moreover, at the time of the Buddha, fire was considered to exist or come into being in dependence on what was called its sustenance or its nourishment. The word that was used for sustenance or nourishment was upadana, which is the term that we use for clinging, the term the Buddha used for clinging or grasping.

So the idea was that a fire could be born of leaves or sticks or twigs or logs or grass. And then that was said—those materials, leaves or twigs or sticks or logs or grass, were said to be the material or the sustenance for the fire. They were said to be the upadana on which the fire depended.

So when the fire goes out, it was thought of at the time as being released from its nutriments, from its sustenance, from its upadana.

The Buddha took both these terms and brought them together in this sense of nibbana as something going out. And what goes out is the fire of clinging, upadana. This is what gets extinguished. So again, using the common terms and concepts that were of his day and taking them and making a new kind of spiritual truth from them.

When clinging—the nutriment, you could say, for suffering—is released, then there's a sense of extinction. The fire of craving, the fire of greed, hatred, and delusion goes out. And that's the state of nibbana, the going out of greed, hatred, and delusion.

So nibbana can be understood as a state of freedom in the mind that is released from greed, hatred, and delusion, but it's also come to be understood as an element in its own right. I hope you can get this distinction.

It could just be a psychological condition, right? When there is no greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind, then there is this state of freedom called nibbana. That's one possible interpretation.

Or this quality of nibbana could be something that is already within us, that when we touch is that place of freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion.

There's one particular sutta that seems to indicate the second reading. That is from the Udana, when the Buddha says: "There is, bhikkhus, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible. But since there is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded."

So the general interpretation is that in addition to nibbana describing a state of mind, it also refers to an element that is already within us—that there is this unchanging, you might say, dimension within ourselves. Somewhere within this mind-body process or underlying this mind-body process is this element which is often referred to as a transcendent element because it transcends the limitations of birth, aging, illness, and death, the discovery of which opens us to the Third Noble Truth, opens us fully to the Third Noble Truth.

Some of the implications of this understanding are this quality is ever-present within us. Because it's not conditioned, it's not subject to arising and passing. Therefore, it doesn't get created. Therefore, it can't arise in a moment, so it must already be here.

I don't know if this interests you, but this has always really intrigued me. This element called nibbana is already here and now. This unborn, unmade, unbecome is already here and now. And it is what makes it possible for us to be released or liberated from what is born, become, or made. And of course, as we've seen many times, it's our tendency to hang on to changing elements of experience that causes our suffering.

So here's something that isn't changing. That is in a way stable. That is free from the cycle of birth and death. That's free from the cycle of samsara. And it's already here.

Now when I hear that, something in me stops and opens up. So I think this is the first practical pointer that I'd like to mention about hearing about this quality of nibbana—that it can make us stop and listen deeply within ourselves to see what could that be. Where could it be? How could it be sensed or intuited? Where is perhaps a trail, the scent that leads to that realization? And we'll talk more about that.

So if it's ever present, why is it so hard to see? It's said that it's because the movements of mind are so coarse in comparison to its nature—that its nature is very subtle. And the movements of greed, aversion, and confusion are so heavy that they overwhelm our perception of that. So the understanding is that it needs a very fine balance of mind in order for it to be perceivable.

This balance of mind is what's pointed to in lists like the seven factors of enlightenment that Sally talked about. The balance of mind is illustrated in this lovely story of the enlightenment of Ananda. We've talked quite a bit about Ananda, who was a beautiful being who was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life.

After the Buddha's death, Ananda had been so busy serving he hadn't had much time for practice. So there were many, many fully enlightened beings around, but Ananda was only a stream enterer.

They were having a meeting of, it said, 499 Arahants to collect all the teachings of the Buddha since he had died in order to preserve them. People wanted Ananda there because he had heard a lot of the suttas and he had this fabulous memory. He said that he could remember everything that he'd heard, but he wasn't an Arahant, so he couldn't really be trusted. This was really a boys' club, I'll tell you.

So Ananda wanted to be at the council, but he knew he had to be an Arahant to join, to get the invitation. He said, "I'm going to practice really hard." And the night before the council, he stayed up all night practicing, sitting and walking and cultivating the factors of enlightenment. He thought that he was in the territory, and the evening was wearing on, and still nothing was happening. He sat and walked and put in more effort and tried to get his mind in just the right balance, and nothing was happening.

Finally, just before dawn, he thought, "I guess it's not going to happen. I'm not going to be able to join the council, but at least I can take some rest. I gave it my best effort. I'll take some rest." So he went to his bed to lie down, relaxed his body, relaxed his mind, and just before his head hit the pillow came that moment of full realization.

And then Ananda had a little nap and joined the first council where he contributed all those suttas that begin, "Thus have I heard." Those are all from the mouth of Ananda.

It's very interesting. Effort can do a certain amount on this path in terms of the unfolding, the opening to the realization of nibbana, but effort can't do the whole thing. It's beautiful because it illustrates the potency of effort. We can collect and gather the factors of enlightenment through our continuous mindfulness. They do grow, and they gain a momentum that's onward leading. But we cannot control that possible moment of opening to what is beyond conditions. That is beyond effort, beyond our effort.

All we can do is lay the ground as best we can and then be patient. In fact, the very desire or striving for that particular breakthrough will in fact block it. So I think this is a nice reminder that all along the way, to open ourselves to the deepest truth, it needs an element of surrender and realizing that there's a mystery that's beyond our control and an opening beyond our ability to cause.

So, nibbana is one word for it. Some other common synonyms from some suttas in the Samyutta Nikaya: the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the refuge, the beyond.

This condition or this realization, this way of being, is considered by the Buddha the highest kind of happiness. And therefore, it's the culmination of the path. Many different kinds of happiness come along the way: the happiness of sense pleasures, which we've talked about; the happiness of very refined meditative states looked at through the seven factors of enlightenment or transcendent dependent arising, as Sally discussed. But all of these are still considered in the conditioned world. And it's said that this realization, this way of being, brings a greater kind of happiness than anything else.

The reason, of course, that it is so completely happy is because it marks the end of suffering. When you think about what we as humans most deeply want, it really isn't particular experiences. It really is to be beyond the touch of pain and sorrow. And so the Buddha said that when we realize that, that is the most satisfying. That is the greatest kind of happiness.

The reason it's so fulfilling is that in that state or in that realization, there is no possibility for the mind's agitation. Because it is a place where craving cannot arise. It is a place of complete safety and complete freedom from even the potential of harm that we cause ourselves.

So just a little bit of an overview reminder again about how we approach it. When you think about the talk on transcendent dependent arising, you remember the first part—you could sort of think of that sequence in two halves. The first half starts with suffering, moves through faith and gladness and rapture and tranquility and happiness or contentment. And the second half starts from there and goes into deeper states of calm and then insight.

So I like to think of it as that half of our journey is from suffering to contentment, and the second half of the journey is starting from contentment and going to liberation.

Now, when you came into the retreat, if I asked you, "Are you here because you'd like to realize nibbana?" I don't know that very many of you would have checked that box. When I started practicing, I was definitely practicing just with the idea of contentment. If I could have found that in practice early on, that would have satisfied me. But as time went on, my motivation started to change as I started to see greater possibilities.

So just to be aware that our aspiration is a factor of the path that also evolves as we deepen in practice.

Whether you conceive of your journey as moving toward contentment or toward full liberation, both are heading in the same direction. The Buddha said that one who walks the Eightfold Path "slants, slopes, and inclines to Nibbana." Isn't that a beautiful image? All of you are on this downhill roll, heading in that same direction. We simply need to keep rolling. Whether you know you're going there or not, whether you conceive of that as your destination, doesn't matter. The practice naturally unfolds in that direction.

Let me draw in another aspect of the nibbanic experience—our relationship with time. You'll notice that even the concept of path has time built into it. We begin from suffering, practice mindfulness, develop concentration and wisdom, and over time, at some point in the future, we arrive at the goal. This understanding often carries within it the sense that we are moving through time toward something else, implying that fulfillment is not here and now. The feeling that accompanies this is often a subtle dissatisfaction with the present moment, because the future is meant to be the real thing. Even in states that are fairly calm, harmonious, and peaceful, there's often this undercurrent of time. Take a look and see if you notice this in your practice.

But when we arrive at the goal—the realization of nibbana—that sense of time dissolves. Integral to this realization is a quality of timelessness. When that timelessness is touched, the sense of time becomes much more relaxed and expansive. Time opens up in a broad way, and we begin to reflect that there is never anything but this present moment. Instead of using the present moment as a vehicle to get somewhere else, we come fully into this present moment and discover there is nothing else. This is what gives that sense of relaxation and expansiveness.

If you observe children's relationship to time, they are much less caught in the sense of time's rapid movement. They inhabit a much more open and relaxed sense of time. The Tibetans say that generally speaking, we are caught in the three times—past, present, and future. But when we touch freedom, we enter the fourth time, which is timelessness. I think this is an interesting reflection to bring into your practice. Anytime there's a sense of being caught in time, there's movement toward a goal. But when there's the fullness of arrival, there's no sense of time.

The Third Noble Truth, like all the others, has an imperative—a prescription that the Buddha gave us of what is to be done. He described it this way: "This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized." This realization is the whole point of our path, the reason the Buddha taught, and the reason we practice.

The Buddha encouraged us all to come to the realization of nibbana—to directly know it from our own personal experience. You may not feel this is a compelling motivation at this point, and that's fine. But I also want to explore the ways we are already touching this quality in relative form. Whether in the relative sense or the direct sense of realization, this quality of freedom from clinging, freedom from craving, is met all along the path.

The direct realization and fullness of seeing nibbana is what's called enlightenment. In our tradition, enlightenment is understood as the meditator's direct apprehension of this unconditioned element. The Buddha said this direct realization can influence people on four different levels. Sometimes the word enlightenment is used only to describe those who have become completely liberated, but in our tradition, there are four levels of enlightenment or realization.

The first, which is how most people experience it, is called stream entry. This refers to the first moment of direct knowledge of the unconditioned element. This first moment of realization removes three fetters from the mind: the fetter of personality view, which Sharda discussed last night; the fetter of attachment to precepts and rituals; and

the fetter of doubt—doubt that there is an end of suffering, doubt that this path leads to that end. Because one knows from direct experience the state where there is no suffering and no possibility of suffering. The middle fetter is somewhat perplexing.

How many of you feel attached to rituals and precepts? I don't think many do. I think this was a teaching that the Buddha used to address the Brahmanical practices of his day, where there was an understanding that purification through rituals alone could lead to liberation. He was saying it's not enough in itself—don't be attached to that as the way.

If a stream enterer progresses further, or for some people this first moment of contact will lead to the next level of enlightenment, called a once-returner. The idea is that such a person is born once again in the world. At this level, it's said that sense desire and aversion are weakened—not eliminated, but weakened.

As one progresses further, or for some individuals the first contact will lead to the next level, called a non-returner. A non-returner is not born again into this world, but will be born in another realm before full liberation. At non-returning, both sense desire and aversion are completely eliminated.

This third stage of enlightenment is a very high achievement. I've known a few people in my life who were considered to be at this level. I don't know if they were or not, but from my observation of them, they could well have been. This is the first stage of enlightenment where there's a strong change in affect, in emotional experience, because sense desire and aversion are no longer present in the mind. This is a very high attainment.

Going on from there, as one continues to practice, or for some people on the first moment of realization, it's said that five more fetters are uprooted from the mind. Two are attachment to higher levels of concentration or absorption. The last three are restlessness, conceit, and ignorance. This is why we often say the comparing mind doesn't go away until full liberation, and why it's such a hard thing to be really free of. Ignorance is the ridgepole that was pointed to in the Buddha's poem—the underpinning of all our constructs of self and searching for lasting happiness.

This can seem a little remote. It certainly does in my practice. But I do want to tell you one story, because there are people alive who have reached this fourth and highest level of enlightenment, it seems. Again, I can't verify, but someone who is said to be an arahant in Thailand is a teacher named Ajahn Mahabua, who is a disciple of Ajahn Chah. He's quite old now, but still teaching in the north of Thailand.

In one of his books, he described his journey to liberation. It's a very interesting story. He said he'd been in robes for about ten years when he decided to make a strong resolution. The resolution he took up for one three-month retreat, the rains retreat, was to sit up all night every night. As you can imagine, that's a strong resolution—not an easy one to do. He said that after he did that, he lost his fear of death, because nothing could possibly be more painful than sitting up every night for three months.

After that period, he said his concentration became very, very strong. His mind became immovable—just like a rock. But he kind of liked that state. When we talk about attachment to the qualities of concentration, that's what Ajahn Mahabua was experiencing. He didn't really move, he said, for about five years from that rock-like concentration.

At some point he realized that wasn't enough, so he got motivated to investigate again. He began investigating basically the noble truths—he started looking at suffering and desire and then non-suffering and ease. Those were the qualities he investigated. But he saw that they were all coming and going. So he said, "What would it be that doesn't come and go?"

Then he turned his attention to the qualities he called mindfulness and wisdom, directing them to the quality of knowing itself. He let go of everything else. Then he said those two qualities became impartial and impassive, and the mind was not tending to move to anything at all.

This is a description from his book: "At that moment, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked."

Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared—at the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

The key here is his statement that ignorance was eradicated. The eradication of ignorance is the same as saying that one has reached arahantship. So he did that by turning his attention to the qualities of mindfulness and wisdom, which did not change at that point.

This still seems pretty remote. Most of us aren't ready to stay up all night for the rest of the retreat, let alone the whole three months. So how can we make sense of this teaching on the Third Noble Truth? How can we bring it into our actual experience and make it relevant for us?

The first question is: Does the Third Noble Truth point to a permanent end of suffering, or can it be understood as a temporary end of suffering? I would say that for us, it's helpful to understand it as a temporary end of suffering. Because if it's a permanent end, that's way in the future. But if it's a temporary end, we can start to work with it here and now.

One of the ways you can approach this is to look at times when the Second Noble Truth is your experience—when there's craving and some discomfort or unease. It means that the mind is clinging in some shape or form. Be willing to stay with that clinging until it goes. Observe it closely, feel it, feel its impact in the body where there will probably be some form of tension. Feel its effect in the mind where there will be some kind of rubbing or discomfort or unease, and be willing to observe that until that form of clinging or craving goes away.

That moment of its going away has the flavor of the Third Noble Truth. It has the flavor of this temporary end of the suffering that's coming from the clinging. It may not be the fullness of the direct realization of nibbāna, but it is a taste of the same kind of release. So become familiar with what that feels like.

As you get familiar with this sense of observing the clinging and observing the release, these two experiences can become the whole of your practice. In approaching it this way, you might relax the body, bring your attention into the heart center, have a sense that you're going to rest it there, and know moment after moment whether you're in a state of clinging or freedom. These can be your only two notes: Clinging, clinging. Freedom, freedom.

This becomes a really interesting exploration when the mind is quiet enough to see in that way. As we observe this and practice with it, we become more skilled at knowing the forms of clinging and releasing them.

There are three avenues to this non-clinging. The first is we just wait for things to pass. I'm sure you've experienced this in your practice. If you wait long enough, the clinging will exhaust itself. This is reassuring, but sometimes you have to be really patient.

The second is that you develop a greater skill at releasing voluntarily. It can't always happen. Remember that Ajahn Chah said that seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing you're clinging and not being able to let go. So don't put pressure on yourself. But sometimes we can release.

Then there's a third avenue, which is that as you get to know the feeling of this state of release, we develop more skill at just being able to put the mind there. You become familiar with what release feels like and you find a way to encourage the mind just to go there.

There are a couple of tools that help with that movement. It helps if in our direct experience we can find something on the relative level that's a little bit like the unconditioned—a substitute or an approximation for nibbāna that's within our direct moment-to-moment experience.

So I want to ask you to investigate. What could that be? What could it be in our experience that's always here? What could it be that, like nibbāna, can accommodate everything that isn't moved by a painful or pleasant feeling? What could it be that's not caught up in birth and death? What could it be that's not caught in a sense of time?

I want to suggest two possible answers for you to think about. What about the quality of space? You can think about the space in this room. You can think about the space extending more widely out beyond. Does space come and go? Is it born and dying? Is it ever-present? Does it accommodate the beautiful and the unbeautiful?

Does it depend on time?

So space might be one kind of approximation of this unconditioned.

Here's another. What about the quality of awareness? In every waking moment, is there some awareness? Yes. Does awareness care if it's knowing pain or knowing pleasure? Is it subject to birth and death? Is it subject to time? Or is it kind of like space in that it reaches everywhere and is always there? Some kind of knowing.

So I want to suggest as a shorthand or an approximation, a way to tune into this quality of the unconditioned, that you might think about marrying space with awareness. Have a sense that your own awareness can expand to fill this room, but even beyond, outside as we listen to the sound of the wind, or as you walk out tonight and look up at the sky and the clouds or the stars. All those things are in physical space, but they're also in the space of your awareness.

I want you to investigate just for a moment: what is it like, or what would it feel like, to release any holding around the particulars of your experience in this moment? Maybe you're holding on to some sensation in the body, pleasant or unpleasant. Maybe there's some mood or thought in the mind. Maybe there's a sense of limitation, of con-

fining the attention to your body posture. What if you let go of all those limiting particulars and let the non-clinging extend as far as your awareness extends, as far as space extends? What would that feel like? Does it have a little bit of this quality of release?

Notice also that because space and awareness, as we're talking about them now—just approximation—are not changeable, not subject to arising and passing, they're always accessible. They're accessible in any moment. So when the mind isn't stirred up or isn't clinging, could you think of this as the natural state of being? That if you simply relax your awareness from the particulars, you can know its fullness and its expansiveness, its reach, its accommodating qualities, its non-preference. It still illuminates the beautiful and the unbeautiful, the pleasant and the painful. But is it limited by them? It doesn't need to be.

So in this way, perhaps this sense of the vastness of awareness becomes a direct avenue to—let's call it an intimation of nibbāna—the flavor of release. If you get familiar with this, you can start to feel the shift that happens. It's as though in a moment of clinging—a synonym we sometimes use is fixation—the attention gets narrowed down and constricted by some kind of holding. As we move into this wider view of things, it's like the center of gravity shifts from the particulars to a very, very big space.

So at the least, this big space gives kind of more room to breathe. It gives room for the body to relax, for the mind to expand, and for everything just to happen on its own. The second thing it can do is to shift our sense of identity. This big space includes the body, includes the thoughts, includes emotions, but it's not limited by them. So maybe we don't have to be defined by our particulars. Maybe what we're more like is this big space in which everything comes and goes. Maybe that's more our nature.

This is from Ajahn Mahabua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration." In the Thai forest tradition, this quality of mind is considered more or less equal with nibbāna.

What you can feel is that as you let your attention go in this broad, expansive way, your center of gravity shifts from individual holding to an open and undying space. You can play with this.

Now, these intimations of nibbāna are not the same as the direct realization of the deathless element, of what is truly unconditioned. But they give us a way in, to feel our way in, to what that feels like.

Ajahn Buddhadāsa was a great Thai monk of the past century. Carol and I both had the chance to spend some time at his monastery in Thailand. He was quite a revolutionary in his own way. He brought the Dharma out of the monastic confines and started sharing it with lay people, applying it to lay people's experiences. He re-read the Pali Canon, the words of the Buddha, and brought fresh interpretation and meaning for people. One of the things that he said was kind of revolutionary, was a teaching in a little pamphlet called "Nibbāna for Everyone." He said that nibbāna shouldn't be understood just as the province of some arahants, but that we all have little tastes of it.

He prefaced this teaching by saying, "When you hear a phrase like 'Nibbana for everyone,' you may shake your head in disbelief and understand that someone has tried to dye a cat for sale." I love this image. If you want to sell a cat that's not very beautiful, you dye it first. You color it and then you put it on the market so that somebody will buy it.

Nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any defilements. So he's basically saying that when you check your attitude and you don't see greed, you don't see aversion, you don't see delusion, that is this flavor of nibbana—temporary though it is.

He went on to say, "Anyone can see that if defilements are with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them? Under such conditions, living things must either die or become insane and finally die away. Let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods that the fires of defilement are not burning. Periodical nibbana keeps all of us alive and well, without making any exceptions, even animals at a certain level. We survive because of the nourishment from this kind of nibbana."

So he's pointing to the fact that these moments where greed, aversion, and delusion are absent or much reduced are coming all the time. We just need to start to notice them as the cool state of mind. Moreover, this cool state of mind as we start to observe it is the natural state of mind when we aren't stirring things up with cravings.

It's not that you have to force yourself into this state. It's not some accidental thing that happens as a result of a lot of effort and construction and contrivance, but rather in any moment when the mind has let go of clinging, this is the state that results. So all we have to do to touch it, to access it, is to not do, to not fabricate, to not make up, to not construct formations, to not cling. Then the natural state of our being is this everyday nibbana.

When the mind settles in this way and we're not stirring it up, there is a great sense of peace. This is from the Buddha. The Buddha talked about the four foundations—not of mindfulness, but of growth in the Dhamma. He called them wisdom, truth, renunciation, and peace. And he explained it this way: "The tides of conceiving do not sweep over one who stands upon these foundations. And when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over him, he is called a sage at peace. The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. He is not shaken, and he is not agitated. For there is nothing present in her by which she might be born."

This is truly our natural state of mind when we are not agitating it. So at any moment, really, we start to see the choice is ours. Do we want to be agitated or do we want peace? The Buddha said peace is the highest happiness. Sometimes he expressed it as nirvana is the highest happiness. Sometimes he expressed it as peace is the highest happiness. Do we believe that? If we do, peace is available in any moment in which we simply let go of clinging. It is always accessible.

This is from Rumi. It's a poem called "Tending Two Shops":

"Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere, and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops, and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller and smaller. Checkmate this way, checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish."

Now, the extent to which the fish can swim freely is, I think, almost inconceivable for us. This was brought home to me one time when I was in Kathmandu. I was visiting one of my Tibetan teachers who has a monastery there, and I was just about to go home. But my Tibetan teacher was hosting a very well-known and revered Tibetan Lama named Nyoshul Kempo Rinpoche.

Sharon Salzberg had asked me if I would offer some dana to this Rinpoche on her behalf because he was one of her teachers. I had never met him before. So I told my teacher that I'd like to make an offering of some dana from a friend. And my teacher said, "Would you like to present it yourself to Kempo?"—it was a name for Nyoshul Ken. "Would you like to present the dana?" And I said, "No, I don't need to."

And I was thinking, you know, you've seen one lama, you've seen them all. But then, just as I was about to leave—it was my last visit to the monastery on this trip—I thought, why not? Why not meet this Rinpoche whom I've heard so much about?

So I told my teacher that actually, I would like to present the dana. I collected the money, put it in an envelope, and was brought into the room where he was staying. There was a little chit-chat among the group of us—my teacher, the Rinpoche's wife, an attendant, a couple of other people. Then it came time for me to present the dana.

I got a bit nervous because this Rinpoche was well-known and very highly respected. I approached him, made my three bows, and offered the envelope on my open palm. As I did this, I looked into his eyes. He received the dana, and I was still feeling nervous. Then he did something in his mind that became evident through his gaze—he went into this meditative space that was a marked shift.

As I watched him, his eyes moved slightly apart, as if he were looking in a very unfocused way, and became extraordinarily still. Because I was looking directly into his eyes in that moment, I received a transmission of some flavor of the state he had entered. This experience of incredible stillness came over me.

Reflecting on it later, I realized I couldn't even say that his mind was still in that moment—it was beyond that. There was no mind there to be either still or moving. I felt I was looking right into the unconditioned, that he was manifesting it in that moment. If I could have kept looking into his eyes long enough, something profound might have happened. But I was nervous and shy, and couldn't quite get there. The moment passed and the transmission ended.

Yet I felt I had witnessed a human possibility I'd never even imagined before. It gave me a deeper sense of what looking into the eyes of the Buddha must have been like, and how so many people awakened in his presence.

I'd like to close with another quotation from the Buddha about this transcendent place of nibbana, from the Udana Sutra:

"One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's sit for a moment, please.

"There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. Just this is the end of suffering."

Thank you.

CHAPTER 13

Loving-Kindness and Gratitude

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong explores the brahmaviharās (divine abiding places), focusing particularly on mettā (loving-kindness) and muditā (appreciative joy). Drawing from the Karaṇīyamettā Sutta and traditional commentaries, he explains how mettā serves as the foundation for all four brahmaviharās, naturally transforming into karuṇā (compassion) when encountering suffering and muditā when witnessing happiness, all held in balance by upekkhā (equanimity).*
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> *Armstrong addresses common challenges in mettā practice, especially the difficulty of extending loving-kindness to oneself and working with the inner critic or 'judge.' He shares inspiring stories, including his encounter with a generous Thai monk who spent nine years working through self-hatred, and Caroline Kornfield's compassionate act of helping ducks cross traffic. The talk explores how muditā, particularly when directed toward oneself, manifests as gratitude—a quality that naturally cuts through both greed and aversion.*
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> *The discussion includes practical guidance on progressing through the traditional categories of mettā practice: self, benefactor, neutral person, and difficult person. Armstrong emphasizes how the brahmaviharās are 'boundless' practices, both in their scope (extending to all beings) and in their capacity to make the mind immeasurable. He concludes by connecting these heart practices to the ultimate wisdom of emptiness, citing the Dalai Lama's teaching that 'compassion is the best source of happiness.'*

One of the qualities we discover on a long retreat is what sensitive creatures we are. Being in the present moment, we find that we're subjected to this constantly varying stream of pleasant experience and painful experience. That alternation never seems to end. And it's said that because of this, the human realm is considered to be the best realm to wake up from because things are difficult enough that we have a motivation to look and become free, but they're pleasurable enough that we have enough hope and confidence that we can become free. So I hope you are counting your blessings at having this mix of pleasure and pain. It may not be the best for enjoyment, but it's the best for enlightenment.

We recognize as we're practicing that really anything can happen at any moment in life. And that's part of what makes it uncertain and out of the uncertainty somewhat intense. Just a story to illustrate this: a friend of ours a few years ago was practicing Qigong on a beach in southern India. The date happened to be December 26, 2004. And

as he was just out on the beach taking in the morning sun, this big wave started to roll in and knocked him over, flattened him. There he was, knocked on the sand. And he said he stood up and looked back at the ocean to see what was going on. And he saw this very strange characteristic of an emptiness where the wave had been and where the ocean should be, and it was the emptiness that freaked him out so he ran and got his partner. The two of them came outside and climbed up on top of this concrete wall, and he held on very tight to a palm tree that was right beside the wall.

And just then, the second wave came. And that's the wave that, as you probably remember, was the tsunami of 2004 that took many people out in its wake. But because he'd had the foresight to climb on the concrete wall, which is about three feet tall, and hang on to a palm tree, they were able to stay upright during the impact of that second big wave. Anything can happen. This was a case where the practice of non-clinging was not advisable! He was fortunate enough to realize that.

So given this alternation in our practice, in our immediate experience, as well as in our outside life, how do we respond to all the changes that life brings? How do we respond to this changing mix of joy and sorrow that really is the situation for all humans that are alive?

If we look at the state of the world today, it's quite easy to get depressed. Because if you read the news pages, it's mostly bad news. You notice they never report on, you know, a monk in Thailand getting enlightened today. That never makes the front page. But mostly what makes the front page is not good news. And it's also easy to get kind of depressed about the state of our mind as we follow it moment by moment here. Sometimes the enlightenment story doesn't show up here so clearly either.

But fortunately we have these tools that give us other ways to relate. And among the tools that show us another possibility are the Brahmaviharas. So tonight I want to talk about the Brahmaviharas, particularly the two that we haven't talked about a lot in this six-week period, which are loving-kindness and appreciative joy, metta and mudita.

Just to back up a minute and look at the structure of these four qualities of mind that are called the divine abidings—the place where we can find a heavenly state of mind within ourselves. In our tradition, we consider that metta is the foundation for all the Brahmaviharas. And in the practice of metta, which you all did in the first six weeks if you were here, we consistently turn our mind to the well-being of individuals, of ourselves and other individuals, with the wish that may you be well and happy and peaceful and healthy and so on.

And this consistent turning of the mind to welfare, eventually of all beings, starts to train the heart to be open, or you could say tender, around the subject of people's happiness or unhappiness. That's one of the great movements that happens in the practice of loving-kindness. We start as a matter of habit or practice to tune in: Every time we meet a being, how are you doing? How is your health? How is your state of mind? Are you feeling safe? And these issues start to matter to us, for ourselves and for others. And this is how the heart starts to open.

Then this open heart becomes the platform for the next two—really, you could say the next three. When that open heart looks on someone who's having a difficult time, the natural flavor that comes out is compassion. So it's not that compassion is such a radically different state than loving-kindness. It's just a transmutation of it when loving-kindness looks on suffering. Or on the other hand, when that open heart of loving-kindness looks on somebody who's going through happiness and uplift in their life, then the flavor that that evokes is mudita or appreciative joy. We resonate in sympathy with people's suffering or happiness.

So there's this beautiful symmetry. Loving-kindness is the foundation. Compassion is the natural response to difficulty. And appreciative joy is a natural response to well-being or happiness.

Then the fourth factor, equanimity, balances and holds all three, ensuring they don't fall into their near and far enemies. Equanimity is the quality of mind that provides the strength so that we can stay in the divine abidings rather than their opposites or their near enemies. They all work together to support one another. They're all needed to complete the picture.

We have this beautiful gift from the tradition from nearly 2,500 years ago. It's not recorded in the suttas that the Buddha taught these practices exactly the way that we do them, but they're taught in a commentary that came into existence maybe 200 years after the Buddha. So these practices in the way we do them go back about 2,300 years for sure. They have been tested once or twice. They have been found to work.

The beautiful thing is that as we develop them, they really do have the power to evoke these qualities of our being, and in doing that, they sweeten our lives. They bring our emotional life up into a realm that is very worthwhile, very beneficial for ourselves and others. They strengthen the emotional life, bringing it into greater realization in this very wholesome way.

Some people don't particularly feel drawn to practice the Brahma Viharas, and that's fine. If you have tried the Brahma Viharas and don't connect, you can stay with Vipassana, and over time, all these qualities will also unfold from Vipassana. I tend to think that they unfold more strongly with the support of the Brahma Viharas, but they will also unfold from Vipassana.

This is from Rumi: "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." But you don't have to practice loving kindness. It's your choice.

We begin with the foundation of loving kindness, and we start practicing metta usually for ourselves because it's said to be the easiest—when in fact it often turns out for many of us to be one of the most difficult. But we start with metta for self, and it's actually designed to evoke the areas where it's difficult. As we aim our orientation toward appreciation and well-wishing, we find all the attitudes of mind that collide with that, that don't support that.

For many of us, turning the attitude toward well-wishing brings up its opposite, which are ways that we don't feel so great about ourselves. As we turn toward metta, we often find that we encounter a lot of self-judgment, a lot of criticism, a lot of ill will that's directed toward ourselves. We have the opportunity then to get really familiar with this judging mind, which we've talked about a lot on this retreat.

It's very helpful to get well acquainted because the judge is kind of a difficult customer, as I know you've seen. The judge tends to be a very tough, stern, critical, demanding taskmaster within us. Elements of perhaps the least attractive parts of our parents' personalities often seem to get directly channeled into that figure.

So how can we meet the judge in a way that's helpful? The best way to meet that hardness is with softness. If we can soften when that hard voice is coming in, then we don't have to be so caught in its hard nature. The turning of the mind to either metta or compassion is the way to evoke an attitude of softness to meet this hard-edged quality that's coming from the judge.

When we can stay with some kind of softness for a while, then it starts to touch other things. When we're feeling soft inside, or merciful, you might say, it's not extended just to ourselves—it's extended outward as well. And that's what brings some kind of change.

This is from Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher: "It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. The sore spot on

our body is an analogy for tenderness. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate. A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief."

This soft spot, even though it exposes our vulnerability, is a way that turns out to be the avenue to opening ourselves and allowing that open quality to touch us, to change us, and eventually to touch the world. As we start to trust in that softness, that tenderness, that very movement starts to weaken the influence of the judge. It can't maintain that hard-edged attack in the face of our softness.

But we have to be patient with this process. It can take time to transform the judge's attitude. The judge has a lot of momentum, a lot of habit patterns.

When I was ordained as a monk in Thailand quite a while ago in the 80s, my preceptor was a really wonderful monk who had a monastery outside of Thailand. He just died a couple of months ago this year. He was in his 90s when he died.

His name was Ajahn Panyananda. There's a wonderful book that recounts part of his life as a young monk called *Sons of the Buddha*. At any rate, he was very kind and helpful to me, ordained me, and then allowed me to go to another monastery in the forest to practice. But he said, "While you're on your way to this other monastery, which was up north near Chiang Mai, stop in at one of my branch monasteries." It was actually a place where he had gotten quite established as a young monk—a monastery in the town of Chiang Mai.

I said, "That sounds great. I can break my journey up and it will be interesting to stay there."

So I got to this wat in Chiang Mai and there was another Western monk there who took me around, showed me the ropes, took me on alms round, and we had some really lovely conversations. The first day I was there, we went on alms round together. He went in front because he was a senior monk—he'd been in robes for fifteen years at that point. I'd been in robes for about two weeks, so I was definitely a junior. Oddly enough, behind me there were two novice monks, which doesn't usually happen. Novice monks don't usually go out on alms round. So I wasn't sure what was up, but I just followed him.

He walked down this street in Chiang Mai, and there were all these people lined up waiting to give him alms because they had known him for a long time. They knew his route, they knew what time he came, and they were waiting. So they put lots of food in his bowl. I followed behind, and they put lots of food in my bowl. He and I both filled our bowls. My bowl was ordinary looking, but his bowl was the biggest bowl I've ever seen. It was appropriate because he had a girth to match the size of his bowl—he was obviously well-fed, which not all monks in Asia are, but he was well taken care of.

I came to understand that this was because of his generous spirit. He really exhibited a lot of loving-kindness. His practice was that he would sit at his kuti in the morning at a nice little place by a pond. He would meditate there in the morning, and in the afternoon he would receive visitors. He spoke fluent Thai at this point, so many local people would come and talk to him about their meditation practice. They would ask his advice about their family and raising their children, and he would just give selflessly of his time to these people. That was why his alms round was so well supported. That's the exchange that is meant to happen between the monks and nuns and the lay people in Buddhist countries.

So we had both filled up our bowls, and for some reason then—I didn't know why—we ducked into an alley. He led, and I followed. The novices followed us in. Then they opened up their robes, and each one had hanging off their left shoulder a big plastic bag. We took all the food offerings, which were in little plastic bags, out of our bowls and put them in the novices' plastic bags. The novices closed up their robes. We put the lids on our bowls, went out on the street again, and filled up again. I think we did this once more.

When we got back to the monastery, the novices' bags were jammed with food offerings. Our bowls were still full. We had more than enough for ourselves. We shared with other people who hadn't gone out on alms round, we shared with all the lay people who were staying at the monastery, and then we shared with the dogs. There was enough to feed everyone based on this monk's generosity and loving-kindness. That's why we were so well supported on that walk.

I was very touched and inspired by his being. He had this really lovely, outgoing nature. So I got to talking to him about his practice. As we chatted over the next couple of days, I was really surprised when he told me that it wasn't always like that for him. He said, "I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred." Nine years. But the transformation in him was so full, so complete, so apparent. He had developed, through a combination of mindfulness and loving-kindness, this great open heart of metta.

So we begin with ourselves, then move on to a benefactor or friend. This is a really important person in our metta family because this tends to be the person who can kind of pick our heart up. If in retreat we're feeling a little down, if our spirits are low, it's wonderful to have a benefactor or friend.

whom we connect with with deep affection because that can elevate our mood, inspire us, and keep us going. Then we can bring that kind of uplifted mind back into doing the metta practice for ourselves. So having the alternation between self and benefactor or friend is extremely useful in metta.

Then we come to the neutral person, who is conceptually perhaps the most interesting person in the metta practice, from the point of view of dharma theory. This is such a fascinating point, because we find that we can care a lot about someone that we don't really know. This really opens the doors of possibility much wider than we would normally think from our upbringing.

The neutral person is like a representative of all the other people on the planet that we don't know. There are six billion people out there that we haven't met yet. Therefore, we don't have a reason to dislike them yet. And the neutral person is the representative of those people. When we find we can open to them, the possibility is there to open to anyone else that we meet.

This is where the concept of the Brahmaviharas being boundless practices comes in. They are boundless in the range of beings to whom they can be extended. It's said that loving-kindness is like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without distinction because of this boundless quality. They're also boundless in another way, which is that the mind that can open to loving-kindness for all beings itself becomes immeasurable. It becomes limitless. So both the range of beings to whom we can extend it and the breadth or expansiveness of the mind of loving-kindness are both boundless or immeasurable.

The Buddha pointed to this universal quality of loving-kindness in a quote that kind of blows my mind if it's true. The Buddha said that given all the rounds of birth and death and rebirth that all of us have gone through, it is not easy to find a single being in this world who has not at some time or other been your mother or your father or your sister or your brother or your daughter or your son.

What if that was true? I'll invite you as your eyes are open and you're looking around the room to imagine if that was true for us, if we had all had that intimate a connection at some time in the past—how would that feel? We may all be a lot more closely connected than we sometimes think we are. This kind of reflection really can open our hearts to the wideness of life.

The Buddha said this also in the Karaniya Metta Sutta: "Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings."

I heard a really beautiful story about this over the summer. It is easy to look around the world, focus on all the things that are going wrong, and lose track of the fact there are a lot of things going right. For me, one of the most heartening things in our world today is the young people. I meet people in their teens and twenties who are so remarkable—they are so mature and poised and self-confident in a way that I never was at that age. I think it comes from having had some good parenting along the way, as well as innate good qualities.

Young people coming into the dharma world with that kind of background really have the opportunity to do a great deal of good service in this world. A lot of the younger generation are very committed to environmental concerns, very committed to positive change in the world, and with a kind of spiritual bent, doing it all. So I feel very happy about the state of the young generation right now.

One of the people who has made me appreciate this is Caroline, the daughter of Jack Kornfield, another Vipassana teacher in our circle who lives in California. She's just graduated from UC Berkeley, and she's applying now to law schools thinking that she wants to do human rights activism work.

Caroline was driving back from Berkeley into Marin with a friend of hers, a girlfriend who was about her age. They were driving down this six-lane road that leads by the ferry in Larkspur on their way out to Woodacre, where Spirit Rock is. They noticed that traffic was slowing down—there's usually not a jam there at that time of day.

They inched along, got up to the place where the traffic was stopped, and then they saw what the problem was. There was a mother duck who was trying to cross the three lanes of their road to get to the bay on the other side. Behind this mother duck were about eight little ducklings.

The mother had gotten across the lanes of traffic and hopped up on the median, but the little ducks were having a hard time, first getting across because the traffic kept holding them up, and second hopping up onto the median because it was tall for their little bodies.

When Caroline and her friend got there, she stopped the car in the middle of three lanes of traffic. Her friend got out and held the other lanes back so that the ducks could cross. The ones who couldn't get up on the median, Caroline and her friend went and

helped them up. They got all the ducks—the mother and the eight little ones—onto the median, and then the mother hopped down on the other side because the bay was in that direction. So they had to go over to the other side and stop those cars there.

So the mother and the ducklings could cross and then help the ducklings up on the curb on the other side. Meanwhile, the traffic is backing up because it's now come to a complete standstill. People in the back are honking—why are you stopped? Get going, get going. Obviously some aversion going on. But the people who drive up and see what they're doing got out of their cars and started applauding and cheering for them.

So they got all the ducks over to the other side, started off again, and everybody left happily. This is how with a boundless heart we cherish all living beings. That was a nice story.

As we start to open with the eyes of loving kindness to other beings, we become really aware that the same phrases work for everybody. When you hit upon a set of phrases about safety and happiness and health and ease, what beings don't want those qualities? We really see how much alike we are. We see how connected we are. In some ways, we all have the same heart. We have different permutations of patterns, different combinations of emotions, but basically we all have the same range of feelings and we all have the same deep wish, the same deep aspirations to be safe and happy and healthy and to live with ease.

The Brahma Viharas are a really direct way to connect ourselves with all of life. In this way, they provide a path that moves us out of a place of isolation or loneliness that a very individualistic culture tends to engender in us. This also forms the basis for our practice of sila, as Sally talked about—this practice of conduct that seeks not to harm others.

I sometimes wonder how far this practice of non-harming can be extended. I was very interested to read this interview that the Dalai Lama had with Oprah Winfrey. It was published in her magazine a couple of years ago. I really appreciate that Oprah has this rare talent of bringing teachings about well-being and health and spirituality to such a wide audience. It's hard to introduce wide audiences to this material, but she's somebody who has that talent and capability.

This is a report from somebody who was at the interview she held with the Dalai Lama. The first question that Oprah asked was, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

I think that that kind of blameless life really helps to support that kind of meditative depth. Just seeing the degree of refinement that is possible for us, I find really inspiring.

This quality of care for other beings that is really touched through the practice of the Brahma Viharas, particularly through metta and compassion, can come back into our practice as a motivation for why we're doing what we're doing. This is the quality that we've talked about a number of times called bodhicitta—this aspiration that may we develop our practice to the fullest extent possible, so that we can help others to come to the end of suffering as the way to benefit them. This quality is sometimes translated as the awakening mind.

The Dalai Lama said that he used to be very impressed by the concept of emptiness. I'll read you the quotation: "Twenty years ago, I used to contemplate emptiness. I was very impressed by the theory of emptiness, and it really inspired me to seek the cessation of suffering."

So notice the connection here between emptiness and the Third Noble Truth. They have a very close relationship. The Dalai Lama continues: "Now I realize it is the compassion and tolerance that come with the awakening mind. The union of compassion and emptiness is something quite unique, but you can bring about an inner experience of it if you make the effort."

Here he's pointing to the concept that the root of bodhicitta, sometimes called absolute bodhicitta, is the direct experience of this union of compassion and emptiness. Once we see it in ourselves, we can see that nature in everyone.

This is again from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "There is also an inner wound called Tathagatagarbha or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called Bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore."

So this is the kind of opening that comes from the neutral person and the way that the neutral person connects us to all sentient beings, to all of life.

Then the next person in the progression is the difficult person. The difficult person often brings for us strong reactions, often of fear or of anger. This is very common.

I was doing a six-week period of metta retreat here at IMS one year, and my difficult person happened to be on the retreat also. So I would be saying my phrases—may all beings be safe, may they be happy—feeling the stirrings of metta, and then my difficult person would walk by. And I'd start running over all the events of the past year that had caused the difficulties between us. And then I'd start spinning out: How could they have done that? Why didn't they do this? And my anger level would just start rising and rising.

And I couldn't gather it in. I was spinning out for half an hour. I had been fairly concentrated up to that point. Then eventually it would sort of wear itself out, and I'd come back, and I'd get back with the metta phrases. And then a few hours later, they'd walk by again, and the whole thing would happen again.

So I thought, I need to do something different here. And I'd heard about this concept of doing metta for the difficult person, but frankly, I thought it was a little hokey. I thought, I don't want to have to pretend I like this person. It seemed like it was going against the grain. But I was really running out of options. So in my desperation, I thought, I guess I'll try it.

So I tried it, and I found something really interesting. The quality that we often translate as anger—dosa from Pali or Sanskrit—is usually better translated by the words ill-will. And what this means, of course, is the opposite of goodwill. In metta, we're sending out goodwill, which is a wish: may you be happy. With ill-will, when we look at it, our wish is: may you be unhappy. That's what ill-will means.

So I looked at this quality of ill-will and I saw that within my anger was this wish that the other person suffer. Now, ill-will is the far enemy of loving-kindness. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty. The difference between ill-will and cruelty is: with ill-will, we would like the other person to suffer. And with cruelty, we enjoy it when the other person is suffering.

Now, I could sort of hang with the idea of being an angry person, but I could not hang with the idea of being a cruel person. When I thought of myself potentially being cruel and enjoying someone else's suffering, something brought me up, and I couldn't live with that. And I saw how close ill-will was to that. And that's really what gave me the inspiration to see if I could generate some goodwill for my difficult person.

And so I just made a really sincere effort, and I found I could bring a wish that that person be happy. And I found when I could wish my difficult person happiness, it ended the ill-will. Goodwill and ill-will can't coexist. And in ending the ill-will, the anger went away.

So it was interesting. I didn't have to like that person. I didn't have to want to spend time with them.

I didn't have to condone the things they'd done. All I had to do was shift my ill will to goodwill, and it took the anger out. So it was very interesting learning for me.

The second of the Brahmaviharas is compassion. We talked quite a lot about this through the guided meditations. Sharda did a whole talk on it, so I'm not going to go further into compassion tonight.

I'll skip to the third Brahmavihara of appreciative joy, or mudita. While metta has tremendous potential for happiness—for bringing happiness into our own hearts and then sharing it—mudita, I feel, has even more potential for happiness. It is a practice that is founded on the quality of happiness, so it's very upbeat.

The meaning is that we respond with joy to someone else's joy. As a simple example, I got a phone call a while ago from a friend I hadn't heard from for a while. I picked up the phone, said hello—I was happy to hear from this person—and I asked her, "How are you?" Very enthusiastically came this response: "I'm wonderful." Just hearing her say

that without any hesitation, so directly, touched something in me, and without even thinking, I said, "I am too." Her energy just brought out that same kind of energy from me.

That's the immediate response of mudita—this double hit of happiness. There's the other person's joy and then there's yours, like a double latte. It's just twice as good.

As Sally talked about in her discussion on transcendent dependent arising, this quality of joy is really an integral part of the path. Not only does the Buddha say this, but I found a very intriguing comment from a Theravadan monk who lives in Sri Lanka and is becoming a very skilled translator and commentator on the Buddha's teachings. His name is Venerable Analayo. He's written a very impressive commentary, a book-length work on the Satipatthana Sutta called *Satipatthana*—highly recommended.

In that book, Venerable Analayo says, "The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." This is really what Sharda was pointing to last night in the development of sukha—the ripening of sukha, whether it begins from dukkha or from sukha itself, always ripening in that direction of inner pleasure and happiness.

The term mudita is sometimes translated as "sympathetic joy." I want to point this out because there's a bit of a split in our tradition on the appropriate translation. Sympathetic joy means that in order for me to feel it, I have to resonate with you. In some texts, the message is that we can only feel this quality of mudita for other people—we can't feel it for ourselves because there has to be joy "out there" that I resonate with in sympathy. That lineage within our tradition tends to call it sympathetic joy, and it's said that you can't practice mudita for yourself, I think because they consider it too self-centered.

But the Buddha never said that we should exclude ourselves from the immeasurable quality of mudita. He never said it was for all beings but you. He said it was for all beings, just like the other Brahmaviharas. I interpret it in that way, and I feel it's very helpful to include oneself in the practice of mudita. So I like to translate it as "appreciative joy"—we appreciate the joy that we find in others, and we appreciate the joy that we find in ourselves.

As we practice the quality of mudita toward ourselves, the flavor that it evokes, for me, is that of gratitude. When we appreciate our own blessings, that flavor is gratitude.

I want to talk a little bit about this state of mind. It's really a beautiful state because when we appreciate what we have, it cuts through greed for more. We don't feel we need more because we appreciate where we are. It also cuts through aversion, because

we're looking at what's wholesome in our life—we're not so aware of what's lacking or what's difficult. So when gratitude is present, greed and aversion are both prevented from arising.

A number of scientific studies recently have focused on this quality. I think in Western terms, it's one of the Brahmavihara faculties that Westerners can relate to. While there could be great studies on metta, on compassion, on other forms of appreciative joy, gratitude is a little more embedded in our culture, so I think it's been a natural one to study.

These studies have shown that gratitude, when practiced regularly, leads to feelings of greater joy, optimism, happiness, and a sense of well-being that includes the body as well as the mind. People report fewer physical complaints when they've been practicing gratitude.

But even gratitude, though it's recognized in our culture once a year on Thanksgiving, doesn't come that easily.

It's not that deeply embedded for us as a practice, as a heart practice.

So if we want to understand our culture's attitude on this, we turn to the Simpsons. For those of you who have the good fortune to be from Europe or New Zealand or Australia, The Simpsons is this rather cynical cartoon show that has taken the country by storm, reflecting something of the malaise of modern life. There's an episode where Bart Simpson, the mischievous young kid, was asked to say grace at his dinner table one night, and this was his grace: "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing."

This reflects something of the attitude of gratitude in this culture.

Sometimes it's helpful to step outside our culture and see how gratitude is practiced in other places. Many people have talked about being touched by the gratitude they've witnessed in Asia. I experienced this when I went to Burma a couple of years ago. One of my students loves to practice generosity and is very keen on supporting serious practitioners. She gave me a few hundred dollars to take to offer to the monastery where I was going to be living for six weeks.

When I got to the monastery, I thought I would sponsor some lunches for all the people living there. The place had 750 people at that time—450 monks, about 150 nuns, and other lay people living and practicing. It was an intensive practice monastery.

When I arrived, I went to the steward, the layperson who controls the money for the monastery, and said, "Someone gave me a gift I'd like to make to the monastery. I'd like to sponsor some lunches, if possible." I told him I had a few hundred dollars.

He said, "Oh, I'm very sorry, but all the lunches are spoken for for the next three months."

Feeding 750 people was already spoken for for the next ninety days. Burma is one of the poorest countries in Asia—it used to be one of the wealthiest, but unfortunately today it's one of the poorest. And people there, almost entirely local people, had already sponsored lunches for the next ninety days.

Every day at lunch, there would be a white board with the name of the donor and a message. It was that kind of practice that inspired our dana here and the beautiful messages of support that we read every day. There, this process of giving is so integral a part of the culture. People bring a lot of joy to it, and it's just a natural ongoing part of their lives.

When we turn our minds to gratitude, all of us here have so many things to be grateful for. Largely, it's just a matter of remembering that this is the case.

A friend of ours had been a monk in Thailand for a number of years, and when he came out of the robes into lay life, he didn't feel in any hurry to leave the country. So he found a job in a refugee camp on the border with Cambodia, running part of a training program that would prepare Cambodian refugees for being relocated to the West. These were people who had been persecuted under the Khmer Rouge and found safe haven in Thailand.

Many of the people there were from the hill tribes of Cambodia and had lived very simple lives. They were being prepared to be moved to places like Fresno, California, where they had to learn to use things like toasters and washing machines, read bus timetables, and handle coins—none of which had been part of their lives.

As part of the training, my friend asked his class, "What are the most important things in a human life?" This is a great reflection. I love to ask myself that question from time to time.

One teenage girl from a hill tribe replied, "The most important things in a human life are fire, rice, and water."

When you think about this answer, those would be the most important things in our life too if we didn't have them and take them for granted. We're inside on this really cold and windy evening, and we're warm. We're dry. We've been well-fed. Those are some of the advantages we enjoy that not all beings in this world enjoy, not all human beings enjoy.

Even just thinking outside these four walls—what are the birds doing tonight? And the chipmunks? And the deer, who may be quite aware that it's hunting season? What are they doing tonight? We're really quite lucky in so many ways.

Moreover, we have another really great and unique advantage that Tibetans call a precious human birth. In addition to having the requisites of life—which in the Buddhist system are considered to be food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—we all have reasonable access to health care, and we all have an opportunity to make this life truly meaningful.

We have been born as human beings with our mind and body working reasonably well. We are alive at a time when a Buddha has appeared in our historical era. We're living in a place and time where the Dharma is flourishing to a certain extent, where there are practitioners following the teachings, where we ourselves have the time and interest to pursue the teachings, where we've heard and understood the Dharma, and we have the requisites of life to pursue them.

How many people on this earth have all those combinations of qualities in their life right now? Not so many.

The ability to have recognized an authentic path to liberation and to have the opportunity to walk it—this really is a tremendous blessing. One of the things I'm most grateful for when I reflect on gratitude is the existence of the path itself. I reflect back to my life before I knew there was such a thing as a path, and I think about the level of what I can only describe as darkness and confusion in my mind. Happiness seemed random. Suffering seemed random. I didn't know any way to stabilize my mind in peace or contentment.

How would we face death without this practice? How would we face aging? Just to know that you are not the body is amazing. How few people in the world have a sense of that? How scary it must be to meet death when we don't have a sense of anything else.

On one retreat, in order to practice gratitude, I made a list of all the things in my life I felt grateful for. At the start of every day, I would read that list. I found it just set my mind in a really positive direction. Whatever happened in the rest of the day, I had made that beginning with a truly optimistic attitude.

The last of the Brahmaviharas is this quality of equanimity, which Sarda also talked about. I don't want to say a lot about it—just want to make one little pointing.

I've often wondered how the Buddha stayed equanimous in the face of all the suffering that he saw. Conditions were very brutal in India in his day. There was a lot of war between neighboring kingdoms, and as you probably know, combat at that time was hand-to-hand, pretty direct and pretty bloody. There are accounts of monks walking across battlefields strewn with dead and bloodied bodies. The Buddha would have been exposed to all of that and seen all of that. How did he manage to stay equanimous in the middle of that kind of brutality?

Or how does the Dalai Lama stay balanced when he's responsible for Tibetan culture, when he may be all that stands between the present moment and the genocide—the termination of Tibetan culture?

I think it's because enlightened beings know a secret that we haven't fully integrated, if we've realized it at all. They know that within this mind and body process, there is no abiding center to whom all of this is happening. When we see clearly, there are only sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, thoughts, and emotions. There is nothing else. There's no core that's experiencing the impact of all this.

In the Visuddhimagga, there's a beautiful line that expresses this: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true."

Summed up another way: Jack Kornfield was visiting Sri Lanka when he was a monk. There was a very well-practiced patriarch in the country whom he went to visit. He asked the patriarch the reason for his happiness—this very jolly, smiling and laughing man. The patriarch replied, "No self, no problem."

It's the same pointing. This really is the union of wisdom and loving-kindness—the union of emptiness and caring. This is essentially what solves the problem of existence for us as we get grounded in that way of looking.

I'll close with the end of Oprah's interview with the Dalai Lama. Oprah said to him, "In my magazine, I do a column called 'What I Know For Sure.' What do you know for sure? The one thing about which you have no doubt?"

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate: "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For a happy life and a happy world, there is no doubt."

Let's just sit for a moment together.

This is the formulation of the Brahmaviharas in the Tibetan tradition—four wishes that are called the four immeasurables:

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.

May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Thank you.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 14

An Attitude of Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · 54 min

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses two key aspects of meditation practice: the technical mechanics of observation and the spirit or attitude we bring to our practice. Drawing on the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN 10), he emphasizes finding balance between wholehearted commitment and relaxed ease, avoiding both excessive striving and insufficient energy.*
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> *Armstrong introduces a practical teaching from Burmese teacher Ute Jāniya: regularly checking whether greed (wanting something different), aversion (resistance to what's present), or delusion (spacing out) are coloring our meditation attitude. He explains the framework of "relax, observe, allow" and discusses the Buddha's teaching on the totality of existence—the six sense doors and their objects from the Samyutta Nikāya.*
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> *The talk explores two levels of knowing: basic consciousness (viññāṇa) that automatically receives sense impressions, and mindfulness (sati) which brings intelligent awareness to experience. Armstrong emphasizes that right attitude—characterized by the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—creates what teacher Upasika Kee called "unentangled knowing," a foretaste of the unconditioned peace of nibbāna. This approach transforms meditation from mechanical attention into the opening of wisdom, where the path and goal converge in each mindful moment.*

The talk tonight is called An Attitude of Mindfulness.

I want to discuss two different topics this evening. One is some technical aspects of how we do the practice and why we do the practice. The first day of a retreat, especially for those who are arriving, it can be helpful to reflect on some of the basics. The second thing I want to talk about is the spirit with which we approach our practice here.

Suzuki Roshi, who was the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, said it very nicely when he said, "In our practice we need to be serious, but we can't be too serious or we'll lose our way." So finding that balance between diligence and commitment to moment-to-moment noticing, and on the other hand, a sense of relaxation or ease or playfulness as we go through the day.

As Carol alluded to last night, some people begin a retreat, especially a long retreat, with very strong determination: "Enlightenment or bust! I've got to get some result. If I don't get enlightenment, at least I should get some jhanas, so I have a card stamp to take home and show people."

When I went home from my first long retreat here, one of my friends back in California said to me, "Did you have any out-of-body experiences?" And I said, "No." She said, "Did you ever levitate?" I said, "No." So it didn't stamp my card for her, but it was not what I was looking for.

So finding this kind of balance of mind that's wholehearted, but that is not putting pressure on ourselves. When I was younger in my practice, I had a lot of zeal. I worked really hard. Every retreat that I came on—long retreat, short retreat—I worked very hard, which I'm very grateful for today. I don't regret that in the least. But at times, in order to find balance, you usually have to go to each end of an extreme. So I was often at the trying-too-hard end of an extreme, and it manifested in my attitude.

When Sally and I moved to California, which was about twenty years ago—we met in England—but shortly after moving to California, we went to see a psychic. Because that's what you do in California. It's like you get your driver's license and you go to see a psychic. And where would we go but San Francisco, of course.

So we went to see a psychic and we walked in together. When I walked through the door, the psychic who was seated in a chair made this gesture of being thrown backwards by my energy. He said something like, "Wow, you're in such a hurry to get there. Don't you know that God comes more often to those who don't want him so much?"

So this was the phase of my strong zeal, or as it's sometimes called in Dharma circles, dhamma chanda—a wish for the dhamma, a longing for the truth. If that gets stretched a little too taut, it can bring us a lot of tension.

But on the other hand, if we don't have any of that zeal, then we come to a retreat like this, and first days are often long and hard, and the body's adjusting, and we're adjusting to the environment, and getting to know our job, and the people, and the teachers, and when can we take a shower. Sometimes it all seems like too much, and maybe I'll just spend the first days in bed. I'll get caught up on my sleep, and then I'll start to practice. So that could be a little bit insufficient on the energy and the motivation.

But somewhere between the two is a very useful attitude that we want to discover. We want to find it out through our own trial and error where that middle point is for us in effort.

Again, as Carol mentioned last night, one teacher expressed this really nicely in the short phrase: relax, observe, allow. This can be an instruction that you turn to again and again in our weeks together. I don't think there's ever an occasion where it's not a useful reminder: relax, observe, allow. It really sums up a lot about our practice.

So the first piece—relax—is a very important starting point. Joseph emphasized it in the instructions again this morning. We all will keep saying it over and over, and it refers to that inner place of being soft in the body and somewhat soft in the mind. When we can relax in meditation, it sends a strong signal to the brain and to the whole nervous system. The signal it sends is something like: "Things are okay. Things don't have to be different than they are. Things are okay right now." And that means we don't have to change anything from how it is. We don't have to fix anything.

You could say that this is evoking a factor that's really highly valued in the Buddha's teachings, which is a sense of trust—also called confidence, sometimes called faith. It's the first of the five spiritual faculties, and it's considered to be the thing that allows the whole path to be set in motion because we have a certain degree of trust that we can settle into and the path can unfold for us. This quality of trust is a very helpful place to start from. So we'll often stress this in the instructions: to relax the body and relax the mind as a beginning approach.

Why can we trust? Why is that a sensible thing to do? We talk a lot about how uncertain life is, how impermanent all the arisen conditions are. What are the grounds for this kind of trust and relaxation? Basically, it's the refuges that we talked about last night.

And particularly we can trust because the mind has an essential purity. This is what we spoke of last night—that seed of awakening, the nature we share with the Bodhisattva as he began his journey to Buddhahood. When we can start to feel that potential in ourselves, then we know: oh, that's what I can trust in. That's why I can let go a little bit, because that nature holds me.

There's a phrase that Joseph has used for years that I find really helpful: "settling back into the moment." I think he used it in the first retreat I ever sat, back in 1976, and he still uses it today. It expresses that ability of the mind to settle in itself out of a sense of trust or confidence.

As you practice with this, you'll discover that things don't have to be perfect for us to relax. Things just have to be okay. Things just have to be good enough. And then there is the ground for that ease to come in. So don't think that everything has to be just right before you can let go. Things can be just okay.

Then, once you're in that somewhat relaxed place, the next step is to observe. This is really the active part of meditation. We could also call it paying attention, looking, watching, experiencing, being present. If we're interested, then the observing happens pretty naturally. So from that relaxed place, can we become interested in what's happening now? Then we activate that awake quality that is the very meaning of the word Buddha. We wake up and notice what's going on in the body, what's going on in the mind, what's going on around us.

This quality of interest starts to cut through the fog of dullness that we often bring into retreat, or the distracted mind that is so common both in retreat and out of retreat. There was a New Yorker cartoon not long ago that epitomized this daily life mind that most of us carry in the world. It was a cartoon in three panels. The first panel showed a guy at work, sitting at his computer, thinking about playing golf. Obviously, his mind was involved in the golf game where he'd rather be than being at work. In the next panel, he was on the golf course about to hit the ball, and he was thinking about his girlfriend—rather than being present to golf, he'd rather be with his girlfriend. In the third panel, he was making love to his girlfriend, and the image that came into his mind was of his computer at work, just to close the loop.

With that kind of mind, wherever we are, whatever activity we're engaged in, it isn't quite enough to hold us. This distracted mind is always looking for something else. Here, of course, we're really training to be present here and now without needing to find anything else. And that's a kind of radical step.

As we find ourselves more and more in the present, we discover the lightness and relief that comes from that ending of distractedness. In the time of the Buddha, there was a visitor to the community. The Buddha was living as he often did in a community of practitioners—monks and nuns. The visitor was struck by how well all the practitioners looked. He said, "Your community is so happy, they're actually radiant. They're smiling, they're healthy, they're glowing. Why is that?"

The Buddha replied that they are radiant because they've learned to abide in the present. Their minds aren't distracted by the pull of hopes for the future or regrets about the past. They're just fully here and now.

We'll talk in much more detail about how to carry out this observing. But once we relax and we're here, then we watch with interest what's happening—body, mind, environment.

The third piece is to allow. This means that whatever we're observing, whatever we find happening, we let it be just the way it is. We don't try to fix these experiences of mind and body, because we start to recognize that everything that comes arises because of certain causes and conditions. Nothing arises purely randomly. Nothing arises uncaused. Everything arises because some other condition has been present to bring it into being. In that way, the moment as we encounter it could only have arisen in this one way.

We often teach with a friend and colleague in California, Sylvia Boorstein, who really has a way with phrases. This particular phrase came from one of her students, who shared it with Sylvia, and Sylvia's been sharing it ever since—so I'll share it with you. It was a California transmission. When someone asked Sylvia's student how she was, the student found the best response was: "I couldn't be better."

Whatever her condition was, that response was true. I couldn't be better. If I could be better, I would.

This moment has arisen from past causes and conditions—it couldn't be any different. And yet, the habit of our untrained mind, our unawakened mind, is to want it to be better and to try to make it better.

One of the things we observe again and again when we slow down and come into meditation is how many moments we spend trying to make the conditions better—trying to fix some ache in the body, some restlessness in the mind, some emotion arising from the heart. We don't want it that way; we want it this way. And we put our energy into trying to make it the way we'd like it to be.

In meditation, we start to see this is not just an infrequent occurrence, not just an occasional visitor, but a deeply conditioned habit of mind in each of us. This wanting to fix, wanting to improve, wanting to make things just right.

Through meditation we gain a very tiny amount of skill in being able to alter the way things are and make it a little better. Through our facility with awakening wholesome states of mind, the proper application of right effort, we find a way to alter that a little bit. But until we look at this innate habit, we remain caught in a significant pattern.

It doesn't seem like so much when you first become aware of it—oh, just a little tweak here, a little tweak there. I just want to improve it a little bit and then I'll be okay and then I'll rest in peace. But this little habit has quite significant implications.

You're probably all familiar with the term samsara. It refers to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that the Buddha described many times in his discourses, which he said has been going on for us since beginningless time, meaning that the number of existences each of us has had is uncountable, innumerable, too many to tally.

In the Tibetan tradition, they say that the source of our continued round of birth, death, and rebirth is the tendency to correct. The tendency to correct is the very heart of samsara.

So what's the heart of liberation? What's the heart for ending this wheel of continued arising and passing? It is not correcting—it is accepting, allowing with equanimity things to be just exactly the way they are, moment after moment after moment.

This inclination, this direction to allow, has deep consequences and deep meaning. It's where we discover the quality of peace. Eventually, we discover the quality of an unshakable peace through that allowing.

So this process of examining the attitude we bring to our practice and finding one that's not too striving and not too loose is very, very important and quite central. Maybe more important than what we choose to pay attention to is the question: How am I paying that attention? What's the attitude I'm bringing to this moment as I meditate in sitting and walking and throughout the day?

One of the teachers all of us have spent time with and really appreciated is a young Burmese Sayadaw named U Tejaniya, who has a center on the outskirts of Rangoon and came to the Forest Refuge about a year ago. One of the teachings I've most appreciated that's central to his message is a specific teaching on right attitude and how to discover what that is. I like it because he expresses it very simply. Many of you have probably heard this by now.

He said to check in any moment and to check frequently through your meditation: What is the attitude right now that I'm approaching the meditation with? Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion in the way I'm approaching the moment? Or is there non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion?

This sounds a little heady, but fortunately, Sayadaw gave some very simple ways to investigate these three tendencies.

In answering the question "Is there greed?" he says, take a look and see: Do you want something to be happening in your meditation that isn't happening? Are you looking to make something happen? Do you want more peace? Do you want more metta? Do you want more samadhi, more concentration? Do you want an insight right now? Are you

looking for something to happen, in which case there's some wanting at work? It's unnecessary because we don't need to disturb the conditions the way they are, and because it's unnecessary, we call it greed. It goes further than it needs to. So is there wanting at work? Take a look.

Is there aversion at work? You can check that by asking: Is there something that's happening that I don't want to happen? The flip side of wanting is not liking. So is there something in my experience that I wish would go away, that I wish would stop? A physical sensation, a mind state, a noise, the presence of some person or a smell, some food.

Is there something that I want to stop happening? That's the reaction of aversion.

Or is delusion present? Delusion is the most subtle of the three, and it has many layers. So Sayadaw recommends just taking a look at the top layer of delusion. Am I aware of what's happening? Am I in touch with what's happening? If I'm not, then delusion is present. I'm spacing out into something else.

So this is a very helpful thing to bring in. You could bring it in a number of times in a sitting, a number of times in walking, at different times throughout your day as you're moving around. How am I relating to my experience of this moment? We can check this frequently, whatever our meditation focus happens to be—whether we're with breath or sounds or body or emotions or our food or our work meditation. We can be asking this question: What's my attitude right now? Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion?

Simply by asking the question, take a look and see what happens in your experience. I don't want to spell it out because I'd like you to do it. But I find that for me, there's a shift that comes inwardly just from asking the question. So try it. Try it a few times. And as you ask it, see also if there's an inner shift that happens just in the asking of the question.

Just to give some simple examples of missing the right attitude: the other day in my meditation, I noticed I was feeling some tension in the body. I wanted to have the experience that I'd had a few days earlier, which was of no tension in the body and a sense of relaxation and ease throughout the body. When that experience was there, it was kind of like my body sensations lined up in a certain way. There was this nice kind of pillar of free-flowing energy that ran up my spine and kept me erect, and everything felt very comfortable. I felt alert. I wanted that experience again. And in some subtle way, I was trying to make it happen. I was trying to bring it back.

When I realized that that's what I was doing, then I could say, "Oh, wrong attitude. That's desire. That's greed." But I was still wanting it back. So just noticing it doesn't always make it lift. Be aware of that. We may notice greed or aversion. It doesn't mean that they go away.

So I was noticing it: "Okay, there's wanting. There's wanting." And then the realization came. It was an insight I've had many times before, but I had it again: I can't control the body. I can't control my body sensations. I can't control my experience of the body. And then when I saw that, the real letting go happened. And as soon as I let go of the trying, the body relaxed into a comfortable pattern of sensations. So I can't control, but sometimes insight can help us relax and that opening takes place.

On a day like today, there can be a lot of opportunity for aversion. If you're a continuing yogi, there are a lot of new people to get used to, new teachers to get used to, maybe a new rhythm, new people around you in the hall, new neighbors in your residences. There can be a lot of speediness at this time in the retreat compared to the people who left a few days ago. The place is a little fuller now, so the dining room's a little more crowded at lunch.

For new people who've just arrived, settling in—as I mentioned earlier—brings a lot of bodily adjustment, a lot of mental adjustment. So aversion can easily come up today. Many opportunities for noticing resistance on a day like today. Of course these things will pass, and we can just kind of be stoic and gut them out.

But if we do, we're missing the opportunity to be mindful of our attitude. So when resistance is present, please notice it. And then see how the noticing affects your meditation. See what happens.

We're not asking this question so that we can become judgmental about ourselves. If we notice that greed or aversion or delusion is present, we want to notice that without adding any more greed or aversion or delusion. So we just notice, oh, that's wanting. No judgment, no further ripples of it. Wanting's present. We simply commit ourselves to noticing.

This is the pure property of mindfulness at work—just noticing. And then, at times when we find greed and aversion and delusion aren't present, we meditate, and with another one of Sylvia's lovely little phrases, our meditation becomes without agenda and without struggle. See if you can remind yourself from time to time throughout the day what it's like to be present without any agenda and without any struggle. That's the same pointing to right attitudes.

Now I want to talk a little bit more about the mechanics of observing. This is introducing some vocabulary that we'll be using throughout the retreat, so it's good if we can all get agreed on the terms we're using. To introduce it, I'd like to open up a kind of big picture view and ask each of us to take a look at our basic situation as human beings.

Regardless of being on retreat or in daily life, regardless of being in a female form or a male form, regardless of being young or old or white or black or any particular culture or race, what is our basic situation as humans? Maybe to frame it, I'll read something from Rumi, the Persian poet, when he said, "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea."

That says something about our basic situation, doesn't it? How did we end up in this body, on this planet, alive on this earth? I have no idea. And yet, here we are.

So what does it mean to be a sentient being? We talk a lot in Buddhism about sentient beings and the possibility for all sentient beings to be free. What does it mean to be a sentient being? It really means that we're conscious beings, doesn't it? I want to talk a little bit about this factor of being conscious and what that involves.

What does it mean to be conscious, sentient? Maybe to approach it, we might ask by contrast, what is it when you're unconscious? Say you're in deep sleep, no dreaming, or you've fainted and there's nothing going on. By distinction, being conscious means things are going on, right? Isn't that the essence of being a conscious being? Things are happening for us.

This quality of happeningness is central to the Buddhist worldview. In fact, you might say it's the domain of Buddhism. Like moving objects are kind of the domain of physics, and interactions between atoms and molecules are the domain of chemistry, and the behavior of the mind is the domain of psychology. In Buddhism, the domain is the happenings in conscious experience.

So what's happening in conscious experience? What are the things that happen in your experience as an awake or conscious human being? This is from a discourse of the Buddha from the Samyutta Nikaya called the Discourse on Totality:

"Bhikkhus, listen, and I will teach you the totality of existence."

This is kind of bold, isn't it? How many people do you know who would start a discourse like that? I don't think Einstein ever said that. I don't think Freud ever said that. I don't think Marx ever said that. So here's the Buddha: "I will teach you the totality of existence. Listen, attend carefully, and I will speak. What is the totality of existence? It

is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and objects of touch, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called the totality of existence."

And here he means sentient existence. Simple, isn't it?

These are just these six kinds of things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental phenomena, and the organs through which they come. This is the domain of Buddhist investigation. These are the things that we look at again and again and again. Is there anything omitted here? Anything left out? Maybe something will come to you later, so you can drop me a note. But let's just take this as the basic situation for us as sentient beings. This is what we want to examine in our meditation.

We want to understand how these things come, how they pass away, and what our relationship to them is. Because being sentient means we're in relationship to all these things moment after moment.

So there's one other aspect that we want to tease out. You have sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental phenomena. Because you're conscious, you're experiencing all these things. They are registering as events, we could say, in your mind, in your consciousness. So each time there's the receiving or the registering of one of these events, that which receives it in Buddhism is called consciousness.

The Buddha's term in Pali is vijnana, and in English we translate it as consciousness. Whereas in the West we tend to use consciousness in a kind of broad, almost cosmological sense, most of the time in the Buddha's teachings, vijnana is used to mean just this receiving of a sense impression—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mental phenomenon.

This is the first word that I wanted to talk about so that we're on the same page with it. And we often, instead of consciousness, we'll say "knowing." So right now, if your ears are working, you're conscious of that sound, or we could say in shorthand, you're knowing that sound.

There's just the bare sense data of sound that's happening, and it registers automatically in each of us. It's different from a corpse's experience, isn't it? If the bell was rung and there was a corpse, chances are that sound would not be arising, probably because the ear had ceased to function, the mind had ceased to function. So the sound is a physical thing, but the knowing of it is a mental event called a moment of sound consciousness, a moment of hearing consciousness. Or we would often just say what's happening in us all at that moment is a knowing of that sound.

To fill out the picture that the Buddha just described, we need to explain that word "mind"—the mind organ that he mentioned. He said the mind and mental phenomena. Mind in this passage refers to this capacity for consciousness or knowing. So you could say it's the organ that knows, arising at all the six sense doors.

That's our life. We are experiencing the six sense objects and knowing them moment after moment. And they're always changing, so a new consciousness is arising, knowing each new moment of things that are happening.

This kind of knowing we're describing is not an intellectual knowing. It's not a conceptual knowing. It's pre-verbal. Any sentient being here would know this sound, but a dog or a baby would know this sound, even though they might not have the word "bell" or the word "sound." Still, that would register in their consciousness. So this is not a particularly intelligent kind of knowing. It's just a bare sense knowing.

It's happening all the time, as long as we're awake. There's always some object at the six sense doors, at some of the six sense doors, happening for us. And we can't turn it off. When the bell sounds, can you choose not to hear it? Maybe if you plug your ears, but otherwise, we don't have any choice. It happens automatically.

So this consciousness faculty is almost mechanical. I mean, we need to be living sentient beings. But once we are, it happens beyond our will. We can't turn it off. If the sound is there, we will know it. Albert Einstein had this kind of sense consciousness. A dog has this kind of sense consciousness. A baby has it. An ant has it. So all sentient beings are characterized by this. Buddhas have it. Bodhisattvas have it.

We all have it. This is one level of knowing that we'll talk often about.

There's another level of knowing that Joseph alluded to today in the guided meditation, which is better described by the term mindfulness. So mindfulness in Pali—you probably know the word is sati. Sati originally was another of those words the Buddha took from common Indian usage and gave a deep spiritual significance. In common Indian usage, the word simply meant remembering, but it's used as mindfulness for our knowing what our experience is.

This early sense of remembering is quite a nice thing to reflect on because it has the sense of "remember you're here," or recollecting—recollecting that you're awake, recollecting your attention in the present moment. If you've ever read the book Island by Aldous Huxley, it was his last novel, presenting a very optimistic counterpart to Brave New World. By that time he had gotten into LSD. Island was a kind of utopian paradise set on a tropical island somewhere in the Pacific.

One of the features of this very enlightened society was that the people had trained the mina birds to speak. What they were trained to do was say very loudly, "Here and now, here and now," so that wherever you were on the island, you'd keep getting this reminder to remember here and now. That's the sense of remembering—remembering what it is that you're about, remembering what it is that's happening.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha uses again and again this encouragement—as Joseph mentioned this morning—when one breathes in long, one knows that one breathes in long. When one breathes in short, one knows that one breathes in short. This kind of knowing has a quality of intelligence, of an awake, paying attention, comprehending quality that hearing the sound does not.

So vijnana, or consciousness, is basically unintelligent in its barest form. Sati, or mindfulness, has intelligence—requires intelligence to function. This is pointed to in the sutta by the choice of the word that the Buddha uses, which was translated this morning as "knowing." The word in Pali is pajanati. It can also be translated as understand, discern, distinguish. The later commentaries used it as a synonym for panya, which is the common word for wisdom in Pali.

That points to the fact that this quality of mindfulness is an intelligent response to the events that are revealed by consciousness. You could say that consciousness reveals the phenomenon, mindfulness understands it or knows it for what it is. It knows that it's a present moment arising, may know which of the sense doors it's arising in. As you connect with your breath, you know it's long or short. As you connect with the sound, you may know that it's pleasant or unpleasant, that the pitch is high or low. This active quality of intelligence is brought to bear on the bare phenomena that are revealed by vijnana or consciousness.

So you might say there are these two levels of knowing. One is quite automatic and unintelligent—we could just call that simply knowing. The other is of a higher level, has intelligence—we might call it understanding. We'll also call it knowing, so I will leave it to you by context to understand which level we're talking about. But I just wanted to make it clear there are these two different levels of knowing that we may discuss.

Because mindfulness introduces this element of intelligence, it becomes the opening to wisdom. As you probably know, in the Eightfold Path, wisdom is the first part of the path—right view, right intention—that comprises the wisdom component, and it's considered that it's only wisdom that can liberate us. So the open door of wisdom is activated through this quality of mindful intelligence.

This is drawn out by some of the Thai, particularly the Thai forest teachers, who have this habit—this lovely habit—of combining the terms for mindfulness and wisdom and using them as one word. So Ajahn Buddhadasa, a great master in the Thai tradition, would often talk about satipanya, mindfulness-wisdom as a pair, with a clear implication that where mindfulness goes, wisdom will follow.

So in our practice of paying attention moment by moment, we're not just being mechanical. We're not just being vanguards of samadhi by bringing mindfulness to collect the mind, but we're also opening the wisdom door to insight.

What happens in a very practical way, as we start to bring the mindful attention into the details of our experience, is that we encounter a breath, we know that it's breathing in, we notice that it's long, and we start to notice that it has a beginning and it also has an end. We start to tune into sounds, and any sound that arises we can trace the beginning—it extends for a while and then it fades, and we notice that it has an end.

As we start to get close to the individual characteristics of these detailed phenomena of our experience, revealed by consciousness, we also start to understand their universal characteristics. We start to see the impermanence of every arisen phenomenon. We start to see that if we try to hold on, it's futile. If we try to change the way things are, we suffer. So we see the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned arisings.

And because everything arises and passes at these six senses, then we know that nothing is stable or ongoing in the field of the senses. So we realize there can't be an ongoing I, an ongoing core to this phenomenon. The close attention of mindfulness leads us directly into insight.

You probably know that the kind of meditation we're practicing is called Vipassana in Pali. It means seeing clearly, often translated as insight meditation. And this is how the insight connection gets established. All we can do to encourage insight is to pay close attention, interested attention, with this right attitude. As we see more and more the details of our experience at the six sense doors, the truth of their universal nature—what are called the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—come through clearer and clearer.

I was talking with a staff member at Spirit Rock recently, someone who had a very strong longing to be on a long retreat, someone with a lot of Dhammachanda, a lot of zeal right now. He asked me, "I haven't been able to do a long retreat yet. Tell me one of the benefits that I might expect from doing a long retreat." I could have talked about things like the fantastic altered states that arise from time to time, or the strange concentration phenomena that come for some people, or how beautiful nature looks when

you go out to watch the sunset. But what I told him, what came to me, is that the three characteristics become really unmistakable after a while—really unmistakable. I heard it from a number of you in interviews this morning: this absence of ongoing self becomes so apparent at times, and the impermanence becomes just a simple fact of life that we almost don't even comment on because it's so taken for granted.

So this is the awakening of intelligence, the awakening of insight, the awakening of wisdom through this close attention.

As we give meditation instructions, we can point to phenomena at all the six sense doors. There are so many different meditation techniques—they're mostly about what you pay attention to that's arising in your field of experience. We started today with the breath because the Buddha started there. It's a wonderful beginning and can be the whole of your practice career. But we'll introduce many other objects because different ones work well for different people. So we'll give you a lot of choices.

As we introduce the different objects, please remember that the most important thing is not your object, but the quality of mindfulness and attitude that you're bringing to it. There's nothing sacred about the breath, even though we started there. Any object of the six senses can work just fine. So we'll give you a lot of choices. Find the ones that work best for you.

One of the other factors that is so helpful in letting wisdom grow out of mindfulness is the quality of interest. And of course, this also supports the right attitude. We have this great capacity for self-understanding, and it's strongly buttressed, strongly supported by the element of interest. If you can develop an interest in what you're looking at—whether it's the breath or a sound or your body sensations, the thoughts and emotions, even this play of consciousness—sometimes that becomes the most fascinating aspect of sentient life. Anything that you experience, you can pay attention to. And so anything that you become interested in of these six kinds of objects can become the basis for your mindfulness.

The quality of interest brings a wholeheartedness and a natural ability to stay in the moment. What's it like when you see a chipmunk on one of the stone walls? What's it like when one of the chickadees lands in the palm of your hand when you're out there with sunflower seeds? Isn't there a natural, wholehearted interest in that moment?

Sally and I were driving back to our apartment after lunch. We were on the backside of the loop, and she spotted a coyote standing in a field in the noonday sun—a green field and this big, bushy-haired, dog-like thing. So we just stopped the car and we were just riveted on the appearance of this coyote because I've often heard them at night but

I haven't seen them. And here in broad daylight was this creature in the middle of one of the fields. So we just stood and watched it. But then it sort of tuned in that we were there. I think the sound of the car engine running—it noticed. So it loped off. And again, watching a coyote lope is fascinating. It's almost like a deer because it had a bounce in its step that most dogs don't have. So it was just a short experience, but we were so present because we loved seeing that creature.

Imagine if you loved seeing your breath in that same way, if you loved seeing your body sensations, if you loved meeting a thought or a mind state in that same way. Then that natural interest and curiosity will hold your attention without any effort. And the function of mindfulness can just happen very naturally.

So this practice of checking attitude can be very helpful. Is there wanting? Is there aversion? Is there delusion? But what happens when we ask those questions and we look and we check and there's not? Am I wanting something different? No. Am I resisting something that's happening? No. Am I in touch with what's happening?

Yeah.

So in that moment, as far as we can see, there's not greed, there's not aversion, and there's not delusion. What does that feel like? I don't want to describe it because honestly, every time it arises, it can be different depending on what other factors of mind are present also. But let's say that's a wholesome state—the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion.

When you start to feel what that state is like and the potential of it, you're starting to find the sweet spot in meditation. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that this is when meditation proceeds well—when we find no greed, no aversion, no delusion.

There's a very wonderful Thai laywoman teacher who taught in the second half of the last century named Upasika Kee, a very enlightened laywoman, I think, from her writing. She pointed her students again and again to this place of the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion and the presence of awake attention. What she called this was unentangled knowing.

And that's kind of the feeling of it. We're present, all the phenomena of the six senses are happening, but we're not entangled with any of them either in a reactive formation of holding on or reactive formation of pushing away. So there's this sense of freedom and awakeness at those times.

Sariputta was once asked—one of the chief disciples of the Buddha was once asked—what is nibbana? What is the unconditioned element? And he said, "It is the destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbana."

Do you notice a similarity? Non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—very close to the unconditioned nibbana, the description of the final freedom, the unconditioned peace.

So you could say that as you start to find this sweet spot in meditation, this quality of unentangled knowing, you are approaching the quality of the unconditioned. It's not full, not necessarily complete in that moment, but you're getting a taste of it, a foretaste of it, which is the culmination of this path.

So this right attitude that we're looking for is, let's say, as close an approximation as we can find today to this quality of nibbana, this unconditioned element that is the release pointed to by the Third Noble Truth.

When we start to understand this, we start to feel that the path—which is this unentangled knowing—and the goal—which is this absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—start to come together. And we can have a sense that we're touching the goal even as we're activating the path. So in a way, we arrive at our destination moment after moment. And each of those moments of arrival furthers the path, draws us even closer to the fullness, to the completeness of nibbana, the unconditioned element.

I'll just close with this quotation from the Satipatthana Sutta, where the Buddha concludes by saying that this—that is, the foundations of mindfulness—"this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way"—that is, the establishment of mindfulness.

At the end of a Dharma talk here, we'd like to just sit for a minute or so in silence together, just to let the words settle before we move. So we'll just have a moment of silence together.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 15

Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses the inevitable arising of difficult emotions in meditation practice and daily life. Drawing from the Satipatthana Sutta (MN 10), he explores the third foundation of mindfulness - contemplating citta (mind-heart) - and how to work with afflictive mental states rather than trying to eliminate them. Armstrong identifies four primary difficult emotions that arise from our relationship to time and pleasant/unpleasant experiences: sadness (pleasant past), desire (pleasant future), anger (unpleasant past), and fear (unpleasant future). He emphasizes that these emotions are sustained by our thoughts and storylines, and can only be transformed through direct investigation with mindfulness. The talk offers practical guidance on observing emotions in three areas: bodily sensations, mental qualities, and thought patterns. Armstrong stresses that wisdom develops not by avoiding difficult states, but by learning to meet them with courage and understanding, allowing them to become 'the very food that wisdom grows on.'*

The Buddha's entire forty-five years of teaching, as you probably know, was all about the theme of suffering and the ending of suffering—always these complementary pairs. Sometimes Buddhism has gotten a reputation for being a gloomy religion because of its emphasis on the dukkha aspect. But when you listen to the discourses of the Buddha, he almost always pairs dukkha with the end of dukkha, and points as often to the liberated qualities of mind as to the struggling qualities of mind. So in our practice also, we want to keep both these halves in mind.

However, the fact is that near the start of a long retreat—this six-week period for those who have arrived—the predominant experience tends to be on the dukkha side. And it may not stay that way for those of you who have been here for seven weeks now. You may be moving into the positive and blissful and liberated experiences from time to time. But dukkha has probably still not gone completely out of your vision. As we go on in the second half, we'll talk more and more about the beautiful qualities of mind through qualities like the spiritual faculties, the factors of enlightenment, the brahmaviharas, and so on. But tonight, I'm going to focus on the dukkha aspect of things.

When I contemplate life in the world and think about the magnitude of suffering and distress that's happening, it seems very complex. We can look on a global level at the international conflicts and wars that are going on. We can look at a national level and the

number of people living in poverty and unemployment. We look on the community level and know friends who've lost their homes or lost their jobs. We look on the family level and see conflict and stress.

And yet when we come into retreat, it all begins to seem very simple. Our own personal suffering becomes pretty straightforward. I've been struck by this a number of times. It seems to me that once I start to look at my own situation—and Buddhism always encourages us to do that, you might say to take responsibility for the state of our own minds and the possibility of freedom of our own minds—when I look from that point of view, when I ask what can I do to solve the problem of my own suffering, it starts to seem simple.

Because it seems to me that in retreat there are basically three things I suffer from. And this may be true for you as well. You can check and see.

One is body pain. It's a frequent visitor because we're sitting long periods, long hours without moving, and often that accumulates some degree of holding and tension that becomes uncomfortable. You sit long enough and any sitting will become uncomfortable. So that's the first thing that I always find myself dealing with.

The second thing is mental pain. Whenever I sit, I go through a whole range of emotions, some of them pleasant and some of them not so pleasant. So I encounter in my practice, as in my daily life, the forces of wanting and loneliness and fear and sadness and regret and anxiety, self-judging, judging of others, anger, irritation, and so forth—part of our whole human experience, in addition to the beautiful states. But these difficult states still come.

And then the third form of suffering I experience on retreat is unique to meditators, I think. So isn't it nice to know we have our own special brand of suffering? And it's the suffering that comes from wanting the meditation to go well. You know, when you were an untaught worldling, as the Buddha said, did you worry if your mind wandered? Did you worry if you couldn't keep it on a chosen object for ten minutes at a time or one minute at a time? No, that wasn't a problem. But here, quite often during the days on retreat, I find myself thinking, "Why can't the mind stay a little more settled? I want more stability. I want more experience of concentration." So I suffer from wandering mind, restlessness, lack of stability, lack of concentration—a unique occupational hazard for us.

But these are the only three things that I notice. That's it. And when I'm in the retreat mode and I start to sort it out that way, then I realize, oh, to make my peace with life, I have to make my peace with these three areas. And that's really it. That solves my problem of suffering while I'm in retreat.

If we can solve our problem of suffering while we're in retreat, we'll find that when we go back into the world, we know much better how to solve the problems of suffering that we find ourselves in, whether the suffering is from us or from others. Because when we understand the roots, we're able to liberate them more easily in our own mind, and we're able to deal more skillfully with the suffering of others.

So tonight I want to focus specifically on this second type of retreat suffering, which is the suffering of difficult mental states. I want to talk about how to work with the difficult emotions that arise for us, which arise in retreat as well as in our daily life. When you look across the world as a whole, you can see how much havoc these states play in the world. You can look across the West today and see virtually an epidemic of depression, it seems to me.

We can see this epidemic reflected in the growing numbers of people reporting these conditions to their doctors and receiving treatment. It reveals something profound about our culture and our modern world.

We suffer from anxiety and stress brought on by the relentless pace of life, feeling its daily impact in our bodies, hearts, and minds. We experience loneliness and isolation as we become disconnected from genuine community, watching the breakdown of relationships that once sustained us. Being part of this culture, we ourselves are subject to all of these afflictions.

When we don't understand these states, when we don't know how to release them, we often feel victimized. We become hostages of our own minds, which inflict pain upon us. But precisely because these conditions are such a source of suffering—both individually and globally—they also point us toward some of the greatest openings in dharma practice.

I personally believe that vipassana practice, with its direct application of mindfulness to our experience, holds immense potential for healing in the world. When we begin to shine the light of mindfulness on these difficult emotions, they start to open up, revealing possibilities for liberation. Perhaps not final liberation or complete freedom, but pathways that can bring significantly more freedom into our lives, both in retreat and at home.

One of the most immediate benefits of vipassana practice is developing greater facility in working with difficult emotions. This encourages us—indeed, invites us—to open up and explore the full range of what occurs in our minds.

So often in life, we can see how people close down, how we've all restricted our emotional range because some territories have become frightening. We haven't been able to handle the intensity of certain emotions that arose for us, often during adolescence when we opened to experiences we couldn't fully integrate at that stage of life. By failing to integrate them, we moved into adulthood with limitations—areas of closure, holding, and unresolved issues.

Through meditation, we can begin to explore this complete range and bring greater understanding to it all.

Pema Chödrön, the wonderful nun who is abbess of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, expresses this beautifully: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every dark and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, grisly, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just learn about the whole thing."

There is tremendous encouragement to do this, and meditation provides us the method. This is the key. The tool of mindfulness gives us the means to examine every area of our mind, every corner, whether beautiful or frightening and dark. If we leave those areas unexplored out of hesitation, reservation, or fear of what we might discover there, we will always live in tension with ourselves—somewhat divided. But meditation offers us the possibility to enter the whole of the psyche, make peace with what we find there, and in doing so, integrate our being to a degree we haven't been able to achieve before. This is an essential part of our journey.

I find it refreshing to watch children deal with their emotions because they're not afraid of them. Children will dive right into the normal emotions of daily life. They'll be playing happily together, full of laughter, joy, and giggling. When something comes up—some anger or conflict—they'll go right into that too, yelling at each other, ready to bump heads. Then five minutes later, having worked it out, they'll be playing happily again, peaceful and calm. They don't hold back, and the emotions don't get stuck.

This happens as long as children are raised with a basic degree of respect. When children are severely neglected, mistreated, or abused, emotions can become overwhelming—too much for them to understand or handle, and then closure happens. But

when they're brought up with consistent respect and trauma doesn't enter the picture, there's a natural openness and lack of fear that is quite inspiring. We can learn this approach as well.

Watching children shows us that to have that sense of openness and freedom, we don't need to eliminate these difficult states. That doesn't become the immediate aim of our practice. In the long term, it is said that this does happen for practitioners at advanced stages of development—sense desire and aversion are eliminated from the mind at a certain stage of awakening, and all other mental impurities are eliminated at full awakening, the final stage.

But at our current stage—since we're probably not going to reach the third stage of awakening on this retreat—we can discover tremendous freedom by opening to what we actually have.

When I first came to meditation, I really hoped it would allow me to get rid of these states. I thought enlightenment would accomplish that, and I couldn't wait to become enlightened so I could be free of this kind of pain. Now I see it the other way around. I don't believe enlightenment is possible until we make peace with these states, until we achieve some degree of wisdom in relationship to them.

Again from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like what is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run 100 miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

This is the invitation: whatever form of emotional difficulty is yours—and it varies greatly from person to person. For some, the dominant difficulty is craving; for others, it's anger; for others, fear; still others struggle with confusion or self-judgment. Whatever is most present for you becomes the place to inquire into, explore, and learn about. There is no other way than diving in and discovering its nature. This is meditation's invitation.

Just to set this within the classical foundation, what we're talking about is included in the third foundation of mindfulness, as described in the Satipatthana Sutta. This is the foundation that focuses on what's called citta. The first foundation is body, which includes breath. The second foundation is feeling tone, which I think was introduced in the instructions this morning by Carol. The third foundation is called citta—it can be

translated either as mind or heart. The fourth foundation is called dhammas, and I think of this as the principles of nature, learning about the principles that govern us. So the talk tonight is focusing on the third foundation.

This foundation is described by the term citta, which is often translated as mind, but could just as well be translated as heart. If you ask a Western person, "Where is your mind?" we're likely to point here, to our heads. If you ask someone in Thailand, "Where is your citta?" they will point here, to the center of the chest. Because it's considered in Buddhist teachings that the base of mind is in the center of the chest. It includes emotional as well as cognitive activity.

In the teachings of the Buddha, there is not this kind of clear distinction in using the word mind that we often might make in the West when we talk about the mind in relation to—or as opposed to, or compared to—the heart. So this word citta encompasses both. It encompasses our thinking faculties and our emotional faculties as well.

This was brought home in India through a meeting with the Dalai Lama. You probably know that over the last fifteen years or so, a group of scientists have been meeting annually with His Holiness the Dalai Lama to explore the overlap between Buddhism and Western science, sharing perspectives between these two worlds. The Dalai Lama is very interested in this dialogue.

What's emerged from these meetings is a series of research studies that are starting to validate in Western empirical terms the benefits that come from Buddhist meditation—both physical benefits, mental benefits, emotional benefits, and so forth. So these studies may become the way that the rest of the West starts to believe what we've been trying to tell them for a long time. But you see, they're not so interested in listening to meditators, because if we believe in a religion, we're already biased. We're not trustworthy, you see. So the scientists who are impartial and objective, reporting on it, will convince a lot of people that we could never reach. So I'm very appreciative of their efforts.

One of the foremost researchers is at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. His name's Richie Davidson. He's a longtime vipassana practitioner, but don't tell anybody. He has been working with the Dalai Lama for a number of years now through this organization called Mind and Life. At one point, the Dalai Lama asked him to bring over some of his equipment to India, because His Holiness wanted to show the rest of his monks what this research was about.

Well, a lot of Richie's experiments were done in MRI machines, and that's a little too much equipment to transport to Dharamsala. So what he did was take over electrode caps that they have created out of strips of leather lined with electrodes. The electrodes come in contact with the scalp, and there are quite a number of them—maybe fifty electrodes running down, implanted in these leather strips in the cap that the subject puts on. They're connected by wires to a computer that reads the output from each electrode. So they can measure where brain activity is happening in a reasonably precise way. It's not as good as an MRI, but it's reasonably precise when subjects are looking at different pictures or engaging in different meditative exercises, such as generating compassion.

So Richie carried over a few of these electrode leather caps and put one on to demonstrate to the monks how the experiment was being carried out. He explained the purpose of the research: to measure brain activity so that scientists could understand what was happening in the mind of meditators and then share that with the world. His Holiness was up on the platform with Richie, and there were about five hundred monks in this large auditorium.

Richie said that when he finished the presentation, all the monks just broke up laughing. Just five hundred of them cracked up at the same time. He assumed that it was because he looked so silly with the electrode cap on. But that wasn't the reason.

One of the monks, in explaining it, spoke up and said, "This is so funny. You're trying to investigate the mind by measuring the brain when everybody knows that the mind is here." And he pointed to the center of his chest.

Richie told us this story on a retreat some months ago, and we had a discussion with him: How can we measure what's happening here in the heart center? Because there's not quite the same kind of electrical activity as is going on in the brain. So that will be the frontier of neuroscience—to measure what is happening around the heart center. That would be fascinating.

So this third foundation of mindfulness is looking into the whole area of heart and mind, and I'd like to read you the way this is introduced in the Satipatthana Sutta. The Buddha, in giving these instructions of the third foundation, puts it this way:

"And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind—that is, citta as citta? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind

unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. This is how a bhikkhu abides, contemplating mind as mind."

A couple of things to notice in this description. First, the term "understands." This is our old friend, pajanati, which we also encountered in relationship to the breath—understanding a long breath or a short breath. Or we could just use the word "knowing." So again, this concept of knowing or understanding comes through here.

The second thing to mention is that in the instructions, the Buddha is focusing on these qualities we've been talking about—greed, hatred, and delusion, or the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion. So we see again that these three are the critical roots of unwholesome states. The absence of them are the roots of all the wholesome states.

It's quite interesting to look in this way because you can take any suffering state of mind and analyze: what's the component in it of greed? What's the component of aversion? What's the component of confusion? Because every unwholesome state is a mix in some way of those three. Then you can look at wholesome states of mind, beautiful states, and see what's the mixture of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion.

So this is the exploration of the realm of citta, and we'll be looking particularly tonight at the difficult or suffering aspects of this.

I want to talk a little bit about the vocabulary that I'll be using, not just tonight, but throughout the retreat. A lot of us share this vocabulary, so I want to introduce it early. We often talk about citta as encompassing moods, emotions, and states of mind. I'll use these three terms at different points tonight, so I want to distinguish what I mean by them. Other people may use them a little differently.

For me, emotion is something that's a strong feeling—a very obvious and clear strong feeling: happiness, sadness, joy, fear, loneliness, anxiety, and so forth.

Mood is something that has an emotional quality. It has a heart tinge to it, but it's often more subtle, not quite as pronounced, not as strong. More like a kind of cloud in the background that pervades everything that you might miss if you weren't just tuning into it. You might say, "Oh, I woke up this morning and I had a kind of mood of melancholy"—just feeling kind of melancholy. It's not a big deal, but it's kind of there in the background in a pervasive way. Or you might go for a walk and the sun is out and you've just been sitting in quiet, and you just feel a mood of tenderness. You look around and everything just seems very open and vulnerable, and there's a tender relationship to it. It's not going to knock you over the head, but it's a coloring that's in the mind at that time.

Then there's this more generic term that I'll use often called states of mind. This is the broadest term. For me, states of mind include moods and emotions, but it also includes the more subtle qualities of mind that develop through meditation—qualities like mindfulness, calm, equanimity, peace, wise attention. These are factors of mind that we can notice, that we can appreciate, that are very wholesome, but they don't have a particularly emotional quality to them. Their affect is quite neutral, but they are very wholesome at the same time.

So states of mind is the broadest of these. It will include moods, emotions, as well as refined meditative states. The technical term that came out of the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, that you'll often hear is "mental factors." The Abhidhamma, which is compiled in the few hundred years after the Buddha's death, identified fifty-two different factors of mind that could arise. And it said, "That's all there could be. There are no more." And every other one is a combination of these fifty-two factors. Well, life has gotten more complicated since then, so there are probably at least a hundred fifty-two now. But at any rate, there's a lot. There's a wide range.

So in working with difficult emotions, there are two things that need to happen. One is, compared to when we begin practice, for most of us there needs to be an attitude shift, and it is toward greater acceptance. This is the kind of first move that we need to make in relation to these states. We need to have more willingness to let them be just the way they are.

The second thing that needs to happen is we need to bring greater understanding of the states in. And we do that just by observing them. That's the beauty of mindfulness—to simply watch these states arise, persist. We learn how they're given to arise, how they're sustained, and how they pass away. That understanding is ultimately what frees us from their grip.

Because we start to see their mechanical nature. It's like a button is pressed and one of these reactive formations comes up. Once it's activated, it has its own particular dance. We learn its steps. We learn how they impact us. The mystery starts getting taken out of it. When the mystery gets taken out, they can't enchant us in the same way. They can't delude us or confuse us or mislead us.

The wisdom aspect that comes simply from observation is the most important piece. But in order to activate it, we have to open with acceptance first. These are the two steps: accepting attitude and greater understanding.

Let's talk about this in more practical detail—how to work when one of these states comes up. The first step is to know what it is that we're feeling. To name it is very helpful—to name the emotion you're feeling if you can. As Annie said the other morning in response to a question, if you don't know the name, don't worry about it. You can name it as "something" or just "this." If you happen to recognize what it is, then you can name it, and that will be helpful. But just to know that something is present and you're feeling it—that's the first step.

This is harder than it sounds, even when we're pretty mindful. I'll give you an example. I was practicing here for a six-week period some years ago. About two weeks into the retreat, I'd settled in and was pretty present. After the 8:15 sit, I got up from the hall and walked out to go to my walking place, which was down in the grassy area below the meditation hall. I walked out the back door, very present with my steps, aware of lifting, moving, and placing with each step.

Partway down the hill, I looked out to my walking path—there was someone there. This should not have happened, because I had been walking there every walking period for those two weeks. I thought, "Don't they know that's my walking path?" I was still very mindful—lifting, moving, placing—and as I started to walk down the hill, I was trying to figure out what had happened. Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line this morning? Is this their revenge? Are they trying to play mind games with me? I was lifting, moving, placing. I was really with my steps.

But inwardly, I was fuming because it seemed, at the most charitable, very undeveloped of them. Nonetheless, I walked down to my walking area, found another patch of grass, which much to my surprise worked just as well, and did my walking meditation. I was about thirty minutes into it when I noticed—I'm angry.

I had continued to go through all the blaming thoughts and the figuring-it-out thoughts, but I had never made the notice: "Oh, anger." As long as I couldn't recognize that that's what I was feeling, I was just caught in it. I was caught in the story. I believed what I was thinking. I had no doubt that they were wrong and I was right, and that angry tone colored my whole world. The identification with the experience was so strong, there was no space to liberate it.

Once I could recognize, "Oh, I'm under the sway of anger," then I could work with it because I know how to work with anger. I knew by then I needed to feel it in my body, recognize it in my mind, and look at the kinds of thoughts that arose and how they impacted the anger. Within a few minutes, it was gone. I was able to release it.

Until I could recognize it, there was no possibility of releasing it because I was just glued to it. This process of noticing what we're feeling is a very powerful step toward freedom.

One research study is particularly interesting. Scientists—I think these were psychologists—were working with subjects who had problems with anger management. They'd tried many techniques to get people to inhibit their responses when anger becomes activated in them, because many people will just lash out verbally or physically, lose their temper, and get themselves into a lot of trouble.

They tried many techniques to inhibit anger responses, with varying degrees of success. In this particular experiment, researchers used only one simple instruction with their subjects: when anger arose, they were to say "this is anger." That was the entirety of the intervention—nothing else. No additional instructions or advice were given.

The subjects practiced this for two weeks, and the results were remarkable. Those who had practiced this simple recognition showed significantly greater success in managing their anger compared to many other methods previously tested. This strikingly successful approach was nothing more than basic mindfulness—the simple act of knowing what we're feeling.

Even when we cannot find precise words for an emotion, just recognizing "this is what I'm feeling right now" creates space around the experience. We no longer need to blindly act out our emotions. This space emerges through the intelligence that mindfulness brings to each moment.

When we add this new piece of information—"Oh, there's anger present"—we introduce a wisdom element into our experience. We discover that our emotional state has shifted from just anger to anger plus mindfulness. This wholesome quality of recognition gives us the space to make wise choices about how to respond to the emotion rather than being swept away by it.

Three Aspects of Emotional Awareness

In working with emotions through mindfulness, we need to examine three interconnected areas: how emotions manifest in the body, how they feel in the mind, and how they express themselves through our thoughts. Bringing all three aspects under the umbrella of mindfulness creates a comprehensive understanding of our emotional experience.

The Body

Every strong emotion creates some kind of impact in the physical body. With anger, we typically find contraction, an upsurge of energy, and tension gathering around the neck and shoulders. Learning to recognize these bodily signatures helps us identify emotions as they arise, often before they fully develop.

The Mind

This aspect can be more challenging to understand because emotions feel so embodied that we might think the bodily sensation is the emotion itself—that anger is simply that contraction in the neck. However, as meditators, we need to distinguish between the physical and mental components of our experience.

While the contraction and tension belong to the body's domain, every emotion also brings a distinct mental coloring or flavor to consciousness. The taste of joy differs completely from the taste of fear or the flavor of anger. By becoming familiar with these mental qualities, we can identify emotions simply through their characteristic mood-tone, even when physical sensations are subtle.

Though we experience emotions as unified phenomena—mind and body seamlessly coupled—we can learn to recognize their different components. It's like drinking coffee with milk: we taste one unified flavor, but understanding the individual tastes of black coffee and plain milk helps us comprehend how that combined flavor emerges.

Sometimes in meditation, bodily sensations may be so light and moods so subtle that we don't register much physical impact. In these moments, we can still recognize emotions through their mental flavoring alone—that particular coloring they bring to consciousness.

The Thoughts

The third component involves observing our thinking patterns. When we examine anger's mental quality, we often discover a fiery or burning characteristic. Then we can observe the accompanying thoughts. In my walking meditation example, the thoughts centered around righteousness: "They're wrong and I'm right. They shouldn't be there because this is really my walking path."

As long as I continued entertaining these thoughts, I kept reinforcing the anger. When I stopped feeding these mental patterns, the anger naturally began to fade. This reveals the powerful relationship between our thinking and our emotional states—how our thoughts can either sustain or dissolve our emotional reactions.

So this is something else we want to really understand about emotions. All the afflictive emotions are sustained by thinking. Let go of the thoughts, and the afflictive emotion fades.

Basically, left alone, any emotion will pass. That's why it's safe to open to them. Emotions don't have the ability to sustain themselves forever. They only get that power through our resistance. When we try to suppress an emotion out of fear, we prolong it. If we open to it and allow it, it will arise, persist, and pass away. That's the nature of emotion.

Another way to think about this factor of thoughts is that we create a storyline around the emotion. The storyline with my anger was that I was right and they were wrong. If you look at anger in general, that's generally what it's founded on—a storyline of "I'm right and they're wrong." As long as we keep going over those thoughts and believing them, we sustain the anger. Cut through the storyline, let go of your belief in the storyline, and the emotion will fade.

Let me share something I've observed in my practice and in many meditators' practices. There are four big emotions that everybody needs to learn to relate to. They're like the primary colors of our emotional palette. The Buddha made a list of the five hindrances, which is very helpful for understanding different obstacles in meditation. But I want to talk specifically about these difficult emotions and make another important point.

For an afflictive emotion to be sustained, it has to rely on a sense of time. Afflictive emotions cannot endure with a completely present moment orientation. They can only endure if we generate around them a sense of time. This isn't true of beautiful states of mind. Mindfulness can exist purely in the present moment. Love, compassion, happiness, joy—purely in the present moment. One of my teachers likes to use this wonderful phrase: "happiness for no reason." Not because we're counting our chickens or storing up goods or hoarding anything—happiness for no reason. We let it all go, and happiness is just there. It doesn't need time. Afflictive emotions do.

I want to suggest that afflictive emotions are born out of past and future—that'll be one axis. The other axis is pleasant and unpleasant. Since you talked with Carol this morning about feeling tone, you know that the feeling tone of pleasant and unpleasant is the root of much grasping and preoccupation.

So past and future will be one axis, pleasant and unpleasant another. Let's explore what emotions emerge from these four quadrants.

We'll start with pleasant and past. Say there was an experience in the past that was very pleasant. The implication is, because it was in the past, it's not here today. What's a primal emotion that comes up around that? Loss and sadness. This is one of our primary responses to life. We had something beautiful, something lovely. We lost it. We're stricken by grief, sadness, loss. That's the first of the big ones we need to relate to.

What about something very pleasant in the future? Desire. Something very pleasant that's going to happen only in the future creates a wanting of it. The second primal emotion.

What about something unpleasant that happened in the past?

And I'm going to modify this a little because I'm going to lead you. Connected with another person: anger. Somebody did something unpleasant to us, and we hold that with anger. The third primal emotion.

Something unpleasant that we think is going to happen in the future: fear.

So I want to suggest that these are the big four that we need to learn to relate to—sadness, desire, anger, and fear. As a subset of these four, a subset of anger, we sometimes direct that anger toward ourselves as self-judgment. And so that would become, I would say, a fifth major one that we need to relate to. I think we're going to have talks on a number of these emotions, so because of time, I'm not going to go into them in a lot of detail. But let's look at each of them just briefly.

Let's take desire for an example. Come into retreat. There are many things that have been pleasant in your life that you don't have here: contact with friends, the food of your choice, going out to a movie, intimacy with your partner, the comfortable chair you sit in at home. There's often a sense of wanting for those things. Very, very common that that arises.

Let's look at the quality, sort of the psychology of desire. There's a payoff for us in bringing up those images. Here we are in this very kind of stark, austere, we might say ascetic setting, and we recollect something really comfortable or juicy or sweet about our home life. What's the impact in the mind of that? Kind of pleasurable, isn't it? It gives you a sweet hit for a moment.

But take a look at the other quality that comes with it. There's a comfort in the image, but at the same time, there's this realization: it's not here now. It isn't real. It's only a memory that's not the same as the real thing. So along with the sweetness or the comfort comes this yearning. And that's the essence of desire. We're unsatisfied because we don't have it now.

So desire is always this bittersweet experience, and it cannot be satisfying. If you look closely and feel it in your body and your mind, you'll feel the dissatisfaction of it. This is the kind of quality of thirst that's in the craving that the Buddha pointed to. It's always unsatisfying because we never want something we already have. You ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? A nose in the middle of your face? No, that would be way too easy. We always want what we don't have.

So take a look. When desire is present in the body, what's the feeling of it? I notice it often in relationship to meditative states here. The wanting for me on retreat is often about states of meditation, and I notice it as a kind of leaning forward, trying to make calm happen, trying to produce concentration. So I start to tune into that tension in the body, and that alerts me. Then I might notice, oh, my thoughts had been about a particular sitting that I wanted to recreate. So then that yearning quality of the mind—

The storyline in desire is something like, "If I had that, I would be happy." So it's a basis of happiness if I had it. If that concentration came back, then I'd be happy. Of course, what we don't look at is that object is impermanent. Either the object will fade or our delight in it will fade, one or the other.

We talked quite a lot about anger. I just want to mention a couple of things that the tradition says about anger. We feel this self-righteous indignation that we are in the right and the other person is in the wrong, and so we blame them. There is in the quality of anger usually an aspect of what we'd call ill will.

That is, because we're suffering on account of their action, we would like them to suffer. This is the opposite of metta. Metta is goodwill—we'd like them to feel good. But with anger, the quality intrinsic in it usually is ill will.

Now think about that. Can you take responsibility for that? Could you say out loud to yourself, "Yeah, I'd really like that person to suffer. I can't wait to see them hurting. I would really enjoy that." That state of mind is bordering on what we call in Buddhism cruelty. Cruelty is the actual enjoyment of someone suffering, and it's the opposite of compassion.

We may feel it's okay to be angry with somebody. It's okay to feel a little bit of ill will, but then you realize it's right next door to cruelty. Can you feel good about being a cruel meditator? That's a hard one for me. So looking at that was a strong encouragement for me to let go of anger.

The other strong encouragement is feeling in the body, feeling in the mind that burning quality with anger and realizing the pain it causes us. In the tradition, it's said that anger is like picking up a hot coal and wanting to throw it at someone. But before we

can throw it, we have to pick it up, and then we get burned. In a situation like this, where we're restraining our speech, we're restraining our bodily action, generally we're the only one who suffers with anger. So that became for me the strongest encouragement to let go. I simply didn't want to suffer with it. The other analogy that's used is that anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to fall sick. Doesn't work.

So: desire, anger, sadness. In sadness, we have had something beautiful and lovely in the past. It's not with us, and there's a sense of loss. Feeling it in the body, there's a kind of heaviness, a weightiness, often a heaviness in the heart area. And the mood is just a kind of glum, dark, hopeless quality. The thoughts dwell on the fact that the thing that we loved is not with us anymore. And the storyline I see in sadness is something like, "I can't be happy because I've lost it or because I don't have it." So all our well-being really depended on that thing, that person, that experience, whatever it was.

Sadness can feel so pervasive that we're often afraid to open to it—as though if I open to the degree of sadness that's with me, I'll drown. It will be too much. And so we hold ourselves back from really feeling it directly. But this worry about drowning is just another belief, just another thought that we have told ourselves. We need to open to it little by little, because it's the opening that lets it come up, and in the coming up, present itself and pass. So we're not going to clear sadness out with one or two looks, but touching it a little bit, moving away, touching into it a little bit, moving away, generating all the wholesome qualities that come through meditation—loving-kindness and mindfulness and wisdom. Those will start to lift the sadness up and out.

And the last of the four main emotions is the quality of fear. Fear has a special place in my heart because it was my biggest hindrance for years in practice. I've worked with it a lot. I became very familiar with it and I so appreciate all the lessons that it taught me.

You read things like "these defilements are the very food that wisdom grows on." The defilements as we work with them are said to be the manure for bodhi, the nourishment for enlightenment, as we learn how to relate to them in our life. And in the beginning, I thought that was all hokum. I thought that was teachers just trying to cheer me up. But as I look back at my own experience of working with fear, I appreciate how much I've grown from that and what it taught me.

If you learn one of these emotions thoroughly, you'll understand how all the others work too, because all their mechanisms are similar. So for myself, with fear, I came into my retreat, I started to feel fear, and I really didn't want it to happen. I was very resistant to that experience. I thought something had gone way off track if I was feeling fear. I

was supposed to be feeling more happiness, and here I was feeling more afraid. But I took the encouragement of my teachers to investigate it, and I started to explore it in the body.

It was so helpful to find that I could ground my attention in the body at a time when I was feeling afraid, because otherwise I was disconnected. I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to turn to. So my teachers told me to ground the attention in the body. There I found shakiness and trembling and lightness that gave me no sense of groundedness or security. I had to ask myself: can I be with this? Can I open to it?

I looked a little at the storyline of fear. The storyline in fear seems to be something like: this moment may be bearable, but the next moment isn't going to be. Watch out. So I just came back into this present moment. Can I bear this bodily feeling? Can I bear it? And I could. I could bear that shakiness. I could bear that trembling.

Then I had to look in the mind. What's the mood or tone or color of fear in the mind? What does that feel like? I turned the attention toward the mind, and it was really hard to get to, because fear itself is a wanting to flee. As I got close to that thing, it was like: get away. I get closer again, and it was: get away. I had a very hard time actually connecting with the mind's nature of fear. But because of the wonderful support of samadhi and the stability that it gave, I was able to touch it, touch it, touch it. And I asked: can I bear that? And I could. I could learn to bear the mental tone. Then I would look at the thoughts that projected into the future and let go of those.

I came more and more just to bear the momentary experience of fear. And I found out it was a paper tiger. There was nothing but that experience of shakiness and wanting to flee. Shakiness and wanting to flee. I just became more and more comfortable with it over time. When I did, it lost a lot of its power over me. The more I could open to it, the less it tended to have me in its grip.

The invitation is there whenever these difficult states are present to open to them with acceptance. It takes a lot of courage, but this is where we find courage in our practice. I found levels of bravery I had no idea existed in me. And I know all of you are finding the same thing day after day. As you commit with perseverance and diligence to meeting every experience that arises, your courage is developing moment after moment.

I found that I had the capacity to understand. In the middle of the most difficult experiences, some of the most difficult experiences in my life, I could bring out qualities of wisdom. And the wisdom could understand the problem. Through understanding the

problem thoroughly enough, it ceased to be a problem because I could see how it was put together. It was just another mechanism. Once I could let it be, it would come and it would go.

That's what we finally understand about these difficult emotions. They aren't problems in themselves. They are not a problem. They come, they dance, and they go. What just happened? What was that dance? Oh, it's just the weather system. We really come to trust that awareness, mindfulness, and wisdom have the capacity to receive them, to hold them, to understand them with perspective, and not to be shaken by them.

This becomes our practice. It's not that we awaken after we've gotten rid of these things. We awaken in the middle of them. The most powerful qualities of mind can be brought out directly in relationship to these states.

This is transformative. We start to gain a confidence in our mind, a confidence in our understanding, a confidence in our practice that we can handle whatever the heart and mind throw up at us. Wisdom cannot be overthrown when it's strong enough.

I'd like to close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition—The Four Blessings of Gampopa. This is considered a supplication. To whom the supplication is made is for your own decision. It could be considered to the Dharma, to the Buddha, to a special being like the Dalai Lama, to your own wisdom mind—however you'd like to interpret it.

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's sit for a moment together in silence.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 16

The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) as a direct path to understanding anattā (not-self). Drawing from the Anattalakkhana Sutta, Armstrong demonstrates how our sense of 'I' is actually composed of five constantly changing processes: form (rūpa), feeling tone (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa).*
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> *Using accessible analogies like a disassembled pen and the classic chariot example, Armstrong shows how what we take to be a solid, permanent self is actually just an assemblage of impermanent parts with no fixed essence. He guides practitioners through the Buddha's method of inquiry: examining each aggregate's impermanent, unsatisfactory nature and asking whether such changing phenomena can truly be called 'mine,' 'I am,' or 'myself.'*
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> *This teaching offers both intellectual understanding and experiential investigation into the liberating truth that underlies all Buddhist practice. As Armstrong notes, seeing through the illusion of self doesn't lead to coldness but to greater lightness, freedom, and capacity for love—embodying the teaching that 'no self, no problem.'*

The subject of the talk tonight is the five aggregates are not self. In the talk this evening, I want to suggest that fundamentally you don't exist—at least not in the way that you might think that you do. So all of those who are desperate about holding on to existence, you might want to go now because this concept is going to be somewhat challenged this evening.

You probably know that in Buddhism this unexamined sense of I or self is considered one of the biggest misunderstandings that we have in life. It's a core component of the quality of ignorance that's the start of the chain of dependent origination that leads to suffering. The way things actually are is so much lighter than the way things feel when we're burdened by this sense of self.

So seeing into this false sense of I and being able to let it go is the doorway to a lot of personal freedom for us that each of us as meditators has access to. This is not something that waits until you're just on the edge of full awakening. This is a lightening that you can feel year by year in your practice.

In my own personal experience of looking into this question of self, it's taken some years of looking, reflecting, examining my experience to get clearer and clearer on it. So I hope you won't have an expectation that it should all be clear from one talk tonight. And I say that for two reasons. One is I don't want you to think too hard about this as we're going. Just don't think, "I've got to figure it all out tonight or I'm going to miss it entirely." Just kind of take the words and concepts in and see where they resonate for you and open to just a slight shift in your way of seeing. And secondly, so that you don't get too concerned if it doesn't make a lot of sense. Some of this stuff is hard to comprehend on our conceptual level and matching it against our experience. So take it really slowly if some of these concepts are new for you and realize this is a topic for ongoing investigation.

For most of us, I is the center of our universe. It's what everything revolves around. Like in the old days, it was considered the earth was the center of the universe and the sun and all the planets revolved around it. For us, the I is the center of that universe. Our thoughts revolve around it. Our actions, our speech, our values, our emotions, our direction in life—all comes out of this sense.

This I is completely taken for granted by most of humanity. And even for us as meditators, it seems very obvious. It seems very self-evident, doesn't it? I mean, what could be more natural than I? We use it all the time. We think about it. We adopt it. Here we are, this sense of I. William James put it this way: "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat."

In your examination over these weeks on retreat where you've been looking closely at sights and sounds, smell, taste, touch, thinking, and emotions, have you come upon this I yet? Something that seems so obvious, the center of everything—have you found it? Probably not. It's very elusive when we start to look.

The Dalai Lama said, "It's a sure sign of delusion when you think something is really apparent, but you go to find it and you can't." Then we know that something's confused in our minds.

The classical analogy in the tradition is we look at a piece of rope that's lying on the ground, a multicolored twined piece of rope, and we think it's a snake. And when we see it as a snake, we get really afraid. "Oh, it could jump up, it could bite me, it could crawl on me." We draw back. But that's just a misperception. When we see clearly that it's just a piece of rope, all the worry goes out.

In the same way, it's said when we hold this concept of self, we tie ourselves up in a burden that agitates us. And when we see things the way they are, then we're calm. The truth frees us.

It's easy to draw out some of the confusion around this concept of I. So let's just look at language. I want to ask you a couple of questions. The first is, how tall are you? It is not a trick question. So if I ask you, "How tall are you?" that's pretty easy to answer, right? So I would say I'm five feet, ten inches tall. Very straightforward.

We could hear it every day: "I'm five foot ten." But really what we're saying is the body is five foot ten, right? My thoughts aren't five foot ten. My emotions aren't five foot ten. My mindfulness isn't five foot ten. My body is five foot ten. So here we're saying I am the body, which is five foot ten. There's an identification: I am the body, and that's five foot ten.

Or I could ask you a second question: what color are your eyes? And that's easy, right? You don't have to think too long about that. So I would say my eyes are brown. Here, all of a sudden, I'm not the body—I'm the owner of the eyes. They're my eyes and they're brown.

So which are you truly? Are you the body or are you the owner of the body who's somehow separate from it? Which is right? Could you be both?

If you're the body and your hair is cut and falls on the ground, is that you lying on the ground? Do you feel it as you? Do you feel attached to it?

We could do the same thing with the mind. Sometimes we would say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad," and then we're equating I with the emotions. So we say, I am the state of mind. Other times we might talk about "my joys and my sorrows," and now we're the owner of the emotion. So which are you, the emotion or the owner?

At other times we feel ourselves really as the observer. We really think most deeply, perhaps, that we're located somewhere just behind the eyes, in the middle of the head, maybe inside that mass of brain tissue. And we look out through these eyes onto the world and experience everything that comes in. So this eye that's at the center of everything is like the observer that experiences sights and sounds and smells and tastes and so forth. And this eye—this observing kind of eye—is also considered to be the one who does the thinking or the one who does the feeling. So here there's the sense I am the observer.

These are five distinct ways we use the word I: the body, the owner of the body, the emotions, the owner of the emotions, or a central observer that everything's happening to. Could they all be true? Yet we use the words like this every day and we never stop to question what the underlying reality is.

In fact, they're all rubbish. Every one of those positions is rubbish.

The Buddha put it this way: "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." Or another of my teachers put it a little more directly when he said, "Everything you think is wrong."

A yogi a couple of years ago told me something that he'd heard on the radio, which I thought was a good reminder for all of us. We need to stay humble in this practice. You know, when we hear things like "everything you think is wrong," that's a humbling kind of statement. Well, this is something he'd heard on the radio. A commentator said, "The mind—often wrong, seldom in doubt."

This is really true in our relation to self. So this sense of I is basically a concept that's been created by our thoughts. And it's a fiction. Things aren't like that. But it's a fiction that we've believed in a lot and we've placed at the center of everything. So this is a form of delusion, and we've become entranced by this delusion of I.

It's created in us a deep self-centeredness. As we return to it again and again, we strengthen that sense when we don't see the true reality of things. We invest in it and strengthen the sense of self-centeredness and self-cherishing that grows out of that. So we create a world where obviously I am more important than you, and the whole world behaves that way: I am more important than you. So we see how the whole world is under the spell of this same delusion.

And then we dance to the tune of this false sense of self. And what's the tune? There are three main chords: greed, aversion, confusion. This is the song of the self.

Just one slight hint of the suffering that's involved—as long as we believe in this "I" and are invested in it, we'll be afraid of death. But by seeing the limited nature of this false concept, we can, to a certain extent, free ourselves from that concern. So undoing this level of delusion is one of the main pieces of work that meditation leads us to.

An interesting question is: how was it that the Buddha saw? When he saw the nature of things in a liberated way, in an enlightened way, what did he see that was different?

Just looking around the room tonight, when we look at this assembly, we probably see people. I would suspect that most of you, as you look around, see person, person, person, person. In the Visuddhimagga, it's said that that alone is a sign of insufficient reflection. They said that one who has reflected deeply does not see "person."

It would be like a skilled butcher who has been working at carving up animals for many years, putting a cow on the carving table, and as he's cutting, saying "cow, cow, cow." A skilled butcher doesn't cut in that way. The butcher goes: rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs—because he knows the details of this creature so well. He doesn't just lump it under the term "cow." He sees the component parts.

So one who looks at a human being who has reflected deeply doesn't just see the lump "person," but sees in more detail than that.

So how did the Buddha see in more detail? When the Buddha looked at our human experience, he tended to see in one of two ways. The first is something that I think I mentioned in the first talk during this retreat: the six sense bases. This is from the Sutta on Totality. I think I read that night: "Monks, what is the totality of existence? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and mind objects."

We've talked about this a lot—the six senses—and they fit very nicely in with our meditation practice because this is the way the instructions unfold. We direct the attention to sounds, to body sensations, to sights, to mind objects like thoughts and emotions, or to smells and tastes. The Buddha used this description primarily to teach people how to cut through craving, because craving tends to arise for pleasant objects at the six sense doors, and it's helpful to look how we get entangled with different objects at different sense doors—sometimes sight, sometimes touch, sometimes taste, and so forth.

But there was another description that he used, I would say equally often in the suttas, and that is the description that's called the five aggregates. This is another way to see a human being, and this is the outline that I want to talk about tonight. This device he used to cut through wrong view.

We have the sense that the "I" is somehow to be found in this mass of changing phenomena. In order to establish us in the right view—the fictitious nature of that "I"—the Buddha most often used the five aggregates. As we tune into this way of seeing, we start to see human beings without the overlay of the false sense of "I," or what you might call the ego. The ego and false sense of "I" are more or less synonymous.

So as we start to look at the world through this map, we see things the way the Buddha saw. And that is a very interesting exploration. This is going to sound technical as I get into the description. It may sound a little too intellectual, but I want to assure you it's not. It becomes very experiential as you live with these categories.

The time in my life that this opened up for me—actually it was about fifteen years ago now—my older sister died quite unexpectedly at a fairly young age. She was fifty-two at the time. She had had some health problems, but she was not close to death. And then unexpectedly, she went into a coma and never awoke. It was quite a shock for her family and for me.

I was quite close to this sister, and one of the most startling things about her dying was that she had seemed so real and vibrant and alive just a week before. I'd been talking to her on the phone. I'd gotten a photograph of her around that time. She seemed so alive and real and present, and my mind was just stunned at how she could go from that lively manifestation to no longer existing. I just couldn't put it together how that could be.

So I became very interested in investigating this question of what makes up a human being. And in this investigation, it helped me understand how we go from vitality to non-existence, possibly in a short period of time.

So it was very helpful for me to understand what's involved in dying. And then it also gave me a lot more freedom in my own life through that understanding. Again, it's an exploration that takes some time. Tonight, I just want to lay out the map and encourage you to simply reflect and play with it a little bit.

The term aggregate is a translation of the Pali word khanda. In Sanskrit, the term is skandha, so you might hear from a Tibetan group the five skandhas. It's the same teaching. And again, it's a fairly simple word in Pali—it just means heap or bundle.

So aggregate sounds kind of technical to me, like it should be a formula that people use in mixing up road paving material, you know, a little of stone and a little of gravel and a little asphalt and a little cement. But the word that I really like to translate khanda as is kind of stuff. Really what it's saying is we are made of five kinds of stuff. So that's what I'm going to be talking about tonight, the five kinds of stuff that make us up. If aggregate feels too technical, just think of it as a kind of stuff.

These five aggregates are material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. I want to go through them one by one and talk about what they mean. Generally, they're all present—all five are present in every moment of experience. It's the same domain that's covered by the six sense bases, but just sliced up a

little differently. For example, in the six sense bases, there may be a moment where there's no particular smell or taste or sound, so some of the sense bases may be absent. In the aggregates, all five of these are present in every moment of conscious experience. It's just divided up a little differently.

The first aggregate is material form, or often we'll just call it form. The Pali word is rupa. Rupa is sometimes taken to mean body, and this is in many ways the most interesting kind of material form that we have to look at or work with. It's sometimes used as body. A statue like this one behind me in Asia is often referred to as a Buddha rupa, the form of the Buddha or the body of the Buddha as a statue.

But this is the way the Buddha defined it: Any kind of material form whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate.

One of the things it includes is the body. This is one type of material form. It includes all the other matter that makes up the physical universe. This is all included in the material form aggregate. But it also includes the interactions among matter. If this bit of matter contacts this bit of matter, we get a sound, and that sound is also in the realm of rupa. All the interactions among the sense doors, like tastes and smells, touches—those are all in the area of rupa. So the five physical senses and their objects and all the physical created universe is all under this heading of rupa or form. It's sometimes also translated as materiality.

An interesting question is the body is so taken for granted. It's like the base of life. But how do we know the body? How do we know it's here? Well, mostly it's by the fact that we see it. We see our own body and we experience sensations through it. Now the fact is the body also has smells and tastes and sounds, but some of those are not always so pleasant, so we don't tend to dwell on those too much. The primary way we contact the body is through seeing it and touching it. So the body is also just known through these senses. This sound is in the aggregate of rupa, or form. It's part of material form. That's the first aggregate.

All the other four aggregates are on the side of mind, or mentality. The first of these is feeling tone. The Pali word is vedana, and this was introduced in the meditation instructions about a week ago. It's a quality that every moment of sense experience has of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The reason vedana is important is because it forms the basis for grasping and clinging. When things are pleasant, we tend to hold onto them with greed, or the pleasantness becomes the basis for the reactive formation of desire. When things are unpleasant, that becomes the basis for the reactive formation of aversion.

And when things are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we tend to overlook them. They don't please us or displease us. They're considered irrelevant to our gratification. And so this becomes the basis for delusion, for being disconnected or out of touch, for ignoring.

So if we have this sound as our sense experience, generally that's a pleasant sound. I think most people who heard that would say that's pleasant. Because of its meaning, the sitting's over, it's really pleasant. There are eight pleasant times it happens during a day, and we really like it.

But it's curious, too, that this quality of vedana is put in the mind category rather than the category of the sound itself. And that's because the feeling tone of being pleasant or unpleasant or neither is not actually inherent in the item, in the phenomenon at the sense door, like the sound, but it's received in the mind. One of our teachers said that the mind is actually feeling as a verb—to give that phenomenon its feeling tone, that we interact with it and taste it and give it a feeling. It's not done consciously. Often it's almost immediate that we know the feeling tone. But he's suggesting there's an active participation.

I'll give you a little example of how this works. When I grew up, my mother really liked the music of Mantovani. If you remember, he was a popular conductor of music from movies, from soundtracks, and they'd be sort of sentimental melodies, and they'd be scored with a lot of strings and very lush, swelling instrumentation, and it'd be a little bit sentimental. So I listened to a lot of Mantovani when I was growing up. And it was okay. I didn't mind it too much.

Down in Southern California, there was a 7-Eleven that was having a problem with drug dealers coming and doing their business in the parking lot. And they'd call the police, and the police would come and chase the dealers away. But the police would drive off, and the dealers would come back. And they'd ask them politely to leave, and they wouldn't. So the store owner got an idea, which was to play through the speakers of the outside music system, Mantovani. So he put on Mantovani and turned up the volume and flooded the parking lot. And that drove the drug dealers away. Because while my mother experienced that as very pleasant, the dealers experienced that as very unpleasant. So they left.

Well, it's curious. This feeling tone is somehow interpreted differently in each of our minds, depending on our conditioning.

The third of the aggregates, the second mental aggregate, is this quality of perception called saññā. Sally talked about it a lot in her last talk. Carol talked about it some more in her talk following that. And it is basically this factor of recognition that when a sense phenomenon appears to us we tend to recognize it and put it into a category that we already know based on memory. This happens so quickly and so automatically for us as grown-ups that we don't see it taking place, but it's happening all the time.

For instance, if your eyes are open and you're looking around the room right now, you are probably seeing what's here as women and men and zabutons and floor and ceiling and statue and flowers and bell and so forth. This is all a level of conceptualization that's happening above the bare sense experience. Actually all that's happening in the visual field are patches of form and color, form and color. You get more of a sense of this if you close one eye and you lose some of the depth perception. And then you see the way painters need to see when they're learning to see anew—throw out the old habits and see things in a fresh way.

When we grow up, we learn to perceive these categories of concepts as our parents and teachers tell us to. So we learn how to recognize women and men and chairs and floor and things like that. But those are not inherent to the visual field. We forget that this is really happening, but Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, tells a story that makes it really clear.

He was able to work with a patient who had lost his sight when he was quite young, a few years old. But with the technology of surgery that was available as he grew up, his sight was able to be corrected. So as a middle-aged man, he had his sight restored. And Sacks was there in the hospital with the patient when the bandages were taken off after the operation. And the man's family was there, and the surgeon was there, and Sacks was there, and everybody was just expecting this, wow, it's so fabulous to see again, I can't thank you enough.

So they took off the bandages and there was no real expression from the patient. And he later explained that all he saw was a blur of shapes and colors that had no meaning for him. And that the first thing that started to make sense was this flesh-colored blob that started moving toward his face that seemed to emanate a sound saying, can you see me? And he just deduced that that was probably the face of his surgeon because he recognized the voice. But this blur of form and color made no sense to him. He did a lot of exercise and a lot of practice, and he got much better at functioning in the world, but his perception never became automatic the way it is for us.

He always had to struggle to make sense of the shapes and colors that he saw.

So then we realize this is a learned faculty, but it's necessary for our functioning in the world. We don't need to get rid of it. We don't need to change it. But we need to appreciate it, and sometimes we need to question it. I think Sally and Carol both talked about how sometimes it leads us astray. We perceive things inaccurately. We see a snake where there's a rope. Or, as the Buddha said, we tend to see permanence where there's impermanence. We tend to see lasting happiness where there's *dukkha*. And we tend to see a self where there isn't one. So these are the kinds of perceptions that we need to straighten out.

When we put a label on something and perceive it, such as a pain in the body, sometimes the label can block us from a fresh experience of that. So sometimes we need to look beyond our first perception and find out what's the reality of that.

Zen is full of stories about this, because in Zen, they're trying to train practitioners to see things fresh. So you'll read stories where the Zen master holds this up and says, "What is this? If you call it a stick, I will hit you. But if you say it's not a stick, I will also hit you." What I deduced from that is that if I went into Zen, I was going to get hit a lot. So I chose Vipassana.

But really what they're trying to get the practitioner to do is to see this thing before concept, before made-up terms. Like take this thing. You look at it probably ten times a day. I look at it and I think "bell." But couldn't it equally be a flower pot? Or how about a monk's bowl? This would be a very nice alms bowl—just enough food for me for lunch. Or if it was put on a statue, couldn't this be a fancy chapeau? Wouldn't this make a nice hat for someone? So just calling it "bell," we kind of miss all the potential that's in there.

There was a funny story about this. In the early seventies, two great masters from different traditions were both in Cambridge at the same time. Some of their students knew each other and thought, "Wow, wouldn't it be fun to bring together these two enlightened masters and just watch their minds kind of meld in this recognition of each other's emptiness?"

So the two masters were Kalu Rinpoche from the Tibetan tradition and Sansanim, who was a Korean Zen master. They met at a house of one of our friends, sat down and had tea together, and Sansanim decided to challenge Kalu Rinpoche. He took an orange off a plate where they'd been served for tea, and he held it up to Rinpoche and said, "What is this?" in that very straightforward Zen style, because in Sansanim's lineage, this is the way one trained. One trained to answer questions like "What is this?" And that became a measure of one's dharma understanding.

That was not the case in Kalu Rinpoche's lineage. And so he just sat there doing his mala beads and looking at Sansanim, completely unperturbed, but also kind of not quite getting it. And so Sansanim held the orange up again and again said, "What is this?" And Kalu just quietly turned to his translator and said, "Don't they have oranges in Korea?"

So this is another case of perception, different in different cultures. In our case, we hear this, we recognize it as a sound, and we recognize it generally as the bell. And that has a particular meaning for us. It means the sitting's over, we can get up and move. So that recognition is very important. It's very functional in our days here.

The third of the aggregates—the mental aggregates, the fourth aggregate in total—is called volitional formations or mental formations. The Pali word is *saṅkhāra*. They're also sometimes called urges or impulses. This is a very broad category, and it basically includes all the kinds of states of mind that we've been talking about: the qualities of moods, emotions, the refined meditative states of mind, such as mindfulness and concentration, equanimity.

These are all included in sankhara. Sankhara also refers to actions that stem from the mind—that's why they're sometimes called volitional. So actions of thought, of speech, and of body are included in this category of sankharas.

Because of the link to action, this is also the field of karma. Remember that when Joseph introduced the factor of intention, he talked a little about how that becomes the seed of karma. So sometimes these things are called karmic formations, and that's why they also have the sense of impulses. The movements of greed and aversion are impulses that come from this field of sankharas. Similarly, the movements of loving-kindness or compassion or generosity—wholesome qualities that come from this field of sankharas or impulses.

So when we hear the bell at the end of a sitting, notice what happens in the sankharas. Often there's this real sense of ease that comes in: "Oh, I'm so comfortable now. I could sit forever." This sense of ease that comes in response to the sound and the thought "I could sit forever"—these are sankharas that happen with that moment of hearing.

The last of the aggregates is the quality of consciousness. In Pali, the word is vijñana. This is that most bare kind of knowing that we've been talking about a few times—just the bare receptivity to sense phenomena before they're interpreted, before they're perceived, before we're mindful of them. So the knowing of the sound as a sound—that simple level is what's called consciousness.

It's understood that the sound and the knowing come together. This is an important point that we'll probably come back to in other talks. When that sound arises in your experience, you can't really separate your knowing of it from the sound appearing, can you? The sound appearing to you is your knowing of it. They're right together. If a tree fell in a forest and there was no one to hear it, there might be sound vibrations, but there wouldn't be that human experience of hearing a sound arise. So it takes that consciousness plus the phenomenon, and then they come together in our experience.

I like to think of it as receiving this—it's a unitary experience, but it's got two facets. One is the sound, which is rupa, a physical phenomenon in our language. But it's received by this quality of mind called consciousness. They are together, but we can look either at the mind side of it or the rupa side of it. They're both there. It's just one experience.

So we say all five aggregates are present in every moment of experience. In our little example, the sound is rupa. The feeling tone of pleasantness is vedana. The recognition of it as the meditation bell is perception or samjna. The mood of ease that comes when we hear that is a sankhara. And consciousness knows all those other four. Consciousness holds the rupa. Consciousness holds the feeling tone. Consciousness holds the perception. And consciousness holds the sankhara that comes. They're all there in that moment.

These are the five categories that make up the kinds of stuff that form our human experience. I invite you to consider: Is there anything in your human experience that is outside of these five categories? Anything in your direct experience that wouldn't be able to be included somewhere in these five? In other words, is this an exhaustive description of our human experience?

[Student asks about karma]

Karma is only known, in the Buddha's description of it, through action. So when a thought arises that is motivated by generosity, that could be said to be a karmic act, because it has the volition of generosity. The karma is implicit in the sankhara.

Now, one of the questions that philosophers have debated for centuries—and this may be what you're pointing to—is where do those karmic seeds reside? Because one person's personality may be conditioned toward generosity, and others may be conditioned toward stinginess. So it became a very interesting philosophical question.

Where do those patterns live when they're not being activated? Do you get the question? It's a very interesting question. Different schools answered that question differently, but the Buddha chose not to even pose the question or answer it because he was really just concerned with what do I experience. And we experience karma when it expresses itself through an impulse—generosity, stinginess, greed, aversion, and so forth.

So I'll leave you to reflect further, but let's say for the time being that this constitutes an exhaustive description of the categories of our experience. You can reflect later and see if that's true or not. Everything that makes up our human experience can be put in one of these categories.

Why is that important? Because there's one interesting thing that's missing, and that is the I, capital I. It's not included in any of these. In this map, there is form, there is feeling tone, there is perception, there are mental impulses, and there is the knowing of all of those. There is no category for a self, for an I.

So once we start to explore this particular map, once we decide that it's an exhaustive map, then we can start to believe maybe there's not a need for an I in our understanding of human experience. Maybe there isn't an I except as a thought. There can be the thought of an I or the sense of an I—maybe that's all there is. And what really makes us up is form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

The traditional analogy that was used to explain why this was important was the chariot. I'm sure a lot of you have heard this. You take a look at a chariot that's put together and you're asked, well, what is the chariot? Is it the axle? Is it the wheels? Is it the cart? Is it the steering handle? You can't say that it's any of those. It's kind of the way all of them have been put together. A simpler example—the modern equivalent, by the way, is car. So if you want, you could analyze a car and all of its components and ask, where's the car?

But a simpler example, because we're just here together—everybody, I hope, can see this, and you don't have any trouble identifying it as a very common object of daily use, called a pen. Right? Everybody agree this is a pen? But we can start to take this pen apart. That was the cap. This is the tip. This is the ink cartridge. This is the barrel. And this is the end. There are five different parts. And if I could, I'd squeeze the ink out of here and you'd see there's something else in here too.

Now where's the pen? Does it exist? Does it really exist as an object? Or is it only a conventional designation that we give to this assemblage of parts when they're assembled in a certain way and function as kind of a unity? That is, there's the appearance of an object, but we know that the object is nothing more than an assembly of

these different parts. There's no pen there apart from the parts. There's no essence to this. There's no little piece somewhere in the center—oh, this is the real pen. This is the magic essence of pen. There are only these parts that are put together.

Now, five might be a little too complicated for the human experience. Let me suggest, just look at three parts. The body, very fundamental piece of us. That's one part. Second piece, also very fundamental, is consciousness. There's an aliveness and awareness within each of us. That's why we're sentient beings. And the third piece are the things that go through our minds—the emotions, moods, states of mind. And we'll just toss feeling and perception into there for the time being.

So think about yourself as a body united with a consciousness that has things going through the mind.

that it's like a river. When you look at a river from a distance, it appears to be a stable, unchanging thing. But when you look closely, you see that it's actually a continuous flow of water. No drop of water remains the same from moment to moment, yet we still call it "the river."

The body is similar. The cells are constantly dying and being replaced. The breath is continuously coming and going. The blood is flowing, the heart is beating, the neural activity is firing and changing. Nothing about the physical form remains static, even for an instant. Yet because the changes happen gradually and in patterns, we have the illusion of a solid, permanent body.

The same is true for consciousness. We tend to think of consciousness as this stable, continuous awareness that's been with us our whole lives. But when we examine it closely, we see that consciousness is actually arising and passing away moment by moment. It's different when we're asleep, different when we're awake, different when we're happy, different when we're sad. It's constantly shifting and changing based on what object it's cognizing.

And then there are all the mental formations - our thoughts, emotions, moods, perceptions. These are obviously coming and going. One moment we're thinking about dinner, the next moment we're remembering something from childhood, then we're planning tomorrow, then we're feeling frustrated about traffic. It's a constant parade of mental activity, none of it lasting.

When the Buddha pointed this out to those five practitioners, something clicked for them. They saw that what they had been taking to be a solid, permanent self was actually just a collection of processes - all of them impermanent, all of them constantly changing, none of them substantial enough to constitute a real, lasting self.

This doesn't mean we don't exist at all. Obviously something is here reading these words, something is breathing, something is aware. But what we are is much more like a dynamic process than a thing. We're more like a verb than a noun. We're a flowing, ever-changing pattern of physical and mental activities rather than a solid entity.

Understanding this can be tremendously liberating. So much of our suffering comes from trying to protect and defend this sense of solid self. We worry about what others think of us, we get attached to our opinions and preferences, we're afraid of losing what we have or not getting what we want. But when we see that this self we're trying to protect isn't actually there in the way we thought, much of that anxiety and grasping can begin to relax.

is to realize its connection to nature. We often think, "Oh, this is me, this is who I am." But did you have anything to do with how this body came out of the womb? Did you have anything to do with the basic color of your hair, color of your eyes, physique, whether your hair was curly or straight, whether it was blonde or brown?

And yet, we take so much pride or embarrassment about the way the body turns out, as if we had something to do with it. Of course, if we reflect, we realize it was just our father's sperm meeting our mother's egg, combining, multiplying in cells, nourishment from the womb, being born, growing from food and air, aging over years—getting bigger and stronger, and then getting weaker, less capable. We had nothing to do with the aging process. It just happened in this body, completely out of our control. We make minor choices that affect its appearance, but it's basically out of our control. And that's because the body is really just part of physical nature.

One of our teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, put it this way: "This body came out of nature. It's part of nature. It's never departed from nature and it belongs to nature. So give it back to nature and that'll be a big relief for you."

You can think about emotions in the same way. This package that we all have of joy and delight and fear and apprehension and sadness—this is just mental nature. It's not ours because we all have it. It's just part of being human. So in the same way, we can't claim those. When they express, it's mental nature expressing itself.

Sometimes seeing this, we retreat and want to find our true identity in consciousness. "Oh, I'm not any of that changing stuff. I'm not really the changing emotions and changing thoughts and the changing body that's going to decay. I'm really the awareness that holds all of that. That's what I really am."

But when you start to think in this way, there's another piece that's missing from this identification with consciousness, which is that consciousness is in no way unique. There's nothing in consciousness that makes it particularly like me or like you. And there's nothing individual in it. Because of that, everybody's consciousness in that way of just knowing is pretty much the same part of nature. So there's nowhere to find a Sally or a Carol or an Annie in consciousness. There's nothing unique. So there's no individuality there. We realize consciousness is just another part of mental nature, not at all individual, something in fact that unites us all, that we share.

As you examine all these different components of the aggregates, you might ask: Where was I expecting to find a self in all that? Where was I expecting to find an "I" and what did I think it might look like? We have some thought that maybe it's discoverable, that it still feels like it should be there and yet it's completely elusive.

So the Buddha described how things should be seen, also in the discourse on not-self: "Therefore, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself." And in the same way with feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Why? He continued, "Seeing thus the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, with feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, one's mind is liberated. When it is liberated, one understands: birth is destroyed. The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more renewal of being."

When we don't fixate on these individual arisings as "I" or "mine," then we can just let them come and go as they will. We don't feel that we need to hang on to them or claim them or identify with them. In that way, we see their unsatisfactory nature and the mind inclines to dispassion toward them, not being moved with greed and aversion. And it's dispassion that starts to release the mind from its grip.

Sometimes we might think that this pointing toward dispassion is a cold kind of turning, that we're going to become uncaring, unemotional, unfeeling by this kind of equanimity.

But it's not like that. It doesn't feel like that. When the burden of I starts to be lifted from our existence, there's a lot more lightness. And that sense of lightness and lack of burden starts to open the heart naturally to stronger feelings of love and compassion. So the quality of life warms up when this burden of self starts to lift.

Jack Kornfield was visiting an old monk in Sri Lanka—a very happy person. This old monk asked him, "Well, you're a Buddhist. What do you understand the main teaching to be?" And Jack said, "Well, I understand the main teaching to be that within this whole complex of changing phenomena of body and mind, there's no abiding self. There's no constant I."

And the monk just said, "That's right. No self, no problem." And he just sat on his bed and rocked with his big smile. No self, no problem.

I'll close with this quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj about this interplay between the two, who said: "Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 17

From Ignorance Come Impulses

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the opening links of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination): "avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā" - from ignorance come impulses. Drawing on the Majjhima Nikāya teachings, he explores how avijjā (ignorance of the Four Noble Truths and three characteristics) gives rise to reactive saṅkhāra (volitional formations) rooted in greed and aversion.

Armstrong describes three levels of obscuration that bind us in suffering: the fundamental delusion of self and other, the arising of afflictive emotions, and unskillful karmic actions. He explains how the gradual path of sīla, samādhi, and paññā works from the outside in to purify conduct, mind, and view. The talk includes practical guidance on cultivating bodhicitta to transform self-centered practice, and concludes with teachings on nibbāna as the cessation of all saṅkhāra - the unconditioned peace that ends suffering.

This evening's subject is "from ignorance come impulses"—the first two links of dependent origination, which Sally explored last week. The traditional translation renders this as "ignorance gives rise to volitional formations" or "ignorance gives rise to mental formations." I prefer the term "impulses" because it captures the inner feeling of how these phenomena arise in the mind. The formations that emerge from ignorance possess an impulsive quality—they're not considered or deliberated, not held with wisdom, but simply arise in this impulsive, sometimes compulsive way.

The Pali formulation has a beautiful ring to it: *Avijja paccaya sankhara.* Pali is wonderfully succinct.

Avijja is ignorance—essentially not knowing the way things really are. In Sally's talk and the handout you received, this appears as the blind man at twelve o'clock in the wheel of existence. This is where everything begins.

I noticed someone wrote to Sally saying they'd posted the image of Mr. Yama on their mirror and were looking at it daily. The blind man sits at twelve o'clock, at the very center, the starting point of everything.

As a digression, I first encountered this painting when I was a monk in Thailand. It was quite remarkable because the image comes from the Tibetan tradition, yet I was practicing with a wonderfully eclectic Theravadan monk named Ajahn Buddhadasa. He had established a monastery called Wat Suan Mok in southern Thailand—"The Garden of Liberation"—a beautiful place to practice.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was one of the most open-minded Theravadan monks I've ever met. As a young monk, he learned Pali and read through the Buddha's suttas himself. He said this completely overturned the conventional interpretations he'd been taught in monk school. Because of his iconoclasm, he had difficulty getting along with some mainstream Thai monks until he became older and well-respected. But when I practiced there, he was established and respected, and remarkably open. He had built a special hall called the Spiritual Theater, where he displayed reproductions from all three traditions: Zen paintings, Tibetan thankas, and original Theravadan art. I deeply appreciated his spirit, and it's in that same spirit that we share this painting of the bhavachakra, the wheel of existence.

Avijja stands at the beginning, considered the root, the first link in the chain from which suffering arises. It's essentially synonymous with delusion when we speak of the three root poisons of greed, aversion, and delusion. Because it is a root in this chain, ignorance is considered one of the mind's deepest tendencies—one that doesn't leave the mind until full awakening. As long as ignorance remains, suffering will eventually result.

The second word, *paccaya*, establishes the connection between consecutive links throughout dependent origination. *Paccaya* means "conditions"—the first link serves as a conditional factor for the arising of the second. As Sally mentioned, it's not quite accurate to say it "causes" the next link—that's too strong a correlation. Rather, it provides the necessary condition for the next link's arising.

The third term is *sankhara*—the same word used for the fourth aggregate in the list of five aggregates. Mental formations, volitional formations, urges, or impulses. In the wheel of dependent origination, this is symbolized by a potter fashioning pots from clay. These pots, shaped from clay, represent the fabricated or constructed nature of *sankharas*—they're assembled through will, through effort.

The meaning of these two links—*avijja paccaya sankhara*—is that when ignorance is present in the mind, the mind gives rise to impulses that generally contribute to the perpetuation of suffering. These impulses themselves carry the quality of ignorance. The most common ones, as you can imagine, are the forces of greed and aversion—desire and hatred are the typical impulses that embody this movement from ignorance.

Sankharas, if you'll remember from the aggregates, refers to actions in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. We look at bodily actions, we look at actions of speech, and we look at thoughts and emotions. These are all included in the range of sankharas.

So when ignorance is present in the mind, you can expect that impulses based on greed and aversion will arise. Or another way to say it is that craving will arise. Ajahn Sumedho put it succinctly when he said, "Ignorance complicates everything." And this is the flavor of these two links.

Here's a simple example of ignorance complicating things. This is a true story. A robber went into a bank and approached a teller, handing them a note that said, "Give me all your money, I have a gun." The teller complied. The robber took the money, drove away, and went home. When he arrived, the police were waiting at his front door. How did they catch him so quickly? The note was written on one of his bank deposit slips, which listed his address. Ignorance complicates everything.

When we act out of greed and aversion and hurt others, we might say we leave a karmic deposit slip with them, because in some way we end up hurting ourselves from that action. But as my friend Sylvia Boorstein says, "When we see clearly, we act impeccably." When wisdom is in the mind, when ignorance is weak, then our actions are clear. These impulses don't just run away with us.

On a personal level, we can understand these impulses and their impact. On a global level, we see that they are responsible for so much pain and suffering in the world—really all the pain and suffering in the world.

Two simple examples from our time. I'm sure you all remember the financial crisis that was underway when we started this retreat, whether you joined in September or November. The financial crisis was ongoing and came out of bad mortgage loans. I just read an example where a gardener in California making $14,000 a year was allowed to borrow money with no down payment to purchase a house worth $700,000. This is such an amazing example of greed. Why would a banker do that? Because they make money off the loan, then they repackage it, bundle it with other mortgages, and sell it to some financial institution who bundles it with other kinds of investments and sells it to investors. So the bank has lost its exposure in that transaction and passed the risk on to somebody else. It's just unfettered greed at work that brought this crisis into being.

And aversion or hatred—one news flash that I'm sure won't surprise you is that the terror attacks have not stopped in Iraq. Almost daily we read accounts of bombings, suicide bombings, and people being killed. It's just the naked force of hatred, unchecked by compassion or reason, acting out unhindered on that big stage.

So in small ways, through our own machinations of greed and aversion, and on a global level, through the massive destructions that happen in the world, ignorance is giving rise to impulses unchecked by wisdom. This is the dynamic, as Sally explained, in dependent origination that keeps us on the wheel of suffering. We'll go into it in a little more detail further on.

Let's talk a little bit more about this quality of ignorance and how it works. As I think you know from Sally's talk, ignorance is not about the lack of facts. It's not that you don't know who the president of Zimbabwe is or you don't know how to conjugate verbs in Latin. That's not the kind of unknowing we're talking about. It's not knowing, as the Buddha said, the Four Noble Truths. It's not understanding really what leads to suffering and what leads to happiness.

Just to remember these Four Noble Truths: the first says that we need to fully understand the truth of dukkha—fully understand the truth of dukkha. That means to see all of the manifestations in our lives of this quality of unsatisfactoriness. Because we are not liberated beings, we have not fully understood the truth of dukkha. Even though conceptually we may know the first noble truth, we haven't integrated that understanding, so we haven't fully understood it.

As a result, we haven't relinquished—this is the injunction of the second noble truth—we have not relinquished the cause of suffering, which is craving. We can look in our own minds and see: Yes, I can check that out. It's true. I haven't completely relinquished craving yet. If we had, we would also be fully enlightened.

So that means we haven't yet satisfied the third noble truth, which is to realize directly for ourselves the end of suffering and the end of craving. We haven't fully arrived there, and so we haven't yet completely practiced the way to the end of suffering of the Eightfold Path.

Even though we can conceptually understand the Four Noble Truths, we haven't yet embodied the fullness of all their implications. This is a core meaning of ignorance.

We haven't come to realize the Four Noble Truths fully. Another way ignorance is understood in the tradition is as not comprehending the three characteristics. We haven't fully appreciated the implications of impermanence. As with the Four Noble Truths, we

haven't completely integrated the implications of unsatisfactoriness, and we haven't fully absorbed the teaching of not-self. These continue to cloud our perceptions—the fact that we don't clearly see these three characteristics.

As a shorthand for ignorance, the understanding I return to again and again when contemplating this topic is that we haven't fully grokked the teaching of not-self. That's what I hold for myself personally as the core of ignorance: we haven't fully grokked not-self. We still believe in "I." We invest in "I." We put energy into it. We care for it.

When we see through this "I," our motivations fundamentally change. One thing you've likely noticed from observing your thoughts for four or ten weeks is that most of them concern "I"—and mostly they're about how we can make things better for this "I." That's what most of our thoughts are about. They're mostly expressions of self-centeredness and craving, and the motivations in our lives tend to reflect this. They center around how "I" can make things better for "I."

When our understanding changes, our motivation changes. As a simple example in practice terms, the quality of bodhicitta—sometimes translated as the awakening heart—is a wonderful thing to bring into dharma practice because it begins to make even our practice not completely self-centered.

Notice that we can take that same self-centered craving and apply it to practice, becoming focused on my suffering, my happiness, my progress on the path, my delusion, my release, my wisdom. We can approach practice with the same gaining mind we have in daily life.

This beautiful quality of bodhicitta offers a way to begin undoing that self-centeredness in our very approach to meditation practice. We bring in the reflection that we practice to liberate our own minds as a way to help liberate the minds of other beings. It's the aspiration to reach our own awakening in order to serve others—to help pull them out of suffering into their own awakening.

If we can make this even a small part of our motivation in practice, even just a tiny flicker, it shows how we can transform self-centeredness in our very approach to dharma practice.

I discovered this in an interesting way during a retreat where we made this wish part of every sitting. At the start of each session, we would say to ourselves or chant together, "May I awaken for the benefit of all sentient beings"—some formulation like that. Practicing this way, day after day as the retreat deepened, that aspiration sank into me.

Simultaneously, we were looking directly at the factor of ignorance and wisdom in the mind. I began to see, as I examined ignorance and wisdom back and forth, how this quality of wisdom is shared among all humans, among all sentient beings. This wisdom, which is part of our essential nature, has the ability to free us and lead us to the deepest happiness.

As I reflected on this alongside bodhicitta, something in my entire outlook shifted. Up to then, my practice had only been about wanting to remove the obscurations that veiled wisdom in this mind. But as I tuned into the fact that this same wisdom was available in every human mind—just covered over by layers of ignorance—I saw the whole endeavor could be held very differently.

The practice became: what I'd really like to do is remove the obscurations to wisdom wherever they're being obscured. Seeing through the separation of individual bodies and recognizing the commonality of this universal wisdom we all possess, the scope became much larger.

I offer this reflection for you to perhaps bring into your own practice: setting the intention regularly that we practice in order to bring all beings out of suffering and into awakening, accomplishing that first step through our own awakening.

This quality of ignorance—where we're fixated on the idea of self and act on it repeatedly—strengthens our self-centeredness and binds us to suffering. To investigate this, examine your experience when suffering is present. Look at times when you're struggling and ask: what's the mind like in that state?

Whenever there's suffering, there's some misunderstanding. If the Four Noble Truths had been penetrated with complete understanding, that suffering wouldn't be there. So whenever there's suffering, there's some level of delusion, confusion, not seeing clearly—some obscuration of wisdom.

What is it like when the mind is in that state? Is it peaceful? Is the mind quiet? Is everything settled? Typically not. The state of suffering is usually one of struggle where thoughts tend to swirl. There's often an upheaval of thoughts and emotions—trying to figure out what to do, how to escape this predicament, how to solve it, whether it will continue forever, how bad it is, judgments about ourselves.

As this whirlwind of thoughts and feelings moves through us, the tendency is to keep grasping onto different ones: "Let's try this..."

Maybe this is the way out. I'll investigate this solution. Maybe this will work. Because we don't know anything else. So that in itself is a good example of the combination of ignorance and the swirl of formations. When we're in a state of delusion, that swirl of formations is all we kind of have to go with. Until we learn meditation practice and we understand how to be with that swirl with mindfulness, then there's another option. But for the untrained mind, being landed in that kind of confusion and suffering just tends to generate more thinking and more emotions.

The Buddha said that typically, for most people, suffering results in bewilderment or search. Bewilderment or search. And the search can be wise or unwise. It can be a search for happiness through sense pleasures, or it can be a wise search for happiness through an authentic spiritual path. But this quality of bewilderment is something that most of us can relate to experiencing. When these hard times come along, one of the qualities tends to be this factor of confusion, of a sense of being lost, of being separated from home, of not being able to find peace or a resting place.

This bewilderment is another synonym for confusion or delusion. The Pali word is moha, and the literal meaning—this is the third of the kilesas: greed, aversion, and delusion—moha literally means stupefied. So you might just reflect on that as you're in this state of confusion. It feels kind of stupefying. We really don't know where to go next. And then all the activities of greed and aversion are kind of supported by this confusion.

You probably know that in Buddhist thinking, there are three personality types defined by greed, aversion, or delusion. Obviously, we all have all three, but as individuals, one or the other may predominate in our minds. So if greed is predominant, one could be called a greedy type, a desire type. If hatred or aversion is predominant, one could be described as an aversive type. If delusion is predominant of the three, one can be described as a deluded type. And then you can just look at how those personalities relate to the world to understand the mental effects of that particular kilesa.

What I find interesting is that all three of these are basically just different strategies for relating to suffering—the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. The greedy type relates by trying to bring more and more pleasure in. If something has a pleasant appearance, let's keep it close so that our moment-to-moment experience is filled up with pleasant things. That's the first strategy.

The aversive type looks at the world and sees what's threatening and tries to keep that at bay. So the aversive type perceives the unpleasant, threatening phenomena and tries to push those away or create separation from the unpleasant. That's the second strategy.

The third type, the delusion type, tries to create a fog around themselves so that nothing very much is felt. The pleasant is not felt so directly, and the unpleasant is not felt directly. Rather, everything's happening at a distance, so it doesn't touch very deeply.

If you get delusion types talking about their life experiences, it can be quite funny at times. Sally runs a program in California called the Dedicated Practitioners Program. It's a combination of study, meditation, and experiential exercises, and as part of the study, she gets groups of people to come up on stage and talk about what it's like to be a greedy type, an aversive type, or a deluded type. And the comments are funniest with the deluded types.

One of the teachers at the retreat—I'm not going to name names—was self-confessed as a classic deluded type and gave an example where his wife asked him to pick up a shopping bag and take it back to the store because he was going by, to exchange it or return it because it wasn't what she had wanted. In order to jog his memory, because she was very familiar with his deluded type nature, she put the bag in front of the front door so that he couldn't get out the door without tripping over it. So he wakes up in the morning in a little bit of a hurry to get going, walks to the front door, gently picks up the bag, puts it to the side of the door, opens the door, and walks out. That's a deluded type. They just don't get the message.

Sharon Salzberg has told in many talks about her delusive temperament. One story that I love—I'll mention briefly in a very condensed form—she was teaching a three-month course one year and had driven to her home the night before and left her car in the driveway. She got up the next morning to come over to sit and do interviews. As she walked over, she didn't see her car and thought, "That's funny. Didn't I park my car here last night?" So that's the first sign of delusion: not being able to quite remember if you parked your car there or not. She came over and walked in the building and saw someone who might know where her car was and said to them, "I can't find my car this morning. It's not where I left it last night."

And his first question to her, knowing that she was a deluded type, was, "Are you sure?" And she said, "Well, the car is pretty big. I think I would have seen it if it was there." But his very raising the question caused her to doubt whether the car was actually there or not. And that's another movement of the deluded mind. It turned out that somebody else had borrowed her car without telling her. So everything was okay.

In delusion, we don't really stay in touch with our own experience, so we don't stay in touch with others' experience. And that's why delusion becomes a support for actions of greed and aversion. There's an element of denial at work. We don't see the impact of the wanting and disliking in our own mind, so we don't see the impact of our actions on others that are affected by it.

How to Come Out of Delusion

The simple practice of mindfulness is the direct path out of delusion. It's said that the proximate cause of non-delusion is wise attention. So every moment of connecting clearly to something that's real in the present moment is undoing the delusive tendency of mind. So that's one of the powers of this mindfulness practice.

But I want to look a little more deeply into the interaction between ignorance and sankaras. And I want to do it through looking at what we could call three levels of obscuration in our experience. How did we get to where we are? How did we get in this situation?

Developmentally, it could be described as something like this. At some point in the past, who knows when, we lost touch with the mind's essential nature, which you could call emptiness or you could call nirvana—that which is beyond change. We lost touch with that. And instead, we substituted for the direct seeing of emptiness; we substituted the sense of self as the core of what we take to be our identity.

When we create a sense of self in a world that is manifold, we also create a sense of other. So this is the fundamental, or you could say the first level of obscuration. We lose touch with our essential nature of emptiness, and we create a fictitious duality between self and other. And in that, we establish the I.

Once we've established the I, then we have to defend it against the other. Or we use the other to feed it, nourish it. On the one hand, it sets up protection from what is unpleasant or threatening. On the other hand, it sets up a wanting to feed or nourish with what's pleasant.

Of course, the problem with that is that this activity is unending. Once we've established the I, it can never be fully protected once and for all, and it can never be fully fed once and for all. So we have to keep recreating, sustaining this sense of I. This basic ignorance and the fictitious creation of self and other embroils us in an unending activity of protecting and feeding. So this is the first level of obscuration: the false sense of self and thereby also other.

The second layer of obscuration that comes up is as we engage in this ongoing activity, this endless activity, we're developing it through these twin forces of greed and aversion. So on top of the basic ignorance come the feeding and protecting activities of the mind.

Once we get involved in this approach to the world, which seeks to feed and protect through liking and disliking, that becomes the basis for all the other emotions. All the afflictive emotions—pride and fear and jealousy and loneliness and grief and anger—all come out of different combinations of greed, aversion, and this basic ignorance.

As we involve ourselves, we commit to this feeding and sustaining project, we start to generate all the afflictive emotions. In one Buddhist tradition, they say there are 84,000 of these. But that was a long time ago. Now there are at least 168,000, I'm sure.

All of this is built up on having constructed an identity as self. And you take a look at the way that normal life is experienced by most human beings across the globe, and you see that the content of their minds is filled with this kind of activity. It's filled with this unending flow of self-referencing thoughts and afflictive emotions over and over and over again. And this is the state that we find ourselves in when we sit down in meditation and start to take a look. That's why one teacher said, "Self-knowledge is not good news."

So this is the second level of obscuration. This swirl of emotions and grasping and clinging creates a sense of confusion in the mind, and we can no longer see clearly. As you know, when greed and aversion are active, we don't see things the way they are.

But then this leads to the third level of veil or obscuration. As we're tormented by these afflictive emotions generated in response to the world, the other, we start to act in ways that are unskillful. When we act out of greed without considering it, we harm others. When we act out of aversion or hatred without considering it, we harm others. These forms of harm create another layer of obscuration, which we could call the obscuration of actions or karmic obscurations. When we've been involved in unskillful actions for some time, they create an additional clouding in the mind.

In the first place, we're generally not very happy to admit what we've done. We're not willing to see the effect on ourselves and see the effect on others. So there comes another layer of denial or delusion about the truth of our own actions and their impact on other people.

This is the fuller picture of where most of us are when we enter meditation. We have the initial veil of losing our essential nature and the misunderstanding of self and other. Built on that, we have these formations of greed and aversion and the manifestation of

the afflictive emotions and the confusion they bring. And on top of that, we have the layer of unskillful actions that we may have committed in our life when we didn't really understand.

Because in hurting others, of course we end up hurting ourselves. Deep down in the unconscious, there's some part of ourselves that knows that duality has never been true. There's some part of the mind that knows that self and other is a false distinction. And so we know on some level that hurting others is hurting ourself. And it's certainly true karmically.

I want to read from a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya. This is Majjhima 46, where the Buddha draws out the effects of these unskillful actions. And if you look closely, unskillful actions will come either from aversion or from greed. These are the two motivating forces that lead to unskillfulness.

Some obvious examples coming from aversion are killing beings who have annoyed us—a simple example of just squashing an insect, a bigger example of the violence of murder and killing of human beings that is in the world coming out of hatred. On a more mundane level in our daily lives, angry speech comes out of this motivation of aversion and is one of the most hurtful things that goes on in our daily lives.

The Buddha talked about these kinds of actions as painful now and ripening in the future as pain, and they're supported by the ignorance that doesn't understand how this works—the false sense of duality, the distancing ourselves, the disconnection of delusion that doesn't feel what's going on in our own mind and doesn't feel the impact on others.

"Now bhikkhus, one who is ignorant, not knowing this way of undertaking things that is painful now and ripens in the future as pain, does not understand as it actually is: 'This way of undertaking things is painful now and ripens in the future as pain.' Not knowing it, not understanding it as it actually is, the ignorant one cultivates it and does not avoid it. Because they do so, unwished-for, undesired, disagreeable things increase for them and wished-for, desired, agreeable things diminish. Why is that? That is what happens to one who does not see."

So then he continues with a simile of pain now ripening in pain later: "Bhikkhus, suppose there were a bitter gourd mixed with poison, and a man came who wanted to live, not to die, who wanted pleasure and recoiled from pain, and they told him: 'Good man, this bitter gourd is mixed with poison. Drink from it if you want. As you drink from it, its color, smell, and taste will not agree with you, and after drinking from it, you will come to death or deadly suffering.' Then he drank from it without reflecting and

did not relinquish it. As he drank from it, its color, smell, and taste did not agree with him, and after drinking from it, he came to death or deadly suffering. Similar to that, I say, is the way of undertaking things that is painful now and ripens in the future as pain."

This is one way that we do unskillful actions based in hatred or aversion. There's another way that we do unskillful actions which is based in greed. Some simple or obvious examples of that are overindulgence in drugs or alcohol and violating the precept on sexual misconduct drawn out of sexual desire.

So the Buddha talked about this as actions that are pleasant now but ripen later in pain. And here's the reading from the same sutta on this quality:

"Now bhikkhus, one who is ignorant, not knowing this way of undertaking things that is pleasant now and ripens in the future as pain, does not understand as it actually is: 'This way of undertaking things is pleasant now and ripens in the future as pain.' Not knowing it, not understanding it as it actually is, the ignorant one cultivates it and does not avoid it. Because they do so, unwished-for things increase for them and wished-for things diminish. Why is that? That is what happens to one who does not see."

And he offers a simile for this way of undertaking also: "Suppose there were a bronze cup of beverage possessing a good color, smell, and taste, but it was mixed with poison. And a man came who wanted to live, not to die, who wanted pleasure and recoiled from pain. And they told him: 'Good man, this bronze cup of beverage possesses a good color, smell, and taste, but it is mixed with poison. Drink from it if you want. As you drink from it, its color, smell, and taste will agree with you. But after drinking from it, you will come to death or deadly suffering.' Then he drank from it without reflecting and did not relinquish it. As he drank from it, its color, smell, and taste agreed with him. But after drinking from it, he came to death or deadly suffering. Similar to that, I say, is the way of undertaking things that is pleasant now and ripens in the future as pain."

This is the way that ignorance compounds with greed and hatred and leads us into greater suffering, greater delusion, greater confusion.

This is sort of summed up in a quotation which I've seen attributed to the Buddha, but I can't find in the suttas anywhere. But whether the Buddha said it or not, it has a lot of wisdom: "Thoughts give rise to intentions, which express through actions, which are repeated in habits, which harden into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings."

So what we see is in these three levels of obscuration, there's the core layer of self, there are the afflictive emotions built on top of that, and then expressing through unskillful actions on top of that. And this is what creates the bondage that untrained human beings find themselves in.

I hope you'll get from this accounting the kind of sense of the restless swirl of energy that comes out of ignorance. It swirls internally, and through this greed and aversion in relation to the world, we mix it up with all the elements of the world and swirl it with our actions as well.

This is another quote from the Buddha: "This samsara, the round of death and rebirth, this samsara is without discernible beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, clouded by ignorance and driven by craving." So these two go together—the not seeing and then the craving, the wanting—that keep us on this wheel, that keep us bound.

So how does the path work? I think this is really fascinating. The path works from the outside in. It starts at the outer layer of unskillful actions and then moves to the layer of afflictive emotions and then moves to the false creation of self down to the essential nature of emptiness. And this is reflected in the way the gradual path is commonly described as the practices of sila, samadhi, and paññña—ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom.

As we enter the path, the first thing we do is learn the five precepts. Annie's going to talk about this in more detail, I think, tomorrow night. The beautiful thing is that the Buddha has laid out a very clear directive for us to clear away this outer layer of karmic obscurations, the obscurations brought on by unskillful conduct. As those begin to thin, that is a level of development that's referred to as purification of conduct, and that's the area of sila. I won't go into more detail on that tonight, but just understand that it works on the formations of body and speech. That's the area of the precepts, the practice that starts to undo those knots of karmic obscuration.

But then we come through that and we still find internally the mind is stirred up with the afflictive emotions and the reactive impulses of greed and aversion. So the tool to work with that is samadhi. Through moment-to-moment attention to something that's actually happening, we undo the delusive nature of mind by connecting with reality as it is, and we collect the attention in the present moment, stepping outside of these forces that are looking to feed and sustain with pleasure and protection.

Stepping outside those, collecting the mind, the mind attains a stability in the present moment and a level of peacefulness. We come out of that swirl of the afflictive emotions and the reactive formations of greed and aversion. We discover that peace is available in the present moment. And it's the development of this moment-to-moment mindfulness resulting in a collected mind that starts to deliver us from the veil of the second layer of emotional affliction.

Then as that weakens—as the Buddha said, "tranquility is for the abandoning of desire"—as the force of desire weakens and we come into the present moment, then we're able to see more clearly. The mind is not all swirled up. We've worked against the grain of delusion to see things the way they are. And that starts to open the door for wisdom.

So the third factor of the path, paññā, or wisdom, starts to undo this fundamental ignorance grounded in the belief in self. We start to see with our wisdom eye all things are coming and going, not just within the body, which we take to be me or mine, but outside as well. We see that events inside and events outside are all held within the same kind of consciousness—consciousness of external, consciousness of internal, are all happening in just the same field.

So this sense of a belief in the absolute division between inner and outer, between self and other, starts to get chipped away at. We start to see all phenomena coming and going on their own, none of them to be taken as I or mine. And this was pointed to in that beautiful teaching to Bahiya where the Buddha said, when you see in this way and you don't establish yourself in inner or outer, you will be neither here nor there nor in between.

So the mind starts to become clear of this fundamental delusion of self and other, starts to emerge from the basic level of obscuration or ignorance. This level is called the purification of view. I think I forgot to mention the second stage is called the purification of mind. So, sila deals with purification of conduct, samadhi deals with purification of mind, and paññā deals with purification of view.

Now we understand things arise and pass on their own. There is no one at the center to whom they're all happening. And as we understand that, a great letting go takes place. We see that the world is essentially uncontrollable. The strategies that we had for just collecting to ourselves continuous pleasure, pushing away from ourselves anything that is unpleasant, is basically futile. In the end, that kind of control doesn't work.

And we see that the aftereffect of being so stirred up in this ceaseless self-referencing activity is basically more trouble than it's worth. We feel the burden of it, the pain, the exhaustion of constantly trying to feed and defend this poor self, this poor isolated self.

But we find in ourselves the capacity for trust, for relaxation, for surrender, with a full presence of what's true, not denying any of the arisings or any of the passings. And this is why the Buddha said that vipassana is for the abandoning of ignorance. We see the delusion of self and other. But this is not the final step.

Wisdom has to take one more step before it's complete. And that is the penetration to the third noble truth.

The Buddha taught dependent origination to show the creation of suffering with ignorance as its root, but he taught it even more importantly to show the end of suffering. As he said, with the end of ignorance comes the end of formations. With the end of formations, the other links also cease, and with that, so does the final link of suffering.

So not only does ignorance cease formations, but the cessation of ignorance leads to the cessation of impulses, especially these untrained impulses of greed and aversion.

You can take a look at this in your meditation experience. What is it like when the mind is filled with wisdom? When you're truly in a state of understanding, seeing the impermanent nature of things, seeing the selfless nature, seeing the unsatisfactory nature—what are the qualities of mind at that point?

People describe it in different ways. There's some sense of peace. There's some sense of spaciousness. There's a sense of non-clinging, a sense of release or freedom, a degree of courage, a willingness to open, acceptance, loving-kindness, joy, interest. All these are qualities of the wisdom mind, or you might say the awakened mind.

But for the awakening to really take place, there has to be the penetration to the third noble truth. The third noble truth says that there is an end to suffering reached through the end of craving, and this is equated to nibbana.

This is from Sariputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples: "The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion—this is nibbana."

Or as the Buddha put it: "This is the peaceful, this is the sublime—that is the stilling of all formations." That is, in Pali, *sabba sankhara samatha*. All sankharas go to tranquility. "The stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

The Buddha's teaching on the third noble truth was: this third noble truth is to be realized. That means his instructions to us as practitioners is: your directive is to realize in your own practice the truth of the end of suffering, the end of craving, that is nibbana.

In our tradition, this direct realization of the element of nibbana is what's considered an enlightenment moment. And when such a moment takes place, it's said that one has entered the stream. And then with further practice, further realization, full awakening is possible. In fact, it's said to be inevitable at a later time.

So the key of this transformation is the direct realization of this unconditioned element, or nibbana. Sally and I were listening to teachings from the Dalai Lama this summer, and in the Tibetan path, he formulated it in a very similar way. He called it the direct realization of the ultimate nature of reality. Because nibbana is the one element that is unchanging in our makeup, that is what's viewed in the tradition as the ultimate nature of things. So it is the direct realization of that that constitutes this awakening.

Now the Buddha, when he described this quality of stream entry in the suttas, tended to put it in this language. He'd say of one for whom that event had just taken place: "The spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose. All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation."

So in our tradition, this realization of nibbana has become associated with this term cessation. And most accounts of enlightenment report that some kind of cessation happens with stream entry. At that moment, some kind of cessation happens.

So what ceases? At the very least, sankharas cease forming. There is the stilling of all formations. *Sabba sankhara samatha*. All sankharas go to tranquility.

In most accounts, there is the sense that the sankharas have ceased so completely that there is no possibility of disturbance in the enlightenment moment, no possibility of the mind being disturbed because the sankharas are so completely absent. And that's why this kind of experience is often described with a sense of unshakable peace, unshakable peace.

This peace is generally reported by those who have discovered it as the highest happiness, because the mind is beyond any need of feeding or protection, because it is dwelling in this peace that is beyond comprehension, beyond possibility of disturbance.

Some beings have realized this peace. Some beings have found it. And some beings can transmit it.

Some years ago, I went over to Nepal to spend some time practicing with one of my Tibetan teachers, a young Rinpoche there named Soktse Rinpoche. And while I was practicing there, he had a visitor who was one of the most esteemed masters in his lineage. His name was Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche.

Rinpoche had taken up residence there but was not teaching. But my teacher said if I'd like to meet him, he would make it possible. And I said, "No, I don't need to meet him."

I was sort of thinking, you've seen one Rinpoche, you've seen them all. Then I reconsidered. And I said, you know, if it would be okay, I would like to meet Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche. And my teacher said, okay, I'll arrange it.

So I was brought into his presence. He was sitting up ready to receive me. He was with his wife and a couple of attendants, and my teacher was there. We just had some chat through my teacher who translated. I was actually offering him a dana on behalf of a friend who knew him.

The moment came for me to offer the dana. So I went up and made three bows to him. I held the envelope out with my hands and reached up for him to take it. And as I reached up, I looked him in the eye.

As I looked him in the eye, something shifted. He seemed to go into his meditative state, and what I felt was his eyes moved slightly apart, and then everything stopped. He became completely still inside.

Looking into his eyes at that moment, I felt it wasn't accurate to say his mind had gone still. Rather, there was no mind there to go still or active. And as I was looking into that stillness, I just felt drawn further and further in, and I felt actually like I was falling into the unconditioned. I was falling into the stillness of the unconditioned.

And then something came back in me, which was a sense of self. I got nervous. I felt too exposed somehow. He was completely unguarded, undefended, looking right into the center. And I felt exposed in his eyes. And it broke the spell for me. I must have drawn back, and then he went back into a more normal look, and the moment was over. I felt if I could have just gone on looking a little longer.

I'll just close with this quotation from the Buddha on Nibbana:

"One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit for a minute, please.

There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. With the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of formations.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 18

Kamma and the End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines one of Buddhism's most fundamental yet misunderstood teachings: kamma (Pali) or karma (Sanskrit). Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya and Dhammapada, he clarifies that kamma means 'action with volition' (cetanā) - not mere physical action, but intentional acts of body, speech, and mind rooted in either wholesome states (generosity, loving-kindness, wisdom) or unwholesome roots (greed, aversion, delusion).

Armstrong addresses common Western misconceptions about karma, emphasizing that it's not about 'deserving' suffering or avoiding compassionate action. He explores six ways karmic results manifest: before, during, and after actions; in how others respond to us; in creating mental habits; and in mysterious future ways beyond our perception. The talk integrates karma with the teaching of anattā (not-self), explaining how our ever-changing mind-stream carries karmic patterns while remaining fundamentally empty of fixed essence.

The discussion culminates in exploring how the Noble Eightfold Path itself represents a karmic process that leads to the complete end of kamma - the state of the arahant who no longer generates new volitional actions while potentially still experiencing results of past karma. This profound teaching reveals karma not as cosmic punishment, but as the moral fabric woven into existence itself, offering both the means of liberation and the path beyond all conditioning.

The talk tonight is on karma and the end of karma.

The Dalai Lama was once asked by someone, if you were teaching Westerners, would it be more important to teach them about emptiness or about karma? He said that as important as emptiness is in the Buddhist teachings, it would be more important to teach Westerners about karma. So I thought we shouldn't have a three month course go by without some discussion of this topic, which is very central to the Buddha's teachings.

The word has entered our Western vocabulary, but it's not very well understood. Most Westerners have a difficult relationship with karma when they first encounter it. In the talk this evening, I'd like to suggest that karma is something you can really cozy up to. In fact, it may become one of your best friends on the path. We don't really need to hold it at arm's length as we understand it properly.

I have to say as a preface that I cannot verify from my direct experience the range of the Buddha's teachings on this topic, and most people I know are in the same position. So tonight, I'm not going to tell you what I know personally about karma, as much as what the Buddha said about it, because he said that he could see these things from his direct experience. I just want to share with you his teachings on karma. I am also not trying to get you to believe, although I think it would be greatly to your benefit. But I just want you to know what the Buddha said and let you find your own relationship to these teachings.

This evening, I'm going to touch on four main points in relation to karma: the meaning of the word, the way results are generated, the relationship between karma and not-self, and the end of karma.

**What is Karma?*

This is the Sanskrit expression of the word. In Pali, it's known as kamma. I might use either of those. It's another example of a simple Indian word that the Buddha took and gave a special meaning to.

In these Indian languages, karma or kamma simply means action, nothing more. In the time of the Buddha, all the different philosophical schools around northern India had something important to say about action. Either it mattered or it didn't matter. There would be consequences or there wouldn't be consequences. It's predetermined or it's freely chosen. There were all these different views.

The Buddha contributed a unique and original perspective on the term. The way he defined it, he said that it means action with volition, or you could say intention. This is the term cetanā that we introduced as a meditation subject toward the end of the instructions a few weeks ago.

This is a quote from the Anguttara Nikaya: "Volition, O bhikkhus, is what I call action. For through volition one performs the action."

We could talk about different synonyms for this word volition: intention, motivation, urge, will, impulse. You get the feeling that it's the kind of energy from the mind that drives the action of thought or speech or body. This is really the key.

In the Buddha's explanation, what makes an action wholesome or unwholesome is the wholesome or unwholesome quality of the volition from which it comes. Actions that are rooted in greed, aversion, and confusion—which are called the roots of the unwholesome—express themselves in unwholesome actions. Actions that are rooted in their opposites—generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom, which are called the roots of the wholesome—express themselves through wholesome actions.

It's not the action per se that is to be judged wholesome or unwholesome. It's the volition from which it comes. For example, if a baby moves in their sleep and knocks over a candle and the candle burns the house down, the baby has no unwholesome volition in that. So there's no karmic consequence, even though you wouldn't really like to have your house burned down. The baby did nothing wrong.

You could take an action like cutting somebody with a knife and ask, is that wholesome or unwholesome? If it's done by a surgeon as an act of compassion, it can be very wholesome. If it's done by a robber out of hatred, then it's very unwholesome. It's not the act per se, but the intention behind it that causes it to be seen as wholesome or unwholesome.

An interesting point in this very definition of action with volition—which is most of the action that we do—is that there's a moral weight to the action that's intrinsic to its volition. This is an important point that we'll come back to later, and a departure from the other schools in India at the time.

Action can take place in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. In this understanding, thoughts and emotions also can have volitional impulses as their basis.

Fortunately, the Buddha was very clear about what kinds of actions have wholesome qualities and what kinds have unwholesome. This aligns very much with the talk that Annie gave last week on sīla. To put it in a slightly different context, he identified ten actions as unwholesome.

Three actions of body are considered unwholesome: killing, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct. Four actions of speech are considered unwholesome: lying, harsh speech, malicious speech about another person, and idle chatter or gossip. And three actions of mind are considered unwholesome: covetousness, ill will, and wrong view.

This is very interesting. The Buddha said that misunderstanding the nature of reality gives us an unwholesome basis from which to relate to life. So misunderstanding or wrong view is a mental unwholesome action.

The ten wholesome actions are simply to refrain from the ten unwholesome. This gives us very clear guidelines for our conduct in daily life, just as Annie described in her talk. And I think especially because in another week we'll be heading back into daily life, this is a very important time to turn our reflections to action in the world and what will conduce to our welfare and what will not conduce to our welfare.

The Buddha described one who takes great care with their actions as enjoying what he called the bliss of blamelessness. That is, when one reviews one's conduct in the world, if it has been aligned with the precepts and with the ten wholesome actions, one enjoys a certain kind of freedom from regret and freedom from remorse that he called the bliss of blamelessness. And I've always been interested to what degree this quality, this impeccability of conduct, can be developed.

I was very interested to read the account of an interview with the Dalai Lama that took place a few years ago. The person conducting the interview was Oprah Winfrey. I really appreciate Oprah for bringing wholesome teachings about well-being and healing and spirituality to a very wide audience. I don't know anybody in the world who hits such a wide audience with such good teachings as she does. So I very much bow in her general direction.

This is an account of the interview that she held with the Dalai Lama. Oprah started by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

The Dalai Lama continued, "Regarding service to Tibet, service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

All that stands between us and the Dalai Lama is sixteen lifetimes of practice. So we're getting started.

This is the potential in the bliss of blamelessness—not to have any regrets in one's life.

So this is the basic meaning of karma: looking closely at our actions and seeing the intentions that they spring from. Then the other part of the teaching is that the kinds of actions we do lead to certain results in our life. And the basic understanding is that when we act from a wholesome intention, that brings wholesome results back into our life. When we act from an unwholesome intention, that brings unwholesome results back into our life or unhappiness.

This is from the Dhammapada, a famous quotation near the beginning: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief."

Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable. This is the general statement of the teaching on karma: speak with a pure mind and happiness results, or act with an impure mind and unhappiness results. This truth holds whether our aim is simple human happiness—cultivated by qualities like generosity, loving-kindness, and compassion—or the highest happiness, developed through the factors of the Eightfold Path. In either case, these are our karmic directions.

This basic understanding is gaining ground in our wider culture. A few years ago, I was teaching a class at Juvenile Hall in San Mateo, California, to a group of teenagers—young people under eighteen who were in jail awaiting trial on charges like assault, grand theft, and murder. As part of the class, I felt it important to teach them about karma because of its crucial bearing on our welfare. I began presenting the topic as the study of how we can find happiness.

"Do you all have some feel for this teaching on karma?" I asked.

One young man replied, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around?"

"Yes, that's it," I said. He had it. He already grasped that concept. There wasn't much more I needed to say, and there wasn't much resistance to the basic idea.

In the Tibetan system, the phrases for the Brahmaviharas are expressed partially in terms of karma. The four immeasurables in the Tibetan tradition include these lines for metta and compassion: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." That's the metta phrase. The compassion phrase: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." Here the metta and compassion wishes have been joined with the teaching on karma to illuminate how they arise.

What fascinates me about this teaching is that it doesn't matter if you believe in it or not. It doesn't matter if you know the teaching or not. It doesn't matter if your religion believes in it or not, and it doesn't matter if your culture believes in it or not. These teachings describe a universal law that operates whether we wish it to happen or know if it's happening—it happens anyway. Much of the growth in the path comes through developing confidence in this teaching, learning to trust somewhat in this law. Do we trust that impeccable conduct really leads to happiness?

There's a beautiful story that illustrates this trust. It concerns one of the most remarkable monks in our tradition I've had the chance to meet—a Cambodian monk named Maha Gosananda. Maha Gosananda became the patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism after the time of the Khmer Rouge. Perhaps the only reason he survived the Khmer Rouge was that he was practicing outside Cambodia while they were in power. Sixteen of his immediate family members were killed in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime, but he was practicing in Thailand at the time and escaped that period of mass killings of the monks.

Around 1980, the Khmer Rouge were starting to be displaced from power, but many refugees remained on the Thai border. Maha Gosananda began living in the refugee camps as a way to help heal the country and create a path for people to return home. While there, he taught, becoming well-loved and well-respected. From a simple hut in the refugee camp, he would teach on Sunday mornings, and hundreds of people—sometimes thousands—would gather outside his hut for the teaching.

One of his main teaching devices was to have people chant in Pali another verse from early in the Dhammapada: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is the ancient and eternal law."

Can you imagine having the courage to teach this to people whose families had been killed, whose fellow citizens had been murdered mercilessly by the government in power? Many supporters of that government were still alive and in positions of local influence in Cambodian villages and towns. Yet Maha Gosananda wanted to unify the country. How could he heal? His message was that we can only heal through love. That's trust in karma—trust in the impeccability of conduct and speech.

A footnote to this story: there were Khmer Rouge affiliates still in the refugee camp who didn't appreciate the reconciliation work Maha Gosananda was trying to carry out. They threatened his life. When word reached some of the Westerners in the camp, they approached Maha Gosananda and said, "It's not safe for you here anymore. We're going to give you money to take a plane to Paris where you can live in exile and your life will be safe."

Maha Gosananda had been teaching this prayer from the Dhammapada—about reconciliation through love—through pamphlets. He had printed many, many pamphlets containing the Pali phrases that the Cambodians would chant along with him during the Sunday morning teachings. Essentially, they were asking him to give all of that up.

So Mahagosananda said, "OK, you give me the money, I'll go to Bangkok and do as you say." So they gave him the money—several hundred dollars to fly to Paris to safety. He went to Bangkok, printed up thousands more of the pamphlets, came back to the refugee camp and handed them out to even more people and continued his teaching: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love." That was his trust in the Dhamma.

So our equanimity practice, which we introduced this week, is built on this understanding that our happiness or unhappiness comes from our past actions, their wholesome or unwholesome qualities. The traditional phrase goes like this: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their past actions more than on my wishes for them."

The Buddha actually stated this even more strongly in the text. This is from the Majjhima Nikaya: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions." Here you understand that the word he was using is karma. "Beings are owners of their karma, heirs of their karma. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or bad, of that they will be the heirs."

I've found that Westerners often have a strong resistance to this idea, so I want to explain a little about the sense of it and why sometimes I think there's a misunderstanding. First, for Americans at least, it conflicts with some notion we have about democracy. Those of you outside of America may not know that the beginning of our Declaration of Independence says—and I'm paraphrasing slightly—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all persons are created equal." So there's something about this notion of fundamental equality that seems to people to conflict with the teaching of karma, as though out of this fundamental equality, everyone should be equally happy. And so from this point of view, the teaching on karma can seem cold, uncaring, or even cruel.

But I think one of the misunderstandings is this: The teaching on karma doesn't mean that we think beings deserve to suffer. That's not part of it. There's no deserving anywhere. And I'm very convinced that if the Buddha could have reached into everybody's heart and plucked out the seed of suffering, he would have done that instantly. I don't think there's any wish on the Buddha's part or on any serious practitioner's part that people deserve to suffer.

Think about the story of Angulimala. He had killed 999 people and strung their fingers in a bracelet around his neck. He was in the forest and tried to kill the Buddha as his thousandth victim. Did the Buddha think that he deserved to suffer? No. He taught Angulimala the Dharma. He helped him to practice and understand. Angulimala soon became enlightened and his suffering was ended. This is the work of compassion.

But the fact is that the teaching of karma is just a law in the Buddha's view. Expecting to do an unwholesome action and not have a result of suffering would be like expecting the law of gravity to be suspended. It would be like expecting an apple to be plucked from a tree and not fall to the ground. There's just no way to arrest the law of gravity. There's no way to arrest the law of karma. But that doesn't mean there's a deserving in it. There's not a punishing attitude in the law of karma.

Sometimes we also may think that this is an excuse for not caring. You know, we look at someone who's suffering and we go through this rationale: "Oh, they're suffering. That must be their karma. Therefore, it's their fault. So it's not my problem." And we could think it could be used as an excuse for not taking action or not caring. Again, that's not the way it's meant. This is called indifference and it's the near enemy of equanimity.

The Dharma is about unfolding compassion. So when we see somebody suffering, it doesn't matter what the cause is. It doesn't matter whether the cause is an external cause, a physical cause, a mental cause, a karmic cause. Compassion wants to alleviate

suffering. Of course, to alleviate effectively, we have to understand the cause, but it does not come with a judgment that says you should be suffering, therefore I'm not going to intervene or help.

If in doing the equanimity meditation you find this tendency coming to mind—oh, that person's suffering is from their own karma, therefore it's not my problem, I don't care—then that equanimity needs to be suffused more with metta and compassion. It's an unripe equanimity, an incomplete equanimity that's slid to its near enemy. So in this way, the Brahmaviharas help to balance one another out. Compassion has to go along with equanimity.

The fruits of action, or the results of action, you might say, can be seen in at least six different ways. So I want to run through some of those.

First way is before we do an action, we get a feeling for its tone. So if we're thinking of doing something lovely, beautiful, coming out of metta or generosity, before we do it, as we're considering doing it, we feel good. So even before we do the act, it brings an uplift to us. Similarly, if we're thinking about doing something unskillful, take a look inside. As we get more sensitive, something feels kind of creepy about it. If you tune into it, there's a quality.

Not long ago—I work on a lot of committees and a board at Spirit Rock, teacher groups and so forth, and we have lots of discussions and debates about how to run the center—we were having a discussion on something and I'd put out some viewpoint or other. And somebody was taking the opposite viewpoint and replied in an email to me that I found not only disagreeing with me, but disrespectful. I don't mind if people disagree with me, but when it's disrespectful, then I kind of get stirred up about it.

And I noticed my first impulse—very first impulse—was sort of happily, I'll forward this email to the other members of the committee. So I won't say anything against the person, but I'll show them, you know, the unskillful attitude from this other person who disagrees with my view. And I saw that, and I was sitting with that for a minute. I didn't hit send, and I saw that was the motivation, and I couldn't send it. So I just didn't send it. I can't even remember if I replied to the original email or not, but I very consciously made the decision not to send that because it just didn't feel right. So before we act, we can feel the influence.

During the act, we feel the result. When you're being generous with somebody, tune into how it feels. When you're expressing love to somebody, tune into how that feels. It feels great to give. So in the very moment of doing a wholesome act, you feel the wholesome effect of it. Similarly, when we're doing something that is going to hurt somebody

else, inside there's some degree of pain that's going along with it. Maybe it's coming out of pain in the first place. And we can feel the pain even as we do it. Something that doesn't feel right, doesn't feel good.

Our friend Sylvia Borstein has this nice line that's helpful to remember: Anyone causing great pain is himself in great pain. And that's helpful to remember as a source of compassion.

In the future, after we've done an action and we remember our past actions, we can feel good about that. And that's why in the metta practice, we very often encourage us all to reflect on our good actions as we enter metta for ourselves. Because when we tune into our own goodness, it makes it easier for the metta for ourselves to arise. Or if we've harmed people in the past, often in retreat those memories will come up clearly and we'll feel that sense of remorse or guilt about those past actions. So that's the third way.

A fourth way is that the way that we act toward others kind of comes back to us in the way they relate to us. If we relate to other people out of friendship and warmth and affection and generosity, then people like to see us coming. And they kind of open their hearts and their minds to us, and they want to receive us. So our actions have created an atmosphere that forms the relationship that we're held in. But if we act to people out of anger, frustration, irritation, impatience, and judgment, then people aren't so keen to see us coming. And we may find as we approach people, they turn away or close off to us. So again, the results of our actions in relationship get mirrored back in others' responses.

The fifth way that our actions influence us in the future is in creating habitual states of mind. When we generate wholesome states of mind again and again and again, that becomes the way the mind inclines. If we generate unwholesome states of mind again and again and again, that becomes the way our mind inclines.

So take a look at this as you sit on your cushion. One question that always interests me when I'm sitting or when I come to physical stillness is, why does my mind move at all? Does it need to? Most of the time there's not a real need, but it does. Why is it moving?

And then where does it go? Where does the mind commonly go when it moves? What does it dwell on? Often we'll see it's drawn to those places where we've invested in the past—where we've invested in people or outcomes or situations or money or pleasures or pains. It will go where we've put our volitional energy.

This is from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, then their mind will incline to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then their mind will incline to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

So as we act, we are wearing a groove in the mind that the mind will settle into in the future. This is the fifth kind of outcome from present actions.

The sixth is the one that people question. It seems from what the Buddha said that our actions have results in the future in mysterious ways that we really cannot see or understand. These are the ways that we can't verify from our individual insight or experience—some of the complicated and intricate workings of karma. How is it that a life of virtue brings happiness? I don't know all the details of it. We can see some of the ways in those first five. But how does that work completely? I don't know. But the Buddha said that they do come back in ways that we normally can't foresee or tell, in complicated and mysterious ways.

It's kind of interesting when you tune into this level of the teaching of karma—you understand that what the Buddha was painting is a picture of the universe in which morality is woven into the very fabric of the nature of beings. That wholesome actions bring wholesome results is essentially a moral statement. Immoral conduct brings unhappy results—that's a moral statement. This was something that really amazed me when I started to tune into it and reflect on it. Morality is an essential part of the universe of sentient beings. It's inescapable.

To me, this became the heartful view. I wouldn't want to live in a universe that was amoral. Finding that I live in a universe of which morality is an integral part is, to me, a much more heartful way to approach life. It makes me care more about my conduct and the underlying intention. For me, this understanding warms up the universe. It's not a cold or immoral or heartless view at all. It brings a great sense of heart to the very fabric of this world that we live in.

But the Buddha said in many ways we can't figure out the details of how karma unfolds in these subtle ways. In fact, he described it as one of the four imponderables. The Buddha said there are four things that if you speculate about them, you will go mad and experience vexation. I'm not sure which comes first—the going mad or experiencing vexation—but nonetheless, it's not a good outcome.

One of the four is the workings of karma, meaning the details of how karmic results happen that we can't see. The other three, in case you're curious, are the range of mind of a Buddha—what a Buddha could know or not—the beginning of things, the beginning of the universe, and the power of a concentrated mind. These are the other things that you just can't figure out, so you don't need to think about them.

But think about the way that karma is sometimes held in our culture and probably in others. Have you ever heard this? I have heard this. Someone gets sick, and a friend, questionably, will say to them, "Oh, you're sick? It must be your karma." How do you think that makes the sick person feel? Usually pretty awful.

To me, the really interesting thing is there is no way that friend can know whether that's true or not. That's only a belief—a belief with no real evidence and no foundation in these teachings. Only somebody like a Buddha could see that kind of connection. You and I cannot see that. So for us to speculate on the causes of a friend's illness is really inappropriate. It's way off base.

The Buddha was asked one time if everything that happened to one on the level of pleasant or unpleasant feeling came from past karma. And he did not say yes. This is an important thing to remember. He was invited to make this statement, and he did not agree with it.

And he named other causes that he said all the world recognizes as being influential factors. He mentioned illness, diet, climate, and assault as other factors that lead to pleasant or unpleasant feelings for people.

So just remember, karma is one kind of cause that works in this world that we live in. It is not the only cause. There are physical causes. There are chemical causes. There are biological causes, including genetics. There are dietary and meteorological causes. There are many other things responsible for pleasant or unpleasant feeling.

So we can go in one direction. We can say if there's a wholesome act now, it will bring wholesome results. If there's an unwholesome act now, it will bring unwholesome results. We can go from the present and say there will be some future consequence. But there is no way that any of us can go from the present and say this was the past cause of that.

This outcome that someone is living—whether it's their illness, their general health, their sense of mental well-being, their living situation—anything, any accident that befalls them, any assault that befalls them, there is no way that we can say that was the

result of karma. This is not in the Buddha's teachings whatsoever. So this is something I think often catches Westerners, and I just wanted to be very clear that this is not in the teachings. Not everything that happens is a result of karma.

But when somebody says in the West, "I don't believe in karma," it usually means this sixth kind—this mysterious way that it unfolds in the future. Because we can understand the other five ways that present actions lead to wholesome or unwholesome results. They're quite verifiable.

In terms of this sixth way, this mysterious way that karma can unfold in the future, it took me quite a few years of hanging out with the concept and observing my life and the lives of people I knew to get some confidence in this teaching. So don't expect that you have to believe in it overnight or you should believe in it overnight. I'd say just maintain an open attitude to the possibility it may be true and then see. See over the years how it feels to you, how your intuition relates to it.

But also I'd ask you not to believe in its opposite—that there is no way that a wholesome act results in wholesome circumstances in the future. Clearly, you and I cannot know that either. And so to discount this teaching would also be an act of blindness. So I just ask you to hold the possibility, recognizing that none of us knows from direct experience, and then investigate and see.

This also influences the next topic I want to mention briefly, which is rebirth. For karma to be understood fully, we need to understand it in the light of rebirth, because the actions from this life, according to the Buddha's teachings, will influence our next birth after death.

Again, the concept of rebirth was alien to me when I started to practice Vipassana. When I heard the teachings on karma and rebirth, I was skeptical at first. So I didn't toss them out. I just kept an open and questioning mind and then let them settle and reflect over years. So again, there's no rush to have to decide on this question, but just ask you to keep an open mind.

In some of the suttas, the Buddha says very clearly how some of the actions of this life play out in future lives. He said, for example, that one who is generous in this life will experience either in this life or a future life abundance in material things. One who is stingy in this life will experience in this life or some future life a lack of abundance in material things.

He said that one who abstains from killing living beings in this life or a future life will enjoy long life. One who abstains from injuring living beings in this life or a future life will enjoy good health.

So again, there's the possibility of present actions leading to future results, but trying to interpret it backwards, we can't do. We can't say that someone who has a short life—it's because of some action in the past. We don't know enough to see it that way.

Then another question that comes is: what do we take with us at the time of death? What is important that we carry forward? And this is what the Buddha said:

"Grain—" this is an agricultural society; grain was a form of wealth back then —"grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, dependents, none of them can you take with you. You must cast them all aside when you die. But whatever kamma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession, and you must fare according to that kamma. That kamma will follow you, just as the shadow follows its owner. Therefore, do good actions, gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings in the hereafter."

So again, it's not necessary that you believe this, but I think it's important that you know that the Buddha said this. And then you can think about it. Suppose you decide to believe this and want to lead a good life.

Then there's the great possibility, according to the teachings, that you will experience benefits in a future life. But even if you don't believe in a future life, yet you live in this way, you'll experience great benefits in this life. So whether you believe in rebirth or not, it doesn't matter—the benefits are there for you.

Now, another question that arises is: if there's no self, what gets reborn? This also intersects with the teaching on kamma. There's a similar question you can pose about kamma: if there's no self, what is it that inherits the results of kamma? This was posed by a bhikkhu in the Buddha's lifetime. The bhikkhu said, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" Basically the same question. The Buddha said, "You haven't been listening to me."

So I want to explain a little bit about how this can be understood. First of all, in terms of the self going from one life to another, it's in just the same way as our patterns go from one moment of practice to another. You can say that nothing is the same as you look closely from one moment of experience to another. Everything is changing—physical sensations, thoughts, emotions, sounds—and yet there is some continuity in our being. In the same way, there is some continuity from one birth to the next.

The factor that continues, or that makes the link—that's a better way to say it—is consciousness. It's spoken of as the relinking of consciousness from a death to the next birth. But there is no essence that is carried in that. So Ajahn Amaro put it this way:

"The process of going from one life to the next is in fact not very different from the process of going from one moment to the next. In either case, nothing substantial is ongoing, but there is a pattern that continues."

How do kamma and not-self fit together? At first they seem contradictory, but in fact they completely need each other to make sense. We talked before about this analogy of the river. A river is flowing along, there's nothing fixed in it, and yet we can give a name to that river that makes sense. The Connecticut River is a useful designation that's different from the Mississippi River.

Similarly, each of us has a mind stream that is constantly changing, but is an individual kind of phenomenon. Each of our mind streams is in constant flux, but has its own way of being. So everything is changing within each mind stream, and yet to know that Joseph's mind stream is different from Carol's mind stream, is different from your mind stream, is a helpful thing. There's an element of truth in that.

Within the mind stream, what constitutes personality? I would suggest that it is the flow of thoughts and emotions formed in certain patterns according to how the mind has been inclined, what we frequently think and ponder upon, and how we've shaped ourselves by our actions of speech and body. So the way we've acted in terms of thoughts, emotions, speech, and bodily actions comes to make up what we call personality.

There's nothing fixed in it, only a changing stream as we move through our different emotions of love, sadness, compassion, fear, joy, and so on. There's no solid essence within, and yet each of us has a kind of ongoing personality. This pattern of our actions, you could say, are karmic actions. That's all that personality is. There's nothing fixed or essential in the middle of it. But our minds are conditioned to run in those certain grooves that we know so well. And as you've seen during this retreat, it's not so easy to change those grooves. Those grooves have a certain disposition. The mind tends to run along those tracks.

Here's another quote from the Buddha about kamma: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin." So we are bound to our kamma in the way that it generates our mental habits as well as some other ways.

But the freedom in that is that because nothing is fixed in this flow of our mind stream, everything can be changed. Our habits of thought and feeling and speaking and acting can all change. And Dharma practice is all about changing this.

So we start to understand that the Dharma uses the principles of kamma to transform our lives. Or another way to say it is that the path itself is a karmic unfolding. As we practice wholesome mind states, that becomes the new grooves of the mind. Our intentional cultivation of qualities like mindfulness and loving-kindness and calm and investigation and energy and equanimity—the cultivation of those factors predisposes the mind to find them again. So in that retraining, we are karmically influencing

the direction of our whole mind stream.

Imagine this mind stream as a great river flowing along, carrying all of our conditioned habits with tremendous momentum. This mighty river is our mind, our personality—all those karmic formations upon which we ride. When we enter Dharma practice, it becomes like a small tributary joining from one side. At first, its power seems weak—a little bit of mindfulness, a little bit of metta. The great river doesn't shift much at all.

But as we continue our Dharma practice, that tiny stream gradually becomes a larger and larger river, and it begins to shift the entire current of the main flow. Our minds start to transform. The whole mind stream begins to take on this new karmic flavor of beautiful mental qualities.

This transformation is only possible because there is nothing fixed within our mind stream. If there were something essential and unchanging, how could we alter it? How could we transform it? If ignorance were permanently fixed, how could it be undone? If greed were immutable, how could it be overcome? But they are not fixed. There is nothing permanent in this great flowing river—that is the truth of anatta. And Dharma practice can enter with its beautiful karmic qualities and transform the entire direction of that stream, from suffering to happiness, and finally to liberation—the highest happiness.

When you contemplate our human situation, we are like beings floating in a vast sea of causes and conditions. There are external conditions—the world with all its uncertainty. There are internal conditions—our karmic predispositions. As human beings, as sentient beings, we simply float on this immense ocean of causes and conditions from the physical world, the chemical world, the biological world, and all our own conditioning. Here we are, this awareness, simply tuning into this vast unfolding on karmic levels, physical levels, biological levels, and so forth.

But how can we steer? What is our rudder amidst all the uncertainty and sometimes seeming chaos of this world? Where can we find a reliable rudder for our lives?

The teaching on karma is the pointer. The only reliable rudder is intention. Our own volitions turned toward generosity, renunciation, kindness to others, and compassion—this is how we steer our lives, and this is how we find safe harbor. This is the path to human happiness.

Let me say this again: if you want to be happy in a human sense, it is about renunciation, generosity, kindness, and compassion.

But as Dharma practitioners—serious Dharma practitioners—most of us have a further goal, which is the highest happiness: awakening, liberation, enlightenment. The Buddha said that for the Arahant, the fully awakened one, there is the complete end of karma. For some of us, this becomes the most compelling destination—the ending of karma itself. The Arahant may still experience results of past karma, but generates no new karma.

How does this come about? Again, it is volition that shapes us.

This insight comes beautifully from Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Advaita Vedanta teacher who died in the early 1990s—a deeply awakened being who worked primarily through dialogue. One questioner came to him, and Maharaj told this person, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." Do you see that same pointing as karma shaping the river?

The questioner replied, "Well, surely karma interfered." And then Maharaj said something profound: "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life. The attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character."

Your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character. So shape your character toward human happiness—generosity, loving-kindness, compassion.

Shaping your character toward enlightenment, I'll read this statement from the Buddha:

"What karma is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result, which leads to the end of karma? The karma that leads to the end of karma is this noble eightfold path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

If we focus just on the outwardly wholesome actions—generosity, loving kindness, and compassion—we're still involved in doing. We're still involved in activity with an end in sight of some greater happiness. But as we follow the Eightfold Path, we are pursuing factors that lead to this element of nibbana, the unconditioned, which is the stilling of all formations.

And so we approach the stilling of all formations more and more by this quality of non-doing with presence. The stilling where we abandon any self-centered activity. We don't hope for future happy results of abundance or long life or better conditions. We want to come to the end of suffering.

So resting in this stilling, the refraining from the unwholesome, the development of awareness, the stilling of concentration—this allows the mind to open to that which is beyond conditions, to that which is beyond good and bad in the conventional sense. That is the quality of the unconditioned, which is our nibbana.

It is the Eightfold Path that is the way leading to the end of kamma, the end of volitional action.

So let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 19

Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

> *In this dharma talk from a November 2005 retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Guy Armstrong addresses one of the most practical aspects of Buddhist meditation: working with difficult emotions. Drawing on the Buddha's teachings on the five hindrances and the mechanisms of the deluded mind, Armstrong explores five common challenging states that Western practitioners encounter: desire, anger, sadness, fear, and self-judgment.*
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> *Armstrong explains how each difficult emotion contains both a bodily sensation, an emotional mood, and a supporting "storyline" - the conceptual beliefs that sustain our suffering. He demonstrates how desire projects happiness into an imagined future ("I would be happy if I had this"), while anger maintains the narrative of "I'm right and you're wrong." The key insight is learning to withdraw attention from these compelling storylines and place mindfulness directly on the emotional experience itself.*
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> *Rather than trying to eliminate difficult emotions, Armstrong suggests the more realistic goal of developing equanimity and spaciousness around them. He emphasizes that these states are temporary visitors, not our fundamental nature, and will naturally pass away when we stop feeding them with reactive thoughts. The talk includes practical guidance on using loving-kindness practice as an antidote to aversion, and developing confidence in our basic goodness to counter self-judgment. Armstrong concludes with Rilke's powerful reminder: "Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final."*

I just looked out at the trees and the sky and the white clouds that were there and the sunshine, and all of a sudden my mind opened and dropped all those little concerns that I'd been tight around. I opened to the sense of well-being and connection to nature and the vastness that brings. I hung out there for a little bit and then went back to email and got plugged in again. But nonetheless, this shift was a very pleasant one.

It reminded me of something that Dogen Zenji said, a great Zen master in Japan, who said that to study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. And to forget the self is to be enlightened by the 10,000 things of this world. This is the shift that I went through, dropping the self and being awakened by the 10,000 things back into this easy and relaxed way of being.

I mention this because it's a shift that we need to make in meditation over and over again. It is, in a way, the essence of right effort to step out of the small, constricted, self-conscious world of "I" and "my" and to open up into the vastness of life and the beauty of life and the impersonality of life. In this way, the mind really moves from bondage into freedom. We need to find out how to do that over and over.

This is a quote from Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche, who was one of the great Dzogchen masters of the last half century: "The purpose of Dharma practice is to know the nature of the non-deluded mind and to understand the workings of the deluded mind." This really encapsulates the scope of our practice.

To know the nature of the non-deluded mind means to recognize this state of freedom—at least relative freedom, ease, relaxation, openness, clarity, mindfulness, steadiness of attention. All the factors that are cultivated, commonly called the seven factors of enlightenment, which I think Kamala will be talking about later in the retreat.

And to understand the workings of the deluded mind: How do we get caught? How does this essential freedom, which is in some ways our deepest nature, get obscured, covered over? What are the mechanisms by which we lose touch with that?

In tonight's talk, I want to spend more time on particularly the workings of the deluded mind, how we get caught and how to work with that situation when we do become caught. I want to talk about working with difficult states of mind. This really picks up from the talk Steve gave a few nights ago on the hindrances and expands on it, getting a little more specific and adding a few practical pointers.

When we come into meditation practice, we start to look at the contents of our mind, maybe for the first time, and we find that the mind has this huge range of experience. I think one of the awesome things about retreat is that it tends to unpack and open up that wide range of experience that is part of our birthright that we may not have touched for a long time.

So we get exposed to some of the very most refined, sublime, even mystical states of being through our Dharma practice—states of great joy and happiness and bliss and calm. And on the other end of the spectrum, we often open up to those darkest corners of the mind, the most difficult things for us to experience: intense feelings of loneliness or terror or despair, hopelessness.

If we have the model that the point of our Dharma practice, the point of full enlightenment, is to be rid of a lot of the range of these difficult states, we may come in expecting them to go away rather quickly. And what we find is that they don't. For most of us, they don't.

I was asked to participate over the last weekend in a panel discussion for Buddha Dharma magazine on this topic of working with difficult states of mind. There was a Tibetan Rinpoche, a Zen teacher, and I was the token Theravadan, shall we say, on the call. We were talking about what are the problems that people get into when they think that we should be quickly free of these difficult states of mind. It can lead to a lot of striving and a lot of tension.

I suggested that maybe we should reposition our aim not to be rid of these states, but to come to equanimity with them, to come into a feeling of acceptance of them. Because when you think about it, we all have these qualities within us. This is just part of the human package. Every one of us knows this range of states of mind and states of heart. They're not foreign to any of us.

And although I deeply believe that part of our human possibility is that they can be ended through the process of awakening, as the Buddha exemplified and many others have found, I also believe that for most of us that's a long journey. What I've observed in people who are far down that path is that well before these difficult states of mind are actually uprooted or removed from the mind, beings' minds are so spacious and so full of other qualities that we develop, like love and compassion, that even when they arise, they don't have so much the power to disturb us.

I believe that this happens before the full uprooting. I think this is a much more realistic goal for us in the relatively near term. If you look over the course of this retreat, the next several years of your Dharma practice, this is possible. It is possible to find the spaciousness and the acceptance, the qualities of loving kindness, of heart, to be able to accommodate these difficult states and not be so disturbed by them. The uprooting may be a more distant goal. So for the time being, I wouldn't worry so much about that. In the near term, can we find a way not to be bothered so much by these states? And I think that is really possible.

Suzuki Roshi, the Zen master who founded San Francisco Zen Center, once began a Dharma talk like this. He said, "The difficulties you're experiencing now..." He just paused. And he had a long pause.

You can imagine—this is probably in the middle of a session, an intensive period of retreat, somewhat like this—that people were probably on the edge of their seats. *Yes, how am I going to get rid of that?*

He continued: "The difficulties you're experiencing now will be with you for a long time."

When I first heard this, I thought it was a little discouraging. Where's the sense of progress? Where's the hopefulness in this practice? But as I sat with it more, I came to feel it's actually very liberating. It's liberating because what it says is you can attain a high degree of inner freedom and happiness while these states of mind remain active in us. This is possible.

So it tells me that the goal of a high degree of freedom is not so remote. We can find it with all the range of states of mind that we know today. They don't have to be plucked out. Rather, we can change our relationship to them. And it's primarily through understanding them that we change that relationship.

We come to see that strong emotions—even difficult ones—aren't necessarily a problem if we don't make them a problem. If we grasp onto them and become very concerned about them, if we hold the idea that we shouldn't be feeling them, if we dwell on the concept that they've been a problem for a long time or that they're a deep pattern of ours that really needs to be changed somehow, we can make a problem of them.

But if we simply let them arise, express their nature, and pass away—which they all will—they don't have to be problematic.

As I mentioned the other morning, you can watch children enter these emotional states without fear. Children will rush headlong into joy and happiness and delight, and in a moment they can transform to anger and sadness and frustration, and then they can drop out of that back into happiness. The states just blow through them like clouds through an empty sky. That's part of our potential also. That's what's truly freeing.

We don't have to be afraid of these states. We can let them come and go. In this greater opening to them, the heart becomes purified because we're not obstructing them. We're not getting caught on them. As they come and go, they move more easily.

This notion of purification in the Buddhist tradition has a very specific meaning. It means that the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are weakening. This is what we mean by purifying. We come to understand that happiness isn't about having more

things or attaining outside things. Happiness comes from the heart which is purified. That is, as the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are weakened in our hearts, more happiness comes in their place. This is the route to happiness.

So the first step in relating to these difficult states is knowing what we're feeling. And this is harder than it sounds. It sounds easy: "Oh yeah, just know what you're feeling. Oh, that's mindfulness. I got it. That's the third foundation. Easy. The Buddha described it in a paragraph about this long. No problem."

But it's trickier than that.

I remember some years ago I was sitting a six-week retreat here. I think the instruction period had finished, and I was just leaving through the back door of the hall and going out to my walking path. The retreat had been going about two weeks, and I had found one place down beyond the tennis courts where I liked to walk.

So I walked out the back door. I felt I was very mindful at that point—two weeks into the retreat. I was really with the lifting and moving and placing, lifting, moving, and placing. Then I looked down to my walking path and there was somebody in it.

The thoughts began: "What are they doing in *my* walking path? They've been here for two weeks. They know I walk there." And then I was just lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing.

I thought some more: "Are they trying to mess with my mind or something? Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line this morning?"

Once I could recognize the anger and see how petty it was, it simply evaporated. But this illustrates how these difficult states typically operate—they seduce us by spinning stories about the way things are, taking us over through the narrative. I was completely caught in the story: they're in my path, that's wrong, and I'm right. As long as I remained trapped in that storyline, I was blind to what I was actually feeling.

All these challenging mind states we encounter have an underlying story that we unconsciously accept, and this belief system props them up. I'll call this their storyline. The storyline consists of beliefs or views about the situation, and when we buy into these views, they sustain the emotional state. If you can see through and release the storyline, the emotion will collapse because it no longer has that conceptual foundation supporting it.

I find this particularly fascinating because it reveals that our entanglement—our bondage and suffering—isn't merely emotional activity. It's emotional activity supported by views and opinions. This is precisely why the Buddhist path combines opening the heart, which addresses the emotional dimension, with awakening wisdom to see through our false views. The path beautifully integrates right understanding, which belongs to the mind, with right intention, which belongs to the heart. In our emotional life, these two aspects must work together.

This not-seeing of what we're feeling represents a form of ignorance. In terms of the kilesas or mental defilements—greed, aversion, and delusion—this exemplifies the operation of delusion. When you're experiencing something intensely without recognizing that you're feeling it, as I was during my walking meditation, you're caught in delusion. This is the deluded mind, completely unaware of what's actually happening.

Mindfulness serves as the primary tool that cuts through this type of delusion, connecting us with our actual experience. This is why I often say that mindfulness carries the tip of wisdom directly into our experience.

The key to working with all these states involves redirecting mindfulness—our attention—away from the storyline and placing it directly on the emotion itself. Once I could step away from my view that "they're wrong" and focus simply on the irritation or anger, the state became completely workable. As long as I remained entangled in the story, it remained unworkable.

When Steve spoke the other evening, he discussed the classical five hindrances that the Buddha described as obstacles to deepening meditation. Tonight I want to explore a slightly different list—one that, in my experience, represents the most common mind states that we as Western practitioners encounter in our practice, forming the most challenging aspects of our minds to work with skillfully.

The five states I'll discuss tonight are desire, anger, sadness, fear, and self-judgment. These are the ones I encounter most frequently, both in my own practice and when working with students.

I've noticed something intriguing about the first four—they seem to organize themselves into a particular structure that relates to pleasure and pain on one axis, and past and future on the other.

Consider this: if something pleasurable is anticipated in the future, what emotion most commonly arises? Desire. When something painful awaits us in the future, we typically experience fear. Another way to understand this is through hope and fear—these two states govern the mind's relationship to the future when we're not settled in present-moment awareness.

Now let's examine the past. When something pleasurable has occurred in the past but is no longer present with us, what emotion typically dominates?

Sadness, yes. Grief is about the loss of that which was pleasurable that we no longer have. So sadness or grief. Loneliness could be a variation. Despair could be a variation.

Now this last one may be a little tricky, and there may be other answers, but think about if something painful happened in the past, what's the dominant emotion when you look back on it? Let's say someone else caused that pain.

Judgment or anger. Yes, judgment or anger.

So I think that's why these four are so strong for us. They have to do with these fundamental poles of pleasure and pain painted against the backdrop of past and future. And these are the emotions that often come up. Then I bring in self-judgment because it seems to be our Western hell realm to deal with. So we'll talk about that a little bit also.

Each of these states has a mood, it has expressions in the body, and it has this storyline that's bound up with conceptual thought. So I'll talk about all of those.

Desire is this movement of mind that leans forward to something pleasurable that it wants to happen in the future. This force comes very, very often on a retreat, and sometimes it can be quite heart-wrenching. The force of missing people, missing places, missing where you feel comfortable, missing certain kinds of activities that have meant a lot to you—even missing certain kinds of food or clothing can come up quite poignantly for people on retreat.

As you look into the experience of desire, you'll start to see that there's a kind of comfort there by bringing up these familiar places, people, objects—that is a pleasure. So in a way, it's a way of bringing a pleasure into the moment. But at the same time, as you investigate the quality of desire, you realize there's also something that's always unsatisfying in desire. There's something that's unfulfilled. The very missing of the pleasant leaves a kind of hole in the heart. And it leaves this yearning, a feeling of not being fulfilled, not being complete.

So intrinsic within desire is this sense of dissatisfaction, of unsatisfactoriness. Desire always carries in its wake a trail of dukkha, a feeling of dukkha, because one of the curious things is we never seem to want what we already have. You notice that? When was the last time you wanted a hand at the end of your arm? It never occurs to us to want that unless it was gone. If our hand was taken away, we would want it a lot. But while it's here, it's not an object of desire. We always want what we don't have, and that's the dukkha of desire.

I was teaching in Italy a few years ago, which was a joy, I have to say. All the things you imagine about Italian yogis are probably true. First of all, it was very hard for them to stop talking. The silence was not quite as well-founded as the silence is here. The culture of the retreat center was a little different. They wanted to put out red wine at lunch and dinner, so we had to ask them to take that away. But nonetheless, there was an espresso machine just outside the dining hall. So after lunch, the coins were going in and the cups were coming out. Not as much sloth and torpor at the 2:15 sit, though. That was good.

I found that a lot of the Italian yogis had this really beautiful fluency with their emotions. They're very comfortable talking about what they were feeling and more in touch than I had tended to be before I began practice in knowing what I was feeling. And they weren't shy about talking about it. They felt like they were very at ease in their emotional life.

So on about the third day of the retreat, I had an interview—we had translators for all the interviews—with a very nice young Italian guy who came in and said he was having a hard time settling into the retreat. And I said, "Why is that?"

He said, "Well, this is August. This is our vacation time in Italy. And I had two choices. I could come on this retreat, or my friends asked me to go to the Caribbean with them for a ten-day vacation."

And I said, "Oh, why did you come on the retreat?"

And he said, "Because the tickets to the Caribbean were all sold out."

So if you kind of compare in your mind—let's see, Caribbean vacation, warm sun, golden sands, blue water, or sitting and walking for eighteen hours a day—he was having a little trouble settling.

So we talked about how the force of desire, wanting to be with his friends, the images of the vacation spot, could be affecting his ability to be present in the moment a little bit. And what if he didn't have those thoughts about the Caribbean? Then how would it be to be here?

So he went off and meditated, and when he came back in for his next interview, which was with another teacher, the problem had gone away. He saw that what was disturbing him was the wanting.

It wasn't that there was anything wrong with the retreat or that he couldn't settle. It was that he kept taking himself out. When he let go of the desire, he landed in the retreat, and then everything opened fine. This is what desire does. It takes us out of the present and creates a conflict. It creates a sense of insufficiency where there may not be any.

One of my friends is a greed type—a personality type that's dominated by the force of wanting. He says there's a line that he uses when desire is present in him. He asks, "Is there anything truly lacking in this moment?" So when desire is strong, that's a good question to ask. Is there anything truly lacking in this moment? Or is it basically okay the way it is, and it's just the wanting that is stirring us up?

In the meditative environment, sometimes the things we want come to be the special things that happen on retreat. We may want a particular meal. We may want a particular meditation experience. Sometimes the deepest, deepest longings are to re-experience some form of sitting that we'd had earlier. Start to notice if this comes in, because this will create tension. And as long as you're looking for some particular experience, you're not open to the moment as it is. All the unfolding of the Dharma comes from aligning with the moment the way it is. This is the golden doorway in practice.

So I start to notice that in myself if I'm having thoughts about the way a sitting was a day ago or two days ago or a week ago. Are you dwelling on a past experience of sitting or walking or being in nature? Are those thoughts and images in your mind? If they are, check and see if there's a wanting at work. And if there is, that's where to be. Otherwise, the wanting will block you from being in the present.

You don't have to make the wanting go away. You can establish mindfulness right then and there by being with the wanting. That's what's true. Relate with that. And as you open to that, you come back into the present moment.

The storyline that underlies the wanting—you can look into this for yourself. This might vary from person to person, from incident to incident. The basic storyline in wanting is something like, "I would be happy if I had this thing. I would be happy."

That's why desire becomes such a big deal, because there's implicit within it—and it's usually subconscious—this belief: it would make me happy. It's the key to my happiness.

Of course, what we don't do when we pick up a storyline or a view like that is we don't look at impermanence. We don't realize that if we get the thing we want, sooner or later, either it will go away or it will fail to satisfy us. Because we've had many, many opportunities to get the things we want, and we haven't found a lasting happiness from them. But we ignore that in the moment of desire. We don't look at that truth of impermanence.

The second of the states that I wanted to talk about is anger, which is one form of aversion. Steve talked the other night about aversion as a hindrance. And aversion has a lot of different flavors. Just a partial list: anger, ill will, hatred, impatience, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, blame, resentment, depression, despair, resistance. Are you overwhelmed yet? And that's just partial. I'm sure you could think of more. So aversion has a lot of different flavors. Anger is a strong one.

The general tone of aversion is not liking, negativity, seeing things in a critical frame of mind. When we're feeling negative, everything tends to rub us the wrong way. Everything appears imperfect, flawed, not quite right.

The Buddha told this story to a group of monks who were standing around in the clearing in a forest. Actually, it wasn't a story.

It was happening right on the spot. As they were standing around in the forest, a jackal ran out and stopped in the clearing, standing there for a moment. But it obviously wasn't peaceful—it immediately ran into the hollow of a tree and lay down, but only momentarily. Then it jumped up and ran into a cave, stood there briefly, and ran back into the forest.

The Buddha said, "Monks, did you see that jackal? It wasn't comfortable in the forest. It wasn't comfortable in the clearing. It wasn't comfortable in the tree hollow, and it wasn't comfortable in the cave. It wasn't comfortable standing or lying down or running. It blamed its suffering on the forest, on the clearing, on the tree hollow, on the cave. It blamed its suffering on standing, on lying, on running."

The Buddha said the problem was with none of these. "Monks, that jackal had mange. The mange was its suffering. It couldn't be comfortable because it had mange."

Aversion is like mange. When the mind is in a state of aversion, nothing feels good. Nothing feels right. We tend to blame our problem on all the other conditions, but the problem is the aversion in the mind. Everything rubs it the wrong way.

When aversion has been there for a long time—when there's a chronic sense of aversion—it's probably masking some long-standing pain that we aren't able to open to. The aversion gets implanted or conditioned by the presence of pain in the heart or mind or body that's been there for a long time.

When there's a long-standing pattern of aversion, the classical antidote—a really effective antidote—is loving-kindness practice. This is mentioned in the suttas over and over. The Buddha talks about metta as the antidote to aversion because metta has a way of softening the mind, opening the heart, and letting us then open to and include that pain.

Anger is a particular form of aversion. Here the storyline, as it was when I was caught in my walking experience, is basically: "I'm right and you're wrong. You shouldn't have done what you did and it hurt me." That's the basic storyline. If we listen to the thoughts of that storyline again and again, we sustain the anger.

Sometimes this is a little tricky because the thoughts could be true. In the case of my walking meditation, it really wasn't—there was no plaque on that walking path that said "Guy Armstrong," much as I would have liked to put one there. That walking space was open to anybody. It was my delusion to think that it was mine.

But it's different at other times. People do take things from us that belong to us, that we have a right to expect will be there when we go back. In that case, it's not proper for people to take those things. This is the point of the second precept: not taking that which isn't freely given. So we may be right.

Really awful things do happen in the world—things that really shouldn't happen. There's war, there's murder, there's racism, there's violence and cruelty in the world. It really shouldn't happen, but it does. So it may appear that getting angry is an appropriate response to those things. It can be a useful motivator for social justice. Many people have drawn on the power of outrage to try to correct things in the world that are wrong, and in that sense it can be a useful motivator.

But as meditators we have to take a look: What's the most effective way to change the world? Whether that involves anger or love is something for each of us to wrestle with. We also need to look at our own experience. Here on retreat, this is probably the most important place to look. In terms of our own experience: What leads to suffering and what leads to happiness?

In the classical texts, they say that getting angry at someone has within it an element of wanting to hurt that person.

This is an interesting place to look. When we talk about anger in Western psychology, we often condone it or approve it or say it's justified. But from the point of view of the Dharma, we really want to look and see what's going on in the mechanism of anger. And I found in looking at my own anger, often there is integral to it a wish to hurt the other person.

Now in Buddhism, the enjoyment of hurting somebody else is called cruelty. It's the far enemy of compassion. Compassion is that heartfulness that wishes to relieve the suffering of others. Cruelty is that frame of mind that enjoys someone else's suffering. Wanting to hurt someone has within it basically the beginning of cruelty. When I saw that, I had to question anger in a really deep way because I couldn't live with the sense of myself being a cruel person. I couldn't live with that truth about myself and feel good about it.

Now it so happens that it is a truth. Sometimes I do get angry. Within that anger I see that I want to hurt, but I can't feel good about it. So it's made me more resolved to look really closely and deeply into this phenomenon of anger.

What the texts say is that wanting to get angry at somebody is like picking up a hot coal and getting ready to throw it at them so that they'll be burned by the hot coal. The problem is that we pick it up first and we burn ourselves before we ever throw it. So start to take a look at this side of anger—that before we can ever express it, we are hurting ourselves in the holding of it, in the maintaining of it.

It was the seeing of the suffering that I felt as a result of my own anger that was most effective in getting me to let go. And letting go means basically to stop the thoughts that blame the other person and justify myself. These are the thoughts that feed the fires of anger. As we think more of those thoughts, we're just throwing more logs on the fire of anger. So it's a big renunciation. But if you practice with it, you'll see it's the way through anger. It's the way not to suffer from our own anger. And that's the letting go of the blame.

When we let go of that blame, the mind starts to cool. Because like all states, anger will just manifest its impermanence. It's the blame that sustains it, that feeds it. When we let go of it, it starts to pass. So in Buddhist circles, this work with anger is considered a really important part of the path.

The Dalai Lama tells a story about a monk that he had known in Tibet before 1959. 1959 is when he left Tibet for India, ten years after the Chinese invasion. And he thought that this monk was just a rather ordinary practitioner. Then some years later he met the monk again in India and the monk told him his story. He said that he had been in a Chinese prison for twenty years and finally he had been released and then he had escaped from Tibet and made his way to India. The Dalai Lama hears many, many stories like this. I can't even imagine the bigness of his compassion to be able to hold all these stories that he hears.

So he asked the monk about his time in prison. And the monk said, well, he often felt in danger. And the Dalai Lama said, were you tortured? Were you in fear for your life? And the monk said, yes, I was tortured, and I was in fear for my life, but that's not the danger that I meant. I mean that I was in danger of being angry with my captors.

The Dalai Lama said that his opinion of this monk was greatly enhanced by that comment, that he had the devotion to practice in that way, to work with non-anger, even under those extreme conditions.

Sometimes the sense of anger or criticalness gets directed toward ourselves and manifests as self-judgment. This comes up often in retreat. And I think part of it is that we lose our social connection. We don't have the kind of social strokes that we do in daily life. People are interacting with us and we're getting signs of love and affection. And when those signs of love and affection are taken away and we're just on our own resources, then this more critical part of the mind often comes out and we find ourselves lacking in many ways.

This is actually a sign of what's referred to in the tradition as mana or conceit. Conceit is the tendency to compare ourselves to others, and if we compare ourselves as being better than, equal to, or worse than, it's considered a sign of mana, and it's considered an impurity of the mind. The Buddha basically said there's no need to ever compare oneself to another in terms of one's stature. Certainly one can compare in skill levels and certain qualities or attributes, but to say that one person is better than another, there's no need to say that. So the mind doesn't make that comparison.

But this quality of comparing mind or mana or conceit is only uprooted at arahantship. So only the fully enlightened person no longer compares.

That means the judging mind is going to be around for a while. So again, it's good to get to know how to work with it.

The storyline with the judging mind is some form of "I'm not good enough, I'm not loving enough," or "I'm not lovable enough" - something like that, some form of "I'm insufficient as a person."

Sometimes these thoughts, these opinions of ourselves, start from a kind of rational observation. I'll share what one person I work with in California reported. She's a therapist, and one of her clients left her. That happens all the time, of course, but it caused her a lot of self-doubt. The first thing she thought was, "Oh, I'm just not the right therapist for that person." And that actually made complete sense - my personality is not a match for their personality. That was fine.

But then it went to, "I don't have enough compassion or warmth to be able to help them." And then it went to, "I'm really not a very loving person." And then it went to, "Actually, I've never loved anyone and no one's ever loved me." At that point, she was just crushed by the weight of her own judgments of herself.

I share this because I hope you can see this is not an isolated problem - we all make these exaggerations of ourselves. In fact, any judging thought that really burdens you is probably not true. It's probably not true. The thoughts that really burden us are the ones that go too far: "I can never love. I have never loved. No one has ever loved me. I don't have any friends. No one cares about me." These really huge generalizations generally overstep the bounds of truth.

So one way of working with those judging thoughts is to turn and ask the judge - have you met the judge yet, by the way? Anybody met the judge? The judge is just a thought, but if you want to get playful with the judge, you can give them a personality. You can give them a face, give them a name, draw them like a cartoon. What does your judge look like? What do they sound like? You can have fun and just kind of make something up here.

One person I work with - their judge is named Darth Vader. So they're often saying, "Welcome, Darth. Nice to have you back. Thank you, Darth, for that opinion."

You can turn to your judge and say, "What you just said about me isn't true. Please restate it as a true statement." If you can get the judge to restate it as a true statement, you'll find it's usually not that bad. It's something like, "I wasn't the right therapist for that person." No big deal. So you can neutralize the judgments by making them truthful for a change.

One of the other ways to work with judgment - Joseph may have talked about this in part one, it's one of his favorites - every time you hear a judging thought, you append the phrase "and the sky is blue." That just makes it light. You're walking through the lunch line and you see somebody took a lot of dessert. You say, "That person took too much dessert, and the sky is blue." You can try that also.

This sense of not being good enough is really widespread in the West today. I really think it's a comment on our culture that it's so widespread. I don't know quite why it's happened, but it seems to be a big problem. Sometimes it grows stronger and becomes self-hatred.

I was recently ordained as a monk in Thailand - I mean, this was a long time ago, but in the story I had just ordained.

My preceptor asked me to stop at a branch monastery in Chiang Mai while traveling to a forest monastery for retreat. I spent several pleasant days there, enjoying the good food and the beautiful town.

I particularly enjoyed meeting another Western monk who had been in robes for thirteen or fourteen years. He was very large-hearted, loved people, and enjoyed conversation. The Thai people really appreciated him. He would give interviews to them in the afternoon—he spoke good Thai—and meditate in the morning. Very warm, he drew many Thai people to meet with him.

On my first morning there, we went out on alms round together. He went first as the senior monk, I followed behind, and then there were two novices behind us—young boys whose presence puzzled me since novices usually don't go on alms round.

As we walked down the road at his usual hour, people started coming out when they saw him. Very soon our bowls were filled up. He was well-known, well-liked, and well-supported—which showed in his bowl, quite big, bigger than this bell, matching his girth because he was obviously well-fed.

After we both filled our bowls, he motioned to duck down an alley. There's no food in an alley—why were we going there? In the alley, the novices opened their robes, revealing big plastic bags hanging over their shoulders. We transferred all the food from our bowls into these bags, covered them up, put the lids on our bowls, and went down the street again to fill our bowls once more.

Returning to the monastery with this huge amount of food, we all ate well—the novices, other monks, nuns, and lay people. All of this abundance flowed from the metta, the love that the Thai people had for this monk and his spirit of warmth and loving-kindness.

I was very impressed, thinking he was just a natural meditator. But as we talked, he revealed that it wasn't always like this—that he had spent the first nine years in robes working through his self-hatred. Nine years. Yet he had completely transformed through practice, developing this warm nature beloved by the community.

What really offsets self-judgment is confidence in our own goodness, our basic goodness. As we come more and more to trust that the non-deluded mind is our basic nature—awake, alive, and growing in us—this offsets any sense of insufficiency or lack. Each of you has everything you need. It's simply a matter of clearing away the obscurations so that your true nature shines through more and more. As we touch this truth and gain confidence, we know that our heart is genuinely good.

I'd like to save fear for another time—I may want to discuss it at length on another evening. For sadness, I'll simply say that the storyline usually goes: "I can't be happy because I've lost this thing." That's the root of sadness or grief—believing we were happy before when we had something, and because we've lost it, we can no longer be happy. This view often becomes so deeply rooted that it's very hard to open to the feeling of sadness itself. We come to believe that the loss has blocked our happiness.

So there's often the fear with sadness, and you might say this is a sub-storyline—the fear that if we open to the sadness, we're going to get drowned or lost in that deep pool of unhappiness and sorrow. So we may hold ourselves back from feeling it, from opening to it, out of that fear.

But that is just a story. It's just a view or a belief. It's not true. Grief of any sort has the ability to come up, be experienced, and then eventually released. But we just have to have the willingness and the trust to go into it. It won't happen all at once. But to experience it and back off, to experience it and back off—little by little we find that it starts to unfold itself and becomes more, as somebody used the other day, permeable. We start to see little holes or little dents in the sadness, and it's a sign that it's starting to weaken and can fall away.

So in all these cases, the sense of freedom doesn't come from getting rid of the state. These states will come to visit for a long time, but it comes by understanding their nature and how they're put together—this mechanism that involves the sensations in the body, the mood in the mind, and this underlying belief or storyline about them.

As we start to understand the mechanisms that put these states together, they don't fool us anymore. We start to see, "Oh, that's just wanting. This is how it makes one feel. This is just anger. These are the causes and conditions. This is the remedy." When the causes and conditions are no longer there, the state passes away. All these states will exhibit their own impermanence if they're not clung to.

And this is where our basic faith comes—that we can open to them. None of them will be here forever. If we open and let them express themselves, all of them will also pass. They get stuck when we don't have that trust and we close down to the feeling.

So what we're really seeing as we start to get more familiar with their real nature is they're just like passing clouds, like aspects of the weather. They arise, they express, they pass away. And in this, we're really seeing their emptiness. They don't have any essence, and they're not lodged in us. They are not our deepest nature. As Steve said the other night, they're just visitors. We're really seeing the empty nature of these phenomena.

I'd like to just close with this poem from Rilke. It's from a book called *The Book of Hours*, translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows. It's kind of nice to have a Buddhist take on Rilke's poetry. And in this particular poem, just to set the stage, Rilke is imagining that God creates human beings, but before launching them into life, gives them a little pep talk. So this is the pep talk:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out in the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Give me your hand.

Let's just sit for a moment together.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

CHAPTER 20

Mudita, Joy and Gratitude

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

In this Thanksgiving Day dharma talk, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of mudita, appreciative joy, as the third of the Brahmavihāras (divine abodes). Drawing from his extensive retreat experience in Asia, Armstrong illustrates how mudita differs from ordinary happiness through its quality of shared joy—delighting in others' happiness without self-interest. He explains how the four Brahmavihāras work together as a complete system: mettā (loving-kindness) as the foundation, karuṇā (compassion) as the response to suffering, mudita as the response to happiness, and upekkhā (equanimity) providing the balance to hold it all.

Armstrong traces joy's essential role in the Buddhist path through what he calls "Transcendent Dependent Arising," showing how gladness leads through rapture (pīti) to tranquility, happiness (sukha), concentration (samādhi), and ultimately insight and liberation. He emphasizes that gratitude naturally arises from mudita practice, freeing us from both greed and aversion by appreciating what we have. Through personal anecdotes from monastic training in Thailand and Burma, he demonstrates how recognition of our "precious human birth with great endowments"—including access to the Dharma—cultivates profound appreciation.

The talk addresses mudita's near enemy (attachment/exuberance) and far enemy (envy), offering practical guidance for recognizing simple moments of joy in retreat life and daily experience. Armstrong concludes by showing how the entire Buddhist path can be understood as "a progressive refinement of joy," leading not to mere wholesome states but to the "unshakable deliverance of mind" that is complete liberation.

The subject of the talk tonight is practicing mudita, joy and gratitude. I was struck many times throughout the day today by how lucky we are. This seemed to me like almost a perfect day for practice. It started off and you knew you were going to have a great lunch, so you kind of wake up happy. Then there was that amazing quiet snow, the first real snow of the winter coming on Thanksgiving Day—beautiful timing. The lunch lived up totally to its expectations, including the beautiful way the staff decorated the tables. Didn't that just pick your spirits up when you walked in? So much love and care for you. It wasn't for anybody else. Then in the afternoon, the way that the sun came out of

those heavy clouds and the light in the western sky as it was setting—it's just a gorgeous day to be here. And it's a gorgeous day to be warm and dry and inside at this time of night also. We're lucky that way too.

A Zen master was once asked, "What's the purpose of a lifetime of practice?" This is an interesting question to reflect on, something each of us might want to take some time to think about. What's the purpose of a lifetime of practice? I wonder how each of us would answer that. The Zen master's answer was really simple. He said, "An appropriate response."

Is that a little anticlimactic? Doesn't it seem like the Zen master should say the purpose of a lifetime of practice is so I can be run through with a sword and not blink an eye—something really death-defying? The purpose of a lifetime of practice is an appropriate response. I love the humility of that. We're not aiming for anything otherworldly. We're aiming to be fully human and let our humanness come out in each moment that it is asked for.

When life presents us with a situation that challenges our understanding and our equanimity, what does our practice lead us to in our response? That's how we check our practice. How do we respond to these situations of life?

In our tradition, I think the Brahma Viharas are one really beautiful roadmap of the appropriate response of our hearts. They show us the possibility of a way that a wise heart, or you could say an awakened heart, meets life. Life is characterized by changing conditions—constantly cycling among what the Buddha called the eight worldly conditions: pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disrepute. The Brahma Viharas show us how we can meet these changes in a balanced and wise way.

First, we set the foundation with loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is that development of heart that can look at another being and look into their heart and say, "I know there is in there a world of feelings, a world of joys and sorrows, and I care about that. I care about how your heart is receiving the joys and sorrows of your life." Turning to ourselves, we care about how our own heart is receiving the joys and sorrows of our life. So the practice of loving-kindness tenderizes us to the human condition, to everybody's situation of enjoyment of this existence and our vulnerability to the suffering in it.

Then with that as our foundation, when this open heart turns toward suffering, what naturally gets evoked is compassion. Compassion is the natural response of the open heart when it sees suffering. And then exactly complementary to the compassion is appreciative joy or mudita. When this open heart looks upon someone who's experiencing

happiness, the natural response is our own happiness. We are happy that someone else is experiencing happiness in this life. So these are the two poles. How do we relate to the changing conditions of life? If we're awake, compassion when we touch suffering, appreciative joy when we touch happiness, outside in others or inside in ourselves.

This is so different from the usual responses. The near enemy of compassion is grief—feeling burdened, overwhelmed, miserable because of the amount of suffering that we encounter. The most common enemy of appreciative joy is envy—feeling that we can't enjoy somebody else's happiness because their happiness threatens ours in some way.

But the heart can move to these wise responses of compassion and joy when the mind is supported by the fourth Brahma Vihara, which is equanimity. Equanimity is the balance of mind that lets us hold all the suffering in life and all the joys of life in a balance where we're not disturbed, where we're not thrown off our own inner sense of well-being. So these four Brahma Viharas are all necessary. They all work together.

But together they provide this roadmap to the heart's response to life—our own and others' experience of life.

This evening I want to talk particularly about the third of the Brahmavihāras, the practice of *muditā* or appreciative joy. As we explored last night in the guided meditation, this can be a really happy practice. It's very upbeat because, first of all, we're looking for happiness outside ourselves and within ourselves. Our radar is up for the happy experiences of life. And then we cultivate this ability to feel our own happiness when we touch them. So it's really this double expression of happiness.

I had a phone call a while ago from a friend I hadn't talked to for some time. I picked up the phone and said hello, and she told me who it was. I said, "How are you doing?" And her immediate response was, "I'm wonderful." Just hearing that from her, with her spirit, it picked my spirits up, and immediately I said back without thinking, "I am too." That was just the spontaneous expression of *muditā*—her happiness and then our shared happiness, that double happiness of the situation.

The Dalai Lama says that if you can be happy with other people's happiness, then your odds of happiness go up by six billion to one. That puts the odds in our favor. Those are good odds.

This is a very helpful quality of mind to cultivate as part of our path of practice, as one aspect of our path of practice. Joy is an integral and I would say a necessary part of the path to liberation. Later in the talk I want to discuss how it fits into the conventional view, the classical view of insight practice.

But this quality, as we foster it, as we recognize it, as we develop it, keeps the mind inclining to what's wholesome. When your mind is in a place of joy or happiness, you're not going to have much interest in gravitating to unwholesome states. So this keeps the mind on that side of right effort which supports the wholesome, the positive.

James Baraz, who's a teaching colleague of Sally's and mine at Spirit Rock, has been offering a series of classes over the last couple of years on the development of joy. These are some of the best attended classes I've seen in the Bay Area. People take them, then they tell their friends about them, and then all their friends start going. People have really gotten a lot out of it and enjoyed it too.

One of the things we say when we teach about joy is we're not trying to force anything to happen in our hearts or in our minds. It's not possible—at least doing it skillfully, it's not possible. As you know from doing the mettā practice or compassion, we intend the mind in that direction, we incline it, and then we take what we get.

The Buddha said that what one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind. As we practice loving-kindness, compassion, and joy, these qualities more and more become the inclination of our mind. That means we find ourselves there more and more often, quite spontaneously. The mind just starts liking to go in that direction, tending in that direction.

So all we really have to do in doing the vipassanā practice is notice the presence of this joy when it arises. Of course, in doing the practice of the Brahmavihāra, appreciative joy, we're doing a little more. We're saying phrases, we're looking for happiness, we're recognizing it when it comes. But in vipassanā practice, all we need to do is recognize the joy when it's there.

But this can be a new step for a lot of us as meditators. The Four Noble Truths are not heavily slanted toward this recognition. And yet I'd like to suggest that they could be reframed a little bit and that this is implicit in them.

I think if the Buddha had grown up in California... You know, in California, we're relentlessly upbeat, right? It's the sunshine and the surf and the orange groves and all that. So the first noble truth would probably have been: there are many opportunities for growth in life. And the third noble truth would definitely have been restated. Instead of the end of suffering, it would be the attainment of happiness.

But this is not actually that heretical. The Dalai Lama had a bestselling book that was on the charts for quite a while, I think on the New York Times bestseller list, called *The Art of Happiness*. And it was his expression of the Third Noble Truth.

Because when you think about it, if you let the significance of the Third Noble Truth sink in, what would it feel like if suffering really went out of your life altogether? What would it feel like if any one of us came really to the end of suffering, of the torments of mind, of greed and fear and hatred and confusion? That is the highest kind of happiness possible.

So the whole path can be seen as the development in a wise way of our potential for happiness. That's really the point of it.

In this setting, we can start to tune into the very simple moments of happiness that come during a day, things we just may not have been looking for previously. Start to tune into them and see how the recognition of them affects your quality of mind and heart.

For instance, waking up, getting out of bed, and having a hot shower. There's something really delightful about that. When you're still a little bit sleepy and that hot water hits—

Or you come in from a cold afternoon walk after lunch and you can have a hot cup of tea from the tea urn. You warm your hands around the cup, and it warms your belly as the tea goes down. A day like today after the dark clouds and snow—then seeing the sun break through those rays of light in the late afternoon. And then the meditator's perhaps greatest pleasure: lying down on one's bed at the end of a day. Such a delicious moment. It lasts so briefly because it seems the next thing I know, the wake-up bells are ringing.

These simple joys are all present, and when we're on retreat, because of the simplicity of our life, they're actually heightened. The Buddha said that robes, alms food, a hut, and a straw seat will seem rich and luxurious to one who is renounced. Don't you feel that way sometimes here? How rich and luxurious it feels to have all this time, this food provided for you, and good company on the path. It's wonderful.

There's the joy of nature, which supports us so well here. It reminds me of a particular period of practice when I was in Thailand, just after I ordained as a bhikkhu. My preceptor let me go to a forest monastery in the north outside of Chiang Mai. It was a very small monastery with about ten huts for nuns and ten huts for monks, separated by a river—so there wouldn't be any complications.

The Thai people were very generous and gave me the most remote monk's hut, the furthest upstream. From my hut, I couldn't see another person. It was a wonderful experience of solitude, right by this running stream set down in the base of a deep gorge. It felt quite wild and mountainous, like those old Chinese hermit monks you see in paintings.

I was there for three months, doing retreat just before the rains. The teacher didn't speak English. He was a lovely man, well-practiced in our style of meditation that he had learned from a student of Mahasi Sayadaw. But with no translator available, for those three months I didn't have an interview and didn't hear a dharma talk. There wasn't another Westerner to talk to, so it was quite solitary.

The teacher and I would communicate somewhat. He would occasionally bring visitors up to my hut, and usually I'd be meditating because there wasn't really anything else to do. They'd look in through the window, and seeing me meditating, he'd say, "Dee, dee"—"good, good." So that was one of my interactions with the teacher.

The other was when he'd come up while I was doing walking meditation. For some reason, I was wearing my rubber sandals while walking. He'd point to my shoes and gesture—no, no—telling me to take them off. That was the extent of my instruction for three months.

It was quite isolated. I felt very lonely at times, and yet what really pulled me through was the beauty of that nature. I felt so nourished and enriched and delighted in its presence.

One other facet struck me: there was a big old mango tree I had to walk under to get to my hut. It happened to be mango season, so the tree was dropping its fruit all over the path. These explosions of orange and that brilliant mango aroma would rise up as I walked by.

The little catch was, as a monk, I couldn't eat the fruit. You're not allowed to eat anything that hasn't been placed directly in your hands before noon of that day. So I'd come back from breakfast—this was a one-meal-a-day place, we'd eat around eight in the morning—and I'd walk back by all those falling mangoes, unable to touch them. It was bittersweet, but the fragrance was beautiful nonetheless.

The joy of nature is a great support and very available here. Even if you're outside briefly in a day, just notice the impression on your senses and that touch of happiness and joy from contact with beauty.

In meditating, there are also deep levels of joy that we touch. One of the great discoveries early in my practice was the possibility of peace. I'd never really known this was achievable in normal daily life. To come into meditation and find that the mind could quiet, that my whole being could be restful and stilled, was a great delight.

In some ways, I think it was that lure that kept me coming back to retreats again and again. Each time I came, it seemed I'd touch a deeper level of peace that I hadn't known was possible.

And that was a revelation for me.

There's also a great joy in being with the truth of things, even when the truth is not so easy. Something in us knows that we need to make our relationship with what's difficult in us. When we leave difficulties unresolved, they govern our lives in unconscious ways, leading us into confusion and fear and unskillful conduct that's harmful to ourselves and others, accompanied by the torments of mind that follow. We know that touching those places of difficulty is the way to freedom, and so there's often a great delight in this process.

One yogi said in an interview recently that one of the most joyful things about being on retreat was being able to be with pain and open to it. This is an acquired taste, but take a look and see if there isn't truth to it - that when you touch that pain and make your peace with it, there is a real delight in that.

As we practice mudita for others, we naturally come into contact with the joys in their lives. I'll share one example, a recent one from a friend of ours in the Bay Area. They're meditators who have practiced for a long time, and their son, in his late teens, went on a meditation retreat for the first time recently. This was kind of a dream come true for them because, as you know with parenting, you can't force anything on your children, especially once they become teenagers. But he had overcome his distrust of the older generation's habits enough to be interested in meditation retreat.

At the end of it, he wrote this beautiful summary of what he'd learned, describing how he'd come to a new understanding of life and the importance of non-harming - conducting oneself in such a way as not to harm other beings in any way - and then enjoying what he called "the bliss of blamelessness" from that. This became a key for him in a new view of life as he went off to university. We've heard that since entering his freshman year this fall, he started a little meditation class for other students. That was just a beautiful source of happiness for his parents.

As we open to mudita for all beings, we touch on something I believe to be true in my experience: that all beings have some experiences of joy and happiness in their lives. However difficult their lives are, there are moments that shine through, as far as I know, for everyone.

There was a woman on retreat last summer who had come to California from Manchester, England. If any of you know Manchester, it's not one of the most radiant places on the globe. It's one of those northern British cities where night falls very early in the winter, and as an old industrial area, it's not extremely beautiful in its architecture. Her job there was a difficult one - helping women refugees get established in their new lives in England. These are women who had fled their home countries, mostly in the developing world, because of persecution of some form, religious or political, and for whom it was not safe to live in their homeland.

Can you imagine having to flee your homeland because of persecution where probably your life was in danger, maybe your family's life was in danger, and landing in some strange, cold, northern city where you may not know people? That would be a really difficult adjustment.

Since this was a metta retreat, I asked her: can you see moments of joy, openness to joy, in the lives of the women that you counsel? And she said, absolutely. She said one of the most inspiring things about the job is the resiliency of their spirits. That in the midst of that really difficult life situation, they still have a lot of enthusiasm and obviously experiences of joy and happiness.

When we focus on the practice of mudita, we look for things that will make others happy, and they don't have to be the things that make us happy. A few years ago, Sally, who likes to ride horses, when we moved onto the Spirit Rock land, kind of inherited the care of this old quarter horse who had been on the land for many years rounding up cattle, since it was formerly used for cattle grazing.

This old horse named Bob had a deep sway back and had been running up and down those hills for probably twenty years herding cattle and bringing them down to the pastures. At this point there were no more cattle on the Spirit Rock land, but we were left with Bob. That was part of the deal, and Sally, having knowledge of horses, was the one who took on his care.

So in winter and summer, she would be down there at 8:30 in the morning making sure Bob had food and water in his corral. On winter mornings, ice would be thick in the trough, and she'd have to break through it to make sure he could get to the water. Sometimes in winter, his hoofs would get abscesses, and she'd have to fill a bucket of

hot water with Epsom salts, take it down, pick his leg up, and stick it in the bucket so he could soak that foot and the abscess would heal, all while tramping around in the mud because it rains a lot in Woodacre in the winter.

Yet I never heard her complain about doing that. There was something in her care for that old horse - who was cantankerous to boot - that I could tell was a pleasure for her, at least mostly. It doesn't have to be what makes us happy.

Around that same time in winter, some local skunks found their way underneath our house. The place they ended up liking best was underneath our bedroom. Some mornings at about two o'clock, we'd be awakened by this pungent, oily aroma wafting up from below. It was hard to get back to sleep because it was quite strong, and we could smell it in the closets the next morning. As you may know, it's not so easy to get skunks out from underneath your house, so it took a while to figure out what to do.

And in the meantime, they discovered that the other thing they liked to do was to bounce on the top of our furnace, which was a metal gas-burning furnace. They used it kind of like a trampoline, and they liked to do this also about two or three in the morning. So there I'd be: boing, boing—the skunks are at it again!

This was naturally a source of some frustration, as you can imagine, and my thoughts were not always kindly directed toward them. But at the same time, I did appreciate that they were probably really enjoying being dry and warm in the basement of our house. So I had some mudita for them, though it didn't stop me from trapping them with a Havahart trap and releasing them in a state park a few miles down the road. I was happy to relocate them to their natural setting.

With mudita, the near enemy is exhilaration or exuberance—or you could say attachment. This is something that might arise because there's some personal benefit involved. Perhaps you have a friend who inherited a cabin in the mountains where you want to go skiing, and you think, "Oh good, I can go skiing at their cabin. I'm happy about that." But that's not appreciating just your friend's happiness.

This kind of exuberance is a feeling that arises when one attaches to happiness and starts thinking—as Sally mentioned this morning—of projecting it into the future: "Oh, now that I'm happy, I can do X, Y, and Z. My life will be so great now that I'm happy." That's a clinging and a kind of corruption of the happiness by thought.

The far enemy is envy, and this is an interesting state to explore because it's really irrational. It's our inability to enjoy someone else's happiness, and it feels as though their happiness takes away some of ours—as though there's only a finite quantity of

happiness in the world, and if they have that much of it, I can't have enough for myself. So take a look when you hear good news from a friend and see if the response has a little bit of a tinge of this quality of envy.

About a year after I graduated from college, I went off to the Peace Corps. I taught for two years in Malaysia. I was really interested to experience another culture and to have some contact with Asia because I was already interested in Buddhism at that time. I had broken up with my girlfriend a few months before I went away. Then, after I'd been in Malaysia for a few months, I got a letter from my best friend telling me that he was now in relationship with my ex-girlfriend.

Mudita was not the first emotion that came to my mind.

So what is underneath envy? What is the reaction that forms the ground for envy? I wonder if it isn't caught up with the comparing mind—as though if someone else is doing really well, that means they're a better person than we are. If we don't feel we're doing as well, their success or good fortune reflects on us in a negative way, which of course doesn't make sense, but we might feel that.

This is similar to a near enemy of compassion that is sometimes called pity. When somebody's having a hard time, we sometimes imagine that makes us better than them. So we may feel sorry for them, but with a condescension or looking down. That's not true compassion, but more the quality of pity. In true compassion, there's a sense of equality between us.

As we tune into mudita as it expresses through our own situation—the appreciation of our own blessings—part of the flavor that comes through is gratitude. When we appreciate the blessings that we have, gratitude is a really beautiful state of mind because when we appreciate what we have, it cuts through greed. We don't necessarily want more. But it also cuts through aversion because we're not dissatisfied with what we have. So gratitude frees us from both greed and aversion.

I'll tell a little story about Kamala, which she's given me permission to tell. She has a few granddaughters now and was talking to one of them on the phone a few years ago. I think her granddaughter at that time was five years old. Kamala asked the granddaughter, "Well, when you get lots of presents on Christmas, do you feel thankful for what you have, or does it make you want more?"

And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, I'd like some more."

Kamala just quietly said, "Oh, that's too bad."

This kind of stopped her granddaughter, and she said, "Why? What do you mean by that?"

Kamala said, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, you feel good? And when you're wanting more, it doesn't feel so good."

The little girl said, "Oh, Nana, you're right."

This is the magic of gratitude. And all of us here have so many things to be thankful for—being warm and sheltered and clothed and so well-fed as we are, having access to medicine for the most part. We have fulfilled what the Buddha called the four requisites of human life: food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. We have those in reasonably good supply, most of us. Many people don't.

You look at any one of those factors, and many people do not have adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medicine in this world.

The Tibetans, moreover, call the situation that we all share "the precious human birth with great endowments." You may have heard this statement in the Buddhist view of life—of beings taking birth over and over—that it's very rare to be born as a human being. The human realm is very conducive for practice and liberation because it has a good mixture of pleasure and pain. If there's too much pleasure, it's easy to become lazy and not want to work. If there's too much pain, we feel overwhelmed and discouraged and cannot work for our freedom. The human realm has a mixture that's conducive from both sides.

We have the opportunity to take real advantage of this through our situation here in our connection with the Dharma. First of all, we've all been born with reasonably well-functioning minds and bodies. Our senses are working; our minds are in good shape. We've taken birth at a time when a Buddha has appeared in the world. We've been born in a place and time when the Dharma is flourishing and available. We've been born at a time and place where practitioners are actively engaging in the teachings. We've also heard and understood the teachings, and we have the interest and some degree of leisure time to pursue them.

When you put all those things together, that's a very rare combination of circumstances. The Tibetans say that it's because of great merit—wholesome karma that we've accumulated in the past—that all these conditions have come together for us in this way. And they encourage us to take advantage of our time and these conditions to make our best effort for freedom, for liberation.

Many of you have mentioned this sense of gratitude over the last days. I think it's a very beautiful feeling that comes often at this time in retreat—an expression of gratitude mainly for the Dharma. That you've been able to have your life touched by the Dharma, transformed by the Dharma. That it has illuminated so many things that were unclear for you. And it is a great blessing.

So being in a practice situation, there's often a lot of gratitude already. But those of you who've practiced in Asia probably know that the sense of gratitude can be very, very strong at centers there. I went last year to practice in Burma for six weeks, and I had the opportunity—so I took advantage of it—to ordain as a monk with Paok Sayadaw, the great meditation master in the southeast of Burma, one of the most reliable authorities on the jhanas that I think is alive and teaching in the world today.

Because they knew I was going to Burma, one of my students gave me some money to take to offer as dana to the monastery. As you know, Burma is a very poor country, and the monasteries are always in need of support. So I told her that I would try to sponsor at least one lunch, if not a few lunches, with her donation.

As soon as I got to the monastery while I was still a layperson, I went to the office and said to the steward—the layperson who handles the money for the monastery—"I have some money from a supporter in America, and she would like to offer some lunches during this retreat."

Well, I'd gotten there at the start of the rains retreat, which is a three-month period of practice. There were 750 people practicing in the monastery for most of the rains retreat: about 400 monks, about 150 nuns, and many laymen and laywomen. So I said, "I'd like to purchase at least one lunch."

And he said, "Oh, I'm sorry, all the lunches have been provided for the next three months, and they're all on dana." The monastery doesn't have this great store of money that they can provide lunches out of. People had already come forward—most of them Burmese—and made the donations to provide the meals, the lunches for the next three months to feed 750 people.

So what I was able to do with her donation was to offer a few breakfasts. We had three special breakfasts during the rains retreat, which were actually quite delicious—fried bread and a curry soup.

Every day we would go down to lunch, and there was a whiteboard, similar to the one here, on which would be written the menu for the day and who had donated the lunch for that day. That was the form, which is used in other monasteries in Burma as well, that inspired our practice here of the meal dana and the whiteboard with the acknowledgments.

So every day as I went down, I would read—they'd have the name in Burmese and in English—the family, mostly, who had made the offering for that day. And on many days, the people who had donated the lunch would come and sit by the food line and watch the monks and nuns go through serving themselves from the food that they had offered. You could tell what a delight it was for them: first, to have made the offering, and second, to see 750 people be fed from the donations they had made.

It was just a beautiful exchange of generosity and then gratitude from our side that we were reminded every day: this is made possible through the donations, through the generosity of many people who so value and support what you're doing that they give of their money in this country that doesn't have a lot, so that you can do what you're doing. And then obviously, as a meditator, one feels that one really needs to use that support well and not waste one's time, but really practice as well as one can to honor that generosity of spirit, that donation.

The Buddha said that three persons are rare in this world. One, he said, was a Buddha. Another, he said, was a person who is grateful and thankful. This is a really, really beautiful quality.

Often as we're sitting, we may feel a lot of gratitude for the existence of the path at all. I don't know if you've ever taken time to reflect on what your life was like before you knew about a path.

But I'll invite you to just consider it for the moment. What was life like before you knew there was a path? Before you knew there was a possibility of ending suffering? Before you knew that suffering had a cause? Because it had a cause, it could have an end.

I know what mine was like. I had a lot of pain and I had no idea what to do about it. I had no idea that there was a way to clarify it and understand it and be free from it. How would we face death without our practice? How would we face aging and illness if it weren't for the practice? Just to know that we are not the body is a huge gift. Most people in the world don't know this. Even if they've heard it, they don't have an experiential sense of it or a real faith in it. We know we are not the body. There is more to us than this.

And did you ever think about how you got connected to the path? How did you wind up here? How did you get started? Isn't it mysterious? You read a book. Where did the book come from? How did you get your hands on that book? Or somebody talks to you, a friend just mentions it and you think, "I'll check it out." How did you have a friend like that? You know, there's this great mystery about what brings each of us onto this path. And in some ways it's mysterious, but at other times do you kind of get a sense that there's a destiny about it for you? That something in you was going to move you this way no matter what?

There's a quotation from the Chippewa tribe of the Native Americans: "Sometimes I go around pitying myself while all the time I'm being carried across the vast sky by great winds." We're all being carried by great winds. The great winds of our past actions have brought us here and provided the foundation for our wisdom and loving-kindness.

One year I was starting a six-week retreat as a yogi here, and the weather was really bad. I was starting in November, and it was very cold and gray and rainy. And I was starting to feel the bleakness of the weather sort of seep into my mind state. And I thought, "I don't really want to go into that kind of aversion. It's not good to get habituated to aversion early on in a retreat." So I thought, "I'll do something to offset it."

And what I did was I made a list of things I was grateful for. I just thought of all the things in my life that I appreciated at that time. I didn't spend a lot of time at it, but I filled one sheet of paper. And then every morning on that retreat, I would read over that sheet of paper when I woke up so that I could turn my mind in a direction of appreciation and joy. And that was a very helpful practice for me. In fact, I got that list out the other day and took a look at it, and it's still most of the things I'm grateful for. I can read it today and feel the same uplift that I felt then.

Sally and I were teaching about gratitude in a senior students class that we do in the Bay Area. And one guy in the class got the idea, "I'd like to practice gratitude." So he made the resolve, he connected with a friend, and they made the agreement: every night before they went to bed, they would email each other one thing that they were grateful for in that day. And so every night before they went to bed, they had a gratitude thought from their life and a gratitude thought from their friends. And he said it was a really beautiful practice. So since we've told other people about that, other people have taken it up, and I don't recommend you start it now, but after you get home, it's a nice way to keep it alive in your mind.

I want to just finish by talking briefly about the role of joy in insight practice. And I believe that joy is really essential in the path of liberation. There are so many words in Pali that point to this quality. There's mudita, which we've been talking about. There is sukha, which is usually translated as happiness. Steve calls it happy comfort of body and mind. Ananda, which means bliss. This appears in a lot of Buddhist names. The Buddha's cousin was Ananda. My preceptor in Thailand was Ajahn Panyananda, which is the bliss of wisdom.

There's the word piti, for rapture or delight. There's pamoja, which can be translated as gladness, and somanasa, also for gladness of mind. This factor gets pointed to again and again in the Buddha's teachings.

There's one sutta in particular where it stands out very strongly—a list sometimes called Transcendent Dependent Arising. I hope you won't get intimidated by the list, but it's a series of twelve links similar to conventional dependent origination. However, these links trace the movement of the path to liberation in very positive terms, showing the wholesome qualities of mind that develop and lead one to the other to deliver us to the doorway of liberation.

Because of this, one commentator—Analayo, a German bhikkhu in Sri Lanka who has written a fantastic book called Satipatthana, a book-length commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta—writes that the entire scheme of the gradual training, that is the path of Dharma, can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy. The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy.

In this list called Transcendent Dependent Arising, the Buddha talks about suffering as the starting point leading to faith, and faith leading to gladness. Really, it's our faith in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha that brings this sense of gladness in our practice—this sense of gratitude. And then the gladness, as it becomes developed and recognized, starts to grow.

This is from Thomas Merton: "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and of joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created beings."

We touch this quality of gladness over and over, and that, the Buddha said, gives rise to rapture. Rapture is finding this gladness around the meditation object, finding the brightness of mind that loves to connect with our chosen object. As the mind collects and becomes unified through that delight, then it leads to tranquility in the body and mind.

As the body and mind become tranquil, that leads to the factor of happiness or sukha. I like this word sukha because it sounds a little bit like sugar, and sukha is a pointer to a sweetness of mind. That is the meaning of this link—such a satisfying sense of being that the whole body and mind start to settle. The mind starts to settle in itself. The body relaxes and calms. And that is the entryway to concentration.

Concentration, then, is the basis for insight. And insight is the basis for liberation. So the function of gladness and joy is to bring contentment into the heart and mind, to allow for that complete settling where we don't need to look outside ourselves because everything we need, all our deep satisfaction, is found just in the here and now.

This sense of sukha is a very deep and more stable flowering. But I think it's so interesting that the practice the Buddha taught doesn't stop at happiness or sukha. It continues from there through concentration to insight and then liberation.

This is from the Buddha: "Two things I never lost track of: not to be lax in my efforts and not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind." Not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind. So many times I would have gladly settled for merely wholesome states of mind, but that's not the end of the path.

In a sutta called The Simile of the Heartwood, the Buddha said, "It is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end." It is this complete liberation, the total end of suffering, that is the final outcome of this path.

But this is the same destination as mudita, gratitude, joy, and all the brahmaviharas. These are all supportive forces that lift the mind up and take it to the doorstep of peace and then liberation.

I'll close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition of the Brahmaviharas in what are called the Four Immeasurables. Each line expresses one of the four: metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness which is free from sorrow.

May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue. May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue. May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow. May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

CHAPTER 21

Closing Talk - Mind and Life Retreat

Guy Armstrong · 17 min

> *In this closing talk from a Mind and Life retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses the crucial transition from the supportive retreat environment back to daily life. He explores the fundamental tension between mainstream cultural values focused on acquisition and the Buddhist practice of letting go, offering practical guidance for maintaining mindfulness in relationships and daily interactions.*
>
> *Armstrong emphasizes the transformative power of developing space around thoughts and emotions, leading to more skillful responses rather than reactive patterns. He provides detailed instruction on Right Speech from the Buddha's teachings, including the five qualities one should cultivate before offering criticism to others: speaking at the right time, in truth, gently, with kindly intention, and for the other's benefit.*
>
> *The talk includes inspiring examples from the Dalai Lama's approach to forgiveness and the importance of formal meditation practice in daily life. Armstrong encourages continuing retreat practice and building sangha connections to support alternative values in mainstream society. Drawing from the five precepts and the brahmavihāras (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity), he offers a framework for living with greater peace, happiness, and kindness.*

I want to say I really appreciate the work that you all did on this retreat. We commented many times as the days were unfolding that one thing this group knew very well how to do was to work hard. And it was attested to by your presence at the sittings and the walkings and your discipline, diving right in to the regimen.

We also recognize this retreat was something of a risk for a lot of you. You'd never been in an environment like this before. You didn't know what you were getting into. And so especially we appreciated your willingness to take on this form and the rigor of it.

At the same time, I hope you appreciate it was something of a risk for us too, because not only are you a highly intelligent and possibly critical audience, but if this had been a total flop, it would have been quite a visible embarrassment for IMS. So we all feel very good about the way things have turned out, and I hope you will also.

We're at the position now where we're about to make the transition from this sheltered, very supportive, very simple environment back into the hustle and bustle of our daily life where, as you know as well as anyone, the values of that world are not entirely consistent with the values that we've been trying to foster here.

In a very broad way of looking, we might say that the mainstream values of our culture are primarily in the direction of acquisition. It's about having more, whether that's money personally or professionally, whether it's things, whether it's recognition and credits and awards. It's mostly about accumulation. In the practice of mindfulness, as you've seen again and again, the key is in letting go—not in having more, but in having less. And that's what allows us to come into this clear relationship with the present moment.

So many people have been wondering how we can best take what has been precious and meaningful from this experience and translate it back into our daily life. I think the first thing I want to say is that daily life is much more about relationship than retreat is. And so the core of our practice in daily life will probably move into the arena of relationship.

Mindfulness is an incredibly supportive tool in that relationship because we can understand much better our own part, our own participation in the world of human culture and society and individual relationships. As I was reflecting on some of the things that I've seen in myself and lots of people who've gone through this practice over the years, some of the great benefits that I see are that we learn how to have a little more space around our thoughts. We learn to see a thought as a thought and to be aware when it arrives.

Because of that, then, we start to have a little more awareness of the emotions that thoughts engender, and particularly when those emotions are difficult in the nature of anger or fear or great desire or sadness. That awareness gives us the opportunity to have a little more choice in our next action so that hopefully we can relate from a place of wisdom and not a compulsive place of surrendering to the reactive emotion.

I think these are some of the greatest immediate benefits of this practice. These result in our life in having more peace, more happiness, and more kindness. So I think this last point, especially the kindness, is something I want to talk about for just a minute. Again, who's better to think about than the Dalai Lama in this regard?

A few years ago, the Dalai Lama was being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, and it's recounted in a book called The Wisdom of Forgiveness, if you're interested in reading more detail. So Oprah began by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive

yourself for anything?" "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect," the Dalai Lama replied. "Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect, hmm, okay." The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also." And that's it.

Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?" "Small mistakes every day maybe," the Dalai Lama said, "but major mistakes, it seems, no." "No major mistakes," Oprah repeated. She fell silent. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life to have no regrets."

This ability to live in the world without having regrets is a big challenge. Most of us find that we make small slips all the time and we make major slips regularly. One Zen master said that Dharma practice was basically repeating mistake after mistake. So we might notice that in our own lives also.

In learning to relate to the world consistently from this place of kindness, the best framework that I know of are the five precepts that Sharon mentioned on the opening night. These are guidelines for our lives as lay practitioners. They're very commonsensical and really very simple: not killing, not stealing, not harming others through our sexuality, not lying, and not engaging in drugs and intoxicants to the point of heedlessness.

I want to pay specific attention to the notion of speech because most of us are usually fairly good about not killing at least other humans, not stealing. We're getting better at refining our sexual energy, I think. But it's in the area of speech, I think, that we most often get hurt in daily life and most often hurt other people.

So in addition to the guidelines on not lying, the other guidelines that the Buddha encouraged with speech were not undermining one another, not speaking in a divisive way that creates separation, not taking what one has heard here and repeating it over there to others in a negative sense. So having an engendering of respect for one another in our personal life, in our professional life.

He also encouraged us to speak gently, to avoid speaking harshly. When we're in the throes of anger, it's very easy to vent that anger on someone else. It's very hurtful to be the recipient of that kind of angry energy. So we must really take care with our speech to be gentle in our expression, even when we need to communicate that we're angry with someone else, which often happens.

The third guideline he offered was not to spend too much time in idle chatter—the kind of conversations that go on around the water cooler that are simply about what one co-worker said to another and that are merely for titillation or gossip. We can take a pass on those and spend our time talking about things that are meaningful to us, that touch our heart, that come from our heart.

In particular, on the topic of speech, he said that if we are about to criticize another—this is a rule that was instigated for the community of monks and nuns that he led for the forty-five years of his life—one who is about to criticize another should realize five qualities within themselves before they offer that criticism.

The first is: I will speak at the right time, because sometimes saying it publicly or in front of certain people or when someone else is vulnerable is not going to be skillful.

I'll speak in truth. That means if I have a complaint, I'll just say truthfully what it's about and not try to exaggerate or overstate what the offense has been.

I will speak gently, not harshly, which I mentioned earlier.

I will speak with kindly intention. Isn't this interesting? That one can deliver criticism to another with a kindly intention. And how can that be? It's the fifth point: I will speak to their benefit and not to their detriment. So we offer criticism in hopes that somebody else's understanding of themselves can be improved and it can be a pathway to greater happiness in their life.

Sometimes he advised, if one can't put one's mind into these five qualities, to withhold the criticism until one is able to do that. That's a high bar, but I think it's a very useful reflection if we're about to engage in admonishing another.

So on the level of informal practice, the precepts are very good guides, held within the context of those sublime abidings that Sharon talked about last night—the brahmaviharas: loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

There's also a really critical piece in daily life for formal practice. If you found these tools and this experience to be a benefit, we really encourage you to carry that back into your daily life.

The conversation with Oprah continued in this line also. Oprah continued the interview with the Dalai Lama by saying, "Would you encourage the rest of the world to meditate?" she asked.

"Stupid question," the Dalai Lama's response was as immediate as it was unexpected. Oprah's face froze. There was a stunned silence in the hotel room. One thought crossed everyone's mind: this was probably the first time someone had ever said this to Oprah's face.

The Dalai Lama grew thoughtful. "Should people meditate? I think so," he said after a pause. Maybe it had been a stupid question, but he had still wanted to reply with care. "It is worthwhile, for the world has to look more inward. We are not doing enough here. I'm not saying that people should be religious-minded. What I'm saying is we should focus on our inner potential more."

"Oh, I believe that," Oprah said, visibly relaxing. "That's why I asked the stupid question."

So this question of formal practice comes in often at the end of retreat. People say, "Should I sit in my daily life?" Now you know the answer. "How much should I sit?" is usually the next question.

When I was beginning meditation, my teachers—who are here with you now, Joseph and Sharon were my first teachers—said very clearly and unambiguously at the end of a retreat in a talk like this: "Sit two hours a day." At that time, I was in my twenties and fairly uninvolved, and I could do that. In fact, I did that for years, and some years it was more. When I was on staff here, we were expected to sit three hours a day.

So I just say whatever time you can find in your daily life is the right time for you. I like to sit when I first get up in the morning because my mind hasn't yet gotten plugged into the events of the day. Other people like to sit right before they go to bed because it clears their mind for sleep. Other people like to sit right after they come home from work because there's an emptying of all the events of the day. Whatever time you can find in your life, you'll test it and find the value that it has for you. I just encourage you to make the effort and see what will work for you.

Please continue to come back to retreat if you found this experience useful. I find that a combination of a consistent daily practice and one retreat a year is really good for keeping one's dharma practice alive and deepening. So if you can manage to do that, that would be a great start.

Of course, sometimes people get more motivated. I want to let you know we do have longer opportunities for retreat for those of you who feel the call. There's a three-month retreat here every fall, which also has the option of doing a six-week piece in either half of it. And there are often retreats of two to three weeks throughout the year on our calendar.

I'm going to be flying back this afternoon to California. I live near Spirit Rock meditation center, a sister center in Marin County, and we also have a two-month retreat every winter in February and March that is also available in one-month pieces. So please, if this has touched you, especially if it's touched you deeply, think about giving more time. You'll have a lot more time after the settling process. Remember those painful first three days? Then after that, it goes on and on. Hard to imagine, but it's terrific.

The last thing I wanted to mention is because it's hard to keep alternative values alive as an individual in a broader society, it's very helpful if you can make Sangha connections wherever you live. There are a lot of meditation groups and instruction opportunities available around the country. A good place to look is in a journal called The Inquiring Mind, of which I think there are copies out on the tables during this retreat. So look to see if there's anybody in your area who's interested in practicing together, and that support will be invaluable.

I wanted to close with a mention of another scientist whom I've appreciated a lot. There was an article about him last weekend in the New York Times, and that is Albert Hoffman. Albert Hoffman was the chemist who first synthesized LSD in 1938, was the first subject for LSD and kind of transformed a generation with his work. He's still alive and actually celebrated his 100th birthday on Wednesday. So that's why the Times was doing the interview.

His bright eyes flash with a recollection of a mystical experience he had on a forest path more than 90 years ago in the hills above Baden, Switzerland. Notice that this was before the invention of the drug. The experience left him longing for a similar glimpse of what he calls a miraculous, powerful, unfathomable reality. "I was completely astonished by the beauty of nature," he said, laying a slightly gnarled finger alongside his nose, his longish white hair swept back from his temples and the crown of his head. He said any natural scientist who was not a mystic was not a real natural scientist.

"Outside is pure energy and colorless substance. All of the rest happens through the mechanisms of our senses. Our eyes see just a small fraction of the light in this world. It is a trick to make a colored world, which does not exist outside of human beings."

When asked if the drug had deepened his understanding of death, he appeared mildly startled and said, "No, I go back to where I came from, to where I was before I was born. That's all."

So it's been a pleasure to share this week with you. May your practice continue to deepen in both secular and spiritual ways. And may you come to great happiness and great kindness in your life. Thank you for all your work.

CHAPTER 22

Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpānasati)

Guy Armstrong · 52 min

In this opening talk of a vipassanā intensive retreat, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing) as taught by the Buddha. Drawing primarily from the Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN 118) and Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Armstrong explains how breath meditation serves as a complete path leading to both samatha (calm) and vipassanā (insight). He defines mindfulness as 'understanding what our present experience is' - not mere bare attention, but an intelligent awareness that opens the door to paññā (wisdom).

Armstrong systematically presents the Buddha's 16-stage progression of breath practice, from initially noticing long and short breaths to the advanced stages of contemplating impermanence, cessation (nirodha), and relinquishment. He emphasizes the importance of balanced effort - neither too tight nor too loose - using the analogy of picking up a baked potato with a fork. The talk addresses common challenges like striving mind and offers practical guidance on connecting with and sustaining attention on the breath.

Throughout, Armstrong weaves in stories of accomplished teachers like Dipa Ma and Pauk Sayadaw to illustrate the fruits of deep practice, while maintaining that technique is ultimately subjective and breath meditation, though widely used, is not the only valid approach. The discourse concludes with the Buddha's own words about the four satipaṭṭhānas as the direct path to purification and the realization of nibbāna.

The first thing I'd like to do tonight is express my appreciation for the new hall. How many of you practiced in this place before this year? Anybody miss the red carpet? A little bit—a little sentimental value to an old red carpet that used to cover the platform. But on the whole, isn't this a happier place to be? A place a little on the dark side. So I'm really appreciating the bright colors and light tones of brightness here.

I want to talk tonight about mindfulness of breathing. In some ways this is a rather fundamental talk, really just intended to remind us all of what we're doing at this stage in the retreat. First day of a retreat is always difficult if you just arrived yesterday. It's a little bit like going back to the gym after Christmas and New Year's holidays and finding out that you put on too much weight and you didn't keep the muscle tone up. So rediscovering the muscles is always a little bit achy and tiring.

For those of you who have been here for two weeks or four weeks, you've been going through the transition of all of us coming in from the outside with all our manic, worldly energy, and I appreciate your patience with us all. You may have found it interesting to start over with the instructions this morning. I don't know if you are or not, but it wouldn't be a bad idea because going through the instructions again will give you a sense of how you've changed or what you've learned or how you might be relating to them differently than you did two weeks ago or four weeks ago. So I encourage you to try it if you have an inclination. Start with the whole sequence again, if that feels appropriate, and see how it feels this time around.

We started the instructions today with paying attention to breathing. In some ways, this is kind of an arbitrary choice. I hope you all know that. We could really have started anywhere or nowhere. Technique is a very subjective preference in the whole field of meditation.

Some very well-established meditation traditions put very little emphasis on technique. I remember a Zen session that I went to sit in—I think it was 1978, the first year I was on staff. Actually, Carol and Steve and I all went together to New York to sit with a well-known Zen teacher named Sasaki Roshi. Sasaki Roshi is a very strong spirit in any world. He's Leonard Cohen's teacher. If you happen to see the new film about Leonard Cohen, there's a little scene of Cohen in the film with Sasaki, who I think was used as the model for Yoda in the Star Wars films—that timeless kind of face.

Sasaki Roshi is in the tradition of Rinzai Zen, which is the tradition that tends to hit you if you move in the meditation hall. One of the reasons I didn't stay too long in that tradition. It's also a tradition that puts very little emphasis on meditation technique. So as we started the retreat, we were all given a koan—a baby koan suitable for Westerners, but a Zen riddle that we were supposed to present our answer to four times a day to the teacher, to the roshi, in individual meetings. If you didn't have a good answer, he'd say things like, "stupid answer, ring the bell," and that meant you were dismissed. So he wasn't one of these warm and fuzzy, cuddly types like we tend to be. It was a little bit intimidating for some of us.

At one point, we'd been given very basic instructions about feeling the breath in the abdomen, and then we'd been given our koan. That was about the extent of the instruction. So in one question period, somebody raised their hand and said, "What should we do while we sit? Should we follow our breath, or should we reflect on our koan?" And Roshi's answer was very Zen. He said, "You can do whatever you want." That was the end of the answer. You can do whatever you want.

That's really true here, too. You can do whatever you want, and I know many of you will, regardless of what we want you to do or ask you to do. We realize that's out of our control. You will do what you want. But we do feel that there is a value in technique, and we want to share with you some aspects that we found helpful in working with techniques in meditation. Hopefully over the time you're here, whether it's nine weeks, seven weeks, or five weeks, you'll have a chance to play with them enough to get a feeling for what works for you.

That's the point of technique—to find what tools, what choices, what directions to aim the attention in best harmonize with your body and mind. Because the body and mind are always changing, different ones will work better at different times. That's why it's good if you have a few; then you'll know which one fits each condition.

When the mind is agitated, it might call for one choice. When the mind is calm, it might be another. When the body is tight, it might require one approach. When the body is easy, it might invite another. So we'd like to offer a range of practices, and we begin with the breath, I think because it's where the Buddha really began. His meditation instructions tend to start with the breath.

Looking over the whole field of Buddhist meditation practice—2,500 years and all the different traditions it has spread to—the breath is probably the most used single technique. But there's nothing sacred about it. I hope you really appreciate that. It is not the sacred object of meditation. It is not the only appropriate place to put your attention. It's a skillful place for many people, and for some people it's a really unskillful place.

If you find it difficult to relate with the breath, please talk with your teacher in the interview and see if you can work together to find an alternate focus that better harmonizes with where you're at. So there's no obligation for anybody to be with the breath. And please don't think that this is in some way the best technique. It's just one technique, and it's the one that we tend to start with.

But really more important than the object of the breath is the quality of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be applied to any part of your experience. So it can be applied to any of the sensations at the five physical sense doors, any experience of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Those are bases for mindfulness. It can be applied to any phenomenon that you recognize at the mind door—to thoughts, to emotions, to intentions, to perceptions, to feeling tones, volition. Any of those are excellent grounds for mindfulness.

We tend to start with the breath, but mindfulness is the primary thing. So as Steve mentioned today, if in being with the breath you find the attention drawn somewhere else and you notice that, mindfulness is still happening, and that's really the key.

I find it interesting that after about thirty years of coming into this country, the practice of mindfulness is starting to become recognized outside the kind of fringe group that you and I represent. We're kind of an oddball assortment of people who would come into a place like this and be in silence for five weeks or nine weeks. Mainstream America isn't going to do this anytime soon.

Nonetheless, mindfulness is starting to be really recognized and appreciated in the mainstream. Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction has made a big impact. And that has brought it to the attention of the scientific community who are now starting to do research and experiments involving mindfulness that are showing some pretty amazing results. But I don't really want to go into those because I think you know from your own experience the benefits of mindfulness.

One group that I know of in Los Angeles is part of a $25 million funding effort. And there's a group within that dedicated to the study of mindfulness in a research-oriented way. So I think this is great. I think this will validate the beneficial effects of what we do and take it further into the mainstream as yoga has gone into the mainstream after years of being considered sort of a fringe and cult pursuit.

So as mindfulness becomes more mainstream, I wonder—I want to ask you a question. Have you ever tried to define it for yourself? If a friend came and asked you, "Okay, you do this practice called mindfulness, I'm reading about this. What do you mean by mindfulness?" Would you have a clear response for them?

Sometimes it's described as bare attention, just the sense that we connect with our experience. And around mindfulness, there's something to do with the present moment, right? It's important that mindfulness have to do with an experience in this moment. And bare attention represents that connecting of our attention to something that's happening, and we don't add anything to it. That's what the bare part means.

So we don't analyze it. We don't judge it. We don't compare it. We don't evaluate it. We don't wish it were something else. I mean, we may, but that's not mindfulness. Mindfulness doesn't add to the experience, and that's why it's called bare.

But I don't think that completely sums up what mindfulness is, for me anyway, because as far as I can tell, dogs have bare attention. Most of the time, when I look at a dog, they're just with what is. When they sleep, they dream, and then you see their paws going. But when they're alert, they're very happily, usually, with what is. Are they being mindful?

Is a dog mindful? A dog is in the present moment. They're connecting to some sense experience. Are they being mindful? Is a baby mindful? A baby is also very connected to the present moment. Is a baby mindful?

For you to consider this question, I want to read some sections from the Satipatthana Sutta. This is in a way the Bible in our tradition for how to practice mindfulness. It is the discourse on the foundations, or the establishment, you might say, of mindfulness. It's found in the Majjhima Nikaya, one of the primary texts that came down to us in the language of Pali, a language from ancient India, and has been translated into many languages around the world. There's now a very good translation in English, and that's the one that I'll quote some sections from.

The Satipatthana Sutta is directed to a practitioner. In the way that the Buddha delivered it, he used the term bhikkhu because mostly he was speaking to male monastics in his day. But the term bhikkhu, according to the commentaries in this context, means anybody who's committed to the practice. So you don't have to be a monastic, you don't have to be a male. It means all of us who are seriously engaged in mindfulness practice. So this is how we are instructed by the Buddha to practice. These are just a few examples. There's a lot more in the whole sutta, but these are a few representative examples.

"Breathing in, the practitioner understands I am breathing in. Breathing out, she understands I am breathing out. Or, feeling a painful feeling, he understands I am feeling a painful feeling. Or, feeling a pleasant feeling, she understands I am feeling a pleasant feeling. She understands the mind affected by lust as the mind affected by lust, and the mind unaffected by lust as the mind unaffected by lust. Or, there being aversion in him, he understands there is aversion in me. Or, there being no aversion, he understands there is no aversion in me."

So these are the Buddha's own descriptions of how to practice mindfulness. What common word stands out to you from that selection? "Understands" is actually the way that Bhikkhu Bodhi translated the term from Pali. Understands.

So I would say that a good working definition of mindfulness is understanding what our present experience is. It doesn't have to be our total present experience. It just means understanding that experience where our attention is directed—understanding what's happening in the present moment where our attention is landing. That's mindfulness.

I like this word "understands" because there's some quality in there that I think is important to notice, and that is an intelligence. Understanding is the part, I would say, that's missing from the dog's experience. It's the part that's missing from the baby's experience. They don't quite have that—you could almost call it a reflective ability in consciousness to take note of what the present experience is. There's almost this sense of stepping back a little bit from the immediate engagement, and also understanding what's happening to us.

This quality of intelligence is a really important piece of mindfulness because it is the opening of wisdom. It's through our mindful relationship to our experience that the wisdom door opens up to us. Wisdom is the word we usually use to translate the Pali term paññā, an important component of the Eightfold Path. And they are so related, these two qualities of mindfulness and wisdom, that one of my teachers from Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, seldom spoke about them separately. He would use the combined term sati-paññā, mindfulness-wisdom, and he would talk about this as the natural functioning of our beings. When we are present and we pay attention, our mind naturally engages with our experience from this quality of mindfulness and understanding. It comes forth naturally if we let it.

This is really what we're training in, this quality of mindfulness with understanding or wisdom. So then let's back up one more step. This is what mindfulness is. Why do we do it? Why on earth would you put yourself in this situation for nine weeks? I'm sure you've asked yourself this more than once.

This is an arduous practice. I really appreciate working with people in long retreat because I know each one of you has a tremendous amount of commitment, tremendous faith in order to undertake this kind of activity. It's a challenge every day, sometimes many times every hour. This is a challenge. Why do we do it? What is it about mindfulness?

There's something about a wisdom of staying in the present moment that I think is an important part of it. There was a cartoon in the New Yorker a few months ago that really illustrated our human condition and said something about the nature of desires.

The cartoon was in three panels. The first panel was of a man at work, sitting in front of his computer, working away on the keyboard. But over his head there was this little thought balloon which had an image of him out on the golf course playing golf.

Next panel: same guy out on the golf course striking a ball off the driving range, but over his head was an image of himself at home making love to his partner. Third panel—can you guess? Same guy at home making love to his partner, thinking about his PC at work.

This is the nature of samsaric mind. Wherever we are, we can't be entirely present because the mind is running on to somewhere else. Desire is taking our thoughts somewhere else. That kind of life doesn't really have the possibility of deep satisfaction—the life where we're always somewhere else. As the Dalai Lama expressed it, the present moment is the only place that we can feel love. So the present moment is an important piece of the puzzle.

But there's another aspect to it also, which is that this property of mindfulness as the channel for wisdom begins to interact with our experience in a way that wakes us up. As we start to connect with the facets of our human experience—all the experiences of the body and of the mind, the outside world and the inside world—mindfulness looking on those things with the eye of understanding starts to make some sense of life. This is really the unfolding of wisdom. I want to talk more about it later, exactly how that comes about and how it develops. But just to say that the wisdom piece of mindfulness is the one that ultimately gives the greatest satisfaction through the development of freedom.

So I want to talk a little bit technically for a few minutes about meditation practice. I'll talk about this in relation to the breath, but I hope you'll see the connection with any other focus that you may experience. I want to talk about two words that are really helpful in understanding how meditation practice functions. These two words are connecting and sustaining. They're the English translation of two Pali words: vitaka and vichara. They're, you might say, the beginnings of concentration. We'll talk more about concentration later, but concentration is the settled quality of mind that lets us start to feel some stability, some calm, some steadiness with our attention.

As we practice meditation with the breath, notice that what you do when you're being properly mindful is that you connect your attention to the breath and then you sustain the attention there for a short period of time. That's the meaning of these Pali words. First, we choose to connect the attention to the sensations of the breath, and then we let the attention rest there for a little bit of time.

This little bit of time is important because if you have the sense that you should last the whole hour, you'll get really tight. So don't try to sustain for very long. The recommended time is half a breath. Don't try to sustain that connection for more than half a breath. So we connect with the breath as we feel the in-breath coming. We let the attention stay there for half a breath, and then we kind of let go. When the out-breath begins, we connect again, and we sustain for just that length of time.

I think this is realistic for us. If you have in mind "I should sustain for ten breaths even," you can get really tight and frustrated and discouraged. If you have in mind "I only have to sustain for half a breath," I think you can do it. I think I can do it. I think this is a helpful way to gauge our effort.

Even so, we might get tight because we miss a breath, or two, or three, or five minutes, or ten minutes. I mean, if you're here starting a retreat, I would suspect that most of you have been gone for ten minutes at a time, maybe twenty minutes at a time today, without connecting to the present. That happens on early days of retreat. Don't be discouraged.

Because we feel a little judgment about that, sometimes we get tight. "Oh, I can't miss this breath." But does the tightness actually help us stay connected? Not so well.

Other times we might be so relaxed, we'll say, "Whatever happens, happens." This is the hippie approach to meditation. "I'll just sit back, man, and whatever happens, I'm cool with that."

And that's not so satisfying either because the whole period can go by and we haven't really connected with anything.

So we want to find that quality of effort that's somewhere in between. This is really what's meant by the balance of effort—a mind that's firm enough to make a good connection with our focus, let's say the breath, but not so tight that it squeezes the life out of it.

An analogy that one of our teachers used was trying to pick up a baked potato with a fork. Let's say you have half of a baked potato, a small potato, and you'd like to pick it up and put it in your mouth. Notice the quality of effort with which the fork hits the potato. If you hit the potato too hard, what happens? It breaks up, and you can't pick anything up. But if you hit it too soft, the fork doesn't go in and you also can't pick it up. So you have to press the fork in with just the right amount of force. Then it picks up the potato and you can eat it.

Similarly, when connecting to any meditation subject like the breath, find where that appropriate balance is for you of effort. It can change moment by moment, but keep trying until you find it.

This is really a key to something I think Steve or Carol mentioned last night about right attitude. You want an attitude of mind in your practice that's not too aggressive, not too gaining or striving, because that leads to being too tight. But you also want an attitude that's not too laid back or too passive, because that will lead to you being out of touch. So you want to find the place that's firm but not too hard and connect with the breath in that way.

Remember that the point of the meditation is to be present, to be mindful in as many moments as you can. But in a lot of ways, that's not up to our control. So be really patient with yourself in those periods when mindfulness just doesn't happen. It's not always up to us. A lot of times, it's not our choice that we're away in thought for a long time. It's just what happens—not under our control, so not right for us to blame ourselves or judge ourselves for that.

Remember that you can always just start over. When you've come to the end of one of those long periods, attempting to blame ourselves doesn't help so much. Remember, you can just begin again. Every moment is a new opportunity. You don't have to go back and figure out what you thought about. You don't have to resolve the train of thinking. You can just let it go. You don't have to excuse yourself or even forgive yourself. You say, "Oh, here again," and we start anew. You can be grateful for that.

Now the development of mindfulness leads in two directions, which I'm sure you've heard often. The Pali terms are samatha and vipassana. You could say these are the two big streams of the benefits of our practice. In English, these are translated as calm and insight.

So samatha basically means calm. Vipassana we usually translate as insight. The literal meaning is more like seeing clearly, seeing things the way they are.

Over the 2,500 years that these teachings have been around, there has been a lot of comment on these two streams of the practice. Different people have said, "Oh, if you want to develop samatha or calm, these are the practices you should do. And if you want to develop vipassana or insight, these are the practices you should do." So over time, there's been this division of certain practices that are considered right for developing calm or samatha and others that are right for developing insight or vipassana.

Some teachers will tell you, "Oh no, you're doing a samatha practice now, don't go looking for insight." Or "You're doing an insight practice now, don't worry about samatha."

As I read the Buddha's teachings, he never talked in this kind of separated way. Rather, as I read the teachings, he said when you practice mindfulness, you will develop in both samatha and vipassana. They both really support one another. It is true that you can take an approach that emphasizes one or the other, but here in this course, most of us will be developing both. So we'll make our instructions on the assumption that you're interested in both calm and insight.

But it is very interesting to meet people who've developed a lot of calm because it's hard to tell them from fully enlightened beings. It's an interesting point about the development of calm.

One of the teachers I got to spend time with was Dipa Ma, and I'm sure many of you have heard of her. There's a wonderful book about her written by Amy Schmidt, who was a resident teacher here for many years. I'd say of all the dharma books in the last ten years, this is one of the most immediately happy-making dharma books, and especially for women. Women who read the Dipa Ma book tend to really connect with her as a kind of living teaching figure, even though she died a number of years ago. So I highly recommend, especially for the women, that you check out the book called *Dipa Ma*.

Dipa Ma was a very accomplished yogi who had experienced deep insight and profound stillness—deep samatha. Just to give you an idea of what her concentration was like: she went to her first meditation retreat and had been practicing for about a day when she was supposed to go for an interview with her teacher. As she was walking toward her teacher, she found she couldn't lift her left foot off the ground. Something just stopped her, and she wasn't sure what had happened. So she just stood there for a few minutes—"Oh, can't move. Guess I'm supposed to be here." She didn't fight it. After a few minutes of still not being able to move, she looked down and discovered that a dog had bitten her ankle, closed his teeth around her ankle—that's why she couldn't move. She didn't even really feel it, except as a kind of weight. That's how steady her mind was at that point.

So spending time with Dipa Ma was always amazing because her mind never seemed to move. And I couldn't tell if that was because she was so highly enlightened or because she had developed calm to such a high degree.

Another person who reminds me of this is a teacher from Thailand named Ajahn Jomnian. Ajahn Jomnian has a monastery in the south of Thailand near the town of Krabi. He's in his late sixties now and has been a monk since he was very young. He has done a lot of metta practice, so he has a very joyful disposition and strong concentration. He also has psychic powers that arose out of the concentration. One of the things he said a few years ago is that he hasn't had any anger in twenty-five years. And it's not because he's isolated, living in a cave—he runs a large monastery with many people coming and going, and I'm sure many headaches. He said he hasn't had any anger. Now, is that because he's so realized, or is that because of the steadiness of his mind from concentration? I don't know.

Another teacher who really impresses me was here at the Forest Refuge this summer. His name is Pauk Sayadaw. He's a Burmese teacher who teaches a very complete and complex system of meditation, the first part of which is seriously oriented toward developing samatha. He wants you to develop what are called the four jhanas or absorption states—very high levels of concentration. He himself is clearly a master of those concentrated states. Then he instructs you how to use that concentrated mind to turn to insight, to see the nature of reality very clearly.

In himself, he is a very impressive being. I find him remarkable. I've met a fairly wide range of teachers in Buddhist circles, and of all the ones I've met, Pauk Sayadaw reminds me of the stories of the Buddha more than anybody else I've encountered. His mind seems always unflappable. I've never seen him in anything but a state of equanimity. He always has a very warm and loving presence, very nonjudgmental, very accepting. And he's totally focused on dharma. Nothing else interests him. I try to make conversation with him, and it just falls flat after about a sentence, because he'll go there to be polite for about one sentence, and then it's clear he's not interested anymore.

He was at the Forest Refuge, and the Burmese donors would come up from New York or Boston to visit with him. He'd have lunch with them and exchange a couple of pleasantries, and then he'd retire to his room. Because if the conversation wasn't about dharma, it didn't interest him. So he manifests this complete dedication. He's been in robes since he was ten years old and has complete dedication to his own liberation and the liberation of anyone else who wishes to follow his teaching.

So these are some of the powers of a concentrated mind, a still mind, a steady mind in conjunction with insight. This is the direction that mindfulness of breathing leads—both the deepening of stillness and the deepening of insight.

In terms of meditation technique, there is no other that the Buddha described in as much detail. There's this wonderful sutta in the Majjhima called the Anapanasati Sutta —a discourse on mindfulness of in-and-out breathing—where the Buddha describes in detail how this practice unfolds for us as we follow it all the way through. He said that this practice is sufficient to follow all the way through to realization, and in doing so, it covers the other foundations of mindfulness as well.

Mindfulness of breathing is about the body primarily, but as we explore it with some depth and some consistency, it also opens up the other foundations of mindfulness—feeling tone (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), mind states or citta, and the fourth foundation called dhammas or dharmic principles.

The Buddha described the unfolding of this practice in sixteen separate stages in the sutta, normally organized into four groups of four. In each stage, the meditator is experiencing these developments both through breathing in and through breathing out.

The first group of four: One notices whether the breath is long. One notices if the breath is short. One breathes in experiencing the whole body. And one tranquilizes the bodily formation.

So fairly early on, the meditator is using the breath to bring calm into the body. This is one of the first beautiful benefits of breath as a meditation—it starts to calm the body. The breath is particularly good for this because of its rhythmic nature. I'm sure you've felt this, for short periods or for long periods, how that very steady in-and-out activity has a soothing quality to it. The rhythm can eventually convey that soothing quality to the body, and the body starts to calm down.

Whenever I enter a retreat from the outside world, from a busy period in life, one of the first things I notice is how busy my body is—that it's stored up tensions and energies and hasn't fully relaxed. Then as the retreat goes on, I feel the body relaxing and letting go. So the breath begins to bring a calming energy to the body.

The next four descriptions: breathing in and out, experiencing rapture, experiencing pleasure. The commentaries liken this to the second foundation on feeling tone, the pleasant aspect of experience. You might try this in a sitting—see if in breathing in you can have a sense of that energy picking up throughout the body and of a pleasant quality to that energy.

Third in this step: experiencing the mental formations. So early on, only seven steps in, the meditation on the breath is leading to looking at the mind. When we talk about the breath, don't think that you have to hold it separate from knowing what's happening in the mind. They're really meant to be integrated. We can look at the quality of

mind that is with the breath. The relationship we create with the breath—is it an aggressive one where we're taking hold too hard? Is it too distant or laid back where we're not connecting enough? Are we finding the right relationship with the breath?

Next step: tranquilizing the mental formation. As the breath calms the body, so also in time it starts to calm the mind. These two steps of calming the body and calming the mind are important developments through the mindfulness of breath.

The third tetrad has four more components: breathing in, experiencing the mind—so knowing clearly what's in the mind—gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind, and liberating the mind. That's delightful. Liberating the mind, and we're only at step twelve.

This has a special meaning in the text: the mind that's free from hindrances. You might notice this in your practice—there are moments when the hindrances of desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt aren't active. In those moments, feel that quality of freedom. It may be there a number of times in one sitting. In that moment, the mind is free. It is liberated. Breath leads in that direction.

Because of the beautiful qualities that grow out of mindfulness of breath, there can easily come a striving around these states. Just think what we've covered so far: tranquility, rapture, pleasure, gladdening, concentrating, liberating. Who wouldn't want that? So notice if there starts to come a striving element in relationship to mindfulness of breathing: "I'm being mindful so that I can get concentrated. I'm being mindful so that I can get glad. I'm being mindful so that I can feel free."

Of course, if we do it from that kind of ulterior motive, it doesn't work. We have to really be with the breath in an innocent kind of way, and we have to see these benefits all as byproducts. That innocent attention leads to all this beautiful result, but we can't force it.

So we learn that right effort is just about forming that relationship in the moment with the breath—not pushing it, not trying to get over it to get into a different next moment. All the beautiful qualities of meditation come out of a moment where we accept it the way it is. Never out of aversion or grasping. This is always the first step: accepting the moment the way it is. Then the beautiful qualities come from that.

When I sat with Palak Sayadaw the first time, I went over to Burma and spent six weeks with him.

And a friend of mine was already there and knew I was coming, so he told Sayadaw about my arrival. I'm afraid he gave me quite a buildup, saying, "Oh, this teacher from California is coming. It would be good if we could give him a nice kuti."

So they did. I received a beautiful kuti when I arrived, and Sayadaw went out of his way to welcome me. I was able to see him every day for interviews, which was wonderfully positive. At the same time, I felt like I had a reputation to live up to. After practicing for about thirty years, I thought I should be somewhere significant along this path.

But Sayadaw's level of concentration is extraordinarily high. I charged in and practiced as intensely as I could. I made some progress and was advancing on his system, but then I completely plateaued. I never got close to where he would have liked me to reach.

Did I get caught up in striving? Absolutely. I had to deal with it as it arose—this desire to be somewhere other than fully present, motivated by something beyond just being here now. It was an ego thing. I had to examine that and let go as completely as possible.

When I sat with him again at Forest Refuge, I encountered a friend who sometimes joined the daily sits. He saw me recently and asked, "How did you work with the striving in relation to Sayadaw?" I replied, "I'd already fallen on my face in Burma—I didn't have to worry about doing it again here." So it was actually much easier the second time.

We do learn to recognize and work with this striving quality of mind, this gaining mind that craves some special experience from our practice. But the practice truly unfolds only when we can accept the moment exactly as it is and find ease with that. That's freedom—the freedom to discover peace of mind with things precisely as they are.

What leads in this direction is the fourth group of stages in relating to the breath. As we breathe in and out, we contemplate impermanence. You'll notice that these final four stages are entirely about insight or vipassana. Some of the first twelve were clearly about concentration—tranquilizing the mind, gladdening the mind, concentrating the mind—clearly on the side of samatha. These last four are unmistakably on the side of vipassana.

Contemplating fading away—the Pali word is viraga, literally meaning "not passion" or dispassion. It's a synonym for the unconditioned, for nibbana. Contemplating nibbana as I breathe in, contemplating nibbana as I breathe out. Not the concept, but the direct experience.

Contemplating cessation or nirodha—this means the cessation of suffering. This is truly the third noble truth. The end of suffering is the end of craving. So we contemplate in our direct experience of breathing in and out what it feels like when craving ends, even if only temporarily. With the end of craving comes the end of suffering.

Finally, contemplating relinquishment or letting go. What the commentaries say this refers to is releasing any of the defilements of mind, the torments of mind that Carol mentioned last night—letting go of greed, aversion, and delusion, hopefully at some point for good, so that these qualities of mind never again visit. This is the final freedom, the direction toward which the entire path leads.

This great stability of mind where the mind is no longer troubled by self-centered thoughts or confusion in any direction whatsoever. This is truly the kind of peace from which love and compassion flow naturally. Love and compassion are already present when the mind isn't preoccupied with self-centered striving.

As the mind settles and becomes free from these torments, love and compassion emerge naturally, expressing themselves in countless forms of connection, helping, sharing, and generosity. This is what the Buddha was teaching the Satipatthana for. This is why the Buddha taught the practice of mindfulness.

Through understanding the way things truly are, as mindfulness comes into contact with objects like the breath, body, sounds, thoughts, and moods, we begin to see their specific characteristics—an in-breath, an out-breath, a sound, the quality of fear, generosity, anxiety, or compassion. We see how all these phenomena have their individual nature, but they're also subject to the universal characteristics of impermanence, unreliability, and selflessness.

As mindfulness and wisdom together begin to uncover all these characteristics, we find ourselves releasing more and more of any kind of clinging. It's the letting go of clinging that allows the mind to be liberated, released finally into a direct realization of the unconditioned. It's that direct realization that accomplishes the work of relinquishing the defilements.

So as the Buddha said toward the end of the Satipatthana Sutta: "Friends, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, and for the attainment of the true way and the realization of nibbana—namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

In the mindfulness of the breath, we find a complete path in itself that opens up to all the other foundations, beginning with the development of calm and opening into the development of liberating wisdom.

Let's just sit for a minute in silence, please.

[Silent sitting]

"This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness."

Thank you for your attention. It was a pleasure to be with you at the start of this retreat and also in the new hall. It's the first time I've taught in the new hall, so it's been a great pleasure.

Just one brief announcement about interviews: Interviews for the whole group will begin tomorrow. Due to the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of this computer system, there was no way to separate out the people who had interviews today from the whole group. The result is that some people who had interviews today—the continuing retreatants—may also be on the list for tomorrow. In addition, about half of the new group will be scheduled for tomorrow and about half the day after.

So please, everybody check the board because your number could be up tomorrow. Please do check, and we look forward to seeing you then.

CHAPTER 23

Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong draws from the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN 10) to explore cittānupassanā, the third foundation of mindfulness focused on observing mind-states. He addresses the reality of dukkha as described in the First Noble Truth, using both contemporary research and classical Buddhist teachings to frame our understanding of human suffering.*
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> *Armstrong identifies five core difficult emotions that create the most bondage: wanting, sadness, anger, self-judgment, and fear. He explains how these states arise through our relationship to pleasant and unpleasant experiences across past and future, and provides practical tools for working with them. The talk introduces a three-part analysis of emotions: the mental coloring or mood, bodily sensations, and the underlying storylines or beliefs that perpetuate suffering.*
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> *A key teaching is the RAIN technique - Recognition, Acceptance, Interest, and Non-identification - offering meditators a systematic approach to transform their relationship with difficult mind-states. Armstrong emphasizes finding the middle way between suppression and expression, allowing full feeling without reactive behavior. The talk concludes with Rilke's profound poem about embracing all experiences, reminding us that 'no feeling is final' and encouraging practitioners to remain open to the full spectrum of human emotional experience while cultivating freedom through mindful awareness.*

A couple of nights ago, Steve talked about the Four Noble Truths with particular emphasis on the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering. When we look around the world, it's quite easy to see, isn't it? Even if you shared this truth with many people, they might not acknowledge it. Yet if we look with an eye that is more open, it's easy to see.

This reminded me of an article that appeared in the New Yorker not so long ago. According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. Surprisingly, they say, they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed, by positive logic, that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be given everything it must put up with.

Nine out of ten of the respondents in the survey stated that they would give up completely if they only knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail. In a personal note in the afterword, researchers stated that statistically speaking, life is, quote, "just too much," unquote. As yet, they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through it at all.

This may remind you of our situation here, except that you've probably given up hope of anything in the mail.

When I come on retreat, the question of suffering seems to get really simple after I've been in retreat for a little while. There are basically, you may have noticed, two kinds of suffering: body and mind. When you look closely, body suffering is basically about physical pain or discomfort.

This was really clear to me a couple of retreats ago. I went over to Burma and sat with the concentration master that I mentioned the other evening, whose name is Palok Sayadaw. When I arrived at the monastery in Burma, I was given an outline of the daily schedule. There were six sittings a day. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half, and the longest sitting was two hours. As soon as I arrived, I was expected to start practicing according to that schedule.

In practicing by that schedule, I encountered quite a bit of physical pain because I wasn't used to sitting for an hour and a half, much less two hours. I'm sure in your transition here, you've also encountered physical discomfort here and there while sitting for an hour or 45 minutes. This is one common occurrence and common theme of retreat—something that stretches us.

On the mental side, when I'm sitting, I divide it into two pieces. One piece has to do with meditative skill: How am I with the fact that I'm not with the present moment all the time? How am I with the fact that the mind gets restless and wanders or goes to sleep and gets caught up in thought? That's an area of some need for attention, lest we fall into suffering with frustration, disappointment, judgment, discouragement—all the feelings that come around a sort of loss of control. This is one area that I know all of you are working with in this retreat.

But the second area is really more challenging and has to do with directly painful states of mind. This is what I want to talk about tonight: How do we work with the difficult states of mind that come? They come not only in retreat, but of course they come in daily life also. How do these states lead to suffering for us, and how can we release the suffering and find freedom in relation to them?

As we enter this area of states of mind, we're getting into what's called the third foundation of mindfulness. In the Satipatthana Sutta, it starts off talking about the third foundation like this: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

So here are our three old friends—essentially greed, hatred, and confusion—that become the object for our mindfulness, either their presence or their absence. Their presence being unwholesome or suffering states, their absence being a wholesome state, a state of well-being.

This is the area of practice that I want to talk about tonight, and it's a very central area in our life, in our meditation, and in coming to greater freedom. So much of our core sufferings are from these states of mind—the difficult states of mind—and knowing how to relate with them.

Just a short word about terminology. I may talk about emotions. I may talk about moods. I may use the term mind states. Let me clarify that a bit. The word that is translated in the third foundation as "mind" is the Pali word citta. It could equally well be translated as "heart," because the word citta encompasses both qualities that we would call mental and qualities that we would call of the heart or emotional. Probably the best translation for the word citta, as it's used in the suttas, is the word "psyche." Everything that makes up our psyche is part of citta.

We may talk about emotions. These are generally considered heart qualities, and they're states of mind like love or happiness or joy or sadness or fear or embarrassment that have a resonance in our heart.

There is a tone of being pleasant or unpleasant that is usually rather strong. So for emotions, we're talking about these rather strong heart qualities.

When I use the word mood, it's more or less synonymous with emotion, but it may have a little gentler intensity, and it may encompass a slightly wider range of feelings.

Then the word mind state or state of mind is the most encompassing, and it's really what's pointed to in the third foundation. It includes not only the range of moods and emotions, but also all the subtle states of mind that we become familiar with in meditation, like calm or mindfulness or concentration or equanimity or rapture. These more subtle states don't really leap out at us, but as we investigate the more refined qualities

of mind, we start to really understand how these feel, how they present themselves, how they affect us. So the term states of mind encompasses this range of subtle meditative states as well as the more dramatic emotional states that come. It's the most broad and all-encompassing.

The Abhidhamma, which is a very analytic look at the teachings of the Buddha, says that there are 52 distinct mental factors or qualities of mind—the entire list of factors of mind that can arise. Although they join in so many different combinations that they give rise to a very, very complex set of experiences, it says there are only 52 building blocks in mind that give rise to these. Some of these building blocks are considered beautiful, or you could say wholesome. Some are considered unwholesome. Some are neither beautiful nor unwholesome, like the quality of intention that I think Steve talked about in the instructions. It's rather neutral.

But I want to focus tonight on talking a little about these states that have quite pleasant or quite unpleasant qualities. As a frame to the discussion, I'd just like to invite you to reflect on what are the most sublime states of mind that you've experienced in your life? It may be that you go back to childhood. It may be that you remember particularly deep meditation experiences. The most sublime states that you can recall. That may give you a sense of the range of the beautiful that's available within the human heart and mind.

And now I'd like to ask you to reflect on the experiences in your life, the mental qualities that have been most painful. Not particularly incidents—they may be connected with incidents. I don't want to focus on the outer incident, but focus on the inner experience. What was the most painful experience or what were the most painful emotions you can recall feeling?

And then think about all the states in between, states that are somewhat difficult, states that are somewhat pleasurable, and then the extremes. So I hope this gives you a sense of the range of the human heart and mind as it's played out through your experience. It's vast.

In meditation retreats, we often have the experience of touching these extremes. It's one reason that meditation is very challenging, but it's also why life is so challenging. If life was all just one way, it might be simpler to navigate, but it's this peculiar mix of the intensely sublime and the very, very difficult and problematic that course through us at perhaps a moment's notice, completely out of our control, that creates some of our imbalance in our relationship to living.

So there are many things to say about the beautiful states, the wholesome states of mind. We'll talk about them a lot as the retreat goes by. For tonight, I just want to say briefly how not to be involved with suffering around the beautiful. And this is easier than how not to be involved with suffering around the difficult.

So essentially, I'm sure you know the first instruction: don't cling. Whatever the beautiful experience that comes to you or that you remember from the past, don't hold on. Let it go so that the mind comes freshly into this moment and is ready for whatever happens now. Clinging to even the most beautiful only creates an obstacle to being present with what is, as I'm sure you know.

The second recommendation, and this takes a little bit of practice, is a skill that should come with practice: Appreciate these states when they arrive. When a wholesome state or a beautiful state comes to you, please be very, very mindful that it's appeared. Naming it is helpful, feeling it in the body, feeling it in the mind, and knowing that, oh, this is the arrival of something beautiful or something wholesome.

So this could be a state like calm or peace or equanimity, loving kindness or compassion, contentment, joy, happiness, wonder, awe, friendliness, warmth. Sometimes they're subtle, but as soon as you become aware, please recognize that something very good has arrived.

Sometimes I found, especially in the early years of my practice, I took these states completely for granted. And there would be a respite from the storm of the hindrances and whatever. There'd be some peace, some good feelings, some openness to nature and appreciation, gratitude. And I'd sort of think, oh, this is the way it ought to be. That was the killer: "This is the way it ought to be." And I wouldn't recognize how special what had just arrived was.

I think this is a little bit of our Western problem, that we're raised in a culture that's pretty idealistic.

Our culture is remarkably adept at defining and describing how things ought to be. So we carry many opinions about how things should unfold. We are idealistic as cultures go. But the problem with this orientation is that reality isn't based on ideals. And when reality doesn't match the ideal, we struggle.

It could be the ideal about how a meditation center should work. It could be the ideal about how our fellow yogis should be behaving. It could be the ideal about how my meditation experience should be unfolding in this retreat. And when the reality doesn't

match the ideal, we fight with reality. When you fight with reality, who wins? It's almost never the ideal, and there's usually tremendous suffering along the way to aligning with reality.

So our idealism doesn't serve us very well when it comes to meditation. It's wonderful to have an aspiration and to work toward ideals like social justice and equality and non-discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, and so forth. Those are beautiful, inspiring ideals within our culture that we move to actualize through law and through our own human hearts. But when we see that the reality is not in alignment with the ideal, can we keep from suffering around that?

It doesn't mean we stop trying to make a better world and move toward the realization of our deep aspirations for justice, equality, and so on. But can we not come into conflict? Can we not suffer when the ideal doesn't measure up? Especially when it comes to our own hearts and minds and experience.

What's interesting is that the Buddha's mind doesn't have a bias toward expecting that things should be wholesome. This is my interpretation anyway. There's no bias in the awakened mind. The awakened mind, we might say, starts at emptiness. It starts with not expecting anything particular, or starts at zero, if you like.

Then, if something beautiful shows up, we go, "Oh, how wonderful, something beautiful." We recognize it, acknowledge it without clinging. If something difficult shows up, we say, "Oh, something difficult has shown up," and we recognize that. But we don't have a sense that one or the other ought to be happening. We align our awareness just with the way things are. We let reality teach us.

In relating then with the beautiful emotions: don't cling and appreciate them when they come. You'll find this very helpful. The more we appreciate the beautiful emotions, the more likely they are to return. The more familiar we become with them, the more likely they are to come again.

So let's talk now about the difficult emotions—sometimes called painful emotions, defilements, hindrances, torments of mind, afflictive emotions. All of these describe this terrain. Emotions like fear or terror, humiliation, sense of low self-worth, embarrassment, depression, despair, anger, hatred, sadness.

How can we relate when these come to bring greater freedom in our lives? Two things are really needed here. One is an attitude shift, and that is in the direction of greater acceptance. And the other is more wisdom about these emotions. We just need to understand how these emotions are put together better. And we do that just by paying attention. This is the laboratory where we understand how the emotions work.

So it's actually a great opportunity when a difficult emotion comes in the middle of meditation. You don't have anything else to do but to learn about it. And from my point of view, learning about the difficult emotions is one of the key things that happens in a long retreat like this.

You know, mindfulness practice is becoming widespread in our culture—still in a small way, but much more widespread than it had been ten years ago. One of the most immediate benefits that people can receive is understanding how to work with difficult emotions through mindfulness. And it's one of the most immediate ways that people can get benefit.

So I hope this will be a source of interest for you on this retreat and a source of tremendous learning and freedom. Because as we open up around these core areas where we typically get caught, where we suffer, where we're in bondage, some of the greatest opportunities for freedom lie in this understanding, in this learning.

The first step really is to know what we're feeling when we feel it. This is easier said than done. Our culture has not really given many of us the tools to understand our emotional landscape. I grew up in a family of Anglo-Saxon descent. We didn't talk much about our feelings around the dinner table or in warm heart-to-heart conversations between parent and child. So I grew up without much fluency around my emotions, not really knowing what they were, the range that was normal in people, how to work with them, what was okay to express and let out, what I needed to moderate in my speech and actions. I had to learn much of this on the cushion, in meditation circles, within the sangha. It's been a slow education process for me.

Often knowing what we're feeling is really harder than it sounds. Let me tell you a little story. I was practicing here on one three-month retreat, sitting in the hall during the 8:15 sit. I'd been sitting for a couple of weeks at that point and felt pretty present and mindful. I was leaving the hall to do my walking meditation. For the last two weeks I'd been walking in the same spot, down on the grass in Yogi Park. So I went out the back door of the meditation hall, very mindful—lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing—very much with my walking. I went down the steps, feeling really present.

I looked out toward my walking spot and saw somebody was already walking there. This was not supposed to happen because that was my walking place. I had practically ground my initials into the dirt by that point in the retreat. Everyone had watched me walk there for two weeks, so they should all have known that spot had my name on it.

So I was walking down to my path, still thinking I was being very mindful—lifting, moving, placing—but all these thoughts kept coming up: What are they doing there? Don't they know that's my walking path? Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. More thoughts came: Did I cut in front of them at breakfast this morning? Is this some kind of yogi payback? Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing.

I kept walking and got to another walking place nearby. I started doing my back-and-forth walking, and it was a half hour into my walking period before I realized I was irritated. I thought I was so in touch—lifting, moving, placing—and I hadn't even noticed I was getting angry. That's how these states work. They come in underneath our radar. When they come in under the radar and we don't know what's happening, we're completely at their mercy.

Once I recognized I was irritated, then I could start to work with the irritation. I could name it. I could look into the thoughts that were going on around it. I could feel it in my body. I could let go of it. But until I understood that it was in operation, I was just completely caught in it.

So the first step, if we want to achieve some freedom in relation to these states, is to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. Then essentially what we do is turn the attention away from the story of the hindrance onto the experience itself—onto the experience of the anger or the desire or whatever it might be.

In looking at an emotion like anger, start to notice that there are three parts you can tune into with any strong emotion. One is the kind of mood that comes in and colors the mind. I'd call it irritation. It could be annoyance. It could be anger. It's a particular flavor that comes out of the mind. That flavor is not a bodily thing, but the taste of it is something that comes out of the mind. That's why we call it a mental state. Notice that the flavor of anger is really different from the flavor of joy or the flavor of wanting. It has its own taste in the mind, and that's what I'd call its mood or coloring. That's one key piece, perhaps the central piece.

The second thing is that if the mood is strong, it's going to have an impact in the body. You're going to be able to feel where that emotion is expressing itself in the body.

If anger is strong, you're likely to feel a burning sensation and a sense of contraction. The contraction may be felt around the shoulders and chest, around the back. The burning and the sense of heat may be all through the trunk. So the second thing is, if it's strong at all, look in the body and feel what the physical sensation is.

Notice that these two are different components. Sometimes you'll go—let's say you're feeling anger in the chest, a contraction and a burning. You put the attention in the chest, you feel that contraction, and also there you feel strongly this coloring or the mood of anger. It's as though the sensations at that point in the chest are permeated with the flavor of anger. But notice that these are two different components. You might have the same contraction in the chest, but the emotion could be of sadness or fear. So there'd be a different coloring, a different flavor associated with the same physical sensations. Even though it feels like they're really merged—which at times they are—they have two different pieces.

It's a little bit like preparing coffee with cream. If you like cream in your coffee and you pour the cream in and drink it, you really know that's one flavor. But if you understand what the coffee tastes like separately and what the cream tastes like separately, then you understand how they're combined. Similarly, with the mood and the physical sensation, you get to know each on its own terms and you understand how they get merged in that direct experience. But they're two different pieces.

The third piece is thought. Thought plays a really central role in any difficult emotion that we are caught in. Anytime there's suffering around an emotional state, it's because thought is also playing a role. When I was walking and I saw somebody in my walking path, the thought that tripped me up was "they shouldn't be there." Or another way to say it is "they're wrong and I'm right."

These thoughts form themselves into a view or an opinion that we believe in. It's the belief, the conviction, the certainty that we're right about that which locks in the emotion. As long as I keep telling myself they're wrong to be there and I'm right, what happens with the anger? It just keeps getting built up and up, reinforced again and again. It's as though a fire is burning and every time I think that thought, I toss another log onto the fire. Let's crank the flames of anger up a little more. How do we do that? We think that thought.

If we stop thinking the thought or if we stop believing it, what happens to the emotion? It will just start to fade away. This belief or view that we have, I would call a storyline. Every strong emotion that we're gripped by, that we're caught in, that we're suffering from, is accompanied by a storyline—an unconscious belief that we've bought into that we usually haven't recognized.

In freeing ourselves from the emotion, we can work both on freedom in relation to the mood and the sensations, and freedom here means basically acceptance. Don't fight the fact that you're angry. Don't fight the fact that your body's contracted. That's just

done itself. You didn't choose it, and right away it's not easy to un-choose it. Just notice that that's there and work with greater acceptance. That starts to allow things to relax. And also look at what thought you're believing that is fixing the emotion in place.

If you look at these three things—the coloring in the mind or the mood, the physical sensation, and the kind of thought that's at work—you'll pretty much have the whole view of the emotion. So pay attention in all three of those ways.

I'll talk about this a little bit in relationship to a couple of different mind states. Kamala talked very beautifully the other night about the hindrances, which is the classical list that the Buddha offered for us to look at for difficult mind states. As I look at my own experience and the experience of many yogis, I come up with a list of five emotions that I see as the most common ones that we get caught in. I'll just name what they seem to be to me: wanting, sadness, anger, self-judgment, and fear. These seem to be the ones that grip us the most tightly and form kind of the core bondages for many of us.

I thought it was interesting as I was reflecting about these—emotions are very much dependent on feeling tones. First foundation of mindfulness is the body. Second foundation of mindfulness is feeling tone or vedana, the quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Emotions, as the third foundation, are in a way built on the second foundation, which is feeling tone. Emotions have to do usually with past and future. That's how they kind of take us out of the present and spin us into past and future. So I thought about past and future and pleasant and unpleasant.

And try this. When something pleasant has been in the past and no longer is... What's the emotional response to that situation? What does that feel like? Anybody?

Sadness. I heard someone say that. Isn't that really common? When we have lost something that was pleasant, the emotional response is sadness.

Now let's look at painful experiences in the past. What's a really common response to something that's been painful that happened in the past? Anger, isn't it? If somebody has offended us and there's a hurt underneath it, the common response is that we get angry.

What about the future? Something pleasant that's out there in the future—what's the emotional leaning? Wanting. Something unpleasant that's out there in the future—what's the emotional reaction? Fear.

So we see what I would call the big four: sadness, anger, desire, and fear. They're all built around relation to pleasant and unpleasant in the past and in the future. That's an interesting reflection on these core emotions. Self-judgment, in a way, is a particular form of anger that's directed against ourselves—so it's actually a subset.

Let me talk about a couple of these. Let's take desire as an example. Desire comes up frequently on retreat. It may be for people, places, things. Steve talked about this in The Four Noble Truths, Kamala in her talk on the hindrances.

Carol and Sally and I were in Italy a few years ago, leading a retreat. First of all, it was a lot of fun to be in Italy on the dharma side because Italians are different in dharma practice than Americans are. One of the things we noticed was there was an espresso machine right outside the dining hall. So often after lunch, after breakfast, hits of espresso going down. We were staying at a facility that was a Christian convent, and their normal retreat fare was to put out wine with lunch and dinner. So we had to ask them, please, not to do that.

Italian yogis are just different. It was hard to hold the silence as well as we hold it here, and we just kind of let that happen. The other thing I felt is that the Italians I met were quite fluent with their emotions. They often knew what they were feeling and talked about it quite easily, even when it was quite difficult.

I had an interview early on with this young guy, and he said, "I'm having trouble getting into the retreat. I've done another retreat, and it was okay, but I'm having trouble getting into this one."

I said, "Well, what's going on?"

He said, "Well, we were there in August. This is our vacation time in Italy, and I had a choice of where to go. My friends were going on a vacation in the Caribbean and invited me to go along, or I could come on this meditation retreat."

I said, "Well, why did you come here?"

He said, "All the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out." And he said, "But as I come on this retreat, I'm just thinking about my friends and all the fun that they're having there—the warm sunlight and the sandy beaches, the beautiful women of the Caribbean. And here I am just being with my breath."

I said, "Could you say that this is a case of desire?"

He said, "Yes, yes."

I said, "Well, when you're feeling desire for something, is it ever easy to be with something else?"

He said, "No, it's not."

I said, "Does the desire necessarily mean that the thing that's going on is bad?"

He said, "No, no, not necessarily."

I said, "So do you think it might be possible to let go of this desire?"

He said, "I'll try."

So a couple of days later, he came back in another interview. He had let go of the desire, and he was just here. He was settled in, he was with his breath, and then the retreat just unfolded.

But desire has this quality. When we're caught in it, we can't see what's in front of us. We can't see what's here and now. And it's not satisfying. Because one of the things you notice is, do you ever desire for what you already have? Do you ever sit there and think, "I'd really like a nose in between my eyes"? I've never had that desire reported to me. We always want what we don't have, and there's always that gap. So in desire, there's inherently this dissatisfaction.

Sometimes it's pleasant to encounter a beautiful object, but there's always in that encounter a bittersweet quality because of this gap. We can't have it right now. So it may be the desire for things outside, maybe the desire for things in retreat—particular kind of food, a particular temperature, particular weather, certain quiet in the meditation hall or in the residences, a certain kind of experience in sitting. All these things act in the same way and keep us from being at ease with the way things are. It's one of the functions of desire.

So what's the storyline of desire? I would put it something like this. You can look and see different forms of desire might have a little bit different stories, but it's something like, "I can't be happy because I don't have this." Something like that. That there's a belief that if we had that, we would be happy, and without it, we can't be.

In coming into feeling desire in the body, I think you can find that even if desire is subtle—it may be a desire for a concentrated state of mind, it's not a very big or blatant wanting—there's a kind of leaning or tension that we can feel in the body. This started to be a clue to me when I was looking at what's making the sense of friction. If the body

was kind of leaning forward or I felt some tension, that would sort of clue me in that a desire was present, and then I'd try to look and see what is the desire for. And once I saw it, then I was better able to release that desire.

I talked a little about anger earlier, opening to the feeling of anger, really letting it be there and be fully expressed in the body and in the mind without acting on it. So we find with emotions that there is the possibility of finding a middle way between suppression and expression. Often from a Western psychological point of view, we may be told, "Well, if you don't suppress the emotion, then you really need to express it." But in meditation, we can find a middle path.

We're not suppressing because we let ourselves feel it completely, but we also don't have to express. We don't have to go out and get mad at anybody. We don't have to behave in such a way that we are aggressive or offensive. We can feel the emotion very strongly. There's no suppression, but we don't have to act on it.

And then take a look. Anger is almost always accompanied by some thoughts of blame—what someone else did that was wrong. Now, the interesting thing is those thoughts of blame may be accurate. Somebody may have done something that was wrong. There's a lot of wrong going on in the world. You know, all over the place, terrible things happen. Wars and murder and racism, oppression and exploitation, abuse on a personal level. These things are not right. They're not appropriate. And if they've been done to us, we are justified in saying that wasn't right. It was not a right action.

The thing to look at if we want to release suffering is: does holding on to that conviction free our own heart or not? Is there a way that we can know that something wasn't right, but not hold on to the sense of blame about it? It's almost like there's a quiet conviction. The action was wrong. It was hurtful. It hurt us. It doesn't feel good. Somehow the person doesn't understand. Maybe they haven't apologized. But how can we release that burning that's in our own heart of the resentment?

What happens if we just stop thinking the blaming thoughts? Instead of adding more fuel to the fire, we simply don't add any more fuel and then see if the fire dies by its own accord.

So it's not to excuse what the other person has done. It's not to condone it. It's not to say it was right. It's not to overlook our own hurt. And often in daily life, in societal conditions, it may be very important to express the sense of injustice or harm that was done on an individual level, on a group level. But at the same time, can we do it in a

way that our own heart is not burning with resentment and blame? So that we're inwardly free, even as we recognize the other person's unskillful actions. See if that's possible.

The Dalai Lama tells a story of a monk that he knew when he lived in Tibet in 1959, before he fled to India as a result of the Chinese invasion. The Dalai Lama remembered him as rather an ordinary monk. Many years later, he met up with him again after this monk had been in prison—in a Chinese prison during the years of occupation. He had spent more than twenty years in prison and finally escaped to India, where he was able to meet with the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama, of course, was concerned about his welfare, so he asked him how his time had been in prison. The monk said, "Well, I felt that I was in danger." The Dalai Lama jumped to the assumption that perhaps he had been tortured, so he said to the monk, "Do you mean that you were tortured?" The monk answered, "Yes, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I meant that I was in danger of getting angry at my captors."

This illustrates the kind of potential of the practice—to be in prison, to be tortured, and to be able to so hold one's own balance of mind that one doesn't slide into anger. Why? Because of the suffering—the suffering for ourselves and the suffering for others. This is a possibility.

When anger is directed against ourselves, it comes across as self-judgment. This is one of the very, very strong and unnecessary sufferings that we have in the West. So many of us grow up with this sense of not being good enough and think thoughts about ourselves that deprecate us. We believe in these thoughts, are more harshly critical of ourselves than we would ever be of anyone else, or than we would let anyone else be of us. Often when it gets quiet in a retreat, the voice that kind of percolates to the surface is this self-judging voice.

One of our students in California—Sally and I worked with a number of older students and had a group with them for a few years—was discussing this tendency to judgment. She said, "You know, it started off very realistically. Somebody called me up and said they didn't want to see me as their therapist anymore." She was this person's therapist and they ended the relationship. "My first thought was, 'Well, it just wasn't the right fit between me and this person.' And then I thought, 'Why wasn't it the right fit?' And I thought, 'Oh, I didn't have enough compassion for them.' And 'Why didn't I have enough compassion?' 'Oh, I'm really not a compassionate person.' 'Oh, why am I not a compassionate person?' 'Well, my heart is really closed and tight and I'm really not a good person at all.'"

This is kind of the way self-judgments go. They spiral from one incident that is understandable and rational, but then we overgeneralize until we're making these blanket kinds of generalizations about ourselves that no longer hold truth. It wasn't true that she wasn't a good person. It wasn't true she wasn't compassionate. She'd been a therapist for many years. She was compassionate and caring. But she convinced herself in that moment that she wasn't.

How to work with judging? The first thing is just to see the judgment when it comes and feel the pain of it. Sometimes a few thoughts in a row will come and it's like we're putting arrows into our heart. Let yourself feel the pain of that judging. I think until we feel the pain we're causing ourselves, we're not motivated enough to let go. But when we feel the pain, maybe then we can bring in some mercy and just realize we shouldn't suffer like this. It's not needed, and it's not justified.

So tuning into the pain, and if possible, feeling that compassion, that sense of mercy for yourself. We don't need to do it to ourselves. Notice the judging thoughts—you might just make a note: "judging." Joseph Goldstein has this little tip that lightens it for him.

He adds a phrase, "and the sky is blue." Oh, I'm a crummy meditator and the sky is blue. And it just puts a little bit of smile into the sentence. So you can try that.

The other thing I find very helpful is to question those thoughts. Is that true that you're a crummy meditator? I mean, who can really say that that's true? When I think about what makes a good meditator, I think about how sincere is the person. Are they sincerely trying to learn? Are they sincerely trying to look at their own areas of bondage and come to greater freedom? And anyone who would undergo a schedule like this is very sincere, in my opinion.

So I think you all are great meditators. All of you that I have met with are great meditators, from that point of view of heart sincerity, devotion, faith, commitment, strength, perseverance—many beautiful qualities. So question these judgments. The ones that hurt aren't true.

One way to work is to make them tell you the truth. It's like there's a judge there who's putting these oppressive thoughts on you. Turn around and tell the judge, "Say it in a way that's true. I'm not going to leave until you tell me the truth." And by the time you express it in a way that's true—oh, I was not with the breath for a ten-minute stretch. Oh, okay, big deal. Doesn't mean I'm a crummy meditator.

The bottom line of the storyline with self-judging is usually something like, "I'm not good enough," or "I'm not lovable," or "No one can love me." And when we believe that, when we buy into it, it's a very oppressive burden that we carry largely unconsciously. We may not even know it's there. And only when it starts to lift can we feel what a weight that's been on our shoulders.

Practice of metta and compassion for oneself are very helpful with self-judging. We'll talk more about working with other states as we go.

I wanted to leave you with one technique that has proved very helpful for me and many people we've shared this with. It's a technique called RAIN, and it was formulated by another Vipassana teacher. It's an acronym, R-A-I-N, that reminds us what steps to take when a difficult emotion is coming and we feel we're struggling with it.

The steps are recognition, acceptance, interest, and non-identification.

Briefly: recognize the emotion that's being felt—fear, sadness, desire, whatever it is. Accept the experience. There's not something positive you have to do to accept. It just means stop resisting it. Stop thinking it's wrong. Stop trying to make it go away. Stop trying to deny it. But open and let yourself feel it with a really allowing and accepting frame of mind. Just let it be there.

Third step: become interested. Can you have a child's curiosity about this emotion, like you're feeling it for the first time? Notice how children can be playing happily away, laughing and joking, and then all of a sudden they'll say something that is in conflict with another child, and they'll turn to anger in a moment and have a big fight. Then a few minutes later that's all gone and they're laughing and joking again.

Kids have this amazing fluidity with their emotions. They're not afraid of moving through that range. So what would it be like to be a child feeling anger or feeling fear? And you go, "Wow, what is this?" Like it's never been felt before. And you just want to open up and say, "What does this feel like? How does this feel in the body? How does it feel in the mind? What kind of thoughts come when I'm like this? How do I regard the world? How do I feel about myself and other people?" Just exploring it.

That interest is such a wholesome factor that it can totally shift your resistance and aversion toward the emotion.

The last point is non-identification—not claiming these states as me or mine. All these emotional experiences are not uniquely yours. They're part of the whole human package. Everybody knows these qualities: fear and loss and despair, agitation, insecur-

ity, anger and resentment. Because they're part of the whole human package, it doesn't mean that you've done anything wrong by feeling them. We all have these things. It's just part of our makeup.

So can there be just seeing this as another arising? An emotion arises, persists for a while, and passes away. No need to claim it or identify with it. When we can see it that way without the label of "I," it's much lighter—just one of many mental states described in the Abhidhamma, experienced previously by the Buddha and by every human that's lived. It's arising and living now in us, but the beautiful thing is it also will pass.

This is why it's safe to open, because each of these states that arises will also pass away. This is why we can open and accept, because ultimately they won't harm us. If we don't struggle with them, they can't harm us.

I'll close with this poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. A little background: it was written when he was in his early twenties, during a very spiritual phase—an overtly Christian phase. He imagines that before each of us is fashioned by God the Creator, God has a short conversation with us before sending us into existence.

"God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently into the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand."

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 24

Money as Dhamma Practice

Guy Armstrong · 16 min

> *In this thought-provoking dharma talk, senior teacher Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's nuanced teachings on wealth and money, drawing distinctions between guidance for monastics and laypeople. Armstrong addresses common patterns he observes among meditators - from anxiety about scarcity to overspending without awareness - and offers the middle way as a path to financial sanity.*
>
> *The discussion explores how lay practitioners, who the Buddha described as 'enjoyers of sense pleasures,' can use wealth skillfully for genuine well-being rather than mere gratification. Armstrong emphasizes the Buddha's teaching that laypeople should use their resources to make themselves and their families happy while also supporting others and spiritual practice. He distinguishes between spending that contributes to development, health, and connection versus acquisitions that only feed desire.*
>
> *Particularly relevant during economic uncertainty, this talk offers practical wisdom on finding contentment regardless of financial circumstances, remembering the Buddha's teaching that 'contentment is the greatest wealth.' Armstrong concludes by highlighting dāna (generosity) as a key practice for those with financial resources, while noting that giving can also take the form of time and service for those with limited means.*

Hello, Sangha News listeners.

This is Baba Goliath, IMS's Executive Director, and I'm happy to have with me today Guy Armstrong, one of our senior and guiding teachers here at IMS.

Hello, Guy. Welcome.

Thank you. Nice to be here.

Guy began his practice of insight meditation over thirty years ago, and at one point in his life, he trained as a Buddhist monk in Thailand with Ajahn Buddhadasa. In 1984, he began teaching and he leads retreats worldwide and is also a governing teacher at our sister center in California, Spirit Rock. Each fall, he is part of the teaching team for IMS's annual three-month retreat, as well as leading other courses here from time to time.

While Guy was here at IMS for this year's three-month course, he gave a presentation to our staff on the Buddha's teachings in regard to money and wealth. Many of us found it thought-provoking, even challenging, I might add. And we thought that members of our wider community might find his reflections on this topic interesting as well.

So again, Guy, thank you for being here and taking on this topic with us. Let me start by asking—you've led lots of retreats and you've certainly had relationships with many, many people who are meditators. What do you find the attitudes about money and financial matters among meditators about this broad topic?

Very much as you would find in the world as a whole, I'd say with one exception—and that is that I don't see in many meditators this kind of obsessive greed for more and more money that you sometimes see in the outer society. I'm thinking of banking executives who object strongly if even a small fraction of their hundred million dollar bonus is threatened.

Most meditators don't subscribe to the idea that money alone can buy happiness. We've seen through some of the false allure of consumerism. But in some cases, then, meditators in moving away from money may have overshot in the other direction and have not quite made a clear relationship to what constitutes enough money, or clearly how to relate to money.

So more commonly with meditators, I find a degree of fear and anxiety over not having enough, and sometimes a certain amount of denial or delusion, not coming to terms in making a clear relationship with money.

Guy, when you say that meditators might be deluded a bit about their relationship with money, can you expand upon that? What do you mean by that?

Yeah, it's kind of an attitude of not really coming to terms with the reality of money in their lives. And I see it a little bit differently with someone who's more of a greedy temperament and someone who's a little more of an aversive temperament.

So greedy types, in relation to money, tend to like to spend. They like to be surrounded by beautiful things, so they enjoy money in order to spend to surround themselves with beauty and happiness and pleasures. When delusion comes in to the kind of greedy temperament often what happens is they spend but they don't look at the impact on their bank balance or their credit card bill or their loans. And so they may tend to overspend and then they find they've got an unsustainable living style and credit card bills that are going to take a long time to repay and that's really burdensome and really worrisome.

Then with aversive types who don't want to deal with money, the mind state that tends to predominate is fear and anxiety. There's sort of always a worry about, "I won't have enough, I won't have enough," and then that can lead to stinginess—not a sense of liberality or ease or generosity, but being kind of tight around the whole area of money.

But when we can get clear about how much we need and we take care to provide that amount and then to spend it thoughtfully, that's kind of the middle way of what I would call sanity in relation to wealth. I think that's the wisdom factor coming into our relation. It's helpful to know whether we tend to greed or tend to aversion and then to find the middle way.

Guy, as you know, economic times, especially for the last couple of years, have been quite unusual and difficult for many, many people. There are many people who don't have work. And you were talking here about relationship to money and so on. And there are people who right now, of course, are really struggling and don't have enough money. Can you say a little bit about how practice and understanding of money that practice might lead to might apply in that situation?

Sure. It's a good question, and a lot of people are in that situation now because of this economy. Two things come to mind.

One is that in any situation someone is in, from a Dharma perspective, the most important thing to look at is what is our relationship to money and our attitudes to money. So if there's a sense of real insufficiency, how are we relating to that? Usually it's gonna trigger fear and anxiety, worry about not having enough, and that may be a reality for people. The more that someone can be comfortable with the emotions that that provokes through the practice of mindfulness, acceptance, allowing of the emotion, understanding with wisdom—emotions come and go, sometimes present, not always present—the more that will help them be more comfortable, more settled in their relationship to money itself. This is true of kind of any aspect of life.

The second thing I think about is that meditators, those who've come to IMS have had the experience of being on retreat and living a very simple, you might even say Spartan or somewhat ascetic lifestyle and finding in that really simple lifestyle, great deal of contentment and richness.

For me, that provides a really good bottom line that if I end up being poor, I've got practice to support me. The Buddha said that contentment is the greatest wealth. And sometimes it's helpful to reflect that even if we lose most of our material prosperity, if we have the requisites of food, clothing, and shelter, and we have our practice, we can find contentment.

How are the Buddha's comments on the relationship to money, coming to terms with money, if you will, different for laypeople and for monastics?

It's interesting because you get two very different sets of advice from the Buddha. For monastics who are unable to handle money at all, the message is very clear. It's not a contributor to their path. In fact, monks and nuns can't handle money, but they can have possessions. If you go into a monastery, you'll see that monks have robes, bowls.

They may have a nice cottage and a number of books. These days, they can own computers and work on computers.

Just as an example of this kind of wealth with monastics, my wife Sally and I took a pilgrimage last fall to the Buddhist holy sites in India. While we were in Bodh Gaya, there was a group of monks, I think they were from Thailand, chanting under the Bodhi tree. This happens all the time—there's always a group of monks or nuns chanting there. As they were chanting, we noticed a monk with a laptop propped up on a wall, who had turned his webcam to the group of monks chanting, was logged into Skype and was broadcasting a live video of the event via his cellular modem plugged into a USB port, presumably to some friends or monastery back in Thailand. So here was an amazing example of monks using modern technology for dharma purposes.

So the question of wealth in the monastic community the Buddha addressed by saying that gain or possessions, honor and fame are dreadful, bitter and vile for monastics because they can be obstructions to liberation.

But the Buddha had a very different set of messages directed to the lay practitioners of his time. In this quote from one of the suttas, you get a sense that having wealth as a lay person can be a very good thing. He says that the wise one gathers wealth just as the bee gathers honey, and it grows like an ant hill higher yet. With wealth so gained, the lay person can devote it to his people's good. So for lay people, the idea is that one can have money and do good things with it.

When the Buddha talks about how lay people should use their wealth, he singles out a few key points. He says that lay people should use their wealth to make themselves and their families happy and pleased. I think this is a really beautiful thing for us as lay people to know—that we are free under the Buddha's direction to use our wealth to make ourselves happy and our loved ones happy. That takes away the idea of having to be really tight or stingy around money. And the other thing he said is that we can use our money to do good for others. So for those in need, to support spiritual life, of course, to support dharma centers, is a very good way to use wealth.

Given what you just said about the obstruction to liberation for monks, why wouldn't that very same thing apply to lay people who are also practicing with the intention of full realization or liberation?

Well, that's a great question and I think it hits on an important point. In our community today, many of us are really somewhere between monks and ordinary lay people as described by the Buddha. A lot of the lay people in the time of the Buddha weren't dedicated practitioners. They practiced generosity, ethics, loving kindness. Maybe they were more interested in creating merit for a better rebirth than for attaining liberation.

But in our situation today, a lot of our practitioners are very intent on developing the Eightfold Path, which leads to liberation. So the question then is, if you are such a practitioner, how do you interpret the monastic guidelines of the Buddha and the lay guidelines of the Buddha in relation to wealth? I think the answer is you need to find yourself somewhere in the middle and create your own Middle Way based on drawing some values from one and some values from the other.

In this regard, the Buddha said something I find really valuable about lay practitioners. He said, this is for someone who's actually on the path, on the Eightfold Path, that such a lay practitioner should use their wealth without being tied to it or infatuated with it, not blindly absorbed with it, seeing the danger in it and understanding the escape. So such a meditator will use wealth where it serves them and serves the path, but doesn't have an obsessive relationship to it. They understand the danger of obsession. They understand that the escape is in not being attached to the wealth that they have, and they use it in wise ways.

Well, of course, one of the other ways that we use wealth is for sense pleasures. And in one sutta, the Pali word for householders or lay people literally means enjoyers of sense pleasures. So how can we better gauge the difference between using our financial resources for wholesome happiness and pleasure—an action which the Buddha said is praiseworthy—and self-indulgence, which is giving into the impulse to get more and more?

I think the line there is something that each of us needs to find for ourselves. But one of the criteria that I've been reflecting on is that when money is used to further one's well-being, one's development, certainly one's sustenance, that's money well used. So money spent on our health, on our inner growth and development, and for those around us—such as going on retreats, seeing doctors, taking care of healing, education and learning. Those are really good uses of money, and hopefully they'll give us pleasure and well-being also.

Enjoying a good meal with friends where the object is really the sense of camaraderie and connection is a wonderful thing to share. And then we see other spending options—like adding the seventy-fifth pair of shoes to our closet that we realize is just kind of gratifying some desire, but it doesn't really make a contribution to well-being. And those we could see in the Buddha's guidelines as being unnecessary. So I think the crux is, does it contribute to well-being, or is it only about gratification?

One other thing is that I know generosity is fundamental to the Buddhist teachings, but how does this particular quality connect with our relationship to money and other forms of wealth? And how does it impact our practice and our lives?

I think one of the great advantages of having some money is that one is in a position to be generous. And I know often at the end of retreats, yogis love the sense of being able to give to the teachers or to the center, to the scholarship fund, to support other people being able to enjoy the retreat experience. And this is one of the key ways that the Buddha encouraged us to use wealth as lay people.

Similarly, if one doesn't have money, sometimes one wishes that one had more in order to share. Although I'd like to say that, in my understanding, the idea of giving can also be in terms of one's time and energy. So even meditators who don't have a lot of money can offer their services as volunteers.

set aside resources for others and helping to run centers or other enterprises.

I think it's really important to consider giving as we look at our annual budget. What do we want to give away? In the old Christian tradition, there was often the practice of tithing—giving ten percent. While we haven't thought in those specific terms or put out any given percentage, I always consider it an important part of my annual spending to have a certain amount go to supporting the things I care about.

The practice of generosity transforms our relationship with money from one of grasping to one of flowing. When we give, we practice letting go. We remind ourselves that these resources are not truly "ours" in any permanent sense, and we experience the joy that comes from supporting what we value most deeply. This practice of dana becomes a form of meditation in action, cultivating the very qualities of non-attachment and loving-kindness that we develop on the cushion.

Whether through financial gifts, volunteer service, or simply the generous offering of our presence and attention to others, we can use our relationship with resources as a path of awakening. In this way, our money and possessions become not obstacles to spiritual development, but opportunities to express our deepest values and to practice the art of letting go.

CHAPTER 25

An Attitude of Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · 52 min

In this opening retreat talk, Guy Armstrong emphasizes that the attitude we bring to meditation practice is even more important than technical details. Drawing from the Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya's approach, he presents a simple framework: "relax, observe, allow." Armstrong explains how to check our attitude by asking whether greed, aversion, or delusion (the three kilesas) are present in the mind through three practical questions: Am I wanting something to happen that's not happening? Am I resisting something that's happening? Am I not knowing what's happening?

The talk provides clear definitions of consciousness (viññāṇa) versus mindfulness (sati), explaining how mindfulness is the intelligent knowing of present-moment experience that distinguishes human practice from mere animal consciousness. Armstrong emphasizes that any of the six sense doors can serve as valid objects for mindfulness—the breath is not privileged over body sensations, sounds, or thoughts. He concludes by connecting this practice attitude to Sāriputta's definition of nibbāna as "the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion," showing how right attitude in meditation offers a foretaste of ultimate freedom.

This is quite a baptism you're getting today with the rainstorm. But I think there's something about the elements whipping it up for us that speaks to the purification, the degree of purification that you'll be receiving from the retreat. So I think it's actually a favorable omen once you get dry.

Tonight I want to talk about two different things. I want to discuss the technical aspects of what we're doing here and why we're doing what we're doing, because I find on the first day of a long retreat, I always forget if I'm sitting and give myself about twenty other different things that are much more important that I should be doing instead. So I wanted to remind us of what we're about here.

But before I do that and get into some of the more technical aspects of the practice, I wanted to talk about the spirit that we bring to undertaking meditation. You could say the attitude that we approach our practice with. This attitude that we approach with is probably even more important than the technical details of how we carry on the practice. So I think it's really helpful to try and reflect on our attitude at the beginning, because if we set that straight, then the other things tend to fall into place a lot more easily.

So on the spirit of Dharma practice, Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, had a wonderful reminder. He said, we want to be serious, but we don't want to be too serious. Because if we get too serious, we lose the joy of discovery that the practice is all about. But if we're not serious enough, we don't quite apply ourselves well. And we'll see this kind of balance running throughout Dharma instructions, and I'll touch on it a couple more times in the talk.

At the beginning of a long retreat, it tends to draw dedicated people, dedicated meditators, who often have a lot of zeal. And so at the beginning of a long retreat, some people may approach this kind of experience with an eye toward achieving something —something great, enlightenment, or seventh jhana, or some experience of bliss or deep peace that we remembered from an earlier retreat. We're very fired up, and we're going to make our way straight there. We know it's just around the corner if we just push a little harder. We're going to get there.

But that kind of pressure that we put ourselves under eventually ends up making us feel tight, tense, and it wears us out. I brought a lot of this attitude to my early years of practice. And I remember some years ago going to see a psychic. I'd been in California for a while, and that's what Californians do. Every once in a while, you should do it, like renewing your driver's license—check in with a psychic.

So I went to see this psychic in San Francisco that a number of my friends had recommended. And I went in to see him. And almost the first thing that he did and said, he sort of drew back in his chair, sort of recoiling from my energy. And he said, "Wow, you are in such a hurry to get there. Don't you know that God comes more often to those who don't want him so badly?"

And that was a comment that I really took in and reflected on because I've always had a lot of zeal for practice and the journey and the exploration that sometimes gets a little too goal-oriented. That's what he was picking up on and reflecting back to me.

So this kind of attitude where we definitely want some specific experience, we want some form of outcome, some special state to happen, will eventually tie us up in knots and tire us out. But if we're too loose also, then the path just doesn't unfold. There's a temptation on a day like today to say, "Wow, it was such hard work to get here. Now I've gotten here. I think I'll go to bed till the rain's over. And wake me in a few days. And when the sun comes back out, I'll check the hall out again. But this is too much today."

So that kind of attitude doesn't really bring the energy that will let the path open up for us. Somewhere in between, we have to find the proper attitude, this balanced attitude of interest and engagement, but at the same time, moment by moment, feeling a sense of peace or ease.

So one teacher expressed this right attitude in a very short phrase, which I like a lot. He said the practice is "relax, observe, allow." That's it. Relax, observe, allow. And this is a really nice summation of what we're about here.

So the first part, relax—you've heard us mention this quite a few times already. It really is key to the unfolding of mindfulness. When we relax, we're sending a strong message to our whole system. And the message is: things are okay already. When we can relax and be comfortable with the present moment, we don't feel under any kind of pressure. We don't feel we have to change anything or make anything happen. That very inclination of mind that says relax, I believe, sends a strong signal to the whole nervous system that says, "Okay, calm down, no fuss, no worries, just be here."

Things don't have to be perfect for us to relax. We can relax if things are just kind of good enough.

This has become a new mantra for me in practice: "Maybe this is good enough." And if I can relax in it as it is, it's good enough to start meditating.

The second piece then is observe. Once we find ourselves in a somewhat relaxed place—it doesn't need to be perfectly relaxed, just incline the mind in that direction—then we start to get interested or curious. Okay, what's going on? What's happening now? What's happening in the body? What's happening in the mind? What's happening in the environment? We bring that kind of awake attention to our experience.

This interest of observation is what starts to burn through the fog of the mind's wanderings. We realize that once we get interested in observing, we cut through the tendency to drift away into analyzing or planning or past or future or fantasy. And we develop an interest in how things are right now. It's that interest that keeps connecting us to the present moment.

So we observe our body and how we're relating to it, our mind and emotions and how we're relating to them, the environment and how we're relating to them. I want to talk in much more detail about this activity of observing, but just for now, as I'm sure you already know, this is the central thing that we're doing.

Then the third part of the string—relax, observe—is allow. This means that whatever our experience is in that moment, we let it be just the way it is. In the observation, we don't try to make it turn out a certain way. That would be like Edison doing his experiments on the light bulb and trying to read the data in an unbalanced way, or Einstein looking for confirmation of the general theory of relativity and interpreting the data in a distorted way that came in from the experimental physicists who followed up his predictions. We don't want to put a thumb on the balance pan. We want to see it just the way it is. So we want to allow things to be the way they are.

We learn fairly soon in meditation we can't control very much anyway. Everything arises from past causes and conditions, and in this moment they couldn't be any other way than the way they are. When we try to change them, which we do continually, this is not a random or occasional activity. It is more or less our constant activity that we start to see as we observe. We're always trying to make things turn out a certain way. We want the body to feel a certain way. We want the mind to behave in a certain way. We don't want thoughts to arise. We want the attention to stay steady, and so on.

Over time through meditation, we may get a little bit of skill in this area of control. But it's very limited. And ultimately, we realize we don't have the ability to influence things in a very big way. We find that our tendency to exert control so continually carries a high price. And the price is our freedom. We give away our peace of mind by always trying to structure the outcome.

This is not a small thing. You probably know the term samsara, which refers to the round of continual birth and death that human beings and all other sentient beings are engaged in, a round that eventually brings us into intense forms of unhappiness. The Tibetans say that this round is sustained by our tendency to correct. So this ongoing attempt to adjust things to be exactly right is the essence of samsara. It's the essence of this round.

So what's the essence of peace? Allowing. This is the way out. This is the way into release—allowing things to be the way they are.

We want to find an attitude that can align with this understanding. And the fortunate thing is that there's a very nice and simple way to check our attitude. In sharing this, I want to acknowledge a debt to the Burmese teacher Sayadaw Utejaniya, whom a number of us have practiced with over the last year and longer in some cases. So I'm going to share a little bit now of what we've learned from Sayadaw Utejaniya.

He said the question we need to be asking in order to find this right attitude is: In this moment, is there greed, aversion, or delusion in my mind? These qualities—greed, aversion, and delusion—are what are called in Pali kilesas, sometimes translated as poisons. The Buddha called them the roots of what is unskillful, the roots of what leads to suffering.

The troubles of our own life and the troubles of the world are all due to the presence in human minds of these three factors. So is there greed, is there aversion, is there delusion in our mind in any given moment?

Fortunately, Sayadaw Utejaniya also gave us an easy way to answer this question. He said, am I wanting something to happen that's not happening? If so, there's greed in the mind. Am I resisting something that's happening? If so, there's aversion in the mind. Am I not knowing what's happening? And if so, there's delusion in the mind.

Now, delusion has many layers. This is not the entirety of the meaning of delusion, but it's a way in for us and a way to check. So notice: Do you want something to happen that isn't happening? Are you resisting something that's happening? Are you not knowing what's happening—meaning, is the attention lost in some string of thought?

The recommendation is that as you're paying attention to any object within the field of your experience, very frequently during your sitting, during your walking, in the informal times of practice throughout the day, you turn your attention back and check on your attitude. So throughout the day, the phenomena of your experience are anchoring your attention in the present moment. But your investigation is always partly directed to this question of: Where am I coming from? How am I approaching this moment? How am I relating?

Because truly, what is happening in our experience is not as deeply important as the way that we're relating to it. And this is the way that we learn about how we're relating, moment after moment.

Just some really simple examples. Am I wanting something to happen? I was sitting the other day in meditation and I noticed that I was looking for my body sensations to line up in a certain pattern that I associated with ease and comfort. I was trying all sorts of little shifts of attention and focus and energy to make that happen. And I realized this isn't helpful. This is just acting out greed. It's not practicing mindfulness so much as it's practicing greed.

That insight spelled itself out in my thought as "I can't control the body." When that insight spelled itself out—I can't control the body—all of a sudden I stopped trying. At that moment, the mind relaxed and then the body relaxed. It didn't line itself up in the

pattern I was looking for, which was interesting. But it found its own configuration, its natural way of being, which was even more suitable. Because, of course, the body knows how to take care of itself if we just let it.

Or, am I resisting something that's happening? First days of retreat are usually really great opportunities to look at the mind that resists because there are the old companions of physical discomfort as we sit hour after hour, restlessness of mind that doesn't want to stay in the present moment, sleepiness which dulls our body and dulls our observation and makes us want to just curl up in bed—not to mention dealing with adjustment to the new facility, wondering what work meditation is going to turn out to be like, when we're going to get to take a shower during the day, whether we're going to get to sleep at night with all these new people around us, and all of that going on.

So you can just begin to notice when the resistance is present that it's there. It's not that it's wrong or that we need to judge ourselves for its being there. Simply the act of noticing will start to interact with these forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. And eventually it's the noticing, the clear paying attention, that starts to purify them from the heart and mind.

So we aim to have our meditation practice be one that our good friend Sylvia Boorstein calls "meditation without agenda and without struggle." We don't come into meditation with an agenda of something specific happening that we want to see happen, and we don't struggle with things the way they're turning out. We find that way of allowing things to reveal themselves just the way they are.

I'd like to talk now in a little more detail about this middle step of observation, which is really the heart of our meditation practice. In order to talk about it in some detail, I want to explain some of the terms that we use and how we use them.

When you reflect on your basic situation as a human being or as a sentient being from a Buddhist point of view, I wonder what occurs to you or how you would see it. What's our fundamental human situation that applies to all of us—all human beings that live, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, as well as unawakened beings? What's true for all of us? What makes up a sentient being?

One way that the Buddha described it is that we are continually experiencing phenomena of six types corresponding to the six sense doors. As long as we are awake—and I just mean that in a physical sense, we're not physically asleep or unconscious—we're going to be seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching through the five physical

senses, and through the mind door, we're going to be thinking and feeling. Thoughts and emotions are primarily what make up the activities in the mind, which is considered the sixth sense in the Buddhist teachings.

This is true for all of us. Do you have a choice about this? Could you decide to just throw an inner switch and turn off hearing or turn off feeling body sensations?

Not really. These things just happen. Sometimes they're pleasurable, sometimes they're unpleasant. And that revolving door of pleasant and unpleasant is essentially what creates all the turmoil in our hearts and minds, because we don't want that constant change. We want some security.

Nonetheless, all sentient beings are subject to a continual exposure to experience at all the six senses—sometimes pleasant, sometimes not. Being sentient means that we're registering them. We are very sensitive, sentient beings. So the appearances at the six sense doors impact us in their pleasant and unpleasant aspects. They impinge on us, and there's no way to stop that.

Sometimes this is experienced as quite a frustrating situation, a desperate situation—that we are vulnerable in that way to the impingement of all these experiences and, as the Buddha pointed out many times, always at the mercy of aging, illness, and death. So this is our basic experience as human beings.

All these things are happening, and because we're sentient, we're experiencing them, or you could say we're knowing them. Knowing not in any verbal or conceptual sense, but knowing in the sense of receiving, feeling, sensing, experiencing, directly having the impact of them.

This bare kind of knowing, which just receives sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental events, is what in Buddhism is called consciousness. The Pali term is vijñāna. And this is the basic ground of our experience. This is the field that our meditation is based in—the field of the six types of knowing and their sense objects.

Just two things to notice about this: It happens all the time involuntarily, and it doesn't take any particular intelligence to be receiving this. We receive it. Small children and babies receive it. Presumably dogs and cats and all the creatures in the animal realm receive some form of these six sense objects. So it doesn't take any intelligence. Consciousness is a mental faculty of knowing experience that's quite automatic.

The next level up in terms of mental cognizance—a step up from consciousness—is the quality that we call mindfulness. Mindfulness, as you well know, is what our meditation practice is all about. So what is mindfulness? It's more than consciousness, be-

cause the understanding is that we have the capacity to be mindful, but it's not always there. So unlike consciousness, which is always present as long as we're awake, mindfulness is not. It's sometimes there and it's sometimes not there. If we want it to be there more, which is considered generally a good idea in Buddhism, we have to make a little bit of effort. Consciousness doesn't require any effort.

So what is mindfulness? Let's call it the quality of mind that knows what our experience is in the present moment. Let's take that as at least a working definition for mindfulness as we'll be exploring it together during this month: knowing what our experience is in the present moment.

For instance, if you're breathing in and you know that you're breathing in, you're being mindful. If you breathe in but you don't know you're breathing in or anything else, you're not being mindful. If you have a strong pain, let's say in the knee, and you recognize it as a painful body sensation, you're being mindful. If you have a strong pain but your attention is somewhere else, you're not being mindful, at least of that.

The word that we're translating as mindfulness in the Pali language that the teachings came down in is sati. The original meaning before the Buddha started teaching was simply remembering. Now this is kind of curious—how does this connect with mindfulness? A nice word that kind of connects the two is the practice of recollection. When we come back into the present moment, we're kind of recollecting what's going on. We're recollecting why we're here. We're recollecting that we're a human being engaged in understanding our experience. So the sense of remembering is remembering to come back, remembering to come into the present moment.

This kind of knowing that happens in mindfulness is a step up from consciousness in both the effort required and the intelligence required. We have to be a little bit smart to know, oh, that's an in-breath. That's a body sensation. That's a sound. That's a mood of sadness. So there's some intelligence going on in mindfulness that is not found in consciousness.

We could say that consciousness reveals the experience, while mindfulness understands what it is, or understands what's going on. It's considered, for example, that dogs don't have the capacity for mindfulness. They certainly have the capacity for consciousness and activity, but they lack this capacity for mindfulness. I would suggest, although I don't know, that small babies or infants also don't have the capacity for mindfulness. They're very present moment oriented, but they lack this capacity to understand what they're experiencing because they're just completely involved with the experience.

Joseph Goldstein has this nice analogy that he calls "black lab consciousness" to illustrate the difference between consciousness and mindfulness. You ever watch a black lab go about its business? Labs are pretty impulsive creatures. So there's a smell. Do you imagine that the lab goes, "Hmm, I'm receiving a smell through the nose door of consciousness. That's a pleasant smell. The image of meat is arising in the mind, and the image of my food bowl is arising in the mind. Those have a pleasant feeling tone, and I'm starting to feel a desire. Therefore, would it be skillful to walk over to my food bowl and see if someone has deposited some meat in it?"

That doesn't seem to be the way that black labs function. It's more like: smell, smell, smell, desire, desire, desire, go, go, go, go, go. The black lab is kind of running on autopilot, lacking this capacity for self-knowledge, understanding, and reflection.

Truth to tell, it's not just the black lab that is operating in this way. When we look at the chaos in the world and we see the vast reach of greed and hatred, we realize that a lot of the world is running on autopilot in this same way, too—to not very wholesome outcomes. The difference for us is that we have the capacity to know smells and pleasantness and images and feelings, whether it's desire or aversion or whatever, and then to make choices about action based on what's going to be skillful. This is a higher level of intelligence than simple consciousness. This is the role that mindfulness plays.

Another way mindfulness is sometimes described is by comparison to a movie. When you go to a movie and you're sitting there, you may be very engaged in the playing out of the movie—in the images, the characters, the story, the plot line. And in that engagement, you may not be thinking at all of past or future or life outside. So in a way, you're quite present moment oriented. But how often do you remember that you're sitting and that you're in a movie? Sometimes it doesn't happen very often because the movie is so compelling.

So that moment of recognizing, "Oh, I'm in a movie"—that's a moment of mindfulness. The rest of it is engaged consciousness. It may be involving, but it doesn't have that capacity of reflective awareness that's mirroring what our activity is.

Also, what happens when a moment of mindfulness comes into you during a movie? What happens to your level of engagement with the plot and the characters and the story when you recognize, "Oh, this is just a movie. I'm actually just sitting here and it's a movie"? For me, what happens is I lose a little bit of the grip of the drama that's being played out on the screen because I realize it's just a story.

A similar thing happens when we start to apply this factor of mindfulness in relating to our own lives. We lose a little bit of the grip because we start to see how the story, how the drama is being created. So for those who are very attached to the drama of their lives, I don't really recommend mindfulness. It tends to interrupt that kind of fixation.

So mindfulness is this quality of stepping back a little bit and taking a big picture view and knowing what our experience is in each new moment. This is the practice that we want to come back to again and again and again.

Now, what do we practice that on? As we just talked about, consciousness unfolds this whole range of sense appearances at all the six sense doors. Any of those appearances can be excellent grounds for mindfulness. Any of them. So body sensations, sounds, sights, smells, tastes, thoughts, emotions. That's the primary range that we direct our mindfulness to.

Sometimes in Vipassana retreats, the idea of meditation gets really closely connected with the breath. And I've had people say to me on Vipassana retreats, "Well, I was with the breath for a while, but then I got distracted by some sensations in my body. I lost the breath, so I guess I stopped meditating." So please understand that Vipassana meditation is in no way synonymous with the breath.

Fundamentally, the object that we pay attention to doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all. What matters is the factor of mindfulness. This is what we're trying to preserve.

So it actually doesn't even matter if the experience that you're having is pleasant. Sometimes people think, "Oh, in order to have a good sit, my body has to be really fully relaxed. No tension anywhere, no holding, no what are sometimes called energy blockages, no obvious experiences of contraction. Only then can I really meditate." Not true.

A good sit is not equal to "body was comfortable, mind was not moving." Sometimes those things can happen and we're almost asleep. So that's not what constitutes a good sit from our point of view. What constitutes a good sit is the frequency that clear seeing of mindfulness is arising at. How many moments are coming where you really know clearly what's happening in the present moment? That's the continuity that we're looking for.

Experience will sometimes be pleasant and will sometimes be unpleasant. Don't think you have to wait for a pleasant experience for the mindfulness to develop. Sometimes some of the greatest learnings can come from times of difficulty, whether emotional pain or physical pain. Mindfulness can grow very strong from those experiences. So the object is not so important. The factor of mindfulness is the important thing.

Also, don't imagine that it has to be very detailed or that it always has to be getting to just the minutia, the exact minutia of how many different sensations are unfolding in the rippling effect of one in-breath in the abdomen. "I have to see 17 different sensations in the abdomen." Not so.

Joseph Goldstein's first teacher was an Indian man named Munindra-ji. And one of Munindra-ji's favorite instructions to new meditators was this: If you sit and you know that you're sitting, the whole of the Dharma will unfold for you. This is enough mindfulness. If you sit and you know that you're sitting. I mean, just tune in right now to how difficult is that—to sit and know that you're sitting? It's a pretty easy thing to become aware of.

So, all the different objects of our conscious experience are good grounds for mindfulness to develop from. How do we choose?

This brings in the next term that I want to mention, which is the term of attention. When we talk about attention, what we mean is the focus we bring that lands on a certain part of our experience and leaves the rest what we might call in the background. So generally, in every moment, there's one aspect of the experience at these six sense doors that's kind of being highlighted, and you might say brought into the foreground. This is the quality of attention. It's doing that highlighting and picking out, selecting from amongst the myriad things that are going on in any given moment.

Attention can be directed by choice. So for instance, I could ask you just in this moment to bring your attention to the sensations in your sitting bones as they contact your chair or cushion. And generally that's a fairly easy thing to connect to. I could ask you to bring your attention to the sound of my voice as it's registering in a musical pitch, high or low kind of frequency, just paying attention to the pitch of my voice. I could ask you to bring your attention to the object of sight, which is the statue of the Buddha behind me on the altar.

So we can choose to direct the attention to any of the experiences that are presenting themselves. Most of what meditation techniques are about in our tradition is what do we choose to pay attention to? That's really all that it is. I've probably been taught twenty different ways of relating to the breath based on how I pay attention. Do I pay attention at the belly, at the chest, at the nostril, just below the nostril? Do I count? Do I notice "in, out," along with that paying of attention? Do I experience it through the whole nose down to the belly? Do I experience it through the whole body? What do I pay attention to with a single breath? There are many, many ways to do that. And then we open up the field more widely to body sensations and emotions. Thoughts and the techniques ripple out.

From our point of view, all the techniques that we know about and that we may share are fine. Again, the important thing is not where the attention is directed, but is there mindfulness? As the attention lands somewhere, is there a knowing that in that moment that's what your experience is?

So sometimes it's very helpful to choose to bring the attention, say, to the breath for a period of time. Especially in the early days of the retreat, you may have found it helpful in the past. You might like to do it now. Stabilize the attention where the breath is clear. It might be in the belly. It could be in the chest. It could be at the nose. It could be the whole breath. If you like to practice that way, that's fine. Or you can let the attention sort of float with the whole breath as it comes in and as it goes out. The way that Howie instructed this morning is a way of grounding the attention in the whole body and feeling the breath's impact throughout the body.

What's interesting is that where we place the attention starts to affect the factors of mind and body. If we place the attention in a very narrow way, it tends to strengthen the factor of concentration. But that can bring a little bit too much tightness because it takes effort to keep the attention fixated. If we let the attention go out very broadly, for instance to sounds, it tends to bring in a sense of ease and relaxation through that kind of spaciousness. We'll talk more about these different ways, but just know that where we put the attention starts to shape our experience in certain ways, but none of them are the heart of the practice. The mindfulness can come from any of these.

The last thing to say about attention is this: when it is somewhere—and it always is somewhere—take the time to connect to that experience. That means the attention has landed. Give your interest to that so that it really comes alive for you with mindfulness, so that you really know your experience there.

For instance, when you're feeling the breath, try to feel it really wholly, wherever you're feeling it. Really make that experience fill the frame so that you're not feeling divided—half with the breath, half with the sound, half with the thought. But be wholehearted in your attention wherever it is. And it's this kind of giving of yourself wholeheartedly that makes the meditation start to become vital.

The other name for this factor of connecting is aiming. It's a translation of the Pali word *vitaka*, which is a factor of concentration. You call it aiming or connecting—establishing a firm relationship. That means bring your awareness close to the place that it's landed so that you really feel it directly.

Sometimes we use the word observe or watch, but it's a little misleading because you can think that, oh, it should be at a distance. I want to sort of stay back here and the object's over there and I always want to maintain this distance. That's a little misleading. *Feel* is sometimes a better way of saying it. You want to kind of feel where the attention has landed. Let all of your attention go into that so you know the characteristics of what's being felt.

The characteristics of an in-breath, for instance. Let yourself feel it directly, say in the abdomen. Let the awareness mingle with those sensations so that you know it very directly. Then two things start to happen.

The first is you know the individual characteristics. You'll know whether that breath is fast or slow, long or short, rough or smooth. You'll know that without any special effort because you're so close to it. Just like you know if a good friend has brown hair or gray hair, has wrinkles or not. You know that just from being close to them.

As you pay attention to the individual characteristics of these objects that you meet, what also starts to slip in almost unbidden is your understanding of the universal characteristics of those objects. So you start to notice: Oh, every in-breath that I'm with has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Every out-breath has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Every emotion that I feel started sometime, lasts for a while, and then goes away.

All my experiences that I've seen since I've been in this retreat are temporary. Even the great, blissful, pleasant, peaceful sittings that I have—they go. So maybe all these experiences, all the arisings at the six sense doors, maybe they all pass. Let me keep looking and see.

And if they do, none of them is capable of a lasting satisfaction. But I keep trying to hold on. Why do I do that? Holding on makes me tense.

What if I let go?

And then we find that letting go is the sure path to peace, not holding on. And we get more trust in that. That's all from observing the individual and then the universal characteristics as awareness meets the features of our experience. This is where wisdom starts to build.

This is the last term I want to mention tonight. Really, what we're practicing for is the development of wisdom. Stillness and peace and pleasant body sensations and times without thought or disturbing emotions are wonderful, but they don't in themselves liberate. What liberates is understanding.

As we understand the changing nature of experience, we tend not to hold on. And it's the letting go that opens us up to seeing clearly and to liberating insight. It's the understanding of how a painful emotion is put together that lets us just see it as an impersonal mechanism triggered by a memory or an association or an event, stirred up by obsessive thinking, blaming thoughts, fearful thoughts, felt through the body and reacted to with negativity or aversion to the unpleasant body sensations, and then eventually passing away in its own time.

We start to see the impersonal unfolding of all these events. And in seeing that, we can't hold on so strongly anymore. We start to see how they play out just out of their own nature and causes and conditions. Wisdom is the aspect of mind that frees us. So all of the peace and calm and pleasantness that we develop here is really in the service of supporting insight or understanding.

One of the most helpful supportive conditions for wisdom, apart from mindfulness itself, is this factor of interest. If we become really curious about our experience, that keeps our attention there quite effortlessly.

It's fun to watch after the rain goes through—which it will eventually, trust me—the deer will start to come out. There are deer all over this town and these lands, and I've seen so many yogis, and I've done it so many times myself, just stand by the side of the road for a while to watch these groups of deer. You see the mother deer and the younger deer, and you can just watch for a long time how that community hangs out together, how the younger ones follow the mother, but the mother is always keeping a sense of where the younger ones are. And if they're not following along, she'll give them some kind of signal to get them to come.

You get to see how relatively unscared these deer are who've grown up on this property because there's no aggression and no hunting here, and how they don't get very ruffled when people come relatively close to them—much closer than Sally and I can get on our home lot, which is only a few miles from here.

When you have that interest in the deer and you have that kind of love for them, for their beauty, your attention is held there without any kind of effort at all. This love for seeing nature, when you bring it into meditation and you fall in love with the breath, you fall in love with the sensations of the body, there's a quality called rapture, or in Pali, *pīti*. And when that's there, that joy, that enthusiasm for the practice, everything picks up and goes on a great momentum. This love for what we're seeing and what we're doing.

And then we look in the mind and we say, is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion? No. There's none of those. There's non-greed, there's non-aversion, there's non-delusion. Then check out how that feels. We're seeing clearly and we're open to things just the way they're unfolding. How does that feel? This is the path.

It's said that a moment of pure mindfulness is a moment free from greed, aversion, and delusion. So this is the path of mindfulness. It is the practice.

Yet I'd also like to read you a quote from Sariputta. Sariputta was one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha and said to be the foremost disciple in wisdom. He was asked by another monk of his time, "What is nibbana?" Nibbana, you know, is the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path, the place of unconditioned freedom and unshakable peace.

Sariputta's reply was: "The destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion—this is called nibbana."

Sound familiar? Non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. These are the qualities that we discover as we apply mindfulness again and again and again. This is the purification of heart and mind.

So you might say that as we tune to the right attitude—the attitude that is free of wanting to shape our experience but is directly in touch with it—we experience, you might say, the foretaste of enlightenment. We experience the essence of freedom. Right attitude is a factor of the path, but in this way, you see, it's also the goal.

So when we find that place where we can look with interest and curiosity and love without trying to shape things in a certain way, it is the path, but also we start to feel, oh, I've arrived.

This is also the goal. We've reached that point of real rest and peace.

Then as the path and the goal come closer together and our whole experience starts to be in tune with right attitude, it's in tune with the unconditioned. It's in tune with nibbana. We let that unfold until the mind just falls into that dimension.

At the end of our talks, we'd like to just sit for a minute in silence just to let the words settle. So let's just take a minute of silence sitting together, please.

[Silence]

"The destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion—this is called nibbana."

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 26

Mettā, Tenderness And Connection

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong examines how our fundamental human sensitivity—what Chögyam Trungpa called our 'soft spot'—becomes the foundation for cultivating mettā (loving-kindness). Drawing on the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta and teachings on the brahmavihāras, he explores how our natural tenderness and vulnerability, rather than being weaknesses to overcome, are actually the doorways through which we can feel both our own joys and sorrows and those of all beings.*
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> *Armstrong weaves together stories ranging from tsunami survivors to whale rescues, illustrating how mettā reveals our deep interconnection despite the ego's illusion of separation. He discusses how this practice transforms our underlying mental conditioning, offering protection from fear and creating the spaciousness where anger cannot take hold. The talk culminates in exploring bodhicitta—the awakening heart that uses our own difficulties in service of compassion for all beings, pointing toward the radical possibility of maintaining loving-kindness even in the face of adversity, as exemplified in the Buddha's teaching in the Kakacūpama Sutta (Simile of the Saw).*

The talk tonight is called Metta, Tenderness and Connection.

We've talked before about how our basic human condition is one of great openness to a range of pleasant and unpleasant experiences of both mind and body. It's said that the human realm is actually the best realm for awakening, the optimum realm for awakening because of this mix. You see, if it was too pleasant, we'd just get complacent and we'd never be interested in liberation. And that's what it's said to be like in the heaven realms. So, God forbid you should be reborn in one of those places. Spirit Rock sometimes feels like it's tending a little too much to the heaven realm. Maybe we need a little more grit here. Nonetheless, we find enough.

If we have too much pain, then our spirit gets completely overwhelmed and oppressed, and we can't really imagine the possibility. We can't get inspired to the possibility of happiness. And you can see this in many lives that go on parts of this earth, that the conditions are so hellish that there's not really the ability to look up and imagine the possibility of freedom. But in our realm, we have a mixture that's said to be very good for showing us the possibility of freedom, but also spurring us to develop in that way.

Sometimes we might wish we weren't quite so sensitive. This openness is both a blessing and a bit of a burden at times. Sometimes we might wish that our hides were a little thicker. These horses down in the meadow have very thick hides. I don't know if you know that about horses, but Sally is a horsewoman, and she tells me you have to hit a horse quite hard, actually, to get its attention, because the hide is fairly thick, and they can live outdoors, even in cold winter weather, and that cold doesn't penetrate to their bones quite as much as you would think. We might like to be like that sometimes, but we're not.

This is from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for tenderness. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate. A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. Such a relief."

This sore spot is the point that we cultivate in the practice of the Brahmaviharas. It's this openness of heart or tenderness of heart through which we feel not only our joys and sorrows, but the joys and sorrows of the whole world. And it is this that we can develop in a very beautiful way.

I think one reason that we feel so sensitive is our vulnerability. Due to impermanence, the conditions can change at any time. And pleasure can come or pain can come. Essentially, anything can happen in any given moment because life is so unpredictable. Anything can happen.

So this was brought home to us a few winters ago. A good friend of ours was in India for spiritual practice and holiday both. He got up in the morning and went outside of his hotel room to do some qigong on the beach where he was staying in southern India. But the date happened to be December 26, 2004. And he was out on the beach, pleasantly enjoying the warm temperature, tropical temperature, and all of a sudden a very big wave came and knocked him over, flattened him, and then swept back out to the sea.

As he stood up, he looked at the wave as it was going out, and he thought, this isn't like any other wave I've ever seen, because it left a huge hollow. You probably saw the video. A huge hollow as it retreated. This was the first wave of the tsunami. And he

thought, this doesn't look right. And he went and got his friend, his partner, and said, come on, you better get ready. And they climbed on top of this concrete wall and held arms, locked arms. And our friend latched onto a palm tree that was growing up beside the concrete wall, which was about four feet off the ground.

And then, as you probably know, the second wave hit. And that was the wave that did the major part of the damage. It swept a lot of people out to sea, and a lot of lives were lost all over the southern rim of India and Sri Lanka and Thailand. But our friend, because he had a good grip on the tree and his partner had a good grip on him, they were buffeted around, but they were okay.

They were basically saved by his foresight there. So this was one time when the practice of non-clinging was not recommended. It was through clinging that their lives were saved.

So life is like that. At any time, anything can happen. As you start to open to the stories of people's lives, and even in this room, you know, so many stories of ups and downs. One of the ones that touches me, I mean there's so many, but one that touches me is the story of this famous Tibetan teacher named Yeshe Ken Rinpoche. He was one of the great Dzogchen masters of the last fifty years.

He was born in Tibet in 1932. He practiced intensively, was trained in the old system, received many years of training under the great masters of his time, and developed as a very great lama and practitioner. And then when the invasion came in 1949, he stayed on for a few more years but fled Tibet like the Dalai Lama in 1959 and found his home in India.

So here he is, one of the great masters of old Tibet, now kind of adrift in India. And sometimes he would center around members of the Tibetan community. And he said, "At those times, I gave empowerments to great assemblies of people, including dozens of tulkus, reincarnate lamas, and thousands of monks. At other times, I was utterly poor, living hand to mouth on the streets in Calcutta, wandering around with my hand out, begging for pennies. So many unexpected ups and downs. Who can describe them?"

How do we prepare ourselves for those kinds of changes in life? How do we strengthen our heart so that we can retain the tenderness and still meet life and its changes with some equilibrium?

Just another short story. About a year and a half ago, there was a really quite lovely young man in his early twenties who came to practice at the three-month course at IMS. He got very into his practice, very inspired by the dharma, and wanted to ordain as a

monk, either in the US or in England or perhaps in Asia, and was at home making plans to do that when all of a sudden he was hit by some intestinal bug. He had been spending time in India before he had been at IMS and had probably brought something back, but essentially his digestion broke down. Although he's consulted many doctors and tropical disease specialists in Toronto, they haven't been able to diagnose his condition, much less remedy it. So here he is a year and a half later, very strong desire for dharma practice, but incapacitated by some mysterious illness that has come. How should he practice? What does one tell him to do? I've stayed in touch with him and it's not easy to know what to say.

This is from Bob Dylan, his memoir called Chronicles. "My grandma was filled with nobility and goodness. Told me once that happiness isn't on the road to anywhere. That happiness is the road. Had also instructed me to be kind because everyone you'll ever meet is fighting a hard battle."

So I think one of the beauties of our brahmaviharas practice is that we use that tenderness as an avenue, as a doorway to feel out the world, to feel the hard battles that other people are fighting, to feel the battles that we ourselves are fighting, to open to our joys and sorrows and also open to the pain of the world. And it's this tenderness that really provides the doorway to connection. And it's amazing when that kind of connection happens.

There's a story that happened in the Bay Area just a couple of winters ago. You may have heard it. It was in the newspaper at the time. You probably know that humpback whales migrate down the California coast. In the winter, they're going south to Baja California, where they give birth to their young in warmer waters. So in December, this female whale was going off the coast of San Francisco near the Farallon Islands. They're about twenty miles out from the bay.

Unfortunately, she was traveling in an area that was planted with crab traps. And what the crab fishermen do is they string these ropes in the water that are weighted with crab traps in which hopefully the crabs wander and can't get out. And then they go and collect the crabs later. They're long ropes with the traps dangling off. And this female whale who weighed about, they estimated about fifty tons, she's about forty-five feet long, about fifteen meters long, got tangled up in these crab pot lines.

And a fisherman happened to notice her one Sunday morning. Some of the lines had wrapped around her body four times. And they were around her back, around her flippers, and there were ropes over around her head and through her mouth. The problem was that the crab pots were still on the ropes, and the ropes were digging into her flesh. And the fishermen said that they could see visible cuts where the ropes were digging in.

Because the crab pots were heavy, she was burdened by about a thousand pounds of extra weight. And she was having trouble staying afloat and swimming back up to the surface in order to breathe before she went down. So she was losing energy and starting to lose the fight against the weight of these things.

So this fisherman noticed her and then called the Marine Mammal Center to alert them. And they sent a team of divers out to look at the situation. This was about two-thirty in the afternoon.

The divers reached the scene and found themselves facing an extraordinary dilemma. As one diver later explained, getting into the water with a humpback whale is an incredibly risky maneuver. One flip of the tail can kill a human being. Yet there she was, trapped and struggling in this dire situation. What else could they do?

Four divers donned their suits and plunged into the bay carrying special knives. They positioned themselves strategically around the whale and began the delicate work of cutting through the ropes. One diver who worked near the whale's face later shared his remarkable experience: "The whale just floated passively in the water the whole time, giving off a strange kind of vibration. When I was cutting the line through her mouth, her eye was there winking at me, watching me. It was an epic moment of my life."

After some time, the divers succeeded in cutting through all the ropes. When the whale realized she was free, she began swimming in circles in apparent joy. Then something truly extraordinary happened—she swam up to each diver individually, nuzzling each one in turn.

"It felt to me like she was thanking me," one diver recounted, "knowing that she was free and that we had helped her. She stopped about a foot away from me, pushed me around a little bit, and had some fun. She seemed kind of affectionate, like a dog that's happy to see you. I never felt threatened. It was an amazing, unbelievable experience."

I feel touched when I read this story again, as I did when I first heard it. It reminds us of this heart connection to the rest of life that we don't often feel, but exists within us as a possibility. We have this deep, deep connection to life. We're touched by her tenderness and vulnerability, and that touches the open spot in our hearts.

The reason an encounter like this can be so powerful is that we forget this experience of deep connection. We live with one of the real sadnesses of the false sense of self or the ego—it makes us feel isolated. We feel we are unique in all ways. Each of us is

unique in some ways, but we're also very alike in other ways. The ego makes us forget our alikeness, which is our connection, and focus instead on uniqueness and difference. This gives us a profound sense of isolation.

When I was teaching the retreat for scientists at IMS about a month ago, one participant reported a finding—I don't know if it's even been published yet—that one of the deepest sources of unhappiness among people is this sense of isolation. You can feel it in our culture today with the breakdown of family and community. The sense of separation is growing stronger.

The Brahmaviharas and loving-kindness give us a way to see beyond this false sense of isolation, which is so limiting. Isolation is not the same as seclusion. Seclusion is voluntary, a protection, a freedom, whereas isolation is this underlying feeling that we can't connect, that we aren't connected, or that we don't belong because somehow we're not acceptable. Metta shows us a different view. All the Brahmaviharas show us a different view.

There's a poem by Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shehab Nye called "Kindness" that speaks to this:

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Feel the future dissolve in a moment, like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go. So you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you. How he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness is the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

The part I love most is where she says, "You must speak to sorrow till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is the size of humanity—and in fact, of all beings. All beings experience difficulty as well as joy. That's the size of our cloth.

The Brahmaviharas open us to this truth. We look around at every being we bring into our hearts and minds. We see the scope of all beings in the world and recognize that range of sorrow and joy, the wish for safety, happiness, health, and ease—just like our own wish.

So that's why it's beautiful that we've reached this point in the retreat where we've opened up the metta to all beings. Then we begin to touch on this boundless quality of metta. And that's how the Buddha often spoke about the Brahmaviharas—he called them immeasurable deliverances of mind.

It's said that metta is like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without distinction. It falls on, as you've been reading, the short and the tall, the mighty and the weak, omitting none—like a rain falling everywhere, touching everyone. This is the boundless quality of it.

Sometimes it's hard to remember why that metta should be extended in a boundless way. But the Buddha offered this reflection: Given the vast span of lives that we have lived in this circle of birth, death, rebirth, we've all been born countless times. He says from beginningless time, truly countless. We have crossed paths with each other before. So he says that it's hard in this world to meet a being who has not at some point in this past been your mother or your father, your sister or your brother, your daughter or your son.

Now you may or may not believe in this whole rebirth thing, but what if that was true? What if all of us here went back with that kind of connection and intimacy? How would you feel if that was true? It might depend how you feel about your family of origin. But nonetheless, I think we'd all feel a lot more connected than we tend to while rushing about our busy daily lives. So this is one way to open up to that boundless quality—that we may all have been in this dance for a long time together.

And so then the Buddha uses the analogy as you've been chanting in the evenings of a mother's care for her child: "Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths." This is a possibility of our metta practice.

And we can activate it on so many occasions in daily life. Jack Kornfield, many of you know, one of the main teachers here at Spirit Rock, lives in Woodacre, is married, and has a daughter who is now, I think, twenty-two or so. She graduated from college this past year and wants to be a human rights activist, is applying to law schools at the moment, and took some time off to travel in South America.

So she was back home for a spell after her graduation and was driving back with a friend from Berkeley. They were going along Sir Francis Drake along Larkspur Landing. Many of you know that's where the ferries come in from San Francisco. So the bay is right on one side of the highway, and there are six lanes of traffic and then office buildings and a shopping center on the other side of the highway.

So they were driving back from Berkeley, heading west on Sir Francis Drake, and they noticed that the cars were really slow at a time of day when they shouldn't have been. They were curious what was going on, why there was a snarl in the traffic. So they got up to where the traffic was virtually stopped. Cars were just going by very slowly.

And what they saw is that a mother duck was trying to cross the highway with six little ducklings. They had plopped off one curb on one side of the road, and they were out in the middle of the three lanes of traffic—westbound traffic, heading for the bay. The cars were trying to drive around them, and people were getting annoyed.

So Caroline stopped her car in the middle lane. Her friend got out and waved all the other cars to a stop. The friend held the cars at bay while Caroline sort of shepherded the mother duck and the ducklings over to the median of the highway. The mother duck hopped up, but the little ducks couldn't quite make it—the curb was too high, so she helped each of the little ducks up.

And then she said, "Oh good, mother's safe." No—still heading for the water. She hops down the other side. And then cars are coming in the other direction, and then they start stopping and trying to go around. So Caroline and her friend stop that line of traffic, wait for the mother duck to cross, and they're helping the other little ducks, too, across and up to the next curb.

Meanwhile, traffic is backing up behind their parked car. Some drivers also don't see what's happening, so they're leaning on their horns and hanging out the window and shouting, "What's this about? Get moving. Keep the traffic going." But the drivers who get close enough to see what's happening start standing outside their cars and applauding and cheering, until the mother duck and all the little babies are on the other side of the road and headed toward the bay.

Even as a mother protects her child, her only child, so we can cherish all living beings.

The Brahma Viharas open us up to this sense of caring. That is what our practice is: we practice caring over and over and over again.

People have asked, "Should I focus on the outcome? If I'm wishing somebody happiness or health or safety and it's not happening, does that mean the metta isn't working?" Not at all. Because what we're practicing is caring. Every time there's a sincere moment of goodwill toward another person—which means we really do care that they find safety and happiness and the rest—that metta is waking up in our heart. And by waking it up moment after moment after moment, we're strengthening that quality of mind. We're opening up that tenderness, bringing it into contact with life and making it what actually becomes a refuge for ourselves as well. I'll say more about that later.

Then eventually this sense of caring can come back around to become a motivation in our practice. And this is the quality that we call bodhicitta. If we really want to save beings from suffering, we start to realize the only way we can fully do that is to be able to help them come out of their own suffering. And in order to do that, we have to come out of ours. So we take on the motivation as a core of our practice: I want to come out of my suffering and understand it as the best way—or a really effective way—to help others come out of theirs. And this is the motivation called bodhicitta, also sometimes called the awakening heart or awakening mind.

The Dalai Lama, who as you probably know is considered to be the bodhisattva of compassion, said that when he was young in his practice as a young monk, he was very impressed by the concept of emptiness and cessation. He said, "Twenty years ago, I used to contemplate emptiness. I was very impressed by the theory and it really inspired me to seek the cessation of suffering. I thought that working for the welfare of other sentient beings—an infinite number of sentient beings—was very idealistic. Later I studied Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Shantideva, and that changed my outlook. I still admire the idea of cessation, but these days I have a stronger admiration and aspiration for the compassion and tolerance that come with the awakening heart. The union of compassion and emptiness is something quite unique, but you can bring about an inner experience of it if you make the effort."

So we'd like to just touch on this concept of bodhicitta. It's a hard thing to really actualize in a strong way. So don't be disappointed if it's not a really, really big flame in your practice. Bring it in as a little candle and nourish it.

The Dalai Lama says, "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is. That is all."

So we take this care for others as one of the central motivations in our own aspiration to wake up and to become free.

And then we start to see that this care for others also expresses itself in our care with our conduct. As we start to tune into how sensitive we are and how sensitive others are, we start to want to move through the world without harming, even in the slightest kind of way. There are not many people who can do that really, really thoroughly, so we have to give a lot of space for our own learning. But this is the area of sila, compassionate conduct, as we took especially the first five precepts this morning.

We just remember the importance of creating that sense of safety for others. Really, it's our conduct and our care with it that creates a safe atmosphere for others. This practice of sila is called giving the gift of fearlessness—so that when people are in our presence, they can trust they're not going to be harmed by us. We take care with not harming life, with not taking what isn't given, with our sexual energy, take care with our speech, which is the way that most harm comes for people in our walk of life, I think. And we take care with our use of drugs and intoxicants.

So how well can sila be developed? How refined can it be?

Oprah Winfrey had the opportunity to interview the Dalai Lama, which I think is fantastic. I love what she does on television and in her magazine, O, because she brings into a very mainstream audience these teachings that ordinarily don't get such a wide distribution. The people who've been in O include Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, James Baraz—one of our usual February teachers—and this month is Richie Davidson, the neuroscientist I think I mentioned the other night. A lot, a lot of people read her magazine and watch the TV show. So I really appreciate the spirit that she's bringing to this.

A few years ago, she got to interview the Dalai Lama. She started off by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?" The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect." "Killing an insect?" Oprah said.

An insect. Okay.

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small incidents every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she continued, "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

Some of that could be the fruit of that practice of sila. Such a calm mind to have no regrets about our conduct.

The Dalai Lama was expressing that as he has matured, he has appreciated more and more this quality of the awakening heart. Alice Walker said something similar: "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness."

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche continued on that theme of the soft spot. He's talking about like a sore spot on the outer part of our body: "There is also an inner wound called Tathagata Garbha, or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore."

The bodhisattva fever is what the brahmaviharas wake up. We start to feel the emptiness, the tenderness in ourselves, the tenderness in the world, and it all comes together. We see that whereas we originally thought the game was just to clear it up here, the game becomes much bigger. It's to clear it up everywhere that nature is getting caught, everywhere that constriction and suffering are happening.

Ryokan, the Japanese Zen monk and poet, expressed this in a lovely sentence: "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this floating world." All the people in this floating world. Could we gather them together and take care of them all?

As we bring this kind of generosity of spirit into our dharma practice, we start feeling this connection to the life of all beings. I was on retreat some years ago at IMS, doing a long retreat in the winter. It was November into December—cold, icy, snowy, freezing rain. You probably know Massachusetts in the winter. Every day I would go out walking by this stone wall, and even into the winter months, one of those really cute chipmunks that Sally mentioned the other night would pop up out of the cracks in the stone wall where they were probably storing acorns, right alongside my walking path. I'd get to watch them for a little bit before they got frightened and ran away. I had this really warm feeling toward the chipmunk because it was about the only sentient being I was meeting out there in that weather.

A friend happened to visit the center. A few of us were practicing and he dropped off little cakes for each one of us and a little note with his words of friendship. I especially appreciated his encouragement because it was cold and gray and dark. I could use some encouragement. The little note that he put in with the cake said, "All beings are cheering you on. Good luck with your practice."

All beings are cheering you on. And they're cheering you on too. The devas who are fluttering up in the trees are looking down and sending their blessings.

And I had the image that that little chipmunk was standing there, standing up and yelling, "Go guy, go! Do your walking, do your sitting."

So we come with this innate capacity for connection, and I think children tend to have it if they haven't been abused in some way. But then for the rest of us too, our heart tends to get hardened by the experiences of life—just the normal knocks that life offers—and we don't yet have the wisdom to know how to stay open through the challenges that life throws at us.

So often through our teen years or maybe our early twenties, the heart starts to get covered over, and we start to contract. There are a lot of names for this process. We could say we close down or we shut off, that we start to repress our feelings, we build more defenses, we become armored in many ways. And that sensitivity of feeling that we had when we were younger isn't so accessible. We lose track of the connection, especially as we get so involved in career, livelihood, relationship, family, children, and so forth.

Freud said something really interesting. He said that the very root of neurosis, the reason that mental ill health occurs, is because of our refusal to suffer. So life gives us more suffering than we can open to, and out of our inability to stay open in the face of

it, we become neurotic in many different ways. So basically the movement to shut down as a way of dealing with the pain of life doesn't work. It just goes underground and becomes a lot more complicated.

And of course then we meet those habits of denial and avoidance and the complications when we come to practice meditation. In some ways, I don't think we need to worry too much about how the pain got there. Eckhart Tolle, who is a kind of self-taught discoverer, said something really interesting in his book *The Power of Now*. He said, "All negative emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who you are beyond name and form."

So in other words, that basic separation from the immediate knowledge of our true nature is really what caused the loss of awareness, the cloudiness, the confusion, and the complications. That's an interesting thing to reflect on. That's a deep and possibly ancient separation.

The metta practice brings us back into the life of the heart. By looking at our own well-being and others' well-being, we touch sometimes many of these old hurts. One of the ways that we get hurt growing up is by the criticism of others. If we've been embarrassed or shamed or punished unfairly, we can take that in and really close around it.

I was very interested to see how the Dalai Lama handled criticism. He was here at Spirit Rock. In fact, he was sitting in a chair that was about three feet in front of me several years ago. He was addressing—we held a conference here of about two hundred Buddhist teachers, Asian and Western both. The format of the day—we had about a day and a half with His Holiness—the format was that individual teachers would present on a theme that was of interest to them and hopefully to the group. Then the Dalai Lama would respond.

And generally what happened is, because so many people wanted to engage him in dialogue, about three people would present, and then he would respond to three presentations along a similar theme. So three people had presented and came to the Dalai Lama's time to speak, and the first presenter said, "Your Holiness, what do you think?"

And he said, "I don't know. All gone out of my head. When you were speaking, I had some ideas, but then these other people spoke. All lost." And he just laughed. Next presentation.

But then one of the presenters said something I thought was a little bit bold. He said, "You know, Your Holiness, Buddhism is becoming quite popularized today in our culture at large. There are movies like *The Little Buddha* and *Kundun*. There are per-

fumes selling by the name of Samsara. There are travel agencies advertising Nirvana as the best destination. And in that, Buddhism could get lost or trivialized or degraded. And you, Your Holiness, are the biggest popularizer of them all. What do you think about this?"

Dalai Lama was just quiet for a moment. And then he said, "Some people, you see, they call me living Buddha. Other people, they call me the God King. But I am not. I am just a simple Buddhist monk. And then other people, they call me a counter-revolutionary. Or they call me a wolf in monk's clothing. But you see, when somebody says something to me like that, I look back at my own intention. If my intention is sincere, then that is what is important."

What others perceive is up to them. I don't care." And he said that really forcefully—"I don't care." For me, that was a magnificent teaching. When we're criticized, can we have that kind of strength to look at our own intention and know if it's sincere? And then, if it is, not to care what anyone else says about us.

He carries the weight of the whole Tibetan nation on his shoulders. In the face of the cultural genocide that Tibetan people are undergoing, it's only the Dalai Lama at this point who has the international stature to make any difference in that trend. I don't know if even he can do it. He doesn't know if he can do it. But he's the one, if anyone can. So all that rests on his shoulders.

And yet he can still say, "I don't remember what you said. Ha ha ha, all gone." And be so light. He's amazing.

Our very difficulties, as we open to them, can be used in the service of love and compassion. As we open to our own pain, we're better able to understand the pain of others. We're even better able to understand those actions that come out of that pain. We can see the deep roots of the pain, even if those doing the action can't.

Aung San Suu Kyi, as you probably know, has been under house arrest for many years since the elections that should have put her into power—maybe it was seventeen years ago. She's been under house arrest for most of that time. While she's been under house arrest, she's continued to receive teachings from noted Buddhist teachers, noted sayadaws, some of whom we have known, who have gone in and given her teachings even while she's been under house arrest.

One of her practices while she's been in this enforced arrest has been the practice of loving-kindness. It's a central part of what she does. This is something that she said not so long ago: "When I compared notes with my colleagues in the democracy movement in Burma who have suffered long terms of imprisonment, we found that an enhanced

appreciation of metta was a common experience. We had known and felt both the effects of loving-kindness and the unwholesomeness of natures lacking in loving-kindness."

So even through our difficulties, we can come to appreciate the beauty and the power of this quality of loving-kindness.

I mentioned a few nights ago that one of my big hindrances in meditation practice was the arising of fear, sometimes quite strongly. Mostly I worked with it with vipassana practice. That was my main avenue. But as I started doing intensive metta, that brought a quality to my relationship to fear that the vipassana hadn't brought. It was very interesting.

I think somebody may have mentioned—I think Heather mentioned in an earlier talk, Heather Martin—that metta was originally taught as a protection practice. Some monks were sent into the forest to meditate. They were disturbed by beings nearby and came running back to the Buddha in a great state of nervousness and fear. He taught them metta as the practice to take back. He said, "It's all the protection you'll need."

Metta is a wonderful protection practice. As it strengthens in the heart, what you'll find is that it keeps fear at a distance. Basically, fear can't arise when the heart is firmly in the scope of metta.

We were doing the February retreat a few years ago, and one woman who was here for the month had to leave the retreat to fly back to the East Coast to attend a funeral. A family member unexpectedly died while she was in retreat. She said, "I'm quite nervous about going out. I feel pretty sensitive. I'm going into a difficult family situation, but mostly I feel nervous about going through the airports." She wasn't getting integration time and was just being thrown into all that hustle and bustle. "What should I do? Should I practice mindfulness?"

I said, "No, why don't you practice metta? Whenever you're in the airport, you're in line, or you're sitting in the lobby waiting to board the plane, do metta for all the people around you. Then come back and tell me what happened."

So she came back and said that it was amazing. She sat and started to get nervous, and she turned her mind to metta for all the people around her, and the space turned from a space of fear to a space of loving-kindness. She said it completely transformed her experience in the airport.

It's said that metta makes the heart so spacious that anger and aggression can't land in the heart. It's like when you throw—the analogy is—when you throw paint through space, it can't stick to the space.

Metta makes the heart so spacious that anger cannot stick within it. And so there is no need for fear—one feels protected.

For myself, the shift that happened through practicing with fear was profound. Through mindfulness practice, the fear kept getting smaller and smaller, but it remained the habit of mind—that was the conditioning. In some ways, Vipassana doesn't try to shift that underlying conditioning. It just creates great space around it. So that's what it had done—created this vast space around the fear.

After I had done quite a bit of metta practice, I saw that my mind tended to move not as much in the direction of fear and more in the direction of metta. The metta changed the underlying conditioning, which the Vipassana had basically shown the emptiness of. That was quite a beautiful shift. I have to say, I appreciated that transformation.

As these difficulties come up—whether it's the deep sense of separation, the loss of our true nature, past hurts or fears or anger—as they arise in the practice of the Brahmaviharas or in metta, we simply want to hold them there in the space of that particular Brahmavihara, in the space of metta. Then that difficulty starts to get touched again by the feeling of friendliness and warmth. The metta sort of reaches out to include it, and those parts which we may have rejected—fear or anger or hurt—all of a sudden start to be included in this field of loving kindness.

This is a poem from Michael Leunig, an Australian cartoonist:

When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it. Let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it. Let a bird lean in the hole and sing a simple song like a tiny bell and let it ring.

The encouragement with the practice of loving kindness is never to leave that mind of metta, never to leave that feeling of goodwill. As metta becomes more and more stabilized in our being, we start to feel this as a human possibility. It seems very remote at first, because at first metta is only occasionally available. But as it becomes more reliable and more the way the mind naturally tends, we start to see the possibility—maybe it could be there all the time as a human possibility. And that's really radical.

Normally we think it should be there if people are nice to us. And if people aren't nice to us, then we'll get angry at them. The Buddha gave a teaching in a sutta called the Simile of the Saw in the Majjhima Nikaya, where he said, "Look, even if somebody speaks rudely to you, don't get angry at them. Keep your mind in a space of loving kindness toward this person."

But I think he thought the monks weren't quite paying attention, so he upped the ante a little bit. He said, "Look, it's like this. Even if bandits were to meet you on the road and cut off your four limbs with a two-handled saw, one who gave rise to a mind of hatred toward them would not be carrying out my teachings."

Got it? In other words, he's saying no matter what happens, if a mind of hatred arises in response to an action, it's not carrying out his teachings.

"Monks, you should train yourselves thus: Our minds will remain unaffected and we shall utter no evil words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving kindness without inner hate."

Wow, that's a challenge. Even if people speak rudely to us, that's a challenge. So, not to think that we should be there tomorrow—I'm certainly not there. I don't think I know anyone well who is. But to think of it as a human possibility—for me, that's very inspiring.

What it reminds me of from Western culture is the image of Jesus as he's being nailed onto the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That is the human possibility. So it's beautiful, this idea that we could stabilize within the field of metta and carry it through any interaction. Wow. Amazing.

Loving-kindness takes us to this deep level of connection. We see that all beings have the same body. All human beings have roughly the same body that we do—two eyes, a nose, two ears, arms, legs. All beings have roughly the same emotions that we do. Everyone wishes to be safe and happy and healthy and at ease.

We're all vulnerable to fear and hurt and anger and criticism. So we start to see how much alike we all are, as though really we're one organism that's just been poured into these different shapes, one being poured into these different containers.

This is from Rumi's teacher named Shams: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

Metta reveals this. The differences that we hold on to so strongly, that we differentiate ourselves about so compulsively—these are not true distinctions. Metta leads us to see this.

Poonjaji was an Indian teacher who was a disciple of Ramana Maharshi. Carol and Sally and Howie all spent time with him in India when he was still alive. He was once asked about bringing peace into the world. His reply was: "As long as there are two, there will be war." As long as we think that we're separate, there will be war. The Brahmaviharas show us the possibility of seeing beyond that, seeing the illusion of that separation. And when we really feel how we're in the same boat, that awakens a lot of metta, a lot of compassion.

So I'll just close with the end of Oprah's interview with the Dalai Lama. She said, "In my magazine, I do a column called What I Know for Sure. What do you know for sure? The one thing on which you have no doubt." The Dalai Lama did not hesitate: "Compassion is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world. There is no doubt."

And you could say the same thing about metta. Best source of happiness, happy life and happy world.

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

From Shantideva: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 27

Consciousness, Awareness And Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong delves into the deepest teachings of the Buddha on consciousness, awareness, and nibbāna. Drawing from the Udāna and various suttas, he explores the Buddha's description of the 'unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded' - the unconditioned element that exists beyond the realm of arising and passing away. Armstrong discusses the four stages of enlightenment from stream entry to arahantship, sharing inspiring accounts from contemporary masters like Ajahn Mahāboowa and Ajahn Sumedho.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for touching this unconditioned dimension in daily practice. Armstrong suggests two approaches: first, recognizing moments when greed, hatred, and delusion temporarily cease, offering a taste of nibbāna's peace; second, investigating the relationship between consciousness and awareness through the metaphor of space-like knowing. He distinguishes between mindfulness (sati), consciousness (viññāṇa), and awareness, exploring whether our capacity for knowing points to something unchanging within our experience.*
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> *This teaching bridges the ultimate goal of the path with immediate practical application, showing how the same spacious, equanimous awareness cultivated in meditation reflects the awakened mind itself. Armstrong's clear exposition makes these profound teachings accessible while maintaining their transformative depth.*

The talk tonight is on consciousness, awareness, and nibbāna. So put your seatbelts on.

We've talked a number of times in this retreat about our basic situation as human beings—the fact that we are sensitive and conscious, and our experience is of different appearances coming and going all the time. Some of them are pleasant and enticing; some of them are painful and repelling. When we are not trained in how to relate wisely to the changing appearances, our conditioned habit of mind is to hold on tightly to what is pleasant and to push away what is unpleasant, while remaining unaware of that very activity—not recognizing what we're doing.

If we look more deeply, we see that this comes from a very deep-rooted instinct, or you could say longing, for some kind of security—looking to stabilize our life experience in something reliable and pleasing. But of course, as we start to investigate, we see that all the temporary things we try to hang on to or control just slip through our hands.

The Buddha pointed to this in one of his suttas from the Saṃyutta Nikāya. He used an analogy: it's like a person caught in the current of a river. The river is carrying them downstream against their will—they don't wish to go where the river is carrying them. So they reach up to the banks of the river trying to hold on, to stop their flow. But what they reach for and cling to are just bunches of grass. The current is so strong that it pulls out the bunches of grass and continues to sweep them downstream. This is our experience in trying to cling to changing objects.

When the Buddha was reflecting on his own journey, he said that when he started, he realized his habit was, being himself subject to death, to look for his satisfaction in that which was also subject to death—that is, in changing objects. As he reflected on that, he developed the aspiration to look for something that was beyond the quality of change. He said, "Seeing that I was subject to birth, aging, illness, death, and sorrow, I sought the unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, and sorrowless security from bondage—nibbāna." He called this the supreme security from bondage.

This is the state that he realized the night he sat under the Bodhi tree near the town of Gayā and came to his awakening. This is the poem said to have sprung into his mind immediately after his awakening:

Through many a birth I wandered in saṃsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. O house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken. Your ridge pole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving.

The unconditioned is one of his favorite synonyms for nibbāna—the deathless element. In attaining the unconditioned, it brought his mind to the very end of craving. In this analogy, the house that was being built was this body being born again and again. The house builder is craving. The rafters of the house are the kilesas, and the ridge pole is ignorance. All of these were shattered on the night of his awakening. The unconditioned was attained and his mind was liberated.

This is the pointing of the Third Noble Truth in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths: dukkha, the origin of dukkha, and the Third Noble Truth—the end of dukkha, which equates to the end of craving and here also to the quality of nibbāna.

The Buddha also said this about his attainment: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, subtle, hard to see and hard to understand, to be experienced by the wise." He's basically saying that this quality of nibbāna is indescribable. So in talking about it tonight, I am attempting something that's essentially impossible. You know how the Tao Te Ching says that those who know do not speak and those who speak do not know? Well, since I'm speaking, you already know what category I'm in. That's okay. We have nothing but words to point to these things.

I can't claim that this talk will be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So as you listen, please don't worry too much about trying to figure it out. As Heather indicated in her talk last night, figuring out doesn't take us terribly far on the road of insight. Rather, maintain a receptive attitude and let the words come in. Try to feel into the sense of them. You don't need to engage the thinking apparatus too much. If something doesn't resonate, let it go by. Don't worry about it.

In explaining nibbāna, Sāriputta was once asked what it is. The way he described it: "The destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion—this is called nibbāna." The literal meaning is extinguishing. It's as though craving is being compared to a flame that burns us. We feel the burning fire of craving throughout our experience. When nibbāna is understood or even glimpsed, touched, that flame goes out. The extinction is what brings the peace. So you could call it the extinction of craving or the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Those are synonymous.

Nirvana can be understood as a psychological state of complete freedom. That's one way in which it's true, and there are some schools in Buddhism that understand it as nothing more than that. For them, nirvana is only a state of mind—the highest state of mind, the ideal state of mind, but only a state of mind.

Most schools in Buddhism, however, understand it also as something that has a kind of existence. You could say philosophically an ontological reality—that it is more than just a state of mind, but nirvana itself is an element or a dhamma that is available to be experienced. I believe that the words of the Buddha support this second view more.

Here's a passage from the Udana:

"There is the unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded. But since there is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded."

I hope you get the flavor of this. It's as though we look out at the whole of human experience and we see that it's just made up of things that are coming and going, being born and dying, made, compounded, created in existence, formed from other conditions, and then passing away as part of their nature of change. And the Buddha is saying if that's all there was in our whole being, there would be no deliverance possible. But there is this dimension within us that is not born, not become, not made, not compounded. This is the element of nirvana.

So what are its characteristics? The Buddha said that the unconditioned has three marks: it is not subject to arising, it is not subject to passing, and it is not subject to change. So it is not in this sphere of that which is born and dies. It is sometimes called the unborn, sometimes called the deathless, sometimes called the unchanging. This is a dimension within our own being.

Because its nature is beyond change and it's not subject to arising, it has to be here and now. That which is not subject to arising or passing must be in every moment of experience. So it's here now. And that's why the suttas are full of these stories of people who penetrated to that realization in an unexpected moment. They didn't know that opening was going to come to them. They didn't know that realization was going to happen. But because of nirvana's ever-present nature, that is possible in any moment—in a moment of sitting, in a moment of walking, in a moment of lunch, in a moment of looking at a deer. That opening is possible for us.

So why don't we see it? If it's always here, why don't we see it? The reason, as I understand it, is that the kilesas are too gross. In being as gross as they are, these movements of mind—the agitation of craving, of desire and aversion, and the fog of delusion—they cloud our vision and we cannot see that which is the most subtle. Our minds are captivated by bigger movements, and so we don't yet have the refinement of attention to see that which is very subtle.

That's why the act of stilling the mind through the development of mindfulness and the growth of concentration is so critical to the deepening of insight. It is only when the state of mind becomes more refined, more quiet, that it's likely that breakthrough can take place.

The Buddha suggested some synonyms for nirvana. There's one passage in the Samyutta Nikaya where he gives thirty-three different synonyms, ways of talking about nirvana, and I find it inspiring and rather moving to read some of them. Some of the synonyms are: the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the

deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the harbor, the refuge, and the beyond. All of these point to that sense of the transcendent nature of nirvana—a transcendent refuge beyond change, beyond the conditioned.

The realization of nirvana is considered the highest kind of happiness available, above sense pleasures and above just the pleasure of concentration and a still mind. Why is that? I think this teaching—that nirvana is the highest happiness—is a profound pointing to an aspect of our nature that is not immediately obvious.

Normally, the untrained mind thinks that the highest happiness is the glitziest thing or the most bubbly kind of high or the most extreme form of ecstasy. But the trouble is that all those things always pass. And if that's really what happiness is, then happiness is only temporary. Moreover, when something that special passes, it leaves a big hole and it leaves us wanting more of it.

So the beauty of nirvana being the highest kind of happiness is that it is experienced as a complete peace—a complete peace that is incapable of being disturbed. Because of the total absence of craving, there is no movement in mind to disturb that peace. And that turns out to be the greatest relief. The experience of the mind which is not even subject to agitation turns out to be the most satisfying domain of happiness.

Moreover, when the degree of enlightenment that the Buddha attained—the full liberation of mind—takes place, one realizes then an experience that I haven't personally had and can't speak about: one is completely beyond the possibility of suffering. The possibility of suffering has vanished from human existence. I can't even imagine the kind of relief and happiness and bliss that such understanding would bring.

So it's an interesting reflection that what we are really looking for most deeply is peace. The Buddha expressed this two different ways in the Dhammapada. He said nibbana is the highest happiness, and he said peace is the highest happiness. I find that very inspiring to contemplate.

How do we get there? This question may have crossed your mind, and I discovered with great pleasure that the whole path leads only in that direction. The Buddha said that this path of mindfulness, the Eightfold Path, is a path that goes in one direction only, and that is to nibbana. He also put it this way: "Just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines toward the ocean, so too a practitioner who develops and cultivates the noble eightfold path slants, slopes, and inclines toward nibbana."

So we are all, through our practice, heading in that direction. When we will reach it remains a mystery, because all our efforts, even the best efforts, cannot open that door. What effort can do is take the mind into the territory from which the opening to the un-

conditioned can arise. The best way of preparing the mind is to develop the seven factors of enlightenment. That creates the kind of balanced, alert, still mind from which this opening is most likely to come. But no effort can make that opening happen.

This was shown beautifully in a story from the Vinaya. After the death of the Buddha, a council was called of all the fully enlightened beings of the time in order to preserve the teachings. The teacher was gone. There would be no fresh discourses given, and they realized it would be very important to remember what the Buddha had said during his life.

So they convened the council. It was considered the council of 500 arahants, fully awakened ones. There was just one problem. First, it's a very exclusive gathering—only arahants are admitted. But the person who had spent the greatest amount of time around the Buddha and who probably had the best memory was his attendant, Ananda, whom Carol mentioned a few nights ago. Unfortunately, Ananda was not an arahant, so he couldn't gain entrance.

Ananda thought, "I have much to share. I'd really like to be able to join this group of arahants. I'm going to practice with great dedication." So the night before the council was to begin, Ananda was in his hut, sitting and walking all night long, paying close attention, generating tremendous aspiration. His effort was very high. Sitting and walking, his mind seemed balanced, but daybreak came and there had been no opening. There had been no liberation. Ananda was not going to be able to join the council.

With great disappointment, he said, "That's just the way it's going to be. I have to accept this. I might as well take some rest—I'm tired from practicing all night long." So he went to his bed to lie down, and with that relaxation and peace of completing his effort, just as his head was about to touch the pillow, the full awakening came, and Ananda became an arahant. He joined the council the next day and provided us with all those beautiful discourses that begin "Thus have I heard," which comprise the majority of the suttas.

Sometimes relaxation or letting go is the doorway when all the factors have been brought together.

So what do we mean by this term enlightenment? In our tradition, in the Theravadan tradition, what constitutes enlightenment? The way that I understand it—and you'll find differing opinions among different Buddhist schools on this topic—in our tradition, it is the moment of realization of nibbana in one's direct experience.

The mind of the practitioner opens in some way to this unconditioned element that we call nirvana. The veils of the defilements have fallen completely away, so it's a moment of complete purity of consciousness without a flicker of craving. There is the direct touching and knowing for oneself the quality of the unconditioned, with its complete unshakability and its tone of complete deliverance and freedom.

But that penetrating insight, in the teachings of the Buddha, can give rise to four different depths of realization. The first is called stream entry. There's a formula that appears in the suttas again and again to describe someone who has attained the quality of stream entry. It says something like—I don't have the quote right in front of me—"the stainless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in him or her: all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation." That's a description of that immediate touching of the deathless. All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation. And it may be why the term cessation is sometimes applied to this moment of direct realization.

So one who has touched this level of realization of stream entry finds that some of the fetters binding the mind are permanently uprooted. These are said to be, in the case of a stream enterer, personality view, attachment to rites and rituals, and doubt—that means doubt about the path and its destination and its ability to reach that destination. But quite a number of other fetters or kinds of bondage still remain. So a stream enterer, even one who has had this direct realization, is not completely liberated. There are still other bondages in place. So the stream enterer continues to practice in order to purify the rest of the fetters.

Now just on a practical and realistic note, the attainment of stream entry is something that happens for Western practitioners today. It happens at centers like Spirit Rock. It happens at centers like IMS on the East Coast. So this is not an impossible attainment for modern Western practitioners of the Dharma.

Ajahn Sumedho is one of the few monastics who has alluded to his own experience of stream entry. He said he was practicing as a monk in Thailand under the guidance of Ajahn Chah, who was a great master, and had an experience where he felt he had touched the deathless, touched the unconditioned. But he wasn't quite certain. Because, I mean, how do you know?

Generally the reports of stream entry from first-hand experience are of quite an altered state of consciousness. And because nirvana is indescribable anyway, words can never map easily onto these descriptions. So you'll even find two people in the same tradition who both feel they've experienced stream entry and the realization of nibbana, but when they talk about their experiences to each other, they sound so different that one will say, "No, I think my experience is valid, but I don't think yours is." And the

other will say, "Well, that's funny, I had the same take about your description." So even practitioners in a similar lineage may not agree on the descriptions of what constitutes the realization of the unconditioned.

So Ajahn Sumedho had some doubt. Was this the real thing or not? So he went to talk to his teacher. He described the experience to Ajahn Chah and was sort of saying, "Was this it?" And Ajahn Chah said, "I wasn't there. How do you expect me to know?" I think this is a wonderful lesson. It's very hard for anybody but the Buddha to know somebody else's level of attainment. So it helps to be humble in these areas.

So the stream enterer continues to practice, and the second level of awakening or enlightenment is said to be a once-returner. At this stage, another glimpse of the unconditioned takes place, and the fetters of sense-desire and aversion are greatly weakened, but still other fetters remain.

Then continuing to practice, at the third stage, it's said that sense-desire and aversion are completely uprooted. Imagine a mind that had that degree of freedom, where there was no longer any sense desire and no longer any flicker of aversion. This is said to be the stage that Dipa Ma had attained. I think her teacher let the secret out on that one. I don't know if it's true or not, but she was somebody with an incredible peace and freedom.

Then continuing still further, the fourth stage of enlightenment is Arahantship. And at this, all the remaining fetters are uprooted, including restlessness, conceit, and ignorance. Isn't it interesting that restlessness continues longer than sense desire? The next time you're complaining about having to get through forty-five minutes, just remember, even a near-Arahant could be in the same position.

So it's said that at this fourth stage of awakening, the mind becomes completely unshakable. This level of enlightenment, this fourth stage called Arahantship, is called the unshakable deliverance of mind. The practitioner knows that they have passed completely beyond the possibility of suffering.

If you'd like to read a contemporary account of someone describing his Arahant attainment, there's a very impressive recounting in a book called Straight from the Heart by a Thai forest master named Ajahn Mahabua. Ajahn Mahabua is still alive and still teaching in the northeast of Thailand. He was a disciple of Ajahn Mun, as was Ajahn Chah. So Ajahn Chah and he were Dharma brothers.

He recounted that when he was a monk with about nine or ten vassa—that means nine or ten years in the monkhood—he decided to challenge himself in his practice and decided to sit up all night every night and decided not to move. That's determination. So

he did that for a three-month period in practice. He sat up every night, all night, and he didn't move. And he said that the pain was unbelievable. He said he lost his fear of death because he knew that no pain of dying could be worse than the pain that he experienced in sitting up all night, every night.

And then he said at the end of that period of practice, his mind became like a rock. Through the power of concentration and determination that he developed, his mind was completely unmovable, couldn't be swayed by anything.

Then he said, "I got stuck on that concentration for five years." Like why go beyond, right? There is a harbor, but it's a constructed harbor. It's not the harbor of the unconditioned. It's the harbor of really, really good concentration, but it's not the end of the story.

So, I don't know if it was through interaction with a teacher or his own reflection, he realized that he had to investigate further. And he began investigating the presence of craving and the absence of craving. And he would see them come and go in his practice. He was looking at where was craving arising, where was it not arising. And then with that, he also started to notice suffering and the absence of suffering. So that became his meditation.

But after a while, he became dissatisfied with that because he said, "All that is is impermanent. That's not taking me to the deathless. All I'm seeing is more impermanence."

So then he turned his attention to the two things that he felt were not really changing for him, and those were mindfulness and wisdom. He said, "Oh, those are shining all the time." And you'll find this language in the Thai forest tradition. The combination of mindfulness and wisdom is referred to in that tradition as *sati-paññ*a.

So he turned his attention then to *sati-paññ*a, and he said that these two factors of mindfulness and wisdom became impartial and impassive. And the mind was not tending to anything. It wasn't interested any longer in changing conditions because it had settled back into the knowing of mindfulness and wisdom.

He said then at a certain moment, "The cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked. Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared. At the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom."

So the eradication of ignorance is essentially a statement of Arahantship—one of the last fetters to go, and when it is completely removed from the mind, that is equivalent to a claim of Arahantship. So it's a very inspiring passage to read in his books. It really shows us the human possibility and that there are people alive today who have touched, it seems, who have touched that possibility.

Well, this Arahant stuff is all very well and good for people with twenty years in the robes living in the forest in Thailand, but that may seem a little remote for the rest of us. So how can we bring this interest in the unconditioned, this understanding of the unconditioned, how can we bring it alive in our practice today, right now, right where we are?

I want to suggest that there are two basic ways to approach this. The first is to kind of pick up on this description of Sariputra's that nibbana is the destruction of greed, of hatred, and of delusion. That suggests that perhaps we don't have to go so far as destruction, but perhaps the reduction in greed, hatred, and delusion. Now, this is not watering down the Dharma because we know the destruction is where the path is leading. But as a way to get a feel for it, a flavor for it, maybe we could look at this possibility.

So here's one way to relate with it in your practice. When we talk about the end of suffering or when we read that in the suttas, I believe the Buddha is talking about the complete end, the final end of suffering that does never recur again. But it can also be understood as a temporary end of suffering.

So here's one way to look at it. Anytime you're involved in some kind of struggle, of resistance or wanting or friction or conflict, unease in your practice, follow this practice that we've mentioned a number of times in the retreat. Take a look and see if there is in the mind greed, aversion, or delusion. Take a look and see if one or more of those is active. If it is, then understand that the conflict and suffering is as a result of those forces in the mind. And then simply pay attention to the sense of struggle and the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion until it goes out, which it will at some point, either through understanding or through impermanence. It will go out.

So notice what it feels like when you've been involved—struggle, struggle, struggle—greed, aversion, delusion, and you watch it as you get to that point where there is this temporary end. The sense of struggle ends. The sense of ease returns. Feel into that flavor of ease. Look in the mind and notice the end of greed, aversion, and delusion, if temporary. That is a partial flavor of nibbana. It's not the complete nibbana, it's not the direct knowing of the unconditioned, but it does have that same flavor of release and freedom.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, who is a great Thai master of the last fifty years, a little pamphlet that he wrote called "Nibbana for Everyone." Very encouraging title. "When you hear a phrase like 'nibbana for everyone,' you may shake your head in disbelief and believe that someone has tried to dye a cat for sale." I think this might be a Thai saying, but the basic idea is you have this scruffy, multicolored cat, and it would be worth more if it was all black. So you dye the cat all black, and then you can charge more money for it. "You may believe that someone has tried to dye a cat for sale. That means to hoodwink you, to deceive you. But nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any defilements."

Anyone can see that if defilements are with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them? Under such conditions, living beings must either die or become insane and finally die anyway. Let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of defilement are not burning. As a matter of fact, we can say that these periods last longer than when the fires are burning. Periodical nibbana keeps all of us alive and well without making any exceptions, even animals at a certain level. We survive because of the nourishment from this kind of nibbana.

So this is from a great Thai master. You can take this to heart and tune into the fact that when your mind is free of greed, aversion, and delusion, you are experiencing this taste—a foretaste of nibbana—and feel the flavor of release that's present then. So that's the first way to make this teaching practical in our own meditation day by day.

The second way is going to be a more extended reflection on the theme of consciousness and awareness. I want to ask: what in our experience is kind of like nibbana? What is like it in the sense of being ever present, able to accommodate all arisings and passings without itself arising and passing? What can accommodate pleasure and pain impartially? What doesn't have an agenda, that is free from craving or struggle? What is unchanging, or you could say beyond time?

First I want to ask on a purely physical level: can you think of anything in the physical world out there that has this kind of quality or even partially has this kind of quality?

I want to suggest that the element of space has something like this—the element of physical space. The space in this room doesn't really change, does it? The air changes, but that's not space. Air is matter. Space is that which matter moves in. So the space in this room is unchanging. It can accommodate all the comings and goings. In fact, it's because of the space that each of us can be in this room. It's not partial. It doesn't care if a Buddha walks in or if a killer walks in. The space is equally accepting of both. And it doesn't change. So in a way, it's timeless—it has that timeless quality.

Now we know if we think cosmologically, maybe this space was created at the Big Bang. Maybe it's not really permanent. But for our purposes, it's permanent enough. So as an approximation of the unconditioned, physical space has some of those qualities. Ajahn Sumedho has a nice teaching in one of his books where he says, "Contemplate space." And he says this to disillusion us a little bit—that the unconditioned is about as exciting as space. It removes a little bit of craving, perhaps.

Now, there's one other thing that in our experience might approximate this quality of the unconditioned. It's not the unconditioned, but you can use it as an approximation. When we've had the big mind meditation on this retreat, you probably remember that the first instruction is to feel your awareness as being like a big clear sky or like empty space. Do you remember that instruction?

So then we feel this vastness of awareness in which all the appearances arise and pass away. Does that awareness seem to be coming and going? There's a way in which it feels kind of stable, doesn't it? And it's as though in this big mind meditation, what we're seeing is that the space within our awareness is just pervaded by the quality of knowing. So it's kind of like this big mind meditation reveals this property in us that's like the marriage of space and awareness. The space brings this sense of emptiness—there's nothing there from the beginning, therefore anything can come in. Body can come in, thoughts can come in, the appearance of other people, sounds. Anything can come in this space of awareness. So it has that same empty quality as physical space. But this space of awareness is always knowing. You could say it's pervaded by knowing. So we sometimes call this just the quality of empty knowing.

We sometimes call it the cognizing power of emptiness. And we sometimes call it the nature of mind.

In some ways, this is most fundamentally what our human experience consists of—this empty space of knowing in which things are always coming and going and being known. The things come and go, but this empty space seems to always be there, doesn't it? Every time you turn and look, isn't that empty space there revealing things?

I want to suggest that this awareness is also an approximation of the unconditioned when joined with this sense of space. This union of space and awareness is an approximation of the unconditioned. But is it really unconditioned? Is it really unchanging?

The word we've been using for knowing recently and throughout the retreat is consciousness. We talked about consciousness as one of the five aggregates—the quality of mind that has the ability of holding or receiving, feeling, sensing, knowing any object at

any of the sense doors. And you remember that the five aggregates are all characterized by impermanence. We talked about how consciousness arises with the object and then passes away when the object passes.

So is awareness the same as consciousness or different? Are they impermanent or permanent?

I don't know if you care about this question, but I care passionately about it. This became a very big deal for me at some point in my practice and was something I really deeply needed to understand. If this is the deepest aspect of ourselves, I wanted to know to what extent it was permanent, reliable, a refuge like nirvana, and to what extent it was just coming and going like everything else—and therefore unstable and unreliable.

I went into quite an investigation of this, and I want to share with you the reflections that came to me.

We need to distinguish between three terms: mindfulness, consciousness, and awareness.

We've talked about mindfulness as this aspect of intelligence in our mind which can know what we are experiencing. If you remember, we said at the beginning of the retreat that a black Labrador has experience, but he can't tell you what he's experiencing—and I don't think he can tell himself. He's just caught up in eating and smelling and chasing and running and feeling pleasure and feeling pain, but he can't go, "Oh, this is craving. Oh, this is satisfaction. Oh, this is hunger."

Mindfulness is the quality that we humans have that can know that. "This is an in-breath. This is a sound. This is a sensation. This is the hindrance of sense desire. This is a thought of ill will." We can know that, and that's mindfulness. It's the opening of wisdom because there's intelligence in that understanding. That's why the term sati is often combined with paññā—mindfulness-wisdom—together in Thai forest tradition.

Consciousness is this quality that just knows the bare experience of objects arising. It just knows, on a very pre-verbal level—the most simple pre-verbal level—a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, a mood. Animals have this. Humans have it. You can't turn it off. It's automatic as long as you're awake. It doesn't require any intelligence and it doesn't have any wisdom. So mindfulness has wisdom, knows what's happening. Consciousness is automatic, pre-verbal.

So what's awareness? Well, the curious thing is there's no word in the Pali canon that needs to be translated by awareness. There's not even a word that's asking to be translated by awareness. So awareness is like this free word that we have in English that doesn't have a reference to the language of the Buddha—therefore we can make it mean whatever we want. It's a little bit like the joker in a deck of cards. This term awareness is kind of a joker in dharma language, at least in our tradition. Some of the Tibetan traditions define it much more clearly, but in our tradition it's a wild card.

You'll notice that different teachers will use it differently. Sometimes it's used to describe this intelligent quality of mindfulness: "Are you aware of your experience in this moment?" Meaning, do you know what is happening? "Yeah, I'm experiencing joy, or I'm experiencing metta."

At other times, awareness is used like consciousness, where there's this empty space of knowing that is stable and functioning all the time. "Oh yeah, awareness—it's just that field of knowing that's with me always." Notice that it's a slippery customer, and it can slide between meaning mindfulness or meaning consciousness, depending on who's using it.

So let's return to the original question: Consciousness and awareness—permanent or impermanent? I ask you to conduct a thought experiment with me. I majored in physics in college, and we were taught that we could prove things in one of three ways: we could carry out a physical experiment, we could carry out a mathematical proof to establish a certain law, or we could carry out a thought experiment called a *gedankenexperiment*. If it was built on valid assumptions, that proof was considered reasonable.

Here's a *gedankenexperiment* on the nature of consciousness and awareness. I want you to imagine that you're in outer space on the outer fringe of our solar system, but you're facing away from the sun. You're looking into outer space. The sun is behind you. No planets are in front of you. And for hypothetical purposes, let's say you're looking into a part of the sky that has no stars.

What do you see? Not a trick question. Anyone?

"Nothing."

What's the color?

"Black."

It's totally black, right? And it's not the black of some beautiful dress—it's the black that's a complete absence of any light. No light is reaching your eyes.

But the sun's behind you. And let's say your shadow is negligibly small. Is there light in that space? By light I mean packets of light energy, photons. Are there photons in that space in front of your eyes?

There have to be, because the sun is streaming them out in all directions evenly. So that empty space in front of you is actually pervaded by sunlight, but you don't see it.

Now, let's assume that a meteor comes up from below and passes right in front of your eyes. Do you see it?

"Yeah."

Because what you're actually seeing is the reflected sunlight that bounces off the meteor and then comes back to your eyes. Then the meteor streaks through and it's gone. No more meteor. Again, you're seeing black.

I want to suggest that this is an analogy for the way consciousness works. The light that gets bounced off the meteor as a result of its arising is the light of consciousness. It arises, persists for a little while, and then passes away. But I want to suggest that this underlying phenomenon of sunlight pervading empty space is the unconditioned. Because it's always there, but we don't see it.

I want to suggest that this sunlight pervading empty space is not itself consciousness or awareness, but it's our innate capacity for knowing. Because of this, it's sometimes just called the factor of cognizance or the quality of luminosity. But it is not perceivable except in moments of altered states of mind, altered states of perception. There is no direct realization of this unconditioned luminosity unless there is that moment of breakthrough which is a direct realization of the unconditioned. It's there, but we cannot perceive it. Yet everything that we perceive is only perceived because of the activity of this luminosity.

So in truth, there is no awareness without an object there to be known. And yet the capacity for awareness is that luminosity which is stable beneath all the appearances.

This is one way of understanding the unconditioned. There are a number of Buddhist schools that see it this way: the Thai Forest tradition, the mind-only school of Mahayana philosophy, the Dzogchen and Mahamudra traditions within Tibetan Buddhism.

There are other schools that deny this intrinsic luminosity—some of the Theravadin Orthodox schools based in the Visuddhimagga, some of the pure Nagarjuna schools, followers from the Mahayana and Tibetan traditions. So this is a little bit controversial, but I like it. It's my personal preference as a way to understand the unconditioned and the nature of consciousness.

So consciousness is impermanent, but it is in a way a link to the unconditioned nature of mind. When we are involved in our normal routine of life with our untrained mind—and even the mind we bring to meditation—we tend to glom onto the objects that are coming through. As Sally talked about, there's contact, feeling, craving, and clinging. We fasten onto an object, and notice how in that the mind shrinks down, becomes obsessed with one of the arisings, and there's suffering, contraction, unease in that grasping.

Then the instruction comes from the big mind point of view: turn your attention instead to the empty space of knowing. What this instruction does is give us permission to unfasten from all the arisings and from the tendency to focus on and attach to the individual arisings, and open up to this empty space. In doing that, notice how it feels. Someone just in an interview yesterday was talking about how there was a stable experience of that equilibrium that lasted quite a bit of a sitting, where there was just a sense that everything could come and go and there was no inner disturbance from any of it. Because in a way, our center of gravity has shifted into this other dimension which is close to the unconditioned or a link to the unconditioned.

So the shift away from grasping into knowing—truly, it doesn't matter whether the knowing is in a small way or a big way, but somehow the big way helps us. This is from Ajahn Maha Boowa: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

Ajahn Buddhadasa puts it this way: "This emptiness is self-existent. Nothing can touch it, concoct it, or improve it. This is the essential state, for it knows neither birth nor death. Once the mind is rid of delusion, it discovers its primal state, the true original mind, which is sati-paññña."

So as we shift into this space of knowing, start to feel the release, the accommodating power, the lack of change—you could say the timeless quality that comes from moving in that direction. The center of gravity shifts from a fixation on one individual arising into a space of emptiness which is not focused or fixated on any one particular thing.

And then we see that the path starts to come closer and closer to the goal. When you think about the goal of this practice, you could say the awakened mind. Isn't it a mind that stays in balance and knows all the arisings and passings? And yet, the path we are walking or describing is also a state of mind that stays in balance, spacious, equanimous, and knows all the comings and goings.

So we describe this as the quality of resting with awareness. I don't so much like the term "rest in awareness" because it gives an idea that awareness is something separate from the things we're aware of, as though awareness is a destination that we can touch or hold and we can move out of engagement with the arisings and passings. That's a way of detachment under which there's a little bit of aversion to the becomes, to the made, to the compounded, to what appears. We realize that awareness arises together with all the arisings. But we can rest in that state with awareness.

This is from Rumi: "Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere and eyes that judge distances, how high, how low. You own two shops and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller, checkmate this way, checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish."

I had a very strong manifestation of this on a visit to Kathmandu one year. I had gone over to sit with my teacher at his monastery, and while I was there visiting, this very great Dzogchen master was also visiting, named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who I mentioned in an earlier talk—one of the great Dzogchen masters of the last fifty years. I was in touch with some friends in the U.S. One of my friends who is a student of Khenpo Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche asked me to give him some dana, and I had some extra cash. So I put some money in an envelope, wrote his name on it, and asked my teacher to please give it to him on behalf of my friend.

My teacher said, "Would you like to meet Khenpo?"

And I said, "No, I don't need to. You just give it to him." I thought, seeing one lama, you've seen them all.

And then I reconsidered. I thought, I've heard a lot of great things about this teacher.

Why don't I make that little effort and meet him? So I went to my teacher and said, "No, I would like to take the envelope and present it to Rinpoche myself."

He said fine and set up the meeting. Rinpoche was seated on a cushion, wearing an ornamental robe of some kind, sitting up very straight. I was nervous about meeting him because I'd not only heard what a great teacher and practitioner he was, I also felt this was somebody who could really see through me. I felt I was always exposed going in front of him.

So I was a little nervous, but we made small talk through an interpreter, and then the time came for me to offer the dana from my friend. I went up, and as I got close to him, he touched my head, which was very moving. Then I extended the envelope with the money to him, and he took it from me.

At that point, I was looking right into his eyes, but I was a little nervous, and he did a transmission thing. He dropped into his meditative state. I could feel the change when he did it. His eyes moved slightly apart as though he was looking into a very great distance, and his mind became completely still. As I was looking into his eyes, I felt like I was looking into an ocean of the unconditioned.

I had never seen anyone that still. I didn't even know it was a human possibility to be that still. When I thought about it later, I thought I couldn't even say that his mind was still. There was no mind there to be either still or moving. That's how complete his absence of craving was.

I felt if I could have just kept looking into his eyes a little longer... but I got nervous. He was so unguarded and so undefended, it brought up my own nervousness and kind of fear of exposure, and my ego reassembled. And I remain unenlightened to this day. But it was a very inspiring moment.

It reminded me of another quality that the Buddha probably had that was part of the reason why people were going off right and left around him into full liberation.

So I'll close with this quotation from the Buddha: "One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit for a minute, please.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 28

The Attitude of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 53 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses the essential attitude needed for effective meditation practice. Drawing on Suzuki Roshi's wisdom about being serious but not too serious, he explores the delicate balance between spiritual effort (dhamma chanda) and relaxation. Armstrong introduces a three-part approach to meditation: relax, observe, and allow, emphasizing how this attitude leads to freedom from the three kilesas (greed, aversion, delusion).*
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> *The talk delves deeply into the Buddha's teaching from the Sutta on Totality (Samyutta Nikāya), which describes human experience through the six sense doors. Armstrong distinguishes between consciousness (viññāṇa) - the basic knowing faculty - and mindfulness (sati) - the intelligent understanding of experience as described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. He introduces the practice of mindfulness of consciousness itself, suggesting we can rest attention in the "pure space of knowing" that remains constant while all phenomena arise and pass away.*
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> *This refuge in awareness offers freedom from the endless cycle of grasping at pleasant experiences and pushing away unpleasant ones. Armstrong concludes with teachings from contemporary masters like Ajahn Jumnian, pointing toward the deathless nature of pure knowing that transcends the three characteristics of existence.*

Tonight I want to talk about something of the spirit of our practice and how we approach it, and also to define some of the terms that we've been using and will continue to use and hopefully put a little more context around what we're doing.

Suzuki Roshi, the Zen master who founded San Francisco Zen Center, had a lovely statement about the spirit of Dharma practice. He said, "We have to be serious about our practice, but if we're too serious, we lose our way." This is a good reminder for all of us in an intensive practice situation to try and find that lightness of mind and lightness of spirit that Joseph talked about last night.

In doing meditation practice in our tradition, it's easy to get overly attached to some of the fruits of practice. We can get really interested in the concept of enlightenment, for instance. Or having had some very good sittings, even in the past or on this retreat,

we might get attached to the strong concentration, feelings of bliss or peacefulness, and have a very strong motivation to recover those. But that kind of approach to practice where we're aiming towards some achievement or attainment can wrap us up in knots.

I got a little feedback on this one time in California. It was a period of practice where I had a lot of zeal for practice. I had a lot of motivation, which in our tradition we call dhamma chanda—love for the Dharma, desire for the Dharma. But it was probably a little out of balance with the sense of relaxation.

I'd been living in California for a few years, and I went to see a psychic. It's something you have to do after you're in California for a few years, kind of like getting a driver's license—you go to see a psychic. My friends had gone to see this guy and raved about him, so I thought I'd go.

I went into his office in San Francisco and walked in the door, and he sort of drew back, almost in alarm, as though my energy was pushing him off his chair. He said, "Whoa, slow down. You're in too much of a hurry to get there." He said, "Don't you know that God comes more often to those who don't want him so much?"

So I realized that I had to balance this dhamma chanda with the opposite side of the spectrum, which is this quality of relaxation that we've been talking about. And yet it's possible to go too far that way also. If you come in and you're too relaxed, you might say, "Oh, I think I'll sleep the first few days. It's so cozy in my room. It takes about three days to get through the tiredness. Then I'll come back to the hall." But the practice isn't going to unfold so well.

So we have to find some kind of approach that is somewhere in between these two—not too much striving, but also not too loose. We'd like to talk about this place in the middle as what we call a right attitude to practice.

One teacher expressed this quality of right attitude with three simple instructions. He said, "This is how you can approach your meditation: Relax, observe, and allow." Just that simple. So let's talk about each of those three steps.

The first step is to relax. As soon as you sit down, it's good to relax. Partway through sitting, if you notice that your shoulders are starting to migrate up around your ears, it's good to notice that and consciously relax again. At any time during the day when you feel wound up, either physically or mentally, it's good to remember to relax.

Relaxation is almost a magical instruction for our whole system. When we can actually tune in and just drop a level, it sort of sends a message throughout our nervous system that says, "Things are okay." If I can relax, things are okay, and the situation is not too bad.

This quality of being able to relax expresses a very important state of mind that we talk about a lot in Buddhism called trust or confidence. It basically says that we can trust in the moment to support us, to be workable, and we can trust in our own hearts and minds to find a way to work in this moment. So when we're able to relax, it really soothes the whole body and mind, and it sort of lays to rest some of those flutters of worry or anxiety.

It's a fair question: why can I trust? Or what can I trust in? Myoshin spoke last night very effectively on the three refuges of trust in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and I think that's always helpful to reflect on. But maybe more immediate to us as we're coming into our direct experience of the moment is trusting in some purity in our own heart and mind, in our own citta—this word that really means both heart and mind.

When the four of us were thinking about putting this retreat together, and I think we've said it's kind of an experiment for us as much as it is for you, what we wanted to convey to you was a sense that you can explore and discover your own experience and find within yourself some kind of refuge that is part of your direct experience. You don't have to go looking outside yourself. It's the reason that we're talking a lot about awareness and the knowing and coming into the present and investigating that side of things, because it has the potential to be a really wonderful refuge and place of trust.

What we find is that the mind itself has a certain strength and purity that doesn't depend on the circumstances around us. So the circumstances don't have to be perfect for each of us to be able to relax. The mind may be a little bit scattered.

There may be thoughts. There may be some flickers of disturbing emotion—some sadness or apprehension, anxiety. The body may not be entirely comfortable. You may be sleepy. You may be bored. That's all okay. The circumstances just have to be sort of good enough. And maybe most of our moments are kind of good enough for us to trust and bring out that quality of relaxing.

Once we relax, the next step is to observe, pay attention, see what our experience is showing us. It really helps to be interested. I think there was a question this afternoon about how does one become interested if one is not supposed to be actively doing. And I think a really helpful ingredient is interest. When we're interested in our experience, then the presence is there. The willingness to look and feel is there.

This is really the heart of being awake. I'm sure you know that the word Buddha in the Pali language that his teachings have come down in simply means the awake one. So really what we're trying to discover for ourselves moment after moment is how do we wake up? Interest, alertness, a willingness to learn are all really important pieces of this waking up process which is actualizing our own awake nature.

So we want to, as far as possible, not spend too much of our time drifting into thoughts of past and future and fantasy and analysis and imaginary conversations, although that will happen again and again. But we want to have the willingness to come back into the present moment, turn to our experience, and see what's happening. So we'll observe our body and the knowing of it, our relationship to that, our mind, the knowing of it, the relationship to that, and the environment, the knowing of it and our relationship to that. We'll talk in more detail about all of these focuses.

The third aspect of this instruction is allow. And that just means once you're relaxed and you pay attention, you let things be the way they are. You allow your experience to be just as it is. Everything happens from past causes and conditions. We aren't in control of creating this moment the way it's unfolding. There are so many factors that have gone into its unfolding just as it is. And based on all those factors, it couldn't be any different. Couldn't be any different. Couldn't be any different.

That's why one of our colleagues, Sylvia Boorstein, who's a teacher also at Spirit Rock in California, likes to say when somebody asks how she is, she says, "I couldn't be any better," because it's the literal truth. We are the way we are. The moment is the way it is. We'd like to have our experience always be a certain way—you know, a pleasant way, an uplifting way. It's not always like that. And there's this kind of universal human tendency to try to tweak it so that it is like that. And if you take a look at a lot of our thoughts and activities during meditation, I think you'll see that we're constantly trying to adjust the experience to make it more pleasant or as pleasant as possible.

But we forget that this attempt to control things carries a certain price. And the price, you could say, is our peace of mind or our freedom. There's this image from the Buddhist tradition of samsara being this never-ending round of birth and death and birth and death. And you can interpret that in a very long time frame of many human lives. You can interpret that in a moment-to-moment way—how we go through the day, sort of incarnating as different beings: the sad being, the sleepy being, the frightened being, the ecstatic being, the joyful being, the contented being, the worker being—all the way through our day, this sense of being born and dying again and again and again, constituting this round of samsara.

And this Tibetan teacher said that the very essence of samsara is correcting. This whole wheel is put in motion by our attempts to make things better than they are. And conversely, the relaxation into freedom comes out of accepting things the way they are. So this allowance is not only a kind of convenient easing of friction, but it turns out to be a very profound teaching about how we can best live with great peace of mind and great ease in the world.

So this is one teacher's pointing to this right attitude: relax, observe, and then allow. Another teacher took this sort of allowing piece and refined it, made it a little more precise, and for this we owe a lot of appreciation to a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya. All four of us have had a bit of contact with him over the past few years and have appreciated his teachings a lot.

He says that the way we can check our practice attitude is just to ask ourselves a simple question in any moment, and he recommends that we ask it often: "In my mind at this moment, in relation to my meditation, is there greed, is there aversion, or is there delusion?" You may recognize these as what are called the three kilesas or torments of mind, sometimes translated as defilements, that are the root cause of all the problems in our life personally, in the life of the society, for all of us as humans. Greed, wanting more than we need; aversion, the stance of negativity or disliking; delusion, the stance of being confused or not in touch, not seeing and understanding the way things are.

So we can take a look at any moment. Is there greed?

Is there aversion? Is there delusion?

Well, those can be a little abstract. So Sayadaw recommended three simple questions that are very practical to allow us to answer that question.

Am I wanting something to happen that isn't happening? So when I'm sitting, for instance, in meditation, am I wanting the mind to be peaceful? Am I wanting the body to be really calm and pleasant? Am I wanting the lunch bell to ring so the sitting will end and I can go eat? These are the influences of greed or wanting.

Is there aversion means am I resisting something that's happening? There's a pain in my knee and I wish it would go away. There's a feeling of restlessness in the body and I don't like it.

Or for delusion, the question is, am I knowing or not knowing what's happening? So there are many layers of delusion. We'll talk more about them as the retreat goes on. But in a very simple way, am I not in touch with my experience in the present moment? Then delusion is present in the mind.

So I want to recommend this practice to you. I think we'll probably all talk more about it as the retreat goes on. But just to suggest that you could start to ask this question a few times in every sitting period, a few times in every walking period, during meals and in between. Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion in my relationship to what's happening? And you'll find it a very interesting exploration.

On days like today, we might find that there's a flood of aversion. Often on first days, there's a lot of sleepiness, and it's not a particularly enjoyable state until you finally go to sleep, and then it's actually one of the better ways to pass the time on the cushion. Or body pain. In the first few days when I sit, sitting so many hours when I haven't been sitting so much at home, the body goes through a real adjustment, getting used to the posture and getting accommodated to the discomfort of the first few days. Or boredom. We miss the things at home. Life here doesn't look that stimulating or exciting. We long to be somewhere else—an expression of the lack of interest in the neutrality of the experience.

So there may be a lot of aversion, a lot of resistance in the first few days. You can also be longing for the kind of sweet states you might remember from other meditation retreats. So both greed and aversion are usually big on the first few days. And delusion because we're often away in thought a lot early on.

But see if it's possible that our meditation can be an expression of a relationship that doesn't have an agenda for something to happen and doesn't have a struggle against what's happening. That is kind of the sweet spot in meditation practice. No agenda and no struggle. Notice what it feels like when your meditation comes out of that kind of attitude. It's almost like from this place we find, oh, this is really the proper way to meditate.

And of course we learn we can meditate and be mindful of agenda or be mindful of struggle. But the difference when both of those are absent is really noticeable. It's a qualitative difference. So continue to check in your mind. The more familiar you become with this place of no agenda, no struggle, no greed, aversion, delusion, the easier it will be to get there. And from this place the meditation unfolds in a really beautiful way.

So there's a little bit about attitude and an approach to meditation, but how can we carry out this observation and what do we observe? What do we carry out the observing on? So I want to talk about some of the key terms that we'll be using, but before I do, I want to take a big picture view of what we're doing here.

I just want to ask in a kind of broad way, as a meditator, what do we understand our basic human situation to be? In the most basic terms, what constitutes a human life? Sort of as observed from the meditator's point of view. Where's the difficulty in it? And where's the freedom or release in it?

So thinking in a fresh way, I like to orient myself around this quote from Rumi: "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea."

Continue beautifying this talk (part 4/9). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

Ever feel like that at the start of a meditation retreat? How did we get here? What is up?

Another way to say it might be—we talk a lot in Buddhism about our care and compassion for sentient beings. What does it mean to be a sentient being? What does it mean to be sentient? Or you could say conscious.

Are you conscious in this moment? Are you sentient in this moment? Well, you're not unconscious, are you? Or if anyone is, could you wake them up? Generally, we're conscious when we're awake.

How do you know you're conscious? We've all had the experience of going unconscious for a while, either coming out of deep sleep or fainting or emerging from anesthesia. How do you know when you're conscious again? Isn't it that things start appearing? And isn't that our basic nature as sentient beings? Things appear to us. If we were unconscious, nothing would be appearing to us. But because we're conscious, things appear.

From a Buddhist point of view, what appears, the Buddha put into six categories. The first are our five physical senses. But rather than paraphrase, let me read you the sutta. This is called the Sutta on Totality from the Samyutta Nikaya, one of the old Pali texts of the Buddha's teachings.

"Monks," the Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of life."

That's kind of bold, isn't it? In one discourse, he's going to teach the totality of life. Einstein didn't say that. Freud didn't say that. Marx didn't say that. Here's the Buddha: "I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully, and I will speak.

"What is the totality of life? It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and objects of touch, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called the totality of life. Anyone who talked of a totality beyond this would not be speaking of what they knew about."

So basically, it's the five physical senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—plus the mind and objects of mind, which for our purposes are primarily thoughts and feelings. We'll elaborate more on this as we go, but for now, thoughts and feelings are the objects of mind.

It's kind of a simple classification. There are just these six categories, the six senses—five physical and one of the mind. And yet, is there anything in your experience that lies outside this list? Can we take it as a comprehensive list of human experience? Let's take it that way as a platform to work on, at least as a hypothesis, and we'll explore.

So basically our life as conscious beings is that we come into the world and all these sense experiences have confronted us since we woke up—certainly from the time of our birth—and have been happening pretty nonstop as long as we're awake. Some of them are beautiful, attractive, pleasant, delightful, enjoyable. Some of them are frightening, painful, terrifying, hair-raising, to be avoided at all costs, we believe.

And it's really this intense mixture of the pleasant and the unpleasant that makes our human life such a challenging circumstance. If it were all pleasant, we could probably live with that. If it were all painful, in some way we'd just get resigned and numb to the extent that we can. But we retain this sensitivity to the beautiful. And then that opens us up to our vulnerability to what's uncomfortable and unpleasant.

This is really, I think, our basic human situation. We're such sensitive creatures. We're capable of great pleasure and joy. But life continues to present us with difficulties and pain. Moreover, we can't control—as we just talked about a few minutes ago—we can't control the ever-changing flow of these appearances, and we can't control the pleasure and pain ratio.

We're simply subject to these experiences arising whether we want them or not. And it's this constant struggle—because we have such a deep yearning for security—this constant struggle to secure ourselves with the pleasant and to push away the painful that really constitutes this round of birth and death. We're constantly trying to make the pleasure last and make the pain go away.

Where might the freedom be in that?

Meditation attempts to provide an avenue to freedom through the activation of a faculty called mindfulness. A close synonym we'll explore a little later in this talk is the word awareness. As we activate this quality of knowing and understanding our experience—its pleasant and painful aspects and our relation to it—the mind starts to disengage its tendency to grasp. Understanding comes in of the dilemma that we're caught in, this alternation of pleasure and pain, and we start to develop a non-grasping equanimity that understands this flow.

That non-grasping equanimity gives us a place to rest that creates a greater and greater sense of freedom in our life. And in its maturity, in its development, it leads—the Buddha says—to the complete absence of suffering, even in the midst of this changing display of pleasant and unpleasant.

So it's really the cultivation of this quality of mindfulness that we're here to engage in this week and to feel the freedom possible from it.

Let's talk in a little more detail about these experiences that come and their impact on us, and then what the quality of mindfulness develops and how it helps us.

These experiences come alive for us—all the appearances come alive—because of our sentient nature, our conscious nature. In the Buddha's teachings, the faculty of mind that is open to receiving all kinds of experiences is called consciousness. The Pali word is viññāṇa, and it has a particular meaning in his teachings. It is simply that cognizant factor of mind that knows the bare reality of a sense datum.

So a sound arises. And immediately as that sound arises, that consciousness arises in each of your ears. And that consciousness of just the sound, that knowing quality, is this element of viññāṇa. It's the most basic part of mind, as the Buddha described it.

Viññāṇa doesn't have any intelligence with it. You could be almost dozing off and yet that sound could still penetrate. You don't have to do anything verbal with it. You don't have to interpret it or recognize it or think about it. Just that bare pre-verbal knowing of the sound itself—that faculty of the mind is called consciousness. It's what we've been referring to informally as knowing. So knowing and consciousness are synonymous most of the time that we use it.

We all have consciousness. Babies have consciousness. Animals have consciousness. In the Buddhist view, all sentient beings have consciousness. And that simply means that experiences are appearing for beings at their sense doors. We don't have choice about this. We can't decide not to hear. If I ask you not to hear the sound, you can't

choose to do that. So it doesn't take volition. It doesn't take intelligence. It's a more or less automatic functioning of our mind and body combination. We have the sense door of the ear, and we have this consciousness factor that receives it.

Mindfulness is—you could say it shares a cognizant quality with consciousness, but it's a higher level of cognition. Mindfulness, and I'd like to use this as our working definition, is the quality that understands what our experience is in each moment.

If you're being mindful and the sound happens, you would notice, "Oh, sound," or "hearing." So there's this reflective quality that mindfulness gives that is understanding what is happening to us.

The Buddha's main discourse on the practice of mindfulness, as you probably know, is the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. And in it, there's one word that he uses again and again to characterize mindfulness. He'll say, "When the practitioner breathes in, he or she understands, 'I breathe in.' When the practitioner experiences a mind influenced by greed, he or she understands, 'The mind is influenced by greed.' When the practitioner experiences a pleasant feeling, she or he understands, 'I experience a pleasant feeling.'"

This word "understand" is a translation of the Pali word pajānāti, and its root is very similar to the root for wisdom. The word for wisdom is paññā. And it could be translated as understanding, discrimination, distinguishing. Sometimes it's a synonym for wisdom. But it involves—I hope you see—all of these involve some measure of intelligence.

So mindfulness means that we're bringing intelligence to these appearances in consciousness. And we know what's going on. We know when there's an in-breath. We know when there's a sensation of pain. We know when there's a feeling of happiness or sadness that's happening in us. That requires a level of intelligence that the simple consciousness doesn't.

It's really this factor of being able to understand our experience that proves to be the liberating factor in our path.

Notice how mindfulness differs fundamentally from consciousness. Consciousness operates quite automatically—it simply happens. Mindfulness, however, sometimes arises and sometimes doesn't. It requires a little effort in the beginning to cultivate this factor, though not an enormous amount of work. Remember when Joseph asked us to move our arm—it wasn't difficult to know we were moving our arm or to recognize that sensations were being known. But it does take some effort to turn our attention in that direction, to know that this is what our experience actually is.

Mindfulness requires a kind of intelligence that I don't believe animals possess. I don't think animals are capable of carrying out our meditation practice. While I can't say this conclusively, I'll borrow an example that Joseph uses, which I find quite illustrative—what he calls "black lab consciousness."

If you've ever watched a black Labrador going about their daily activities, you'll notice there isn't much mindful attention happening. There's a smell, and they're off. Another dog enters their territory, and they're immediately reactive. Imagine the black lab near the kitchen when the scent of dog food being opened reaches them. Does the lab pause and think, "Hmm, a smell is arising at my nose. That's a pleasant smell. Now I notice desire arising for the taste of that food. I hear the sound of dog food being put in my bowl—hearing, hearing. Would it be skillful to wander over for a sniff and taste?"

That's not how the black lab operates—that's how mindfulness works. As humans, we have a choice. When a delicious smell wafts from the kitchen, we can ask ourselves whether we should go to the dining room now. We can check our watch and determine if it's appropriate. But the black lab simply smells and goes—a split-second reaction.

Mindfulness is a special quality we must cultivate, and it's the enlightening factor on the path. Honestly, when we look around, much of the human world operates at a level not so different from the black lab, which explains why the world is in the condition it's in. But mindfulness offers us the genuine possibility of transforming our reactions to circumstances.

We can integrate these two elements. Normally, mindfulness in our lineage focuses simply on the appearances themselves. We would typically open a retreat with instructions on mindfulness of the sensations of breathing, then expand to mindfulness of other bodily sensations, sounds, emotions, thoughts, sights, and so forth.

We've taken a different approach in this retreat. While it's perfectly fine to notice those things—and we encourage you to notice them—we've added and elevated in importance what I would call mindfulness of consciousness. When we ask you to notice the knowing of things, which is synonymous with consciousness, we're actually encouraging you to be mindful of vijnana, or consciousness itself.

In the meditation Joseph led this morning—the big mind meditation—when he said to look at the nature of mind, at the nature of awareness as a combination of emptiness and awareness, he was encouraging you to direct mindful attention toward this quality of knowing. We could simply say "be aware of awareness," but in the technical language of the early Pali texts, what we are practicing in those instructions is mindfulness of consciousness.

For those interested in the details, this practice is part of the fourth foundation of mindfulness where the Buddha describes mindfulness of the five aggregates. Consciousness is one of the five aggregates, so this is the link in the Satipatthana Sutta to this instruction. We can pay attention to the knowing itself, and that's what we're encouraging you to do.

But it's not easy. Did anyone find that today? It's challenging because in my experience, consciousness is the most subtle phenomenon we can pay attention to. The other reason it's difficult is that consciousness receives objects—consciousness is of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, and feelings. But becoming conscious of consciousness presents something of a contradiction, like the eye trying to see itself. The eye sees other things.

We can't grasp consciousness with consciousness in that direct way. We have to approach it sideways. For me, this means feeling its functioning. Consciousness functions moment after moment by revealing things. As we stay close to the revelation of each appearance, we remain close to the consciousness of it, the knowing of it.

If you found it too elusive or subtle at this point, don't struggle against it. Return and pay attention. Be mindful of breathing.

Body sensations, sounds—wherever you find a comfortable base in the realm of appearances, pay attention there. And little by little, this knowing will become clearer, will unfold more through the instructions, more through the Dharma talks, and you will get closer and closer to feeling it, seeing it. It's a very intuitive process. It can't be grasped like other objects are grasped.

So that's consciousness, mindfulness, and mindfulness of consciousness. And then the next word I'd like to talk a little bit about is this word we've been using quite a lot, which is awareness. Does everybody understand awareness clearly? I don't either.

Awareness is a very interesting word, and for those of us who have come up through the suttas of the Buddha's original teachings, it's very interesting to me. There's no word in Pali that we need to translate by the term awareness. There's no term the Buddha used that quite corresponds to our use in English of the word awareness. And yet other traditions of Buddhism, particularly some Tibetan schools, use this word a lot and it becomes really central in their teaching.

So how are we using the word awareness today? The way it seems to me—and it's all a personal take because it can be used differently by different teachers—is that awareness seems to be a word that spans consciousness and mindfulness. Or you might say it blends the two. Both consciousness and mindfulness are manifestations of cognition, of cognizing. And awareness is a word that kind of holds both ends of the spectrum.

For instance, we have said something like awareness is the very nature of mind, that it's spontaneously happening, that it's ever-present. That is a description more of what the Buddha called vijñāna. It doesn't need to be willed or intended. It's ever-present. Consciousness has that aspect, that it's always happening, quite automatic. So awareness conveys things like spontaneity, effortlessness, naturalness, and this ever-present sense, a little bit like consciousness has.

But awareness as we use it in English also has a connotation of intelligence. When we say something like, "Were you aware that you were feeling sad?" that means really, "Were you mindful of the fact of sadness that was present in your mind?" In that, it's more like mindfulness.

So we tend to use awareness in a way that evokes both some of the intelligence of mindfulness and some of the natural spontaneity of consciousness. Because mindfulness has a little bit of intelligence involved. Intrinsic to it, knowing, understanding what's happening. It's the doorway to wisdom. And it's the wisdom that gets developed from mindfulness that starts to liberate the mind. Well, awareness also has this property of intelligence associated with the word. So awareness is a nice lead-in also to wisdom.

The sense of spontaneous intelligence—the feeling of that, the flavor of that—is something that we want you to start to have some faith in, whether we call it awareness or whatever we call it. This is the refuge that we hope you can discover on this retreat, that that natural intelligence and wisdom is always there in us in every moment, just waiting to be recognized.

This is from Ajahn Mahā Bua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

So if that's true, if there is this kind of deathless quality in us that is intelligent and beyond birth and death, that becomes a very immediate resource for us. And so we just need to refine our confidence in that and our ability to touch it, our ability to access it or recognize it again and again and again.

Doing that, whether we do it through directly pointing to the nature of awareness or whether we activate wisdom by exploring the appearances that come, both have the same power to awaken us. So I don't want to say that this looking at awareness is a kind of different order of meditation. It's not. Mindfulness itself will wake up our wisdom, whatever it's directed to. If it's directed to breath, body sensations, thoughts, sounds, or consciousness itself, they're all liberating practices.

The way that mindfulness tends to work in our normal practice, as we start paying attention to the different aspects of our experience, the six sense appearances, we start to become interested. Interest is a really critical component. You notice how when you love something, you love watching it.

I was just teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock, and there was a visitor from Canada who was on the staff side and didn't know our California birds, but she brought a bird book. And she was out the whole month. I would see her for like an hour at a time, out with her binoculars, scanning the trees and listening to the bird songs for all these new birds that she'd never encountered before. And I could tell from her energy and from talking with her a little bit that she loved birds. She loved watching their behavior and learning about their habitats and their flight patterns and their silhouettes in the sky when they flew.

And it's that way with all of us. When we love something, the interest comes really naturally. So this love for what we're paying attention to—the term from the Buddha is called rapture—and we find that that quality of love and appreciation for our meditation grows.

The more we do it and the quieter the mind gets, we love—after a certain point, we love watching the breath and we love observing body sensations because we get so interested in the nature that's living out through this body and mind.

As we start to pay attention to the breath, we see each breath is different. And we become really interested in how it's born and how it persists and then how it dies. We stay with an in-breath till the very last fading away. And then we're right there for the movement of the first flicker of the out-breath and stay with it until it fades away.

And similarly with the other aspects of our experience—the sensations and thoughts and emotions—we really want to understand them as we become so interested in this nature that's living in us. As we do, we become really familiar with their individual characteristics, just like my friend watching the colors and the flights and the sounds of those birds. She got to know each of those birds really well. We get to know the breath really well. We get to know impatience really well. We get to know loving kindness and compassion really well because we start to love them.

We start at first to see their individual characteristics. You know, this breath is long, this breath is short, that emotion is fiery, this emotion is very pacific. But then as we keep observing, we also start seeing without even trying their universal characteristics. Oh, every breath ends. Every thought has a beginning, a middle, and then it passes away. Every mood that I've ever had on this retreat has not lasted. Everything that was pleasant in my life has faded, and I couldn't hold on to it for satisfaction. Nothing lasts forever.

So through these observations we start to see the characteristics of impermanence, lack of satisfactoriness, and lack of abiding self-structure within the whole experience. Then we take that kind of interest and we see how wisdom grows. We see that when we understand that everything fades and we can't hold on for satisfaction, non-clinging becomes so much more natural. We start to live more from a space of not holding on and not grasping.

Then we start to take that interest and investigation and wisdom that have developed and we turn it toward the nature of consciousness itself. In fact, one author said that this type of meditation he described as the penetrative focus free of conceptual elaboration upon the very nature of conscious awareness. And we discover then the possibility of this kind of refuge for ourselves.

There's a Thai teacher who comes to Spirit Rock every spring called Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian is a master of meditation developed in both vipassana and loving-kindness from the time he was very young. He has this incredibly joyful appearance and energy. He said that he hasn't had any anger for the last thirty years. And he seems like that because every time I see him, he's just joyful and energetic and outgoing. His favorite mantra—he doesn't speak much English, but this is the little English he speaks—he'll touch space and he'll say, "Empty, empty." And then he'll say, "Happy, happy." It's a union of emptiness and happiness.

So this is a quote from Ajahn Jumnian about this refuge: "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and he used the Pali term mahasati, which means great mindfulness—"the best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that know-

ing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure awareness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharma of impermanence and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

We start to see that most fundamentally, when everything else comes and goes, this is what we are. We are this empty space of knowing in which everything appears. From the time we were young, everything started to appear. Mother, bottle, milk, kindergarten, high school, career, marriage, income tax, Paris Hilton—everything appears on that screen, some beautiful, some not so beautiful. But the knowing stays with them all, stays somewhat constant with them all.

As we start to place our emphasis, our attention, our trust in that knowing, we start to shift our center of gravity from the preoccupation with the specific objects that are appearing—to which we're inclined to cling if they're pleasant, or push away if they're unpleasant—to simply rest in this knowing space that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion. Because we notice that the knowing doesn't have preferences. It reveals the painful as easily as it reveals the pleasant. So this knowing already has the right attitude that's free from greed, aversion, and delusion. We trust more and more in that. We put our attention more and more in that. We start to trust our being to that.

I'll just close with a quotation from Rumi called "Tending Two Shops."

Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller. Checkmate this way. Checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish.

So let's just sit for a minute in silence, please.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 29

Awareness Is Like The Unconditioned

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's fundamental teaching that all suffering stems from ignorance and misperception. Drawing from the Abhidhamma analysis and the Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta (Mass of Foam Sutta, SN 22.95), he explores how a person consists of three components: material form, mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness. Armstrong demonstrates how careful investigation reveals these components to be insubstantial—like foam, a banana tree, and a magic show—with no abiding self (anattā) at their center.

The talk delves deeply into the nature of emptiness (suññatā), showing how our sense of solid reality dissolves under close examination. Through personal stories, including his experience with autopsies in Thailand, Armstrong illustrates how direct investigation reveals the ephemeral, interdependent nature of all conditioned phenomena. He then turns to the unconditioned realm of nibbāna, described as having no arising, passing, or change. Armstrong offers practical ways to taste this liberation through moments when greed, hatred, and delusion are absent, and explores how awareness itself points toward the unconditioned dimension of luminous emptiness that underlies all experience.

The Buddha said many times that his teaching was all about suffering and coming to the end of suffering. Tonight's talk may seem a little technical and philosophical at times, but I hope you'll hang with me because the intent is really to talk about suffering and the end of suffering.

The Buddha traced our suffering to a lack of understanding. He said that ignorance is the foundation of the way we misperceive the world and ourselves, and because of that, suffering comes into being. He put this in a rather pithy way at one point: "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that." Or as one of my teachers said even more pithily, "Everything you think is wrong."

So we want to explore tonight some of the misconceptions that we hold and see how we might understand them differently. As a preface to the talk, I want to quote something else from the Buddha when he was talking about his awakening. He said, "This dhamma discovered by me is profound, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, sublime, beyond the sphere of logic, subtle, to be experienced by the wise." The talk tonight

may not be profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So I invite you to let the words in, see what resonates, and let them go. Try not to argue too much during the talk. You can argue with me tomorrow.

Generally, when we look at ourselves or each other, we see a person. But the Buddha said that one shouldn't really see in this way. The Visuddhimagga said that looking at somebody and seeing a person is not very refined. That one who has closely investigated the mind-body process wouldn't see in this way. They said it's like a skilled butcher who's cutting up the carcass of a cow and going, "cow, cow, cow." A skilled butcher wouldn't do that. The skilled butcher would go, "rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs," because they have so much familiarity with the detail of their work.

So the Buddha said we should bring that kind of detail to our own knowing of what constitutes a person. There are a few ways that the Buddha described a person. One is the description that I talked about on the opening night, which we've referred to a number of times: the six senses and the objects of the six sense types—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and objects of mind. He used that very frequently.

But there's another model that comes in, referenced in the suttas and then explored also in the Abhidhamma, that I want to use mostly as the basis for this investigation tonight. We'll follow the Abhidhamma model here. This is a part of the ancient scriptures in Buddhism that dates back to about 200 years after the death of the Buddha. In the Abhidhamma, a person is described as being composed of three components: physical form, consciousness—which we've talked about quite a bit—and mental phenomena, or mental formations.

So I want to talk about each of these three and see if you can get a feeling for what is being pointed to here that is our makeup.

The first is material form. But when material form is pointed to, it doesn't just stop at this body. It includes the whole physical world. So you could say that what we're really investigating is the domain of our experience. Our experience includes the physical body, but it also includes our experience of the rest of the physical world. So this first component of form includes all of that.

It is the physical body, but it is also everything external. Everything that we consider in the world of physical matter is included within this first component of form. So it includes the five physical senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches—as well as the body, which is the base of all those senses.

I think we take it for granted that we know what the body is, but if we stop and ask, do we really? Have you ever been surprised on a retreat at what the body was as you examined it closely? Mostly all we know of the body is primarily through two senses: we see it and we feel it. We also sometimes smell it and taste it and hear it. Those usually don't tend to be too pleasant, so we don't spend too much time on those. But we see the body and we feel the body, so our information about the body comes through those senses already, conditioned by those senses.

When you hear that sound, that is one example of form. This is in the component, part of our experience, that's considered physical matter or form.

I'd like to read from a discourse of the Buddha's that talks about his view of form, and it's maybe a little different than we might be prepared for. This is a sutta called "A Mass of Foam."

"On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There, the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Monks, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great mass of foam.'"

A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mass of foam? So too, monks, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, far or near, a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?

This is a little radical, isn't it? What substance could there be in the physical world? It's quite a profound question. We'll return to this later.

The second component that makes us up we could call mental formations. We understand these primarily as thoughts and feelings—the constructed events that flow through the mind. This includes the activity of thought, which we're all familiar with by now, and the different kinds of moods and feelings that arise in consciousness.

These might be the hindrances that Joseph began discussing the other night: doubt or anger, desire, dullness, restlessness. They could equally be the beautiful qualities of the brahmaviharas—love, compassion, or joy. This realm of mental phenomena also encompasses refined meditative states: the presence in the mind of concentration or mindfulness or equanimity or calm. These too are included in this component of mental formations.

For instance, if we're sitting in the hall and we hear the sound of the bell—which usually means the sitting is over—I don't know about you, but often when I hear that sound, I experience a new sense of ease throughout my body. "Oh, it feels so good," and then I think, "You know, I could sit forever." So upon hearing the sound, this mood of ease arises—a mental formation—and the thought comes: "I could sit forever." Both of these belong to the field of mental formations, the objects of mind.

The third component we include in this analysis is the factor of consciousness. We've talked about this extensively—awareness or consciousness or knowing. We've been using these terms largely synonymously throughout this retreat. It's that capacity of mind that receives all sense experience and knows it in this bare, pre-verbal way that makes it part of our experience, part of our sense data.

When the sound arises, it's known immediately. There's no gap. It takes no effort. The way this is understood in the Buddhist teachings is that the sound and the knowing of it actually arise together as one unitary event. Don't think of it as two different things happening. See what occurs if you consider it as one event that has these two aspects: one is the form aspect of the sound, and the other is the mental aspect of the knowing or consciousness. A unitary experience of mind and form combined. We can examine either aspect.

This may seem puzzling—one experience with two aspects. But I'd ask you to look at the base of this bowl and ask: is it round or is it black? It's really one object, but it has two aspects, doesn't it? I'd like you to consider investigating your experience of hearing in the same way. A sound arising and being known is one event, and we can tune in either to the sound or we can tune in to the knowing, the consciousness of it.

Of course, consciousness is present throughout this entire process. There's consciousness of the bell. There's consciousness of the sense of ease. There's consciousness of the thought "I could sit forever." All of these are held within this factor of consciousness.

Why is this investigation worthwhile? Why is it valuable to look in this way? I want to suggest that this approach can be profoundly liberating. Personally, I've found this investigation to be a part of my practice that has brought tremendous freedom over the years.

I began investigating in this way when my older sister died—a sister five years my senior who died at fifty-two, quite young, quite unexpectedly. I was deeply shaken by her death because I had spoken with her just a few days before. She was robust, vital, an interesting and delightful person. Then suddenly, a few days later, she was simply gone, and I couldn't comprehend how that had happened.

Her death launched me into a profound investigation. I needed to understand what constitutes this mind-body process and what happens when someone transitions from living to dying.

And I'll suggest that investigating these three aspects of our being gives us a very good way to understand what that process is.

What became clear to me as I carried on this investigation is that there's an element we commonly think of as being part of a person that is not in form, is not in mental formations, and is not in consciousness. And that is the "I," the self. What we think of as a self is just an unconscious lumping together of all three of these aspects. But when we tease them apart, we find that there's no center within that collection—no abiding or ongoing entity at the center that receives it all, that experiences it all, that is the essence of this collection. There is only form, formations, and consciousness. There's nothing else. There's no self hidden in here.

This itself is freeing. This is one of the very liberating insights along the path of discovery in meditation. We'll come back to this in a minute. But one of the ways I want to suggest this understanding comes through—of the lack of self-essence—is by investigating each of these three components as an aspect of nature.

So we take the physical body, which represents all form. Take a look at this physical body and think about its origin. It came about because your father's sperm met with your mother's egg, came together in conception, and the cells started to multiply. That body was then grown in the womb, emerged from the womb, was nourished by milk and food and water and air, and grew up in a purely physical process over these twenty, thirty, forty, or however many years. So it's always been a natural physical occurrence from its very beginning.

One of my teachers in Thailand, a great monk named Ajahn Buddhadasa, put it this way. He said, "This body came out of nature, it never departed from nature, and it still belongs to nature. So give it back to nature. That'll be a big relief for you."

Can you get the flavor of that? We spend so much time cherishing this body and trying to own it, and yet did you have anything to do with its appearance that you can recall? The "I" that takes possession of this body today had nothing to do with its arising, nothing to do with its growth, nothing to do with its shape and form and color of hair and eyes. Just physical nature created this.

Similarly, if you look at the range of mental formations that constitutes what we usually call personality—somebody being a kind person or a generous person or an unkind person or a thoughtful person—these are based on the moods and feelings and inten-

tions that go through the heart and mind. When you think about all these different components, sure, our particular mixture is different, but everybody has kindness. Everybody has some generosity. Everybody has some cruelty, some anger, some joy, some sadness.

We take possession of these emotions also and identify "my anger," "my happiness." But when we step back just a minute, we see, oh, it's just a human emotion. All humans share this emotion. It's part of our makeup. It's part of the makeup of every one of us. It's part of the human package. So we start to see that this is part of mental nature, or you could say emotional nature, that we carry just by virtue of being human. Again, we didn't create it, we didn't cause it, we didn't bring it into being, but we inherit this package as part of our humanness, and each of us does. So again, just human nature.

And then we come to the third part, this knowing quality, and there the individuality really goes away. Because when you hear the sound of the bell, don't you imagine that your knowing of that is just like my knowing of that, is just like Meoshin's knowing of that? Our knowing doesn't have any individuality at all. There's nothing of "guyness" about that. There's nothing of "patricianess" about the knowing. Again, it's just consciousness—an aspect of the nature of mind, an aspect of human nature, but nothing more than that, something we all share.

So in all this bundle—the body, manifestation of physical nature; the moods, emotions, and thoughts, manifestation of mental nature; consciousness, manifestation of the nature of mind—there's really no individuality. There's nothing we can call a true abiding self. So then we start to see there's not so much difference between us all. Our bodies are so similar, the range of our emotions the same, our capacity for knowing identical. Fundamentally, it's like we're one being that's just been poured into these different vessels, different shaped vessels, and then conditioned in different ways.

So seeing it all as nature takes out some of that identification, some of that grip of the "I." This letting go of the sense of "I" is an aspect of what's called emptiness. In the Buddha's teachings, he used "empty" most of the time synonymously with this understanding that there's not an ongoing abiding entity at the center of this mind-body process—the teachings on the absence of self, even though it sure looks that way sometimes.

He compared this all to a magic show. "Suppose, monks, that a magician should hold a magic show at a crossroads and a keen-sighted person should inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it. It would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance, monks, could there be in a magic show?"

This is a continuation of the sutta that we began with this evening. So it's as though we have all been taken in by the magic show of form, formations, and consciousness, believing that there's an existing self somewhere in there when there isn't actually.

What happens when you've seen a magic show and you've been really wowed by it, and then the person tells you how they did the trick? Does it take away some of the glamour? It takes away the wow factor, doesn't it? In Buddhism, this movement from being taken in by the magic show to understanding it and losing that wow factor—the dazzle factor—is called disenchantment, *nibbidah*. And in the Buddha's teachings, it is a key component for leading us to quit grasping onto the passing show that is this world. When we understand the way it's put together and we see the mechanism of it, we don't hold on quite so tightly.

So the Buddha continues: "Even so, monks, whatever form, formations, consciousness there is, a person inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it. It would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance, monks, could there be in form, formations, consciousness?"

And then he ends with a little verse: "Form is like a mass of foam, and formation's a banana tree." I didn't understand that at first. If you've lived in the tropics, you probably know a banana tree bears once, and then the whole tree dies because it doesn't have a solid core. There's no solidity at the core of a banana tree. It's gone. "Formations are like a banana tree, and consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick entire. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun"—another word for the Buddha.

So one meaning of emptiness is the absence of an abiding self within this process of form, formations, and consciousness. But this sutta is also pointing to another meaning of emptiness, which is something like insubstantiality, even of the physical world. See the world as a mass of foam. How can that be?

This is very counter to our culture's assumptions. We live in a very materialistic culture, dominated by a firm belief in the solidity and the primacy of physical reality. Not all cultures see this way, but our culture does. So growing up in a Western culture, we come up with the idea that this physical world is the ultimate truth of things. And the ultimate truth is that it has existed for a very long time. We're born into it. And as a result of being born into it, a consciousness develops out of the physical makeup of the body and contacts the physical world, and when we die, we go away and the physical world continues. This is the sort of primary assumption of Western culture.

But other cultures have had different understandings of what constitutes the ultimate reality. There are schools of Indian philosophy that deny that and take the opposite view. They say, no, no, no, no, no. Physical reality is just a bubble arising in consciousness. Consciousness is the ultimate reality. Mind is the ultimate reality. It has existed since beginningless time, and the physical worlds just come and go. World systems play within this vast space of mind or consciousness. In those cultures, this is a more valid view. Personally, I find this view a little more entertaining.

But the early teachings of the Buddha, of the Pali Canon, take kind of a middle way between these two. And he describes consciousness and physicality as mutually dependent. He gives ultimacy to neither one, but says that they lean against each other like two sheaves of reeds, and if you take one away, the other collapses. That's a very interesting thought. Not that body caused consciousness, but that they both depend upon each other, and that is a shift from the Western materialist worldview.

Patricia began to talk last night about some of the implications of this. When she talked about coming out of our concepts about reality and coming into direct contact with reality and touching the truth of our direct experience. And we start to see the insubstantial nature of experience as we get closer and closer to it. So we start, and with sounds, we soon tune into how ephemeral every sound is. Even the big trucks that roll by pass in a matter of seconds. Smells, as we go into the dining room, very elusive. Tastes flourish and then pass away. Thoughts, so fleeting.

One thought arises and within moments dissolves completely. Emotions emerge so tentatively and vaguely that it becomes difficult to maintain connection with them for long. They come and color our experience like passing clouds, impossible to grasp or hold.

When we turn our attention to exploring the body—and I believe this is what Patricia touched upon last night—we discover something remarkable. Most of us arrive at practice assuming the body is entirely solid. I certainly did. Yet as we experience it directly for ourselves, as we draw closer to its actual nature, we begin to notice something extraordinary: there is nothing solid there at all.

Everywhere we direct our attention within the body, we find only change—pulsation, vibration, flickering, arising, shifting, passing away, appearing and disappearing. We begin to feel through direct experience that the body is simply an energy field, a flowing stream of changing sensations, none of which endure in any solid way. We start to feel this insubstantial, fluid nature of embodied existence.

Yet of all the senses, sight has always proven most challenging for me in recognizing any sense of insubstantiality. We look around a room like this and nothing appears to change. The floor looks utterly solid. The walls appear completely stable. The windows, the doors—all seem permanent and fixed. How might we examine sight in a way that reveals it too could be like a mass of foam?

Indulge me for a moment in some seventh-grade science reflection. Let us turn our attention to how this sight actually arises. We understand from elementary science that vision emerges because light particles—photons—reflect off the elements of this room, travel to our eyes, and strike the retina. This light activity stimulates the retina to send signals up the optic nerve, which travels into the brain and stimulates various brain regions. From this stimulation, somehow—quite mysteriously, as scientists haven't yet solved this puzzle—visual consciousness arises.

That final step remains profoundly mysterious. Yet we know all the preceding steps are absolutely necessary. Consider the implications: what would happen to this solid sight if someone switched off the lights and all illumination disappeared? The sight vanishes completely. Perhaps this sight is not so solid after all.

When we reflect further, we realize this sight isn't truly solid but is being regenerated continuously—perhaps dozens or hundreds of times per second—by the constant influx of new photons. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of photons must be stimulating the retina every second, sending fresh signals to the brain, with the brain regenerating the visual picture over and over, many times each second. Without this constant regeneration, sight would cease entirely.

What we assumed was the real world, when we pause to reflect even briefly, reveals itself as something we cannot truly know. We discover we don't actually live in a solid, permanent world but rather in a flickering representation of the world, constructed by our brain based on ever-changing sensory data and interpreted through our human consciousness.

We don't actually inhabit a real, solid world. We dwell within a flickering representation of the world, generated by our senses and neural activity. That is all there is. We cannot know anything else. Even what feels most solid—the sensation of hardness we experience through our fingertips or sitting bones—is only another sensation arising through the sense of touch.

The floor feels like one of the most solid things we encounter. We often take it as our ground, thinking, "Here is something stable where I can place my faith, where I can rest." Yet when we investigate this sensation closely, we discover it too is only the sensa-

tion of hardness known through touch. When you pay careful attention to your sitting bones or fingertips, you begin to feel the change, pulsation, and vibration within that sensation as well. You realize that while there may be a physical ground, that physical ground is also merely an appearance in consciousness, flickering on and off through our senses.

There is no ground to consciousness itself. Consciousness exists like a bubble with nothing supporting it underneath. We recognize this truth when we recall the image of Earth suspended in space—nothing holds up our planet, just as nothing holds up our consciousness.

When we reach this level of seeing, we enter the realm of the emptiness of objects. We truly understand how the Buddha could declare that this physical world is merely a mass of foam—nothing but a flickering appearance in consciousness, utterly without ground. This represents one of the profound senses of emptiness.

This also came home to me powerfully when I was a monk in Thailand. As a monk, I had the great privilege of being able to observe autopsies—a profound teaching opportunity for a Buddhist practitioner.

One day, a friend and I went to the coroner's office in a hospital in downtown Bangkok. We walked into the room adjacent to the autopsy theater, where the body of a young woman who had drowned in one of the canals lay on a metal table. She was to be the first autopsy of the day.

I was thirty-four years old and had never been next to a dead person before. Now I stood inches away from a stranger who had died, about to witness the autopsy being performed. They wheeled her into the theater, and the coroner began the procedure—removing and weighing the bodily organs, beginning with the brain. Her chest was opened, the internal organs examined and weighed, then replaced, and she was sewn up. The entire process took about thirty minutes.

After watching this autopsy and two others that followed, I walked back out into downtown Bangkok to a large parade ground where I would catch my bus to the monastery. I had been doing intensive sitting practice before coming to the hospital and was in a particularly open and sensitive state. The experience had been profoundly moving.

It was a sunny day, and people were walking through the parade ground—a mother watching her children play on the grass, an elderly woman wheeling a shopping cart full of groceries from the nearby market, a young couple walking hand in hand, radiant in each other's company. I watched them all and saw them in a completely different way.

On the bus ride home, I reflected on what was different about this perception. I realized I was seeing walking corpses. Everywhere I looked, I saw walking corpses. The bodies I was observing were exactly like those I had seen on the coroner's tables, but with one crucial difference: they were animated by a kind of light that shone out through their eyes—the light of consciousness that we possess when alive.

As I watched these people, I understood something about consciousness that I hadn't grasped before. That light shining through their eyes was completely of the present moment—it had no past and no future. Yet because of our capacity for memory, we construct an imagined past based on recollection and project it into an imaginary future, weaving ourselves into the web of time, into the bondage of time, when we don't see clearly how we're constructing it all.

In that moment, I saw that these walking corpses were completely free—that brightness, that illumination, was utterly free of past and future. It was deeply moving because I could see how all of us wanted to secure our lives and well-being in the midst of this foam of the material world, this foam of life, where all we have is the body and this brightness. You can see how impossible it is to secure anything in such a situation.

The Buddha compared all our attempts to find security to a person caught in a river, being carried downstream by a strong current. Along the bank are clumps of grass, and as the person passes by, they grasp at each clump seeking stability, but each one comes off in their hands, and they're carried further downstream. This is our attempt to cling to what is ultimately passing and transitory.

How, then, do we find any refuge, any release from this predicament? The Buddha began his quest in search of this very solution. He said that as an unenlightened bodhisattva, he recognized that he was seeking satisfaction in the conditioned realm: "I am subject to birth, illness, and death, yet I'm seeking my happiness in what is also subject to birth, illness, and death. Will this ultimately lead to lasting peace?"

The answer, clearly, was no. So he asked himself, "What if I sought my security in that which is beyond birth, beyond illness, beyond aging, and beyond death?" This is what he called nirvana.

He discovered what he was seeking on the night of his enlightenment. It's said that among the first words that came to him after his awakening were: "My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving."

This is the release that he was looking for. This is the security that he was looking for. This unconditioned he also called nibbana, a word that literally means extinguishment or blowing out—the blowing out of the flame of craving and also of suffering.

At one point someone asked Sariputta, "What is nibbana? Can you describe it?" And Sariputta defined it as the destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion. "This is called nibbana."

The Buddha said there are three marks of the unconditioned or of nibbana: there is no arising, there's no passing away, and there's no change. If there is something within our being, some dimension of our being that is not subject to arising, is not subject to passing, and is not subject to change, then it must be present now. Because it is present in every moment, enlightenment is possible at every moment. Enlightenment is the discovery of, through our direct experience, the nature of this dimension of our being.

Some synonyms for this dimension: the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the refuge, the beyond.

The entire path leads in the direction of the unconditioned. This is from the Buddha: "Just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines toward the ocean, so too a practitioner who develops and cultivates a noble eightfold path slants, slopes, and inclines toward nibbana."

So how can we understand it within our experience? We've heard of arahants. There are, according to my understanding, beings in the world today who reach this level of complete liberation, full enlightenment, as the Buddha did. Such a person is said to abide in nibbana, to be fully released, fully liberated.

But since most of us aren't there yet, what can we make of nibbana in our practice? Can it be something that becomes a part of our approach to life and to meditation?

I want to suggest two ways that the element of nibbana can come alive for us. One way is to understand that there can be a temporary—what you might say—foretaste of nibbana in our ordinary day-to-day experience. And it is basically at those times when greed, aversion, and delusion go away. So starting to be alive to, awake for the possibility that when we check on our attitude—is there greed, is there aversion, is there delusion present?—none of those factors may be present. And that at that point, the mind free from greed, aversion, and delusion, at least as far as we can tell, at least first approximation, is a mind that's enjoying a little bit of the taste, the flavor of the release of nibbana.

Ajahn Buddhadasa wrote a really lovely little pamphlet, which I think you can find on the internet, called "Nibbana for Everyone"—not just the property of arahants, nibbana for everyone. He said, "Nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any kilesas or defilements. That is, without the qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion."

This is not the permanent nibbana that the Buddha discovered. It's not the full nibbana of someone who penetrates directly to the unconditioned and has firsthand knowledge of it. But it is a little bit of a taste that can point our practice in that direction.

In fact, Ajahn Buddhadasa went on to say that we're having many moments of this coolness every day—that we are all experiencing many moments of this temporary nibbana, as he called it. And he said, if we didn't, we'd all be going crazy, because who could stand to be burned by the defilements nonstop all the time?

So this is one way that you can start to have the flavor of this in your practice. Look for those times perhaps the mind has been struggling with an agenda of desire or some resistance of aversion, some delusion of not seeing or not understanding. And as you stay with that experience, paying close attention, the mind will come out of it. At some point, those kilesas will pass—and feel the coolness of that release, of that transition, and know that that's a little bit of the flavor of everyday nibbana.

What else in our experience might be like nibbana? What has the quality of being ever-present, unchanged, and yet accommodating without disturbing all the arisings which are of the conditioned realm?

On a physical level, space kind of has this property, doesn't it? Physical space can accommodate anything. It accommodates all of us. It accommodates all the furniture. Physical space accommodates the earth. And then, of course, when we turn to the big mind meditation, we tune into that inner space which is pervaded by awareness. So we talk about the empty space of awareness.

So we might say that this inner space of awareness also has some of the qualities of nibbana, doesn't it? Whenever we look for it, it always seems to be there. Everything can come and go within it and it's not obscured. It's not stained. It's not harmed by that.

Its nature is peaceful. Nibbana is often described in the texts as the stilling of all formations. This empty space of awareness has that still quality, doesn't it? Because it's ever-present when we turn to it, I wonder if it has the quality of being the deathless.

But when we think back to those three components that make us up—form, mental formations, and consciousness—the Buddha said all three of those are impermanent. All three are coming and going and so can't be a proper refuge. So if consciousness is impermanent, is awareness any different? It seems stable, doesn't it? But could it be another flickering on and off, like the stability of the walls?

So is awareness permanent or impermanent? Deathless or conditioned? I don't know if this question interests you, but it interests some of us very much. And I think it was essentially the spur that led Joseph to write this really wonderful book that he wrote a few years ago called *One Dharma*. If you haven't had a chance to read it, I highly recommend it. He talks about this from a number of different angles and talks about the response of different schools of Buddhism in answering this question.

I don't want to go into all the different schools tonight because that would take a long time. I want to give you my answer. Realize this is just one person's opinion, but this is what I'd like to talk about.

I want to suggest that awareness actually is synonymous with consciousness and that it's not strictly deathless, but that it serves as a very good approximation to the deathless. You can use it that way as a skillful means in your practice and put a lot of trust in it. It can be a wonderful refuge. Philosophically, when we investigate the actual nature and detail of it, I would say it is not actually deathless. But it sure looks like it, so it works really well.

The other reason that it serves so well as an approximation for the deathless is that it has a direct link, a direct connection to the unconditioned. And that's what I want to draw out with this image.

I want to ask you to do a little experiment—a little thought experiment. Please humor me a little longer. Please imagine that you're on the edge of our solar system. Your back is toward the sun. Your space suit is taken care of, and you have a non-reflective visor. Your back is to the sun and you're looking out into a part of the sky. Let's just say, for point of hypothesis, that doesn't have any stars in it. Your back is to the sun. You're looking into the sky. There are no stars where you're looking.

What do you see? Not a trick question. You see anything? No, it's just black, right? And it's not the color black, but it's just the total absence of light, right? So you're looking into this space and there's the total absence of light, but your back is to the sun. Let's assume your shadow is negligible. Is there actually light in that space in front of your eyes? By light, I mean packets of light energy, photons, electromagnetic radiation.

Yeah, it's full of light, isn't it? Because the sun's light is just streaming out in all directions. So that space in front of you is actually pervaded by the light of the sun, but you don't see it. That light is always there. You could say it's ever-present, but you don't notice it.

Now, let's say a meteorite flies through space in front of your eyes. Don't worry too much about the physics. Do you see the meteorite? Yeah. It's really clear, right? Because it's reflecting the sunlight that's already there back to your eyes.

That's an impermanent arising. It only comes for a second and then it's gone. But it's possible because of this ever-present light that's permeating the space—the infinite space permeated by ever-present light.

So I want to suggest that the infinite space permeated by ever-present light is the unconditioned in its aspect of emptiness, which is the space that's not full, and luminosity—that this is always there. When an object arises, that object is illuminated as a flashing into consciousness. So you could say the light and the object are revealed together, but that's impermanent. That's an analogy for consciousness and the object coming up together. And the luminosity pervading the empty space is an analogy for the unconditioned. This is the way I understand our nature.

Some schools don't agree with this view. Some schools do.

As I understand awareness, it always comes with something being known. Without something being known, we wouldn't feel aware. Often it's the body, it's sounds, thoughts, emotions. A lot of times when you feel the spacious extent of awareness, I want to suggest that what's being known is physical space. You can reflect on that a bit. But all of those things can be known because the luminosity is intrinsic to the nature of our experience, to this dimension of nibbāna.

So I want to suggest that nibbāna is the combination of emptiness and luminosity—unmoving, unchanging, and having the capacity to reveal the whole conditioned world.

When we practice a practice like Big Mind and we kind of let our awareness unhook from the individual objects that we may have been fixated on, can you feel how that shifts your center of gravity away from individual phenomena into this kind of mysterious presence of awareness? As it unhooks from the individual phenomena, it opens us up into this at least approximate union of emptiness and awareness.

We aren't exactly seeing the unconditioned in our day-to-day experience. Usually that perception is a shift, an abrupt shift in experience. But we are sort of letting that unconditioned nature come through to us, come through to our intuition. And with it is a sense of peace.

"The tides of conceiving do not sweep over one who stands upon the foundations of wisdom and peace. And when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over one, they are called a sage at peace. The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. They are not shaken and they are not agitated, for there is nothing present in them by which they might be born."

So this luminosity has an unborn quality. It has not come into the manifest world yet. But when an object arises within it, then its light is made manifest. And we are in the conditioned manifest realm. And yet right within it, permeating it, is this unconditioned luminous nature.

Ajahn Buddhadāsa: "This emptiness is self-existent. Nothing can touch it, concoct it, or improve it. This is the eternal state, for it knows neither birth nor death. Once the mind is rid of delusion, it discovers its primal state, the true original mind, which is satipaññña, or mindfulness and wisdom."

Some teachers have a way of manifesting this kind of understanding or this kind of attainment. And I want to close by telling you a story of a meeting with one of these people.

I was in Kathmandu practicing with one of my Tibetan teachers. It was a few years ago. There was a very esteemed senior lama visiting his monastery at that time. The lama's name was Nyoshul Kan Rinpoche. I had some money that a friend asked me to offer to Rinpoche as dāna because the friend was a student of Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche.

So I told my teacher I'd like to pass on some dāna to Kempo, that was his name in short, from this student in the States. My teacher said, "Would you like to offer it to him personally?" And I said, "No, I don't need to. You can give it to him." In the back of my mind was kind of, seen one lama, you've seen them all.

And then I thought about it, and I thought, "You know, I actually would like to meet him because I've heard so much about him."

So a meeting was arranged, and I was ushered into his room, and he was sitting up in a meditation posture. I was a little nervous because he's such a well-known and esteemed lama. He died a few years ago, unfortunately.

So I made my bows, we had a short conversation, and then my teacher encouraged me to offer the envelope with the donation to Khenpo. So I did, and as I offered it to him, I looked up into his eyes.

And just in that moment, he seemed to go into a deep meditative state as he looked directly into my eyes. His eyes moved slightly apart, and I felt such a stillness in his mind that it wouldn't even be right to say that his mind was still. There was no mind there to be either still or moving. It was just like looking into this deep ocean of peace.

What I actually felt it was like was looking directly into Nibbana. I felt if I could have just kept looking there a little longer, who knows what might have happened. That was the nature of mind. The meeting ended, and I left, but the image has always stayed with me.

It showed me something that I think the Buddha had—a deep presence of tranquility and unmovability that perhaps was the reason that his talks, unlike our own, can enlighten so many people. There was something in that quality of presence, that depth of being, that could transmit understanding beyond words.

So let's just sit together for a moment in that spirit of deep presence, allowing ourselves to touch that same ocean of peace that exists within each of us.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 30

The Pure And Luminous Mind

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk from a retreat setting, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's profound teaching that "this mind is luminous, but it is colored by visiting defilements." He explores how our naturally pure awareness becomes obscured by difficult emotional states, yet remains fundamentally untainted underneath. Drawing from the third foundation of mindfulness (cittānupassanā), Armstrong discusses the nature of citta—the heart-mind that encompasses both cognitive and affective experience.*
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> *The talk focuses on working skillfully with four primary hindering emotions that bind us to time and circumstance: desire (craving for future pleasure), anger (resentment over past pain), sadness (grief for lost pleasures), and fear (anxiety about future suffering). Armstrong explains how each emotional state has three components: a mental tone or mood, bodily sensations, and sustaining thoughts or stories. He emphasizes that recognizing these patterns is the crucial first step, as difficult emotions often operate below the radar of awareness, creating delusion about our actual experience.*
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> *Through personal anecdotes and practical guidance, Armstrong demonstrates how mindfulness can transform our relationship with challenging emotions. Rather than trying to eliminate these "visiting defilements," we learn to understand their temporary nature and develop equanimity toward their arising and passing. This process of emotional wisdom gradually reveals the luminous awareness that is our fundamental nature, allowing the beautiful qualities of heart and mind to naturally manifest.*

I want to start tonight with a quotation that Carol used in her talk when the Buddha said, "This mind is luminous, but it is colored by visiting defilements. The uninstructed ordinary person does not understand this, so for them there is no cultivation of the mind."

There's this image that in our nature there is this pure and luminous mind, or you could say awareness, that's the foundation for all of us. It gets colored or covered over or stained by these defilements that visit it and obscure it, but it's still there underneath all the time. Ordinary people don't understand this because they dwell so much of the time in the obscurations, and so they don't bother cultivating the mind to uncover this brilliant original nature.

The Buddha goes on: "This mind is luminous and it is free of visiting defilements. The instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is, so for them there is cultivation of the mind." When we gain some conviction that our original nature is pure and undefiled, it gives us the motivation to rediscover that again and again, to open it up so that it becomes more and more our living experience.

So what stands between us and the manifestation of this pure mind are these visiting defilements. The work of cultivation is about understanding their effects and how to release them. That's really what I'd like to talk about tonight.

These forms are many. There are many such visitors—just a very partial list: craving, lust, anger, hatred, aggression, sadness, despair, loneliness, fear, anxiety, terror, shame, jealousy, confusion, guilt. The list could go on and on. In Mahayana Buddhism, it's said that there are 84,000 of these afflictive emotions. But that was invented about 2,300 years ago when life was much simpler. So I think today there must be at least 168,000 of them.

Of course, when the underlying luminous mind is exposed and touched, as it unfolds it has the capacity to bring forth all the beautiful states of mind too. So qualities like love and compassion, joy, wisdom, generosity, non-clinging, renunciation, calm, equanimity, mindfulness—all of these are implicit, you could say dormant, and just waiting to be activated within this pure and luminous mind that is our basic nature. And I trust that there are at least 84,000 of these also. So that's the strength of our nature.

It is really in the activation of these beautiful qualities of mind that we develop the path. So when the Buddha says, "For the noble disciple, there is cultivation of the mind," it means learning to release or liberate the obscuring qualities, the difficult qualities, thereby exposing the pure nature underneath, which then manifests in all the beautiful qualities. This is really the work that we're engaged in here.

When I first started practice, I was in my mid-twenties, and I was very drawn by the idea of enlightenment. Back then, the books that were available were largely from the Zen tradition, and they talked about these old Chinese and Japanese masters who had become enlightened, and that was very appealing to me because it was a way out of my emotional problems. I thought, being lovelorn, being insecure, being lonely—all I have to do is get enlightened and all that stuff will go away. So enlightenment was so appealing because it was going to rid me of my emotional problems. That's really what generated my interest in the path in the first place.

But as I think of the path now, I have a different take on it. Now I think that it's not possible to get enlightened until we've resolved our emotional misunderstandings and cleared up and liberated those forces. Then enlightenment can perhaps visit us. But we need to do this work first. There's no magic bullet that's going to come along in our practice and solve these conundrums for us. So fortunately we don't need that. We can use our own native intelligence to start to relate to these forces of mind and find out how to become free in the middle of them.

It's really about inviting these states to come, not trying to shy away from them or hide from them or avoid them, because we have the capacity to know them and to let them be. This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, grisly, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing. There is a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method."

Because we actually have the capacity to make peace with this emotional realm, the states that are the source of a lot of our suffering in day-to-day life as well as in retreat, we do have the potential to make peace with this. I like to think of this process as becoming enlightened before we're enlightened. Because as we understand this whole level of the heart and mind, we open to a great deal of inner freedom.

It's not that we have to make any of these states go away. For most of us, they will not go away for a long time completely. They are not uprooted until very advanced stages of development. But nonetheless, we can come to harmony with them through understanding. So even though the first impulse of our mind is to get rid of them, it's not actually what works because it's simply not possible at our level. They don't go away immediately. And that's why we have the opportunity, and it's a great situation for learning, to learn to relate to them directly.

Again, from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run 100 miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

So tonight I want to explore this whole area of the difficult states of mind, the source of most of our suffering.

I want to ground this exploration in the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness, specifically in what's called the third foundation of mindfulness. While breath and body are included in the first foundation, the area we're examining tonight is significant enough to have its own foundation—the foundation called *citta*.

We've mentioned this word several times. *Citta* can be translated as either heart or mind, encompassing both affective and cognitive qualities. When we say *citta*, we always mean both dimensions. In the West, we tend to split heart and mind, but in the Buddha's teaching, they were never separated. One teacher suggested that the best translation for *citta* is psyche—a beautiful way to understand it. This is the realm of our psyche we're exploring today.

If you ask a person in Thailand where their mind is located, they'll point to the center of their chest. Ask someone in the West, and ninety-nine out of a hundred will point to their head. But in Asia, it's assumed that the heart and mind are located here in the chest.

There's a wonderful story that illustrates this cultural difference. You've probably noticed the abundance of neuroscience research today, where scientists use rigorous methods to prove meditation's benefits for mind and body. One of the foremost researchers is Richie Davidson from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who is himself a meditator. He pioneered studies of Tibetan monks—meditation adepts who were placed in functional MRI machines to map their brains as they entered deep meditative states of absorption or generated strong feelings of compassion.

Dr. Davidson has consulted with the Dalai Lama for many years. They've brought His Holiness to meet with American scientists and have traveled to Dharamsala to meet with him there. On one trip to Dharamsala, Richie decided to demonstrate some test equipment to the Dalai Lama and other monks.

Since they couldn't ship an entire MRI machine—a bit too heavy—they brought a cap: essentially a leather shell with strips running down it, fitted with twenty to thirty electrodes along the strips. When placed on a subject's head, the electrodes contact the scalp, and cables running to a computer detect brain activity, measuring and graphing brain waves in real time. They actually ran experiments here a couple of years ago on yogis after a three-month retreat and found very impressive results. So come to a three-month retreat—it really works. We're not sure about nine days yet.

They demonstrated this apparatus for the Dalai Lama in a great hall with about five hundred monks present. After putting the cap on someone, connecting it to the computer, and explaining through a translator how the experiments work, something unexpected happened. When the translation finished, all five hundred Tibetan monks burst into laughter. They found the whole thing absolutely hilarious.

Richie assumed they were laughing because the cap looked silly—which it does. But when they asked what was so funny, the monks explained: They thought it was ridiculous that people would try to study the mind and meditation's effects by examining the brain, because everyone knows the mind is located here, in the center of the chest.

So that's our next challenge: How do we measure the mind at the center of the chest? I don't have the answer for that.

This is the realm of *citta*—heart and mind, cognition and affect, all experienced through this third foundation. We'll explore the beautiful states of mind as the retreat progresses, so don't be impatient. We won't give you *dukkha*, *dukkha*, *dukkha* the entire retreat. We usually start there and warm up to the beautiful states.

Two important shifts are necessary to feel relaxed and free with difficult emotions that visit us. First, we need an attitude shift—moving from resisting and judging these forces to acceptance and allowing.

Second, as we open in this more allowing way and shine the light of awareness on difficult states, we develop greater understanding of how they work. We begin to see that all these challenging states of mind have their own mechanisms—they operate in particular ways. Because we all share the full range of human emotions, these mechanisms work in remarkably similar ways for everyone.

Through this study, we're learning about our mental nature, which is the same as all human mental nature, and we're understanding the nature of these obscurations.

As we start to study them, we see how they're put together. We see they all have a process of arising, persisting for a while, and then passing away. We start to have great conviction or faith in their temporary nature. None of them are permanent or very long-lasting.

And we start to see that as they manifest their nature, they come in just like weather systems. Just like this warm breeze that came in today lasts for a while and is temporary, as you probably had guessed, so also all the moods that come in arise, last for a

while, and pass away. When we can start to understand them just as weather systems, we don't have to own them. They're not particularly yours or mine. They're just these states. And we become familiar with their own nature.

As we do that, we start to see their essential impersonality. We don't have to own them. We don't have to identify with them. They're present. They come. They go. So this is the operation of wisdom. One of the shifts is just of greater openness. The second is greater understanding through the wisdom factor.

In learning about these states, the first thing that's really helpful is to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. It's not often taught in this culture. I grew up very untrained in this area. So when I came into meditation and I found that one could actually observe the mind and the kinds of moods that came through, for me it was like discovering a new world. There was a whole landscape I hadn't known anything about.

It was like my wife taught a friend of ours who's, I think, 63 years old. She taught her last year to snorkel. This woman had never snorkeled before. They were in warm waters together. And our friend came up from her first time of snorkeling and said what most people do when they have had their first snorkel: "Wow, there's a whole world under there I never knew existed." Because it is amazing, isn't it, if you start to see that. So that's the way it is looking into our mind. There's a whole world of beautiful states and difficult states that live and breathe and move within us. But until we've closely looked and examined, we don't sort of know that landscape and terrain. So it's a very interesting exploration.

Kids, I think, have a tremendous potential for learning this early. One of our Sangha members at Spirit Rock runs a preschool. And because it's the Bay Area, it turned out that all the parents of the kids in her preschool were supportive of meditation. It might not happen everywhere, but it happened for her. So she has about 20 kids who are aged 3 to 5 in this preschool, and because the parents were into it, she's basically structured it as Dharma training for these children.

She has them from 9 to 1, five days a week. She tells them stories from spiritual sources like the Jataka tales, early lives of the Buddha, other traditions that have clear spiritual messages. She teaches them yoga asanas where she uses the animal poses and makes stories about what the animals are doing while the kids are in the yoga poses. And she teaches them to meditate and takes them into a meditation room and encourages them to sit. And she has these three- to five-year-olds quiet, sitting quietly for 30 minutes at a time because they've so soaked up kind of the vibe of the stories and the movements and everything else. It's an extraordinary thing that she's doing.

One of the ways that she gets them into this meditative state is that she has them do yoga postures and they end up in a lying down posture at the end. I think it's savasana. And as they lie down, see, they can't relate to words like calm and awareness. That's not in their vocabulary, but they relate really well to images. So she said, as you settle down into the floor, imagine that you're just falling into a pool of water. And then you're becoming the pool of water. And within this pool of water, all the fishes swim. And the fishes are your emotions. You can have a happy fish swim through your water. You can have a mad fish swim through your water. A sad fish can come. A friendly fish can come.

All the fish can come and swim through your water. Just lie down and open up the water and let all the fish come.

So one five-year-old boy got up from this exercise and he said, "I could let all my fish come except the mad fish." And she said, "Well, why couldn't you let the mad fish come?" And he said, "Well, when you don't know that you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt other people."

When you don't know you're this pure, luminous mind in which everything moves, the mad fish makes you do things. It's amazing. The kids have this kind of intuitive understanding available. And we can learn it. We can learn it also. But for me, it wasn't so easy. It wasn't so apparent in the beginning.

I'll give you a little example. I was doing a long meditation retreat sitting in this hall in the early years of my practice. And I'd been settled in for about two weeks, so I was pretty present and pretty concentrated. The morning sitting had ended—I think it was 9:15—and I went out the back door to go for walking down on the grass that's below the parking lot. And I felt I was being very mindful as I left the hall. I was with every step, slowly lifting and placing and lifting and placing.

I got out the back door, and I looked down to my walking area, and there was somebody on my walking path. And I'd been walking in that path every walking period for two weeks. And I look out there and I go, "How could somebody walk in my walking path? I've been there every period. Haven't they been observant?" And then I was just very mindfully still walking, lifting and placing and lifting and placing. I get a little closer and I think, "Are they trying to play head games with me? You know, did I cut in front of them in breakfast this morning or something?" Lifting and placing.

And so all this time I was kind of getting steamed that somebody was in my walking place. But I walked down there and I found another stretch of grass not far away. And to my surprise, it worked just as well. So I was doing my walking, I was about thirty

minutes in, and I was still dwelling on this guy who was in my walking path, and all of a sudden I realized: I'm angry. I hadn't picked up on it. I thought I was being really mindful by being with the lifting and the placing, and I was missing the main thing that was happening to me.

This is what we mean by delusion. When I say delusion is not knowing what's happening to us, I was in a state of delusion. I thought I was mindful, but I didn't even know what I was feeling, and it was the main thing that was going on.

When I didn't know what I was feeling, I was completely caught up in it. I believed in my story—that it was my walking path, and that guy shouldn't be there. And I was right and they were wrong. And as I was telling myself this story over and over again, what happened is my mind just kept going back to that person. And I might still be with my feet, but I wasn't really with what was happening. So I was caught. I was completely identified. I believed in the story.

When I realized I was angry, it was like a light bulb went on in my mind. "Oh, anger." Then, instead of pointing all my attention at the other person, I could turn the attention to my inner experience. "Oh, there's anger here." Then I had a possibility of release because I knew how to meditate with anger. I knew how to feel it in the body. I knew how to feel it in the mind. I knew to look for the kinds of thoughts that were going on. But until I recognized it, I couldn't even do that meditative work. I was just completely glued to it.

So this is what these hindering energies tend to do. We think we're being mindful, but they slip in under the radar. Boom, they establish themselves, they take us over, they point us in some other direction—with anger toward the person that we're annoyed about—and we really lose touch with what's going on inside.

So the first step, and it's really the most important step, is to turn that attention back to ourselves and say, "Oh, what I'm feeling now is anger," or whatever else it is. So be aware of this with these hindering qualities.

They're quite tricky. They seduce us in a different direction away from mindfulness. But if we can just remember first to recognize they're there, mindfulness is reestablished, delusion is dispelled a little bit, and we can start to work. We can start to relate.

So there are a few states of mind that I want to talk about specifically tonight. There are four big ones that I see again and again in my practice and in meditators that I work with.

One of the curious things about these difficult states of mind, the unwholesome states, is they're bound up with time. Anytime you're caught in one of these hindering energies, you are also caught in the web of time. Wholesome states don't have this quality. Just in a moment, very freshly, we can feel love or joy or compassion or generosity, not dependent on past or future. But when the hindering energies are there, we're locked somewhere in past or future with them. So this is one of the main axes on which these hindering energies unfold.

The other axis they unfold in is pleasure and pain. We've talked about how this human life is such an unpredictable mix of the pleasant and the unpleasant. And our tendency to lose our balance is largely due to that. We don't know which is going to come. We don't know quite how to rest in the middle.

So I want to suggest that the four main obstructing energies come from this combination of pleasure and pain mapped against past and future. Let me ask you to investigate a little bit with me.

Let's start with one quadrant: past pleasure. There was a pleasurable experience in the past, but it's no longer here. What's the emotion that attends upon that kind of event? There was past pleasure, but it is no longer. Sadness, isn't it? It was here, it was beautiful, I've lost it, and that engenders sadness. This is a strong part of human experience—our response to pleasurable things that were in the past.

Now let's take an unpleasant experience from the past, particularly one connected to another person. What arises? Anger. Anger arises if we remember something that somebody did to us that was unpleasant in the past. And that's another very strong human experience.

Pleasant in the future—that's craving, isn't it, or desire. When we think about something pleasant that could happen in the future, that sparks desire.

And what about unpleasant in the future? Fear.

So I want to suggest that these are the main four dominant kinds of hindrances that come to us: sadness, anger, desire, and fear. These are the four I want to touch on this evening. There are many others—this is by no means exclusive, and you'll find different variations of these. One variation I want to touch on is that when the anger is directed against ourselves, it takes a particular form of self-judgment. It's another strong one for meditators in retreat. And to this group, I want to add one other that I'll talk about toward the end: the factor of doubt.

Each of these four, which can come and visit us frequently in daily life or in meditation retreat, has three main components that I would suggest to you as a meditator are very, very helpful to investigate and explore.

The first is every one of these has a mood that is just a quality of mind. There's a mental tone, a kind of coloring that comes into the mind, an atmosphere or a climate, you could say, that is connected with that particular emotion.

He said, "The problem is my girlfriend. I keep thinking about my girlfriend. And I want to be with my girlfriend." So I said, "Well, that's understandable. How does that feel when you have those thoughts about your girlfriend?" And he said, "Well, it feels good to think about her. I love her very much, and it's pleasurable to bring her to mind."

I said, "Okay, that's fine. But tell me, at the end of thinking about your girlfriend for a while, how do you feel?" He paused for a moment and said, "Well, I feel sad." I asked, "Why do you feel sad?" He replied, "Because she's not here."

This is the bittersweet quality of desire. There's immediate gratification in the fantasy, in bringing to mind something we want. But the end result is always a sense of lack, because we're reminded that we don't have what we're fantasizing about. The very act of desiring points to what's missing.

So when you notice desire arising in your meditation practice, investigate this quality. Feel into that tone of wanting, that reaching quality of mind. Notice how it expresses in your body—perhaps as a kind of leaning forward, a tension, an unsettled quality. And then look at the story that sustains the desire. Usually it's something like: "If I had this thing, this person, this experience, then I would be happy. Then I would be fulfilled."

This story is the glue that keeps the desire spinning. It's the belief that our happiness depends on getting something that's not here right now. But when you look carefully, you can see that the very structure of desire guarantees dissatisfaction. It's always pointing away from this moment toward some imagined future fulfillment.

The interesting thing is that when you see this clearly—not intellectually, but in your direct experience—the desire often just collapses. You don't have to fight it or push it away. You simply see its inherent frustration, and it naturally releases its grip.

This doesn't mean you won't want things or that you'll become some kind of emotionless robot. It means you won't be driven by the compulsive quality of wanting. You won't believe the story that your happiness depends on getting what you desire.

What's wrong? He said, well, this is our vacation time. It was August. And he said, I had two choices. Some friends invited me to go on a vacation to the Caribbean with them, or I could come on this meditation retreat. And I said, why did you come here? He said, because all the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out.

So we were his second choice. And it looked pretty austere compared to Caribbean beaches and the warm waters and being with his friends. And he said he just wasn't getting into being here. But I worked with him to see if maybe the problem was not the absence of the Caribbean, but the presence of the wanting. Because wanting has this unfulfilling quality—when we dwell in it, we feel unsatisfied. Wherever we are, we'll feel unsatisfied if we're wanting something else.

So I suggested, what would happen if you just didn't think about the Caribbean for a while and just were in the present moment? How would that be? And he came back a few days later. He had kind of let go of the Caribbean fantasies, and he had really settled into being in the retreat, and then it was no problem. He settled in, and the meditation unfolded beautifully.

Once we settle into the retreat, the desire force tends to express itself in relation to retreat life. So the things that we start to want are peaceful sittings, concentration, special insights, feelings of expansiveness, a moving quality of loving-kindness. Those are a little harder to pick out because they're so embedded within our environment. But start to tune in that they have the same dissatisfying nature and that it's only when we can release them that we can fully settle back into the moment the way that it is.

So when desire is present, notice how the force feels in the mind. I find there's a kind of leaning forward, kind of toppling into the future to make the next moment the way that I want it to be. And I start to feel that body tension, just a strain in my body as I'm leaning after something I can't quite get. So the tone in the mind, the sensation in the body, the thoughts that come typically about future, and the story of desire as I look within—something like, I would be happy if only I had that. So it's like a promise of future happiness if we could attain that. You take that storyline out, the force of the fantasy really goes away. So play with that.

When anger is present, we find ourselves dwelling on the incident from the past that caused it. Take a look inside. The mental quality of anger is kind of fiery or burning or hot. You feel inside the body, and it's similar. There's usually a constriction, contraction. There's often quite a lot of energy with anger, but it feels like there's a lot of friction in it, as though it's burning. Sometimes heat comes strongly into the body with anger.

Notice what kinds of thoughts come—probably quite similar to when I was looking at my walking path being occupied. Thoughts of blaming. And so we run the thoughts over and over, blaming the other person, justifying ourselves. Those are the kinds of thoughts that come. So the storyline, for me, feels something like—and you might find variations on this storyline; this is not like fixed in doctrine—but take a look and see what the storyline is for you. For me, the storyline is something like, I'm right and you're wrong. And that's the basic belief that sustains anger. And if you take that belief away, the anger just crumples. This is why it's so helpful to have dialogues.

So also take a look in anger at the feeling in your own experience when anger is present. And if you look within, there's this burning, there's this friction, there's this fiery quality. It's very unpleasant. It's a very unpleasant emotion to feel. So there's a saying in the tradition that anger is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will get sick. It doesn't work so well.

One of the most convincing things for me to encourage me to let go of the blaming thoughts was the realization that I was the one who had the poison. Especially in an environment like this, we may be angry at somebody here, we may be angry at someone at home, but we're the ones who are suffering and they're going about their way very happily, quite unaware of the poison that we intended for them.

Another image from our tradition is anger is like picking up a hot coal to throw at someone. But before we can throw it, we have to pick it up, and then we get burned. So I found it very, very helpful in anger to feel the suffering that the state brings to me. Now, that encourages me often to let go of these blaming thoughts because the blaming thoughts keep adding fuel to that fire. Every time I think another blaming thought, the fuel gets thrown on and the fire gets higher.

So it encourages me not to think those thoughts anymore. And when I stop thinking those thoughts, the fire starts to die down. But just stopping to think those thoughts is kind of an act of faith, because at first I thought, "Oh, well, if I don't think those thoughts, then I will be condoning that person's action. I'll be saying, oh, what that person did was fine." And it may not be fine.

You know, it could be accurate that you were right and they were wrong. That could be a kind of clear perception because awful things happen in the world to very innocent people. These things happen. There's war and there's torture going on in so many countries around the world. In our own culture, there's individual violence and domestic violence, racism, assault, and all kinds of injustice taking place that are wrong, unskillful acts.

The question is, even if we perceive that clearly, do we need to keep telling ourselves that story? Once we've understood that someone did something that was unskillful and perhaps motivated by ill will or malice, do we need to keep telling that story, thereby fueling the anger? Or is it possible to hold it with the understanding that yes, that was unskillful on their part, but we don't need to consume ourselves with anger?

The Dalai Lama tells this story of a monk that he used to know in Tibet. The Dalai Lama left Tibet in 1959 after almost 10 years of Chinese occupation and fled to India. This monk stayed in Tibet, was not able to leave at that time, and was eventually imprisoned by the Chinese government for about 20 years. And then finally he got out and escaped to India and met the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala.

So the Dalai Lama received the monk and they had a conversation because the Dalai Lama makes an effort to meet people who have escaped from Tibet. So they were talking about the monk's time in prison. And the Dalai Lama asked him how his treatment had been. And the monk said that he had been in danger. And the Dalai Lama said, "Yes, of course, you must have been very worried about being tortured or even killed." And the monk said, "I was tortured, but that's not what I meant by being in danger. I meant I was in danger of being angry, but I wasn't."

The Dalai Lama said after that, he had to conclude that this monk was a very developed practitioner. This is an extraordinary capacity. It's not a capacity I have. But to me it's very inspiring to know that this is even part of our human potential. To have that kind of mistreatment and to be able to hold it without moving into anger. Because anger doesn't often accomplish a lot for ourselves. There is a strength in it that we may be able to draw on and to use, but we have to be careful of burning ourselves in the process.

One form of anger is self-judgment. And this is something that often comes into people's minds as they enter into the silence, maybe because we're away from social contact. We start to feel the ways that we're very hard and judgmental on ourselves. With self-judgment, most helpful to be able to identify the kinds of thoughts, develop a label for the thoughts as being judging. Notice the impact of that on our mood. Feel the sense, the kind of heaviness and the oppression that comes from self-judgment. And feel the pain and the suffering of it.

Something that really helps to relate skillfully with this is a sense of compassion for ourselves. When we feel the hurt that we bring to ourselves through this judging tendency, let ourselves feel that directly, then some compassion can come in for ourselves.

One of the other strong things we have to deal with in life is a sense of sadness. We've all had a lot of disappointments in life. There have been things that we hoped would turn out that didn't, things that we hoped would turn out better than they have. With sadness, often I think we're afraid to open to that feeling because there may be a belief, "If I open to this, it will never end. I'll drown in it, and it's bottomless and will never lift."

But notice that that's just a belief. And so to have the courage to open and let that feeling come through, feel it in the body. Sometimes there's a heaviness, just a kind of weightiness, maybe in the chest. Feel the mood of sadness. Notice the thoughts. And the storyline for me in sadness is something like, "I can't be happy because I've lost that," that thing that it's focused on. And if we believe in that, we don't allow ourselves even a moment of opening to real happiness. Happiness could be a possibility of just an opening in this moment to a delight or joy. But if we believe in the storyline of sadness, we can't find that willingness. We can't find that openness even for a moment.

So most grief has its own timeline.

If we open and let ourselves feel, not resist, it will move through us. Grief often moves in waves—it comes, and at some time will pass. So we need to trust in that natural process in order to allow the sadness to have its movements.

One of the particular hindrances that meditators encounter, which I wanted to touch on briefly, is the quality of doubt. In this sense, it's skeptical doubt, particularly about the activity we're engaged in here. You'll notice this when the question comes up, often early in retreat: "What on earth am I doing here?" We can't seem to connect with why we came. We can't make any sense out of the instructions being given. The question arises: "What does sitting on my butt and following my breath have to do with happiness for myself or anybody else?" None of it makes any sense.

Then we often fall into questioning the teachings, the practice, the teachers, ourselves, or all of the above. When doubt comes, if it isn't seen clearly, it's in a way the most paralyzing of all the hindrances because the uncertainty, the indecision stops us in our tracks. It keeps us from taking a single step forward. We can't make a commitment to anything.

It's like we've come to a crossroads. Should I go right? Should I go left? Should I go straight ahead? And we can't move in any direction because there's not enough determination to take that step. So we just stand at the crossroads and kind of dither.

If we dither with the meditation, then we don't give ourselves a chance to carry out this experiment. Someone in an interview this morning said something interesting: "This is like an experiment where we're the scientists, but we're also the laboratory." That's really quite accurate. This mind-body investigation is an experiment, and there's a certain formula that we suggest you follow to carry out the experiment. We suggest that if you do, these are the results that will happen.

But it's like you get to the doorway of the experiment and you don't mix the chemicals. Then you go off at the end of the week and say, "Well, nothing happened. I guess this stuff doesn't work, or it wasn't the right thing for me."

So if doubt is there, it can completely block our ability to open and progress in the meditation practice. Once we recognize it, we can see its paralyzing nature and we can just take that determination: "I'm just going to follow, I'm just going to do it, then I'll check after."

The last quality of mind I wanted to touch on tonight is fear. Fear was something that had a really strong presence in my practice in my early years. It was my main hindering energy, and I had to spend a lot of time coming into it, touching it again and again and again.

One of the first things I saw is that when fear arose, I was afraid of it. That tended to multiply it. As fear arose, I'd get more scared. As that got bigger, I'd get more scared. It would be this spiral, and I didn't know how to work in that situation.

What was very helpful for me was learning to come into the body first and foremost. When fear arose, I would always bring my attention directly into the body and just feel whatever sensations were there. It might be a contraction in the belly. It might be a kind of fluttery, light feeling through the chest. There might be sweat under the arms. I would direct all my attention, all that I could muster, to just being with those body sensations.

I would ask myself, "Can I open and feel these? Can I allow these to be present?" And I found that after contact, after contact, after contact, I could. I found that they were bearable.

As I investigated the storyline of fear, it was something like: "This moment is bearable, but something really awful is going to happen in the next." So if I could come back into this moment and bear it, that sort of undercut the fear. That's where I directed my energy: "Can I open and bear the manifestation in this moment?"

First I got comfortable or familiar with the body sensations. They didn't get pleasant, but I could bear them. Then I looked at the state of the mind.

And in the mind, the tone of fear carries a quality of wanting to get away, wanting to move away, wanting to flee, not wanting to feel. So I tried to bring openness to that too. Generally, little by little, I would bring more and more acceptance to the body, to the mind, understanding the story of the fear, and it grew more and more workable. But I still really didn't like it—and this was after many, many encounters.

Finally, one day I was sitting with the fear, and I noted that I still had resistance to it, even after working to bear it so many times. I asked myself: if I was truly going to be accepting of this, could I be okay if this stayed like this for the rest of my life? That, to me, was a sign of true acceptance. Could I be okay with this for the rest of my life? And the answer was no. Are you kidding? No way.

But I didn't stop there. I investigated further: why? Why couldn't I accept this being here for the rest of my life? What came into my mind were images of things I had enjoyed intensely in life up to that point. I would think of times listening to a piece of music, so involved that I'd be in rapture of delight, strong emotions that the music unlocked. Or watching a sunset somewhere beautiful in nature when I was completely open, with a sense of just merging with the sky and the earth—that sense of oneness and deep connection.

I thought I'd have to give these things up if I was going to be fearful. So I sat with that for a moment and thought: you're going to resist it now on the off chance that one of these things might come along later? I realized I was giving up my present equanimity and peace of mind in the hope of some future getting high. Then I just realized that wasn't a good trade.

So I opened to the possibility that I could be with this state the rest of my life and that I could be okay with that. When I did that, the fear lost some deep hold on me. That degree of openness broke something in the grip that fear had held over me. I went through a period of practice where I was completely equanimous to fears arising or not arising. If it came, that was fine. If it didn't come, that was also fine. I truly had no preference.

Since then, fear has come back a number of times—visits from time to time. But I feel I have the way to understand it and relate with it, and it doesn't throw me off balance these days. Of course, I haven't faced a lot of difficult life situations yet, so I'm not making claims about the future, but it's become much, much more workable.

With all these difficult energies that come, we have the potential to bring that same level of equanimity and acceptance to anything that visits us. Your particular main one may be sadness, or desire, or self-judgment, or fear, or anger. But the capacity is there for each of us to develop this complete equanimity in relation to these states so that they really don't obstruct us or obscure us any longer.

As we do that, we find that we start to clear out a lot of space in the mind—areas that were formerly problematic. Experiences in life that we couldn't accept were felt as a threat or problem. They aren't intrinsically problematic, but if we avoid them, then there's a problematic relationship that leads to suffering. As we can open to them, a lot of those problem areas just clear out.

Difficult emotions are one of the most challenging areas of life. So those problems, one by one, as we understand and as we open, start to disappear from life. We begin to develop great confidence that we can relate to whatever life throws at us, because we've learned to relate with some of the most difficult aspects of our hearts and minds.

I'd like to close tonight with this quote from the Tibetan tradition—The Blessings of Gampopa, who was a disciple of the famous Tibetan yogi Milarepa. It's presented as a kind of prayer or supplication, but you can think of it as directed to anyone you like: to a guru, to a deity, to a higher power, to your own inner wisdom. Understand it in whatever way makes sense to you.

The Four Blessings of Gampopa:
Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's simply sit together for a moment in this understanding.

Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 31

A Brief History of Buddhism in India - Part 1

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this comprehensive historical survey, Guy Armstrong explores the fascinating evolution of Buddhism from the Buddha's death (Parinibbāna) in 463 BCE through the formation of the eighteen early schools. Drawing connections between ancient sectarian debates and contemporary Western Buddhist discussions, Armstrong examines key developments including the Second Council's East-West divide, the emergence of the Mahāsaṅghika and Theravāda schools, and the compilation of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. He traces how the Sarvāstivāda school's influence through Kashmir shaped what became Tibetan Buddhism, while the Theravāda tradition preserved the complete Pāli Canon in Sri Lanka. Armstrong skillfully weaves together scholarly historical analysis with practical insights for modern practitioners, showing how ancient philosophical disagreements about karma, the nature of time, and the authority of scripture continue to resonate in today's diverse Buddhist landscape. This talk provides essential context for understanding the common roots and distinctive developments that shaped both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, making it particularly valuable for Western practitioners encountering multiple Buddhist lineages.*

One of the amazing things about Western culture today is that we have available most of the world's religions at our fingertips through bookstores, visits from teachers, and friends who have practiced in various traditions. Just reading through all the interview sheets on this retreat, I think we have most major schools of Buddhism represented, quite a bit of Hinduism, and very little Christianity or Judaism perhaps, but a little here and there. So you all reflect that multi-religious strain.

It's rare that a practitioner in the West today has practiced only with one teacher or in one particular lineage. I find it very awakening that we're subject to all these different influences. It hasn't been like that in Asia for a very long time, probably for over a thousand years since the schools have met and mingled in the way that they're doing now in the West. It's going to be very interesting to see what comes out of this meeting.

It's going to be a long evolution, obviously, because it's not just the meeting of the different Buddhist schools and Hinduism, but also Western psychology is part of the mix. So it's a wonderful opportunity, and at times I think it's also our curse as Westerners, because we hear so many things, we're drawn in so many different ways. Sometimes we don't take the opportunity to go really deeply in one school, but we gain a lot from hearing the different schools that we tune into.

The same was true for me. I started my interest in Buddhism in college by reading Zen. I then discovered Vipassana about four years after I got out of college and practiced that for about twenty years before I met Sogyal Rinpoche on his first retreat in California in 1993. And I loved his teachings from the very beginning.

Sometimes he would be like a playful twenty-six-year-old, which I think is what he was then. I'd be walking down the hallway and maybe I looked a little too somber and he'd reach out and tickle me in the stomach to make me lighten up. And then he'd sit up on the podium and the words that came were like a wise old sage. The Dharma was so pure and elegant.

So I really loved his teachings from the beginning, but it was a little bit of a culture shift, I have to say. I'd spent twenty years getting steeped in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. I met Rinpoche, and two days later I was chanting 100-syllable mantras in Sanskrit to this golden-skinned deity who was primordially enlightened beyond time and space. That created a little bit of cognitive dissonance.

And so I said, well, what's going on here? Are these the same religion? Are we even in the same school at all? And as I tuned into Rinpoche's teachings, I began to realize there was a lot more than just Dzogchen in what he was sharing with us. You can hear that in the talks today. He made quite a bit of mention of very basic concepts like the Four Noble Truths and karma and mindfulness, basically the Theravadan kind of foundation. And then he moved on to other topics that are connected with the Mahayana: the topics of emptiness, bodhicitta and compassion. And then he just touched or alluded to some Vajrayana teachings, Dzogchen-po, which we'll start talking about tomorrow, the allusion to the mandala practice and tantric practices. So he touched on all three strains today.

And as I came to look into how this all fit together, I understood what everyone has always talked about: that the Theravada teachings form the foundation, the Mahayana teachings are layered on top of that, and the Vajrayana on top of that. You'll hear that history in his teaching.

So I became very curious to understand how this had all come about and how it all got put together. And it led me to study and then touch on the themes that I want to talk about today and tomorrow, which are: how did we get from the death of the Buddha, the Buddha's Parinirvana, to the origination of Dzogchen? There's about a 1300-year span of history there as Buddhism evolved. How did that happen? What were the steps? What were the schools? What were the stages?

What I found as I started to look into this—one, I was completely wrapped with the history of it because I found that the things that people were arguing about 2,000 years ago are the same things we're arguing about today. If you notice discussions, heated discussions, sometimes debates among different schools of Buddhism today, I can almost guarantee you that they have gone on in the distant past as well. I mentioned this at one of our Spirit Rock teacher meetings, and Deborah, who's here on this retreat, said to me, "Yeah, and probably by the same people." So here we are, continuing the discussion that we may all have begun a thousand or two years ago.

So I found that I was very drawn to the study of our Dharma ancestors and felt a lineage connection to them that I'd never felt with my genetic ancestors. My family of Armstrongs came somewhere out of the border area of England and Scotland, and it's rumored that they were chased out of that area for sheep stealing, but I don't know about that. Ended up in America, and that history never interested me very much. But when I heard about the debates between the Madhyamaka school and the Chittamatra school and the early Vinaya disagreements, that was the lineage I could really feel in my bones.

So this is some of the kind of adventure that I want to share with you tonight, not just as dry historical fact, but because I think it sheds a lot of light on where we are in the West today and the kinds of issues that challenge us and stretch us as we open to the different views and the different schools that are alive in Buddhism today.

One of the frames that I'd like to put on this is that I believe that we have a great opportunity to hold these different philosophical views in a new light apart from the sectarianism of the past, that we can find common ground in our understanding of them. And to frame that, I'd like to read a quotation of the Buddha from the Sutta Nipata, one of the early texts in the Pali Canon:

"This I do now declare. After investigation, there is nothing among all the views that such a one as I would embrace."

Seeing misery in philosophical views without adopting any of them and searching for truth, I discovered inner peace. For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions wander about in the world annoying people.

So let's hope that we can refrain from annoying one another and use our diversity of understandings to enrich our practice and our approach to practice.

Another amazing aspect of Buddhism's history that struck me was its extraordinary reach. At one time or another, Buddhism covered almost all of what we now call Asia. It began in northern India along the Ganges Valley, and within just a few hundred years had spread throughout the entire subcontinent. From there it migrated west into Pakistan and Afghanistan—you may remember evidence of this from those magnificent tall standing Buddhas that the Taliban destroyed seven or eight years ago. Buddhism also journeyed north into Tibet and China, Korea and Japan, and spread throughout Southeast Asia. Much of Southeast Asia remains Buddhist today: Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. The dharma reached as far as Indonesia, where you can still find the remains of that magnificent temple at Borobudur on the island of Java, one of the great Buddhist complexes in the world.

Virtually the whole of Asia was Buddhist at one time or another. Yet when you look around all those regions today, Buddhism has either disappeared or is in decline. It's sobering to realize that in places where Buddhism was once so strong, its influence is now waning. As far as I can see, the only places experiencing real resurgence are due to Tibetan refugees, who are changing the face of Buddhism in India and finding welcome homes in places like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Otherwise, the outlook is challenging. The situation in Tibet remains difficult. Throughout much of Southeast Asia, what hasn't been lost to communism is in danger of being lost to capitalism. The Tibetan refugees, however, are doing extraordinary work to preserve and transmit the dharma.

Let's begin our exploration of Buddhism's evolution from the pivotal moment of the Buddha's death. The scholarly consensus places the Buddha's parinirvana at 463 BCE. A word about nomenclature: I grew up using the terms BC and AD, but in Buddhist scholarship these Christian-centric terms are replaced with BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era), which correspond to the same dates without the Christian overlay.

What happens when a charismatic founder dies? People maintain harmony for a while, then they start arguing. This is exactly what occurred after the Buddha's parinirvana. The Sangha actually got along quite well for about a hundred years. Then reports began circulating that a group in the East was becoming rather radical. They allegedly wanted to change the Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline, to allow monks to handle money—something the original Vinaya explicitly prohibited. This eastern group also rejected the claim that the Buddha's words were the sole authority for dharma understanding. Instead, they argued that personal inner experience could serve as equal authority to the Buddha's teachings, and that rational mind and logic could also guide dharma interpretation.

When news of these liberal views reached the elders in the West—the more conservative faction—a familiar tension emerged. Interestingly, in our contemporary American Buddhist scene, the roles are reversed: the West Coast is considered the liberal wing while the East Coast represents the conservative tradition. Yet the same fundamental struggle continues: How quickly should the dharma adapt to new cultural contexts? What should authorize such changes? Should we abandon traditional texts simply because a charismatic teacher claims a powerful experience that contradicts established teachings? To what extent should we remain aligned with a tradition that has provided a stable foundation for practice and understanding across 2,500 years?

This tension between tradition and innovation seems inevitable in all Buddhist communities and will likely persist for generations to come.

To resolve this ancient dispute, the western elders called for a meeting between the two factions. This gathering became known as the Second Council. To provide context: the First Council had convened immediately after the Buddha's death, when 500 fully awakened beings gathered to establish the authentic legacy of the Buddha's teachings. During that historic assembly, the monk Upali recited the complete Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline.

Another monk, Ananda, who had been the Buddha's attendant, recited all the discourses of the Buddha that he could remember. These became the collection of the suttas. So the Vinaya Pitaka and the Sutta Pitaka were assembled immediately after the death of the Buddha, and those became the formally recognized teachings.

The Second Council was called about one hundred years later to resolve the dispute between East and West. The dispute was not resolved. The Western group could not accept the innovations in the East. The Eastern group could not accept being compelled to follow the norms of the West. This was the first split in the Sangha.

The Eastern group became known as the Mahasangikas, the Great Assembly, the Great Sangha. The Western group, because they were more reverent of the past, became known as the Sthavairavadins. That's a Sanskrit word. The Pali translation is Theravada. Sthavairavada in Sanskrit means "the elders." Theravada is the Pali term, and that's what that school became known by. It has continued in one form or another to the present day.

Through all the splintering, altogether eighteen schools were formed in this early Buddhist phase, where the canon of the Buddha's own words was the foundation and the shared understanding. The splintering continued to happen until at least eighteen schools were formed. Of those eighteen schools, only one remains today, and that is the

school called Theravada. Some of the other schools were very influential and important. A lot of this has been lost to history. It's rather sad because there have got to be a lot of great stories buried there.

This tradition that I'm part of, that the Vipassana school is part of, is curious in one respect—very different from the Tibetan tradition and different from the Zen tradition. Let me ask you a question: Could you name three Zen masters from China or Japan in medieval times?

"Bodhidharma."
"Bankei."
"Dogen."

Great. There are many others, right? Hakuin and Huangpo, Huineng—the list goes on and on. Zen is a very literate tradition, beginning with Chan in China.

Can you name three Tibetan practitioners in medieval times?

"Milarepa, Marpa, Naropa."

And you could go on and on, right? The volumes are full of names of ancient Tibetan teachers.

Now, I address this specifically to the Vipassana practitioners—Tibetans are also welcome. Can you name three Vipassana or Theravadan teachers between the death of the Buddha and, let's say, the 1800s?

"Buddhaghosa."

Excellent.

"Shantideva."

Shantideva was Mahayana. Anyone else?

This is rather the state of things in our history. There's not a lot recorded. Buddhaghosa is the most famous. He wrote commentaries in the fifth century. A contemporary of his was another monk named Dhammapala. Another famous Theravadan figure is the person who brought the religion to Sri Lanka—his name was Mahinda. Beyond those three, it gets pretty sparse.

Our tradition is not very literate. There were many practitioners, because it's an unbroken oral lineage going back to 463 BCE—or even further, since the Buddha was in there—but not very literate. That's just how it was in our tradition. I think because there was so much emphasis on the words of the Buddha himself, later writers were not as valued.

The splitting continued to happen, and the development continued.

The next important development in the history of the Theravada schools was the assembly of what's called the Abhidhamma. This is the third basket, the third pitaka, alongside the Vinaya and the Sutta Pitaka—the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

If you ask a devout Buddhist in Sri Lanka, Burma, or Thailand how we got the Abhidhamma, they will tell you a story like this: The Abhidhamma had to be delivered uninterruptedly by the Buddha, but it was too long for any human being to receive. So the Buddha, in one rains retreat, ascended to Tushita heaven, spent the three months of the rains retreat there, and delivered the entire Abhidhamma to his mother, who was residing in that heaven realm. He taught her over three months in an uninterrupted fashion. During that same rains retreat, he projected his psychic body down to where one of his disciples, Sariputta, was staying. Every day he would give Sariputta updates: "This is the part of the teaching that I gave today in Tushita heaven." And Sariputta remembered it and assembled it during the lifetime of the Buddha.

Believe that? Western scholars say otherwise.

From my point of view—because, rather like the Dalai Lama, I believe in scientific research more than I believe in words from some old book—if scientific research indicates that any doctrine of Buddhism is incorrect, as the Dalai Lama said, we should toss it out. There's a funny little footnote to this. Carl Sagan was the one who asked him about this. Carl Sagan said, "What if we proved"—he's a great astronomer—"what if we proved that the doctrine of rebirth is wrong? Would you accept that?" The Dalai Lama said, "Definitely. If science proves it wrong, I'll accept that." And then he was still for a minute. He turned to Carl Sagan and said, "How would you prove that?" And Carl Sagan had no idea.

Western scholars have done a lot of research in this area. It's the viewpoint that I'll be presenting tonight. There are very different viewpoints in Asia on some of these questions, so I don't want to get into arguments about who's right—the Asian tradition or the scholars. I just want to tell you what the scholars say and let you make your own decision.

The scholars say the Abhidhamma was not assembled by the death of the Buddha. The first signs of its collection started to appear around a hundred years after the Buddha's death. The Abhidhamma is this amazing volume—actually, it's seven volumes in English. It analyzes in minute detail the workings of the human mind in an ordinary person and also along the path to enlightenment. It details how moments of consciousness come one after another, how the factor of perception arises, how intentions are born, how karma is generated from wholesome and unwholesome intentions, and how all of that can lead eventually to enlightenment.

It's an extraordinary work that had to have been put together by a very, very still and clear mind. It is associated in the lineage with the name of Sariputta, who was the Buddha's disciple foremost in wisdom. Whether that is accurate or not, I don't know. Perhaps it was students of Sariputta who assembled it.

But there's an indication about the character of Sariputta from the story of his enlightenment. He came to the Buddha at the same time as his boyhood friend Moggallana. They were best buddies from early years, and they turned out to be the Buddha's two chief disciples. Moggallana was the one who was foremost in psychic powers. He got the teachings completely in a week. But Sariputta was slow. It took him two weeks to become fully enlightened. And it's said that the reason was that every time he had a new experience, he analyzed it completely to understand what factors of mind were there and what factors were absent and how it was able to unfold. So he had this amazingly analytical approach to his practice, and that's the spirit of the Abhidhamma.

It's extremely analytical and it maps the whole path from, let's say, a non-ego standpoint. It describes the whole thing in terms of elements that are arising and passing, considered by the Abhidhamma to be ultimate elements of mind and body that they called dhammas—things, little things. And these dhammas were considered irreducible. It's more or less the atomistic view of the Buddha's teachings. So these were called the ultimate. The dhammas were called the ultimate. Other names for things were considered conventional or relative. Things like "sentient being," things like "noble truth" were considered conceptual or conventional.

I think one of the things that happened is that the Abhidhamma tried to answer questions that the Buddha had left untouched in his discourses. As you probably know, there were a lot of questions the Buddha didn't answer, such as: How long does it take from one death to the next rebirth? In the Tibetan system, the answer is roughly forty-nine days. In the Abhidhamma system, the answer is zero.

The view they put forward is that as soon as the mind moment ceases in the being who's dying, in the very next mind moment it arises anew in some being who is being conceived. So they say there is no bardo, period.

The Abhidhamma, because it tries to spell out a lot of these unanswered questions, ends up getting the tradition in a lot of trouble, I think. It's interesting when you think back on what the Buddha taught and what he didn't teach.

You may know this famous story of the handful of leaves. The Buddha's walking in a forest with a bunch of monks, and he picks up a handful of leaves from the ground that have fallen to the earth—a handful of dried leaves—and he says, "Which is greater, O monks, the number of leaves in my hand or the leaves on all the trees in the forest?"

The monks are no dummies. They say, "Oh, Bhante, the number of leaves in all the forest is greater."

And the Buddha said, "Just so is what I know. The mind of a Buddha is like the range of all the leaves in the forest compared to what I have revealed to you. I have only revealed this handful of leaves of all that I know, but this handful of leaves is enough for you to become free."

He didn't teach about what wasn't conducive to awakening. There were many philosophical questions he could have answered, but he chose not to because it wasn't necessary. In the Pali texts, the Buddha doesn't even talk very much about what it looks like from the other shore—what the view is from the awakened mind—because he assumes once you get there, you'll know yourself. I don't have to tell you. All you have to know is it's the end of suffering.

So the Abhidhamma becomes a focal point for disagreements because it tried to fill in areas that the Buddha had, I think, wisely left unresolved.

One of these questions came up a couple hundred years later, actually in 250 BCE, about then. A very influential king had risen to power in India named Asoka, or Ashoka in Sanskrit. Asoka was the first Buddhist king in India to hold a wide range of the kingdom in his power. After his conversion—he was not Buddhist by birth, but he converted from his own understanding—he became a great patron of the Dhamma.

The Dhamma flourished under his patronage. You'll see this in the history of Buddhism: where there's royal patronage, court patronage, the Dhamma flowers. Nuns, monks, monasteries, nunneries are supported. When the political climate changes and that support goes away, Dharma dwindles.

So there was a great flowering under Asoka. He vowed to stop making war. He had been an expansionist, conquering, warring king. He vowed to cease attacking neighboring kingdoms. He outlawed animal sacrifices, which were very common in the Vedic tradition, and even tried to turn his court to more vegetarian diets. And he provided liberally for the people in his society.

There's a lovely teaching in the Dīgha Nikāya, one of the sets of the Pali Discourses, where the Buddha talks about why crime arises in a culture. And he says it arises because of poverty, because there hasn't been fair distribution of the material goods in the country. So Asoka knew that and tried to create a just and fair and generous society.

At the time of Asoka, there was another split brewing. And this one was over the question of karma. So everything arises and passes, right? We know that from the teaching on impermanence. So if your past action has ceased, where are the seeds of its fruit? It's said that when we act, those intentions become the seeds for future results, future karmic results. Okay, where are those seeds right now? Show me your seeds.

Different schools have answered this differently. There's a later evolution from the Cittamatra that tries to answer this in a different way. But a school sprang up around 200 years after the Buddha's death that tried to answer this. Their answer was, "Oh, the past and future aren't really gone. They actually exist here and now, along with the present. And that's how the karmic seeds and fruits get carried on. The past isn't really over."

This group became known as the Sarvāstivādins. They're one of the most influential schools of the early schools of Buddhism. But the original school, the Sthaviravādins, or the Theravādins in Pali, couldn't accept this. They said, "No, impermanence is clear. It's one of the three characteristics. The Buddha said so. We reject this doctrine."

And the Sarvāstivādins split off. They were influential for a number of reasons.

One major doctrine that made them influential was their fascinating attempt to resolve the mystery of karma and how it operates across time. Another significant contribution was that they were the first school to systematically stress the importance of the paramis - the perfections. They developed the foundational list of six paramis that would later form the basis for Shantideva's beloved "Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life" and much of Mahayana thinking. These paramis are considered the very foundation of Mahayana practice, yet it was the Sarvastivadins who first articulated them.

Their canon was written in Sanskrit rather than Pali, and unfortunately, no complete copy has survived. The only complete canon that remains today from any of the early schools is the Pali canon of the Theravada tradition. While fragments of other school canons exist, none are complete - the Sarvastivada canon shares this fate.

Despite this loss, the Sarvastivadins wielded enormous influence because of their geographical position. Their power base was centered in the Kashmir region, having moved north and west from the Ganges Valley. There they established flourishing communities of practitioners, teachers, monasteries and nunneries. This location proved historically crucial because Kashmir served as the jumping-off point for the Silk Route.

When the Dharma traveled to Tibet and eventually through Tibet into China, it followed these ancient trade routes. Consequently, what was carried to Tibet was the Sanskrit canon of the Sarvastivadins, not the Pali canon. This partially preserved canon remains embedded in Tibetan Buddhism today. While there's substantial overlap when comparing their canon to the Pali canon, they are not identical traditions.

This historical reality has created an interesting situation. The Pali canon is not part of the Tibetan canon. I've heard Tibetan teachers claim they possess a complete inclusion of Hinayana teachings, but what they actually have is this partial Sarvastivadin canon, which shapes their understanding of what constitutes "Hinayana" Buddhism. Because these traditions were separated for so many centuries without dialogue between Tibetans and Theravadins, there has been limited cross-understanding of what's actually contained in Theravadan practice or the Pali canon.

So you may be relieved to learn that the label "Hinayana" doesn't actually apply to us Theravadins - it applies to this extinct school called the Sarvastivadins, though we certainly shared many philosophical views.

The establishment in Kashmir led to another fascinating development: this variety of Buddhism took root in Mathura and Gandhara. Gandhara produced some of the most exquisite Buddha sculpture I know of. Here's an intriguing historical footnote - there were no Buddha statues until Buddhism encountered Greek culture. It was Greco-Roman sculptural tradition that provided the first inspiration for creating Buddha images. This cultural contact also produced other remarkable exchanges in the western regions, where King Menander, a Greek ruler governing parts of that territory, engaged with Buddhism. His name was rendered as "Milinda" in the local language, and the famous "Questions of King Milinda" records extensive dialogues between this Greek king and the monk Nagasena. This text now forms part of the Pali commentarial literature.

The Sarvastivadins developed their own systematic psychology, though being a Sanskrit tradition, they called it Abhidharma rather than Abhidhamma. They became deeply absorbed in these analytical teachings, which eventually led to yet another significant split with a group called the Sautrantikas.

"Sautra" is simply a grammatical variation of "sutra" - the Sanskrit equivalent of the Pali word "sutta," meaning discourse. So the Sautrantikas were literally "the people who believed in the sutras" - the original recorded words of the Buddha. Their critique was pointed: "We don't trust your elaborate Abhidharma. We believe you've become too fixated on these ultimate dhammas, taking them too literally and concretely. You've fundamentally missed the point. By focusing obsessively on these minute mental arisings and moments, you've lost sight of the heart of awakening - that transformative realization the Buddha was actually pointing toward and trying to cultivate in us." Their solution was to return to relying primarily on the sutras rather than the Abhidharma.

This philosophical tension resonates strongly in contemporary practice. You'll find in Theravadan countries today some teachers and practitioners who regard the Abhidhamma as the ultimate reference point. Let me share an example from my practice in Burma. I met a teacher there who was explaining the Tripitaka structure, saying: "Here's how we understand it - the Vinaya is for sila, ethical conduct; the Sutta-pitaka is for samadhi, teaching us meditation; and the Abhidhamma is for paññā, wisdom."

It's the liberating wisdom. So they held the Abhidhamma above the Sutta-piṭaka. Other practitioners—I confess to counting myself among them—hold the Sutta-piṭaka as the supreme source of wisdom above the Abhidhamma.

One of my teachers in Thailand, a great monk named Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful scholar, practitioner, social activist in his way, and teacher, offered a unique perspective on this. Rather than translating Abhidhamma as "higher dhamma" or "supreme dhamma" as is standard, he said his translation for Abhidhamma was "too much dhamma." So he was more of a Sautrāntika in this ancient split that continues today.

These kinds of divisions and discussions persist in our time. The Abhidhamma is a dazzling intellectual work—I can't imagine how it was ever created. I don't think anything like it exists in any other body of literature. But its intellectual dazzle, for me, doesn't carry the living spirit of liberation the way that the suttas do. Other people see it differently, and that's the beauty of this ongoing dialogue.

Around this same time, 250 BCE, while the Sarvāstivādins were splitting off from the Theravādins, a truly important movement occurred: Aśoka sent his son as a missionary to Sri Lanka. His son's name was Mahinda. Aśoka sent out many missionaries because he was a convert who believed deeply in the Dhamma. He had the resources and sent monks all over the known world, even to Europe to plant the seeds of Dhamma there.

I just heard something fascinating this past week—though I haven't been able to verify it from other sources. According to what I read, some Theravādan monks made their way to Greece, where they were known as Therāputrā—meaning "sons of the Theravāda," sons of the elders. This word Therāputrā, spelled T-H-E-R-A-P-U-T-R-A-E, became the root for our word "therapeutic." So according to this account, the teaching of the Dhamma was the original therapy in ancient Greece.

I don't know if this is historically accurate, but it's certainly intriguing. Today we have discussions about whether psychotherapy is the same as Dhamma practice or different, and here we might have the Dhamma as the original therapy itself.

While the monks didn't successfully establish lasting communities in Europe, they did take root in Sri Lanka. Mahinda established monasteries there, and within a few hundred years of his arrival, the body of teachings known as the Pāli Canon was finally written down.

For four hundred years, these teachings existed only in memory—they weren't written down because the technology for writing and storing books simply wasn't available. When the technology developed, the Canon was inscribed on palm leaves, four centuries after the Buddha's passing. So for four hundred years, it was simply memorized.

This is extraordinary when you consider the scope: the Sutta Piṭaka comprises about twenty volumes, the Vinaya Piṭaka seven volumes, and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka seven volumes. All memorized for four centuries. It makes you wonder about reliability—you know how when you play telephone, the message changes after just three people. Yet somehow we have this remarkably consistent and liberating body of teachings.

Initially, I didn't believe that such vast material could be accurately memorized. Part of the preservation system involved different sections of the texts being entrusted to different monasteries and schools, so each had responsibility for preserving a portion of the overall canon. This distributed approach helped ensure the teachings survived and were passed down intact.

But today in Burma, you can still find monks who have memorized the entire Pāli Canon. Personally, I think they might have been better served by meditating, but their accomplishment is undeniable. You can pick any sutta, any paragraph, ask them to recite it, and they will. They undergo examinations testing their textual knowledge. So clearly, this kind of prodigious memory is possible—people are still doing it today.

The Pāli Canon was first written down in Sri Lanka around the first century BCE, approximately four hundred years after the Buddha's death. The significance of this cannot be overstated: Sri Lanka became the only place where the original schools of Buddhism survived intact.

In India, Buddhism was systematically wiped out around the eleventh and twelfth centuries by Muslim invaders from the west. Buddhism was vulnerable to destruction precisely because it was centralized—concentrated in monasteries, nunneries, and great learning centers like Nālandā. Hinduism survived because it was decentralized, present in every home, every neighborhood temple, every family shrine. Buddhism, being largely monastic and institutionalized, could be eliminated by targeting these centers, and tragically, it was.

All the other original schools of Buddhism were destroyed, their canons largely lost by the twelfth century. But the invaders never reached Sri Lanka, and there the Theravādan school continued in an unbroken lineage, preserving these ancient teachings through the centuries.

Through the centuries when Buddhism had effectively died in India, Sri Lanka maintained the Theravadan tradition in an uninterrupted lineage. That is why there is only one complete canon available today—the Pali Canon, which was first committed to writing in Sri Lanka over 2000 years ago. All the others were destroyed.

There's one other school among the eighteen that I can't resist mentioning. They're called the Puggalavadins. Wouldn't you like to be a member of the Puggalavadins? Puggala means "person," so these are the personalists. Their philosophical doctrine held that the self actually did exist to a greater extent than the Buddha had indicated. They said the person has more reality than the other schools were acknowledging.

According to the Puggalavadins, the self was connected with the five aggregates in a way that it wasn't exactly the same as the five aggregates—which are all impersonal and subject to impermanence—but it was almost like them and very closely associated. This self had some higher degree of permanence than the impersonal, impermanent nature of the five aggregates. So the self existed somewhere in between temporary arising and passing and an ultimate kind of nature. This was called the puggala.

When I was reflecting on this today, it reminded me of the "mere I." Isn't that somewhat like the sense of the mere I? The Puggalavadins held it in a more solid way than Rinpoche was describing the mere I—I don't think Rinpoche is a Puggalavadin! But this school had considerable appeal, and you can understand why. Isn't it comforting to think we really do have an I? Isn't there a little resentment of the Dharma for taking away our sense of self? The Puggalavadins restored it to us.

A visitor to India—one of the Chinese pilgrims who came in the seventh or eighth century—reported that the main early schools that still survived were the Theravadins, the Sarvastivadins, the Puggalavadins, and the Mahasanghikas. Most of the others were of lesser importance by that time.

The Mahasanghikas become significant because scholars believe that it was from their philosophical leanings and attitudes that the Mahayana evolved. This is what I want to explore starting tomorrow: the origination of the Mahayana, the evolution of its schools, and then the later development of the tantras and the Vajrayana.

Rinpoche is spending the first couple of days laying a conceptual framework before we move into meditation. I'm following the same approach—establishing the framework of the teachings and the links between traditions. Then, as he moves into more meditation instruction, I'll also shift toward more meditation guidance in these evening talks.

Tomorrow I want to complete the story of Buddhism's evolution in India. I won't venture into China and Japan, as that's an entirely different subject. But I love the Indian story because you see there the common foundation of Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism.

I feel these two schools have great affinity. I've benefited tremendously from exposure to both Theravadan and Tibetan teachings. The wonderful thing is that we can sit down and have meaningful dialogue together. If I tried to discuss with a Zen master where the seeds of karma are stored, he'd probably just hit me! But with someone like Rinpoche, I can ask such questions and engage in logical discussion.

I believe this is because both Theravada and Tibetan Dharma are grounded firmly in Indian Buddhism and remain strongly connected to that foundation. We share common philosophical underpinnings, which enables very comfortable dialogue between our traditions.

I think that's all I wanted to cover tonight. You're tired, and you've been a wonderfully patient audience. We'll take a couple of questions or comments if you have any. Obviously, we could discuss these topics all night, but I won't keep you long. Please, if there are any brief questions or comments?

A question about the distinction between direct and gradual paths... Could you give an example of what you mean by direct?

The comment refers to Dzogchen being described as a direct path while the Theravadan path is characterized as gradual. I've also heard it said within the Tibetan tradition that there's a sutra path considered gradual, while Dzogchen is considered more direct. This isn't an area I know extensively, so it might be better to ask Rinpoche about it.

I will discuss tomorrow the birth of the tantras—of which Dzogchen is one practice—and the foundational attitude in the tantras. That will give a taste of this directness, but I'll save that exploration for tomorrow.

Faith and Questions

"What's your faith in me?" The comment was that Nagarjuna may be claimed by both the Mahayanas and the Theravadans. I agree. I'm going to talk about Nagarjuna tomorrow night. His central work, the *Mula Madhyamaka Karika*, Root Verses on the Middle Way, has almost no uniquely Mahayana vocabulary. Virtually the whole vocabulary is in terms of language that the Buddha himself used. So it fits very well in the Theravadan line of understanding.

Understanding the Abhidhamma

The question is about the proper understanding of the Abhidhamma. It's definitely acknowledged that the things that are called the ultimate truths are impermanent and arising and passing. The practitioners of Abhidhamma were saying that these things called ultimates were actually just the ultimate in experience. They said that they were conditioned phenomena, but that they were, this is as far as we could go in experiencing them.

I've always kind of bristled a little when I hear people say, "Oh, you know, they're making it atomistic and they're saying these things are ultimate." I think what happened was that some later practitioners made more of the Abhidhamma than was inherent in it. I think there's a way to hold the Abhidhamma model in a wise light where there's no conflict with the suttas in any way.

But I think that what happened was that later philosophers and practitioners became so fixated on the reality of, for instance, just these fifty-two mental factors. There are only fifty-two mental factors in the Abhidhamma view, no more and no less states of mind. And other kinds of parsing of reality—no moment can touch another. Mind moments are all discrete and they cannot overlap or contact one another. They're said to be discrete.

Nagarjuna's Response

So it's actually on the basis of those kinds of what I would call rigid views—or views too rigidly held—that Nagarjuna mounted his counterattack. Nagarjuna's counterattack was basically to people who were taking the Abhidhamma too literally and fixating a view that this was the only way to view reality. And in doing that, they had lost touch with the essentially empty nature of designations.

So all the things that the Abhidhamma describes, I think we have to hold as merely descriptions of reality. And when it gets taken too seriously, it's held as constituting reality. So I think that's the critique.

Okay, I'm going to liberate you for tonight. We have about half an hour for walking, stretching, and then we'll come back at nine o'clock for our last sitting of the day. Thank you.

CHAPTER 32

A Brief History of Buddhism in India - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · 1h12

In this second part of his historical overview, Guy Armstrong traces the profound transformation of Buddhism around 100 BCE with the emergence of the Mahāyāna. He explores how this movement may have grown from lay practitioners' emphasis on compassion and the shift from the Arahant ideal to the Bodhisattva path, examining the development of bodhicitta and the ten pāramīs as a framework for practice. Armstrong discusses the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras and their focus on śūnyatā (emptiness), highlighting how these texts balance affirmation and negation to cut through conceptual clinging. He presents the revolutionary philosophy of Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka school, including the radical teaching that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa have no distinction. The talk covers the Yogācāra (Cittamātra) school's contributions, including Tathāgatagarbha (Buddha-nature) and the ālaya-vijñāna (storehouse consciousness), and concludes with the emergence of Vajrayāna and Dzogchen. Throughout, Armstrong encourages practitioners to appreciate how different schools address various temperaments and spiritual needs, suggesting that philosophical views should serve awakening rather than create division.

We left our little fledgling Indian religion about 400 years old after the death of its founder, struggling with all kinds of contentious issues and the splits into eighteen different schools over various doctrinal differences. But the biggest upheaval was yet to come. Somewhere around 100 BCE, the Mahayana emerged.

The start of the Mahayana movement is really shrouded in mystery. Nobody seems to know exactly why it arose or where it came from. There are speculations that it grew out of a focus that had started to shift from monastic practice to lay practice. I think this is an interesting point. As we explore these different schools that arose in Buddhism, I'd like to encourage us to look at them from the standpoint of our own lives and hearts and understanding. What I find is that each of the schools speaks to me in a different way, and they all have something important for my overall spiritual life.

This suggestion that the Mahayana grew out of lay people's practice is very interesting to me. We are, all of us, lay people here. Sogyal Rinpoche is a lay person. For those of you who don't know, he has a wife and two children. His oldest daughter is now seventeen and is in a Buddhist nunnery in India, which is a beautiful thing. She plans to

stay there seven or eight years, he said. I think this must be every parent's dream—to have a child grow up in their footsteps. Mostly if you suggest a child go in your direction, they'll run the other way. But his daughter is a beautiful young woman.

As lay people, I think we can't withdraw from the world. We are always in contact through our work and through family with human relations. Because of this contact with human relations, we are often up against the dilemma of human suffering. Monastics can withdraw to a certain extent. Of course, then they have to live with other monastics, and that's not easy either, but they're a little bit withdrawn from some of the stress of the world. So it could be in this way that the Mahayana came out of the struggles of ordinary people like you and me and put more immediate emphasis on compassion as a direct response to the suffering that they saw around themselves.

There's another suggestion. These are all suggestions I've read from scholars, none of whom have a firm bead on the true answer. Another suggestion is that the Mahayana arose because it was not so easy to become an arahant anymore. The arahant ideal had fueled the explosion of Buddhism for many years. I'm sure you know how in the early days the Buddha would give one discourse and fifty people would become fully liberated. His third discourse, the Fire Sermon, he was addressing a group of Vedic fire worshipers of the god Agni. He gave a discourse called the Fire Sermon where he pointed out everything is burning—burning with the fire of greed, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion. On completion of that talk, all fifty people were fully liberated. As you read stories of people who came to practice with him, it happened a lot like that. They practiced for one week, two weeks, a few months—full liberation.

So the arahant ideal was strong and realizable then. You had living examples of people who in very short periods of time and moderate effort could completely wake up. But as time went on, that became less and less frequent. The Buddha even made this comment over the course of his lifetime that the quality of the practitioners as he was getting older had declined from the early days. So you can imagine after his death it became probably harder and harder to actualize the arahant ideal. There were fewer fully enlightened beings around to inspire.

There needed to be a new generative ideal, and that became the bodhisattva. Maybe we don't aim just to free ourselves in this lifetime, but we take a much more expansive view—that we aim to develop all the qualities of a Buddha over many, many lifetimes. It's said that the Buddha himself made his resolution four immeasurable eons previously and 100,000 kalpas on top of that. It took him that long to develop the qualities of heart and mind to be able to wake up fully in one lifetime.

The bodhisattva ideal then offers us a different way to view our path. Implicit within it is the notion of bodhicitta—that we carry on our own practice in order to bring enough wholesome qualities to fruition that we ourselves awaken and then can help bring others to awakening. I find this is an ideal that resonates very strongly for Westerners today. We are nominally at Spirit Rock, a Theravadan center, and yet the appeal of the bodhisattva and the quality of bodhicitta is so strong that for me it's hard to imagine teaching without them anymore. I find a great resonance with these qualities in us as laypeople today.

Another group of scholars felt that the Mahayana grew as a backlash to the Abhidhamma—that the Abhidhamma had gotten too dry, analytical, intellectual, divorced from heart qualities and the immediacy of liberation. The Mahayana was a way to bring that back to the center of the teachings.

In whatever way it grew, it grew as a very significant movement. Some suggest that it started in southern India, but I don't think there's clarity even about that. But it clearly grew and spread over the whole of India because there was something so powerful about it.

It's interesting to reflect how this bodhisattva ideal sprang to the center at this time period because it's not as though this is a new idea. Siddhartha Gautama was the bodhisattva in his lifetime and previous lifetimes who became the Buddha of our historical era.

All his followers knew that. He alluded to his previous lives throughout his teaching career. Yet throughout the entire Pali Canon, there is not a single record of Gautama Buddha recommending the bodhisattva path to any other practitioner. I find this quite remarkable. So either he did recommend it, perhaps on an individual basis, and it never got recorded because it wasn't considered a public teaching, or he simply never recommended it—leaving it up to individuals to recognize the possibility and make their own resolution.

There is a story in the Pali Canon that describes how the Buddha we know received his initial inspiration, and I'd like to share it because it illuminates another important aspect of the Mahayana. Four immeasurable eons and 100,000 kalpas ago, there was said to be an ascetic named Sumedha who had been practicing quite intensely. On this particular day, he was planning to attend a discourse by the Buddha of that era, whose name was Dipankara.

On his way to the teaching, Sumedha caught sight of the Buddha Dipankara and was so moved by his nobility, radiance, and dignified bearing that he experienced a profound shift. In that moment, he no longer wanted to become enlightened simply as Sumedha. Instead, he gave up his own immediate awakening to aspire toward becoming a Buddha in a future era. He made this aspiration in the presence of Dipankara, who read his thoughts and affirmed that Sumedha would indeed continue in his growth to become a future Buddha.

The text tells us that if Sumedha had proceeded to listen to Dipankara's teachings that day, he was spiritually ripe and would have attained full enlightenment. But he willingly gave that up. He then retired to a cave for meditation and reflection, contemplating what he would need to cultivate in order to prepare himself for future Buddhahood. The list he developed became known as the Ten Paramitas.

Interestingly, the Theravadan texts enumerate ten paramitas, while the Mahayana tradition lists six. The Mahayana list isn't simply a subset of the Theravadan version—they differ somewhat in their specifics. Nonetheless, these paramitas represent qualities of heart and mind that can be developed both through formal meditation practice and through engaged living in the world. This framework fits beautifully with lay life, unlike other traditional lists such as the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, which develop most effectively only in intensive retreat practice.

The paramitas include qualities like generosity, ethical conduct, patience, and equanimity—virtues we can cultivate whether in retreat or in the midst of daily life. These became the structural foundation for the Mahayana path and form the heart of Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life.

The other crucial element the Mahayana brought to prominence was placing the notion of emptiness at the very center of its philosophical framework. The concept of emptiness wasn't new—it appears throughout the early texts, the Pali Canon, and the teachings of the other eighteen schools of Buddhism. However, it wasn't given such central importance. More commonly, the Buddha spoke of what he called the three characteristics of conditioned existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. These occupied the central position in the early teachings.

These three characteristics can be understood as aspects of emptiness, and the Buddha did indeed use the term "emptiness" to describe both the emptiness of self and the emptiness of phenomena. Both concepts appear in the early texts, but they weren't positioned as the primary organizing principle.

The first texts to present emptiness in this new, central way were the Prajnaparamita Sutras, which began appearing between 100 BCE and 50 CE, right around the turn of that millennium. Much of my commentary on the Mahayana draws from the work of translator Edward Conze, a distinguished British scholar who translated most of the Prajnaparamita texts. He maintained great sympathy for the Mahayana—these translations represented, in many ways, the crown of his life's work. Yet I appreciate his balanced perspective on all schools of Indian Buddhist thought.

Conze's assessment is that there was nothing entirely new in the early Mahayana teachings on emptiness, compassion, or the possibility of becoming a bodhisattva. As he puts it, there was simply a "new emphasis on commonly accepted traditional material." Nevertheless, this reconfiguration—the centrality given to compassion and emptiness—created a sufficiently distinct flavor that the Mahayana emerged as a recognizably new school. The Prajnaparamita writings crystallized these differences in viewpoint.

Prajnaparamita means, as you likely know, the perfection of wisdom or the transcendent quality of wisdom. It represents one of the paramitas in both Theravada and Mahayana traditions. In the sutras, it's viewed as an innate capacity that each of us already possesses—a subtle but significant shift from some of the original texts. This wisdom is sometimes described as the mother of all Buddhas because it's the factor of wisdom inherent in every mind that enables awakening.

Prajnaparamita takes a feminine form, and you can see her represented in the statue at the back of our meditation hall. Typically, we place her on the front altar alongside the Buddha because we appreciate the balance of masculine and feminine principles this represents.

One time a Theravadan monk came in, looked at that assortment and said, "Oh, Mr. and Mrs. Buddha." So for that retreat, we moved her away. This retreat, a little more traditional, just the Buddha is up front.

Just another side note, an interesting side note on Prajnaparamita. I've read from a Tibetan scholar and I've also heard Rinpoche say that Rigpa is considered identical with Prajnaparamita.

Now, the Prajnaparamita Sutras took an interesting form. They have the Buddha delivering most of them as though they were delivered by the historical Buddha. The Heart Sutra, for instance—the Buddha makes a comment. He's not the main speaker, but he makes a comment. But it's set on a classical location from the Pali texts, which is

Vulture's Peak in Rajgir. It's a place where the historical Buddha delivered a lot of discourses. So the impression is given that these are also the words of the historical Buddha.

And if you ask a traditional Mahayana follower, in Asia particularly, they will tell you that, oh yes, the Mahayana sutras, Prajnaparamita sutras, and so forth, were delivered by the historical Buddha, but to a different group than the Pali suttas. The Pali suttas were delivered to people of lesser capacity because they really couldn't get it. And these pithy teachings were delivered to the people of higher capacity. And that's why they're separate and why they don't appear in the Pali canon.

Western scholars say there is no evidence for that. Western scholars say that these texts were composed by unknown authors—again, the kind of mystery of the evolution of the Mahayana in the period between about 150 BCE and 50 CE. They say that there is no record of any Mahayana schools between the death of the Buddha and this period of around 100 BCE.

And some of the records that they look at, just because you might be curious—they looked at the words that were written on the scrolls or the pillars of King Asoka. He planted pillars all around India that carried Dharma messages. And they sometimes mentioned different schools that were local to that area. There's no mention of a school that fits the Mahayana. There were also records kept from donations by kings to religious groups. And so it enumerates some of the eighteen schools of early Buddhism, but there are no records of Mahayana schools.

So the scholars that I've read say there's not even any controversy about the fact that these sutras were written later, authored later. But they put them in the mouth of the Buddha to give them authenticity, I believe, and to make them appear as original.

The early Prajnaparamita Sutras have one particular focus, which is ultimate truth. Over and over and over again, they are statements of the nature of ultimate truth. The Pali texts have mostly teachings about gradual path, developing, cultivating, application of practice. The Mahayana Sutras go back over and over again to the ultimate.

This is also from Conze: "The lengthy writings on perfect wisdom are one long declamation in praise of the absolute. Everybody knows, of course, that nothing can usefully be said about the absolute. This had prompted the Theravadans to keep silent, or at least nearly silent about it. The Mahayanas, on the other hand, consider everything that might reasonably be said about it and then expressly reject it as untrue and inadequate."

So I love this description. It kind of explains where the paradox comes from in our tradition. And if you listen to Zen teachings, you know they are full of paradox. Zen basically built a dynasty on paradox and the apparent contradictions between the conventional truth of things and the ultimate truth. If you answer from the conventional, the Roshi will show you the ultimate. If you answer from the ultimate, he'll show you the conventional so that you don't get stuck in adhering to either one.

So I love the way that this plays out, for example, in the Heart Sutra, the combination of the affirmation and negation that is in the Heart Sutra. In a lot of Japanese monasteries, this is chanted three times a day with meals. And the chant of the Heart Sutra includes things like the negation of a lot of common doctrine.

One of the lines is, "no form, no feeling, no perception, no formations, no consciousness," which you'll probably recognize as the five aggregates. Then it goes on, "no ignorance and so on up to no end of ignorance," which you probably recognize as the chain of dependent origination in forward order—ignorance creating suffering, and then backward order to end of suffering leading to end of ignorance.

So what's so curious about the Heart Sutra is it affirms the basic tenets of classical Buddhism. So they're in people's minds as the sutra is chanted, and then it negates them. So it says, yeah, here are the teachings, and you get familiar because you're chanting them all the time, but then it takes them away.

So I think this is a beautiful technique. It exposes the practitioner to the basic teachings, and then it negates them to drop the practitioner into emptiness and cut through any clinging—clinging to view, clinging to doctrine.

So one of the interesting flavors you get moving from the Theravada worldview to the Mahayana worldview is you move from kind of a human realm into an archetypal realm.

When you read the stories of the Buddha in the Pali Discourses, you encounter a very human portrait of the man. He had to work with kings who were often in conflict with one another, or the Sangha wouldn't have been supported. He had troublemakers in his community. He had an angry cousin who tried to kill him on a couple of different occasions. When he first awakened, as I think Rinpoche mentioned yesterday, he contemplated not teaching at all. What he said about this was, "If I teach, I think no one will understand it, and that would be a vexation for me." That's a remarkably human emotion to express.

On another occasion, he was visiting a group of monks at a location called Kosambi. The monks were in a very tense period of conflict, having separated into two factions. I don't even remember what they were arguing about, but they were butting heads in quite a mean-spirited way. The Buddha was drawn in and tried to make peace, attempting to get the two factions to drop their complaints and become harmonious, but he was unable to succeed. What he said at the end was, "This is too much of a vexation for me," and he withdrew. Even the Buddha couldn't heal the split within his own sangha.

Late in life, as he was traveling around the countryside on his way to the Parinirvana, he would arrive at a town with his attendant, Ananda, and say, "My back is aching tonight. I need to rest. Ananda, you give the Dharma talk." And the Buddha would go off and rest. You see these very human sides of him in the Pali texts, in the early texts.

When you move into the Mahayana texts, it shifts into a much more archetypal realm. You enter realms of great cosmology and vast expanses of time and space. Let me read a brief excerpt from the Avatamsaka Sutra, The Flower Ornament Sutra, to give you a flavor of this Mahayana vision:

"At that time, the Buddha's lion seat, its round platform of exquisite flowers and many jewels, its base, steps, doors, and all its embellishments, each produced as many great bodhisattvas as there are atoms in a Buddha land. Their names were Oceanic Wisdom, Sovereign King of Occult Powers, Thunder Shaking All, Topknot of Light of Many Jewels, Bold Intelligence of the Sun of Knowledge..."

There's no more Sariputta and Moggallana in there.

"At the same time that they appeared, these bodhisattvas each produced clouds of offerings—clouds of flowers, of all jewels, clouds of all different fragrances, of lotus blossoms, clouds of orbs of jeweled light, clouds of fragrant flames of boundless realms, clouds of jewel-like light spheres from the treasury of the sun..."

That kind of Buddha doesn't get a backache.

It's fascinating. You receive this very inspiring, vast, imaginative view of the cosmos, which offers a perspective on our human life and our work within it. But at the same time, you lose something of the rooted, bare reality of human existence in these sutras.

Another quality of the early Mahayana texts—I'll again let Conze speak to it—he says another characteristic as the Mahayana sutras evolved was an increasing spirit of sectarianism. This is where you begin to feel the tension between the new school that was

emerging and the schools that were already established. The Mahayanas criticized the existing schools for being too self-absorbed, too selfish, too dry, too withdrawn. Again, you can sort of see the lay-monastic flavor in that way of looking.

As the sutras were expounded, some of the early disciples who were very well respected in the Pali texts became the whipping boys in the Mahayana sutras. They became the butt of the jokes. In the Prajnaparamita sutras, it's typically Sariputta who becomes the object of gentle condescension. I mentioned he was the chief disciple in terms of wisdom in the classical texts, but here he becomes the one who needs to be educated because he doesn't quite grasp the new teachings.

In the Prajnaparamita Sutras, the person who most often delivers the message to educate Sariputta is another bhikkhu named Subhuti. Subhuti appears in the classical texts, but he doesn't figure very prominently. The reason he becomes so elevated in the early Mahayana is that he was the Buddha's foremost disciple in loving-kindness. As the quality of heartfulness and compassion became elevated, so Subhuti became elevated as the exemplar of that.

A controversy then arose about what to call the new schools. In the beginning, the new school was called, quite logically I think, the Bodhisattvayana—a name we don't hear very much anymore, but it was the first term that emerged. The old schools were called Sravakayana. Sravaka is a Sanskrit term; the Pali word is savaka, found often in the original Pali texts, meaning "listener." So the disciples of the Buddha were called the savakasangha, the assembly or sangha of those who listened—meaning in this case, listened to the Buddha. You'll hear this in Pali chants: "supatipanno bhagavato savakasangho," the sangha of listeners. This term was applied to the early schools.

But in not too long a time, it evolved into the terms we have today: Mahayana on the one hand and correspondingly Hinayana. I don't think the term Hinayana was invented by the Sravakas themselves. The Mahayanas applied that term to the earlier schools in a somewhat pejorative sense.

This division between Mahayana and Hinayana has persisted to this day. You'll still hear practitioners of Mahayana traditions refer to Theravadans as Hinayanas, likely because there has been so little genuine dialogue between these schools over the centuries. Just to set the record straight, we prefer to be called Theravadans.

Of course, the Theravadans couldn't let it rest there either, so they developed their own counter-term for the Mahayanas. They called them Vaitulikas, meaning "illusionists." I won't delve into that any further.

From this early Mahayana tradition emerged one of the towering figures in all of Buddhism—perhaps as an individual second only to the Buddha himself. This was a man named Nagarjuna. Not much is known of his life; he lived sometime around the first century CE. I consider him the greatest philosopher in the entire Buddhist tradition after the Buddha.

His key work is called the *Mula Madhyamaka Karika*, or *Root Verses on the Middle Way*. It comprises twenty-seven chapters, each taking a different aspect of life and teaching to reveal where conception tends to form a sense of solidity around the existence of that area—and then cutting it away through rigorous analysis so that we are brought back to the point of emptiness.

He begins with simple things like moving and acting. Is there a doer separate from the action being done? Is there a walker separate from the walking? This isn't too radical—the early schools had this kind of outlook as well. But then he applies this same analysis directly to the Buddha's teachings themselves.

So if you thought you were going to find relief from emptiness by taking refuge in the path, Nagarjuna cuts that out from under you too. Basically, everywhere the mind turns to find some ground, his dialectical inquiry cuts yet again, until finally every place you could go to rest or reify has been taken away.

I think that's both the purpose and the power of his writing—it leads us nowhere else but to emptiness, because any concept we could cling to gets dismantled somewhere along the way.

The philosophical school formed from his teachings is called the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way school, and it remains prevalent in virtually all Mahayana traditions today. He laid a foundation that still endures. All the Tibetan schools revere him for his contribution. In fact, he's probably the single most important philosophical figure in the Gelug school—he's at the very heart of their view of reality.

Let me share a few passages from this pivotal work. There are several good English translations available. If you're just beginning and want something more poetic, Stephen Batchelor's translation is recommended. If you're more philosophically inclined and ready for serious study, Jay Garfield's translation is excellent.

One of the verses states: "Emptiness stops conceptual proliferation." This is remarkably similar to something Rinpoche said this morning when he explained that one meaning of the word *dzog* or *dzogpa* is "end"—and in the practice of Dzogchen, fixa-

tions come to an end. This same principle appears in Nagarjuna: when we see the emptiness of things as they actually are, we don't tend to spin off into elaborating thoughts.

Another passage declares: "That to which language refers is denied." This is quite a strong statement. That to which language refers—things like floor, chair, mat—is denied. There's no real object there. How about person? How about sentient being? How about suffering? How about the path itself?

"That to which language refers is denied, because an object experienced by the mind is denied." Nothing ever exists firmly enough to be truly called an object. Things appear only fleetingly, and there's no solid existence there. We cannot say there really is such a thing as an object.

He continues: "The unborn and unceasing nature of reality is comparable to nirvana." This is a radical statement—the very nature of reality is comparable to nirvana.

Normally reality is considered as more like samsara. But Nagarjuna says because it cannot really ever be said to have been born, it can also be said to pass away. Therefore, all things are unborn and unceasing. That which is unborn and unceasing is nirvana. So the nature of reality is like that of nirvana.

Then he elaborated this one other step: Samsara does not have the slightest distinction from nirvana. Nirvana does not have the slightest distinction from samsara. This really opens the doorway for the non-dual. This is the first pointing in any literature that I know of to the ultimate non-duality—that between samsara, the condition one might wish to move out of, and nirvana, the goal to which one might wish to move.

This sort of laying of the foundation, although I don't believe he used the word non-dual, set the stage for the elaboration of the non-dual. The first appearance of which I know in literature is in the Vimalakirti Sutra, which has a whole chapter on non-duality and different ways to view non-duality.

So Nagarjuna was a brilliant, creative, powerful force in Buddhism. The school of the Madhyamaka gained great weight over the centuries. But as was commented this morning, one of the shortcomings is because they were so involved in cutting, cutting, cutting, taking away, taking away, taking away, they didn't put forth any of their own positive teachings. And that's why sometimes other schools will look at this school and say it's a little nihilistic. All it does is take away. It doesn't give us anything to put our faith in or move forward into.

In fact, Nagarjuna himself embraced all of the Buddha's teachings, so that is implicit in his argument. So it's truly not nihilistic, but that's the criticism that other schools will make of it—that it's not positive enough.

Somebody commented last night that Nagarjuna has been claimed as a Mahayanist. Is that actually the case? From my point of view, not necessarily. The language that he used in this root text is completely open to both Theravada and Mahayana views. His use of the word emptiness is more complete than you find in the early texts, but it's just an elaboration. It's not really a new pointing. There's not a single mention in this key text of the word bodhisattva, for instance. There's very little stress on compassion or the paramitas. So it is a text that could fit very comfortably right into the Pali Canon. And I think some Theravadans are beginning to appreciate this now and to begin to claim Nagarjuna as their own. Because he was so early in the Mahayana, it's hard to know whether he was coming from a Theravada or a Mahayana viewpoint. But he's had tremendous impact on the tradition, particularly in the Mahayana.

So this opening of the equality of samsara and nirvana really lays the groundwork for the next major school that comes into Mahayana, the next major school in India, which is that of the Yogacara. Yogacara doesn't mean a whole lot by itself—it just means the conduct of union. But they're much better known by their central doctrine, which is Chittamatra or mind only. So this is the same as the mind only school that Rinpoche was talking about this morning.

There are a few kind of central theses in the Yogacara philosophy. The first is that of Buddha nature. They were the first to clearly enunciate this teaching. In Sanskrit, the words are tathagatagarbha, which literally means the womb of the tathagatas. So they considered that this innate purity is the birthplace of the Buddhas, somewhat similar to the Prajnaparamita pointing. But the term didn't originally use the word nature. Just like prajnaparamita, it's a very feminine evocation. And it didn't get called nature until the concept migrated to China. Somewhere in China, the translation turned into nature. Then some teacher who was translating Asian concepts to Western in the last 100 years began to use the term Buddha nature. I can't remember who did that. So now that's what's come down to us.

But remember that that's not the way that it was originally stated. Buddha womb would be a clearer way to state it—our Buddha womb. But it does inhere in each of us. It is identical with the concept of the three kayas—the dharmakaya, the sambhogakaya, and the nirmanakaya, which we've been chanting, which I think Rinpoche will explain more about in the next day or two.

Another key feature of the Chittamatra philosophy was an attempt to answer the same question that the Sarvastavadins tried to answer: where are your karmic seeds? Remember the Sarvastavadins tried to answer it by saying that past and future are both existent now? The Chittamatrans answered it by saying, oh, they're in a different layer of the mind. And they created or assumed or discovered, I don't know which—

another layer of consciousness that they say holds the karmic seeds, called the alaya-vijnana, the storehouse consciousness or ground consciousness.

Actually, in their system, it's considered the eighth layer. The seventh consciousness is considered to be, I think it's mana-vijnana. Does anybody know, is that the right designation for the seventh? Seventh. And the idea of that, as I understand it, is that that is where the ongoing ego sort of continues from.

So these two extra consciousnesses, in addition to the five physical consciousnesses and the mind consciousness, help explain how things happen that otherwise were hard to explain, such as the continuation of the sense of self and the continuation of karmic seeds. So these are all part of Yogacara.

They also invented the term of the three turnings of the wheel, which you may have heard. So this comes out of Chittamatra philosophy. They say the first turning of the wheel was the Buddha's first teaching of the Four Noble Truths. It happened in Sarnath shortly after his awakening. The discourse in which that teaching was given is known as Dhammacakkha-pavatana-sutta, the discourse on setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma. So that's where this concept of the Dhamma wheel and the turning of the wheel comes from.

Then they said the second turning of the wheel was the Prajnaparamita Sutras with the focus on emptiness. And they considered that their teachings, specifically on Buddha nature and the three kayas, were the third turning of the wheel. So if you hear this phrase, three turnings of the wheel, that's specifically from the Chittamatrins.

They became a very influential school also because they became the textual basis for a lot of later developments, including, to some extent, their influence on Dzogchen, Mahamudra, Chan, and Zen. So although Rinpoche said their view is not identical with that of Dzogchen, it provided a philosophical basis for some of the Dzogchen view.

The Chittamatrins peaked in their influence and popularity around the fourth century. So they continued, but they kind of built up and then their influence went on, but they themselves didn't evolve much more. And in fact, philosophically, this is the end to the development of Buddhism in India. It didn't evolve philosophically beyond this school, apart from small variations.

There was a little discussion this morning about the relationship between the Dzogchen view and the Madhyamaka view. And I was curious about this, so I asked Mingyur Rinpoche when he was here on his first teaching trip to the West. It was almost 10 years ago now, I think. Mingyur Rinpoche is Tsoknyi Rinpoche's younger brother, who's now also a wonderful teacher.

He had just done a retreat in Santa Rosa and my wife and I had the privilege of taking him around a little bit to see some of Marin County. We thought he would enjoy the sights and we had a translator who was Tashi, who many of you know from Tsoknyi Rinpoche's monastery. So we thought we'll take him up to the top of Mount Tam, a beautiful day and beautiful viewpoint.

And as we were driving along, I tried to make a little conversation. And I asked Rinpoche how he found the West. And he said, "Square and clean." And that was it. He didn't elaborate any further. He lived in India, so I could sort of understand why it would look square and clean to him. Didn't elaborate anymore.

Well, I tried another time, and I said, "Rinpoche, do you think Tibetans are happier than Westerners?" He said, "Yes." Didn't elaborate anymore.

So we got up to the top of Mount Tam and we were walking around the path at the top, looking at the view of San Francisco and the coastline. There was not much conversation happening. So I thought, I'll try a different tack. I said, "Rinpoche, what is the difference between the Madhyamaka view and the Dzogchen view? The view of Nagarjuna's school and the view of Dzogchen."

Then his eyes lit up. He said, "Ah!" And he started talking. He said, "The first thing you have to understand is there are 18 different kinds of emptiness." And then he talked and talked and he wanted to sit down. So we sat down right on the path. It's a path that only two people can walk by. But four of us sat down and we had about a 10-minute conversation about the difference between these two views.

And what he said in the end was that the Madhyamakas believe that the Dzogchenpas believe that something exists, but we don't actually believe that it exists. Can you get that? It's this emptiness-luminosity union. The Madhyamakas believe that the mind-only school or the Dzogchen school or somebody

is attributing more reality to that than they actually are. And that's the basis of the dispute. But in Minju Rinpoche's understanding, the Dzogchen school isn't attributing any more reality to that. So they're off the hook.

But there's a beautiful way that the Yogacarans responded to these attacks. They were basically unfazed by the criticism. And they said, "We're not worried about the theory. It's all constructed, and it all dissolves when you realize emptiness." This is a wonderful view, I think, to hold to.

When we talk about how to appreciate the spirit of these different schools in our own practice, this is one I've come back to again and again. Because the Madhyamakas, truth to tell, are not very far apart from some Theravadans. Practitioners who follow the Abhidhamma and the Visuddhimagga particularly would level the same criticism of the Yogacarans: they're positing something that doesn't truly exist.

I was teaching one part of a three-month course at a center in Massachusetts, and this fellow knew that I was practicing Dzogchen and sometimes taught with a Dzogchen master. He said to me, "How can you do that? Because it says very clearly in the words of the Buddha that if you begin to propagate the false dharma, then it will start to erode the true Dhamma in the world, and the words of the Buddha will be lost."

And what I said to him is, "Well, I don't know about that, but this method really works."

I find that a very helpful thing to come back to again and again. Any philosophical view that is put out, ask yourself: Number one, do you really know how it is? Do you know from your own direct experience that emptiness and clarity are indivisible and the way, the extent to which they exist or clarity exists and the extent to which it doesn't? I think Rinpoche said it's only when one has realized emptiness directly for oneself that one could understand that. Even if one has realized emptiness, one's memory may not be so good.

So I think it's important to keep asking on these philosophical questions: Do I know that absolutely from my own immediate experience? Or am I taking that as someone's teaching, someone else's view that I'm adopting? And if I don't know it absolutely from my own experience, then there's a possibility that both views could have some validity. Maybe not that either one has to be absolutely right, but they're both different ways of validly describing some truthful experience.

Then, if we're willing to live with a little bit of ambiguity, we can say, "Oh, could this view be useful in my practice?" Because all these views are meant to lead to our awakening. They're not meant for us to take philosophical stands on and make arguments about. They're meant to be helpful to lead to awakening, nothing else.

So, can I make use of this view? If you can, then it's a useful and skillful means for you. That's the way I approach the different views that I hear. If I can learn something from all of them, then I'll use them. But I don't have to make a final judgment until I know in my direct experience the way things are.

So one of the things I appreciate a lot in Buddhism is lots of different schools, and therefore they suit different people, different personalities. Some people are drawn to the Yogacara school because it has a great basis for faith. Like Rinpoche, I also feel Westerners need a basis for faith. We've lost our ability to believe in anything transcendent, anything that has the nature of ultimacy, through our intellect. And this presents a very refined philosophical exposition that gives a basis for faith in something ultimate. I find its impact on Westerners very uplifting—gives confidence, hope, strength. A very helpful view to have.

But other people are so logical, like Nagarjuna was, that they absolutely need to cut away anything that they can't directly experience. And then it doesn't work so well for them. So for them, just resting in the quality of emptiness is the useful way forward—not taking up any other view, just emptiness of direct experience. That's useful for them.

So different approaches suit different people. We kind of have a joke in our scene. Of the three major schools of Buddhism that are around in the West today, different people tend to be drawn to them differently. And the joke in our scene is that the artists go to Tibetans, the carpenters go to Zen, and the therapists go to Vipassana.

A little overgeneralized, but you can get the flavor.

So on the whole, Guenther says that the Theravadans tend to be a little more rational and the Mahayanas tend to be a little more mystical. This is a distinction I do see in what draws different people. But then he qualified that. He said it's because they're not exclusively one way or the other. The difference is really between the rational mysticism of Mahayana and the mystically tinged rationalism of Theravada.

They had much common ground in the middle ranges of the path where the ascetic strove for emancipation in a quite rational and business-like manner. That is, if you look at practitioners from the outside, you may not see much difference in what they were doing, but a little bit of difference in personality, and so a little bit of difference in emphasis and philosophy. But the basic work of liberating the mind looks much the same.

Again, the two have a little bit different perspective on how the path unfolds. The Mahayana tends to view it from the point of view of intrinsic purity, which is only covered by obscurations. The obscurations need only to be removed like clouds parting so that the sun can shine through. The Theravada looks more from the point of view of the defilements as being front and center—how do we work with the defilements in such a way as to eliminate them? What this involves is building up strong qualities of mind, the beautiful qualities of mind: mindfulness, concentration, equanimity, loving-kindness, and compassion that can release the defilements.

So do you start from the purity going out, or do you start from the defilements working against them to develop strength? From the point of view of moment-by-moment experience, it may not feel very different, but the flavor is a little different for the practitioner. Just the perspective the practitioner has on their practice may feel a little different.

As Shabkar taught, "Butter is made of the essence of milk, but if the milk isn't churned, the butter won't form"—the butter being the awakened mind, milk being where we are today. In either case, there's a lot of work to be done.

Another thing I was curious about: when the Mahayana came, did the Hinayana schools wither away? They didn't. In many cases, the two lived together in shared monasteries quite happily, practicing side by side. Then there were other monasteries dedicated to one or the other. A Chinese pilgrim who went to India around 400 CE reported that about 60% of the monasteries he found were early school, about 24% were Mahayana, and 16% were mixed, where the two were living together. Again, a later visitor, a pilgrim in the 7th century, came back and reported that the majority of monasteries were early schools, and a minority were Mahayana at that time.

Then came one final development, a big development: the Vajrayana. This is, to me, a very interesting story. I found this story mostly in a terrific book called *Indestructible Truth*, written by Reggie Ray, who's a student of Trungpa Rinpoche and a professor at Naropa for a long time, and now a dharma teacher in his own right. *Indestructible Truth* is a really wonderful overview of Tibetan Buddhism. If you're new to the subject, it's a really good way to get a read on the whole range of systems in there.

The emergence of the Vajrayana is not a new school philosophically. There's no new philosophical ground being broken, but it's the development of an incredibly powerful bag of tricks—or as one of my friends put it, incredible implements in the technology of consciousness. Tantra and Vajrayana are more or less synonymous, as I understand. So if we talk about tantric teachings in Buddhism or Vajrayana, we're talking about the same body of techniques.

But they actually started in Hindu schools and not in Buddhist. They started in the Hindu worship of the god Shiva. Shiva had been an old fertility god going way, way back, but the growth of Brahmanic culture overshadowed Shiva for a long time. Shiva was not part of the Brahmanic culture. As Buddhism started to grow up in India, it started to wear away some of the tight hold that the Brahman caste had, and this allowed the influence of Shiva to come back up into the culture.

So on an informal basis, people in probably villages all over the country started doing forms of worship to the god Shiva. The style was that they would visualize themselves as Shiva or as his female consorts, goddesses, and dance together. In this visualization, imagining themselves as the god, they would start to feel that they were channeling Shiva's energy or the energy of the goddesses who were his female counterparts. This started to be enacted in a ritual way and was called deva yoga—union with the god in the Hindu tradition.

Then some of these practitioners said, "Hmm, this is pretty good stuff. I'm feeling a lot of energy from this. Pretty strong, pretty powerful. What if we actually enacted the intercourse of Shiva and his consort?" Well, this was not a public kind of thing to do, but they went off into private settings and began to enact ritual intercourse between those who were visualizing themselves as Shiva and those who were visualizing themselves as Shiva's consort or goddess. This became a powerful way to practice.

Eventually this drew Buddhist practitioners as well. The Buddhist practitioners started to understand how they could use the bodily energies that were generated either through the visualization or through intercourse to speed their journey to enlightenment. Some of the tantric practices are clearly about generating different kinds of bodily energy and using that generated energy for awakening—not simply for pleasure. The purpose is not pleasure; the purpose is awakening.

So this began to be taken up in Buddhist schools, both the visualization and the ritual intercourse. What do you suppose the classical monks and nuns thought about this? They were not too keen.

They faced a dilemma: either lose all their practitioners to this vibrant new scene that was far more dynamic than what was happening in the celibate monasteries, or make some adaptation. So they chose to adapt, incorporating the visualization aspects of these practices while bringing them into the celibate monastic context.

Since that time, this has been part of the Buddhist tradition called Vajrayana. It can involve either visualization or actual sexual union—both threads have continued down to the present day.

In the Tibetan schools, the Geluk tradition, of which the Dalai Lama is representative, has tended to favor the celibate monastic path ever since the time of Tsongkhapa. They have maintained their inclination toward monastic discipline and celibacy, so they tend to use only the visualization form. But the other schools, particularly the Kagyu and Nyingma, employ both the visualization form and the ritual enactment of intercourse for non-monastics. Monks in those traditions may also follow a completely celibate path, but lay practitioners are able to use both forms of tantric practices.

There are a range of practices that constitute the Vajrayana. I don't know enough about them to speak knowledgeably, but obviously the visualizations of deities, the mantras, and the mandalas are all part of that system. Dzogchen is a tantric practice. In the Nyingma school, there are considered to be six levels of tantric practice, many having to do with bodily energy—altering and raising bodily energy. Dzogchen is considered the highest of the six tantras and is called Ati Yoga in that system. So Dzogchen is indeed a Vajrayana practice, a tantric practice.

One of the most beautiful things that can be said about these practices—and you'll especially appreciate this as Rinpoche unfolds the meditation instructions over the next day or two—is that the Vajrayana takes as the basis of the path the awakened mind itself. Let me say that again because it's very significant: the Vajrayana takes as the basis of the path the awakened mind.

Someone asked a question yesterday about a direct path versus a gradual path. I think possibly one reason Dzogchen might be considered a direct path is that we start from the point of view of awakening and then simply don't let go of it. That will be the instruction, essentially, in Dzogchen meditation. We start with awakening as closely as we can intuit it, and that becomes our path. You'll hear more about this, but I wanted to illustrate how dramatic the Vajrayana approach is, how revolutionary, and point to some of the power inherent in it.

So when did Dzogchen come along? Dzogchen was a later development. The story of its transmission, which I repeat from a scholar named John Reynolds—a Westerner, I believe British, who speaks Tibetan and is a scholar of the old texts—says that from what he understands, Dzogchen originated in a being named Samantabhadra. Samantabhadra is a deity in the Vajrayana system. Let me read you who Samantabhadra is:

Samantabhadra is the ultimate Dharmakaya aspect of Buddhahood, beyond conception by the finite intellect, being without limitation and all-pervading like infinite space.

You got him? So this is where the Dzogchen view originated.

He then transmitted it to a being who was only slightly less connected to our realm, slightly more connected to our realm, named Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva is one of the key deities in the Nyingma lineage—he's the statue behind me on the altar in front of the Buddha—also a being of great purity. This is a description of Vajrasattva: he represents the principle of Buddha enlightenment which is beyond the cycle of conditioned existence, beyond all time and history. So Vajrasattva also exists on a somewhat different level than you and I.

It's said that Vajrasattva transmitted the Dzogchen instructions to Garab Dorje. Garab Dorje was considered to be from Uddiyana, the same area as Padmasambhava, and the times are very tentative, but perhaps around the 6th century CE. Uddiyana, by the way—I don't know if I mentioned this the other night—is considered to be northwest of what's currently India, perhaps in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

Garab Dorje had students who included Vairochana, Vimalamitra, and Padmasambhava. It was these three who took the Dzogchen teachings into Tibet. Particularly Padmasambhava is revered as the founder of the Nyingma lineage in Tibet and the one who primarily instructed Tibetans in Dzogchen.

Interestingly, as a sort of confirmation of that time frame, Padmasambhava went into Tibet around the 8th century. Two Dzogchen texts were found in caves in China in a place called Dunhuang. If any of you have heard of it, it's an amazing archaeological find where practitioners lived for years. There are beautiful frescoes still on the walls because it's so dry—desert-like conditions have preserved the paintings. You can still visit there. Two Dzogchen texts were found in a library that was sealed in the 10th century, so there's clear evidence of Dzogchen teachings in China from the 10th century. It's believed to have been in Tibet from the 8th century.

So that brings us to where we are today—here we are with a Dzogchen master from Tibet.

Here we are today with a Dzogchen master from Tibet instructing us in these meditation practices.

To complete the story in India, as I mentioned last night, Buddhism was essentially wiped out between the 8th and 12th centuries. Invasions from the West began in the 8th century and had swept completely across the Gangetic plain by the 12th century. Buddhism disappeared from India at that time. The monasteries were destroyed, many of the monks and nuns were killed, and the texts were burned. Who knows how many irreplaceable texts were lost—all those early canons from the Sarvāstivādins and the

Sautrāntikas and so forth. All of those gone. Who knows how many Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts were lost. We rely now on the pieces that remained in Sri Lanka, Tibet, and China primarily.

So here we are today. What can we take from the past? I think we can understand that philosophical disputes are conceptual and don't need to divide us personally, that we can respond to the different points of view in the various schools and use them in our own practice and teaching. There is in the foundation of the Nikāya schools—the classical schools—very clear and concrete step-by-step instructions for a gradual path. In the Mahāyāna schools, we find deep philosophical pointings to the ultimate truth of things and inspiring visions of cosmology. And in the Vajrayāna, there is a very powerful set of tools to transform consciousness, should we wish to explore them.

I think we're very fortunate to be at a position in history when all of this is available to us. All of it is possible.

So we'll stop there.

CHAPTER 33

Mettā: Near and Far Enemies

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

In this dharma talk on mettā (loving-kindness) practice, Guy Armstrong explores the crucial teaching of near and far enemies that arise during cultivation of the brahmavihāras. Drawing on personal experience and traditional Buddhist psychology, he explains how the near enemy of mettā—attachment or conditional love—differs from unconditional loving-kindness, while the far enemy manifests as aversion, anger, or hatred.

Armstrong offers practical guidance for working with difficult emotions that surface during mettā practice, presenting four graduated approaches: allowing emotions to remain in the background while continuing with phrases, opening mindfully to let them pass through, applying compassion phrases to one's suffering, or switching to pure vipassanā investigation. He emphasizes that encountering these challenging states is not a sign of failed practice, but rather an essential part of purifying the heart.

Using the metaphor of gardening and scientific observation, Armstrong encourages practitioners to approach their hearts with patient curiosity, planting karmic seeds of wholesome intention while allowing the Dharma to bring them to fruition. He shares the inspiring example of Ajahn Jumnian, demonstrating the profound happiness possible through dedicated mettā cultivation, while remaining realistic about attachment in intimate relationships.

When I was in college, I began to get interested in Buddhism and read all the books I could get my hands on, which at that time were not very many. This is ancient history we're talking about. I was very inspired by the Buddha's degree of peace and calm, and also by the fact that somebody could be alive and not be afraid of dying. That was a revelation to me—that this was a human possibility. So I was very uplifted by the stories of practitioners and the Buddha's life.

Also at this time in my life, when I turned about twenty—I think this happens for a lot of people entering adulthood—my world really opened up in a big way. I started having very strong experiences of love. Sometimes it would happen through connections with people, sometimes through connections with nature, sometimes through music or art. But my heart was just opening in these really new and unexpected ways. It was very powerful for me.

But as strong as these experiences were, they were equally unstable and unreliable. I didn't know why they came, and I didn't know why they went away. And yet I had this deep longing to refine that field, to reconnect with that way of experiencing life. This connection became a strong motivating force in my taking up dharma practice.

As the years went by, I came to realize that one needed an open heart—which I had to do some clearing to rediscover—and one also needed to understand deeply how not to cling, what we could call the wisdom of emptiness. And then the access to love could become more available, more stable.

Rumi said that someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives. So I join you all in running toward the allure of love. It's a central factor in the Christian path and has long been recognized as a powerful force in spiritual development. In our tradition, it is the practice of loving kindness that is the most direct route to awakening this factor in our own hearts and minds.

The Buddha said—actually it wasn't the Buddha, but a later commentary written shortly after his death—that practicing loving kindness develops all seven factors of enlightenment, the forces that lead the mind into awakening. And the Buddha said that when loving kindness is developed to its fullest extent, it becomes a liberation of heart, a liberation of mind.

It's quite interesting that in our tradition we use our connection with people and other beings to open the door to this love. But as you feel it awaken, you'll find it transforms the whole world and your whole experience of life. Our avenue is through connection with people and other beings.

It's extraordinary to meet somebody who has developed this quality to a great extent. The degree to which it's possible to experience this state, you can start to feel when you're around some of these people. One master in our tradition of loving kindness is a teacher named Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian is a monk from southern Thailand, about seventy years old now. He comes to Spirit Rock about once a year. He's been doing mettā practice for a very long time, and you can feel the effect of it in his energy and his level of happiness. He always seems to be happy.

So he'd come and teach—he likes to teach. Sometimes he's around for a week or so, and someone would ask him, "Well, Ajahn Jumnian, what would you like to do today? Would you like to go see the Golden Gate Bridge, or would you like to go to the beach in Point Reyes?" And he'd say, "Is there anybody who'd like to hear the dharma?" because he really loves to teach the dharma. But he said, "If there's no one who wants to hear the dharma, I'm happy to do whatever you like. If you want to take me to the beach, you

can take me to the beach. And if nobody comes and we don't go anywhere, I'm happy to sit here because I'm always happy." And he seems to be like that. When you're in his presence, you just feel that joy that he radiates. He says that he hasn't had anger in thirty years, and it seems believable when you're in his presence. So it's a very inspiring example.

But that level of development wouldn't be possible if this seed of love wasn't already in us as part of our deepest nature, part of our human nature. So in the mettā practice, we're encouraging it to come, we're cultivating it, we're strengthening it, and we're making it arise more regularly.

We use this quality of mettā as the foundation. Once it's developed—that open-heartedness and connection with life—then when that open heart looks on suffering, the mettā simply morphs into the emotion of compassion, the second of the brahmavihāras. When that open heart looks on somebody's joy in their life, then it morphs into sympathetic joy or appreciative joy. And when the open heart can simply rest, then it stays in a balanced place, even in its awareness of all the joys and sorrows of life. And that's the brahmavihāra of equanimity. So loving kindness is the foundation of all the rest.

Once loving-kindness is developed, the others come about quite easily. So what supports the metta? What helps us develop it? I want to talk a little about how this practice works during our week together.

It's like gardening, which I'm sure many of you have reflected upon. Any spiritual practice resembles gardening. There are flowers, and there are weeds. You want to cultivate the flowers and dig out the weeds. You must be very patient and work at it day after day, maintaining real steadiness so the blooms can emerge.

Sally and I first met when we were working as gardeners in a Dharma community in England twenty-five years ago. We were doing intensive Dharma practice and gardening for the princely rate of three dollars an hour—the minimum agricultural wage in England at that time. We lived on this beautiful estate in southern England, which the owner had graciously offered as a site for our fledgling Dharma community.

Working in the garden day by day, I constantly saw images of how it mirrors meditation practice: removing weeds and planting good seeds, then nourishing those seeds. This is what we're doing with every metta phrase—planting a good seed. As we continue nourishing those seeds, in time the flower grows, the plant emerges, and the blossom blooms.

What makes it a good seed? Every phrase becomes a good seed when we say it with genuine intention. You know in Buddhism that intention is the heart of everything we do. So as we say each phrase, what is the right intention? What makes that phrase a potent seed?

The right intention is simply that we mean it. Nothing more than that. When you say a phrase with sincerity, you're planting a beautiful seed.

This practice doesn't work like a mantra where we mindlessly repeat words again and again—that has very limited effect. But anytime you can truly mean the phrase for yourself or someone else, genuinely wishing happiness, you've planted a powerful seed. In formal terms, it's called a karmic seed: an action of mind bearing the intention of loving-kindness. It's a pure and powerful thing to do.

We are gardeners in this practice, responsible for planting karmic seeds. But we are not nature. Nature is the force that waters, provides sunlight, supplies minerals in the soil, and tells that seed when to sprout and how to grow. That's not our job. Gardeners can't force those processes. Our job is simply planting seeds, providing the best conditions we can, then letting nature—or the Dharma—do the real work.

The Dharma brings these seeds to fruition in experiences of love, compassion, and joy. Our work is planting seeds as carefully as we can. If we can bring care to each moment of saying the phrase, that's a powerful seed. If we miss it one moment, we try to catch it the next. This is our practice: planting seeds and letting nature take over.

Don't worry if you're doing much planting with no sprouts yet. Gardeners must be patient. Sometimes you wait most of a growing season before the plant appears. You can't tug on that plant to make it emerge quicker—you'll break it. You must be truly allowing, which means being genuinely patient. Remember, our job is only planting seeds, not forcing results.

Don't try to force feelings from your metta practice. We often think we must try hard to make metta come, but that very trying will squeeze it off and choke its life. As Sharda said, you need a light touch and must let it come naturally.

Sometimes it feels like nothing's happening in metta practice, and that's perfectly fine. Don't worry when it feels like nothing's occurring. Someone reported yesterday that sometimes metta would come very strongly, then completely disappear as if nothing were happening, then return strongly before disappearing again. Don't be concerned about these kinds of changes.

Don't feel like it's supposed to be strong all the time because it just can't be. That's like asking for a peak experience all the time, like the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon that Sally read. The heart's rhythm is that it opens for a while and then it closes. It opens for a while and then it closes. And if we expect it to be different than that, then the head tries to put pressure on the heart and that's what causes the heart to shrink.

So I like to think of it that in this week together, this is kind of like a laboratory, a biological laboratory, where we want to learn to understand this kind of wild creature that is our heart. And we're feeding it these beautiful inclinations and beautiful suggestions, and then we just kind of want to sit back and listen and see how it responds. So if you have a child who's kind of shy or a wild animal, you know the thing to do is not stay right on top of them and put a lot of pressure because shy beings will recoil from that. But you want to give a lot of attention but in a very spacious way, and know that you're really interested, but not lean too hard.

So this is the kind of approach we want to take with our heart, to plant these great intentions and then to learn, oh, how is it going to behave? Does it have its own cycle of opening and closing? Are there conditions that make it able to open? What are the conditions that cause us to close with fear or contraction? So we just want to learn and observe all that. And the way to do it is to be like a new scientist with a really open mind discovering this new form of life which lives in us.

It may seem like one little phrase isn't very powerful. But one after another after another starts to build an incredible power. Those of you who have done vipassana retreats know that a moment of connecting with the breath feels like nothing in the beginning. So I feel a breath. So what? But then when we put one moment after another after another and we keep it going, that mindfulness, that awareness builds an incredible momentum. And in the same way in our practice of loving kindness, it's the contact with that caring, moment after moment after moment, that builds this same kind of momentum in the direction of love.

The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, 'This will come to nothing.' By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." So each phrase is just like a drop of rain. But as we keep letting them drop in, the biggest jar will eventually get filled from that.

Another reason sometimes metta feels like there's nothing happening is that we're looking for something dramatic. And sometimes metta is not very dramatic. It has a really broad range of feelings in the spectrum of metta. So you could say at the high end, there are these very strong feelings of intense love and even union with people or with nature, with the earth. And then a little down from that, there are really strong

feelings of connection and friendship, human kind of love. Down a little bit from that, there's just a mild kind of friendship of appreciating somebody at a little bit of a distance.

And then down a little bit cooler than that is just the flavor of acceptance. Anytime you can be accepting of yourself or somebody else, metta is there. Because as Sharda said last night, there's no aversion. Anytime there's the absence of aversion, there is a form of metta. And even a little cooler than acceptance is the quality of patience. You know, you may get in the food line at lunch and you really want that next dish. And somebody seems to be going really slowly. And the irritation starts to be noticed. Why can't they move a little faster? And then all of a sudden you go, oh, I can be patient. And the patience transforms that aversion into acceptance. And then even that quality of patience has the flavor of metta. So sometimes it's not very dramatic. Nonetheless, metta is there and growing any time the aversion is absent.

The practice is hard going in the early days. Again, as Sharda said last night, just saying a phrase one after another after another seems incredibly laborious sometimes. Vipassana practice has never looked so good as on a metta retreat. Because it's like, just let me rest, please. Please.

So I want to suggest a way to bring some more rest into your practice of loving kindness. You can actually bring a lot of silence into this practice. So you can play with this, and maybe I'll give these instructions again tomorrow morning. You can play with it a little bit then. Think of each phrase as having three parts. There's a part where you connect with your person, let's say your benefactor.

And so maybe you bring up an image of your benefactor, and that's step one. That's in silence. Or maybe you just say their name. That's pretty quiet, pretty easy.

Then the next step is you send the phrase to them. So that's the work. You have to turn the mind on and turn out the phrase and direct it to them. That's labor.

Then for the third step, I want to suggest come back after you say the phrase and rest in your heart center. Just bring the attention into the center of your chest and let it rest there for a moment. No words at this point. And what you pay attention to when you rest there could be the physical sensation. Also tune into the feeling that's present right then. It's almost like you're listening to the echo of that phrase.

The phrase is like offering a gift, let's say to your benefactor. And then you want to just tune in for a second. How did it feel to offer that gift? Let the phrase just resonate a little bit for you. And you might feel some kind of warmth or affection or metta there. You might feel other feelings. You might have been sending metta to your benefactor

and you become aware of some way that they've disappointed you or some difficult interaction where you felt hurt by them. And so it may bring up fear or some resentment. All of that is okay. I'll talk in a few minutes about how to work with all the other kinds of emotions that come in. But in that resting time, take time to tune in to what it is you're feeling.

So the three steps are the connection with the person, the phrase itself, and then coming into the heart center and feeling the feeling. So in actual fact, these are three different areas for mindfulness. Those of you who have a Vipassana background and have worked with mindfulness, we're not moving very far away from mindfulness. We're just choosing different things to pay attention to. So we're mindful of the connection to the person, we're mindful of the phrase, and we're mindful of the feeling that is there after we say the phrase.

You could also say that these are the three objects that make up our concentration practice. Metta is a strong concentration practice. Some of you are already starting to report this in the interviews. You can start to notice how it feels when you can string a few phrases together, how the mind collects around that and becomes quiet and a little firm. That's the feeling of concentration. So this will get stronger as the days go by because we keep coming back to these three points. The connection, the phrase, and the feeling.

All of these together—the moment of caring, the person that we feel some warmth for, the mindfulness of the present moment experience that we're having—all these are going together to create the sweet spot of meditation, where the present moment attention is developed as you've learned how to do it through mindfulness, and then it becomes suffused with the warmth of the loving-kindness.

This is the kind of balance of mind that we're looking to find through this practice in combination with the mindfulness practice. And you can think of these two, this fusing of the present moment attention with the warm feeling of the metta as a warm attention. This is really what we're trying to create. And once we find it through the metta practice, we can also find it in the mindfulness practice.

It's not to think that these two practices are really separate fundamentally. We want to shape the mind in the direction that it holds both. So that in doing the metta or doing the mindfulness, both these qualities start to come through and merge for us.

One of the images that I like to remind myself of this quality of warm attention is a story of Roberto Benigni, who was the Italian actor and director who produced the film Life is Beautiful, won an Academy Award a few years ago. He was honored after win-

ning the Academy Award by an invitation to the White House. So he came to the White House when Clinton was still president and entered the room where Clinton was waiting for him. And as soon as he got into the room, he made a dash toward the president and leapt up with his legs around Clinton's waist, hugged him and said, "I'm so happy to see you."

So this is how we can meet our experience. Breath, I'm so happy to see you. They said that Clinton's Secret Service people were freaking out because they didn't expect a bodily assault, but Clinton was totally fine with it.

Another way to say it is that our practice of mindfulness opens up this great spaciousness in our experience. A lot of people talk about that. We get space around our thoughts. We get space around our emotions. We open up to the natural space of the universe. And then the practice of loving kindness fills that space with warmth. So it's no longer a cold and forbidding void, but it's a warm container that holds us really beautifully.

This change that happens as we plant these wholesome seeds and the quality of loving kindness starts to wake up as it's nourished by the Dharma is a process that we could call cleaning up the heart, or washing out the heart, or a more technical phrase we sometimes use: purifying the heart. Because instead of our usual intentions of distractedness, of leaping into the future with worry or desire, or mulling over the past with regret or sadness—instead of those intentions taking us out—we collect the mind in the present moment and the intentions become wholesome, turning to care, wishing well for ourselves and others.

So this moment-by-moment change starts to purify, starts to clean up what's in our heart on just a moment-to-moment basis. And this reconditions us. It retrains the heart how to be in the world. So this is one aspect of the purification that happens through this practice.

Many people will report that one of the biggest things we feel coming out of a week-long retreat—really whether it's Vipassana or Metta—is that it feels like our heart has been cleaned up, has been scrubbed, and we're going back with really fresh and open and kind of childlike eyes into the world. So this is how Metta does that piece.

But there's another way too that I want to talk about, and that has to do with the way that we work with two qualities of mind that are called the near and far enemies of Metta. Each of the four Brahmaviharas has two associated states of mind that are not wholesome states called the near enemy and the far enemy. Sally may have talked about this today with compassion.

So for loving kindness, the near enemy is a state of mind that looks like Metta and smells like Metta, but when you look at it closely, it isn't Metta. And that state is attachment—liking or affection with attachment connected to it. The far enemy of loving kindness is its opposite, and that's the quality Sharda mentioned last night: aversion or hatred.

So the far enemy of each Brahmavihara is its total opposite. The near enemy is something that looks like it, that's kind of an imposter, but is an unwholesome variation of the original.

Very often as we're practicing with the Brahmaviharas, the near enemy and the far enemy will come into our experience a lot. So it's very helpful to start to learn to identify them when they come. When you take that moment and return to the heart center, ground the attention in the body and see what feeling is there, just keep an eye out if one of the near enemy appears or the far enemy appears.

So I'll talk about both of these in a little more detail. The near enemy is affection with attachment. It's a liking, but the feeling is not unconditional. We say in Metta that the caring is unconditional. In this sense, it doesn't mean that nothing can break it. Sometimes I think about Jesus as having had unconditional love because he could still have love when he was being nailed to the cross. Nothing could break, it seems, his ability to love.

This sense is not so much in that. It's just that we can care for somebody without them satisfying any particular condition first. So in that sense, we're not asking somebody to fill out a form or sign on a dotted line or be really nice to us first. We'll care for them anyway. We'll take the initiative in caring. So in that sense, loving kindness is unconditional.

But affection with attachment has a condition, and it is basically: "I'll love you if you'll love me." And when that second part of the contract isn't filled, then my love goes away.

We see this a lot in the phenomenon of romantic love, the phenomenon of falling in love with someone. There's a very strong attraction. Obviously we appreciate a lot of things about that person, but fundamentally the emphasis in romantic love or in the phenomenon of falling in love is on me. "I love you because you make me feel so good. And once you stop making me feel great, I'm not so interested in you anymore."

Metta is different because the emphasis really is on the other person's well-being. It's not fundamentally a narcissistic exchange. It's fundamentally about the other person without regard to whether it profits us or benefits us or not.

So it's sometimes hard to tease these apart in the beginning. We're so used to caring being dependent on this affection exchange that it's hard to know what the pure form of Metta is. And it's why in the beginning we recommend that you don't take a relationship partner as your benefactor. For many of you, your relationship partner may be a great benefactor in your life, but there's also liable to be some attachment, some dependency, some kind of reciprocal need in that relationship.

So in order to discover just the purer flavor of Metta, it's helpful to work first with a relationship where there's not so much expectation. And often the benefactor is relatively free of that. And then we'll move on later to a good friend, where it can be a little bit freer of that kind of expectation or attachment.

I think about the progress of romantic love, and I don't know if anybody's written a pop song exactly like this, but it could certainly be written.

The lyrics would go something like: I want you, I need you, I love you, I'll kill you if I can't have you. It's a little different from metta.

So start to tune in as you're holding your metta subjects. Can you feel sometimes a wanting of something? Can you feel a kind of neediness or an expectation or a looking for some return from the relationship? That's a sign of the near enemy being present.

Now, it's not to be judgmental about that. It's not to expect that that degree of attachment has to go away. It's just to become aware that it's present.

For instance, in our intimate relationships, we usually have quite a lot of forces come together—quite a lot of things that we want focused on that person. There is a desire for companionship. There is a wanting of affection. There is sexual desire. All different kinds of parental influences come into it.

So in my relationship with Sally, for example, I feel a lot of attachment to her. And I don't expect it to be otherwise, maybe as long as I live. It could be that I'll get really, really free and that attachment will go sometime before I die, but I don't have an expectation of that. And I know if something were to happen to her, if she were to get really ill or if she were to die, I would be devastated. So for me, that's just part of the terrain. This attachment piece is part of the terrain of having a close and committed relationship.

So I've chosen to be in that relationship. I know that there's going to be some suffering that comes as a result of my attachment in that field. And I don't think it's within my capability to completely let that go at this point in my development.

I'm just sharing from a personal outlook. I don't know anyone who is in a committed relationship that doesn't have some degree of attachment. Sometimes people can get very idealistic about Dharma language and think they should be able to be in an intimate relationship without attachment. But I haven't seen it work. Usually it means that they want something of the relationship, but they don't want the commitment piece.

Speaking broadly, I don't think it's very realistic to expect the attachment in this central area of our life to suddenly disappear while we still have ego invested in so many other areas—in sense pleasures, in our house, in our career, in having money or status or whatever. So as long as desire is operating in the mind, it's going to latch on to certain objects in our life. Relationship partners are a big one. Children are a big one. Even after children are grown and completely out of the house, and you've done most of the caring that you can for them, there's usually a strong element of attachment that continues.

So it's not something that should be judged as wrong or inappropriate at all. It's part of what we take on in living as laypeople in the world. It's just to recognize it when it's there: There is desire on my part. This desire is born of attachment, and at some point it will cause me suffering, but it's just part of the way that I'm choosing to live in this life.

So there's no need to fight with it, there's no need to judge yourself about it, and no need to push it away—just to recognize when it's there. Then, once you start to see that clearly, you can also start to see the parts of the relationship that are more purely the care for the other person's well-being.

I'll say in my relationship with Sally, one of the really notable changes is that over the years, that pure metta-feeling has gotten stronger and stronger, and my neediness has gotten less and less. And so I regard that as a beautiful development. It gives me a lot more freedom in my day-to-day relating with her, and it puts a lot less pressure on her. I think we've both gotten a lot happier as a result.

So this is the area of the near enemy—affection that has some string or attachment connected with it. The opposite side is the far enemy. And this is when we notice in our relationship to one of our metta subjects, or just someone who comes to our mind as we're practicing, a quality of disliking, of aversion, or sometimes really strong hatred. Mixed in with this aversion can also be the forms that not-liking takes around being hurt or being afraid.

This comes up often during metta practice. As we get into metta for people that we've had long relationships with—it could be a benefactor, it could be a friend—we end up going through a whole life review of our time with those people. All kinds of

memories come up spontaneously. Have you noticed that? As you stay with your benefactor, you remember lots of times you've spent together, lots of things that have happened between you.

We start with the benefactor because more of them tend to be positive. As we move into the friend, then there tends to be much more of a mix, as friendships are.

So we'll remember times that we did something unskillful, where we hurt our friend and we may feel a lot of guilt or shame about it. We remember times that they did something unskillful to us, and we might feel hurt, we might feel afraid of them, or we might feel angry or resentful in return.

This whole area of all the aversive reactions that can come in doing metta is a very, very big part of the practice. When we first encounter these other reactions, we often think, "I'm doing it wrong. I was supposed to get metta, and I'm getting the opposite. I must be doing it wrong. Let's push that aside, and I'll try really harder. Or I'll change the person. Yeah, that's it. I'll go to a different person."

In fact, this work is half of what the metta practice is about. This is the other half of the purification of heart that metta brings. As we incline the mind to loving kindness, somehow our sneaky subconscious says, "Oh, but wait, there's another story here." And it will kind of bring to the surface anything that's in there that's not of the nature of loving kindness.

It's sort of like starting metta practice is like running this big magnet right up the center of your system. You've got the strong north pole coming against your heart, and that pulls out all the particles that are magnetized in the opposite direction. "You want to go metta? Boom. Boom." So all different kinds of aversion start to come through, sometimes really strongly.

The more sensitive the heart gets through the influence of the loving kindness, the more impactful the negative emotions can be too. So this is all part of this process of opening up. Unfortunately, we can't just choose to open to the beautiful. When we open to the beautiful, we also open to the difficult. And this is still part of our mindstream. All these different kinds of aversion are in all of us, so they will come and will be experienced to different degrees around different people and with different memories.

There is something quite beautiful and quite magical about the meeting of the force of metta with these different kinds of aversive reactions. You really do not want to push them away. So let's talk about how to work with them.

A common one that comes up is self-judgment. We're sending metta to ourselves, and as we do it, we remember all kinds of things we did in our life earlier that we feel really badly about. When I did my first long retreat, I had this parade that I had to write down to get it out of my thoughts—what I wrote down as the ten biggest mistakes I ever made in my life. I reviewed these things over and over in the silence of the retreat setting because they just kept coming. I hadn't really looked at them before with the spirit of kindness.

One of them was a time I was about sixteen years old and I went on a hunting trip with my father. My father was an avid hunter and fisherman. We got up at like three o'clock in the morning, drove to the edge of this river in the middle of winter where he had a little rowboat with an outboard engine. We motored across to this island where he had a duck blind. We had to get there before dawn came up to go into the blind, so the ducks wouldn't see us, and we'd be hidden away as the light broke.

The light was coming up, but it wasn't time yet to shoot ducks. So my father, who had given me this 410-gauge shotgun, said, "Why don't you take some target practice?" And he pointed to a songbird that was on the limb of a tree not very far from me. I was just a sixteen-year-old kid. I didn't know what to feel. I didn't know what I was feeling. So I followed my father's advice, and I pulled the trigger on the 410, and there was just this explosion of feathers where the bird had been.

We went through the rest of the day hunting, and I was never a very good shot, fortunately, and didn't contribute by killing any ducks that day. But as I was sitting in meditation, this memory came up, and I felt so badly about it. In light of the first precept, refraining from killing—innocent songbird, I hadn't even thought twice about taking its life. There was nothing I could do to make it better, and so I was just left with this incredible guilt.

In starting to work with that, I just had to let that be. There wasn't anything else I could do with it. We have now a practice that will be shared with you, I think tomorrow, of forgiveness, where as we come in touch with things that we've done that have been unskillful, we have a practice very much like the metta practice that works to forgive ourselves for those actions.

So we'll share that with you.

I didn't know about the forgiveness practice at the time, so I just had to sit with this memory. And in the investigation, I learned something interesting about the quality of guilt. Guilt is not a helpful emotion. Guilt is the judging of ourselves, beating ourselves up over what we've done, taking the blame, directing anger toward ourselves. Not helpful.

But what is helpful and ultimately cleans it up a little bit is the willingness to feel the remorse. I felt deep regret about having shot that songbird. And although I couldn't make it up to the songbird, the regret that I felt strengthened my resolve to be really careful in my relationships with creatures from then on. So that remorse is a very wholesome quality, that feeling of regret.

Now I can think about the incident. I still have a feeling of regret and some remorse, but I don't have guilt anymore. Do I wish it was different? Yeah. But I no longer beat myself up about it.

So when self-judgment comes, if this review of our own actions arises, remember to examine the difference between guilt and remorse. See if you can open to the feeling of regret without strong judgment and self-blame. Because you're a very different person now than you were then. Your actions were different. Your understanding was different.

Other times, the memories that come are times that we've been hurt. So we might find a strong feeling of hurt arising. And then we have to allow that to be there. Sometimes in response to the hurt, anger can come really strongly. And then how do we work with that?

You probably know that one of the traditional ways is to send loving kindness to the person who has hurt us. That's difficult to do if you're angry. I had one retreat where some memories came up of an incident and I was getting angry at the person. I thought, I should probably try sending loving kindness to them. And I thought, I don't want to do that. That's really hokey, because then I'd have to pretend like I really love that person or at least like them a lot. There's no way I'm going to do that because I'm pissed off.

But I was at the end of my rope. This scenario kept running. The image kept coming. I kept getting angry, and it was unpleasant—one of the things we find about anger is that it doesn't feel good. So I was tired of the pain of it, and I was getting desperate. So I thought, okay, I'll try it.

I started directing thoughts of loving kindness to the person. And what was so interesting is that I found as soon as I could really wish for their happiness in a sincere way, the anger was gone. Because the anger has a component of ill will, which means there's a piece in anger that wants the other person to hurt the way we were hurt. If you take it a step further, that's what leads to cruelty.

So when I saw the connection between ill will and cruelty, I sort of couldn't stand the sense of myself being a cruel person or wanting to be cruel. So it really motivated me not to prolong the ill will. And as soon as I could bring in a sense of good will, that blocked the ill will.

So it's a very interesting thing with anger. If metta is truly present, anger can't get in because goodwill is the opposite of ill will. So it was very skillful for me to find I could wish the other person well, and that really deflected, diffused the anger.

But nonetheless, we can find different ways to work with the individual emotions that come. Metta is very skillful for relating with a number of them. But I want to talk generally about how to hold any of these feelings that come, whether it's guilt or remorse or fear, anxiety, anger, hurt.

So let's say you're going along, you're doing the loving kindness phrases, and you come to rest in the heart center and you notice a different emotion is there. Let's say it's a form of the far enemy of aversion, some degree of negativity there. You feel the pain of it, you recognize it's not metta—what to do with it then?

There are about three different things that you can do. The first is the simplest: you just let it be there in the background and you keep turning your intention to the metta phrases.

So continue to do the metta practice, again meaning each phrase as much as you can. You know the emotion is there in the background and you just let it be there. Then as you continue with the metta, you'll find that the metta will develop and start to come in contact with that difficult feeling.

When metta starts to wake up, it's not directed to just one person. It fills the mind and heart, and so it touches the whole world. As the metta starts to come through, it begins to touch that aversive mind state. The meeting of those two is where the magical thing happens that we could call healing. The presence of metta makes that aversive state much more acceptable—not something that we have to toss out of ourselves, but something that we can simply acknowledge as another part of the human psyche, something that we all have. We all have a reaction of anger sometimes.

So in this mode, just continue with the loving kindness and allow it to hold and eventually touch and change that aversive reaction.

If the aversive reaction gets stronger—let's say anger is there really strongly—it will block the ability to generate an intention of loving kindness, and you really can't do a phrase with any meaning anymore. The emotion is strong enough that it's blocking the metta practice, so there's no point in continuing with the phrases. Then turn your attention with mindfulness to the direct experience of the difficult emotion and just open up to it. Say, "I invite you in, let me feel you."

If you've caught it near its beginning, or near its beginning of intensity, often just that opening up is enough. You can have the sense, "Okay, come on in, express yourself, I surrender." That invitation lets it present itself and often just wash through. Very often after you do that opening, it'll come, manifest for a short time, and pass through. Great. When it does, when it gets weaker or goes away, you can just return to the metta.

Let's say that doesn't work. You open to it for a minute and it's still strong. The next thing you can do is turn to a compassion phrase, as Sally introduced this afternoon. You're suffering because it's a painful mind state. Recognize that suffering and bring the compassion attitude directly to it. You might say something like, "May I hold this anger with compassion?"

Feel the pain of it for yourself. You're not trying to make it go away. You're not trying to aim above it by looking for happiness, because sometimes metta can be too idealistic. In times like this when we're suffering, metta aims too high. Compassion goes right to the reality, the truth of our present moment experience, can meet it and hold it in a bigger picture. Just "May I hold this pain, this anger, this hurt with compassion." Be with that for a while. Often that will soften the whole mind state and soften the aversive reactions.

It's nice to move to compassion because you stay within the brahmaviharas family. You're keeping the concentration part of the practice going, staying connected to the metta field.

The fourth thing you can do is switch to vipassana—switch to mindfulness practice. Drop any phrases. Just turn your attention to the experience of the emotion in the body, in the mind, and through the door of thinking. Stay with it as long as it's presenting itself. Because of impermanence, it will eventually fade. When it does, you can return to the loving kindness.

This approach of four graduated steps—leave it in the background, open and let it wash through, turn to it with compassion, or turn to it with mindfulness—can work for any of the difficult and painful emotions that come. You can try each of them. These are just four different tools. Try them and see which ones work for you when these visitors show up.

As we keep opening and allowing in ourselves again and again, letting metta widen our hearts and widen our being, we find there's room for all these difficulties. The heart can expand enough to hold them and finally accept them so that we don't have to push them away. That's where the second stage of this purification comes from.

By opening to the difficult and transforming it with all the different tools that we have, another kind of purification of heart and mind takes place. These states may recur—they may come again—but once we learn the tools, we learn that they're all workable, and we develop more and more confidence that we know our way back to balance. Whatever is thrown up by the mind, whatever presents itself, we start to trust: "I know how to work with this. I know how to come back to my center, find my balance, and restore the loving kindness in my heart."

This gives a lot of self-confidence. We really don't have to be afraid of these parts of our mind because we find the tools to make them workable.

So this is very healing.

I'll close with this segment of a poem by Galway Kinnell, which many of you know, "St. Francis and the Sow":

"The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within of self-blessing. Though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing."

So let's just sit for a minute together, please.

Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness until it flowers again from within of self-blessing.

Thank you for your attention. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 34

The Seven Factors of Awakening - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

In this second part of his exploration of the seven factors of awakening (satta bojjhaṅga), Guy Armstrong delves into the three pacifying factors that balance the energizing ones. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and reflecting on the Buddha's teaching that "peace is the highest happiness," he examines passaddhi (tranquility) as the mind's natural rest when disturbance ceases. Armstrong explains samādhi not as mere concentration but as unification of mind—the gathering of scattered mental energies into a powerful, collected state that forms the foundation of spiritual power.

The talk illuminates how these factors develop sequentially: tranquility arising from the joy of the first three factors, deepening into the strength of concentration, which then gives rise to upekkhā (equanimity)—that balanced awareness that can meet changing conditions without being thrown about by craving or aversion. Armstrong offers practical guidance for recognizing and balancing all seven factors, emphasizing that this balanced development creates the optimal conditions for insight. He concludes with the Buddha's promise that these noble and emancipating factors, when cultivated together, lead to the complete destruction of suffering and the realization of nibbāna.

Last week I introduced the topic of the seven factors of awakening and talked about the first four factors. Mindfulness gets everything else rolling and then keeps the factors in balance. Then come the first three awakening factors of investigation, energy, and rapture—that joyful interest in meditation. We talked about how these three together work to bring up the interest and the energy, and how that creates a kind of joy in the mind that's focused on the meditation object. This joyful quality then starts to settle the mind because the presence of joy itself is satisfying.

This week I want to talk about the final three factors, which are the tranquilizing factors of tranquility, concentration and equanimity. To introduce this phase of the awakening factors and set the stage, I was thinking as I walked up the path tonight of a time at Spirit Rock before the meditation hall was built and before we had the paved road. If you can imagine back to that setting, you'll see that this slope of hill around the meditation hall and up to the site creates a kind of natural amphitheater. In fact, there was no landscaping then. The little bulge to the right of the road as you come up wasn't there either. It was just a smooth contour from here down to the residence halls and then sloping down the hill to the stream.

The dining hall was already there. With this natural amphitheater, once every couple of years we invited Thich Nhat Hanh to come and teach here. We built a platform, a raised wooden platform for him on the other side of the stream. He would sit there, his voice was amplified, and we had a thousand or more people spread out on the hillside listening to him. It reminded me of what it would have been like in the time of the Buddha, when the Buddha is said to have addressed five hundred or more people at a time. Even without amplification, somehow he was able to do it.

Thich Nhat Hanh, more than most teachers that I know, has the ability to manifest this quality of tranquility and calm—and not only manifest it, but radiate it. There's something about his body language and his deep inner stillness and the place that he speaks from. I felt like the whole day that he was talking, he was casting a spell of tranquility over the whole hillside. Everybody over the course of the day just calmed down and settled into the space that he created.

Toward the end of the day, it was very sweet—he took the whole group for a slow walking meditation up the dirt road to the very end of the path. If you've walked back to the end, you know there are a couple of lovely little meadows back there where one day we hope to build a hermitage with about twenty retreat cabins. But for now it's undeveloped. We have a photo of five hundred or so people walking in single file behind him as he did slow walking up to the other end of the property. It was very beautiful. The whole thing unfolded in this space of tranquility and stillness.

As I tuned into him that day and reflected on the incredibly difficult and violent years that he'd lived through during the Vietnam War, where both sides of the war made death threats against him—which is why he had to leave Vietnam—it struck me that his stillness came from somebody who was no longer afraid of dying. He had faced death in all its manifestations so many times that he'd lost his fear of death. And that's why he was so completely at peace in himself.

This transmission of peace and settledness is one of the great blessings of our path. When you meet a master like Thay, you can see it, you can feel it, and how it manifests in his life—his mind, his speech and his body. It's really quite a transmission.

This is the part of the path that I want to explore tonight in these facets of calm, concentration and equanimity. But first, just a little more about the general role of tranquility in the Buddhist path.

The Buddha talked about the practice of mindfulness leading to two main developments. One he called samatha or serenity, the other he called vipassana or insight. Now we've named this an insight meditation practice, an insight meditation center. So we

seem to emphasize the vipassana aspect. And I think it is more important because it's only wisdom or insight that has the potential to liberate the mind. It's only the direct seeing of the nature of reality that can really truly free the heart and mind. So insight is supreme in the teachings of the Buddha.

But this factor of samatha is nearly as powerful. The translation is serenity. It could equally well be called tranquility—we just give it a different word to differentiate it from the other terms. This development of samatha is what allows the mind to relax and settle into what has been talked about during this retreat as its natural peace and ease. The mind and body find their own natural peace and ease, which is their very nature when we don't go disturbing it or stirring it up.

It's the opening to serenity, the discovering of this property that lets us settle into that faculty, which is already potential within ourselves. This is not something new we have to construct. It's already our birthright. We just have to open to it and sort of find the way in.

When we find this ability to rest in this peace, this becomes the doorway to contentment. As we rest and there's a satisfying quality in that, we can let go of a lot of the desires to be elsewhere. A lot of the cravings and wantings can fall away as we find a natural satisfaction in this resting in peace.

The enlightened teacher looked at his student and said, "So that's why the Buddha said that samatha is for the abandoning of lust." This is a profound statement because the desire force is considered such a formidable hindrance on the spiritual path. Samatha enables the abandoning of lust precisely because we discover in this peace a profound contentment and settledness—a natural satisfaction that allows our cravings to fall away.

Vipassana, meanwhile, is for the abandoning of ignorance. Only the wisdom that penetrates the ultimate nature of reality can remove ignorance and truly liberate the mind to its fullest potential, uprooting the deepest bonds that hold us captive. Yet these two work together harmoniously—samatha and vipassana, serenity and insight, like two wings of the same bird.

This evening we'll explore the qualities that comprise this serenity, examining how they develop and how we can skillfully support their cultivation.

The first of the pacifying factors is commonly translated as tranquility, sometimes as calm. The Pali word is passaddhi. Other synonyms might include repose, rest, or as one translator beautifully rendered it, relaxation. I find this particularly appealing—the notion that relaxation itself may be one of the factors of awakening. This is precisely why we place it so centrally in our meditation instructions.

This factor of tranquility represents a state where the body has become calm, free from strong energy movements that might disturb its natural equilibrium. The mind, too, has found its peace—no longer churning with the rapid succession of thoughts and emotions that typically stir up our mental processes.

Picture the surface of a pond when no strong wind disturbs it and no currents bubble up from below. That serene, undisturbed surface—the very absence of movement—points to what we mean by this first factor of calm or tranquility.

I trust that everyone here has touched these awakening factors to varying degrees in your practice. When you encounter this feeling of calm, what is your experience? What affect does it carry? What mood does it evoke? Is it difficult to bear?

There's usually something pleasant about it, isn't there? When the mental chatter subsides and those turbulent energies that shake the body finally settle, a pleasant feeling tone often accompanies the experience. It frequently carries a sense of wellbeing, a quality of rightness.

When I first discovered this state in practice, there was an unmistakable recognition: "Ah, this is what I've been seeking—at least part of what I've been seeking." In our busy Western culture, we receive few pointers toward this state and even less instruction on how to access it. As active Westerners, we often live in perpetual motion—active, active, active, stirred up, stirred up, stirred up. You can feel how exhausting this becomes for both mind and body when we lack knowledge of where to find genuine rest.

Suzuki Roshi observed when teaching at Zen Center in the late seventies: "You know how to rest physically, but you don't know how to rest mentally." The mind grows weary from this constant activity. When we finally touch this factor of tranquility or calm, we begin to feel: "Oh, now I can truly rest." It brings profound soothing to the mind.

Yet because this represents new territory for many of us, it can feel unfamiliar at first. I remember a meditator friend who, upon first encountering this experience while noting her mind states, found herself thinking: "Calm?" As if to say, "What is this? I've heard about it, but I don't recognize this experience. Can this be real?" We must gradually become acquainted with it, learning to recognize its subtle presence.

Because tranquility is such a delicate state, it doesn't announce itself with fanfare. No neon sign flashes "CALM HAS ARRIVED—THE AWAKENING FACTOR IS HERE—PAY ATTENTION!" It's far more subtle than that.

We might not notice it initially and thus overlook it entirely. When it goes unrecognized—when it's not mindfully noted or properly acknowledged—several reactions commonly arise. We might think, "Oh, now nothing's happening. The lights have gone out." When there were fireworks of emotion or cascades of thought, that seemed fascinating. But now that the excitement has subsided, we assume nothing significant is occurring and slip into boredom, wondering when the next stimulating event will awaken our interest.

This reminds me of another of those wonderful cartoons by Gahan Wilson set in a meditation hall...

I think Sally and Sylvia both mentioned. And in this one, there are two monks sitting next to each other. One's clearly older, one's clearly younger. The older monk is leaning over to the young monk and whispering in his ear, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

So sometimes that might be how it feels when we first touch calm. Oh my God, nothing happens next. This is it. Especially if we're used to a lot of storm and fireworks in our practice, either lovely or difficult, then this can seem really uninteresting. And a reaction can be boredom.

But this itself is a clue. When boredom comes, let this be an invitation to investigate what's up. I tend to think of boredom as a reaction that's formed to a neutral feeling tone. So take a look at your experience when boredom has set in. See if there isn't something neutral in the experience that you're having at that moment. This is the feeling tone that tends to be the condition for boredom to come. And then I think of it as an aversion to the neutral, because in some ways we want the drama of pleasant or unpleasant.

But this neutral is a very interesting place to investigate. If it's neutral, that means there's not anything particularly painful going on. That itself is a good development in meditation. Oh, there's the absence of pain. I can appreciate that. Having encountered a lot of pain, I can appreciate that. So take a look at that and then notice if there is a sense of calm in that neutrality and then note it. Oh, this is what the mind state of calm is like. And you know, the Buddha spoke rather highly of this mind state. So there might be something to it.

So take a look at the factor of calm, the sense of neutrality, and if there's any aversion to the neutralness of the experience, but realize that this is a place of great potential. In some ways, this is what we have been waiting for. This calm is part of the fruit of meditation that can really enrich our life. We just want to become more familiar with it, more comfortable with it, and then it tends to become pleasant.

There's another reaction to calm that often happens, and that is we can feel quite unsettled by it. Because calm has a sense of spaciousness that can feel kind of empty to us. When there's a lot of movement, either pleasant or unpleasant, then there's a lot of activity and the I can relate to that. We know what to do with activity. We sort of know how to find ourself or define ourself in relation to mental activity. But when that mental activity stops and there's space or silence or nothing, then where are we?

So we might get a feeling: I don't know how to find myself in relation to this much space, this much emptiness. And that can be scary. Not knowing where we are in that experience can be unsettling. So sometimes what happens as soon as calm is really opened up and discovered is that there's some degree of fear or anxiety that comes in. So just be open to that. If that's the next thing that arises, you might be noting calm for a few moments, and then you might note anxiety. That's okay. Then just be with that. Let the experience unfold however it does. But start to notice this presence of calm. As we meditate more, it comes more often, is more available.

The Buddha said, in the Dhammapada, "Peace is the highest happiness." This, I think, is a really interesting thing to reflect on. Peace is the highest happiness. To see if we believe this or not. Because I think when we come into meditation, we often are looking for something other than peace. There's a wanting for, or a belief that the highest happiness is a really strong, uplifting experience of bliss, or a great hit of ecstasy, something strongly energizing and moving. And here's the Buddha coming in and saying—who has explored the mind over and over and over again—saying the highest happiness is peace.

What if that's true? Then we might be looking in the wrong places for our ultimate contentment. I think this is a really interesting comment on human psychology and something that's worth pondering. What if the thing that is really going to satisfy us is peace and not any kind of fireworks?

Would that reorient your sense of seeking or aim in life?

This quality of calm can also be developed somewhat. It can be invited. In the Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing, the Buddha says at a few different points, "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe in tranquilizing the mental formation. I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe out tranquilizing the mental formation."

This is really a meditation instruction. See if this is possible. As you're breathing in and out, if you turn your mind to calm, see if the breath has that capability of bringing calmness into the body and mind. You can just play with this in any sitting. As you tune to the breath, connect it in your thoughts with the factor of calm and see if it has the capability to bring that alive somewhat.

So as this quality of calm comes in more, we trust in it more, we relax in it, we just settle our being in it, then it deepens into the next factor, which is concentration. The Pali term is *samadhi*.

Concentration grows out of this collectedness of mind that has come about through the mind's settling in rest or repose. This factor has been in human culture for a long time. It's one of the most powerful qualities in mind, and it's been known since ancient, prehistoric times. Shamans in indigenous cultures all over the world have used this factor to enter the altered states that they enter, to contact other realms, to do the kind of magical healing things that they do. It rests on the power of concentration.

Before the Buddha's awakening, the first two teachers that he went to taught him how to enter deep states of concentration. And in a very short period of time, he reached the same level of attainment that his teachers had. They invited him to teach, but he felt it wasn't the final release he was looking for, so he left those teachers. But those technologies were already in place early in the Buddha's lifetime.

Even today in the West, some aspect of this power is alive in our culture. It's quite interesting to discover this. You can find it in cartoons. You know if it's in cartoons, it's in the common consciousness.

There are two types of guru cartoons that you'll see. The first is a wisdom type. It's the cartoon of the seeker who goes and meets the wise person on the mountaintop and gets all their questions answered. Here is one cartoon that was in the New Yorker. The picture shows somewhere that looks like the Himalayas because there are really tall mountain peaks in the background. There's a cave on one of these mountains, and in front of the cave is a man with a long white beard, sitting cross-legged, wearing just a

white loincloth. There's a figure in Western clothes who looks like he has just climbed up the peak to sit in front of the guru and pose his question. The guru's reply: "If I knew the meaning of life, do you think I'd be sitting in this cave in my underpants?"

So I guess that's the wisdom aspect. But the other aspect is the yogi, the yogi who is deep in concentration. There's this archetypal image of the meditator. Think about a person on a mountaintop, seated cross-legged, wrapped in a shawl, eyes closed, not much expression, and what that image evokes. Of course, for you who've been involved in this, you know it from the inside. You get that feeling when you walk into the hall and people have already started to sit. You can feel that presence and groundedness.

I think there are three qualities in this image that I want to draw out. They're aspects of concentration.

The first is stillness. The person is sitting unmoving. There's the implication that as the body has come into stillness, the person's mind has also come into stillness. This is that quality that Thich Nhat Hanh was radiating.

The second quality is that it's an inner experience. There's a sense the person has closed their eyes and somewhat withdrawn from contact with the world. One has turned away from outer engagement and looked inwardly at the mind's own qualities and found rest and stillness inside. This is important because the Buddha talked often about the importance of seclusion, not only seclusion from the outer world, but seclusion from the inner forces of distraction.

The third feature that I think we carry with that archetype is that there's a sense with this inward looking of some deep happiness or contentment or bliss. The yogi in turning away from the world and going inside has found a more meaningful or more lasting or more significant kind of happiness than is available outside.

All these qualities are aspects of concentration. In the Buddha's teachings, it's hard to overstate how important this factor is. It's the last factor in the Eightfold Path, and because the Eightfold Path is presented as a sequence, it's the culmination before it wraps back around to begin with wisdom again.

When the Buddha summarized the Eightfold Path, he spoke of it as sīla, samādhi, and paññā—ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom. He didn't speak of it as ethical conduct, mindfulness, and wisdom. This is quite interesting. Why is the meditation portion represented by samādhi rather than sati, mindfulness? Because in many ways, samādhi is the culmination of mindfulness. It's the fruition of mindfulness.

Concentration appears in what are called the Iddhipāda, the four bases for progress in spiritual life. It's part of each one of these foundations. It's also found in the five spiritual faculties and in the seven factors of awakening. So it appears again and again in the Buddha's teaching, and I think we have somewhat underrepresented it in Western teaching.

So what is this quality? The word samādhi is usually translated as concentration. It's not a very good translation. I'm going to stay with it because it is so common, but it's a little misleading for us. The fact is, as far as I can tell, there's no single word in English that really conveys the whole meaning of concentration. And that in itself is interesting.

What does it say when a whole culture—and I'd say this is true in any European language—doesn't have a word for something? It generally says we don't know what it is. We don't know how to perceive it or we don't know how to develop it. You know how the Eskimos are said to have seventeen words for snow? Because they've looked at it really closely. And the cultures that have looked at the mind really closely have words for this. You'll find it in most of the Asian languages.

So in English we don't really know what it is, and it took me a long time in practice to understand how concentration is different from mindfulness. I'll talk a little about that tonight.

We usually think in English that the word concentration means I have an exclusive focus of attention on something. Like we say, "I'm concentrating on my homework—can you please turn off the television because it's distracting me?" So we mean my attention is just on one thing. But the term samādhi doesn't have anything to do with attention being just on one thing. What it means is that the mind's substance has gotten collected. The mind's substance has gotten unified or pulled together.

So the best translation that I like for samādhi is "unification of mind." This appears once in the Majjhima Nikāya that I know of—unification of mind. Other synonyms that I think we've been using often are collectedness, composure, non-distractedness, wholeheartedness. So I hope you get the sense that all of these are pointing to how the mind's energy has come together, and in that coming together, it takes on a certain kind of strength.

Normally, what do we do with the mind's energy? We send it into past, we send it into future, we send it into plans, we send it into memories. All these stray random thoughts are taking our energy and just dispersing it, tossing it out to the four winds,

and that's how we lose it. When we stop doing that and we let this quality of resting happen, all the mind's energy comes together. And then we find the mind has a tremendous power.

The concentrated mind is at the base of spiritual power because of the strength that builds up as we pull those energies back in. And I want to emphasize this quality of rest. It's not so much that we have to effort, effort, effort to collect this energy. We just have to non-distract ourselves, and the energy will collect by itself. So the quality of resting will bring this energy together. It's not that you have to effort really hard. In fact, efforting too hard will disturb this natural peace. There just has to be enough effort to stay in touch with the present moment and not become distracted.

So this energy will naturally collect within us. Basically, it's just our attention to the present moment and our not turning away from that which allows this energy to become collected and for the mind to become whole again.

Now, there are two ways that this collectedness can be cultivated. One is through the very open attention where we're in touch with changing appearances moment after moment. This is called momentary concentration, and it's represented in that kind of open attention meditation that we did the other morning. As long as the mindfulness is there moment after moment, that is enough to draw the attention in.

Another way that it can be developed is to pick one steady focus, like the breath, and keep returning the attention there again and again. You could feel it in the abdomen, you could feel it in the chest, you could feel it in the nose. Or the metta phrases are another example of a single-pointed focus. So this collectedness can happen around a single focus, but it doesn't have to. That's not the only way it can develop.

At this point in the retreat, I would invite each of you to reflect and maybe discuss with your teachers: what's the best way in my practice for this sense of collectedness and unification to develop? For me, is it most harmonious to develop through a kind of open attention to anything that comes, but a real commitment to being there moment after moment? Or is there a place in my practice for choosing a single focus at times and being with that—just returning the attention to breath, sounds, body, metta—as a way to bring that collectedness together?

Both can work. It's something of an individual suitability question. What harmonizes best for you?

So start to notice when this factor is present. This is one of the instructions in the Third Foundation in the Satipatthana Sutta. The Buddha says, "The practitioner understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind." The instruction is that we should know whether the factor of concentration is present or not. So just start to explore and look at that.

How do we know when concentration is present? The simplest way is that we're able to sustain mindfulness moment after moment continuously for a while. This is how it feels differently. When you can be in the present moment, moment after moment, and that goes on for a while, that's a sign of developing concentration. You probably remember the first days of the retreat—you were lucky to catch two breaths in a row. Now maybe you can catch five. That's progress. That's the sign of concentration. That's not the definition of concentration. The definition is the mind comes together and it has a kind of strength. But that's the symptom. That's how you can tell when it's happening.

Concentration is basically generated just by being fully present for each moment of experience. You could say doing one thing at a time. So in your work meditation, to the extent that you can just do your work meditation and be present—say for the movement of your arms and hands—then your attention will collect in doing your work. Really take it as an opportunity through your work period to use it as a meditation practice, and you can continue to develop this factor of unification or collectedness.

When you're walking from here to your room, be in touch with some clear activity—movement of the body, for instance—and that will continue to collect even though it seems like an informal period.

The Zen teacher Seung Sahn used to instruct his students like this. He'd say, "When you sit, just sit. And when you walk, just walk. Just do one thing at a time." So one morning, a student who was living in the Zen center at Providence came into the dining room and found Seung Sahn eating his breakfast and reading a newspaper. The student was very upset and said, "But teacher, you said just do one thing at a time, and here you are eating your breakfast and reading a newspaper." And Seung Sahn replied, "And when you eat and read, just eat and read."

So we don't have to do anything different to cultivate this collectedness. Just be wholehearted in the way you do it. In each moment, just give yourself to that moment.

Now, sometimes you'll feel this factor quite strongly and then it'll go away. How does that feel? Yeah, it's disappointing. That's one of the hard things in meditating—when the concentration factor has been here and goes. So then watch what happens. Often

there's a strong desire to be back there. Sometimes that's unconscious. But if we don't catch it and see the wanting, then it drives us. Often we don't see it and we don't notice: oh, craving.

We're basically craving for a pleasurable state, but we don't see it. So we start efforting strongly, hardly, as much effort as we can put in trying to get back to that concentrated state. But when we effort with that kind of striving mentality, that kind of craving underneath, it doesn't work so well. And it ends up tying us in some kind of knot. We get caught up in a lot of tension of desire.

So if you can notice this strong desire, oh, I really want the concentration back, then you can avoid that extra striving kind of effort. Because concentration has to come out of relaxation. It has to come out, it grows out of a real acceptance of the present moment. Not a striving to be somewhere else, but a settling into here.

One of my favorite meditation instructions is one that Joseph Goldstein has been using for thirty-some years now, when he says, "Just settle back into the present moment." I love to remember that as I'm sitting, just settle back into the present moment. And it has this sense of drawing me from an outward reaching kind of future-oriented grab to just relaxing into the body and settling into the base of the sitting posture.

Because it said in the texts that the proximate cause for concentration is happiness. When happiness is present in the mind, then that settling takes place easily. So striving or craving are the opposite of happiness, and they'll block concentration from being able to happen. But happiness and relaxation will let that settling happen quite naturally.

Some people, it turns out, have a real faculty for concentration, and some people don't. Ajahn Jumnian is one of the teachers who comes here about once a year. He's a Thai meditation master. He's now in his late sixties. When he was a boy of four and a half, his father, who was an ex-monk, decided he should learn meditation. So at four and a half, his father made him sit down on the floor of their cottage in southern Thailand. They lived in the countryside.

And he told the young boy to repeat the term "Buddho"—it can be used as a mantra. So Ajahn Jumnian, or back then, Little Jumnian, would just repeat "Buddho, Buddho, Buddho," but he really wasn't into meditation. Imagine when you were four years old, if your parents had told you you had to meditate, that'd be the last thing you'd want to do. So he'd be sitting there, but his fantasy, his mind would be with flying his kite out in the fields. And so he'd be wandering off in his imagination.

And his father then would actually read his mind because his father had been a monk of some accomplishment and would say, "Jumnian, let go of that kite fantasy or I'm going to whack you upside the head." And so Jumnian would have to just focus again or he knew his father would be on him.

So something about that intense kind of training worked. Because at age four and a half, Ajahn Jumnian was sitting there doing his "Buddho, Buddho, Buddho," and he went into a deep absorption state. A deep state of concentration where the mind kind of shifts into another gear and gets enclosed within itself. His parents couldn't reach him. They'd talk to him and say, "Are you okay? Come out, come back, what's going on?" But he wouldn't come out. He just stayed in his absorption.

And his father, because of his training, understood where his mind had gone, but no matter how much they asked him to come out, he just stayed in his meditative state. And they got quite worried. You can imagine how you would feel as a parent if your four-and-a-half-year-old just went away on you.

So finally his mother, whom he loved very much, was a very kind and loving person, entreated him over and over, "Please come back to us. We'll have a very nice meal when you come back. I'll cook your favorite dinner if you come out." And so he did eventually come out.

But they recognized at that point they had a meditation prodigy on their hands. So from that age, very young age, he was trained both by a village monk, as his father turned him over for training to another monk, and by the local shaman. So Ajahn Jumnian has both traditional Buddhist training and also shamanic training because of his concentration. So he was quite a prodigy recognized at an early age.

I, on the other hand, was not. And when I came into meditation practice, concentration was really my weak suit. And I would look at some of my friends, and we'd compare stories after retreats. "I was in the first jhana in this retreat." I opened my eyes in one retreat. I looked at a friend of mine, and she was just kind of... And I could tell she was just in some deep bliss and surrender state. And here I am dealing with tension in my chest and pain in my knees, and I was not there.

So it comes to some of us, and it doesn't come so easily for others. But although concentration was not so available, insight was more available to me.

And so over the years, I put some effort in and strengthened the factor of concentration, and it has gotten better for me. But be aware that if concentration isn't your strong suit, it's not the end-all and be-all. Wisdom can operate whether or not there's strong concentration. You can use ordinary life, unconcentrated retreat experience, and if you

reach it, concentrated retreat experience to develop the faculty of wisdom. Whether concentration is present or not does not stop the development of insight and understanding on our path.

If you're able to develop this quality of concentration, I recommend it because as the path develops, it gives us a strong foundation of stability of mind so that we can see clearly with some depth to develop wisdom. It also gives a sense of well-being and ease in life.

The Dalai Lama said: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." This factor of samadhi is an important part of the quality of inner peace.

As this factor develops, it develops into these qualities called jhanas. On the road to jhanas we reach states where the mind is so collected and so unified in the present moment that the five hindrances can no longer arise in that state. This is described in the text as something called access concentration, meaning that the access to the jhana state is close.

Finding this experience in meditation where the five hindrances are not arising is to discover a place where the mind is not swayed at all by the forces of wanting and disliking and restlessness and doubt and dullness. The Buddha said that it's really quite extraordinary. He said when these five hindrances have been abandoned, one sees that as freedom from debt, like health after a long illness, like release from prison or freedom from slavery and a land of safety. He talked about this state of concentration as being a liberation of mind—only temporary, but a liberation of mind because the hindrances are no longer arising.

Part of what happens as the mind becomes collected in this way is that it achieves a stability and a strength so that you can feel unmoved by the comings and goings of the changing conditions of comfortable and uncomfortable experiences in life. This is one of the most notable things that happens as you're sitting. Things keep happening, pleasure and pain keep arising, but the mind is no longer so moved by them. We're not thrown all over the place by the changing conditions.

This strength of concentration is what gives rise to the final factor of awakening called equanimity. Equanimity is this balance of mind that comes out of a sense of strength—not out of indifference—that can feel all the changing conditions in our experience but is not caught up in greed and aversion in reaction to them. There's enough

confidence and support in the mind that we can experience a certain amount of pleasure and not crave for more. We can experience a certain amount of pain and not need to push it away. The mind has the strength and the spaciousness to hold it.

Above all, it feels like the mind has achieved a kind of balance within the changing field of appearances—to be on an even keel, an even temper, even as the phenomena keep changing. You can take a look at this. When your mind is concentrated, observe things that were formerly drawing you with their pleasure or things that were repelling you with their unpleasant quality, and see if the mind is still as moved by them. You're not out of touch. You still feel them clearly and distinctly, but you're not caught up and thrown around by them.

This also becomes a great support in daily life. This is part of that inner peace that the Dalai Lama was talking about.

The term equanimity sometimes has a connotation in our culture of being—what in the Brahmaviharas is called its near enemy—indifferent. Sometimes we get the sense that in equanimity there's no feeling, there's no heart, there's no love, there's no compassion. But that's not the way the experience of it feels. Rather, there's a balance of mind and a strength and a confidence so that all the emotions can go through us and we're not so shaken up by them.

That confidence itself gives more room for the other three Brahmaviharas to come through and be felt and expressed. The qualities of metta, compassion, and joy are supported by the equanimity. They're not turned off by it, they're not dampened by it, they're not dulled by it, but rather this inner confidence gives them the freedom to start to move through more strongly.

We had a discussion group at the end of the last three-month course at IMS. I was asking people to share some of their experiences from having sat the six weeks or the three months. A lot of what people shared about was this growing spaciousness of mind that let them feel into their family relationships at home, feel into the bodily aches and pains that came during the long sits, feel into the difficult states of mind—fear, anxiety, worry, planning, or wanting that visited them. What they reported was that all these things happened and those experiences just weren't burdensome in the same way that they had been previously. They didn't suffer around them in the same way. They associated with this spaciousness the word equanimity.

I said, "I want to ask you something. Is this a flat or dull or turned off place?" And they said, "Absolutely not. My heart is more open, more alive. There's more warmth and more connectedness than before."

So don't think of this as a dull place because of this term.

It's not like the emotions get turned off, but it's an unburdened place where the beautiful qualities can come through more easily.

This factor of equanimity appears throughout the Buddha's teachings. It's included in the list of the paramis, the qualities we develop for liberation. It's also found in the Brahmaviharas—the fourth one, which we'll practice later in this retreat. The Visuddhimagga, the sixth-century commentary, outlines a very detailed "progress of insight" leading to awakening, showing step by step how the process often unfolds as meditators advance. In this progression, equanimity is the stage that comes just before awakening. And of course, it's one of the factors of awakening itself, which we're exploring tonight.

In all these lists—paramis, brahmaviharas, progress of insight, factors of awakening—equanimity is mentioned last. These are all sequential progressions. What the Buddha's teachings are essentially saying is that equanimity is considered the worldly state closest in nature to the unconditioned, to nibbana, to awakening. It's not possible to describe a worldly state of mind more similar to the deathless than this factor of equanimity. It's considered the highest of the conventional states that can be developed.

At one point, the Buddha said, "Clinging to equanimity is the highest kind of clinging, but it's still clinging, and you need to let go even of that."

So this is the complete list of the seven factors: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. For the mind to come into its fullness, these factors need to be brought up together and balanced.

Let me talk about how, in a practical way, to do that balancing. First of all, mindfulness starts the rolling, and all the other factors arise from that. So you don't need to do any different practice to start these factors going. Mindfulness will engage them, and they all follow. Mindfulness is also the balancer.

As you're practicing, begin to notice when the energizing factors are high and what that feels like, and then when the tranquilizing factors are strong and what that feels like. I find it simpler in the beginning to keep monitoring three factors in particular, and I do this in my practice almost continuously.

I try to keep an eye on: Where's my mindfulness? That is, am I present? Am I knowing what's happening? Where's my energy? I use energy to stand in for the three arousing factors. And where's my concentration? I use concentration to stand in for the three pacifying factors.

So if my teacher came along and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Guy, right now, where's your mindfulness, energy, and concentration?" I would hope I'd be able to say, "They're like this." And they can all be different.

Think about a time when energy is high, but concentration and the pacifying factors are low. What's that experience like? Someone said restless? Yes. This is the quality of restlessness. There's too much activity, not enough pacification. There's a lot of energy—we're really up—but maybe there are many thoughts, a lot of movement in the body. Emotions may be flashing through, and there's not a sense of rest. There's a restless quality. That's the feeling when the energy factors are high, but the calming factors are not.

What about when the energy factors are low and the calming factors are high? What's that like? Dullness, sleepiness, sloth and torpor. In the beginning of the retreat, this was common and you really felt the sloth and torpor. What's interesting is it returns later on in the retreat in a slightly different form that we call "sinking mind."

Your mindfulness is much stronger now. Let me give an example, and you can see if this has happened for you. You might be very mindful, very present and connecting with the breath, breath after breath after breath.

So mindfulness is present. Concentration is good. There's enough wakefulness—you're really with it. But as you're connecting with the breath, all of a sudden the breath feels so soothing, like Brahms' lullaby. You're just getting so soothed by the breath that you start drifting off, moving into a kind of hazy, dull, very pleasant fog.

This is not strictly sloth and torpor. It's more what we call sinking mind. Mindfulness is strong, but here you see clearly how the energies of calm have gotten a little too strong for the amount of energy present to meet them, and consciousness has toppled over into this state of dullness or fogginess. It's not exactly a hindrance, but rather an energy imbalance.

When you notice that the energizing factors are too high, you want to bring in more of the pacifying factors. One of the best ways to do this is to think about whatever helps you relax—let relaxation be your way in. Another useful approach is reflection on space, making the attention very broad. Sounds can help bring in that sense of wideness and relaxation. You can use the breath with the intention of breathing in, tranquilizing the bodily formation; breathing out, tranquilizing the mental formation. See if the breath with that intention can help bring in a sense of calm.

Also, when energy is high and thoughts are very active, don't put too much energy into investigating that state. Part of our cultural conditioning as Westerners is that we're really good at investigating. Generally, as a culture, we do a lot of investigation. When we come to meditation, we tend to be a little overactive in investigation. So when things are already active, don't heighten the energizing factors. Investigate a little less and just tune into resting in that, even if it's resting in a little bit of turmoil.

When the calming factors are too high and the experience is one of dullness or fog, you want to find a way to bring in energy. Obviously you can bring it in through the physical response to the hindrance of sloth and torpor—open the eyes, stand up, take a brisk walk, splash some water on your face. In bringing up the physical energy, you'll bring up the virya overall.

But there are other ways to work with it. If it's not quite sloth and torpor but more just dullness of mind, you can pick it up through the meditation itself. You basically want to energize the investigative faculty—that's the way to come in. Get more interest. Explore your experience in more detail. Find something to ask questions about. Bring some vividness to your exploration.

Another way I find really helpful to pick up energy out of dullness is to turn to noting and do it really steadily. Turn on this regular noting practice: in-breath, out-breath, sound, sensation, thought, mood, hearing, and so on. That will wake up the perceiving quality. It will wake up mindfulness, and mindfulness will wake up the energy. It's a nice way to investigate—it will brighten the mind and bring that energy in.

When the factors are brought up together and they're all in balance, you get this beautiful quality of a mind that is poised and still, but also really alert and interested. Everything is alive and vivid and clear, yet it's being experienced with a great deal of peace and stability of mind. This is the mind that is ripe for insight. This is the kind of mind that is getting tuned closer and closer to the factor of the unconditioned.

As that attunement gets strengthened and heightened, at some point it may get so tuned that the mind just tips over into that unconditioned place—tips over and opens to nibbana, the unconditioned, or the deathless.

Let me close with this quotation from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, these seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering."

So let's just sit for a minute together.

So this beautiful teaching concludes with the Buddha's own words about these seven factors of awakening. When we develop and cultivate them, they lead us to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering.

This is what we're working toward—not just momentary states of calm or clarity, but the fundamental transformation that comes from understanding the deepest truths of our experience. The seven factors of awakening are our pathway there, our companions on the journey toward complete freedom from suffering.

Each time we notice mindfulness arising, each time we cultivate investigation or energy, each time we touch joy or tranquility, each time we deepen our concentration or rest in equanimity, we're moving closer to this ultimate goal. We're training the mind in the very qualities that the Buddha identified as essential for awakening.

And perhaps most beautifully, these factors don't require us to become someone else or to transcend our human experience entirely. They ask us to work skillfully with what's already here—with our capacity for awareness, our natural curiosity, our innate potential for joy and peace. The path to the unconditioned runs right through the heart of our conditioned experience.

Let us sit now in appreciation for these teachings and in dedication to putting them into practice. May our cultivation of these seven factors of awakening benefit not only ourselves but all beings everywhere. May all beings be free from suffering. May all beings know the peace of nibbana.

CHAPTER 35

From Ignorance Come Impulses

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines why the untrained mind experiences a constant rush of thoughts and emotions, rarely finding true peace. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), he focuses on the first two links: avijjā-paccayā-saṅkhārā - ignorance conditions volitional formations or impulses. Armstrong explains how avijjā (not-wisdom) - specifically our failure to fully embody the Four Noble Truths and three characteristics - gives rise to unwholesome impulses rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion. He describes three layers of obscuration that veil our true nature: the false construction of self, afflictive emotions, and karmic obscurations from unskillful actions. The path works in reverse through the threefold training: śīla purifies conduct and removes karmic obscurations, samādhi develops concentration to calm afflictive emotions, and paññā cultivates wisdom to see through the illusion of self and touch the unconditioned. Armstrong emphasizes how understanding these dynamics helps practitioners recognize that disturbing thoughts aren't random but arise from deep habitual urges, offering a framework for liberation from suffering.*

At this point in the retreat, if we take a look back at the mind that we entered the retreat with, or the mind of ordinary daily life, we can see that the normal human experience is one where there's a kind of ongoing rush of thoughts and emotions.

This ongoing rush of events, of movements of mind, tends to bring along with it also a swirl of emotions. So that in the normal course of an untrained mind, there's a feeling of being stirred up, never fully at peace or at rest. This is so much an ordinary part of life that most people don't even notice that that's what's happening in their minds.

But from the perspective of meditation, where you have touched a different experience and a degree of inner peace, then looking back at the normal daily life experience, it looks busy—some degree of turmoil and disturbance, and some degree of flooding of emotions as just an ordinary experience.

At one point in my meditation practice, when I had tasted some degree of peace and then was looking at this mind, the question came to me and became a subject of a lot of interest: Why does the mind move at all? Why is this the normal human experience of things? Why do we not just rest in a state of inner peace until thought is needed to carry

out a task, and then we summon it up, employ it, and then put it to sleep again? Wouldn't that be a saner way to live? Isn't this kind of ongoing turmoil that is the normal human condition a little crazy? And why are things the way they are?

This is the area I want to explore in the talk tonight. We've talked about the role of intention in movements of body, in utterances of speech. Tonight, I want to bring a little bit of the investigation of intention into the area of thinking. I'd like to suggest that the thoughts that come are not just random or uncaused, but that if you look closely at their nature, many of them—I don't want to say all, but many of them—spring from some kind of deep and habitual inner urge, or really more accurately, urges. There are lots of different motivations, volitions, intentions, and urges that propel thoughts into our mind, into our experience.

Just some common examples that I know we're all familiar with: A friend comes up in our meditation and there arises a spontaneous wish for them to be well and happy. That's the urge of loving kindness or metta. Of course, we cultivate it through formal practice of the Brahmaviharas, but it's a natural urge that is there often when we connect with people we care about.

Or we're feeling a lot of gratitude, a common visitor in a retreat at this point, and a friend comes into mind who we feel is not as fortunate as us, and there's an urge to share some of what we have. It may be our time and energy. It may be other of our resources. We want to share something with them to improve their situation. And that's the urge of generosity, another natural urge that we take care to develop through meditation.

Or another time, someone will come to mind whom we've had a conflict with and a feeling of resentment or anger will come up, and we feel in that an urge or a mood of ill will. There's some way we'd like them to be a little less happy than they are when that mood is present—another of these urges from habits of mind.

Or we might start to think about someone that we're really close to, maybe a partner or a good friend that we'd like to go on a great trip with, a vacation of some sort. And we think about being in the company of our friend and we think about the lovely place or places that we'd visit. That's entertaining for a while and somewhat pleasurable. And we look into that thought and we say, "Oh, that's expressing this urge of desire"—especially comes in when the atmosphere is so austere and we want to provide a little hit of pleasure. So this deep force of desire coming through in that way.

We might think about our job back in our daily life and feel a sense of, "Oh, I wonder if anything's going to have changed while I'm away. Are people taking care of things all right? Is office politics going to stab me in the back while I'm gone and can't defend myself?" And this fear urge, another primal movement of heart, may come in.

Then what we start to notice is that when these thoughts come from these kinds of urges, they're not just neutral, equanimous events in the mind, but they carry an emotional punch. And the emotional punches, like the other conditions of life, roll through us with an alternation of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. It's lovely to feel loving kindness and generosity. It's not so lovely to feel anger, longing, ill will, and fear.

So the net result is that in the untrained mind, these thoughts travel through our experience rather pell-mell, completely out of control, rushing one after another with this alternation of some wholesome—but honestly, if we look closely, the majority are not metta and dana, are they? When we first come into retreat and establish ourselves in those first days, it's not like we're overwhelmed out of so many thoughts of love and compassion and joy and generosity. It's more the other stuff that's going through—the force of all the hindrances that we've talked about.

And that's why, as we just look on this experience without trying to change it or to judge it, we start to see why our life feels so stirred up outside of our arena of meditation, the avenues we discover to peace and calm. There's just this random flow of thoughts from these deep urges that carry these packets of emotion—some wholesome, many unwholesome—and it leaves us feeling tired, tense, sometimes beaten up, sometimes quite victimized by the force of these habits of mind.

So this is the area where we start to understand that thoughts are also carrying intention. Of course, many of them we could carry to the next step. We could call our friend and tell them how much we love them. We could go to the pay phone and place an order with REI and send them a really nice gift of a new bicycle that they've been wanting and express that generosity. We could get really upset and write them a letter expressing our anger.

But because you all are such well-trained yogis, I know you're not doing any of that. So these impulses are only being born in thought, but they could be carried out, couldn't they, in actions of speech or body. These volitional forces move through us. We can hold them in mind, where they act as disturbing forces, or at times we can express them through speech and bodily action as well.

It's quite interesting to tune into how thoughts carry an emotional charge—many of them—and those charges are expressing some kind of, often a deep kind of intention or wish.

So this is a little digression. I don't want to go into this in the talk, but I want to plant the seed for your exploration. Are there thoughts that don't carry any emotional charge? That's the first question. The second question: Are there thoughts that don't carry any intention or volition? Are there thoughts that arise without volition, without expressing an urge like this?

I'm going to leave that question for you to reflect on later if it interests you. But what I want to talk about tonight are the ones that come with an intention or an urge, that express a volition of the mind, and can act in this disturbing way.

Because of this volitional component, these thoughts—and then if we move into actions of body and speech—are sometimes called volitional formations. They're sometimes also called mental formations. They're sometimes also called karmic formations, because the volition or intention is the seed of karma, wholesome or unwholesome. The Pali term that we're using here is *sankhara*. And this is the same term as we talked about in the aggregates—the fourth aggregate, the third mental aggregate called formations.

So again, looking at the influence of these, we have to ask: why do these keep arising over and over in the mind? James quoted the *Hsin Hsin Ming* last night, the verses on the faith mind, that said something like, "Stop talking and thinking and there is nothing you cannot know." But you see how extraordinarily difficult it is to cease this process of talking and thinking. There's no off switch up there that we can just reach up and turn. This is a powerful process.

As we start to look into it—which is what I want to explore in the talk tonight—we'll see that this is not just a random or superficial occurrence, but rather this is a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in our psyche. But not just in our individual psyche—you could say it's deeply rooted in the human experience.

So that's what I'd like to look into. Where does this movement come from? And that this is essentially the problem of meditation to resolve—the arising of this disturbance from our inner volitions and urges.

I'd like to link it to what the Buddha called his most profound insight, his most profound teaching, which is the chain of dependent origination, which many of you have heard of. We're not going to go into it in detail. I want to focus just on a part of it. But in

the chain of dependent origination, the Buddha outlined twelve links or steps that carry us into suffering. It was a very detailed explanation of how suffering comes to be in our experience, step by step.

The heart of it is the territory that Carol was describing in her last talk—how sense contact brings up pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones, and the mind habitually responds with some form of craving, either greed or aversion, and then that leads to clinging, to taking hold of the object, either to draw it in or to push it away. And where there's clinging, there will be suffering. That's the heart of dependent origination.

It's actually not the part I want to focus on tonight. Carol did a great job of covering that, so I think we've been through that terrain. What I want to cover tonight are the first two links of dependent origination. And colloquially, the way we could describe it is: the first two links say that impulses come from ignorance.

So that's our topic. Impulses come from ignorance.

The way that the chain is presented, ignorance is the very first link. And so it's considered the root of everything that can lead to suffering. When ignorance is in the mind, suffering will inevitably result to a greater or lesser degree. And the whole twelve links of the chain explain that process in a lot of detail.

The second link in the chain is volitional formations. The Pali term is *sankhara*—it's the same word we were talking about earlier in the talk. And the word that links them can be translated—the Pali word is *paccaya*—and it can be translated as "conditions," "is a necessary condition for," "gives rise to," "influences."

So the traditional translation of these two links were: ignorance conditions volitional formations. The term for ignorance in Pali is *avijja*. So the whole Pali link has a very nice sound. It's *avijja-paccaya-sankhara*.

Ignorance gives rise to sankhara or these volitional formations. But in this context, I prefer the term "impulses" as a translation for volitional formations because it captures that inner experience more vividly.

As a meditator, when you sit down on the cushion and tune into this part of your experience, it is felt—or I feel it anyway—as an impulse that comes into me, often from somewhere quite deep down. This impulse is out of my control. It's experienced as something that springs up from some deep layer of mind, uninvited, unrequested, and uncontrollable—just a budding into the mind of this force. So I'm quite fond of this term "impulses." We can say that impulses come from ignorance. This is the meaning of these first two links.

Now it's crucial to understand that the chain of dependent origination not only describes the arising of suffering—it also describes the undoing of suffering. When you trace the chain in reverse order and examine the ceasing of each step, suffering ends. The key to this is that when ignorance ends, the whole chain collapses and suffering comes to an end.

So ignorance is considered the linchpin in our human condition. When it is present as a force in the mind, we will fall into suffering. When it is eradicated, suffering is over and done with. The entire journey of the Buddhist path can be understood as the uprooting of the force of ignorance from the mind. But as you know, that's not a simple undertaking.

The first term, ignorance, is a translation of the Pali word avijja. Avijja literally means "not wisdom"—that's all it means. "Ignorance" has a rather pejorative connotation in our culture, but the Pali is simply "not wisdom." So if you prefer to think of it as "unwisdom" or "not wisdom," that might feel less harsh.

The important thing as we examine this is not to be judgmental about the factor of ignorance in the mind. We all have it. We're going to have it for a while. There's no need to be embarrassed about it, so I hope you won't feel judgmental about yourself as we explore this term.

One of my teachers explained it beautifully. He said the wisdom mind arises in practice—that's one side of the hand. Ah, wisdom is there: clarity, peace, understanding. Then a minute later it swivels, and unwisdom is there: confusion, obscuration, some measure of suffering or discontent. This is our life as meditators—wisdom, unwisdom, wisdom, unwisdom. They go back and forth like this for a long time.

So don't be discouraged by the presence of unwisdom. It's simply a fact of life, a way we're put together right now.

The basic meaning of avijja-paccaya-sankhara is that when ignorance is operating in the mind—which it will be much of the time—this will give rise to these not-well-thought-out impulses, which will lead to suffering through actions of body, speech, and mind.

So what fundamentally drives these impulses, these unwholesome forces of mind? It's our old friend craving in its manifestation as greed, aversion, and delusion. You're very familiar with the forces of greed and aversion. Delusion means we don't recognize their activities. It acts as a veil that prevents us from seeing clearly how greed and aversion operate, because when we start to see clearly how greed and aversion work, we want to give them up. We do give them up when we see them clearly.

As Ajahn Sumedho expressed it: when you start from ignorance, you end up in suffering. This is a helpful way to think about it—start in ignorance, end up in suffering.

Here's an example. A bank robber went into a bank with a note for the teller. He approached the window and handed the teller this note.

It said, "Give me all your money. If you don't, I will shoot you. I have a gun in my pocket."

The teller, having gone through the usual training, knew it wasn't worth risking their life. So they put the money from their drawer in a bag and handed it over the counter to the robber. He got in the car and drove off.

When he got home, the police were waiting for him. He couldn't understand how they had tracked him down so quickly. When he asked, he found out that the note he had written to the teller was on the back of his deposit slip, which had his name and address.

So that's ignorance leading to suffering—unwise choices. Of course, we're not quite that unaware. But when we don't understand how our actions come out of unskillful impulses, when we act out of greed or aversion, we end up causing harm, and we leave a kind of karmic deposit slip that's got our home address on it. The karma police track us down, and it all comes back.

Sylvia has this beautiful saying—I haven't heard her say it this retreat, but I've heard her say before: "When we see clearly, we act impeccably." This is the factor when wisdom is there. We see clearly, these impulses don't dominate our consciousness, they don't dominate our actions, and we stay out of the realm of suffering.

These forces of greed and aversion we feel in our personal life are also rampant in the world, as I'm sure you know. All the misery of the world is also traceable to these three roots: greed, aversion, and delusion.

Just a couple of simple examples. The financial system is in such bad shape basically because of greed. When credit was easy, bankers were writing unbelievable mortgages, handing out loans that they really should not have. As an example, one of the stories I heard: a gardener who was making $14,000 a year in California went to a bank and applied for a loan on a $700,000 house with no money down and was given the loan. Why would a banker do that? That seems really unwise for the institution. But it made sense because the bank got fees off generating the mortgage. Then they took the mortgage and bundled it up with a bunch of other mortgages and loans, bundled it all together and sold it to a financial institution. Why would the financial institution buy it? Because

they packaged it with other instruments and sold it to investors, making a commission. So the banker's greed and the brokerage's greed combined to put all this worthless debt out there that could never be paid off, but people were profiting along the way. All the predicament we're in right now, mostly caused by greed—rampant, unrestrained greed.

And for the force of aversion or hatred, you don't need to look further than the daily headlines from Iraq or Afghanistan, where almost every day some suicide bomber is killing more people, mostly innocent civilians. Just hatred and fury unchecked, unreasoned.

This is a dynamic that causes the suffering in our own hearts and minds—we see this clearly in meditation. This is a dynamic that spreads all the harm in the world. It's underlain by this force of ignorance.

So let's talk about this ignorance a little bit. Ignorance here doesn't mean not knowing certain facts. It doesn't mean you don't know who the president of Zimbabwe is or you don't know how to conjugate a verb in Latin. It's not about that kind of knowing.

The Buddha described ignorance as not knowing the Four Noble Truths. Now, I could ask a lot of you, "What are the Four Noble Truths?" and I'm sure you'd be able to tell me. There's the truth of unsatisfactoriness in life—that's the first. The cause of that unsatisfactoriness is craving—that's the second. The third states that the end of unsatisfactoriness or suffering lies in the end of craving. And the fourth says the way to the end of suffering is through the Eightfold Path.

So we may all know that, but there can still be ignorance in the mind because we haven't fully embodied it. We haven't gotten all the implications. For example, if we understood the truth of unsatisfactoriness as it applies to all the sense realms, we wouldn't crave or cling any longer. We crave and cling for conditioned things because we haven't quite understood they don't really fully satisfy. And when they pass, we suffer with their loss.

So the Buddha's injunction is that we should understand the first noble truth, and we haven't fully understood it because we keep craving. So we haven't carried out the second injunction for the second noble truth, which is to relinquish craving. We fail to relinquish the second noble truth because we haven't fully understood the first.

And because we haven't fully relinquished craving, we haven't fully seen its end, which is the third noble truth. And we haven't fully seen its end because we haven't fully walked the eightfold path to its conclusion. So we understand them intellectually, but we haven't taken them all the way into complete integration with our experience. And that's why ignorance is still there.

Another way of understanding ignorance is that we don't really get the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. Again, if we truly saw change, we wouldn't try to hold on because we'd know that anything we held on to was going to change and that would be painful. Because all conditioned things are unsatisfactory, we'd know not to cling to any of them. And in seeing the selfless nature, we'd understand there's no way we can collect things around the center of self.

So in shorthand, a nice way to think of ignorance is to think of the construction of self. As long as we're believing in a self, we're caught in ignorance. So that's a nice shorthand way to think of it. The sense of self, the belief in a separate I, is the sign of ignorance.

Ignorance is related to the factor of delusion in the list of the roots of the unwholesome. The Pali term is moha, as Carol mentioned. This word moha originally means, in its etymology, stupefied. So that might be a nice way to think of delusion—stupefied. And that feeling is not so far off at times in our practice. At times when there's confusion, you feel lost or uncertain or bewildered, not sure where the ground is—that is the factor of delusion. This sense of bewilderment is a part of it. And this sense of bewilderment supports the operation of greed and aversion. When we're not seeing them clearly, they have more reign. If we saw them clearly, they wouldn't take us over so much.

These three forces—greed, aversion, and delusion—are talked about in Buddhism as different personality types. And when we look into the personality types—the greedy, the aversive, and the deluded—what we really understand is they're all just different ways of trying to manage the unsatisfactoriness of experience. Trying to manage dukkha.

The greedy type undertakes a strategy in the face of dukkha of trying to pull in as much pleasant stuff as possible and as often as possible. So it's to keep the dukkha at bay by maintaining a steady diet of pleasure. That's the first strategy.

The second strategy, the aversive type, is to prevent against dukkha by constantly being on guard and pushing it away. So the aversive type sees the unpleasant and wants to keep it at some distance. And that's the pushing away effect of aversion.

The deluded strategy is quite interesting. It is not to feel. The deluded type sort of steps out of the interplay, the variation of pleasant and unpleasant, by going into a bit of a fog so that the intensity of that variability is not really felt so much. So this is kind

of the origin of the fog of delusion. It's like, let me not feel. Let me stay in space. Let things not come too close. So with deluded temperaments, there's often a little bit of a spaciness about them.

I get this feeling sometimes when I travel a lot. At different times of year, I may be in different places, and I notice this happening more as I get older. I'll be driving a car down some road which I've been on before, but all of a sudden I wonder, what season is it, and what town am I in? And I just don't know. I have to think for a minute, and I just feel spaced out and not really in touch while that is going on.

Sharon Salzberg is a self-confessed deluded type. She's talked about it a lot in talks, so I can share this. She recounted an experience that's very typical of the deluded mind. She was teaching a three-month course at IMS. She lives right next door to IMS. She'd driven home at night the night before, parked her car in the driveway, went home and slept, and in the morning she walked over to do interviews at the center next door. She walked across the driveway where she'd parked her car, and it wasn't there. And she thought, did I park my car here last night?

So that's the first sign of a deluded temperament—not really knowing where you left your car. Did I park my car here or not? So she wasn't really sure, but she walked into the center and she saw somebody who is a good friend and might know, and she said, "Do you know where my car is? I parked it in my driveway, but it's not there this morning." And the friend who knows her as a deluded type said, "Are you sure it's not there?" So that was the right person to ask that question of. And she said, "Well, a car is a pretty big thing. I think I'd have noticed it this morning if it had been there."

But she said that just for a minute, she had this confusion—was it really there and I just didn't see it? And so that's another sign of the deluded temperament: not being quite sure. It turned out somebody had borrowed her car without telling her, and that solved the mystery. But it was an interesting chain of reactions to watch.

So there's this quality in the deluded mind of being a little disconnected from our own experience. If we don't make that connection moment by moment, it doesn't go clearly in, and then it's easy to forget what's happened, where we are, what's going on.

The countermeasure for the deluded temperament is that the proximate cause for wisdom is wise attention. So this is the way to get the counterpart to delusion—wise attention. What I think is very helpful for deluded temperaments is steady noting practice, just waking up the mindfulness in each new moment to take clear account of

what's happening right now. Just that moment-by-moment kind of refreshing of the wisdom factor will bring in the strengthening of this factor of wise attention, which overcomes delusion.

So I want to look a little more deeply now at how our current situation has come about, how we find ourselves in this situation of impulses coming out of ignorance being such a disturbing force in our life. I want to suggest that there are three steps that have happened somewhere along the way in our development. It may be back in beginningless time, as the Buddha has mentioned, but somewhere along the way there was this primal step where we lost touch with our true nature.

There is in each of us an essential nature that is sometimes called the deathless, sometimes called the unchanging or the unconditioned. Somewhere along the way, that was lost track of. Its quality of not being subject to change, which was lost touch with, got substituted with a belief in an ongoing self. So can you get a sense for that flip? There is the unchanging. There is the unconditioned. There is the stable. There is the permanent. But somewhere along the way, consciousness lost touch with that and, in order to try to compensate, let's say, it created the notion that the self is that ongoing, enduring, permanent entity.

So it constructed this sense of I in a way as a replacement for the essential, deathless nature that we all share. But it forgot it. And that's the operation of ignorance. It forgot the substitution. It forgot that that substitution was generated from its own volition. And it started to believe in the reality of the self, identified with a particular body and mind, and therefore had to project all the rest of experience as other.

So there was now this creation of a duality. There's a belief in myself on the one side and all the rest of creation, all the rest of the appearances that arise in consciousness are now labeled other. This fundamental split is what we could call the first level of obscuration. This is the basic sense of ignorance.

Once we buy into it, all of a sudden we have an activity that can never be completed. That activity is to protect the I against the threatening aspects of the other and to nourish the I from the pleasing aspects of what we have labeled other. Once we undertake this project, it can never be done. The I can never be completely protected. We're always vulnerable. Anything can happen to us—illness, accident, natural catastrophe. We could die. All of us could die in the next hour. So the I can never be fully protected, nor can it be fully nourished. We have very beautiful experiences. We have pleasure. And they all pass. And then we're back in this open space again.

Out of that creation of the false sense of duality comes the strategy of greed and aversion. And the delusion is we don't recognize the split that we have created. So we keep operating, searching for the pleasant, pushing away the unpleasant, on and on and on. And this is what essentially removes our inner peace. When we commit to this project of defending and nourishing the I, we give away our inner peace, and we commit it to caretaking the self.

Then, as greed, aversion, and delusion start to become habitual, highly conditioned, deeply conditioned tendencies of mind, they give rise to all the other afflictive emotions. In the Buddhist texts, it's said that there are 84,000 afflictive emotions based on greed, aversion, and delusion. Now, that number was made up like 2,000 years ago. The world's in much worse shape today. I think we must have at least 160,000 today.

Different varieties of afflictive emotions. Just start looking at the list: sadness and loneliness and fear and self-judgment and shame and humiliation, wanting and longing and yearning. The list goes on and on. These become habitually conditioned and then make up that swirl of afflictive emotions and thoughts which is our normal human condition. This is the layer of obscuration that keeps us from seeing clearly, so we have trouble reconnecting with our essential peace. We call this the swirl or the layer of afflictive emotions—the second layer of obscuration. The first was the false creation of self. The second is the layer of afflictive emotions.

Then, because we're often taken over by, driven by, compelled by these afflictive emotions, we act them out in ways that harm others. When we harm others, of course, we end up harming ourselves because the duality was never true in the first place. There is no real division between my heart and your heart. If I harm you, I'm also harming myself. But we pretend that's not happening from this place of ego. We pretend the rest of the world doesn't matter because all we're committed to is nourishing and protecting this self, and we don't worry about the impact elsewhere.

This is delusion because deep in the unconscious we know duality has never been true. The unconscious knows that, but delusion keeps us from understanding it consciously and from integrating that understanding. Sometimes we act out of desire and hurt ourselves or others—sexual desire, intoxicants, killing beings for food. Sometimes we act out of aversion, hatred, lying, killing, and so forth.

This creates another level of problem for us. These unskillful actions build up in our whole body and mind and form a layer called karmic obscurations. It's hard to see through the thickness that results from a lot of unwholesome deeds because there's a level of regret and remorse and shame that we're at first in denial about. We can't see

them because we pretended it doesn't matter. Our ignorance gets compounded with greed and aversion expressed outwardly in all kinds of unskillful actions that end up harming others and ourselves.

So these are the three layers: the sense of self, the afflictive emotions, and the karmic obscurations.

Then how does the path work? What are we doing here? I find this really fascinating because the Eightfold Path starts at the outer layer and works back in to the deeper layers. This is the path of, as it's traditionally described, sīla, samādhi, and paññā—ethical conduct or virtue, concentration or meditation, and wisdom or insight.

We start by beginning to practice with virtuous conduct. Really, if we simply practice with the five lay precepts, it goes a long way. We start to look at these areas of killing, of taking what's not given, of lying, of misusing sexuality, and misusing drugs and intoxicants. As we start to clear up our behavior in all those areas, then we have the openness to start looking at some of the past misconduct. That's when the life review comes in, and we open to the feelings of real remorse and regret for the unskillful actions that we've done in the past.

As we start to make our peace with the past actions and our present conduct becomes much more refined, that itself brings a level of great harmony into the mind because we're no longer in as much conflict with the outside world. The relations start to become harmonious and stable and undisturbed. This is a terrific advance, simply the practice of sīla and the clarification that brings in the heart and mind. It takes out the factor of regret, remorse, and the denial of wrongdoing.

Now this practice can be really beautifully refined. I love to think about this story of the Dalai Lama when he was being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey. Oprah ran an interview with His Holiness in O Magazine a few years ago, and this is the account of that interview.

Oprah began by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect," Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it," Oprah said. She couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

So that quality of...

of this understanding, we recognize that the very process of seeing clearly is itself enlightenment. This is not a distant goal we're working toward—wisdom is already present in every moment of clear seeing.

When we look closely at any experience—watching a thought arise and dissolve, feeling sensation flow through the body, hearing a sound emerge and fade—we discover that nothing has the solid, permanent characteristics we once attributed to it. Everything is revealed as fluid, interconnected, arising from conditions and dissolving back into emptiness.

This direct perception gradually dissolves the fundamental delusion that there is a solid self at the center of experience who needs to be defended, promoted, or satisfied. The ego-structure, which seemed so real and important, is seen to be a mental construction—useful for practical purposes but not ultimately real.

As wisdom deepens, we naturally begin to live from a place of greater freedom. The compulsive reactivity that once drove our behavior starts to relax. We respond to life's circumstances with increasing clarity and compassion, because the self-centered agenda that once filtered everything through the lens of "what's in it for me" begins to dissolve.

This is what the Buddha called the purification of view—seeing reality as it actually is rather than through the distorting lens of self-concern. When we truly understand that there is no separate self to protect or aggrandize, our hearts naturally open to the welfare of all beings.

These three stages—ethical conduct, concentrated meditation, and liberating wisdom—work together as one integrated path. Each supports and enriches the others. Without the foundation of skillful conduct, the mind remains too agitated for deep concentration. Without the peace of meditation, wisdom lacks the clarity needed to see deeply. And without wisdom's insight into the illusory nature of separateness, both ethics and meditation remain subtly self-centered.

Together, they constitute what the Buddha called the Noble Eightfold Path—the way leading to the complete cessation of suffering and the realization of our deepest freedom.

of the implication of impermanence, we see that all these factors are uncontrollable. The outward world is uncontrollable. Inner experience is uncontrollable. They're all just coming and going according to their own nature through many, many causes and conditions.

So that lets us take our hands off the steering wheel. What we are really doing is surrendering those outworn strategies of greed and aversion. We start to see that if we simply relax and trust the unfolding of the moment, there's a deeper ease, peace, and happiness that comes from that trust and relaxation than came from any degree of control, which is always governed by fear. Control is always based in fear.

As we start to trust the natural unfolding of things, we let go of these strategies of greed and aversion. We rest more in the present moment. And as we see through this duality, the interconnectedness becomes so apparent. We start to see that we are not so different. When we look at ourselves in terms of nature, my body and your body are the same nature, put together in the same way. My emotions and your emotions are the same emotions. We have the same range, put together a little differently from person to person. My awareness and your awareness—it's the same nature. It's just human awareness. We start to feel like we're just the same water poured into different vessels, as one of the old poets said.

At some point in my practice, as that kind of deep interconnectedness became clear to me, my very motivation in practice started to shift. First, I was only concerned with these levels of obscuration getting cleared in this mind and body. I just wanted my awareness to be free from the delusion, from the karmic obscurations, from the afflict-

ive emotions. But then I started to see it's the same awareness everywhere. My wish started to be: I'd like all the awarenesses to be free of obscuration and be able to shine with wisdom—with the wisdom that is our common nature, the wisdom that is at the heart of all of us.

So even my intention in practice changed, and this is something I offer to each of you. Our intention can become working for our own understanding and liberation as a way to help remove the obscurations everywhere. This is the quality in practice that we talk about as bodhicitta.

We can reflect on this, make it a part of our daily contemplation. I like to make a resolve in this direction at the start of every sitting. I just say something like, "May I come to awakening in order to benefit all beings." The understanding is that if I can awaken, then it will be easier for others to awaken.

This term bodhicitta, sometimes translated as enlightened mind—I like "awakening heart." You can just bring this in and make it a part of your daily experience, your daily reflection. We can start to include as motivation in our practice to wake up in order to benefit others, to be able to liberate awareness wherever it's obscured.

So this is called purification of view. We start to see through the duality, the falseness of the duality of self and other. We see how everything is arising according to its causes and conditions. This is the work of paññā, or wisdom. But the work is not done yet.

Wisdom has one more step. Seeing through the falseness of self is good. Seeing the truth of impermanence is good, and it brings a certain freedom. It doesn't bring complete freedom. So wisdom has to take one more step, which is to go beyond the duality and touch again that essential nature. We could call it our essential emptiness, our essential unconditioned nature, our unchanging nature, the factor of nibbana.

When the mind has been collected through the purification of conduct, the purification of view, when wisdom has been developed and the mind comes into balance, there is the possibility for that penetration to take place, where there's the touch—the direct touch of the unconditioned.

Some people on this planet have developed this quality to a very high degree. I was in Nepal a few years ago. I was practicing with my Tibetan teacher named Soni Rinpoche, a young lama. One of his teachers was staying at the monastery while I was there. My teacher said, "Would you like to meet this lama? He's a very highly regarded teacher. His name is Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche."

At first I said, "No, I don't really need to." I thought, seeing one Rinpoche, you've seen them all. Then I thought about it for about a day and said, "Yeah, I would like to meet him if I could. I've heard a lot of good things about him." I actually had an offering from a friend who asked me to pass on some dana to him.

So I had an occasion to meet him. I went into the room where he was prepared, sitting in meditation posture. His wife was there, along with a couple of attendants, and my teacher translated. We had a little chat, and then I prepared to offer the dana.

I crawled forward, did three prostrations to him, and then offered out the envelope. As he took it from me, I looked directly into his eyes, and he looked back into mine. As he did, he went into his meditation state. I'd never experienced anything like it before.

I looked into his eyes and his eyes moved slightly apart as though he was looking into a great distance. Then something in him went completely still. I felt like I was looking into the unconditioned nature. When I thought about it later, it wasn't even accurate to say his mind was still. The feeling was there was no mind there to be either still or moving. He was just utterly empty.

As I kept looking into his eyes, I felt like I was falling into that empty and unconditioned nature. I felt if I could have just looked a little longer... I don't know what would have happened. But I felt so exposed. His gaze was so penetrating and he was so undefended that some nervousness came up in me. The nervousness broke the spell and he saw it in my eyes. Then he just went back into his normal mind state and the moment passed.

But I felt I had seen at that moment one of the qualities of the Buddha that is probably why so many people woke up when they came into his company—because of his deep touch and manifestation of this utterly still, unconditioned nature, the highest kind of happiness that we can each touch as a possibility when we penetrate through these layers of ignorance and obscuration.

So let's just sit together for a minute, please.

This is the peaceful. This is the sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, cessation, nibbāna.

CHAPTER 36

Impermanence

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this retreat dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines impermanence (anicca) as one of the three fundamental characteristics taught by the Buddha—alongside dukkha and anattā. Drawing from the Hebrew folktale of King Solomon's ring inscribed with "this too shall pass," Armstrong explores how we can work skillfully with the truth of constant change in our lives and practice. He outlines the Buddha's three levels of wisdom: hearing (sutamaya paññā), reflection (cintāmaya paññā), and meditative insight (bhāvanāmaya paññā), focusing particularly on reflective and experiential understanding. The talk addresses how impermanence manifests across cosmic, personal, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions, including aging and death contemplation as recommended in the Buddha's daily reflections. Armstrong explains how meditative insight reveals the moment-to-moment arising and passing of all phenomena through the six sense doors, leading to the understanding that there is nothing solid to grasp. This recognition naturally inclines the mind toward nibbāna—the unconditioned element beyond change—and the freedom that comes from non-clinging.*

There's an old Hebrew folktale that probably many of you have heard, but I like the story and I can't resist sharing it again. It is set in the time of King Solomon.

They were about six months away from a festival, and Solomon thought he'd have a little bit of fun with one of his ministers. So he said to him, "There's a magic ring that I really want, and I'd like to have it in time for this festival, which is six months away. Six months should give you plenty of time to find it. The properties of this magic ring are that it will make a happy man sad and it will make a sad man happy. So please go out and find me this ring. I really want to have it."

The minister was very obedient and dutiful to the king. He said, "Yes, I will go and search and find you the magic ring." Solomon knew that such a ring didn't exist, but he was playing with the minister.

So the minister went all around the countryside asking everyone he could find if they knew of such a magic ring, and no one knew of such a thing. Six months passed, and it was time for the festival. The day before the festival was to begin, he was at his wit's end. He didn't want to let down the king, so he kept searching.

He went to the marketplace and the bazaar in the town to a poor looking jeweler. He came up to the jeweler and said, "Sir, I need to find a magic ring that will make a happy man sad and a sad man happy. Can you help me?"

The jeweler said, "Yes, I can." He picked up a simple gold ring and inscribed on it while the minister waited. Then he handed the ring to the minister who looked at it, read the inscription, and his face lit up.

So he went to the king. The celebration was to begin the next day. The king and his retinue were all around, and he thought he'd have a little more fun by embarrassing his minister. He said, "Well, minister, have you found that magic ring for me?"

The minister said, "Yes, your royal highness, I have." The king was shocked—it took the smile right off his face. The minister handed the ring to the king. The king read it, and the inscription said, "This too shall pass"—which makes a happy man sad and a sad man happy.

This story, if it's true, goes back about 3,000 years. Who knows if it's true? Solomon died in about 930 BCE, so it's an old, old story. Abraham Lincoln told the story in a little different form in 1859. It was reported in the newspapers. He was giving a speech in Wisconsin and he told the story this way: "It is said an eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence to be ever in view and which should be true and appropriate at all times and situations. They presented him the words 'And this too shall pass away.' How much it expresses, how chastening in the hour of pride, how consoling in the depths of affliction." That was Lincoln's comment on this story.

Of course, the message of the story is on impermanence and change. This teaching on impermanence and change is one of the central themes of all the Buddha's teachings—a very powerful teaching that can lead to a fundamental change in how we understand the world and therefore how we relate to it.

It's so interesting. There are so many directions we can come to the Dharma through that make fundamental shifts in us. Just the precepts, for example—really understanding the precepts, we start to understand how being kind to others creates our own happiness. It's such an awakening when we find that out. Working with emotions and learning that what was unacceptable formerly, if we can accept it, starts to weaken the difficult emotion that we had been resisting.

This teaching on impermanence likewise goes against the grain of our conditioning. So tonight I want to explore this theme—how we feel it in our lives, how we can work with it, and ultimately where it takes us in Dharma practice.

We can sum this teaching up: "This too shall pass away" is another way of saying everything changes. We all know this is true. I'm not telling you anything you didn't know before, but we haven't yet fully realized all the implications of this message. How do we know? Because we keep holding on. If we had fully realized this, we would no longer be holding to anything in the world. So we know it intellectually.

We may know it a little bit down here in the heart, but it hasn't gotten completely into our marrow and bones yet. In fact, you could say that the whole of our Dharma practice is about fully understanding the truth of this teaching.

As we look into this more deeply, I want to mention that the Buddha talked about three levels on which wisdom, or insight, comes to us. First, there is wisdom that comes simply from hearing teachings—sutamaya paññā, the wisdom that comes from hearing. As you listen to Dharma talks, read books, and hear words from others, a certain amount of understanding comes through. This is the first level. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, it's important to have the right information at this level, and the Buddha's teachings constitute pretty good information at the level of hearing.

The next level takes what we've heard and applies it through reflection. We examine whether these teachings are true in our own lives, seeking to apply them in our experience and life situations. We reflect on them, turn them over in our minds, connect them to other things we know, and see if they still hold up. In this reflective process—using thinking for a Dharma purpose—we learn more deeply. This is the level called wisdom from reflection, or in Pali, cintāmaya paññā. Cintā means thought, maya means "produced from," and paññā means wisdom.

Then there's a third level of understanding that cannot come through hearing or reflection alone—the level of meditative insight. When we calm and still the mind, it moves into a new way of seeing, a deeper and more penetrating way of understanding the nature of things. This opens the door to meditative insight, or bhāvanāmaya paññā—bhāvanā means meditation, the wisdom produced from meditation.

Tonight I want to focus particularly on the second and third ways we can learn and gain insight. Impermanence lends itself well to all three levels, but especially these latter two. The wisdom from hearing you've already received—everything changes. We're done with that one, right? You know that. But how far did it get you? Not very far, though you do have the right information.

The second level, wisdom from reflection, is particularly valuable because impermanence is one of those themes that's always relevant for contemplation. Just as the sentence "this too shall pass away" is always applicable, so is reflection on impermanence itself.

Let me place this in the context of one of the Buddha's central teachings. Through the practice of vipassana, he encouraged us to understand clearly the nature of this world—the body, mind, and external environment. He described them in terms of what he called the three characteristics of all existing things. I'm sure you've heard these before, but let me remind us all of what he taught.

The first characteristic is that all conditioned things are impermanent—anicca in Pali. This feature of impermanence is one of the fundamental characteristics of existence. The word "conditioned" is important in this formulation. What constitutes a conditioned thing? Something that arises from prior causes and conditions.

Your body, for example, was the product of your father's sperm meeting your mother's egg, nourished by countless conditions—each of our bodies is a conditioned thing. It arose dependent on conditions, and the Buddha said everything that arose from conditions will pass away. So we know that our body will pass away. This building is also a conditioned thing, put together by carpenters, bricklayers, and foundation workers who erected it piece by piece. This building, too, will pass away at some point.

The second characteristic is that all conditioned things are unsatisfactory—dukkha. Everything that comes from prior causes and conditions does not have the power to deeply satisfy us. Why? Because of its nature of impermanence—it will pass. In this context, I prefer "unsatisfactory" as a translation, which is broader than the more common "suffering."

The third characteristic is that all things are not-self—anattā. There's nothing we can really claim in this whole world, inner or outer, as being "I," "me," or "mine." We'll explore this more as the retreat continues. This is one of the more enigmatic parts of the teaching, but absolutely central.

Notice a difference in the formulation between the first two characteristics and the third. The first two say "all conditioned things"—impermanent, unsatisfactory. The third says "all things."

What's the difference between all conditioned things and all things? There's one thing that's not a conditioned thing, and that is the unconditioned. One thing that's not a conditioned thing, called the unconditioned—also called the deathless or nibbana. So

even nibbana is characterized by being not-self, but it is not subject to impermanence or unsatisfactoriness. That means it's not subject to arising and passing. We'll come back to this later.

The Buddha went on to say that whether a Buddha arises to describe them or not, these three characteristics always apply. They're always true—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. Whether they have been proclaimed or not, they're always true.

The curious thing is how hard they are to see. There is something in the psychological makeup of the self that doesn't want to see it. It's not good news for the self, because what is the self's project? The project of the constructed self in this world is to find permanence, lasting happiness, and something it can call me and mine. That's what selves do. That's basically all that selves do.

Because we have invested so much in the I, me and mine through our psychological creations, we don't want to see these three characteristics. This is the operation of ignorance. There is in each of us at this moment—unless you're really awake right now—a veil which is more active than simply not knowing the truth. There's an obscuring force at work that will make it difficult to see clearly these three truths. It's part of the operation of self. It's part of what we are subject to.

For example, in our human condition, somewhere deeply we kind of know this truth about impermanence. Here we are—twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, or seventy years old. Have any of us found a lasting happiness yet? Does it stop us from looking further? No. But somewhere underneath, we kind of know that impermanence is the name of the game, that it's the way this universe has been put together.

How do we know it? By feeling anxious, by not having found that lasting happiness. We all have—it's part of human nature—a deep longing for some kind of security, a lasting kind of happiness. And so we keep trying to find it through things of the world which don't last. So the happiness doesn't last and it keeps us perpetually unsatisfied, looking, craving, striving, trying to fill this hole of our insecurity.

This is the human existential dilemma. We know on some level the shifting nature of things and yet we can't stop this longing to find a secure base. So even as we try to hold on to one pleasurable thing, lasting happiness, and it passes away as all things do, we move on restlessly to the next. Rather than meet this anxiety, this fundamental insecurity—it's so uncomfortable—we keep reaching out and looking for something else. And nothing ever fills this underlying hole.

This is from the Buddha: "Before my enlightenment, O bhikkhus, when I was still a bodhisatta, this thought occurred to me: What is the gratification of the world? What is the danger in the world? And what is the escape from the world? Then I thought: Whatever joy and happiness there is in the world, that is the gratification in the world. That the world is impermanent, pervaded by suffering and subject to change, that is the danger in the world. The removal and abandoning of desire and lust for the world, that is the escape from the world. So long, monks, as I did not fully understand as they really are the world's gratification as gratification, its danger as danger, and the escape from the world as escape, for so long I did not claim that I had awakened to the unsurpassed supreme enlightenment. But when I had fully understood all this, then I claimed that I had awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment. The knowledge and vision arose in me; unshakable is my deliverance of mind."

The Buddha is saying that really by looking into this question of the delights of the world and their changing nature and finding a resolution to that—finding a way out of this dilemma—that's where awakening lies. That's where freedom and deliverance lie.

So this is the theme I want to explore this evening. Remember, we're still in the reflective area of insight that comes from reflecting on. These are themes that are useful to reflect on in daily life as well as in retreat. We can look on the very most vast level that we have at our disposal. We can look on a cosmic level, and we can see impermanence on that level too.

The Earth is said to be 4.5 billion years old. The oldest parts of the known universe are something on the order of nine or ten billion years old. And it's assumed by most cosmological theories that these will return to nothing again. At some point, the sun will burn out, the Earth will disappear. Perhaps the universe will coalesce again in that very dense coagulation that preceded the Big Bang, and even on a cosmic level, everything may go away again.

This is echoed in the Buddhist texts where the Buddha talked about eons of world expansion, eons of world contraction, worlds arising, worlds passing away. Even on the greatest level, we can see this truth of impermanence.

Coming down from that level, looking at one lifespan, this is where it gets a little more interesting, a little more gripping to look at the truth of impermanence. What is the case in our own life?

We've all seen through this promise of finding happiness outside—that's the way our culture trains us to look. We've all kind of been over that route and we found it's unsatisfactory. So we've come here looking for happiness from a different direction and we

start to see that true spiritual practice, real happiness doesn't come from things outside. It comes from inner qualities. You could say it comes from having an inner purity, a state of heart and mind that is not clogged up with greed, aversion, and delusion.

As you touch this place in your meditation—temporary freedom, relative freedom from these three forces—take a moment to explore the peace that's in that, the quelling of restlessness, the fading away of craving, the satisfaction of that state. And you'll come to trust that this is the direction of our practice. This is the direction for true happiness.

So we start to uncover this possibility, but we notice we tend to have brought our old habits of mind along with us. And what happens when we find it? We tend to hold on.

I remember when I first started to discover this peace through meditation, and it was after some period of having a really restless mind. I thought, wow, now I've got it. I've got this peace. It's going to be like this forever now. I found it. Now I can live my life from this place. I go, wow, what would it be like to live in the world from this place of peace? And I start spinning out on all my fantasies about working at jobs with this place of peace and having relationships from this place of peace and all the great things I could do.

What happened to my place of peace? It's gone. So as we hold on to it, build it up, project into the future, we destroy it.

Well, for me, that loss of that place of peace was devastating the first times it happened. I thought I'd found it and my life was going to be like that for the rest of my years. And then half a day later, it had disappeared. That was devastating. So it was actually much more important to me, that place of peace, than my car or my bank account or things that I had had in the outer world.

So we find this real meaning in spiritual practice, a deep sense of satisfaction. We touch it and then it also goes away. So our spiritual practice also is characterized by this same kind of impermanence.

Often we come into meditation—I can see this habit in myself, I've had it for a long time, it's weakening, still comes in from time to time—we think we're going to find, based on the development of concentration and beautiful factors of mind, this kind of nice plateau through meditation that then we can kind of cruise at. We work, we develop some peace. Oh, this is what I've been looking for. Now I can sort of stop working and I can cruise at this for a long time. It's a search for another kind of security based on factors that will change.

Unless we arrive at that peace through the same deep understanding the Buddha was talking about—gratification, danger, and escape—then we realize, oh, it's only temporary. The peaceful places that we come to in meditation also have the quality of arising and passing, until wisdom, in its fullness of development, can establish them in an unshakable way. So at this point, they are temporary, but we often think they're going to last, so we get disappointed. Again, we miss the truth of impermanence. Or let's put it a different way. We need to learn the truth of impermanence in this dimension also. It applies in spiritual life as well as in our outer life.

In all these research projects that are going on these days, a lot focus on meditation specifically. There seems to be an equal number that focus on the question of happiness. Every week, it seems, you read a new research study on happiness.

An interesting one that was done some years ago was by a team at Harvard, led by a professor named Daniel Gilbert. They basically studied this question of impermanence by looking at what happened to people's level of happiness when they got what they want, and then what happened to the level of happiness when they got something they really didn't want. What they found was we're really bad at predicting how what happens to us is going to affect our happiness or unhappiness.

So people would get a large sum of money from an inheritance or winning a lottery or something like that, and the expectation was that's really going to make me happy. You probably know from reading these studies that lottery money makes you happy for at most a year, and then the crash is really painful because it doesn't continue. Similarly, if people got a big paycheck, a raise, a new car, something like that, it would make them temporarily happy, and then that would fade quickly—much more quickly than people expected.

But the other side was also true. If people broke a leg or lost a job or even lost a loved one, a family member, they found they recovered from that more quickly than they expected to also.

So what does this say about our tendencies of mind? What it says is—and this applies in meditation too—when we get what we want, we tend to overestimate its importance. So we tend to get kind of inflated when we get what we want. And it's true in meditation states as much as in outside. When we lose it or something bad happens, we tend to get more unhappy than is justified. We tend to think it's a bigger deal than it is.

This happened to me when I would reach some peaceful state, happy state, concentrated state in meditation and it went away. Then the crash made me think it's gone forever. I'll never get it back.

This was really strong for me a couple of years ago. I had been a monk kind of early in my practice history, for about a year. Then, once I'd left, I always felt a little unfinished. I wanted to go back and experience that again. I kind of had a longing to be in robes again.

So, a few years ago, I went back to Asia, and I took robes again, just for a short period of six weeks. It was in Burma with a teacher named Paok Sayadaw, who teaches a very strong form of concentration practice. There's only one place you're allowed to put the attention, which is right below your nose. You follow the breath there for every waking hour. Sitting, walking, eating, moving around, the attention should never move from this very small area under the nose. So that was my practice for six weeks. A little demanding.

I'd arrived at the monastery at the start of the rains retreat, which happens to be the start of the rainy season. So I showed up one day in my lay outfit from California. The next day, my head was shaved, and I was wearing the robes, and I was on this practice schedule, which was fairly strenuous. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half. The longest sitting was two hours, and I kept it up throughout the day.

Well, the start of the rainy season means the start of the monsoon. And it was raining about three hours a day there. The first two weeks I was there, I did not see the sun. It was raining all the time. I'd sort of forgotten how to tie my robes on because it had been a few years. So here I am, a fairly new monk, walking back from the dining hall, trying to hold my bowl in one hand, an umbrella in the other, and keep my robe from falling off my shoulder while the Burmese lay people who are visiting the monastery are down on the ground kneeling to me because they so venerate the bhikkhus. I was embarrassed. I thought, you should not be venerating me. I'm not a very good monk at this point.

The practice was difficult. The usual hindrances came up. The rain and the weather were sort of driving me crazy. I wasn't having a huge amount of success with the meditation practice. I felt very awkward being in the robes again. And I got depressed. I thought, this is just awful. And I didn't see any end to the rains. I thought, it's going to be like this for six weeks. What on earth am I going to do?

So one of the characteristics of falling into these states is we forget about impermanence. We think the state we're in is going to last forever. That's why it's so helpful to reflect on these changing conditions when we're in the middle of them.

So I'll tell you what I did. I tried to reflect on impermanence. I didn't have a lot of conviction in it.

But I had a photograph of the Dalai Lama with me that I'd brought from the States. He always has this very equanimous smile on his face. He's such good company if you're ever bummed out. So I asked him a question. I said, "Your Holiness, I'm really going through a hard time. Do you have any advice for me?"

And immediately I heard his voice in my head, and it came in his Indian-accented English. It was very clear. He said, "Yes, stay optimistic, cheerful, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Okay, I'll try.

So I tried to stay positive, optimistic, and cheerful, and sometimes I could, and sometimes I couldn't. But eventually, what do you think? The weather changed. The mood changed. Things seemed to lighten up. The situation improved. So even then, in the midst of all that difficulty on every level, impermanence came through. It got easier for a while. The rest of it's another story.

But what did come from the reflection and the conversation with the Dalai Lama was a real confidence that whatever happened, I would come out the other side of it. This is something that grows in our practice from going through all these ups and downs, going through the highs that meditation offers and then the lows that we touch. The first times we go through them, we think it's always going to be like this, especially the lows. We become really convinced they're going to last. But all we have to do is keep going. Just keep sitting and walking and don't form conclusions, and they do change. Every time, they will change.

Once we go through this cycle of up and down and up and down enough times, we really start to get that conviction. "Oh, what I'm in now is not going to last." And again this phrase "this too shall pass" starts to ring really true. So don't lose sight of that. Notice in a difficult space if the mind starts to project it into the future, as mine was doing in Burma thinking this is going to be like this the whole rest of the retreat. And then notice when it starts to change, because it always will.

One of the other areas that we notice are subject to impermanence is with emotions. As I mentioned in the talk the other night, every emotion has the nature to arise and pass away. Is there any emotion that stayed the same the whole time you've been here? Probably not. This is actually why it's safe to open to the emotions and really feel them. We don't have to push them away because their very nature is to go away. The only thing that makes them stay is suppressing them. It's kind of curious. As long as we're open to letting them come, they will also go. So we start to really trust in this. We don't have to worry about any of these emotions if we can let them arise, because their very nature is to pass through just like weather.

Obsessive thoughts are the same. Earlier this year, I was in a period of conflict with somebody, and it was quite painful for both of us at times. We basically had a good relationship, but we got into this little quarrel, and I think we both contributed to it, and we both suffered from it. We were able to talk about it and talk it through, and we've resolved it, but while we were going through it, it was quite painful for both of us.

When it was first up, my thoughts went there a lot. I was kind of obsessing on what am I going to do about this problem and how am I going to fix this in the relationship. So when I had a spare minute, my mind would turn to and kind of obsess about that particular conflict, that particular problem in my life. And that also started to feel like it was always going to be there. I thought I'm never going to solve this problem. I'm always going to have this to deal with.

A few months later, the thought's gone. It doesn't come. Every once in a while, something will remind me of that period, and we can get together and talk about it. It doesn't stir up the obsessive thinking.

So it's sort of like everything that makes up our personality and our struggles at this point in time—it's all a passing show. The things we think about, the ways we feel about it, the situations we create in our imagining, all of that is going to go into the past the same way all the past has gone away now. All the things you were thinking about five years ago—not here now.

So we really start to see all these changes of mood, changes of thought, problems, fixations—they're just all going. And a year from now, there's going to be an entirely new set. So watching that process happen over and over and over, we no longer put so much weight on what's happening now.

They all pass.

This is a poem from Rainer Maria Rilke that I like. It's called "God Speaks to Each of Us." This is from a period when Rilke was in quite a religious mood. He had done a lot of tours of churches, I think in Russia, and then came back and wrote a short book called *The Book of Hours*, all specifically on religious themes.

In this poem, he's imagining that God the Creator fashions each of us and then gives us a little pep talk before launching us into life. This is Rilke's imagining of that conversation:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your memory,
Go to the limits of your longing and embody me.
Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror.
Just keep going.
No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Now, give me your hand.

I especially love this section: "Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final."

There's no final resting place in this journey, in what could be called a state of mind or heart or emotion or feeling. There's only change and a growing equilibrium within the change. No feeling is final.

One of the other areas where it's really helpful to reflect on impermanence is in the way the body changes. Aging is a fact of life. Sometimes it's quite a beautiful fact of life. If you talk to someone who has a small child, it's a delight to watch that child grow and develop and change—how their bodies grow, their capabilities grow, their capacity to express their love grows. It's an amazing thing that the child doesn't will that. It just happens through every child, has happened through each of us.

I have a friend who has a six-year-old daughter. He says the hardest thing about coming away to teach is having to leave his daughter, because at six, she's still changing quite a lot. And in such a beautiful phase of life, he wants to be there for all that change. It was a beautiful aging process at that time.

Just so you know, there's a fire drill tonight, so there may be voices outside. They're all beneficent. There's no fire, but there are firemen and firewomen.

As we get a little older, the aging process doesn't look quite as inviting. We all have to start relating to the change in our appearance. If we were handsome before, we are probably not quite so handsome as the years go by. We start to lose some of our physical capabilities. We can't do all the things that we were able to do, and certainly not as quickly as we could when we were younger.

Our brains start to deteriorate as well. We lose some of our conceptual ability, and there's something else that we lose but I've forgotten. Oh, memory. We lose our memory as we get older. So we have to adapt to all these things.

Ajahn Sumedho, who is going to turn seventy-five this year, said something really interesting. He was talking at Spirit Rock—I think it was last year. He said, "You know, from the ego's point of view, this aging process is really awful. I look in the mirror and I think, where is that handsome young man I used to know? I have more aches and pains throughout my body. It's not pleasant for the ego. But," he said, "for a Dhamma reflection, it's very, very interesting, because we really feel this truth of impermanence. We feel the fact of change day by day."

In older people who have a spiritual foundation, I've noticed many who open into this very beautiful kind of deep acceptance, surrender, love, and peace. Within the aging process, from a spiritual point of view, there are really great treasures that open up. Nobody told me this when I was young. I didn't think about aging very much anyway—I thought it happened to my parents, but not to me. Now that I'm getting older, I understand. Aging is also accompanied by a beautification of the heart if there's a spiritual foundation. So that's a wonderful thing to see.

Nonetheless, it's hard to lose our physical and mental capabilities. It's hard to see our appearance change the way that it does. This process of aging will test us, and there needs to be a lot of openness to impermanence on that level. And of course, aging only leads in one direction, as probably most of us are aware.

A friend of ours was in the hospital with a parent who had to go because of a critical acute illness, and was there with a family member, a brother. The brother said, "Wow, being here really makes me depressed. Seeing our parent go through this and all the other people here really makes me depressed." Our friend, who's a Dharma enthusiast, said, "Well, you know, your life's only going in one direction—aging, sickness and death." Her brother, who had no spiritual context to hold that observation, was shocked and felt it was quite a rude comment to make. But it is true. This is our direction.

Once we get into the aging process, we become very aware of where it's leading—that death is in our future. Sometimes this change, the extent of change that we encounter on a day-by-day basis when we're really paying attention, can feel like a kind of death. Especially in meditation like this, we get created so new each morning when we wake up that it can really feel like yesterday's over and there's kind of a new being coming alive out of that death.

This is from Krishnamurti: "Death is extraordinarily like life when we know how to live. You cannot live without dying. You cannot live if you do not die psychologically every minute. To live completely, wholly, every day, as if it were a new loveliness, there must be dying to everything of yesterday. To die is to have a mind that is completely

empty of itself, empty of its daily longings, pleasures, and agonies. Death is a renewal, a mutation. When there is death, there is something totally new. Freedom from the known is death, and then you are living."

It's not always easy to keep this fact of dying in mind. You may have heard of this story from the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian text, where a wise person is asked, "What is the greatest miracle in existence?" And they answer, "The greatest miracle is that everyone is surrounded by death but believes that they won't die." So interesting.

This reflection on death is a powerful Dharma aid. It's encouraged as a support for our Dharma practice, and there are many stories in the texts of this kind of reflection. Dogen, the great Japanese Zen master who trained in China for many years and then came back and started Soto Zen in Japan, said that his whole spiritual journey was begun when he was at his mother's funeral. He saw the smoke from the stick of incense wafting up and kind of disappearing into the air. He was just profoundly moved by the truth of his mother's passing and the disappearance of the incense smoke to reflect deeply on impermanence. He felt that's what eventually led him into his awakening.

Of course, one of the experiences that prompted the Buddha to undertake his quest was the seeing of the heavenly messengers—an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. This is what the Buddha said about seeing the corpse: "An uninstructed person seeing a corpse feels repelled and disgusted. But I reflected that I too will die and come to be a corpse someday. So it is not befitting for me to be repelled and disgusted by a corpse. Seeing this, the pride I took in life entirely vanished."

There are within the Buddha's instructions the recommendation to reflect on our nature and the susceptibility to aging, sickness, and death on a daily basis. The Buddha recommended five reflections for laypeople and monastics to undertake every day. I'll read these reflections in case they appeal to you. We just run these thoughts through our minds:

"I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging. I am of the nature to become sick. I have not gone beyond illness."

I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death. At death I will be separated from all that is dear to me. And last, I am the owner of my actions. All that I do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

These reflections are recommended so that the truth of impermanence comes through again and again in our understanding of ourselves, of life, of the world. The Buddha said this about seeing impermanence: When the perception of impermanence

is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sense desire. It eliminates all desire for existence. It eliminates all ignorance and it uproots all conceit of "I am." This is equivalent to full awakening—this seeing impermanence again and again.

So how can we come into alignment with what we know to be true? There's a quote from a movie I quite like called *Bedazzled*, which I think has been underappreciated generally. The hero, a celebrated author who uses his role to be a bon vivant and seductive, delivers this charming come-on line: "Why does the existential dilemma have to be so damn bleak? Yes, we're alone in the universe. Yes, life is meaningless. Death is inevitable. But is that necessarily so depressing?"

This is a good meditator question too. The interesting thing is that the teachers who have really understood these truths of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness are some of the happiest people I've ever met on the planet. So there is some way in which seeing these truths is not actually depressing but freeing. How is that?

There's a lovely chant often sung at funerals in Thailand and other Buddhist countries that says in English: "All conditioned things are impermanent. Their nature is to arise and pass away. To live in harmony with this truth brings the highest happiness."

When we first hear this teaching on impermanence, it may seem like a bitter pill we're asked to swallow. But we find that as we explore it, investigate it, realize it, and bring that realization into the way we live, it has the possibility of opening us up to a very deep happiness—the deepest kind of happiness.

This relies on the third kind of understanding which comes from meditative insight, the *bhavana-maya paññā*. Meditation can reveal these deep truths about impermanence in ways that thinking, hearing, and reflecting cannot.

As the mind quiets through this practice, through the continuity of attention moment by moment, we develop an ability to see more and more clearly the way things are. Out of that still and deep attention, we start to examine every aspect of our experience to see if this feature of impermanence can be seen in it.

What is the experience we investigate? It's these six realms of experience I mentioned in a very early talk: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, and feeling. We start to bring an interested examination in each moment to every phenomenon that arises at any of these six sense doors to see if every appearance is characterized by arising and passing. To see if this teaching on impermanence applies on this moment-to-moment experiential level.

Usually one of the first doorways that opens up to see this is sensations through the body. When we come in from outside and sit down, the body may feel solid, fixed, lumpy, earth-like, immobile. As we sit for a while and the concentration deepens, as the mindfulness becomes more refined, it starts to seem like waves of energy—just pulsating energy everywhere the attention is turned. If you look even more closely, you can see how that energy is rising and passing, getting bigger, getting smaller, pulsing on, pulsing off, moment by moment, everywhere the attention is turned.

What was solid soon starts to be seen the way it really is, as just these momentary flickers on and off, on and off. We apply the same kind of inquiry to every sense door. Sight is a little more difficult, but sounds, smells, tastes, as well as sensations start to become very clear. This reflection on the rapidity of thoughts and emotions passing through becomes very clear.

All of a sudden, we start to see there is nothing fixed in this whole field of inner experience, whole field of outer experience—only arising passing, arising passing very quickly, moment after moment after moment.

When we start to see this in its full reach, we really understand there isn't anything there to cling to. It's not that we can hold on to something for a while and then it's going to change. We start to see that in the very moment, every part of our experience is arising, passing, arising, passing—or you could say coming into being and dissolving out of being. There's nothing solid there to hold onto even for a few seconds.

When we see in this way, we really know it's futile to cling because there's nothing that can even really be called an object that we could hold onto. This is getting into the understanding of emptiness—nothing substantial anywhere that can be even made an object for a short time.

The Buddha said that our situation is like someone who's being swept downstream in a fast-moving river. It's the river of our changing experience. But this person who's being swept downstream keeps reaching out for something to hold on to on the banks of the river, but all they can grab hold of are stalks of grass. And because the current is so swift, they're just pulled out as the person is tugged along by the rush of the river. Everything that one tries to hold on to pulls away and becomes part of the moving stream.

This is from Rumi:
Think of how phenomena come trooping out of the desert of non-existence into this materiality. Morning and night, they arrive in a long line and take over from each other. "It's my turn now. Get out." This place of phenomena is a wide exchange of highways with

everything going all sorts of different ways. We seem to be sitting still, but we're actually moving, and the fantasies of phenomena are sliding through us like ideas through curtains.

So meditative insight sees this is the reality. There is nothing to hold on to. And seeing at this level really shows us the only thing we can do is to let go. This turns out to be the escape. If pleasure is the gratification, and this dissolving change is the danger, the escape is in letting go, or more precisely, not taking up in the first place. The escape is in not clinging.

We can touch this through our meditation. Just because the world is subject to change and the phenomena of the world are inherently insecure, and as I think Joseph said, anything can happen at any moment, that doesn't mean that we have to respond with fear or wanting. Those are our two conditioned responses: "I want it" to hold on the pleasure; "I don't want it" to come, the pain, because we know how quickly it can change and things come and go.

Through meditation, we discover a different stance, a different relationship. Even though things are coming and going, we find the peace of mind that comes from not holding on—not holding on to keep the pleasant, not holding on to push away the unpleasant. We're in touch with impermanence.

And this is a good criterion to check your meditation. Are you in touch with change? It doesn't take such a deep concentration to realize this. "Yes, I experience change." We're in touch with impermanence. We're fully present. But there's no holding on to any of the passing phenomena. This is the doorway to peace.

This is from the Buddha: "When one establishes the perception of impermanence in all formations without exception, then the mind inclines to nibbana." Nibbana, you remember, is the element within our whole possibility of experience that is not subject to change. By developing the perception of change in every experience, the mind is inclining to this peace that's beyond change, that's not subject to arising and passing.

We could call this by different names. We could call it the unentangled knowing—full awareness, but not caught up in any of the passing show. We could call it the freedom from greed, aversion, delusion. We could call it right attitude. This is the place we're looking to discover in our meditation. This becomes our refuge. This becomes our safety, again from the Buddha: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

From that place of unentangled knowing, of full presence without clinging, the mind has a possibility of opening to this direct experience of the unconditioned.

And I'll just close with this quotation from Rumi: *Be with those who mix with God as honey blends with milk and say, "Anything that comes and goes, rises and sets is not what I love most." Live in the one who created the prophets. Otherwise, you'll be like a fire left by a caravan burning out alone beside the road.*

Let's just sit for a minute, please. Anything that comes and goes, rises and sets, is not what I love most.

Live in the one who created the prophets. Otherwise, you'll be like a fire left by a caravan, burning out alone beside the road.

Let us rest in this profound teaching. Anything that comes and goes, rises and sets, is not what we love most. In this recognition lies the doorway to the deathless, the unconditioned, the peace that surpasses all understanding.

May this practice of seeing clearly, of releasing our grip on the impermanent, lead us ever closer to that which neither comes nor goes, neither rises nor sets—the timeless awareness that is our deepest nature.

Thank you for your presence and your sincere practice.

CHAPTER 37

Starting A Long Retreat

Guy Armstrong · 54 min

> *Guy Armstrong opens a three-month retreat with profound reflections on undertaking long retreats as one of humanity's greatest endeavors. Drawing on his experience practicing as a monk in Burma with Paok Sayadaw, he explores the unique challenges and extraordinary benefits of intensive practice. Armstrong discusses inspiration as being 'filled with the breath of life,' connecting it to the Ānāpānasati Sutta and the spiritual urgency that motivates deep practice.*
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> *The talk examines renunciation (nekkhamma) as one of the ten pāramīs, explaining how letting go of ordinary comforts creates the simplicity necessary for wisdom to unfold. Armstrong addresses the practical aspects of retreat life - accepting what is offered, maintaining noble silence, and refraining from external communication. He emphasizes that beneath all technical instructions lie two fundamental elements: silence and presence.*
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> *Reflecting on Thoreau's Walden and poetry by T.S. Eliot and W.S. Merwin, Armstrong frames retreat as learning 'how to live deliberately' - developing the art of meeting each moment with openness and wisdom. He concludes with Bhikkhu Bodhi's teaching that liberation requires only two things: to start and to continue, offering encouragement for the transformative journey ahead.*

So I hope you had a pleasant day today. In terms of an ordinary start of retreat, was this a little more pleasant? You got a few extra things to do—talking to each other, getting to know some people, picking apples. I think we're going to be eating apples now for the rest of the three months. So you did a great job.

But it is a special time starting a retreat like this, whether you're here for six weeks or three months. It's a big undertaking. And tonight I want to talk about this approach of starting a long retreat, because it's like nothing else in our lives and nothing else in the world. I think we all believe that it's one of the greatest things a human being can do.

There are many cultures throughout history who have revered this in that spirit. When you practice in Thailand or Burma or other parts of Asia, you practice in a culture where this has long been understood as one of the greatest undertakings that a person can make. And meditators who undertake it are really respected more highly than government officials or well-paid generals or politicians.

It's very unusual to be practicing in a culture where a meditator is kind of at the pinnacle of status because, as you know, it's not like that in our culture—rather the opposite. Our culture doesn't really have any frame of reference for what we're doing. So if you look from the outside with sort of modern Western eyes, this looks pretty strange. And the only thing I could really compare it to to get any respect in this culture is like an extreme sport. You're doing one of the most extreme things you could possibly do.

A few years ago, I went to Burma and ordained for about six weeks and practiced with a very wonderful meditation master named Paok Sayadaw. The conditions were difficult. I lost about, on average, about half a pound a day while I was there, eating just one meal, not a lot of protein, rainy season. And so I came back after six weeks and met some people that I've known for a lot of years.

One of the people that I spent some time with—he's a friend, not a close friend, but he is a friend—is an ex-Navy SEAL. And for those of you who aren't from this country, the Navy SEALs are a very elite part of a fighting force. They're the kind of guys who get dropped off in submarines in James Bond style operations and climb up on the shore and then do battle in foreign lands. They're trained to do that kind of work. So their training is very intense, physically demanding. Sometimes people die in the training.

So I came back having lost a lot of weight. My head was still pretty shaved. I looked pretty bedraggled, to tell you the truth. And the monastery didn't impress him. Buddhism didn't impress him. Meditation didn't particularly impress him. But what he was really impressed by was that I sat still for eight hours a day. Because he knew that was not an easy thing to do. And it's not an easy thing to do, as you all well know.

So there's this combination of extreme effort that's required in doing this practice fully with a wholehearted commitment. But you also know the incredible benefits that come out of it. I don't know any other path to get to this range of benefits so directly and have them be developed so strongly and so reliably.

We heard a number of them this morning as you were stating your intentions: the development of peace, of compassion and love, of wisdom, of coming toward the end of suffering, of healing, of equanimity, of spaciousness, of inner strength and balance. The benefits when you stop to think about it are really unmatched, but the effort is also kind of unmatched. We are fortunate enough to know that it's worth it. A lot of people don't, but I want to appreciate again the challenge that you're all undertaking and also the possibilities, which are really tremendous here.

So I want to talk about—given this very unique and fruitful situation, and I know it's going to be fruitful and a wonderful experience for everyone, because that's just been our experience through so many of these—I want to talk about how to approach it both in very practical terms, what to do with the body, in heart terms, what to do with attitude and our motivation in it, and also just some information, conceptually some things about undertaking a long retreat. Those are the three areas I want to talk about this evening.

And I want to start by touching on two things that Carol mentioned last night: inspiration and aspiration. The first one, inspiration, is a very important element of why we're here. So I was curious what the dictionary had to say about it. And when I looked it up, I found, as many of you know, that it's from the Latin word *spirare*, which means to breathe. And this word, *spire*, is also the root of the word spirit. So inspiration and spiritual are linked in their root meanings, and it's linked to the breath.

And you'll find this connection between breath and spirit in a number of cultures. It's in English, Western culture, of course. In the Hawaiian language, the word *aloha* means the breath of life. And it also means love or affection. It has a lot of broad meaning. So when someone in Hawaii says aloha to you, they may be saying hello as a greeting or goodbye as a greeting, but they're also saying love, affection, and life in that word.

In Pali, the language of the ancient suttas, we find this connection beautifully illustrated. The famous sutta about breathing is called the Anapanasati Sutta, the discourse on the mindfulness of in-and-out breathing. Here, breath is *pana*. Of course, it's central in our meditation practice.

In Sanskrit, which forms the basis of much Hindu thought, that word becomes *prana*, again meaning the breath of life. So breath and life are closely associated across traditions.

And now here's the deeper meaning: inspiration is defined as being filled with an exalting influence. You can feel how the breath of life and all that life means fills us. That's what it is to become inspired—to be full of the breath of life.

Carol touched on this last night, and I wanted to bring it forward again. Often these moments of inspiration are central to our dharma life, to our path. So I invite you to reflect: what have been some of the inspiring moments in your spiritual life?

They may have been things that happened before you knew about practice. They may have come through practice itself. They may have been the very things that started you on this path. Could have been a book, an experience when you were younger—chil-

dren have many deeply inspiring experiences. Could have been meeting a teacher, someone whose being inspired you. Could have been an experience in your own meditation or hearing about a friend's experience.

As you think about those experiences that perhaps form the foundation of your understanding of spirituality and your own potential, what comes to mind? Would anybody be willing to share one of those moments of inspiration?

"At the conclusion of a metta retreat—actually it was a New Year's retreat I did here—the person sitting next to me and I exchanged blessing cords. Speaking for myself, I was so full of love at that moment. I was crying from happiness, perhaps a little sadness, I don't know, but so full of love. We tied them on each other, so I tied it on her with the utmost love and affection, and she did the same for me. I still wear it, but that moment was so explicitly clear."

Beautiful. So at the end of a metta retreat, tying a red blessing cord around each other's wrist with a real spirit of care and openness of heart and loving-kindness. Moments like that can move us, stay with us, and show us a human possibility—a possibility that's real within our own hearts.

Another offered: "I think it was my first ten-day retreat here, and I was really struggling with a lot of inner suffering, my mind going over and over things. Then I was walking and touched a railing, and there was this immediate presence in touching something physical. All that mental construction just evaporated, and there was this sense of freedom."

So beautiful—carrying around a history of suffering, then coming into the present moment, touching a railing, feeling the freedom in the here and now, and having that whole cloud of mental construction simply evaporate, opening into freedom.

I'm sure all of you have your moments, near or far in time, that in some ways inspire your whole path. I'll share one from my own history. I was in my early twenties, out in a forest in East Texas where I was living at the time. It was late afternoon, the sun was setting, and I was surrounded by these tall pine trees. The light coming through the pines was so beautiful—the green of the pines and the streaky sunlight coming through them. I just said to myself—I don't even know where this came from because I'm not particularly theistic—but the thought arose: "God is love." There was this ecstatic and exalted feeling of touching something truly divine.

In some ways that moment has always provided inspiration for me on the path—that there's the possibility of feeling that degree of love so directly. I wanted to live with openness to that, availability to that.

When our heart responds to these moments of inspiration, they form what we want from spiritual life, or what Carol called our aspiration. This morning, many of you shared your aspiration for this retreat, which were all lovely and beautiful to hear. I could relate to all of them.

I'd also invite you to think about your aspiration over the long term. I hope you consider your spiritual practice a lifelong endeavor. For me, I consider it extending beyond one lifetime, possibly to many lifetimes.

So when you think on that bigger scale, where do you want to go? Where do you want your practice to take you? And I'm not going to ask you to share this because this can get quite personal. But to think on a really big scale, what's possible for you? What would you really like to realize through your dharma practice?

And just to mention that the Buddha's aspiration when he started his journey was for the complete end of suffering. He was convinced that there had to be a way. And he didn't care what it took to find it, but that's what he dedicated his journey to—finding that complete end of suffering.

Aspiration is an important thing. I work out in a gym near my home in California, and there was a guy who used to work there who was one year a competitor in the Mr. America contest. This was back before it became Mr. Universe and Arnold won it—things kind of changed after it got into the movie world. But back in the days of Mr. America and that level of competition.

So this guy who worked at our gym was a Mr. America competitor, and they had a photo of him in the window in his Mr. America outfit. You know, they wear the skimpy bathing suit, they oil their body, and they strike one of these poses where all the muscles stand out in great relief. And he was very impressive.

I had been working with him—he was giving me some pointers on a couple of the exercises, and I happened to put my hand on his shoulder. It felt like touching a brick wall. He was so solid. There was no soft give there. Very solid. His name was Lance.

One day I was in the gym, and these two teenagers were working out together. They were spotting each other on the machines and helping each other with the heavy weights, and I was eavesdropping on their conversation. One of them said, "Did you see Lance in here the other day? He pressed 515 pounds"—which is, for me, an inconceivable amount of weight. At my level, it's considered really good if you can press your own weight, which for me would be about 160, and I'm not quite there.

So Lance pressed 515 pounds that these young guys had witnessed. These were teenagers. They were not highly developed in their physiques yet. But the way that they talked about their hero, Lance, really indicated to me they were basing an aspiration on that. Something about Lance had inspired them of what was a possibility, and because of that their motivation was somewhere up here, whereas my motivation was somewhere down here.

So it's a different kind of inspiration maybe than we're interested in here, but for them Lance was really inspiring and he changed where they aimed their workouts. They had a different idea of what was possible.

So I encourage us all to think high in our aspiration. There's no downside, as long as it doesn't come with expectation in a certain amount of time. But as we aspire to something like the compassion, the clarity, the wisdom of the Buddha or the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh or whoever is a great being for you—that can only uplift us and move us down that avenue. It's a beautiful thing.

And also with aspiration, a few people mentioned it this morning. I just wanted to draw it out. Whether we consciously include it or not, it's always helpful to remember that as we develop our own hearts and minds, as we develop our practice, we touch and benefit many, many other beings through our example, through our kindness, through just our way of being in the world. So we can take that into account. We never know how far those ripples will go.

And so we say—it may be a little inflated, but we like to say—we practice for the benefit of all beings, because we may inspire friends who then might take up practice, open their hearts, touch many other beings, and we never know how far it goes. So we'd like to remember that our practice is never just for ourselves, but it's always for the benefit of many, many—we could say countless, we could say all other beings, all sentient beings.

So from this beautiful aspiration, the inspiration that it came from, and a great deal of faith—everyone here has got a lot, a lot of faith. To put yourself in this situation for six weeks or three months, there's a lot of trust, a lot of faith—beautiful quality.

We come here and we leave behind our normal life. We leave behind our friends and our family, comforts of our home, our choice in food, our cars, choice in music or movies or books or television, all the kind of pleasures of our daily life to come into this very spartan environment. The word for this classically in the tradition is renunciation—we let go of all those kind of pleasant things of our daily life in order to come into a situation which is not so gratifying on that level.

And this is not an easy thing to do.

Of course, we're reenacting what the Buddha did when he left his very comfortable home life - his palaces, his family, the wealth of his household at age twenty-nine - and embarked on six arduous years of spiritual practice. We're reenacting that journey in our own way.

This quality of renunciation, an important step in any spiritual life, is in our tradition one of the ten paramis. The paramis are the qualities that, when fully developed, lead to complete freedom and awakening. They include loving kindness, equanimity, patience, determination, and effort. One of them is this factor of renunciation - the willingness to let go of our usual comforts.

But it's not an easy thing to do. In the Buddha's discourses, he sometimes spoke of the sorrows of the renunciate life. You may feel those in the early days of retreat - missing what you left behind at home: comforts, friends, family, food, chocolate, all those things. You may experience that longing as a form of grief. This is part of the adjustment to this life, the sorrows of the renunciate life. The Buddha said that in the end, these sorrows are overcome by the joys of this way of being. I'll speak more about that shortly. But first, let me acknowledge that there is genuine difficulty in making this shift. The transition is usually felt quite keenly in the first several days, when the contrast is most apparent.

Sometimes this word "renunciation" doesn't sound appealing in our culture. It suggests something unpleasant, like a hair shirt being forced upon us. Other terms that capture this quality include simplicity, voluntary simplicity, letting go, relinquishment. It's said that the proximate cause for this letting go is spiritual urgency - there's something we really want to understand, and that urgency allows us to release our attachments. So it's important to stay in touch with the urgency of why you're here. It all has a purpose.

This is from Thoreau, from Walden: "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach me and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

In a way, you could say we're here in order to learn how to live. Sometimes all the vocabulary of meditation doesn't make that connection apparent, but that is really what we're all doing here - learning how to live wisely and with love.

The world contains both beauty and pain. A big part of the spiritual life is opening to both dimensions of what life holds. We'll find this reflected in our retreat experience as well. Much of it is about opening to the joy and love that's available, and also to the

dukkha, the difficulty that is an essential element of life. As we open our hearts, we feel the beauty and love more directly. We also feel the pain more sensitively. But it's through our capacity to open, to feel both dimensions, to continue opening and holding them, that we grow and learn. This is an integral part of our journey.

It's such a remarkable choice, coming into this renunciate situation. I feel we're very fortunate today as lay practitioners. We have this opportunity. In many cultures, even in Buddhist societies, one is either a nun or monk choosing the renunciate life, or one is a householder with family, responsibilities, and work. To taste the beauties of the renunciate life, one traditionally had to abandon daily life completely.

But our situation is different. We can live a full daily life, a rich engaged life, and also come into a situation like this to experience what it's like to live as a true renunciate. On shorter retreats - a week, ten days, even two weeks - we get a taste of this. But as you settle in for six weeks or three months, you get to really explore this terrain. In the first week, you sort of settle in. Then - this has been my understanding - you're really living here. As you truly inhabit this place, you're adjusting to this new style of life that is like a monastery, a temporary monastery. And then you get to experience that opening to the beauty and difficulty that has always been integral to deep spiritual life across traditions and cultures.

It's such an interesting choice. The riches of this life are often covered over by the busyness of our daily existence. I think it was T.S. Eliot who described life in the twentieth century - normal, busy daily life - as "distracted from distraction by distractions." We don't even notice we've become distracted because the distractions have carried us away again.

In this life, there's only the essential activity to occupy us: sitting and walking and breathing and eating and sleeping and working and taking care of the body. From that simplicity, richness opens up.

I don't know if you all tuned into this, but two weeks ago in California, there was a very lovely event—the ordination of a bhikkhuni, a word for a Buddhist nun, a fully ordained nun, in the Theravadan tradition. That's the Southeast Asian tradition of Buddhism that our practice comes out of, and it took place in California. It was the first bhikkhuni ordination in our Theravadan tradition to happen in North America. There have been many legalistic complications and obstacles that prevented it from happening, but the first one took place two weeks ago and four women were ordained. That means they took the 254 precepts of a fully ordained Theravadan nun. So it's quite a step forward, I think, for the Dhamma in the West.

Our good friend Sylvia Boorstein was there. Sylvia teaches at Spirit Rock, an old student here, friend of all of ours. She wrote about it for the Huffington Post, so when you get home you can look up Sylvia's article. It was a beautiful description of the event. Afterwards, when we were at a couple of days of meetings together at Spirit Rock, Sylvia was just reflecting on that experience and she said, "You know, I could have been a nun." She isn't—she has a family with a husband and four children and lots of grandchildren, very involved in an active daily life. But that call to a kind of quiet contemplative life was really speaking to her as it has spoken to all of us.

So there's often, as you move, as you make this transition from busy daily life—active, rich, engaged—into this simple way of life, there are often a lot of different feelings, especially when you're looking at six weeks or three months ahead. I just want to name some of those to let everyone know that these are included and just part of the normal process, a part of our practice at this point.

A common one is exhaustion. Often people come in from their busy lives and think, "I just need to sleep for two days, then I'll be ready to go." There can be some nervousness—I read that on one of the interview sheets—or some fear, such a long time, maybe haven't been in retreat for such a long time before. Some inspiration as you reflect on the possibilities and a sense of excitement. Often there can be self-doubt: "Am I going to be up to this? Am I going to be able to do it?" And based on our experience with many, many people, the answer generally is absolutely. Can be some loneliness and also some confidence: "Yeah, I can do this. I've done days and days. I've done weeks. I can do this."

So all those feelings may be at play and may alternate during the early days of the retreat. We just take those into account. Notice that they're present. Don't resist. Don't hang on. And part of the heart's opening.

Then in terms of living in this renunciate way, I'd say, especially having practiced as a monk in Asia where conditions are a little tougher than this, the essential spirit of that life is to take what's given. We have lost control of our outer situation. We have surrendered in being here. We have thrown ourselves on the mercy of strangers. In some cases, you may know the staff and you may know they're really lovely strangers, but in many ways, we're at the mercy of the cooks and managers and teachers and housekeepers and so on. And we've surrendered in a big way.

So in this spirit, we take what's offered to us. We take the food that's served. It may not be our first choice. We may have many good ideas on how the cooks could improve it—we generally refrain from expressing those. We accept the room that we're given. We might like one with more sunshine or a better view of the forest, but we accept

where we have been offered to stay. We notice that the clothing that we have with us is what we'll be working with and living with for the time that we're here. When we're a monk or a nun, we accept the medicine that's offered by the monastery.

So we work with these conditions, whether they're to our liking or not. Most of the places that I practiced in Asia as a monk, we received just one meal a day.

Usually it was at breakfast. And I have to tell you, if you haven't had a red fish curry at eight o'clock in the morning, you really haven't lived. So it's a little easier here.

In Zen, they have a saying: "The mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace that can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease." So I don't think you'll be served dried cow dung, but just in case—with equal ease.

The Spirit Rock cooks have a sign on the bulletin board there that says, "When we prepare a delicious meal, that's our practice. When we prepare an undelicious meal, that's your practice."

Along with the renunciation of our control, we also give up communication. We settle in here and, in the spirit of noble silence, make a commitment not to communicate with our friends and family back home unless there's an emergency. We make a commitment not to communicate with one another, with other yogis who are on the retreat. So we give up conversations. We give up different forms of contact.

We recommend that even through the process of snail mail, you keep your letters to what's really necessary and urgent. No need to check the mailbox every day. No need to send outgoing letters every day to people. They'll know if they don't hear from you that you're doing fine.

This also includes all these new forms of communication that are multiplying at such a rate in our culture today: cell phones, text messages, instant messages, email, Facebook, Twitter. You may be used to following two dozen friends' activities through social media. All those things stop when we come here.

It's so interesting because five years ago, we didn't have to say much about this. Cell phones didn't work so well here, and there weren't smartphones. So people couldn't really check their email. Now you bring in a smartphone or a tablet or some netbooks, you could be running your own internet business from the annex for all we know. But we recommend that you don't. We ask that you not.

Really, for the sake of your own practice, we recommend that you give up all those forms of outside communication. It's not necessary to check your email or text messages or IMs or Facebook and Twitter while you're here. And if there's a continuing temptation to do that, Marilyn is really happy to receive your smartphone or tablet or netbook or whatever it is and keep it under lock and key for the time.

This is what's going to make the kind of space and simplicity that lets those beautiful qualities of heart and mind unfold. It's the lack of complication that allows this flowering. So I really encourage you to be very careful and follow this kind of guideline.

It's getting harder and harder to unplug from this always-connected world. Nielsen, the company that used to rate who was watching what TV programs—they're still a media rating company, but they've extended it beyond television—just released a report that says American teenagers on average send over one hundred text messages a day, send or receive. The actual number was 3,146 a month. So those images you have of teenagers wandering through the malls with their thumbs never stopping? That seems to be fairly accurate—over one hundred a day.

One of our teachers works with a lot of young people and commented that this year, unlike any other year, it was harder for that group to unplug from all these different forms of connecting. She said the young people on this retreat seemed more afraid of the silence and solitude than in any other year. When they unplugged, they reported feeling a lot of fear of the emptiness.

So this is a great place, as Thoreau said, to get back to the essential facts of life. What is it to just face life in its bare and simple form?

What we often find is we have a lot of identity—self-identity—based on this frequency of contact. It's sort of like: Is somebody talking to me now? Is somebody being aware of me? Is somebody messaging me? Because every time that happens, we get affirmed in someone's eyes. We get validated and appreciated, at least recognized that we exist. So we've started to construct our identity, a different kind of identity, on the frequency of these contacts. It's a new kind of phenomenon.

I think based on this, we need to do an update of Descartes' famous posit of cogito ergo sum: "I phone, therefore I am." This is the new rendering.

We're in a place where we're not looking to build up the self. We're looking to decrease the formation of self. So letting go of all those connections will help with that.

We also really request in the spirit of this renunciation that you not communicate with one another. This is so central for keeping an even keel in our community. As you know, when you drop into the silence and you start to open up, you get really sensitive. A little bit of contact from someone else, especially when it's not expected, can be very disturbing. You know, maybe somebody just wants to say, "I love you, I really think you're cool." Even that can set a lot of thoughts off.

But what's more problematic is—let's take it from the other side. Let's say you found someone's behavior annoying. God forbid it should ever happen during these three months. But just occasionally, sometimes one yogi doesn't 100% like what another is doing. And they feel the need to let the other person know where they are falling down. So they'll write them a note expressing this level of irritation. It's always signed "Metta." But if you're the receiver of a critical note in this silence and with this sensitivity, it's like a bomb has gone off in the middle of your body. And people are thrown into tumult by that for days, literally days, because we hear about it and we track its effects. It's one of the most difficult things that people can deal with on a retreat like this.

So please be kind to one another. Please don't send notes to one another. If there's something that someone else is doing that you feel is inappropriate, maybe annoying you, maybe annoying other people, please tell one of us and leave it to us to work it out with that person. We'll try to smooth the situation out in the way that seems most appropriate, and you don't need to try to work it out on your own. So if there's one request that I would make, that would be it. If you're having a problem with someone else, please let us know. Carol's really good at that. Joking. She is, but I don't want them all to go to her.

I wanted in this spirit to say a little bit about the fact that there are lots of different ways to communicate. You can write a note. You can touch someone. You can make gestures, kind of pantomime around somebody. All those are different ways of communicating, of connecting with someone here that can feel intrusive if you're on the receiving end. It feels like somebody's coming into your space or making an inappropriate communication with you. So please refrain from all those different ways of communicating.

Sometimes in seeking to communicate, we might look to make eye contact as a way of starting a communication, initiating a communication. So again, I would refrain from using eye contact as a way to start communicating with somebody, hoping to catch someone's eye and maybe a spark will fly and then you'll be married by the end of the retreat or whatever. But if we were to say don't make eye contact with anybody, then it would feel really—to me—too frozen, too rigid. So it's not like that.

I think looking at people's faces in the middle of the retreat can be very heart-opening. You know, I've learned a lot and opened to a lot of compassion and affection through just noticing the expressions on other people's faces while I'm sitting a retreat. And then if somebody happens to open their eyes and you make eye contact, it's not a problem. So it's not that we always have to go around eyes downcast and I can't ever look at another person's face, but just be sensitive that eye contact sometimes can be a little electric. Some people may prefer not to have any and maybe want to keep their eyes down. But if your eyes are up and someone else's eyes are up and they cross, not a big deal. Don't worry about it. But also don't use it as a kind of way to say, "Now we really have something going together." Just simple. Keep it simple.

So just remember that the purpose of living so simply as we're doing here is so that the mind's activity gets laid bare. We're not really so concerned with the things that the mind is fastening onto—whether it's the food or the bed or the noise or the teacher's instructions that day or the dharma talk didn't work for us or those kinds of things. It's more that those are the outer places where our movements of mind land and sometimes fixate, but we're more interested in the movement that's landed rather than where it's landed.

So movements of liking and disliking and greed and aversion—that's what we want to understand, not the external circumstance so much. So the simplicity here kind of lays bare those workings of the mind. It's like as we're here over these six weeks, most of the leaves will come off these trees. And then you can really see how the limbs are filling the space that the leaves are currently covering.

The leaves obscure the structure of the tree. When the leaves fall, that structure becomes really clear. So when we take away the busyness of life, then the bare movements of mind stand out like those limbs in fall. And that's what we're here to learn about because that's where the freedom comes.

This is from T.S. Eliot: "Quick now, here, now, always, a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." It's this complete simplicity that allows the wisdom and the love to grow. And these are the deep sources of happiness that come through in an experience like this.

That's why the Buddha said in the Dhammapada of renunciation: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness, one attains to a happiness which is greater, then the wise pursue that happiness which is greater." And that's what you're doing here—by letting go of the lesser happiness of our daily lives and all the pleasures and comforts of it, you're all

pursuing a happiness which is greater, deeper, more reliable and lasting. So this is why, for me, it's so inspiring to see all of you here and wanting to do this work, wanting to undertake this.

Let me share a few more things before I finish. I want to talk a little bit about what really matters during your time here. You're going to hear from us lots of Dharma talks—most nights of the retreat there will be some Dharma talk. You'll hear lots of instructions. At times they'll sound really complicated and you'll probably go crazy trying to figure out which one you should be doing at any given point in time.

I just want to say that all the techniques are really secondary. They're refinements that are very helpful. They're good, skillful means. But the two primary things for me are the silence—and I don't mean the external silence, but I mean the silence that you feel as you stop and listen—the silence and your presence within it. If you carry on and return to those two elements, your retreat will unfold. That's our baseline. So even though the instructions may get complicated, the techniques may get complicated, just keep coming back to that: the silence and the presence.

Silence has so much to teach us. This is from Walt Whitman: "There is that in me. I do not know what it is, but I know it is in me." That's sort of what we hear when we touch into the silence. There's something there. I can't say what it is, but there's something there. And that's what we want to let unfold in us.

Another beautiful quote that I love on silence is from W.S. Merwin. Merwin is in his eighties now and lives on Maui. I got to meet him once—he was doing a book signing on Maui and autographed a book. He's a very lovely, gentle presence. It turns out he practiced Zen Buddhism for many years with Aitken Roshi, who lived on Hawaii and taught for many years. A line from one of his poems is: "Now all my teachers are dead except silence." All my teachers are dead except silence. So this continues to teach us, continues to inform us.

And the quality of presence, awakeness—it leads to the more specific forms of mindfulness and awareness that we'll be talking about. Just that sense of being awake and present in this moment. This we can trust in, this we can always come back to. It's very, very simple. Really what we're learning is to live well, to live wisely. And there's an art to this. It's not really a science, it's an art.

When I first started meditation practice, I was very focused on the technical aspects of meditation and the technical descriptions of the progress of the Buddhist path—things like the possibility of enlightenment, the stages of concentration referred to as jhanas, stream entry, arahantship, and so forth.

Those teachings really called to me. And I didn't realize that during those long retreat experiences here, what I was really learning was how to live artfully, skillfully, wisely, compassionately, and lovingly.

Over the years, as I've taken the practice back into daily life and applied it, grown in the Dharma and grown in my daily life, it's become really clear to me that I learned all those things here. In silent retreat, I learned how to listen. I learned how to open to what was difficult. I learned how to have compassion for myself, acceptance, and loving kindness. I learned to wait before I spoke. I learned to know whether my mind was in a loving place or an angry place before I acted. Then all those flowers have bloomed over years of carrying these teachings back into daily life.

This is from Alan Watts: "The art of living is neither careless drifting on the one hand, nor fearful clinging to the past on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive."

Does that remind you of meditation? That's a lovely description of meditation. That's what we're learning to do here—how to find that place in the mind and then how to meet each new moment from that kind of place. We discover it here because it's easier to discover it in the simplicity. We get grounded in it, we get steeped in it, so that when we take it back home, it becomes our baseline. That is what, more and more over time, we live from. And that's the place that allows all these beautiful qualities to flower.

I'll close with a quotation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the great translators and teachers of our time: "Liberation is the inevitable fruit of the path and is bound to blossom forth when there is steady and persistent practice. The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue. If these requirements are met, there is no doubt that the goal will be attained. This is the Dhamma, the undeviating law."

At the end of our talks each night, we like to allow just a minute or so of quiet time together, just to let the words settle before we stand up and leave. So let's just take a moment, a minute, to sit together in silence.

The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue.

Thank you for your attention. We have now about forty-five minutes for walking, and then we'll have the last period of the day with chanting. Skye will lead the chanting at 9:15, so I hope you will have the energy and come back for that. The sit will be a little shorter today just to entice you to come—not the whole forty-five minutes.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 38

The Sources of Happiness

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's teachings on happiness through five progressive sources. He begins by exploring the Pali vocabulary of happiness - sukha (contentment), pīti (meditative delight), ānanda (bliss), pāmojja (joy), and somanassa (gladness of mind) - noting how the entire gradual training can be seen as a progressive refinement of joy.

Drawing inspiration from observing a remarkably content Buddhist monk, Armstrong outlines five avenues to happiness found in the Theravāda teachings: sense pleasures (kāmaguṇa), merit (puñña), concentration (samādhi), insight (vipassanā), and awakening. Each represents a progressively more refined and reliable form of happiness, all resting on the reduction of greed, aversion, and delusion.

He discusses how sense pleasures, while temporary, have their place in lay life when enjoyed ethically. Merit - comprising generosity (dāna), virtue (sīla), and mental development (bhāvanā) - forms the foundation of wholesome action that creates happiness through the law of kamma. Concentration brings the joy of mental unification and temporary freedom from hindrances, while insight reveals how clinging creates suffering and its release brings freedom. Finally, awakening offers the possibility of discovering unconditioned peace beyond time and change, representing the Buddha's highest happiness that surpasses all conditional forms by incalculable measure.

The subject of tonight's talk is the sources of happiness. The whole point of the teachings of the Buddha was for us to find happiness. Although he often talked about it in terms of the end of suffering, the outcome is the same. However you want to language it, the outcome is the same. The Buddha often used this kind of negative language in his teaching, so the end of suffering is consistent with his terminology. But he also used many very positive expressions for different kinds of happiness.

In the Pali, I'll mention a few words and their sense in English. One word he often used was *sukha*. I really like this word because it sounds a lot like "sugar" and has that kind of sweetness, which means alternately happiness or pleasure. I think of it as a quiet kind of contentment.

The word *pīti*, which many of you are familiar with, refers to a happiness specifically associated with meditation. There's a kind of delight when you really connect well with your meditation focus—whether it's the breath, the body, a mood—and you're really present with it and meeting it with fullness of attention. There's a delight, a meditative delight in that.

The word *ānanda* means bliss, and it's used in many names. The Buddha's attendant was named Ānanda. You see it frequently in monks' and nuns' names in Asia. My preceptor was the Venerable Paññānanda, the bliss of wisdom.

The word *pāmojja* means joy. It's one of the factors in what's called transcendent dependent arising, the increase in joy. *Somanassa* means gladness of mind. I believe it's mentioned in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* in a few places.

One contemporary scholar and commentator named Venerable Anālayo wrote a wonderful book called *Satipaṭṭhāna*, a book-length exposition of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. He put it this way: "The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." So really, that's what we're here to do. We're here to refine the sense of joy and happiness that we experience both in our retreat life and in our daily life. That's what the path is about.

This summer I was sitting with a Buddhist teacher who is a monk. I decided not to name him because I want to be able to speak freely about him based on my own suppositions. I may or may not be right, so I don't want to taint his name with my projections. I also don't want to create expectations in you. There's nothing worse than being told somebody's a fantastic teacher, then meeting them and thinking, "Oh, what a disappointment." So I'm not going to share his name, which will enable me to speak more freely about him.

But in spending time with him, listening to his teachings, being around him personally outside the formal teaching role, I was really struck by his happiness, his degree of contentment and joy. That's not a purely subjective impression, because he'd been through those machines at Madison. The University of Wisconsin does MRI tests and brain scans of people, and his happiness quotient in the brain scan was off the chart. So he had been coined by some there as the happiest person in the world. But they haven't tested everybody yet, even at Madison, so we won't call him that for sure.

But as I observed him through many different situations, I watched how this happiness had different facets. If he was not called on to do anything, it wasn't like he was always bubbling over with some kind of cheerful, smiling delight. Often if he wasn't interactive, he'd be very quiet, peaceful, very low-key. You could sort of just overlook his

presence if he was in a room with people and wasn't called on to do anything—very simple and modest and humble. But when he taught, and often when he interacted, he was really playful. He'd break into smiles and laughter very easily, and it was very contagious. So being around him for a while, one tended to soak up that happiness through his manifestation of it. But he was quite charismatic also.

As I spent time around him, I started to wonder: where did his happiness come from? Because I wanted some also. And I thought if he developed it, that means any of us could develop it to that extent. That's one of the promises of the path.

As I reflected on it, it seemed to me that in the teaching of the Buddha, there are basically five avenues or five means to developing happiness. I reflected on each of them in relation to him as I observed him and listened to him teach. So that's what I want to talk about tonight—these five sources of happiness in the teachings of the Buddha.

But first I want to say why this is of interest to us. Because happiness is the destination of the path, it's something I think we're all interested in. Once we learn what the causes of it are, then we know how to create it for ourselves. Happiness is a mental factor like any other. It's a conditioned state that arises based on prior causes and conditions and comes into being when those conditions are right. It's very scientific.

So if we go through the steps to prepare the mind for happiness, happiness is the inevitable result. This is not a whimsical thing. It's not a random thing. It's not an elusive thing. As it often feels in Western literature, it's really hard to figure out in Western life why some people are happy and some are not. But in the Buddhist teachings, it's very predictable.

Now, of course, we're all starting from a different point. And so it's not easy to predict. It's not possible to predict the timing of the development of happiness in anyone's practice. But the eventual outcome, if we persist, is inevitable. And that's one of the things that I love about the Buddha's teachings. There are very predictable ways for us to get where we want to go. Happiness in its various gradations are points along this route. And if we know the causes, we know how to reach that destination.

So in my understanding of the Buddha's teachings, there are five avenues to happiness, each one is kind of a set of practices. Again, it's not random. It's something that we can practice and develop. Four of them can be taken to a lot of depth. You could almost say unlimited depth of development in four. And one of them is always going to be shallow and superficial. So we don't worry as much about that one, but it's available also.

The other thing I want to say is this is just in our tradition of Theravadan Buddhism and the Buddhist teachings in the Pali Canon. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the ways to happiness. I looked up the word happiness on Amazon just this evening, and the response came back of 18,000 books dealing with happiness. So there are a lot of other ideas out there. The Buddha's list is not exhaustive, but it is reliable.

Just to name some of the others that are common in our culture: psychotherapy, exercise—there's a new formulation of exercise that some of our friends are into called the happy body. I don't know if you've heard of that one. There's a whole system to make the body happy that makes the mind happy too. Developing creativity, spending time in nature, and I'm sure you all have your own lists as well.

The five that I'm going to talk about tonight from our tradition are sense pleasures, merit, concentration, insight, and awakening. I'll talk about each one a little bit as we go in the order that I gave them. Each one is a progressively more refined, more reliable, and more satisfying form of happiness.

The other thing to say about all five of these avenues is that they rest on a common understanding in the Buddhist tradition of what constitutes genuine happiness. And that is that the forces in the mind of greed, aversion, and delusion are reduced and eventually absent. So this is the sense of when we say in our practice that the mind becomes more pure, we mean something pretty precise by this, which is that greed, aversion, and delusion decline over the course of our Dharma practice. So I'll talk about how each one of these contributes to that sense of decline.

So the first one is sense pleasures. This is from the Buddha talking to his attendant. "Ananda, there are these five chords of sense pleasure. What five? Forms—which is a synonym for sights, often when the Buddha says form also means sights—cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing."

Isn't that nice to think of all the sights in the world that have that combination of qualities? "Sounds cognizable by the ear that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing. Odors cognizable by the nose, tastes cognizable by the tongue, sensations cognizable by the body. Similarly, the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on these, that is called sensual pleasure."

And what came to my mind when I read this was a trip that Sally and I took to a museum in San Francisco, the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park. It was showing this quite wonderful exhibition of Impressionist paintings.

The Musée d'Orsay in Paris was undergoing a renovation, and so they were lending out quite a large body of their works in two stages. The first stage, called "The Birth of Impressionism," traced the early development of this revolutionary art form into its more mature expressions.

As we walked through the exhibit, we witnessed Impressionism's evolution through time—from the early, more realistic paintings by Manet and Degas to the later works by Renoir and Monet that became pure plays of light and color. The further we progressed, the more impressionistic the paintings became, and I noticed my smile growing wider and wider. I wasn't even conscious of it at first, but as I gazed upon the beauty of these Monets, Renoirs, and Pissarros, joy simply arose, and my smile expanded until I became aware of it and felt slightly self-conscious.

It truly is a delight to encounter beautiful things—to see magnificent art, to hear beautiful music like a symphony in concert. I've often thought that if an alien visited this planet and wanted to experience the greatest achievement of Western culture, I would take them to a symphony hall to hear Beethoven's Fifth. The interplay of instruments and the resulting harmony is simply magical.

We can indeed experience very high degrees of pleasure, bliss, and joy through exposure to the delights of the five senses. This is a natural part of life for lay people. When you think longingly about your life outside these walls, I suspect it's often the sense pleasures that come to mind—sharing a good meal with friends, savoring your favorite latte, making love, listening to beloved music at home or while driving. These experiences create the small moments of delight in our lay lives, moments of uplift through pleasurable encounters with the physical world.

When we enter this contemplative environment, as I mentioned in my previous talk, one of the sorrows we face is the loss of those familiar pleasures. We feel this absence for a while until we adjust, and then the joys of the renunciate life tend to compensate, making us less concerned with what we've temporarily set aside.

I'm sure you've noticed that in the Buddha's teachings, there are numerous warnings about the dangers of sense pleasures. Generally in Buddhism, sense pleasures receive rather harsh treatment—they certainly get a bad reputation. Here's a classical statement from the Buddha:

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness and sensual pleasures, which is the way of worldlings—ignoble and unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-morti-

fication, which is painful, ignoble, and unbeneficial. Without veering toward either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision and knowledge, which leads to peace, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

But notice the crucial preface: "for one who has gone forth into homelessness." The Buddha's warnings about sense pleasures are primarily directed toward monastics—people whose entire lifestyle involves renouncing access to sense pleasures. This renunciation forms the very foundation of the monastic path, just as it provides a foundation for our life here during retreat.

We don't make the pursuit of sense pleasures a central part of your experience here, nor is it highly recommended. Such pursuits tend to distract the mind from our essential concern: observing the mind and its movements.

In other suttas, the Buddha offers vivid comparisons for sense pleasures—likening them to a dry bone because ultimately there's no real sustenance there, or to a dream because they're so fleeting they can seem almost illusory and not worth pursuing.

However, it would be incorrect to believe that the Buddha condemned sense pleasures for lay practitioners. He didn't. In one sutta, he explicitly stated that one who enjoys sense pleasures may be praised, provided the wealth they depend upon has been acquired lawfully and is shared to create happiness for oneself and others.

There's a logical connection between sense pleasures and wealth that the Buddha recognized—many sense pleasures require money. As lay people, we use our resources to enjoy these pleasures, and this is a natural part of householder life.

But of course, we all understand that sense pleasures are not the final word. They represent a limited kind of happiness—temporary, transient, coming and going with fleeting satisfaction. The pleasure is genuine while it lasts, but it ends very quickly.

I remember one summer day when Sally and I were eating lunch at our kitchen table. We had fresh, homemade chocolate chip cookies, and as I bit into one straight from the oven, I remarked to her, "It's really hard to be unhappy while eating a fresh chocolate chip cookie." But then came the inevitable problem—it ends so quickly. The cookie is gone, and with it, that particular moment of pleasure.

The Buddha continued his teaching to Ananda about sense pleasures and the joy that arises based on them...

Though some may say that sense pleasures represent the supreme pleasure and joy that beings experience, I would not concede this to them. Why is that? Because there is another kind of happiness more excellent and sublime than that happiness.

So we move on to examine this next kind of happiness, which exists at a higher level. When I reflected on the enjoyment of sense pleasures in relationship to this teacher I mentioned, I realized that as a monk, sense pleasures didn't make up a huge part of his life. All I really saw was that he enjoyed some meals, but he seemed to enjoy every meal equally. Whatever he was served, he ate it with an equal degree of happiness or equanimity. I didn't see any particular preference or craving, and it wasn't a big deal for him. So for him, sense pleasures were not a significant component. For us, they form a bigger component in our daily life.

The second avenue, the second source of happiness, is a word that carries some ambivalence among Westerners: merit. It's a translation of the Pali word *punya*, and it basically means wholesome action or skillful action. But this term "merit" feels somewhat tied up with merit badges, or perhaps with the idea of bringing an apple to place on your high school teacher's desk to be seen as a good student. There's something a little too goody-goody about the word, and many of us don't feel comfortable with it. Unfortunately, there isn't another word in common use to translate this term, so I'll continue using "merit." You'll encounter it frequently in Buddhist teachings. If you simply think of it as skillful action, hopefully that will remove some of the uncomfortable associations.

The understanding is that when we engage in skillful action, it brings positive results back into our life. Some of these results may be experienced on the physical level, some on the mental or emotional level. But in any case, the results tend to lead to happiness. This is the basic law of karma.

One quotation that has been mentioned several times is this opening of the Dhammapada: "All states come from mind, are preceded by mind, are ruled by mind. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable." This captures the essence of merit—that when we act from a purity of mind, happiness and good results return to our life.

I find it fascinating to contemplate this understanding. If you understand karma in this way and have some degree of faith in it, you begin to realize that this provides the lever, or the engine, for building happiness into our lives. We can control, to some degree, the future outcome of our life by examining the intention from which we act in the present moment. If we make an effort—if we develop a regular practice of acting from beautiful or wholesome intentions—that lays the groundwork for happiness to re-

turn to our life on both physical and material levels, as well as emotional and mental levels. This understanding of karma begins to give us a certain degree of agency in our lives and reduces some of its apparent randomness.

This concept of merit is what most lay Buddhists in Asia practice for. Most lay people in countries like Thailand and Burma don't engage in the kind of intensive meditation we're doing here. Some do, but the majority of Buddhists don't enter intensive retreat the way you're experiencing. Rather, they feel that their happiness will be generated by an ongoing series of wholesome actions. They structure their relationship to Buddhism around offering food at the temple to monks or nuns, making prayers, developing loving-kindness, observing the five precepts or eight precepts. This is considered in Asia—and the roots lie in the Buddha's teachings—a good lay path. Someone following this course is considered to be carrying out authentic lay practice.

Because we have a foot in both worlds, I think it's valuable for us to undertake both the monastic practices based on insight and concentration, which I'll discuss later, and also the lay practices based on carrying out wholesome action. This is a teaching we haven't always emphasized during the years the Dharma has been in the West, but I believe it's tremendously important for us who live most of our lives in the lay world.

The Buddha said there are "streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nourishments of happiness, which are heavenly, ripening in happiness, and which lead to whatever is wished for, loved and agreeable—to one's welfare and happiness." Part of the understanding of merit is that developing merit through abundant wholesome action leads to realizing your aspiration. It leads to whatever is wished for.

Because different people hold different aspirations, the outcome of wholesome action varies depending on the person's heartfelt aspiration. If your heartfelt aspiration is liberation, this practice of merit will conduce to liberation. If your aspiration is simply to live more comfortably in the world with greater prosperity, health, or ease, then developing wholesome action can lead in that direction as well.

The Buddha spoke of three particular practices that form the basis of this wholesome action, the foundation of happiness for lay practitioners: generosity, virtue or integrity, and *bhavana* or mental development. The Pali terms for these three are *dana, sila, bhavana*—generosity, virtue, mental development.

Let me speak briefly about each of them. Generosity is a tremendous part of the Buddha's teachings for lay people. It's the first of the ten *paramis*.

So in some ways it's considered the foundation for developing the qualities that bring one to awakening.

Generosity is a very powerful practice because it cuts across the assumed separation between ourselves and others. Generosity is about tuning into someone else as a being like ourselves, who experiences happiness and unhappiness, who has wants and needs, and wanting to care for that person's needs the same way we care for our own needs.

The act of generosity is based on seeing through this assumed duality, through the force of empathy—feeling what another feels, and then acting in a way to share, which breaks down the assumed division or separation. When we have an understanding of non-separateness with one another and then act based on that understanding, the action plants that truth of non-separation in a deeper place in our heart, our mind, and also in our karmic stream.

It's a wonderful thing to carry out acts that bridge the divide between ourselves and other beings—human beings, animal beings, any other beings that you may encounter. We notice something of this in the joy we feel in giving. When you think about a time that you've given freely—not because you had to, not because it was your uncle's birthday coming up—but when it was a freely given gift, there's a lot of joy in thinking about making that gift, feeling into what would make the other person happy. When you find the right gift, there's joy in offering it. It just feels beautiful. And when you reflect on it afterwards, there's joy in thinking about the gift, the person receiving it, and the happiness that it hopefully brought to them.

You can feel how this happiness builds from the act of giving. And you also understand that it leaves a karmic imprint that will bear good fruit in the future.

One of the great things about being around the Dharma for long is you meet people doing extraordinarily generous things. Of course, many of you are devoting your lives to serving others. It's always inspiring to meet people on retreat who serve in this way—who serve at Dharma centers, serve as nurses or therapists, serve as teachers in schools, as caregivers to aging parents, as parents to young children. So many people I meet in the Dharma have based their lives around giving of their time and their energy and their skill. It's beautiful to be in the presence of that.

I was teaching a retreat in New Mexico one time and driving home with this woman who had recently returned from Thailand. She had gone to Thailand as a relatively wealthy person. She had worked as a management consultant for many years and built up savings, invested in real estate and different properties. She went to Thailand with the intention to give it all away and to retire to live in a monastery or nunnery.

She got to Thailand and made connections with different places, both monasteries and nunneries. While there, she sold her properties in the States and channeled her money to give to these different places that she'd visited and wanted to support. She sold all her properties except one and gave the money away—hundreds of thousands of dollars. She moved into one of the monasteries and got sick. She could no longer really practice and needed to return to the States to look after her health. She only had one property left.

She came back, sold that property, got enough money to live on for a while to look after her health, then went back into her job as a management consultant. The beautiful thing was she had no regrets. She'd given away almost everything she owned to support the Dharma, and she had no regrets about it. I just knew that the fruit of that giving was going to enrich her for years to come. It was very inspiring.

The second foundation is sila, or integrity or virtue. Skye talked about this extensively in her talk earlier this week, so I won't go into great detail. I'll just mention one thing that Skye said and repeat it. When we observe our sila closely, keeping the spirit of non-harming and being really conscientious with that, we're also giving a gift in that observance. The Buddha said what we give to countless beings is freedom from fear. That's a wonderful thing.

When you know somebody who has really good sila, there's a real feeling of trust in that person. It makes it very safe to be around them. You can feel that atmosphere influencing the other people who come into their orbit, so that those people create a zone of safety. The people who move in that zone are all receiving this gift of fearlessness. It makes a safe place for countless beings.

In terms of the benefit of observing this kind of integrity closely, the Buddha said that it brings a certain kind of happiness which he called the bliss of blamelessness. When we know that for a long time we really haven't harmed another being intentionally, there's a wonderful feeling of relief that's there—a lack of guilt or inner pressure or regret or uneasy conscience, a real feeling of purity and ease. The Buddha called this the bliss of blamelessness. That's a fruit of integrity.

The third practice, bhavana, is very interesting. Bhava means being or existence or becoming. So bhavana means bringing into being. It's sometimes used as a synonym for meditation.

A common translation is mental development. And I love this sense that we are bringing into being our own hearts and minds. That's really the essence of bhavana—we learn how to shape our heart and mind in a beautiful direction.

The French poet Paul Valéry kept a series of notebooks that became his spiritual practice at a certain point. I think he didn't publish them during his lifetime—they were published posthumously—but he wrote for one or two hours every morning in these personal notebooks, which were kind of a diary of his inner exploration. He'd write on many different themes. It wasn't poetry. It was just reflecting on the things that he read and his own understanding of them. It was his spiritual practice. He said of it: "Other people write books. I am making my mind."

That's what we're doing here. We're making our minds step by step, moment by moment. We're fashioning what's in here.

When the Buddha talked about bhavana as a form of merit or wholesome action, he tended to talk about it specifically in terms of developing the practice of loving-kindness. In terms of merit, the sense is something that lay people—people in daily life—can easily access and build: the sense of loving-kindness, compassion, connection. You could put gratitude in that. The other quality he talked about often was the development of faith.

So in this dana, sila, bhavana combination, I think of it as developing loving-kindness and faith. When faith is strong, life goes more easily, practice goes more easily.

This is not an exclusively Buddhist law, as you must know. Think about people you know in your life who you feel are truly happy, and just run over your acquaintances. See who comes to mind among the people you know who you feel are happy, and take a look at their lives. See if they aren't characterized by generosity, integrity, and some degree of loving-kindness.

You could say that these are the requisites for normal human happiness—not happiness that even conceives of a spiritual path, but just what it is to be a good person in the world, in human society, across cultures, across religions, across any part of the globe. You'll find these people: generosity, integrity, loving-kindness. That's what makes for a normal, happy human life.

As we develop these three in our lay life, we also will be generating the conditions for a normal, happy life.

I think it's interesting—just one final note—what all three of these have in common is they're all based on empathy and caring for others. And that's so interesting to me: the basis of a happy human life is caring for others and then expressing that.

When I thought about this in relation to the teacher I was with, the connection was very apparent. His conduct was very, very blameless. I'd never seen him do anything that would in any way give offense to someone. Very gentle person, spoke kindly when he spoke. Of course, he was practicing a lot of precepts, but you could just feel there was a genuine intention of kindness and compassion behind them.

The next of the avenues to happiness is concentration—the third, after sense pleasures and merit. Now we're getting into the realm of what you're doing on this retreat. So this is something special. This is not something that a lot of people in normal daily lives have access to or are able to develop strongly, but it's one of the key things we're doing here.

Concentration is the common translation of the Pali word samadhi. It really refers to a mind that has gathered itself into the present moment—that has become, as Carol said the other night, one-pointed in its awareness of the present moment. This gathering into the present moment brings a lot of strength to the mind.

Normally in our daily life, we're distracted by past thoughts, by future thoughts, by what we have to do next, by running here and there. In this situation, because our activities become so simple, we're enabled more and more to gather our full attention and put it into just this moment.

When that happens, you'll feel it. You'll feel the mind really collect upon the breath or body or sound in a very wholehearted way. Then we find the mind has a lot of strength.

When the mind collects in this way, it becomes still, and you can feel that in that place, it's hard to shake it. When the mind's distracted, any little sound might throw us off or start us down a path of thought and papañca. When the mind really comes together in this way, it acquires a strength that lets it stay connected to the present moment.

That brings a sense of stillness and peace and well-being. So this unification of mind, the strengthening of mind, brings with it automatically a sense of well-being.

If you look back over some of your fondest memories in meditation or what you might say are some of the happiest moments you've had, I bet they'll exhibit this factor of concentration. This is one of the things that put the dharma hook in me and made me keep coming back—because I tasted some peace through meditation I'd never felt before. I kept coming back because I wondered: wow, if a little bit feels like that, what would a little more feel like?

This cultivation of peace brought me back again and again. One of the things that's so satisfying about this state of concentration is that when it's strong, the hindrances don't arise. This is one of the hallmarks of strong concentration. The hindrances are temporarily at bay. They haven't gone away for good, but these movements of liking and disliking and sleepiness and restlessness and doubt have temporarily quieted. The mind then feels a certain kind of freedom. It's a beautiful experience not to be assaulted by these chaotic movements of our own mind.

So it's said that this state is one of seclusion. We're not only secluded from outer distraction, but we're secluded from the impact of our own kilesas to a large extent. And that's part of the beauty and delight.

The concentration can develop further into these states called jhana, which are described as absorption states of concentration. This is the Buddha's description of the first of the jhanas. There are seven states beyond this, but this is the first one: "The meditator enters and abides in the first jhana with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. She makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, fill, steep, and pervade her body so that there is no part of her whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure."

The development of this kind of joy and pleasure in meditation naturally reinforces our ability to stay present, because now the present moment experience is satisfying in itself. So this concentration enables the mind to relax into its own experience of the moment. And it can become self-supporting because the mind's not being drawn out through likes and dislikes, through wants.

One of the other things that happens as the mind settles into itself more and more is that the body also starts to settle. I think for most of us in the West, we've grown up in a very busy culture and our body reflects that. When we come to meditation, often we've picked up the energy of the fast-paced society that surrounds us. In the early years of practice, I often felt that energy was vibrating my body and rising up, coming into the head a lot. It was hard for me to settle in a relaxed way lower into my body because I felt I was still reeling from all the busyness that my life had picked up. And especially if there's any injury, trauma, or deep hurt, that kind of buzzy energy gets even stronger.

So a lot of what happens as we calm the mind in meditation is that the body also calms and lets go of that unnecessary frantic energy that's so prevalent outside. Sometimes it can take a long time for that calming to happen, but it's part of the natural process. And when the body does start to calm, it's much simpler for the mind to rest because it's not meeting the jangly energy in the body.

The practices that you're doing, the practices that we've been instructing in the mornings, all develop this quality of concentration and samadhi. You don't need to do anything differently. Sometimes people want to develop concentration very strongly and go in a particular direction, and a few people on the retreat may end up doing that. But for most of you, the practices that you are doing through the vipassana instructions will lead you to deeper and deeper concentration as you go through the retreat, and that will be sufficient.

The next of the avenues is insight. This is basically the growth of wisdom or understanding. This is what all our instructions are pointing to. This is what most of the evening talks will be pointing to. This is really what the retreat is structured around. I don't have to talk about this a lot tonight—I know you're very familiar with this ground. I'll just recap.

Insight is really around understanding what it is that we do with our minds that leads to suffering, and what we can do through our minds that leads to the end of suffering or to happiness. This is what we're here to understand.

The Buddhist formulation of this question came in two or three different main paradigms. The first, probably most important, is the Four Noble Truths: to understand suffering, its cause, its end, and the path to its end. In this, we spend most of our time on the second and third noble truths. How do we understand the arising of craving, which is the source of suffering, and how do we release that craving to come to the at least temporary end of craving and to that place of freedom? So this is really the crux of our meditation practice. If we're caught in something, there's some kind of craving at work—how do we release that and return the mind to a place of freedom, relative freedom, ease, relaxation, well-being? There's a central investigation that goes on through the Four Noble Truths.

Another insight that's commonly talked about is the insight into the three characteristics: the understanding of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. But these insights are very closely related to the Four Noble Truths. As we understand that everything is in the process of change, we don't tend to hang on or to grasp as much.

So we move through life more easily, letting things come as they come and letting things go as they go. As we learn to let things come and go naturally, there's less clinging and therefore less suffering. We learn not to hold on, and then the craving and clinging doesn't arise so much in the first place.

The Buddha talks about this in a third way as well—through the direct observation of clinging or grasping. We learn to notice when there's clinging in the mind through some form of contraction, either through liking or disliking, and how to release that. All these insights revolve around the same core issue: How do we get caught? How do we release? How does the mind get stuck? How does the mind free itself?

The understanding of not-self is particularly helpful here because we begin to understand that all the different phenomena that arise are not really commentaries on me, myself, or I. Everything arises according to its own causes and conditions. Everything passes away according to its own causes and conditions. This kind of understanding seeps in gradually through our practice, but it has a deep and lasting impact.

I have a friend who's an old meditation student, interested in coming to a longer retreat next year, who recently emailed several of us with reports of a difficult health condition. He's about my age, and his body is starting to break down in different ways. He said, "I don't know—this may be the last long retreat that I may be able to come on." He's someone who's participated in long retreats with us for many, many years. But then he added, "You don't need to feel badly for me. I know I'm not this body."

Even in the midst of that health crisis, even while seeing the end of his life on the horizon, he could say with genuine conviction: "You don't need to feel badly for me. I know I'm not this body." There's tremendous freedom and lightness when we let those truths of not me, not mine, not I really settle in and grow slowly, slowly.

When I reflect on the teacher I was with this summer, one of the most enjoyable things about watching him was observing the kind of lightness with which he approached everything. I simply didn't see stickiness or grabbiness in his mind. He was someone who really seemed to have understood the fleeting nature of everything in this world, and he wasn't getting too caught up in any of it that I could see.

The fifth and final avenue to happiness is awakening. You could say this is another form of insight, but because it's insight on such a deeper level, I place it in a different category—awakening or enlightenment. This points to the realization that it's our human potential, through meditation practice, to discover a peace that's beyond time, beyond conditions, beyond change. There's a dimension within us that has this absolute purity—it cannot be corrupted or made imperfect by anything, no matter what happens to us.

The discovery of this dimension, whenever it happens in practice, represents at least one stage of the awakening process. This discovery gives us truly unshakable faith in the end of suffering as a possibility for ourselves. We know it because we've experienced it directly. Nothing can take away that knowledge. Nothing can take away that faith.

In addition, this realization gives a certain confidence in life—certainly confidence in the path and the teachings. When it happens, it removes some of what are called the fetters in the heart and mind—some of the very structural elements that lead the mind into suffering. These can be removed once and for all.

This happens in different stages, so different fetters are removed at different points in the journey. But ultimately, the Buddha said, all the tendencies of mind that can possibly lead us into suffering—meaning all forms of greed, aversion, and delusion—can be taken out of the mind so that there's no longer any potential for suffering to arise in the mind stream. This, the Buddha said, was the highest happiness.

The Buddha taught that the happiness of sense pleasures was not one-sixteenth of the happiness of this kind of awakening. It's hard to imagine what that would be like because we're buffeted every day—as we live, as we sit, as we practice—by these forces in our own hearts and minds. The forces of wanting, of not wanting, of not seeing clearly—this is our normal human life. To come to a place where we knew that those forces could not come again to harm us, to injure us—what a relief, what a blessing, what happiness that would be.

In closing, I want to mention that this monk who seemed to know what he was talking about said that the main cause for this kind of freedom is happiness—the development of sense pleasures in moderation, of merit through generosity and virtue, of cultivating the heart, of concentration and discovering inner peace even if conditional, and of the growth in wisdom through understanding clinging and its release. The happiness from all these sources becomes the main cause for liberation.

So as we practice all the different avenues to happiness, if we practice them all, then they all channel toward this possibility—a real human possibility of awakening and the final end of suffering.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 39

Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong offers practical guidance for working with difficult emotions through the lens of Buddhist meditation practice. Drawing from the third foundation of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) - mindfulness of citta (mind/heart) - Armstrong explores how emotional and cognitive aspects are interconnected in Buddhist psychology.*
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> *The talk examines four primary difficult emotions that meditators commonly encounter: grief/sadness (clinging to pleasant experiences from the past), anger/resentment (aversion to unpleasant past experiences), desire/craving (wanting future pleasures), and fear/anxiety (aversion to anticipated future pain). Armstrong explains how these emotions arise through our relationship to time and our attachment to pleasure and pain, illustrating the Buddha's teaching that dukkha emerges from taṇhā (craving).*
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> *Rather than trying to eliminate difficult emotions, Armstrong emphasizes developing two key capacities: shifting from resistance to acceptance and understanding the three characteristics (tilakkhana) of all phenomena - impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and selflessness (anattā). Through mindfulness practice, we learn to recognize the 'storylines' that sustain emotional suffering and discover freedom within difficult states. The talk includes practical guidance on working with the physical sensations, mental qualities, and thought patterns that comprise emotional experiences, offering a path toward what Gampopa called the transformation where 'confusion dawns as wisdom.'*

Working with Difficult Emotions

The subject of our exploration this evening is working with difficult emotions. The Buddha's teaching, as you know, is all about suffering and the end of suffering.

When I'm in daily life and living that busy life in the world, the question of suffering seems really complicated. You can just talk to people in your circle of friends and family and you hear all the different situations that people are dealing with—there's such a range. Maybe somebody's son is using drugs and they don't know how to help, or somebody's aging parent has contracted Alzheimer's but they don't have the money to pay for a good care facility, or a family loses their jobs and their home in the economic downturn and they wonder where to turn for support. Looking more broadly, I think everybody these days tends to feel that the other political party has gone crazy—

whichever political party you're from, you feel that about the other side. Or looking on a broader scale, it's just hard to believe that human beings are ruining the only planet that we have to live upon through the effects of climate change. It's really disheartening.

So there are so many problems on so many levels—personal, societal, global. The question of suffering seems very complicated.

But then we come into a situation like this and it gets really simple. When I'm in retreat, it seems clear there are only three things that cause us pain.

There's the body, and that's often present. Physical discomfort probably comes in a number of times during the day, and we've talked some about how to work with that.

There's emotional pain. As we start to pay attention and go through our days, we see the movement of different states—loneliness or anxiety or hopelessness or judgment—move through the mind, some of them more difficult than others.

And then being here, we're privileged to have a different kind of pain: the pain of frustrated meditation. So if your mind wanders, sometimes that's really the most difficult thing in a day. I can't stay connected to the present moment. If you were to go into the outside world and talk to the man or woman on the street, they wouldn't even notice that their mind was wandering, much less care. But here, through our aspiration, we generate a new type of dukkha—so it's a very privileged kind of pain that we enjoy. That's our third kind: wandering mind, restlessness, lack of stability, lack of concentration.

So in retreat, these are the only things we really have to deal with on a difficult level—body, emotion, meditation. Really simple.

We've talked some about working with the body. We talk a lot about the craft of meditation, how to work with the third. Tonight I want to talk specifically about this middle portion: how to work with the difficult emotions that come.

Again, whether we look in retreat or in outer life, this area of pain is one of the greatest that we can see. In the world, we probably know a lot of people whose lives have been really affected by depression or anxiety or panic or serious loss and grief that comes from that, self-doubt, lack of self-confidence. In retreat too, some of our most difficult experiences are dealing with these kinds of feelings that come up for us.

When I first came into meditation, I didn't feel I knew this terrain very well. When one of these difficult states would come up—like fear or anger—the only thing I wanted to do was to get rid of it. I thought, "This is not why I came to meditation. I don't want to have this be happening while I'm here on retreat. How can I make it go away?"

You're all sophisticated meditators and you know that that doesn't work. In the short term, we can't just push these states aside. In the long term of practice, it's said that they do all disappear. It's said that the very roots of them are uprooted and they never arise again. But that's a high attainment. So for us, it may not happen this week, and we should probably be prepared to have them around for a while.

So the aim is not for them to go away, but rather: How can we find freedom while these states are present?

I think that one of the biggest and most immediate benefits of our meditation practice, our mindfulness, is in this area—that through the understanding and working with difficult states, we can immediately find a lot of freedom, both in our meditation and in our daily life. This is a very, very fruitful area for our practice.

Pema Chödrön puts it this way: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's creepy, grisly, splendid, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. This is really key. Meditation gives us the method, and the method is mindfulness—paying attention in this area and learning from the experience, learning from what we find out.

In the teaching of the Buddha, this falls into the third foundation of mindfulness as described in the Satipatthana Sutta. This is the foundation of the mindfulness of mind. The word that we're translating as mind is the Pali word citta. Most often translated as mind, sometimes translated as heart-mind to emphasize the fact that this word citta includes both emotional components as well as thinking or intellectual components.

So we may translate it as mind, but in Buddhist teachings generally, mind includes both the emotional and the cognitive aspects. Don't think when we say mind that we're just thinking about thought.

We're also including the whole range of emotions. In fact, the best word to translate citta is the word psyche because it encompasses that same whole range of thoughts and feelings.

One pointer to this understanding comes from asking a person from Thailand where their mind is located. They don't point to their head, indicating the brain. They point here, to the center of the chest, or what we call the heart center. Their word for mind is jit, which is derived from citta, and they believe that the base of the mind is in the heart center, the center of the chest. Many Buddhist teachings share this same understanding, that the center of the mind is really in the center of the chest.

Here's a little story that illustrates this beautifully. There's a lot of neuroscience research going on these days around meditation, and one of the foremost researchers is Richie Davidson who heads a lab at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Richie is a longtime Vipassana meditator and developed his approach to experiments in order to validate what he had experienced firsthand from meditation, which is a lovely thing to know.

We have a meditator on this retreat who works at the university in that field and knows Richie well. At one point, Richie was going to Dharamsala to give the monks around the Dalai Lama a little taste of the kind of work and research he was doing. He couldn't take his whole equipment—his basic equipment is an MRI machine, which is a little too big to ship to Dharamsala. So what he took was one of these caps studded with electrodes that make contact with the scalp and signal the activity in the brain underneath each electrode. You get thirty or forty electrodes all sending signals to a computer, and you can get a map of where the brain activity is happening.

There was this meeting with the Dalai Lama and Richie and about five hundred monks. Richie modeled this leather cap studded with electrodes for them. He felt kind of silly with it on because, truthfully, it looks kind of stupid. But he explained what he was doing and then took the thing off.

All the monks burst out laughing. Richie thought it was because he had looked so silly. But one of the monks spoke up and said, "Oh, that's so funny! You're trying to measure the mind through the brain when everybody knows the mind is located here," pointing to the center of the chest. "Like, what a joke, you guys." So they talked a little bit about how you might measure mind activity around the heart, but he hasn't figured that one out yet. It's a later experiment.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, in the third foundation of mindfulness, this is how the Buddha begins: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind?" Just to mention this word bhikkhu, which we normally translate as monk—many of the commentaries say that bhikkhu here should be understood as a sincere

practitioner. Anyone who's sincerely practicing the path of meditation is a bhikkhu. So all of you are bhikkhus tonight. Some of you may be bhikkhunis if you prefer, but either way.

"How does one abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

Again, greed and aversion tend to be more on the affective side, more on the emotional side. Delusion tends to be more on the cognitive side of not understanding things the way they are. So again, in this definition of the foundation of mindfulness of mind, we have both the emotional and the cognitive aspects coming in.

Just a word on vocabulary—I think this was mentioned a few days ago. In this talk, I'll be discussing emotions, which are the strongly felt affective components: fear, anger, loneliness, jealousy, rage, happiness, joy, sympathetic joy, compassion, and so forth. I'll be discussing moods, which are sort of softer or lighter forms of emotions, kind of the cloud-like backdrop. You might be having a mood that's a little melancholy someday, or feeling a little tender or a little blue or a little nostalgic. It's not quite strong enough or fully formed enough to be called an emotion—it's just kind of a background flavor in the mind.

And then broader than that are these things we could call states of mind, which include emotions, moods, and refined meditative states. Qualities like calm or peace or concentration or equanimity. So states of mind is the most inclusive. Moods are a little bit lighter. Emotions tend to be the stronger expressions.

We'll talk more as the retreat goes on about working with positive states of mind, pleasant states that lead to happiness. But for tonight, I'm going to focus mostly on the difficult ones.

In finding greater freedom in relation to the painful emotions—we might call them difficult, we might call them afflictive—we need generally two things to develop through practice. And many of you have already spent time developing these.

These are not new to you, but I want to single them out.

The first is we need a shift in attitude. To go from the attitude like when I came into practice—I just wanted to get rid of these states. I didn't want to feel them. And every time they came, I thought something had gone wrong. We need to shift that attitude to one more of acceptance and allowing and non-judging.

The second thing that we need is a greater understanding of the nature of these emotions—not just the particular nature like the flavor of desire, rage, or terror, but also their universal nature.

All emotions can be seen as having what the Buddha called the three characteristics of phenomena, which are that they're impermanent—none of them lasts forever. They're unsatisfactory, especially as we talk about the difficult ones. You know they're not satisfying in themselves. And we can't really claim them as "I" or "mine" because we all have them. It doesn't make sense to try to own an emotion like anger because it's part of the whole human makeup. It's in every human being who hasn't practiced to be free of it. So it's not yours or mine—it's part of human nature, just part of all of us. Nothing personal really about it. So we need to understand these three marks of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness as they apply to our emotions. These three together make up what we sometimes talk about as the emptiness of emotions.

Emptiness doesn't mean that emotions are boring or vacant. It doesn't mean they're absent. Emotions can be rich and vivid and lively and energetic and energized, but they're also impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless. And that sort of expresses their empty nature.

So attitude shift to acceptance and an understanding of the empty nature. These are the things that can free us in the near term.

As we start to relate with emotions in our practice, the first step is really to know what we're feeling. This sounds easy, but it's not. I know growing up, nobody told me how to explore my emotional landscape. Not my parents, not my teachers, not my favorite TV shows, not my siblings. Nobody explained it to me, that there's a whole world in here that's very rich, partly beautiful, partly difficult, but a world that's really worth exploring.

So we have to practice. Most of us have to practice knowing what these are.

There's this beautiful program that's happening now in the public schools in Oakland called Mindful Schools, where a number of trained Vipassana teachers are going into public schools at the elementary level, spending, I think, fifteen minutes at a time, taking a whole classroom and teaching them mindfulness and teaching them to be aware of what they're feeling.

To me, this is really revolutionary. And it's beautiful that the public school systems are opening to allow this to happen. Of course, it can't be called Buddhism, because then somebody else would have to come in from every other religion, but it can be called mindfulness. So nobody really has to know about what the roots are. That doesn't matter. The point is that these kids are getting to know how to explore their inner landscape.

And I just remember the kids wrote back a number of letters on what was so great, and they said things like, "I love mindfulness. It helps me be nicer to my baby sister." Or "I love mindfulness. Watching my breath helps me to go to sleep at night." So they're really getting a firsthand taste of meditation kind of under the radar, and it's beautiful.

I have another friend and student who runs a preschool in the Bay Area that she runs as a Dharma preschool. So she takes kids who are three to five. She has them five days a week for the mornings. And the whole time that they're with her, she's teaching them Dharma through yoga, through spiritual stories, through guided meditations.

And she said that in dealing with kids of that age, you can't talk about things like mindfulness or awareness or phenomena of the six senses. Way too abstract. So what she does—she's had them lie down and imagine their mind like a big lake. So just imagine that there's this big lake. You open your mind, there's this big lake and all kinds of fish are swimming through it, all different colors.

She said there's a happy fish that can swim through, there's a sad fish, there's a loving fish, there's an angry fish. Just open yourself to this lake and let all the fish swim through. And she'd guide them along those lines for a while.

And then at the end of the meditation, she asked the class one day, "Well, how was that? Could you let all the fish come? Could you know what fish were there? Did you let them swim through?" And this one young boy, I think he was four years old, raised his hand and said, "I could let all the fish come through, except I couldn't let the mad fish come."

And she said, "Well, why was that?"

And he said, "Well, when you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt other people."

When I finally recognized there was anger present, it became anger plus awareness. And that's a completely different state. The awareness doesn't eliminate the anger right away, but it creates space around it. It gives us options. It prevents us from being completely consumed by it.

This recognition is what the Buddha called "clear comprehension" – knowing what's actually happening in this moment. It's such a basic teaching, yet incredibly profound in its effects. When we can clearly see what's arising, we're no longer completely identified with it. There's a part of us that remains free, observing.

The hindrances are particularly tricky because they create their own kind of trance. They generate compelling stories that seem absolutely true in the moment. When I was angry about someone being in "my" walking path, the story seemed completely reasonable. Of course I should be upset – this was clearly an injustice! The mind creates this whole elaborate justification for why the emotion is not only appropriate but necessary.

But these stories are usually based on some form of delusion. In my case, I had unconsciously claimed ownership of a piece of grass. I had decided that because I'd walked there for two weeks, it belonged to me. How absurd! Yet in that moment of identification with anger, it seemed perfectly logical.

This is why the Buddha emphasized that ignorance is the root of all suffering. Not necessarily intellectual ignorance, but this fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of experience. We take things to be solid, permanent, and personal when they're actually fluid, changing, and impersonal.

The practice of mindfulness helps us catch these misperceptions as they're happening. Instead of getting swept away by the story, we can learn to step back and examine what's actually occurring. What does anger feel like in the body? What kinds of thoughts does it generate? How does it affect our breathing, our posture, our relationship to others?

This investigation isn't meant to be analytical or judgmental. It's more like the gentle curiosity of a scientist observing a natural phenomenon. Oh, interesting – this is what anger looks like when it moves through this particular human system.

When we can observe our experience this way, something remarkable happens. The emotion doesn't necessarily disappear, but our relationship to it transforms completely. We're no longer the victim of our own mental states. We become the witness, the space in which all these experiences arise and pass away.

This shift from identification to observation is one of the most liberating discoveries we can make in meditation practice. It's the difference between being caught in the storm and watching it from a place of safety.

Anger plus wisdom or intelligence or recognition or mindfulness or awareness—whatever you want to call it—creates a much better combination. When we can bring that quality in, we know there's not just anger there. There's an ally that's helping us work with the situation. That's the mindfulness, the wisdom, the awareness.

I want to focus tonight on a few states of mind that seem particularly powerful for us as human beings, for us as meditators. They're states that come over and over in life and in meditation. It's a little different list than Skye talked about last week. She talked about the five hindrances—the key list for meditators from the Buddha: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt.

I'm going to make a slightly different list, which is really the kind of big emotions that I see people working with in actual meditation practice—in retreat, out of retreat, in meditation, out of meditation and so forth. But rather than name them, I'm going to ask you to tell me what they are. And if you've heard this talk before, which some of you have, you can't participate. So this is for the new audience only.

To start drawing this out, I want to make a distinction between beautiful states of mind, as they're called in our tradition, and these difficult states. Beautiful states of mind can arise just in a moment and exist just in momentary being. For instance, you might see somebody and have a real feeling of affection or love that just pours out of you. You might see someone else and have a sense of compassion. You might walk out into the evening setting sun—the beautiful light and the warm air—and have this upsurge of joy. These are just momentary floodings of beautiful feeling that come.

The difficult emotions, on the other hand, for them to involve any degree of suffering, we have to be clinging to them with some concept of time. And as we go through some examples, I think this will become clearer. Time has to be a factor in a difficult emotion that causes suffering for us.

So one of the ways we're going to look at these emotions is using an axis system where we'll have the axis of time running from past through present to future. The other thing that difficult emotions are born around is the range of pleasure and pain that we experience as human beings. This is a very mixed realm. There's great beauty here. There's a lot of joy and love. There's also a lot of suffering and pain. Anywhere you look on the globe, on almost any level—personal, social, cultural—you see this whole range of experience. So our range of openness, our range of sensitivity as people to these extremes of pain and delight, are also a basis for the afflictive emotions to build upon.

So the other axis that we'll use—the vertical axis—goes from pain to pleasure. The horizontal axis is going from past to future. The vertical axis is going from pain to pleasure. That gives us four quadrants.

Let's start with the quadrant up here: past and pleasant. So I want to ask you to think about if there was something in your life that was really pleasant in the past and it's not here anymore. That's what it means about being in the past—not here anymore, not in the present. What emotion could get stirred up? What difficult emotion could get stirred up by that? Very pleasant in the past, not here anymore.

"Nostalgia." "Missing it." "Grief."

This is basically it. This is the basis for sadness. Nostalgia, missing, grief, loss—it's all about clinging to something that was very pleasant in the past that is no longer with us. So this is one of the things that human beings everywhere struggle with. You can read accounts of this in the Buddha's time of those who lost family members and were driven really into states of great suffering and distress.

What about something unpleasant in the past? And we'll circumscribe it a little bit more. We'll narrow it a little bit by saying something unpleasant to do with another human being that happened in the past. What emotion might you be feeling today in thinking about that?

"Anger." "Resentment."

If somebody hurt you, insulted you, offended you, stole something from you, took something away, you could be angry or resentful.

This is the second of these primal emotions that we all work with—grief and anger.

Let's move now to the future end of the spectrum. If there's something you're anticipating that's pleasant and lies ahead, what emotion might that condition? Desire. Wanting. Imagine if I told you that you were going to get ice cream sundaes tomorrow for lunch—though that's not true, by the way, and I don't want anyone waiting around for them. That would condition a response: "Wow, that would taste really good. I'd really like some now." This is how pleasant future possibilities give rise to desire—wanting, longing, yearning, lust. These are very strong primal forces.

And on the other side, what if there's something unpleasant that you think might happen in the future, something painful? What emotion arises then? Aversion or fear. When we anticipate something truly painful—like a scheduled visit to the dentist for a root canal—we become anxious, fearful, nervous.

So these are the four primal emotions I particularly want to explore: sadness or grief, anger, desire, and fear. These are the forces I encounter over and over in myself and in other meditators.

We've discussed before how each strong emotion has two major components. First is the coloring in the mind—fear feels different than anger, which feels different than happiness or jealousy. Each mood has a distinct taste, a different quality of mental experience. When the emotion is strong, it also manifests in the body. Fear often brings contraction in the belly. Sadness frequently creates pressure or heaviness in the chest. Anger commonly produces a burning sensation around the shoulders or neck. So we have both the mental tone and the physical expression.

There's a third component that's equally important: thoughts. When we're in certain frames of mind, we tend to think thoughts that match that state. In fear, we think fearful thoughts. In rage, we think angry thoughts. This is helpful to notice because thoughts and emotions reinforce each other—thoughts can trigger emotions, and emotions can launch thoughts.

There's one particular kind of thought that serves as a foundation for these afflictive emotions, and I call this the storyline around the emotion. The specific storyline varies from emotion to emotion, and each of us needs to feel out what our particular storylines are. I'll suggest a few tonight, but the words that quite fit you might be different, so it's helpful to investigate: What's the belief or story underlying my difficult emotion when it arises?

In that walking meditation experience I described earlier, I believed that person should not have been in my walking place. As silly as it sounds, I really did believe that. And as long as I held onto that belief, I couldn't let go of the anger. The storyline was essentially: "I'm right and they're wrong." As long as I clung to it, the anger remained locked in place.

As we examine these other primal emotions, I'll point out the storylines that support them. It's really helpful to see that there's a conceptual underpinning to these emotions—they're linked to time, either past or future, and connected to specific beliefs. Understanding their nature this way helps us recognize their empty quality, how they're all fabricated from various causes and conditions. Once we see how the whole mindset is assembled, like a Lego set, we can understand how it can be taken apart. Then it's no longer such an overwhelming mystery.

Let's take desire as an example. Desire is this movement that wants something pleasant in the future. It's especially common on retreat, particularly during the adjustment period when we often experience homesickness—missing people, places, things, and comforts we associate with home.

As the retreat progresses, this desire force often attaches to experiences within the retreat itself. "I'd really like to have that meditation I had last week again." We don't ask why we'd want to repeat something that disappeared last time, but never mind—we want it again because it felt good.

So we desire things both outside and inside the retreat setting. When we examine the nature of desire itself—how desire feels while it's present—we discover that desire has an inherently bittersweet quality. It's pleasant and sweet to bring in an object we like, whether ice cream or concentration. This brings a sense of pleasantness into what's often a fairly stark environment, serving as a way of comforting ourselves.

Desire has this comfort aspect. But the problem is that the thought of ice cream isn't ice cream. The thought of concentration isn't concentration. And we're still left without that thing we want. So desire always has this built-in frustration. It reminds us of what we want, but it doesn't deliver it. There's always an unsatisfying aftertaste with desire.

This is really what the Buddha was pointing to when he taught that the source of suffering is craving. Dukkha arises out of this force of wanting. And it's curious—we never want what we already have. Have you ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? No. We take that for granted. We never think about that. We just want what we don't have.

When this hits a meditation practice, some really good learning can happen. I was teaching a retreat a few years ago in Italy, which was a delightful experience. Carol and I were teaching, and Sally was there also. First of all, it was just a delight to work with Italian yogis because they seemed to me very familiar with their emotions and were able to share them very openly in interviews.

There was a young man on the retreat who came in for his first interview. We worked through an interpreter. He said he was having trouble settling in. I asked why. He said, "Well, I keep thinking about being somewhere else." I asked what was up. He explained that some of his friends were going on holiday to the Caribbean, and they had asked him to join them. He could either go on the holiday in the Caribbean or come on this meditation retreat. When I asked why he came to the retreat, he said, "All the plane tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So we were the consolation prize. But while he was on the retreat, he kept thinking about his friends on the beach in the Caribbean—how much fun they were having, the people they were meeting. He said he just couldn't stop wanting to be there, so he couldn't really settle into being here.

What we talked about was how maybe the unhappiness he was experiencing was because of those thoughts about the Caribbean. Maybe the meditation retreat wasn't actually an unhappy environment, but he was making it unhappy by thinking about wanting to be somewhere else.

After he reflected on that for a couple of days and came into his next interview, he had settled down. This is a brilliant teaching—that the situation we're in may be totally fine, but if we want something else, it will make us miserable. Desire has this effect of stirring up discontent, taking a situation that may be absolutely fine and introducing a level of discontent to it.

The storyline that the young man was working from, I would say, was "If I had that, I would be happy." That's the storyline behind desire. That's why it's so compelling. "If I had that, I'd be happy."

Of course, desire never looks at the next step. What happens when that's over? Whether it's an ice cream or a vacation or a concentrated sitting, what happens when that's finished? Oh, I'm just back to where I am already now. But desire never looks that far. It doesn't look at impermanence.

So when desire is present, feel it in the body. What I sometimes notice is a kind of tension, like I'm leaning forward to make something happen. That's what you sometimes hear described as "toppling forward into the next moment." There's some kind of strain in the body that's looking for something else, even with subtle movements of desire. I feel it that way.

Then get familiar with this bittersweet quality. The object brings a sense of pleasure or comfort, but also a built-in sense of frustration. It's really helpful to investigate the unsatisfying nature of desire as it's present.

The second quality I want to talk about is sadness, as a form of aversion.

Aversion manifests in countless flavors: ill-will, anger, hatred, impatience, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, blame, resentment, depression, despair, and resistance—to name just a few. Yet beneath their varied surfaces, they all share a similar quality, one that the Buddha illustrated beautifully in a story he once shared with his monks.

While the Buddha was meeting with monks in a forest clearing, a jackal suddenly ran out from the trees, stood in the open space for a moment, then darted into the underbrush. After sitting there briefly, it ran to the hollow at the root of a tree and lay down, only to jump up again almost immediately. Next it moved to a nearby cave, sat for a minute, then wandered back into the forest.

"Did you see that jackal?" the Buddha asked. "It couldn't find contentment anywhere. It ran from the forest—no contentment there. It stood in the clearing—no contentment there. It lay down at the tree root, went to the cave—still no contentment. Everywhere it went, it remained discontent. It blamed its discontent on the forest, on the underbrush, on the tree root, on the cave. It blamed walking and running and lying down and sitting."

The Buddha explained that the problem wasn't with any of these places or postures. The jackal had mange—an intensely itchy skin disease. Because of this condition, it was miserable everywhere it went.

This is precisely what aversion is like. When the mind dwells in aversion, nothing satisfies. Everything we try, everything we pick up, everything we touch feels somehow not quite right. The storyline behind aversion follows a familiar pattern: there's some unpleasantness somewhere in our field of experience, and because of that unpleasantness, we form the belief, "I can't be happy." With sadness, this manifests as "I can't be happy because I've lost this thing from the past." As long as we hold this belief, it blocks our ability to find contentment or happiness.

Sometimes opening to sadness feels daunting, especially when we've been carrying it for a while. It can seem enormous, and we fear that if we truly let ourselves feel it, we might go under—might drown in its depths. But this too is just another belief. With all emotions, mindfulness offers the skillful approach: touch the feeling, be mindful of it, and when it becomes too overwhelming, gently back away. Find refuge in a different object of attention, take a walk, practice loving-kindness—place the mind somewhere else that feels safer.

Anger represents one of the stronger forms of aversion. The body feels tight, the mind seems on fire or burning. The storyline, as I discovered during my walking meditation, typically follows the pattern: "I'm right and you're wrong." This becomes the foundation for all angry narratives.

Here's where watching our thoughts becomes crucial. When we're angry, we tend to string together self-righteous and blaming thoughts one after another. Each thought is like adding fuel to an already burning fire, making it burn hotter and hotter. We keep stoking the flames with our thinking, repeating "I'm right and you're wrong" in endless variations.

But if we stop feeding these thoughts to the fire, the emotion naturally dies out—this is the nature of every emotion. Unless continuously stoked, emotions fade away on their own. The challenge arises when our "I'm right and you're wrong" thoughts happen to be true. These are the ones that catch us most completely, because they feel so justified.

Sometimes it may be true, but that doesn't mean that it's skillful to keep telling ourselves that story.

The Dalai Lama in the early 1980s met a monk who had just escaped from Tibet. The Dalai Lama had known this monk back in the 1950s when he still lived in Tibet and had thought he was a monk of just middling capacity—a good monk. Then the monk had been put in prison for over twenty years and had finally escaped and made his way to India, where the Dalai Lama was able to meet him again.

In the conversation, freshly back in India, the monk said, "You know, when I was in prison, I really felt I was in danger." The Dalai Lama thought, as it happened to many people, "Do you mean you were in danger of being tortured?" And the monk said, "No, that's not what I mean. I was tortured. But what I meant was I was in danger of getting angry at them." He said, "But I didn't."

The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his estimate of this monk's practice.

So even in a situation like that—he was imprisoned for being a monk, that was his crime, he had done nothing wrong, he was not resistant or angry to his guards—nonetheless, he was tortured. Very clearly, he was right, and they were not. But he did not let that perception give rise to anger.

So just observe when anger comes, how we tend to feed it and create it through these thoughts that justify ourselves and blame the other. And feel the feeling. Anger is painful. That's one of the things that's really easy to see—it's such a painful state. In the texts, it's likened to someone picking up a hot coal to throw at another person. But by picking up the coal, we burn ourselves first. And the other thing it's likened to is drinking poison and hoping that the other person gets sick. But we get sick first.

So we have to feel this pain of anger. For me, it was the only thing that really encouraged me to let it go. I didn't see any other way out of the pain except to let it go. So we need to feel that fire and dukkha and learn from it.

One of the forms of anger, you could say it's a form of anger that comes up, is that we judge ourselves. We feel angry about things we've done in the past or we blame ourselves or we put the wrong onto ourselves, and that's doubly painful. This form of self-judgment seems to be really widespread in our culture today.

Again, a story from the Dalai Lama. Some Western teachers were meeting with him a number of years ago in Dharamsala—Western Buddhist teachers—and were explaining this problem in the West of people not feeling good about themselves, of judging themselves, of being critical about themselves, of not really having self-love. The Dalai Lama could not understand what was being described. He said, "What are you talking about?" And when he finally got it, he said, "You know, we just don't have this in Tibet. Children are raised in an atmosphere of love, and they're given positive messages from their family and the culture. And people grow up really caring and trusting in themselves."

So this factor of self-judgment I think we'll talk about more because it's so common in the West. It comes up very often on meditation retreats, particularly because we're not getting the kind of supportive affirmations of friends and family and normal human contact. So in the silence often there's a sense of loneliness, and our fears about ourselves come to the surface. So often in retreats these judgments become really apparent, and we want to talk about ways to work with it.

In the classical tradition, the best antidote for all forms of aversion, including self-judgment, is the practice of loving kindness. So for self-judgment as well as anger, the development of loving kindness is a really powerful way to offset that.

One little word about the storyline behind self-judgment is that it has something to do with "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not lovable the way I am"—some underlying belief. And it's so ironic in a way that meditators feel this so strongly at times because you all are some of the best people that I know. Anyone who comes here and has the intention to make the world a better place by developing understanding and love is one of the highest aspirations. And just from knowing each of you that I've met and knowing what my colleagues are finding—you are all really good people. So there's not a rational basis for this kind of self-judgment in this group. And yet a lot of us carry it. And it's a burden that we don't really deserve. There are ways to work with it.

The last of the kind of primal emotions I wanted to mention is fear. This is the one that was my constant companion in practice for many, many years.

This is the one I would say I cut my emotional teeth on. I became so familiar with this state of mind. The first thing that made it workable for me, I think it was after a Joseph Goldstein dharma talk on the topic of fear in this very hall some thirty years ago, was that he simply encouraged us to look into the direct experience in the body and see if we could accept it.

So my practice for a long time was: can I feel the body sensations that arise when I'm in fear, and can I bear them? Fear is this projection into the future, and there's some kind of belief like this present moment is bearable—just barely—but the next moment isn't going to be. Something unbearable is about to happen, or something disastrous is about to happen. So if we can set aside the future story, future thinking, and come into the present moment, the question becomes: can we bear the fear?

The first avenue in for me was could I bear the body sensations of fear? The contraction, the flutteriness, the sweat under the arms, the lightness and ungroundedness that came with the fear. So I worked hard at it. I couldn't right away. But little by little, meeting it time and time again, dozens of times, meeting it, feeling it, trying to open—eventually I could. And I said, I can bear this.

Then I went to the mental experience. Can I bear that mood in the mind? Again, it wasn't easy, but eventually I could. And finally, I could come enough into the present that I could let go of the future. Because when we're in fear and the world feels like a scary place, there's some kind of projection going on that isn't in this world. I was in a meditation center—it's got to be one of the safest places on earth—and I was feeling like something bad was going to happen to me. It was a total projection made up just out of that feeling of fear.

So over the years, just bringing mindfulness to this quality again and again and again, I've just seen its power ebb, ebb, ebb, ebb, all by the force of mindfulness and loving-kindness. It's kind of like mindfulness has this wearing away quality with these old habit patterns of mind and heart. It wears them down little by little, just like a wheel would get worn down if you put your hand on it every time it went by. It wouldn't wear away quickly, but it would get worn away. And mindfulness is like putting a hand on this churned up energy every time it passes. And every pass slows it down, weakens it, until it can pass through.

So this is our approach with the difficult emotions: coming into the present moment, feeling them, noticing them in the body, noticing them on the emotional level, noticing the connection to thoughts. This is how that whole complex has gotten constructed, and this is how it can dissolve and fall apart as we bring to the difficult emotions this investigative and curious attitude.

What we're doing is waking up in the middle of the difficulty. It's not that we get rid of this stuff first and then we wake up, but in the very moment of difficulty—of fear or anger or wanting or sadness—we bring qualities of interest, kindness to ourselves, presence, wisdom, compassion, investigation. All these qualities are waking up in the very middle of the difficulty. That's what transforms the emotion, and ultimately that's what transforms us. Our confusion gets woken up out of its own very nature, not by making it go away, but by bringing aliveness and awakeness into the middle of it.

So I'll just close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition, which is kind of a supplication. The supplication could be to the universe, it could be to your own wisdom, it could be to the Buddha or a teacher—whatever you like. It's called the Four Blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

CHAPTER 40

The Seven Factors of Awakening (Bojjhaṅga)

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong presents the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga) as described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that these factors "lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbāna," he explains how mindfulness sets the foundation for the arising of investigation (dhammavicaya), energy (vīriya), rapture (pīti), calm (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā). Armstrong illustrates how the first three factors are energizing while the final three are calming, with mindfulness providing the crucial balance between arousing and tranquilizing energies. Through practical examples and stories of accomplished teachers like Dīpā Mā and Ajahn Jumnien, he demonstrates how these wholesome mental factors naturally develop through sustained meditation practice. The talk emphasizes how practitioners can recognize these arising qualities in their own experience and learn to nurture them, understanding that "the one that I feed" - referencing a Native American teaching story - determines which mental qualities predominate. This detailed exploration provides both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for cultivating the mental factors that lead directly to liberation.*

At this point in the retreat, we've talked quite a bit about the difficult energies that come into the heart and mind—the hindrances, the roots of the unwholesome, working with difficult emotions. Now we're turning a corner in our discourse and are going to start talking more about the beautiful states of mind. Carol talked last night about the quality of loving kindness, which you've been practicing for a few weeks. Tonight I want to talk about another set of beautiful qualities called the seven factors of awakening.

The reason I want to talk about them now is that I'm hearing them a lot in the interviews and the questions. These beautiful qualities, now that you're settled in for three weeks, are really starting to come alive and percolate in you, in everyone that I've talked to, and I think they're there in everyone here. It's very helpful to start to pay attention to them, recognize them, and know how to nurture them.

There's a story from the Native American tradition that was popular right after 9-11. Many of you may have heard it. A story about a young boy who goes to school and has a conflict with a classmate and feels that he's been treated unfairly. He comes back in the evening to his home and talks to his grandfather about it, describing how he feels so angry and wants to get some kind of revenge for what happened at school that day.

The grandfather listens to him and says, "Yes, I know just what you mean. When I think about all the things that have been done, people taking what didn't belong to them and not caring for the people that they injured, I can feel very angry and full of hatred and want to take vengeance on them. It's like there are two wolves inside of me. This one wolf is the angry and quarrelsome and hateful wolf. But there's another wolf inside of me that is patient, wants to be kind to everyone regardless of what they've done and live in harmony with others. These two wolves often battle inside me and each one tries to dominate my spirit and each one tries to come out on top."

So the young boy asked, "Well, grandfather, which one will win?" And the old man said, "The one that I feed."

What I was struck by in this story—it's a very touching story about spiritual life in general—but I was really struck by the language that the old man used because it's very similar to the language that the Buddha used. He talked many times about how the path is all about starving the hindrances and feeding these factors of awakening that we'll be talking about tonight.

So really the question is, in all of our practice, how do we starve or weaken the afflictive forces in the heart and mind, and how do we strengthen and grow and build up the beautiful qualities of heart and mind? This work is the work of what's called bhāvanā, or mental development.

If you remember, I quoted this French poet, Paul Valéry, who in one of his works, his notebooks, said, "Other people write books, but I am making my mind." In this work of meditation, we are making our minds also, and we can shape them in the direction of these beautiful qualities once we understand how they come about. There are no limits that I know of to the depth of development of these qualities.

A teacher who comes to Spirit Rock often is Ajahn Jumnian, a Thai monk who's now in his 60s and has been coming for probably the past 10 years every year. In one of the conversations with him, Ajahn Jumnian said that he has not had any anger in 25 years. That's a nice mind. That's a mind of some accomplishment. The Buddha talked about how through this development, the mind can really become tamed, brought under some kind of control so that the afflictive forces don't torment us any longer.

Another person who was very impressive in this regard, this degree of development, was an Indian teacher named Dipa Ma. I know many of you have heard of her and there's a wonderful book about her life simply called "Dipa Ma" that many women practitioners resonate strongly with because she was a very strong figure as a woman teacher in our tradition.

I had the chance to spend some time with Dipa Ma in the early 1980s and look after her for a month on her first visit to this country. She was accompanied by her grandson, who was about four years old at that time and was a little bit of a whirlwind. We would take them out shopping in the local mall near Amherst. I remember the young boy, his name was Rishi, running down the aisles of this department store and tugging at clothes, clothes falling off in the aisle, hangers falling down in the aisle, and kind of chaos just following him. Then Dipa Ma running after him—she was probably in her 60s at that point—and her white robes were flapping behind her as she ran down the aisle, but there was always a little smile on her face. She had such great love and patience for her grandson. I thought, if you can be cool shopping in a mall in America, you're a pretty cooled-out yogi. So that was Dipa Ma.

At one point, she helped teach a three-month course here. Some yogis were spending time with her. Everybody was struck by her presence, her quality of stillness and openness. They asked her, "What is in your mind? What's there? What do you feel?" And she replied, "I only have three things in my mind. There's peace, there's concentration, and there's mettā." That was it. And she seemed to abide in that place most of the time.

So the kind of development that is possible is really unlimited. People like Dipa Ma show us some of that potential.

The states that I want to talk about tonight, the seven factors of awakening, are probably the group that the Buddha talked most about when he was describing the unfolding of meditation. As the hindrances are the list of difficulties that meditators frequently encounter, these are the list of wholesome qualities that are directly developed through the meditation practice. So they're ones that it's very helpful for us as meditators to get to understand.

Really, I would say that these factors become the meditator's best friend. These are the qualities that accompany us on the journey and produce the beautiful outcomes as well as the insights that arise on the path.

So the seven states that are included in this group are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. These are the ones I want to talk about tonight, and the Buddha said they lead to awakening—therefore they're called

factors of awakening, which makes sense. He said they're all described as "maturing in release"—that is, when we develop them and bring them to strength, they lead to our release or liberation. That's their destination.

Another quote from the Buddha: "Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, he slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbana"—to the unconditioned, to awakening. So these are the factors that lead in that direction.

They can also be understood as the qualities of a mind that is approaching the moment of awakening or enlightenment. As the mind is filled with these factors and as they come into strength, maturity, and fulfillment, the way that mind is formed is right next door to the unconditioned, right next door to nibbana. You might say it's the closest approximation that can be made to that. So it's as though we're tuning to or imitating this unconditioned nature. And as the mind gets closer and closer in approximation to it, it can then fall in. And that moment of enlightenment or awakening happens because of that proximity.

The Buddha described these factors in a given order because he said one leads to the next, leads to the next. So I'll explain it that way, and I think it's helpful to understand them in that developmental line. But they're also nonlinear in the sense that every one of them supports the others. So it's not really that we have to strictly start at the first and only then go to the second and only then to the third. They grow all along the path.

In the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha describes this as one of the important areas of dhammas or principles that the meditator should understand. And what he says is we should know these seven factors. We should also know what leads them to arise and how to bring them to fulfillment or real strength. So that's pointing to the basic terrain of knowing the factors, but also being open to their arising and being weak in the beginning. But then as the meditation develops, as we learn how to strengthen them, we can grow them up into quite strong forces in the mind.

So again, it's my impression that everyone here has tasted these factors by this point in the retreat to a greater or lesser degree. And in coming to recognize them, they don't have to be built to a very strong level. We can start to get familiar with them just in their first taste. So I want to describe them tonight and encourage you to begin to tune into them in your practice. I think they're already there, and it's just a matter of looking for them, getting to know them, and then understanding how to develop them further.

The first of the factors in the sequence the Buddha described was mindfulness. Because we've been developing this from the very beginning, it is really the practice of mindfulness that has set the chain going for these other factors. So whether you consciously knew the other factors were developing or not, mindfulness has been the engine that has made them grow already.

The next three factors are what are called "arousing"—they're qualities that tend to pick energy up. The final three are called "calming"—they're factors that tend to settle the energy that's been brought up by the first three. Mindfulness starts the chain going, and then mindfulness is also the factor that balances the energizing and the calming sets of the seven factors.

So overall, what this grouping describes is a group that balances the factor of arousing energy and tranquilizing energy. For instance, when we gave simple instructions in the beginning, pointing to a way of being that was both tranquil and alert, that's an expression of this same balance. So you can see this is a really fundamental place we're aiming in our meditation practice—to find this balance where there's enough energy to be alert, awake, sensitive to each moment as it unfolds and changes, but also relaxed, steady, to some extent still, and able to observe clearly. It's the balance of these qualities that makes the mind ripe for meditation, ripe for insight, ripe for awakening.

So we'll talk about these one by one. Mindfulness we've talked a lot about already. I don't need to say a lot about this factor this evening—you've been doing it hour by hour, day by day, and it's grown quite strongly in everyone that I've seen, and I suspect in everyone who's here.

Sometimes we don't notice it because the growth of mindfulness doesn't mean that the movement of mind stops, but it means that we're much more aware of it when it's happening. One thing that I'm noticing and hearing in the interviews is it's taking less effort to be present than it did at the beginning. This is something you may notice—it's easier, more effortless to be in contact with the present moment. Sometimes it can start to feel like you're not working hard enough, and you may question, "Am I really doing it?" Because in the beginning, it takes a lot of effort to connect with the present, not be swept away by thinking. As the mindfulness has gotten stronger, that becomes a little more natural, a little easier to do.

But you can trust that. When that more effortless quality appears, you can use it as an indicator to relax. Trust that awareness will reveal what you need to see.

When mindfulness is present and we start to look at our experience, we tend to get interested in it. We get curious. We notice a level of detail, a level of activity we haven't seen before, and that leads us to pay closer attention. That leads to the second factor, which is the factor of investigation.

Investigation sounds very conceptual, like we should be raising lots of questions and thinking about it and reflecting. But in meditation, that's not the meaning of investigation. Investigation really means drawing the attention closer to our experience. So it's not that we have to ask a lot or think a lot or wonder a lot. We just have to connect more directly. You might say feel things more intimately in our experience.

I'll give you a simple example. In experiencing the breath, many people report feeling bored after some time. "Oh, the breath seems so similar. I've been with a hundred breaths in the last hour. It seems like nothing is changing. My attention's drifting off." What do we do? Boredom is often a factor of just not looking for all the richness that is there already. So by looking more closely, we can often refine that interest.

Here are a few simple suggestions for investigation of the breath. Every breath has three parts: a beginning, middle, and end to the in-breath; a beginning, middle, and end to the out-breath. Can you notice those? Try it sometime and see. Can you feel the breath just as it's making itself known? Can you feel that long stretch of the in-breath coming in? Can you feel it fading away? Then how soon do you feel the first touch of an out-breath? Can you be with it through that whole middle portion of exhaling? And then can you feel it fading away to nothing again? If the mindfulness is close to the breath, you'll feel these three parts. Being interested in that will keep your attention there more easily.

Another good way to investigate the breath was an exercise that Sayadaw U Pandita used to assign meditators. His instructions were to follow the breath at the abdomen with the rising and falling. But if you're experiencing it at the nose or the chest, you could also ask the same question. He would mention this in an interview and then ask for a reply later: "Tell me three distinct sensations that you notice in an in-breath. Tell me three distinct sensations you notice in an out-breath."

Often we might think, "Oh, there's just the in-breath." But if we look more closely, we see that in the in-breath, there are lots of little sensations coming and going, coming and going, coming and going over the course of that whole breathing in. Over the course of the out-breath, same thing. Lots of little sensations coming, going, coming, going, coming, going. So he would say, "Tell me three sensations you notice for an in-breath and an out-breath."

When you have to find it and report to a teacher like Sayadaw U Pandita, it brings your interest into the moment. You don't want to walk into the room next day and say, "I couldn't find anything." So you get very motivated. And then if you were successful, he'd say, "Well, next day tell me something new that you haven't told me before." So you'd get motivated all over again.

This kind of investigation really draws on a quality of what you might call careful attention. In the Pali, there's a phrase that the Buddha used over and over again called yoniso manasikāra. Manasikāra means attention. Yoniso is often translated as wise. The Buddha talked about how to apply attention that got us in trouble, how to apply attention that led to growth in meditation. And this word yoniso, which is often translated as wise, actually has a meaning of womb-like, like the womb from which babies come.

So it's beautiful to think about our mindfulness as embodying a womb-like attention, because that has this beautiful image of whatever our object is—breath, sound, sensation, emotion—being embraced with mindfulness. It's being surrounded and held and nurtured.

as it emerges from this womb-like quality of attention. So there's a sense that mindfulness is not some cold, clinical, detached quality of observation, but rather embodies what Carol spoke of last night—a quality of non-hatred, or *adosa* in Pali, leaning toward *metta*. This suggests an attention that is warm, caring, embracing—genuinely friendly in its quality.

You can feel this happening quite naturally when certain things arise. When you smell dessert emerging from the kitchen at lunch, attention moves toward the back table in this truly embracing way, holding and nourishing whatever delicious creation is appearing there.

I was taking a short walk after tea the other evening when I heard a single honk up in the sky. Looking up, I saw a flight of about twenty Canadian geese passing overhead in a beautifully formed V—this was before the rain started. They were flying fairly low, and I could see each one clearly. When that happened, my attention was simply there, effortlessly. I wasn't distracted, didn't want to be anywhere else. Because of that natural interest, attention sustained itself.

When we can cultivate genuine interest in this experience of mind and body, mindfulness arises with remarkable ease. Investigation can truly support this quality of interest.

Consider investigating an emotion as another example. If we can discover genuine interest in it—even when the emotion itself may be difficult—that quality of interest brings in a positive element. We sense that we can learn from this experience, that there's something to be understood here. Wisdom can grow. Our capacity to hold whatever arises can expand. When we bring in this positive element, this positive feeling, there's actually a kind of joy, even in being with difficult emotions.

Notice if sometimes, even when being with primary patterns you find—anxiety, worry, fear, sadness—being present with them and maintaining interest doesn't bring a certain joy to the experience that helps sustain attention with that emotion.

Then, as we remain with the experience out of this interest, we feel not only the immediate characteristics—with breath, we feel all the small sensations coming and going, the flutters, pressure, relaxation, or expansion. With emotion, we sense its particular quality—how joy differs from contentment, differs from anxiety. We feel these particulars, but as we continue staying present, we begin to see some of the universal characteristics.

All those small sensations with breath—coming, going, coming, going—reveal that nothing solid exists there. Everything is constantly changing. Breath demonstrates impermanence beautifully when we look closely. There isn't just one sensation; all sensations arise and pass away continuously.

We can observe impermanence with emotions as well—none of them last. We can begin to investigate how this quality we call fear exists in all of us. The quality we call happiness exists in all of us. It's not "mine" or "yours"—it's part of nature, part of human nature. We start to see beneath this notion of self. It's not about me or you; it's simply part of human nature. We begin to release some of the ownership, some of the "I, me, mine" from that experience.

This understanding emerges naturally from the interest in investigating combined with mindfulness.

Investigation is also powerful because it directly expresses the wisdom nature of our mind. The practice we're engaged in—Insight Meditation—ultimately relies on developing wisdom and understanding. But sometimes it's challenging to know how we cultivate that. Among all the factors available for us to directly strengthen, investigation is one that truly draws out this wisdom element. Investigation expresses "I want to see, I want to understand, I want to know." We're activating that wisdom quality quite directly.

Now, as we become more interested, as we launch this investigation, we move into the third factor—the factor of energy. The Pali word is *viriya*, sometimes translated as energy, sometimes as effort, sometimes as energetic effort—because translators couldn't decide, so they combined them.

And I'll just say a few more words that are sometimes associated to give you a sense of the meaning: strength, courage, ardor, or my current favorite—enthusiasm. For me, virya is about what quality of enthusiasm we bring. This enthusiasm relies on this level of interest and investigation, so it's triggered by those, conditioned by those.

It refers to energy in both body and mind, but it's a specific kind of energy—an energy or enthusiasm that's directed to the path. It's directed to the work that we're doing here. So this is the Buddha's description: "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the responsibility of cultivating wholesome states." There you kind of get a feeling for where the quality of courage comes in. The word vira, that's the root of virya, means hero in Pali. So this quality of virya has a heroic quality about it.

And you all manifest this day by day. I'm touched by this every day in the interviews. We know it's not easy doing the discipline that you're doing—having left your homes, sitting, walking, being present, sitting still moment after moment after moment. It takes a lot of resolve to keep coming back and greeting the present moment. It's not always pleasant, not always easy. So each of you is carrying out a kind of heroic undertaking in your willingness to be here. That's the expression of the courage quality of this nature of virya.

Of course, it comes out of our motivation, our aspiration, and understanding what we need to do to carry out the practice. You can see this in any walk of life—people who want to reach a difficult goal carry out this quality of courageous effort again and again and again.

When I look for analogies to this, I look at the area of professional athletes where it's very clear. My particular sport addiction is tennis. I like to play and I like to follow it and I like to watch. The level of physical conditioning in the world of tennis has gone way up in the last ten years. So you have people like Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal who are these amazing super guys—they can go out and run around a court for five hours or longer and still look fresh. I mean, you hardly ever see Federer even sweat. Nadal is working hard, but he can do it all day long. They're incredibly well conditioned.

I remember when I was following Andre Agassi, who retired a number of years ago—I read about his training regimen. He had a very tough workout coach who would lead him on runs in the hills around Las Vegas, where Agassi lives. It's a desert, as you probably know, and it gets really hot most of the year. So he would be pushed to sprint up these hills until he got so tired that he was throwing up. And when he reached that point, the trainer said, "Okay, that's enough for today. You can go back down." But that's the extent to which he worked to achieve his goal of conditioning.

Another realm, and this is the one that I'm really most in awe of, are professional bike riders. Every year I like to follow the Tour de France when it happens in July and a little bit into August, because I think those are the most amazing athletes on the face of the planet. They go for most of a month going full out day after day after day. How they get the energy to climb back on the bike the next day and do it again—going up thousands of meters, up these really steep grades, racing other people who are in the best physical shape imaginable—it's just amazing.

I followed Lance Armstrong for a number of years when he won the tour seven times. And he made a comment: "Yeah, I do well in this sport because I have a high tolerance for pain. Basically, when I go out and race, I know that I'm just going to be setting myself up for eight hours of continuous physical pain. That's what happens when I get on a bike." That's a lot of determination. That's a lot of courage. And in the training for that, there's a lot of hours of pain too.

So these people are just going for fame and fortune. We're going for the end of suffering. But actually I think our effort is not inferior to theirs. The effort that you all put in on a course like this is similar to that of world-class athletes.

I remember one three-month course where the style was intensely oriented toward virya. The teachers recommended that we plan to sleep only four hours a night, dedicating the remaining twenty hours to continuous mental noting. I took on that challenge, though it wasn't my normal style—I was accustomed to at least six hours of sleep in retreat.

I thought I might not be able to do it. Initially I managed about six hours, but I held the sincere intention to keep working until I reached the requested four hours. Every day in interviews with Joseph and Sharon, they would ask how many hours I'd slept, so there was no escaping accountability.

After countless sleepy sittings, walkings, and standings, I managed to reduce my sleep to four hours while maintaining awareness and noting practice for the other twenty. It was probably the hardest I've ever worked in meditation retreat, and I

learned tremendously from it. Looking back—fortunately it's looking back now, as I was younger then—I discovered things I don't know if I could have learned any other way. I'm deeply grateful for those demanding teachers and that rigorous style. The lessons were invaluable.

The fruit was extraordinary continuity. That sustained noting across so many hours of wakefulness created the finest moment-to-moment continuity of mindfulness I've ever experienced. That was the true reward.

This represents the courageous side of virya—the extending, going-to-the-limit aspect of this energy. But there's another way to understand virya that doesn't rely so heavily on that courage element: the quality of simply persisting.

Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote in one of his books on the Eightfold Path that only two things are required to reach liberation. One is that you start, and the second is that you continue. He said if you do those two things, the outcome is guaranteed. That's the quality of persistence—just keep going.

This quality appears beautifully in a story from the Tibetan tradition about the great yogi Milarepa, who practiced in the eleventh century. He lived most of his practice career in a cave, very simply, always dressed in just a thin white cloth, sustaining himself through winters by practicing inner heat yoga. He trained great disciples, particularly Gampopa and Raichungpa.

The story tells of Milarepa saying goodbye to Gampopa, who had studied with him extensively, receiving teachings, transmissions, and secret instructions. Now it was time for Gampopa to find his own cave and practice independently. The student, sorry to leave his teacher but knowing it was time, came to say farewell. He bowed, took leave, and started down the path.

Then Milarepa called him back. "There's one more teaching I must give you," he said. "This is really the secret to everything I've achieved through meditation."

To give this teaching, Milarepa turned around, flipped up the hem of his white robe, leaned over, and showed Gampopa his buttocks, which were calloused as hard as a camel's hoof.

"This is really the key to my success," Milarepa said. "Sitting on my backside is what has made my meditation successful. This is the kind of perseverance you need too, Gampopa."

Gampopa took that advice, practiced with great dedication, and became himself a great teacher with many disciples and schools.

Another teacher, the modern Burmese master Sayadaw U Tejaniya, expresses this quality of perseverance beautifully: "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this, you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

Again, just this steadiness of application. It's not hard to be aware—can you feel your seat on the chair right now? That's not difficult. But maintaining awareness moment after moment after moment is challenging. That's what Sayadaw U Tejaniya points to: relaxed effort, but very persistent.

When this kind of energy arises in practice—this interest in what we're doing—the mind becomes alert, bright, and present. This naturally leads to the next factor of the seven: rapture.

"Rapture" is perhaps too strong a translation. When I think of rapture, I imagine someone almost unconscious in ecstasy—that's excessive. A better rendering might be "joyful interest" or "rapt attention." The Pali word is *pīti*, which describes the quality of being bright, alert, energetic, and connected to the present moment. Within that connection—whether with breath, body, sensations, or sounds—you begin to discover happiness.

It's truly a wonderful moment in meditation when you find you actually like your object of attention.

It might be the breath, it might be sounds, but there's a sense in coming into contact with it that it's pleasant to be there. There's a happiness in being with the object itself. In the beginning, it just seems like work. And the object doesn't seem that exciting. It's certainly not delightful. But as this quality of present moment interest and attention grows, it takes on a pleasant quality. Then it becomes easier to stay connected because of the enjoyment of it.

There's a teacher in Australia who lives in Skye's hometown of Perth. A Western monk named Ajahn Brahm teaches extensively on the qualities of the breath for strong concentration. It's his central interest and teaching. The way that he encourages people to make a really close connection with the breath is to see it as beautiful. Because if you can see the breath as beautiful, you'll naturally want to be there. Just like seeing a flock of geese, just like watching a sunset, just like seeing the face of a child.

So finding this quality of delight or joy in relation to the meditation object is the next factor of awakening. It's a mental factor because it comes out of the mind's relationship to the object, but it's said that it expresses itself physically. And it can manifest in varying degrees.

Often when people reach this stage, there's a kind of release or opening to energy in the body. The energy can be experienced, it's said, classically in five different ways. It can be minor—it just feels like there's a kind of trembling on the surface of the skin. It can be momentary, and there's a kind of rush of energy, like a bolt of lightning. There's a showering kind of energy where it feels like waves of energy pass through the body. One wave passes away and later maybe another wave. There's an uplifting kind of energy where the body starts to feel really light. You could sit for a long time on the cushion because there's a lightness to the body, and sometimes you feel you could almost float off the cushion.

It's said that it's this uplifting quality of piti that allows yogis to develop a quality of levitation. Remember those old stories about the Maharishi when he was teaching levitation in Indiana somewhere? I recently met someone who had been on those retreats and she said people actually were kind of bouncing across the room based on the development of this factor of piti expressing itself through the body lifting. This is also described in the Buddhist texts as well. And the fifth kind of rapture is said to be all-pervading, where it's felt throughout the body.

Mostly this energy is felt as pleasant because it comes out of this kind of happy relationship with the meditation object. But as the factor gets developed more strongly, the bodily energy becomes stronger too, and it can become unpleasant. The bodily energy can become strong enough that it's no longer felt as pleasant. It can be felt as a little too intense or at times as overwhelming.

It's not that the meditation at this point has gone wrong or that anything bad is happening. Generally one just needs to open and accommodate this slightly too strong energy. And as the meditation deepens, it tends to smooth out. But sometimes it's a little unpleasant at this point.

Piti is one of the factors that's connected with the strengthening of concentration. It has a quality of happiness, and it's often paired with this word sukha, which I think I've mentioned before, which also means happiness. So together, the kind of enjoyment of the object and the growth of this quality of sukha or pleasure or contentment starts to lead into the second half of the factors, which are the calming factors.

So the fifth factor that appears is the factor of calm or tranquility. And the way that it comes about is as more happiness comes in through this bright energy connecting with the object, finding that delight, a certain satisfaction comes in just based on the meditation. Not based on having a particular experience or object or anything special, but just in the ordinary meditation, the mind starts to become contented. And because there's a quality of contentment, satisfaction, the mind is not tending to go out so much through desire, restlessness, aversion, and so on. So this leads to a sense of the mind starting to settle within itself, finding its contentment within its own operation. And that settling is felt as a calming of mind and a calming of body. It's as though the mind starts to settle within the body itself.

And this is often a kind of new discovery in the meditation process. This unfolding of calm doesn't happen so often in daily life and it's a new experience within meditation after often a lot of active thoughts and restlessness and other hindrances. So as this calm starts to develop, thoughts are no longer so frequently assaulting us. Hindrances are no longer so generally plaguing us. And because there's a sense of calm and the body can relax, there's usually less pain in the body as well.

So it's as though it feels like—and again, you felt this in the first weeks of the retreat—like you come in and the ocean, you're kind of on an ocean with a lot of stormy waters, right? The waters of the hindrances and thoughts and bodily discomfort and restlessness and quite turbulent. And then maybe just for short periods and maybe just for five minutes, ten minutes, this other space opens up where you feel like you've kind of floated into a really calm harbor somewhere, out of the storms of the sea into this calm space. May not last very long, but it's a really different kind of experience.

Emily Dickinson has a poem that kind of expresses this movement, this discovery. It's a section from a poem called "Wild Nights": "Futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass, done with the chart."

Rowing in Eden. That's kind of what it feels like. It feels like you've come upon this blissful lake for a while—perhaps only briefly, but you've touched it.

At this stage, one can start to open to a different approach to meditation, which is a sense of resting. One has opened to, discovered, unfolded a new quality that has a sense of stillness and rest in it.

Ajahn Amaro, a monk who used to live in Northern California and now serves as the abbot of Amaravati in England, likes to offer this meditation instruction: "Rest in the natural peace and ease of mind and body that is the natural peace and ease of mind

and body, and pay attention to that. But if something comes to disturb that peace, then pay attention to that." That's a lovely thing to be able to do, and you can take it as an encouragement, as an instruction anytime you'd like.

Joseph gave that instruction early on in working with the breath: "As I breathe in, I tranquilize the bodily formation. I tranquilize the mental formation. As I breathe out, I tranquilize the bodily and mental formations." So we can make this quality of calm more accessible by suggesting it to ourselves.

Sometimes when this quality of calm comes, it seems like it has snuck up on us, and we may not recognize it. One meditator said that her first note was "calm"—like, is this what they're talking about? She couldn't quite recognize it when it first came.

Because it's a subtle state, it can slip under the radar. Often people will come into interviews and say, "I had really interesting things going on a few days ago. I was working with this pain in my chest and it was really opening. There were a lot of thoughts. I learned a lot about a relationship that I had in the past. But all that's over—there's nothing happening now." Often we overlook the fact that what's happening now is this quality of calm.

The Buddha said the state of peace was a pretty good state. But we often don't see it because it doesn't have the drama of the hindrances or a torrent of thoughts. So it's important to notice it and appreciate it. It really opens the doors to a new movement in meditation. It's the foundation for a lot of inner contentment and inner peace.

This then sets the stage for the unfolding of the next factor, which is the quality of concentration. As the mind settles within itself and is not sending itself out in desire for the future or regret about the past, its natural energy starts to collect. When the natural energy of the mind comes together and is unified, you discover that the mind is naturally strong. Its very nature is strength, and that strength is felt as stability—or you could say stillness.

Whereas calm might be a momentary and easily disturbed state, as it grows further into concentration, there's a sense that this concentration has a power. It has the power to be unmoved, unshaken by some of the normal comings and goings.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to come and teach at Spirit Rock before we built our retreat facility. We had a big open hillside that was like an amphitheater. We built a platform for him at the bottom of it, and about a thousand people or more—maybe fifteen hundred people—could sit on the hillside and listen to his teachings during these day-long events.

It was amazing to be in his presence. His voice was amplified, but we could see him across the hill. He was so still in his body and in his speech that he transmitted this quality of concentration to all fifteen hundred people who were watching. It was like a samadhi engine that was generating and filling the whole space. Over the day that he taught, you could feel everybody settle, settle, settle.

So concentration has this strong quality where you feel really grounded in the present moment. Even if thoughts come, they're seen in the present moment. It doesn't feel like they're going to knock you off your mindfulness. This is a very satisfying feeling. The mind being stable is a great relief—not being swayed so much by the hindrances, by past and future.

The Dalai Lama put it this way: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility."

Concentration is a big part of inner peace. This factor of concentration, the stability of mind, also prepares the mind for insight. When things become still, then we can see clearly what's happening. In this place of peace and stillness, when an insight comes, it goes deep. Concentration is a beautiful ground for understanding.

Somebody can say something to us in our daily life like, "Body sensations are always changing," and we'll go, "Oh yeah, I've heard that before." But when you're in a concentrated place and you look everywhere in the body and you see every body sensation is changing, it affects your view of the body forever. It goes deep and it affects your relationship to life.

One of the things that happens in concentration is that pleasant things and unpleasant things don't have as much impact on the mind. Someone mentioned this in an interview the other day. They said that they were sitting, they were concentrated, they felt a strong sensation in the leg that normally they would have identified as pain. So from the stable attention of concentration, they looked at it more closely. And in that closer look, they couldn't actually see pain there. All they saw was a strong sensation that really had the quality of neutrality. It was intense, but it was basically neutral. This happens out of concentration. The pleasant and unpleasant things that come to us don't shake the mind so much, don't move us so much.

And this leads to the last of the factors of awakening, which is called equanimity. Equanimity is a state where we're not so thrown by the changing factors of pleasure and pain, and that gives the mind a lovely balance. You could call it balance, you could call it spaciousness, you could call it an openness that can include a lot of different things without being thrown off our centeredness.

In English, sometimes we hear this word equanimity and we think it means unfeeling, but it's not like that. When the mind has this quality of balance and space and openness, actually the beautiful qualities of heart can be felt more directly and more strongly. The strength of equanimity makes us much more open to loving kindness, to compassion, and to joy. So it doesn't become a colder place as equanimity develops. It becomes a warmer place. We have the strength to open, to feel those qualities.

So mindfulness starts the unfolding. The first set of factors are energizing. Then as happiness develops out of the energy, the mind moves into a settled state within itself that leads to the calm and concentration and strength that grows into equanimity.

As you meditate, start to notice as these different factors are arising. They may not last for a long time at first. They're all impermanent. When they come together well, that's kind of a peak experience. It's not something that's going to happen every sitting. But start to look for the balance. Look for the quality of presence or mindfulness, the factor of energy that makes for the alertness, brightness, and interest, and the factor of steadiness or calm.

Particularly keep an eye on the relationship between the energizing factors and the calming factors. It's this balance that is most important for keeping the mind in the kind of really sweet spot of meditation. If the energizing factors are too high, you'll feel a lot of bodily energy and restlessness and a lot of thoughts may dart around taking you into past and future. Then the counterpoint is to bring up the calming factors, maybe go back to a primary object like the breath, work with a spacious awareness on sounds, consciously relax the body.

On the other hand, if the calming factors get too strong and the energizing factors are low, this leads to the state that we call sinking mind. It can be very comfortable, very pleasant, you get a little bit drowsy, you could sit for hours, but the brightness of insight is not happening. So that needs the arising of the energizing factors. You can accomplish that by bringing up energy directly, the antidote to sleepiness, or start doing steady noting on changing objects. And that will wake up the alert, interested wisdom faculty of mind.

When these factors come together and into balance, then we are in the place where we can open to insight, open eventually to awakening.

I'll just close with these two quotes from the Buddha. "Bhikkhus, these seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering."

And from the Anguttara: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future, all will do so by overcoming the five hindrances that stain the mind, by firmly establishing the minds in the four foundations of mindfulness and by cultivating the seven factors of awakening in their true nature."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 41

Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the spiritual journey from suffering to freedom through the lens of "unentangled knowing" - a phrase from Thai lay teacher Upasaka Ki. He explores how bondage arises through the chain of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), focusing on the crucial links between contact (phassa), feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), and clinging (upādāna). Armstrong demonstrates how freedom can be found by resting in the gap between feeling and craving, where no reactive formations arise and no new self is born.*
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> *Drawing from suttas including the Totality Sutta and teachings from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, he explains how our basic human situation involves constant contact at the six sense doors, each carrying pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling tones. When mindfulness is strong enough to remain present without falling into greed, aversion, or delusion, we experience what Ajahn Chah called aspects of the unconditioned mind.*
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> *The talk concludes with three practical approaches: checking our attitude toward experience (inspired by Sayadaw U Tejaniya), becoming aware of awareness itself, and recognizing the empty nature of mind. These methods shift focus from objects to the subject of knowing, offering immediate access to freedom that doesn't require special conditions - only strong mindfulness and the willingness to let go without grasping something new.*

The spiritual life is about making a journey from a state which is subject to suffering to a state that is free and beyond the reach of suffering.

There are many different words that describe the bare reality of this suffering state. Sometimes it's called bondage. Sometimes it's referred to as states of clinging, grasping, attachment, or the generic overall term of samsara—wandering on through realms of being. This word samsara gives a sense of how deeply conditioned are the habits of mind that keep us in a state of suffering. It indicates how daunting a task liberation might be.

There are also many words that describe the awakened state: awakening, enlightenment, freedom, release, liberation, emancipation, nibbana or nirvana in Sanskrit. Our path is to take the journey from a state of suffering to a state of freedom.

Tonight I want to explore what the path is and offer some reflections on this quality of freedom. The subject of this talk is unentangled knowing.

This phrase comes from the Thai teacher Upasaka Ki, a lay woman who taught from the 1950s through the 1970s. She has a book I highly recommend called "Pure and Simple," which is a collection of many of her dharma talks. She was always very good at pointing to the heart of practice, turning her listeners back to the very central focus of the teachings and of liberation.

This phrase, unentangled knowing, appears in her work within a short verse: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning, cast aside." We'll return to this and explore it further.

For those who are not native speakers of English, "unentangled" is a rare word. To explain it: a tangle often refers to a ball of string or thread or yarn that's gotten all jumbled up, and when you try to pull it apart it just falls into knots. "Entangle" is the verb that describes that condition. "Unentangle" means to unthread or take apart the tangled bits that have all gotten jammed up together.

This word "tangle" is one that the Buddha often used in describing our state of affairs, our state of mind. He said, for example, "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." The idea is that our desires go in so many different directions and contradictory directions that they form a tangle in the world and in our mind.

There's a wonderful question from the Samyutta Nikaya. Someone has come to the Buddha and asked: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

That's really us, isn't it? We are at work disentangling this tangle—the inner tangle in the work of purifying our hearts and minds. And that gives us the understanding to know how the outer tangle has been created. The Buddha's reply was that it was the one who developed sila-samadhi-panya—conduct, meditation, and wisdom—who disentangled the tangle.

In Upasaka Ki's language, unentangled knowing refers to a quality of mindfulness that doesn't get caught up in reactive formations to the experiences of the world that we contact, both outer experiences and inner experiences. It's a mindfulness that is fully present, fully aware, but is not caught up in or bound by the arisings.

We are all dropping into this state very often throughout the day in meditation practice. This is a state that's happening for us repeatedly. There are many moments of this unentangled knowing arising at this point in the retreat. We may not yet have taken the time to notice them.

I want to emphasize this quality of mind, encourage you to start to notice when it's arising in your practice, and especially to notice and feel the element of freedom that's there. Sometimes when the mind is in these free states—and we know they're temporary—we don't take the time or effort to notice the quality of freedom. If we start to notice it, it can really enrich our practice, motivate our practice, and bring a lot of interest and appreciation.

This is happening already with all the meditations you've been doing—meditations on breath, sounds, body, thoughts, emotions. Continue as you're doing, and notice the freedom that comes. Later in this talk I want to discuss three approaches to practice that focus on this unentangled knowing as their central feature.

But before we go into that, I want to talk about how bondage happens, because we can't really understand freedom fully until we know how we get caught, how we get bound.

The Buddha's central teachings are all about this question of how bondage happens and how release happens. The Four Noble Truths are one of the central pointings. There's another teaching where the Buddha went into more detail, which is called the Chain of Dependent Arising or Dependent Origination. There are twelve links to that chain, which could be a whole talk in itself.

We're going to focus on the experiential heart of the teaching. We're not going to examine the first four or the last four links. We're going to zero in on the central four links of the chain because they're very experiential. This is really where the heart of the question lies.

Before we get into that, let me pose a question: what is our basic situation as human beings? Whether we're meditators or people out in the world, what's the basic reality of life for all of us?

Because there's a reality we all share. We're going to die. We are going to die. That's in the future somewhere. What about here and now? What's our basic situation?

Things are how they are. And what are those things? Our basic situation is that experiences keep happening to us at the six sense doors, all the time. Whether you're enlightened or not enlightened, whether you're a meditator or a layperson, wherever you live in the world, as long as your six senses are uninjured, those things keep unfolding for us.

The Buddha gave one discourse that pointed directly at this called the Sutta on Totality. He said, "Listen monks, and I will explain to you the totality of life." He was not one given to modest pronouncements. And he said, "It is simply this: the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. This is the totality of life. Anyone who would describe a totality beyond this would not know what they were talking about."

So we've said a few times—I think Joseph has said it—there are only ever six things happening, and these are the six, the objects of the six sense doors. Can you turn those off at will? No. When we fall asleep, we lose touch with them, but a loud sound in the middle of the night will wake us up, so there's some thread of consciousness still hanging out there, alert, able to be contacted.

But basically these six things, as long as we're awake and our senses are functioning, are coming to us all the time. They're impinging on us. They are contacting us. And so these elements are known in the Buddha's teaching and in this chain of dependent arising. These aspects of our experience are known as contact. There are six types of contact: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. This is where we'll pick up this thread of dependent arising.

So we're constantly receiving these contacts. They are mixed in terms of their pleasure or pain. Some are pleasant, some are painful, some are neither. And that's the quality of feeling tone. Every contact has associated with it a feeling tone, or vedanā, and that's the next link in the chain of dependent arising.

This is a very important point. Why is the feeling tone so important? It's based on the feeling tone that desire and aversion arise. The pleasant feeling tone often gives rise to wanting. The unpleasant feeling tone often gives rise to aversion. The neutral feeling tone often conditions delusion—like, that's not important. That doesn't have enough charge to interest me, so I won't pay attention to that.

So the feeling tone is often the ground for the arising of these reactive formations of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion.

And then when we notice that we can't have it, and that we have to just let it go, there's a death there too. The hungry yogi dies. So there's suffering in the life and suffering in the death.

But let me give you an example that goes the other way. Say you're sitting in meditation and you have a really peaceful sitting. There's some lovely concentration, maybe some joy arising, and the mind notices this and says, "Oh, this is really nice. This is what meditation should be like. I'm finally getting it." And we take hold of that pleasant state.

In that grasping, we're born as a successful meditator. We have a new identity - I'm someone who can do this, I'm good at this practice. So that birth feels really good. We're happy to be the accomplished practitioner. But of course, in the very next moment, that concentration shifts or changes, as all conditioned things do. The pleasant state fades, and suddenly our identity as the successful meditator dies.

So even when the birth is pleasant, the death is unpleasant. This is why the Buddha said that wherever there is birth, there will be aging and death, and wherever there is aging and death, there will be suffering.

This is the heart of dependent origination - this process by which we continually create new forms of suffering for ourselves through our reactive relationship to experience. Contact arises, feeling tone arises, craving arises, clinging arises, and in that clinging a new self is born that will inevitably suffer and die.

The beautiful thing about understanding this process is that it shows us exactly where we can interrupt the chain. We don't have to go unconsciously from contact to suffering. We can learn to see the feeling tone clearly. We can notice when craving is arising. We can catch ourselves before we move into clinging. This is the essence of mindfulness practice - learning to see these links clearly so that we have choice in how we respond rather than being driven by unconscious reactivity.

It may not be profound unhappiness, but there's a subtle dissatisfaction present. Then, as you continue walking to another part of the building, the aroma fades, the craving dissolves, and your mind naturally returns to equilibrium.

This balanced state is what Upasaka Ki calls "normal." It's an amusing choice of words because it's certainly not normal in worldly terms. But from a Dhamma perspective, this is what she describes as a normal mind—a balanced awareness that remains free from entanglement in desire or aversion.

That example illustrated a mildly suffering existence. But consider instead those times when you sit and experience a truly beautiful meditation. The concentration feels effortlessly present. You rest naturally in the moment as mindfulness flows with strength and clarity. The hindrances remain dormant because awareness is so well-established. There's a profound sense of relaxation, comfort, and ease suffusing the body. You observe each moment with remarkable precision.

When you rise from such a sitting, you think, "That was extraordinary. I must share this with the teacher."

In this moment, something subtle has occurred. You've grasped hold of those beautiful meditative qualities—the concentration, the stillness, the ease—and claimed ownership of them in some way. This constitutes a happy birth.

But by the time you complete your walking period and return to sit again, everything may have shifted. Sometimes after such experiences, we hurry back to the meditation hall, eager to recapture that state. We settle onto our cushion expecting the same profound concentration, only to encounter physical discomfort, mental chatter, and emotional turbulence. "Where did my concentration disappear to?" we wonder with dismay.

Then comes the pain of witnessing the death of that happy birth.

When we cling to any experience, we generate a sense of selfhood around it. We either endure a painful existence followed by perhaps a happy ending, or we enjoy a blissful life followed by inevitable suffering when it passes. This is how clinging invariably leads to dukkha, just as the chain of dependent arising demonstrates.

For most untrained individuals, the mind knows nothing but this endless cycle of grasping. It exists in a habitual state of reacting to feeling tone, clinging to one experience until it loses interest, then immediately latching onto the next. It's like a monkey swinging through the forest—never releasing one vine until it spots where to grab the next. This represents the ordinary condition of human consciousness.

This observation isn't a judgment of anyone; it's simply our inherited conditioning, the way we've all been programmed to operate.

But as meditators, we have access to another possibility entirely. This is truly the heart of our practice: we can learn to let go without immediately grasping something else. We can release our grip without immediately forming new attachments.

As you know, this isn't simple. When Skye spoke about letting go, she illuminated just how challenging this process can be. Ajahn Chah once observed that roughly eighty percent of spiritual life consists of recognizing that you're holding on while feeling unable to release. This aligns remarkably well with my own meditation experience—it's often exactly what unfolds.

Yet sometimes we do discover how to let go, and no new clinging arises to take its place. This is where we encounter genuine freedom in the present moment.

We often conceptualize the spiritual path as an enormous journey, with descriptions of liberation only arriving after tremendously long periods of practice—one lifetime or perhaps many lifetimes of effort. Sometimes we forget that we can taste profound aspects of this freedom right here, right now.

When we recognize this possibility, it can tremendously energize our practice. The fruit of the path needn't wait many years to manifest—it can be witnessed in this very moment. This strengthens faith, deepens motivation, and builds conviction that the path is actually working in our lives. These immediate glimpses prove invaluable for sustaining our commitment to practice.

This is why learning to notice when these moments of freedom arise becomes so crucial.

What we're describing is the possibility of breaking the chain of dependent origination that typically leads from contact to suffering. We experience contact, then feeling tone—but must craving inevitably follow? When a pleasant sensation arises at any sense door, must greed automatically appear? When unpleasant feelings emerge, must aversion immediately take hold?

The answer is no.

When the mind remains present with its object and mindfulness possesses sufficient strength...

We don't have to move into a reactive formation, even though that feeling tone may be there strongly. This is where we find freedom in the chain, and this is what keeps us from moving on to suffering.

So more and more, our meditation is about opening to the pleasant, opening to the unpleasant, but not reacting from greed or aversion. Again, in worldly life, in normal life, the greed and aversion formations are usually accompanied by delusion, because we don't see what we're doing. That reaction is so instinctive, it's not seen and it's not questioned.

In meditation, we also see clearly. There is no greed, there is no aversion, so there is no delusion in that moment. So in the moment of no greed, no aversion, and no delusion—clear seeing—that's a description of a mind that's free. Temporarily, yes, but free.

So it's very helpful to start to look into the mind at this place in between feeling and before there's any craving and feel what that feels like and become familiar with that, because more and more that's where you find your sweet spot in meditation. One teacher said that the whole of the Buddhist path is about resting in the gap between feeling and craving.

This is available at any moment. It doesn't depend on special conditions. It depends on your mindfulness being strong, but anytime your mindfulness is strong, that is a possibility to rest between feeling and craving. And that resting is a place of some freedom.

Really what we're talking about is finding a place in that gap that's not determined by conditioned things. The impact of the six sense doors is conditioned, sometimes completely out of our control. We're all receiving pleasant and unpleasant contact alternately, but our response can be unaffected by the conditioned things around us. Ajahn Chah called that an aspect of the unconditioned mind, the mind that is not bound by external conditions.

And I'd like to read a little bit from Ajahn Chah on this. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it because there's a lovely expression in this.

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, liked and disliked. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself.

The tendency to conceive things in terms of self is the source of happiness, suffering, birth, old age, sickness and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind. Not knowing these things, the mind doesn't see the Dhamma. Not seeing the Dhamma, the mind is full of clinging. As long as the mind is held down by clinging, there can be no escape from the conditioned world. As long as there is no escape, there is confusion, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This kind of mind is called the conditioned mind.

The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are, as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

So we have that possibility of realizing the Dhamma in relationship to the changing conditioned things at the six sense doors.

What is it like resting in that gap? You could say that resting in that gap means we're not taking birth. Not taking birth, we're not subject to death in this moment-to-moment kind of living and dying. So that is described as a place where we're not turning into a new self or a new I.

This is from the Sutta-Nipāta. There was a chapter where a number of Brahmin youths all came to visit the Buddha, and each youth asked him their own questions, and the questions were collected into this one chapter. This is a youth named Todeyya. And Todeyya asked, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you like to ask the Buddha that? What does it feel like to be you, to have your mind, to have that freedom?

And the Buddha said, "The sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." Becoming is this process of taking birth again as a new self. "The sage has nothing and is unentangled in becoming." That means he hasn't taken ownership at the six sense doors.

Ajahn Chah put this non-becoming in terms of a hall where he was giving a talk. He was giving a talk probably in an open-air sala in Thailand that had basically a roof, a floor, and pillars, but open walls. And he said, "When you look at this hall, the roof is a becoming. Something has taken birth there."

You could take a stand there. The floor is a becoming—it's something constructed, you could take a stand there. But the space that's in between the floor and the roof? You couldn't take a stand there. He said there's no becoming there, and that's what's called emptiness. And he said, to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness—this state of resting between feeling and craving, where a new self is not being born.

Ajahn Chah says this is the place of peace, this deathless place, uncreated, unbecome. It's deathless because no birth is taking place. No birth means no death will take place. And it's always available. It's not that special conditions are needed for it. It's always potential for us.

The Buddha made an interesting comment about the deathless in another sutta from the Samyutta Nikaya. He said that our path, the path that we're walking, has the deathless as its ground, its destination, and its final goal. So when you think about that, the path that we're walking is going from suffering or bondage toward freedom. Does the

path partake of bondage or freedom? Here, the Buddha is saying that the path has the deathless, freedom, as its ground. The path is founded upon the deathless. The path is built upon the goal.

In another sutta in the Anguttara, the Buddha says that merging in the deathless are all things. So all things are being supported, held by this deathless state. This becomes quite an interesting point. The mind that is balanced between feeling and craving, that does not fall into craving even though there's feeling, is residing in this place of deathlessness, of not taking birth—and that is the path.

So it becomes very interesting. Not only is it immediately, inherently free, but that furthers the freedom, that grows the freedom. The path keeps unfolding, keeps uncovering more and more of this freedom as we rest there.

Something that's happening when we make that shift is we are no longer staking our happiness on objects. We've given up clinging. We've given up trying to find a lasting happiness through the six sense doors. And something that helps this shift is that we turn from a main concern with objects to a greater concern with the subject.

So I want to talk in the second half of the talk about three approaches to our meditation that are based on this shift from focusing on objects to starting to take into account the subject. It doesn't mean we give up connecting with objects. The objects of the five physical senses are very good groundings for mindfulness in daily life. Even this looking at the subject involves some of the sixth sense door, looking at formations of the mind. So we're not putting away the practice that we've done so far. These are only suggestions of additional ways you might like to try if you find them helpful. The practice we've described so far is completely sufficient for you forever. But if you'd like to try these, they're also good practices.

The three that I'm going to talk about are a practice of checking the attitude, a practice of becoming aware of awareness, and a practice of noticing the empty nature of awareness. I'll talk about each of these.

In the last few years, a number of us have spent time with a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He has a very refreshing approach to practice, which is not so focused on what we're paying attention to, but more how we're relating to what we're experiencing or contacting. I think you've probably heard Carol talk about his approach a few times in the retreat already.

One of his central practices is what he calls checking the mind. And he says, okay, you're relating to the breath, you're relating to sounds, you're relating to your body, whatever your meditation object is, that's fine. But what I'm interested in is how are

you relating to it? If you have a strong emotion in the mind, are you wanting it to go away? Are you wanting something else to be in its place? Are you noticing clearly what's there?

So his instruction is, while you're doing your meditation relating with thoughts and emotions and physical senses, also notice: is there greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind? Sometimes that's not so easy to see, so he has a simple checklist.

First question to check on greed: am I wanting something else to happen? So often you sit in your meditation—I wish I could be a little more still. You sit and think, I had that really beautiful metta opening yesterday, a strong feeling of love for my benefactor. I'd like to have that again. So we notice, I'm wanting something else to happen. This is the force of desire or greed.

Sometimes we look and the question for aversion is: are you wanting something to stop happening? Yeah, I'd like this pain in my knee to go away. I'd like this experience of fear not to be here. I'd like the restlessness in my body to calm down.

So if we want something to stop happening, that's a sign of aversion. And the third one, delusion, he treats very simply for this level. There are many layers to delusion, but just on this checking, you ask, am I not in touch with what's happening?

Generally by the time we've asked this question we're back in touch with what's happening, so usually the answer to delusion is no. But often the answer to greed or aversion is yes. So he just suggests checking very often—it could be, in the beginning, four or five times a sitting. As the practice develops, it could be ten times a sitting, twenty times a sitting. As this practice gains momentum, this becomes the main place we look, more or less continuously.

And this is very doable. This is not unrealistic or impossible. Our main item of interest is: Is there greed in the mind? Is there aversion in the mind? Is there delusion in the mind in the way I'm relating to what I'm experiencing? This is a very, very interesting path to follow.

If you notice that there is greed, aversion, or delusion, then just become mindful of that. You don't have to make that go away, because that would be aversive. You just notice it's there, but the noticing shifts things. As you know, noticing these formations of mind makes a change in them.

Upasaka Kee puts it this way. Her teaching uses different vocabulary, but it has a really similar emphasis. She says, "Your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by

the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's worth checking on. Just keep checking: How am I relating? Am I trying to grasp at the changing factors of my experience?" If so, notice it as greed, aversion, or delusion.

This is the first of the three ways I wanted to talk about.

The second one is becoming aware of awareness. And here's where we make a very conscious shift from object to subject. Objects are known. What are they known by? They're known by some aspect of subjectness. Now, what is that?

In the Buddha's description of our experience, well, first let me say, Buddhism as a domain is interested in the experience of human beings. That's not true of every field. Physics is interested in interactions between physical objects. Chemistry is interested in the interactions between atoms and molecules. Earth science is interested in the formation of rocks. All those things are interested in objects. Buddhism is interested in human experience all the way through. That means that it's only interested in objects as they're known by a human subject.

So how do we know things? When you hear a sound, you recognize the sound as an object. In the Buddha's language, this is in the field of materiality because it's arising from a material object. But from the point of view of the teachings, the important thing is that it's arising in a human consciousness. This element of consciousness is a critical piece that in ordinary disciplines we often don't talk about. But in Buddhism, it's central.

So when you hear the sound, there are actually two aspects that we want to tune into. One is the sound itself, which has a fairly pleasant quality. It arises, it lasts a certain amount of time, and it fades away. But the second thing is you are conscious of it. Is that clear to everybody? We're conscious of that sound.

The way that I understand it is it's not like that consciousness is in you and the sound is out here, but rather when the sound arises, there's one experience, which is the sound and your knowing of it, which come up together. We can distinguish two aspects of the experience, but I want to suggest there's only one experience happening, which is your hearing of the sound.

So how can it be that there's this material thing called the sound and there's this knowing, which is of the mind, that's happening at the same time? That's kind of the mystery of our existence. Nobody knows how that happened. Science doesn't have a clue.

How that happens nobody does, but it does happen again and again and again. Or you might wonder, how can one thing have these two different parts? Well, if you take a look at this bowl, I could ask you: is it round or is it black? It's one bowl, right? But it has two aspects. It's both round and black.

So in the same way, when a sound arises, it's one thing, but it has two aspects. There's your knowing of it and there's the sound. So this knowing is what the Buddha called consciousness. The Pali word is viññāṇa.

When we start to take that into account in our practice, it starts to shift things. We come into meditation generally from this worldly perspective where we think the world is made up of objects. Yeah, the world is made up of earth and cars and dollar bills and women and men and parents and Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, all that stuff. That's not what the world is made of. The world is made of our consciousness of all those things, because it's only through our consciousness of things that we have the possibility of finding freedom in relation to them.

So consciousness is one of the five aggregates. It's in the fourth foundation of mindfulness that Sally talked about the other night. And we can make it a focus for our meditation. We can make it a focus for our mindfulness.

So right now, let me just ask: do you know that you're conscious? Those of you who are asleep don't need to answer. But for everybody else, do you know you're conscious? Okay. Can you connect with that quality of—we could call it awareness or consciousness—and recognize it in this moment? Yeah. No? If it's difficult, I'll just say: remember what unconscious is like. Unconscious is like being asleep and you're not knowing any experiences. So in the moment, if you're having experiences, you're aware, aren't you? You're conscious. Yeah. Okay.

Rather than turning our attention to the objects that are filling our momentary experience—if your eyes are open at sights, if your eyes are closed you're hearing things, you're feeling your physical sensations—what if you turn your attention to this quality of awareness?

Let me suggest a way to kind of get into this. Let your mind just roam over the objects in the room or in your experience right now. If your eyes are open, they can just roam over your body and the sounds. If they're open, include the events of the room. Take a look around. Let your eyes just gaze and travel around and see interesting things and uninteresting things.

And now, instead of looking outward, take that quality of attention or awareness and direct it back toward where the seeing is happening. One way this is sometimes expressed is "become aware of your awareness," or it can be described as turning awareness back on itself, or it can be described as letting the eyes roll back into the head.

When you make that shift from the eyes wandering around or the senses wandering around outside and then coming to look back at the source of awareness, does it feel any different? You get a little shift in the way that feels? Okay, keep playing with it if you like.

What happens when we make that move away from outer objects and toward the inner seeing is to some degree we unhook from the objects. So it can be for some people—if it doesn't work for you, you don't have to do it—it can be a way to consciously let go. It can kind of consciously take our fixation off of objects. You know, it could be body sensations that we're fixating on because they're pleasurable or painful. It could be a sense of space in the room. It could be a sound. But we can unhook, look inward, and in that kind of let go.

Now, we can't, of course, really see awareness, because that's like trying to see your own eyes, which someone read Ajahn Sumedho talking about. He said, "I can't see my eyes, but I don't need to because I know they're working." So in the same way, we may not see the awareness so clearly—consciousness is a subtle object—but the very act of turning in that direction, being interested in the subject rather than the object, lets us stop clinging or stop being so fixated on objects.

I was taking a walk yesterday in the rain and walking down by the pond down the hill from here, and I just stood and watched for a while the raindrops falling in the pond and then making their ripples, one after another after another. And it struck me that that was a lot like the experience of contact that the Buddha talked about. Our awareness is just kind of open. And then there are all these sensory inputs just coming in and landing, coming in and landing one after another. The surface of the pond is very still if it's not being disturbed.

It can be disturbed by wind. It could be disturbed by rain. It could be disturbed by an animal swimming in it. But if it's not being disturbed, it's very still.

In the same way, our awareness has this ability to be very still and just let things land and touch it, land and touch it. They make a little ripple, but the ripple will die out really quickly unless we try to grab hold of it. Some of the things that land we get fascinated by - we grab hold of and fixate on. That's the way clinging works. But when we

start to feel this receptive quality of awareness, we can simply let things land and ripple, land and ripple, and that mind can return to its basically placid and tranquil state.

When we're not clinging, we're not creating a disturbance. We're not taking a new birth. We're not leading into more suffering.

So if this appeals to you and you would like to play with it a little bit, then here's what I'd suggest: just try this exercise. Sometimes a visual cue is helpful, so have the sense that you can let your senses roam outside as much as they want. Become interested, and then at some point take the attention and turn awareness back on itself, or direct the attention inward to the source of knowing. Sometimes the phrase "aware of awareness" helps people connect with that experience. See if in doing that anything shifts in you.

If something connects and you want to practice with it as a practice, then these are the steps you could go through. Take a look back - in other words, become aware of awareness. Notice if anything shifts, and then just rest there. How long can you rest? Until you get distracted, until the mind gets caught up in thinking, proliferating, grasping onto something. And then when you notice it again, you can do the same sequence: turn the attention back on awareness, notice what the effect is, and then rest.

Upasaka Ki put it this way: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." That's another synonym for grasping - making up from grasping. In other words, "an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing, cast aside." That is, the tendency of mind to look for its gratification through objects has been put down. And there's a contentment, an interest, a vitality in this turning to awareness itself.

When we turn to awareness, it doesn't block out any of the sensory arisings. Awareness is still there receiving them. But our attention is not fixated on the objects. And for some people, that gives a sense of greater space, greater equanimity. It's not for everyone. And again, if this description doesn't appeal to you, there's no need to take it up.

The last quote I'll mention in this section is another one from the French poet Paul Valéry, where he says, "I only refer to my pure self, by which I mean absolute consciousness, through which one turns loose from everything else." That's pretty good intuition for a non-Buddhist.

The third of these approaches that I wanted to mention tonight looks at the empty nature of this awareness. And I want to approach this by another question - a simple question. It is not a trick.

Do you have a body?

Do you have a mind?

It's not a trick. We all have a body, and because we're alive and breathing and walking, we all have a mind. If I ask you where is your body, it's really clear, right? It's here. Where is your mind? And to answer that, we have to know: what is your mind?

Somebody points to the chest. That's a good place to look. What is the mind?

When the Buddha talked about the sutta on totality, and he talked about the six kinds of things, he talked about the mind and mind objects. So mind objects we've talked about many times - as thoughts, emotions, meditative states, feeling, perception, intention. Those are all objects of mind. What's left that could be called the mind in this schema?

How about consciousness? Maybe consciousness or awareness is the mind. I'd like to refine it a little bit by saying that I want to call the mind that which is the source of consciousness, or more simply, that which knows. Other parts of what we call mind, like thoughts and emotions, those will be mind objects. But mind is going to be the organ that knows in this consciousness kind of way.

So in this sense, in this language - it's only language - consciousness is the activity of this thing we're calling mind.

Can you buy this temporarily as a hypothesis?

Is consciousness limited in space? Your consciousness, is it just around your body? Does it include the meditation hall? Does it include the grounds of IMS? Does it include the trees down the road? Does it include the stars? It's pretty unlimited, isn't it? It seems to be everywhere we turn. There's some consciousness happening.

So where is the mind? Can you find that which is the source of the knowing? Where does this knowing come from? It's tough, isn't it? I will encourage you to explore. You could ask questions like: does the mind have any shape? Does it have any color? Does it have any limit? Does it have any boundary? See what you come up with.

If you can't find it, that's also significant because it says it's empty—we could say it doesn't exist. That's a fine thing to say, but then what is it that keeps knowing? Knowing continues to happen, so in this language something like the mind is still doing that. So we can't find it, but it seems to function. All we can say is it's ineffable.

What if you let your attention kind of evaporate into that ineffable place? What if you let your attention release into that limitless, boundless, unfindable place of mind?

Connecting with the empty nature of mind can also bring in a sense of unhooking from grasping at phenomena. This is from the Buddha talking to his seven-year-old son who became a student after the Buddha's awakening: "Rahula, develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like space."

As you let your attention kind of fill the vastness of this limitless space of awareness, there's a natural letting go of fixation, preoccupation and clinging to the individual comings and goings of contact.

I'll just close with another quotation from the Buddha. This is also from the Sutta Nipata in the dialogue with another Brahmin youth whose name is Kapha. So Kapha asks this question: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replies: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing. That is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 42

Keys To A Long Retreat

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

> *In this opening dharma talk for a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong offers profound guidance on how to approach extended meditation practice. He introduces the foundational attitude of 'relax, observe, allow' as a touchstone for the entire retreat experience. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings on saddha (faith/trust), Armstrong explores how we can place our hearts upon the essential purity within us—the seed of awakening that exists in every practitioner. He discusses the transformative power of settling back into the present moment, referencing how the Buddha's community appeared radiant because they had learned to abide fully in the now. The talk addresses the challenges of renunciation and simplicity that come with retreat life, drawing parallels to the traditional monastic requisites of food, shelter, clothing, and medicine. Armstrong emphasizes how this voluntary simplicity creates the conditions for the mind to settle naturally, allowing practitioners to see the basic tendencies of mind that usually remain hidden beneath our busy activities. He concludes with encouragement about the inevitable fruition of steady practice, quoting Bhikkhu Bodhi: 'The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two, to start and to continue.'*

So in beginning the dharma talk tonight, I just wanted to mention something that Carol referred to last night, which is this is the 10th anniversary of September 11th, 2001, the bombing of the World Trade Center. I wanted to acknowledge for a few moments the significance of that event and this anniversary, because I know for everyone who lives in America, it has affected us profoundly. And I think probably for those of you from Europe or other parts of the world, it has affected you too.

So I think we all share in holding this event and this memory with a lot of sadness and also, hopefully, with a lot of compassion. Because I think the one way that we can use events like this in the deepening of our dharma practice is to let the pain of the world really touch our hearts and let the heart move into compassion evoked by what touches us from that situation.

Many of us, I think, probably knew somebody who was touched by that event, especially those of you who live on the East Coast. Sally and I were at home that morning—I think it was a little before 8 o'clock California time. We got a call from a friend telling us about it because we hadn't turned on the news that morning. Our friend said that she

was on the phone to someone who was working at the World Trade Center when the first plane hit, and it hit their building. So that brought the reality of it home to us really strongly and just made me imagine what it must have been like to be in that situation.

And then we became aware, as you become attuned to this possibility, that life in America would never be the same again after an event like that, because our country had been pretty removed from war on American soil for a long, long time. And then you realize it's not like that for a lot of the world. So we start to use events like this to link to the experiences of other people.

I have a friend who has family in Sri Lanka, and she mentioned that people in Sri Lanka have been used to this kind of event happening for a long time. That was a shock to think about—that around a lot of the world, things like 9/11 happen almost as a matter of course.

Sally and I were in Mumbai a couple of years ago, and a friend there took us to the hotel where, after the terrorist attacks of 2008, the terrorists had hidden after they had killed a bunch of people in the hotel. We were walking across this beautiful white marble lobby, and our friend told us how after the attacks, when they had been able to go back in, that lobby was awash in blood. It was a shock because it was a five-star hotel—it used to be the Oberoi.

So this event links us to the pain of violence that takes place throughout the world. That can not only deepen our compassion, but also broaden it to help us realize something of our human vulnerability—that things like this have been happening forever across the world, and it really connects to our fragility and our exposure at any time. So that in itself is a painful but I think really worthwhile dharma reflection: that we share this tragedy with all those around the world who are touched by violence through all kinds of war or terror or physical violence in any form.

Then there's the question of how we respond. As practitioners, how do we respond to an event like this? One of the groups in California said that as they considered this question, they came upon what felt to them a very meaningful form of action. It's something that you all did last night, which was to restate their commitments to the refuges and precepts—to acknowledge where true refuge is in this uncertain world, and to restate our own personal commitment to non-harming and non-violence.

We don't know what the rest of the world is going to do. The rest of the world doesn't live by the five precepts. We can imagine what a different world it would be if everyone did, but we can. And in doing that, we make our own personal commitment to making this world a place of safety for everyone we come in contact with. So I found that a very

beautiful reflection. And I love the fact that we will take the precepts regularly through this retreat and restate our own personal commitment to living in that way of non-harming.

The last thing that I think we can all take from this is to generate the intention—the intention out of compassion—to end hatred in our own minds. This is a real human possibility, and this is the purpose of our path, one of the purposes of the path that we're walking. To be able to show through our lives and through our dedication that it's possible to put an end to hatred, anger and violence within our own minds is, to me, a really inspiring direction and intention and statement. And that's what we're doing here.

I can't think of any more effective way to do that than to do what we are doing here for these six weeks and three months. So in a way, I feel this is our collective response to 9/11. This is our memorial of those events: to refrain from violence and to work to end hatred. I hope you feel that this is something you can personally feel connected to. I think it's where we're all aiming, and we can make it our conscious intention and really the gift of our community—one of the gifts of our community to this world.

So a long retreat is a very powerful thing to do. In my view, it's one of the greatest things that we can do as human beings. It has so many terrific benefits. It's wonderful to practice in some parts of Asia because there are whole cultures that revere this as the highest human activity. When I practiced in Thailand and Burma, I felt that. I received the support of the people there because they valued what I was doing as a monk as one of the highest things that a human being can do.

Of course, in our culture there's not that general understanding. What we're doing looks kind of weird from the outside. You're going to take your vacation time or three months of your personal leave and you're going to sit quietly and not talk to anybody?

It looks kind of out there. The closest thing I can relate it to is doing some extreme sport, like skiing off the top of a mountain or gliding in those suits across the mountain faces in the Swiss Alps. It's something like that.

I have a friend who used to be a Navy SEAL. We don't connect on a lot of cultural events. He's more into rodeo and hunting, and I'm more into sitting quietly. When I came back from Burma, I came back and my head was still really mostly shaved. And of course, I told him what I'd been up to. He wasn't so impressed by the shaved head and the taking of robes and eating one meal a day. That kind of stuff didn't impress him. But he was impressed by the fact that I sat still without moving for eight hours a day. He

kind of got that that was a hard thing to do. He didn't understand the reason I was doing it, but he knew it was difficult. I could see my respect level went up a notch because of that.

But of course, if this was easy, everybody would do it. Because the benefits are so wonderful, but you know it's not easy. This is really a challenge. There are so many things that come out of an experience like this—things that I believe will guide you for the rest of your life. I feel that after a six-week retreat or a three-month retreat, many of you already know this, the development of qualities that come stay with you for a long, long time. Some of the specific experiences, meditative experiences won't, but some of the qualities that you build will. I'm thinking of things like equanimity, peace of mind, understanding, a degree of healing of old hurts and disappointments, opening to qualities of love and compassion, development of patience, and just overall the amount of freedom you feel in your heart and mind can stay with you forever to some degree.

So tonight I want to talk about how best to use your time here, because this is such a rare opportunity and one of so much promise and so much power. I want to focus on two aspects. We're going to talk in a lot of detail about how to practice mindfulness, so I'm not going to go into that so much tonight. But I want to talk about two things in particular. One is the attitude that we bring to a retreat like this. And the second is what it means to live in such a simple way with such a level of having given up or renounced so much of the world.

We will be giving you a lot of instructions over the next couple of weeks. We'll give a standard set of sequential meditation instructions. We'll refine them. We'll work with you through interviews and questions in the hall on more detail. But as you follow the different techniques, maybe even more important is the attitude of mind with which you approach them. It's possible to take hold of a technique, any meditation technique, and cling to it very strongly and go at it rather fiercely. This can have certain results—I'd say somewhat limited, but it can have certain results. But our approach is going to be to start from the very beginning talking about how you use the techniques and how you approach meditation in general. Because our trust is that if you come from the right place, it doesn't so much matter what technique you use—the retreat will unfold in a great way for you.

So we want to talk about this basic way that you move into meditation and how to do it most skillfully. One teacher expressed this approach or this attitude in three words: relax, observe, and allow. And I hope you can take these and work with them as some-

thing of a touchstone over the length of the retreat, because I can't think of a time when they're not useful. In a way, they kind of describe the whole of the practice. Relax, observe, allow.

So I want to talk about each of these just a little bit this evening. When Sally was giving the instructions this morning, she really stressed this factor of relaxation and how important it is. And by putting it first in this list, we also want to stress it. Relax means, as far as you can, you make the body soft and you make the mind soft. So however you can move into doing that—and of course you can't always relax completely, either the body or the mind—but to the extent that you can, we encourage you to start from there.

In the beginning of every meditation, even right now as you listen, you can practice with this a little. Let the body be soft. Let the mind be soft. That creates a kind of receptive and open attitude to your experience. Also, when we can relax, it sends a strong signal to the brain. It basically says to the brain, "You can chill. Things are okay. Things are all right. Nothing really has to be fixed because I can relax into the way things are. Things are okay just right now."

This is a very liberating place to come to in meditation—recognizing that we don't have to change anything. Things are okay. This quality of relaxing expresses a state of mind that's really central in the Buddha's teachings. In English we could call it a quality of trust. We can trust in this moment because we can relax and drop into it. Synonyms for this are faith or confidence. We can think of it as faith in the Dharma. We can think of it as confidence in ourselves. The moment is okay. I can trust it.

This term in Pali that we're translating as trust is *saddha*, and it literally has the meaning of "to place one's heart upon." So it's a way of saying, what can we place our hearts upon? There is something that we can have faith and trust in and have our own confidence in.

So what is that? What is that quality that we can have faith in? The world is uncertain. As we learned from this reflection on 9/11, the world is uncertain and things can happen to us at any moment. We can't necessarily place our faith in changeable external conditions. But maybe what we can place our faith in is the essence of our own heart and mind. That we trust that there is already within us some quality we might call the seed of awakening or the ground of awakening. This quality that the Buddha brought forth under the Bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment. That seed, that potential is already in each one of us.

This says there is some kind of essential purity in each of our hearts and minds that if we let go into it, it will hold us. It will support us. It will carry us. It's almost like saying when we trust in that, the Dharma will carry us on this path. It's not that we have to force every step, but as we relax into this essential quality, which has a flavor of peace, then the Dharma can carry us.

I think of our practice in this way. We can't push our own unfolding, but if we relax and trust in it, the energy of the Dharma will carry us through healing, through difficulties, into understanding, into love and compassion and into awakening. The Dharma is there in each of us and will do its job when we ask it to, when we let it do that work.

I don't want to get too worldly about this, but you can kind of see this in good athletes. I love to watch tennis, and a lot of you probably know the last couple of weeks the U.S. Open has been on in New York, and there was a great semifinal match yesterday with my favorite current player, Roger Federer. I'm not going to tell you the outcome, because there may be one tennis fanatic who's taped it and is going to watch it when they go home, which I might do if I were in your place.

Federer is an amazing athlete and a great tennis player. If you watch him in the middle of a very intense match, he can go into relaxation in about one half of a second. He'll be running all over the court, high energy, sprinting, and then an easy shot will come along, a kind of easy volley put away, and his whole body will just settle, and he'll just do a tap. Right from the high voltage, immediately—tap.

When we are relaxed, our best responses come out of us. You'll see this in meditation. You'll see it in your own life. When we can relax and feel that trust, feel that confidence, then what comes out of us is the right response, the right movement.

Another way to talk about this is a phrase that Joseph uses a lot, and I love it because I find it very evocative physically. Joseph uses this phrase, "settling back into the present moment." You have this sense from the phrase of an attention that's been drawn out, kind of getting involved with activities that are happening outside, and the energy kind of moving out. As you feel into that phrase, it's like bringing the energy back into the body and settling it lower down. You get that sense of relaxing, calming and stilling because when we settle in, we still the body and that brings a kind of stilling of the mind. This phrase for me evokes a beautiful place of practice which has a quality of relaxation, peace and ease.

As we play with this factor of trust and the ability to relax, we find out the moment doesn't have to be perfect for us to relax. Sometimes we think, well, I can't really meditate right until all the aches are out of the body and the mind isn't distracted by random

thoughts and I don't have any movement of aversion going. We don't have to wait for that. All the moment has to be is kind of good enough. Our average kind of moment is good enough.

So we start to learn that we can trust and relax in most of our moments. The more we do that, the more that flow of the Dharma can carry us. We don't actually have to do so much when we can relax into the moment.

So then the second part of this little formula is observe.

We relax, we're in the present moment. Observe means we get interested. What's happening? Okay, I'm relaxed, I'm in the moment, what's up? So this is the alert, you might say the slightly more active part of the meditation. We simply tune in: what's my experience in this moment? When we can get interested in that, then again, the meditation kind of takes care of itself.

This word observe sounds a little clinical or detached, so some synonyms are to pay attention, to be aware. This is really what's pointed to with the phrase "be mindful"—notice, watch, or one I especially like: feel. Feel your experience in this moment. Feeling brings you into closer contact than watching does. I like this word—feel the experience. This is really the quality of awakeness.

I'm sure you know that the word Buddha means "one who is awake." That was his central quality—one who is awake. So this is our awakeness, our entry into awakeness. When we get interested, then that interest and the energy of it starts to burn off the fog.

In the first days of retreat, usually there's a lot of fog. You may have come in from a busy life, maybe just a little tired when you get here. A lot of the sittings in the first couple of days can be very sleepy, drowsy, foggy, hard to see clearly. This interest starts to burn through that.

The other thing it cuts through is this kind of distracted tendency where we just wander off into past and future in our thoughts a lot, and we miss the present moment. We miss this contact.

There was a cartoon in The New Yorker I like a lot for this. It was in three panels about a guy's life and what he's thinking about his life. In the first panel, he's at work at his desk, typing on his computer, and the thought bubble is a picture of himself on the golf course. So he's not really with his work—he's thinking about being on the golf course.

The second panel shows him on the golf course, about to drive the ball, and the thought bubble above his head is a picture of his girlfriend without any clothes on, just to make it a little more energized. So he's golfing now, but he can't stop thinking about his partner.

The third panel is him at home, making love to his girlfriend, but the thought bubble is of his computer at work. So wherever he is, it doesn't fully satisfy. The mind is somewhere else. A lot of people live this way.

Our training is really to let us be fully with whatever it is that we're doing. We learn to be fully with something as simple as sitting and breathing, sitting and hearing, walking and feeling the earth, chopping vegetables, cleaning a toilet. When we learn to be fully present with that, it's much easier to go home and be fully present in things that are really compelling.

This is a training that goes on a long time and has lots of benefits. We learn not to drift off so much into thinking or fantasy or figuring it out or rehearsing conversations or analyzing. We're just awake here and now, and we feel the life of this moment. This has so many beautiful and beneficial qualities. It's so opening.

Somebody came and visited the Buddha and his community of monks and nuns during his lifetime. I think it was a king—I can't remember exactly, but I think it was one of the high-placed figures in the world at that time. The visitor was struck by the appearance of the community. Here they were living really simply. They didn't have the riches that he had or that the people in his court had. They were just eating probably one meal a day and wearing these simple robes.

But the visitor said, "Your community seems so happy. In fact, they look radiant. Why is that?"

And the Buddha replied, "They're radiant because they've learned to abide in the present moment."

This abiding in the present moment brings a great sense of lightness and relief, because the present moment is usually pretty uncomplicated, just like now. This is a pretty good present moment. We're in the company of like-minded people, and we're turning our attention toward the Dhamma. Your butt may be a little uncomfortable, or you may have an aching shoulder from apple picking.

This is not a bad moment, if we can just be here fully in this moment, and most moments are like that.

Henry David Thoreau, who lived just about an hour from here in a little hut near a pond called Walden in the 1800s, wrote: "I feel a little alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily without getting there in spirit. What business have I in the woods if I am thinking of something outside the woods?" This is a beautiful sentiment. When you go for a walk in the woods, you might think about that. Can we just be in the woods when we're walking in the woods?

One of the insights we get in Vipassana practice, which is actually really freeing, is that only the present actually exists. The past and future don't exist on their own. They're only thoughts if we call them up. It's not like the past is hanging out back there somewhere. It's gone. It's over. It's not like the future is waiting for us up there somewhere to arrive. It hasn't happened yet, and our actions in this moment will change it. So the past and future don't exist. All we have is this present moment. And that insight supports the concentration just to be here fully now.

So we come into the now with that relaxed observation. We start to tune in: How's the body responding? And then, how am I relating to the body? How's the mind responding? And how am I relating to the mind? How's the environment around me in this moment? And how am I relating to that? We're always feeling into both halves of this relationship. How's the world—my experience—and how am I relating to it?

This is where our meditation really takes hold, because especially we want to understand in this relationship: How is it that I suffer, and how can I free myself? In relation to bodily events, in relation to mental events—and when I say mental, I include emotional too, heart and mind together—and in relation to environment, other people, the world in general. We observe: How do I get caught? How do I get free?

So then allow. The third part of this attitude practice means from a meditative point of view, whatever happens, we let it be the way it is. We allow things to be the way they're coming through in our body, in our mind and heart, in our environment. Normally, this is not our natural habit of mind, just to say, "Oh yeah, this is groovy." Normally, we're wanting things to be a certain way and not be another way.

But part of wisdom is we start to see that everything that comes, comes from past causes and conditions. The present moment as it's arising right now couldn't be arising any differently. And so if we get in conflict with it, it's like being in conflict with reality. The present moment has happened because of many, many past conditions. Here it is. If we don't like it, who's going to win that fight—reality or us? Reality always wins. We'd like to have it be a certain way, but we can't affect that a lot of the times.

One of the practitioners at Spirit Rock, a student of Sylvia Boorstein, had a really nice comment. She said when somebody asked her how she was, she learned a skillful response. She said, "I couldn't be better," because that was strictly true. I couldn't be better in this moment, the way it's presenting itself. This is as good as I can be. If I knew how to be better, I would, but this is how I am right now and I couldn't be any better. What a great response. No matter how you're feeling, "I couldn't be better."

We start to see that this tendency to make things different is not just a random or occasional turn of mind, but it is a deeply conditioned habit that pervades our normal way of relating to the world. It's a little bit alarming when we start to see the size of it, the frequency of it, the unceasing style that it's in. What we're always trying to do in these different forms...

Our sense of self is always engaged in this activity—increasing pleasure and decreasing pain, moment after moment. As you start to get quiet on the meditation cushion in this quiet atmosphere, you'll begin to see these habits of mind over and over again. This current will become very familiar, this tendency to fix things. In the beginning, we might think this is just a minor little habit of mind, but it's not. It actually has profound implications.

You know this term samsara, I think. Samsara is the Buddha's term for how we've taken birth many, many times—countless times in the past, he says. We've lived lives, we've died, and then we've taken birth somewhere else to live another life and go through all the trials and ups and downs of that existence. We've died again and taken birth again. This is also called the wheel of cyclic existence. In the Buddha's teaching, this process of going through birth, life, death, birth, life, death goes on and on until we figure it out.

You may not believe in the rebirth image that he was pointing to, but in similar ways, we take birth through our many different modes of mind throughout a day, throughout a week, throughout the many years of our life—from being children to adolescents to adults. We take birth in different forms, and each of those has its own way of passing away. We can get that sense of the ongoing nature of birth and passing away, even in that model.

The Tibetans say that the motive force behind this wheel continuing is trying to correct. This energy to make things better is the motive force behind samsara. This is a big deal. So what if we stop trying to make things a little bit better? This is the function of wisdom—to stop just trying to make these little adjustments and go to the root. Then there's the possibility of coming out of samsara, and coming out of samsara means discovering nibbana, this place of peace that's not shakable, not conditioned.

That's why this allowing comes to be so important. It's really the entryway into peace. We don't have to struggle with the way things are when we develop this capacity to allow them to be.

Now I want to say that I'm talking here about the inner attitude in meditation. This is not meant to apply as a blanket statement to life in the world. In life in the world, sometimes we need to take action. It doesn't mean allowing everything to be when people are being harmed, when things are being done that are not right. But in our own inner relationship, this is how we can discover peace in our own hearts and minds.

You can see this in people like the Dalai Lama, who spent basically sixteen lifetimes perfecting this practice. Someone asked him, "You have so much responsibility. Things are so difficult for the Tibetan people right now. How do you stay cheerful?" And he answered, "It's my profession." It's our profession, too. Our profession is to stay cheerful, all of us here. I hope you'll find that in this retreat and discover how to do that—that this is part of all of our potential.

One of the great supports for being able to open in this way is the lack of busyness here. It's really the simplicity of this life that lets us relax. We're not being constantly bombarded by requests from friends or from work or from partners or from children or from parents or from the world. In that lack of stimulation, we can just let the mind settle. And if we let it, it will settle. This tendency of relax, observe, allow leads to settling. We create the simple environment for the mind to be able to settle into itself, to find calm and a natural kind of peace.

But in coming into this really simple environment, we create another problem, which is all the things we leave behind. It's not easy to leave behind your friends and your home and your preferences for food, the internet and your Facebook account and your family and your television and your bookshelves—all of that you've given up to be here. That's not an easy thing to do.

The Buddha talked about this quality of—you could call it renunciation, simplicity, letting go—as one of the ten paramis, one of the ten beautiful qualities to develop on the way to awakening. But he also talked about the sorrows that come with this life of renunciation. Moving into retreat, it seems to me that often we go through a period of homesickness. As we adjust to living our life here, making our life here, we go through a letting go of the things that we've left behind that has pain in it. It's not easy to say goodbye to the things that made up our outside life.

As we're going through this adjustment and settling in for a long retreat, many different emotions come up for people in this transition. I just want to name some of the common ones that are happening at this stage, often for people.

There can be an excitement about being here and starting this big adventure. There can also be an element of nervousness, not knowing what's coming, or even a fear. I remember starting one long retreat at the Forest Refuge. I was getting instructions on work meditation on the opening evening, sitting in a chair in the dining room, when all of a sudden I was gripped by this fear. I thought, what have I gotten myself into? And that fear lasted for about half a day. It was still there when I woke up overnight, still there as I went through the morning meditations. I was just kind of gripped by this fear. And then I just kept practicing, and it went away.

So don't worry if there's some nervousness or fear. Watch it. Relax, observe, allow it to be there.

Other feelings people often have at this point: feeling exhausted, coming from a busy life; feeling inspired by the beautiful potential that is in this form; a sense of self-doubt—I don't know if I'm capable of this; or a sense of regret—Why did I sign up for this course? Where's the exit line here? Or you might feel very confident—I can do this. I can be with my experience. I can make it through and I'll grow and learn. There might be a sense of loneliness, a sense of depression—It's so hard. Or it might be a strong sense of determination—I don't care what comes. I'm going to just put one foot in front of another and meet it directly and deal with it as it comes. I can do this.

This is from Thoreau in Walden: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach me, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

So in living with these essential facts of life—sitting and walking and eating and sleeping and being in community—we really learn how to live in so many ways. And I think you will feel that when you've been through a retreat of this length. Many of you know this: that you have something with you that will also be there at the moment of your death. In many ways, you could say our whole path is preparing us for that moment. And learning to live and learning to die are not so different.

So the Buddha talked about the challenges of the renunciate life, but he also said that the way to overcome them is to develop the joys of the renunciate life. Because this style of life opens up levels of happiness that we never knew were possible from a busy daily life, at least for most of us. There are levels of stillness and peace and love,

wonder, awe, compassion and insight that for me were totally new to discover in meditation that I hadn't touched outside. And all that potential is opened up by the simplicity of the life we're living here. It's really beautiful when that starts to unfold.

We appreciate this quote from the Buddha, from the Dhammapada: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness, one attains to a happiness that is greater than the wise pursue that happiness, which is greater." And that's what a retreat like this is for. There is happiness in daily life, but the possibility is that there's a greater degree of happiness here, one that can truly satisfy. A lot of times the happiness of daily life is beautiful, but kind of fleeting, and it changes. And here we find the possibility, we start to glimpse the possibility of a satisfaction that doesn't go away.

So I want to talk a little about the details of this renunciate life that we're all involved in. Here we've also left our homes and our familiar places. The basic spirit for all of us in the renunciate life is to accept what's offered. And in the life of a traditional renunciate, this is in the area of what are called the four requisites, the things we really need to live: food, shelter, clothing, and medicine.

Those are fairly simple here. The food will be offered three times a day. The lodging has been provided—a fairly simple single room for each of you. The clothing is just what you've brought with you.

And the medicine will be whatever you need. The office will help you take care of that.

In Asia, you really get the flavor of this kind of simplicity. Most of the monasteries I practiced at, we ate only one meal a day in the morning. If you haven't had a red fish curry at 8 a.m., you haven't really lived. Then that would be it for twenty-four hours.

In Zen, they put it this way: the mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace that can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease. So there won't be dried cow dung on the menu, I can assure you. But there may be things you don't like, so you just think of it as fuel. It's okay.

At Spirit Rock, the cooks put up a sign that says: "When we prepare a delicious meal, that's our practice. When we prepare an undelicious meal, that's your practice." So please hold it in that sense.

We make a commitment to noble silence. We don't get in touch with our friends and family outside. We don't communicate with the other yogis who are here. If you have to write a letter, the office can help you with envelopes and stamps. Just do what is really necessary, please.

We give up reading. We give up journaling. Just part of the simplicity to keep the mind out of the realm of concepts. We want to keep the mind in the realm of direct experience.

And of course, there's a whole new level of renunciation in about the last five years with smartphones, tablets, and netbooks. Because then it's like you're never out of touch. So email, texting, instant messaging, contact through the web, Facebook, Twitter—all this stuff, sometimes it's really hard to leave behind. It's not so hard for people my age, because we didn't grow up with it. But for young people, it can be really hard to unplug because this frequent, incessant contact can become pretty addictive.

Nielsen is an American company that used to measure how many people watched a television program. Well, now they measure a bunch of other stuff, including internet usage and texting. Nielsen did a study and reports that teenagers, on average, send and receive over one hundred text messages a day. Teenagers—that's hard to give up.

So we teach a young adults retreat here, and one of the main teachers is Rebecca Bradshaw. She wrote me an email last year and said that young people on retreat seemed more afraid of the silence and solitude than in any other year. When they unplug, they report feeling a lot of fear of the emptiness.

So this may happen as you unplug. We really ask you to do it—to unplug from your smartphones and texting and instant messages and web and so on. And there may come kind of what feels like a loss of identity in this. That's okay. You can let go of that identity. You'll find a new identity here that's not so dependent on continually connecting with other people. That's where our independence and freedom comes from. But it may be a little bit of discovery. It's a little bit like Descartes has been updated. Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." The new one is, "I phone, therefore I am."

So feel free to give your cell phone or smartphone to Elizabeth. She will guard it safely and won't send any spoof emails on your account.

In addition to not communicating with friends and family back home, please don't communicate with one another. It may seem innocent, it may seem minor if you're the communicator, but when that lands in the mind of someone who has gotten still over a few days or a few weeks or a few months, a communication can go off like a bomb. And I have seen when a yogi writes a critical note to another yogi—it might be something as simple as "Please don't wear that rustly jacket into the meditation hall. Remember the manager asked us to wear silent clothes?"—and they're always signed "Metta, a fellow yogi."

But when that lands and your heart is open, you just feel like the world has turned against you.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 9/10). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

And it takes people days to recover from a note like that, from criticism that comes from a fellow yogi, because it breaks down the sense of safety and trust. We all go through this incredibly delicate process of opening here because of this field of trust. It's a great gift that we give one another in not violating that container of silence and trust that holds each of our open hearts. It's such a big thing.

If there's a problem with another yogi, please tell one of us. We will confer among ourselves. We know either you or the person you're talking about. We'll figure out how to work with it. But please bring any problems to us and let us handle them. Please don't communicate with another yogi, especially critical things, but even friendly things. It's just simpler if everybody can be in their own experience.

Communicating by gesture, by movement, by walking near someone, sitting near someone, eating near someone can all be forms of communication if that's your intention. Please just be simple. Stay in your experience, let others stay in theirs.

We don't say don't make eye contact because that feels a little too frozen to us. It's not that you shouldn't make eye contact because sometimes looking at other faces in the middle of a retreat brings a lot of caring and a lot of compassion. My heart's been opened many times being on retreat and feeling into where my fellow yogis are. You'll develop really close bonds with people.

So looking at people's faces is not forbidden, it's not prohibited, but don't use it as a way to try to engage them in a connection or a relationship. Let each person have their own space. That will really support their practice and your practice.

The purpose of all this living simply is so that the mind becomes kind of bare. When we're not involved in outer activity, we see the mind's basic nature so clearly. It's like in another month, when the leaves start falling off these trees, then you'll start to see the outline of the limbs. The limbs are there, right? But you can't see them now because they're all covered over by the leaves. As the leaves fall, you start to see what supported them. You start to see the limbs.

In the same way, when our outer activities fall away, we see the tendencies of mind that are behind them all. That's really what we're here to see—those tendencies of mind. So let that bareness come to you.

This is from T.S. Eliot: "Quick now, here, now, always, a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

I love this—a condition of complete simplicity. Anytime we come completely into this moment, that's where we're at. We're in a condition of complete simplicity, just open to what is, nothing extra added. What does that cost? Not less than everything. That means basically letting go of our past and future. That's what identity is built on. Coming into the present, inhabiting the present, we come into our true self, our true richness, our true fullness, letting go of identities that aren't quite real. We find a real identity, a real self in that experience.

So what can we trust in this process and in this part of our journey? At home, we might trust in our thoughts. In the beginning of the retreat, we might trust a lot in our thoughts. When I first sat a long retreat, I figured, "Well, I'll think all I want, and eventually I'll run out of things to think." Never happened. Six months in, I was still finding plenty to think about.

So you might as well give up the thinking now as far as possible. Not so easy, but when you have a choice, you can give it up now because what we really want to trust in is not so much this conceptual mind that turns things over and tries to figure it out. You want to trust in your intuition. It's the intuitive knowing that brings breakthrough insights, that discovers new ways of seeing things, that discovers new ways of understanding the world and ourselves. This intuitive insight operates best out of silence.

So let's say there's a problem in your life that you'd really like some guidance with from your deep meditation. Rather than trying to figure it out while you're sitting, trust in this quality of quieting when you have the choice.

Trust in the quiet. Let that take your whole awareness into what I would call a deeper level of your being. You come from a deeper place, a more intuitive place, a more integrated place, a more heartful place. It may come from your gut. It may come from your heart. It doesn't so much come from your head. That is the place where some of the difficult problems of life can get understood. But it comes more through intuition than through concepts.

This is from Walt Whitman: "There is that in me. I do not know what it is, but I know it is in me." This is our awareness, our intuition, the beautiful riches that are there.

And this is from W.S. Merwin, who until recently was the poet laureate of this country, lives in Hawaii and is a beautifully spiritual person. In one of his early poems, he made this comment: "Now all my teachers are dead except silence."

Silence is always a teacher for us. Trust in the silence, listen in the silence, open in the silence.

I'll end with this quotation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the great American teachers and translators: "Liberation is the inevitable fruit of this path and is bound to blossom forth when there is steady and persistent practice. The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue. If these requirements are met, there is no doubt the goal will be attained. This is the Dhamma, the undeviating law."

So you've started. All you have to do is continue.

At the end of our talks during this retreat, we like to just have a minute or so of quiet to let the words settle. So this evening, we'd like to sit together for a few moments in quiet.

[Silent pause]

The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue. This is the Dhamma, the undeviating law.

Thank you for your attention on this first night—not the easiest time to pay attention. We have forty-five minutes now for walking meditation on the schedule. The last sit will be at 9:15, and we'll begin with a period of chanting that James is going to lead. I really encourage you to come to it. James promises it won't be as long as it says on the schedule tonight, so you can come, learn the chant, and you won't have to stay until ten o'clock. If you have some energy, I hope you'll come give a listen. It's a beautiful and uplifting chant.

So lovely to see you here. Thank you for your apple picking and other good work this afternoon. I hope you enjoyed connecting with one another. We look forward to seeing you in the morning. Please rest well.

CHAPTER 43

Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses one of the Buddha's core teachings: understanding suffering fully. He focuses on the second type of dukkha we encounter in meditation—emotional pain or mental suffering—drawing from the third foundation of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), cittānupassanā (mindfulness of mind).*
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> *Armstrong explains that while the Buddha taught about suffering and its cessation, on retreat our suffering simplifies into three main categories: physical pain, emotional pain, and meditative frustration. He explores the "84,000 afflictive emotions" described in Mahāyāna teachings, showing how these states are connected to time and our relationship with pleasure and pain. Using a framework of past/future and pleasant/unpleasant, he identifies four primary emotional patterns: grief (pleasant past), anger (painful past), desire (pleasant future), and fear (painful future).*
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> *For each difficult emotion, Armstrong teaches a three-part approach: recognizing bodily sensations, understanding the mental mood or flavor, and identifying the underlying storyline or belief that sustains the emotion. He emphasizes that naming these states—simply recognizing "this is anger" or "this is fear"—can be transformative, as research shows this alone helps with emotional regulation. The talk includes practical guidance on developing an allowing attitude toward difficult emotions, understanding their impermanent nature according to the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa), and finding freedom through mindful relationship rather than elimination.*

The Buddha said often that his teaching was only about two things: suffering and the end of suffering. In regard to the first, he said that our job is to understand it—to understand it fully.

When we consider this in the context of our daily life, this task can seem complicated, unending, a little overwhelming. We look around at our friends and family and may feel something similar because we may have people in all sorts of different difficulties and life situations. We ourselves may have been in very difficult life situations.

It's not uncommon that we have a friend who has become addicted to drugs, or one of our children, and we don't know how to reach them to move them out of that. Or we may be bringing up a family and lose our job, and our home becomes in jeopardy with all the foreclosures that are happening. That situation seems overwhelming.

We may find as we look around society that there are different currents that seem unworkable. The political polarization happening in this country and around the world today seems almost insoluble. The difficulties of violence in all its forms—racism and injustice and the suffering of poverty all around the world. What do we do? How do we understand that? It's very difficult.

But when we come on retreat, the situation becomes simpler and the suffering becomes workable. This is one of the beauties of life in retreat because we can leave behind some of that complexity.

As I come into retreat, suffering comes down to basically three things. One is physical pain. I'm sure you all have experienced that, felt that, know that meditation isn't able to solve it in all cases, but it can help us learn to relate to it. So a very frequent source of suffering in retreat is our reaction to physical pain. This is a good learning ground because it will be with us in our life as well.

The second kind of suffering is emotional pain or mental pain. There are so many different varieties here: qualities like desire and wanting, longing, yearning, hatred, aggression, despair, depression, jealousy, loneliness, envy, pride, sadness, grief, sorrow, embarrassment, shame, guilt, confusion. There are more, right? We're vulnerable, aren't we? And we all know all of these.

In the Mahayana teachings, these are described as afflictive emotions. That's a nice term because when these states assail us, we are afflicted by them. We suffer on account of them. They cause us pain. In the Mahayana descriptions, there are said to be 84,000 of these states. But those texts were written 2,000 years ago, and life has gotten a lot more complicated since then—there must be at least twice that many now.

All these different forms of emotional pain come to us in our daily life and also here while we're on retreat. For most of us, I think these are the most common and probably intense forms of our personal suffering—the different kinds of emotions that visit us. This is really what I want to talk about: how to work with these difficult and afflictive emotions, sources of so much pain in our life here and outside.

Then there's a third kind of suffering that we have as meditators that normal people in daily life don't have. We're very privileged, you could say, to have this third kind of pain, and that is the pain of meditative frustration. We sit down, we direct the mind to

be present, we pick up our anchor. Does it stay there? No, of course not. So it wanders off. When it comes back, we often feel some degree of disappointment, discouragement, frustration, anger, self-judgment—all those things that we are subject to because we've taken a meditative path.

If you were to go ask the person on the street, "Did your mind wander much today?" First, they wouldn't know what you were talking about, and second, if you explained it to them, they really wouldn't care. So as meditators, we have this third kind of high-class suffering, which is the suffering of the wandering mind.

But it's primarily the difficult emotions that assail us that are most of the suffering in our human life. So that's what I want to talk about.

The beautiful thing about mindfulness practice is that it gives us very immediate tools to begin to relate to these states. In the long run, the promise is that they can be uprooted through the different stages of awakening and be completely removed from the mind.

The Buddha said that they are cut off like a palm stump, no longer subject to future arising. But that is a very high level of attainment. And if you aren't an arhat yet, you wouldn't be familiar with that. I'm not familiar with that.

So for us, for a long time in our spiritual practice, we're not going to be rid of these states. I used to think that was really disappointing. When I began meditation, I thought, "I'll clear this up in a few years." It didn't work that way for me. But you never know. I'm not saying what's going to happen for you. You never know.

I had to take a different approach, which was to learn how to find some freedom in relation to these states when they came. That is possible. It is possible for all of us and all of you who have this level of commitment to find that through the practice of mindfulness and its supporting factors. So this is what I want to talk about tonight—how we develop that kind of freedom in relationship to these difficulties.

As we explore the range of mind through meditation, we find out we don't really have to be afraid of what we're going to find there. When I came into meditation, I really was afraid of my emotions and the range of them. But just having observed them and survived them for many years, most of that fear has gone away, and this is possible for all of us.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. So this is part of our project here on retreat, part of the work of each one of us. The more fully we're able to take it up, the more freedom will unfold within our experience, even before we're enlightened. There's a great deal of freedom available even before that effect of enlightenment.

This area, in working with mind states, traditionally comes under what's called the third foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the mindfulness of mind. The word that's used for mind, the Pali word, is *citta*. It's spelled C-I-T-T-A, and it's pronounced "citta." So this is the realm of *cittanupassana*, mindfulness of mind.

To be sure we're on the same page, this word *citta* doesn't refer to mind as just the thinking mind, but it refers to mind as the thinking and feeling mind both. One word in Pali refers to what we might call heart and mind. So we're talking about the emotions as well as the thought process when we use this word *citta*.

Sometimes we'll call it heart-mind, and sometimes we'll talk about getting in touch with our heart. Sometimes we'll just use the word mind. Tonight I'll probably mostly just use the word mind, but I want you all to be clear I'm talking about heart and mind, emotions and thoughts together. I'm not separating them. The Buddha didn't separate them so much.

This is understood in Asian countries as well. If you go to a Buddhist country and you ask a person where their mind is, they tend to point to the center of their chest. If you ask someone in the West, "Where's your mind?" they'll normally point to the head. That's not true in Asian countries. They'll point to the center of the chest.

There's a nice little story about this. You know, there's been a lot of interest lately, a lot of research in neuroscience on the effects of meditation. And you don't need to have neuroscience to prove to you the effects of meditation because you know it firsthand. But in this culture, scientists really are the high priests. And there's a lot of the population that will only listen to something when the high priests say that it's actually true. So it's very helpful for getting the Dharma out to a wide audience that the scientists validate through their research the effects of meditation that you know for yourselves firsthand.

One of the foremost researchers in this field is Dr. Richard Davidson, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He was really a pioneer of this whole field. What he may not tell his colleagues, but is true, is that he was a vipassana meditator before he was a neuroscience researcher. His motive for doing the science was to give this empirical validation of the effects of meditation that he already knew. There's a nice connection between him and this community. He's helped us on retreats here for scientists to introduce them to meditation.

Richie is the one who did the groundbreaking experiments with the Tibetan monks, where advanced practitioners would enter these MRI machines and they'd look at the activity of their brains and discover that they were kind of off the charts in areas like compassion and stillness and meditative states of concentration.

The Dalai Lama invited Richie to India, to his home in Dharamsala, to demonstrate some of this research to the Tibetan monastic community. It wasn't practical to transport an MRI machine—those things are bigger than a station wagon. Instead, Richie brought scaled-down scientific equipment consisting of a leather cap fitted with rows of electrodes. The electrodes touch the scalp at many different points, connected by wires that trail from the back of the cap down to a computer. As subjects perform different tasks, the triggered brain activity is recorded by the electrodes, which roughly map what areas of the brain are being stimulated. The computer then analyzes these signals in relation to the tasks being performed—a poor man's MRI, you might say.

This was the equipment Richie brought to Dharamsala. His Holiness was on stage, Richie was on stage, and five hundred Tibetan monks filled the audience. Richie wore the cap while explaining how they were trying to measure mind activity by recording electrical signals in the brain. When he finished his lecture and removed the cap, all the monks burst out laughing.

Richie was certain they were laughing because he looked silly in this black leather cap with dozens of trailing wires. But that wasn't why. One monk explained their laughter: "You're trying to measure the mind by putting the cap here," he said, pointing to his head, "when everybody knows the mind is located here," pointing to his heart. They found it absolutely hilarious that these scientists were missing the boat entirely.

This is fascinating. In the Buddhist tradition, the seat of consciousness is generally understood to be in the heart center. This gives us an interesting way to hold our thoughts—they're not necessarily just originating in the head, but something more profound is happening at the heart. This is the sense of *citta*. It encompasses both heart and mind activity, and this is the area of the third foundation.

The best translation for *citta* is actually "psyche." Psyche also carries that sense of moods as well as thoughts, though it's a bit cumbersome, so we'll generally use "mind."

If there are 84,000 afflictive emotions that we uncover through meditation, I believe there are also 84,000 beautiful emotions. We'll explore these in much greater detail as the retreat progresses. Usually in the early days, the difficult emotions are more obvious, so we'll start by addressing the difficulties as they unfold. Later, we'll go much deeper into the beautiful states.

To develop greater freedom in relation to these emotions, two shifts are needed. The first is a shift in attitude. We touched on this the first night by discussing the quality of allowing. This is the attitude shift we truly need regarding our difficult emotions.

When people first come to retreat, they really don't want these emotions. That was certainly my experience. I didn't come to meditation to experience anger, fear, and desire. I came to find peace and love. But this is part of what comes as we deepen. All these states move through us. We need to become familiar with them, so we must open to them. We must allow them. If we have the sense that they shouldn't be there, we'll always be in conflict with them.

This is an important question to examine as you begin touching these difficult emotions: Is there an attitude of accepting that it's okay for them to be there? This is really important.

The second piece is developing greater understanding of them. We need to understand their nature—not only their individual nature (how anger feels, how disappointment feels, how depression feels), but also their universal nature. Like all conditioned things, they're subject to the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

We begin to see that these three characteristics apply to our emotions just as they do to every phenomenon that arises. The impermanence lets us know they won't stay forever. This is why it's safe to open to them. They come, and if we leave them alone, they'll also go. They're unsatisfactory—that's clear in this case. And they're also not who you are. They're not you, and they're not even yours.

They belong to the human heart-mind of which we are instances, but we are not unique owners of these emotions. The emotions are not unique to us—we all know these things. This is simply part of nature. Just as our bodies are part of nature and not all that different from one another, our heart and mind is part of nature, and we're not that different from each other. So we start to understand this about these emotions. We don't have to claim them as "I" or "mine."

In working with these states, I want to describe in greater detail how to engage with them. The first step is knowing what we're feeling. If we don't know that, it's very difficult to begin making a relationship. But this is not as easy as it sounds. We're not generally taught this in our culture. I didn't learn it from my parents, my school teachers, or my university professors. Nobody sat me down and said, "What are you feeling now? When this person said that to you, how did that make you feel? And when you felt like that, what emotions were connected?" I didn't have those kinds of dialogues across the dinner table at my parents' home. So I grew up really unaware of this inner landscape. It was only when I started to meditate that I realized I needed to learn what this was all about, because there was a whole world in there that I became fascinated with and wanted to understand, needed to understand.

I think one of the greatest gifts we could give the world would be to let children learn what their emotions are when they're still not afraid of them. You know how kids will just let anything rip through them? They don't hold back at all. They're open to feeling anything. If we can educate them at that point in their lives, they'll grow up with tremendous emotional intelligence.

One of the projects I'm really excited about is based in Oakland and called Mindful Schools. Some Vipassana meditators have created an organization dedicated to taking mindfulness training into public and private schools. They've now trained over a thousand people to go in and teach. In some cases, they've received grants to do the work. In others, they've gotten funding from the schools because it has real benefits for the children. They've been successful in teaching in elementary schools and middle schools—ages roughly ten to fifteen.

This is wonderful. One of the teachers goes in and the students love to see her coming. They call her Miss Mindfulness. "Oh good, Miss Mindfulness is coming today!" At the end of the training, when asked what they appreciated about it and if they enjoyed it, one child said, "I love to be mindful because if I do it before I go to bed, I get really happy and I have wonderful night's sleep." Another said, "If I'm really mindful, I don't feel like hitting my little sister." So this is unfolding in a lovely way, and I think the potential here is great.

There's another school developing as well. One of our sangha members near Spirit Rock in Marin, California, has started what is essentially a dharma preschool because she found enough parents in the area who wanted their kids to grow up learning the dharma. She has twenty three- to five-year-olds, five mornings a week, and she teaches them dharma. She teaches them yoga and spiritual stories and some chanting, and finally a little bit of meditation. She's gotten them to love silence. They'll have their lunch

for thirty minutes, and twenty three-, four-, and five-year-olds will be quiet while they eat because they've come to love the process of just being present. It's kind of magic—it's hard to imagine kids that age being quiet that long.

One of the meditations she leads I particularly love. She'd come to the end of a yoga session and have them lie on their backs in corpse pose. You can't use words like mindfulness and awareness and attention—that's too abstract for them. So she leads them with imagery. She'd have them lie on their back, close their eyes, and she'd say, "Imagine a big lake. You're floating in a big lake. Through the lake are swimming all kinds of fishes. Just let all the fishes swim around. There might be a happy fish and a sad fish and a jealous fish and an angry fish and a loving fish."

You just let all the fishes swim through, but you're not any of them. You're the water. Let yourself be as wide as the water and just let all the fishes swim through. Whatever fish is coming, you just let it swim through.

After the meditation, she asked the kids to report. This four-year-old boy said, "It was pretty good. I could let all the fishes come, except I couldn't let the mad fish come."

She asked, "Well, why couldn't you let the mad fish come?"

He replied, "Well, when you don't know that you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt other people."

Four years old. It's beautiful. Kids are really ripe for this stuff—it's going right in there.

Knowing what we're feeling doesn't necessarily come so easily to us, but we can learn it. We can learn to tune in and understand that. As an example, I was doing a long retreat here one year—sitting the six weeks. I was a couple of weeks in, and so I was pretty present. I felt I was pretty concentrated. I had just finished a sitting in the hall, probably the 8:15 in the morning, and I was going outside for the walking period.

Every walking period in the first two weeks, I'd walk down on the grassy paths in Yogi Park. I'd walked in the same spot every day for two weeks. So I leave the meditation hall, and I'm pretty with it—stepping, lifting, moving, placing, going out the back of the hall, down the steps, lifting, moving, placing. I felt very present.

I looked down at Yogi Park. There was somebody in my walking path. I couldn't believe it. Lifting, moving, placing. What's he doing there? Doesn't he know I've walked there every period for two weeks? Lifting, moving, placing. Did I cut in front of him in

breakfast this morning? Is he playing some kind of head game with me? Lifting, moving, placing. He's not very sensitive. If he was sensitive, he would have known that was my spot. Lifting, moving, placing.

So I walked down to the grass. I found another patch of grass, which to my great surprise worked just as well. And so I was walking along and occasionally just cast him an evil glance. He just kept walking also.

It was about thirty minutes into the walking before I finally realized I'm angry. I had thought I was so mindful. I had really thought I was present with my steps, and I was missing the biggest thing that was happening to me. I was pissed off.

Once I recognized that, I could work with it. I could relate to it and I could release it. Until I saw that, I was just enmeshed in it, because I was believing the story I was telling myself. He was in my space, and he was wrong to be in my space, because it was my space. Once I could see that, I could let go of those thoughts and the story, and then the whole thing was over.

Next walking period, I beat him to it. So order was restored.

This showed me something fundamental about these afflictive states that come. They're propped up by what I'd call a storyline or some belief or view. Andrea alluded to this the other night in talking about releasing her anger. There was some belief I had that kept that anger in place, and the belief was: I was right and they were wrong.

There was no real reason that he shouldn't have walked there. My name was not on that patch of grass. IMS had not deeded me that strip. It was open for everybody. If I'd let go of that belief, I couldn't have sustained the anger. But when I did let go of it, the anger fell apart.

All these afflictive emotions have some kind of belief underpinning them that supports them. That's what I call the storyline, and we'll come back to that. One way to release the afflictive emotion is to give up the storyline.

What was happening to me in that walking meditation—I was fairly mindful, but the anger came in like a low-flying aircraft that slips beneath our radar. I didn't have the radar up in the emotional terrain. I had it up in the physical domain, but it slipped into the emotions without my seeing it. As long as I couldn't name it, I was just caught in it. Naming it, recognizing that it's present, is a really important first step for beginning to make a good relationship with it.

One way to think about this is that when these states come, we need to shift where our attention's pointing. My attention was pointing at the person in my walking path, and as long as it was pointed there, I was caught in my reaction. I had to turn the attention to look at what I was feeling, and then there was the potential to release it.

So you could say that these hindrances—I think this is true, but I'm not going to state it categorically, you can play with it—hindrances are a result of misplaced attention. We direct the attention outside to the situation instead of inside to what we're feeling, and that's what gives rise to and sustains these states. When we can name what's happening, that's a recognition that we've turned the attention inwardly, and that's when we can start to work.

In conversations with scientists who are doing research, I heard of one study where they were investigating different ways to work with anger in people in daily life who had a problem with anger management. They were looking at different kinds of intervention for people who had trouble acting out their anger. One of the methods that they tried with them was to just get them to name anger when they noticed they were feeling it. That's all they had to do. They didn't have to try and be mindful of it. They didn't have to try to put an antidote in place. They didn't have to do anything else. Just name it. And that proved to be one of the most effective interventions that they worked with.

This power of naming is part of the mindfulness practice. It's like the noting. But with difficult emotions, it's so important because it shows there's not only anger there, there's also some kind of awareness that knows it. We're not just angry, we're also knowing it. And that knowing is a little bit of wisdom. So now all of a sudden there's not just anger, there's anger and awareness and wisdom. The odds start to tilt in our favor at that point.

There are a few states of mind in particular that I see a lot in my own practice and in meditators that I want to focus in on this evening. I want to suggest that afflictive emotions are bound up with time in a way that the beautiful emotions aren't. With a beautiful emotion like love or joy, it can just arise spontaneously in a moment. You walk in, you see somebody, you feel a surge of loving kindness. Beautiful. Walk out the door, the sun is setting, there's this beautiful pink-red streak across the sky, joy comes up. Or you see someone with a little sadness in their face or a few tears in the meditation hall, compassion comes through right in the moment.

But for an afflictive emotion to be sustained and for it to cause suffering, it needs to be sustained. It depends on time. We have to get involved in time to keep these things going. That's one of the features. The other feature that difficult emotions revolve around is pleasure and pain. As human beings, we are subject to ever-changing flows of

pleasure and pain in our normal experience. Andrea gave the instruction this morning on feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We'll leave the neutral out of this discussion. But this changing flow of pleasant and painful is just part of our human condition, and it's around these strong experiences that the difficult emotions come.

So if you enjoyed eighth grade algebra, I'm going to take you right back. I'm going to suggest we have a horizontal axis, which is time, going from past to future. And we're going to have a vertical axis that's about pleasure and pain, going from painful up to pleasant.

This divides our territory for the afflictive emotions into four quadrants. Let me ask you: what are the emotions connected with those four quadrants?

Let's start with past and pleasant—this quadrant up here. Something that was in the past means it's not here now. Very pleasant, but it's gone. What's the emotion connected with that? Loss, nostalgia, sadness, grief. That's where loss and grief come from. It was beautiful in the past, but we don't have it anymore. It could be a relationship, it could be a loved one, it could be someplace we lived, even some beautiful experience. We feel sad at the loss of that—its pastness, its gone-ness.

What about painful in the past—and I'm going to restrict it a little bit—connected with another human being? What's the emotion that tends to arise around that recollection? Could be guilt. But there's a stronger one, which is anger. If someone has hurt us, caused us pain in the past, then the emotion that constellates around that memory is anger. Guilt would be if we had caused pain to someone else, so guilt is in that family also. Shame as well. Let's say anger is often the strongest or hardest of those.

Let's go to the future scale. Something pleasant that's out in time in the future—what's the emotion? Craving, desire, wanting, hoping. That's pleasant in the future and we can get very bound up in that as well.

What about unpleasant in the future? Fear, dread.

This came through to me just a few weeks ago when I had to make a presentation at the Marin County Board of Supervisors. Spirit Rock was putting forth a new master plan with building plans, wanting to increase the number of people who could use our facility. So I had to make the main presentation to the Board of Supervisors where we were seeking approval.

For about two weeks before that presentation, I had this sense of dread about it. It kind of surprised me because I don't mind speaking in public so much, and it was fairly short. But there was something about the responsibility that felt like a burden. There

are sometimes hostile people in the public hearing phase of a proposal who will attack one, and the people I was talking to were not people I knew. All of that contributed to just this sense of dread about going and giving the presentation.

But even though I dreaded it, I didn't mind the dread. I would rather not have had to do the presentation, but I didn't mind the fact that I dreaded it. So it was okay. And in the end, the presentation went fine—Spirit Rock got approved. So we're moving forward with building plans as we speak.

So these are the four what I would call primal emotions that we often feel: sadness or grief, anger, desire, and fear. These are the ones that I hear again and again. One variation of anger is when it's directed against ourselves—it comes as self-judgment. We become disappointed and blame ourselves, and that's where self-judgment comes in. So these are the five big ones that we hear a lot, and shame and guilt are also significant for people.

As we explore these states—and I want to go through these four or five tonight—I want to look at three facets of them. If they're strong, they'll be felt in the body. So in coming to relate to one of these emotions, the first place to look is: how does it feel in the body? This is a good place to ground the attention because it's usually a very concrete object and easy to find.

The next one is to look at the mood that's in the mind—there's a coloring or a flavor that's a mental piece. You know how joy feels different than sadness.

Fear feels different than hope. There's a mood that each of these have. So we want to get familiar with it. It's kind of a taste. Each has a unique taste or flavor. And that's a mental component. That's of the mind, not of the body.

And the third thing is: what's the storyline? The belief or thought or view that props the emotion up, which if we didn't believe it, the emotion couldn't continue.

So I'll talk about these four or five emotions and how these components reveal themselves.

First, let's look at desire or wanting. This is wanting a pleasant experience. It comes up often in retreat, especially in the early part. The desire is often about things we've left behind. We want something from home that isn't here—a person, a food, a comfy chair, a TV, a movie, a record, something like that. We find our fantasies going there, sometimes quite a lot, especially in the early phase of a retreat.

Tune in when it comes. Tune into the energy of this wanting because there's something nice about it. The nice is that pleasant experience. We don't have it. In fact, the environment here is pretty austere. The time between pleasant experiences is sometimes rather large, like one lunch to the next. So pleasure becomes kind of a big deal. It's very understandable that if it's not there, the mind will bring it in—will bring in something pleasant. And it's like comforting ourselves by thinking of something pleasant.

So notice that there's a pleasant quality to these desires that's a little bit comforting. But is it satisfying? And this is the other side of desire. There's always something a little frustrating in wanting because we don't have the thing. There's a separation from the thing we want. The image of it isn't the same as the thing, and it doesn't satisfy us in the same way.

So that's the kind of bittersweet nature of desire. There's something pleasant, and also there's some frustration involved in it. It's not as satisfying as the present moment, but that's one of the things we have to learn about it.

And this frustrating quality is intrinsic in desire because we never want what we already have. Have you noticed? Do you ever want a hand at the end of your arm? That doesn't really come up, does it? But if you didn't have it, you'd really miss it. But we never want that because we have it.

Some years ago I was teaching a retreat in Italy and this question of desire came to the fore. A young man came in early on in the retreat for an interview. And I really loved the interviews with the Italian yogis because they had this kind of fluency with their emotions that I didn't have before I started meditating. They tended to know what they were feeling and were very comfortable with it, able to talk about it and report it quite easily. It's a little bit the stereotype of the Italian character, but I found it true in the meditative setting. So it was a delight to talk with them.

So this young guy comes in, and I asked him how he was settling in. He said, "I'm not doing very well. I don't think I really want to be here."

I said, "Well, what's going on? What comes up?"

He said, "Well, I think I'd rather be somewhere else."

I said, "Well, why are you here?"

And he said, "Well, this is August. It's our holiday time. And my friends asked me to go on a trip with them to the Caribbean, or I could come to this meditation retreat."

I said, "Okay, why did you come here?"

And he said, "All the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So I came here.

So I get it. We're the consolation prize.

He said, "Yeah, and I just keep thinking about my friends there and the beautiful beaches and the blue waters and the sunshine. I just don't really want to be here."

So what we talked about was this nature of desire—how maybe it's not the absence of the Caribbean that's the problem, it's the wanting for the Caribbean that's the problem. And if you could let go of these images of the sand and the water and the sun and just be here, maybe it would be okay here. So try that. See if that would be all right.

I didn't see him again for a couple of days, but by the next interview he came again, we spoke, and he was totally fine. He'd been able to let go of the desire, and then he'd really landed, and it was great.

So when desire is an obstacle, it's sometimes helpful to remember it's not the absence of the object that's the problem. It's the wanting for it. And that's one way of releasing. Because the storyline is something like: "If I had that, I'd be happy." Then we keep telling ourselves that storyline. The corollary is: "I can't be happy because I don't have it." If we let go of the object and we don't have the storyline, then maybe we can be happy. That's the lesson with desire.

After we've been here for a while, the desire force gets tuned more toward things in the retreat, and especially it gets tuned around meditative experience. So we find ourselves really wanting that sitting that was calm and collected, or the one where the body didn't hurt, or the walking meditation where we had unlimited loving-kindness for all sentient beings everywhere. And those are the things that desire forms around.

Sometimes it's hard to pick up because it's so much a part of the fabric of our life. So we come and sit and we're in some kind of conflict, but it's sometimes hard to know what it is. With desire, I look for a kind of leaning forward tension, like I'm moving towards something. And that's that kind of future pull towards something. Sometimes I don't even know what it is. But I'll feel like this pull out of the moment, which is different than that settled back feeling. And that will clue me in. There's some kind of wanting, moving forward, leaning into, going on.

Then I'll look at my thoughts. And I'll say, "Well, what have I been thinking about?" Oh, I was thinking about a concentrated sitting. And then I'll realize, "Oh, I'm wanting concentration." And then it's easier to really—oh, just here now. Just come into this moment.

Anger is one of the difficult forces to work with. Andrea talked about this quite a bit the other night. I won't go over it a lot. But as you feel anger, generally connected to some episode in the past, notice first how it feels in the body. Often with anger, there's a strong sensation of tension, contraction, kind of burning. It's often a fiery quality in the mind and can be really unpleasant.

I was doing a metta retreat here one year, a six-week metta retreat, and my difficult person was on the retreat with me. So our paths would often cross during the day. When I'd cross paths with them, I'd start going: "Just think about what they did this past year." We had had different kinds of conflict over the year. "Just think about the way they behaved." And I'd start getting stirred up, and I'd get angry, and I'd go back to my room and sit, and I'd be angry for like twenty minutes, thirty minutes. It sort of moved through, and then I'd get back to the metta: "May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful."

Then we'd cross paths again. "I can't believe they acted that way." And then I'd go to sit, and I'd be stirred up. As I was getting more sensitive and more open with the metta, my body was really open and my mind was really bright. And then this anger would come in and I just felt the contraction so strongly—it was so painful. I felt like my body was being held by these vice grips. Finally it just became so unpleasant.

I would do anything to get out of it. "How do I get out of this?"

So I started looking at those blaming thoughts. The storyline with anger is basically: "I'm right and you're wrong." And every time we think another thought and believe it, we throw another log on the fire. So I kept building the fire up hotter and hotter, and I kept suffering from it. When I could stop the blaming thoughts, the fire went away—died down, went away.

So the only thing that could persuade me to let go of the blaming thoughts was the pain I was in from the anger. So look closely when anger is there, how it feels. It's not pleasant. In the texts, it's compared to someone picking up a hot coal to throw it at another person. But of course, before you can throw it, you have to pick it up and then you burn yourself. It's also compared in the texts to drinking poison and hoping the other person falls ill. Often the other person doesn't even know you're upset, right? It's just hurting you.

Of course, sometimes this storyline of "I'm right and you're wrong"—sometimes it's true. And those are the hardest ones to let go of. Sometimes it's really clear somebody has done something unskillful and really has hurt us in an unkind way.

So I'll tell you this little story from the Dalai Lama. He left Tibet in 1959 to escape to India. At the time that he left, he had known a monk in one of the monasteries, and he judged the monk to be a rather average practitioner. Then he escaped to India in '59, established his center in Dharamsala. About twenty-five years later, this monk escaped after being in prison for many years. He escaped to India, and as many of the escaped Tibetans do, he managed to see the Dalai Lama very soon after he arrived. The Dalai Lama loves to welcome the Tibetans who have gotten out of their country to India.

So he met with the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama, of course, was very concerned for him and said, "Well, I heard that you were in prison for twenty years." The Dalai Lama was worried that he may have been tortured—at least he wasn't killed. But terrible things happen in those prisons. So he said, "How did you fare?"

And the monk said, "Well, I often felt that I was in danger."

The Dalai Lama said, "Do you mean you were worried about being tortured?"

And the monk said, "Oh, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I was in danger of becoming angry." He said, "But I didn't."

Imprisoned for twenty years, tortured often, didn't generate anger. The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of the monk's practice. That's an awesome level of practice. It's not something I feel capable of, but it points us to a human potential. And so maybe when somebody cuts in front of us on the freeway, we can sort of remember that as an inspiration. We may be right that they were wrong, but maybe we can let go of our anger.

This quality of self-judgment—James talked a lot about this the other night, so I'm not going to talk about that tonight. Just to say that it comes up frequently for people on retreat, and the tools of mindfulness and especially loving-kindness can be really transformative in working with this quality. So if this is up for you, please talk to your teachers about it. There are lots of great ways to work with it, and it can make our whole level of self-trust and self-confidence entirely different. So it's a great one to work with.

Sadness or grief—another of the difficult primal emotions arising out of a sense of loss. Often the feeling in the body is a kind of heaviness, and the tone in the mind is kind of dark and burdensome. And the belief, the storyline, is something like: "I can't be happy because I've lost this. I can't be happy because of the loss." And if we keep believing that, that perpetuates the sense of burden or weight that's in the mind.

But sometimes opening to sadness is difficult because we might feel like it's so big. It might be carrying a lifetime of disappointments that we haven't ever really been able to open to or let ourselves feel. And there's the worry: "If I open to this, I'm going to drown under it. I'm going to get lost in it. I'll never make my way out."

But that's just another belief. That's just another thought. And with sadness, as with anything else, we just need to open little by little and feel it. As we open to feel it, every time we contact it with mindful attention, it releases a little bit of the weight of it. It's really the bringing into consciousness, touching it with awareness, letting go, that starts to allow these emotions to move through. And this is how grief and loss get processed also.

Finally, with fear. I love to talk about fear because it was my main hindrance for the early years of my practice, and I worked with it a lot. One of the breakthroughs for me was when one of my teachers, I think it was Joseph, said in a talk that in order to begin to develop this allowing attitude with fear, we needed to open to the body sensations that came with it.

So I'd had fear come up a lot. Every time it came, I hated it. I didn't want anything to do with it. And it made me more afraid. I was really afraid to feel my fear. So I couldn't move to open to the whole thing at all. But my teacher said, open to the body sensations and see if you can allow and bear those. I started to feel those. I started to feel the contraction in the stomach, the kind of fluttery energy, the lack of grounding that came up into the chest and the head, that shakiness that goes with fear. I asked myself, can I bear this?

Then I learned something kind of interesting. The storyline in fear is that this moment may be bearable, but in the next moment it's not going to be. Something disastrous is about to happen, so be on your guard because you may be okay now, but you're not going to be for long. Watch out. That's where that vigilance comes from. If you've carried fear for a while, there's a vigilance about, I can't trust the world. It's not safe.

That part of the vigilance really came through to me one evening. I was meditating in England. I was sitting a long retreat in England. I was doing standing meditation before the Dharma talk. It was one of these really incredibly beautiful soft summer evenings where it had been a warm day and the warmth of the day was still in the air. I was standing out by an apple tree in the back. It was full of leaves and the apples were growing and the doves were calling in the distance. There was just this soft twilight.

I was standing with my eyes closed and I was in this pattern of fear. Wow, everything's so scary. My body's scary, my mind's scary. And then I opened my eyes and I opened my ears and I tuned into that incredibly beautiful and gentle and nourishing English summer twilight. I just went, wow, it's really a scary world, isn't it? And it was so clear the whole thing was just a projection of my mind. The world wasn't threatening. It was beautiful and supportive.

So there's a storyline that we create that's gotten embedded somewhere. Something disastrous is going to happen. But if we can come back into the present and feel the sensations as a starting point, we find we can bear those. Then I could open and feel that quality in the mind, the mood that's fear. That was harder. Because the essence of fear is run away from. Run away from it. And so it wanted to run away from the feeling of fear. So it was very hard for me to bring mindfulness to touch the emotion of fear directly. But then finally I could do that. And then that became bearable.

So the whole experience became okay, but I also wanted to get out of it as soon as I could. And then my teacher said something else. He said, if you really accept it, it would be okay if this fear was with you for the rest of your life. So I had to ask myself that question. And that kind of became the acid test.

Would it be OK if this fear was here for the rest of my life? And the answer was obvious. Hell no. No way. I couldn't take that.

And so I asked myself, well, why? Why couldn't I allow that? And I thought, I could never listen to music the same again if I was always scared. I could never have this kind of merging experience with a sunset if I was scared. I could never fall in love again if I was scared. So I'm not going to give those things up. And I didn't. So I kept clashing with fear. I couldn't really accept it that deeply.

And finally, it wore me out. The fighting with it wore me out. And I thought, I can either find peace now, or I can cling to these hopes of future gratification. Which would I rather have? And finally, I wanted peace now. And I said, OK, if this lasts the rest of my life, it's all right.

And when I opened to it that fully, something in the power of fear just started to drain out of my mind. And it lost some kind of grip over me. Some kind of obsessive relationship went out of my relationship with fear. Fear has come again many times, but it's never had that kind of grip in my mind because I learned how to be with it so fully with so much equanimity. I really didn't care if it arose or not. I really didn't care. It didn't matter to me one way or another.

And so if you develop this kind of relationship with your main hindrance, whichever one it is, you'll learn a lot about how to open to all the hindrances and the kind of freedom that's available through that. So you don't have to go through such a struggle with every one, but by learning from one, you'll find out how to relate to all of them. And then a great deal of freedom opens up in the mind because we're not afraid of our emotions so much anymore. We find that space that lets them all come and go.

So I want to close with a poem from Rilke, the German poet, from a small book of his called The Book of Hours. And a little bit of setup to this: Rilke was in a very religious phase in his early 20s, and this book came out of that period. And so this is about an image where, as each of us is created by God, God gives us a little pep talk before he launches us into this human life. So this is the pep talk.

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now give me your hand.

So let's just sit for a minute together, please.

Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 44

Five Aggregates: Self and Emptiness

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong builds upon previous teachings on the five aggregates (pañca-khandhā) to explore two fundamental aspects of emptiness in Buddhist understanding. Drawing from the Anattalakkhana Sutta and other core teachings, he examines how the aggregates of form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa) reveal the absence of any permanent, unchanging self.*
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> *Armstrong guides practitioners through the Buddha's classical inquiry: investigating whether any of the aggregates can be considered "mine," "I am," or "myself" when all are impermanent and subject to change. He shares the teaching given to Bāhiya Dārucīriya about experiencing phenomena without adding the fabrication of self—"in the seen, let there be just the seen"—and explores how clinging to the aggregates gives rise to the illusion of selfhood.*
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> *The talk also addresses the second aspect of emptiness: the insubstantial nature of sensory experience itself. Using the Buddha's Foam Sutta (Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta, SN 22.95), Armstrong illustrates how all phenomena are like foam, bubbles, mirages—appearing solid but lacking substantial existence when examined closely. This understanding, he explains, leads not to nihilism but to greater compassion and freedom, as we recognize our shared condition of living within this "magical display" of consciousness.*

Andrea talked a couple of nights ago about the five aggregates, and I want to pick up that theme and explore it a little further. It can be, in our meditation, the basis for a lot of great insight. She explained very well the basic concepts and how to work with them in our practice. I just want to extend it a little bit more tonight to talk about opening this scheme for greater insight.

I'm going to talk about insights in two directions, both of which have to do with the quality of emptiness. In the Buddhist tradition, emptiness tends to get talked about in two ways. One, that our overall experience is empty of self. And the second, that the nature of sense experience is insubstantial. So I'm going to try to cover both of those tonight.

In talking about this sense of self or I, we start to realize that this question about I or self is really at the center of what the Buddha taught about. It was a unique contribution that he made to the whole meditative journey and really the history of philosophy. So a big encouragement is to examine this sense of I, because when we don't examine it, it gets us in a lot of suffering.

I would say one way of understanding the Buddha's teachings is that this unexamined sense of I is one of our biggest misunderstandings in life. The actual truth of things is a lot lighter than we imagine it to be. When we carry around this sense of self, we put an unnecessary burden on our experience of life. The experience of life as we see clearly becomes much easier, lighter, and more joyful. This is not an intellectual question so much as a way to free the heart and mind.

The sense of I tends to be at the center of our whole universe. You could say that our whole life revolves around it—our thoughts, our words, our actions, our values, our associations, our directions, our motives. It all comes out of this sense of I. And this sense of I seems like the most obvious fact in the world at first. It seems totally self-evident. Why should we have to question it?

But it's very curious. You've been examining your experience really carefully for two weeks. Have you located the I yet? Have you ever kind of looked inside and said, "Well, where is it? It's here all the time. It must be somewhere. I must be able to find it." Have you found that I? It's really curious, isn't it?

The Dalai Lama said that when we are sure something exists, but we can't find it when we turn to it, that's a sure sign of delusion. So that's basically where we start from with this question of I. There's a sense of delusion or confusion about it.

The classical analogy is to walking through the grass and believing that we see a snake. We become very startled and afraid. But when we look more closely, we see that it's not a snake at all. It's a piece of rope with different colors—maybe white and green and red—but they're intertwined in such a way, with such a length, we thought it was a snake. When we see that it's a piece of rope, we're not afraid anymore.

In the same way, when we examine our experience with the sense of I, it's kind of scary and burdensome. But the Buddha said when we investigate it correctly and we can see things as they really are, that sense of fear and burden and dis-ease goes away for us. This is the motivation to understand this sense.

We can see some of the confusion by the language that we use around I. So let me ask you a simple question: How tall are you? This is not a trick question. I assume everybody knows the answer. This is a common question we hear every day. I would answer it and say, "I'm 5'10"." You might have your own measurement in feet and inches or in centimeters if you're from Europe.

But this is a very easy question for us to answer. Yet when we say, "I'm 5'10"," what we're really talking about is the body, right? The body's 5'10". It's not the thoughts that are 5'10". It's not my joy or anxiety that's 5'10". It's not my feeling tone that's 5'10". It's the body.

So here we're using "I" to mean the body. The "I" is completely identified with the body: "I am 5'10"." Oh, really?

Well, let me ask another question: What color are your eyes? That's easy too, right? This is not a trick either. So I'd say my eyes are brown. So here we're not the body, but we're someone separate from the body who owns eyes that are a part of the body. They're *my* eyes. So we've moved from being the body to being the one who owns the body. That's a little odd, isn't it?

So which are you? Are you the body or are you the owner? And can you really be both? Is that logically consistent? How many selves do you have?

We can do the same thing with the mind. Sometimes we'll say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." So here we're identifying with an emotion, or let's say with the mind. I am the emotion of happiness or sadness. Other times we'll talk about my joys and my sorrows, my hopes and my fears. So now we're someone apart from the emotions who has them, who owns them. So are you the body or the owner of it? The emotions or the owner of them?

Or there's one other really familiar sense, which is that it feels like we're somewhere behind the eyes, like maybe in the center of the mass of brain, and we're kind of looking out. I am looking out on the world, and everything happens to me, who am the observer. I'm the center of it all, I experience it all, and that's what I really am. It's like there's a command and control center somewhere up here. We're that observer and director of everything.

These are five different ways that we think we're the "I," and there are more. The Buddha enumerated twenty, but that's another talk. So there are at least five and maybe more. They're all delusion. Every single one of them is delusion.

The Buddha put it this way, and he said this a few times—he didn't just say it once: "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." And one of my teachers put it even more crisply than this. He said, "Everything you think is wrong."

It reminds me of a great phrase that somebody heard on a talk radio show. It's an unusual source of wisdom, but a yogi told me he heard this on a talk radio show where the announcer was commenting on the mind. There are a lot of opinions that go back and forth in talk radio, so maybe this is the right place for a comment like this. The commentator said, "The mind: often wrong, seldom in doubt." It's kind of like that, isn't it? We hold lots of opinions and beliefs and we seldom really question them. It feels like they should be true.

The Buddha said that the "I" is basically a fiction. Until we examine it clearly, we won't be able to see through it. When we are bound by it, then it creates a lot of unnecessary suffering in our lives.

So this concept of "I" has kind of entranced us. The whole world, the whole human world is roped in by it. And then it sings—we listen to that tune, we're kind of caught in that tune, and that tune has three main chords: greed, aversion, delusion. These are all the activities of the "I."

So undoing this misunderstanding is the central work of insight meditation. Spring talked last night about the truth of impermanence and how many ways that affects our lives, on how many levels we can see that truth.

This teaching on impermanence is closely tied to the teaching on self. The more we see clearly the truth of impermanence on all its levels, the more we understand how this self does or doesn't exist.

One way to approach this is to look around the room. Most likely we see people. I'm suggesting that as you look around, you notice persons—there's a person over there, there's a person over there, there's a person in the back. Most likely we see persons.

But in the Visuddhimagga, an ancient commentary, the author says that if you look and see a person, you're not seeing very clearly. Put another way, one who sees a person hasn't investigated deeply enough.

The commentary offers the analogy of a butcher. If you're a skilled butcher who's been working for twenty years and you have the carcass of a cow on your table, as you're chopping it up, you don't say "cow, cow, cow." A skilled butcher wouldn't do that. A skilled butcher knows more intimate detail—rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs.

So one who wants to investigate one's own body and mind needs to see more clearly than this tag "person." We need to examine that assumption.

We might ask, well, how did the Buddha see? I think the Buddha saw in two different ways when he looked at a person.

Sometimes he saw the six sense bases—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. We've talked about this framework extensively. It provides the structure our meditation instructions are based around, so it's very comfortable for us. It's becoming more and more familiar, and this is a good way of understanding what constitutes human experience, what makes up a person. Most often, the Buddha used this format of the six sense bases to cut through craving, because we attach to things based on their pleasant nature at a sense door. So if you want to cut through craving, look at the six sense bases. This is very skillful.

But the other scheme he used—and I'd say he used it just as often—was the scheme that Andrea presented the other night: the five aggregates. Understanding our experience in terms of material form, feeling tone, perception, formations, and consciousness. He used this scheme for a different purpose. He used this scheme to cut through wrong view—that is, delusion about the way we're made up.

This goes to the heart of the two ways that we're bound. Craving is the affective manifestation of our bondage—this constant lure of attractive sense objects. It's how we get pulled off center again and again, either through desire or through aversion. The not seeing clearly is the delusion part. So that's one thing we have to understand enough to not continue to get caught in.

But the other basic component of our suffering is ignorance. The Buddha said something like: "Fettered by craving and obscured by ignorance, beings have been wandering this samsara since beginningless time." These are the twin poles of our problem—craving on the one hand, which is affective, and ignorance on the other, which is delusional and has to do with wisdom.

So to cut through craving, we use the sense bases. To cut through ignorance and delusion about our experience, we use the schema of the five aggregates. The Buddha used it again and again to point to right understanding.

One meta comment about the five aggregates. I looked at this list for years and thought, this is a very funny list. How did anybody come up with this kind of strange list? Body is important—the physical world, that's important. Consciousness is import-

ant. What are we without consciousness? Mental formations are basically mental states—those are important. But what are feeling and perception doing in there? These two little blips, what are they doing in there?

I could never figure it out. And then why, if feeling and perception are in there, aren't some other things that are just as important? Volition, contact, and attention—why aren't those in there?

Why is it five and not eight? I don't know. Somebody suggested that this list existed before the Buddha, so perhaps he was simply working with an established framework. He could have expanded it to eight aggregates, or in my view, he could have simplified it to just three: form, formations, and consciousness, incorporating feeling and perception within formations. I could never quite understand the reasoning, and I still don't know the definitive answer. But I came to realize it doesn't actually matter.

It truly doesn't matter whether we work with three, five, or eight categories. The crucial question is: can everything in your experience be placed within one of these categories? This is what matters. Does this framework provide a complete outline of human experience?

We'll continue with the traditional five aggregates. Is there anything in your experience that cannot fit into form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness? Is there anything else happening beyond these categories? You can continue exploring this question. It's not essential that you simply accept my word or the Buddha's teaching. What matters is that you discover what rings true in your own experience. So keep investigating.

For now, let's proceed on the understanding that these five categories encompass our entire experience. This assumption is significant because it suggests this is an exhaustive list—it covers everything we experience.

So what's notably absent from this list? There's something quite important that we've been discussing that doesn't appear here. Someone might say emptiness. Emptiness isn't explicitly listed, though it could be understood as an insight, perhaps fitting within mental formations.

Nibbana—that's true. The list doesn't include Nirvana. In the Abhidhamma, they specifically addressed this as an additional category. This framework doesn't include the unconditioned, and there's good reason for this omission. Most of us don't realize nibbana moment after moment. When the realization of nibbana does arise, it exists out-

side the reach of the five aggregates. But that's advanced territory—graduate level, if you will. For now, we're working with what falls within our sensory experience, since nibbana lies beyond the reach of the senses.

The most significant absence I've mentioned tonight is the "I"—capital I. It's not included in this list. We don't have form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness, *and* self. This omission carries profound implications.

The understanding here is that there exists *only* form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. There's no need for an I. Our entire human experience consists of these five aggregates, and the I is not among them. You could express this same truth through the framework of the six sense bases: our complete human experience consists of six types of sense objects and the consciousness that knows them. That's all there is—sense objects and the knowing of them, the five aggregates including consciousness. Nothing else exists. There's no self lurking anywhere.

This provides a complete and exhaustive description of experience. When we begin to see in this way, this understanding brings greater freedom into our lives. But untangling this sense of I is not easy work.

It's so integral to our concepts. It's not easy to untangle.

Let's take a simple example. In the traditional description, it was said: if you look at a chariot, what is a chariot? What is this thing we call chariot? Is it the wheels? Is it the cart? Is it the axle? Is it the steering post? Is it the reins? Is it the yoke for the horses? Or is the chariot just an assemblage of all those little pieces? It's not a specific thing in itself, but rather just the way the pieces are put together.

Here's a simple example. Can everybody see what this is and recognize this? It's a pen, right? It's a ballpoint pen. Clearly it's an object we all know and are familiar with. It's a pen.

But what happens if I start to take it apart? Then we see there are about five or maybe six different pieces to it—the cap and the tip and the end and the barrel and the ink cartridge. So where's the pen now? Is there a pen now? Or are there only these five parts, which might be compared to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness? They're separate parts. Sometimes they don't have anything to do with each other. Is your liver very much like your compassion? They're really different, aren't they?

But when they're assembled in a certain way, all these different disparate pieces form something useful. They form a kind of unity, a kind of unit, that is very helpful. It's called a pen, or conventionally we call it a human being. But it's just an assemblage of really different kinds of parts.

Yet it's very useful to know. If you need to write a note to Elizabeth, it's very helpful to know where the pen is. And when you go out of the hall tonight, it's very useful to know that your room is not someplace where somebody else thinks is their room, or you'll end up on their floor.

So this concept of objects or beings is really useful, but let's not be deceived that there's anything essential there—anything more than an assembly of parts fit together in a certain way and functioning as a kind of unit.

There is not within us some essential entity that is the self, that is the I. When I came into meditation, I sort of assumed that there was somewhere like a mini-me inside that was kind of running things and experiencing things, and I kept looking for it. William James undertook the same investigation, the philosopher, and he said, "I search for this sense of self, but the closest I can find is a tickle in the back of my throat."

But we need to carry out this search. If we don't carry it out, we'll always be left with this suspicion that it is somewhere—we just haven't found it yet. That's why it's so helpful to look very clearly at all these sense experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind objects and the knowing of them, to realize that's all there is. Or the five aggregates—that's all there is: form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. There's nothing else.

One reason this is important is because all these component parts, these five aggregates or the sense bases, are all impermanent. When Spring talked last night, I imagine she talked about how impermanence goes all through our experience. It goes down to this very fine level of detail. As closely as you can see through the aggregates, through the sense bases, all of these things are impermanent. That means they all arise, persist for a while, and pass away. There's nothing ongoing.

One of the assumptions about self is that it's continuing, right? If we didn't have that assumption about self, we wouldn't really be afraid of dying, because we would think, "Oh, that's somebody else that's gonna die." But it's because we think, "I'm going to die," that it causes that kind of anxiety or dread. So we have this assumption of continuity with the self, and that's where some of the problem comes from.

So it's very helpful to understand that impermanence applies to these component parts. It doesn't apply to nibbana. And actually, when Brent said emptiness, he may have been pointing to nirvana. So I may have—is that right? My apologies. So Brent was also pointing to nirvana when he said emptiness. Christine said nirvana. That is the element that's not included in the five aggregates. That's not subject to arising and passing. But all these components are.

So the Buddha had a lot of dialogues where he explored this. Here's one place where it came in. After his awakening, he decided to find this group of five friends that he'd been practicing with before his enlightenment. And he saw that they were near the town of Sarnath. And so he traveled there from Bodh Gaya and met them there and offered to give them teachings.

At first, they weren't interested because he looked too healthy. "Oh, he's gotten lax, he's given up the ascetic practices, he's fallen off the path." But as he approached them, they tuned in that there was something going on with their old friend, Gautama. So they decided tentatively, "Okay, we'll give an ear."

And he gave them a discourse on the Four Noble Truths. During that discourse, one of the five, Kandanya, had beginning enlightenment insight and saw the truth of the Dhamma. The other four didn't get it. The Buddha wanted them all to get it, so he had them practice meditation, develop some concentration. A little later, he gave them another talk. In this talk, all five of them came to awakening. This talk was on the characteristic of not-self.

And the gist of it was using the theme of the five aggregates to explore impermanence and not-self. So he asked them these questions: "Is form permanent or impermanent?" That means the body and physical senses. Is it permanent or impermanent? They're all impermanent, right? So they replied, "Impermanent, venerable sir."

He said, "Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or happy?" This is a great question, right? I'm sure Spring touched on this too. Whatever is impermanent, even if it's delightful, will pass away. And if we're basing our happiness on it, we lose that happiness. So is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or happy? They said, "Unsatisfactory."

So then he asked them, "Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: This is mine. This I am. This is myself?" And they said, "No, venerable sir." And in the course of that dialogue and that investigation, they all became fully enlightened, all five of them.

This is a powerful inquiry. It's better to get it from the Buddha than from me. It can be a powerful investigation. Is it fit to be regarded thus? This is mine. Like if I hang on to this pen because I really like this pen, is that fitting? Well no, it's going to run out of ink or the barrel's going to crack or the tip's going to break off and then I'm going to be disappointed.

Or "this I am." Can I take this body to be what I truly am knowing that one day it's going to die? Or "this is myself." Our personality, let's say, we identify with as ourself, but it's so changeable. It's so variable. It never stays the same for very long at a time. And so if we identify with that in ourself, we're always insecure.

We're riding a wave that doesn't have any solidity.

The Buddha conducted this same dialogue with Anuradha regarding feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. None of them fit to be regarded as "this is mine, this I am, this is myself." You could do the same inquiry with the six sense bases—either approach would lead to the same understanding.

So where is this "I"? What constitutes this "I"?

A monk once approached the Buddha and said, "Venerable sir, wanderers from other sects—all deluded, as the other sects in the Buddha's time hadn't developed this kind of wisdom—are approaching me with philosophical questions. They ask whether the Tathagata exists after death or not. I don't know how to answer them. How should I respond?"

The Buddha led this monk, whose name was Anuradha, into another dialogue, another inquiry. He asked, "Do you think the Tathagata is this body?" This seems rather preposterous—that the most enlightened being would simply be the body. Anuradha, being wiser than that, answered no.

"Do you think the Tathagata is this feeling tone, the vedana quality?" No.

"Do you think the Buddha is his perception?" No.

"Do you think the Buddha is just a collection of mental formations?" No.

"Do you think the Buddha is just this consciousness?" No.

"And Anuradha, do you think the Buddha exists apart from all the aggregates? Do you think the Buddha is somewhere else?" No.

The Buddha then said, "Well, Anuradha, you can't even find the Tathagata here and now. How much sense can it make to talk about where he's going to be after he dies? This is how you should answer the wanderers from the other sects to dispel their confusion."

Sometimes we think perhaps the self is all these things taken together—I'm my liver and my blood and my pleasant and unpleasant experiences and my perceptions and my thoughts and feelings and consciousness. That's all me. This is the conventional idea of a human being, much like the pen—an assemblage of parts, quite different and distinct, functioning together as a kind of unit. That's what we take to be a person.

But the problem is that all these things are coming and going continuously. If you truly feel that all these things constitute you, then you must be coming and going moment by moment by moment. If you can feel this—that your self is arising and passing and arising and passing on all these different levels moment by moment—and you want to call that "I," fine. But there's nothing continuing there when you see with proper wisdom.

The other problem with this view is that it raises the question: how many selves do I have? Can the liver be your self and your compassion be your self? They're not the same thing. So how many selves are there? Is there a liver self and a compassion self? It becomes quite problematic.

This concept of all these things being our self doesn't really work either. We find that the self is an unnecessary appendage to the aggregates. We don't need to add it. All we need to see is form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. The self isn't needed.

This became really clear in an interaction the Buddha had with another wanderer named Bahiya. You may have heard this story, as it's quite famous. Bahiya was meditating somewhere near the coast and thought that he was perhaps an arahant.

He had never met the Buddha or heard his teachings, but he had the feeling, "I'm a pretty spiritual guy. Maybe I'm at the end. Maybe I've completed the journey and maybe I'm an arhat." But then he heard that there was someone who really was an arhat, the Tathagata, Gautama Buddha. And he said, "Well, let me just go and check myself out. If this person is genuine, he can tell me if I'm an arhat or not."

So he found the Buddha. He had a great deal of urgency because he actually had a lot of great qualities, a lot of good spiritual qualities. The Buddha was on alms round, and Bahia came up to him and said, "Venerable sir, I've come a long way. I have a great deal of passion about this question. Can you please give me your teaching in brief?"

And the Buddha said, "This is not the appropriate time. I'm collecting my meal for the day. Please wait until it's over."

But Bahia said, "It is hard to know how long you will live or I will live. Please, can you give me your teaching now?"

And a second time, the Buddha refused. He said, "I'm on my alms round. Please come see me later."

But as these stories usually go, if you ask the third time, the Buddha can't say no. So Bahia again asked and said, "It's hard to know how long you will live or I will live."

So the Buddha gave him this very brief teaching. First, he told him he wasn't an arhat. Oh, sad day. But he told him how to understand so that he could become awakened. And he said, "Bahia, this is how you should train. In what is seen, let there be just the seen. In what is heard, let there be just the heard. In what is sensed, let there be just what is sensed. In the thought, let there be just what is thought. Then there will be no you in terms of that."

You get that in his formulation? In the seen, let there be just the seen. That means there's no one standing aside who's thinking they're doing the seeing. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In that way, there will be no you in terms of that. You won't create an "I" that believes "I'm doing the seeing." There's just what is seen.

"When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

This is a pith meditation instruction. You can explore this in your experience. When you are experiencing any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, is it just standing on its own? Is there just the seen, the heard, the sensed, the cognized? Or are you adding an "I" that owns it or experiences it or is it? See what that's like. There's just the seen, there's just the heard, there's just the sensed. That's the end of suffering.

Bahia's mind was so balanced and so interested that at these words he awakened, completed his journey, got what he had come for. That afternoon, walking through a field, he was attacked by a bull, gored, and died. Who knows how long you will live or I will live? Bahia died that afternoon, but he had understood. And so he had come to the end of suffering.

So this is the possibility in our practice—to explore this quality when self is absent, and then to see what brings it about. I want to go into a little more detail about this in another talk, but there are specific things that give rise to the sense of self.

This is the Venerable Ananda, who was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. A beautiful, kind, compassionate, thoughtful person.

After the Buddha, Ananda is one of the people you really would have liked to know from the Pali Canon. He had a great heart. And so he was describing to the monks that after he had ordained, when he was not understanding very well, there was another monk who gave him this very clear instruction of how to understand.

This other monk told him, "Ananda, it is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, to feeling, to perception, to formations and to consciousness." So when there is clinging or grasping, the sense of 'I' follows on from that. And once there is clinging or grasping, we're on the way to suffering because eventually change will take it away from us. And when we're holding on and there's change, we suffer.

One meditator, I thought very nicely, defined suffering as rope burn—holding on to what's passing through our hands, it burns.

The Buddha put it this way: "When there is form, by clinging to form, by adhering to form, one regards things thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself.'" And similarly for the other aggregates. So the 'I' is built on clinging, and clinging leads to suffering. We can feel this again and again. So when we let go...

It's not that in the absence of self there's this cold world that opens up. I mean, this description sounds kind of technical—lack of clinging, aggregates, all of that. This is really about freeing the heart. So when the sense of 'I' is lifted, there's a lot more ease. And from that ease, more loving-kindness and compassion and joy and contentment naturally come through.

A lot of you know this story, but for those who haven't heard it, it's a great pointing. Jack Kornfield was in Sri Lanka and visited an old Sri Lankan monk. The monk invited him into his bedroom and had heard that Jack was doing some teaching. It was in the early years of his teaching in the West, and so he wanted to check him out. He said, "Well, I understand that you've studied Buddhism and you're doing some teaching. What's the essence of the Buddhist teachings?"

And Jack said, "Well, the essence of the teachings is that within this changing flow of experience, there's no abiding entity that we could call an ongoing self or 'I.' There's really no self here."

And the old monk smiled and he said, "No self, no problem." And he just laughed. "No self, no problem."

So that's the pointing. That kind of seeing opens the heart.

So one way we can investigate is this lack of self in the experience of the five aggregates. Another way that we can investigate is the emptiness of what constitutes our sense experience, the lack of substance in what constitutes the experience of the senses.

So let me read to you the start of a sutta. This is from the Samyutta Nikaya, and the sutta is called "A Lump of Foam."

"The Blessed One was dwelling at Ayoja on the bank of the river Ganges. There he addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is—internal or external, gross or subtle—a practitioner inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could there be in form?'"

So the Buddha's talking about our bodies and the whole physical world. And he's saying that our body and the physical world is void, hollow, and insubstantial, just like a lump of foam. That's a fairly radical statement.

So this is the investigation that's suggested by this sutta: How can form, how can this body, this world, be like a mass of foam?

I was teaching at Spirit Rock a few years ago and giving a dharma talk at the same time of day—at 7:30. It was getting dark outside. In the middle of the dharma talk, we heard this kind of harrowing cry. It was like a baby crying or someone crying in real pain and anguish. We all noticed it, commented on it, but let the dharma talk finish. I think a manager went out to take a look.

When the talk ended, I went out and a number of people went out to see what that had been about. By one of the residence halls near the meditation hall, there was a deer lying there with its neck broken—a young deer with its neck twisted back at an untenable angle. One person reported that they'd seen a couple of large dogs running off. So

what we think happened is that two dogs attacked this deer and somehow broke the deer's neck and killed it. But when people showed up, the dogs ran away. By the time we got there, the deer was dead.

We formed a circle around it and said loving-kindness meditation and sent good wishes for it. Then, after spending some time with the deer, we went on our way. The caretakers said they called the Humane Society, who promised to come by the next day and pick up the body of the deer. So the caretakers took it and left it down by a parking lot so that people could easily load it into the van. We continued to say prayers and send loving-kindness for the deer.

But the Humane Society never came. Day by day, we would go by and look at the body of the deer. Every day there would be a little bit less of it left because coyotes and raccoons and turkey vultures and ants were making it their food. Little by little there was less and less of the deer until eventually there was just some fur and some bones. After about a week, that was all that was left.

Where was all that body? Where was that flesh and blood and sinews and organs? Just gone, like a mass of foam. Just gone, as one day all of us will be just gone. So in this way, we can see that our body is like a mass of foam.

But there are other ways too. When you're meditating and you're very present—you've been here for two weeks now—and you're really looking closely at a sensation in your body, this is as close as we can know the nature of this body. Our awareness is right there touching the sensation. What do you find when you're really present, really awake and touching a sensation? Is it solid, firm, unchanging? Can you rest your life upon it? Or is it more characterized by pulsing, vibrating, up and down, intense and weaker, always changing, flowing, vibrating, with just waves of energy?

When we get right into the sensations in the body—which is really as close as we can get, closer than a microscope—we just find change, fluctuation, pulsing, vibration, really insubstantial.

When you listen to a sound, is it solid? Or does the sound have a nature of just arising and passing away? A car passes by, a bird calls, someone coughs in the meditation hall. The bell rings, comes together, glides away, back into the silence. Smells and tastes are even more floaty than body and sounds. Emotions—have you ever tried to hang on to just a bare emotion? They go so fast. If you can find it in the body, it may be easier to stay in contact, but the body, as we know, is dissolving too.

All the senses, when we look closely from this quiet meditative mind, reveal this dissolving nature, this transient nature. One of the hardest to penetrate is the sense of sight, so let's do some reflection on seeing, because it looks solid. This world looks really solid, and that's one place where we believe in the solidity of the world. So let's question this a little bit.

We know from seventh grade science how sight works. Light particles travel from somewhere, bounce off objects like the wall, floor, ceiling, people, and then come to our eye. These light particles strike the retina and then travel up the optic nerve to the brain, where some kind of processing goes on. Then mysteriously—and nobody knows how this happens—that gives rise to the consciousness of seeing. There's this huge leap that scientists haven't even begun to find an answer to, because it's transitioning from the world of matter to the world of consciousness. But this leap happens—we know it does, because we experience sight.

So the sight forms—that wall looks really solid and unchanging. But if we think about how it arises, we start to realize it's only appearing because all these photons are striking the retina many times a second, generating a nerve impulse that the brain translates and concocts into some appearance of wall. That's all that's happening.

So this appearance of wall is a fabrication based on what's actually there, which I don't know what it is. The way the light hits our eye and then the nervous system and the brain work together to concoct that image, that sight.

So we kind of think we're living in a real solid world. We think we're living in a real world that's made up of walls and floors and people. But actually what we're living in is an appearance of a world that's constructed by our senses. And that construction is not solid because it's turning on and off many times a second. It's being generated by these nerve signals in the brain and it appears to us as consciousness. It's some kind of representation of what's there. We're not questioning that. But it's not the same as what's really there. It's a fabrication. It's a human fabrication. A dog would see it differently. A cat would see it differently. A mosquito would see it differently. So it's kind of our creation. So it's an insubstantial appearance, not a solid world.

One of the things I used to like to play with: This book is blue, right? But where is the blue that this book is? It's not really here, is it? Because what's really happening is white light falls on this and the blue color gets reflected back to you and to me and all the other colors get absorbed. So what's coming to you is blue light and that means what's not in the book. Every other color is in the book. So the book is everything but blue. But it looks like blue. So where is this blue? It's not in the book. It's in your con-

sciousness and nowhere else. So this world we inhabit is a world that's created by our senses and what's out there. So in that way, even the world of sight, which seems solid, is insubstantial.

So the Buddha continued in this way: "Suppose, monks, that a magician should build a magic show at a crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it. It would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance, monks, could there be in a magic show?"

And then he says, this play of consciousness is the magic show. If we understand it, it's kind of delightful. It's kind of amazing that this happens. The Tibetans call this a magical display. And not to lose sight of the kind of entrancing quality of magic. But if we don't understand it, we get deceived into thinking that it's more substantial and more solid and, in a way, more real than it is.

Do you remember that book, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Milan Kundera? There is something a little bit unbearable about how light reality actually is. And so with our concepts, we invest it with more security and more solidity and more stability than it actually has. And part of the work of meditation is to untangle that apparent solidity and see the insubstantial nature.

This can feel a little unsettling at first. It kind of feels like the ground has gone out a little bit. But it's actually not dangerous. It's freeing to see it, but we need to be patient with ourselves as we understand this, because it can feel a little unsettling.

So the Buddha continued, "Whatever form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness a person inspects, it will appear to them to be void, hollow, and insubstantial. What substance could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness?"

And he concludes with this image which is very lovely and runs through a lot of later Buddhist literature. Form is like a lump of foam and feeling just an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations are like a banana tree. What? I didn't get that one for a long time, but when I lived in the tropics, I came to know banana trees don't have a solid trunk. They're basically hollow in the trunk. So when one banana tree grows up and gives rise to bananas, the trunk dies. It just crumples.

And a new trunk needs to grow for another batch of bananas. Formations are like a banana tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun—another name for the Buddha.

This insubstantial nature of reality is something we can discover directly through our meditation practice. We begin to understand how one of my teachers could say, "Everything that appears has no solid existence whatsoever. It's just a play in consciousness. Everything is held in consciousness." This is the meaning of the emptiness of phenomena or the emptiness of sense experiences. They're not solid. They're not substantial in that way.

This also is not meant to be a cold experience. Sometimes we think emptiness is just a dark black space that doesn't have any heart, that we have to surrender our humanity to, but it's not like that. When we see this, we're all in this same situation. We're all living in this insubstantial world through our bodies and through all our senses. We're all in this same boat.

Here's a quotation from a student of ours who was exploring this in a class for senior students a few years ago. She wrote: "It's spooky. I would look at everything—like this Japanese lamp that I love—and I'd see that it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When I went from an object and say it's an appearance to a person and say they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile."

You may know this figure of Kuan Yin, who in Mahayana literature is the embodiment of compassion. She's a female figure, a deity figure that embodies the quality of compassion. It's said that Kuan Yin listens to the whole world and hears the cries from our hearts—the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows of our human lives. She's there to hear them all and be receptive to them all and to care for us all.

But Kuan Yin is not a beginning meditator. She knows that this is okay. She knows that because of the insubstantiality, our suffering is also not substantial. And that when we see the insubstantiality clearly enough, it releases our suffering also. As it says in the Heart Sutra: "When the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty, he was saved from all suffering and distress."

So it's seeing the emptiness that liberates, and Kuan Yin knows this. That's why she, like the Buddha, has a half smile. She sees the sublime beauty of the magical display, and she also feels the poignancy of the transience of it, both at the same time. So she can't land in sorrow, and she can't land in joy, but she holds them both.

This is the word of wisdom that is attributed to Kuan Yin: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm? The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

So let's just sit together for a moment, please.

From the haiku poet Issa after his four-year-old daughter died:

"This dewdrop world is just a dewdrop world,
and yet, and yet..."

CHAPTER 45

Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

Drawing from the Thai laywoman teacher Upāsikā Kee, Guy Armstrong examines how freedom from suffering can be accessed in the present moment through 'unentangled knowing.' He explores the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), focusing on the experiential links of contact (phassa), feeling tone (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), and clinging (upādāna). Armstrong demonstrates how mindfulness can break this chain between feeling and craving, offering a taste of temporary nibbāna.

The talk includes practical meditation approaches: Sayādaw U Tejāniya's method of checking one's attitude for greed, aversion, and delusion, and turning awareness back toward awareness itself rather than getting entangled in sense objects. Through vivid examples of how we construct temporary selves through clinging - like the 'angry yogi' or 'good meditator' - Armstrong shows how we can rest in the gap between feeling and reactivity, touching the unconditioned nature of mind while remaining fully present to experience.

Sally talked last night about the Four Noble Truths, the teaching of the Buddha that describes the journey from suffering to the end of suffering, or nibbana, the state that's free from all craving. And the question arises in our meditation practice: is that kind of freedom that the Buddha was pointing to, some taste of freedom, only available at the very end of the path when the person has become completely established in nibbana, in the state of final awakening? Or is there some freedom that we can find in our journey before then? Sally pointed to this phrase of temporary nibbana that Ajahn Buddhadasa used.

So in the talk tonight, I want to focus on this question of the freedom that may be available here and now, before several lifetimes of journey along the path to full awakening—something possibly available sooner to us. And I'm going to describe it in terms of what one teacher called an unentangled knowing. So that's the subject of the talk this evening: unentangled knowing.

For those of you who aren't native English speakers, this is a very odd word, unentangled. A tangle refers to a twisting of yarn or string or hair if you've been riding in a convertible and it's gotten in a knot. It's not easy to undo those tangles. Then entangle is the verb that describes that process happening. You can think about when a kitten plays with a big batch of yarn, how the kitten can get entangled in it and get their paws all wrapped up in it, or we can get entangled in a web of untruth. I remember when I

was in my teens, somebody that I really respected asked me to tell a lie for them. I felt very conflicted and it was really painful for me. So we can get entangled in all these different ways, and putting "un" in front of it means that it's not entangled. So this is the phrase: unentangled knowing.

It was coined by a Thai laywoman teacher named Upasika Kee. It's unusual for women to teach in Thailand. Most of the teaching is done by monks. And it's even more unusual for the teaching to be done by a lay woman, which she was. She was not an ordained nun. This name Upasika means a lay woman supporter, and Kee was her given name. So she's known as Upasika Kee.

This phrase comes out of a dharma talk of hers in a very wonderful book, which I recommend to you called Pure and Simple. She taught in Thailand somewhere between the 1950s and the 1970s. So she's sort of contemporary. And her teachings are a very clear pointing, again and again and again, to the central point of the dharma: how we get caught and how we can work to free our hearts and minds. I found her teaching really powerful and a direct pointing.

This concept of tangle was used often by the Buddha in his lifetime in describing the situation of things. He said, for example, "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." So you get the sense of how all these contradictory desires that make up craving sort of weave us into this web that is confining and traps us. It's hard to release the mind from that tangle.

On another occasion, there was this kind of nice dialogue. A questioner came up to the Buddha, who you remember had the family name of Gotama, so he was often known as Gotama Buddha. And this questioner said, "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle." Doesn't sound so different from now, does it? We could say that of our generation too. This generation is entangled in a tangle. "So I ask of Gotama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

That's our situation, isn't it? We find ourselves caught in this tangle. We could call it craving or greed, aversion, delusion. Who succeeds in disentangling it? And the way the Buddha answered the question was that one who is developed in virtue, meditation, and wisdom disentangles this tangle. That's the development of the Eightfold Path that Sally was talking about: sila, samadhi, and paññā. So that's the work that we're engaged in here—disentangling ourselves from this tangle.

So Upasika Kee picked up on this image, which is used often in the suttas, and her central quote reads like this: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside." We'll come back to this later. An inward staying, unentangled knowing.

This inward staying is kind of the work of meditation, isn't it? We're always examining our inner world in response to both our inner world and the outer world, but this inner world of response—an unentangled knowing. This will be the theme.

The way that she uses this phrase evokes a kind of mindfulness that is very aware of all the objects of our experience but isn't caught up in them, isn't attached, isn't clinging, isn't holding on, isn't enmeshed in them. It's a quality of mindfulness that is in a state of some freedom.

in relation to all the things that are coming and going, the objects of our experience.

So there's a sense with this word knowing that there's a full kind of presence and awareness, that this mindfulness is not limited in scope, but it's kind of fully there with everything that is happening to us, but it's not caught up. It's not caught in the reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is actually our experience, many moments of the day. When Sally was talking last night about temporary nibbana that Ajahn Buddhadasa was pointing to, I think she quoted him as saying that if we didn't have moments of coolness like this throughout the day, we'd all go mad. If we were enveloped in the kilesas nonstop, it would drive us crazy. But in fact, we're not. And we have these moments of unentangledness many times throughout the day.

So in the talk tonight, I want to point to how we can recognize those, how we can develop them further. And by recognizing them and developing them, they can become more and more of our experience. We will know how they take place.

In addition, I want to describe a couple of approaches to meditation that lead directly to this kind of relationship, this kind of outcome.

Just one little footnote or caveat. A lot of the vocabulary I will use in the talk tonight comes from one particular school of Theravada, and that is the Thai forest lineage. So some of the vocabulary would not be comfortable for practitioners from other lineages, lineages that are very closely tied to the Abhidhamma or the Visuddhimagga or very orthodox Theravadan sources. Thai forest tradition has a little different way of expressing things. So that's the viewpoint that I want to communicate this evening.

In order to understand clearly how freedom is accessed, we want to understand a little more deeply how bondage takes place, how it is that we get caught or entangled with the objects of our experience.

The Buddha's primary outline for the detailed way that we get caught is a teaching called the Chain of Dependent Origination. In the chain of dependent origination, the Buddha uses these twelve causal links that start from ignorance and go through intermediate steps that lead to the final outcome, which is forms of suffering. This teaching explains in detail how suffering gets generated. It puts it as a kind of cyclic process that will happen over and over and over again until we learn how to interrupt it.

Now I'm not going to go through all twelve links because that would be a whole other talk in and of itself. Later someone may do that in this retreat, I'm not sure. So I'm going to drop out the first five links, which for my taste get a little bit philosophical and stir up views and opinions. I'm going to drop out the last three links, which also get a little philosophical and can stir people up. I'm going to focus on what I consider the central four links of the chain, which are the most experiential and which we can start to notice in our meditation practice and work with directly in our immediate experience.

These four links start from what I'd say is our basic situation as human beings. And what is our basic situation?

The Buddha described it in this sutta, which could be translated as the sutta on totality. And so I'll read you the gist of this sutta.

"Bhikkhus, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

That's pretty far out, isn't it? I haven't heard many other philosophers or teachers say that they will teach the totality of life, so that caught my attention.

"Listen and attend carefully. The totality is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who tried to describe a totality beyond this would not know of what they were speaking."

So this is the totality of our sense experience, isn't it? We've talked about this a number of times. These are the six senses and the organs that receive them. This is what makes up our human experience, and every part of our normal sense experience is included here.

One way of saying this is there are only ever six things happening. That's why it gets very simple in one way in our meditation. The basic experience for us as human beings is that things keep happening to us at these six sense doors. It doesn't matter if you're old or young or male or female or from any culture or race, if you're awakened or unawakened, this is our common shared experience. Things keep happening in the realm of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects.

So the word for this, these six kinds of things, the word that the Buddha used for this is contact. This is the sixth link in the chain of dependent origination. This is where we're picking up the chain. Five other things have already happened to us. We're not going to go into those, like how we got here and why contact is happening. But the reality is contact is happening at these six sense doors. That's what we pick up on.

Contact is defined really precisely in the Buddha's terms. It means the coming together of the sense organ, the sense object, and the sense consciousness. So for a sight to arise, there has to be an external object, my eye has to be working, and I have to have functioning sight consciousness. If I was asleep, my sight consciousness wouldn't be functioning.

Even if someone propped my eyes open, the sight consciousness might not be functioning. So when these three things come together—object, organ, and consciousness—there is this phenomenon called contact.

The next link in the chain is feeling tone, the Pali term vedana, which we've discussed extensively. This means that every one of these sense contacts has a feeling quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This is a crucial point in the Buddha's teachings. Why is feeling tone so important? Because it's on the basis of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral that our conditioned reactions arise. Greed is based in relation to pleasant feeling tones, aversion arises in relation to unpleasant feeling tones, and delusion often arises based on neutral feeling tones. The combination of these three reactions—greed, aversion, and delusion—is what we call craving or tanha, which is also the second noble truth.

As Sally mentioned, even though tanha, craving, has a desire nature, it includes the formation of aversion because that too expresses a preference. If we want things to be one way, we don't want them to be another. This desire force expresses itself both as greed—wanting the pleasant—and aversion—not wanting the unpleasant.

These formations happen constantly, and in normal life we don't see them happening. That's why they're usually accompanied by delusion. It's usually greed with delusion reacting, or aversion with delusion reacting, because we're not seeing them clearly. When we start to see them, that changes the whole equation.

Craving is the conditioned response to feeling tone, the next link in the chain of dependent origination. It flows from contact, which brings about feeling tone. Feeling tone conditions craving, which is the reactive formation of greed, aversion, or delusion.

After craving comes something even more solidified. Craving identifies the object and inclines the mind in that direction. Then, if you pay attention, usually what happens is a fastening onto that particular object—either a fascination with its pleasant quality or its unpleasant quality. There's a taking hold that occurs, which is called grasping or clinging.

This grasping or clinging is simply a further solidification of the movement of craving. It's like: "Okay, I'm drawn there, I kind of like it—got it." If you watch how your mind relates to these charged objects with strong feeling tone, you can observe this happening. As the mind becomes more settled, you can see that inclination and then the taking hold of, called grasping or clinging.

Once we've taken hold, we tend to stay there for a while and often proliferate about it: "I like it, I don't like it, I want more of it, I've got to get rid of it, this is going to ruin my retreat, I can't have this in my life," and so on.

These are the central links in our experience of the chain: contact, feeling, craving, clinging. The key thing to understand is that clinging, once it has taken form, invariably leads to suffering. I'll explain that in a moment. But this is important to know—clinging is what provides the fuel for suffering to happen.

Here we are. We come into conscious experience when we're fairly young. You can think of it as being a baby, and all these objects start appearing in the world, forming our world of contacts: mother, breast, food, father, school, friends, high school, crushes, college, jobs, career, money, taxes, government, Britney Spears, VH1, income tax, Barack Obama, global economic crisis. It never stops.

Of all these objects that go by, some are very attractive, some are very scary. We end up moving in relation to them, taking hold, wanting. Even to push something away, we have to take hold of it first. If you want to get rid of a pain in your knee, mentally you've got to take hold of it before you can push against it. So clinging happens not just with things we want to bring close, but also with things we want to push away.

This is how we get entangled. Once entangled, suffering results.

What actually happens is that when we grasp something and hold on for a while and start to proliferate around it, we create a new kind of sense of "I" in that relationship. We could almost say we give birth by taking hold of and then proliferating. What's happening is a new sense of self is getting created in that movement.

The sense of self is always bound up with suffering because there's birth and death with this sense of self. Let me give a couple of examples.

I told a story earlier in the retreat of how I was going out for a walking meditation one morning while I was on retreat here. I looked down to my walking path and saw there was somebody already walking there. Unpleasant, very unpleasant kind of contact. And I didn't like it, so there was immediately aversion, and then I started to proliferate about it.

So I made a big thing of it. I latched onto it, and I got angry at that person who was in my walking path. I thought all kinds of thoughts about why they shouldn't be there, and what could their motivation be for being in my walking path, and they weren't very sensitive. I proliferated about it for thirty minutes before I finally realized, hey, I'm angry. It took me that long. Once I realized I was angry, then I could kind of work with it.

But in the middle of that, I had constructed a new sense of self, which was the angry yogi. I was angry with one of my fellow yogis because he had appropriated something that belonged to me. So I took birth as the angry yogi. I sustained that birth for a whole thirty minutes by thinking about it more and dwelling on it and basically grasping the situation over and over and over again through my thoughts and feelings. Of course, there was a lot of delusion because I wasn't seeing it. There was a very solid taking of birth as an angry walker.

Then, when I could see what was happening, mindfulness came in and identified it as anger, I could release it. In just a few minutes, the anger passed and I was happily doing walking meditation. That angry yogi died then. He had a lifespan of about thirty minutes. He was very real. It was a very real formation of personality characteristics. Then he passed away. I took birth, lived out a lifespan—thirty minutes in this case—and then passed away.

So that was an example of an unpleasant birth, an unhappy birth. But there are other examples of happy births that also take place here every day.

You come in for a sitting. And all of a sudden, you notice the mind has gotten really still. Everything has just settled down. The body feels relaxed but very comfortable. You're fully present. There are not a lot of thoughts dragging you away. The body energy is settled. Not a lot of hindrances going on. Wherever you turn your attention, you can connect kind of effortlessly. Feel the breath. Pay attention to sounds. Open up to choiceless attention. And you're just there moment after moment with a sense of ease and peace.

And now you realize, this is what I always knew my meditation could be like. It's taken me three weeks, but I've figured it out. Now I know how to meditate. I know the secret to this stuff. Wow, this is going to be so much fun. I'm going to be able to go back into my daily life and carry on conversations like this. I'm going to be completely at ease. I won't be rattled by that next-door neighbor or my boss at work. Wow, I'm going to have so much power in my daily life.

And you think all of a sudden the concentration continues. Wow, I can think anything I want, and it's not disturbing this concentration. This is fabulous. And then let's take this out for a walk. So the bell rings, sitting ends. Go out for a walk with every step. Life is going to be so fantastic from now on. I can't believe this. Can't wait to get back to sit next time. Walk slowly into the hall, sit down. It's all gone. The body energy is all stirred up.

Looking at this as a whole, we can recognize this cycle playing out throughout our entire day. From morning until night, we can observe countless different selves taking birth in response to the various experiences that unfold. Yet eventually we release each one. This is precisely why this process is called the wheel of samsara—we keep getting born into new identities, then letting go and passing away from them.

Upasaka Ki describes how, when we finally let go of whatever we've been clinging to and return to balance, we come back to what she calls "normal mind." This normal mind isn't what the outside world considers normal—we might wish it were! Rather, she calls it normal because it's the place meditators can discover again and again, making it our home base. This is our natural state of balance, though we certainly experience many ups and downs in between our returns to this center.

This quality of clinging—the fourth step in that sequence of contact, feeling, craving, clinging—is precisely where a new self solidifies. This raises a fascinating question: Where does the self actually come from? Is there some pre-existing self that does the grasping? Or is grasping itself simply another mental activity that creates the very sense of self?

Andrew Olendzki, director of the study center down the street, offers beautiful clarity on this point in one of his essays. He writes: "What becomes clear through this analysis of moment-to-moment experience is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds onto or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

Let me repeat that profound insight: Grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping.

This transforms our understanding completely. Every time we take hold of something—whether pleasant or unpleasant—we construct a new sense of self. There's the birth of a new "I" in a new form.

This principle becomes particularly clear when we consider how our minds typically function. The untrained mind is often compared to a monkey mind, and there's an image I find quite helpful of how a monkey travels through a forest. The monkey grabs hold of a vine and swings across on that vine, but generally won't let go of it until there's another vine within reach. Then it swings on that second vine until yet another vine becomes available to grasp.

When we observe the untrained mind—one that's not watching itself with awareness—this is exactly how we all tend to function.

We grab hold of something and don't let go until there's something else to grasp. This process of birthing into a new self happens over and over, moment after moment, with only very brief respites that offer a little pause.

So where is there any freedom in this? This chain that the Buddha laid out—contact, feeling, craving, clinging—he said was one of his most profound insights. The repetitive nature of this cycle is what keeps us on the wheel of samsara. Where is there freedom in it? Are we really doomed to go through this cycle again and again?

If there is some freedom in this cycle, that would be good to know, because not only would it lead to insight here and now, but it would bring the fruit of the path closer to us. Rather than expecting the fruit to come only after many lifetimes, if we could find the fruit of the path now, it would give us tremendous confidence and faith and trust in this process.

The question becomes: how is the chain to be interpreted? Can the chain be broken? Is it a strict causal sequence or only a conditioning sequence—a leading to, but not always?

The right understanding is that the chain is not a strict causal sequence. It is a leading to, not necessarily causal. Classically, where the chain can be broken is between feeling and craving.

This is important to understand. If there's enough mindfulness—and I know you all have experienced this in your meditations here—can you be with a pleasant feeling and not move into greed? Has everybody experienced that? If there's an unpleasant contact, unpleasant feeling tone, can you be with that and not move into aversion? I've heard it a lot in interviews. If there's a neutral experience, can you be with that and not be oblivious, not space out, not go into delusion? I think all of you have experienced those moments in this retreat.

This is really a key point in our practice. This is a point we could call acceptance, non-reactivity, equanimity—where we're fully with the experience of the feeling tone, but we don't move into the reactive formations, we don't move into craving.

You are finding out in your direct experience that it's possible to be with feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and not have craving arise in the next moment. This is revolutionary. This is what can get us off the wheel.

It's vital to become familiar with what this feels like, because this place is the sweet spot in meditation. Meditation goes best when we can be there. The more we contact it and recognize it, the easier it is to find that place.

You could call it the place of non-craving. You could call it the place of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion. You could call it the place of temporary nibbana, as Sally mentioned last night.

One Buddhist teacher put it this way: the whole of the Buddhist path is resting in this gap between feeling and craving. Finding this place where feeling is present and you're fully with it, you're really aware, you're totally mindful, but it doesn't lead into craving. That's the place to rest. The whole of the path is resting there.

Start to recognize this. Start to explore it. What does that feel like? People will have different descriptions. You might say it feels easeful, spacious, restful, non-conflicted, light. But the word I want to emphasize here is that this place feels free. We can start to feel the freedom that's available when we're not caught in reactive formations.

Resting in that gap is the path, as this teacher said, but it's also in some way our goal. The definition of nibbana expressed by Sariputta in the suttas is the destruction of greed, aversion, and delusion. Well, we're resting in a place where, relatively at least, greed, aversion, and delusion are absent. So we're getting a little foretaste of this total experience of nibbana.

This freedom is like the nibbana of an awakened one. It's not as full, it's not as complete, it's not finished, but it's a little bit of the same stuff. It's the path and it's also the goal.

As we start to feel into it, recognize it, and access it more, it starts to expand. More of our practice comes from this place that feels like a fruition—feels like an end point, not a total end point, but a kind of reaching of an end point.

Something else about this resting place: feeling tone is there, but we're not reacting out of blind conditioning. Greed, aversion, and delusion are blindly conditioned reactions. We're not reacting out of those. So somehow the mind has found a place that's not being determined by the conditions. The conditions would say, "Oh, you should go now to greed, aversion, delusion." But our mind isn't being determined by that. We're not being forced into that conditioning.

So we've also found something in here that is less conditioned, leaning toward the unconditioned nature of things. We're not being determined by the conditions—we've stepped out of the conditions to a certain extent—and so we've touched a little bit on the unconditioned, which is a synonym for the Dhamma. So we start to see this resting place as a kind of dhammic way to be, and then conditioned things go on at the same time. They don't necessarily interfere with that.

This is a quote from Ajahn Chah. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable—material and immaterial, big and small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself. The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are—as transient, imperfect and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

So resting in this gap, we can be at peace, and yet all the conditioned world is still unfolding. We're not caught up in it. We're at rest. We're at peace, but we're also fully aware. And by resting, not grasping, we're not giving rise to a new sense of I. So we're not taking a new birth at that point. We're not creating a new self with this rest. So not taking birth, we're also not subject to dying.

There's this kind of sweet sequence in the Sutta Nipata where a bunch of young brahmins come to ask questions of the Buddha. In that day, the brahmins were the religious elite, and the wanderers—like the Buddha and other ascetics—were kind of outside the realm of normal society. And so the brahmins tended to look down on them. So when young brahmins would come to ask questions of the Buddha, it was just kind of a sweet stepping out of their social role because they had a deep spiritual interest and weren't so concerned with the social role at that point.

So this is one brahmin youth asking his question. His name is Todeyya. He asked the Buddha, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you have loved to ask this question? What is that liberation like?

And the Buddha replied, "That sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming."

So again, this pointing to unentangled nature.

Ajahn Chah had a nice gloss on this concept of becoming. You can imagine him giving a Dharma talk in Thailand. The Dharma talks were usually given in outdoor halls. They had a floor, they had a roof, and they had pillars supporting the roof, but they didn't have walls. They weren't closed in because the temperature was so mild they could just let the air come and go. So imagine Ajahn Chah giving a talk in an outdoor sala, a hall like that.

And he would point and say, "The roof is a becoming, the floor is a becoming, but in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. There's no becoming. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness." And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbāna is this emptiness.

So when we rest in this gap, we're not becoming. We're not taking a stand. We're not taking a stand on any of the sense phenomena that are coming our way. In that, there's a kind of empty place. And in that emptiness, we're not being born. And so we're not subject to death.

This is from Ajahn Jomian, another Thai Forest teacher: "The best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless." From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless.

Oh, and yet, we're still fully aware—full presence, full knowing, all the sense phenomena are in contact.

So by balancing in this place, this gap between feeling and craving, we're moving into a place of unbecoming, which has an undying and unconditioned quality.

One of my teachers in Thailand, another Thai Forest teacher, was Ajahn Buddhadāsa. He was one of the great masters in Thailand in the last half of the last century. He seemed always to be resting in this place. I never saw him move out of this place.

Frankly, it kind of disturbed me as I was getting to know him because he was very accessible in those days. He was kind of iconoclastic. He had a habit of speaking his mind, and whether that was against the government or the military or the social order, he'd just tell it the way he saw it.

In the days that I was there, he was always available to us as monks or to the visitors who came to the monastery. After breakfast, he would just sit on this stone bench that was outside his little house. And the forest chickens would come out, and they'd be scratching around in the dirt at his feet. The temple dogs would be wandering around. A couple of them would be lying at his feet.

These temple dogs, I swear, they always could smell a Westerner. They'd bark at us and bite at us, but they'd let the Thai monks go by. So it was always a little bit of a challenge to go up and visit with Ajahn Buddhadāsa. You never knew if you were going to get attacked by a temple dog.

But if I wanted to ask him a question about Dharma, I could just go up basically any day and visit with him there. I could go up, make my three bows, and then address him. And his expression never changed. I'd make my bows, I'd start to ask my question. He

wouldn't say, "Oh, how nice to see you today," or "Is your practice going well?" or "Could I get you a cup of tea?" He's not like a Western Vipassana teacher. He was just sitting there watching everything arise and pass away, observing all the phenomena of his senses, and he was observing me too.

So at first I took it as a rejection. He's not being at all friendly. He doesn't want me here. But I'd stay and ask my question. He wasn't impatient at all. And it took me a long time to realize that if I wanted to hang out there for quite a while and talk Dharma, I could. But normally I got intimidated and I thought, he doesn't want me here. So I'd get up and go.

But he was equanimous about the arisings and passings. And he was equanimous about my arising and passing. He didn't care if I came, asked questions, or went away. It was just all the same to him. So he rested in this great balance. And looking back, I really admire him for that.

At some point in one's meditation practice, it can become skillful to make a little bit of a shift. We start off looking very closely at the objects of the senses.

It's really important in Vipassana meditation that we become quite skilled at looking at the six sense doors and their associated objects so that we see how we can get caught and entangled with each one. It's only through clear investigation of sense phenomena that we learn how not to get caught.

When we've grown somewhat skillful at noticing and being mindful of different sense objects, sometimes the question arises: I've become pretty fluent with objects—what's the subject side like? In other words, there's all this awareness happening, and usually we focus it on knowing objects, but what about the quality of awareness itself? Here I'll use awareness as a broad kind of mindfulness, a knowing of objects in an expansive way—not so much focusing on particulars, but on this faculty that knows in a comprehensive manner.

We start to realize that objects are not ultimately where fulfillment lies. They cannot satisfy. If we cling, we suffer. None of them will give lasting happiness. The quality of awareness itself becomes more interesting as time goes by, and we might want to direct more of our attention there.

I want to briefly discuss two approaches for doing this—two meditation methods I mentioned that lead toward placing awareness on awareness itself.

The first is a practice we've alluded to several times, which I want to spell out more clearly. I learned this from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: the process of checking regularly on our attitude, which is his term for our relationship to whatever experience we're having in that moment.

We've discussed this—checking whether there's greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind. This is what he recommends. Simply carry on with meditation, being mindful of arisings and passings, with your anchor—breath, body, sounds, choiceless attention, whatever. Then turn and ask: what's my relationship to those experiences? Is there greed, aversion, or delusion in my relationship to them?

This isn't always easy to see, so he suggests three simple questions. To check for greed, ask: "Am I wanting something else to happen?" To check for aversion: "Am I wanting something to stop happening?" And to check for delusion: "Am I not in touch with what's happening?" Usually by the time you ask about being in touch, you're already back in touch. The answer to delusion is usually no. But very often we discover, yes, I would like something to happen—I want more peace in this sitting. Or I want something to stop—I don't want this pain or wandering mind to continue.

If you see greed, aversion, or delusion, don't be judgmental about those reactions. Simply make that reaction the new subject for mindfulness. Don't judge it, don't try to push it away or make it disappear. Just include it as part of your experience now. Be mindful of that.

When I first started practicing this way, I was doing choiceless attention practice, but perhaps every ten minutes—maybe five times per sitting—I would turn and check my attitude. As I grew more comfortable with it, I could check without so much internal dialogue. I wouldn't need to go through elaborate questions. Having practiced it repeatedly, I could simply turn inward and see if there was greed, aversion, or delusion present.

Then I became more interested in this investigation. I really saw there was tremendous depth to this question of how I was relating. So I started checking more often—ten times per sitting. Eventually I realized that if my mind was steady, this could become my main practice. If I didn't need sense objects to steady the mind, if there was inherent steadiness, I could remain tuned in to the arising of greed, aversion, or delusion.

By staying attuned to this, I was more often able to see these patterns arising, and often that very seeing, when the pattern was weak, would release it. It became a very helpful way to center myself and not get carried away so much by greed, aversion, and delusion.

Upasika Kee says the same thing: "Your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. You have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that is so worth checking on."

This, then, is Sayadaw U Tejaniya's practice of checking on attitude, and eventually it can become the primary practice when the mind is stable.

So this is one approach. The second approach in meditation is to turn awareness toward awareness itself.

As you're sitting here now, let your eyes roam if they're open, or your ears if they're open, to all the objects in the room. Notice the beautiful things and the things that are not so appealing—the nice sconces on the walls, the shiny faces of the yogis who have been in retreat for three weeks already. You're getting more beautiful every day. Notice the texture of the floor and the walls, and anything that's unpleasant that you might react to. Just let your eyes latch on and delight and play with that field of pleasant and unpleasant.

Now, instead of sending that attention outward, what if it's turned back on the awareness itself? Or you might say the source of the knowing. Does that feel any different? You've been out, out, out, out, out—awareness going out through the eyes, latching on to things, getting involved, liking, disliking. Now you come back and you turn it inward, back toward awareness itself. Does it feel any different? Do you feel a shift when you do that?

Sometimes people say that brings a little sense of relief, a little sense of ease, a sense of disentangling, a sense of spaciousness, of stepping back, of settling down a little. You can play with it in your meditation. Sometimes it offers a way that we can unhook from a fixation on sense objects, coming back into awareness itself.

This is not a simple meditation instruction like "notice the sensation of your breath at the nose." This quality of looking at awareness is very subtle. I think it's the most subtle way to look in meditation, so it may not be so apparent at first. That's okay. Just play with it over time if it appeals to you.

Different phrases are used to suggest this, and different ones might work better for you than others. Some are: turn your attention to awareness, become aware of awareness, turn awareness back on itself. Or sometimes you might ask the question: who is

aware? Or what is knowing? There's all this going out, knowing, liking, disliking, sense objects, pleasure, pain. Then ask, who's knowing? And just come back inside and feel how that settles.

"The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness." This is Upasaka Ki's description of the way to this unentangled knowing. In this language, we send our awareness outside when we get involved in sense contact. And outside in this case means not just the objects outside us, but even the body and even the thoughts and moods that are inside, quote unquote, that are part of mind objects. We stay just with the awareness itself. Anything else is outer.

"The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside.

This inward turning doesn't mean that we cut off from the world. When you ask a question like "who is knowing?" or "what is aware?" or turn awareness to awareness, do you lose contact with your senses? Do you lose touch with the world? No. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, feelings—they all still come. But it's as though we've moved into a little different center of gravity. And it's a center that's not bound to whether things are there or not. But if we need to relate, we're still in touch. We're in touch from an even more peaceful place.

If you like, you can play with this. We're going to do another meditation in a couple of days that will give another avenue into this, probably an easier way in. But for now, if you'd like to play with the sense of turning toward awareness, do it sometime when you feel a little stuck. Some kind of greed has caught in, some kind of aversion. You feel entangled. There's contraction. There's something unpleasant. Turn to the knower or the knowing. I'm just using knower as "who is knowing," not that there's someone there. Turn to the knowing. Turn to awareness. See if you can feel that.

And see how that feels in relation to this place of being caught, being entangled, hanging on to something.

When the Buddha was visited by these Brahmin youths, this is another question from another young man named Kappa: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replied: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 46

Mettā: Tenderness and Connection

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines how mettā (loving-kindness) practice gradually develops two profound qualities: tenderness and connection. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on the eleven benefits of loving-kindness practice, Armstrong explores how these qualities grow slowly over time, much like equanimity develops through vipassanā meditation.*
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> *The talk weaves together inspiring stories of compassion in action—from marine biologists rescuing a whale to community members stopping traffic for a duck family—illustrating our fundamental interconnectedness. Armstrong references the Jewel Net of Indra from the Avatamsaka Sutra and the Buddha's teaching that all beings have been our relatives in past lives, pointing to our deep connection beyond apparent separation.*
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> *The discussion covers how mettā naturally leads to bodhicitta (the awakening heart) and supports ethical conduct through the precepts. Armstrong shares examples from contemporary figures like the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi, demonstrating how loving-kindness practice strengthens the heart against anger and criticism. The talk concludes with the recognition that compassion is, as the Dalai Lama states, "the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world."*

The talk this evening is on loving kindness, tenderness, and connection.

The loving kindness practice brings so many benefits into our lives. It makes life sweeter, warmer, and more enjoyable. It brings a quality of concentration, greater comfort with ourselves, and therefore greater comfort and ease with others. It reduces the amount of judgment that we bring to ourselves and the judgment we bring to others.

The Buddha said that there were eleven benefits of loving-kindness practice. I'm going to read this list slowly so that you can feel them. It says that one who has really developed the heart of loving kindness will sleep easily, wake easily, and have pleasant dreams. People will love you, devas and animals will love you, and devas will protect you. Weapons can't harm you. The mind is joyful. Your face is serene. You will die peacefully. And when you die, you'll be reborn in a happy destination.

Kind of makes it worth it, doesn't it? I'd sign up for that. That's a great list.

But I want to talk tonight about two benefits that come to us from loving kindness practice that develop rather slowly. These are the qualities of tenderness and connection. These qualities grow slowly, kind of in the same way that through vipassana practice equanimity grows slowly.

A lot of experiences come and go in doing our mindfulness practice. A lot of insights come and pass away. If we look for something that's an enduring result from years of vipassana practice, one of the things we can definitely point to is a growth in equanimity. The mind is less ruffled by the alternations of pleasure and pain that meet us. This is something that is a lasting fruit from that practice.

With mettā, I would say that these qualities of tenderness and connection are also lasting fruits. But like equanimity, they grow slowly. Different experiences in loving-kindness come and go, and these build over a long period of time.

One of my teachers put it like this. He said, "Experiences are like clouds, but true realization is like space." So experiences are like clouds in that they're always coming and going, taking different shapes, different forms, here for a little bit, passing on. Realization is like space in that it's always there, and it's a little underappreciated at first. But as time goes by, it seems to expand, expand, expand, and we realize that's where our freedom is.

So through loving-kindness practice these qualities of tenderness and connection grow over time like realization in vipassana practice. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

There is for us in being people a kind of inherent tenderness because we're sensitive beings. If you look in the animal world, for example, other creatures don't have this bare skin that's exposed to the four elements. We have horses on the land at Spirit Rock. It's fun. They're out where yogis can watch them. A lot of people do because there's not much entertainment when you're a yogi. People love to walk by and look at the horses.

What you'll find, because we do a long retreat in February when it rains a lot, you'll often see the horses standing outside while the rain is falling down upon their skin, a cold rain. Even though there's a shelter they could move under, they sort of don't bother to do it because their skin is just not as sensitive as ours.

But we have very sensitive skins, and we also have very sensitive emotions or hearts. So in our practice of loving kindness, we take advantage of this sensitivity. It's built on this quality of sensitivity, and we grow it by examining one another's welfare. The practice of loving kindness is all about: How are you doing? I hope you're safe. How are you doing? I hope you're happy. How are you? I hope you're healthy.

I hope you're at ease.

We check this over and over again for ourselves and for others, and in that way we're constantly connecting our heart to others' hearts. The whole practice is about well-being and the feeling of that.

This tuning to other people's welfare, tuning to our own welfare, starts to sensitize our hearts even more. It wakes it up, you could say, to the joys and sorrows of living. We feel those joys and sorrows in our own life. We feel them in others' lives.

The brahmaviharas as a whole are very balanced between joy and sorrow. We tend to emphasize love and compassion a lot in practice, but when we round out the brahmaviharas, there's love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Metta establishes the caring, compassion tunes into the suffering, but appreciative joy tunes into the happiness in life—our happiness and others'. And all these factors are held within the balance of equanimity.

So we're really exploring through the brahmaviharas how happiness comes, how unhappiness comes. And we don't bias towards suffering or happiness. We open ourselves either to compassion or to appreciative joy, depending on what meets us. In a way, we're working this sensitivity to joy and sorrow all the time with metta.

This is from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for tenderness. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate."

"A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong, but there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief."

So this is the beginning of our practice, this point of sensitivity, this soft spot in our being. One of the reasons that it's soft and that we're intrinsically tender is because we're vulnerable. As we've said, as human beings, anything can happen to us in a moment. A visit to a doctor can change our lives. A walk on the beach could change one's life.

We have a good friend who was taking a spiritual journey to southern India a few years ago, staying at a little bungalow on the beach not far from Madras. He went out on the beach on a warm winter morning—it's always warm in Madras—and was doing some movement on the beach, waves coming in, swaying with the gentle tropical breezes. All of a sudden a big wave came up on the beach, and he thought it looked kind of strange, this wave, especially because when it went back out, it left a huge gulf as it was leaving. He thought, this is not normal.

It turned out that it was not normal. This was the date of December 26, 2004. He was vacationing there with his partner and he saw this weird outgoing wave. He went to get his partner from the bungalow and said, "Come out, I think something strange is happening." They hopped up onto a concrete wall that was about four feet high. There was a palm tree growing there. He hung onto the palm tree and his friend hung onto him. That's when the second wave hit.

That's the wave that was the tsunami of 2004 that killed tens of thousands of people in the southern parts of Asia and Thailand. The tsunami hit. It came up high, but because he was holding onto the palm tree and they were a little higher and his friend was holding onto him, they were okay. Other people were washed out to sea and never seen again, but he was okay. It was a time when the practice of non-clinging was not advised—but by holding on, they were saved.

So you never know. You're just out on a beach on a warm morning in December, and anything can happen, anything can change.

There's a very interesting story of the life of one Tibetan teacher, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He was born in old Tibet and did years of retreat practice and became a very recognized Dzogchen master. But he fled Tibet after the invasion in 1959, the same year the Dalai Lama fled, and came to India. But things weren't so well established for the Tibetans at that point in India. They were just starting to come out. And so his life had a lot of unexpected turns when he was living in India.

Because he was a very recognized master, he was in demand as a teacher and as a figurehead. But other times things didn't go so easily for him. This is his description of his life: "Sometimes I gave empowerments to great assemblies of people, including dozens of Tulkus and thousands of monks. At other times I was utterly poor, living hand to mouth on the streets in Calcutta, wandering around with my hand out begging for pennies. So many unexpected ups and downs. Who can describe them?"

Life presents us with this really changing array of experiences. How do our hearts stay strong enough to be open to those experiences and not crumble? How do we meet all those kinds of changes and stay strong within? I think this is the gift of the Brahmaviharas. The Brahmaviharas are about strengthening that heart. As we tune in, we see the opportunity for love and compassion everywhere.

This is from Bob Dylan's memoir, *Chronicles*: "My grandma was filled with nobility and goodness. Told me once that happiness isn't on the road to anywhere, that happiness is the road. Had also instructed me to be kind because everyone you'll ever meet is fighting a hard battle."

When we can approach life from this understanding of the sensitivity that everyone is facing—everyone is vulnerable, and everyone is trying to find their way—it opens us up to a new kind of connection, which sometimes comes through fairly dramatically.

There was a story reported in the San Francisco Chronicle a few years ago about a female humpback whale that was migrating south. These whales migrate from the colder waters up by Alaska down to the warmer waters, where they tend to give birth in Hawaii. She was passing by the California coast, close to San Francisco, about ten to fifteen miles off the coast near the Farallon Islands. She was estimated to weigh forty-five to fifty tons.

But she happened to be swimming in an area where crab fishermen had set up their lines. The way crab fishermen work is that they hang nylon ropes with crab pots, and the pots are quite heavy. She had gotten tangled up in a whole bunch of these lines. Some of the lines had wrapped around her four times, and the crab pots, because they were so heavy, were weighing her down. Each line that she got tangled in, with the weight of the pots, was about a thousand pounds.

A fisherman happened to have his boat nearby and saw what was happening. He noticed that she was being weighed down and was in danger of sinking and drowning. She would struggle to come up to get air, but then the weight of the pots would carry her back down. Then she'd struggle up again, but she would exhaust herself in this cycle.

The fisherman contacted the Marine Mammal Center in Marin County, and they sent a boat out. They gathered a group of divers and went to see if they could help. It took them a couple of hours to get there, and by then she'd been struggling and was getting weaker.

When they came upon her, they looked at the situation and thought, "This is not going to be easy." The only way to save her would be for each of the divers to get in the water and cut through the ropes. But when you're near a whale that big, one splash of her tail could kill you. So there the divers were—safe on the boat, while she was drowning in the water. Do we get in and risk our lives, or do we just say it's too much?

They all jumped in.

Each diver took a special curved knife, and they worked very close to her body cutting through the ropes that were binding her. There were ropes around her back, a line that went through her mouth, one around her tail, and one that caught her front flipper. She was totally tangled up.

They worked for about an hour cutting through the ropes right close to her body. One of the divers said that all the time they were doing it, the whale just floated very passively in the water. Wouldn't you think if there were four strange people around you, you might get a little freaked out? But it seemed like she trusted them. She was just floating there very still, and the diver said she was giving off a strange kind of vibration.

One diver was working right by her face, cutting that line that went through her mouth, and he was working next to her eye. He was swimming and cutting right next to the whale's eye for quite a while, and this is what he said: "When I was cutting the line going through the mouth, her eye was there winking at me, watching me. It was an epic moment of my life."

Can't even imagine that.

So after an hour, they managed to cut all the lines and she was free. When the whale realized she was free, she began swimming around in circles in apparent joy, according to the rescuers. She then swam up to each diver, nuzzled him, and then swam to the next one. "It felt to me like she was thanking us, knowing that she was free and that we had helped her," one of the divers said. "She stopped about a foot away from me, pushed me around a little bit, and had some fun. She seemed kind of affectionate, like a dog that's happy to see you. I never felt threatened. It was an amazing, unbelievable experience."

So at moments like that, this connection to life just comes through so dramatically. Can you imagine the human consciousness and the whale consciousness kind of eye to eye like that in that meeting? It's really beautiful.

This quality of love and compassion can lead to that kind of connection. It's so important because part of our delusion, part of our ignorance is we only see the separateness. We tell ourselves again and again that we're different. "I'm special. I'm unique. I'm not like everyone else." And because we tell this story again and again, we believe it. And it's only at these times of special contact that we can feel how alike we are.

So these stories are missing half the point. We are different in ways, but we're also just alike in just as many ways. And so the Brahmaviharas practices—loving kindness and compassion—reconnect us with this quality of likeness which we tend to forget.

Researchers are finding that one of the deepest sources of unhappiness for people is a sense of isolation. And we can look at Western culture and see what's happened over the last couple hundred years with the breakdown of the immediate family, the separation of the extended family as people move apart, the loss of community, and so many families living just within their home or apartment and not mingling the way that we all used to. And so in that not mingling, we're losing the sense of the bigger human family that we're a part of.

This isolation has a very frustrating impact on us because we don't get to live as social creatures. And based on that isolation, we tell ourselves more stories about how we're not enough or we're not like everybody else. But it's not true. We're connected in many, many deep ways, and that's part of what I want to talk about during this talk.

One of the ways that we're connected is this beautiful image from the Avatamsaka Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism called the Jewel Net of Indra. The picture is a very cosmological kind of sutra. Later Buddhist teachings got very cosmological. So this one is the image of the cosmos as a vast net. So you can just imagine a big net that has vertical ropes and horizontal ropes. And at every place the two meet, they're joined by a gem, a jewel, which is at the intersection.

So there are all different kinds of jewels on this net and this net is infinite. It stretches across the whole of the cosmos. So there are emeralds and rubies and diamonds and sapphires and they're all these translucent or transparent gems. So at each intersection, there's a gem and that represents consciousness. It represents a sentient being.

And if you look inside a gem, what it contains is an image of the whole rest of the cosmos. So any jewel that you look at is reflecting all the other jewels and that whole net that ties them together. And that's an analogy for you and me. Each one of us re-

flects a whole universe of beings and nature and meaning. That's what a human consciousness is. That's what it holds. Each of us reflects the whole or has within us the whole, just like the gems on the jewel net.

So when you start to think about that, are you really separate or isolated from anybody? I mean, right now, in this moment, I'm part of your experience and you're part of mine. So you're in my consciousness and I'm in yours. So in this way, we're more than connected. We interpenetrate each other. We become each other. So we're connected in that way.

Then we're also deeply connected on a heart level. This is a poem from Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet called "Kindness."

She and her friend got out and gently guided the baby ducks up onto the concrete divider to join their mother. But then Caroline realized the mother duck still needed to cross the other three lanes going in the opposite direction to reach the bay. So she and her friend walked over to those lanes and began waving down traffic in both directions.

Now picture this scene: a busy six-lane highway in Marin County, and all these cars—maybe fifty or sixty vehicles—coming to a complete stop so that one duck family could cross the road safely. Caroline said that as she stood there directing traffic, she looked at all these faces in their cars. Nobody was honking. Nobody seemed irritated or impatient. Everyone was just quietly waiting, watching this little drama unfold.

The mother duck, with her babies following in a line behind her, waddled across those final three lanes. They made it safely to the grassy area near the bay, and then all the traffic resumed.

Caroline said what struck her most was seeing how readily people stopped their busy lives for this duck family. It made her realize something beautiful about human nature—that we have this natural impulse to protect life, especially when we see a mother caring for her young.

This story captures something essential about loving-kindness practice. We already have this capacity within us. It's not that we need to manufacture compassion or create it from scratch. We're just learning to extend what we already naturally feel in certain situations—like watching a mother duck protect her babies—to a wider and wider circle of beings.

When we practice metta, we're cultivating this innate quality of the heart. We're training ourselves to access that same tenderness we feel for the duck family, that same spontaneous wish for safety and well-being, and learn to offer it more consistently and more broadly.

This is why the Buddha called loving-kindness a "natural state." It's not foreign to us. It's not something we have to import from outside ourselves. It's recognizing and nurturing what's already there, this basic wish for all beings to be free from harm and to experience happiness.

They were too small. So Caroline went out and gave each of them a little boost. So the mother and the six ducklings are all up on the divider—not over yet.

Then the mother jumps down on the other side to head to the bay, and the traffic in the other direction starts backing up. People are honking and leaning out of their windows, shouting: "What's the problem? Get it moving! What's happening?" Caroline and her friend go to the other side and stop those three lanes of traffic, holding them up while they escort the duck and the six ducklings safely across, where they finally have a straight shot to the bay.

"Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child." I thought that was such a beautiful gesture—"I don't care if I'm going to hold up six lanes of traffic, I'm going to get the ducks across." That's metta in action.

This feeling of caring for others can become truly boundless. It's not limited in who it can be extended to. I want you to think into this a little bit, because it leads to another beautiful quality.

Suppose we're able to develop this kind of boundless loving-kindness and compassion. We realize that for all sentient beings, we really don't want them to suffer—we want them to be happy. We can generate this limitless love and compassion in our own hearts that feels authentic and genuine. We'll do that meditation in another week with the loving-kindness practice.

Then the question arises: if you really want all those other sentient beings not to suffer and to have the best kind of happiness, how can they do that? What's the best way for beings to come fully out of suffering and fully into real happiness?

As we've been discussing, the most authentic and deepest kind of happiness is the happiness of awakening. When we take metta and compassion to its logical consummation, it becomes the wish that all beings everywhere come to awakening.

Then how can we best support that? Wishing is good, but is there another way we could be more effective? We wonder: can I really help others come out of suffering if I haven't come out of suffering myself? Could I help others more fully come out of suffering if I come out of suffering myself?

This inclination can become a motivation in practice—as the most effective way to help other beings come completely out of unhappiness, I could come out of unhappiness first and then help them.

This aspiration has gotten a name in the Buddhist tradition. This aspiration to awaken ourselves in order to help others awaken is called bodhicitta. The literal meaning: bodhi is awakening, and citta is mind or heart. A beautiful translation is "the awakening heart." We can see it as the logical conclusion of metta and compassion for all beings, brought back as a motivation in our own practice.

I mention this in case you like it as a motivation—it resonates for me. At the start of every sitting, I make the aspiration: "May I come to awakening in order to benefit sentient beings." Every time I start a sit, I remind myself that's one of the reasons I practice.

This is a subtle thing. It's not generally a big flame that takes over our motivation, but it can be a little candlelight that, if you connect with it, you can nurture and it can grow stronger. It's not easy to maintain this as a motivation—doing this much work for the benefit of other people doesn't come so easily. But if we nurture it, it can become a real motivation.

Even the Dalai Lama says it's difficult. So if he says it's difficult, it's okay for us too! He said, "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration deep inside me. I realize how valuable and beneficial it is."

This loving-kindness, through this sense of connection, also expresses itself through our conduct. When we think about the precepts and their meaning, we realize they really come out of a sense of loving-kindness. We wish for others' happiness, so we don't want to harm them in any way.

The Buddha said that as we develop the precepts, we're offering a gift to other beings—the gift of freedom from fear. You can feel this if you know someone who has really developed their conduct well. They create an atmosphere of safety. When people come into the field of their presence, they feel safe. This is that gift of fearlessness.

This can be cultivated to a very high degree. The Dalai Lama was being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey a few years ago, and I have to say I have great appreciation for Oprah and her skillful editors, because they have brought teachings that help people to

a very broad and popular audience through her television show, her magazine, and now her television network. Those of you from Europe may not know, but Oprah has established her own TV network in this country called the Oprah Winfrey Network, which she describes as "mindful television." You've got to love it—mindful television.

She has carried teachings from many of our friends out to this very wide audience, including James Baraz, who appeared in O Magazine, and Sharon, Jack, and Joseph. Joseph did an article on non-attachment in relationship and earned him the nickname "Dr. Love." That was Joseph's contribution.

In this particular interview, Oprah started by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

"Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect," the Dalai Lama replied.

"Killing an insect?" Oprah responded.

"My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable," the Dalai Lama continued. "Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated. She fell silent and looked out the window. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life to have—no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

Wow. That's impressive. But all that separates us is about fourteen lifetimes of practice, so we can catch up.

This is a beautiful expression of the refinement of his meditation practice and the refinement of his conduct. These two things really go hand in hand. You can't separate them because when the mind is free of greed, aversion, and delusion, it's easier to be skillful in our conduct. And as we purify these forces, our conduct becomes cleaner and more purified also. They really go together.

So loving-kindness is a foundation for sila, for conduct. It's also a foundation for dana, for generosity. It's really the source of generosity. In order for us to want to give, we have to tune in to what someone else is going through and what they really need.

There are many discouraging signs in the world today. Overall, globally, it feels like the darkest period I've ever been alive for. But there are also some very positive signs happening in the world. One thing I'd like to point to is a recent book by Paul Hawken, a New Age commentator and entrepreneur. I'll just read you the title and say a little about it: "Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming."

The book is about all the individuals and small foundations around the globe who have taken a look at the massive amount of problems that no governments are dealing with, and just said, "I'm going to tackle that one." Very small groups, very committed to social action, environmental action, social justice—maybe on a small scale, but people saying, "I'm going to do what I can to make a difference," and taking their time, energy, money, speaking skills and talents, and rallying these forces to make a difference in the world. One group, one individual at a time.

He made a catalog for this book and counted up something like a million organizations worldwide on this rather small scale, each doing what they can. I think that's extraordinary. I don't think that was going on at that scale when I was a kid.

This awakening of consciousness is part of a global movement happening on an unprecedented scale. I think this represents something fundamentally new in our world - this widespread impulse toward engaged compassion.

Some of these initiatives have gained recognition. Dr. Paul Farmer established health clinics in remote regions of Haiti. Greg Mortensen, despite some financial missteps, has done remarkable work with girls' schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Within our own dharma community, we have three friends doing extraordinary work in Burma.

Carol Wilson travels there annually, collecting donations that have grown to tens of thousands of dollars. She creates proper homes for nunneries - buildings, residences, bathrooms - allowing nuns to continue their practice with dignity. She also provides food relief to families devastated by natural disasters, families the government essentially ignores.

Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters have established a school-building project in Burma. For just $25,000, you can build a complete school. The remarkable thing is that if you build the school, the government will provide a teacher. They won't build the infrastructure, but they'll staff it. Over recent years, Steve has traveled there with donor funds, typically constructing four to five schools annually.

Our friend Hal Nathan, former board president of Spirit Rock, established the Foundation for the People of Burma, dedicated to healthcare and sanitation improvements wherever he could find teams to collaborate with. Last year alone, he raised six million dollars to create meaningful change there.

These initiatives spring from individual caring - people who have committed incredible amounts of time and energy to manifest their vision. They express love and compassion through generous action, tuning into suffering and responding with whatever capacity they possess. This quality of heart remains central to all genuine service.

Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, captured this beautifully: "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." This is exactly what our metta and compassion practices generate - this fundamental good-heartedness from which so much else flows.

Trungpa Rinpoche continued his teaching about the sore spot on our body, saying: "There's also an inner wound called Tathagatagarbha, or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made up of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore."

This creates a beautiful sense of connectedness with life. As this quality develops, it also creates a strong presence in the heart that naturally guards against the hindrance energies of the mind.

A few years ago, we had a remarkable opportunity - the Dalai Lama came to Spirit Rock for a day and a half. About two hundred Buddhist teachers, both Western and Asian, spent time with him. The first day's format was somewhat awkward - different people would make presentations about aspects of Western Buddhism, usually three presenters with five to ten minutes each, followed by requests for his comments.

It was quite touching to observe. Sometimes he had much to say. Other times, after three presentations, when asked for response, he'd simply say, "Oh, nothing left up here. First person spoke, I had something to say, but then other people kept talking. Now all gone." He would just laugh about his memory, completely unbothered, and remain peacefully quiet.

One presentation focused on Buddhism's growing popularity in the West. A Western presenter said something rather bold: "Your Holiness, you are the biggest popularizer among all of us. This has led to things like a perfume called Samsara and a resort advertising 'We'll carry you to Nirvana the first day.' Your Holiness, this popularization risks trivializing the Dharma. What do you think?"

The Dalai Lama sat quietly, reflecting. Then he replied: "Some people call me Living Buddha. Others say I am God-King, but I am not. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk. But then others call me counter-revolutionary, or say I'm a wolf in monk's clothing. But you see, I look back at my own intention."

He said, "I got to Bangkok and I was standing in line to buy a ticket to Paris, and I just thought about my people here in the camp. How can I abandon them? So I turned around and got on a train back to the camp."

His supporters said, "But what about the threats on your life?" And he said, "If they want to kill me, they can kill me. But I'm not going to abandon the Dharma or abandon my people."

So he stayed and continued teaching. And remarkably, over the years, as Cambodia began to stabilize, Maha Ghosananda became one of the most respected figures in the rebuilding of the country. He organized peace walks across Cambodia, bringing together former enemies to walk side by side in reconciliation. His unwavering commitment to loving-kindness, even in the face of death threats, became a beacon of hope for an entire nation torn apart by hatred and violence.

The power of his practice of metta was that it enabled him to see beyond the immediate threat to the larger healing that was needed. He understood that only through love could the deep wounds of his people be healed. This is the transformative power of loving-kindness - it doesn't just protect us from anger, it enables us to act with wisdom and courage even in the most difficult circumstances.

These examples from the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King, and Maha Ghosananda show us that loving-kindness isn't just a nice feeling or a spiritual luxury. It's a practical tool for navigating life's challenges with grace and effectiveness.

When our hearts are established in metta, we become unshakeable in our commitment to what is wholesome and beneficial, regardless of external circumstances or opposition.

This brings us to one of the most profound aspects of loving-kindness practice: it creates what we might call "fearless compassion." When we're truly rooted in metta, we're no longer driven by the need to protect ourselves from criticism, rejection, or even physical harm. Instead, we're free to act from wisdom and care for the benefit of all beings.

He said, "Oh, I had more pamphlets printed." So he had 10,000 more pamphlets to distribute saying, "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love." And Cambodia has done a lot of work in reconciliation since that time. When the government got somewhat back together, he returned to the country and became the next patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism. He was a strong leader for years.

So this loving kindness makes the heart strong. It can withstand criticism. It can withstand anger. It can withstand fear. And it's a tremendously healing energy. This quality of love as it develops can heal a lot of our own hurts and injuries.

There's a poem from an Australian man named Michael Leunig: "When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it. Let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it. Let a bird lean in the hole and sing a simple song like a tiny bell and let it ring."

So loving kindness has this great healing energy and connects us through the uniting energy of care to all other beings, all other people. We start to understand that we're not so different and we're not so separate, that we're actually put together in pretty much the same way. When we look at our bodies, they're not that different. There are minor variations, but we all have eyes and nose and tongue and ears, heart and mind, belly. Our bodies are more or less the same.

As we start to understand these deeper needs and wishes—safety, happiness, health and ease—we realize that's pretty much the same also. And you start to feel like there's really just one human heart that has been poured into different vessels and then gone through different experiences and gotten shaped in different ways. But it's fundamentally not any different between any of us. It responds in much the same way in all of us.

And so, although a lot of our thoughts are about how we're different, we could also choose to reflect on all the ways that we're the same. We have the same emotional package. We have the same physical body more or less. And that's the deepest kind of con-

nection. When we see that there's some underlying unity in this human experience, despite all the distinctions, there's some way that we're all alike. It cuts through the sense of separation.

This is a poem from Rumi's teacher Shams of Tabriz: "I, you, he, she, we—in the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." And in the garden of loving kindness, these are not true distinctions either. We see an underlying unity despite the apparent differences.

So I just want to close with the way Oprah concluded her interview with the Dalai Lama. And before I read it, I just want to mention that in our tradition, metta is the primary of the Brahmavihāras, and it's the one that we emphasize. In the Tibetan tradition, compassion is seen as the primary one of the four immeasurables. So that's the one they emphasize. But love and compassion are not very different. So what the Dalai Lama says of compassion, we would equally say about love.

This is the conclusion of the discussion between Oprah and His Holiness: "In my magazine, I do a column called 'What I Know for Sure.' So what do you know for sure? The one thing of which you have no doubt." The Dalai Lama did not hesitate. "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For happy life and happy world, there is no doubt."

So let's just sit for a minute, please. Compassion is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world. There is no doubt.

CHAPTER 47

Kamma and the End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · 1h04

Guy Armstrong offers a thorough examination of one of Buddhism's most fundamental teachings: kamma (action with intention) and its results. Drawing from core suttas and the Dhammapada, he explains how the Buddha redefined the common Indian concept of action to emphasize volition (cetanā) as the key factor determining whether actions are wholesome or unwholesome. The talk covers the ten unwholesome actions across body, speech, and mind, and explores six ways karmic results manifest - from immediate effects during contemplation and action, to long-term habitual patterns and mysterious future consequences. Armstrong addresses Western resistance to karma teachings, clarifying misconceptions while explaining how this understanding differs from fatalism or indifference. He connects kamma to the brahmavihāras, particularly the equanimity practice of recognizing beings as heirs to their actions, and explores how the teaching relates to anattā (no-self). The discussion culminates in examining how the noble eightfold path leads to what the Buddha called 'the end of kamma' - the cessation of self-centered volition that reveals the unconditioned state of nibbāna.

Kamma and the End of Kamma

The Dalai Lama was once asked if he had to choose between teaching Westerners about karma or about emptiness, which was more important. He said, "If I could only teach about one, I would teach them about karma." We've spent considerable time discussing emptiness on this retreat, but we haven't devoted much attention to karma. Perhaps, by the Dalai Lama's guidance, we've missed something essential. Tonight I want to rectify that.

Why is the teaching on karma so important, especially for us as Westerners? First, because it's not a teaching we're very familiar with in this culture, and second, because it really is the science of happiness. Karma teaches us a clear road to happiness—whatever our aspiration may be, whether for ordinary human happiness, divine happiness, or the happiness of liberation.

I want to preface this talk by saying that some of what I'll discuss tonight is beyond my personal experience and that of most people I know. I'll be relating teachings from the Buddha that I haven't been able to personally verify. I'm not trying to convince you

that you should believe in them—I want to make that clear from the start. Whether you believe in them or not is up to you. It's not my job to make you believe; it's simply my job to tell you what the Buddha said. Then you can decide for yourself.

Don't feel you have to subscribe to anything in tonight's talk, and don't feel you have to figure it out this very evening. Many of these concepts may be new, so just let them settle, take them in, and try to keep an open mind. But I do want to convince you that karma is your best friend along this path. Karma is really your only friend along this path of awakening.

I'll divide this talk into four parts: karma and the concept itself, what the Buddha said about the results of karma, how it relates to anatta (the teaching of no fixed self), and what's meant by this mysterious pointing to the end of karma.

What is Karma?

Karma is a Sanskrit word. The Pali word is kamma. If you read the Buddhist texts in Pali, the word will be kamma, but they're identical—they mean the same thing. This was another common Indian word that the Buddha took and gave special meaning to. The original Indian word simply means action. That's all it means. Karma means action in Sanskrit; kamma means action in Pali. It's a standard concept in many Indian dialects.

But the Buddha put a new spin on it. At the time of his teachings, there were many philosophical schools in northern India, and every one of them had their own interpretation of what action meant, what karma meant. There was a really wide range of philosophical views. People would say things like: karma matters or it doesn't matter; action has consequences or it doesn't have any consequences; all our action is predetermined; all our action is freely chosen. These turned out to be speculative views because most of the teachers at the time didn't know from direct experience what they were talking about. They made up ideas and philosophies and propounded them.

The Buddha put a different spin on the word, and his originality in this understanding, he said, came from his own insight. In the Buddha's definition, karma meant action with volition, or you could say intention. The Pali word here is cetanā, the same word we've been using in the meditation instructions when we talk about mindfulness of intention.

This is how he defined it in one of the passages: "Volition, O bhikkhus, is what I call action, for through volition one performs the action."

This was a revolutionary concept. All the emphasis in other philosophies at the time was about the action itself. But the Buddha's particular emphasis was on the question: What is the intention or volition behind the action? Where does it come from as a motivation?

Synonyms for this word of intention or volition could be urge, motive, impulse, will, or motivation. You get the sense that it's the mental energy that drives the outer action.

Although in fact, thoughts themselves and emotions are also actions. We'll talk about that in a moment. And the Buddha said that actions are wholesome or unwholesome depending on what this inner force is that drives them. If the inner force is wholesome, it's considered a wholesome karmic action. If the inner force is unwholesome, it's considered an unwholesome karmic action.

As you probably can guess, the unwholesome actions are influenced by these three kilesas, the roots of the unwholesome, which are our old friends: greed, aversion, and delusion. And wholesome volition is that volition that comes out of their opposites. The opposite of greed being renunciation, or you could say generosity—letting go in its different forms. The opposite of aversion being loving kindness. The opposite of delusion being wisdom. So the wholesome roots are renunciation, loving kindness, and wisdom.

So in the Buddha's teaching, it's not the action in and of itself, but rather the motivation behind it.

Just a couple of simple examples. An infant is sleeping in its bed, rolls over, and in its sleep knocks over a candle. The candle catches fire to the drapes, and the fire burns the house down. The baby is, of course, saved—I want you to understand that. The baby's been rescued. Don't worry. But the house is burned down. This is not a particularly good outcome, but there is no unwholesome intention behind that knocking the candle over, so there's no karmic impact for the infant. There's no karma in that action. It was just an accident.

Or we could take an action like someone cutting another person through the abdomen with a very sharp knife and blood spews out. Is that wholesome or unwholesome? Depends on the intention. If a surgeon is performing an operation to remove an inflamed appendix, that's a wholesome action based on compassion. If a thief has cut the person in order to subdue them to steal their property, that's an unwholesome action. So the root that we judge by is the wholesomeness of the intention.

And also to be aware that some actions have mixed motives. We can see this a lot. We give someone a gift—there's generosity, but maybe we also want some gratitude in return. So often actions have mixed motives, and that means that they have a mixture of wholesome and unwholesome motivations.

I think what's interesting about this formulation of the Buddha's is that he's pointing to the fact that actions coming out of mental impulses in themselves have moral weight. There are morally wholesome and morally unwholesome actions based on the impulses that they come from. And this has a lot of big implications, which we'll get to.

The Buddha considered that action could take place in three spheres: thought, speech, and body. We're normally used to considering actions of speech and actions of body, but the Buddha said actions of mind can also be volitional. That means that thoughts sometimes come out of a motivation. Emotions sometimes express a motivation. For instance, a motive behind desire is to gain something pleasurable. The motive behind aversion is to get rid of something unpleasant.

But just so you don't get too paranoid in terms of your meditation, actions of thought have relatively little weight compared to actions of speech and body. So let's say you're angry at somebody—the thoughts are kind of angry—but if you don't express it in speech and you don't express it in action, meaning you don't blast the person and you don't punch the person, the karmic effect of the thought itself is relatively weak. It's not non-existent, but compared to the other actions, it's relatively small.

Fortunately, the Buddha was very clear about what kinds of actions are skillful and what kinds are not. He made a list, which appears many times in the texts, of what he called the ten unwholesome actions. Of these, there are three related to bodily action, four related to actions of speech, and three related to actions of mind. This is very helpful because we can understand that these are the ones we need to be careful with. We've already worked some with this topic in exploring conduct and the precepts. Some of them link very closely to the precepts, but it gets even more refined through this list. Some relate to the mind, which we haven't talked about so much.

Here are the ten unwholesome actions. The three unskillful actions of body are: killing living beings, taking what isn't freely offered or given, and sexual misconduct—harming others through our sexuality. And you can clearly see these form the first three of the five lay precepts.

Then there are four actions of speech that the Buddha considered unwholesome: speaking what isn't true, using harsh or abusive speech towards someone, speaking maliciously of others to undermine their reputation, and wasting time in what he called

idle speech and gossip. You can sort of get the flavor of this as like gossip—using the events of other people's lives just for entertainment and stimulation and kind of judgment.

And then he identified three actions of mind: covetousness, which is wanting something that belongs to another; ill will, which is wishing someone harm; and the third is quite interesting—wrong view. If we don't understand the world the way it is, which forms right view, the first element in the Eightfold Path, if we don't understand the way the world is, we have wrong view, and that becomes the basis for our relationship with life. If we understand the nature of life incorrectly, that becomes an unwholesome foundation for actions.

So these are the ten unwholesome actions, and the wholesome actions are simply to refrain from the ten unwholesome. It's pretty clear. Then in addition, there are many wholesome actions that go beyond this, but the basic list is to refrain from the unwholesome.

These teachings on karma and skillful action are very helpful to reflect on and take care with in our life in the world. As we've already discussed, the precepts form guidelines that protect us and protect others. The Buddha said that one who has taken real care with their conduct in the world enjoys what he called the bliss of blamelessness. He considered this a very high source of happiness in life. When we are so careful with our conduct that we don't have regrets about the way we have treated others, then we feel this freedom from remorse and freedom from guilt that has a very pleasant quality—this is the bliss of blamelessness.

I mentioned in a talk a while ago how the Dalai Lama had this quality. Someone else who I thought also had this was Dipa Ma. Dipa Ma was this wonderful Indian teacher from Calcutta who visited IMS in 1980 on her first trip to America. Carol and I had an opportunity to look after her at that time. We had been on staff at IMS, and so we were asked to look after her for a month when she first arrived. We were all living together in a house in Western Mass, so I had the chance to see her in many different situations—some situations that would have been trying for me. But I never saw the slightest flicker of anger in her or even impatience.

I particularly remember a visit we took her and her family on. She also had a daughter and a grandson with her at the time. We took them shopping in a department store near Amherst, and the grandson was about four years old—a very rowdy four-year-old. He was loose in this American department store; I don't think he'd ever been in one before. It was spacious and quite big and fun, so he was running down the aisles. Shirts would be falling off and hangers clattering to the ground, and there was Dipa Ma run-

ning along behind him, both to pick things up and try to catch him. Her white sari was flapping out behind her as she ran down the aisle, and on her face was just this sweet little smile. There was no frustration, irritation, impatience, or anger—just a very sweet attitude toward her grandson.

In the whole month that we were together, I never saw anything approaching impatience or irritation in her. She was someone who, as far as I could tell, really enjoyed this bliss of blamelessness. She was a very happy and contented person.

So this is the quality of the action itself—really taking care not to harm, not to harm ourselves through unwholesome actions, even with our thoughts.

The reason this is important is that actions have consequences in the Buddha's teachings. So let's talk a little bit about results. I'm sure you're familiar with this basic concept: wholesome actions lead to wholesome results in our lives; unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results. Wholesome actions lead to happiness; unwholesome actions lead to unhappiness for ourselves. This is clearly stated by the Buddha in one of the first passages in the Dhammapada, where he says:

"Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

So this is the basic message of karma and result: wholesome actions lead to happiness; unwholesome actions lead to unhappiness. It's interesting that this notion is becoming fairly well known in modern culture, the basic outline of it.

James and I, some years ago, were teaching a series of classes at a juvenile hall in California. That work was actually the basis for what later became the Mind-Body Awareness Project and the Lineage Project.

We were invited in by a student of James who worked there. For those unfamiliar with the American juvenile justice system, Juvenile Hall is where people stay when they've been arrested and charged with a crime if they're under eighteen. These were teenagers, mostly fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old, but we were in the maximum security wing. These were young men who had been arrested and charged with crimes like theft, armed robbery, assault, and murder.

Fortunately we had a very good ally who worked with the young people and supported our being there. Otherwise, I don't know if we would have had the nerve to do it. But it was a very good experience for us.

We had completed the entire class series on mindfulness, following the breath, and how to be with difficult emotions. They were a very appreciative audience because they had a lot of time on their hands. Also, they were young people in a very scary situation where a judge could put them away for a long, long time. So many emotions were up for them - fear, anxiety, uncertainty in their lives. They were very receptive to the teachings.

When we got to the last class, James and I talked to each other and said, "Should we talk about karma? I don't know how that would go down." We were also going to talk about sila if we taught karma, and we decided to go for it.

So we began teaching about karma and this understanding that wholesome actions lead to happiness. We simply asked, "Does this sound like something you've ever heard before?" One of the young men said, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around? Sure, we've heard that." That was pretty cool - it's already out there in the vernacular. What goes around comes around. That's the essence of it.

This sense of things coming around is also expressed in the Tibetan tradition in their phrases for metta and compassion. Tibetans also work with the Brahmaviharas, the same ones that we work with, but they have a slightly different name. They call them the four immeasurables because all the Brahmaviharas are considered to be boundless or immeasurable states.

The Tibetan phrases for metta and compassion weave in this teaching on karma. Let me read you the phrases and you'll see. This is the phrase for metta: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." This is the phrase for compassion: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue."

What's interesting about this formulation - the way the Buddha expressed it, the way the Tibetan phrases express it - is it applies to all beings. In the Buddhist understanding, it's a universal law. It doesn't matter whether you believe in this or not, it applies. It doesn't matter whether you know it's true or not, it applies. It doesn't matter if your religion believes in it or not, it applies. It doesn't matter if your culture believes in it or not, it applies.

In fact, our whole growth on the path is dependent on this law. So it's fortunate that it applies for us. There are these universal laws, and the Buddha's whole teaching was really about discovering them and revealing them. He did not teach speculative views. He taught things that he understood directly to be the way things are.

Another of those universal laws we discussed last week with Mahagosananda handing out pamphlets and chanting with his Cambodian refugees on the Thai border: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law." Another phrase from the Dhammapada, one of the Buddha's teachings.

This understanding that virtue is the cause of happiness and non-virtue is the cause of unhappiness is reflected in the phrase for the equanimity practice in the Brahmaviharas. There are different phrases for loving-kindness, for compassion, for appreciative joy, and for equanimity. The equanimity phrase is directly related to the teaching on karma.

Here is the phrase we use for the equanimity meditation: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own past actions more than on my wishes for them."

This is the classical phrase. Sometimes this isn't so easy, so we soften it for people. But for now, we'll talk about it as the classical approach.

This is a very useful practice if you have friends or family members who you always see making the kinds of choices you wish they wouldn't. Most people know one or two people like this. You wish you could get into their control center when they're about to make the next major choice in their life and say, "Don't do that. That's not the wise way to go." Then you watch the effects play out in their life some months or years later.

As you repeat this phrase, you understand that people make their own choices, and they're going to keep making their own choices—some of which don't help them. Some of their choices lead to their own unhappiness. This phrase gives us equanimity about acknowledging that everybody has their own journey and their own direction in life based on their choices. It brings about a sense of acceptance.

This phrase for equanimity, the Buddha actually stated even more strongly in his teaching. I'll read this passage: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions." The word here, of course, is karma, but it means action with volition. "Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of those they will be the heirs."

This is a powerful message. Our actions are the womb from which we are born. Our very being, moment after moment, emerges from our own past actions—a huge sense of personal responsibility in that formulation.

Westerners often feel a strong resistance to this notion. I think because it's not so familiar in our culture and also because we have a very democratic understanding of the way things ought to be. For those of you who aren't from this country, you might not know that the very beginning of the American Declaration of Independence from 1776, when America formally separated from Great Britain, starts off—I'm just paraphrasing a little—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal."

This is a very deep notion in our culture, the notion of the equality of all human beings, and a very noble and inspiring one. But sometimes I think it leaves a little bit of an impression that all beings should be equally happy. And that doesn't work. Things just don't work that way.

So this teaching on karma, which basically says that we have a lot of personal responsibility for our situation, can seem cold, can seem indifferent, uncaring, and like it glosses over a number of ways that suffering comes to us. We'll explain this a little more as we go along.

But one of the ways this is sometimes felt in the West is that it means if you're unhappy, you deserve it—that beings deserve to suffer. That is not in the notion of karma and it's not in the Buddha's teaching. And I don't think it was at all in his intention in delivering this teaching. I strongly believe if he had had the ability to reach into the heart of everyone he met and pluck out the source of suffering, he would have done it in an instant.

A good example of this is his relationship with Angulimala. Angulimala was a former spiritual student who got some bad instruction. On the advice of his spiritual teacher, he murdered 999 people and collected a finger from each person he'd killed in a necklace which he wore around his neck. That's the literal meaning of his name, Angulimala. And he intended to kill the Buddha as his thousandth and final victim.

The Buddha was walking near Angulimala's hangout place in the deep forest. His friends said, "Don't go there. That murderer is going to get you." But the Buddha said, "I'm not worried," and he went there. He met Angulimala and avoided being killed. Angulimala was so taken with his presence and his centeredness that he asked the Buddha for teaching.

So if the Buddha thought Angulimala deserved to suffer, he would have said, "No, you just live out your karma. You're going to have a really bad road, but you deserve it." But that's not what happened. The Buddha taught him the Dhamma. He ordained Angulimala. Angulimala practiced and became awakened—ending the basic mass of suffering through his awakening.

Now interestingly, when Angulimala went on alms round, he was attacked by local people who knew him as a murderer. He came back to the Buddha and said, "Why are these people attacking me?" The Buddha said, "That's your karma." But he had freed his heart and mind from suffering.

The teaching on karma does not mean anyone deserves to suffer, but it's simply pointing to a natural law. Expecting this law not to operate would be like expecting the law of gravity not to operate. It would be like expecting an apple to ripen and fall from a tree in the orchard down the road and not drop to the ground. You can't arrest the law of gravity, and you can't arrest the law of karma. It simply happens.

Another way that karma is sometimes misheard or misunderstood is that it seems to provide an excuse or rationale for not caring. It's as though we think, "Well, that person is suffering, but that's their karma. So it's their problem. Therefore, that's not my problem." That is not what the teaching of karma is about either. That is called indifference.

Compassion recognizes suffering and wants to help, and it doesn't care what the cause is. The cause could be something from outside, something accidental. It could be something in one's own body, an illness. It could be mental afflictions. It could be something karmic. Compassion doesn't care about the source. It sees suffering, and it wants to alleviate it.

Using a rationale like, "Oh, that's their karma, so that's their problem," to turn off the feeling of compassion is called indifference. And indifference in the Brahmaviharas is recognized as the near enemy of equanimity. In other words, when equanimity isn't ripe and it falls into an unwholesome state that mimics it, it falls into indifference. What this means is that if we're feeling indifferent and rationalizing why we don't need to help somebody, then our equanimity isn't right.

Equanimity supports metta and compassion, but metta and compassion also need to suffuse equanimity. If they don't, equanimity becomes too cold and turns into indifference. In that case, there needs to be a suffusion of compassion that will fill out the equanimity and ripen it so that there's balance but also caring. The heart can then respond to the suffering that we meet.

The results of actions happen in at least six ways, and I want to go through the six ways that they're seen and described.

The first is that before we act, we pick up the energy of the action we're thinking of doing. So if we're thinking about being generous with someone or kind with someone, even as we contemplate that action, it feels good. It uplifts us. It makes us happy to think about helping other people. Similarly, if we think about doing an action that's not kind, that's going to hurt somebody, it feels kind of creepy.

I work on various committees, both at IMS and at Spirit Rock. One time, we had a phone call about what to do regarding a certain situation. It wasn't clear-cut, and so we were all giving our opinions about what we should do. I put forth one opinion, and somebody else on the call put forth a different opinion, which is fine. I don't mind being disagreed with.

But afterwards, the person sent me an email about the topic, restating the disagreement, but in a way that I felt was really dismissive of my view and disrespectful. I felt it was very clear from the email—it was really dismissive and disrespectful. So I didn't feel good about it.

The first thing that occurred to me was, "I think I'll forward this email to the rest of the committee." I thought, "Oh, then they'll see the unskillful nature of my opponent's argument, and that will sway them to come to my side of the argument." But as soon as I saw that my motivation was basically to undermine the person, I couldn't send the email. So I didn't. I didn't forward it. I called the person up and talked about it, but I didn't forward the email because it felt creepy to think about doing that.

The second way that we feel this effect of karma is in doing the action itself. When we're in the process of giving to someone or helping someone, it feels great. A staff person was collecting wood for the winter, and they asked if any other staff would like to help them stack it. It ended up being three and a half cords of wood, which is a lot of work. A bunch of staff people came over and helped them, and in return, their friend offered them some nice food.

And at the end of the day, the staff who had come to help thanked the people who needed their wood stacked. Part of it was for the food, but also because it simply feels good to give. It feels good to help. In a way, they were thanking them for the opportunity to be of service, to be community.

So giving feels good, helping feels good. Hurting somebody feels painful. If you reflect on times when you've caused harm and examine the state of heart and mind in that moment, you'll find it was contracted, unhappy—a state of suffering. Our friend

Sylvia Borstein has a beautiful phrase: "Anyone causing great pain is themselves in great pain." This is true. Reflecting on this can sometimes open a doorway for compassion.

The third way we experience karma is when we've completed an action and reflect back on it. We feel the happiness or unhappiness of what we've done. When we give instructions for sending metta to yourself, we often say: reflect on your skillful actions in the past. Reflect on ways you've been generous. Reflect on ways you've helped people. When you do this, you feel good about yourself. You remember the joy in doing something that helps another, and this creates a wholesome quality that allows the metta to grow more easily.

Similarly, as we enter a long retreat with extended silence, we often remember things we've done in the past that have hurt other people. The forgiveness practice has a whole element directed toward this recollection. Remembering the ways we've harmed others becomes very painful as we grow sensitive and attuned to the precepts, the wish not to harm, and the value of loving-kindness. Those moments in our lives when we haven't been able to live by these values are profoundly painful to feel. We often experience deep guilt or remorse at such times.

The fourth way we can observe karma's influence is that as we treat other people, our actions return to us in relationship. If you tend to be friendly, warm, and generous with people, they welcome you, want to see you, are open with you, and value being with you. If you are irritable, judgmental, or unfriendly, people remember that. When you meet them again, they step back and eventually close off to you, shutting you out. Our actions come back to us in relationship—this too is karmic.

The fifth way we see karma manifest is through what I would describe as habitual states of mind. When we repeatedly engage in certain patterns of thinking and feeling, these are actions arising from intention or volition, and they create patterns that then repeat almost automatically, almost compulsively.

The Buddha taught: "Bhikkhus, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, then their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

Through our habitual ways of thinking and feeling, we wear a groove in the mind that makes it easy to fall back into again and again. This is the fifth way we can observe karma's effects.

Then there's the sixth way: according to the Buddha, actions we perform for good or ill can have mysterious results in the future—results we cannot see or understand, but which he said do happen. He described these quite clearly. This sixth way represents aspects of karma we cannot experientially verify, but the Buddha spoke of them with certainty.

For instance, how is it that acting out of kindness brings happiness? It's rather mysterious, isn't it? And yet, that's the basic teaching of the Dhammapada passage—that it simply does.

What I find so fascinating about this entire teaching, which points to the effects of wholesome and unwholesome actions, is what the Buddha seems to be saying: this concept of good and ill—what we call morality—is woven into the very fabric of the universe. It's not something accidental, not merely an adaptive mechanism of evolution, but exists at the center of the laws governing sentient life. Wherever there are sentient beings, these actions and their results apply.

Initially, the teaching of karma can seem cold, impersonal, or uncaring. But as I felt into this message more deeply, I realized what it truly means: we live in a moral universe where morality is one of the central features of sentient existence. This began to feel to me like a universe with a heart—a caring universe. When I then reflected on the idea that there was no morality in the universe, that the universe was essentially cold and amoral, that began to feel very uncaring and heartless.

So as I contemplated this teaching on karma more deeply, it warmed up the whole universe for me. It gave existence a sense of a beating heart, right at the center of all sentient life.

Now the Buddha said that actions play out in complicated ways that we cannot figure out.

He said that the results of karma are one of what he called the four imponderables. He said if you try to figure this stuff out, you will go mad and experience vexation. I'm not sure in which order, but either way, the outcome is not so great. There's no point in trying to figure out how this works. It's beyond the scope of reason. The Buddha said he could intuit it through insight, but it's beyond the scope of reason.

The three other imponderables, in case you're interested, are the range of the mind of a Buddha—the kinds of things that a Buddha can see—the beginning of things, which I take to be the origin of the physical universe, and the power of a concentrated mind. All impossible to figure out.

These imponderables leave us necessarily humble. And the teaching on karma does get misused sometimes. You've probably had this experience where someone you know gets sick, and a friend will say, trying to be helpful, I guess, something like, "Oh, that's your karma." And how does that make the person who's sick feel? Not very good. Like, I have to blame myself for this illness now.

But saying "that's your karma" is just a speculative view. We can't see that, and the Buddha never said that. He was asked at one point whether everything that happens to us in the way of pleasant or unpleasant feeling comes from past action. And he said, "You can't say that." He said you can see for yourself that there are other causes for pleasant and painful feelings. Illness of the body is a cause for painful feeling. Climate is a cause for pleasant or unpleasant feeling. Diet can be a cause. Accident can be a cause. And assault or attack can be a cause. These are all causes for pleasant and unpleasant feeling, and karma is another cause.

This is the way we understand it. It's not that everything in the universe happens because of karma. There are lots of other kinds of causes—physical, chemical, biological, genetic, climatological. Karma is one cause among many. But not everything that happens to us is because of karma, the Buddha said quite clearly.

I think the way to hold this teaching is to take it in broad terms and mostly look forward, knowing that wholesome actions will lead to more happiness, unwholesome actions will lead to more unhappiness. It doesn't work so well as a rearview mirror. Like, how did I get here? It must have been that karmic action. I don't think so. We can't see that. The Buddha said that he could in certain cases, but we can't. So speculating on that doesn't really take us anywhere.

There are these six ways that we can describe the workings of karma, six ways we can see the results. When somebody says, "I don't believe in karma," usually what they mean is they don't believe in this sixth kind, this mysterious kind that the Buddha talked about that we can't see directly. But the other five we can see and understand. So I wouldn't just take it on faith if we're inclined to say we don't believe in karma. We don't believe in one small slice, perhaps, of the teaching on karma.

You may or may not resonate with this teaching at this point. It took me a lot of years of hanging out with it, observing and reflecting on it over a long period of time to get confidence in this teaching. At this point, I have a lot of confidence in it. I've looked at my own life. I've looked at the lives of many of my friends over thirty, thirty-five years. I have a lot of confidence in this message, but it took me a while to get there.

What I'd recommend is if you feel unsure about this, just let your mind open to the possibility. You could close off and say, "That's not true. I don't believe that." But this "that's not true" thing—we don't know either. To say that's not true is just another view and opinion. There's no basis from which you can know that. The proper attitude, as I understand it, is just to stay open. Consider it as a possibility and watch as your life unfolds and as you practice the dharma, and see what you think.

Just hang out with the possibility and consider and reflect on it.

So then the next place that this leads, of course, is the question of rebirth. Because to fully understand the workings of karma, for it to fully play out, it has to be seen across lifetimes. We look at a figure like Hitler, for example. I don't see enough suffering in this lifetime proportionate to his misdeeds. So in order to consider where the karmic result might be taking place proportionate to his actions, I have to look at a future life. And the Buddha described this again and again also.

So as I understand it, rebirth is needed to make full sense of karma. Of course you can understand it in a more limited way in one lifetime, but really to understand the fullness of it, I think it helps to understand it in the prospect of several lives.

So I was also skeptical about rebirth when I came in contact with these teachings. But I didn't close my mind to it. I just said, I don't know the situation here. Maybe it's true, maybe it's not. And again, it's just a concept I hung out with over a lot of years and became more and more appreciative of. So now I don't know what happens when I die. As Ajahn Sumedho said, I haven't died yet. How could I know? But I have a certain confidence in this teaching also. But again, it may not be true for you.

So the Buddha said a few things about the actions in future lives. He said that if one is generous in this life, one will experience now or in a future life an abundance in material things. If one is stingy and not prone to giving, then in this life or future life, one will experience a lack of abundance in material things. If one takes care and doesn't kill living beings, then at some point one will experience a long lifespan, kind of reflecting that commitment to life. If one is non-injuring of living beings, at some point one will experience health over a lifespan.

About karma and its influence in future lives, the Buddha put it this way. Grain was a form of wealth in the agricultural society 2,500 years ago in India, so it's one of the ways he points to wealth here. "Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, and dependents, none of these can you take with you. You must cast them all aside at death. But whatever karma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession, and you must fare according to that karma. That karma will follow you just as the shadow follows its owner. Therefore, do good actions. Gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings after death."

So again, I can't tell you to believe this or not. But the Buddha said that it would be a good bet to make because if rebirth turns out to be true, you'll be well positioned. If it turns out not to be true, you'll have done good in this life and you'll be loved and respected.

So rebirth also raises the question of who is reborn. And in a way it relates to the question of karma also. This question on karma was addressed to the Buddha in his lifetime. A bhikkhu approached him and said, "What self, then, will actions performed by the not-self affect?"

It's a good question, isn't it? What self will the actions performed by the not-self affect? And the Buddha said, basically, you haven't been listening to me. And that was really all he said. It's a great question, isn't it?

So in order to understand this, both about karma and about rebirth, think about the way your experience unfolds moment after moment in meditation. You're observing very carefully and you see everything is changing. Body sensations, sounds, thoughts, emotions. Nothing is solid from one moment to the next. Nothing is fixed.

And yet, there's a kind of ongoing continuity, isn't there? There's some way in which my experience at the end of a meditation is like my experience has been for a while. I don't turn into the Dalai Lama as a result of one sitting meditation. There's a way that there's a continuity going on, we could say, of a pattern. There's a pattern in my experience, even though everything is changing.

So we might say that this pattern is what continues in us moment by moment because one moment of experience touches and conditions the next, touches and conditions the next, touches and conditions the next. Nothing solid or fixed all the way through, but there is a conditioning process that creates an ongoing appearance of patterns. This is basically how rebirth happens also.

Nothing is fixed, but there is some way that the pattern is transmitted to the next birth. Ajahn Amaro had a really nice way of saying this. He said, "The process of going from one life to the next is not very different from the process of going from one moment to the next." You can reflect on that. I think that's a great pointer.

But let's talk a little more about how this unfolds. Think about a river or a stream. If you like, think about that stream that flows from the little pond at the end of the parking lot. It's kind of fun to watch a stream and ask, "Where's the stream? What is a stream?" Because we could call that the IMS stream, and it would have a name. It means something to us. If we say "the IMS stream," you know what I'm talking about. It's different from, say, the Connecticut River, which is much bigger, has a lot more water. It's also dirtier.

But if you look at the IMS stream, is there anything solid there? Is there anything that stays the same from moment to moment? It's all changing, isn't it? Heraclitus said you never step in the same stream twice. It's totally different water, moment after moment after moment. Nothing is the same in that stream from one moment to the next, yet it sort of forms a predictable shape, or we could say pattern. There might even be an eddy that's in the same place all the time, even though it's completely different water.

We can also use this concept of a stream for our inner experience. We can call it a mind stream. We look into it and there are thoughts and emotions and sense impressions going by moment after moment after moment. Nothing's fixed, yet this mind stream that we call mine is different from that mind stream that we call yours. This mind stream has certain recognizable patterns and eddies. Your mind stream has certain recognizable patterns and eddies. Even though there's nothing fixed, there's no self at the center of it all.

And personality is basically just this collection of feelings, thoughts, speech, and actions, right? Isn't that basically what personality is? So personality is kind of the total sum of our karmic patterns, just unfolding from this mind stream as it rolls on.

Our mind stream, when we come into the Dharma, is headed one place, and that is Lake Samsara. Driven by greed, aversion, and ignorance, it's just heading again and again to Lake Samsara. And we know what keeps it going. Greed, aversion, delusion keep it on that track. That's our pattern. That's the destination.

But then the teachings of the Dharma come in. And the teachings of the Dharma in the beginning are just this little tributary that come in from one side and add a different kind of current to it. We start adding the current of mindfulness, a current of metta, of compassion, of renunciation, of tranquility, of generosity. In the beginning, these

don't seem to affect the basic flow very much. They're kind of a minor impact. But as time goes on, these things become really strong. All of you who have been here for five weeks now, they've become very strong in your mind stream. You are now not headed toward Lake Samsara. You are headed to the Nirvanic Ocean.

And as this tributary becomes stronger and stronger, it totally changes the direction of our mind streams and leads us in an entirely new way. So the only way this can happen is because there's nothing fixed here to begin with. If our ignorance was fixed, if our craving was fixed, if our aversion was fixed, this tributary couldn't move the direction of this current, but they're not. They're also conditioned and subject to change. So this new stream that comes in starts to take us in an entirely different way, an entirely different direction.

And we start to see that Dharma practice is basically using the power of karma for personal transformation. Because these are all intentional actions that we undertake through our thoughts and feelings. The intention for mindfulness, the intention for metta, the intention for calm, the intention for renunciation. We act these over and over and over again. And it's a karmic unfolding that's able to change the direction of our mind stream. Another way to say this is the path itself is a karmic unfolding.

And without the law of karma, this path couldn't unfold the way that it does.

This great Indian teacher, Nisargadatta Maharaj, put it this way—I love this expression. He was in dialogue, I think with a Westerner, and said, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." This is very much like the equanimity phrase: "Your choices have been the backbone of your happiness and unhappiness."

The questioner replied, "Well, surely karma interfered." And Maharaj said, "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life. The attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character."

This is profound. Your character shapes your life. And ultimately, you alone can shape your character. This is what we're engaged in here—shaping our character moment after moment after moment with these very powerful and wholesome intentions. And as we do that, the whole shape of our life is changed.

Eventually, it ends in this direction, rather cryptically expressed by the Buddha as the end of karma. The Buddha said that one who is fully awakened has come to the end of karma. By that I understand the end of self-centered volition or intention. And what is it that takes us there? He said, "It is this noble eightfold path—right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—that is the way leading to the end of karma."

And so we start to understand how sila, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom start to still our being. We come into a place of so much peace and so much stillness that the urge to act on behalf of ourself goes away. And we trust in that stillness and that abandoning of individual will. We feel then that we're at this place where the Buddha described nibbana as the stilling of all formations, and we start to feel we're in close proximity to that.

And so we let go the individual volition, the self-centered willfulness, and surrender to that stillness. And that has the power to reveal to us something else beyond karma, beyond conditioning, beyond the individual—the power to reveal to us the unconditioned nibbana, the real stilling of all formations.

We trust in that. We trust in that stillness, the ending of karma.

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 48

Day One Instructions For the Three Month Retreat

Guy Armstrong · 40 min

> *Guy Armstrong offers welcoming and practical guidance for the opening day of an intensive three-month vipassanā retreat. This foundational talk addresses the natural disorientation that comes with settling into retreat life and establishes the core framework for developing continuous mindfulness (sati) throughout all activities.*
>
> *Armstrong emphasizes that mindfulness is the heart of awakening and should extend beyond formal sitting and walking periods to become "a continuous thread of presence throughout the day." He guides practitioners through establishing awareness of the six sense doors - seeing, hearing, bodily sensations, thoughts, emotions, and the overall field of consciousness. The instructions focus on developing non-conceptual awareness that knows what's happening in the present moment without getting caught in thinking.*
>
> *The practical meditation guidance includes proper posture (upright yet relaxed), breath awareness integrated throughout the body, and gentle acknowledgment when attention wanders to thoughts. Armstrong addresses the common challenge of trying too hard with the breath, offering the alternative of simply resting awareness in the sitting posture. This talk sets the stage for the gradual unfolding of instructions over the retreat's first two weeks, emphasizing patience with the settling-in process and the importance of attending daily morning sessions for evolving guidance.*

Good morning, everyone. Nice to see that most of you have found your way back to the hall. I hope you got some sleep last night. You know, the first day or so of a retreat can kind of go by in a blur of sleepiness and wondering where's the food, when can I take a shower, what are these instructions for my yogi job? So don't worry if it feels like there's a bit of fogginess around the whole enterprise this morning. It's normal.

We'll begin with some simple instructions for sitting. We will be unfolding the instructions over about the first two weeks of the retreat, so they'll be changing every day. That's why it's really helpful to come to the morning sitting, because this is the time when we'll be giving new instructions each morning.

I want to lay a general framework for what we're about. You all know well this quality of mindfulness, which is really the heart of waking up. We want to have that quality of mindfulness available to us throughout the day—not just during the formal sitting

periods, not just during the formal walking, but to have it be a continuous thread of presence throughout the day. That is really the challenge for us all as practitioners: how can we stay connected to the present moment?

The formal sittings and walkings will have very clear instructions for that. As time goes by, we'll fill in how to bring that into all the other activities of the day as well. But you can begin working with that throughout the day today as you move between silence and talk, between activity and stillness. You begin to work with just filling in with the continuity of mindfulness.

In the sitting meditations, I want to start with a very basic fact: that we are already aware. We are conscious beings, we are sentient beings. So take in now what's occurring within your field of consciousness, because this is the field for our meditation.

If your eyes are open, you're experiencing seeing. When we live with eyes open sixteen or eighteen hours a day, we sort of forget that the eyes are another sense and that contact is happening a lot of the time. In meditation we want to know at times, "Oh, what's predominant now is seeing." So we can use seeing as simply another sense door.

There are the sensations in the body as you're sitting, and with some stillness, the sensations are often strong or quite apparent. There's hearing—you're hearing the sound perhaps of the fans, the sound of my voice, the sound of one another. Thoughts will be coming and going: my words, your words. And there will be a mood or emotional tone that's present for all of us right now. You've probably had a lot of different moods and emotions in traveling here, in arriving yesterday. So maybe just tuning in: what's that mood and emotion right now?

This is the range of our senses as we sit. There may be some smell, there may be some taste, but these are the primary senses that we'll be working with in the sitting posture. So just first having the attention very broad and aware of everything that you're experiencing in this moment: sight, sound, sensation, thoughts, mood, letting that all be just as it is. This is the field of human experience. This is the field of meditation.

Now you can let your eyes gently close. If you're used to a practice where you meditate with your eyes open, that's fine. Mostly in Vipassana, we sit with our eyes closed. So if that's comfortable for you, it's recommended. Let the eyes be gentle. As you close them, there's not a hard gaze, there's not staring. They're just softly closed and relaxed. Maybe slightly downcast gives a little more sense of relaxation.

Then connect with the sense of your body in the sitting posture. Let your posture be such that the back is fairly straight. You might feel that a balloon is stretching your head up toward the ceiling, and that will lengthen your spine. But at the same time, you want to have a real feeling of relaxation. So don't strain. As one teacher said, don't sit like your spine is a steel rod. Let it be soft and flexible and upright.

Take a quick look through the body posture to see if there are any areas that you can consciously relax. The forehead can be unknotted. The eyes can be soft. The jaw can be loose. The shoulders can drop.

And the belly can be soft. The hands don't have to clench tightly. Let them relax too.

Notice how it feels to sit in this upright and relaxed body—relaxed as far as possible. We can't relax everything at once, but as far as possible, we're relaxed, upright, and alert.

As you know, mindfulness is not about thinking. It's really about discovering a new dimension that we have—this non-conceptual awareness that knows what's happening in the present moment. So right now, know the body posture, know the body in sitting. Have a sense that you can just rest within the body. You can let the mind drop into the body and allow its stability to hold the wandering mind.

As you rest your attention within the body, eventually you'll notice the sensations of breathing. Begin to feel how the breath is impacting the body. Every time you breathe in, certain sensations are known in the body. Every time you breathe out, a different set of sensations takes place. Let your interest be just with feeling those sensations as the breath comes and goes in the body.

It's not so much that we want to observe the breath from the eyes or from the head, but we want to integrate the awareness throughout the body so that we feel the breath where it's happening. Some of you may find that you feel the breath more clearly in one part of the body—it could be in the belly, the chest, or the nose—and your attention naturally goes there. That's fine. For others, it may be that the breath is just felt throughout the whole body every time it enters, every time it leaves. That's fine too.

In whatever way the breath is felt most clearly for you, let that be the focus for your attention, whether that's small or wide. If you ever find that bringing attention to the breath creates some sense of strain or trying too hard not to miss a breath, then just return to the sense of awareness filling the body posture. Knowing when you sit that you're sitting—that's enough.

Sometimes you'll notice that you've lost touch with the present and your attention has been involved in a train of thought for some time. That's natural. It happens a lot. Don't worry about it. When you notice that, you're already back in the present moment. So acknowledge the thinking, appreciate the return to the present, and then remember just to notice again: sitting and breathing.

Today is something of a transition day, a settling-in day. It's time to take care of any unfinished business that you may not have been able to wrap up yesterday, time for formal practice, time for informal practice, time for a little communication. We're going to be together a long time—three months for some of you, six weeks for all of us. It's really helpful just to have a little base of getting to know a bit about each other before we go into the extended period of silence. So we'll do a little bit of that today as well.

CHAPTER 49

Morning Instructions - Intentions

Guy Armstrong · 2 min

> *In this morning instruction from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines cetanā (intention) as one of the most powerful mental factors, ranking it alongside sati (mindfulness), paññā (wisdom), and samādhi (concentration). He teaches that intention is the very root of kamma, determining the moral weight of our actions of body, speech, and mind, and ultimately shaping our future happiness or suffering.*
>
> *Armstrong explores the three wholesome roots of action: alobha (non-greed), adosa (non-aversion), and amoha (non-delusion), which manifest positively as generosity, mettā (loving-kindness), and wisdom. He emphasizes how aligning our intentions with these wholesome qualities leads to long-term well-being, illustrating the fundamental principle of kamma in action.*
>
> *The teaching offers practical guidance for daily life, showing how meditation develops the crucial skill of recognizing unwholesome intentions before they manifest as actions. Through simple exercises like mindful posture changes and door opening, practitioners learn to cultivate awareness of intention as the foundation for transforming their life's direction and contributing to both personal and collective happiness.*

I mentioned at the beginning that intention is a really powerful factor of mind. After mindfulness, wisdom, concentration, and perhaps loving-kindness, I'd say it's the most powerful factor of mind. This is surprising because, based on this little exercise, it wasn't like knocking you over the head, right?

Intention is the root of karma. The intention behind our actions of thought, speech, and body is what gives them their moral weight and leads ultimately to our increasing happiness or increasing unhappiness. Intention is the influencer of our future well-being.

It is said that when we speak and act from a wholesome intention, this will lead directly to happiness. Speaking and acting from an unwholesome intention will lead to some kind of suffering for us. It is very important that you start to be in the driver's seat of your whole life when you take hold of intention. You shape your future happiness or unhappiness with this factor of intention.

The wholesome roots of action are non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion. Put another way, we could say it's generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. When you negate greed, it turns into generosity. When you negate hatred, it turns into loving-kindness. When you negate delusion, it turns into wisdom. If we keep our actions of body, speech, and mind aligned with non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, this is what leads to our long-term happiness. This is the principle of karma, and that's why this factor of intention is so important.

In daily life, the first thing we start to notice is when there's an unwholesome intention arising, and then we have a choice to restrain it. Before I found meditation, when an urge would come, action would just follow. Once I started to meditate, the urge would come, I'd notice it, and I could restrain the unwholesome ones. This is a great skill and a great contributor to your own happiness and others' happiness.

Being able to tune into intention in this simple way—changing posture, opening doors—is the lead-in to directing our life's outcome. It all starts here, really simply.

CHAPTER 50

Morning Instructions - Intention or Cetanā in Pali

Guy Armstrong · 44 min

> *In this morning meditation instruction from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong introduces practitioners to cetanā, the Pali term for intention—one of the most important mental factors in Buddhist psychology. This teaching focuses on developing awareness of the subtle mental signals that precede voluntary bodily movements, what Armstrong calls the 'about-to moment.' Through careful observation of simple actions like adjusting posture, swallowing, or shifting position, practitioners learn to recognize the intention that arises in mind before the body responds.*
>
> *Armstrong explains that cetanā (also translated as volition by scholars like Bhikkhu Bodhi) represents the connection between mind and body, demonstrating how mental factors direct physical actions. This practice builds foundational awareness for understanding the broader role of intention in karma and mental formations (saṅkhāra). The instruction emphasizes starting with simple, observable movements during meditation before extending this awareness into daily life activities.*
>
> *This teaching offers both beginning and experienced practitioners a practical entry point into understanding one of the key mental factors (cetasika) in Abhidhamma psychology, while maintaining focus on direct, experiential investigation rather than theoretical study.*

We're going to introduce one more meditation focus this morning, and we've waited until this point because it's one of the more subtle things that we can pay attention to—the factor in the mind called intention. The Pali word is cetanā.

This is an incredibly important mental factor. I'll talk at the end about why it's so important. But being able to recognize it in simple situations first, as we'll do in this meditation, will be really useful for carrying it through the rest of our days and also out in the world. Intention has a tremendous amount of power in our life.

We're going to look at it very simply in this meditation and through the rest of the day as the connection between mind and body. Generally, body doesn't move unless mind tells it to. There are a few exceptions to that—like when you're sitting in the doctor's office and she taps the mallet on your knee and your leg goes up in a reflex reaction. There's no intention or mental urge behind that. But otherwise, everything we do

—when we sit down, when we stand up, when we move our arms, when we speak, when we make physical movements with our body—happens because the mind is telling the body to do that.

What we want to look at and discover in the meditation is that moment when the mind instructs the body to move. We'll keep it simple since you're not speaking. We're going to focus on movements of the body during this sitting period.

Here are a couple of examples. Anytime you notice you've slumped and you want to straighten your posture, notice that before you straighten, there's an intention to do that. The mind directs the body to do that. Notice each time you swallow. The mind usually says, before it happens, "It's okay to swallow, go ahead and swallow." Then the swallowing takes place. Not in so many words, but there's a signal from the mind to swallow.

You might also notice if you're feeling some discomfort in your bodily posture and you want to move—you want to unfold the legs or stretch forward with the back—the mind has to give the signal for the body to do that. And that signal is what we call the intention. It's a mental factor; it arises, it acts, the body responds, and then it fades away.

The intention is a very subtle movement of mind. Sometimes things happen so quickly in the body that we can't quite catch that little burst of intention that precedes it. So don't be frustrated if you find this hard to discover. It's subtle, it can happen quickly, and that's okay.

We're going to start paying attention to the moment before the bodily movement takes place and see what we can notice in the mind happening at that point. We're going to call this the "about-to" moment—when the body is about to move, about to do something. See what you notice happening in the mind.

We're calling it intention in this setting, which is how we usually describe it as a meditation subject. If you read the translations of the suttas, it's more often described as volition. Bhikkhu Bodhi uses the term volition to translate cetanā. So intention, volition, urge, motivation, motive power—all these words describe what's happening in the mind before the body responds.

What you want to try to do is pay attention and see if you can find the mental signal that precedes a bodily movement during this meditation. The body's not moving a lot, so this intention to move won't be there all the time. But notice—you may move your

neck, you may move your arm, you may straighten your posture, you may move for discomfort, you may swallow. Just see if you can find the mental signal that tells the body to do one of those actions.

Once the act has happened, you can let go of looking for intention until the next time the body is about to move. We're going to focus on this "about-to" moment and just see what you find there—that moment of intention.

Please begin as you always do. Sit or stand in a comfortable and relaxed way, feeling the uprightness of the spine and relaxing through the eyes, jaw, belly, and shoulders.

I find it really helpful to have the conscious moment of relaxing at the beginning of a sit. Anytime you feel you've gotten a little tense through the sit, restore the sense of relaxation. It can be helpful to take two or three deep breaths and think that relaxation is happening on the out-breath.

This movement to relaxation reminds us we're not trying to get somewhere else. You're not trying to make anything special happen. All we're trying to do is to know what is happening.

in the mind, the body, the environment. Really our faith is in the mindfulness being enough. We don't have to control the experience because the mindfulness is enough. It will learn.

Coming into the body, just feeling the body as one integrated unit in sitting. For some, the body posture itself is a good anchor in meditation. The mind learns from the body's stability, from its stillness. As you connect with the body, let the attention open wide and take in all the sounds that appear and disappear. Have the sense that hearing is very receptive—not sending the mind out towards sounds, but simply resting and letting sounds come to you.

Settling again in the body and feeling the impact of breathing. How does the in-breath feel throughout the body? How does the out-breath feel? Just sitting, and the breath happens by itself.

As you're attending to the body, breath, and sounds, from time to time other sensations will draw your attention. A mood or emotion may call you. You may notice a feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. In a very natural way, let the attention go where it's drawn—to what we call the predominant experience in that moment. See thoughts as a present moment arising in just the same way.

In this way, nothing that arises in your sitting is a distraction. Everything is more food for mindfulness. Mindfulness can grow moment after moment, no matter where the attention is drawn, no matter what the experience is.

And then in this sitting, begin to investigate the mental factor called intention—just related simply to movements of the body. Anytime you notice that you're about to make a movement with the body, see if you can pay attention to the moment before the movement happens and catch the signal from the mind that is directing the body to move. Every voluntary movement is preceded by a moment of intention. You could call it an urge, a volition, a motive, or just that "about to" moment.

See what you notice in the mind in that moment when the body is about to move—from straightening the posture, swallowing, shifting. The intention may be accompanied with thought, or it may not.

Just keep an eye out for the action of intention, the "about to" moment just before the body makes a voluntary movement—adjusting the posture, shifting, swallowing.

There's a little bit more to say about intention, but before I do, I'll just see: are there any questions about working with it or what it is?

CHAPTER 51

Working With Fear

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines fear as one of humanity's most fundamental emotional patterns. Drawing on the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN 10) and the foundations of mindfulness, he explores how fear arises from our basic existential situation of unpredictable pleasure and pain, linking it to the three unwholesome roots (greed, hatred, delusion) described in Buddhist psychology.*
>
> *Armstrong demonstrates how fear operates as a form of aversion - a strategy of drawing back from the unpleasant - and shows how thought breeds fear through mental fabrication. He shares personal stories and teachings from masters like Ajahn Mun, illustrating how the Thai Forest tradition used direct encounter with fear as skillful practice. The talk offers practical guidance for working with fear's three components: body sensations, mood, and thoughts, emphasizing that true fearlessness comes not from the absence of fear, but from the confidence to meet it with wise attention and tender acceptance.*
>
> *This teaching reveals how opening to fear with complete acceptance can break its power over us, leading to the profound understanding that any emotion can be worked with skillfully through mindfulness and equanimity.*

Tonight, I'd like to talk on the subject of working with fear. I really enjoy this theme, even though it sounds like it could be a little heavy, because as much as anything, I think this topic really shows the liberating power of the Dharma. By extension, in learning to work with fear, we also learn to work with a lot of other difficult emotions. Not only does the Dharma offer the possibility—the long-term promise—of uprooting these forces from the mind, but it also shows a step-by-step way that we can continue to reduce and weaken them over time in ways that bring a lot of relief and happiness into our lives. So I hope that in exploring this theme together this evening, some of that will come across.

Fear is one of our deepest conditionings. It goes way back in the evolutionary timeframe. It's one of the most powerful forces at work in our hearts and minds. When it's present, it feels like a kind of cloud—a heavy cloud has settled over us and blocks the sunlight from getting in and reaching us and letting the heart feel beautiful and spacious. When fear descends, it really limits our ability to enjoy the beautiful things of life and to open in the way that we're capable of opening.

There's an author and therapist named Gerald Jampolsky whose most famous book has a title I like: *Love is Letting Go of Fear*. That's a strong message that when we let go of fear, the quality of love is spontaneously there. It's not that we have to build it up little by little, but when this cloud lifts, love comes through very naturally.

Fear can be a very strong force in our life. At times it can be emotionally overwhelming. It can have a strong impact in the body. We're learning how much stress, how much illness is related to stress levels—forms of fear in our life. And it can lead to a lot of unskillful choices as we act in the world and live.

When you think about the big picture of human culture, it seems like fear has haunted our whole development as a species. From a long time ago, fear has been like a specter over the evolution of the human race. You can feel it over thousands and probably millions of years—this worry that humans have had that there's not going to be enough food, that there's not going to be enough land, that there's not going to be enough warmth, that there's not going to be shelter, that there's not going to be safety. In modern terms that all gets crystallized into: there's not going to be enough money. This fear of lack that we have struggled with has led to countless conflicts and wars and suffering.

In meditation we can find a lot of freedom in relationship to fear in general and to our individual specific fears in particular. The long-term promise of the Dharma is that this force can be uprooted from our hearts and minds—that it is possible to live without the influence of fear. That's a long-term aim. It might not happen in this retreat, so we need to be patient and set our aim accordingly. But it really is possible in one retreat to significantly change our relationship to fear. The gist of it will be not getting rid of it, but becoming more and more comfortable with it, so that when it arises, we're not so disturbed by it. We find a greater and greater ability to accept and be with the fear.

I'd like to talk a little bit about what the emotion is and how it plays out—what its role is in the psyche. When you think about our basic existential situation as human beings, and actually all sentient beings (you see it in the animal world as well), the basic situation is that we have a shifting mix of experience which is sometimes pleasant and sometimes painful. It's mostly unpredictable and it's largely out of our control.

I imagine you're seeing this in your day-to-day experience as yogis. This is one of the most striking features of retreat. We have a concentrated sitting, and the next sitting is all over the map. We have a lot of body pain, we get up and walk and it totally goes away. We have one day where we feel very open and enjoy the beauty of nature, and

another day where we're very contracted and worried or sad or angry about something. These different experiences just seem to sweep through us, not of our choosing and not in our control.

This is one of the main things that we learn as yogis: life is unpredictable, practice is unpredictable, and above all, we find a growing equanimity in being with all those changing situations. But that's because the Dharma provides us some understanding.

At the root of sentient life is this unpredictability and a sense in the middle of it of our insecurity and vulnerability. Anything can happen to us at any time. This is so fundamental to our life, this changing mix of pleasure and pain. This is why the quality of feeling tone or vedanā is so important that it's the second foundation of mindfulness, because around vedanā our emotions live.

We're constantly being hit by this contact, alternately pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral in all the sense doors. I think fear has to be understood as one response to that shifting mix of pleasure and pain.

We've talked quite a bit about the three chalaces—the three roots of the unwholesome in the heart and mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. These can all be understood as ways to relate to this unpredictable mixture of pleasure and pain.

In my understanding, fear fits under aversion. Basically, desire is for the pleasant. The tendency of aversion manifests in two ways when encountering the unpleasant. One is anger, which pushes out against the unpleasant. The other is fear, which tends to draw back from the unpleasant. But they are both ways of trying to relate to the unpleasant or painful in life.

We can see that these patterns are born in the psyche and continue as strategies for dealing with this mix of pleasure and pain. The greedy temperament seeks to resolve this dilemma by constantly drawing in pleasure—"Let's just keep the pleasant coming moment after moment without interruption, and that will be the strategy for happiness." You probably know people who live like this. We all have known friends whose addictive personality comes out of this tendency of mind.

Aversion is a strategy that seeks to find security by keeping the unpleasant away—pushing it away through anger or aggression, retreating from it through fear. And delusion has a strategy of "Oh, well, let's not feel it. It's impacting us. Let's withdraw somewhat so it's not touching us so closely." I hope you got some sense of that from Andrea's talk last night.

All of these chalaces are volitional in nature, and they enact a fundamental strategy of interacting with the world. In Buddhist psychology, personality types are described along these three lines. Those with a greedy temperament are driven more by the factor of greed than the other two. Those of an aversive temperament are driven more by that force, and those of a deluded temperament driven more by the force of delusion.

Now we all have all three, but it's very interesting—as you look into your own psychology and you look at your friends, I bet you can tell for most people which of these three is predominant in their lives. In classical Buddhist psychology, it's a way of understanding ourselves and others.

What fear does is try to protect us by projecting into the future some painful experience, hoping that by that projection we can find a strategy to avoid it. So fear is future-related—I think that's the interesting thing to note here. It's also closely tied to desire because there's a desire that we won't experience that painful experience. And when desire creates the hope for a pleasant experience, there's also the fear that we won't get it. So fear and desire are intermingled.

It's interesting that when the Tibetans sum up the strategy of samsara, they will often talk about it as "hope and fear"—almost as one word. It's what governs us: the search for the pleasant, the avoidance of the unpleasant. And it's interesting that we often want to give up fear, but we don't always want to give up wanting. Have you noticed that? Desires are kind of entertaining and soothing and oriented toward the pleasurable. They're not often felt as suffering. But the fact is, pursuing desire always involves some degree of fear also. So we can't really be free from one without being free from the other.

In fact, when you look at your experience of life, which is more fundamental for you—desire or fear? In other words, as we grow up into adulthood and realize what life is presenting, are we mostly insecure and wanting pleasant experiences to soothe that insecurity? Is fear the primary motivator? Or are we mostly searching for pleasure, and then fear comes about because we can't always find it? Which came first—wanting or fear?

In the Buddhist statement of the Second Noble Truth, when the Buddha described the cause of suffering as being craving, he used the phrase "seeking delight now here and now there." So he was putting the primary emphasis on the desire force. That's one man's opinion. But for someone who is psychologically more driven by fear, fear seems

like the obvious predominating force in life, and one can see it in many people as well. In fact, I'd say for a fear type, it seems like a very reasonable response to an unpredictable world. You never know what's going to happen. Anything can happen at any time.

A friend of ours was vacationing in southern India, staying with his girlfriend in a little cabin on the beach. He went out one morning by himself, enjoying the beauty of the waves rolling in and the warm sand under his feet, perhaps doing some movement exercises on the beach, welcoming the morning and feeling the energy of the ocean, sun, and earth. Very pleasant.

As he stood there, a big wave rolled in. He watched it come and watched it go back out, and he thought, "That is weird." The wave had gone so far out that it exposed a lot of the ocean bottom, which hadn't been exposed earlier in the day. "This is not right," he thought.

So he went into the cabin, woke his partner who was still asleep, pulled her out, and they both climbed up on a little concrete wall next to a palm tree. "I think we need to make ourselves safe," he said. So they climbed up on the wall. He held on to the palm tree and she held on to him.

Then the next wave came in.

The date was December 26, 2004. This was that massive tsunami that killed so many people and destroyed so many homes, hotels, and villages throughout India, Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia. The big wave hit them, but because he was hanging on to the tree and she to him, they weren't swept out. They survived. The big wave went back out, ruining many other things, but they were okay.

Peaceful morning, right? Beautiful beach. Anything can happen at any time.

Who wouldn't be afraid living in a world like this?

It's as though we try to imagine all the things that can go wrong so that we can hopefully prevent some of them from happening. This reminds me of a joke you may have heard. There was a patient seeing a therapist in New York, and the therapist noticed that this patient had a habit of snapping his fingers rather frequently. After a while, the therapist asked, "Why are you snapping your fingers like that?"

"Oh, it's to keep the elephants away," the patient replied.

"But there are no elephants in Manhattan," the therapist said.

"Yeah, it works, doesn't it?" the patient responded.

For the worry type, the fact that we keep thinking of all these things that could go wrong and they don't go wrong proves how effective our thinking is. It's really very useful to worry, because it helps keep those things away.

But what we don't look at when we worry like that is the impact it has on the body and mind right now. We don't realize that we are really tormenting ourselves with fearful thoughts and images. Imagining all the things that can go wrong, we're constantly evoking anxiety, fear, worry, dread, and that creates a stress in the body and mind that's experienced here and now. But we don't tend to notice it because we're thinking about making the future safe.

From a dharma point of view, the reflection is: the uncertainty in life is real. The unpredictability is real. Anything can happen at any time—that is true. But the question is, do we need to meet the moment with fear? Is the fear really necessary or not?

This is one of the opportunities for great opening and understanding. When we start to understand that our mental state doesn't have to follow either our habits or outside conditions, we find through meditation more and more choice and freedom in regard to our state of mind. Right effort is basically keeping the mind in a wholesome place. We find more and more ability to have the mind be free from fear regardless of the outer situation.

Sometimes it just becomes apparent how absurd the response of fear is. In the early 1980s, I did a number of retreats in England. I was there one summer, probably in June, and it just so happened that at this point in my life, fear was coming up a lot. I went through a couple of years where fear was arising strongly—I'll say more about that later.

On this particular occasion I was doing standing meditation out in the back garden of the retreat center—this was a precursor to Gaia House for those familiar with the English scene. I was standing after tea, in the early evening, under a tree with my eyes closed. The fear was coming up quite strongly. I was just feeling it in my body and feeling it in my mind, feeling how unpleasant this fearful response to life was.

For some reason, maybe to interrupt it, I opened my eyes and looked around.

So it was one of those really soft summer nights in England—so beautiful. It's a little bit warm. The air has a little humidity. It just feels like it's settling on you like a gentle wrap. The sun was going down, so it was already in that golden light stage. I was standing on lush green grass that was illuminated by the golden setting sun. And I was standing beside a tree that was flowering—it was probably a fruit tree, flowering in the very late spring, early summer. The white flowers were beautiful in my face.

So it was just this idyllic scene that I woke up to, and my thought was, "Wow, it's really a scary world, isn't it?" The contrast between my mind state—what I was imagining—and the actual situation I was in was so stark. I saw that this state of mind had nothing to do with the reality of the present moment. And it just made me laugh at the silliness of that habit, the uselessness of that habit. The emotion was real, so I'm not trying to discount anybody's emotions. It was something I needed to live with and practice with, but it wasn't related to reality. It was just an old habit.

So as we look into this quality of fear, it's helpful to look at what causes it. One of the pieces of advice in the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta is: understand what causes the hindrances to arise and what causes them to pass away. So we want to understand why fear comes.

One of the main sources of fear was put really clearly by Krishnamurti—J. Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher—when he said very succinctly: "Thought breeds fear." Thought breeds fear. When we think about all the things that could go wrong, we generate a sense of fear.

This is from Mark Twain: "I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

And you may have heard the story—there's a Zen artist, generally a monk, and he had painted on a scroll this big bold picture of a tiger: sweeping brushstrokes in black on white paper, really giving the tiger a lot of vitality and fierceness and fangs and claws. And he stepped back from the painting and he was scared of the image he had painted. The tiger seemed so lifelike to him.

So this is kind of what we do. We scare ourselves with our thoughts and with our images. We make up frightening situations in our head that are just mental projections, and then we recoil from them in fear. What happens if we just don't fabricate those thoughts and images? What's the state of mind then? This is an interesting question generally. What is your state of mind when you're not fabricating thoughts and projections? Take a look and see.

I think that there's a natural peace in the mind. When we're not stirring it up, the mind tends to be tranquil. So there's this kind of natural way of being, which is peaceful and relaxed, and then we keep stirring the waves by our imaginings and projections. So once we find that we can access this natural state of peace, it gives us a lot of confidence. We find it through meditation. When we stop stirring up the mind, it settles by itself, and we can trust in that. That becomes a real refuge for us.

Some of the ways we stir up the mind, some of the things we stir it up about—of course, a big one is death. There is a fear of death that's common to all animals and common to all humans who haven't fully walked a spiritual path. It's a very primal relationship to life. We are, by and large from birth, very attached to this body. It's our most precious possession—our body and this life.

And that's why it is so impressive when you find people who put their life on the line for a cause. Martin Luther King predicted that he would be killed before he was killed. Environmental activists are often targets for the violence and hatred of others. There's someone I hadn't known about at the time of his death that I read about recently. Chico Mendes was an activist, an environmental activist in Brazil. He was born as a son of a rubber tapper. Brazil had lots and lots of natural rubber trees back in the '40s and '50s, so he was born into that era.

And at the age of nine, he began working as a rubber tapper. As he grew up, he came to feel that the owners of the plantations were not truly caring for the workers or for the land. So he formed a trade union to provide better conditions for the workers, and he started organizing environmental groups to protect the land—something that he wanted to build as extractive reserves so that they would be preserved.

But unfortunately, this threatened the ranching interests around the area where he was working and living. He was eventually assassinated by the son of a cattle rancher in 1988. But he knew that. He had predicted that he wouldn't live to see the next Christmas, and he was killed in that year. He didn't step down from his work. He kept doing his work, even in the face of mortal danger.

You may also know the story of Dian Fossey. She was an American zoologist who worked to protect the mountain gorillas in Rwanda, in Africa. She wrote the book *Gorillas in the Mist*, which was then made into a movie. Her life was on the line over and over in working to protect these creatures. She was killed in 1985, probably by a poacher. They never actually found the person, but most likely by a poacher who made a lot of money from killing the gorillas and selling their bodies.

So it's amazing when people will overcome that fear of death to stand up for what they believe—for justice, for the environment, for each other.

It's kind of interesting. I tend to think that the fear of death is the number one fear, but a poll was taken a while ago and fear of death only came out as number four. Number one on the list was fear of public speaking. That's kind of interesting—it definitely can bring up more immediate anxiety. Ajahn Amaro, who's a British monk and now the

abbot of Amaravati, gave a talk with a great title: "Why Public Speaking is More Terrifying Than Worldwide Nuclear Destruction." It seems kind of true, but I don't know why that is.

So we all, until we investigate it and grow beyond it, have this fear of death. And of course, it's easy to understand. There can be pain in illness. There can be pain in dying. But there's another component of it that's kind of irrational, isn't it? There's some fear of this stream of experience coming to an end. Why should we care? It's like, suppose you went to sleep tonight and you just didn't wake up in the morning. Would that be a problem for you? It isn't really, is it? It might be a big problem for other people. But your stream of experience in this form has ended. And yet, we have a real resistance to that.

The Buddha pointed out that there's a very deep-rooted cause for that, which is that we have a very deep desire for existence. It's one of the three forms of craving that he pointed to in the Second Noble Truth. We want to exist. We want to have a body with senses so that we're having contact—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, feelings. I'm not sure where that springs from, but it's very deep-rooted in us. And it's that, to a large extent, that leads to the fear of dying. We don't want this stream of experience to come to an end, even though it's not always that satisfactory. Still, we hold on to it.

But the Buddha said that it's not necessary that we fear death. At a certain point in spiritual life, one doesn't need to fear death. He basically said there are four conditions for that to be true: if you're not too attached to the body, you're not too attached to sense pleasures, you haven't done a lot of unwholesome actions, and you have faith in the Dharma. He said, if these four things apply to you, you don't have to be afraid of death.

I mean, this is a high bar, right? It's not immediately available, maybe, but it's possible. This is not our inheritance. This is something that we can come to in this life—to come to that degree of settledness in the Dharma, emphasis on the wholesome, emphasis on non-attachment. This is possible for us. And so it's possible to face that possibility of one's own death without deep fear. And then in the maturing—the real maturing of the spiritual life according to the texts—it's possible to go beyond that altogether.

There's this wonderful story from the Theragatha, verses of the elder monks at the time of the Buddha, involving an Arahant, a fully awakened being named Adimutta.

Adimutta was wandering in the forest when he was captured by a group of bandits. These bandits had their own religious practice and needed a human to sacrifice to their gods. Adimutta was the unfortunate soul they found for this purpose. You get from this

story that life was pretty wild at the time of the Buddha. Indian society was not some completely lawful, peaceful place. Monks could literally take their lives in their hands by wandering through the forest.

So the bandits captured Adimutta and told him they were going to sacrifice him to their gods. And Adimutta was unmoved. He wasn't afraid. He didn't show any unease. He certainly didn't manifest any terror. The bandits couldn't believe it. It really threw them. They hadn't seen anything like this before.

The bandit chief says to him, "Why are you not showing any fear in the face of this?"

Then Adimutta gave this little verse, which is recorded in the Theragatha: "There is no mental pain to one with no expectations. All fears have been transcended by one whose fetters are extinct."

No mental pain to one with no expectations. Even the expectation that we will live another minute is an expectation. But he was so thoroughly in the present, he had no expectation about the future. All fears have been transcended by such a one.

We can be afraid of other people. Sally mentioned in a talk the other night that it was only about 7,500 years ago that you could run into a stranger and expect that one of you would need to kill the other before you were killed. That's not very long ago. This fear of others lingers as a residue, a psychological residue of our evolution.

Martin Luther King said, "People fail to get along because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."

We see this playing out across the world in the distrust between nations. We see it playing out within our own society because different races and ethnic groups have been segregated for so long. We don't know each other very well. We haven't built those bonds of trust and familiarity. That all needs to break down so that we can have a sense of shared trust and safety with one another.

There's a fear of physical pain. The sawing that's been happening this last week on making the deck outside the meditation hall reminded me of nothing so much as being in a dental chair. When it was going on, I would just notice this aversion, reminding me of drilling in the chair.

We're afraid of physical pain. And we find that often as yogis here. Sitting for forty-five minutes to an hour or longer, being still, not moving the body, discomfort often comes. It's a fact of yogi life. Sometimes it's going to hurt. And sometimes we develop a resistance to sitting because of that physical pain, not wanting to feel it or endure it.

I got to exploring this and became very interested in it. At one point in my practice life, actually I was practicing in Thailand at the time, I would have pain in the afternoon sitting almost every day. One day I got up from the sitting, and the pain was entirely not there once I got up and started walking. I thought, "Why should I worry about it?" It didn't really hurt me or damage me in any lasting way. There's some discomfort for a period of time, and I just thought, "It's just sensations. There's really nothing to fear in that." That really helped me get much more comfortable with having physical pain in my sittings. It didn't damage me. I got up and it was as though it had never happened.

There's a fear of emotional pain.

Just as with physical pain, once we begin to open to emotions, we see that they arise, move through us, and dissolve. We'll return to this point about fear again - we don't need to fear our emotions either. Once we learn how to open and allow them to be, they all pass through naturally.

There's also fear of particular events - obviously fear of future happenings. This is quite interesting. I appreciate what the Dalai Lama said: there's no reason to worry about things. One of two possibilities is always true. Either you can do something about it, in which case you should do it and then you don't need to worry. Or you can't do anything about it, so you shouldn't worry about it. Really quite simple, isn't it?

Many of these fears arise from thought in one way or another. But there's another source of fear I want to mention. At different times in life, sometimes very powerful events have happened to us that we couldn't fully open to at the time. The emotions and sensations that were present then, because we couldn't or didn't know how to accept and feel them, we repressed them. We pushed them down, and the bodily sensations and emotions that accompanied them became locked into our system. They became embedded mentally in the subconscious and locked into the very muscles and tensions of the body.

This can arise from injury, accident, trauma, or abuse. Then we grow up as adults and often have a feeling that something has been shadowing us our whole life, but we can't quite identify what it is. We come into meditation, and part of the beauty of awareness is that in the empty space of awareness, this material now has the possibility to emerge.

Often people come into retreat, especially long retreats, and find emotions arising, sensations coming from long ago that have simply been held by the body and mind over sometimes decades. Fear can be one of those emotions that emerges from this kind of unconscious holding, as well as sadness, grief, or anger. Many things can be held in this way.

Sometimes fear is not triggered by thought at all. It's simply released from the subconscious as we relax, open, and trust in the unfolding of the present moment.

There's one other fear I want to mention - a dharma fear that arises. Sometimes there's discomfort in opening to what's unfamiliar. We open to a new place in practice. It could be an experience of profound calm, or it could be seeing into impermanence - how things don't last very long. In either case, there can be a feeling of "I don't know what to do now."

Calm can be unsettling because we think, "Oh, where did I go?" We're accustomed to expressing through action, thinking, doing. When that stops and there's just empty space, we wonder, "Where am I?" It can be unsettling because the familiar self doesn't seem to be there. But we simply need to trust in that opening. It's a beautiful unfolding in meditation.

Impermanence reveals a groundless quality to our whole experience - the things we've been counting on aren't as reliable as we thought. So where do we place our trust and faith then? One place we can rest it is in the space that opens. The empty space of awareness is fundamentally peaceful and trustworthy. That becomes our refuge, the reliable place we can return to.

Fear can arise through all these different avenues, all these different entry points. In a way, it doesn't matter so much what the source is, although it's useful to understand. What's most important is how we relate to fear once it has arisen. This approach remains the same regardless of what has caused the fear. We want to bring the same quality of attention.

This is the part of the talk where I hope you'll see the similarity to any kind of afflictive emotion that can arise. Working with them all follows very similar principles, whether it's fear or grief or longing or anger. You want to take the same basic approach.

Basically, we need to face our fears and difficult emotions directly. We cannot overcome fear theoretically—it simply doesn't happen that way. We need to overcome it through meeting it face to face and finding a new relationship with it. You can't do it through thinking about it, through planning, through theorizing. It needs to be a direct encounter. Fear, any emotion—we need to meet it.

In that sense, finding fear arising in a meditation retreat is a great blessing, a great opportunity. Because until it arises, we don't have a chance to work, to become free of it. This is true for all the difficult emotions that may come.

In the Thai forest tradition, the abbots or teachers would look for places to send monks and nuns so that they would meet their fears. Ajahn Mun, the Thai master who re-established the Thai forest tradition in the 19th century, would send his monks out to meditate where tigers had recently been seen. He thought that was the best place. "Oh, there was a tiger there? You go meditate there." If you're lucky, he'll come back.

Monks would report hearing the roaring of a tiger nearby in the forests of Thailand a hundred years ago. They're not so abundant anymore, but a hundred years ago they were. That would awaken one to the present moment—one's mind would not wander far in that situation. And the monks who walked through the forest would often report coming across empty robes and an abandoned bowl, knowing that one of their fellow practitioners had passed through there and died. They wouldn't know the cause of death—it could well have been from a tiger or from sickness. But tigers were plentiful back then. So meeting one's fear was considered very fortunate and a good place to practice.

We're not going to send you into the woods at night. We're going to trust the mind will bring up what you need to see. But when it comes, it is a good opportunity.

One of the things you first want to look at is: How do you relate to fear when it arises? What's your first response when fear comes? For me, in the early part of my meditation path, the first response was more fear. I didn't want to feel it, I didn't know how to feel it, it made me very uncomfortable and it scared me. I thought I was going to be overwhelmed by it—it was too much for me to handle. This is the kind of response, of course, that leads to a panic attack. The fear comes, it makes us more afraid, that amplifies the fear, and then we get more afraid of the amplified fear.

One of the practitioners who had a lot of work to do with panic attacks in his early years was a young Tibetan Lama named Mingyur Rinpoche. Mingyur Rinpoche is a brilliant teacher and practitioner. I think he's in his late thirties now. He set off about four and a half years ago on what he called a three-year retreat, wandering in the Himalay-

as, and he hasn't come back yet. He's one of those beings who is already very well developed, and he has such a strong calling to develop further that he's been on retreat for the past four and a half years. We still don't know when he'll be back.

When Mingyur Rinpoche was about thirteen years old, he entered his first three-year retreat directed by his father. One of the things he really had to deal with was the frequency of his panic attacks, which came upon him when he thought of going to meditate, because he knew he didn't have anything else to protect him. He would just be there with the fear. So he just had to work with it, and his father encouraged him—his father was also a meditation teacher. His father just encouraged him to open to it and make friends with it. That was the advice he followed and eventually overcame the difficulty.

This is the key teaching in relating with fear: open to it and make friends with it. When fear arises, note that your reaction may be fear, but you want to try and shift into a relationship to it that is allowing and accepting.

Often when fear comes, it will encourage you to point your attention to where the fear is pointing. "I'm afraid of what's going to happen next week. I'm afraid of getting old. I'm afraid of dying. I'm afraid of a panic attack." Fear will point you in a bunch of different directions, and normally that's where the mind goes.

But in meditation, we don't want to go where it's pointing. We want to come right here into the fear. We want to be with the present moment experience of the fear and not get misled by where the thoughts are directing us.

In meditation terms, that being misled is called unwise attention. Unwise attention means placing our attention where it's not going to be helpful. And you'll see this happens with all the afflictive emotions. They tend to lead us to place our attention somewhere it's not helpful—past or future, something situational. The proper place for our attention, the wise attention, is to come into the direct experience in that moment of the emotion, in this case, of fear.

So we bring our attention fully into the present moment and let ourselves feel the fear, all the time working to open to it with an allowing and accepting attitude.

As we start to form a relationship with fear and other difficult emotions, we want to look at the fact that they are made up of, from a meditation point of view, three components: body sensations, mood, and thoughts. And we need to make our relationship with each of these pieces more or less independently, because they're all separate aspects of the phenomena.

So with fear, with all difficult emotions, the best place to start is the body sensation. When fear arises, how does it feel in the body? Bring your attention to that and just feel it. There's a contraction, maybe in the abdomen. The heart rate may increase. Under the arms feel sweaty. There's maybe a lightness or a vibration through the whole body as though you can't find a ground or any place solid to be. Maybe the breathing gets a little rapid and shallow when fear is strong.

Let yourself just feel those sensations. They won't be pleasant. And then ask yourself: can I bear them? Can I bear it?

What fear is sort of telling you is something bad is about to happen—meaning something like, maybe you can bear this moment, but in the next moment, something really unbearable is going to happen to you. So that's the tenor of the thinking that's going on, the thoughts that are coming.

The sensations, as we land in them, we find out they're bearable. And so even though the thoughts are saying the next moment's not going to be bearable, what we find as we come into the body is this I can bear. It's not pleasant, and at first it may not seem like I can, but I can. I am. I have. I'm doing it. It's happened before. I've gotten through it. I've survived. I've borne up with these sensations before. So we start to trust: I can bear this.

Then we start to examine them and we see they're unpleasant, but I can be with them. This is a huge step—being with the sensations of the difficult emotion. That opens the door for us to accept the experience.

Then we look at the mood. This is not so easy to locate, but every emotion has a flavor—a flavor in the mind, you might say. Let's say you meet an emotion in a dream and you're not so in touch with the body, but you know the flavor of happiness is one way. The flavor of sorrow is another way. The flavor of love is a different way. And the flavor of fear just in the mind is a different way.

So feel what that mood—I'd call that the mood of fear—is. It's just a mental thing. What's that flavor in the mind? Get familiar with that. It's also not pleasant.

When I came to really be able to feel it clearly, what it seemed to me it was saying was: run away, run away. It's not safe here. Get out, get out. So that was what I just tried to relate to and move to accept and allow.

And then the thoughts—start to notice that all the thoughts in some way or another are saying something bad is going to happen or something bad is about to happen. But that's just a figment of our imagination. That's just like looking at the drawing of the tiger and getting worried. It doesn't mean that it's true.

So we start to see: I can be with the sensations, I can be with the mood, I can be with the thoughts. All of them are basically okay. So that provides the foundation for us to be able to say, okay, let me open to this and really accept it. Really accept it.

We see that it goes on for a while and then it passes away. This is really important and really helpful to see. Any emotion that comes to you during this retreat is going to come, it's going to last for a while, and it's going to pass away. Have you had any emotions here that have lasted more than about a day? It's rare. I'll put it that way. It's rare. They come, they last a while, they pass away.

And we start to see these emotions are just like weather. Some clouds come, they cover the sun, then they pass, it's clear again. Rain comes, sprinkles a few drops, seems gloomy, it goes away. Clouds are back. Clouds pass, it's nighttime, the stars are out. Emotions are just like that. They come, they cast their influence for a while, and they pass through. They will exhibit their impermanence if we let them, just like everything does.

This is why you don't really have to worry about emotions and why you don't have to push them away. By just not doing anything, they're going to go. Now, there is a way that you can make them last longer: reach out, take hold of them, tussle about them, think about them, think of all the things that could happen, why this is such a terrible experience to have on your precious meditation retreat, and dwell on that for a long time. Then you can extend their life. But if you don't do that, they will come, they will express, and they will pass. They'll all pass if you let them pass.

We start to see that fear doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean that something bad is going to happen. Wanting doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean that I have to have that or my life will be miserable. Sadness doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean that I'm destined to be depressed forever because I lost something. All these emotions are rich. They have their place in human life, but they don't have the meaning we attribute to them when we think that they're so threatening and so difficult.

As we start to accommodate the fear, it loses its power over us. And that power is lost through our full acceptance of it. I got tested on this because one of my teachers said, "If you really accept it, it's okay if it lasts the rest of your life." And so I checked out my fear. I said, "Would I be okay if this lasted the rest of my life?" The answer was really easy: No way. Absolutely not.

So I had to live with that for a while. Why not? Why couldn't I let this last the rest of my life? And the answer that came when I looked into it was: I'd lose some of the things I really enjoy. I couldn't open to a sunset the way I had. I couldn't sort of merge with nature the way I did sometimes. I couldn't get so blissed out with music the way I was used to. If fear was present, it would create a barrier.

So I clung onto that for a while. And then the fear continued. And I thought, okay, do I really want to hold out the possibility of future bliss at the price of present conflict and disturbance of peace? Or could I try giving that up and finding peace now?

So I gave that up and said, "Okay, if this is going to last the rest of my life, I'm going to be okay with this." And I found that okayness—I really meant it. At that point, the fear kind of shrank and almost rotted away. I could see that in that full acceptance, I had somehow broken its back. It was my resistance that was continuing to feed it energy and sustain it as such a threatening force. When I just said, "Okay, you can have me for the rest of my life, you got it," and gave up, it just kind of wilted.

I practiced for quite a while after that and was completely easy about fear. If it came, that was fine. If it didn't come, that was fine. It really didn't matter to me one way or the other. That kind of equanimity and openness shifted something fundamentally in my relationship to fear. It broke some hold, some grip that it had in my mind.

Fear has come many times since then, and I've suffered with it on occasion, but I don't suffer with it for long. I haven't ended my life yet, so that story could change between now and the end. It's not easy getting old and ill and dying. But so far, fear has never had that kind of grip again. Fear is a living thing—it still comes sometimes—but I feel very confident in my ability to work with it and open to it when it arises.

I think this is the promise of opening to these emotions: they lose their power to intimidate us. We develop this confidence that anything that comes to me, I know how to work with. If you really know to the very bottom how to work with one emotion, you've learned the secret for working with all of them. Whatever comes, you've got the skill through your practice and through your wisdom, through your awareness, to learn

how to open to it, work with it, accept it, and not be overwhelmed by it. You find a refuge through understanding and through mindfulness to create a healthy relationship with any emotion that arises.

This is really the way I now understand fearlessness. It's not that fear never arises, but rather there's confidence that when it arises, one has the capability to work with it.

This is from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "True fearlessness is not the absence of fear, but going beyond fear. When we relax with our fear, we find sadness, which is calm and gentle. Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart. You're willing to open up. You're willing to share your heart with others."

Let's just sit for a minute and let these words settle: Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart.

CHAPTER 52

The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) as a profound method for understanding the doctrine of not-self (anatta). Drawing from classical suttas, Armstrong explains how the Buddha analyzed human experience into five components: form (rūpa), feeling tone (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa). He contrasts this with our conventional sense of a solid, controlling self, showing how this analysis reveals that what we call "I" is actually a collection of natural processes arising according to causes and conditions.*
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> *The talk addresses contemporary Western culture's emphasis on self-aggrandizement and explains how understanding the aggregates can free us from the burden of trying to control what is beyond our control. Armstrong shares personal insights from his sister's death and how the aggregate teaching helped him understand the mystery of death and rebirth. He provides practical meditation guidance for investigating these five aspects of experience directly, emphasizing that this is not merely intellectual understanding but experiential insight that leads to disenchantment, dispassion, and liberation. The teaching concludes with the liberating realization: "No self, no problem."*

The title of the talk tonight is The Five Aggregates Are Not Self.

It seems in the West today that the concern for the self has risen to a greater level than I've ever seen in my lifetime. I want to say that I accept present company from this general observation. I don't really mean you all when I point to this phenomenon because this practice doesn't lead to immediate selfish gratification. You may have noticed that. This practice tends to frustrate self-centered desire on a regular basis. So you wouldn't be here if you were looking for a quick hit or a promotion of the self.

In fact, I feel most of the meditators I talk to have a very strong altruistic motivation in their practice. For most of you, I think there's a recognition this practice is not just about yourself, but it's bringing clarity and warmth into our own being so that we can take that out into the world and affect many people's lives for the better. So I think we are a fortunate group together for these six weeks or three months, quite a special group of people.

But in the world in general, things seem to be going in a little different direction. One of the reasons for this, I think, is that the role of families and the role of communities is getting weaker in Western culture by and large today. What that does is it leaves individuals more alone and isolated in a way that we didn't used to be. It seems like when people can't locate themselves in a larger context, either of family or of community, then the emphasis on the self correspondingly gets bigger and more important. Without family and without community, the opportunities for service become much more limited and the need for morality even becomes less obvious. We don't see the ramifications of our actions so easily.

The internet has helped to promote some of this weakening, I think, of our culture. I'm thinking of websites like the one that tries to connect people who are looking to be adulterers that had something like 37 million registered users when it was hacked this summer. That's a very high proportion of the people in North America who were looking to have an extramarital affair. It's kind of shocking.

The internet also offers a lot of opportunity for self-aggrandizement. So many people want to just increase the number of viewers on their YouTube channel or the number of followers on their Twitter feed. Fame becomes an end in itself. People no longer want to be famous for doing something. They just want to be famous for being famous. I don't remember this happening when I was young, but it's happening a lot today.

For example, in 1976, there was a survey that asked people to list their life goals. Fame came in at number 15 out of 16 possible goals. Thirty years later in 2007, a survey was taken about people's principle ambitions. 51% of the people said that fame was one of their principle ambitions. Being famous was something they wanted.

So the self is a big deal. Its wants and needs and hopes and plans can become paramount, can seem to mean everything. Even for us at our level of understanding and given altruistic motivation, still our decisions, our thoughts, our choices in life revolve mostly around me, myself, and I. The "I" is the center for most of us as human beings.

But what's interesting is, have you ever found it clearly? Have you ever found this thing called "I" in your life or in your meditation? William James, the philosopher and writer, had a nice comment on it. He said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." That's about as big as it gets.

In Dharma practice, we have the opportunity really to look into this question of the self and its concerns in some depth. In fact, we really are encouraged to do this because the overemphasis on self can bring so much confusion and suffering. Correspondingly, if we can see it more clearly, there's a huge opportunity for freedom in relation to it.

We might say a central question in meditation is exploring what do we mean by a self? What is the nature of the "I"? Is there in fact a self? What is the real understanding of it? What are the implications if we believe there's a self? And how does it feel when that is not our central belief?

I like this statement by Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a great teacher in India who died I think in the 1990s. He said, "All yogas have only one aim, to save you from the calamity of separate existence." This is the aim of our practice also, to save us all from the calamity of separate existence.

This inquiry into self is not primarily an intellectual exercise. It's not about thinking ourselves through the question of self or "I." We introduce concepts, of course, so that those start to go in and hopefully loosen some of the solidity that we normally attribute to "I" or self. But the main form of insight has to come from our direct experience.

It doesn't come from thinking about this stuff.

So in the talk this evening, I really just want to plant some seeds. Over time, as these seeds settle, the hope is that they will flourish into insight under the conditions of some stillness and mindfulness. It's really the combination of the initial turning to investigation, as Andrea talked about last night, but to meet that from a place of some steadiness of mind and some interest in investigation.

So because of that, I don't want you to strain your brains too much tonight in trying to figure this stuff out. It's not really helpful. And when you go away, I don't want you to stay up all night either trying to figure it out. Please leave, do your walking, do your sitting, go to bed, have a good night's sleep. And let the words that make sense to you go in, resonate, and gestate. They can take seed and sprout later.

So let's start with what's kind of obvious. We are all individual beings and the discussion or pointing to not-self doesn't change that. It doesn't try to argue against our individuality. We each had a certain course in life. We have a journey from birth to death. Our bodies are clearly separate. Our mind streams are unique. So we're not trying to merge ourselves into some cosmic oneness. The individuality is true and there are laws that govern our individuality. Laws of genetics and psychology and karma that are all based on this understanding of individuality—an existence of some form that is accurate.

But we could say that this is kind of the ordinary understanding of what beings are. And in that way, it's a conventional form of truth. But there is truth in the conventional understanding. So we're not trying to deny that altogether, but we want to understand it more subtly and in a more nuanced way, because there's more to it than the conventional understanding.

So Suzuki Roshi has this nice comment. He was talking about this question. He said, "Of course, the bird that we see and hear exists. It exists, but what you mean by that may not exactly be what I mean by that." So this is what we want to understand. In what way do we exist? In what way do we not exist as conventionally understood? Because there's something true and there's something that's not true in the conventional understanding.

We can start to question this sense of self by looking into some of the logic in the way we use words. So we take a look at the way we use "I," and I'm not sure that it really hangs together all that well. Let me give you an example.

If I ask, "How old are you?" the answer is pretty simple, right? Not a trick question. You might say I'm 35 or I'm 64 or whatever it is—comes easily. We all understand what that means. But all that really means is the body is 35 or 64, right? The thought you're having right now, is that 35 years old? The mood you're feeling right now, is that 64 years old? No, we mean the body came out of the womb 35, 64 years ago. So here, when we're using the word "I," we mean the same as the body. "I'm 35" means the body is 35, so I equals body.

But if I ask you, "What color are your eyes?" and you'd say they're blue or brown or hazel. Then you say, "My eyes are brown." But now we're not pointing to me as the body, but now they're my eyes. It's my body. So I am now the owner of the body. So that implies something separate from the body that owns it. And this is kind of a usual feeling, isn't it? That this is my body, that I possess it.

So which is it? Are you the body? Or are you something separate that possesses the body?

Looking more closely at this analysis, we might ask ourselves: can you really be both? Are these seemingly contradictory experiences of selfhood all somehow simultaneously true?

We can explore this same paradox with emotions. When I ask how you're feeling, you might respond, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." Here there's a complete identification of the "I" with the emotional state—happiness or sadness becomes who you are in that moment.

But we also speak naturally of "my joys and my sorrows," "my feelings." Suddenly the "I" appears as someone standing apart from these emotions, possessing them as objects. So which is accurate? Are you the emotion itself, or are you the one who owns and experiences it? Can both perspectives be true simultaneously?

There's another sense of self that I find quite common—perhaps you recognize it in your own experience. It's the feeling that there's a being residing somewhere in the middle of the head, located perhaps a couple of inches back from the eyes and between the ears, perched on a little throne and gazing out at the world. This inner observer experiences everything that arrives through the sense doors, somehow central to all experience yet maintaining a certain independence from it.

If you've seen Woody Allen's film "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex," you might remember Tony Randall's character—he played precisely this being, the command and control center in the brain directing all the body's activities. This captures something many of us feel: that we're the observer at the center of experience, stable and separate from the constantly changing phenomena flowing through awareness.

So here we have five different ways we might understand or experience this word "I"—and I'm not convinced they can all be true simultaneously. There seem to be some fundamental contradictions between these various self-concepts.

The Buddha expressed this perplexity beautifully: "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." One of my teachers put it even more directly—he said simply, "Everything you think is wrong."

I invite us to hold that as a genuine possibility: perhaps everything we think about the self is fundamentally mistaken. This reminds me of something I heard recently on a talk show, where someone remarked, "Ah yes, the mind—often wrong, seldom in doubt." This observation feels particularly relevant as we investigate the nature of selfhood. We rarely perceive our own inaccuracy, which is precisely what teachers mean when they speak of delusion.

Given this predicament, it might prove illuminating to consider how the Buddha actually saw human beings. As someone of remarkable clarity and insight, his perspective could offer us a different lens through which to examine our experience.

There's a fascinating passage in the Visuddhimagga, a sixth-century text from Sri Lanka that compiled the meditation techniques and insights available at that time—already nearly a thousand years after the Buddha's life, when considerable wisdom had accumulated. Written by the monk Buddhaghosa, a renowned commentator who synthesized the available teachings, this text offers a striking analogy.

The Visuddhimagga suggests that investigating what a person really is resembles the work of a skilled butcher who has expertly carved many carcasses. Such a craftsman, when preparing beef for sale, doesn't continue thinking "cow, cow, cow" as he works. Instead, his trained perception recognizes the distinct cuts—rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs.

Similarly, the text explains, someone skilled in understanding mind and body doesn't examine experience while thinking "person, person, person." Rather, clear seeing reveals the various components that constitute what we call a human being.

The Buddha typically described these components through two complementary models covering the same territory but approaching it from different angles. Let me share one of his fundamental analyses.

"Bhikkhus," he said, "what is the totality of life?" What a profound question to pose! "Listen carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and mental objects. Anyone who claimed to describe anything beyond this as the totality of life would not be speaking of something they actually knew."

These are, as you'll recognize, the six senses—the five physical sense organs along with their objects, plus the mind as the sixth sense.

I find this description remarkable. First, notice its boldness—who else would dare to define the totality of life so definitively?

I don't think Einstein tried that. I don't think Marx tried that. I don't think Freud tried that. But 2,600 years ago, the Buddha did it. And can you argue with it? It includes everything, doesn't it? It includes it all.

This is a map that applies really well to our meditation because what we're often doing in the meditation instructions—and as you carry them out—is looking at our direct sense experience. Sight, sound, sensations in the body, smells and tastes when those are happening. Thoughts and emotions are the principal mind objects that we include. So this is a really good list for meditation instructions. We rely on it a lot. It's very helpful.

The Buddha used this map primarily to cut through craving. He would point out how we get attached to pleasant experiences at the six sense doors, and then how to see that attachment and how to cut it.

But there's another map that he used, I would say just about as often in the discourses, and this map is called the Five Aggregates. It covers the same terrain in that it also includes everything that's in our direct experience, but it divides it up differently. We'll go into that in a little bit of detail.

But the interesting thing to me is that the way he used the five aggregates was mainly to cut through a misunderstanding of what constitutes the self. So you could say he used the six senses largely to cut through craving. He used the five aggregates to cut through wrong view.

So this is the map that we want to explore tonight. Learning to see ourselves according to this second map is really, really helpful because it leads us into seeing the way the Buddha saw, which is without the confusion or the falseness of the sense of self. So that's why it's useful to start to explore and to look at it in our own experience. It's also not an intellectual exercise. It's primarily experiential.

And it came very alive for me at a time when my older sister died. She was five years older than me and she died when she was 51. So I guess I was 46. It had a lot of impact on me because it came suddenly and unexpectedly. She had a chronic condition, but she was nowhere near dying. There was no hint that that might happen to her. And then I got a call: your sister has passed away.

It happened at home. One of her sons was with her. She lost consciousness. They called the medics. They rushed her to the hospital, but she never revived to consciousness and died that evening. And we were pretty close, so it had a real impact on me.

I couldn't understand where she had gone. We'd had a phone call the week before, catching up on news. She had a kind of a big personality and she was a statement in the world, my sister. And so to have her go, it was bewildering. I couldn't understand how somebody that big had just gone.

The only way that I could resolve it for myself was by understanding the five aggregates and how they had been put together to make her up. And then what happens when the aggregates fall apart or break up at death? And it was that inquiry that helped me understand—you know, what happens at death, to some extent, limited extent, but to some extent, what happens at death. So I hope this will also help explain some of that. The mystery, really, of living and dying.

The Pali term for an aggregate is khandha. The Sanskrit term is skandha, so you might hear either of these in Buddhist writings. And khandha is an ordinary word in Pali. It's not a spiritual word particularly. It just means a heap or a bundle. So if you went out and gathered a bunch of kindling to start a fire, you could call that a khandha of firewood or kindling.

When we put it in English and we call it aggregate, that sounds very technical to me. It reminds me of some paving mixture that gets spread on the road when they resurface the thing. A little too scientific. So what I like better is to call it the five kinds of stuff.

So there are these five kinds of stuff that make us up, and that's what we want to go through. They are material form—you can simply call it matter—feeling tone, perceptions, formations, and consciousness. I want to go through this list and explain each one in a little detail, so we'll come to understand what a meditator can see as we are, let's say, disassembled.

Form is the first one; the Pali word is *rupa*. This word *rupa* is sometimes used to mean body—like the statue behind me is sometimes called a Buddha *rupa*, the form of the Buddha or the body of the Buddha. But the word *rupa* is wider than just body. Actually, the word for body in Pali is *kaya*. So *rupa* means something bigger than that.

Let me read you the definition from a *sutta*: "Any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate of *rupa*." So it means all physical nature. It means this body, but also all the matter that's outside this body. And not only the matter—internal or external, near or far—it also means all the interactions among matter.

So when you put a piece of veggie burger on your tongue, the taste that comes from that is also *rupa*. When you're leaning over the Swiss chard, the smell that comes up and touches your nose is also *rupa*. So *rupa* is the world of matter and the interactions. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch are all different forms of *rupa*. This first aggregate covers the whole physical world. That's a big space.

For example, we take this physical thing and strike this physical thing. That sound that comes out is in the area of *rupa*. The sound is an aspect of form, the first aggregate. So you might sort of infer from this—the other four aggregates must be mental, and they are. If you're looking for a complete description of mentality from a Buddhist point of view, the four aggregates is a very good description of what makes up mentality.

The second aggregate is feeling tone. The Pali term is *vedanā*. I think we've talked about this quite a bit—we introduced it in the instructions. It's the quality in every type of sense contact that it's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. *Vedanā* forms the second foundation of mindfulness. Sally talked about the body as being the first foundation. *Vedanā* is the second. And this points to the importance of this factor in the whole of the Buddha's teachings.

Why is this quality of *vedanā* given such importance—second aggregate, second foundation of mindfulness, very central? The reason is that it forms the basis for reactive formations of mind. Greed, aversion, and delusion arise based on feeling tone being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. So a pleasant feeling tone—the habitual reaction to that is greed. An unpleasant feeling tone—the habitual reaction is aversion. And the neutral feeling tone—the habitual reaction is delusion, sort of overlooking or not caring about.

When one hears the sound of the bell, generally that's experienced as pleasant, isn't it? The tone is chosen to be pleasant, the striker to be pleasant, but more especially because the sitting's over. So that has quite a pleasant feeling tone.

When we first start to tune into feeling tone, we tend to think that it's intrinsic to the object—that the sense object has an innate quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. But that's not the case. If that were the case, feeling tone could be part of matter. The feeling tone, though, is not intrinsic to the sound. It's really about how the sound lands in your mind. And it's ultimately your mind that determines whether it gets interpreted or received as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.

Simple example: some people like the taste of beets. I don't. Beets taste to me like dirt. So that's not experienced as a pleasant form of *rupa* to me.

Another example, and this is quite amusing: there was a 7-Eleven in Southern California where drug dealing was taking place in the parking lot.

And this was disconcerting to the manager of the store because when drugs were being dealt, other customers didn't feel comfortable parking and coming into the store. So he would ask them to leave, and they wouldn't. He'd ask the police to come, and they'd run away for half an hour, and then they'd be back. And so he had to figure out a different strategy.

So he thought, "I'll play some music." The music he chose to play was Mantovani. I don't know if you remember Mantovani. He was a composer from the 1950s who had these very lush accompaniments to movie scores—swelling strings that were very melodic and sentimental. So he put Mantovani on and blasted it through the store's loudspeakers. The drug dealers couldn't stand it, so they all cleared out.

My mother was a great fan of Mantovani. She found it very pleasant. They didn't. So the feeling tone is not in the thing—it's in our mind receiving it.

Ajahn Sucitto, who we've mentioned a few times, talks about feeling almost as a verb, how the mind kind of feels into the sense contact to determine whether it's going to be interpreted as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.

Another thing that's interesting is you'll find that the feeling tone of some sense experiences changes depending on your meditative state of mind. So when you're first settling into a meditation and there's some pressure on the seat or pressure in the knee, that's easily experienced as unpleasant. As the mind settles more—let's say concentration strengthens and equanimity is stronger—the exact same sensation can be experienced as neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It's quite interesting. So you can explore that. The feeling tone can change for each of us.

The third aggregate is called perception. The Pali term is saññā. This means something a little different in Buddhism than normal perception in Western language, philosophical or psychological. Often Western language interprets or defines perception as the sense contact itself. So it would talk about the perception meaning the sound or perception meaning the sight. But in Buddhism it's not the bare sense contact—it's the recognition of it, and recognition in terms of what we already know, or we could say in terms of memory.

So for example, as you look around the room, typically you can pick out objects. There are people and shawls and cushions and chairs and floors and a bell and flowers and statues. So as you look around the room, you're identifying different things that are in the visual field. It's that categorization that is the perception.

The visual field is really just form and color, isn't it? Sometimes you can see this better by closing one eye. You take the two dimensions out and mostly what you see are just patches or shapes with certain colors. But we've learned to interpret them as specific objects—people or chairs or whatever. But what's interesting is it's become so automatic we don't realize that this categorization is something we've learned how to do. We did it so young, and we've done it for so long, we've lost track of that. And so we

tend to look around the room and think the visual field is made up of different objects. It's not like that. The visual field is made up of patches of form with color, but we've interpreted them.

So this is an interesting story from Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, and you know how he really was so great at identifying places in human experience that were a little outside the norm and using that to shed light on our normal experience. So he was attending to a man, a man whose name was Virgil, who had lost his sight when very, very young, probably in infancy. Virgil had met a surgeon who was able to do an operation on his eyes that restored his sight. And when this happened, Virgil was, I think, in his forties. So he had been blind for probably forty years or so, and then had this operation, and the family and the doctors were all gathered around his bedside in order to remove the bandages after the surgery.

So the bandages were peeled away and everybody was waiting expectantly, like Virgil was going to go, "Wow, this is so fantastic, I can see again." But that didn't happen. In fact, as Sacks describes it, Virgil seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing at the surgeon who stood before him still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke—saying, "Well?"—did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face.

Virgil told him later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, "Well." Then and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face, and indeed the face of his surgeon.

So what had happened is that his ability to perceive had not formed because he had lost his sight too young. And that part of the brain that puts it all together didn't develop as a normal person's would.

So when he came back to seeing in his 40s, he had not learned how to make sense of the patches of form and color. As the years went by, he developed more ability and could function well in a simple environment where he had learned to identify the components. But he was not at ease. He was never at ease again going out into the street or the wider world or really unfamiliar places. Some of that wiring of perception never quite got completed again for him.

We are perceiving all the time. It's happening more or less automatically. We tend not to notice it, but we can start to tune into it. Normally we do that when something unusual happens, but we can tune into it any time we start to notice a thing—something standing out from the visual field that we single out and identify.

Another thing to take in about perception is that it involves categorization into familiar objects, but it also carries with it some kind of meaning or association, a kind of emotional tone. For instance, if I say to you the word "car," it probably doesn't evoke a big emotional response. For me anyway, the word car has fairly neutral associations.

But what if I say to you the word "Prius" or "electric vehicle"? Do you get a nice glow out of that? I do. I love the environmental consciousness behind the Prius and behind electric vehicles. I think, "Oh, these are trying to save the planet, and people who drive them are really trying to make a contribution to environmental well-being." I don't think all those thoughts when I see a Prius, but I just feel warmly about Priuses—or Prii, if that's what the plural is.

Similarly, when I see a Ferrari going down the road, I may experience a touch of envy, but mostly I think about, "Do they really need twelve cylinders on a suburban street? And isn't that a little damaging to the environment?" So I have a different emotional response just on seeing a Ferrari. I hope none of you own Ferraris—I haven't offended anyone. I didn't see any in the parking lot.

Very simply, we have these immediate responses to things that we've known well. Think about a friend. When you perceive a friend, there's a whole emotional tone that comes just in the moment of recognition. Or your child, or a mother, or father, or your partner. Perception often carries with it real connection and meaning and flavor for us.

Sometimes if we just stay with the label in which we've put a thing, we don't see it so clearly. We have an unpleasant sensation and we label it "pain"—the very label of pain can prevent us from going back in and feeling what exactly is that sensation. The name can block the direct experience of what's actually happening.

Another example: Take this thing. Normally we think this is a bell, but I've known some monks whose begging bowls were about this size and it made quite a good meal receptacle. Or we could imagine taking it out and using it as a nice little chapeau atop some statue. Wouldn't this be a cute cap for a rather larger figure? It could be that. It could also be a great planter, couldn't it? Wouldn't it be nice to have a little Bodhi tree in here, up on the platform?

So if we just think it's a bell, we're missing something about it. We're not really seeing its thusness, you could call it, or its suchness. In Zen, this is a kind of common koan: "What is this? If you call it a stick, I will hit you. But if you say it's not a stick, I will hit you too. What is it?"

What I got from that is that if I went to Zen a lot, I was going to get hit. That was partly why I chose vipassana.

There's another story about perception and seeing the thing as it is and not getting lost in concepts. Back in the late seventies, some friends of ours in Cambridge understood that there were two masters in town from different Buddhist traditions. One was Sansanim, a Korean Zen master—very wise, very powerful. The other was Kalu Rinpoche, one of the most respected Kagyu masters of our lifetimes. They thought it would be very interesting to bring them together. They rather imagined that these two masters would sort of just immediately recognize each other's enlightened nature and kind of dissolve into the bliss of emptiness together.

So they brought them over for tea.

And they thought it would be very interesting to bring them together. They rather imagined that these two masters would just immediately recognize each other's enlightened nature and dissolve into the bliss of emptiness together. So they brought them over for tea and thought they would engage in some deep conversation. Each had a translator.

Sansanim took the first step. He picked up an orange off the plate, held it out to Kalu Rinpoche, and said, "What is this?"

Kalu Rinpoche just sat there quietly doing his beads, his mala, probably just reciting some mantra. He didn't reply.

So Sansanim thought he was missing it, and he held it out again and said, "What is this?"

Kalu turned and said something to his translator, and the translator said, "Don't they have oranges in Korea?"

This is a little bit of cross-cultural missing, which is easy to do.

So when we're sitting and we hear that sound, we recognize that's the bell. We recognize it is the bell to end a sitting. That's our momentary, immediate perception. It doesn't require thought. It just happens by itself. That's the third aggregate.

The fourth aggregate is called volitional formations. The Pali term is *sankara*. These are sometimes also translated as mental formations. This is the whole world we've been exploring—we could call it objects of mind: thoughts and emotions, moods, mind states. As such, it includes the refined states of meditation. Mindfulness, concentration, calm, equanimity, loving-kindness, compassion are all in here, as well as the hindrances and the difficult emotions and the beautiful emotions. They're all in this realm of mental formations, *sankaras*.

They're sometimes also called karmic formations because when you look closely, the way we form these objects of mind, they're coming out of some underlying intention. Desire is expressing an intention—often an intention to draw closer. Aversion is expressing an intention to push away or move away. Loving-kindness is expressing an intention toward someone's welfare. Compassion expresses an intention toward easing someone's suffering.

Even the beautiful states of meditation—simple things like calm, investigation, concentration—are expressing an intention because they have been developed by repeated effort for the most part. There has been an intention in us to sustain wholesome states. So they are also volitional. Their strength in us is the result of our own effort and volition and will.

For instance, when hearing the sound of the bell, there's often a sense of relaxation. Sitting's over. I don't know if you've noticed this, but sometimes when the bell rings, I think, "Oh, now I could sit forever." As soon as it's over, it gets really easy, doesn't it? That sense of ease and even the thought, "Oh, now I can sit for a long time"—those are both volitional formations in response to the sound.

The fifth aggregate is the most subtle and really interesting one. I love the way the Buddha explained this quality. In English, we translate it as consciousness. It has a very precise meaning in the Buddhist teachings, more precise than in the West, where it's more general. In Buddhism, the Pali word used is *vijnana*.

It is the mental faculty in every moment of our experience that holds the sense object. It's so fascinating to find this in our experience. Everything that's happening to us—hearing the bell, knowing the feeling tone, knowing the mood that comes with it, recognizing it as a sound—that's being known to consciousness because we are sentient beings. What sentience means is this quality that has experience, that knows experience.

This is not an intellectual knowing; it's the most bare form of cognizing a sense experience. As soon as there's hearing, there is consciousness in that hearing. If we were asleep, the sound might be there, but the knowing of it, the consciousness wouldn't be.

You know that old riddle: if a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around, does it make a sound? The answer is it depends how you define sound. If you just mean the vibration of the air, if you call that a sound, then there is a sound.

But if you mean the conscious experience of hearing, no. There is nobody conscious there to bring that sound into human experience.

So consciousness is just that simple revealing or holding or receiving of sense data. It's happening all the time that we're awake. It happens very automatically. You can't turn it off. Sometimes you may wish that you could, right? The sitting's gone on a long time. Mind's all over the place. There's unpleasant sensation in the body. "I wish I could just stop experiencing." But we can't. As long as we're awake, consciousness is doing its job, which is revealing data at the six senses. That's just happening.

So that's what brings this ongoing contact with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience. It's said, as the Buddha explained it, that there's a separate sense consciousness for each of the six senses. So there's eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, and so forth. But essentially, the knowing is very similar, though it acts through the six sense doors. So this is a fun thing to investigate in practice.

The way I understand it is that in an experience like this, the sound and the consciousness come up together. They can't really be broken apart in your direct experience. In other words, the sound comes with the knowing of it. But you can separate—you can discriminate or differentiate these two aspects of what's going on in your experience.

So every sense experience for a human being arises with consciousness, but you can start to feel out what's the sense object and what's the knowing of it. It's a relationship almost like the object is being held in the consciousness, in the knowing.

Now that may sound a little odd—there's one experience, but it's got two aspects—but it's not that odd. When you look at the bell from the side, is it round or is it black? Round or black? It's both, isn't it? There's just one circle here, but it's got two aspects. You can either look at the form of it or you can look at the color. So similarly, when you hear a sound, you can either tune into the quality of sound or you can tune into your own knowing of it. And this is something that you can actually explore and feel in your meditation practice.

It's actually the consciousness that knows the sound, the feeling tone, the recognition, the mood, and the thought connected with hearing the sound of the bell.

Okay, so this is the list: form, including the matter and all the physical senses; feeling tone; perception; mental formations; and consciousness or knowing.

Is it kind of a funny list? I found this kind of a funny list when I first started to work with it. I think the funniest thing about it for me was that matter made sense, mental formations made sense, consciousness made sense—but why were feeling and perception tossed in and separated out as important as body, mind objects, and consciousness? That didn't quite make sense to me.

But what's interesting is when the Abhidhamma classifies our experience, they only put it into three categories, which is basically matter, mind objects—which they call cittasikas—and consciousness, which they call citta. So in the Abhidhamma model, they collapse feeling and perception into the fourth aggregate of mental formations. This kind of made more intuitive sense to me.

So if you want to think of your experience in terms of three aggregates, that's fine. So this talk could be the talk on the three aggregates. It works for me. But you can play with five or you can play with these three.

The important question is: does this list, whether it's five or three, include everything in your direct experience? This is something you can explore. If it does, then it's an exhaustive list. It's a good list for our purposes.

This list or this way of looking is freeing. When we start to understand it is very freeing.

Why is that?

Because there's nothing else here. There's only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. That's all there is to a human being.

What's missing? I. There's no I in the center that is looking at all this stuff. There's no I in the center that is separate from all this stuff. There's no I in the center that's owning any of this stuff. There is only form, feeling, perceptions, formations, and consciousness happening according to their own causes and conditions.

The beauty of this kind of seeing is it takes out the fiction of control. When we establish an I, it's like "queen me" or "king me" at the center of everything—we feel like it's our dominion. I should be in control of my body. I should be in control of my emotions. I should be in control of feelings. It's never worked because body, feelings, perceptions, formations, consciousness all have their own laws and causes and conditions.

Looking at the body particularly, how many times have we felt proud of our body? "Oh, I'm looking good today. Walking well today." Or on the other hand, how many times have we felt embarrassed about our body? Too big or too small? Too thin or too heavy? Too narrow or too broad? But did we have anything to do with that basic makeup? We take so much either pride or embarrassment about it. Was it our fault? Did you have anything to do with constructing the overall form of body? Whether you're tall or short, or whether your hair is curly or straight, or whether your bones are broad or narrow?

No. You know what happened. Father's sperm met mother's egg. They joined. They divided and multiplied. At a certain point, that form emerged from the womb. It was nourished by milk and water and air and light and food over years and years and years. And this is the outcome. It's a purely physical thing that has done its own thing. We've been along for the ride, you might say, but we didn't have any control over it. Why? Because it's just part of physical nature. It's not mine. It's not yours. It's just part of nature.

As such, our bodies are not very different. The differences between our bodies are really, really small compared to the similarities. Any level you look on—from DNA up to comparing side by side—we all have the same basic components.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of my teachers in Thailand. He said, "This body came out of nature, it's part of nature, and it never departed from nature. It belongs to nature, so give it back. That will be a big relief for you."

This is the way we understand all the aggregates. The body is part of physical nature. Emotions are part of human nature. Consciousness is part of a bigger nature than that—every sentient being has this factor of consciousness. We're united with the creatures in this way. Our emotions are part of human nature. Consciousness is part of all nature, all sentient nature.

So the Buddha said, "Therefore all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself."

And similarly for feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. But so often we claim it, don't we? We think "this is mine," or "I am this," or "this is myself." That's what gets us into trouble. That's not clear seeing.

When we see clearly, the Buddha said, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Why become disenchanted? Because they're all impermanent. None of them offer the possibility of lasting happiness.

So disenchanted doesn't mean we hate it, doesn't mean it's disgusting, doesn't mean we're averse to it. We just see, oh, it doesn't have the promise to bring me lasting happiness. So we kind of let go and stop looking there.

Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, one's mind is liberated. When it is liberated, one understands: birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more renewal of being.

So this teaching on not-self goes deep. It is the way through understanding impermanence to let go of clinging through all the forms of sense experience to any of the five aggregates. And in that letting go, the mind rests, and in the deep resting and non-resistance becomes liberated.

In the shorter term, I'll just relate this quote from an old Sri Lankan monk. Jack Kornfield went to visit him, I think when Jack was still in robes. A very happy being, had been in robes a long time, just had a lot of joy. The monk wanted to check Jack out. So he said, "What's your understanding of the central teaching of Buddhism?"

And Jack said, "My understanding is there's no actual separate self within this mind-body process."

And the old monk just nodded and said, "No self, no problem." He just laughed and laughed.

So this is the message: when we understand properly, it's just causes and conditions. No self, no problem.

Let's just sit for a minute together. Therefore all should be seen as it really is with proper wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 53

Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive teaching on the bojjhaṅgas, the seven factors of enlightenment that the Buddha identified as essential qualities leading to liberation. Drawing from retreat experience and classical texts, he explains how these factors develop sequentially while reinforcing each other: sati (mindfulness) as the foundation, dhammavicaya (investigation of phenomena), vīriya (heroic energy), pīti (rapture), passaddhi (calm), samādhi (concentration), and upekkhā (equanimity).*
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> *Armstrong illustrates how mindfulness awakens natural intelligence, leading to curious investigation of direct experience. This investigation generates heroic energy (vīriya) - not mere effort but the courage to transform reactivity into wisdom. As energy brightens the mind, rapture (pīti) arises as delight in the meditation process itself. This joy naturally settles into profound calm (passaddhi), where the mind discovers its natural peace. Deepening calm leads to the unification of samādhi, gathering the mind's scattered power. Finally, equanimity (upekkhā) develops as inner balance undisturbed by changing conditions.*
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> *Using the metaphor of feeding beneficial mental states while starving hindrances, Armstrong shows how these factors create the optimal conditions for insight and potential awakening. He balances inspiration with practical guidance, explaining how to recognize, cultivate, and balance these factors in meditation practice, illustrated with stories from classical masters and contemporary teachers.*

The talk tonight is on the seven factors of enlightenment.

There's a story you may be familiar with, as it became popular after 9/11—the story of the two wolves, which has been attributed to the Cherokee Nation, although I'm not quite sure of the exact source.

The story goes that a young boy was at school and one of his friends did something to him that was unkind and unfair. He came home quite stirred up, wondering how he should respond—whether he should get back at the person or try to work it out in friendship. He came to his grandfather, explained the situation, and asked what he should do.

The grandfather said, "Oh, I know what you're feeling exactly. This has happened to me many times. It is as though there are two wolves inside me. One is very angry and inclines easily to hatred, looking for vengeance. The other wolf is kind and patient and wants to live in harmony with everyone. These two struggle inside me many times, and both try to dominate my spirit."

The boy asks, "Grandfather, which one will win?"

And the grandfather replies, "The one that I feed."

I like this story because of its simple pointing to an important truth, and also because it really echoes the Buddha's language in working with our minds. The Buddha talked often about our meditation practice being directed towards starving the hindrances and feeding the factors of enlightenment.

We start to understand that through the tools we acquire—mindfulness, loving kindness, and wisdom—we gain the capacity to shape our own minds in the direction that we choose. This is an amazing thing. I never imagined when I was young that this was possible, that I could create my mind in the direction that I wanted it to go. But there are specific practices in our tradition to shape it for wisdom, for loving kindness, for energy, for compassion, for freedom—all the beautiful qualities that we seek. We have tools to build the mind in that direction.

We often don't know how far this development can go until we meet somebody who's really walked this path quite a long way. I think about the Indian teacher Dipa Ma. If you haven't encountered her teachings, she's someone I really recommend to you. There's a whole book on her teachings written by a sangha member, a former IMS staff person, called *Dipa Ma*.

Dipa Ma was teaching the three-month course one year. She was staying in the house across the street, and one of the notable things was that after she finished lunch, she would do walking meditation. She was not in a mode of "I'm retired because I'm all the way there." She was still a really ardent practitioner, but her being was so developed that she was very inspiring.

One day in a question and answer period, one of the yogis asked her, "What's in your mind?" Wouldn't that be interesting to ask someone really developed—what's in there? What's going on?

Dipa Ma said, "There are only three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and loving kindness."

That's a well-shaped mind. That's really beautiful, and that's the possibility of practice. We can shape our mind in that direction, and it's just a question of doing the work.

When we think about the lists of the Buddha—many lists describing difficult factors of mind, many lists describing beautiful factors of mind—for us as meditators, one of the most significant lists describing the difficulties is the list of the five hindrances. These are the qualities that the Buddha said obstruct wisdom and block the journey to awakening.

But on the other side, in the beautiful qualities, I think equally important for a meditator is understanding these seven factors of enlightenment, because they really become our great allies on this journey. Where the hindrances block the current to awakening, the seven factors move it forward. They are the forces that propel it.

This is from the Buddha: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future, all will do so by surmounting the five hindrances that weaken wisdom, by firmly establishing their minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by correctly developing the seven factors of enlightenment."

This is a very clear statement of the path. This is our task.

These seven factors are briefly: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. I'll talk about them each in some detail, but as an overview, they're called by this name because the Buddha said they lead to enlightenment—therefore they're called factors of enlightenment. That's pretty clear.

They're all described as maturing in release. Each of these factors, he described as maturing in release or liberation. That's where they go.

He compared them using an image of a kind of house that you see in New England a lot—one of these houses with a peaked roof, very common in this part of the country. If you go into the attic, you see how it's constructed. There are these beams or rafters that all go up to the center and support the roof. Many of these run in parallel to support the roof.

He said, "Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of enlightenment, she slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbana."

So as we develop these qualities, they're aiming in just one direction. Like the rafters that only point one way, these factors only point one way also.

At this point in the retreat, I am quite confident that all of you have had experiences of all these factors. You may not have noticed them when they went by. They may not have been of extremely long duration. But I want to talk about them tonight so that you can start to recognize them when they come. Because the first step in developing them is knowing when they're present, knowing what helps them arise, knowing what sustains them, and knowing how to develop them further.

So they lead in the direction of liberation, enlightenment, nibbana. They're also a description of the mind that is poised on the edge of enlightenment. When we develop and collect these factors together in the right balance, that mind is perfectly prepared for an opening into nibbana or the unconditioned. We can't by effort make that opening happen. We can't effort a moment of enlightenment. But what we can do is prepare the mind with these factors so that it is poised on the threshold.

In a way, you could say these factors, when they're brought together and balanced, describe an approximation in mundane terms of the tipping into enlightenment or nibbana. Either way, they're kind of our best attempt to reproduce or imitate this unconditioned element. They lead there; they approximate that state.

The factors have been described by the Buddha as being sequential—one leads to the next, leads to the next, and so on. That's how I'm going to organize the talk tonight, and I hope to show how that development happens naturally. But they also reinforce each other. So one that seems later down the list is also supportive of ones that come earlier. It's not like you have to develop only this one and only then develop the second and only then the third. They all can develop together. But I think understanding the sequence is helpful because it shows how meditation itself develops.

The first factor in the list is mindfulness. It starts the ball rolling. That's why we put so much emphasis on it from the first day. And it also serves to keep the factors in balance. Now, what does that mean, keeping them in balance?

After mindfulness, the next three factors are called arousing factors. They tend to bring up energy. These are the factors of investigation, energy, and rapture. The next three factors are pacifying factors. They lead to the development of calm. These are calm, concentration, and equanimity. Balance means that the three arousing factors are equally matched by the pacifying factors.

You know all the instructions we gave from day one about finding in your posture the balance of alertness and relaxation? This is really to find in the body the expression of these factors of enlightenment. The posture itself leads to the balancing of these factors of energetic awakeness and calm relaxation. Because it's when these really come together that the mind is best poised for insight.

I'd like to talk about all the factors a little bit, beginning with mindfulness. We've said a lot about mindfulness. I don't need to say very much more. But I want to say something that I hope might be helpful as you practice this quality and as you try to understand it.

There's been a lot written about mindfulness and sati and what it all means, and explanations can become very long to the point where I can't tell if I'm doing it right or not after I've read somebody else's definition. So I want to give you a really simple definition: Mindfulness is understanding what our experience is in this moment. And I honestly think that's enough. If you're in touch with the moment and you know what you're experiencing, mindfulness is happening—in the Buddha's vocabulary.

Some teachers will say, "Oh, it's only real mindfulness if there's no greed, aversion, or delusion." That's a very sweet form of mindfulness. That's a very developed form of mindfulness, but I don't think it's the only form of mindfulness. Very simply, when you know what your experience is, mindfulness is being activated. And then it grows and becomes refined.

What I base this on is the way the Satipatthana Sutta is expressed. Because in each of the sections on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the word "understands" is used again and again in this functional sense. The Buddha will say something like: the meditator understands, "I'm breathing in." They understand, "I'm breathing out." They understand, "I'm experiencing a pleasant feeling." They understand, "The mind is affected by lust," or "The mind is unaffected by lust."

In each case, the word used for "understand" is pajanati in Pali. So I take this as the functional definition of mindfulness: this understanding or knowing of our experience. Pajanati is related linguistically to the term for clear comprehension, sampajanya, which has an element of wisdom within it. This understanding of our experience is enough to get the ball of meditation rolling.

When we become mindful, we start to notice things. We see more about our direct experience, and then we become interested. We become curious. Why? Because there is this native intelligence that mindfulness wakes up. Mindfulness brings out this natural

interest and wisdom or intelligence to relate to our experience, and that leads to the second factor, which is investigation. This is the quality in Pali known as dhammavicaya.

Andrea talked about this in some detail a week or so ago. We've described how this is not particularly a conceptual investigation, but it's really about drawing our attention close to the direct experience and, you could say, rubbing our attention against the phenomenon of our direct experience. It's kind of like when you want to investigate or understand anything that you really care about—you'll notice how the mind naturally calms down and draws close to that phenomenon.

I was biking up Pleasant Street a couple of years ago, going north on this road. It's a very quiet country lane with very little traffic—that's why it's so good for biking. I was about a mile or two from the center when, all of a sudden, out of the woods on the left side of the road, this black bear emerged. Just kind of ambling along, wasn't in any hurry. Fortunately, it was in front of me.

I stopped the bike. The bear just sat down in the middle of the road. It wasn't too worried about the traffic either, and just sat there for a while on its haunches, kind of looking around. I didn't want to get too close, but I was very interested. Eventually, a car drove up, and the car was not going around because the bear was sitting right in the middle of the road.

What was very interesting about this experience is that we were all kind of transfixed by seeing the bear. My attention was not wandering very much. I was really right there with that bear. This is how it is when we're really interested in something—the experience is just naturally there with it.

This bear was really kind of a lazy creature and had no real urge to move along. So finally I talked to the driver of the car and said, "Look, why don't you drive by it on one side? I don't think it's going to bother you. Then we can ride by on your other side while you're driving by the bear." So that's what we did. The car drove by, we rode by on the other side, and just as we passed it, the bear said, "Okay, that's enough," and ambled off into the yard of the farmhouse just across the street. Somehow they had a bear in their yard, but we could keep going.

This is how it is when we're with a natural phenomenon that we really want to learn about—the attention is right there with interest, with curiosity, and ready to learn from that experience. This is the quality of investigation. There's a kind of natural warmth to that interest and attention, sometimes described by the term "wise attention." In Pali,

the word is yoniso manasikara. It's interesting that the term yoni is the word for womb. So you can think of this as a womb-like attention that gathers around something that we care about in a warm and embracing way.

We can cultivate this factor of investigation, as Andrea described in her talk, and hopefully you've gotten a number of pointers from that. I'll just mention one other that I've found helpful. One of the most difficult things when we're with a meditation focus is that the mind wants to wander off into the realm of conceptual thinking. The more interest we can find in the present, the more likely we are to stay connected.

After some time, the breath may become kind of ordinary. "Oh, I've seen a hundred breaths today. What interest is there in seeing the hundred-and-first?"

So one of the ways to keep interest in the experience of breathing is to ask for a little more noticing of detail. One of the things I sometimes like to do in practicing with the breath is seeing if I can find in each in-breath the beginning, middle, and end. Then, if I can find in each out-breath the beginning, middle, and end of the out-breath. And then if there's a pause before the next in-breath, I focus the attention on a touch point like contact of the seat with the cushion or the contact of the nostrils with the breath.

So these seven points—beginning, middle, end, beginning, middle, end, touching—keep my mind often interested in the breath when just a simple noting of "in" doesn't quite hold it. This is just a way to investigate, bringing us a little closer to the experience, bringing up the quality of interest. This investigation factor is part of the wisdom element of mind, and so this is, in a way, a very direct way to activate that faculty within us. Mindfulness brings in some of that intelligence. Investigation sharpens it.

When we get interested and curious and are looking closely at something, it tends to bring up our energy. Dullness is related to being disinterested, and energy is related to being interested. And that leads us into the third factor, which is called energy. The Pali term is *viriya*.

It's interesting—the root of the word *viriya* is *vira*, and the meaning in Pali is hero, or it could be heroine. This is the same root as the Latin word *virile*, or the English word virile from Latin—same root. So there's a sense of a heroic quality to this energy.

It's sometimes translated as energy, but other translations of this term have been used, and I'm going to run through a few because taken all together, they really give more of the connotations of what's being pointed to here with *viriya*. It's also been translated as effort, energetic effort, strength, courage, ardor, and enthusiasm. So you can see it's not just raw energy, but it's energy that's directed—in this case, to the path. It has a strong quality of mind applying directly to the practice.

The Buddha put it this way: "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the responsibility of cultivating wholesome states." You may recognize this as the definition of right effort—to abandon the unwholesome and cultivate the wholesome. And this is where energy is directed.

There's the connotation that this effort is a heroic kind of effort. The effort that all of you are engaged in has a quality of heroism about it. And it's a recognition that it's not an easy task to meet these conditioned patterns of reactivity and with the tools of the practice transform them into wisdom and compassion. That's what we're doing moment after moment. And that's not an easy job. How do you transform anger into wisdom, into love? It's not simple. This is why the energy has to be of a heroic quality. And this can only come from our own motivation and aspiration for freedom, for greater peace and understanding.

Some teachers really emphasize the heroic quality of this effort. I was sitting one three-month course here in 1987, and the teachers were in a very heroic effort kind of mode. In every interview, the way we would start off, as a yogi I would relate how many hours I sat, how many hours I walked, and how many hours I slept. That was the start of every interview with my teachers. And from that, they got a sense of the kind of effort I was putting in.

Their guideline was they wanted me to get down to four hours of sleep a night every night. I was used to cruising on retreats at about six hours of sleep. That felt comfortable to me. I'd never tried to get to four before. But that was the challenge. That's what my teachers wanted me to try to do. And so I had the time to do it. I worked at it.

I came in the hall a lot of times sleepy. I couldn't hit four hours right off. I really had to work up to that, but over the weeks the sleepiness wore away, my sleep needs went down, and I eventually got to the point where I could cruise—it took some effort, but I could do the practice with four hours of sleep a night and not fall asleep very much during the day. That was a very fruitful period of practice. I learned a lot from doing that. It was very rigorous, it was very demanding, and it was very insightful. So I really appreciate the time that I did that.

I think about the way professional athletes train.

You know, I think about the way professional athletes train. I don't know if any of you have favorite sports, but I'm a big fan of tennis. And in the 90s, I really liked Andre Agassi, who was one of the main US players at the time. Agassi was a fitness fanatic. He trained in Las Vegas under this very demanding coach named Gil Reyes, who taught at

UNLV, University of Nevada in Las Vegas. Reyes would have Agassi run up and down the hills outside the city so intensely that he would push himself until he threw up. And then Reyes would say, "Okay, that's good effort for today. Come back again tomorrow. We'll do it again."

You talk to professional cyclists—I don't know if you ever watch the Tour de France. That is an amazing feat of endurance. These athletes, and now there's a women's tour also, go for about twenty-eight days of incredible effort every day. One professional cyclist said, "Every time I get on my bike for a race, I know I'm going to be facing eight hours of non-stop pain." That's how they push themselves. That's just for fame and fortune—they're not even getting liberated from doing that!

So that's an encouragement for us, perhaps, to see what this quality of heroic effort might mean in our practice. Sometimes we'll feel inspired to do that. It's not so helpful to do it from a sense of "I really ought to do it," or "I'm not going to be a good yogi unless I do this." But sometimes we get inspired to just extend a little bit—sit a little longer, or sit a few more times in the day, or stay up a little later, get up a little earlier in the morning. And we find that in stretching our capacity, we grow into that way of practicing.

This isn't right for everybody, but it's right for some people. And especially, it may be right for some younger practitioners, because when you're young, it's really good to stretch your wings and see where your capacity is. It can be really helpful.

So that's one style of heroic effort. But there's another style where the virya expresses itself more as perseverance—or you could say persistence.

One of the greatest yogis in Tibet in their entire history is considered to be Milarepa, who was practicing in the eleventh century. He was one of the lineage holders in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, considered to have made unbelievable meditative progress in one lifetime.

Milarepa left a number of disciples, one of whom was very prominent in the lineage—Gampopa. Gampopa had come to Milarepa, who was practicing out in the mountains. Milarepa is the one you see in Tibetan paintings who's just clad in light white robes. If you see a picture on a Tibetan thangka and the yogi is just in these white robes, that's likely to be Milarepa. He would practice in those thin white robes in the Himalayas in the middle of winter because he learned how to do tummo practice to generate inner heat. So he kept himself alive with the warmth of tummo and by eating nettles out in the wilderness.

Milarepa had been teaching Gampopa for quite a while, and now it was time for the disciple to go off, find his own cave, and do his own practice. They had come to the point where they needed to say goodbye. The student was leaving the master—quite sad at leaving, but it was a necessary step in his own development.

So Gampopa had started off down the mountain track, leaving behind his teacher, and then Milarepa called out, "Wait, wait, come back!" Milarepa said, "There's one more key instruction I need to give you."

So Gampopa came up. Milarepa turned around with his back to Gampopa, flipped up his white robe, and leaned over to show him his buttocks. And this is where the teaching came:

"There is nothing more profound than meditating on this pith instruction. The qualities in my mindstream have arisen through my having meditated so persistently that my buttocks have become as hard as a camel's hoof. You must also give rise to such heartfelt perseverance and meditate."

So this was the pith instruction from the master to the student, and then he sent Gampopa off to do his own practice.

This quality of perseverance or persistence is another way to express the energy of virya. It's just to keep going. Start and keep going.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya puts it this way: "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort simply directed at remaining aware."

It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this you need right effort, which is simply perseverance. This is why we stress in our instructions the quality of relaxation. If you approach each moment from a relaxed frame of mind and you're present, the meditation will gain momentum and that persistence of momentum will develop this quality of virya.

As the energy comes up, the mind becomes brighter. And as the mind becomes brighter in relating to our experience, we find there's a quality that comes in of enjoyment. This is pointed to by the next factor, which is called rapture. In Pali, this is piti.

So piti is the factor of mind that takes a delight in the meditation. This is not like a delight in a sense pleasure—there's a very different experience. It's not stoking sense desire, but it's a very refined enjoyment that's really an appreciation of the quality of the attention itself, the quality of mind. This is sometimes translated as joy, this factor,

but please understand it's a meditative kind of joy. It could also be called joyful interest or a rapt attention. We're enjoying being with our direct experience, whatever its nature. It doesn't have to be sensually gratifying. We're enjoying the process of being present.

So we start to find that the present moment is where we want to be. We're not forcing ourselves to let go of the thought stream and come here. The present is where we're finding our delight, our satisfaction.

One teacher who teaches concentration practice on the breath is Ajahn Brahm. He's a British monk who's living in Australia and teaches concentration practice extensively. He said that when you discover that the breath can seem beautiful to you, when you find the beautiful breath, then your practice picks up this quality of rapture, of delight. This is interesting to explore. What would happen if you saw the breath as something beautiful? What if you discovered the beautiful breath? It has a way of really bringing the attention in with an enjoyment of the process.

So rapture is a mental factor, but it has a physical echo or accompaniment in different degrees. Sometimes it feels like there are goosebumps running down the arms. Sometimes it feels like there's a momentary rush of energy, kind of like a lightning bolt in the body. Sometimes there are passing waves of sensation that arise in the body. Sometimes there's a feeling of being uplifted. I don't know if you've ever felt that. Sometimes when the quality of piti is strong, you almost feel like you could float off your cushion. Something is holding you up. And then there's an all-pervading piti where it's felt throughout the body.

Mostly this experience of piti is pleasant because it's coming out of a mind state of enjoyment. Sometimes the physical manifestation can get so strong that it tips into the unpleasant. It feels a little too intense and it's no longer pleasurable. But in its initial state it's felt as pleasurable and it tends to offset the hindrance of aversion. That pleasantness of the bodily energy offsets aversion. If it becomes stronger and starts to be felt as unpleasant, you just need to keep deepening the practice and that will smooth out in time.

So as the pleasantness of piti grows and the enjoyment of the experience, we're not so inclined to send the mind out to past and future for gratification because the moment feels sufficient. This leads into the next factor, which is calm. Also sometimes called tranquility, the Pali word is passaddhi.

Some of the other translations for this factor might be ease or serenity, tranquility or calm. Once I saw it translated as relaxation, which is nice to think about. This is the quality that lets us relax into the moment. This is the first of the pacifying factors. Rapture has the possibility of getting a little overexcited, amping up the energy too much. And so the calm starts to smooth that out and starts to balance out the arousing factors.

When the mind and the body start to feel tranquil in meditation, it's often a new experience. We're not so familiar with this from our busy outside lives in the West. And so when it first arrives, we may not quite recognize it. The experience of calm is quite subtle, and it's easy to overlook. But when it's pointed out, we can start to recognize it and then work with it.

One meditator, when having this experience for the first or second time, noted it as calm.

Like, is that what this is about? Is this calm? So we get to know it a little bit.

When we first find it, it might not feel that satisfying. Coming out of busy lives in the West, we are often accustomed to intensity, to riding dramatic emotions up and dramatic emotions down, and we think that's what vitality is about. Oh, if I'm feeling really strongly, whether it's pleasure or pain, then meditation is really happening. The emotional intensity is really where it's at.

And as calm starts to come in, we may feel a little disappointed. What happened to the intensity of meditation? And there can even come in a little bit of boredom. Well, not so interesting. I was looking for the ride that I got from the emotions. Well, what's going on now?

So it's an interesting point at which to investigate boredom because boredom is basically an aversion to neutrality. When things are high or when things are low, it's easy to stay engaged because it's kind of thrilling either way. When those go out, there's a kind of neutral quality to the mood and the mind goes, not so interesting. This is actually delusion coming in.

So we start to notice it. Oh, this is calm. Not a bad state to be in. Calm is a really wholesome state. And so we start to appreciate. And one of the ways it can be appreciated is in calm, there's an absence of dukkha. So it may not be thrilling, but the absence of dukkha is very significant.

In the early years of meditation practice, for many of us, retreats are characterized by a lot of turbulence. The hindrances are really the main fact of life, sometimes for years in practice. And when we hit this patch of calm, it's a significant turning point.

And it's kind of like we've crossed some stormy ocean. You know, it's got big winds and there are pirate ships and then there's the attack of the giant squid. And all of a sudden, we've entered this big safe harbor where there's really not much happening. And then we can just sort of float on that for a while, still being mindful, but there's a sense of being able to float instead of struggling.

So Emily Dickinson really expressed this well in a poem called "Wild Nights." And for those of you who aren't native English speakers, there are a couple of odd words in this. Futile means useless, of no benefit. And chart is a synonym for a map in nautical terms. So here's the poem from Emily Dickinson:

Futile the winds to a heart in port.
Done with the compass, done with the chart.
Rowing in Eden.

I love this image. This calm space in meditation, it's like we're rowing in the Garden of Eden. Things are at peace. There's fulfillment and there's satisfaction.

So what is happening in the experience of calm is the mind is discovering its own natural peace and ease. That natural peace is always there when we're not stirring it up. It is the basic nature of the mind and our kilesas continue to ruffle the waters. Now we're discovering that natural peace that is the mind's basic quality.

There's a meditation instruction that Ajahn Amaro likes to use. He's an English monk who's now the abbot of Amaravati Monastery in England. And at a certain point in the retreat, he likes to give this meditation instruction. It's all the meditation instruction you ever need. Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body. Then pay attention to whatever disturbs that. Very simple. Rest in peace or pay attention to the disturbance. That's enough.

So resting in that peace when this comes is a piece of what we've been looking for all along. Peace—P-E-A-C-E—of what we've been looking for. There is a deep satisfaction in discovering this quality of calm. The access to that is really a doorway to contentment.

The mind finds satisfaction in its own nature. Then many of the desires for the future and regrets about the past, which tend to stir up restlessness, start to seem irrelevant because the present moment takes on its own kind of fulfillment.

This leads to a shift in our approach to the path, a shift in our understanding. It's really one of the great blessings of the meditative journey. The Buddha said in the Dhammapada this line I really love: "Peace is the highest happiness." I wonder to what extent we actually believe that, because peace is available in any moment when we don't stir it up. How often do we choose that? Or how often are we looking for some other kind of happiness that we think is going to be better?

So often in the West, we believe that ecstasy is the highest kind of happiness, or some special bliss, or some unitive experience is the highest kind of happiness. But the Buddha, who was not a dumb person, said that peace is the highest happiness. I think this is really interesting to explore, and I think it's a very profound comment on human psychology—that this most deeply is what we're seeking and that this is what brings the most fulfillment for us.

Now there are ways that this can be cultivated in meditation. Obviously the development of mindfulness through the other factors is necessary, but there are ways that we can encourage it. I'll just mention a simple one from the Anapanasati Sutta, where the instruction is: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe in tranquilizing the mental formation. I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe out tranquilizing the mental formation."

So in this discourse on the mindfulness of breathing, we can use the breath consciously to bring in this feeling of calm. You can play with this and see if it's accessible in this way. But the basic instruction is: when calm comes, notice it, be mindful of it, note it if you're doing that, and relax and trust in it. Settle into the calm and get to know it. It will continue to deepen.

As the calm continues to deepen, it leads into the next factor, which is concentration. The Pali word is samadhi. This is a state of mind where the calm has really become collected. The dispersion into past and future has fallen away. The mind is more united, unified in the present moment. And when it becomes unified in that way, it gathers back all its natural power.

We are constantly giving away the power of our mind through our distractedness. The quality of unification brings incredible power to the mind. The Buddha said the amount of power that comes from a concentrated mind is inconceivable—you can't understand what kind of power is there. For instance, it leads to jhana states, these states of deep absorption, which are very purifying. It leads to psychic powers. Again, one of Dipa Ma's skills is that she had the ability to develop all the different psychic powers

that are described in the old texts, described in the suttas. One of the things that her teacher commented on is that she could appear in a room for an interview without using the door. Wish I could do that.

Samadhi is usually translated by the term concentration. We'll continue to use that term because it's so widespread, but it's not a very good translation because the English word has associations that aren't in the Pali. In English, when we say concentration, we usually mean an exclusive focus of attention—like, "I'm trying to concentrate on my homework. Don't distract me with that music." But in the Pali samadhi, the unification is not about a narrow focus of attention. It is about the unification of the mind stuff, the mind as a whole.

It can become unified through one focus like the breath, but it can also become unified in a very expansive kind of awareness, as when you practice choiceless attention or when we did the big mind meditation the other day. As long as the mind is fully in the present moment, that unification is taking place. So the focus can be narrow, the focus can be broad. Unification of mind can be as strong in either state. I like to think of this as a wholeness of mind—when the mind becomes collected, unified, and whole.

Wholehearted is another beautiful term for samadhi. This quality of concentration offers two main benefits.

The first is that it brings a great sense of well-being. You can notice this directly in your meditation practice. When the mind becomes steady in the present moment, how does that feel? It generally feels good, doesn't it? We're not being thrown about by the hindrances left and right. The absence of the hindrances itself is a pleasant experience. There's a sense of well-being that comes from the power of concentration as the mind becomes stable, steady, and strong.

The Dalai Lama expresses this beautifully: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." Samadhi is what gives the mind its strength to remain in this inner peace.

The second significant benefit is that concentration serves as the foundation for wisdom. In one of the suttas, the Buddha says the purpose and benefit of concentration is for wisdom. It's the foundation for insight, because when the mind is steady, it can see more clearly.

Imagine you're on a merry-go-round, seated on one of the horses, going round and round. Your friend approaches the edge and holds up a newspaper announcing, "Here's today's news!" But you're whizzing by so fast you can't read it. The merry-go-round

slows down and comes to a stop. Now you're positioned in front of your friend and can read the headlines clearly. What do the headlines say? "Everything changes. If you hold on, you suffer. Letting go leads to happiness."

When the mind slows down, we see these truths clearly. And when the mind is concentrated, the insights penetrate deeply. They go way beyond the intellect to a place that feels very experiential—into our bones, because concentration brings depth.

One of the powers of concentration is that the mind grows strong and isn't so pushed around by the changing flow of events. It's not so buffeted by the pleasant and unpleasant. This leads us into the seventh factor, called equanimity. The Pali term is upekkhā, and the basic definition is that state of mind not so moved by pleasure and pain. We still see pleasant and unpleasant, we still experience them, but our inner balance isn't pushed around by them.

Sometimes in English, equanimity carries the connotation of not feeling anything, of no longer having emotions. When I first came into Buddhism, I thought the ideal was to be as unmoved as the stone statue of the Buddha appeared to be. But equanimity is not about losing our emotional response.

During a discussion group at the end of one three-month course, I asked people to recount some of their most meaningful experiences over those months. One that several people described was being able to remain centered and steady while still experiencing a full range of changing experiences. They were essentially describing the quality of equanimity and its growth. I think this represents one of the key benefits of a long retreat that doesn't simply disappear when you return to the world. This basic strength of mind will stay with you for some time.

I then asked them, "In that place where you felt centered and unmoved, were you no longer feeling? Were your emotions shut down?" They replied, "Not at all." They said there was actually more metta and compassion arising from that place than in their normal state of mental turmoil. Equanimity truly opens the door to the flowering of beautiful qualities like love and compassion, as well as peace. It's not a cold place at all.

For this reason, Bhikkhu Analayo prefers to translate this not as equanimity but as equipoise. There's a sense that we're poised in the present moment and balanced, but not at all cut off or shut down. Equanimity appears on many of the lists of beautiful qualities in the dharma.

It's included in the paramis, the brahmaviharas, and in the progress of insight described in the Visuddhimagga detailing how meditation unfolds toward enlightenment. It's also found in the factors of enlightenment. What's particularly striking about

equanimity is that it consistently appears last in all these lists, suggesting that equanimity represents the culmination of meditative development. I would say the reason it occupies this final position is that equanimity is the closest worldly state to nibbana—the conditioned state of mind that most closely resembles the unconditioned.

It's invaluable to begin noticing when these qualities arise in your meditation, becoming familiar with each one and recognizing that while they're all wholesome, their particular balance and relative strength shape the mind in different directions. You'll want to discern which factors are strong and which are weak.

One approach I find helpful is maintaining awareness of where I stand with mindfulness, energy, and concentration. Mindfulness serves as the originator, energy represents the arousing factors, and concentration embodies the calming factors. When these three are balanced and strong, meditation feels bright, alert, and peaceful. But energy and concentration can fall out of balance.

When energy exceeds concentration, we feel restless and agitated. When concentration overpowers energy, we may feel dull and slip into what's called "sinking mind"—a drowsy state that resembles sleepiness but originates from a wholesome place. We feel dull and can space out. Understanding how each factor is generated allows us to restore balance through skillful application.

A practical way to work with these factors builds on the attitude inquiry we often suggest—checking for the presence of greed, aversion, and delusion. Sometimes this inquiry yields negative results: Look for greed? No. Look for aversion? No. Look for delusion? No. What then?

This is where checking for wholesome factors becomes invaluable. How's the mindfulness? How's the interest? How's the energy? Is there enjoyment? Do I feel peaceful? Is the mind strong? Is there equanimity toward pleasure and pain? You can identify from direct experience which factors are present and to what degree.

As familiarity with these factors deepens, you'll understand what conditions their arising and what sustains them. When all seven are harmoniously present, there's not only a foundation for insight and clear seeing—there's also the possibility of opening to a moment of enlightenment. We cannot force or control such moments, but developing these factors is within our capacity. We can bring the mind into that balance from which opening becomes possible. That's all we can do. The rest we entrust to the Dhamma.

The Buddha taught: "Bhikkhus, these seven factors of enlightenment, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering."

Sometimes we might wonder whether the complete destruction of suffering remains available to anyone in this day and age. Does this still happen for contemporary meditators? I'd like to share an excerpt from the biography of a Thai monk named Luang Por Liem, or Ajahn Liem.

Ajahn Liem was a student of Ajahn Chah. When Ajahn Chah knew he was dying, he appointed Ajahn Liem to assume the abbotship of Wat Pa Pong in Thailand, essentially anointing him as his primary Dhamma successor. This account describes part of Luang Por Liem's practice experience under Ajahn Chah, dating back to 1969.

In this rainy season, Ajahn Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity, so I increased my effort. Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit in meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and then stop to have a rest, but now I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture.

A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body, as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, an experience of the whole body becoming completely light and at ease. Cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. The body felt tranquil, cool, and light.

This experience continued on throughout that whole year—not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years now, all from that one time. It feels like there are no proliferations of the mind anymore. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before—the kilesas concerning the other sex, or all kinds of ambitions that I had before—I don't know where they all disappeared to. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose.

There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. The experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change at all, all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on and it has been stable, continuous and without changes.

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any.

CHAPTER 54

Impulses Come From Ignorance

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines why the mind continues its restless activity even in the simple environment of meditation retreat. Drawing primarily from the Honeyball Sutta (Madhupiṇḍika Sutta) in the Majjhima Nikāya, he traces how sense contact leads to feeling, perception, thinking, and mental proliferation (papañca) - the explosive tendency of mind to spin stories that pull us away from present-moment awareness.*
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> *Armstrong explores the first two links of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination): how ignorance (avijjā) conditions volitional formations (saṅkhāra) - the impulses that drive our obsessive thinking patterns. He identifies three layers of obscuration that veil our natural peace: fundamental ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, afflictive emotions rooted in greed/hatred/delusion, and harmful actions that create karmic burden. The talk demonstrates how the Eightfold Path systematically pierces these veils through sīla (ethical conduct), samādhi (concentration), and paññā (wisdom), leading toward the unconditioned peace of nibbāna. Armstrong offers practical guidance for recognizing the volitions behind our thoughts and cultivating temporary states that approximate the freedom from craving.*

The subject of tonight's talk is impulses come from ignorance.

When we come into a retreat, we're usually coming from quite a busy daily life, having been involved in a lot of planning and creating and doing and thinking and feeling. We can feel that momentum in our minds when we're outside, and then we carry it into the retreat with us.

So when we come into this environment, which is very simple, we could drop most of the mental doing. But do we? This is what's curious. That thought stream is not really needed here, but it continues with such force and intensity. And I wonder why that is. Why does it work like that? Why can't we just say, "Okay, I'm in a retreat. I can stop thinking. It's not serving any purpose. It's bothering me." Why can't we just put it down?

I'm not suggesting that we should stop all thoughts. Number one, we can't. Number two, if you try to do that, you will just suppress your own vital energy and it will not be helpful. And third, there's not a problem with a thought per se. As all of you know, there are times in practice when thoughts can arise and pass and not disturb us. It's not the

thought that's the problem. The problem is when we get fascinated by the thought and chase after it. With that sort of active energy, we propel thoughts forward and then it becomes obsessive. We can no longer just let them come and go, but we get wrapped up in the content and the momentum of them.

But sometimes stopping does happen. A number of you have been reporting in interviews that there are times when it has become calm, when you can simply see thoughts coming and going, and there's something very satisfying about that kind of stability. There's something quite freeing about it.

I was reminded of a brochure that one of our friends created when I was on staff here in '78, '79. He created a parody advertising brochure for IMS. It said, "Come to the greatest resort of all. There's no talking, no reading, no regular dinner, no swimming, no golf, and no tennis. This is the vacation of your dreams," because, he said, it's better to do nothing than to waste time.

I think this is really a beautiful line: it's better to do nothing than to waste time, because that's what we're involved with here a lot of the time, aren't we? When you take away the formal aspect of the meditation hall and you realize mostly what you're doing is sitting down and doing nothing, right? And yet that's incredibly wholesome. It's like one of the best things you can do. But it's not that easy to really do nothing. It depends on a lot of wholesome factors of mind, because otherwise this habit carries over, carries over, carries over.

So the Buddha talked about this habit also. There's quite a famous discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya called the Honeyball Sutta. I want to tell a little bit of the story of that sutta.

The Buddha was living at this time in Kapilavatthu, the village in northern India close to the border with Nepal where he grew up. So it was a place he was very familiar with, and a number of his closest monks and disciples had come from this area. They were from the same extended clan as Siddhartha was himself. So it was like he was back on his home turf. He'd been there many times before.

This fellow came up to visit him, whose name was Dandapani. Dandapani—the name means "golden stick"—and you can tell by this that he was kind of a fashion plate. He carried around a golden cane, even though he was a young man, to show off his wealth and how well-dressed he was.

So he comes to visit the Buddha who's in meditation. Dandapani doesn't pay respects or sit down and address him in a respectful way, but he leans on his cane and says, "What does the recluse assert? What does he proclaim?" waiting for something that he

can argue with. This is a disrespectful opening, but this is what the spiritual world was like back then. These seekers liked to come to each other and debate their positions and argue.

And it was sort of like ultimate cage fighting—one really wanted to smack the other down and come out on top. So that's the way Dandapani was addressing the Buddha.

The Buddha replied, and this is quite clever: "Friend, I proclaim such a teaching that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world." It's a beautiful statement. And then he continued, "No perceptions underlie such a one who is free of craving."

This is very cryptic—no perceptions underlie someone who is free of craving. The commentaries say what is pointed to here is that one does not build off of sense contact and the perception of things to develop craving. So the Buddha has freed himself from that. But this was still a cryptic statement even to his students, so some of them later asked a senior monk to explain what the teacher meant.

Most of the core of this discourse is delivered by a senior monk named Mahakaccana. But before that, I should mention that after the Buddha said these two lines—"I'm not going to quarrel" and "perceptions no more underlie"—Dandapani shook his head, wagged his tongue, frowned, and went away. We can see he was very disappointed by this answer. He went away leaning on his golden cane.

Later, Mahakaccana explained this line about perception: "Dependent on eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling." I think you've heard this before—this is not new. We've gone over this several times. "With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives."

Perceptions arise based on sense contact where the feeling has impinged on one. Remember that when the Buddha talks about perceiving, it means not sense data, but the recognition of what kind of thing that is—perceiving a man or a woman, a human or a wall or a statue or a chair. It's a recognition of objects. The world really springs up from our perceptions of the shapes and forms that we see. That's what constructs our conceptual world.

Then Mahakaccana continued: "What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates."

This is an interesting turn: what one perceives, that one thinks about. You'll see this in your meditation. There's a pain in the knee—you'll start to think about it. There's an emotion of sadness—you'll start to think about it. But what one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates.

The noun here for proliferation is papañca. This is a great Pali word. I think most of you probably know papañca. You get that there's an explosive feeling to it—the mind going off in all directions.

So we perceive something, we start to think about it, and that easily leads into proliferation. A simple example: You're sitting in the hall. You think the Buddha statue up here is very attractive and you wonder where you could get one. Let's see—I would have to get my phone out. Maybe Elizabeth would release my phone if I ask her nicely. I could connect, I could Google "Buddha Rupa." I think this one is Thai, so I want to look for a Thai Rupa. Maybe I could find one on eBay, or maybe they're creating them on Etsy. Yeah, Etsy. A friend of mine has a site on Etsy, and she's trying to make her living from it, but she wasn't getting enough sales, so she was going to hook up with this guy who said that he could really promote her stuff, but I didn't trust him...

Anyway, this is how proliferation happens.

We take these conceptual leaps from a simple perception of a statue. This is papañca. And when papañca happens, one of the curious things is we don't stay in neutral territory. Buddha, rupa, from Thailand—that's all pretty neutral. But then we get into our friend and her money and her relationships and whether we trust someone or not.

Papañca usually leads us into things we really care about. That's why they draw our attention. We start to care, which means our emotions become involved. It's those emotional involvements that stir us up from this proliferation, creating a sense of disturbance.

Then Mahākaccāna continues: "With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and ideas tinged by proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye."

Let's review this because it's an interesting progression. It starts rather passively and in quite a neutral way. The meeting of the eye and the form brings contact. With contact, there's feeling. This is happening all the time—it's not a big deal. Then it becomes active.

Listen to the next part: What one feels, that one perceives. In perceiving, there's a little mental activity coming in. We perform an act of recognition. It's not very voluntary and doesn't have much charge.

What one perceives, that one thinks about. Now we're starting to get more active. We're engaging the object we've perceived and beginning to dwell on it with our thought. But it's still not problematic because we're still connected to reality. That's a Buddha rupa. I think it came from Thailand. It's not problematic.

But now what happens? "With what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions beset one with regard to past, future, and present." We are assaulted by the proliferations that spring, almost uncontrollably, from the earlier thinking. This is the situation we find ourselves in when we come into meditation. We're not in charge anymore.

Based on past associations, our conditioning, our relationships, our emotional patterns, our areas of craving and clinging, we become victims of our own thought processes. They beset us. They assault us. Papañca launches it all, and then it gets out of hand. That's what we find when we sit quietly in meditation and try to bring our attention into the present moment—all this other stuff going on.

So what is all this other stuff about? And why is it so powerful?

In the beginning of the chain of dependent origination—this cycle of twelve links where the Buddha traced the genesis of suffering in great detail, beginning with ignorance, moving through craving and clinging, and ending in suffering—I want to talk particularly about the first two links: avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā.

Avijjā means ignorance, this fundamental not knowing of the way things are. Paccayā means it's a causal factor, but doesn't mean straight causation. It more means "conditions" or "gives rise to" if supporting conditions are there. You can think of it as "tends to give rise to," but not always.

Saṅkhārā are these volitional formations we talked about when discussing the five aggregates—thoughts and emotions primarily, the contents of mind that show up in our proliferation. Avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā means that ignorance conditions or gives rise to volitional formations.

A more visceral word for volitional formations is impulses. That's how it feels when these things come up—like there's an impulse or urge coming sometimes from deep inside us that forms the driving force for our thoughts and emotions. That's why I like to call this talk "Impulses Come from Ignorance."

This implies that many of these impulses have a blind quality about them. Not all our impulses come from wisdom. If they did, we could probably stop them once we were in meditation.

But because there's ignorance bundled up with them, they're operating on their own pilot. This quality of ignorance is a very deep conditioning factor in the mind. The literal meaning of avijja is "unwisdom." Vijja is another word for wisdom or understanding; the "a" is a negation—unwisdom. It refers to this deep blindness that we carry, this inability to see the truth of things clearly.

The fact that ignorance is the first link in the chain of dependent origination is very significant, because it means that ignorance is where all suffering stems from. The other thing to understand about this chain is that even ignorance is not fixed. That's a beautiful aspect of understanding dependent origination—we'll explore this further later. Ignorance is not permanently fixed in us; it can be uprooted. That uprooting doesn't happen until full enlightenment, but we can puncture it. We have the ability to puncture ignorance quite drastically through the practice of meditation. This is also what we want to explore.

The basic understanding is that volitional formations arise out of ignorance, and these volitional formations are coming up all the time in our meditation practice—when we're feeling distracted, drawn into past or future, figuring things out, adopting views, forming ideas about ourselves, and so on.

At one time in my practice, I became very interested in this connection between volition and thoughts. And of course, thoughts bring feelings, so they're connected on the emotional level as well. For a while in my practice, I would take thought as my primary object. Every time a thought came up, I would label it as a thought, see its content, and then ask: What volition is this expressing? What's the motivation or urge behind this thought?

This became a very interesting exploration because I found that most of my thoughts had a pretty clear volition when I looked at them closely. For example, you think of someone you care for and have a wish that they're doing well. That wish is a form of volition associated with metta—that's what loving-kindness is: a wish for another's welfare. I might be feeling grateful and think of a friend who wasn't doing so well, considering something I could do to help them. That's the motivation of generosity.

During the day, you may have many thoughts that carry these beautiful motivations: loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, renunciation. These are what Sally spoke of this morning when discussing right attitude.

But our most obsessive thinking isn't always so altruistic, is it? How often do we obsess about ending world hunger? How often do we obsess about ending poverty in this nation? That's not typically what we obsess about. The obsessive thoughts tend to be a little closer to home.

We might think of somebody we've had a conflict with and some resentment arises—that's an expression of ill-will, the opposite of good will. There's a quality in anger where we wouldn't be sorry if they got hurt a little bit. That's an ill-will attitude.

Or we think about our work situation, whether our job is secure, whether our income is reliable, and anxiety comes up. Fear expresses an intention—a wish for safety.

We have a thought about some place we'd like to spend time, or reuniting with our partner after missing them for these five weeks, and desire arises—desire to be home or to see someone we're close to. That's an intention toward pleasant experience.

We might think about ourselves with judgment: "Oh, I'm not good enough in this way. I'm not lovable enough. Nobody's ever going to really care for me." This expresses a view of condemning ourselves, finding ourselves insufficient—the comparing mind.

This was an interesting exploration, and I encourage you—you don't have to obsess about this—but take a look now and then. When a random thought goes by, see if you can feel into the volition or motivation behind it. Most thoughts have some motivation.

This raises another interesting question: Are there any thoughts that don't come out of volition? I'm just going to leave that with you as an open question to hold.

Look at your thoughts over the next several days or weeks and see what you find about that.

During meditation, other urges arise—ones that don't involve us so much with the long-term past and future of outside life, but instead entangle us deeply in the meditation world and experience. These urges try to make the moment a little bit better. We want to make the body more comfortable. We want to get rid of that tension and pain that's popped up in the shoulder blade. We want to return to that concentrated, peaceful sitting we had first thing in the morning. Or we want to recapture that open experience of loving-kindness we felt for our benefactor when we felt truly connected and appreciative.

We might try to push away some fear, anxiety, or resentment that's starting to emerge connected with a memory. These impulses arise within the realm of meditation itself.

In these areas where we tend to get obsessive and driven by urges, don't they mostly revolve around me? Aren't these obsessive ones that really push us mostly about self, I, me, and mine? Many of our impulses, especially the really powerful and difficult ones, come from a sense of self-concern in some degree or another.

There's a funny story about ignorance and formations. A robber went into a bank and handed a teller a note demanding all the money in her till. The teller didn't want to get shot, so she emptied her till and handed the money over to the robber, who went out, hopped into a getaway car, drove back to his house—and when he got there, the police were waiting. How did that happen? He'd written his robbery note on the back of his own deposit slip, which of course had his address on it.

We do a similar thing when we hurt someone or when we hurt ourselves. We've written our address on a karmic deposit slip. The impact of that action, of that harm, of that unskillful volition is going to come back to this address, to this body and mind. On the other hand, if we're seeing clearly, then our actions align with that wisdom and clarity. One of our colleagues and friends, Sylvia Boorstein, says when we see clearly, we act impeccably. But when we don't, our actions are not always so great.

We can see this effect of the movement of craving in the world, expressing itself through greed and hatred and confusion. I just read in the New York Times today that the top one-tenth of one percent of Americans own twenty percent of the wealth—one in a thousand people own twenty percent of the wealth. This is compared to what it was in the 1970s, when it was seven percent. So when we talk about income inequality, certainly there is a vast change over the last thirty to forty years in wealth distribution in this country, mostly because of tax cuts in recent years.

What's also curious, and the Times reported this, is that in order to balance the budget, the wealthy are much more likely to favor cutting spending as opposed to raising taxes compared to ordinary Americans. So could that be greed at work? Could be.

Another version from today's paper: The war in Afghanistan is still continuing—this is like fourteen years later—and the Taliban are still fighting. One intelligence report says that they now control or greatly influence about fifty percent of the country. So that's still going on.

Ajahn Sumedho put these first two links succinctly in summarizing the whole chain. He said, when you start at ignorance, you end up at suffering. This is the mechanism, these formations, these impulses—this is the dynamic that keeps us going round.

So what is ignorance? It's not about not knowing facts. It's not about whether you know the longest river in Asia. It's defined in the discourses as not understanding the Four Noble Truths. We don't see the full extent of dukkha, of unsatisfactoriness, number one. We haven't completely given up its cause, which is craving. We still think that there's some lasting happiness to be found there. We haven't fully realized the end of craving, which is nibbāna, and we haven't fully practiced the path to the end of craving, which is the Eightfold Path. In all these ways, we're still bound. We're still bound up with suffering, not having understood the four truths fully.

As long as we're tied to craving, we're also—in a way, that establishes the three characteristics. It also means that we haven't fully seen the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. We don't see the inherent nature of change, so we keep holding on, keep craving and clinging. We don't see how craving leads to suffering, so we haven't fully seen the extent of unsatisfactoriness. Because we haven't seen through the belief in self, we continue to put a lot of energy into the self—extra energy that's not helpful out of the belief in a self, which we could summarize as hope and fear. We continue on that route.

Maybe just as a shorthand, we can think of ignorance as not seeing the truth of not-self—summarizing all these different truths, the craving and the clinging, the unsatisfactoriness, the impermanence, into the truth of not-self.

The Buddha made an interesting comment about one who is in a state of suffering.

He said that when one is in a state of suffering, it results in either bewilderment or search. That's really interesting. So first, maybe there's confusion from the suffering, and second, we look for a way out. And that search might be guided by wisdom or it might be guided by ignorance, by unwisdom.

It's obviously the search through unwisdom that leads us from the confusion of suffering into the activities of greed, aversion, and delusion. We put all our hope in craving, although we don't really see it clearly, and it turns out to bring us more suffering.

So we could say that in this veil of ignorance, it casts a cloud of not seeing. We could say there are three levels to the way that it obscures. And I want to talk about it sort of from the foundation up.

Through not seeing the third noble truth, which is nibbana, we are not seeing the possibility of a complete and satisfying peace. We don't understand that that absolute peace is right within our own nature. Nibbana is spoken of as an unconditioned element, not subject to arising and passing. Not subject to arising and passing means it's present in every moment, but we don't see it. And that is the sad part of our condition.

You could say the Dharma treasure that will set our hearts free is right here. But because its vibration is more subtle than the vibration of the passions, it's clouded over. So we're not able to see that which could give us the greatest possible happiness and freedom and security.

Not understanding that, we look for substitutes. And the substitute that our psyche comes up with is the self. The self seems to offer the promise of some ongoing security. Through the construction of self-image related to past and future, we believe that there's an ongoing nature that is a substitute for the true lasting peace.

But once we construct a self and we identify it with this body and mind, we have to do a lot of activity around it. We have to make the self try to be safe. We have to keep it nourished. So that's what a lot of our thoughts are about—this self-protecting. We don't see that this construction of self wraps us up with holding on. We construct the self out of holding on to past and future and views. And therefore, because it's holding on to what's impermanent, it can't really last. The self-view can't really last. So that's the first level. We've lost touch with the deep inner peace that is part of us.

The second is that we move into these strategies based on craving. We think if we feed the self, that will be the road to happiness. So we put our chips on greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed is to keep the pleasant coming. Aversion is to force the unpleasant away. Delusion is to step back and not feel exactly what's happening in all of those.

Greed, aversion, delusion are the basis for all the unhelpful emotions. We could talk about anger or guilt or judgment or grief or loneliness or pity, desire. They are all based on different combinations of greed, aversion and delusion. In one school of Buddhism it said there are 84,000 of these afflictive emotions combining greed, aversion, delusion in different ways. And that was written about 2,000 years ago. So today I think that number must be at least doubled. Modern life is so much more complicated.

So our normal life is a flood of these emotions, these unhelpful emotions—you call them the hindrances or the taints, kilesas—because we've put our chips on the self and keeping it fed through craving. And these are all oriented around the self, all these unskillful emotions. The Buddha referred to this as a flood. This is the flood that he talks about crossing, talks about crossing to the further shore, crossing to the island, crossing over the flood.

So you could call this the second layer of obscuration. And this is a veil of the afflictive emotions. One of the things we see when we're governed by the hindrances: we don't see clearly. That's one of the main descriptions of the hindrances in the language

of the Buddha—they blind wisdom. So when any of the afflictive emotions are strong, they prevent us from seeing clearly. They draw our attention elsewhere and they reinforce these passions, which are not helpful.

When we are tormented by the afflictive emotions of greed, aversion, and confusion, we act in unskillful ways, and this creates the third level of obscuration. We harm ourselves and we harm others.

That's what's so interesting about understanding sila, which Kamala is going to talk more about in a day or two—that when we transgress the precepts and harm someone else, it ends up harming us also. It's so interesting. And the reason is that we are not totally separate. We are so deeply interconnected that hurting someone else also harms us because on some level we know that it's wrong. And we carry that knowledge with us even if we are in denial about it. But we know that it's wrong and that we've hurt ourselves through doing it.

So harming—basically violating the basic lay precepts—causes harm to us not only emotionally but also in terms of wisdom because it builds up in the mind either a layer of denial, which will block clear seeing, or the burden of regret and remorse, which we really carry as a weight that prevents us from fully loving ourselves and from fully accepting ourselves, which means the moment just as we are, just as it is.

And so we could call this third one the obscuration that comes from harmful actions.

So the ignorance, the basic not seeing, gets layered with these afflictive emotions of greed, aversion and confusion. And out of that come the third level of obscuration, which are the actions that we commit out of these three together.

When we come into meditation, this often becomes a weight that we start to open to. When I did my first long retreat here, all the things I had done in my life that hurt other people or other beings started to come up really strongly in my memory. And every one I would look at, and because I now had a new understanding of the precepts, I would just cringe in seeing it. I can't believe that I did that. I can't believe that I was so ignorant and unaware that I would have done that.

And some of these things went back to second grade. And some of them were a lot more recent at that time. I was about 29 years old at that time. They just invaded my mind. They stayed there. I felt terrible about them. And I had to write them down to get them a little bit out of my thoughts. So I made a list, the 10 biggest mistakes I've made in my life. And by writing them down, I didn't dwell on them quite as much. And then over time, just letting myself feel the remorse and regret about those acts and a real re-

cognition that they were harmful, that I wouldn't do them today, and it was really a different person who had done them, I started to get lighter around them. I still feel regret when I think of them, but I don't feel that heavy weight that I did then.

This is a quotation that's been attributed to the Buddha. I don't think it comes from the Buddha, but it could well have: "Thoughts give rise to intentions, and intentions lead to actions. Actions are repeated as habits, and habits harden into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings."

So we have these three layers of obscuration to seeing: the basic ignorance, the afflictive emotions, and the actions of harmful conduct layered on top of one another. Most people don't have the opportunity to penetrate these layers and see what the truth of things is. And so most beings are bound in this cycle of ignorance leading to suffering. This is the fact for most human beings in the world. And so we just continue to perpetuate. Out of the suffering comes more ignorance and we continue to perpetuate this. That's why the Buddha said, "This samsara is without discernible beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, obstructed by ignorance and driven by craving." And in the Buddha's vision, this is over many, many lifetimes and many, many years of birth and death.

So now what's interesting is to see how the path works. Because the path is constructed deliberately to pierce through these three layers of obscuration. And if you know the Eightfold Path, it can be summed up as sila, samadhi, and panna.

So we start with sila. The point of sila is to undo the layer of obscuration that comes from harmful conduct. As we take up the five precepts, we cease, as far as we can, harming others and harming ourselves. That then leads to the undoing of this layer of obscuration. We have to meet the past harm, but as we meet it and let that go, that level gets purified by the acts of sila.

So conduct alone brings a certain level of peace of mind. This is from the Buddha: "Virtue is for the sake of restraint. Restraint is for the sake of freedom from remorse. Freedom from remorse is for the sake of gladness." So as we take more care with our conduct, it leads directly to a sense of gladness and ease in the heart.

So this stage is described in the text as the purification of conduct, piercing the first level of obscuration—the area of sila.

The second area is the area of samadhi. Samadhi is a word that is translated as concentration, and as we've talked about in the discussion on the seven factors, it refers to a state of mind that has become collected, steady, composed—one that's not so assaulted

by the hindrances. One of the delights of the concentrated mind is that the hindrances have ceased assaulting us. The rolling on of papancha has stopped assailing us, and there is this new sense of calm, peace, and rest that comes in.

Just by being steadily attentive to the moment, moment after moment, the floods have been halted. The floods of greed, aversion, and delusion—the hindrances—have been halted temporarily. In one of the discourses, the Buddha made the comment that mindfulness can dam any flood. That's what we're practicing. When we practice being in the present moment, again and again, we're blocking those floods from coming in and taking over our mindstream.

The mind becomes collected in the present moment. The nature of the present moment is essentially peaceful. If we don't disturb it, the present moment is peaceful, here at least. So this mood of samadhi is about relaxation, about acceptance, and about trust in the moment. The very fact that the hindrances are absent gives a deeper level of happiness. This degree of happiness is found directly in our present experience, so we don't have to go out to look for stuff anymore.

The Buddha expressed this as: tranquility is for the abandoning of desire. This word tranquility is a translation of the Pali word samatha, which is paired with vipassana. Practice develops both tranquility and insight—this is the tranquility piece. Tranquility is for the abandonment of desire.

So this stage of samadhi leads to the purification of mind. The hindrances are in abeyance—they are temporarily halted—and we start to taste some of the possibilities of that peace and freedom.

Then, because the mind is more still, it can see more clearly. It's not blinded by the hindrances. Wisdom can function at a deeper level, and so wisdom now has the possibility of seeing more clearly the deeper truth of things. Wisdom starts to undo the third level of obscuration, which is the misunderstanding about the nature of the self and the nature of our own being.

We start to see that everything is merely coming and going and that there's no fixed center. The more we rest in equanimity with that seeing, the more we are coming closer to that natural peace of non-disturbance. That peace, basically of equanimity, is right next door to a deeper seeing. This is the stage called the purification of view, where we are starting to get closer to piercing the fundamental ignorance about our own nature—the essential peace that's deep within our own nature.

Seeing not-self is a part of that, but it's not the end of the path. The wisdom needs to go one more level at this point, and that is to nibbana.

This dependent origination chain shows how suffering is created based on ignorance. But it's also given, as the Buddha said, in the reverse order, so that when ignorance ceases, the other links of the chain collapse also, and suffering is no longer generated. When ignorance ceases, that is the moment of the realization of the unconditioned, of the element of nibbana.

The Buddha said: with the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of sankhara or impulses, these volitional formations. What is it like when the mind is filled with wisdom? The basic sense is peace, calm, spaciousness, loving-kindness. There's understanding, there's strength, there's joy, there's interest. All these factors are there. These are aspects of the awakened mind.

The actual sense of awakening depends on this third noble truth—the penetration to nirvana—which involves, as is often said, the destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is one of the descriptions the Buddha gave: "This is peaceful. This is excellent. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

This is really, for serious practitioners, the goal of our practice—the realization of the third noble truth. In our tradition, this is called a moment of enlightenment. In this first moment of realization, one is said to enter the stream. One becomes a stream enterer.

If I were to describe this as carefully as I can, I'd say it is a moment of the direct realization of the unconditioned element of nibbana. The Dalai Lama has described it as a direct realization of the ultimate nature of reality.

I think that is also accurate. There's one phrase that often appears in the discourses that expresses this seeing. After someone has had this stream entry experience, the Buddha will say something like, "The spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose: All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation."

This sounds like simply a seeing of impermanence, but I think more is being pointed to here. This quality of cessation is most often referred to as the cessation of craving. And the cessation of craving, as you know, is the cessation of dukkha and is connected with the third noble truth or nibbana.

So when craving ceases, the unwise impulses also cease. There's a sense of stillness and peace. Now this peace of nibbana is an unshakeable kind of peace. But we start to approximate this. We start to feel close to it in our practice when the mind is temporarily free of craving, temporarily free of greed, hatred, and delusion.

And you can start to recognize these moments for yourself. There's a feeling of calm and steadiness. You check on attitude. Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion? No. That is a moment. It's described in the suttas at one point as "insofar as possible, nirvana" or "just this much nirvana." And one of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, called it "temporary nibbana."

This happens not uncommonly for meditators in retreats like this. It's not exactly enlightenment, it's not exactly stream entry, but it gives one a taste, a pre-taste of that quality, and you can start to appreciate it.

Once you start to appreciate the sense of temporary nibbana, you can use it as a meditation instruction for yourself by asking something like, "Do I remember what that felt like? Can I sort of put myself back there?" This is not just to recreate an experience, which would be based on greed. It is because it is such a wholesome place to be in. It not only provides a strong foundation for wisdom, for seeing clearly, but it also continues the work of purifying the heart and mind—continues that work of the three levels of purification.

So it's a very helpful practice in and of itself. If it's not accessible, drop it. You can't strain after it. But sometimes by remembering the feel of it, you can find it again. And then this becomes something of a practice.

When this is a practice, you're feeling the freedom in it already. You're feeling the peace of it already, which is the goal. So it's very interesting—at this point in practice, the path and the goal come very close together. And at one point the Buddha said something like, "The Eightfold Path has the deathless as its ground." It's founded in nibbana, in other words.

Some teachers have a way of transmitting this quality of awakened awareness and intelligence. I have a teacher who lives in Kathmandu named Soni Rinpoche, a Tibetan lama. One winter I went over to visit him in his monastery. I stayed in town and was doing a retreat in my room, and I would go out to see him every couple of days in his monastery.

Just at the end of the time I was there, he had a very senior Tibetan lama staying with him, whose name was Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche. A lot of my friends had studied and practiced with Nyoshul Kempo and spoke very highly of him. Toward the end of my stay, my teacher asked me if I would like to meet him, and I said yes, I would.

I actually had a good excuse because a friend had emailed me and said, "Would you be willing to give Nyoshul Kempo some dana from me?" So I had an excuse to pay a visit and pay my respects to him. I had some cash that she would repay me.

So I was taken in to see Nyoshul Kempo. Everything was arranged. The translator was there. He was sitting up, quite dignified, wearing a gold robe.

His wife was beside him. My teacher was there and there was a translator. So I paid my respects with three bows and went forward on my knees to offer him the dana from my friend, who was a student of his.

As I did that, he drew me closer and looked directly into my eyes. I'd been sitting for a couple of weeks at that point, so I was fairly sensitive and fairly quiet. And he was a very well-known and respected master, so I was a little bit nervous. But I went up—it was quite an open place—and I looked directly into his eyes. Our heads were not very far apart.

At that moment he went into a meditative space. I could tell that he made a shift. He wasn't so much looking at me anymore. His look was more inward, and what it felt like is his eyes sort of went apart and were looking off into infinity. And what I felt in his mind then—it almost wouldn't be right to say that his mind was complete peace. It was more like there wasn't a mind there anymore.

Looking into his eyes, I felt like I was looking into the unconditioned. I just held that gaze for a few seconds and he stayed in that state for a few seconds. Then I started feeling that nervousness came up. I felt so exposed, but I felt he could see right through me. I just got a little nervous and it's like I kind of blinked, and then it ended—that moment of transmission. But I felt like if I had just been able to go on looking for a few more seconds, who knows what might have happened.

It was just a wonderful moment of transmission where he revealed to me that inner state of utter peace—of utter non-disturbance, of the utter absence of impulses, of any kind of movement based on self or anything else. He was just there, I felt, in the unconditioned element.

So I'll just close with another quotation from the Buddha about Nibbana:

One who is dependent has wavering.
One who is independent has no wavering.
There being no wavering, there is calm.
There being calm, there is no desire.
There being no desire, there is no coming or going.
There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising.
There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between.
This, just this, is the end of suffering.

So let's just sit for a minute together.

There being no wavering, there is calm.
There being calm, there is no desire.
There being no desire, there is no coming or going.
This, just this, is the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 55

Joy and Happiness

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

Guy Armstrong presents joy and happiness as fundamental elements of the Buddhist path, reframing the Four Noble Truths in positive terms. Drawing on the Upanissa Sutta's transcendent dependent origination, he traces the movement from suffering through faith to pamoja (joy), pīti (rapture), and ultimately liberation. Armstrong explores various cultivation methods including mudīta practice, gratitude, ethical conduct (sīla), generosity, and the joys found in concentration states. He shares personal retreat experiences and teachings from the Dalai Lama to illustrate how positive mental qualities support spiritual development. The talk emphasizes that while dukkha receives much attention in Buddhist practice, joy and happiness are equally important for balanced mindfulness and the progressive refinement that leads to the "highest happiness" of nibbāna. Armstrong weaves together canonical teachings with practical guidance for developing these wholesome mental factors in both meditation and daily life.

The subject of this evening's talk is joy and happiness.

We've spent considerable time in this retreat exploring the vocabulary of the Buddha's teachings around the concept of dukkha, which is central to the Four Noble Truths—founded as they are around dukkha, its origin, its end, and the way to its end. But those Four Noble Truths could also have been formulated in terms of happiness. They would read something like this: There is unhappiness in life. The cause of unhappiness is wanting. Real happiness is possible. And the way to real happiness is the Eightfold Path.

Although we talk extensively about the hindrances and the kilesas and the afflictive emotions and all the difficulties of practice, it's also important to remember that joy and happiness are essential parts of this path. Especially at a certain point in development, they're really necessary to further the movement. The sense of deep contentment, relaxation and surrender can't fully ripen unless they come out of a place of joy and happiness.

These are essential parts of the path, but they don't always show up strongly in the beginning. It may take some time to really feel the development and the ripening of these factors in practice, so don't worry if they're not there today or this week. But it's

important to know where we're headed, because as Yogi Berra said, if you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere else. So we want to be sure that we wind up in the right place with this quality of joy, this quality of happiness.

It's very helpful to actually spend some attention and time cultivating these as ongoing parts of your practice, your meditation practice, because this kind of development will keep the mind inclining to what is wholesome. If you remember the definition of right effort, two of the pieces of the four elements of right effort are about the wholesome: developing the wholesome and maintaining the wholesome. Joy and happiness are part of that mix of wholesome qualities that we want to continue to cultivate and develop because they're so supportive.

There is, I think, among our community a real thirst to find these qualities and develop them in our hearts and minds. You may know our friend James Baraz in California, who's written a book called Awakening Joy. It's become very popular and is highly recommended if you'd like to develop these qualities further. James has done for several years now a class in Berkeley based on the book, offering very practical ways to help people develop more joy in their life and in their meditation. He structures the class in such a way that there's an in-person portion and an online portion.

At one point his book got a favorable mention from Oprah Winfrey in O Magazine. Of course, that's a big platform to get noticed on. After that review came out, the next session of his class had an enrollment of 2,900 people, which in the Vipassana world is a pretty good turnout. It's not like a Taylor Swift video—I think one of hers just went over a billion views—but for Vipassana it's a good turnout.

It's important first in the beginning to start to notice these qualities when they come. We spend so much time, especially in the beginning, talking about dukkha and the hindrances and the kilesas and afflictive emotions, that in a way it inclines us to be on the lookout for those. We can develop this kind of vigilance about watching out for when one of those hindrances is about to sneak in. And then an experience of calm comes and we hardly even notice it or recognize it or open to it because it's not one of these threatening mind states.

But it's just as important to notice and be open to the positive qualities in meditation—like the seven factors of awakening, like the Brahmaviharas, like the five spiritual faculties—as it is to be mindful of the difficult ones. In the beginning of practice, we often develop more attention to the difficult states. But what we want to find is a balance of mind in mindfulness that's not looking particularly one way or the other. A mind that is so poised in the middle that it's equally open to seeing the beautiful as seeing the difficult, so that we're not biased one way or another.

It's as though the mind is on that midpoint, which we could call zero or we could call emptiness, and it's just open to what appears. So open to seeing the beautiful qualities as well as anything. And the more we notice them, the more the mind learns to find its way there. The development of these qualities comes with the mindfulness and recognition of them when we're there.

Emphasizing the beautiful qualities at different times in our practice is actually skillful because it redresses the imbalance where the mind so often looks for the negative. It is true that craving is a frequent visitor. Greed, aversion and delusion are frequent visitors. The hindrances come often. Such a mind inclines to seeing difficulty, inclines to seeing insufficiency, inclines to the negative. So by cultivating and putting attention and emphasis on the wholesome qualities, positive qualities, we start to right that imbalance a little bit.

And we remember what the Buddha said: "What one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of one's mind." So we want to think and ponder upon these qualities.

There's a very large vocabulary in the suttas for the range of qualities pointed to by these two English terms, joy and happiness. Let me share some of them in Pali and their English translations. You'll be familiar with many, some of them you may not be so familiar with. Mudita, which is the third Brahmavihara, usually translated as empathetic joy or sympathetic joy, which if you're staying for part two, you'll have formal instruction in developing. The word sukha—I find this a very pleasant term. I would translate it normally as happiness.

And this is the word I normally translate as happiness. What I like about it is its sound—it has a quality reminiscent of sucrose, like sugar, which gives it this sweet connotation for me. Sukha is that quality in the mind that brings a lot of sweetness. Often when people are experiencing sukha, a little smile will come spontaneously onto their face with this happiness.

The word ananda is normally translated as bliss. You see this in many Buddhist names. The Buddha's cousin was called Ananda. My first preceptor in Thailand was Panyananda, which means the bliss of wisdom. And when I ordained as a monk for the second time, I asked for this name and my preceptor granted it: Sunyatananda, which means the bliss of emptiness. So you'll see ananda used frequently in names, this attribute of bliss.

Piti, which you already know, means rapture—it's the fourth of the enlightenment factors.

Pamoja is a word that I would translate as joy. This is the Pali word that I would typically translate as joy, and it appears in quite an important sutta that I'll mention later in this talk.

Somanasa means gladness of mind, contrasted with domanasa, which is difficulty of mind.

Santuti—don't you like the sound of that? Santuti. It sounds like an Italian gelato machine, and it means contentment. One of the stanzas in the Dhammapada says, "Santuti is the greatest wealth"—contentment is the greatest wealth.

All these terms point to the same basic quality: gladness, uplift, happiness, empathic joy, delight. They were not neglected in the Buddha's teachings at all. It's a thread that runs throughout.

Pamoja comes in especially in one sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Upanissa Sutta, which describes another version of dependent origination with twelve links showing causal relationships among them. We normally call this transcendent dependent origination—quite a mouthful, but it's called transcendent because it transcends suffering.

Whereas the original dependent origination shows how suffering is created based on ignorance and craving, this cycle describes how liberation is reached through positive states of mind. It describes the journey totally in positive and wholesome terms.

It begins with suffering, picking up where the first dependent origination leaves off, and then moves to faith. Now that's an interesting combination—how does suffering lead to faith? Because when we suffer, we are motivated to find a solution. When we discover that there is a solution available through these teachings, our faith is strengthened and gives us the energy to walk the path.

This leads to the next quality, which is pamoja or joy. Joy then leads on to rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, insight, and liberation. The movement into the maturing of these faculties flows from joy, rapture, tranquility, and happiness. This is what needs to be found.

Bhikkhu Analayo is the author of a book I recommend to all of you if you haven't read it—it's called Satipatthana, an extensive commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta. He's quite a remarkable person: a German monk who ordained in Sri Lanka, practiced there, learned Pali there, and became very familiar with the whole range of the Pali discourses. Because he felt that was fairly straightforward, he went on to learn Chinese so that he could translate the equivalent discourses found in Chinese. He's since learned

Tibetan so he can do comparative studies with that tradition as well. He's a very dedicated and excellent practitioner—probably one of the most remarkable Western scholars who combines both a deep practice orientation and really extensive knowledge of the original texts. In other words, he's a reliable source.

This is his comment from Satipatthana: "The entire scheme of the gradual training"—which is what we're all involved in—"can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." The whole journey we're embarked upon is a progressive refinement of joy, leading to and culminating in liberation, which the Buddha described in this way: "Nibbana is the highest happiness." This is from the Dhammapada.

Nibbana is the highest happiness. And that's where mindfulness leads. From Sally's talks on the Satipatthana Sutta, the practice of mindfulness leads in only one direction, and that is to liberation and Nibbana.

So the discovery of joy is a really good ally at many points. Not only as an integral factor of the path, especially on the upward trajectory of liberation, but it's such a great ally in times of difficulty. And all of us, as we continue on the path, are going to run into times of difficulty.

This came fully home to me about ten years ago. I went back to Asia. I had not quite finished with the robes when I left the monkhood the first time in Thailand, which was in the eighties. And I'd always had a little bit of nostalgia for being a monk. So I went back again in 2005 to Burma with the intention of ordaining again, because I wanted to practice with Pa-Auk Sayadaw, who's a very renowned master of concentration and insight, who had a large monastery.

So I traveled over there, and his monastery is about two hundred miles southeast of Rangoon. I arrived late one afternoon, went up to meet the Sayadaw at his house about five p.m. I was introduced and very pleased to meet him. And I said to him, "Sayadaw, I'd like to stay for about six weeks, and if it's possible, I'd like to ordain."

He checked out that I had been a monk before, so I sort of knew the basics of the Vinaya and the monk's life. So he said, "Okay, I'll ordain you tomorrow."

So I'd just arrived—I'd just been off the plane a couple of days. I'd just arrived there with my big suitcases and foam mat and all of that. And I was going to ordain the next day.

So in the morning I went into town and bought my robes and bowl and belt. I got my monk gear together. Came back to the monastery, had lunch. And immediately after lunch, I joined a small group. My head was shaved. I changed into the robes. And I was a monk about an hour later. It all happened really quickly.

Well, in the intervening years, I'd sort of forgotten how to tie the robes. So I was walking around with them slipping off my shoulders for quite a while, but I sort of got back into the habit, we might say.

And so I went there to do Sayadaw's concentration practice, and he has a rigorous practice and a rigorous schedule. In doing concentration practice with him, he has you focus on just the small area below the tip of the nose, on the upper lip, about the size of a dime. That is your sole meditation object in sitting, in walking, in meals, and throughout the day. So it's a very narrow focus.

I went to him and said, "What should I do about hindrances? Hindrances are coming up." He said, "Oh, if you're averse, do metta, and if you're sleepy, pull your ears." That was the instruction. So other than that, I was right here in this very small place for six weeks. So that's a very disciplined kind of practice.

And the schedule at the monastery—by the way, there were about 750 people practicing when I was there. About 400 or so of them were monks, about 150 were nuns, and the rest were lay people. So it was a strong practice energy.

The schedule was such that we were sitting several times a day in a very big meditation hall. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half. The longest sitting was two hours. And as a new arrival, there was no way around that. I was to be at the meditation center, I was to be in my spot, hour and a half most sittings, two hours some sittings. So this was challenging.

In addition, I had arrived on the day that the rains retreat began. Now this should have been a clue about the weather, but I hadn't quite thought it through. So I ordained, and the day was actually fine. The next day the rain started, and it kept up solidly for about the next three weeks. I really didn't see the sun for three weeks. Mold was growing on my baggage, insects were crawling around my kuti, and the rain just kept coming down.

It rained about three inches a day over that period—a real tropical downpour. And then there were the meals.

Breakfast timing didn't work out so well for me. I was eating just one meal a day. While I appreciated that it was a vegetarian monastery, as I'm vegetarian myself, there wasn't a huge amount of protein. It was basically white rice and stir-fried vegetables. So I started losing weight—about half a pound a day over the time I was there. And I didn't have a lot to give up.

The rain kept coming down, and my robe still kept falling off my shoulder. I remember this one day when it was really raining hard. I'd gone down to the dining hall and had a really hot bowl full of food. I tried to cradle that in one elbow with dessert in the lid, my umbrella over my head as I walked back along the dirt path to my kuti where I was going to eat, and my left shoulder kept coming undone. As I was going, there were these very devout Burmese laypeople kneeling by the side of the path and bowing to this Western monk who couldn't even keep his robes on and who was about to lose his whole lunch on the path.

Long story short, I had a very difficult time at that point. It was about three weeks into a six-week retreat, and the practice was difficult, the weather was difficult. I've never seen such big spiders as inhabited my kuti. I was losing weight and getting really glum. Everything just looked gloomy to me.

Fortunately, I had one piece on my little altar in my hut—a photograph of the Dalai Lama with a couple of verses from Shantideva surrounding it. I find the Dalai Lama a very inspiring being, a very beautiful being. So he was my resource. I felt in real need of some uplift and some advice. So I said, "Your Holiness, I'm having a really hard time. Do you have any advice for me?"

I was in a state of real supplication, looking for some help beyond "pull your earlobes." Immediately that I made the request, the answer came. It was so interesting. It was exactly his voice—that slightly high-pitched, Indian-accented English that he speaks. That's exactly the voice I heard. There was a very clear message. What the Dalai Lama said was: "Stay cheerful, optimistic and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." And then transmission ended. That was it. That was the message. Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident.

I've thought about that many times since. I revisited it a lot of times on that retreat. At times it was really helpful. At other times I couldn't even remember what cheerful felt like, so I couldn't use it. But if I could remember that advice, I could often incorporate it and just pick my mind up and move it into that more wholesome place. It helped that the words had come from the Dalai Lama himself in that short transmission, because he is such a happy and joyful person. I picked that up from him, and it inspires me greatly.

As we know, he has the whole weight of the Tibetan nation on his shoulders—seven million Tibetan people who remain. Something like two million have been killed since the occupation in 1949. But he is the only hope for the remaining Tibetan people and Tibetan culture. There's no one else on the world stage who has his stature, who could possibly shape the international situation for his people. Even the Dalai Lama is not succeeding in that role. But despite this enormous burden that he carries, he is so light and happy—cheerful, optimistic and confident.

He will say that over and over again.

I'd like to share a little anecdote about him. He was at a gathering of scientists in Dharamsala—he's very interested in bridging the Buddhist world and the scientific world, so he often has scientists come over to where he lives. One of the scientists, during a break, was chatting with him and asked, "What was the happiest time of your life?"

I thought, well, surely the Dalai Lama is going to say it was when he was a child in the Potala and Tibetan culture was intact, when his tutors were revealing everything about Buddhism and it was all opening up, dawning—it was so beautiful. I thought he would say something like that, perhaps a bit nostalgic.

Instead, he said, "I think right now—this is the happiest time in my life."

What a beautiful answer. Right now is the happiest time. That's such a wonderful attitude.

I want to talk about some different ways we can develop and cultivate these qualities of joy and happiness in our meditation. The first is the practice of mudita. In terms of formal Buddhist practices, this is the most direct path to joy. It is the happiest practice I know of in the whole realm of Buddhist meditation. The entire practice is about uplifting our heart and moving into a place of joy.

Mudita is defined as taking joy in the happiness of others. Here's a simple example: I got a call out of the blue from a friend one day. I hadn't talked to her for a while, so I said, "How are you?" And she said, "I'm wonderful!" She really meant it—I could just feel that enthusiasm in her voice. Without even thinking, I just said, "I'm wonderful too!" That was the instant arising of mudita based on her happiness. It just picked me up as well.

Mudita is like a double dose of happiness. We resonate with someone else like sympathetic strings. I love this word "sympathetic" because of how the sitar is built, that Indian stringed instrument. There are sympathetic strings underneath—twelve or sev-

enteen or something—and then the main strings above that get plucked. The little strings aren't plucked; they just resonate in sympathy with the strings that the musician fingers. That's how sympathetic joy works. When someone else's heart is resonating with happiness, our heart resonates in response, so it becomes contagious.

A simple phrase, if you feel like playing with it and haven't had formal instruction, is to think of someone else and say: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." Then you focus on the things in their life that are happy, the blessings that are active for them.

Shantideva, that seventh-century Indian author, put it like this: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy." This is a beautiful indicator for our metta practice as well. Metta picks up our heart when we wish others well. Mudita does the same.

We don't teach mudita often in formal settings. It will be taught in Part Two. We usually teach it on metta retreats. But one weekend, I decided I wanted to teach mudita here, so I offered a weekend retreat with another teacher just on the theme of mudita. People came in on Friday evening and we practiced mudita together the whole weekend.

I thought, oh, nothing's going to happen in a weekend because it's the worst format for a retreat, isn't it? You have the first day where your body really hurts, and then you have the last day where you're already thinking about going home. That's a weekend retreat. But I was amazed how much people gained from it. Just doing the practice consistently, I could feel it in my own experience and I could feel it shaping others. At the end of that weekend, one of the meditators came up and said, "You know, this is the happiest I've felt in years, just from two days of doing mudita." So it really is an uplifting kind of practice.

There are other ways that happiness is found in life. As lay people, part of our life involves sense pleasures. We know that sense pleasures are impermanent and they don't give deep, lasting happiness and all of that. And yet, imagine your lay life without any sense pleasures. Wouldn't it feel a little bare?

These places flow with clear, cool water,
Covered with indigo clouds,
Adorned with flocks of many birds,
These rocky crags do please me so.

Like blue clouds in the sky,
Like palaces well-plastered,
Echoing with the cries of peacocks,
These rocky crags do please me so.

This is quite wonderful. Here's one of the most austere practitioners of the Buddha's time expressing such delight in the natural world. And this points to something important about our practice—we don't have to shut down our appreciation of beauty and simple pleasures. Even in the midst of deep renunciation, there's room for this kind of joy.

The Buddha taught that there are different kinds of happiness available to us at different times. There's the happiness that comes from getting what we want, which is pleasant but unstable. There's the happiness that comes from meditation and states of concentration, which is more refined and stable. And there's the happiness that comes from wisdom and freedom, which is the most lasting of all.

But he didn't say we should reject the simpler forms of happiness while we're cultivating the deeper ones. In fact, being able to appreciate the beauty around us, to take joy in simple pleasures with mindfulness and moderation—this can be part of our path. It can soften our hearts and make us more receptive to the deeper teachings.

I think sometimes in spiritual life we can become overly serious, overly concerned with getting to the "important" stuff. But joy itself is important. Lightness is important. The ability to be delighted by a beautiful sunset or a cup of tea or the sound of rain on the roof—these moments of simple happiness can be doorways into greater understanding.

The key is awareness. When we're mindful of our experience, even simple pleasures become part of our practice. We can notice how they arise and pass away. We can appreciate them without clinging to them. We can let them remind us of the preciousness and beauty that's always available in this moment.

Like the lofty peaks of looming clouds, like the most refined of palaces, the lovely calls of tuskers sound. These rocky crags do please me so. The lovely ground is rained upon, the hills are full of holy seers. Resounding with the cry of peacocks, these rocky crags do please me so.

It continues with more verses like that. He was an arhat, and you can see his sensitivity and joy in the beauty that surrounded him.

This reflection comes from Ajahn Sumedho, the former abbot of Amaravati in England. Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism, one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower, you should contemplate its decay. Or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse. That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected upon in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty itself. This is the joy of mudita—being able to appreciate the beauty in things around us.

There are other avenues to joy as well. Kamala spoke extensively about the quality of sila in her recent talk, and there is indeed great joy in virtue. The Buddha spoke of it as the bliss of blamelessness. When we have been committed for a long time to practices that don't harm others, over time there grows in us an appreciation for that refinement. We enjoy looking back on our past conduct and seeing that there is nothing to blame ourselves for in the way we've acted. This leads to a certain kind of happiness.

You might know this verse from the very opening of the Dhammapada: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable." This is one of the fruits of beautiful conduct.

Again, I think the Dalai Lama is a wonderful example of how this can be developed. At one point, Oprah Winfrey was interviewing him for an article in her magazine. They were going to talk for an hour, and Oprah started by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?" This leads us to reflect back on our own forgiveness meditation from a few weeks ago. Most of us can find a few things, right?

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes? It seems no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. There was awe in her voice when she continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

I believe that much of that brightness, happiness, and purity that we see in the Dalai Lama comes from his refinement of conduct, which is of course embedded in compassion and loving-kindness.

There's also great joy in generosity. Kamala spoke about this as well. I'm reminded of going to Burma when I went to ordain. A student knew that I was going and knew what teacher I was going to practice with, and she wanted to make an offering. So she gave me a few hundred dollars to take and donate to the monastery in whatever way I thought was appropriate.

When I arrived—this was before I ordained, I was still in lay clothes—I talked to the clerk of the monastery and said, "I have a donation from a supporter in America. Could we use it to offer a lunch for the 750 people who are practicing here?"

And the clerk said, "No, I'm sorry. All the lunches have been subscribed for the next three months." This was in one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth. But there is so much devotion and so much faith in the power and beauty of generosity that the three-month meal subscriptions had all been taken up.

I said, "Well, is there anything we could do?" He said, "Yes, you could sponsor a couple of special breakfasts." They make a special meal for everybody in the monastery that wouldn't normally be served, but when they have extra funds, they can do that. So then on those days when there were the special breakfasts, I could go down and read the meal board. They have a board much like ours—in fact, our board was inspired by this practice in Burmese monasteries of meal offerings—and the dedication for the day comes from the person or group who was offering the food. So I could go down and read her name on the days that the special breakfasts were offered.

But every day, going to lunch was a treat because the people who were offering the lunch that day would come to watch it being offered to the 450 monks and 150 nuns who went through the line. Sometimes it was a family, sometimes it was like a whole clan or a village. They would sit off to the side and watch the whole line of monks go

through. Pauk Sayadaw would always lead the way because he had about 60 vassa at that point—he had so many years in the robes. He would be the first one through the line, then the senior monks, and then so on.

And they would look so happy. They would be so delighted watching everybody be served from their offering from that day. They would have collected the money from everybody in the village or the whole family. They would dress up in their best clothes to come and watch the meal being offered. It was really beautiful.

So we take these qualities like generosity, like virtue, like loving-kindness. These are considered bases for what's called merit. Wholesome actions in the teachings of the Buddha are considered to generate positive energy that more or less ripples forward with us. And this is from the Buddha: "There are these streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nourishments of happiness, which are heavenly, ripening in happiness, conducive to heaven, and which lead to whatever is wished for, loved and agreeable—to one's welfare and happiness."

This is a profound statement. I hope you'll take it in and reflect on it. Practices like generosity, virtue, loving-kindness lead to whatever is wished for, loved and agreeable to one's welfare and happiness.

When I think about the sources of worldly happiness—happiness being a normal human being in the world—these are the three things I think about that are most important. And as someone mentioned in a question period the other morning, these can be found in every faith: generosity, virtue and loving-kindness. So as we practice these, this is a stream that can lead to what I call ordinary human happiness, worldly happiness.

Then, of course, our practice also offers us the deeper happiness of insight. This opens up new areas, greater potential for freedom. But the insight journey is not always so easy. As you know, the journey of insight opens up old psychological patterns, it opens up the common human tendency of craving through greed, aversion and delusion, and we meet those forces very directly. That's not easy. But there's even joy in that.

If you look at the moment when the mind is steady enough to meet a deeply entrenched pattern that you're just recognizing, there is a joy in that. Because until we meet it directly—and many of you have said this in the interviews—we don't have a possibility of releasing it. But when we can meet it directly and with clarity, there's a possibility of understanding it and then releasing it. And releasing these deeply held tendencies is a source of a great deal of freedom and happiness.

This is from an Australian poet named Michael Leunig: "When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it. Let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it. Let a bird lean in the hole and sing a simple song like a tiny bell and let it ring."

So even in healing, there is a sweetness. There's a joy. Then the meditation leads on to deeper states of concentration, peace and stillness. And these are felt as deeply satisfying places to be, deeply satisfying places to reside, to abide.

In some ways, I think for me personally, the discovery of peace was one of the most onward-leading fruits of retreat practice. As I began to practice through doing intensive retreats, I found levels of peace and calm that I'd never known in daily life—I'd never known in my ordinary existence. And they were so rich and meaningful that every time I thought, "Oh, if this much is possible, how much more is possible?" And then I would want to go back and find out what else was possible. So these experiences of deeper and deeper peace really led me on.

And of course one of the things that's most joyful about peace, even though the emotional tone may feel fairly neutral and not a strong affect, we start to really appreciate the absence of the hindrances. When the mind is in that state of stillness, the hindrances are no longer assaulting, and the relief of that is a beautiful kind of freedom.

And then as the concentration develops further, it moves into these states called jhāna. This is the way the Buddha described the first of the concentration states called jhāna: "One enters and abides in the first jhāna with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. She makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, fill, steep, and pervade this body so that there is no part of her whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure." This is the delight of concentration as it deepens and matures. This rapture and pleasure become very accessible.

Another beautiful access to joy comes through gratitude. And gratitude is such a beautiful emotion. It's in the brahmavihāra family. And personally, I would put it very similar to—has a similar feel to—muditā for self. When we stop to appreciate our own blessings, we are in the realm of gratitude. So muditā for self can give access to gratitude, or you can access it through deliberately thinking of all the things you're grateful for, just calling them to mind.

I want to tell a little story about Kamala. So Kamala has some grandchildren, and one time she was talking to one of her granddaughters. Her granddaughter was about five or six at this time, I think. And Kamala called her on Christmas Day. Kamala was in

Hawaii and her granddaughter was on the mainland. And the girl had gotten a lot of Christmas presents that she really enjoyed. You know, being six years old, you love Christmas presents—that's kind of like the high time of the year.

And so Kamala asked this really thoughtful question. She said, "Oh, when you get lots of presents, do you feel thankful for what you have or does it make you want more?"

And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, I want more."

And Kamala just said in her very quiet way, "Oh, that's too bad."

So the granddaughter actually picked up on that and said, "Well, what do you mean?"

And Kamala said, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, you feel good? And when you're wanting more, it doesn't feel as good?"

And the little girl said, "Oh Nana, you're right."

So this is the beauty of gratitude. When we have gratitude, greed is blocked because we appreciate what we have. And aversion is blocked because we appreciate the present moment. So gratitude is a movement out of those kilesas. And as such, it's in the brahmavihāra family—it's one aspect of the brahmavihāras.

And we all have a lot to be grateful for. Just think about the opportunity to be here for six weeks or three months immersed in the Dharma. Even though it's difficult, even though many times you might wish to be anywhere else but here, it's a fabulous opportunity. And it's like—you know, I think of it as an investment in our future happiness and freedom. We're making deposits that will ripen in the future, moment by moment.

So in thinking about all we have to be grateful for, I'm reminded of a friend who was working in a refugee camp in Thailand. And the refugees were people from the countries where the wars had been going on. This was in the mid-eighties. So both in Cambodia and in Laos, there had been quite destructive regimes where a lot of people were suffering and a lot of people were displaced from their homes. And so a number of the people who were coming into the refugee camps were from the hill tribes of those countries.

When they came to the refugee camp, our friend and other workers—aid workers, both Thai and Western—were helping them acclimatize to a new culture. And they were teaching them skills like how to use money, what a washing machine does, what a toaster is, and how to read a bus schedule.

Because from where they had come, these people didn't have those things. So one of the questions that they would routinely ask in their schools in the refugee camp was: what are the most important things in life? This one teenage girl said, "The most important things in life are fire, rice, and water."

I think about that because if we didn't have those things, they would be the most important things for us too. But as it is, we have food, we have clothing, we have shelter, we have some access to medicine. These are considered the requisites in the Buddhist system. We have those things, and many of us have much more than that. So we all have that to be grateful for, as well as the Dharma.

Many of you have mentioned this over recent days—the gratitude for the opportunity to be here, the gratitude to be able to practice, gratitude for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These really are our refuges.

So joy is normally considered to be dependent on these conditions. It flowers in response to conditions. Happiness becomes a kind of softer and quieter bloom that isn't so dependent on conditions. It settles within us, or we settle into that quality of contentment.

We could say that happiness is a kind of joy that has risen up into rapture or pīti and become more intense, and then has become tranquilized through calm to settle out into this stable kind of contentment where really the mind is finding the quality of being contented within itself. It's not looking out anymore.

We don't have to worry about making this happiness permanent. That was something that bothered me as I first started to come upon this—that there wasn't a way to fix it and make it permanent. But we can't do that. We don't have to try. It will come when it comes and it will go when it goes. And that's why there's this saying in the Dharma: "Take care of this moment and you take care of all time." And we develop that attitude. We take care of this moment.

This is from Rumi, and it helps to remember that when Rumi says "you," he means what is divine, what is most essential:

"Come to the orchard in spring.
There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers.
If you do not come, these do not matter.
If you do come, these do not matter."

That's that deep contentment.

But then, of course, the practice doesn't stop here. It doesn't stop just with wholesome states. The Buddha said at one point, "Two things I never lost track of in my own practice: not to be lax in my efforts and not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind." Because the sequence continues from happiness into concentration, insight, and liberation.

But the role of happiness is really important. One of my teachers, Mingyur Rinpoche, who's a very bright young Tibetan Lama currently away on a personal retreat that is in its fourth year and counting, put it this way: "The main cause of freedom is happiness. The main cause of freedom is happiness." We cultivate this and it's onward leading. It goes further.

Joseph's first teacher, Munindra-ji, used to say, "If you aim for the highest happiness, all the other kinds will come along the way." So we just keep walking this path of mindfulness pointed to the final goal, and all kinds of happiness flower along the way.

And as Kamala read the other night: "The goal of the practice is not virtue or gain or renown or concentration or insight, but it is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end." That is the highest happiness.

So let's just sit together for a moment, please. It is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 56

Mindfulness of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

In this foundational dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong unpacks mindfulness of breathing like Russian dolls - situating ānāpānasati within the Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, and four satipaṭṭhānas. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN 118), he defines mindfulness as "understanding what your experience is in the present moment" based on the Pali term pajānāti. Armstrong emphasizes mindfulness of the body as the foundation, explaining why the Buddha prioritized kāyagatāsati despite meditation being ultimately about mental liberation. He provides practical guidance on vitakka and vicāra (connecting and sustaining attention), addressing both the samatha (tranquility) and vipassana (insight) aspects of breath meditation. The talk includes considerations for when breath practice might not be suitable, alternative anchors like sound awareness, and how mindful attention reveals the three characteristics of existence. Armstrong concludes with the Buddha's promise that ānāpānasati develops tranquility, rapture, pleasure, gladness, concentration, and liberation.

I think this has been a very successful day for practice because we've reached nearly the end of the first full day and everybody's still here. Congratulations and well done. The first days often are difficult. As you know from earlier retreats, it can take a while to settle in. So please don't get discouraged until about the third or fourth day.

The subject of tonight's talk is mindfulness of breathing. I wanted to talk about this because these are the instructions that we've been working with for the first couple of days. When I thought about talking about mindfulness of breathing, I realized that I needed to put it in the context of the Buddha's whole teachings. When I looked at doing that, it became like one of those Russian dolls—you know, where you take off the head and there's a smaller one underneath, and then you take off that head and there's a smaller one. I want to unpack the Russian dolls that hold mindfulness of breathing.

The first is the Buddha's first discourse, where he talked about the four noble truths: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to the end of suffering. It's said that the whole rest of his teaching career—forty-five years—was just footnotes to those four teachings. This is the biggest container that we'll talk about, the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

Within the Four Noble Truths, the way to the end of suffering is the Eightfold Noble Path. Within the Eightfold Noble Path, in the meditation section, we have right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. So now we're in the territory of mindfulness.

Within the territory of mindfulness, the way right mindfulness is described is in terms of the four foundations of mindfulness. Within the four foundations of mindfulness, the first foundation is mindfulness of the body. And within mindfulness of the body, the first thing mentioned is mindfulness of breathing.

So these are the containers: Four Noble Truths reveals the Eightfold Path, reveals mindfulness, reveals the Four Foundations, reveals mindfulness of the body, reveals mindfulness of breathing. This is the little bit of the teachings that I want to talk about tonight.

I also want to bring in a discussion of what mindfulness is and why mindfulness of the body is important and then the role of mindfulness of breathing. So I want to hit those last three dolls as we get to mindfulness of breathing.

What is mindfulness? I find this a really interesting question because I've asked a lot of people, and as many people as I've asked, I've come up with that many definitions. You can go on the web and find tons of definitions also, especially because mindfulness has come into the mainstream and scientists are getting interested in it. They want to get really precise.

The Buddha never defined mindfulness. I think this is really interesting. He never said mindfulness is A, B, and C. You have to get the flavor of it from reading all the different things he said about it. If you go on the web and listen to recent Western understandings of mindfulness, you can get a lot of different definitions. I'm always kind of amused when I go on the web and read that someone is the foremost authority on mindfulness because they have a PhD and they've been studying it academically, never mentioning that the whole concept came from the Buddha twenty-five hundred years ago. I personally consider the Buddha the foremost authority on mindfulness.

In wanting to understand what mindfulness is, I think it's interesting to look at one of his discourses. The Satipatthana Sutta is the primary teaching that he gave on the general development of mindfulness. To unpack that term: sati means mindfulness, patthana means establishing, and sutta means, literally, thread, but in the context of the teachings it means discourse. This is a discourse on the ways of establishing mindfulness. It's sometimes called the foundations of mindfulness, but it's how we establish mindfulness.

I want to read you some excerpts from that discourse in the operational way that mindfulness is developed. In the first foundation, there's this phrase: "Breathing in long, one understands 'I breathe in long.' Or breathing in short, one understands 'I breathe in short.'" In the second foundation: "Feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' Or feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.'" In the third foundation: "When the mind is affected by hate, one understands 'the mind is affected by hate.' When the mind is not affected by hate, one understands 'the mind is not affected by hate.'" In the fourth foundation: "When the enlightenment factor of energy is present, one understands 'the enlightenment factor of energy is present.' When the enlightenment factor of energy is not present, one understands 'the enlightenment factor of energy is not present.'"

What do you take as the key word running through all of these? What word repeats?

Breathing in long, one understands, "I breathe in long."

It's this word "understands," isn't it? It occurs in every one of the explanations of how to develop mindfulness. So I take this word "understands" as pointing us experientially to what mindfulness is.

This word "understands" is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Pali word *pajanati*. It is very closely related to the term *sampajanna*, which is usually translated as clear comprehension. While Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "understands," the Venerable Analayo in his book on the Satipatthana Sutta translates it as "knows." This is interesting—one person says "knows," the other says "understands." You get the sense this word is somewhere between understanding and knowing.

I want to suggest, drawing from Guy Armstrong's definition as a modern Western interpreter of the Buddhist teachings, that for us as practitioners, the working definition of mindfulness can be: understanding what your experience is in the present moment.

This is a lot less complicated than many of the definitions you'll read on the web. You can find some very long descriptions with a lot of added material, but I think for our purposes, based on the Satipatthana Sutta, this is a good way for us to think of it.

I like this definition because it's really simple and directive. Suppose you get in a situation where you become confused or a little lost, or you're not sure how to practice in the next moment. What this definition says is: take a look at what's happening in your present moment experience. If you can do that and notice what it is, you've reactivated mindfulness. That means you're back on track, and that means the path is engaged again. You've engaged the path to awakening.

This is really easy. No matter what's going on, you just ask—this is another way to put it—"What's happening now?" When you know the answer to that, when you understand, "Oh, this is what's happening now," mindfulness has been reactivated.

I want to put this out really as a practice instruction. It's my interpretation—other teachers may frame it a little differently—but I found that this really works. It's really simple and really helpful for me to remember. In any moment, this is how we turn mindfulness back on: we ask, "What's happening now?" We look and we see.

As Andy said this morning, it can be in any of the six senses. It could be sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions, mind objects. Just take a look. One of those will stand out when you look.

The next question is: is mindfulness automatic? Is it always happening for you? Did it happen every moment today? No, not likely. If it did, please come sit up here and you can give us teachings.

We have to make a little bit of effort to be mindful, but that effort doesn't need to be very hard. For instance, if you put your fingertips together right now, can you be mindful of that experience of the fingers touching? Is that difficult? No. Mindfulness can be just that light and just that easy. It requires a little bit of attention to know it, but not much work.

The difficult thing with mindfulness is remembering to do it in every new moment, because we get distracted. We go in other directions. It's not hard to be mindful, but the intention has to be renewed frequently because it's not automatic. You can't just say at the start of a sit, "I'm going to be mindful this whole sitting," and have that happen.

During the sitting, you need to keep renewing that intention to answer the question, "What's happening now?" It's the renewing of that intention that makes mindfulness come into more and more moments of your day—more and more moments of your sitting, your walking, your working, your meals, your showers, your bathroom breaks, and so on—so that little by little, the whole day gets filled in with these moments.

And that's what we're pointing to when we talk about the continuity of mindfulness. It's not that we expect mindfulness really to be continuous, but the aim is to make it more and more frequent. That is, fill in more and more moments of the day with this quality, simply knowing what's going on, what you're experiencing. And that's how it develops.

So it's very simple. And when you first come into a retreat like this, it may not feel like very much. When we noticed the contact of the fingertips, that probably didn't feel like an earth-shaking moment. But what's so interesting is that when you put one simple moment next to another, next to another, the power of the momentum of the continuity of mindfulness starts to build and it does become earth-shaking.

This is a practice that can take us to the depths of our being and give us a fantastically new approach to life—to our inner life, to outer life, to other people. So it's fascinating to me that such simple knowing, just knowing what you're experiencing, can lead to such powerful results.

I'd like to read this from the Buddha. This is toward the end of the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness:

"This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana, namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

That's a big promise. And it all starts with such a simple act of connecting—connecting to the present moment.

Now, I think everyone admitted you weren't mindfully present in every moment of the day. So we have to look at the question: what's the alternative? When we're not being mindful, what's happening?

I like this cartoon in the New Yorker from some months ago. There was a person at work on their PC, supposed to be working on the keyboard, but there was a thought bubble—a fantasy, an imagination—of them on the golf course. Daydreaming, obviously. The next panel showed that person on the golf course, and there's a thought bubble as they're holding their club of them making love with a partner. Another daydream. The third panel—maybe you can guess—they're in bed making love with their partner and there's a thought bubble of them being at work on the PC.

This is the alternative when we're not mindful. We get taken over and carried away into these imaginings and into these thought streams. So where do they take us?

When we're not mindful, where does the attention go? It goes a lot into past, it goes a lot into future—remembering and anticipating. It goes into planning, into judging, into comparing, into views and opinions, and it goes into fantasy, some pleasant, some unpleasant.

We can talk about these as distractions. And to me, that sounds kind of neutral. You know, "I got distracted for a second, but now I'm back." But if you look closely at where the thoughts lead emotionally, is it always that neutral?

When you go into the past, do you sometimes go into regret, sadness, anger, conflict, judgments of yourself or others? When you go into the future, is it just a kind of clinical investigation, or do you go into wanting or longing or anxiety or worry or fear about the future?

Start to investigate what is happening when you're not being mindful. Is it just a neutral experience, like imagining what's for lunch? Or do some of these thoughts, memories, plans for the future take you into areas that are actually pretty emotionally charged?

In my observation, this happens a lot. When our minds wander, they tend to wander into areas that have charge for us. So it's hard to be mindful in the middle of a thought stream, but when you return to the present moment—which you will—check and see where the attention has been. When you come back, do you feel more peaceful, more settled, more contented, more calm, more happy? Or how often do you feel more agitated, more stirred up, more discontented, more upset?

This is not to be judgmental, because all of our minds wander in these directions. We're not wanting to judge this activity, but we do want to learn from it. We want to learn what's going on in our minds. Specifically, we want to learn what are our actions of mind, of speech, and of body that lead us into more unhappiness, and what are the actions that lead us into more happiness.

One of the key questions you can investigate is: where is the attention dwelling? And when the attention dwells in the present moment, how does that feel? Well, the present moment isn't always pleasant. Difficult emotion may be present. The body may not be so comfortable.

So coming into the present is not always a great experience. But because of our development of mindfulness, it holds this transformative potential. So it's where we want to place our bets, really, as meditators. It's what we want to trust in.

But when we wander away in extended thoughts, again, check it out. Do they lead to greater calm, contentment, happiness, and settledness? Or do those thought streams end up making us more agitated and dissatisfied? Do they tend to lead more to suffering? And where are we dwelling? Are we dwelling in the present, which has the potential to be transformative? Are we dwelling in past and future views and opinions, regrets and anticipation?

This is a really key distinction that the Buddha drew between what he called wise attention and unwise attention. We're always placing our attention somewhere. This is an interesting thing to see when you start to meditate and observe the mind. The attention is always landing somewhere. In Abhidhamma terms, the attention is what's called a universal factor. It's present in every waking moment. Where is the attention landing and where is it dwelling? We can examine this. We can start to observe the mind.

One of the great things, Joseph's first teacher, Manindraji said, "If you want to understand the mind, sit down and observe it." And that's really what we're doing here. It's really simple. We sit down and we see what it does. So one of the things it does, it moves attention from one object to another throughout the course of a sitting, a walking, a meal, moving about your room and so forth. Where is the attention landing and how long is it dwelling there? Is it dwelling in places that lead to greater calm, settledness, peace and happiness? Or is it dwelling in places that leave us more agitated and stirred up?

It's not that we can automatically control by will where the attention goes and for how long, but this is the interesting thing about the wisdom aspect of mindfulness. Remember I said that pajanati, related to clear comprehension, has a wisdom component. So mindfulness has an intelligent property built in. It understands, it knows. And that intelligence, when it wakes up, can look at attention, where it's dwelling that leads to happiness, where it's dwelling that leads to suffering, and learn from that.

You don't have to force it by will, but if you turn your mindful attention to that question, mindfulness will show you the answer. And more and more, just by wisdom, we learn, "I don't really want to hang out where I'm increasing my own suffering. I want to hang out with attention that's leading to greater happiness." So trust in this aspect of mindfulness. Trust that it will learn as you observe and show you the way. You don't have to figure it all out ahead of time. Watch what happens, what leads to happiness, what doesn't.

So, of course, wise attention to the present moment is one of the best ways to dwell. As the Dalai Lama said—you could say this about a lot of things—the present moment is the only place we can feel love or compassion or insight. All these beautiful qualities come about when we can connect to the present moment. So this first benefit of mindfulness is that we spend more time connecting in the present, less time in the agitated thoughts of past and future. That leads to more settledness and we start to learn how the mind operates, what leads to suffering and what leads to happiness.

But I think you all know it's not that thoughts are the problem or that thoughts are the enemy or that we shouldn't be thinking. We're not meditating to stop thinking. We're meditating to become aware of thinking when it happens. So we'll unfold the instructions in a few more days so that we can be as mindful of a thought as we are of any other present moment experience. But it takes a little stability to do that well, so we'll wait a few more days to do that. So just as Annie said this morning, anything that's happening can be a great ground for mindfulness, including thinking. And we'll get there.

So that's just kind of a broad view of mindfulness, the way it leads to peace, the way it leads to greater happiness, connecting to the moment. And then I want to talk a little bit about the next dallin, which is mindfulness of the body. Within the overall field of mindfulness, this is one that is really helpful and really central. Mindfulness of the body. It's in so many discourses of the Buddha's. Of course, it's the first foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta.

There's one part in the numerical discourses, the Anguttara Nikaya, where there are fifty discourses in a row in praise of the benefits of mindfulness of the body—fifty discourses in a row. So that's very encouraging, very inspiring.

Here's one of the things the Buddha said in one of those discourses: "They do not partake of the deathless who do not partake of mindfulness of the body. They partake of the deathless who partake of mindfulness of the body." The deathless is a synonym for nibbana—the state of unshakable peace that the Buddha discovered in his enlightenment and passed on to us through his teachings.

Here's another beautiful statement from those numerical discourses: "When one thing is developed and cultivated, the body becomes tranquil, the mind becomes tranquil, extraneous thoughts subside, and all wholesome qualities that pertain to true knowledge reach fulfillment. What is that one thing? Mindfulness directed to the body."

So the Buddha encouraged us again and again to be really in touch with our direct experience in the body—as he said, to feel these experiences in the body, not as thoughts, but what's actually happening in the body.

I find this really interesting because ultimately meditation is about the mind. If we want to understand the mind, we sit down and observe it. We want to understand what mental actions lead to happiness and what lead to suffering. And if you look at some of the most important lists, you'll see how mental they are: the five hindrances, the four right efforts, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the five spiritual faculties. These are all about qualities of mind, and it is qualities of mind that liberate.

The body can be completely free of pain, the body can be completely healthy, and yet it does not of itself have liberating potential. If it did, babies would be pretty much done—healthy babies might be enlightened! But it's really about our challenge to wake up the mind and its wisdom. That's what truly frees us.

So why is the body so central, so emphasized in the Buddha's teachings? Several reasons.

First, mindfulness of the body is always available. We can always drop in and feel the body and know what's happening. As a ground, it's always there for us—a great support in that way. If you're not sure what to pay attention to, just feel the body.

The Buddha himself said that while the body is changing, it's not changing as fast as the mind. So if you want someplace a little more stable to land, the body is a little more stable than the mind. That's why it grounds our attention, and you can feel that as you sit.

As you sit in stillness in the meditation hall, feel how the grounded calm of the body communicates to the mind. The mind absorbs the stillness that the body's manifesting. It's quite beautiful. We sometimes give the instruction to sit like a mountain, and you feel how the body can just sit through all kinds of storms. There could be mental storms, there could be bodily restlessness, and to some extent—it's one of the beautiful things I appreciate when I look out—you all are sitting still and letting it go. The body stays there unmoved in a way.

This quality of unmovedness communicates to the mind. It's one of the reasons that sitting meditation has a certain power. Of course, we need to discover this unshakable attention in all the postures, but the sitting posture does communicate something of that unshakability.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was one of my teachers in Thailand when I was in robes, said, "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body." This is an interesting practice instruction for the day. See what it would feel like to stay in the body most of the time, to really inhabit it, as Annie mentioned in the walking. Can we really inhabit our body all day long?

This is a very helpful practice direction, and it's in such sharp contrast to much of Western culture. I think about James Joyce, the Irish author. One of his characters in Ulysses was a man named Mr. Duffy, and Joyce's description was: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body."

When you feel into that, you get the sense of a withdrawal from life—separation from the vital energy of the body into some kind of headspace, too much thought.

Disconnected in some ways.

As we stay in touch with the body, one of the great benefits is that we remain connected to our emotions. Often it becomes difficult to stay in the body because the emotions have grown too uncomfortable. Particularly for people who have experienced trauma in life—whether from personal incidents, physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, racism, or homophobia—the body can become full of trauma's residue, making it challenging to inhabit. Longstanding racism and homophobia can be traumatic as well, leaving their mark in the body.

Mindfulness of the body isn't always available to all of us. If contact with bodily energy feels overwhelming or threatening because of this residue, then mindfulness of the body may not be the preferred anchor. In such cases, speak with your teacher to find the best approach. Mindfulness of sound might serve as a helpful alternative.

But if you're able to rest attention in the body without too much difficulty, it serves as a wonderful channel for staying in touch with emotions. If the mind is agitated, the body will likely be as well. If the body feels calm, the mind will often be calm too. It's an excellent place to check in and feel what's happening.

When any strong emotion arises, it manifests in the body. Happiness brings an uplift. Joy creates a surge of energy, perhaps in the chest. Fear appears as strong contraction. Anger might tense the neck and shoulders. By staying in touch with the body, you know what's happening in the mind when these strong emotions are present. This contributes greatly to self-knowledge and self-understanding.

As Annie mentioned, when we bring attention into the body and truly inhabit it, we notice the impact of breathing. Sitting and feeling the body, you begin to sense what breathing in and breathing out actually feels like.

Now we enter the terrain of mindfulness of breathing, the innermost of these nested practices. Looking at the modern history of Vipassana practice—I don't know if it's always been this way—but in the last fifty to seventy-five years, mindfulness of breathing has become the most emphasized practice. In my observation, among the teachers I've sat with, the books I've read, and the talks I've listened to, the first instruction is most often mindfulness of breathing. It has come to occupy a central role in our lineage, and there are very good reasons for this.

But as Annie said this morning, mindfulness of breathing isn't the right anchor for everyone. Just as mindfulness of body sometimes isn't helpful, mindfulness of breathing isn't always the best place to settle.

Let me share a few reasons why, before exploring what makes it so beneficial. If you've had difficulty breathing at some point in your life—perhaps childhood asthma or a life-threatening situation where you felt you couldn't breathe—mindfulness of breathing may reconnect you with that experience and bring up the fear and anxiety you felt then. In such cases, it might not be the best primary focus.

Another situation where mindfulness of breathing might not work well: if, like me, you were a perfectionist or striver in life or early meditation. When I started with mindfulness of breathing, I thought I couldn't miss a single breath or it wouldn't work. I stayed really tightly focused, trying to catch every breath that passed. Of course, I couldn't. But attempting this made me incredibly tense. Only after extensive meditation with other objects did I learn to relax enough to return to the breath in a truly easeful way.

Notice your relationship to the breath as you begin connecting with it. If you find yourself becoming tense around it, speak with your teacher. Perhaps there are ways to bring relaxation into mindfulness of breathing, or maybe a combination of breath with another focus would be most helpful. Talk with your teacher and see what makes sense for you.

The central discourse in the Buddha's teachings on this topic is called the Anapanasati Sutta, the discourse on mindfulness of breathing. It appears in the Middle Length Sayings, like the Satipatthana Sutta, and contains a long section describing all the benefits of mindfulness of breathing.

One thing I find particularly interesting: at one point in his teaching career—the Buddha was fully awakened at thirty-five before he began teaching, then taught for forty-five more years—he went into retreat for three months. This meant: don't talk to me. I'm not coming out to give talks. I'm staying in seclusion and doing my own practice.

When he emerged, what do you think he had been practicing? For three months, he practiced mindfulness of breathing. I find this fascinating—someone already awakened still found it helpful to abide in mindfulness of breathing. If it worked for the Buddha, it must be beneficial for us as well.

In mindfulness of breathing, notice where you feel it most clearly. This varies greatly from person to person. Some feel it most clearly at the nose, others in the chest, still others in the belly. Some experience what's called whole body breathing—settling into the torso and feeling the expansion and contraction of the rib cage, like bellows.

Or some people like to follow the breath as it enters the nose, goes down, expands the chest, expands the belly, and then reverses on the way out.

So that was what? About half a dozen different techniques for mindfulness of breathing. And there are many, many more. You can add mental noting to that or not. There are lots of ways to feel the breath. All of them are good.

I'll give some more suggestions tomorrow morning in the instructions, but there's one particular aspect of mindfulness of breathing I want to talk about: connecting and sustaining. These are translations of two Pali terms called *vitaka* and *vichara*. They are the first two factors that go into developing strong concentration, and they are factors to some extent under our control. This is the beauty of connecting and sustaining.

The idea is this: let's say we take the breath as an object. When an in-breath begins, we connect our attention to it. This is the exercise in wise attention—I'm going to be mindful of the breath. So on the start of the in-breath, we make the effort to connect the attention to that experience of breathing in. That's connecting. That's *vitaka*.

And then once we've connected, we make the effort to sustain the attention there for a bit. This is the effort of *vichara*.

So the question becomes: how long should you sustain? What if I told you that you were no good unless you could sustain the attention for ten minutes? Would you succeed? No. So we're not going to say that.

The right length of time to sustain, according to us, is one half a breath. Can you connect at the start of the in-breath and sustain the attention for the duration of the in-breath? Then can you connect at the start of the out-breath and sustain the attention for the duration of the out-breath? That's enough. Is that doable? Sometimes, right? Sometimes you might just touch it and then off. But often you can sustain for half a breath.

Play with these two factors: connecting the attention at the start of an in-breath, sustaining it for the in-breath. Connecting it for the start of the out-breath and sustaining for the length of the out-breath. See what happens in your practice. It's the continuity of mindfulness that leads to the development of *samādhi*. These are two factors that help the *samādhi* to grow, and they are factors to some extent within our power.

Focus on developing these two qualities as you're engaging with the breath and see what happens.

Of course, you'll go away. Of course, you'll be gone for a while. Of course, you'll come back. When you come back, can you land with grace? Instead of saying, "Oh, I messed it up again. I was away. I was away for so long."

Here's a place you could ask: what's the right length of time to be away? What's that bar? Do you have one? No, but whatever time you were away, it was too long, right? We don't know the right length of time to be away, but whatever time it was, it was too long.

So we can't control the length we were away. When you're back, you can't really control how long you're back before the attention goes away again into thought and the loss of mindfulness. That's okay. The thing is that this is the training.

As we practice connecting and sustaining, we will be present more and more. We will be away in thought, lost in thought, less and less. That's the way it develops.

Now another name for this connecting and sustaining, which I really like, is aiming and rubbing. These are just different translations of the same words, vitaka and vicara. Think about it in this way: you aim your attention toward the first contact with the in-breath, and then when it lands, you rub it. Rub it with your mindful attention. When the in-breath ends, you let go of that. Then when the out-breath starts, you aim again and you rub for a bit.

This has a lovely kind of physical, almost sensual feeling of intimacy between the attention and the direct experience in the body. When we learn to aim and rub, we get some very nice results.

One is, of course, that you're staying connected to the present moment. You're not going off into the unwise fields of attention. The second is that when you rub any experience—whether it's a body sensation, an in-breath, an out-breath, an emotion, or a thought—when you rub it with mindful attention, you start to know it better. You start to learn about it because the wisdom is there in the middle of the rubbing. Mindfulness is learning at the same time that you're rubbing.

What do we learn? We rub the sensation of an in-breath. Maybe it feels like expansion. Maybe it feels like pressure. We rub that and one of the things we see is that any sensation within an in-breath has certain qualities. Expansion feels a certain way. Contraction feels a certain way. Pressure feels a certain way. These lead us into really understanding the bare physical nature of our bodies.

Formally, we would talk about these in terms of the four elements. By rubbing a sensation, by rubbing an in-breath, we start to get to know the body in terms of the four elements that make it up: earth, water, fire, and air. We start to see its primal nature—that my air element is just like yours, my earth element is just like yours, my earth element is just like the rocks and the trees. We start to see that in our direct experience.

We learn the individual nature of bodily sensations, the individual nature of the breath, but we also start to see its universal characteristics. We see that every sensation of expansion that arises also is of the nature to pass away. Every sensation of contraction that arises also is of the nature to pass away. Every in-breath passes away. Every out-breath passes away. We start to see this as we rub our experience with mindful attention.

We start to understand these universal characteristics of impermanence, of unreliability. Nothing stays the same connected with the breath. We might always like the breath to be smooth and comfortable and calm, but it's not always like that. It's not always reliable. We start to see all these things are coming and going on their own. We don't make the sensation of expansion be the way it is. We don't make the feeling of pressure be the way it is. The body is doing its own thing and to a large extent it's out of our hands. The body is living its own life.

Classically speaking, by rubbing we start to really see the three characteristics of existence: the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of what makes up our experience—in this case, of the breath, or you could say of the body. This is because mindfulness comes with built-in wisdom and the rubbing lets us get to know our experience directly. The wisdom will illuminate those truths for us.

When the Buddha talked about mindfulness meditation, he described two broad effects that it has. One he called samatha, the other he called vipassana. Samatha is tranquility, vipassana is insight—that's how we usually translate them. This means that as you develop mindfulness, part of what happens is you get calm, and the other part is you get wise. The samatha aspects lead to greater tranquility in body and in mind. The vipassana aspects lead us to understand the way our experience is constructed.

It leads us to see these three characteristics, which lead us into letting go. And it's the letting go that leads us into liberation. So we really appreciate both these developments.

The tranquility feels good in and of itself. Sometimes we think tranquility is primarily of the mind, but tranquility is equally of the body. When we come into meditation, often we've accumulated twenty, thirty, forty years or more of life experiences that result in the body having tension, having stored emotions. And when we sit, sometimes

those things come through and the body doesn't feel so tranquil and the mind doesn't feel so tranquil. The samatha aspects of mindfulness start to allow that energy to move through and calm the whole system, calm the body and calm the mind. And then we find that we can sit comfortably with some degree of ease of both body and mind. This is the beauty of samatha.

This samatha can be developed to great depths, and when it's developed to great depths, it strengthens to a high degree the factor of concentration, of samadhi. Having met teachers who have developed this element to a very high degree, it is very impressive. Someone like Dipa Ma, an Indian teacher who visited IMS in the late seventies, an Indian woman from Calcutta—really beautiful being, radiated loving kindness. Her mind was so still and her heart was just open. In her presence you always felt loved. Ajahn Chah, a Thai forest master, had strong unification of mind, strong samadhi from very early on as a child. He said for twenty-five years he had never felt anger. And U Ba Khin, who was a teacher of mine, a samatha teacher of mine both in Burma and here, was such a steady being. I never saw a flicker of reactivity cross his face. So settled, so in his body and so peaceful.

So the development of samatha can go to great depths. It's very beautiful. But we are not primarily focusing on that development here. We are primarily focusing on the development of insight, of vipassana, and samatha will come as a side benefit. So it's a beautiful thing, but we're not primarily practicing just for samatha.

In taking the breath as an object to develop vipassana, we want to have an open and natural relationship with it. So we might say that we will develop a slight preference for being with the breath, but it's not an exclusive, attached relationship. We can have other partners. So we may like to come back frequently to the breath and aim in that direction, but we're not clinging to it. So when another experience comes that naturally draws our attention, the attention can easily move there—whether it's sensation in the body, a sound, an emotion, a thought, a sight if we're walking outside.

By staying connected with the breath in vipassana, you will continue to strengthen the quality of samatha, but not in an exclusive kind of one-dimensional way. So mindfulness of breathing within a vipassana context has a nice combination of settledness and calming effect, but also an openness to all our experience—very open, wide mind—and an ability to learn through that practice from all the different sense experiences that we contact.

So trust in this quality of mindfulness in general, in mindfulness of the body, in mindfulness of the breath. It will be a consistent place to dwell with wise attention. It will keep you away from all those troublesome avenues of unwise attention. And it's also the gateway to insight. Through the wisdom properties of mindfulness itself, it opens the door to insight.

So I just want to close with mentioning a few of the qualities that the Buddha said mindfulness of breathing leads to. I'm going to really condense it instead of reading a section from the discourse. I'm just going to hit the highlights. The Buddha said that mindfulness of breathing can be used to develop tranquility, rapture, pleasure, gladness, concentration, and liberation. All of these are in our path as we dwell in mindfulness of breathing.

Let's just sit for a minute and let these words settle: mindfulness of breathing will develop tranquility, rapture, pleasure, gladness, concentration and liberation.

CHAPTER 57

Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 43 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong offers clear meditation instructions focusing on three primary anchors for practice. He begins by emphasizing the importance of balanced posture that embodies both relaxation and alertness, reflecting the mental attitude needed for effective meditation.*
>
> *Armstrong guides practitioners through three distinct approaches: whole-body awareness while sitting (kāyagatāsati), mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati), and mindfulness of sounds. He emphasizes developing a receptive attitude rather than forcing attention, encouraging practitioners to rest in awareness and allow experiences to arise naturally. The teaching draws on the wisdom that "if you sit and know that you're sitting, the whole of the Dharma will unfold for you."*
>
> *This instruction is particularly valuable for both beginning and experienced meditators, offering practical guidance on how to work skillfully with attention and awareness. Armstrong addresses the common experience of mind-wandering with compassion, teaching practitioners to notice the aftereffects of thinking and gently return to present-moment awareness. The emphasis on receptivity and spaciousness provides a foundation for developing deeper samādhi and insight.*

This morning we'll continue with the same basic meditation instructions as Annie introduced yesterday. I'll encourage you to work with one of the primary anchors we've talked about: body, sounds, or breath. We'll introduce these one by one, and then you can find the focus that's most suitable for you in this period.

Begin the meditation by feeling comfortable in your posture, finding a position where you feel relaxed and also upright, where the back is reasonably straight and yet you're not straining or stiff. What this posture really represents is also a mental attitude. In meditation we want to have the mind be relaxed and alert, and the body posture supports that. The uprightness supports the alertness. The relaxation supports the sense of ease.

If we're too relaxed, the mind easily drifts away from the present. But if we're too tight, we'll never feel happy about meditating. And it's nice to occasionally feel happy about meditating.

As you settle into this posture, let yourself just feel yourself in sitting. It's not so much that we want to observe the posture, observe the body from above, from someplace in the head, but rather this embodied experience of the posture means we feel the body sitting from inside. What is it like to let your attention just settle within the body and feel it throughout?

Notice how there's some awareness of the body all through, from the top of the head, through the neck and shoulders, through the back, through the arms and hands, in the chest and belly, the hips, and the legs and feet. Wherever attention goes in the body, there's some awareness there. Sometimes there's a clear sensation. Sometimes there may not be a sensation. That's all right. There's some awareness in that part of the body. Awareness really permeates the whole body.

So the first anchor that you can opt for is just this sense of sitting with the whole body in sitting. As Ajahn Chah said, if you sit and know that you're sitting, the whole of the Dharma will unfold for you.

As you're sitting, feeling the whole body, then you may notice from time to time the sensations that are connected with breathing. You might start to notice what happens in the body when there's an in-breath. Where do you feel in the body the impact of the in-breath? And how does that feel? What's that feeling like of an in-breath? Do you just feel the in-breath in one little place? Do you feel it in a few places in the body? Do you feel it throughout the body? There's not one right answer to this; it's just for you to look at your experience.

And then what happens in the body when there's an out-breath? What are the sensations that arise that let you know an out-breath is happening? And how does that feel? How does the out-breath feel? Where in the body do you feel the out-breath? In just one place? In a few places or throughout the body?

Having explored both the in-breath and out-breath a bit, then being a little continuous, feeling the in-breath followed by the out-breath, feeling the next in-breath and the next out-breath. This is the second possible anchor that you can use in your practice this morning: mindfulness of the in-breathing and out-breathing.

Then from time to time, you'll notice a sound. It might be a sound inside the room, sound of the ventilation, sound of my voice, sound of one another. Or it might be a sound from outside of traffic or work in the building. Take a little time to explore this experience of hearing.

As you open to sounds, let your attention open in a wide and expansive way. Just open to all the sounds as they might arise all around you. Might be to the front or back, the left or right or above. It's as though you're sitting in the middle of a concert hall and you're just opening to be receptive to whatever sound arises.

Notice when a sound comes, you don't have to make any special effort to hear. The sound arises and it's heard spontaneously, immediately. All you have to do is rest and receive. See what it feels like to be in this purely receptive mode in your meditation. You're just resting in the center of all sounds and each one is known spontaneously as it arises. And as it's known, mindfulness of sound.

This is the third possible anchor in your meditation: mindfulness of sound. Notice how it brings out the qualities of spaciousness and receptivity.

And now bringing that same receptive attitude back into the experience of the body. Again, having the sense that you're simply resting, receiving the sensations throughout the body. Among them are the sensations of breathing.

So see what it's like to tune into the experience of breathing with this very receptive attitude. Not forcing the attention to the breath, not holding on tight, but just resting in the body, feeling the in-breath and feeling the out-breath. Let the mental attitude be very relaxed and open.

If you'd like to continue paying attention to the breathing, you can let the attention go where you feel the breath most clearly. It could be at the nose, in the chest, in the belly, in the torso—feeling chest and belly together—or following the entire breath as it enters the nose, expands the chest, and then the belly. If you'd like to work with mindfulness of breathing, see where it's most comfortable, most accessible for you to feel the breath, just staying in touch with the simple sensations of breathing.

Sometimes your attention will get lost in a train of thought. It could be for a few seconds or a few minutes. This is normal—not to worry about it. At some point your attention will return to the present moment. And when it does, take a moment just to acknowledge that thinking has been happening.

You might look to see in the aftereffect of the thinking: is there more peace, more calm, or has there been some agitation, some unsettledness in the thought excursion? Just notice that and then again connect with the present moment.

See what stands out for you. See what meets your receptive attention—body, breath, or sounds. Take a look to see what's happening now. What's the present moment experience? And is there mindfulness of that?

CHAPTER 58

Morning Instructions: Thought Game

Guy Armstrong · 47 min

> *In this morning instruction from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong introduces an innovative meditation technique called the 'Thought Game' for developing mindfulness of thoughts (vitakkānupassanā). Building on previous teachings about working with physical sensations and emotions, this practice offers a structured approach to observing thoughts as they arise, persist, and pass away without becoming entangled in their content.*
>
> *The guided meditation begins with establishing mindfulness through traditional anchors like body awareness, breath, or sounds, then systematically opens attention to observe one thought, then two thoughts, and finally sustained periods of thought-watching. Armstrong emphasizes seeing thoughts as present-moment phenomena rather than getting drawn into their narrative content - a key aspect of developing clear comprehension (sampajañña).*
>
> *This practice directly supports the cultivation of continuous mindfulness (sati) throughout formal sitting and walking meditation periods. Armstrong stresses that such continuity of present-moment awareness forms the essential foundation for deeper insight (vipassanā) and eventual liberation. The technique offers practitioners a skillful means for working with one of meditation's greatest challenges while building the stability of attention necessary for profound dharma realization.*

Annie has been pointing us to mindfulness of thoughts all day yesterday, both through the instructions and through the evening Dharma talk. So I thought it would be good to continue with that instruction a little further. In the guided meditation this morning, I'm going to introduce something called the Thought Game. So please settle in normally. We'll give some preliminary instructions to lead up to that and suggest yet another way to work with thoughts as an object for mindfulness.

Again, sitting comfortably, finding the balance in your posture between uprightness and relaxation. Have your back be fairly straight. Your chin should be tucked in a little so that the neck is not tilted upward—it's just vertical. Letting go of any obvious areas of holding. So having the eyes be soft and a little downcast. Letting the jaw be loose. The shoulders be dropped. And let the belly be soft, relaxed.

Then letting the attention rest for a bit in the body, in the sitting posture. Noticing how the awareness can fill the whole body posture. Letting the awareness inhabit the whole body. There's a sense of sitting with attention and dignity in your body.

Opening to sounds, if that helps you bring in a sense of relaxed and receptive attention. Having the sense that you can just rest, and any sound is heard effortlessly, spontaneously.

Connecting again with the body in that same receptive attitude, and now noticing in the body the impact of breathing. Just feeling what happens with one in-breath. Feeling what happens with one out-breath.

A comfortable anchor for many people is the sense of the whole body posture. And then feeling within that overall frame what happens with the breath. This is an anchor that gives both a good sense of groundedness through the whole body, a breadth through the whole body, and also some particular focus on the sensations of breathing.

But as you attend to whatever your anchor is—body, sounds, or breath—also being open to and moving easily to any sense experience that draws your attention: other sensations in the body, emotions or moods, and the arising of thoughts. We easily let go of the anchor, let the attention connect with the new experience as an equally good focus for mindfulness and sustain the attention on the new experience long enough to get a sense of its nature. What kind of sensation? What kind of emotion? What is the thought and its process of arising, persisting and passing?

And so now we can prepare a little bit to enter this kind of mindfulness that we call the thought game. To prepare for it, connect again with your anchor—body or sounds or breath—so that you feel present in this moment. You're bringing a focus of attention, a directed attention to your anchor.

And now let go of the focus of attention on the anchor. Open the attention in a completely unfocused, wide way. And just notice and be mindful of the first thought that arises when I finish this sentence.

When you've noticed one thought, return again to your anchor. Connecting in the present moment, familiar focus, and reviewing your experience with that one thought. Were you able to see its arising, persisting, and passing with mindfulness? And that means basically seeing the thought as just another present moment phenomenon. You will also notice its content. Our intelligence doesn't go away. But you can see its content as a present moment arising also. So this establishes a new meditative relationship to the thought.

Connecting again with your anchor at ease in the present moment. And now letting go of the focus on the anchor, letting the attention just be open as though into a big space. And now become mindful of the first two thoughts that arise when I finish this sentence.

If you've been able to notice two thoughts returning the attention again to your anchor. Staying connected to the present moment.

And now letting go again of the focus on the anchor, just opening to the sense of space and now becoming mindful of every thought that arises until I give a different instruction.

And now returning the attention once again to your anchor. Connecting to the present moment in a way that's real and grounded in a direct sense experience. Just here and now.

And then you might also just review your experience when you were practicing with thought as the object for that extended period of time. How long were you able to be mindful of thoughts coming and going without having the attention lost into the content? How long could you sustain the present moment knowing of thoughts arising, persisting and passing? And again, there's not some standard you're supposed to meet.

It's just noticing what the attention does, how the mind behaves, what's the strength of mindfulness.

Once again, connecting with your anchor grounded in the present moment and letting go of the anchor opening once again, just to notice every thought that arises until I give another instruction.

And coming back again to your anchor.

So this is a way to practice with thought really as a primary focus for mindfulness. Let go of any deliberate directing of the attention. Rest easily and openly in the present moment. Just ready for the next thought that arises. And when it does, notice its arising, lasting, and passing.

There may be times when in doing this exercise, no thoughts are arising. That's fine. See if you can then rest in that open state of readiness. You'll still notice body and sounds and breath and moods. You're just resting easily and waiting for the arising of the next thought. And then seeing that thought with present moment attention arising, lasting and passing.

So in the remainder of this period, I invite you to play with this thought practice as it seems useful to you. You can start with a period of connection, clear connection to the present moment, and then just open and notice any thought that comes as your primary focus for mindfulness.

If you find the present moment mindfulness is getting lost and you're getting drawn into the content of the thoughts, let go of thoughts for a moment. Come back to your anchor. Re-establish the present moment connection. And when you feel ready to play again, you can open up to thoughts again for a shorter or longer period of time.

If you haven't found this thought exercise helpful, then just continue with the meditation practice you've been doing. Connecting with your anchor, but being open to the arising of any sense experience, sounds, moods, emotions, and thoughts.

What's the relationship to the present moment just now? Has mindfulness been lost in the content of some train of thoughts? Or is there a present moment attention that can see all the sense experiences and thoughts as arising and passing, still centered just in the present moment?

So I hope you're starting to get a sense, at least for moments at a time, of how this mindfulness can become steady and stable in the present moment and what that feels like. We've been spending a lot of time in the last few days really talking about the things that tend to disturb it. Bhante talked a lot about working with physical pain—this is one of the things it's difficult to be with, at least in the beginning. John talked about working with the hindrances and how strong emotions move through and sway us and challenge the steadiness. And Annie talked a lot yesterday about thoughts. Thoughts come and we can lose our mindful attention in their content and then they stir up further emotions.

But as we learn to work with these three big areas which can cause disturbance, we find ourselves more and more able to be in the present with some steadiness and balance. And this has so many benefits in meditation.

First of all, it feels good. And feeling good is a good thing in meditation. It brings that sense of ease and happiness.

Second is from this place, in daily life especially, we make a lot better decisions in our speech and actions when we come from a place of steadiness. We're more thoughtful.

And the third thing is—and the reason it's so important here—is that this is the foundation for deeper insight to take place. And from deeper insight comes greater freedom, greater possibility of liberation.

So what is the key factor in the development of this steadiness of attention in the present moment? Really, it's continuity. I think we've said this a few times. Continuity of mindfulness, which I think I mentioned in my first talk, is really about the frequency of

moments of mindfulness through the day. We don't expect any of you to be continuous from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed with your mindfulness. We know there will be interruptions. But the more frequent moments we can put in, in every period of practice—the sitting, the walking, the meals, going about your room, your work meditation, all of that—will help with this development, the buildup of continuity. And at some point you'll feel the momentum start to happen where it's much easier to stay in the present without specially strong effort.

So one of the keys to this continuity is really your commitment to the walking meditation. The schedule is put up the way it is, sitting and walking and sitting and walking, really to support this continuity. So I really encourage you, first of all, to do the walking with as much commitment as you're bringing to the sitting or any other practices through the day.

If you've been a little less careful with the walking than with your sitting, I'd really encourage you to try a period today of continuity where you attend as well as you can fully through a sitting and then make the resolve. Get up from the sitting, stand up, begin your walking meditation, go to your spot, do your thirty or forty-five minutes of walking fully, come back and sit again for the next sitting and see what that kind of continuity feels like if you haven't been doing it already. It really does make a difference and it's what will lead to this greater stability that eventually supports greater freedom and liberation.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 59

Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · 47 min

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong presents what he considers the culmination of Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation instructions: choiceless attention. This approach represents the genius of the Burmese master who founded this vipassanā lineage, making explicit that anything experienced can be a focus for mindfulness.*
>
> *Armstrong explains three ways of relating to meditation objects: exclusive focus (for samatha practice), preferred emphasis on an anchor with openness to predominant experiences, and choiceless attention where no preference is given to any particular object. In choiceless attention, practitioners begin with an anchor but then deliberately unhook attention and allow it to move naturally, maintaining awareness of where attention lands moment by moment.*
>
> *The teacher describes this as "organic meditation" - simply being aware of what's happening now. While this approach offers greater relaxation by removing the effort of constantly returning to a chosen focus, it carries the risk of drifting into what Joseph Goldstein calls being "kind of mindful." Armstrong recommends developing skill in both anchored and choiceless approaches, learning when to stabilize with an anchor and when to open to the full field of experience while maintaining clear mindfulness.*

The meditation instructions I'm offering this morning represent, in many ways, the culmination of the sequence of instructions we've been unfolding. In my opinion, they truly reveal the genius of Mahasi Sayadaw, the Burmese monk who founded this lineage of meditation upon which our three-month course instructions are based.

We've said many times that anything you experience can be a good focus for mindfulness. It was really Mahasi Sayadaw's instructions that pointed this out so clearly and explicitly. You do not find this in all lineages of Vipassana, but in this lineage it's very clear, and today's instructions will make that apparent.

Before I get into the instructions, I want to offer a preface. The approach I'm going to share today is what I call choiceless attention. First, let me explain this word "attention." There was a question yesterday in the hall about attention, and it's something really important in mindfulness practice.

Attention is the faculty of mind that selects one aspect of our present moment experience to focus on and highlight from all the things that are going on. To give the biggest context of what's happening for you right now, take a look at all the things that are in your present moment experience. There's the sense of the body and sitting. There are sensations within the body. There are sounds. There's a certain mood or emotion for you. There may be sight. And there are thoughts passing through. This is basically the field of our experience in most sitting meditations. The senses of smell and taste are not usually very active when we're sitting in the hall, but the other senses are active and constantly revealing experiences.

Attention is the faculty of mind that highlights one of those aspects and settles on it momentarily. Attention, if left to its own devices, keeps moving around. We sometimes do an exercise called Vipassana out loud, where we simply ask the meditator to keep stating what they're noticing now. You'll see that it keeps changing: "Now I'm aware of a sensation in my knee. Now I'm aware of the sound of a voice. Now I'm aware of an in-breath. Now I'm aware of a mood of calm." Attention keeps flitting between all these different facets of our experience, if left to its own devices.

As we've started the meditation instruction, if you remember, in the beginning we asked you to focus on an anchor. This means picking out some aspect of your experience—body posture, breath, or sounds—and deliberately directing your attention to that part of your experience, coming back to it again and again. We were deliberately cultivating a focus on one part of our experience.

Once you pick an anchor like the breath, there are basically three ways you can relate to it with your attention. I'm going to use the breath as an example here, but you could substitute your anchor for breath.

The first way is to make this the exclusive focus of your directed attention. You keep noticing the breath. If anything else pulls your attention, you don't let it rest there—you bring it back immediately to the breath. This is the kind of approach used in developing concentration practice. If you want to direct your practice primarily toward samatha or tranquility, you pick this exclusive focus on the breath. A few of you are doing this, but not many.

The second way involves a preference for the breath. This says, "I'll be with the breath as a focus of directed attention, but if anything comes along that's stronger and naturally draws my attention, I'll let go of the breath as a focus and let my attention relate to this new phenomenon." In other words, you make the attempt to connect and sustain—vitaka and vicara—the attention to the new arising, whether it's a sensation, thought, mood, emotion, or sound. This way, you start to open up to the whole range of

experiences you're having. But if nothing else is strong or predominant, you redirect the attention to the breath. It becomes your default, a preferred focus of attention. This is a very nice way to meditate because coming back to the breath helps establish some of that tranquility and focus development in practice. This is a very good way to practice Vipassana.

In the approach we're discussing today, there is no preference for the breath or your other anchor. You start by connecting to the anchor, but then deliberately unhook the attention and let it go where it will. That's why this approach is called choiceless attention.

And then your job is to sit back and notice where the attention is landing in each new moment. So you're not trying to control it or direct it, but that means you have to be really fresh and alert and awake to see where it is landing because it's not going to be predictable.

So this is what we'll explore today. Can we let go of an anchor, open the attention up, and still stay present enough to see where it's landing moment after moment after moment? This is the basic outline of the instructions that Mahasi Sayadaw invented. And I think it's a really beautiful way to practice because it makes clear anything that arises can be a focus for mindfulness. Mindfulness doesn't need to get lost in the face of any experience that you're having.

That's one way to describe this practice. The other way to describe it, equally valid, is the practice of "what's happening now." So in each new moment, you're answering the question, what's happening now? And what's happening is where your attention is landing. Attention keeps alighting on something. It will illuminate that aspect of experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, emotion. And your job is to be with what's happening now. These are just two different ways to describe this practice of choiceless attention.

Having used up most of our instruction time, we'll move into the formal meditation instruction. So please sit comfortably, finding in your posture that balance of relaxation and ease with the sense of uprightness and alertness. What you find in your posture will be reflected in your mind's relationship to the moment—a balance of firmness and relaxation.

Please begin by connecting with your anchor. It could be the experiencing of the in-breath and out-breath. It could be connecting with the overall feeling of your body as you sit, the body posture. It could be an openness to sounds as they arise all around you

—in front, behind, right and left. Whatever helps you stabilize your attention in the present moment. Here we're deliberately directing our attention to one aspect of our experience: breath, body, or sounds.

Now let go of any effort to direct your attention to your anchor and simply open in a very wide and receptive way to the whole field of conscious experience in this moment. Notice that within this whole field, there are sensations and mood or emotion, the breathing, sounds, and thoughts coming and going. Notice that these are the usual elements of our experience. This is the inventory of our sitting meditation experience.

In the instructions up to this point, we've gone into detail about how to relate with mindfulness to each of these facets of experience. So you know how to practice giving mindful attention to each of the aspects of your present moment experience.

Now, allowing the attention to stay very open and undirected, just begin to notice moment after moment where the attention is moving to. If you'd like, it can be helpful to make a soft mental note or label of where the attention is landing. It can be a support for staying present while the attention is not anchored to any particular facet.

You might just make a soft mental note every few seconds where you notice the attention alighting. The notes might sound something like: "in," "hearing," "sensing," "out," "thinking," "sensing," "sound," and so on. The note is optional. You might experiment to see if it helps you stay present.

If you'd like to use the mental noting, keep it soft like a whisper and keep the main emphasis on the direct experience of that sense contact. We'd say keep the attention 90% with the sense contact and just have the note be a soft whisper in the background. But the note's not required. If you can pay attention to the present moment arising without it, that's fine.

Pay mindful attention moment after moment to whatever attention is highlighting. Sometimes if one experience is predominant, attention may stay there for a while. That's fine. You're letting it do whatever it chooses. Just be there to notice: oh, attention has landed and is staying here. But then also notice—is the attention continuously there? Or does it land there and still dart off to notice other things happening? Just stay alert to all the subtle movements of attention.

Sometimes letting go of the anchor can bring up a little insecurity or confusion, not quite being certain how to practice. So if that happens, notice the insecurity or confusion as the new aspect of experience.

If it continues and it's difficult to find mindfulness happening, just return to your anchor again. You have a reliable refuge there. Steady the attention in the present moment again. And when you feel ready, open up to the approach of choiceless attention. What's happening now? Keeping alive this alert interest in where attention is landing and being mindful of that aspect of sense contact.

I'd like to mention again these three styles of practice. One is exclusive focus on the anchor. For most of you, that doesn't really apply—that's a samatha kind of instruction. So those of you who are doing vipassana have types two and three to work with.

Two: there's a preferred emphasis on the anchor, but an openness to other predominant experiences. Number three: no preference for the anchor, just an openness to anything that's happening in the present moment.

Number two provides the advantage of giving an ongoing focus that will help steady the attention in the present moment, so it has a little bit of that concentration flavor to it. Number three, because it's taking out an additional area of will or effort—bringing back the attention to the same focus again and again—can give a greater sense of relaxation.

Number three, I think, has this quality—it's almost what I call organic meditation. It's the meditation God intended us to do, because it's just so natural. Be aware of what's happening now. That's really its beauty.

But there's a risk to this kind of meditation. Because it's so open, the mindfulness can start to slip away. There's not a clear chosen focus. The mindfulness can start to diminish and you don't quite notice it. Then you find more and more time is spent with thinking, but you're not really mindful of each thought. This is what leads to the condition that Joseph Goldstein describes as "kind of mindful."

This open attention can lead into a little bit of driftiness. You're kind of mindful, still connecting to the present, but you're not really noticing the times when you're not connecting to the present.

What I encourage for most of you is to develop both two and three. As the retreat goes on, your learning can be: How do you balance the strengths of each one? When do you need to come back and refocus on the anchor to generate more steadiness in the present moment? And once you have that steadiness and stability, when can you open up to all the changing objects and retain the stability and the clear mindfulness in doing it?

Knowing when to move back and forth between number two and number three can happen in the space of one sitting—you might move from one to the other. It can happen several times over the course of a day in your sittings.

CHAPTER 60

First and Second Noble Truths

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's foundational teaching from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), the first discourse delivered at Sarnath. He explores the First Noble Truth of dukkha—not merely suffering, but the fundamental unsatisfactoriness inherent in conditioned existence. Armstrong distinguishes three types of dukkha: the direct pain of dukkha-dukkha, the suffering of change (vipariṇāma-dukkha), and the deeper instability of all saṅkhāra (conditioned phenomena).*
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> *The talk then investigates the Second Noble Truth—that craving (taṇhā) is the root cause of suffering. Drawing on stories from Nelson Mandela's transformation and teachings from the Dalai Lama, Armstrong shows how understanding our mental habits of grasping and aversion can be liberating rather than depressing. He explains how taṇhā manifests through the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion, and emphasizes the practical instruction to abandon craving through mindful acceptance of present-moment experience. This teaching offers both philosophical depth and practical guidance for working with difficulty in meditation and daily life.*

The subject of our exploration this evening is the First and Second Noble Truths. Sometimes we hear this and think, "Oh no, not more suffering. Haven't we already had enough suffering?" But I want to share this quote from the Buddha: "The realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy." That is our preview.

I want to base this talk around the Buddha's first discourse, recorded in the Samyutta Nikaya. You may know this story: after the Buddha's awakening, he spent the first forty-nine days not departing from the Bodhi tree, but standing, sitting, and walking around it, basically just enjoying the bliss of liberation and reflecting on what he had come to understand.

During that period, he contemplated not teaching. He thought that what he had found was too subtle for anyone else to understand, and so he wasn't at all sure that he was going to teach. But then, when he surveyed the world with his vision, he saw there were some people who had but little dust in their eyes, who were capable of understanding. So he decided to teach.

The people he decided to first teach were five practitioners who had been with him through his ascetic phase of practice. Again, with his vision, he saw that they were located near the town of Benares, about 150 miles away from the place he awakened in Bodh Gaya. He didn't have a Mercedes, so he had to walk 150 miles to get to his old friends to deliver this teaching. It must have taken him about ten days to arrive.

When he found his five old friends in the spiritual life and started to approach them, they said, "Oh no, Gotama has gone soft. Look how much weight he's put on. You can't press your finger in his belly and feel his backbone anymore. He's eaten. He's fallen off the path"—because they were committed to ascetic practices. But as he walked toward them, they were struck by his composure and radiance, and finally they agreed to open themselves to hear what he had to say.

This was the occasion of his delivering the first discourse called "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma." This discourse was essentially the declaration of the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth that the cause of suffering is craving, the truth that the end of suffering lies in the end of craving, and the truth that the way leading to the end of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. This is what he outlined in this first discourse—a comprehensive view of his whole teaching. You could say that the rest of his forty-five years of teaching were just footnotes to this talk.

If you look at his collected teachings in English, they occupy about twenty-five volumes. I find this remarkable. The recorded teachings of Jesus in the Bible are about fifty or sixty pages, while the Buddha's words fill twenty-five volumes. He said many things, but they were all about this central topic. As the Buddha himself later said, "Formerly, as now, I make known just suffering and the end of suffering." His teachings were always completely pragmatic and down to earth: this is what will help you come out of suffering, this is how you recognize suffering.

Let me begin by reading from this discourse, "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma":

"Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Benares in the deer park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the group of five thus: 'Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness and sensual pleasures, which is low, ignoble, unbeneficial, and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial.

Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata which gives rise to vision and leads to nibbana? It is this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata.'"

This was the first exposition of the path that we are following and the possibility of the path leading to liberation, to nibbana, to complete peace and the end of suffering. The Buddha then continues with an exposition of all Four Noble Truths.

The First Truth is the truth of suffering, or the statement that there is suffering in life. This is how he expressed it: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Illness is suffering."

Death is suffering. Sorrow, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

The word being translated as suffering is the Pali word *dukkha*, which I'm sure you've all heard before. There's not an English word that really corresponds to *dukkha*. We have to approach it with a whole constellation of different English words. Some of the translations that have been used include: suffering—probably the most common—anguish, stress, unsatisfactoriness, unreliability, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction.

All of these point to the meaning of *dukkha* as indicating that there's some friction in life for us as human beings. This friction doesn't mean that you're making a mistake with your life, but it points to the fact that some degree of suffering is an integral part of living. So not to judge ourselves when that shows up in our life.

Notice that this noble truth never says life is suffering. Sometimes people look from outside and they say, "Oh, Buddhism is really a pessimistic religion. It says that life is suffering." It doesn't say that. The Buddha never said that. Almost always when he talked about suffering, he also talked about the end of suffering. Both are equally important.

One of the things one sees is that as we practice the Dharma, we get happier and happier. There are people in the world in the field of Dharma practitioners who are basically happy people. It doesn't mean that happy people are immune from *dukkha*,

but the *dukkha* is more temporary and the happiness becomes the baseline for one's life. This is possible. The Buddha himself was known by one of his epithets as "the happy one"—*sugata*.

This term *dukkha* points to some sense that the basic circumstances of life don't quite satisfy us. I want to read this account from the *New Yorker* from a few years ago:

According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed, by positive logic, that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be given everything it must put up with. Nine out of ten of the respondents stated that they would give up completely if they knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail. In a personal note in the afterword, researchers stated that statistically speaking, life is, quote, "just too much." And as yet, they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through it at all.

Sometimes you might feel like that—though your chance of getting something in the mail has gone away. So here we are.

One of the things I like about the Buddha's definition of *dukkha* in this discourse is how universal it is: birth, aging, illness, death, association with what is displeasing, separation from what is pleasing. Who doesn't experience these things? All of us are vulnerable in this way to the difficulty of living. We all have this.

Sometimes when we feel "I am suffering," it feels isolating, as though I'm the only one bearing this problem. Everybody else seems to be sitting beautifully and walking beautifully, and I'm the one who's struggling here. But of course, no, it's not really like that. We're all in this together. We're all facing the same kinds of problems. When we reflect on that—that there is *dukkha* still in everyone we meet—it provides a way of connection and not a way of isolation.

This is from Naomi Shihab Nye, who's a Palestinian-American poet. The poem is called "Kindness." This is just a small part:

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you. How he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

This universality of our vulnerability to suffering is part of what connects us as human beings.

The second kind of dukkha the Buddha talked about is called viparinama dukkha, and it is described as the unsatisfactoriness of alternation or change. This means something may be going along in a pleasant way for a while, but because of impermanence, it will shift. And if we're holding on to the pleasantness, when it changes, there will be suffering.

Ajahn Chah said that this is like grabbing hold of a poisonous snake. If you grab hold of the head, it bites you directly—that's dukkha dukkha. If you grab hold of the tail and it's pleasant, eventually the head will come around and bite you, and then you suffer. So grasping at the pleasant or the painful eventually leads to the experience of dukkha. Grasping leads to dukkha.

Joseph Goldstein had a nice way of putting this succinctly. He was surveying the changes that he was going through physically in a retreat and he said, "If it's not one thing, it's another." I've reflected on that often.

The third kind of dukkha the Buddha talked about is called sankhara dukkha—the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. Sankhara in this instance means a conditioned phenomenon, something that arises based on prior causes and conditions. And the problem with conditioned phenomena is that they're unstable.

Some years ago we were at a teaching in the Bay Area from the Dalai Lama. I think he was talking on emptiness. And he was using this third area of sankhara dukkha to explain something very fundamental to the way the universe is set up. These were outdoor teachings in Mountain View at an outdoor amphitheater called Shoreline. The stage was set up just for the teachings, going on for three days, and it was quite beautiful.

The Dalai Lama was seated on a high throne, which he said is not about puffing up the ego of the speaker, but to give respect for the teachings—which I thought was interesting. On both sides of him were monastics from all the different traditions. There were Tibetan nuns and monks in the bright red robes that you're familiar with. Theravadan nuns and monks in the ochre robes that you know. Korean Zen nuns and monks in the gray robes of that tradition. Japanese Zen monastics in the black robes. The whole stage was this rainbow of monastic life from all over the Buddhist countries.

The backdrop was a painting of the Potala, the palace where the Dalai Lama had lived until the occupation happened and he fled the country in 1959. The Potala spread across the whole stage where the speakers for the Grateful Dead would have been—this huge canvas of the Potala at sunset with the Dalai Lama sitting in front. It was very beautiful.

We were sitting on the grass behind the seats, and it felt like a Buddhist Woodstock. All the tribes had gathered, there was a big stage and huge speakers so we could hear the voice.

So the Dalai Lama got to this part in the teaching where he talked about viparinama dukkha.

And what he said was, it's not quite correct to understand impermanence as that everything is going along in a stable way and then it changes. This is the pointing of viparinama dukkha. But in sankara dukkha, there's something more subtle being pointed to, which is that things don't go along in a really stable way for even two moments. Rather, things are constantly arising and passing, being formed and disbanding, coming into existence, passing out of existence, moment after moment after moment. And this is what we need to see. This is the instability of all conditioned phenomena.

We can see it in the body. We can see it through thoughts. We can see it through the sense bases. We can see it through mental states. They're all arising and passing really quickly. When we see this, we see that there can't be any lasting security from phenomena because there's nothing solid enough there to hold onto in the first place.

The Dalai Lama said, if you want to help people come out of suffering, you have to understand all three of these ways in which people suffer: the dukkha dukkha, the viparinama dukkha, and the sankara dukkha. We have to see all of them. And each one requires more subtlety to see. Everyone in the world understands the pain of pain. But not everyone understands the pain of alternation, and fewer people understand the pain of the dissolving structure of reality. But all three of these catch us up in suffering.

This is a quote from the Samyutta Nikaya. A god figure came down and commented on the dharma teachings that he had understood. And this person said, "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." You can think of this as body sensations. Having seen the shortcoming in bodily sensations, their chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to the body. This is the insight when we look closely into our experience of the body arising, passing, forming, disbanding moment after moment after moment. Nothing solid to hang on to.

But we usually don't see this, or we usually don't take it in, or we don't quite account for it. So in our worldly life, we want to create a world for ourselves that is kind of safe and cozy and predictable, that has security built into it. It's kind of like we want to have adventures, but we still want to be safe. So it's a little bit like a fairy tale where you can go off and have adventures in the woods during the day, but you come home to your safe little bed at night and a parent tucks you in and gives you your cookies and milk and everything's taken care of. That's kind of what we're looking for in life when we don't tune in to the truth of impermanence.

And we can do this in meditation also. We can aim to end up on a very cozy plateau of mindfulness and concentration. And we think, oh, if I just get the meditation right, I'm going to land and not move from that cozy plateau. But of course, it doesn't ever work like that. There is greater and greater happiness. There is more and more of a sense of resting, but there's always change. States like mindfulness and concentration are also conditioned. They're part of sankara, part of compounded phenomena. So they also arise and pass.

This is not altogether bad. This is another quote from the Buddha: "If there was one speck of permanent form, the holy life for liberation would not be possible." If there was permanence in the world somewhere, it would gum up the works and we wouldn't be able to transform suffering into knowledge and vision and liberation. So impermanence works for our benefit as practitioners. It really does.

The first noble truth states the truth of suffering, but the noble truths are not just philosophical statements. It's not like we're just supposed to believe in these things. Each of the noble truths in this discourse also carries with it an action. There's something to do with each of these noble truths. So further on in the discourse, the Buddha states explicitly, "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood." That's the action that's asked of us. It is to be fully understood.

The meaning, of course, is we don't fully understand it now. We may think conceptually we get it, but we haven't actualized it. We keep forgetting this truth. So we have to see it over and over and over again. And this is an important part of practice.

When things are difficult, can we see that as the first noble truth? This is an interesting question to ask: How often, when things are difficult, do we recognize this is dukkha? This is a universal part of life. I would say not all the time. There are many other ways we think about our suffering.

Sometimes we deny it. "Oh no, I'm okay. I can truck through this." Sometimes we judge ourselves for having it: "It's my fault. It's my mistake. If I was doing it right, this wouldn't be happening." Sometimes we blame others—our parents, society, the teachers, the world. Or we might distract ourselves because we don't want to touch it. In daily life, we go to the television, we go to the refrigerator, whatever, to get away from the experience of dukkha. Or here we might drift off into pleasant fantasy.

We have so many ways of missing, of not truly seeing and knowing the dukkha that comes. Can we let ourselves simply feel it and acknowledge, "Oh, this is the first noble truth. This is the truth of dukkha in my direct experience"? Can we open to it and acknowledge that?

This is a delicate point in practice, this first noble truth practice. If we don't acknowledge the truth, then we're always going to aim for that cozy plateau—whether worldly or meditative—always having a gaining idea that we should be landing somewhere else where everything's all worked out. And that gets us into striving.

But sometimes if we do acknowledge the first noble truth, if we think about it too much, we can get depressed. This is where the view comes in: "Oh, everything's dukkha." But the Buddha never said that. He never said there's always suffering. He clearly pointed again and again to the pleasure and happiness that we can find in life.

There's a difference between thinking about the first noble truth and making it a view—"there's all this dukkha"—which tends to feel like a heavy weight. But when you actually see the truth of dukkha in a moment, that tends to be freeing. It's the difference between holding a fixed view as a constant ongoing take on life and seeing the truth in the reality. When you can see the truth in the reality of the moment, that dukkha is also capable of change. It forms and it's capable of being undone. That part is liberating.

Clearly, we are not meant to take the teaching of the First Noble Truth and get depressed by it. The Buddha said: "A practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm oneself with suffering. One does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet one is not infatuated with that pleasure."

James was talking the other night about finding these wholesome states of joy and happiness and recognizing them within your practice. That is pleasure that accords with the Dhamma. That offsets the inclination of the mind to lean toward just seeing dukkha. Yet one is not infatuated with that pleasure. One appreciates it, but one does not attach.

One way to hold the truth of dukkha is to ask: Has suffering ever been helpful in your practice? Did it ever bring you anything positive? What brought you to the Dhamma? Wasn't it suffering in some form or another? This is the almost universal role of suffering in Dhamma practice. It wakes up our yearning to know, our yearning to understand. It leads us into hearing the teachings, considering the teachings, and then taking up the practice. Without the impact of suffering in our lives, I don't know if any of us would be here. I wouldn't be here.

These are noble truths, meaning they have an ennobling quality. This is another way to understand "noble"—they are ennobling. If you look around the world, how often is suffering ennobling for people? Sometimes it seems not very often.

Sometimes suffering can indeed crush us under its weight, leaving us heartbroken and lost in despair. But if we use it well, if we remain open to learning from it, suffering can become truly ennobling—it can be transformative.

I want to share something from a book that many of you may have encountered: *The Book of Joy*. It records a remarkable dialogue that took place over several days between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Dharamsala, where His Holiness lives. The subtitle, "Lasting Happiness in a Changing World," offers an excellent approach to understanding the Four Noble Truths.

Both of these extraordinary men have endured incredible suffering in their personal lives and in relation to their countries. The Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 and has since witnessed what amounts to cultural genocide and a devastating assault on the monastic order in his homeland—circumstances he has been powerless to change. Archbishop Tutu labored for years under the oppressive apartheid regime in South Africa, becoming a leading voice for justice, especially after Nelson Mandela's imprisonment. He has witnessed immense suffering among his people, even since the movement toward greater equality began.

Neither man is a stranger to suffering, whether personal or societal. Yet what strikes me most about this book is the profound joy from which they speak when conveying their understanding of the teachings in their respective traditions.

Regarding suffering specifically, Archbishop Tutu shared these illuminating words about Nelson Mandela's imprisonment: "I think some suffering, maybe even intense suffering, is a necessary ingredient for life, certainly for developing compassion. When Nelson Mandela went to jail, he was young and you could almost say bloodthirsty. He was head of the armed wing of the African National Congress. He spent twenty-seven years in jail, and many would say, 'Twenty-seven years, oh, what a waste.' I think

people are surprised when I say no, the twenty-seven years were necessary. They were necessary to remove the dross. The suffering in prison helped him become more magnanimous, willing to listen to the other side, to discover that the people he regarded as his enemy were also human beings with fears and expectations, molded by their society. Without those twenty-seven years, I don't think we would have seen the Nelson Mandela with the compassion, the magnanimity, and the capacity to put himself in the shoes of the other."

The Archbishop continued with these paradoxical words: "It is how we face all the things that seem difficult in our lives that determines the kind of person we become. Actually, nothing beautiful in the end comes without a measure of pain, frustration, and suffering. This is the nature of things. This is how our universe has been made up."

In retreat, we have the opportunity to experience this suffering firsthand and to truly understand what it is and where it comes from. This understanding naturally leads us to the second noble truth.

Let me read from the discourse: "Now, what is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight now here and now there. That is craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence."

The word "craving" translates the Pali term *tanha*—the word we'll use as we explore the second noble truth.

When I first heard this teaching, it was revolutionary for me. At that time, I felt completely stuck in my suffering, trapped in what seemed like an incomprehensible mass of confusion. This teaching revealed that there was actually a cause for my suffering. Where there's a cause, there's a way to remove that cause. And when you take away the cause, the suffering naturally ceases—which brings us to the third noble truth.

This realization was profoundly liberating: my psychological suffering could be uprooted by examining this cause.

Now, this teaching on the second noble truth doesn't exclude other perspectives on suffering in the world, because there are indeed other causes for extreme suffering. People need food, clothing, medicine, and shelter. When worldly forces combine to deprive people of these basic requisites, there are certainly societal and economic causes for suffering as well. But assuming one can gather these necessities, the possibility exists to transform our suffering through understanding the noble truths.

Tanha, translated as craving, originally meant simply "thirst" in the Buddha's time—a very straightforward word. The Buddha, as he often did, took this common word and brilliantly re-engineered it for his teachings.

Thirst is indeed a form of craving, a kind of wanting, but it reveals something profound about desire's nature. Thirst can be satisfied temporarily, but it always returns. When you're thirsty, you drink a glass of water—it feels wonderful, completely satisfying. But how long before you need another drink? Not very long at all.

So craving works in the same way. We may have a craving, it gets temporarily satisfied, but it's going to spring up again, just as thirst did. In our hearts and minds, what it springs up from is some underlying sense of unfulfillment. This is the human existential condition that we are trying to remedy—this underlying sense that something is not right or is not being fulfilled in the present moment. It's this hole, you might say, in our heart that is the source of craving.

Craving springs up to try to fill this empty void, this hollowness of insufficiency. And then it latches onto one object after another, seeking delight now here and now there. It picks up and takes in the object and temporarily the craving is satisfied. But because the underlying hole has not been filled and can't be filled in that way, it springs up again.

In observing this pattern, it's really helpful to start tuning into the force of craving itself more than the objects that it is associating itself with. This force of craving manifests in different ways. Even though its language represents primarily desire, it's not limited to just the desire force. Craving basically means wanting things to be different than they are. It's a relation to the present moment that is dissatisfied with the present moment and wants it somehow to be different.

There are three ways of expressing this dissatisfaction—our old friends: greed, aversion, and delusion. One way we get dissatisfied with the present moment is that we want something pleasant, maybe more pleasant, maybe greatly pleasant. We want something pleasant to come into the moment that isn't there, and that's the force of greed. But we can also look at the present moment and see discomfort here that isn't wanted, and we reject that out of the force of aversion. So that's also rejecting the present moment and wanting something different to take its place.

In truth, both greed and aversion are manifestations of craving. They're both rejecting the present, wanting to replace it with something else. So craving doesn't just refer to the force of desire or greed—it encompasses greed and aversion, which are really two sides of the same coin.

How is delusion also an aspect of craving? This is not so easy to see, but it is true. We can see it in two ways. One is that we ignore the activities of greed and aversion. Greed and aversion are always rejecting the present and trying to make something different happen. This activity is ultimately really unsatisfying—it's what keeps the mind spinning, keeps the mind restless, keeps the heart from finding peace and ease. But we don't see it. So we are basically deluded about the operation of greed and aversion as our habitual ways of trying to find happiness. We don't look at their operation, and that continues to strengthen the force of craving. We're acting out craving again and again through greed and aversion, and we don't look at it.

The second way delusion plays into craving is that when we are preoccupied with pulling in the pleasant and pushing away the unpleasant, anything that's neutral doesn't register on our interest scale. When your attention is focused on pleasure and pain, the neutral comes along and you don't care. It doesn't gratify, it doesn't feed you, but it doesn't threaten or alarm you either. So we tune it out.

This delusion regarding the neutral is another expression of the mind that's lost in craving, dominated by greed and aversion. As mindfulness comes in and sees clearly what is, independent of likes and dislikes, the neutral is just as real, just as alive, in some ways just as interesting, as the pleasant and the unpleasant. But the mind caught in craving doesn't see it, overlooks it, denies it. And that's delusion at work as well.

So truly, you could say that craving encompasses or is even the same as the movements of greed, aversion, and delusion. They're more or less synonymous.

The retreat setting is a very good place to see the ongoing activity of liking and disliking and ignoring. These are the active expressions of craving, and we see them again and again. Especially with liking and disliking, which are the stronger forces in active expression, we have to understand that the friction we feel with them is due to our own minds. If we blame it on the external situation—the food isn't right today, the weather isn't right today, somebody's making noise in the meditation hall—if we blame it on the external situation, we never get a chance to look at and transform our own habits of mind.

So when there's a struggle with the way things are, if we can bring it home and look at the movements of greed, aversion, and delusion in our own hearts, that's what gives us the ability to transform them.

There was this beautiful scene in the movie Kundun. I don't know if you've seen it or remember that movie. Martin Scorsese made a film of the life of the Dalai Lama. He did it so beautifully you would have thought he was Buddhist instead of Catholic. He so deeply resonated with and captured what was happening in Tibetan culture.

There was one scene that struck me. I went back and watched the movie again just last year, and I liked it as much this time around. The Dalai Lama is about nine or ten years old, and he's receiving teachings from his tutors, who are very esteemed older monks in his lineage. They're teaching him the Four Noble Truths.

When they come to the teaching on the second noble truth, they ask the young Dalai Lama, "What's your understanding of the second noble truth?" And the Dalai Lama says, "Well, the second noble truth is that the cause of suffering is craving."

They say, "Make it more personal. Speak from your own experience. What's the second noble truth?"

He says, "Oh, the second noble truth is that the cause of my suffering is my wanting."

They said, "Not personal enough. State it again in your own terms."

So the young boy sits there and reflects for another minute. Then he says, "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind."

The tutors respond, "Oh, very good, very good."

This is the message of the second noble truth: most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. If we want to transform it in the context of a meditation retreat, this is where we need to look. When we're willing to look there, we find we have all these tools for transforming the suffering that's based on greed, aversion, and delusion.

I find one really interesting way to work is this: anytime there's a sense of struggle throughout your day, anytime you feel conflict, tension, difficulty, dukkha, take a look and see what is being resisted or what is being wanted. This sense of struggle always comes from some lack of acceptance. What's not being accepted? What in the moment is being pushed away, or what pleasure are we grasping for to replace it?

We can learn about this. When we look at it again and again—these activities of greed and aversion and delusion—and we see our own responsibility in them, we get better and better at letting go. Of course, it's the letting go that leads to the third noble truth, which is the end of suffering. I'm not going to talk about that tonight. We'll talk about it later in the retreat.

But to me, this is the heart of dharma practice: How do we move from the second noble truth, which is struggle, conflict, difficulty? How do we let go of that craving and open to the third noble truth, which is the absence of struggle, the absence of craving, and the presence of peace? This is the heart of what we're trying to learn in meditation. This is how we transform our suffering moment after moment.

The Buddha talked about three kinds of craving that were mentioned in the discourse. The first is craving for sense pleasures. This is called kama-tanha. You can see what a huge force this is in the world—craving in the worldly sense for pleasant experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

I looked up some industry figures. For the sense of sight: movies brought in eleven billion dollars last year in the United States alone. Craving for the visual. For sound: recorded music, fifteen billion dollars in the world last year. Fifteen billion dollars. And this doesn't even include live concerts and all the other ways we enjoy sounds. For smells: this one struck me—the perfume industry, twenty-nine billion dollars a year, and that's not even counting air fresheners and deodorants. And then food, for taste: the restaurant industry in the U.S., seven hundred eighty-three billion dollars in 2016.

Money follows sense desire. The scale of it is enormous.

So this is where in the world people are putting—where we are putting—a lot of energy. And underneath the wanting of sense pleasure is the wish to become happy through it. Sense pleasures do bring a certain amount of happiness, and sense pleasures are an integral part of lay life. If you're really not interested in sense pleasures, then I think Bhante can tell you the monastic life has many advantages. The monastic life is designed as a renunciation of the effort to find sensual pleasures.

But as lay people, we are involved in a world where sense pleasures are part of our daily activities, and we have the opportunity to find many of them. So what the Buddha cautioned about—he didn't say you can't enjoy sense pleasures. He said don't build your happiness all around finding sense pleasures. Because you can see how people do this, right? There are people who do it with food, people who do it with drugs, people who do it with sex, people who do it with television, people who do it with alcohol.

So as lay people, it's not that we are not allowed to have sensual pleasure. Don't build your life around trying to find happiness through those avenues. It doesn't work. You know that, or you wouldn't be here. Because the sense pleasures here are really limited. But other pleasures are great.

This is the first kind of craving—craving for sense pleasure. The second kind of craving is called bhava tanha, craving for existence or craving for becoming. This is a deep force in the mind, this craving for existence. And it's why we're afraid of dying. Somehow we have this deep-seated yearning for life in this body, and it's why death is scary for most people.

When you think about it, this craving for existence is not very rational. I mean, if you went to bed tonight and you never woke up, would that be a problem for you? It might be a problem for other people, but it might not be a problem for you at all. And yet that thought terrifies us. That's like the worst thing that could happen. So it's a deep-seated craving we have to be alive, to be in a body. It doesn't quite really make sense. So this is the basic meaning—craving for existence.

But bhava also means becoming. There's a desire to become something or someone. When I look back on my early years of retreat, I was younger then, and I would run through a lot of projections about where I wanted to live and what work I wanted to do and what kind of community I wanted to join and how I was going to plan my life and support myself. All of these types of becoming were running through my mind over and over and over again. And that's bhava tanha as a craving to become something or someone. I like this line from Lily Tomlin: "I always knew I wanted to be someone, but I guess I should have been more specific." So we all become someone.

And then the third kind of craving is the craving for non-existence. This is called vibhava tanha—non-existent craving. It basically means the state where we want to escape from the world of sense contact. We don't want the constant stream of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind objects. We want to turn it off, but we can't. So this is a deep kind of aversion to life. You just go, "Enough already. I don't want to keep experiencing this stuff."

Obviously this is the deep motivation behind suicides—one simply wants to cut off the stream, a deep aversion to living. It also means, in a less grandiose way, wanting to get rid of a particular unpleasant contact that's happening. So aversion to the unpleasant is also contained in here—not wanting that kind of becoming.

So these are the forms of tanha that we can experience and know. And there's an instruction, an action connected with the second noble truth as well. Here's the instruction: This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned. That means let go of craving. That means surrender your desire in meditation to have the moment be different than it is.

This is why the role of acceptance in meditation is so important, so central. Now we're not talking about going back into the world and saying you have to accept all the conditions of the world.

You have to accept the injustice and the racism and the oppression and the homophobia. We're not saying that. But in meditation, to find your own balance of mind, there needs to be this letting go of the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion, or there will be no peace. Acceptance is opening to the present moment just the way it is, and that's what opens the door for peace and settledness.

This is the instruction around craving that allows it to move into the third noble truth, which is the end of craving is the end of suffering. So we look at this moment again and again. What are we wanting from the moment? And can we let go of any desire for it to be different than it is? Any desire for there to be less physical discomfort, any desire for there to be more calm or more concentration or more metta, any desire for there not to be any difficult state of mind—fear or sadness or anger.

The interesting thing is if we can recognize this movement of greed or aversion, of wanting and not wanting, and start to meditate with it, something interesting happens. Eventually it does let go. The particular form of craving does not last forever. If you can just stay with it, it will release. Sometimes it will release because you've really learned how to do it skillfully. Sometimes it just runs out of steam. Whichever way, whatever you're working with that is difficult to be with, continue watching the urge to push it away or bring something else in, and eventually that will release and you will go back into balance.

This gives real trust in the teaching of impermanence and lets you feel in a direct experiential way the movement from the second noble truth to the third noble truth. When desire is active, what does that feel like? What does wanting feel like? Is it peaceful and calming and settled? Or is it contracted and agitating and restless? When aversion is present, is that peaceful and calming and concentrating? Or is that friction and rubbing and fiery? And then what does that release feel like?

So get really interested in this movement from the second noble truth of some form of craving and lack of acceptance, some struggle, to being patient and observing it with mindfulness and noting that moment of release. How does that feel? This is really the heart of our practice. And we develop more and more skill moving from the grip of craving into the freedom of letting go, finding the peace and the ease that's inherent in our minds already.

I'll close with this quotation from Ajahn Sucitto: "To one who cultivates attention to the present, in whatever form the present moment takes, the mind through practice begins to reveal its treasures—sensitivity, joy, confidence, and serenity." These are all found in this movement from letting go into the third noble truth, the state of peace, acceptance, calm—temporary nibbana.

Let's just sit for a moment together.

CHAPTER 61

The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong investigates one of Buddhism's most central yet challenging teachings: anattā or not-self. Drawing from his personal experience of grief and the classical Buddhist analysis, he explores how our sense of 'I' emerges through identification with various aspects of experience - as body, owner of body, emotions, observer, or all of these simultaneously. The teaching centers on the five khandhas (aggregates): rūpa (material form), vedanā (feeling tone), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (mental formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness). Armstrong demonstrates how these categories provide an exhaustive description of human experience without requiring a central self or observer. He references the Buddha's systematic questioning in various suttas, particularly the analysis showing how each aggregate is impermanent, ultimately unsatisfying, and therefore 'not mine, not what I am, not myself.' The talk offers practical guidance for seeing through the fiction of selfhood that creates suffering, suggesting the contemplation 'not me, not mine, not who I am' as a direct practice tool. Armstrong skillfully bridges intellectual understanding with experiential investigation, showing how every moment of mindfulness helps dissolve the illusion of a separate self.*

The subject tonight is the five aggregates are not self. This evening I want to continue our exploration of this understanding of not self—one of the Buddha's central teachings and, I'd say, one of the most liberating. It offers a great deal of promise, but it's also one of the most difficult to understand.

As you listen this evening, don't have the idea that you have to figure it all out tonight or you'll miss it completely. The purpose of a talk like this is to plant seeds that go in conceptually. Then what happens in meditation, when there's a topic we're interested in, is that the subconscious mind chews on it in the silence. From time to time in that silence, intuition comes out with new understanding.

We're really about seeding this as a question to explore and for your intuition to work on. You don't have to figure it out conceptually. Let it come in, let it pass through. If it doesn't make sense, don't struggle too hard to figure it out. Let land what lands for you.

Central to the Buddha's teaching is this understanding that the sense of self each of us carries is not really intrinsic to being human, to being alive, but rather is a concept we have generated. If we don't understand it correctly, it creates a deep form of bondage for us, a deep sense of suffering.

You could say that our belief in this sense of self is one of the primary meanings of the word ignorance, which in the chain of dependent origination is viewed as the beginning link that leads into suffering. It's a very fundamental misunderstanding.

When we truly believe in the self without understanding it correctly, it leads to a sense of duality between self and other, between ourselves and the world, setting up a degree of tension, separation, isolation, and anxiety. When we cling to this idea without properly understanding it, we box ourselves into a corner that's not very pleasant. There's a deep existential missing, a lack that comes from an unquestioned belief in this sense of self.

Much of the purpose of spiritual practice is to liberate us from this false understanding. There's a beautiful quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, a teacher of Advaita Vedanta who lived in Bombay and died in the 1990s. He was a very powerful teacher, and many of his sayings are collected in a book called *I Am That*, which I highly recommend. From the yogic tradition, he was deeply interested in wisdom as a path to liberation. Though he spoke in terms of yoga, his teaching also applies to our path.

He said, "All the yogas have only one aim, and that is to save you from the calamity of separate existence."

Right now, being unliberated, we are all engaged with the calamity of separate existence—believing ourselves separate from the rest of the world with the attendant isolation and fear that brings.

We want to understand how this sense of self comes about. We want to understand that it's not a necessary element of our human experience. And we want to understand how to move beyond it, how to see through this false sense.

For most of us, this sense of I and self is revealed when we use the words I, me, and mine. Anytime you find your thoughts going there, the sense of self is at play. It can be correctly understood or misunderstood. There's no problem with using the words I and my—once we understand correctly, we use them conventionally and there's no problem.

We have to identify in talking to one another where an action is taking place. If I just said "feeling angry," you wouldn't know where the anger was located. Is it in you? In me? In Annie? So we say "I'm feeling angry" just to identify the location of an experience when talking to one another.

But when you're describing your own experience to yourself, is that word I really necessary? We'll see. Maybe not.

There's this social convention of you and I that makes complete sense. We have to understand that when we leave the room, you'll go to your room and I'll go to my room. If we didn't understand that, things would get really chaotic. These are very useful conventions, but don't get deceived that there's more being pointed to than is actually there.

For most of us, not having examined this sense, everything revolves around this sense of I—our thoughts, actions, plans, future, intentions, motivations. The I is kind of the center of the universe for us, and yet we haven't quite understood it fully.

This sense of self seems self-evident, as it were—pun intended. But have you ever been able to find it? By looking through your direct experience in meditation, when your mind is calm and your inner vision is clear, have you ever been able to locate the self, the I? Somehow I suspect you haven't.

William James, the psychologist, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." He's getting closer than many of us do.

The Dalai Lama said, "When we think something is clear, but we can't actually find it, that's a sure sign of delusion."

This is our relationship to the I. We think it's really obvious, the center of the universe, but we can't get a hold of it. The classical analogy for this is like looking at a piece of colored rope lying on the ground—strands of beige and red and green—and we look at it and think it's a snake. When we perceive it as a snake, we get scared. But when our perception gets corrected and we see it's a piece of rope, we can calm down.

The same thing happens with this sense of I. When we believe in it strongly, we get scared. When perception gets corrected, there's a sense of inner freedom and ease. So this is not an intellectual exploration. This is an exploration that goes very deep to our sense of being in the world, to our existential dilemma, and will possibly solve much of our existential predicament.

There is confusion around the use of the word "I," and we can see it by looking at ordinary language. For instance, if I ask, "How old are you?" That's a simple question, right? You might say, "I'm thirty-nine" or whatever. But when you say "I'm thirty-nine," that's really not quite correct. Are your thoughts thirty-nine years old? Is your mood thirty-nine years old? Is this strand of hair thirty-nine years old? No, we really mean the body is thirty-nine years old. So here, you're equating the I with the body. The body is thirty-nine years old, I'm thirty-nine years old, so I am the body.

But let me ask another question: What color are your eyes? This is simple. "My eyes are brown." Oh. Now the I is not the body. It's something separate that owns the body. These are my eyes. So the I has now become the owner of the body. You don't say, "I'm brown." You say, "My eyes are brown."

So which are you? Are you the body or are you the owner of it? Can you be both? How many selves are you right now? Generally, if somebody thinks they're more than one self at a given moment, we give them medication. So look at this question and see: can you really be both?

We could look at it another way. We say "I'm happy" or "I'm sad," and there we're the emotion. The I is being equated with the emotion. But then a minute later we could talk about "my joys" and "my sorrows," and now we're the owner of the emotion. So are you the body, the owner of the body, the emotion, or the owner of the emotion?

There's another way that we often take ourselves to be located, and that is as the observer. Check this out. This one goes deep for most people. We think that the I is located inside the head, behind the eyes and between the ears. This little being is kind of looking out at the world and taking it all in. I'm seeing sights, I'm hearing sounds, I'm smelling smells, and so forth. So there's the sense of I being a little observer, a little person in the center of the head to whom all this is happening. That's the fifth way that we form a sense of I.

And another way that we do it is by saying, "Yeah, that's right, I'm all those things. I'm the body, I'm the owner of it, I'm the emotions, I'm the owner of those, and I'm the observer looking out on everything. I'm all of that."

Can this all be true? Where is the I really?

It's quite strange the way we use language around the self, but we don't examine what I would call these faulty assumptions of logic. It doesn't really make sense when we look closely.

The Buddha's comment on this is profound: all of those ways of conceiving self are not true. "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." However you take yourself to be—in one of these six ways—the fact is ever other than that.

These six ways of creating selfhood we call identification. Identification in Buddhist terms means that we create a sense of I by pointing to a facet of our experience—like the body or the owner of the body, the emotion or the owner of the emotion, or the observer. We point to a facet of experience and say, "That's I." But when you really think about it, the self is bigger than any of those, isn't it? Your human experience is bigger than any of those fragments. Yet we identify with, we take ourselves to be, these limited pieces.

One of my teachers put it even more bluntly than the Buddha did. He said, "Everything you think is wrong." And about the self, that is kind of true until we've seen it clearly. Everything we think is wrong.

This reminds me of a comment from talk radio. I'm not a fan of talk radio—I think a lot of delusion goes across those airwaves—but one commentator made this observation, which I thought was pretty good: "The mind: often wrong, seldom in doubt."

This belief in the I is actually a fiction created by thought. There's no reality to it in the way that we commonly use these terms.

Here's a quotation from the Buddha. His attendant Ananda—who was his cousin, his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life, and one of the sweetest people in the whole Pali canon—came to the Buddha and said (he was always asking for teachings), "Venerable sir, you often say the world is empty. The world is empty. What does it mean that the world is empty?"

The Buddha replied, "The world is empty because it is empty of a self or what belongs to a self." Meaning within this world of our experience, there's no I and there's no my. Those terms don't really apply.

So how did the Buddha see, if these conventional perceptions aren't correct? When we look out in a room like this, I think we mostly see persons, right? We look around and we see different persons sitting around the dharma hall. Along with the chairs and mats and walls, we see persons.

But in the Visuddhimagga, which is a meditation manual from the fifth century in Sri Lanka, the text says that this is not a very refined perception, and they compare it to a butcher's work. I'm reluctant to use this analogy because I've been a vegetarian for about forty years and I love animals, but it's in the text, so I'm going to relate it.

They said that if a butcher is carving up the carcass of a cow, as they cut, they're not saying "cow, cow, cow." They would say something like "rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs," because they are really well acquainted with that body. The Visuddhimagga says that one who has carefully investigated the process of human mind and body would not say "person." They would look at what makes up a person, having seen it in more detail than just "person."

So how did the Buddha see? When he looked at a human being, how did he see? I don't think he saw "person."

I believe he saw in one of two ways. The first way is illustrated by this discourse called the Discourse on Totality. Let me read this:

"Bhikkhus"—which means you practitioners—"what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality."

First of all, this is a very bold thing to say. Have you ever heard any teacher say they were going to teach you the totality? We've had some great intellectuals in the last hundred years. Marx didn't say this. Freud didn't say this. Einstein didn't say this. But here's the Buddha 2,500 years ago...

Listen, attend. I'm going to teach you the totality of things. What is the totality? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe something beyond this totality would not be speaking of something they knew about.

I love this sutta. First of all, I think it's profoundly radical that a great figure—spiritual or intellectual—points to the most important things to examine as being our human experience itself. Marx pointed to the socio-economic system. Einstein pointed to the way physical objects interact with each other. Many other teachers spun out philosophical theories about what's beyond and what's down here. The Buddha said, look at your own direct experience.

This really sounds the opening bell for Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and meditation practice. It is all about our own personal experience: the sense organs and their objects—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind—and their corresponding objects. This is why our meditation practice reflects this understanding. Notice how often we give instructions about noticing the elements of these six senses. That's what insight meditation is all about.

So that's the first approach: to see the six sense bases and their objects. The second approach the Buddha used is called the five aggregates. I'm going to explore that in a moment, but I'll just say the five aggregates cover the same territory of human experience, but divide it up differently.

The Buddha used these two schemas somewhat differently. He generally used the six sense bases to point out craving and to let go of craving as the cause of suffering, leading into the third noble truth—the end of craving. He used the five aggregates to point out wrong view and to lead into right view. This is the first spoke on the Eightfold Path and the expression of wisdom. The five aggregates are used to lead us into right understanding.

Basically, when we learn to see as the Buddha saw, we see things without this fiction of self. That's the power of this teaching of the five aggregates. This is not an intellectual exercise. It's an investigation that really has the power to open up our understanding in a direct and personal way.

One of my sisters died when I was in my mid-forties. She'd been ill, but she was not anywhere close to dying as far as any of us knew. But one evening at her home, she went into a faint. Her son was there and called an ambulance. On the way to the hospital, before she could reach there and be treated, she went into cardiac arrest and did not come out. So she died suddenly and unexpectedly, and it threw me into a lot of questioning.

I was a practitioner by then, and I couldn't understand how my sister had seemed so solid the week before I talked to her on the phone. She always had a big personality and a big laugh. She was a very alive, dynamic person, and now she was just gone. I'm sure most of you have had experiences like this also—how somebody living can just be gone in a moment.

This was the first time it had really struck me how I couldn't comprehend what had happened to her. As I reflected on it over the next couple of months—because I was in stages of grieving—the most helpful way for me to understand it was looking at it through the five aggregates. Coming to understand who she was in terms of the five aggregates helped me come to terms with her death. Because I understood her situation better, it also helped me understand my situation better when I considered my own death.

Maybe at the end I'll try to remember to bring this back and talk a little about what I learned in this investigation. At any rate, I find the schema of the aggregates really helpful for understanding our experience in a very freeing way. That's part of what I want to share this evening.

The English word "aggregate" is a translation of the Pali word *khandha*. I never liked the term aggregate because it sounded too technical to me—like somebody mixing up road paving material or some chemist in a lab putting stuff together that they were going to patent. It sounded much too technical.

The term that I prefer is "kinds of stuff." We human beings are made up of five kinds of stuff. That's a little more in line with the spirit of the teaching—the Pali term *khandha* just meant heap or bundle. So we're these bundles of stuff. The Buddha talked about five of them: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

I want to talk about each of these tonight. As I do, I want you to be investigating whether this list provides a comprehensive description of your human experience.

In other words, is there anything in your ordinary human experience that isn't included in this list? Or can we say, yes, this is an exhaustive description of what I experience. That's what we're interested in—this exhaustive listing of what we're made up of.

Material form is simply the world of physical matter, which means this body and all the physical matter outside this body. So the whole physical world is included in this category of material form. The Pali term is rupa. Also included are all the interactions between physical form. For instance, if I take one piece of matter and strike another piece of matter, the resultant sound is also in the realm of physical form. So when you take a piece of Indian curry and you place it on your tongue, the taste is also part of physical form. When you smell the lunch as you're standing in the queue, that smell is also part of physical form. So the physical sense objects—sight, sound, smell, taste and sensations—are all part of this category. All the matter in the world and this body. So this is the whole physical world and the physical sense objects. This is all part of the first aggregate.

That's a big piece of reality, isn't it? It's a big piece of our world. So what's left must be the mind stuff. The other four aggregates are all mental.

The second aggregate is feeling tone, which I think we've talked about quite a lot, both in the instructions. Sally gave a whole talk on it as the second foundation of mindfulness. I'll just mention that the reason I think this is included as a separate aggregate is because it's so crucial to the arising of greed, aversion, and delusion. Pleasant feeling

tone has a tendency to stimulate wanting. Unpleasant feeling tone tends to stimulate aversion. Neutral feeling tone tends to stimulate delusion. So it is very central in the links to suffering.

For instance, in this sound, most of us would experience that as a pleasant feeling tone. But it's not universal. If you were in the middle of a really wonderful sitting and you thought enlightenment was just about two minutes away, do you think this would be pleasant? Not necessarily. So we can experience a different feeling tone dependent on our background and mood and tastes. The feeling tone is a mental reaction to the physical stimulus—in this case, the sound.

The third aggregate is perception. The Pali is saññā. And Carol gave a whole talk on this, so I think it's been pretty well covered. Just to mention that it's the faculty of recognition that we take sense objects and place them into familiar categories. So for instance, in looking around the room, we tend to categorize things as window, chair, floor, wall, person, clothes, mat, cushion, and so on.

This is actually a learned association. There's an age at which these circuits wire in the brain and we learn to make sense—for instance in this case of the visual field—by putting these objects into categories. And if that hasn't been learned at an early age, it's very difficult to fill in later.

Sometimes we don't see things the way they are because of a label. For instance, if you're really accustomed to seeing this as a meditation bell, and you look at it and you go, "bell," you might miss its potential as a really wonderful alms bowl for a monk or a nun. Somebody could hold a lot of food in this as a bowl. I had a friend who was a monk in Chiang Mai whose bowl was about this big, and his girth matched the size of the bowl.

Or you might forget that you could turn it upside down and this could be a really cute little hat on a statue. Or it could be used as a planter. We could have a beautiful growth of flowers from this. So if we just say "meditation bell" and we stop there, we don't necessarily see what's really there.

There are a lot of Zen koans about this. A Zen master will hold this up and say, "What is this? If you say it is a stick, I will hit you. If you say it is not a stick, I will hit you."

Wow, that's why I didn't sit Zen. I knew I was going to get hit a lot.

Oh, there's a funny story about perception along these lines.

Some friends in Cambridge years and years ago were hosting a meeting between two very, very distinguished spiritual teachers. Kalu Rinpoche was a highly regarded Lama in the Tibetan Kagyu school, and Seung Sahn was a very inspiring Korean Zen master. They both happened to be in Cambridge at the same time, so some friends brought them together thinking, "Wow, this will be amazing. One enlightened mind seeing another enlightened mind. It'll just be emptiness reflecting emptiness. And we might get enlightened just from the contact."

So they brought them together in a friend's living room and served them tea and snacks. Seung Sahn started the dialogue, and coming from a tradition where koans are used extensively, he picked up an orange and held it out toward Kalu Rinpoche asking, "What is this?"

Kalu just sat there and counted his beads on his mala, keeping a smile on his face. Seung Sahn wasn't getting the response he wanted, so he held the orange out again and repeated, "What is this?" Kalu just kept doing his mala, then turned to his translator and whispered something. The translator said to the group, "Don't they have oranges in Korea?"

This is playing with perception. Can we see things just fresh, not necessarily just as a category? Can we see without so much the veil of memory? That's the challenge of this aggregate.

But at any rate, when we hear the bell, we recognize that it usually means the end of a sitting. So it's usually a pretty pleasant sound.

The fourth aggregate we call mental formations. I think we've talked about this before. This includes all our thoughts, strong emotions—desire and fear and sadness, anger and so forth—moods, background moods like nostalgia or feeling a little blue, contentment, and refined meditative states. All the qualities of mindfulness and concentration, equanimity, loving-kindness, compassion—all these wholesome meditative states are also in this basket of mental formations or *sankharas*. So it's basically all the factors of mind that flow through. This is the biggest assemblage of mind objects that we're pointing to.

So hearing the bell, when it happens, you might feel immediately relaxed—the sitting's over, oh, now I can relax. That mood is one of the *sankharas*. And you might have the thought, "Oh, now I could sit forever." Sometimes the sitting gets really easy after the bell rings. So that thought would also be a mental formation.

The fifth aggregate is a really interesting one, and one that we may not have paid much attention to before we started to meditate—consciousness. The Pali word is *vijnana*. Now in Western languages, consciousness might mean something really broad. In psychology or philosophy, it can mean many different things and has broad meanings and interpretations. Like in the seventies, we spent a lot of time consciousness-raising, looking at issues of gender and race and privilege and so forth, raising our consciousness about all those issues. That's not what it means in the aggregates or generally in Buddhist terms.

This word *vijnana* is really, really simple in Buddhist language. It is the bare faculty of knowing sense data. So for instance, when you first hear the bell, just the fact that that sound arises for you, the bare knowing of the sound itself—it's *vijnana* that reveals that.

There are different kinds of knowing that happen in relation to this sound. There's the knowing of just the bare sound. You might be someone with perfect pitch and you'd say, "Oh, that's F sharp." That would be a different kind of knowing. There might be the perception, "Oh, this is the bell at the end of the meditation session." That's a kind of knowing. There might be the recognition, "Oh, that goes in the aggregate of *rupa*." That's a thought—that's a kind of knowing.

Consciousness is the simplest kind of knowing that there can be. It's just—I don't know how else to say it—knowing, receiving, or making appear to us the bare sense data of our experience.

We are all sentient beings. What sentience means is that we're having conscious experience. When you think about times when you fainted, or were in deep sleep, or under general anesthesia, those were times when—as far as we know, as far as I've ever remembered—conscious experience was not occurring. I wasn't having sense experiences in those situations. But when you're awake, conscious experience is happening through the six sense doors, and it's the faculty of consciousness that allows them to arise and be known. I don't know how else to say it. Do you get a sense of this?

The simplest kind of knowing that reveals our sense objects.

Here's an example. You know that old riddle: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is present, does it make a sound? This is a seeming paradox, but it's really just because sound hasn't been well defined. So let me put it this way: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there, does it create a wave of air pressure at a certain frequency? Yes. Is that a sound? Well, it could be or it could not—it depends how you define it. But if a person

is there and that sound wave hits the person's ear and the ear is working, does a sound arise in that person's experience? Yes. That's the moment of conscious experience. Consciousness is what lets that sound arise and be known.

It's very interesting to investigate: every part of our experience as waking human beings has this element of consciousness in it. In every moment of experience, consciousness is present and its functioning is revealing what's in that moment. When you look into it a little more, as you hear that sound, there are two things going on. One is the physical sound in your experience. The other is that you're having a moment of hearing consciousness that knows it. These two things are not separate.

The way I understand it is that the sound and the consciousness come right together. You can't have one without the other. So I regard it as a unitary experience, but we can look at either the physical aspect of the sound or we can look at the mental aspect of the consciousness. We can tune our attention to either one of those.

Now how can one experience have two aspects? Is this round or is it black? You can look at it either way, can't you? You can notice the roundness of it, or you can notice the blackness of it. In the same way, as you investigate your sense experience, you can either notice the bare data—the five physical senses, thoughts and emotions—or you can notice this activity of consciousness that's always taking place because you are a sentient being. It's always there and it can be tuned into.

This becomes a very interesting meditation pathway. Most of our instructions are about noticing the objects of our senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions. But in each of those experiences, we could equally well notice the consciousness aspect. We can tune into the knowing because that's right there with every object. Tuning into the knowing turns out to be a really interesting meditation exercise. We're not going to go into it anymore tonight, but I wanted to lay the background for that.

So these are the five aggregates: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Is there anything in your experience that doesn't fit? I'm not going to do a big Q&A on this, but I'll leave it to you to investigate. I'm going to suggest that this is an exhaustive description of our human experience. I'll leave you to confirm it or ask about it later.

What's significant about this? There's one really central term that is not included: me. There is no "I" or self or center in the aggregates. Our whole human experience is just form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. There's no one at the center who owns it.

There's no one in the center to whom it's all happening. There's no little observer in the center that's noticing it all. Truthfully, this thing that we thought of as the observer that was inside the head is only identification with consciousness. When we say "I'm seeing, I'm hearing, I'm tasting," actually it's consciousness that sees, consciousness that hears, consciousness that tastes. But when we identify the I with that fragment, we get the sense of the observer. But there's no observer there. There's only consciousness carrying out its work of knowing. That's what creates a sense of the observer.

So that's why looking at the aggregates as describing our experience is freeing—because we start to understand this mind-body process without the addition of an I. Truth to tell, the six sense objects do the same thing. And that's why in every moment of mindfulness, you are helping to unravel the sense of self. Every time you're directly with a breath, a sensation, a sound, a thought, a feeling, a sight, you're giving priority to that object and you're not whipping up the drama of self.

Where do you start whipping up the drama of self? When you start proliferating in thoughts. And that happens a lot. So take a look: when the mind is not with the sense objects, with mindfulness, where is it dwelling? It goes into thinking. What do you think about primarily? Isn't it I, me and mine? When you look at what gives your thoughts the juice, the passion, the energy, the investment, isn't it I, me, and mine? Take a look at where your thoughts go.

This proliferating tendency that tends to dwell around I, me, and mine, is called *papañca*. The thoughts spin, and what do they spin around? Self. When they spin around self, look at what's fueling them. Do these thoughts have emotional energy? Often they do, don't they? When you come back from a thought excursion, are you more peaceful, more settled, more calm, more equanimous? Or does a thought excursion tend to stir up greed, aversion, and delusion?

These thought excursions of *papañca* are not so innocent. They're not so neutral. They involve us more and more in the concerns of the self. And they involve us then in different degrees of suffering.

So we start to look at this makeup of the mind-body process that we call a human being. And it's fine to talk about a human being, but we start to understand there is nothing in the center of all this that we can point to and say, "That's me, that's I, that's the true self." Because properly understood, this is just a collection of parts. Being human is just a collection of parts—the material part, feeling, perception, formations, and then the consciousness part.

I like to think of it really in three parts rather than five. One is the body and the physical sense impressions. The other is all the stuff that goes on in the mind—so I would lump feeling, perception, and formations in one category that I'd call mental factors. And the third is the consciousness, the knowing faculty.

So let's think of it as those three parts. In the texts they use the classical analogy of a chariot, but I couldn't bring one into the room. Everybody recognize what this is? From the back you can probably see it's a pen. We say that it's a common object; everybody agrees this is a pen. But what is a pen, really? Is a pen a thing? Or is the pen just an assemblage of parts?

Because lo and behold, I've got a cap, I've got an ink cartridge, I've got a spring, and I've got a barrel. Is this a pen? No. It's the pieces of a pen, right? But it's not a pen until we put it together again.

And when I take the right pieces and assemble them in a certain way, now I've got a pen. And everybody would agree. So a human being is a collection of these pieces assembled in a certain way—body with physical senses, mental factors like love, hate, desire, fear, compassion, tenderness, and consciousness, this knowing faculty. That's what we are. That's all we are. And there's nothing in the center of it. There are just these pieces passing through and functioning together.

So this is what I came to see about my sister. When I had felt that she was so solid, what I had basically put together was her personality—and that's the mental formations piece. Mental formations describe a personality. That's how we know someone, through their qualities of heart and mind. I had put her mental formations, her personality, glued together with her body. And I didn't understand that they weren't a fused unit. I took her as the person that she was with her physical expression and her emotional expression. And I didn't see that those were two separate things.

When she died, the body was still there. The personality was not. That's what was so confusing to me. But then I came to understand those two had just been put together for the course of her life. They were never fused forever. And so I started to understand myself in the same way. The body is here, exists for a certain period of time, but the personality is changing all the time. You know, mental formations are born and die, born and die, born and die. They're not fused together.

So this is the way the Buddha explained it. He asked the practitioners about this question. He said, "Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?"

You know the answer, right? "Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

Now I have to understand these words the way he meant them—*dukkha* or *sukha*. *Dukkha* means something that isn't capable of giving lasting satisfaction. Remember we talked about *viparinama dukkha* and *sankhara dukkha*? It's not that it's necessarily unpleasant, but at some point it will change. And if we look closely, it's changing even in the moment. Something that's going to change, can it give lasting happiness? No.

So is it ultimately unsatisfying or can it give lasting happiness? The bhikkhus, being very smart, said, "Suffering, venerable sir." It doesn't mean it's unpleasant. It doesn't mean it's *dukkha dukkha*, but it's incapable of giving lasting satisfaction.

"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: This is mine. This I am. This is myself?"

So this is really the crux of it. The Buddha is asking, do you want to pin your happiness and your identity on what is impermanent, unsatisfying, and subject to change? It's kind of like, why would we do that? If we knew that was coming, why would we do that? Build a self and a whole identity around that.

And the bhikkhus said, "No, venerable sir, it is not fit to regard them as this is mine, this I am, this is myself."

And then he went through the same question with the other four aggregates. So he had them examine feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. And what he said is that all of these components are arising and passing, but there is no self that's continuing, independent of these. This continuity is important. When you look into the assumptions around a self, there are embedded assumptions about what a self means, about what "I" means.

The central embedded assumption is continuity. We believe that the self continues over time, but that's opposed to the transitory nature of all the aggregates. Our experience is not continuing over time, but we think the self is. We think "I am."

In some ways, we feel like, "Oh, I'm the same person that was in that third grade class learning arithmetic." And the problem with that is then we think, "I am the same person who at some future time is going to die." So this "I" that has been assumed to have this ongoing continuity, we see an end to that. And that's part of our existential dilemma of being human—this awareness of our own mortality.

If we consider the "I" is supposed to be continuous, that becomes a problem. If you saw yourself as arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing, moment by moment, you'd see yourself being born and dying in every moment. Then that moment at the end—what's the end of the physical life—wouldn't be so upsetting. But we don't see it that way. We think that the "I" continues and has these changing experiences. That's what's not accurate.

At any rate, this formulation of the Buddha's—"this is mine, this I am, this is myself"—is a very helpful way to notice our experience because we can turn it around as he did himself. And he said, "What is the right way to understand it?" And he said, "Therefore, all forms should be seen as it really is with proper wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself." And then he repeats that for the other four aggregates.

This is a practice pointer. This is not just intellectual speculation. This is a practice pointer. When you get caught up in taking some aspect of experience as yourself or as belonging to you, try saying, "Not me, not mine, not who I am." See if you can tune into that with proper wisdom thus: not me, not mine, not who I am. Just try it. Just drop those three little phrases in when you feel like you've identified with something and see.

Another way to say this is we stop taking things so personally. So what does that mean—we stop taking things personally? Obviously there is a person here. There's a person with a whole history and conditioning and background, and our situation is very personal, our conditioning is very personal, our body is very personal. What would it mean to not take these things personally?

Let me suggest that our condition, our human situation, is made up of a personal component and a universal component. Or a better way that I like to say it than impersonal, because that almost seems to deny the personal, is universal. A personal dimension and a universal dimension to our experience.

The universal dimension we can tune into when we see ourselves as part of nature. The personal dimension is really helpful to understand, especially in relating to suffering. Whether it's our own suffering or other suffering, we see how the conditions that have generated our suffering are caused from many, many different situations, and we understand our personal background is also coming out of many different causes and conditions, and we don't invalidate those. The personal way of looking is a valid way of looking.

So in a personal way of looking, I would say I am a white, cisgender, male, middle-aged, brought up with a middle-class background, and a college education. Those are all characteristics that describe this being in a certain way and those are all accurate. But if we just focus on the particulars of our conditions, we miss the universal peace.

So the way I like to think of the universal peace is in the here and now, in the moment, I am just an outgrowth of nature.

We look first at the body. You know, we take the body really personally. We're proud of it or we're embarrassed about it. We like the way it is in certain ways and we wish it were different in certain other ways. And somehow in all of that, there's a sense of meanness about it that feels weighty sometimes. Whether we're proud of it or we're embarrassed about it, it feels like kind of a weight.

But we forget we didn't have anything to do with the basic way this body turned up. It was the product of the meeting of our father's sperm with our mother's egg, nourished in the womb, born into the world, fed on milk and air and sun and water and solid food, and it grew, grew, grew, aged, aged, aged, until it is the way it is today, with a certain hair color and skin color and height and breadth of shoulders and athleticism or lack thereof.

Did you have anything to do with that? For sure, you can modify it slightly with diet, with exercise, with healthcare. But do you have anything to do with the basic way you turned out? Color of your eyes, color of your hair, color of your skin, height, frame. Did you even get a vote?

Yet we claim it with either pride or embarrassment. And it's just a product of physical nature.

I spent some time when I was in Thailand as a monk with Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great forest masters of the last century. Central to his teaching was having us live very close to nature because he felt we learned so much from being in nature. This is the way he put it: "This body came from nature, grew in nature, never departed from nature, and belongs to nature. Give it back to nature. That will be a great relief for you."

So the aggregates are just part of nature.

Emotions are the same. When we have a strong feeling, we look at the personal conditions and history that have led to its arising. But if we drop into the moment without the history, fear is just fear. It's not like my fear is any different than your fear. Joy is just joy. It's not like mine is different than yours.

We all have the whole human package. We all have this whole range of emotions. Until we're fully enlightened, then we lose some of them. But until then, we all have this same package. This is part of our mental nature. They're not unique. The situations that brought them around, the storyline behind them is unique. But the emotion, when it comes, is shared with every human being on the planet. We all have this. That's our emotional nature.

And similarly with consciousness. Consciousness is the least individual thing I can think of in the universe. It's not like some of us have a really great viññāṇa and others have a really puny viññāṇa. This knowing quality, as far as I can tell, is the same in all of us. And I think it's also the same in frogs and cats and caterpillars. All sentient beings have this knowing faculty. There's nothing individual about it. That's also mental nature.

So when we can see the natural part of the aggregates, then we don't have to take it so personally.

"Therefore, all forms should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom. This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself. Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, with feeling, with perception, with formations, with consciousness. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, one's mind is liberated. When it is liberated, one understands: birth is destroyed. The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more renewal of being."

So let's just sit for a minute together.

Seeing thus, the instructed noble disciple becomes disenchanted. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, one's mind is liberated.

CHAPTER 62

The Third Noble Truth and Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · 1h05

Guy Armstrong offers a profound exploration of the Third Noble Truth and nibbāna, presenting what he considers "the very heart of Dharma practice." Drawing from the Buddha's own quest and awakening, Armstrong examines the cessation of suffering (dukkha-nirodha) as both the complete, remainderless end of craving (taṇhā) and its temporary cessation accessible in daily meditation.

The talk illuminates the unconditioned (asaṅkhata) nature of nibbāna through key suttas and teachings, explaining how craving, suffering, and selfing are intimately connected through the process of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda). Armstrong guides practitioners through the crucial four links - contact (phassa), feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), and clinging (upādāna) - showing how freedom lies in "resting in the gap between feeling and craving."

Using practical examples and the Buddha's instructions to Mālunkyāputta, Armstrong demonstrates how to direct attention toward the deathless element (amata dhātu) through non-clinging (anupādāna). The teaching concludes with an inspiring account from Luang Por Liem, Ajahn Chah's successor, describing his realization of unshakeable peace. This dharma talk provides both the ultimate vision of complete liberation and practical guidance for touching moments of temporary nibbāna in everyday practice.

Two weeks ago I talked about the First and Second Noble Truths, and the subject of the talk this evening is the Third Noble Truth and Nibbāna. I want to say that I consider the material of this talk to be my idea of the pointer to the very heart of Dharma practice. What we are talking about tonight, in my view, is why we practice and how we are meant to practice. So I'm going to try to sum it up from a number of different angles.

When the Buddha was still a layperson, he was twenty-nine years old and living with his parents. This sounds like it could be the punchline for a modern sitcom, but it was not so unusual back in India at the time. And he described his quest in this way. He was still a layperson, and he said: "Why, myself being subject to birth, aging, sickness, and death, why do I seek what is also subject to birth, aging, sickness, and death?" You can think of this as the layperson's quest for sense pleasures—that's what the common trend is. But why do I do that? "Suppose that I seek the unaging, unailing, deathless, supreme security from bondage, nibbāna."

That reflection is what led him off on his six-year journey—six years of serious spiritual practice going through deep forms of renunciation and asceticism until he found what he was looking for. As you know, he realized this through his awakening on that night under the Bodhi tree.

Immediately after his awakening, this poem came to his mind. This is from the Dhammapada: "Through many a birth I wandered in saṃsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. Oh house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving."

In this statement, the house is the body that is generated again and again through the rounds of rebirth and saṃsāra. The house builder is craving. The Second Noble Truth points to craving as the source of suffering. So the Buddha is basically saying that it's this craving that generates the round of saṃsāra again and again. "My mind has attained the unconditioned"—this is one of the synonyms for nibbāna.

Something that is unconditioned does not arise from prior causes and conditions. All conditioned things arise from prior causes and conditions and because of their arising are also characterized by passing away. Nibbāna does not arise from prior causes and conditions; therefore it is the unconditioned. So these two are synonyms: nibbāna and the unconditioned.

After his breakthrough, the Buddha thought not to teach. He said: "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, subtle to be experienced by the wise." So I can't claim that this talk will be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So just allow for that. This talk may be really hard to understand, so don't try too hard. Just kind of let it flow over you and through you, okay? You can't figure it all out, this territory.

So the Buddha's statement of the Third Noble Truth—remember the First Noble Truth was the truth of suffering, the Second Noble Truth was that the cause of suffering is craving. Here's the statement of the Third Noble Truth: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it."

Here the Buddha is equating the end of suffering with the end of craving. And because of the earlier poem, we know he's also equating it with nibbāna and the unconditioned. So these are all terms for the same territory of discovery. And he describes this

as the remainderless cessation of craving. To me, that means it ceases and no remainder comes again. Craving ceases and it is over. That is what the full end of suffering is about.

If we only understand the Third Noble Truth in this light—the complete remainderless cessation of craving—that makes it a very remote possibility, at least for me. Maybe it's closer for you; I can't tell. But this full liberation that's pointed to by this term "remainderless cessation of craving" is something that we come to gradually, slowly, over the course of a lifetime or many lifetimes. So this formulation can make the Third Noble Truth seem kind of theoretical. Like, right, this is something that's going to happen ten lifetimes from now or whatever. Won't think about it.

But there's another way to understand the Third Noble Truth where we understand it as the temporary cessation of craving. And this we experience many times during a day.

This temporary cessation of craving leads to the temporary cessation of suffering. As we become more skilled in recognizing these moments, this becomes our pathway to freedom here and now. It's a relative kind of freedom—not the final freedom, but a good kind of freedom. The temporary end of craving is a temporary release and a temporary movement into something profound.

This understanding of the Third Noble Truth makes it genuinely accessible in our experience here and now. It's very practical and can be absolutely immediate for us.

We want to understand both dimensions—this final pointing that the Buddha is talking about, which offers a very inspiring vision. The vision that we can come to the complete end of suffering is right there in the Third Noble Truth. And even before we reach it, there are many, many moments of freedom that we can touch in our practice. I find the combination of both of these very inspiring.

We also want to bring in the connection with self. I talked last week about the fact that there's no self found in this changing mind-body process. This is also directly connected to the teaching on the Third Noble Truth. Over the course of this talk, I hope it will become clear how craving, suffering, and selfing are all very closely related, and how non-craving, not suffering, and not-self are also very closely related. That's why I say that this configuration of elements is really at the heart of what we're doing in dharma practice.

Each of the Noble Truths is not just a philosophical statement to be believed in—it comes with an action. There's something to do about each of the Noble Truths. What is the action for the Third Noble Truth? This Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized. This is a goal in our practice: to realize the cessation of suffering.

In conceiving it as the permanent end of suffering, this is basically saying that nibbana is to be realized. As I understand the Third Noble Truth, the aim of our practice is for each of us to have the direct realization in our personal experience of the unconditioned, or nibbana—this is what we are practicing for. To realize this element directly for ourselves.

This realization—direct, immediate, personal experience—is what constitutes a moment of enlightenment in our tradition. Or you could say awakening; I'll use the terms synonymously. In our tradition, there are considered to be four stages of enlightenment. It's not an all-or-nothing thing. There is an initial stage called stream entry, which matures into a greater degree of freedom called once-returner, and then a still greater degree of freedom called non-returner, culminating in full enlightenment or arahantship. One's practice, one's realization unfolds in our tradition in these four steps.

So what is nibbana? This is the hardest thing in all of Buddhism to talk about. It's not describable, basically. It's beyond dualities. Language differentiates—it separates one thing from another. Nibbana is beyond all dualities, so there are no words that can adequately convey it.

The Buddha was deliberately quite vague in the details of nibbana, and I think that was very wise. As soon as we put out a description of a state, the mind will fabricate an attempt to simulate it. By not giving details, the Buddha kept us away from that kind of artificial effort. What he did is he laid out very clearly the steps for us to realize it ourselves, basically saying: you'll know when you get there. You don't have to have a concept about it ahead of time. You'll know when you reach it, and here are the steps to reach it.

The literal meaning of nibbana in terms of its word origin is extinguishing or blowing out. There's the image of a candle or a fire that is blown out. The fire stands for craving, essentially. In blowing out the fire of craving, where does the fire go? When you blow out a candle, where does the fire go? It's just gone, isn't it? That's what happens with craving when full enlightenment is reached. It's just gone.

Sariputta described it this way: "The destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion—this is called nibbana." He's pointing to the very end of greed, aversion and delusion, synonymous with the end of craving.

So again, craving is equivalent to greed, aversion and delusion. Nibbana is, in this description, a state of mind. But it's also understood as a dhamma, which means something that's present within our experience. We'll get to this a little later.

This is from the Udana, a Pali text: "There is, bhikkhus, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded. But since there is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded."

So what is born, become, made, compounded? The six sense bases. The elements of our experience are all being born, made out of prior conditions. Is there release from the six sense bases? Yes. And it is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded that gives the possibility of release from the phenomena of our six sense bases.

Because nibbana is an unconditioned element, it means it's an element within our experience that is not subject to arising and passing. Not subject to arising and passing means it's ever present. It's not that it arises and then you're enlightened. It's not subject to arising and passing. So that means it's always present. That means it's here and now for each of us. It's a dimension of our being that is always available in any moment. That means the possibility of waking up is here in any moment.

Why don't we see it? We don't see it because it's so subtle. Its nature is so subtle. That's what the Buddha was pointing to when he said, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, hard to see." It is, as far as I know, the subtlest element imaginable within our being. And our usual range of movements of mind—the defilements, craving, greed, aversion, delusion—are so coarse that they cover it over. Their coarse movements obscure the subtlety of this particular element, of this dimension.

And that is why the training of the path involves this meticulous shaping of the mind that we're engaged in through meditation. This is the role of the seven factors of enlightenment. Their role is to shape the mind so that its subtlety matches the subtlety of nibbana, of the unconditioned. When the mind is shaped in such a way with this exquisite balance of presence, energy and stillness, then the mind is prepared. It is converging on the nature of the unconditioned, so close that at some point it will touch it. It will open to it. There will be that direct realization.

And that is why the cultivation of the seven factors of awakening is so critical in our meditation practice. Our aim is to realize the unconditioned element because that's what constitutes enlightenment or awakening. The seven factors are the key players that shape the mind for that to be possible.

Here are some synonyms from the Samyutta Nikaya for this element. The Buddha called it the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the harbor, the refuge and the beyond.

The Buddha considered this the highest possible happiness available to us, way beyond sense pleasures and even beyond very refined states of meditation such as loving kindness or concentration. It is so happy because within it there is no possibility of suffering. That's why it is a place of complete safety. In it we have stepped completely out of the reach of suffering—cannot be touched by it. It is happy because the mind is beyond the possibility of disturbance.

I find it really interesting that this movement beyond disturbance is what gives the deepest possible happiness. It's not the highest high. It's not the deepest concentration. It's not even the most open-hearted metta. It is this state that is beyond disturbance, beyond agitation, beyond suffering. There is a relief that can't be compared to anything else.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says that peace is the highest happiness. He's actually pointing at this kind of peace, but it's still a good phrase to bear in mind.

Peace is the highest happiness. I wonder how many people in the world believe that. Because if you look at the world, it's not like peace is the main thing being chased out there. And then how many of us believe it? It's interesting, because peace is basically available in any moment. If we trust in that, it will come more and more.

So how do we get to this highest happiness? Well, of course, this is the Fourth Noble Truth. The way to the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha said, "Just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines towards the ocean, so too a practitioner who develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path slants, slopes, and inclines towards nibbana."

So this practice that you all are engaged in—you are directly engaged in the Eightfold Path every day, hour after hour. Sometimes it's moment after moment. You're directly engaged in cultivating the Eightfold Path. It's only going one way. It's going toward nibbana, toward that highest happiness. That's where you're all heading. Whether you intended it that way when you came or not, that's where it's leading you.

Now it's interesting—when you head in that direction, a lot of other great things come also. But the Buddha said, "Don't take any of those as the end of the journey. Keep going." And he said this very clearly in a discourse called the Simile of the Heartwood.

The heartwood is the most beautiful part of a tree. And there are lots of other pieces to a tree. There are leaves and twigs and bark and outer wood, and then there's the heartwood. So the Buddha said, "This holy life, friends, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, although that may come along the way, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, although that comes along the way, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. Not even insight is the purpose. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end."

This is what the Buddha taught for—the unshakable deliverance of mind. This is the final release from craving and end of suffering.

So that lays out the map toward this final end that the Third Noble Truth is pointing to. But let's talk now about the temporary end, because it's much more practical and accessible through our meditation practice. And yet, the one will lead toward the other, so they're not entirely separate.

I want to start by looking more closely at what blocks this opening to the temporary end of craving. And I'll put it in terms of the creation of self. We talked about how the sense of "I" is not intrinsic, stable, permanent, and ongoing, but it is created over and over and over again. How does that happen?

There's this really wonderful pithy statement from Ananda. Ananda was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. He was a cousin from the village area that Buddha grew up in. And this is a statement from Ananda: "Another monk told me when we were newly ordained, it is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness."

So when we hold on to any of the elements of the senses—the six senses or the five aggregates—the notion "I am" is going to get created. In other words, a new self is going to arise.

You can take a look at this in your direct experience. When does the sense of "I" arise? And does it ever arise on its own? Or does it come into being in relation to some object of the senses? For example, sensation in the knee: "I have a knee pain." The "I" arises in relation to the knee pain. Or in relation to a thought: "I am thinking." Or in relation to a mood: "I feel happy" or "I feel sad."

Or in relation to consciousness. "I am aware." We don't actually need the word "I" in any of these. We could simply talk about knee pain, thought, happiness, consciousness. But when we add the "I" to it, a sense of self gets born, gets stirred up.

Does the "I" ever arise on its own? Do you ever just sit there and it goes, "me"? Just pop up out of nowhere. "Here I am." Take a look. It arises in relation to objects in our sense experience.

There's a rather poignant discussion in the Anguttara Nikaya between the Buddha and Sariputta. Picture this: the Buddha has been teaching for several years already, and he says this to his chief disciple: "Whether I teach the Dhamma in brief or in detail, those who understand it are hard to find."

That's every teacher's lament, isn't it? This is the universal plight of the teacher, whether you're teaching arithmetic in third grade or astrophysics. And Sariputta replies, "Now, Blessed One, is the time to teach the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand."

So the Buddha continues: "Well then, Sariputta, this is how one should train. In regard to this body with its consciousness and in regard to all external signs, let there be no 'I-making' and no 'mine-making' and no underlying tendency to conceit." That is, forming a sense of self by comparing, by establishing. "Let there be no 'I-making' or 'mine-making' with the body, its consciousness, and all external objects."

What I love about this statement of the Buddha—apart from the poignancy you feel in it—is how clear it is that "I" and "mine" get made over and over again in the present moment. We are generating them through our volitional formations, through our own creations. This activity—I think we've referred to it a few times—we could also call "selfing."

The "I" is not a constant, ongoing thing. We make it up, partly by attaching with language to the simple events of our moment-to-moment experience: "I have a knee pain." "I'm feeling happy." "I'm aware."

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein made this famous comment that the self is merely a shadow cast by grammar. It's just kind of an accident. We say it over and over again in our language—"I have this," "I am that"—and we start believing it's real. It's just a shadow.

Try relating to your experience without making "I" or "mine" and see how that feels, because the "I" is always extra.

As a practice instruction, what's very interesting from this quotation from the Buddha is to notice when the sense of "I" is weak. Take a look. When is the sense of "I" weak? I'll give you a hint: When are things calm and peaceful? When is it pretty mellow?

When is the "I" strong? Well, take a look. When are hindrances up? When are strong emotions and a lot of thought energy up? Then the sense of "I" rises up really strongly.

When is the sense of "I" completely absent? Take a look. It could well be happening numerous times during the day, maybe briefly, but take a look and see. And then look and see: How do these three states feel? When the sense of "I" is strong, does that feel pleasant? Or does it feel agitated and disturbing? When the sense of "I" is weak, you can touch a sense of peace and ease. And when the sense of "I" is completely absent, how does that feel?

Investigate, explore, see what the impact is. Where is there suffering, and where is there the absence of suffering?

Another way the Buddha described the formation of I—probably the most clearly—is in the chain of dependent origination. I think this has been mentioned already. It's a chain of twelve links that begins with ignorance and goes through a series of different activities, ending in suffering. You start with ignorance, you end up in suffering as a rule. That's what this chain describes, though it presents it in considerable detail.

I'm not going to explore the whole chain—it's too much for this talk. Moreover, the first five links are somewhat philosophical, and I don't really want to delve into that. The last three links are again rather philosophical, which I'll leave aside. But the central four links are very experiential. They are designed for meditators to investigate, so these are the ones I want to examine.

The central four links in the chain are contact, feeling, craving, and clinging. Sally may have mentioned these in an earlier talk, but we'll go through them again with a specific focus on the generation of self.

Contact is the arising of an impression at one of the sense doors—one of the six sense objects. Contact really means the coming together of the sense organ, the sense object, and the sense consciousness. For instance, if your eyes are open or your ear is working—let's say your ear is working—you have the ear organ, you have the sound of my voice, and it reveals itself through hearing consciousness in your direct experience. That's contact.

Contact has the quality of giving rise to a feeling tone. This is vedanā, the second foundation of mindfulness—being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Every moment of contact gives rise to a feeling tone. It's embedded in that moment of contact.

We've talked about how feeling tone is so important because pleasant feeling tones are the stimulus for greed to arise. Unpleasant feeling tone is the stimulus for aversion to arise. Neutral feeling tone is the stimulus for delusion to arise. Here we have the fulcrum of moving into greed, aversion, and delusion, and that's why the next link in the chain is craving. Craving is more or less synonymous with greed, aversion, and delusion. The idea is that feeling tone conditions the arising of craving.

So we have contact, feeling, craving. Let's look into this activity of craving a little more deeply.

Something happens at a sense door—like a sound. The attention inclines toward that sound, specifically based on its pleasant or unpleasant nature. In this case, let's say it's pleasant. The mind inclines to it. If you really like this sound—because it means the end of a sitting, for example—the attention inclines, and at some point you take hold of it. That's the activity of clinging or grasping.

With truly pleasurable things, we take hold because we want to keep them. We want to stop that moment and preserve the pleasure of it. It's also called fixating. We want to freeze time, as it were, when something pleasant is there. Or when something unpleasant is there, the attention leans to it because we're fascinated by the threat it poses. We don't want to experience the unpleasant, so again we lean toward it and take hold of it in order to push it away.

Whether we want to bring something to us out of greed or push something away out of aversion, to act on it we first have to take hold of it. That's the activity of clinging, which is the next step.

Contact gives rise to feeling tone. Feeling tone stimulates craving. Craving stimulates clinging. Once you're in clinging, you're in trouble, because then it leads on pretty inevitably to suffering.

Let's look at a couple of examples to see why this is so. Take knee pain as an example. We're in a sitting, in the hall, and there's this little disturbance arising in our knee. Over the course of a sitting, it gets stronger and stronger. Finally, we realize, "Uh-oh, this could really be something serious." So the attention leans in, takes hold of the knee pain, and then what happens? We start to proliferate around it with thoughts: "What have I done to my knee?"

Is it going to be like this forever? Am I ever going to be able to walk again? Do I need to go see a surgeon when I get home and get a knee replacement? How much is that going to cost? Does my insurance cover it?

Do you notice the "I" thoughts in all that? When we've taken hold of something, in this case out of aversion, "I" thoughts proliferate around it. And that's because grasping is not a neutral activity. It's fueled by greed, aversion, and delusion. So there are strong emotions circulating around that act of grasping. The "I" gets born around the strong emotions—in this case, worry, fear, restlessness, and so forth.

But if you're a reasonably lucky meditator, the bell rings, you get up to walk, and in a couple of minutes the knee pain's gone. You think, "I don't have to call my doctor today. I can walk another mile."

So here we've had a birth. As we've taken hold of the knee pain, out of that fear, a self has been born. Let's call it the injured yogi. It's taken birth, it's proliferated, it's projected a future where we're going to have to go to the hospital. The injured yogi was a being, was a self for a while. So there was a birth, and then in time, when we walk and actually find it's okay, the injured yogi passes away. There's a birth and there's also a passing away, and the mind comes back to balance. That's in relation to a painful sensation.

What about a pleasant sensation, a pleasant experience? When I was first meditating in this hall many years ago, I started to wander into places of some concentration, and I thought, "This is what I've been waiting for. This is what meditation is supposed to be about." The mind got still, the body was relaxed, everything was stable. Thoughts would come and go and I wasn't disturbed. A little discomfort in the body wasn't disturbing. Everything was stable, peaceful, workable.

And I started thinking, "Wow, now I know how to meditate. Now I've got it." I kept this through that sitting, went out to walk, and as I was walking, I just kept thinking, "This is so great. It's going to be like this from now on. I'm going to have such a steady mind. I'll be a great worker. I'll get promoted really quickly in my company. I'll be really great in relationships, and I'm going to have the best partners possible because I'm so stable and I'm so loving and I'm so balanced." I just saw my life unfolding in a really beautiful progression because this state was never going to leave me.

Then I came back in to sit. Guess what happened? Totally gone. I'd been spinning out in thoughts. I'd totally lost the concentration.

So here I had taken birth as the good meditator. It was a very happy birth. It was kind of a heaven realm birth. I thought I was floating, cruising, but the passing away—not so pleasant.

First, with the knee pain, there was an unhappy birth as the injured yogi, but a happy death when we found it wasn't that bad. With the state of concentration, there was a happy birth as the good yogi, but there was a very painful passing away. Either way we grasp, either kind of birth we take, there's going to be suffering. Happy birth, unhappy death. Unhappy birth, happy death. There's unhappiness in both.

As long as we grasp, and in the grasping, we will create a self. Take a look at it. When you take hold of something and freeze it in time, watch the "I" thought start to proliferate around it. That's the sign that grasping has happened, and that is a new birth. Eventually, that birth will pass. All these selves that we give rise to during the day do pass away, but with the grasping, a new self comes into being.

What becomes clear through this analysis is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds on to or pushes away what is unfolding in experience.

For the most part in worldly life, we activate this state of grasping so often that it becomes what's called monkey mind. Have you ever watched a monkey go through a forest by swinging? The monkey will take hold of a vine and use that vine to swing, only letting go when it has another vine to hold on to in the next part. Then it takes hold of that vine and swings, only letting go when it gets another one to grasp.

In worldly life, this is exactly what we do—we hold from one thing to another to another, over and over again. But as meditators, we have another choice. We start to realize that we can let go of one vine and not grasp the next. And we don't crash. That's where we have it over the monkeys.

So the question is: in this chain of contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and that leading to suffering—is this inevitable? Does contact always have to lead to suffering? No. If it were inevitable, we'd be stuck. There would be no way out. That means it's possible to have contact and not move into suffering, which means the chain gets broken at some point.

Where do you think it gets broken? Can you ever have a pleasant feeling and not move into greed? Can you have an unpleasant feeling and not move into aversion? Yes. This means that feeling tone can arise and it doesn't have to lead to craving. This is where the chain gets broken.

With enough mindfulness and enough steadiness, we can be with the pleasant and not move into greed. We can be with the unpleasant and not move into aversion. Then we're not taking a new birth. We're not forming a new self. We're not moving on to clinging and proliferating an I.

One Buddhist teacher put it this way: the whole of the path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving. The whole of the path.

Now don't imagine that this is a big time gap. These four—contact, feeling, craving, clinging—can go by in a second. So don't imagine that you'll be able to sit back with your good mindfulness and leisurely observe contact happening for a few seconds, then turn your mind when feeling arises to catch that, then see the mind inclining and catch that, and if it goes to grasping, see that really clearly. No—it goes contact, feeling, craving, clinging, really quickly.

You won't be able to see them all sequentially most of the time, but if you keep looking at that chain again and again, sometimes you'll pick up the contact, sometimes the feeling, sometimes the craving, sometimes the clinging. You'll go over it enough to see how they're all connected together. They go by quickly, but you can start to discriminate the different pieces.

When you do, you'll see that it's quite possible to be with feeling and not move into craving. This is where we want to establish our practice. This is the heart of dependent origination. This is the opening to freedom. This is the abandoning of the cause of suffering.

Remember, in the second noble truth, the action for the cause of suffering is to abandon it. This is where we do that. We experience pleasant or unpleasant, but we don't move into greed or aversion with it.

And what does that feel like? You're with your experience, but the mind is not moving into craving, not moving into greed, aversion, delusion. Take a look. I think you'll find it's characterized by ease, peace, spaciousness, relaxation, rest, contentment.

This peace that you touch when you don't move into greed and aversion—did you construct it?

Did you make that peace? How did you consciously decide, "I'm not going to fall into greed and aversion. Instead, I think I'll call up some peace"? Or was that peace already there when you rested? When you abandoned craving, was that peace already there?

I think that peace is already there. It's not something that has to be constructed or brought about. It's available in any moment when we don't disturb the moment with greed, aversion, and delusion. So when we're not taking birth, we're not subject to death, and that place is always available—always available. In any moment, that peace is available.

We'd say that this has the flavor of the deathless—not subject to arising and passing, not subject to birth and death. There's something there, when we don't disturb it, that can let us rest in peace.

What I'm pointing to here is that this temporary end of craving has a connection to nibbana. It is not the final nibbana, but it is something you could call a temporary nibbana. It's a place of being unborn and uncreated, and it's like a foretaste of the final nibbana. The Buddha actually had a phrase for this in the Samyutta Nikaya. He referred to it as *tadanga nibbuto*, which means approximate nibbana.

So this is the territory we're in when we don't take birth through grasping. We're in the territory of a proximate nibbana. This proximate nibbana is satisfying on its own terms, but it's also onward leading. As you rest there, you are strengthening the habits of non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion in the mind. You're strengthening the habit of non-craving and non-clinging. And that is a very powerful way to advance the path.

It's as though you get to this point—non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—where you taste the freedom of it. And you're also getting a taste of the final deliverance. So it's as though you're walking down the street where there's a bread factory somewhere in the neighborhood and you get the scent of the bread. "Oh, there's fresh bread baking somewhere. Where is it?" You just follow that scent so that it keeps getting stronger and stronger and stronger, and it takes you to the factory. You follow this taste of temporary nibbana, and it leads you on and on and on until you come to the actual nibbana.

"The tides of conceiving do not sweep over one who stands upon these foundations. And when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over one, they are called a sage at peace. The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. They are not shaken and they are not agitated, for there is nothing present in them by which they might be born."

This is the Buddha talking about going beyond birth and death—momentary birth and death.

There are a number of ways we can talk about this in practice terms. Breaking the chain between feeling and craving is one. Another one is looking directly at non-clinging. And the Buddha spoke often in praise of this. It's one of the most used of his phrases in the Pali Canon to denote the process of liberation: "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging."

Through non-clinging. That means this is a practice instruction for us. Non-clinging is the way. Non-clinging is the path.

There are a few ways that non-clinging can come about. One is we wait for clinging to pass. Clinging happens a lot. Ajahn Chah said that 70 to 80 percent of the spiritual life is clinging and not being able to let go. So this happens a lot. If you find it in your practice, you're not off track. You're on the Ajahn Chah track. That was a pretty good track.

So sometimes we wait for it to pass, and it will. All the clinging will eventually pass. The mind will come back into some balance.

Or it might be possible to learn better and better how to let go in the moment. We notice we're clinging and we've learned and are learning the skill of letting go.

So this again is from Ajahn Chah: "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. If you let go completely, there's complete peace."

See what this is like as a meditation instruction. What is it like in a moment of practice of full mindfulness to let go completely? All the areas that might be holding, mind and body—what if you let go of it all? What would that feel like?

I hope you're getting a sense at this point in the evening how all these teachings of the Buddha are pointing to this same area of practice. The instruction from the second noble truth is to abandon craving. The instruction in the third noble truth is to realize the end of craving. The teachings of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion essentially mean letting go of craving. The pointing to non-clinging—a deep letting go.

In all of them, we're not creating a new self. We're resting in this deathless place, the gap between feeling and craving. We're not taking birth and we're resting in the deathless. This is the realization of temporary nibbana.

To me, this is the heart of Dharma practice: How do you move moment after moment from the second to the third noble truth? How do you let go of craving and come into peace? It's always available. It's always there and it unfolds from just letting go.

There was this interesting dialogue between two of the great practitioners in the time of the Buddha: a bhikkhu named Anuruddha and Sariputta, who was already a chief disciple at this time. Anuruddha is in meditation and he needs a little help, so he asks Sariputta for an interview.

This is his report: "Friend Sariputta," he says first, "with a divine eye which is purified and surpasses the human, I survey a thousand-fold world system." Second report: "Energy is aroused in me. My mindfulness is established without confusion. My body is tranquil without disturbance. My mind is concentrated and one-pointed." Third report: "Yet my mind is still not liberated from the taints through non-clinging."

That's a pretty good yogi report, isn't it? I would have said, "Wow, Anuruddha, that's fantastic." But that's not what Sariputta said.

Sariputta said, "Friend Anuruddha, when you talk about the divine eye, that is your conceit. When you talk about your energy and mindfulness, that is your restlessness. When you talk about your mind not being liberated, that is your remorse. It would be good if you would abandon these three qualities and stop attending to them. Instead, direct your attention to the deathless element."

This is a direct meditation pointer: Stop attending to everything else and direct your attention to the deathless element.

This is possible for us. Once we get a sense of what constitutes the deathless element—that quality of resting in the gap between feeling and craving—we can incline the mind that way. Now, if one has been partially enlightened, one knows the deathless element from direct experience to its depth. But if that hasn't happened, there's another discourse where the Buddha gives us more step-by-step instructions. It's as if he's in an air traffic control tower and we're coming in for a landing, and he's directing us how to land in that place of release into the unconditioned.

This is from a discourse to a practitioner called Malunkyaputta: "Whatever exists of sense objects, one sees those states as impermanent, as unsatisfactory, as void, as not-self. One turns the mind away from those states and directs it toward the deathless element thus:"

Now he's going to tell us exactly how to direct the attention to the deathless element: "This is peaceful. This is sublime."

"That is the stilling of all formations. The relinquishment of all attachments, dispassion, cessation, nibbana. This is peaceful. This is sublime." This is what we've already touched through resting in the gap between feeling and craving. We start to get to know that—the stilling of all formations.

This is a phrase you all actually know. The Pali is *sabba saṅkhāra samatha*. *Sabba* means all. *Saṅkhāra* is the fourth aggregate of formations, movements of heart and mind. *Samatha* is just the aspect of tranquility. *Sabba saṅkhāra samatha*—all formations have come to stillness. The formations have stopped. Just be still. Just be still.

The relinquishment of all attachments—this is the deep movement into letting go. Be still, let go. That's what leads to cessation of craving, cessation of suffering, and nibbāna. This is the route into enlightenment.

There's an important pointer here: "Whatever exists of sense objects, see those states as impermanent, unsatisfactory, void, and not-self. Turn the mind away from those states." Why are we so fascinated with sense objects? We have seen them come and go and come and go over and over and over. Has any of them ever really made a difference? Has any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or even mind state really lasted? And yet we keep holding on, keep looking for the right one—the one that's going to fix it, the one that's going to solve it, the one that's going to make a difference.

The Buddha is saying, turn your mind away from all of those. Turn it to peace, to stillness, to relinquishment. This is the path.

As we start to rest in this ground, we start to see that the path and the goal are coming closer and closer together. Stillness, relinquishment—this is a lot like the Third Noble Truth. The Third Noble Truth is what is to be realized. As the path and the goal come closer and closer together, the satisfaction of the goal comes into the immediate present. We don't need to look for anything else because they are so close to one another.

"One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Now in our modern day and age, we often wonder: Is this still really possible for anyone? This complete end of suffering? Is there anywhere in the world someone who has reached this—a living person that I could meet and talk with who is an example, a living example of this? I think there is.

I want to read a little bit from a short biography of Luang Por Liem. When Ajahn Chah passed away in the nineties, his monastery—a big monastery in Thailand called Wat Pa Pong—was passed on to his Dharma heir, who is Ajahn Liem. As he gets older, he's called Luang Por, spiritual father.

"Around the middle of the rainy season of the year 1969, Luang Por Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity. So Luang Por Liem increased his efforts, and as he did so, results became evident. Keeping this teaching in mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit meditation until about ten or eleven p.m., then stop to have a rest. But on this day I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture. A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body as if something was taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, completely light and at ease. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness."

The body felt tranquil, cool, and light. This experience continued throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued unchanging for many years, all from that one time. It feels like there are no proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before—I don't know where they all disappeared to. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose.

There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously, all the time since then. There has been no change all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without change.

So let's just sit for a minute and let these words settle.

As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. This same state still lasts on, continuous and without change.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 63

Transcendent Dependent Origination

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *Guy Armstrong presents the teaching of transcendent dependent origination, a profound 12-link formula that describes the path from suffering to complete liberation. Drawing from the Upanisa Sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, he explains how suffering can become the proximate cause for faith (saddhā), which naturally leads through gladness (pāmojja), rapture (pīti), calm (passaddhi), happiness (sukha), and concentration (samādhi) to knowing and seeing things as they truly are (yathābhūtañāṇadassana). This wisdom then gives rise to disenchantment (nibbidā), dispassion (virāga), liberation (vimutti), and finally knowledge of the destruction of the taints (āsavakkhayañāṇa). Armstrong illustrates each link with personal stories and teachings from the Thai forest tradition, including accounts from Ajahn Chah and experiences from his own monastic training in Burma. He emphasizes that this natural unfolding requires neither forcing nor delaying, and shows how joy and beauty are integral to the spiritual path rather than obstacles to it.*

Transcendent Dependent Origination

The subject of this evening's talk is transcendent dependent origination. Don't be thrown off by the title—it's quite a mouthful, but the concepts are not that difficult, so don't be intimidated.

This is another example of a formula that the Buddha often used, which we might say falls under the general heading of dependent arising. Here's how he stated it in the most general case:

"When this exists, that comes to be. With the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the ceasing of this, that ceases."

We have seen this kind of formulation in the teaching on dependent origination—that chain of twelve links that starts with ignorance, runs through craving and clinging, and ends up in suffering. This particular form is going to start from suffering and state a chain in positive terms that ends up in liberation.

What I find interesting is that these three—the general principle, dependent origination, and transcendent dependent origination—are all put in terms of cause and effect. If you look further, it seems all the Buddhist central teachings are put in terms of cause

and effect. The Four Noble Truths are about suffering and its cause, the end of suffering and its cause. The teaching on karma is the cause and effect of actions with consequences. And then we have this general principle of dependent arising.

Why is causality so central to the Buddha's main teachings? These teachings are at the heart of what he had to say. I think there's an interesting question to ponder.

The basic thing, the first thing I would say, is that when you take the self out of the picture of the world, there's no agent in the middle who's causing it all to happen. When we see the unfolding of events as the process of cause and effect—of prior causes and conditions giving rise to the present moment experience, which then conditions future effects—we see the whole unfolding of our experience in a way that doesn't revolve on "I" and that can be explained in terms of cause and effect. This general principle of dependent arising really covers all of it. So I wanted to toss that in as a footnote that is kind of at the heart of the Buddha's way of seeing the world.

The chain we're going to look at tonight also consists of twelve links. It really describes the emergence of the path, leading from suffering all the way to liberation, described in positive terms. Because it's in positive terms, I find it an inspiring kind of map. It describes a lot of the journey that you've been on in the retreat so far, so I'm sure you'll find your experience reflected in some of this list.

This was outlined in a discourse in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Discourse on Proximate Cause—how one factor becomes the proximate cause for the next. The commentaries call this "transcendent." The Buddha didn't call it that—that's a label from the commentaries because it transcends suffering. That's a nice way to think of transcendent: what transcends suffering, what goes beyond suffering.

I can't resist one bad joke: Why did the yogi refuse novocaine? It was in order to transcend dental medication.

We note that the original chain of dependent origination started with ignorance and ended in suffering. This one's going to start with suffering and move to liberation.

Here's an outline of the twelve links: suffering, faith, gladness, rapture, calm, happiness, concentration, knowing and seeing things as they are, disenchantment, dispassion, liberation, and knowledge of the extinction of the taints. I'll talk about each of those in detail—you don't have to remember them all right now.

The first linkage in this chain is that suffering is a condition, a proximate cause for the arising of faith. I think this may have been mentioned earlier, but this is pretty surprising because there's a huge amount of suffering in the world and I wouldn't say

there's a huge amount of faith in the world. So something is happening here that's different from the usual tendencies of the world, because normally suffering leads to more suffering.

In fact, the Buddha said suffering results either in bewilderment or in search. This is interesting—I think it's kind of true. People either get totally confused and overwhelmed and lost in suffering, or they start searching for a way out, some of which are wise, some of which are not. You see a lot of worldly activity as a search for release from suffering, but not always applied with wisdom.

So what are the conditions for suffering to lead to faith? It's said that there are two: one is the clear awareness of suffering, and the second is that one has heard the teachings.

So I think it's very interesting that all of us are in that position—we have suffered and then heard the teachings and been motivated by that combination. This gives us belief that there is a way, with wisdom, to overcome suffering. We become open to looking at things in a new way when we suffer.

James and I saw this many years ago when we were invited to lead a class in meditation at a juvenile hall in the Bay Area. He had a contact who was a nurse there and thought it might be helpful to these young men who were in jail. For those who don't know the American system, juvenile hall is where young people under the age of 18 are held when they've been charged with a crime but have not yet come to trial. It's a holding place. They know they will be coming to trial in the future, but they haven't yet been tried, so they haven't been convicted.

We went into the maximum security part of the juvenile hall, a men's unit. There were young men under the age of 18 who had been charged with serious crimes such as assault, assault with a deadly weapon, murder, and attempted murder. You can imagine these young guys, 16 and 17 years old, sitting in there not knowing what the next step in their life would be, not knowing what the judge or prosecutors would do. They were in this holding pattern for months sometimes, creating a huge amount of anxiety. Because they were all cooped up together, there was also quite a bit of aggression. It was a very difficult environment.

We went in to teach mindfulness, not knowing if this would connect for them at all. It seemed like an unlikely pairing. Yet it turned out to be a good fit for a number of them because they had time on their hands, they had a lot of emotions up, and they recognized their own suffering and were willing to look at it in a new way.

What we found most helpful to them first were the teachings on how to work with difficult emotions like fear and anger. They would practice with those in their cells because they had a lot of individual time and quiet time. One other exercise we gave them was to do mindfulness of breathing and see if they could tell if they went to sleep on an in-breath or an out-breath. They were really interested in trying to find this out.

We had to relabel the teachings—we couldn't call it Buddhism, and it had to appeal to a younger crowd, so we called it Mind Power. At the end, we gave them all a certificate that said they had completed the course in Mind Power. One of the young guys said, "Can I take this to the judge when I go up?" We said, "Sure, I don't know if it will mean anything, but you can."

When we get into difficult situations, our suffering prompts us to look at our experience in a new way. That's what opens us to new insight. Sometimes it's in situations of real extremity.

In the Thai forest tradition, it's very common for monks especially—I don't think the nuns were encouraged to do this because it's considered riskier for women to be on their own—to go out and meditate in the forest at night. They were specifically encouraged to go meditate where they heard the sound of tigers. If there were tigers roaring, Ajahn Mun, one teacher in the Thai forest tradition, would encourage his monks: "Oh, good night for meditation. Go dwell out there where the tigers are roaring."

The purpose was to evoke fear so that they could meet their fear directly and learn to work with it in their meditation. This was a situation of real life uncertainty—powerful teaching. Moreover, some forest monks recounted that as they made their way through forest paths, sometimes they would come upon the bones and robes and bowl of a monk who had been practicing there before them. They didn't know how the monk had met his end. It could have been a tiger, it could have been illness where they didn't have the strength to get treatment, it could have been an injury. But that was a real life situation with fear, and they were encouraged to engage with it.

Ajahn Chah was Jack Kornfield's first teacher in Thailand, also the first teacher of Ajahn Sumedho, the Western monk who brought that model over to England. At a point in his practice where he felt he really wanted to look at his fear, Ajahn Chah decided to go meditate all night in a charnel ground. This is one of the contemplations suggested by the Satipatthana Sutta: go sit where bodies have been brought, where bodies are decaying, and contemplate the decay of the body because one day your body will do the same thing.

Ajahn Chah went out there. He went out in the day and set up his place for meditation. Toward the end of the day, the local villagers brought a corpse to the charnel ground, built a funeral pyre, and burned the corpse. Ajahn Chah didn't know that was about to happen, but that's what was happening that day at this charnel ground.

So he was sitting in meditation, behind him the funeral pyre was lit, the flames rose, the body burned, the villagers departed, and night fell. He kept meditating.

You may know that in Thailand, as a culture generally, there's quite a fear of ghosts. There is the assumption that something continues beyond the death of the physical body, and ghosts are seen as mischievous or perhaps harmful beings that can appear to the living.

So there was Ajahn Chah sitting in meditation. The body had just been burnt behind him. And then he says, "I forgot about sleep. My eyes were rigid with fear. Then about 10 p.m. there came a sound of shuffling from the fire behind me, the sound of footsteps. They walked up behind me. The leaves crunched under the footsteps as it made its way round to the front. It got closer and closer until it stopped right in front of me and just stood still.

"This was really it. I forgot all about Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. There was only fear welling up inside my chest until it completely filled me. The fear reached its peak and began to overflow. A voice inside me asked, 'What am I so afraid of?' A voice replied, 'I'm afraid of death.' Another voice said, 'Where can you run to escape death? Whether you are afraid or not, there's nowhere to escape death.' As soon as I thought this, all the fear completely disappeared. It was amazing. So much fear and it could disappear just like that. Non-fear arose in its place. Now my heart rose higher and higher until I felt as if I was in the clouds."

It's amazing how in the very extreme of one of these difficult periods of emotion, based on perhaps a real world situation, that fear can just evaporate and turn into something wholesome. That's one of the beauties of impermanence—the impermanence of mind states.

Then there's also this poem from the Therigatha. The Therigatha is a collection of verses from the elder female nuns. These were nuns who were practicing in the time of the Buddha or shortly thereafter. It's part of the Pali Canon. There's a corresponding version of the monks' recollections, but this is from the elder nuns. This is the account of a nun named Siha:

"Obsessed by sensuality, I never got to the origin, but was agitated, my mind beyond control. I dreamed of a great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace. Pale and thin, I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night."

You think six weeks is a long time? She wandered seven years, unhappy day and night.

"Then I took a rope into the forest and thought, 'I'd rather hang than go back to that narrow life.' I tied a strong noose to the branch of a tree and put it around my neck. Just then, my heart was set free."

Again, a beautiful story of someone brought to an extremity where, as I imagine, she just had to let go. And fortunately, she let go inwardly so she didn't have to physically let go of her body. Her heart was set free in that moment.

So even though none of us wants to suffer, and we don't want you to suffer, sometimes it just happens. And out of it can come these really wholesome developments of mind leading onward to faith.

This quality of faith—I know all of you have had experiences like this or you wouldn't be here. It takes a lot of faith to be here for six weeks or three months. The quality of faith, I think Bhante talked about it when he discussed the five spiritual faculties, is not a belief or a doctrine or a dogma, but the original word saddha, the Pali word that's being translated, has an etymology or literal meaning like "to place one's heart upon."

You see, everybody in the world has something that they place their heart upon. Everybody lives out of some core beliefs or some faith about how the world is put together. In the Buddha's system, this word means basically faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—faith in the teacher, the teachings, and the community.

But it's meant to be experienced as a personal thing. It's not just something we believe in, but it gives us a confidence that we ourselves can put the teachings into effect, walk the path, and get the benefits of them. It's a belief that greater freedom is possible in our own life. And as it grows into confidence, it means we trust that we can do that. We can walk this path and find that happiness for ourselves.

This is a comment from the Buddha: "Endowed with faith, one receives the gladness associated with the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha." Some form of this, I think, exists in every spiritual tradition.

In the Bay Area, we have a Native American teacher who sometimes comes to Spirit Rock named Fred Wapipa. His ancestry is joint Kickapoo and Sac and Fox. One time he was speaking at Spirit Rock and said something that quite surprised me, but I was really struck by it. He said, "You know, there's no word for hope in our language. That's because we believe everything's already all right."

I thought that was an amazing expression of native wisdom. Everything's already all right. Beautiful.

So we have this faith or trust or confidence, and that leads onward to what the Buddha pointed to as gladness. The Pali word is pamoja. I might call it gladness or joy—I'll probably use joy mostly in the rest of the talk.

This word joy is a little troublesome in Buddhism because there are about three words that sometimes get translated as joy. One of them is pamoja, which is the word pointed to here. Another is the term piti, which is in the Seven Factors of Awakening. And the other is the term mudita, which is often translated as sympathetic joy. In this case, I'm going to talk about joy as this pamoja or gladness.

It arises from the sense of faith. Once we have confidence that we can see the way out of suffering, it gives us a sense of gladness. We have conceptually solved the problem. We still need to do the work to solve the problem, but we know now how to do it. We've got the instruction manual and we just need to carry out the steps. So this gives a lightness and a delight to the heart.

A number of us have mentioned that joy is really an integral part of the path. James has talked about it a lot. Sally mentioned in one of her talks, quoting Bhikkhu Anāgārika, "The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." So it's very helpful to find this factor of mind, to bring it in and let it become your ally. Let it become your support, because we all will run into times of difficulty. And if we have reliable sources for joy, that can help us persevere through those difficult times.

This really came through to me some years ago when I went to Burma to ordain as a monk. I'd been a monk in Thailand before, but I had disrobed before I'd gotten all my monk yearning out of my system. So I had this leftover "I'd like to be a monk again" kind of thing going. And I had the opportunity to go to Burma and ordain with Paok Sayadaw, who's a noted master of concentration and insight.

I did that and arrived at his monastery the night before the rains retreat was going to start. As soon as I arrived, I went up to meet him and asked if he would be willing to have me ordained while I was there. He said, "Yes, okay. So tomorrow morning you go into town with one of the lay supporters, get your robes and bowl, come back, you can be ordained after lunch."

Well, that was a little quick. I'd just gotten to the monastery the night before. I was trying to settle in. So before lunch the next morning, I had my head shaved. All the hair was gone. I had lunch. And then I slipped into my monk's outfit in this ceremony right after lunch. There I was, about eighteen hours after arriving, back in robes again. It was what I wanted—it was just a little quicker than I'd expected.

It had been some years since I'd been a monk before, and in the meantime, I'd kind of forgotten how to tie the robes. I think you heard Bhante talk about how every monk is always a little worried the robes are going to fall off, because it's basically wrapping oneself up in a sheet. So I had that going.

I got there at the start of the rains retreat, and it was literally the start of the rains. For the next three weeks, I didn't see the sun. It rained on average three inches a day, which gave rise to a lot of mold in my room. The biggest spider I had ever seen was building a web on my porch. I was eating just one meal a day, as often happens in monasteries.

At this monastery, I was eating one meal a day. It was vegetarian, which I was delighted about, but it was mostly white rice and steamed vegetables. I was losing about half a pound a day on that diet. The meditation hall was a 15-minute walk uphill, often in the pouring rain. Once we got there, the shortest sitting was an hour and a half. The longest sitting was two hours.

The meditation was challenging. I was engaged in keeping the attention focused on the upper lip to notice the breath as many hours of the day as possible—the whole day long. Sitting, walking, eating, showering—just to stay here. I once went and asked the Sayadaw about how to practice with the hindrances. He said, "Hindrances? Oh, if you're sleepy, pull your earlobes. If you're aversive, do metta." That was all he had to say about working with the hindrances.

It was a very challenging practice, and the weather continued to be what it was. It became the most difficult retreat I had ever undertaken in my life. All the conditions were just so challenging. We had to report to the Sayadaw every day on our progress—a constant check-in.

I remember one day I went down for lunch. I was dressed in my robes, had my bowl, got it filled up. Hot food was on the bottom, and you know these metal bowls really transmit heat very well. The hot rice and veggies were on the bottom. I was holding that in my arm, walking back to my kuti. The lid of the bowl was upside down on the top because it held a little bit of dessert. I had my umbrella in my other hand because it was still raining like crazy. I was walking up this dirt track to go back and eat at my kuti.

In the path alongside, just to one side, a group of Burmese lay people were bowing down to me because that's what they do when a bhikkhu walks by. They're very reverent. While all that was going on, I felt my robe slipping off my left shoulder. That just epitomized my situation. I managed to keep it on until I got back to my kuti, but it was nip and tuck.

Through all this, my spirits were very low. It's funny now when I think back on it, but my spirits really sank. I had brought with me a photo of the Dalai Lama because he's always a great inspiration for me. I turned to the photo with a great deal of what I could only call supplication. I said, "Your Holiness, I'm really having a difficult time. Do you have any advice for me?"

Immediately this transmission came through. It was in his voice—that Indian-accented English he has, spoken in his tone—and it said, "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then the transmission ended.

I really tried to take that message to heart. Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. When would that not be helpful? This is the role of joy in the practice. Sometimes, unfortunately, I couldn't remember what cheerful felt like. But when I could, and I could bring that into mind, it really lifted my spirits and inspired me to go back and practice again.

This is the role of joy. When we have a channel to it, a reliable access to it, it becomes a tremendous ally for us when times are difficult. Here I think we're really lucky that we are surrounded by the beauty of nature. That has always been for me a very reliable and deep source of joy in practice.

Here it's very available. I encourage you to really take advantage of that and open to that beauty. This is not foreign to the path. This is not antithetical to the path.

This is a quote from Ajahn Sumedho: "Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism, one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower, you should contemplate its decay. Or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse. That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but it can leave

the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty. This is the joy of mudita, being able to appreciate the beauty in the things around us."

So being open to that, let that joy come in and lift us up. It's intrinsic in the nature of things. When you tune in to the way things are, there is joy there. I often tune in to the way light strikes things. Whether indoors or outdoors, there's a brightness, there's a brilliance, there's a radiance in light that reminds me of that joy and beauty.

This is from Thomas Merton: "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and of joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being."

So this access to joy or gladness is one of the central links of this chain to liberation, and it leads onward.

The next link in the chain is rapture. The Pali word is piti. This has been described already on a number of occasions—it's in the Seven Factors of Awakening. It's the kind of joy that comes when we're connected to our meditation. When you find you start enjoying the meditation object, that is piti.

It's a mental factor, but it has an expression in the body. And the expression is one of energy—sometimes strong energy, sometimes uncomfortably strong energy. But in its initial stages, it's quite pleasant energy that comes out of the joy of the meditation itself.

Then rapture leads on to the next link, which is calm, or passadhi in Pali. Rapture in its energetic manifestation can sometimes feel a little turbulent. So as the path deepens, the rapture gets mellowed out, gets moderated by the arising of calm.

Sometimes this word passadhi is translated as relaxation—it could also be translated as ease or serenity, but mostly I'll call it calm. The combination of the pleasantness of rapture and the factor of calm really allows us to settle into the moment in a new way. We find it's easier to be here because there's not as much turbulence, and there's a sense of peace that's quite appealing.

Sometimes when we first discover this factor of calm in meditation, it's like new territory because this is not a common factor out in our fast-paced world. So one meditator who was finding this for the first time wasn't sure what was going on and noted it as calm, hardly believing that this is what it was. So it takes a little while to get to know it, but it becomes a comfortable place to be after some time.

It's as though in the initial stages of meditation, the hindrances are so strong and the thoughts are so active. When we come to this place, it's like we've crossed the stormy ocean—it's had big waves and pirate ships and an attack from a giant squid. But all of a sudden we've landed in this safe harbor, this big safe harbor, and we can just cool out for a while into this calm.

There's a poem by Emily Dickinson that expresses this feeling. It's a poem called "Wild Nights." I'm only going to read a little bit. If you're not a native English speaker, there are two words I want to point out beforehand in this poem. The word "futile" means useless, not of any benefit. And here the word "chart" is used to mean a map—it's kind of an archaic use of the term, a map like sailors would use in navigation.

"Futile the winds to a heart in port, done with a compass, done with a chart, rowing in Eden."

That's kind of what it feels like when we land in this big safe harbor. "Futile the winds to a heart in port, done with a compass, done with a chart, rowing in Eden."

The mind discovers, or you could say rediscovers, its own natural peace and ease. This is something that is a natural part of our being, but we've lost touch with it by covering it over with so much stimulation, so much activity and so much thinking. When we find that it's there, we can use it as a meditation technique. This is an instruction given by Ajahn Amaro:

He's the abbot of Amravati now. "Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body. And then pay attention to whatever disturbs that."

I love this instruction—rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body when we're not stirring it up. A number of people have reported experiences in interviews that really point to this. I often suggest that a nice place to rest at that time is to put the attention in the heart center, just having a sense you can rest the attention there, and then you'll notice whatever comes along that disturbs that kind of peace.

This access to peace is a lot of what we've been looking for all along. We have been looking for a way to calm the heart and mind and body from the overstimulation of a fast-paced modern society. When we discover this aspect of calm through meditation, there's something very satisfying about it.

So the journey continues. The access to calm leads to the next step, which is happiness. The Pali word is *sukha*. I like this term *sukha* because it sounds so much like sugar, and *sukha* has a quality of sweetness in it. The quality of rapture has an enjoy-

ment, but it's subtle. The quality of calm has a pleasant feel, but it's a little neutral. But when the element of *sukha* starts coming in, there's an emotional flavor there that's very sweet. It's kind of touching. So this is recognized as one of the factors of concentration—it helps collect the mind, as we'll see.

This *sukha* is a deeper flowering than the joy of *pamojja*. It's joy that has risen to rapture and become more intense, then been mellowed out through tranquility to land in this place of happiness or *sukha*, which is really a state of contentment. Contentment might be a closer translation, but it has elements of both. The sweetness gives a sense of happiness.

The joy of *pamojja* depends on conditions—we reflect on nature or reflect on Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha. But as this happiness comes about, it doesn't depend on conditions. It is the quality of our own natural development of heart and mind. In that way, it's more reliable. It's the happiness of coming home, coming really into the present moment with both gladness and peace.

I think about this line from Rumi. When Rumi says "you," he often means the divine, and in this case, *sukha* has a kind of similar flavor to this divine:

"Come to the orchard in spring.
There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers.
If you do not come, these do not matter.
If you do come, these do not matter."

When that sense of deep happiness is there, the conditions aren't so important. There's an unconditional contentment that is settling in.

But the practice doesn't stop here. It continues on, and the Buddha himself said when he was a practitioner, when he was the Bodhisattva: "Two things I never lost track of in my practice. One was not to be lax in my efforts. The other was not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind."

I find this a really beautiful and challenging statement. How many times would we settle merely for wholesome states of mind? That might be a pretty good outcome for us. And yet the Buddha said: Don't settle just for wholesome states of mind. The path continues.

So the next stage in the links is concentration, or *samadhi*. This is really the unification of mind where the attention, the energy, the awakeness is brought together into the present moment. When that attention and undistracted quality is brought to the present moment, we find the mind becomes strong. It's like we've given away all our

mental energy, sending it out in fragmented ways to past and future, to thinking and memory and regretting and anticipating. We drop all that, call it into the present moment, collect in the quality of *samadhi*—the mind becomes strong, steady, stable, and firm.

It's pleasant in itself and gives us the ability to accommodate what's difficult. Have you noticed that when the mind takes on some of this quality of concentration, something that was felt as uncomfortable or unpleasant a few minutes before or earlier in the day all of a sudden is kind of neutral—not disturbing, not problematic? This is one of the strengths of the mind of *samadhi,* because it's based in happiness. In fact, happiness is the proximate cause for concentration. We may have thought when we started meditation that the proximate cause of concentration was striving energy—pushing hard, pedal to the metal and all of that. But truly, the proximate cause for concentration is happiness.

When there's the sense of this natural peace and ease, the mind can just rest in itself in an effortless, unforced way. And that settling brings along the quality of peace and rest.

So the mind settles in concentration, but this is not the end of the path either. As the Buddha said, the purpose and benefit of concentration is to know and see things as they really are. This is the next step in the unfolding: knowing and seeing things as they really are.

The Pali is *yathābhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*. *Ñāṇa* means knowing—it's the same root as the word "gnosis" in Greek. *Dassana* means seeing. You may have heard the Sanskrit word *darshan*, which means seeing, basically the teacher. And *dassana* is the same root as *vipassana*—they both mean seeing or insight. And *yathābhūta* is things the way they are.

So what is it to see things as they really are? When the mind is concentrated—and that means it's not being swayed by the hindrances, by the forces of greed, aversion, delusion—there's some steadiness. What do we see as the way things really are? We see impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness. We see the three characteristics. This seeing is where *vipassana* or insight takes off in the classical teachings of the Buddha.

In the West, we've expanded the field of insight to include psychological understanding, and those are very important understandings, and in my view, very important insights. But in classical Buddhism, *vipassana* refers to the seeing of the three characteristics, and it is when the mind is steady and focused and concentrated that those really become apparent, very clearly apparent.

Once we see that things are impermanent, we see that they're unsatisfying and they aren't to be taken as "I" or "mine" in a permanent ongoing way. So this seeing has a transformative effect in the heart and mind.

Most of our life we have grown up thinking that if we could just get the outer circumstances correct, if we could line up the objects in the right way, our life would fall into place and we would find happiness or satisfaction. The right job, the right income, the right relationship, the right community, the right place to live, and so on.

As we start to see the three characteristics of things, we see that there is not stability in the external things of the world at all. And so we stop so much pinning our hopes on getting all the conditions of the world to line up exactly right. We start to understand that the world can't give us the lasting satisfaction that we're really looking for. And this is the kind of pivotal understanding of seeing the three characteristics. It teaches us to let go a little bit.

So this first step in letting go is the next step in the sequence of this chain, and it's called disenchantment. The Pali term is *nibbida*. Disenchantment here doesn't mean we become cynical or we fall into despair or we think everything's worthless. It's not that at all. It's a recognition that the bright objects of the world have enchanted us. They have put a spell on us and made us run after them as though they were capable of really satisfying us. But at this point in the development of insight, we see that that promise was false. The things of the world—whether it's other people or objects or locations or money or jobs—aren't capable of giving that deep satisfaction. And so there's a way in which we start to give up that illusion.

So there's a freedom in that. Okay, that's not going to do it for me. What is? So this is the motivation, the real genuine motivation for renunciation. There's a turning away from external objects and we look for something else.

Renunciation is not about telling ourselves, "As a good practitioner, we should give up everything that's pleasant." This is the way it's described in the Dhammapada: "If by giving up a lesser happiness, one could experience a greater happiness, the wise person would renounce the lesser in order to find the greater." This is the significance of renunciation.

So it's not a painful penalty. It's a movement of wisdom when it comes. And we all renounce different things at different times. It's not that every one of us should be renouncing X, Y, and Z at this point. The wisdom has to grow for us to see what will bring satisfaction and what won't. And then step by step, we all renounce at different rates in different ways.

In this renunciation, it doesn't mean that we scorn the things of the world or even scorn the sense pleasures that we're still engaged in. We just recognize they aren't going to do it for us. And so the Buddha said, "The beauty of this world remains the same, but the wise do not hanker after it." So this disenchantment doesn't mean that things get grim or gray or ugly or even neutral.

The beauty is even more apparent because the heart isn't burdened by greed, aversion, or delusion. And so the beauty is very clear to see, but there's no hankering after it because ultimately it won't finally satisfy.

This leads into the next link, which is called dispassion. The Pali term is *viraga*, which literally means without lust. It has also been translated as without attachment, but I think without lust is the better etymology. There's another sense in which *viraga* is used in the Pali: it means fading away. Like when you take a shirt that's a bright color and wash it many times—little by little, the color in the shirt fades away.

What this is pointing to is very interesting. The movement of dispassion doesn't happen all at once. There is a fading away of lust. The more our minds get purified in the understanding of the way things really are, the understanding of disenchantment, the moving away from the false promise, the more that desire gradually fades away out of our system. Craving fades away, and we encounter more and more of this quality of dispassion.

The initial meaning of dispassion is more or less synonymous with equanimity, as Annie spoke about earlier. It means the mind is not so moved by the ups and downs of changing pleasure and pain. There's a balance. Even though pleasant and unpleasant continue to alternate, we're not so moved by desire or aversion for those changing conditions.

But this word dispassion sometimes doesn't sound appealing in the West because it suggests we're not supposed to feel any passion anymore. We might think, "Wait, my passion is what I really care about in my life." So we need to make a language distinction here. When dispassion is used in translations of Buddhist texts, it has one specific meaning: an unwholesome state based on greed, lust, or craving. That's what passion means in these English translations of the Buddha's language.

There are other words in the Buddha's language that refer to this quality we in the West call passion—which we rightfully regard as something important and beautiful in our lives. Someone might have a passion for clarity, a passion for truth, a passion for justice, for social justice, a passion for non-cruelty. These are all fine things to have. What we are removing are only the unwholesome factors of lust, greed, and craving.

There are many words in the Buddha's vocabulary that point to what we would call passion: words for ardor, for zeal, and enthusiasm. The word for ardor is *atapi*, based on a word meaning fire. So this is a fiery quality of heart. Does that sound cold or hot? Turned off or dead? No—there's a fiery quality of heart in ardor.

Here are some quotations. In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, it says the practitioner dwells ardent, fully aware and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world. In another discourse, Sariputta said very clearly: without ardor, one cannot awaken. So this ardor is passion directed toward the path, toward awakening.

There's the term zeal, which is a common translation of *chanda*. *Chanda* can also be translated as desire. When it's considered one of the four *iddhipadas*—the bases for spiritual success—it's often translated as zeal. This denotes a quality of strong energy toward the path, toward the achievement of liberation.

And then there is *viriya*, which you probably know as energy or effort. One explanation I like is "delighting in what is wholesome, turning our energy to what is wholesome." One of my favorite translations for *viriya*, although it's not used very much, is enthusiasm. When you're feeling enthusiastic and inspired about your practice, about the path, about the meditation, this is *viriya* coming into the mind, and it's what leads us to take the next step, to come to the next sitting, to investigate the teachings.

So there are all these words that point to this deeply caring, deeply motivated quality of heart and mind that in the West we might call passion. But *viraga*—this dispassion—refers to the fading away of lust, of greed, of craving. In its initial stages, it resembles equanimity. In its maturity, it is a synonym for *nibbana*, a synonym for the unconditioned.

We talked about *nibbana* last week, so I don't need to say much more. One other quote from the Buddha: "Insofar as the practitioner has abandoned greed, aversion, and delusion, insofar is *nibbana* realizable, immediate, inviting, and attractive."

So this is the deeper meaning of being without lust. One has completely set aside greed, aversion, and delusion, and in that moment opens to the unconditioned. This is the movement that leads to the next step, which is liberation.

The Pali term is vimutti. This is what we talked about last week as that unshakable deliverance of mind. This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana. The mind has been freed in full liberation from all the fetters and com-

pletely from the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. And there is, it's said, a happiness of peace and lack of disturbance that is the most deeply satisfying kind of happiness that's possible to us.

This uprooting of the fetters happens in the moment of liberation, and then there's a reflecting back which is called knowledge of the destruction of the taints. This is the last step in the twelve links of transcendent dependent origination. One reviews what has just taken place in the mind and knows that the most deeply conditioned tendencies of mind have been uprooted. These are the taints of sense desire, of becoming, and of ignorance.

So this is the culmination of transcendent dependent origination—the three links leading from suffering through different kinds of joy to the stilling of concentration, the turning away from sense experiences and relinquishment of attachments to the touch of nibbana and the liberation of heart and mind.

When I first heard this teaching, I went to one of my interview teachers at the time and I said, "How long is it going to take?" And of course the answer is nobody knows for each of us, because it's different. But if we continue along this path, these factors are not only possible but inevitable. Each one leads naturally to the next. That's what the Buddha said. You don't actually have to make an additional volitional effort to go from one to the next. They unfold as part of nature.

I like this. There are a couple of analogies that the Buddha used for this process. He was talking about if you're a carpenter and you have an adze, which is a woodworking tool like an axe. He said if you use it for a long period of time, the handle of the ax will wear away from the contact of your hands and fingers with it. You can't say how much of the handle has worn away every particular day, but as you keep using it, you know the handle wears away. He said it's just like that with the fetters. We can't tell how much of them have worn away today, but if you keep practicing, they do wear away.

The other analogy he used was the riggings of an ocean-going ship—the sails and ropes. He said this ocean-going ship has been affected by the salt of the sea. It's been affected by the wind, the air, the sun. It's brought up on land and left there. And while it's up on land, the impact from all the elements is going to cause those riggings, the sails and the ropes, to rot and fall away. He said it's just like that with our fetters. Our fetters rot and fall away in meditation, just like the riggings of an ocean-going ship that's exposed to the elements. We don't know how long it takes, but it only goes in one direction.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "As a result of his experience, the Buddha taught that the practice has to develop naturally according to conditions. You allow things to develop according to your accumulated wholesome karma and paramis. This doesn't mean that you stop putting effort into the practice, but that you continue with the understanding that whether you progress swiftly or slowly, it's not something you can force. It's like planting a tree. It knows by itself the appropriate pace to grow at. If you crave to get quick results, see that as delusion. Even if you want it to grow slowly, see that as delusion."

I'll close with another quotation from the Buddha. A questioner came to him and said, "How did you cross the flood?" This means the flood of becoming, the flood of selfing again and again, leading to repeated birth. Basically, how did you become liberated? And the Buddha replied, "I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away."

Let's just sit for a minute together. I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away.

CHAPTER 64

Mindfulness of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong presents mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati) as a cornerstone practice found across all major Buddhist traditions. Drawing primarily from the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN 10) and the Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN 118), he explores the Buddha's definition of mindfulness as simply "one knows" - clearly understanding what is happening in each moment.*
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> *Armstrong traces the historical preservation of these 2,500-year-old teachings through the Majjhima Nikāya, emphasizing how mindfulness of the body serves as the foundation for all meditative development. He explains why breath awareness is so effective: it's always available, naturally occurring, and provides a stable anchor that balances energy while highlighting when the mind wanders into past and future concerns.*
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> *The talk addresses common obstacles including striving, aversion to thoughts, and self-judgment, offering practical guidance for working skillfully with these hindrances. Armstrong concludes by describing how sustained practice shifts one's center of gravity from discursive thinking to the spacious awareness from which wisdom and creative insight naturally arise - what the Buddha called "the direct path for the realization of nibbāna."*

Good evening.

I'm happy to see that you're all still here, because the first days of retreat, especially long retreat, are not easy ones. There's the unfamiliarity with the long sittings and walking slowly and the withdrawal from all our daily activities and contacts. It's not an easy transition often. I often think it takes me about three to five days to really get into the rhythm of a long retreat. So you've made a good beginning. Happy to have you still awake.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is mindfulness of breathing. I'd like to talk about it because I think probably a number of you are doing this practice now. I also want to talk about it because I have a lot of affection for this practice. It's an important practice in the whole history of Buddhism and the Buddhist teachings.

There are three main meditative schools of Buddhism alive in the world today and transitioning to the West. Roughly speaking, our tradition, which is often called Theravada, but we've recently started calling it early Buddhism for reasons that are too obscure to go into. But it's on the website, actually, if you get curious why we decided to make that change in name.

So early Buddhism relates to the very earliest teachings of the historical Buddha. Tibetan, which came out of northern India some centuries after the historical Buddha, and then got preserved in Tibet and the Himalayas. And Zen, which grew out of Chan in China, shares a lot of thinking and practices with Chan. So Zen and Chan I kind of put together as the third major meditative tradition.

What's interesting is mindfulness of breathing is a central practice in all three of these main lineages. It's the only meditation practice I know of that is central or even practiced by all three of the schools. So that's some indication of how important it's been in the history of Buddhism and continues to be until this day.

In our tradition of early Buddhism, there are two main discourses of the Buddha that really pertain to this practice. One of them you've probably heard of—it's called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse. In the Pali language, that's called the Satipatthana Sutta. The other one is the Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing, or the Anapanasati Sutta in Pali.

One of the interesting things about teaching at the three-month course is that people are here with such a range of practice backgrounds. We have people here who have been practicing for forty years or more. We have people who have been practicing for one or two years. We love having all the ends of that spectrum and everyone in between. Because with more veteran practitioners, we get to talk about some things that pertain to their practice. With newer practitioners, it's really exciting to see the way the teachings illuminate your experience and how the understandings dawn, often for the first time in certain areas. So it's wonderful to have both.

But as a teacher, it's hard to speak to both at the same time. So in my talks, I'm sometimes going to say things that will be more suited for people who've been doing this for a while and may seem esoteric or not very interesting to people who are newer. Other times I will say things for newer people that may seem boring or repetitive for people who've been around for a while. But please be patient and recognize that you're a broad group. So we try to hit a little bit of something for everyone.

One of the things I wanted to talk about tonight, especially for those who are not so old in this particular school or practice, is just a little bit of history. Both the discourses I mentioned of the Buddha are collected in a volume that in the Pali is called the Majjhima Nikaya. It's a collection of 152 discourses, originally in the Pali language, and they've been translated into English in a very good translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi.

These teachings are about 2,500 years old. The fact that we have them in readable English today, to me, is an amazing adventure story. It's like something out of Raiders of the Lost Ark. Indiana Jones would feel right at home in a story like this because the texts were preserved orally for centuries. Then they were written down by celibate acolytes on a tropical island and preserved against weather and corruption and all kinds of things for more and more centuries. They got lost in India. Virtually all the teachings of the Buddha got lost in India around the 11th century because of invasions.

Different translations are still available in Tibet, translations from Sanskrit. But our tradition rests on the Pali versions of these texts, which go back to the time of the Buddha. Pali is an ancient Indian language that nobody speaks today. It was kind of interesting—in 1956 there was a gathering of a lot of Buddhist monastics that was called something like the Fifth World Council. They were from all different kinds of countries and they didn't know each other's languages so they spoke together in Pali. It was very sweet because it's the only language that they all knew—all these monks and nuns from around the world talking in Pali, which basically nobody speaks today.

The texts of the Buddha's discourses that were recorded in Pali amount to about twenty volumes in that language. This book, which is quite thick in English, was three of those volumes in the original Pali. So altogether they comprise probably 2,000 pages.

When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, "I feel an unpleasant feeling." When feeling a feeling that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, one understands, "I feel a feeling that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant."

Third foundation, mental states. Here, when the mind has lust, one understands, "The mind has lust." When the mind is without lust, one understands, "The mind is without lust." When the mind has hatred, one understands, "The mind has hatred." When the mind is without hatred, one understands, "The mind is without hatred."

Fourth foundation, dhammas. Here one understands, "There is sensual desire in me," or one understands, "There is no sensual desire in me."

Do you notice something about all these instructions? What's the common thread running through them?

It's simply knowing what's happening while it's happening. That's mindfulness. Not changing anything, not judging anything, not trying to make it different—just knowing. Breathing long and knowing you're breathing long. Feeling angry and knowing you're feeling angry. Having desire arise and knowing desire is present.

This is quite revolutionary, actually, when you think about it. Most of us spend most of our time either lost in what's happening or trying to change what's happening. But the Buddha is pointing to something much simpler: just know what's happening.

Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition, which has become quite popular, is "paying attention in a particular way—on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." I think that's a pretty good contemporary way of putting it. But the essence is right there in these ancient texts: knowing what's happening while it's happening.

Now, you might think, "Well, that sounds easy enough." But if you've ever tried to meditate, you know it's not so simple. The mind has this amazing capacity to be somewhere else entirely. We can be sitting here listening to the breath, and suddenly we're planning tomorrow's grocery list or replaying yesterday's conversation. That's just how minds work.

So mindfulness practice is really about developing this capacity to stay present with immediate experience. And it turns out this is a skill we can cultivate. Like learning to play the piano or ride a bicycle, it takes practice, but it's definitely possible.

The Buddha was quite systematic about this training. He didn't just say, "Go be mindful." He gave very specific instructions about where to place attention and how to work with it. And breathing was his starting place.

When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows, I feel an unpleasant feeling.

The third foundation, which is the meditation on mind, mind states: here one understands, one knows mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust. And mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. One knows mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate. And one knows mind unaffected by hate as mind unaffected by hate.

Here's the fourth foundation: There being sense desire in one, one knows there is sense desire in me. There not being sense desire in one, one knows there is not sense desire in me.

These examples span all four foundations where mindfulness is being described. What word stands out to you here? "One knows." That phrase appears again and again and again. In the Buddha's most basic description of mindfulness, the phrase is simply "one knows." Breathing in long, one knows. Breathing in short, one knows. Feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows, and so on. One knows what is happening to one.

I would like to suggest this as a really good working definition of mindfulness. There are many ways you could expand on this. If you read definitions on the internet, people can get very flowery—that it has to be based in total acceptance, and it has to be non-judgmental, or the mind has to be completely free of greed, aversion, and delusion for it to be a true moment of mindfulness. But when the Buddha described it, he simply said, "one knows." One knows what is happening to one.

This word "knows" is interesting. In Pali, the word is *pajanati*, closely related to *sampajanya*, which is usually translated as clear comprehension. In one translation, the translator uses "understands" in place of "knows." This is intriguing. "Know" and "understand" are similar, but they're a little different, aren't they? Clear comprehension has this flavor of understanding, of comprehension.

So this word *pajanati*, which is really the key operational word describing mindfulness, has within it an element of understanding, which to me suggests there's some intelligence there, some wisdom. I understand mindfulness as the doorway for wisdom to arise in us. It has this basic component of wisdom through the understanding of what's going on.

In the simplest description, mindfulness is knowing what's happening for us. Draw it out slightly and it becomes: one clearly understands what's happening for us. Whichever you prefer.

This has enormous significance to me. I'm not just playing with words here, because mindfulness is our path. That is the path of this meditation we'll be doing. And what it comes down to, described this way, is really simple.

If you ever get off track in your meditation, or you get confused or uncertain—What do I do? How do I get back? I've lost the thread. I've got to start again. What do I do?—know what's happening to you. Breathing in, breathing out, unpleasant feeling, confusion, aversion. You could notice any of those things that are part of the experience, and you would be starting on track again.

That's how we renew our practice in any situation. It answers the question: What's happening now? That's all you have to do. And from that, the whole path unfolds. So it's really simple. Don't make it complicated.

Know what's happening to you now. And here's the hard part: do that moment after moment after moment. Joseph Goldstein likes to say, "It's easy to be mindful. It's hard to remember to be mindful." So it's simple—just know what's happening and then keep doing that in every new moment. And then the path will unfold.

And it's very powerful. Again, in this discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, this is what the Buddha said about the power of this: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana"—that means liberation or awakening—"namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

So this simple act of knowing what our experience is leads all the way to the end of suffering and the fullest awakening. I find that really inspiring because it's so available and so simple.

How does it do that? Well, one thing to think about is what's the alternative. I like this cartoon from the New Yorker. It showed somebody at work, sitting at a desk and working on the computer—a task we can probably all relate to. But there was a thought bubble above the person's head, and the thought bubble was of being out on a golf course, swinging a club. So imagine that you're at work and you'd rather be out playing somewhere.

The second panel of the cartoon was the same person out on the golf course swinging the club, but the thought bubble was of being at home making love to his partner in bed. We can probably relate to that part too. The third panel was the person at home making love to their partner in bed, and the thought bubble was of being in front of their computer at work.

This is all too representative, isn't it, of the distracted mind? Wherever we are, we're thinking about something else. This is not the mind that has really come together in the present moment. So there's always this undercurrent in a life like that, in moments like that which we all know—this undercurrent of not full satisfaction, not complete fulfillment, but a wanting something other.

So I want to suggest that this is a potent image, this kind of cartoon image, and invite you to investigate: when you're not with your anchor for right now, when you're not with your focus in the present moment, where are you? What's happening? When you're not in the present moment, where is your attention?

We often say we get lost in the past or the future. We're planning or we're remembering or we're analyzing or we're conversing or we're comparing or we're in some kind of fantasy. Take a look and see if that's accurate. When you come back from these excursions, thoughts and images, where were you? What were you doing? What were you involved with?

Sometimes we call these distractions. But you know, if we're honest, these are not emotionally neutral activities. We go off into regrets about the past. We go off into worries about the future. We go into judging ourselves for something we didn't do quite skillfully. We go off into resentment of other people who we feel weren't fair to us. We find longings and wants for something that isn't here. These are the things that stir us up.

So in your meditation, when you come back to the present moment after a thought excursion, take a look at your mood and your state of mind. Did that thought excursion help bring calm and peace and settledness? Or did it stir things up more?

Generally, these thought excursions are into the realm of seductive thoughts and emotions. And what seduces us is hope and fear, pleasure and pain. So we return from these excursions a little more stirred up than when we entered them. Check it out. Take a look in your meditation and see if it's somewhat like that.

When we give a lot of attention to these thoughts, especially charged thoughts around past and future, we end up getting more stressed. We end up getting a little bit disturbed and we lose any sense of calm we may have had. Then we come back to the present moment, we pay attention for a while, a little bit more calm comes back in. Next excursion, some thoughts come along and we become stirred up.

So what the Buddha said about giving our attention to these kinds of thoughts that basically stir us up and revolve around hope and fear is that it's a form of unwise attention. We're giving our attention to things that don't end up making us happy.

And we tend to do this a lot with our thinking. The thinking stirs up emotions that don't make us happy. Then take a look at how it feels when you're able to sustain your attention in the present moment for a while—notice if it doesn't bring about some kind of settling of the energy, of the disturbing thoughts, of the hope and fear. And this is what the Buddha said is wise attention.

Wise attention is giving time to things that lead to our happiness and our growth, things that lead to our deepening in the Dhamma. This is wise attention. And of course, the present moment is the foremost of those. In our style of meditation, mostly where we want to give our wise attention is to the present moment. It's also helpful to engage

in Dharma reflection—we'll talk about that probably later in some moderation—but particularly paying attention to the present moment, knowing what you're experiencing. That's our path. That's the way we grow in the Dhamma.

So the first benefit of mindfulness is we're not running off into distracting emotions that stir up the mind. And then the second thing is that as we settle more in the present moment, a lot of wholesome qualities come out of that.

As I mentioned within the Satipatthana discourse, the first foundation is that of the body. And the Buddha talked a lot about mindfulness of the body. So I want to talk about that generally for a bit. He spoke in praise of mindfulness of the body over and over. There's one section in one of these texts—the numerical discourses, the Anguttara Nikaya—where there are fifty discourses in a row on the benefits of mindfulness of the body. Fifty in a row. And here's one of the quotes:

"When one thing is developed and cultivated, the body becomes tranquil, the mind becomes tranquil, extraneous thoughts subside, and all wholesome qualities that pertain to wisdom reach fulfillment. What is that one thing? Mindfulness directed to the body."

I find this really interesting because ultimately meditation is all about the mind. The heart of meditation is about the mind because suffering and the end of suffering really are in the mind. The source of suffering, as you know from the Second Noble Truth, is craving. And that's a mental activity. The five hindrances are states of mind. The four right efforts are about states of mind. So are the seven factors of enlightenment and the five spiritual faculties. The heart of the Buddha's teaching is around states of mind. And yet, mindfulness of the body is the foundation for us. Why is that? Why did the Buddha emphasize it so much?

There are a few reasons. One is that it's always available. The body is always with us, whether we want it to be or not. It's always here. So this practice is always available. It's not like you're practicing with bliss or rapture, which come and go—you're practicing with something you already have. It's already there.

The other thing that's really helpful is that the reality of the body is fairly firm compared to the reality of the mind. The Buddha said that if you're going to identify with anything—meaning make an "I" out of anything, claim anything, like "I am the body" or "this is my body," or "I am the mind" or "this is my mind"—he said it's better to identify with the body than with the mind. Why? Because the mind changes so quickly. Whatever you identify with could be gone in an instant, but the body is here. It changes too, but a lot more slowly.

So there's this kind of firm reality, and you feel that as you sit. The body has a very grounding quality because a lot of it is the earth element. You can feel yourself settle into it and let it rest on the earth and feel the firmness and solidity of it. The more you get in touch with that, the more that stability transfers to the mind. As you ground the attention in the body, the mind picks up by osmosis that stability. And you start to realize that you can sit here for forty-five minutes in the hall and the body is quite still, and the mind may have gone through a roller coaster of waves, but the body has just been there stable. And the more you connect with that, the more you understand—oh, these waves are going to come and go.

And in the end, they don't last all that long. But the body is here, and I can rest in it. To some extent, I can trust in it a little more.

One of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, gave this advice to his students: "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body." Contrast this with our life as Westerners, with this famous line from James Joyce in Ulysses, said of a character, "Mr. Duffy always lived a short distance from his body." You may know people like that—not quite at home.

Now in meditation, sometimes the body is not so difficult to come back into. If there's been trauma earlier in life, the body may not be an inviting or comfortable place to be. And so work with your practice teachers to figure out how to navigate that. Eventually you want to start coming back into the body, but to do it in a measured way that's not overwhelming when there's perhaps a trauma history there.

So the body sits and manifests a lot of equanimity through all the changing waves of thoughts and emotions. As we tune into it, we pick up some of that equanimity. But also the body reflects the mind—really honestly and really accurately. If there's a strong emotion going on in the mind, you'll feel it in the body. There's this great book title: "The Body Doesn't Lie." And it doesn't. The body will reflect whatever's going on in the mind.

If there's tension in the body that you identify as habitual, long-term tension, or you feel it arising spontaneously in the moment, it's important to listen to that because often it's an indicator of something that's gone on in the mind. Once the mind becomes calm, the body starts to calm. When the mind gets agitated, the body usually reflects that. So we can learn a lot about our emotions by tuning in to what's going on in the body. And if we don't move away, it will keep bringing us back in touch with what's happening emotionally.

So that's mindfulness of the body. Within mindfulness of the body is mindfulness of breathing. It's one of the experiences that we find within the body—the experience of the breath going out and the breath coming in.

About this, from the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, the Buddha said, "When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. It leads directly to true wisdom and deliverance." So this practice can be a single path that one follows for years in one's practice career.

In fact, after the Buddha was awakened and began teaching, he still went back into retreat. I find this really interesting. His mind was already free. He had no more suffering. He had no more unwholesome mind states. And he would still go back into retreat for three months at a time. After one of these retreats, he said, "During my retreat I practiced mindfulness of breathing." And this is a quote: "If anyone could say of anything that it is a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Buddha's dwelling, it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one would rightly say this." He spoke highly of this even after his awakening.

So why is it so helpful? Why is it such a central practice in our tradition?

One of the really nice things is breathing happens by itself. It's part of the semi-autonomous nervous system, and even if you don't pay attention to it, it's going to keep going. So that means we don't have to do anything to breathe, and that's one thing we can let go of and start to relax into. The breath's going to happen. It's going to go by itself. Just relax and feel it. You don't have to do anything to breathe.

And like the body, it's always there. We hope it's always there. If it's not, call me or Karin. So it's reliable. It's always present. It's basically neutral. Breathing is generally a neutral experience unless you've had some history where it's been troubling.

But although it's neutral, it has great potential for pleasure. Because as the disturbing thoughts start to settle down, that relaxation in the body, that tranquility, is felt as a pleasant thing.

Finding pleasure in your meditation is really, really helpful. Not only will it bring you back to the meditation cushion more often, but the experience of pleasure inwardly is that we relax more. And that relaxation leads to a collectedness of mind called concentration that's very helpful for insight as well.

Sometimes tune into the rhythm of your breath. Let it be natural. You don't need to control it. But tune into the rhythm. When you can relax and let it just go on its own, there's something really soothing about the rhythm of breathing. I don't know if this is

true, but it may even take us back to the time as an infant when we were cradled on our mother's chest and feeling that coming and going, a rising and falling, inhale and exhale of our mother's breath. But our own breath can kind of cradle us and rock us in the same way. It's very calming and soothing when you can relax into that.

You want to let the rhythm be natural in order for that to happen. You have to let go of trying to control it. That's not easy in the beginning. As soon as we start to pay attention to the breath, we have a tendency to want to direct it—okay, now breathe in, now breathe out, now breathe in, now breathe out. That's okay. A little bit of control, even though it's not recommended, will often happen in the beginning. As you relax more, that little bit of control will go away, and then the relaxation becomes stronger.

Another great thing about the breath is it has a wonderful way to balance the energy. It's interesting to look at the difference, feel the difference between breathing in and breathing out. They have very different effects in the body. Breathing in is energizing. The word in Pali is *pana*. That's why it's the *anapana* discourse—in-breathing and out-breathing. So *pana* is breathing, is breath. The Sanskrit for it you're probably more familiar with is *prana*. And so *prana* in the yogic tradition has connotations of life, vitality, and energy. It originally just meant breath. In yogic practices they use the breath a lot to control the energies of the body. In our meditations we don't use it to control in that way. We just let it be natural.

But you will notice that breathing in has an energizing aspect. You can feel it in many parts of the body. It's kind of an uplift in that way. And then breathing out has a relaxation quality. You can tune into that and kind of encourage the relaxation with the out-breath. You might think on the out-breath that you're letting go. And the breath just goes out into space. And as you kind of feel that out-breath going out into space, you might feel your own mind kind of emptying. You feel that connection to space and it opens up space in your own mind. So you can start to tune in to the energizing aspect of the in-breath, the relaxing aspect of the out-breath.

The other strength of this meditation is that—and this applies to any of the anchors—when you're clear that for a period of time you're choosing to focus on body or sounds or breath, then it really becomes clear when you're not there. So it highlights the times that we go away. Those stand out by contrast. You're with the anchor for a while, for a while, for a while, then you're not with it. That means you're off somewhere else. And then you kind of wake up—oh, I haven't been with the anchor. Oh, where was I? Oh, thinking, imaging, something like that. So it highlights those times of excursion, makes it clear.

And then check—oh, how am I feeling after that excursion? Oh, stirred up a bit. If we practice with open attention where mindfulness of thoughts and images is part of the practice, part of the territory, honestly it's easier to be a little lost in those without recognizing that we're lost. That's my experience anyway.

Meditation on breath is an elemental kind of meditation. We're meditating on the wind element. There are four classical physical elements that we experience in meditation. The wind element is one of them. What's nice about connecting with these elemental qualities—the others are earth, water, fire, or heat—is that it connects us to nature. We feel the air coming into our body, and it's a lot like the wind that's rustling the leaves on the trees outside when there's a breeze.

It also brings up this interesting question about self and not-self. When the air's out there, we don't think of it as us, right? When you breathe it in, at what point does it become you? Is it when it first enters your nostril? Or is it when it goes into the lungs and binds with the blood? And at what point is it no longer you? When it leaves the lungs or when it leaves the nostrils? There's this transition. We're always going back and forth with nature. Bringing nature in and it becomes part of what we consider us. And breathing out and it becomes part of what we no longer consider us. It's back to nature. That's an interesting exploration.

The Buddha also said that practicing mindfulness of breathing, even though it's in the first foundation of mindfulness, fulfills all the other three. In the second foundation of feeling tone, one of the instructions in the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing is breathing in and experiencing pleasure, breathing out and experiencing pleasure. So there's the feeling tone. In the third foundation, breathing in, gladdening the mind, breathing out, gladdening the mind. The breath is directly affecting our mind state. And the fourth foundation: breathing in, contemplating impermanence; breathing out, contemplating impermanence. This is opening up to dhammas or wisdom, dharmic principles, understanding what's going on. This is mindfulness of breathing as a whole.

It's interesting that in this discourse, the Buddha doesn't tell us exactly where to pay attention to the breath. Over the years, people have developed practical approaches. Inside the nose is fine—breath in the nostrils. Just below the nose on the upper lip is fine. Chest rising and falling is fine. Belly rising and falling is fine. Feeling the breath in the whole body is fine. Sometimes people like to track the breath coming in through the nostrils, going down, expanding the chest, expanding the belly, and on the out-breath reversing—tracking the course of the breath as it comes in and out. That's also fine. Anything that feels accessible for you is fine.

As I mentioned this morning, there are some obstacles or difficulties that people often experience taking breath as a focus and why it may not work for everyone. There could have been a past difficulty from asthma or some injury that has conditioned the relationship to breathing and made it not comfortable or easy. And then there are particular hindrances that come up.

One is striving. Striving is basically the desire force that is taking root in the meditative realm or the realm of meditative experience. As an example, we're settling in, a few days into the retreat. We start to feel some periods of calm, maybe even a whole sitting where there's a lot of calm. And then the next sitting, we want that again. We want to re-experience that delightful feeling of calm. To get it back, we may lean on the breath harder with an extra amount of effort that's kind of tense because we want a result. The calm comes when we're just able to be with the breath out of the innocent motive of interest—interest in wise attention. Then the mind relaxes and settles. But if we're approaching the breath in order to get somewhere else, the motive is not pure anymore and tension comes in. We're looking for result and not just to know what's happening.

So what do you do when that happens? I've come across this a lot. One of the places I came across it really clearly was when I went to Burma some years ago. I ordained as a monk just for a short period of time because I wanted to practice with a great Burmese master named Pauk Sayadaw. He's in his eighties now, and he's recognized as one of the great masters still living in our tradition in both concentration and insight practices. I went to him specifically because I wanted to practice mindfulness of breathing to develop stronger concentration.

In his traditional style, I would see him regularly for interviews. He was the abbot of a very large monastery. When I went there, there were 750 people practicing in his monastery—600 monastics, both male and female, and 150 lay practitioners. So there were many people there, some of them very accomplished meditators.

Knowing I was a teacher back in the West, he gave me an interview every day. I'd go to his kuti and meet him outside on his deck. It was a very public affair—we'd all line up and wait for our chance to report on our experience to Sayadaw, then he'd give us advice. We'd hear each other's interviews, which was quite humbling.

One day I remember there was a young Burmese monk ahead of me. I'd been practicing for many years at that point, and this young monk couldn't have been practicing for very long. His report was, "Oh, Sayadaw, I sat for three hours yesterday in the third jhana in the meditation hall." That's a very advanced state of concentration, especially in his system. So it was humbling to hear those reports.

Then I'd give my little report: "Oh, Sayadaw, I'm having hindrances," or whatever I was working on at that point.

What I was reporting on one time was, "Oh, I'm striving. I find I'm striving in my meditation because I go through periods of calm and then I want to re-experience them." I asked for his advice. He just looked at me and said, "Don't do that."

Often his advice was very pithy. When I asked him about the hindrances, he said, "If you have aversion, do metta. If you're sleepy, pull your earlobes." This actually works pretty well—try it sometime when you're sleepy. Yank on your earlobes and it does tend to wake you up. So that was his advice for the hindrances, and on striving it was simply "don't do it."

But if you find yourself striving, you might feel it first as a tension in the body—the body's kind of tight like you're leaning forward, thinking "next moment, not this moment." Recognize it through that sensation and then see what might need to be let go of. Sometimes it's helpful to drop that practice and open to sounds. Just let go of the focus on the breath and open to sounds, because it's a very spacious and relaxing focus.

Another possible problem is aversion to thoughts. We start finding our way into these calm places and begin thinking, "Oh, I get it—thoughts are the problem. If I could just stop thinking, it would all be okay." This is a misguided observation. Thoughts aren't the problem, and our practice is not about stopping thinking. If you think that, you'll tie yourself up in knots, because there's no way we can stop our thinking by any effort of will. If we try to stop thinking through willful effort, it results in a big contraction. That tension is not conducive to relaxation and ease, which are the wellsprings of concentration.

The problem is not recognizing thoughts. If we recognize a thought upon arising—not a problem. It's recognized and then it usually dissolves.

It's the not recognizing thoughts that leads us into being seduced, carrying us far down the road with that thought train. This is what stirs us up. We give away our basic peace by going on these thought train excursions.

Part of wisdom is recognizing that this isn't wise attention and learning to reframe. We cannot stop thinking, but we can develop more and more choice about not following the train tracks of those thoughts. The thought arises—fine for it to be there—but I choose not to pursue it. This becomes the skillful choice point.

Joseph Goldstein offers wonderful guidance for meditation: "Nothing is worth thinking about." This is excellent advice. Whatever kinds of thoughts arise—even those that seem like the most brilliant creative urges you've ever experienced—simply say "not now" and return to the present moment. You can do this right in the middle of meditation: "Not now," and back to the breath.

This practice leads us to trust the still heart and mind as the most reliable source of creative response to life. Whatever personal problems we might feel inclined to work on, we will not solve them through thinking. The response must come from a different place—from the deep settledness, stillness, and openness that meditation cultivates. From that space, truly new approaches, ideas, and solutions can simply arise. Trust this more than thinking through problems. It works better.

The last hindrance I want to address is judgment. We often hold some concept that we should be present with every breath, every sound, every moment of bodily experience. This becomes particularly highlighted with the breath because breaths are so discrete and clear. When we are not present with the breath for a while, we think we have failed. We become very judgmental: "Oh, I've been away in thought for so long. I'm really a terrible meditator, and I'm never going to learn how to do this." Then the thoughts spiral downward: "I should not have missed that whole stretch."

We believe we should be present with more breaths than we actually are, and away for less time than we actually were. Let me ask: what is the right number of breaths to be with in a sitting that would qualify you as a good meditator? Do you know the answer? Has anyone ever told you? Yet we judge ourselves for not meeting some fictitious standard.

Simply release the idea that there is any standard about this. You are making your best effort. Accept what comes. There will be excursions. Has anyone ever told you the right length of time to be away in a thought excursion? No. The right length of time for you right now is exactly the time you were away.

Did you pull yourself back by an act of will? No. There are simply these spontaneous moments of return to the present moment. How wonderful! Our past practice habits make such returns more likely, but the process itself is beyond our control.

Take your actual experience as your standard. This is the way things are right now. I am making my best effort. This is what is happening. That is my standard, and it is perfectly fine. Watch out for judgment—it can be truly crippling.

Looking at the trajectory of this practice, the meditation does work.

One comes more and more to abide in the present moment. The thought excursions do lessen. And as that happens, the mind becomes more peaceful and the body becomes more peaceful. The center of gravity of our being starts to shift.

When I came into meditation, my center of gravity was in the thought world. That's where I lived almost all my waking hours. I almost always had some thought running through my mind, and that's where I hung out. That was my center of gravity.

As time went by and I could see thought as just another arising in the field of awareness, my center of gravity started to shift to the empty space—the empty space that's created by mindfulness. Then thoughts were just blips in that empty space.

So this happens. We dwell more and more in that wide openness that has tremendous wisdom potential. Ajahn Sumedho likes to call that space intuitive awareness. It's from this open, receptive, still place that the deepest insights and creative responses to life arise—the insights that eventually liberate us. We learn to trust the insights and understandings that emerge from that kind of silent space.

I love this quote from Albert Einstein: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift." So we're here to rediscover that gift. Meditation returns that gift to us in its proper perspective.

I'll close with this quote from the Buddha: "Mindfulness of breathing is peaceful and sublime. It is an abiding in happiness that breaks up and calms unwholesome mental states whenever they arise."

Let's have a few moments of silence to allow the words to settle before we move into walking. We'll just sit for a minute together in silence.

"This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbāna—namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

We have about thirty minutes now for walking, and then there will be the last sitting of the day with chanting at nine. Don't be afraid to come—Annie promised the sitting will end at 9:20. It's wonderful to learn a new chant, so please do return.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 65

Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this opening retreat session, Guy Armstrong provides comprehensive meditation instructions for establishing mindfulness practice during an intensive three-month retreat. He explores three primary meditation anchors: mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati), whole-body awareness, and sound consciousness, emphasizing the importance of finding the most suitable focus for each practitioner.*
>
> *Armstrong guides retreatants through the foundational approach of using a chosen anchor to stabilize attention and develop clear recognition of present-moment awareness versus mental proliferation. He addresses common challenges with breath meditation, including over-efforting and anxiety, while offering alternative approaches through body posture and sound receptivity. The instructions emphasize beginning from relaxation rather than striving, cultivating the meditative balance of alertness and ease.*
>
> *The session concludes with a community ceremony of digital renunciation, where participants formally relinquish their phones while chanting the traditional refuge formula (Buddhaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi, Dhammaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṁ saraṇaṁ gacchāmi). This ritual exemplifies the retreat's emphasis on simplification and community commitment, supporting practitioners in creating optimal conditions for deepening meditation practice and wisdom development.*

Good morning everyone.

I hope you're starting to settle in and feeling well rested this morning. It does take a few days to settle into a retreat, and when you add jet lag into it, things get complicated—even remembering where your room is, figuring out when you can take a shower, or how to do your work meditation. These details tend to occupy the first couple of days, so it's good we're easing in gently to the rhythm.

Today will be our first full day of silence and a full schedule of sittings and walkings. I'll fill in more details about that later.

In this morning sit, as Brian mentioned, each morning we will provide new meditation instructions. This will be very helpful so that as we go along, you'll receive a complete set of instructions that we're suggesting you follow. It would be nice if we could just begin and say, "All right, from this moment on we want you to be mindful of everything that happens in a clear and choiceless manner. End of instructions." That's

where we're going, but we find that it really helps if we unfold stage-by-stage instructions for all the different facets of your experience. So that's what we'll be doing over these ten days to two weeks—going through all the different pieces that make up a moment of experience for us as meditators.

This morning we'll continue with the instructions that Brian offered yesterday. As he said, we'll be working with an anchor for the first few days of the retreat. The reason we do that is to stabilize the attention. It's so easy, as you all know in meditation, for the attention to go other places than the present moment—basically into thoughts, fantasies, images, memories, anticipations, and so on. By choosing one area to come back to again and again, we start to build up a mindful relationship to that experience. And because we have a chosen focus, it's clear when we're not there, when we're not with it. So choosing a focus for these days really helps us see clearly: am I in the present and with my anchor, or am I not? This will help bring the attention back more regularly to the present moment, and that's why we begin this way.

As Brian said, you might be comfortable with the breath as an anchor. Many, many meditators are. Some are not. In my experience, the people who are not so comfortable with the breath are those for whom it becomes an area for striving—where the worry increases that we'll miss a single breath. And so there's an over-efforting, a striving, a getting a little too tight around being with each and every inhale and exhale. If you're with the breath and you find that tension is just increasing in your body and in your mind, that's a sign the breath may not be the right choice for you, or you need to be more relaxed in your relationship to it. So you can check on that and play with that.

If the breath doesn't work, another reason could be that there's some past history of difficulty in breathing. For instance, people who had asthma in childhood or who've had an injury in the area of the chest might have a complicated relationship to the breath where it brings up anxiety to focus on it. So in that case, again, choosing a simpler object that's more neutral might be more suitable. And that's why we offer also the body, the body posture in sitting, or sounds as alternatives.

I'll go through each of these three anchors in the instructions this morning, and you can see what feels most helpful for you. With all of them, the important thing is to begin from a place of relaxation. We start from a place of just settling into the present moment the way it is. And from that relaxed attitude, then we meet our present moment experience, however it shows up.

So let's begin with the meditation.

In your sitting posture, check that you can feel this quality of relaxation. As you're sitting, let the body be upright. Let the back be reasonably straight, but not like there's an iron rod up your spine. Feel that you're upright and sitting with some dignity that brings in a sense of alertness and energy, but also that you can feel within the posture a sense of some relaxation or as much ease as possible. You could say that the posture reflects this balance of alertness and relaxation that we also want to find in the mind. The meditative mind should have this combination of a degree of firmness and a base of relaxation.

As you tune into your sitting posture, just begin by settling your attention within the body. Let go of any obvious areas of holding. Let the forehead be unwrinkled, unfrowning. Soften the eyes. The jaw can be unclenched. The shoulders dropped, and the belly soft. The hands can rest in a relaxed way in the lap or on your thighs.

In this way, you can feel the awareness pervading the whole body. Anywhere you direct your attention within the frame of the body, the awareness is there—from the top of the head, through the torso, to the hips.

legs and feet. Awareness is present throughout the body.

In some places it will reveal sensations—sensations of pulsing or tingling, warmth or coolness, tightness or softness. In other areas, no sensations may be apparent. That's fine too. We get the sense of the awareness pervading the whole body, and you can rest with that.

In this way, you can practice with the whole body or the sitting posture as an anchor. From that base, let the attention become wider and open to all the sounds that are arising. Could be the sounds of one another, sound of my voice, sounds of the building, sounds from outside.

Notice how a sound can arise in any part of the room or outside in any direction, and it's heard without any effort on your part. This effortless quality in hearing leads us into an attitude of receptivity—just like you're listening to a concert, or in nature, listening to the sound of the wind in the leaves. So just in resting and being open, sounds are known spontaneously, effortlessly. Sound can become a second kind of anchor for some people.

Then returning the attention to be with the body, to be felt in the body, through the body. Allow the experience in the body to be felt just the way it is, not needing to change or correct anything. There may be a mix of pleasant sensation, unpleasant sensation—just allowing that all to be the way it is, all held in awareness, known through awareness.

As you settle your attention into the experience of the body here and now, you'll begin to feel the changing sensations that come from breathing. Every time there's an in-breath, new sensations are arising and passing in the body. Every time there's an out-breath, different sensations are appearing.

As you maintain your awareness of the whole body, start to tune in to these changing sensations of breath. What happens on an in-breath in the body? What happens on an out-breath? How far throughout the body can you feel the in-breath happening? How far throughout the body can you feel the out-breath?

So not trying to change the breath or control the breath, make it long or short, shallow or deep. Let the breath just come and go naturally, but feel it, feel it in the body. This is the third option for an anchor—maintaining a receptive attitude, receiving the breath the way you would receive sounds at a concert. Allow the breath to find its natural rhythm, based in ease and relaxation.

Then just maintaining this continuity of mindfulness of breathing, resting the attention in the body, feeling each in-breath and feeling each out-breath.

From time to time your attention will move away from connection with the body or breath, and you'll be drawn into some string of thinking or imagery. Then after some time you'll notice that you've been away from the connection with the breath and body. So don't judge that excursion. We all will take these thought excursions.

But when you notice that thoughts or images have been taking the attention, just acknowledge that: "Oh, thinking" or "image." Appreciate that spontaneous return to the present, and then again, rest in the body, feeling the breathing—each in-breath, each out-breath.

These will be the instructions for your sitting meditations throughout the day today, continuing to explore the anchor, finding the one that feels most suitable for you. The real gauge is what helps you stay in the present moment the best, whether that's the whole body posture, sounds, or the breath.

The instructions I gave this morning were really around feeling the breath through the whole body, which I think is a really nice way to practice because it brings in the sense of relaxation and receptivity. But many of you may have an established breath practice where you're experiencing the breath at the nose, in the belly, or at the chest, and maybe that's clearer for you.

If that feels more comfortable for you as a way to practice with mindfulness of breathing, please follow that. This whole body breath is one option, but also the nostrils, the chest, or the belly are also fine. Whatever you're comfortable with and works for you—all of those are fine.

This is the morning where we're doing the renunciation of cell phones for those who wish. It is something that we really encourage, and this is helpful on a number of levels.

I think we all know that screens have become profoundly problematic in our culture today. It's easy to become addicted. Children are spending so much time with their screens that one writer referred to it as "nature deficit disorder" for kids these days—they simply don't want to go outside anymore.

The giving up of cell phones for a period like six weeks or three months is part of acknowledging this over-reliance, particularly our connection to the internet where anonymity leads to wrong speech. There's false speech, angry speech, and divisive speech—all of which the Buddha spoke of very clearly as things to avoid. The anonymity of online spaces gives leeway for these unwholesome expressions.

So in renouncing our cell phones, we're stepping away from that, at least temporarily. Every so often I see an article on the homepage of news sites: "In a bold experiment, young person gives up their phone and all social media for a month." Well, you all are doing so much more than that. I think each of you should be a front-page story in the New York Times. I deeply appreciate your commitment in the way Annie spoke about last night.

As an additional step, we often refer to this as renunciation—a word that carries perhaps negative connotations in modern society. But a better way, an easier way to think of it, is simplification. Our whole approach to retreat is simplifying our daily life so we can give our full attention to being in the present moment. Anything that leads away from that as a regular part of our day, we try not to engage in.

That's why we suggest not reading, not writing, and definitely not connecting to the internet, texts, and so forth. Some people have received very disturbing texts in the middle of retreat that have completely disrupted their experience. By turning your phone over to the office and letting them be in charge of it, you'll be truly protected and safe. We really encourage this, though it's not mandatory.

The reason we're doing this as a ceremony—rather than simply asking you to take your phone to Rebecca, who would give you an envelope, write your name, and put it away in a safe for six weeks or three months—is that ceremony is one of the things that bonds a community. That's what rituals are for: bonding in spiritual communities.

What happens as you see people turning in their cell phones is that you appreciate their commitment. They make their commitment visible. It's like when somebody shows up for a group sitting—they're making their commitment visible, and it really supports the rest of us. It's the visibility of the renunciation that we emphasize in making this a public ritual or ceremony. This is one of those things that binds communities together.

To add a ritual element, we'll include some Pali chanting. As people come up to drop their cell phones in, all of us—not just teachers, but all of you—will join in the chanting. We'll chant the three refuges, just the first version: "Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi," and then repeat those same three lines again and again. They're in the first paragraph of your chant sheet under "Refuges and Precepts," but you'll pick it up quickly.

Those of you who have your cell phones already in an envelope and prepared to give them up, please line up at the back, forming a line that leads to the front. We have a basket here where you can drop your phone. We will bow to you and ring a bell each time a phone is renounced, accompanying that with the chant.

If you meant to bring your cell phone but left it in your room, or if you just feel at this moment like you'd like to participate, there are more packets with envelopes just outside this door in the walking room. Or if you need to go to your room to get your cell phone, you're welcome to do that during the ceremony.

If you've already dropped your cell phone off but would like to be part of the ceremony, please come up and bow, or express your participation however feels appropriate to you.

Now we begin together with our chanting of the triple refuge: *Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*

Please begin to come forward now.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi, Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi...

[The chant continues as participants process forward to place their phones in the basket, each repetition accompanying their steps toward this symbolic act of letting go]

Thank you all for your expression of this commitment to simplicity. May it be the cause for your deepening in wisdom and loving-kindness.

A few announcements before we leave this morning. There will be a walking period coming up. In the walking meditation, please continue for this period to follow the simple instructions Brian gave yesterday. Stay grounded in your body. You can focus on the feeling of moving through the whole body, or on the movement of the legs and feet.

At the end of the ten o'clock sit, Annie will give more detailed instructions in walking meditation. If you already have a well-established walking practice, you don't need to come to that sit. But if you'd like a refresher, if you feel like your walking would benefit from a little tune-up, please come to the ten o'clock sitting this morning.

At 11:30, Brian will lead a session on good posture. Again, this is optional, but as you start into a long period of retreat, it's good to get your body in proper alignment from the beginning. Without it, stress on the back, neck, knees can build up over time. This session is highly recommended. Brian has extensive experience and will give many helpful tips on how to sit properly and comfortably. He'll conclude before lunch.

At 6:15 today, we have the affinity group sit for the LGBTQIA+ community. This will be in room M204, right at the top of the main staircase. Just go to the top of the stairs, turn right, and you'll find it. There's also a note on the board reminding you.

Someone asked whether you have to wait for an emergency to contact retreat support—that is, May or Karin—by going to the office and picking up the red phone. Not necessarily. If you find yourself in a place in your practice where you could use a little contact, a little support to help you through a difficult patch, but it's not an emergency, you can simply leave a note on the board for retreat support. If you forget the name "retreat support," you can address it to the retreat manager, and Rebecca will pass it on to one of them. They will get back in touch with you by note and find a time to meet. They are available for support in situations that aren't emergencies as well.

The last thing to mention is that we will begin the scheduled practice meetings tomorrow morning. Those notices will go up on the board later this afternoon, probably by tea time. Please check the board later today. We'll see half the group tomorrow and the other half the next day—half the group on Friday, the other half on Saturday. So if your name doesn't appear today, don't worry. We haven't forgotten you.

This time now is a walking period until the ten o'clock sit. May you have a beneficial day of mindfulness practice.

CHAPTER 66

Morning Instructions - Thoughts

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this retreat instruction, Guy Armstrong addresses one of meditation's most challenging aspects: working skillfully with thoughts. Drawing from the Buddha's middle way approach, he emphasizes that thoughts aren't the enemy - it's not noticing them that creates problems. The talk explores three practical approaches: noting thoughts as 'thinking,' taking thought as primary meditation object through the 'thought game,' and working with repetitive thought patterns by identifying underlying emotions.*
>
> *Armstrong explains how thoughts, though appearing as mere whispers of words, have tremendous power to shape our lives and decisions. He guides practitioners to shift from living in thought content to resting in the spacious awareness that mindfulness reveals. The session includes detailed meditation instructions for observing thoughts as they arise, persist, and pass away, while maintaining present-moment awareness.*
>
> *Addressing common questions, Armstrong clarifies the relationship between the Second Noble Truth (craving as suffering's cause) and attachment to self, explaining through the Paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination) how contact, vedanā (feeling tone), taṇhā (craving), and upādāna (clinging) interconnect with self-construction. He emphasizes the Buddha's instruction to the Kālāmas: verify teachings through direct experience rather than blind belief.*

This morning we're going to expand the field of the meditation instructions to take in the whole area of thoughts. We've delayed this focus for a few days because thoughts are so tricky. They're very slippery. As you've probably seen, it's a slippery slope into getting fascinated with their content and losing touch with the present moment.

It can come to seem that in meditation, thoughts are really the enemy—the thief of our mindfulness. We might think, "I can't be mindful if I'm thinking, and good meditation must happen when there aren't any thoughts." But that's really a misunderstanding. Thoughts aren't the enemy. It's not noticing them that is the problem.

What we want to do is bring the same mindful attention to the arising of thoughts as we do to the in-breath, the arising of a sound, a body sensation, an emotion, a hindrance, and so on. This is our challenge: Can we bring mindfulness into the realm of thinking?

What this means is we have to shift our relationship to thoughts from the ordinary one. When I came into meditation, I was pretty locked into the content of all my thoughts. That's where I lived—I really lived in my thoughts and they pretty much occupied every waking moment of every day. I was lost in the content, not really aware that that's what was happening.

We're going to shift our relationship into a mindful one that can see thought as another thing that arises, persists, and passes away in the present moment. This is the challenge, and the reason it's challenging is because thoughts are very seductive. If you look closely at the content of thoughts, they tend to be things that arouse our emotions, so it's very easy to get pulled into that content. That's what's seductive about it. The pleasure and pain, the hope and fear, the praise and blame—these all get played out through our thoughts.

Yet if you look at a thought closely, what is it? Most of the time I'll use "thoughts" to mean a string of words that appear in the mind. Some people think in images, and images might also be a form of thinking—whichever way it expresses for you. But let's take this string of words that appears in the mind, basically a form of speech, speaking to ourselves but not vocalizing it. If you look closely at it, all it is is a little whisper of words.

And in fact, as soon as you notice the thought, what usually happens to it? Poof—it's gone. Yet when they're not recognized, thoughts have this incredible power. I'd say every major decision we make in life comes out of our thinking. I remember when I was in college, I was really fascinated with Zen Buddhism. This thought came: "I'd really like to see Asia." Then in a blink of an eye, I found myself in Malaysia teaching for two years with the Peace Corps. One thought, two years in Asia—direct connection.

You could even say our lives are ruled by thought. The world is ruled by thought. But when we look at what a thought is, it's just this slender whisper—poof. Yet it's the power that we give them that truly rules the world.

Our training in meditation will be to see a thought in the present moment, to watch it arise, persist as it expresses itself, and then pass away. That will be the theme of the morning's instructions.

When we get more familiar with this—it's not easy at first, but when we become more familiar with it—the whole center of gravity of our being shifts. Instead of living in the world of thought and occasionally touching the present moment, we start to live

in this big open space of awareness that's like the sky, which is where mindfulness is born. Then thoughts are an occasional puff of smoke in that open spaciousness of awareness. We can take our home in the space and not in the concepts.

In the meditation and guiding this morning, we're going to look at three aspects of working with thoughts. One is simply beginning to notice them, with a suggestion to note them as "thinking." The second is taking thought as the primary focus. This is quite fun—we'll approach it through something we call the thought game. We'll just do that for short periods of time, but it will be an interesting exploration.

The third thing involves dealing with repetitive thoughts, because we all have our top ten list, don't we? It could be the difficult boss thought, or the partner conflict thought, or the "I'm worried about my kids" thought, or "what's happening with my health on this retreat" thought that we bring up over and over. We want to start identifying the particular ones that come often and maybe find some names for those and learn how to work with them skillfully.

Okay, I think that's enough of a preamble so we can go into our formal meditation at this point.

So again, please sit comfortably. Find in your posture that uprightness that also has a sense of ease and relaxation. Connect first with your anchor—the overall body and sitting, sounds or breath. One of the reasons it's helpful to develop a relationship with this focus is that it becomes like a resting place for us. If nothing else strong is going on, we can always come back to this. It's like a meditation home.

Then from that home, anything else that comes up that's strong enough to draw the attention—whether it's a sensation, a sound, an emotion or mental state or hindrance—we easily let the attention move away from the home base and make that new experience a focus for mindfulness. When the new experience fades, we can return, resting in our home base, our home.

So as you rest in your meditative home, one of the things that will draw your attention from time to time is the arising of a thought. Sometimes we don't notice the arising. Sometimes we don't know we're thinking until we've been in the content for a while, even a few minutes, several minutes, twenty minutes. And then we return to the present moment and we notice, "Oh, there's been thinking." Then we reconnect with our home base or with the body, sounds.

But now see if you can begin to notice a thought as it arises. Sometimes you'll notice it with the arising, sometimes you'll notice it partway in, sometimes you may just notice it at the end. But whenever you notice it, turn your mindful attention to that appear-

ance. That too has a lifespan. A thought arises, expresses itself, and passes away. Can mindfulness see that? Can your mindfulness be with a single thought without losing the connection to the present moment?

So you will notice the content of the thought. Don't think you have to blank out the content. Mindfulness can take that in, but you'll also see its passing nature. And then you're back in the present.

It can be helpful just to support the mindfulness. When a thought comes and you notice it, to note it—just the simple label "thinking." And that just says, "This is what's going on right now. I know my experience in this present moment is thinking." So in a way, that's like a little stake that mindfulness places in the ground right then. "This is my orientation. I know I'm thinking."

So practice with that, resting in your meditative home and just noticing any activity of thought as thinking. And for you it could be words, it could be an image. Let's try the same note: "thinking."

So in this way, a thought can come and go and we don't have to give up any of our present moment mindfulness. Thoughts are just another appearance. Once a thought has been noticed, you can return to your home base or with whatever experience is dominant in the next moment—sensation or sound, mood or emotion. Maintain the continuity of mindfulness through changing appearances.

The second way we'll work with thoughts in this meditation is to take thought as the primary focus for limited periods of time. This is kind of fun to play with. What that means is you're going to just sit quietly and sit in waiting, as it were, for the next thought to appear. Notice it, and then return just to waiting, resting. A little bit the image sometimes used is a cat outside a mouse hole. Cat's very attentive, but not focused on anything particular yet.

So perhaps develop that attentiveness with your anchor, your meditative home. Return to that. Ground the attention—body, sounds, breath. Rest in the anchor. And then have a sense—there are two ways to do this. Have a sense that there's a space around you or a space around your anchor. Or have a sense that there's like a screen in front of your eyes. Blank screen. And you're just waiting with your anchor until the next thought appears. And you're going to know it.

and come back to your anchor.

So let's try it.

Resting in the anchor and becoming mindful of the first thought that arises after the end of this sentence. And then returning the attention to your anchor again, resting with the anchor, collecting in the present moment, opening to the space or that visual screen.

And now becoming mindful of the next two thoughts that arise after this sentence, and bringing the attention back to the anchor. And check—was it possible to have more or less continuous mindfulness, even as those two thoughts were appearing and passing? So was it possible to know a thought without being carried out of the present moment?

Returning to the anchor, resting again. Opening to the sense of space or visual screen. And now becoming aware of every thought that comes for a limited period of time. I'll end this in a short while, but being aware of every single thought that comes and goes in this brief period.

And now returning to your anchor, reestablishing the attention there, firmly connected to the present moment. And in this next period of the meditation, you might just play with this thought game. Settling in the anchor and then taking thought as a primary focus for extended periods of time. Anytime you find yourself getting lost in the content or distracted, coming back into the anchor, just resettling in the present moment and opening up again when you feel ready. Taking thought as a primary focus.

If it starts feeling like you've lost the mindfulness, drawn into the content of thoughts, just come back to the anchor. Stay as long as needed to really settle again in the present moment. And if you feel inclined, open up again to thought as the primary focus.

The last of the meditative approaches I wanted to mention this morning has to do with repetitive thought patterns. So you've probably already seen that thoughts often run in certain grooves. If you look at it, thoughts tend to be drawn where there's some emotional charge, either of problems or of pleasure. So sometimes these run around relationships or work, vacation fantasies, friends, children, parents, money, home.

So starting just to recognize what subjects the thoughts tend to circle around and then developing a specific note for some of the main ones. So in addition to just "thinking," you might be specific and call it "planning thoughts," "remembering thoughts," "work thoughts," "relationship thoughts," "redecorating the apartment thoughts," whatever fits that particular train. And then when those thoughts arise, by labeling it

with that specific kind of thinking, it gives a little more distance around it. You know, we just start to get familiar—oh, that's one of the grooves the mind likes to run in. And we get a little more tolerant, accepting—okay, that's that tune again.

So you don't have to go looking for your own particular categories. But just practice as usual. But when one arises that you know comes often, developing a specific label: planning, comparing, judging, analyzing, rehearsing, and so on.

So in this part of the meditation, return again to your meditative home—breath, body, sounds. And from there, move easily to whatever naturally draws the attention: a sensation, a sound, a hindrance, energy, mood or emotion, or a thought. And just beginning to recognize the particular patterns of thinking that your own mind likes to go to. Starting to name some of the different categories that you see again and again. And if nothing particular is drawing the attention, just being content to rest with your anchor.

And one last instruction with repetitive thought patterns. If there's one kind of thought that comes again and again and it's really hard to get disconnected, to let it go, and it takes over your mind and a lot of feelings come with it, then it can be helpful to look at what's the emotion that is fueling the thought. And so in this case, with the repetitive thought pattern that feels quite charged and quite hard to let go of, drop down and feel what emotion is accompanying it.

For instance, with a lot of planning thoughts, there's an underlying emotion that's really driving the thinking. And that emotion many times is more fundamental than the thoughts. The thoughts are just kind of getting spun off from that emotion. So if we want to get a little deeper in relation to that thought pattern, let go of the focus on the thought and drop down to the emotional level. What am I feeling emotionally? And to support that, where am I feeling it in the body?

So to stay connected with the emotion, stay connected with where you feel it in the body. Ground the attention there. Just open to and allow the underlying emotion to be there just the way it is. Don't try to get rid of it. Don't need to judge it. Just open, feel it, and allow it. This is a more sure path to understanding than just staying on the level of the thought.

So please continue today to bring thoughts into the field of your mindfulness. It's such an interesting area. Thoughts are incredibly useful.

The meditation on thought isn't intended to deny the validity or usefulness of thought. I mean, look at the room we're in. Everything here exists because somebody thought about it—from the lights to the windows to the statues to the flowers.

Everything is here because of thought, and we're supported by all that past thought activity. We're probably here because our parents had thoughts about each other! So the world is often born from thoughts, and thought is very useful in that way.

And yet it can also become a kind of trap for us. When I came into meditation, I'd been through many years of school, and what school taught me to do was think. I had a lot of faith in thinking. I thought as I came into meditation, if I think more, I'll be able to solve my problems through thinking. Then I got a little more sophisticated and thought, well, I'll be able to think my way into enlightenment. By understanding the Dharma conceptually, I'll get free.

So I had a lot of attachment to thought and pursued thought extensively on the cushion. It took me a while to realize it wasn't working, and to trust in the silence as the ground from which real insight comes. Real insight is an intuitive process that sees the world in a new way. That's a creative process that comes better out of some degree of stillness.

In the beginning, I had a lot of desire for thinking. I thought it was going to solve things. Then in the middle, I had a lot of aversion to thinking because I thought it was destroying my silence. So take a look—which side of thinking are you on? Are you on the desiring side or the aversive side? What the Buddha tells us is that the middle way is the right approach. Don't be desirous with thoughts. Don't be aversive to thoughts. Let thoughts come when they come and go as they go.

Shinul, a Korean Zen teacher, put it beautifully. He said, "Don't be bothered by the fact that thoughts arise. Only be concerned that you're late in recognizing them." This is the key. If we can see them clearly, they're in the field of mindfulness, and that gives us a lot of protection. We see a thought for what it is.

There were a few questions in the basket, so I have time for at least a couple this morning. I'm going to start with a small picture one and then go to a big picture one. The small picture question: "Have you ever asked yourself, am I being brainwashed? Because sometimes I do, although it's a great feeling."

This is a good question. Are you being brainwashed here? Is this some kind of cult and we're indoctrinating you with views to make you our devotees? The first answer I want to give is: not at all. I think it's the opposite of brainwashing. What's really going on is heart-washing—we're cleaning up our heart from all the unwholesome states that have grown up in it.

But let me address the brainwashing piece first. What this implies is that you're being indoctrinated to believe along a certain line, and there are penalties for not believing—like we might send you to a re-education camp somewhere, perhaps in a cold northern monastery, if you don't follow what's being taught.

I want to put a framework behind the things we talk about in instructions and Dharma talks: check it out for yourself. Don't take anything on our word, but check it out for yourself and see if it's true in your experience. This is really where understanding comes from.

Don't rely on what we say. This principle goes back to the very core of Buddhism. The Buddha traveled throughout northern India for forty-five years, meeting countless people and teaching. One day he wandered into a village of the Kalama clan. He had been speaking about sila, about ethical conduct, when the Kalamas raised a pointed question: "Look, many different teachers come through here. Why should we believe you? Teachers say different things, our elders say different things, our books say different things. Different among us believe different things, and we think through different things. Why should we believe you?"

This question prompted what became a founding principle of his teachings. The Buddha replied: "Don't believe it because I say it. Don't believe it because a teacher says it. Don't believe it because an elder says it. Don't believe it because your tradition says it. Don't believe it because you read it in a book. Don't believe it because you figured it out just with reason. Try it out and see what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering. Those things that lead to happiness—promote those, follow those, develop them. Those things that lead to suffering—don't follow them, don't encourage them, try not to act on them."

This is the founding principle in the Dharma, and this is the principle we all follow. So don't think you have to believe something because we say it or because the Buddha said it. Check it out for yourself.

Now, there are some things you may not be able to verify for yourself in this course. Does karma work? Is there such a thing as rebirth? In a moment of true enlightenment, is there absolutely no greed, hatred, and delusion? You may not find answers to these questions. So those you can take in as reflections—maybe, maybe not. We don't require that you believe in any of those. You can hold those as open questions.

But what we do suggest is this: when greed, hatred, and delusion are present, there will be some suffering. When they're absent from the heart and mind, there's some degree of happiness. That you can check out. You can discover what things lead to a

growth in greed, hatred, and delusion, and what things lead to their reduction. If something leads to their growth, don't follow it. But if it leads to non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion, follow that—it will be for your happiness.

That's the basic message we want to convey. The tools we offer are really to help you come to your own understanding around these things. You don't have to believe anything. What's really going on is that our hearts are getting purified. There's a classical text called *The Path of Purification*, and purification basically means a reduction in the elements of greed, hatred, and delusion, with a corresponding growth in happiness—reduction in suffering, greater happiness. So not brainwashing, but heartwashing is what we think goes on here.

Now for the other question, which I found really interesting. The second noble truth says that craving is the source of suffering, yet at other times the Buddha pointed to attachment to self as the primary source of suffering. How do we reconcile these two? Have you heard both these teachings? I imagine you have.

The second noble truth, which appears in the Buddha's first dharma talk, definitely states that there is dukkha—the first noble truth, as Carol discussed. The second noble truth identifies the cause of dukkha as craving, tanha, thirst. But then in many other places, the Buddha pointed to this confusion around the sense of self as really fundamental to the way we get drawn into suffering. So how do we reconcile these two?

They are basically the same pointing. Craving is inextricably bound up with self. This is probably most clearly shown in the Chain of Dependent Origination, where there are four links in the middle that are truly experiential and worth studying. I'll likely talk about them in more detail later.

The Chain of Dependent Origination consists of twelve links that break down the arising of suffering in fine detail. The first links, starting with ignorance, are philosophical. The later links, which end in becoming, birth, and death, are also philosophical. But there are these middle links—four of them—that you'll see again and again in your own practice. You can check this out for yourself.

The middle links begin with contact—sense contact. This means the arising of experience at one of the six sense doors: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind (which includes thoughts and emotions). This is happening constantly. We are always having contact at these six sense doors, except when we're asleep. Deep sleep seems to stop this process. Otherwise, in waking moments, these contacts are occurring continuously. This is the basic fact of our experience.

The next link is feeling tone, or *vedana*. We'll explore this more deeply in a couple of days. Feeling tone means that every one of these momentary contacts is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither—sometimes called neutral. This feeling tone tends to condition our response.

What's your experience in meditation or in life when something pleasant arises? We want more. The feeling tone of pleasant tends to activate wanting or greed. What's the normal response when something unpleasant comes along? Push away. Don't want it. Make it go as far away as possible. What's the normal response when something neither pleasant nor unpleasant arises—something neutral? We go to sleep. It's not interesting. It doesn't excite us or threaten us, so we're not going to pay attention to it.

But this isn't mindful. Mindfulness is noticing whatever's there.

So feeling tone tends to condition responses of greed, aversion, and delusion when we're not being mindful. This leads to the next link: craving. Feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—conditions a response of craving in the absence of mindfulness.

Craving is basically made up of "I want that," "I don't want that," and "I'm going to ignore all the rest." This is a fuller description of what's happening in a moment of craving or *tanha*. Thirst is wanting things to be different than they are. We want that pleasant thing to stay forever, we want that unpleasant thing to go away forever, and we don't want to see the rest forever. Craving is the conditioned and habitual response to feeling tone.

Then what happens when the impulse of craving arises? We take hold of the thing. We grasp it either to pull it toward us or to push it away. You can see this moment to moment in your experience. If there's something you don't like, you have to take hold of it before you can push it. If there's something you want, you have to take hold of it to bring it closer.

Once we've taken hold of something with clinging, we proliferate an "I" around it. This happens all the time. Start to notice this. Once you've clung to something—and it could be any of these areas of thoughts we've talked about: a thought about our relationship, a thought about our work, a thought about a vacation, a thought about our home—

When it's taken hold of, see if the I-thoughts don't come up abundantly around that topic: "I want it this way. I don't want it that way. I like this. I don't like that. I want to change it in this direction. I don't want it to go in that direction."

So when we cling to something, I-thoughts proliferate from there, and that's the birth of self. Craving, clinging, and selfing are all joined together, as pointed to by these links of dependent origination. This is something you can observe in your moment-to-moment experience.

What's your response to pleasant and unpleasant experiences, whether they arise through memory or present-moment awareness? Watch how the I-thoughts grow from that response.

The Second Noble Truth—that the cause of suffering is craving—points to the same reality as attachment to self. They always go together.

Sometimes, however, this process isn't happening. Begin to notice in your day the times when there's not much I-thinking, the times when there's no holding on, the times when there's no craving. How does that feel? Generally more open, more peaceful, more free.

This is the end of suffering—letting go of craving, letting go of self, letting go of suffering. Take a look and see for yourself.

Have a wonderful day of freedom.

CHAPTER 67

Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong offers profound guidance on working skillfully with difficult emotions that are part of our human experience. Drawing from the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN 10), he explores the third foundation of mindfulness—cittānupassanā—examining both wholesome and unwholesome states of mind characterized by greed, aversion, and delusion versus generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.*
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> *Armstrong presents a practical framework for understanding how difficult emotions relate to time—desire for future pleasure, fear of future pain, grief for past loss, and anger about past hurts. Through personal stories and teaching examples, he demonstrates how mindful attention to bodily sensations, mental flavors, and underlying beliefs can transform our relationship with challenging states. Rather than resistance, which only strengthens difficult emotions, he advocates for acceptance and investigation.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that awakening doesn't come from eliminating confusion but from discovering wisdom within our difficulties. Armstrong shares inspiring accounts of practitioners working with grief, self-judgment, and fear, showing how these challenges can become catalysts for profound growth. He concludes with Rilke's powerful poem encouraging us to "let everything happen to you—beauty and terror" while remembering that "no feeling is final."*

Working with Difficult Emotions

Being human, we all have a very wide range of emotional life and experience. Some emotions are beautiful and quite enjoyable—love and compassion, joy and elation, and even calm, neutral as it is. Then some are really difficult and take us to an edge: qualities like fear and shame, anger, loneliness, grief, wanting, despair, self-judgment, and humiliation. These are things we don't really want to feel, but sometimes they visit anyway.

These difficult emotions can be a primary source of suffering in our lives. We may go through periods where life is easy, tranquil, and enjoyable, or these may be frequent companions for us all along the way. But sooner or later, they're going to be visitors for almost all of us.

Outside in daily life, life is complicated. There are so many people, so many situations, so many facets to what's going on in our lives. But here in meditation it tends to get simple. There are times when things are going well, and then there's bodily pain and emotional pain. We need to learn how to work skillfully with both of these. These times of emotional pain may well come at any point, and it's good if we can learn how to relate to bodily pain and emotional pain. Then, of course, in meditation there's also the wandering mind—occasionally painful, but that's a first-world kind of problem to have. It's not so bad.

Usually we want to get rid of these painful emotions. I certainly did when I came into meditation. They started to arise and I thought, "This isn't what I came for. I came to get peaceful. I don't want this stuff." But the resistance doesn't help. That's just more aversion and it tends to lock them in place. We really can find another way to work with them, to be with them. In the process of that, we unfold and discover a lot of strengths that maybe we didn't even know we had. In doing that investigation and exploration with them, we can really transform not just our relationship to them in terms of being more welcoming, but we transform the emotions themselves. We transform how often they come and how strongly they come into our experience. But it begins with really opening to being willing to feel them.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

With all these emotions, they're part of our human package. They're going to be around in one form or another for probably a long time. So it's really good if we can clarify our relationship to them and come to understand them.

This whole field goes into what's called the third foundation of mindfulness. The third foundation is called citta in Pali, and it's usually translated as mind, but we often translate it as heart-mind. The term citta in Pali really includes both cognitive aspects of mind—knowledge and thinking—and also affective, emotional aspects of mind. They're both together. So neither the word heart nor the word mind quite captures it. I think the best translation for citta is psyche. Psyche really includes that whole realm, but not many English translators use that for citta.

At any rate, citta does include moods, emotions, and states of mind. You can get a flavor of that from the Satipatthana Sutta where it's described like this: "How does a practitioner abide contemplating mind as mind? Here one knows a lustful mind to be

lustful and a mind without lust to be without lust. One knows an aversive mind to be aversive and a mind without aversion to be without aversion. One knows a deluded mind to be deluded and a mind without delusion to be without delusion."

One of the things you'll feel in this description is that the Buddha includes a balance of wholesome and unwholesome qualities. He almost always does that when he's describing our experience. He doesn't usually just focus on one or the other—sometimes, but very often he'll point to both. So this foundation is pointing to the wholesome qualities of mind as well as the difficult or unwholesome.

The unwholesome states are characterized by greed, aversion, and delusion. The wholesome states are characterized by non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion. The Buddha often spoke in these kinds of negatives, but if you think about it, what does non-greed mean? It means giving up or giving away—renouncing or generosity. I like to think of it simply as generosity. Non-greed is generosity.

Non-aversion means we don't carry ill will. The opposite of ill will is loving kindness. So I think of it as loving kindness. Non-delusion means we're seeing clearly, or you could say there's wisdom. So the wholesome states are made up of generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom, while unwholesome states are composed of these roots of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The whole point of the path is to increase the wholesome states and decrease the unwholesome. This is the very definition of right effort in the Eightfold Path. I think it's amazing that we have the tools in this lineage—the meditative tools to develop any of these qualities to any degree that we want.

This process is called in Pali *bhavana*. It means mental development, development of heart and mind, cultivation of the wholesome. Sometimes it's translated as meditation, but it really has this sense of actively developing these beautiful qualities. Any way that you want to shape your mind—which means to shape your life—there are practices to do that.

If you want to go in the direction of wisdom, there's insight practice. If you want to go in the direction of love, there's the *metta* practice. If you want to go in the direction of stillness, there's concentration practice. If you want to go in the direction of joy, there's the practice of *mudita*—altruistic joy. It's just beautiful that we have all these possibilities to bring out the most beautiful human qualities to whatever degree we want to develop them.

That's what we're doing here. We're actually developing all these qualities together. But if you like, at any point in your practice, you could pick one or two and go down that route for a while. The potential is unlimited.

I don't want to talk much more about wholesome states now, just to say two things. One, notice them. Be mindful. Two, don't cling. We'll talk more later.

But I really want to talk tonight about the difficult states of mind, and there are two things we need to do here. One is to shift our attitude. Instead of resisting them, we need to become much more open and allowing. This means on a moment-to-moment basis. It's not that we decide tonight, "Oh, I'm going to be open to these things." We need to move in that direction every time they come. This is something we need to keep learning and doing.

Sometimes a difficult state comes and we have a judgment: "Oh, this shouldn't be happening." But it is happening, right? Someone commented that if we fight with reality, reality is going to win. This is reality. So we need to open to it, allow it to be the way it is. A shift in attitude.

The second is greater understanding. We need to understand the mechanism of these difficult emotions. We also need to understand their nature—their basic nature, which is that like all conditioned things, they're impermanent, they're unsatisfactory, and they're not me or mine. They're impersonal. We all have all these states because they're part of the human package. So why claim them as I or mine?

Third, we need to cultivate acceptance. It's all of ours—this is part of being human. We learn not to take it so personally. As we see the impermanence, we understand that we don't have to make these difficult emotions go away. They're going to go away by themselves. But there's one way you can make them stay: resist them. If we resist or suppress, we just push them lower, and then they can hang around for a long time. But if you open and let these states come, they will arise and they will also pass away, because their nature is impermanent.

So this is what we have to do in practice. We have to accept, and we have to observe to learn what these emotions are like. The first step is knowing what we're feeling when we're feeling it. You can't sort of think through these things before they arrive. "Oh, let's see, I think tonight I'll work out fear." It doesn't happen like that. You've got to work with fear when fear is present. You've got to relate to it in real time.

So the first step is to know what we're feeling, and this isn't learned in our culture. Jill mentioned this morning—wouldn't it be wonderful if kids were taught to know what they're feeling?

We have a friend who's a Sangha member in California, a longtime meditator and very devoted practitioner who ran a preschool. This meant kids who were before kindergarten—three to five-year-olds. She ran that preschool along Buddhist lines, basically because she wanted to teach kids meditation. She had a long waiting list, but one of the requirements to get in was that the parents also had to meditate. She didn't want to just train the kids to be smarter than the grown-ups; she wanted the grown-ups to be along for the ride and support the kids in meditating.

So she had these three-, four-, and five-year-olds, and she was teaching them to meditate. Now, if you've worked with children this age, you know you don't just say, "Sit still and watch your breath." That doesn't work—they'll be bouncing all over. So she got very creative.

First, she would teach them yoga. They liked that—moving their bodies around, stretching, rolling around on the floor. After she got them good and limbered up through the yoga, she'd have them lie down on their backs on the floor where they'd just been practicing. They were relaxed by then. Then she'd lead them into a visualization.

The visualization was this: "You're a big lake. Feel how big your lake is. It stretches all around you. And you are the water. Now in this water, there are many different fishes swimming. I want you to notice all the fishes that are swimming through your lake." Of course, water is an ancient symbol for consciousness, and the kids relate on that symbolic level.

"Notice all the fishes that are swimming through your lake and just let them swim. There's a happy fish, there's a sad fish, there's a mad fish, there's a kind fish, there's a lonely fish, there's a joyful fish. Just let all those fishes swim through." She'd guide them in this for several minutes at a stretch, and they had fun with it.

After one of the meditations, she asked them, "How was that?" A five-year-old boy said, "That was great. You know, I could let all the fishes swim through, except I couldn't let the mad fish swim through."

"Well, why not? Why couldn't you let the mad fish swim?" she asked.

He replied, "Well, when you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt people."

Five years old.

So that's wisdom. First, we have to practice knowing what we're feeling, what fishes are swimming in our water, in our awareness. This is not as easy as it might sound.

A story from my practice here. One of the three-month courses I was sitting in—I was not a new meditator. I was ten years into practice. I was sitting in this hall, and after the 8:15 sitting, I would go out and walk on the grass down below, down where some of the fruit trees have been planted since then. But there was a lot more grass back then. I would walk back and forth for the period, come back in here and sit for the next sitting, then go out and walk again. So basically every walking period, I was down walking on the grass down there.

I was about two weeks into the retreat. I'd been walking there every period for two weeks. The 8:15 sit comes to an end. I go out the back door, head for my walking space, and I'm being really mindful. I'm two weeks in. I'm being really mindful. Lifting, moving, placing. Walking slowly. Lifting, moving, placing.

I get out the door. I look down to my path. There's somebody else there. I couldn't believe it. I start going, lifting, moving, placing, and I start thinking, "What's that person doing there? Don't they know that that's my walking path and I've walked there every period for two weeks?" Lifting, moving, placing. "Did I cut in front of them in line this morning? Are they trying to play some kind of head game with me?" Lifting, moving, placing. Very present, right?

So I got down to the grassy area, and my place was taken, so I found another patch of grass to walk on, which, to my great surprise, worked just as well as my own. I started walking back and forth—lifting, moving, placing—but I was still sort of running on about this guy. And it took me thirty minutes into the walking period before I realized: I'm angry now.

While I was caught in that, while I was telling myself the story about how they were in the wrong place and it was my path and why didn't they see it—as long as I was running that story, I was totally bound up with being irritated at the person. As soon as I could recognize that I was angry, then I had a way to work. Oh, I know how to release anger. I would drop the story, feel it in my body, feel the mood of the anger, feel the sensations, and then very quickly it dissipated. But as long as I was involved in the story, it wasn't going anywhere.

This points out a few things about working with these difficult emotions. If we have a belief about the situation—like mine was, I'm right and they're wrong—it locks the emotion in. We keep telling ourselves the story, and every new sentence, like anger's like a fire, right? Every new sentence adds another log to the flame. I'm right, they're

wrong—basically saying it over and over. When I could drop the story and drop those thoughts, the fire wasn't being fed anymore. And what happens when an emotion isn't being fed? It just faded away.

Basically, my attention was in the wrong place. The Buddha said this about the hindrances—it's kind of an interesting observation tucked away in one sutta. He said every hindrance is a case of unwise attention. We're putting our energy and attention in the wrong place. So where was I putting my attention? Into the person and the story. That was unwise because it just kept it going.

What happened when I turned it to the emotion of anger itself? Poof. That was wise attention.

I think Brian said this the other morning when he was talking about giving instructions for the hindrances: take the attention away from the situation that's causing the hindrance and put it on the hindrance itself. When we become mindful of the hindrance or the emotion itself, that's when there's the possibility of its releasing.

The other funny thing in this story is that I thought I was being really mindful. I was with "lift, move, place" all the way. And I was missing the most important thing that was going on, which was this emotion of anger and all the thoughts around it.

This is how hindrances happen. We feel like we're connected to the present moment, but they slip in under our radar. They get established in some viewpoint, some belief, some story. And the more we dwell on the story, the more we sustain that hindrance energy. Until at some point—I think what finally woke me up was I was getting bored with it, or it was uncomfortable or something—and then I was sort of forced to notice, oh, I'm angry.

So this is delusion. The force of delusion is we don't notice what's happening to us. And this happens a lot with emotions. We don't see clearly exactly what emotion is catching us up.

The first step, when you're starting to feel something stirring, is to name the feeling. I think Jill said this was a real education for her to note the emotions. And that's the way it felt for me too. I hadn't been taught how to recognize or name my emotions. But this practice made me do it. And so I would just keep exploring. What is that feeling that's there? Until I developed a pretty good vocabulary for the things that showed up. And then it was really helpful to know, because if we don't know what we're feeling, it's difficult to release it.

The noting is helpful because there's something that happens when we name an emotion. I think Jill mentioned the neuroscience of it. I feel a shift take place when I name an emotion. And part of what happens is there's not just the emotion, there's also the mindfulness. In the middle of an unwholesome state, we're bringing in mindfulness, which is one of the most wholesome mind states we can bring in. So we're not just with the anger. We're with the anger and mindfulness now. And mindfulness is what transforms it.

There was also a study which I think is really interesting. They took a group of people from an anger management class—people who had documented difficulty with anger—and they gave them different approaches to work with. One approach was simply asking the people every time they started to get angry to note "anger." Just to name it. Basic mindfulness practice, right? That turned out to be about as effective as any other strategy they worked with. And it showed a marked decrease in people's tendency to be angry over the course of the study. So it really does make a difference.

In these difficult states of mind, there are a few that I see again and again—in myself and in practitioners. Rather than just tell you what they are, I'm going to have you guess. I find this really curious: difficult states of mind are always connected with time. That means with past and future. I never quite realized that until I started to look at it. When we're caught in difficult emotions, we're caught in time.

Beautiful states of mind can just be totally in the present. Love is in the present. Compassion is in the present. Insight is in the present.

Peace is in the present. Concentration is in the present, and so on. But difficult states of mind are connected to time—which means past and future.

So imagine an axis running from past on your left to future on your right. That's a time axis. Then we're going to bring in another axis, which is pleasure and pain. We're going to run that from the bottom up—pain down at the bottom, pleasure at the top. Now we have four quadrants. You loved your seventh grade algebra class, didn't you? I know I did.

Let's take the quadrant over here, which is pleasurable things that are in the future. What emotion do you feel for pleasurable things that are in the future? Craving, wanting, desire. That's one of the big ones.

What about painful things that are in the future? Worry, fear. That's another of the big ones.

What about pleasant things that were in the past? But in the past means it's not coming back. Grief. You lost something. Grief or sadness. Another of the big ones.

And then painful things that were in the past—think about this especially in relation to people. Anger. Resentment. So: desire, fear, sadness, and anger. These are four of the big ones that come up often, so I want to talk about all of those. One variation on the anger one is when it's toward ourselves—it turns into self-judgment.

In working with all of them, what we want to do is notice three aspects. First, feel it in the body. If it's a strong emotion, it's going to express itself somewhere in the body. By grounding the attention there, you can prolong the contact with the emotion.

Second thing to look at is the flavor of that emotion. Every mood has a different flavor in the mind. Happiness feels different than regret. Shame feels different than compassion. Get familiar with how it tastes—how the emotion tastes. It's a mental kind of flavor.

And the third is these difficult emotions do have some kind of underlying belief or story, like "I was right and they were wrong." Look for the belief. The belief props up the emotion. It sustains it. It feeds it. It keeps it going.

So look at these three areas, and we'll go through them with examples.

Desire is something that wants a pleasant experience to happen sometime in the future. This can come up a lot on retreat. You're here, but what you really want is to be at home or be with friends or to have a nice meal somewhere or go out to a party. These things pop up and can take our attention away.

Looking at the nature of desire, what we see is that the object that's coming up is to some degree comforting. We remember, oh, there's pleasure in life.

And when we're in a difficult space in retreat, that's kind of appealing. "Oh, there is pleasure." But it's mixed because we don't have it now. So with desire, there's always this gap between the pleasure that could be and the reality of sitting in the hall with your body aching. That contrast leaves a gap of dissatisfaction. Desire always brings with it some dissatisfaction. "Yeah, there's a pleasure out there, but it's not here now." So there's a frustration that's inherent in wanting.

You can tune into that. You can feel it. You notice that you never want what you already have? Do you sit there wanting a hand at the end of your arm? No. We want what we don't have. And that's why it's frustrating.

I was teaching in Italy one time a number of years ago. It was so much fun working with Italian yogis, because as you might imagine, I found them to be very fluent with their emotions. They knew their emotions well, and they were open in talking about them. It's a lot of fun to work with them.

There was this one young man who came in for an interview a few days into the retreat, and I said, "How's it going for you?" He said, "I don't want to be here." I've heard that before. But I said, "Why did you come?" He said, "Well, this is August. It's our holiday month. We had free time. A bunch of my friends were going to the Caribbean, and they invited me to go. I thought, oh, beautiful blue waters and swimming—that would really be a lot of fun to go there." I said, "Why didn't you go there?" He said, "There were no more tickets left. So I came on this retreat."

I can understand why he was having a little trouble adjusting. So I just suggested to him that he wasn't unhappy with the retreat itself. Maybe he was unhappy because he wanted the Caribbean. And that if he didn't want the Caribbean all the time, maybe he'd be happy in the retreat. I said, "Take a look at that. Maybe that's a possibility. Maybe it's the wanting that's making your time here so miserable."

So he went away, meditated some more, came back in a couple of days. He said, "I think you're right. It was the wanting that was stirring me up. When I let go of the Caribbean, the retreat was fine. I'm totally settled in. I'm good with it."

Desire has this quality—it creates dissatisfaction for us when there doesn't need to be. On retreat, that feeling of gap may come about daily life as you settle into the retreat. It comes more and more about retreat experience, so that what we're wanting is the meditation we had two days ago, or in the last retreat. We want a special experience, or we want that state of calm or stillness or peace or bliss or love or whatever.

Start to notice when the desire is coming in. Investigate that inherent quality of dissatisfaction that is with it—sometimes mild, sometimes big, depending on what is wanted. And in relation to meditation experience, see where your thoughts have been going. Sometimes it's the thoughts that will tell you what the desire is for.

It's easier to let go if you can see, oh, it's for that same experience I had two days ago—that experience of being really settled, open. It becomes a little easier to release.

I sometimes recognize that desire is happening in meditation by noticing myself sort of leaning forward with tension in the body, like I'm trying to reach out for the next moment to be different. So tune into that tension. See if you can understand what it's about. And if possible, let go.

The next area I want to explore is anger, though the broader category is aversion, which manifests in many different flavors: ill will, anger, blame, hatred, impatience, irritation, resentment, despair, resistance. There are many variations of this fundamental quality.

How does it feel in the mind when aversion is present? Start to tune into this. Often there's a burning quality. With anger in particular—speaking of anger as one form of aversion—I feel it intensely around my shoulders, neck, and head. Energy seems to rise up and become constricted there, creating a burning, intense, hot quality that comes with the anger.

Feel it in the body: contraction, tightness, burning, energized sensations—these are the bodily manifestations of anger. The mood also carries that burning quality, and the thoughts usually follow the pattern of "I'm right and they're wrong." Get familiar with this—this is what constitutes anger. This is what's actually present.

As we continue the mental narrative of "they're wrong and I'm right," we add more fuel to the flames. You can feel how that fire keeps burning the more we think about it. Don't force yourself to change it at this point, but become intimate with it. This is the mechanism of anger, and we want to truly understand it before we try to eliminate it—understanding how it gets created, how it gets fed, how it gets prolonged, and the beliefs that underlie it.

One of the tricky aspects of anger is that when we say "I'm right and you're wrong," that may actually be true. We might be perceiving clearly someone's unskillful actions. But if we keep running that thought repeatedly with indignation, we continue adding fuel to the fire. How does that feel? Not so good.

I was doing a metta retreat here one year—a long six-week period of loving-kindness practice. I was deeply engaged with the practice and really connecting with the metta, experiencing those beneficial feelings. It happened that my difficult person was also on the retreat—someone I'd known for several years, and the previous year had been especially challenging.

They were on the retreat, and every time we'd cross paths, I'd begin thinking about what they had done, how they had acted, how they had spoken to me. The anger would start arising, building, intensifying. I would spin out for thirty minutes at a time. Not only would I lose my metta phrases—I would completely lose the metta feeling altogether.

Finally, I began to realize how painful this was. It was truly painful to keep entering this anger repeatedly. To tell you the truth, what made me let go—let go of the memories and the blame and all that was stoking the fire—was recognizing how much pain it caused me.

This is why it's so helpful to let yourself feel the fullness of anger when it's present, and to feel the pain of it. Even if I was right—and in some ways I still think I was—it didn't benefit me to keep rehearsing it. It only created more suffering.

So that's what enabled me to release it. It's possible to recognize that someone acted unskillfully without burning ourselves up in the process.

In the Buddhist tradition, it's said that when we're angry at somebody, it's like wanting to pick up a hot coal to throw at them. But first we pick it up, and it burns us. Another way anger is described: we drink poison and hope somebody else gets sick. It doesn't work.

There's another dimension to working with anger. The Dalai Lama used to meet with refugees who had escaped Tibet. After the occupation, when he fled in 1959, whenever someone managed to escape and reach India, if they came to Dharamsala, he would meet with them.

He would hear their stories and difficulties, often breaking down in tears upon hearing their accounts. One year, a monk came whom he had known when he was still in Tibet. The Dalai Lama had left in 1959, and it turned out this monk had been imprisoned for twenty years. His crime was being a monk, being a Buddhist monk. Many Buddhist monks and nuns were imprisoned for that crime.

When he came over and met with the Dalai Lama, he said that when he was in prison, he felt that he was in danger. The Dalai Lama said, "Were you in danger of being tortured? I could really understand that."

And he said, "No, I was tortured. I was in danger of becoming angry, but I didn't."

The Dalai Lama said he had to reevaluate his opinion of that monk. He was a much more developed practitioner than he had remembered or imagined.

This sort of practice is possible with the difficult emotions. It's not a beginning practice—that's really advanced practice—but it shows a human possibility that we all have.

So in relating to anger, can we get to the point of just feeling the feeling and not continuing to tell the story? Feel it in the body, feel the flavor in the mind. If we can do that, that's what sets the condition for the emotion to show its impermanence, to decay, because it's not being whipped up further.

A variation on anger is when it's directed toward ourselves—self-judgment, where we feel we're not good enough. Either we've made mistakes or we've failed to meet people's expectations. We've gotten the message that we're not good enough or smart enough or good-looking enough or something. Sometimes these messages have come from parents, sometimes from teachers, sometimes from siblings or peers. But we take it in and we take it to heart.

The other thing that can happen is if you're part of a group that's been marginalized in society, you may have gotten the message from very early on in your life that you're not as good as everybody else—that you are, in effect, a second-rate person. This leaves an imprint because people in these marginalized groups are often getting this message from the early days of childhood, at least by early adolescence.

It could be from racism, homophobia, or gender discrimination. The message goes out that if you're not conforming to the cultural ideal or the norm in the dominant culture, then you're not as valuable as those people. This message can be overt, like direct racism, or it can be more subtle—implicit bias communicates the same message. If it goes in at an early age, it can go in deeply.

So one can grow up with this kind of internalized sense of being second-rate or second-class. It's very painful. When people come into meditation, that which has been carried maybe a little subconsciously can really start to come to the surface. Same thing if the message has come from parents or teachers or other sources—you may have been taught that you're not good enough in these different ways. As you sit in meditation, this sense of not being enough starts to come through.

Whether it's come from a societal message directed to a marginalized group, or whether it's come as an individual message to you from people around you, this is something that comes up often in retreat. Many, many people feel it.

The Dalai Lama used to meet with groups of Western dharma teachers in Dharamsala. He'd invite about twenty Western dharma teachers over at a time. I never got to go, but I know a bunch of people who did. He would discuss with them over a couple of days issues that they found were important coming up in their teaching.

One year they asked him how to work with this feeling—let's call it lack of self-worth or sense of worthlessness or inferiority. He didn't understand what they were asking about. He didn't have any experience of it. He didn't know about it in Tibetan culture, because children there, apparently, are loved from very early on. Children are really dearly prized in Tibetan culture and get such an outpouring of love from the extended family that they grow up feeling valued and worthwhile. The Dalai Lama could not understand what this feeling was about.

And so he went around to all the teachers and asked, "Have you felt this before?" Yes. "Have you felt this?" Yes. Virtually every teacher there said they had experienced this kind of lack of self-worth in their upbringing and had to work with it in their dharma practice. He was shocked.

The first thing we must do is recognize this pattern, because if we don't, it operates subconsciously. It's not something that stands out as strongly as anger or fear—it's more subtle and underlying. As it arises, we need to appreciate how it makes us feel. We can experience it as a bodily sensation once we learn to touch into it.

I remember going through a period of working with this feeling. It was like carrying a weight on my shoulders that I had to support because I wasn't good enough to relax. I had to hold up this burden. We can work through this considerably—it's one of the things that can truly lift through sustained meditation.

One of the most effective tools for working with self-doubt is loving-kindness practice. We need this partly for ourselves, to soften our attitude and acceptance of ourselves, but also toward people we genuinely like and care about, because that brings the metta out more clearly and strongly. When metta starts to come alive in our hearts—genuine metta awakening in our hearts—we truly know the inner quality of goodness. Then we trust ourselves. There's not much better than metta in the human experience. When we feel that within ourselves, we really trust in our own goodness. We trust that we're capable and equal.

To illustrate how widespread this struggle is, I recently finished reading Michelle Obama's memoir, *Becoming*. It's a beautiful book where she speaks very honestly about her trials and learning in this area. She was a young Black girl in a not particularly prosperous section of Chicago, receiving all the messages from television, newspapers, and movies that she wasn't in the privileged class, the favored class, the dominant class. So with everything she undertook, she carried this deep inner self-doubt: Am I going to be good enough? Am I going to be smart enough?

Fortunately, she had loving parents—I think that was enormously helpful. She just kept moving forward. She managed to get accepted into one of the best high schools in Chicago, went from there to Princeton where her brother had gone on a basketball scholarship, was admitted to Harvard Law, and then joined a prestigious law firm in Chicago, where she met Barack. Then things really changed. But at every step of the way, she had to keep answering this question: Am I good enough? Am I smart enough? She kept meeting it, facing it, and growing, becoming the amazing person we witnessed her become before our eyes.

Another difficult emotion for us to work with is sadness. This one is particularly challenging because often sadness or grief can feel overwhelming. There's sometimes a worry: "If I open to this, I'm going to drown in it. It's going to take me over and I'll never be able to get out." It feels so vast that we don't feel capable of opening to it.

With emotions of this magnitude, you may need to take it one step at a time. Go into it partway, come back out, re-center through nature, meditation, finding your anchor, creating spaciousness, walking—whatever works—and then go back in a little further. But this idea that overwhelming grief will consume us forever simply isn't true in my experience with meditators.

I had the privilege of observing one such process—a parent in California who lost a child to suicide. I believe that's one of the greatest losses a human being can experience in this life. She came to meditation and retreats partly to heal from that depth of grief. Watching her year after year as she kept returning to retreats, hearing her reports of what was happening for her—it was remarkable to witness that over a period of years, she emerged from that grief.

That grief really healed for her. And now she's leading a support group for other parents who have lost children through suicide because she knows firsthand that healing is really possible. She's become a wonderful source of support for others. This transformation came through her willingness to go step by step through that level of grieving and sadness, meeting it with mindfulness and compassion.

The last difficult emotion I want to explore is fear. This is my personal favorite because it's one I worked with extensively in the early years of practice, becoming quite familiar with its nuances and challenges.

One pattern I noticed with fear was that when it arose, I would get scared of the fear itself. Fear would appear, and immediately I'd think, "I don't want this. That's too scary to investigate." Fear can be among the most unpleasant emotions we experience. I had to examine this fear of fear, this secondary layer of aversion.

The underlying story for me was something like: "This present moment is bearable—just barely, but it's manageable. But in the next moment, something truly disastrous will happen, and that won't be bearable at all." This anticipatory dread was what fueled my fear of fear.

Eventually I questioned this assumption. My teachers kept encouraging me to open to whatever arose and simply feel it. Little by little, I began to trust their guidance and experiment with this approach.

The doorway in for me was through bodily awareness. My teachers gave me the same instructions I've been sharing: Feel the physical sensations first, then explore the emotional flavor in the mind. Notice the mental story, then let it go.

My recurring story was always "the next moment is going to be unbearable." I practiced releasing this narrative and returning to direct experience. When I tuned into the sensations of fear, I found my stomach clenched, a fluttery energy rising through my abdomen, and an overall sense of feeling light and ungrounded. The fear was intense and genuinely unpleasant.

But then I began asking myself a crucial question: "Can I bear these sensations in this present moment, right now?" And I discovered I could. This realization opened a significant door. I found I could actually tolerate the experience of fear. It wasn't pleasant—I wasn't rolling out the welcome mat—but I could bear it.

As I continued opening to the sensations and moved deeper, I wondered, "What is this emotion really like? What's the bare mental nature of fear?" This investigation proved quite tricky. Fear is particularly challenging because its very nature involves moving away. Fear says, "Get me away from this—it's too dangerous." So attempting to move closer to the raw emotion of fear goes directly against fear's fundamental impulse.

The closer I got, the more strongly it protested: "Don't get close to me. It's not safe here." Fear kept trying to push me away from itself. But gradually I was able to get closer and open to the bare experience of the emotion.

Then one of my teachers offered a profound challenge: "You know, if you really accept something completely, you're willing to say it could be with you for the rest of your life, and you wouldn't mind." So I asked myself honestly: "Could I be with fear for the rest of my life?"

The answer came back with startling clarity: "No way. I can't do that. I'm not ready for that level of acceptance."

If I was with fear for the rest of my life, I wouldn't enjoy anything again. I wouldn't enjoy music or a sunset or anything. So I said, no, I can't do that.

But then I started to see, if I was holding myself back from fear, I was still creating this distance. And that was going to make the fear hang around, still stir me up. So I said, okay, I could either be agitated the rest of my life, or I could take a risk and maybe find some peace. So I went for peace.

I said, "Okay, fear. If you want to stay around the rest of my life, it's okay." And I really meant it. I really meant it. When I made that move, and I really meant it, something broke in the fear. It lost some kind of hold that it had had over me. It's kind of like its spine cracked a little bit.

I went through a phase in my practice where fear was coming and going, and I really didn't care. I didn't care if it went, I didn't care if it stayed, didn't care if it arose, didn't care if it passed away. And for me, that was the turning point in relating to it.

Fear can still arise for me. Sometimes I have to remind myself, it's okay. It's really an old acquaintance, an old friend. But it really is okay with me now.

I was interested to read this account from Ajaan Liem, a Thai teacher who was a disciple of Ajahn Chah. When Ajahn Chah died, he named Ajahn Liem as his successor. So Ajahn Liem is now the abbot of Ajahn Chah's old monastery, Wat Ba Pong in northeast Thailand. Ajahn Liem apparently is also an arahant, a fully awakened being. There's a beautiful biography with some autobiography and reflections, and he recounts his awakening. It's inspiring. Maybe we'll talk about that later. But he's a very special being, for sure.

At some point, he was in conversation with another abbot. The abbot asked him, as one practitioner might to another, "What was the hardest thing in your practice?" Ajahn Liem said, "I would have to say that fear was the hardest thing for me." Then he paused. He said, "But just to say that it was hard isn't quite right. I would have to say that it was a worthy opponent. Working with it brought about the growth of a lot of wisdom."

That's what I would say about my working with fear also. I had to go really deep in order to accept fear just the way it was and to open to it that completely. I had to find a kind of strength and courage and wisdom I didn't even know I was capable of. But once I found that understanding and that strength, I felt I could work with any emotion.

So the learning wasn't just about fear. It was about any emotion that might come. I found out I could be with it. What looks like a disaster in your practice may turn out to be your lifeboat. It may turn out to be the thing that really fuels your liberation and

your awakening and your growth in the Dhamma. So don't mind it. Don't mind it. We all have this potential of tremendous growth through really opening to these challenging areas.

In the beginning you think, "Well, I'm going to wake up by getting rid of confusion." There's confusion on the one hand, which is our agitated state of mind, and there's awakening, which is wise, peaceful, and compassionate. You might think, "When I get rid of this stuff, then I'll be over here in awakening."

But what has to happen is we have to wake up in the middle of our difficulties. We have to bring the awakened mind or discover the awakened mind in the middle of confusion. It's not get rid of confusion first, then awakened mind shows up. It's find awakened mind in the middle of confusion. This is possible. This is what we're practicing for.

So I want to close with a quotation—a poem from Rilke, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, from a little book called *The Book of Hours*. He wrote this when he was in his twenties, some of his most accessible poetry. He was traveling around, mostly Germany but I think other parts of Europe as well, visiting churches and becoming very inspired and spiritual.

This poem is called "God Speaks to Each of Us."

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your memory,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you:
beauty and terror.
Just keep going.
No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me.

CHAPTER 68

Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this morning instruction session, Guy Armstrong introduces choiceless attention meditation, a practice descended from the teachings of the great Burmese meditation master Mahāsi Sayādaw. This technique represents the culmination of progressive mindfulness training, where practitioners release their reliance on anchor objects (breath, body, sounds) and instead follow wherever attention naturally lands moment by moment.*
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> *Armstrong explains that choiceless attention involves the Pali concept of manasikāra (attention) roaming freely among the six sense doors, while maintaining continuous mindfulness of whatever predominates in each new moment. He suggests optional soft mental noting to support present-moment awareness as attention moves between breath, sensations, sounds, emotions, thoughts, feeling tone, and intentions. The practice requires fresh alertness to avoid drifting into unconscious thinking.*
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> *The talk also addresses practical questions about emotional states in meditation, distinguishing between guilt and wholesome remorse, and clarifying how maintaining wholesome states differs from clinging when motivated by wisdom rather than craving. Armstrong emphasizes that no single technique is superior - the best practice is whatever keeps one most harmoniously present and increases wholesome states of mind in any given moment.*

This morning, for the instructions, I'd like to invoke the spirit of Mahasi Sayadaw. He was a great Burmese meditation teacher, possibly the greatest meditation teacher of the 20th century. The instructions that we've been giving are really descended from his instructions.

We've been unfolding experience gradually, starting with breath, sounds, sensations, in eating meditation, tastes and smells, emotions, thoughts, feeling tone, intentions. At this point, we hope we have covered essentially everything that will arise in your sitting meditation experience. I can't remember if we've done formal instructions for seeing, but I know that it's been mentioned.

Up to this point, we've given instructions how to be mindful with anything that arises within your experience. Today, with the blessing of Mahasi Sayadaw, we're going to combine all that in a new technique that's the logical outcome of where we've been going, called choiceless attention. I think this was his genius, and I love to reflect on his

offering to the world. He founded many meditation centers in Asia, and our instructions are a direct descent from him. I'd like to invoke his spirit, but because he was an Arahant and he's now dead, there may not be any spirit to invoke. Nonetheless, it's a great blessing to have his transmission.

The instructions today are going to shift our relationship to the anchor a bit. So far, in the beginning, you'll remember we asked you to choose an anchor. Let's just take the breath as an example. For some it was body, for some it was sounds. Let's just take the breath. We gave the instruction, stay with the anchor. Anytime thoughts carry you away, return to the anchor. So here we have almost an exclusive focus on the breath as the basis for mindfulness.

Then we started to open up the instructions to include sensations, sounds, emotions, thoughts, et cetera. There we said, stay with your anchor as your home, your meditative home. But if anything came along that drew your attention away from that, go to that new experience, make that the focus for mindfulness. When that passes, you can come back to your anchor of the breath. You'll notice in this, there's not an exclusive focus on the breath, but there's still a preferred focus on the breath. It's where you go when nothing else is predominant.

Today, we're going to take away even that preference. In choiceless attention we take the breath just like any other object and we don't have any particular fondness for it over anything else that's happening. In choiceless attention we really unhook the attention from the anchor and let it go.

To explain this practice, I want to first say what attention means when we talk about attention. Attention is a formal term in our tradition. It's the translation of a term that's central in the Buddha's teachings in the Pali Canon. That Pali term is *manasikara*. We translate it by attention. I think it's a good translation.

In the context of meditation and life, attention is the faculty of mind that singles out one element from all your present moment experience and settles on that, however briefly. For instance, in this moment, there are a lot of things going on. There are sensations in your body, there's your breathing going in and out, there's the sound of my voice, there's the temperature of the air, there's the visual field if your eyes are open, sounds coming and going, thoughts coming and going, and some mood is present. Out of all those things, what are you noticing in this moment?

The interesting thing about attention is that it can be directed. If I tell you, direct your attention to the touch of your hands and keep it there, you can do that, at least for a few moments. But what if I say, don't direct your attention at all? Let the attention be undirected. Where does it go?

If you take a look, you'll probably notice that it's rotating among the different objects in your experience. Sometimes with sensations, sometimes with a thought, sometimes with a mood, sometimes with a breath. If you just let your attention go, it will go. It's always on something until you fall asleep. But as long as you're awake, it's always on something. There's some contact at one of the six sense doors where attention is landing.

In the practice of choiceless attention, we're going to un-anchor the attention from the breath, body, sounds. We're just going to let it go. We are not going to consciously direct it. We're just going to sit in an open and relaxed way and notice in each new moment where it lands. It'll land on some part of your experience and in that moment make that experience the focus for mindfulness. You've learned how to be mindful of anything that arises. We're now asking you to do that in real time.

We could call this the predominant experience in this moment, or simply say where attention is naturally drawn in this new moment. Sometimes it will land on your anchor, but you're not placing it there. You're letting the attention roam freely, but your job is to notice where it lands and be mindful there.

This takes a really fresh, awake quality of mind to keep up with this. Because we're open to anything and we don't have an anchor, it's quite easy for the attention to drift into thoughts and we don't know that it's drifted into thoughts. You know how when you use an anchor like the breath, it's really clear when you're with it and when you're not. In choiceless attention it's not so clear.

It can be helpful to combine choiceless attention with soft mental noting. This is an option, not a requirement. The main thing is, in each new moment, you're noticing where the attention has landed and connecting with mindfulness. But to support that, it can be really helpful to keep up steady, soft mental noting that just names where the attention is and what you're mindful of.

As an example, as I'm sitting here, I might notice: in, touching, hearing, calm, out, thinking, pressure, sound.

So if you'd like to play with this noting, I'd say try to keep it steady and don't force yourself to make a note very rapidly. Every couple seconds, every two or three seconds, notice where the attention is now. If there's a strong experience, the attention might

stay there for a while. If there's a pain in the knee, you might be noticing painful, painful, painful for a while. And that's okay. But you're not trying to keep it there. Sometimes attention will stay there on its own.

So you're not making an effort to direct it, but you are making the effort to stay mindful in the present moment of whatever your experience is.

The first way to describe this choiceless attention is you're unhooking the attention and you're noticing where it's landed. You might say that's the kind of technical description. In this, we're not choosing the focus for attention, so it's called choiceless attention. Some people call this practice choiceless awareness, but that term was coined by Krishnamurti, and he really uses it to point to a mind that's free of greed, aversion, delusion. So I think the more accurate term is choiceless attention. We're not choosing a focus for attention. So that's what we will call it here.

The informal description is you take a look and you ask, "What's happening now?" Oh, I'm feeling sensation at a touch point. There's hearing. There's thinking. There's an in-breath. So the other way to describe this practice is it answers the question, "What's happening now?" And you keep answering it in each new moment.

This is the outline, the background to the instructions. It's a very powerful practice because we're not directing. We don't have an outcome in mind, but we're open to everything. So in this approach, there can be a good deal of relaxation and a very open mind. You might even get a sense of the width of your experience in this moment. How wide are sounds? How wide is the silence? How big is your body? So you can let your overall awareness be big enough to accommodate all that and notice where the attention is going.

So that's the background and let's move into formal meditation now.

Please sit comfortably. Feeling uprightness in your posture and also a sense of ease, of relaxing, dropping into your sitting base. Let the awareness settle throughout the body.

Get in touch with your anchor—body, breath, sounds. And settle there for a few moments. Here you're choosing to direct your attention. Very helpful for stabilizing.

And now deliberately take your attention off the anchor and let it move freely. And notice where it lands in each new moment.

Sitting.

Pressure.

Breathing out, hearing, interest, breathing in.

If you find it helpful, try making a soft mental note every few seconds about where the attention is landing now, covering the whole range: breath, sound, sensations, emotions, thoughts, feeling tone, intention. See if by making a soft mental note every two or three seconds, this becomes a support for you to stay connected to the present moment.

If you're using the mental noting, keep it very soft, like a whisper in the mind. Keep about ninety percent of your focus on the experience itself, and just ten percent on the soft note. To do that, you may need to find the volume knob on the noting and turn it down.

Any time you lose touch with the present and you realize you've been lost in thought for a while, that's fine—of course it will happen. Just notice that the thinking is present, appreciate the spontaneous return to the moment, and begin again the noticing of the present moment experience, whatever it is. Use the notes if you find them helpful.

Remember that the key thing is the noticing, the clear noticing in each moment. The note just serves as a support for that. What's happening now? What experience is your attention with in this new moment? At any of the sense doors? Can you be mindful of that?

So this is the introduction to the practice of choiceless attention. Feel free to bring it in as an approach whenever you feel like it at this point in the retreat.

Sometimes when one starts to appreciate the power of this approach—and it's kind of the last instruction we give after giving a bunch of instructions leading up—there's a tendency to think, "Wow, that's the best meditation. It's so elegant, right? Just be mindful of whatever arises." And yet there's a rigor to it. In every moment. Don't space out. In every moment be mindful of whatever arises. So it's elegant, it's cool, it's profound, and all of that. It doesn't mean it's a superior practice. It doesn't mean it's the best practice.

What's the best practice changes for you depending on the state of mind and body. The best practice may be changing throughout the day. Sometimes it may be choiceless attention. Sometimes it may be returning to your anchor. Sometimes it may be staying with an emotion as it's expressing through the body for an extended period of time—for a sitting, a walking, half a day. The best practice is what keeps you best in touch with the present moment in the most harmonious and suitable way possible. The best practice for you at any given time is what's going to increase the wholesome states of mind the most.

So sometimes it could be returning to your anchor. For instance, one of the downsides in choiceless attention, especially if you're not using noting, is it's quite easy to go off into thought and not really notice that you're going off into thought. Attention's so open, whatever happens is fine. Zip. Gone. Gone.

So if you find yourself in choiceless attention with a lot of thinking coming up that's not being noticed—a tendency to drift off a lot—then the best practice at that point would be to come back and anchor again in the present moment in something simpler. It could be breath, could be body, could be sounds, but something where you have a clearly defined relationship and then you know when you're away.

At other times, if you feel really settled and the mind's balanced and you feel open and fairly settled in the present moment, that's a good time to try opening up to this choiceless field—letting the attention go where it will, knowing what's happening. If there's some meditative stability underneath it, then the conditions are good for practicing choiceless attention.

So it's not that any one practice is the best. The best changes—see what suits you at any given point in time.

In practicing choiceless attention, one of the other things that people run into is it's so open. And there are so many possible places to develop mindfulness. Sometimes the openness of it gets overwhelming, and confusion comes up and uncertainty and doubt: "What should I be attending to?" If that starts to happen, just come back to your anchor. That's the beauty of having developed this meditative home.

So it's always available when we feel we need some stability. If you're feeling any kind of confusion or uncertainty, just come back and stabilize with the anchor. When you feel settled again, you can try opening up once more.

We had quite a few questions today—actually, a lot of questions. The talks must have been interesting the last few nights. We only have time for a couple.

Here's one that comes up often around the topic of emotions: "If I'm not experiencing any strong emotions, does it necessarily mean I'm suppressing something or avoiding a feeling?"

Not at all. Each of us will go through cycles in regard to emotions. There will be times when emotions are really up and expressing and very vocal. There will be other times when emotions naturally are quiet and even silent. This doesn't mean there's any suppression going on. Emotions have a natural flow—they arise and they pass away, even strong ones. So don't worry about that.

The other thing is there are really different personalities among us as meditators. Some personalities tend toward the emotional. I've been in cultures that tended toward the emotional. I've been in cultures that tended toward not being very emotional. We're all representative of our cultural background. So sometimes there's not a lot going on emotionally, and the Buddha actually said some fairly positive things about the experience of peace. That's considered a good development in meditation.

If peace, calm, balance, or equanimity are the mood of the moment, for instance, you're in line with some of the Buddha's teachings. So notice that. Don't think that states of mind have to be loud or dramatic. Some of the greatest meditative states of mind are subtle and peaceful.

Sometimes you go, "Oh, there's nothing going on in the emotions. Nothing's happening. I don't have any state of mind." Check and see if there's calm. Calm is one of the factors of awakening, so it's a very wholesome state.

Another question related to emotions: "Does the Buddha mention guilt? I haven't heard that described yet."

Yes and no. The word the Buddha used, translated into English in this direction, is remorse. Remorse is considered basically a wholesome emotion.

What happens in long retreat, as we're sitting in the quiet and there's not much happening, is things that have been percolating underneath maybe for years have the space to come up and be felt—to be seen through thoughts and to be felt through emotions. Especially on long retreats, there's time for a lot of unprocessed old experience to come up and be noticed.

When I first did a long retreat, my mind just called up all these memories where I had caused harm to people and to creatures. They weighed on me a lot because at that point I'd understood the precepts. Nobody told me about the precepts when I was growing up. I mean, there were the commandments, but they were a different tone. So nobody really told me the value of the precepts.

Through my childhood and teen years, I did unskillful things. These memories came up—like something mean that I did to a fellow student in second grade, going hunting with my father. Fortunately, I was a bad shot, so I let most of those animals off the hook, but I was trying, you know? They were very burdensome to me, and I had to live with the pain of that regret quite a few days as I was coming to terms with these things. So that often happens.

The other thing that can happen is we remember ways we've been hurt.

But the remorse and guilt are around things that we've done personally.

So it's a natural part of meditation that some of these memories may come for you. And in another couple of weeks we're going to be talking explicitly about how to work with them with the quality of forgiveness. Because forgiveness needs to be extended to ourselves as much as to anyone. So we'll talk about that in a couple more weeks.

But right now I want to distinguish between the way I understand the words guilt and remorse.

In guilt, we think about something unskillful that we've done. We see the harm that it's had on other people, other creatures, and we feel genuine regret for that. But we can take it a step further and then really blame ourselves for those actions. We can get into a lot of negative self-judgment around that: "Gosh, I'm such a bad person. I have a really mean streak in my character continuing to today. I'm never going to be able to live harmoniously with people." All that extra conceptual thought is unnecessary, and that's really a lot of the pain in bringing these memories to light. We don't need to do that. The judging thoughts are extra and not necessary.

What needs to be felt is that heartfelt regret, and that's what I would call remorse. We really feel the unskillfulness of the action, and we really have this sincere regret that we did those things. That's healing. When we can hold the remorse with mindfulness, like any other emotion, it has its way of coming up, being accepted, being deeply felt, and then it has its way of passing on.

So when I think back to those earlier incidents—second grade, hunting—I still feel regret about it. But I don't beat myself up, and it's not a place of suffering for me anymore. I acknowledge it, wish it hadn't happened. I'm a different person now. Wouldn't do those things now. I've borne the responsibility and come to terms with it. So that's the value of remorse.

When you can reach that kind of equanimity with things, then meditation opens up. And the Buddha said a number of times that the purpose and benefit of good conduct is lack of remorse—or I would say lack of guilt, lack of regret. The purpose of lack of remorse is gladness. Gladness means the mind can settle happily into the present moment. So we pay attention to the precepts, we act skillfully, and then we don't trouble ourselves in meditation about things that we've done wrong, and that lets the mind settle more and more. So these are really connected: the conduct, lack of remorse, gladness, and settling in meditation. This is our path.

Here's another question. Part of right effort is to maintain wholesome states that have arisen. So there are actually four right efforts. One is to guard against the arising of unwholesome states. The next is once unwholesome states have arisen, to abandon them if possible—it means don't dwell on them, let them go. And then to bring about the arising of wholesome states, and once wholesome states have arisen, to sustain them, let them be maintained.

This question is about the maintaining of a wholesome state that has arisen. The question is, how does that differ from clinging?

This is a really interesting point, and it also ties into the notion of pleasure. The difference is that we strive to maintain wholesome states of mind out of wisdom. Wisdom understands the meditation practice deepens best, heads toward insight, heads toward loving kindness, heads toward liberation, when wholesome states are in the mind. So we sustain them not because they're enjoyable or pleasurable—which they are, and that could be a motivation, but that would be clinging based on craving. We sustain them out of understanding. This is how the meditation deepens. This is the path to liberation. This is the path of benefit to myself and to other sentient beings.

So we make that choice as far as possible: keep wholesome states present, out of understanding. Sometimes craving will come in. Sometimes clinging will come in. If that happens, we see that. That happens with a contraction.

That happens with suffering when they change. If the development and maintenance of wholesome states is brought about by wisdom, there will also be wisdom when they go. And there won't be suffering when they go. There will be understanding.

"Oh, what's happening now? Let me find wisdom in this new moment. Let me relate to what's up now."

So start to look. Is there craving for wholesome states? Is there clinging? That can happen. But deepen the understanding that this is for the benefit of myself and all beings. This development of the wholesome will encourage kindness, it will encourage relaxation, and it will lead to deepening meditation, insight, and liberation.

Now, two announcements for today. Today is a day for mindful movement, so Sabra will be meeting with those who wish to join her downstairs at 2:45. She said that more blankets have arrived, so you don't need to take any props down with you. She'll have a new shipment of blankets for you to use.

The second announcement is that Annie has had to change a couple of her meeting times. So if you're on Annie's list for today, please check the notice board one more time because a couple of the times have shifted.

As you stand up, see if you can do it choicelessly. Maintain the continuity from here in a choiceless way to walking, and then be with the walking really continuously. I hope you will use this practice as a way to foster continuity of mindfulness, whatever experiences are arising for you.

Have a lovely day.

CHAPTER 69

Seven Factors of Awakening

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this retreat dharma talk, Guy Armstrong presents the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga) as taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). These factors—mindfulness (sati), investigation (dhammavicaya), energy (vīriya), rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā)—represent both the path to awakening and the qualities present just before moments of insight.*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes that these are not remote experiences but accessible states that retreat participants are likely already encountering. He explains how the first four factors (mindfulness through rapture) are 'arousing factors' that bring energy, while the last three (tranquility through equanimity) are 'pacifying factors' that cultivate calm. Together, they create the balanced conditions necessary for liberation.*
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> *Drawing from traditional sources and contemporary examples, including accounts from Dīpa Mā and Ajahn Liem, Armstrong demonstrates how these factors mature through practice, leading practitioners toward the 'complete destruction of suffering' that the Buddha promised. The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing and cultivating these beautiful qualities of mind in both formal meditation and daily life.*

At this point in the retreat, as some of you have pointed out to us, we have not shied away from talking about the unwholesome factors of mind. Some of you may have complained a little about the emphasis here. We've talked about the hindrances, we've talked about difficult emotions, we've talked about the three roots of the unwholesome. This is really important because if we don't know how to work with these forces in our meditation, they will hinder it. They will block its development and deepening. Once we learn to work with them, the deepening can happen in relation to them. Hopefully this is what many of us have been working with during the first two weeks of the retreat.

But now we are starting to turn the page and talk about the beautiful qualities of mind. The Buddha talked about these just as often as he talked about the difficult qualities. When he talked about dukkha, he also talked about the end of dukkha. So we're going to spend considerable time moving forward talking about beautiful qualities. Jill started us the other night with her lovely talk on the four Brahmaviharas. That's one of the key lists of the beautiful factors. The Eightfold Path is a list of wholesome factors of mind. The Five Spiritual Faculties are another. Tonight I want to talk about the seven factors of awakening, sometimes also called seven factors of enlightenment.

Both terms refer to this waking up that the Buddha experienced under the Bodhi tree some 2,500 years ago. The Pali term for it is Bodhi, and it's been translated as both awakening and enlightenment. Enlightenment is sort of from a 17th century European intellectual movement, so its applicability to the Buddha's experience is questionable. I like the term awakening, but it's getting overused today—awakening through ten minutes a day or awakening through drinking tea. I'm sure there are workshops on this in California as we speak. I don't want to get over-popularized around this term, but this is the authentic use of the term. The Buddha means the one who is awake. So I'll use the term awakening and you can use it as you like.

This is a really important list for meditators. When the Buddha gave the Satipatthana discourse and he came to the fourth foundation, he only included two lists of mental factors. One was the five hindrances and the second was the seven factors of awakening. So as meditators, his instruction was really to get to know these two lists. These are the ones he considered most important for you as meditators. Obviously the Eightfold Path and the Five Spiritual Faculties and the Brahmaviharas are very important also. But in the Foundations of Mindfulness, these are the two lists the Buddha pointed to as really critical. So it's very helpful to become familiar with this list of the seven factors of awakening.

Carol said in her talk the other day that what we're doing in meditation practice is we're starving the five hindrances and we're feeding the seven factors of awakening. This is how these two lists are to be understood. We do the kinds of effort that reduce the force of the hindrances and we do the kinds of effort that promote the growth of the seven factors. This is the direct path to awakening. It's amazing that we can shape the mind in this direction. That's what our practices do.

It's also amazing to meet someone who has gone a long way down this path. So many of you know of the Indian teacher Dipa Ma. She was a really wonderful and inspiring figure, one of the most amazing minds and hearts that I've met on this journey. She taught at the three-month course one year here. We're sorry that the teaching quality has been a bit in decline since then, but we're doing the best we can. Yogis were, of course, curious about her being. Someone asked her at one point, "What's in your mind right now?" This is what one wants to know when one meets an awakened being—what's that like? What's your experience of your mind right now? She said, "There are only three things in my mind. There's peace, concentration, and loving kindness. That's it."

So that's a beautiful mind. But that's a possibility. That's a possibility for us as well. One of the things I want to emphasize about these factors of awakening is that they are not so remote for you. These are experiences that I believe each of you has already had to some degree in this retreat. I've certainly heard reports in my meetings with some of you, and I bet if you look closely at your own experience, you'll recognize these. This is the first step.

Once we recognize them, then we can start to understand how they come about, and as the Buddha said, how to bring them to fulfillment, how to grow them up. They may be kind of baby formations when we first meet them, but just like any seeds, we water them, we feed them, they grow up. These really become your best friends, along with the brahmaviharas. These two sets of states really become the beautiful qualities that accompany you and move you on your journey.

The Buddha put it this way: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future, will do so by overcoming the five hindrances that weaken wisdom, by firmly establishing their minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by correctly developing the seven factors of awakening." This is a direct quote from the Buddha. They lead to awakening. Therefore, they're called factors of awakening—never shy of stating the obvious. This is what they're here for, to lead us to awakening. They're all described as maturing in release, which means liberation.

He put it another way: "Just as all the rafters of a peaked house incline towards the roof peak, so too when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, the practitioner inclines toward nibbana"—toward freedom, toward the unconditioned, toward release, toward awakening.

So these seven factors lead to awakening, but they also describe the mind just before a moment of awakening. They describe the preparation of the mind just prior to the awakening moment. The awakening itself doesn't come through effort, but the preparation does. So the effort goes into developing the seven factors. As they mature, you might say they converge toward the unconditioned, toward nibbana, toward release, which Annie is going to talk about in a future dharma talk. They converge to that, and when they get very close, at some point the mind can tip into that state, tip into the unconditioned.

It takes effort to develop the mind in this way, to bring these factors together. Once they are close together to the unconditioned, at some point, by a moment of grace which we can't force or predict, they can open into the moment of awakening.

These seven factors are described as sequential, meaning that each one leads to the development of the next one. So they build upon one another, but they're not quite linear in that way. Different factors may pop up at different times in your practice. It's not that you have to bring one to maturity before the next one begins. A little bit of one starts the next, starts the next, and they reinforce each other. So they're also kind of circular.

Let me describe them. You've probably heard them before, but let me review them. The first factor, no surprise, is mindfulness. It's mindfulness that begins the development of all of these. It's also mindfulness that keeps them all in balance, and we'll get later to why that's important.

The next three factors are what are called arousing factors. They bring up energy. These are investigation, energy, and rapture or joy. The last three are called pacifying factors. They bring in calm. These are tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

When they are all brought up together and come into balance, we have the energizing factors that pick up the energy and make for brightness, alertness, and interest. And we have the pacifying factors that calm the energy, settle the mind in tranquility, bring it together, and provide that base of peace. This sounds a little bit like the instructions we give for posture, doesn't it? Bring up the energy and also relax. The seven factors work in the same way—bring up the energy and then calm.

So let's go into these one by one.

Beginning with mindfulness, we've talked a lot about mindfulness. There's not a lot more that I need to say about that. The practice you've been doing, the way you've been noticing all the different facets of your experience—this is the base of mindfulness that we want to continue to develop. Everything comes out of that. We've talked about the importance of the continuity of mindfulness. That means stringing together more and more moments of mindfulness.

And by the way, when we say continuity of mindfulness, we don't actually expect it to be continuous for you. If you've been thinking it should really be continuous because that's the instruction, let me just modify that a little bit. What we really mean by that is frequent. None of us has continuous mindfulness.

Maybe the Buddha had it. But at this point, none of us has continuous mindfulness. What we mean is keep making the effort to be mindful in as many moments as possible, in every activity through the day—from formal sitting, formal walking, to all the informal times. Make it as frequent as possible. And we know that you'll lose it at times. That's okay. That's to be expected.

As we become more mindful and connect with our experience, one of the things that happens—and Brian pointed to this a lot this morning—is we get interested. What's that experience really like when we look closer? What's really going on? This is a wholesome kind of curiosity. This is not speculative curiosity. This is curiosity directed to our immediate experience. This is what brings about the second factor, which is investigation.

Investigation means I want to know my experience even better. Mindfulness knows it—it's a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a sensation, a thought, an emotion, an intention, a feeling tone. But investigation wants to bring mindfulness as close as possible to that momentary experience. So this investigation—the Pali is dhamma-vicaya—is not conceptual. This is not about investigating through thinking. Sherlock Holmes did a lot of that. We don't do it that way.

We do it like you're walking down the path and you see a beautiful flower and you just want to bring your attention right up to it. Or I was riding my bike up Pleasant Street a couple of miles from here, and this large black bear wandered out from the side of the road and plopped down right in the middle of my path. My interest was right there. I didn't have to force mindfulness. I was one hundred percent present. This is what happens when interest is there with us. It naturally draws the attention, naturally draws our gaze right up to the experience. This is what we want to foster with investigation.

We've talked about this quite a lot in relation to emotions or difficult mind states. We want to really feel the experience in the body. We talked about bringing the attention into the body to explore the feeling of difficult emotions. We talked about bringing the attention close to the breath, to just feel the breath within the body as it comes and goes, being fully with sounds and so forth. So this is the kind of investigation—bring it close to the experience.

One word that's used is "rub." Rub the experience with your attention. Rub the experience with mindfulness. Be that intimate with it. There's a sense that your attention can kind of embrace the experience.

The word in Pali for wise attention, which we've talked about before, is yoniso-manasikāra. Manasikāra means attention. Yoniso is the word that's being translated as wise. If you've spent time in India, you may know that yoni refers to the female genitals and lingam refers to the male genitals. So yoni can also be translated as womb or source. Yoniso-manasikāra has this connotation of attention that's like a womb that holds, embraces, nurtures our connection to the object. That kind of warm attention that we give to our immediate experience is part of investigation.

Some ways to investigate, if you'd like to explore this a little more, with the breath: Can you feel in one in-breath the phases of beginning, middle, and end? Can you feel in one out-breath phases of beginning, middle, end? What happens after the out-breath has finished?

Is there a pause before the next in-breath begins? Can you notice the pause? Then can you stay with that sequence—beginning, middle, end of in-breath; beginning, middle, end of out-breath; and a pause if there is one—breath after breath.

In this way of investigating, we can refine our interest in what constitutes a breath and refine the mindfulness in relation through investigation.

If you're connecting with the sensation in the body, you can explore details of it. One thing I like to look at with sensation is to ask: is it solid, fixed, unchanging, or does the sensation itself exhibit change? In other words, can you notice impermanence within a single sensation? Or is it fixed and unchanging? Take a look.

As you're feeling into a sensation, look at how far it extends. Maybe there's a sensation in the shoulder. How far through the shoulder does it go? Does it go around the corner and into the upper arm? Does it extend down the back or down into the chest? Exactly where are the limits? Where is that sensation not felt at all? Where has it faded to the point it's not touching any of the surrounding body area?

Just investigating in this very experiential, simple way to see what's really there will begin to deepen the connection to the present moment.

Also, this factor of investigation is an aspect of wisdom. Interest and curiosity are wisdom openings. As we learn to investigate skillfully—which doesn't mean to think about it, but to get in and feel it and see it—we're waking up the natural intelligence in the mind. So investigation wakes up wisdom. It starts it rolling.

The other thing investigation does is it arouses energy. This leads into the third of the awakening factors, which is energy. The Pali term is *viriya*. Energy is just one translation for it. Sometimes it's translated as effort. Sometimes it's translated as energetic effort. That gives you the sense that *viriya* is not just a random collection of blood flows, but it's directed toward the effort of the path.

Some other words that are sometimes used to describe it are strength, courage, ardor, my personal favorite, enthusiasm. I've had so many practice meetings where people are describing their love for this practice and their enthusiasm for it. That is a sign of *viriya*.

This energy is directed toward movement of the path. The Buddha put it this way: Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the cultivation of wholesome states. And remember, the primary wholesome state that we're all engaged in developing is mindfulness itself. It starts the whole ball rolling, one of the most often mentioned wholesome states in all the Buddha's lists.

The Pali term is *viriya*, and this is from the word *vira*, which means hero. There's the same root as virile, which comes from Latin. The English word virile comes from the Latin—same root. And so there's a kind of pointing that this journey we're on is a heroic kind of journey. It's the hero's or the heroine's journey, this process of awakening. And the energy we put into it is a kind of heroic energy. That can be inspiring. Not to underestimate what you're about here. It's a big thing.

Viriya comes out of our motivation for practice. Not so much pushing ourselves as letting ourselves be inspired and wanting to understand, wanting to find out—this deep interest.

I sometimes like to think of it in comparison to athletes. It's interesting, if you look at great athletes in fields like figure skating or gymnastics, they often started when they were five years old and have worked really steadily ever since then. That's a lot of effort to get to the level of mastery that they're at.

The other sport I look at for energy is professional bike riding. I love to watch the Tour de France when it's on in the summer, and I'm a bike rider myself. So I have an amazing appreciation for what those people do. In this case it's men, but there's also a women's race and they are also amazing athletes.

So one bike rider said that every time I get on a bike in that race, I know I'm pushing my body to the limit and I'm going to experience eight hours of pain. Does this remind you of meditation practice? No, ours is sixteen hours.

But they're willing to do it. And that's just for fame and fortune. We're on a much more heroic journey.

So I went through a period when I was younger where I really explored what for me was the leading edge of this kind of heroic approach. It was a period of time when at the three-month course, the teachers were really suggesting that we work hard to minimize the number of hours we slept every night. So they put it out as a standard: it would be really good if you could get down to four hours of sleep a night.

And I thought, I've never done that. Never been able to do that in my practice. And I was younger then. I had more energy in general. But still, on retreat, I would usually go along at about six hours a night. So looking at two additional hours—not only of less sleep, but more hours of practice—that was a challenge.

So I didn't try right away, but I just tried to decrease it little by little by little. Going to bed later, getting up earlier. And I finally reached a rhythm where I could get by on four hours of sleep a night. So I would go to bed about eleven and I would get up at three, and the rest of the day was just sitting and walking and having meals and showers and work and all of that.

And then I found I could sustain that. It was very beneficial for my insight practice. I saw a lot of things I think I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't put in that level of effort. So I found out that I could do it. And I had a certain motivation because every time I came in for a practice meeting, my teachers would ask me: How many hours did you sit? How many hours did you walk? And how many hours did you sleep? So I had to keep notes and I had to report to them.

So we don't teach like this anymore, as you may have noticed. And part of it is that this kind of heroic effort isn't really for everyone. It's not suited for every temperament and everyone in every stage of their practice. It was very good for me at that time because I was young, I was highly motivated, I had the energy, my body was working. But it's not for everyone, so we don't teach it like that anymore. Though sometimes in individual interviews we might see this might benefit someone and we'll offer it, but not in general.

And so there's another way that this form of energy expresses itself that's very useful for everyone. And that is as perseverance—that's sort of the message of just keep going.

And I like this story from Milarepa. I don't know if you've heard of Milarepa before. He was a yogi in Tibet in the eleventh century, and he's regarded as one of the greatest yogis in all the history of practice in Tibet. And there have been a lot of great yogis in that history. And he's regarded as one of the greatest. He's held as a real model and was a lineage founder of one school of Tibetan Buddhism.

So he had two main disciples. One was called Gampopa and the other was called Rechungpa. And they both also wrote texts and had lots of students and helped solidify the school that Milarepa more or less began.

So at this point in time, one of the disciples, Gampopa, has been practicing with Milarepa for a while. Gampopa has listened to lots of teachings, practiced with Milarepa, gone through ups and downs as all yogis do. Finally, Milarepa thinks, okay, he's learned the basic instructions. It's time for him to go off on his own. The solitude was an important piece of the training—self-reliance at a certain point.

So Gampopa was heading down the path, sad to be leaving his teacher, but he knew it was the right time in his training. And he was heading down the path and Milarepa called him back and said, "Wait, come back. I have one more instruction for you." He said, "There is nothing more important than this pith instruction that I'm going to give you right now."

Milarepa is known in the tradition for just wearing white cotton robes. Even in the middle of Tibetan winters, he just wore white cotton robes. He was dressed in his white cotton robe and was about to give Gampopa this last pith instruction, which he said there is nothing more important. He turned his back to Gampopa and flipped up the bottom of his white cotton skirt and showed Gampopa his backside.

And he said, "You see how my buttocks are as hard as the hooves of a camel? This is my instruction to you. This has come from sitting uninterruptedly hour after hour, month after month, year after year. I want you too, Gampopa, to practice in this way. This is perseverance. Practice so that your buttocks become as hard as the hooves of a camel. This is my final instruction." And then he sent Gampopa on his way.

This understanding of virya as perseverance is profoundly helpful. It doesn't require staying up until eleven or one in the morning. It simply asks that you keep going very steadily, always coming back to mindfulness.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a contemporary Burmese teacher, puts it beautifully: "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this, you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

This we can commit ourselves to. Let me be as steadily mindful as I can. Let me not let go of that intention throughout the day. Let me practice with this kind of perseverance. This is the force of energy.

The next factor, and the last of the arousing factors, is called in English "rapture." The Pali term is *pīti*. Rapture is not a particularly good translation because it points to something more dramatic than *pīti* actually indicates. I think a better translation would be "happy interest" or sometimes "joyful attention."

It's the quality of mind that develops when you actually like your meditation focus. Whether you're being with the breath, with sounds, with body sensations, emotions, or thoughts, you're genuinely enjoying the process of connecting with that focus, with that object, with that phenomenon.

This happy interest has a deepening effect in our practice. Once we enjoy being with experience, we start to find it more appealing than being lost in thoughts or distraction. We discover a genuine pleasantness, a genuine pleasure in being in the present moment. This quality of enjoyment begins to reorient the mind because it becomes where we want to be.

Instead of dragging ourselves back to the present from fantasies or mental excursions that seem so seductive and entertaining, we actually find we prefer being present. We want to hang out more with our objects in the present moment experience.

Ajahn Brahm, a teacher in Australia, talks about discovering "the beautiful breath." This is for those practicing breath meditation. When the breath becomes beautiful to someone, attention is naturally drawn there. We want to abide with that beauty. Discovering this possibility that the breath can seem beautiful and attractive is tremendously helpful for establishing mindfulness in the moment.

Pīti, though commonly translated as rapture, is a factor of mind that often manifests in the body. The texts describe different kinds of *pīti*. Goosebumps might arise—this is called minor *pīti*. There can be momentary *pīti*, experienced as a rush through the body like lightning. There can be showering *pīti*, which appears as waves of sensation passing through the body.

Sometimes an uplifting energy comes with *pīti*, where you feel light even while sitting with all your weight pressing down on the cushion. Then there's all-pervading *pīti*, where the whole body fills with these intensified sensations born from this deepening interest.

Pīti generally has a pleasant feeling tone, but when it becomes strong, its bodily expression can be so intense that it feels unpleasant. If this happens, simply stay with the experience as much as you can. Notice that it's arising from a deepening process. Allow it to be, and gradually that unpleasant quality smooths out.

This is one of the factors connected with strong concentration, often paired with the quality of *sukha*, which means happiness. Together they bring a sense of contentment. This is a wonderful turning in practice, and Dawn will be exploring this more deeply in her upcoming talk.

This turning into contentment brings the next movement, which is the development of the factor of tranquility. And this is the first of the pacifying factors.

For tranquility, the Pali term is passaddhi. We could also translate it as ease, calm, serenity. Sometimes it's translated as relaxation. There's the sense that there's a kind of growing contentment that develops out of the interest being pleasurable. And instead of having to send the mind out—past and future and fantasy and imagination—instead of having to send the mind out for its fulfillment, we find a fulfillment in the here and now with our meditation.

So as that starts to happen, thoughts, discursive thoughts, distracting thoughts of past and future, just don't have as much pull as they did. So they start to calm down, quite naturally, not through any kind of forcing. They just start to calm down. And so, of course, the emotions they stir up also start to calm down.

A lot of us haven't known this experience of calm, of mental calm or tranquility much in our outside life. I hadn't before I found it in meditation. And so the experience, when we come upon it, can feel kind of new. And one meditator said that when it first started happening to them and they were using the noting practice, they noticed: "Calm. Huh? Is this what they're talking about?" Big question mark. And then as it continues or becomes more accessible, you become more confident. "Yeah, this is what they're talking about." It takes a while to get to know it.

But it's as though once we come upon it, it really feels different. And we're coming through working with the hindrances and the difficulty emotions and all of that. And it's like we've crossed this stormy ocean with all kinds of turbulent winds and pirate ships and giant squids kind of leaping out of the waters to attack us. And all of a sudden, after that journey, we find this broad, safe harbor. And so we sail into this, and there's a sense: "Wow, I can kind of relax a bit now. I can start to rest now in my practice."

And this brings about the quality of contentment. It's actually okay to be here. But there are different responses maybe before we find that contentment. And part of it is it may seem uninteresting because the calm is not dramatic. It might not seem interesting. I'll come back to this in a minute. But for now, the instruction is: when you discover this harbor of calm, let yourself feel it. Let yourself rest in it. Take it as your meditation focus. This state of mind, you can trust it.

And it's expressed well by this poem from Emily Dickinson, who, if you don't know, did her writing about a forty-five minute drive from here in the town of Amherst. Her house is there now as a museum. And this is from a poem called "Wild Nights." That's kind of where we've been too, right? We've been through some wild nights.

And she starts off: "Futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden."

So I'll read it again. This term "futile" is a little unusual in English. If you're not an English speaker, it means useless. And then some other references are a little bit eighteenth century. The compass and the chart are ways—chart means map here—it's ways that sailors would steer their boats.

"Futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass. Done with the chart. Rowing in Eden."

So you might feel this. You know, big space opens up from this calm.

And we can rest there.

So Ajahn Amaro, who's the abbot of Amaravati Monastery in England, has a very nice teaching about this. When you touch this calm, he says, use it as an instruction. He puts it this way: "Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body. And then pay attention to whatever disturbs that." Rest in the natural peace and ease—it is the natural peace and ease of mind and body. And then pay attention to what disturbs that.

When we find this element of calm, it's a lovely discovery because it is a part of what we've been looking for all along. I think most of us can relate to thinking that we came into meditation to find greater peace of mind, to find a calm place in the midst of all the turmoil of life—all the emotions, all the relationships, all the work, and so forth. And this is the start of that. This is the beginning of that inner peace.

We find that it becomes more and more available anytime we don't stir it up. And how do we stir it up? By thinking about past and future. By going off on distracting thought excursions. But as we trust in it more and can rest there, it becomes more easily available.

When we first start to notice it, however, it's a more subtle state than the hindrances. It's not dramatic. And we may think, "It's not very interesting." Sometimes we feel bored with it. When boredom comes—I think we've talked about this before—it is basically a kind of aversion to neutral feeling tone.

So when calm comes, check the feeling tone. Maybe it's kind of neutral because not much is happening. And we discover from our fast-paced life outside in the twenty-first century, we may have become somewhat addicted to intensity, looking for the ups and the downs that are more dramatic, that seem entertaining, maybe even cathartic. And maybe we weren't expecting something so undramatic and seeming almost ordinary.

But this is a big deal. This opening into calm is a big deal.

There's this cartoon—Gay and Wilson got into drawing some nice cartoons about meditation. In this one, there's a Zen temple, and everyone's sitting in robes. The monastics are sitting in robes around the edge of the temple. One of the older monastics leans over to one of the younger monastics and is obviously speaking to the younger one. The caption is: "Nothing happens next. This is it."

So this is sometimes the first experience of calm. Nothing happens next. This is it.

So notice the presence of calm when it arises. Notice if there's a more neutral feeling tone to it, and if there's a little bit of discontent with that. But you know, the Buddha spoke rather highly of this quality of peace. He thought it was a pretty good thing to aim for. In fact, what he said is, "Peace is the highest happiness."

I think this is an interesting thing to hear: Peace is the highest happiness. And I wonder if we believe that or not. And if our practice is really directed in our minds to peace, or if what we really think we're looking for is a more intense feeling of bliss or some special peak experiences or some other kind of high. But what the path promises is peace, and that that's the highest happiness.

I think that's also a really interesting comment on our human psychology. I do think it's true. And I think it's true that the most fulfilling way to live is to live in peace, in inner peace. So it's something that we come upon and we can also develop.

Within the Anapanasati Sutta, the Buddha puts it this way: "I will breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation. I will breathe in tranquilizing the mental formation." And then he repeats that for breathing out. So breath can be used at a certain point to bring in this sense of calm, to bring in a sense of tranquility. So you can play with that.

Think about especially relaxing on the out-breath, tranquilizing the formations on the out-breath.

As we settle into this calm, it's as though the mind starts to settle into itself. It's not pulled out so much to outside objects, to past and future, to looking for its satisfaction elsewhere. It starts to find contentment within itself. This gives us a new degree of independence from the world and from the changing conditions of the world.

And it leads into the next of the factors of awakening, which is concentration. The Pali term is samadhi. This is a state of mind that is primarily unified. The mind has come together, and that's what makes the state of concentration. In that state, it's collected, it's steady, it's stable, it's whole. It's non-distracted and therefore it's strong. This is also a very high quality in meditation, another of the factors the Buddha talked about almost more than anything else, except perhaps mindfulness.

This beautiful state of mind comes from being mindful one moment after another. It's the moments of mindfulness that bring up this state of collectedness—the mind collects in the present moment. Concentration is another of these translations that's not particularly accurate, because in English, concentration usually refers to singleness of attention. You know, like "I'm trying to concentrate on my homework. Don't distract me with that music." It's about trying to focus in one area without distraction.

But the term samadhi isn't dependent on narrow attention. Samadhi means the mind has come together in the present moment. That could come together with a narrow focus, like on the breath. It could come together with a very wide focus, as in choiceless attention, or in sounds. It's the coming together, becoming unified, that's the important piece, not the narrowness of focus.

Before Spirit Rock built its retreat center, which now occupies a lot of land and is perched above a natural amphitheater, we had Thich Nhat Hanh come to teach a daylong on a couple of different occasions. When we had him there, the visitors were spread out on this big natural amphitheater sitting in the grass. At the bottom of the amphitheater, we built a platform for Thay that had a good sound system and speakers.

His voice was amplified. We had something close to 2,000 people that day to hear him teach. We could hear every word through the amplification, but we could also see him clearly because we were in the amphitheater and he was at the focal point of it.

It was amazing to experience him in the teaching mode in that setting because he talked dharma continuously. As the day went on, I felt like he was casting this spell of samadhi over the whole 2,000 people because he was so still. His body was still. His movements were still. His focus on the dharma was very clear and specific. We were all just getting a samadhi transmission from him. It was beautiful. The personal power that he manifested there over that size group was really impressive.

The beautiful thing was he led a walking meditation for about a thousand people to the back of the property and back. We still have photos—we couldn't get all thousand in one shot, but we got a few hundred trailing behind him on this little trail to the back of the land. It was amazing.

This quality of concentration or samadhi means that we can stay in the present moment more and more because the mind has become stable, and in that stability it's become strong. The basic measure, you might say, is how many moments in a row you find yourself in the present moment. This is not something that can be forced or willed, but it is something that develops over time with mindfulness practice.

As a measure, you can check it out: How many notes in a row can you make before becoming distracted? How many breaths in a row can you connect with before becoming distracted? That gives a rough measure, just a metric for the concentration.

It's interesting to know that concentration develops from mindfulness. That's a given. But the proximate cause—the thing that really tips it into concentration, the proximate cause—what do you think? Pushing hard? Forcing?

Strongly efforting? The proximate cause is happiness. When happiness develops, then the mind is really willing to settle into itself. It's not forcing. It's not straining. It's not striving. It's happiness. That's what grows concentration.

So concentration has a couple of benefits. One is it feels good. When the mind becomes strong and steady and stable, there is a feeling of inner peace. This is what the Dalai Lama said: inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility. And samadhi is a big part of inner peace. So that's the first thing.

But more important is what the Buddha said: the purpose and benefit of concentration is to see things as they really are. That means insight. The purpose and benefit of concentration is insight. When the mind is steady, we see more clearly.

So it's like when the hindrances are active. Imagine you're on a merry-go-round and it's going round and round and round. You're on a horse. And a friend of yours comes up next to the merry-go-round and holds up a newspaper and says, "Have you seen this?" And you're going by so quickly you can't read the newspaper. But the merry-go-round starts to slow down. And then you come to rest in front of your friend and you can read the headlines. And the headlines say: life is change. If you hold on, you will suffer. Letting go brings happiness. This is what we want to see when the mind slows down. You want to see it in your direct experience.

And when the mind is still, those insights go deep. And they're really transformative. You can hear those insights now and they'll go a certain depth. But when you feel them, discover them in the depth of meditation—and all of you have had experiences like this—they change us. They go deep and they change us.

So how can we develop this factor here? There are things you can do in your daily routine that will help support the development of this quality of stability and unification. One is spending time again, as we did at the beginning, with your anchor. Whether it's breath, sounds, body, whatever helps keep you really connected with the present moment. Do that again. We don't just use the anchor for the first four days and then forget it. We use it again and again and again anytime the mind is tending to distraction.

Techniques like noting or counting the breaths are very helpful for strengthening concentration because we really know when those stop—whether it's noting or counting—we really know we've drifted off. We know we're not really present anymore. The continuity of mindfulness is really key. So this means making an effort throughout the day, not just in formal sittings, not just in formal walkings, but in all the times in between: moving around your room, taking a shower, being in meals, carrying out your work meditation, putting all the same effort at continuity there as well.

Another one we don't talk about a lot, but it is really helpful, is slowing down. When you move the body more slowly, it starts to slow down the mental activity as well. And it's also saying something. You're making a statement: I'm not here to get to lunch as fast as I can or to get to my walking spot as fast as I can. I'm not rushing. I'm taking my time. I'm just here to pay attention. So this factor of slowing down throughout the day—moving around the building, movements in your room, moving from here to your walking spot, trying slow walking when you reach your walking spot—but find the tempo that is most suitable for you. But this general act of slowing down will increase your moment-to-moment mindfulness.

Now, you want to be careful when you get in hallways, when you get around meals, when you get in the lobby. That's not the time for snail's pace.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 11/12). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

So we say, if you're on your own walking path or going to your room, that's more private space. Private pace, private place. When you're in a common space, go at a common pace.

Do you ever see those signs on some two-lane roads: "When five cars pull up behind you, please pull over"? Please don't let five cars pull up behind you while walking to the dining room for a meal. Keep the pace steady and allow people to move.

Guarding the sense doors is another important practice. Brian will talk about this more in future sessions. This basically means being aware of how you respond to sights and sounds. When a sight or sound draws your attention, don't take it as an opportunity to go into greed and aversion and proliferate. Be really clear. Be mindful of the contact. Be very mindful of any reaction of liking or disliking, and avoid proliferating around it. Brian will explore this further.

The importance of formal walking practice as a support for developing mindfulness is hard to overstate. When the walking periods come, try doing the formal walking. It's a really good support.

As the days go by, you may find that your need for sleep goes down—many people do. So the encouragement is: if you're still alert at the end of the day at 9:20, 9:40, or whenever, don't feel you need to go to bed then. If the energy is still there, stay up a little later. Or if an alarm goes off in the morning, or the bell rings, or you wake up naturally, consider getting up then. Little by little, whatever is comfortable for you, out of interest rather than pushing or striving, you can try extending your practice time slightly.

The last of the factors of awakening is this quality called equanimity. The Pali term is *upekkha*. When the mind has become strong through concentration, that strength means it's not so thrown about by changing phenomena. Pleasure and pain will still come, but the concentrated mind is not so moved by them. This is the meaning of equanimity—not being so moved by pleasure and pain.

Sometimes this word "equanimity" in English has a rather cold and unfeeling connotation, but that's not the sense of it here. At the end of one three-month course, during the integration days where people are learning to speak again—and by the way, it does come back, quicker than you might like—I was meeting with a group of about twelve people here in the hall, asking them about their retreat.

I asked, "What were some of the greatest outcomes for you? What were some of the greatest benefits?" People said things like, "I just don't feel so tossed around by my experience anymore. I feel much more stability and centeredness in the middle of all the things that are happening to me." What they were really pointing to was this factor of equanimity, which might also be described as a balance of mind.

I asked, "In those periods where you weren't feeling so tossed around, did you feel emotionally shut down? Was it a cold place to be? Were you unfeeling at those times?" They said, "No, not at all. Because of the stability, I had better access to *metta* and compassion. It was a warmer place to be." We'll see in the Brahma-viharas how equanimity supports the arising of the other three.

These are the seven factors. As they all come to maturity, they truly do lead to awakening, as the Buddha said—to direct knowledge, to awakening, to *nibbana*. They're noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts on them to the complete destruction of suffering.

In this modern age, we might wonder: Is this complete destruction of suffering still possible? Is this just something that happened 2,500 years ago with the Buddha and those disciples? I want to read you a little story from the biography of Ajahn Liam. I might have mentioned him earlier—he was the student of Ajahn Chah who became the abbot of Ajahn Chah's monastery once Ajahn Chah passed away.

This is his account of his meditation one year when he was practicing under Ajahn Chah:

"Around the middle of the rainy season, Ajahn Chah encouraged us to practice with special intensity. So Ajahn Liem increased his efforts at that time. Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit in meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and then stop to have a rest. But on this day I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture.

A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, becoming completely light and at ease. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. The body felt tranquil, cool, and light.

This experience continued on throughout the whole night, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years, all from that one time. It feels like there are no more proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with defilements that had bothered me before, they had all disappeared. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose. There isn't anything to be concerned about.

As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change at all, all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without changes."

So let's just sit for a minute together and let these words settle.

As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then.

The complete destruction of suffering—it is still possible in this modern age.

CHAPTER 70

The Five Aggregates Are Not-Self

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *Guy Armstrong presents a comprehensive exploration of the Buddha's teaching on anattā (not-self) through the framework of the five khandhas (aggregates). Drawing from his personal experience with his sister's death, Armstrong makes this profound teaching accessible by examining how our sense of 'I' is constructed through language and grasping.*
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> *The talk systematically examines each of the five aggregates: rūpa (material form), vedanā (feeling tone), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (mental formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness). Armstrong demonstrates how these categories completely describe our experience without requiring any permanent self or 'I' as owner or observer. He explains how the sense of self arises through clinging to any of these aggregates, referencing Ānanda's insight that 'the notion I am occurs by clinging, not without clinging.'*
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> *The teaching concludes with the profound instruction the Buddha gave to Bahiya: 'In what is seen, let there be just the seen... When you are not in that, there is no you there.' Armstrong shows how understanding the aggregates as impersonal expressions of nature - physical nature, human nature, and sentient nature - can lead to great relief and freedom from the burden of separate existence.*

The subject of this evening's talk is the five aggregates are not-self. I want to explore the Buddha's teaching on not-self through this schema of the five aggregates.

The teaching on not-self—the Pali word is anatta—is one of the most important teachings that the Buddha gave and therefore one of the most liberating things for us to possibly understand. It's also one of the hardest to understand.

Tonight, I want to put out some reflections that might serve as seeds for your meditation. This is not something that can be fully understood through conceptual thought. We use words to plant some ideas and then let them sink into your wise attention and simply hold them. You don't have to consciously hold them, but as they go in, if they're of interest to you, your subconscious will work on them. Then as meditation deepens, insights will come. This is a process that won't be solved in one night, a process that you can't figure out rationally. But take in some of the terms and wordings, let them settle, and see if insights come anyway, which they tend to do.

This teaching on not-self is paired with the Buddha's teachings on impermanence and unsatisfactoriness as the third characteristic. These are said to be the three characteristics of existence. Carol has already talked on unsatisfactoriness in the First Noble Truth and on impermanence a while back, so now we're rounding out those three characteristics.

Basically, the Buddha said that the way we tend to hold the concept of self is mistaken. This is puzzling because it seems so obvious—I'm here and you're there, and there's a self here and a self there. But when we look more deeply, it doesn't quite make sense. This belief we have in self, the deluded belief in self, is a very significant aspect of what the Buddha called ignorance—avijja—which is the start of the whole wheel of dependent origination that leads us into suffering again and again. We're going to fall into suffering as long as we keep holding onto a mistaken view of self.

I appreciate this quote from an Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj. He was a teacher of Advaita Vedanta who lived in Bombay until the 1990s when he passed away. He's from a yogic tradition, so he talks in terms of different yogic paths, but it's the same path of purification as we're involved with. He says, "All the yogas have only one aim: to save you from the calamity of separate existence." In case you didn't realize that you were in a calamity—this is to remind us it is a calamity to be involved in separate existence. It is a burden. It leads us into suffering and prevents us from flowering into happiness and love to the greatest extent possible.

When we believe the self is real, we create a duality. There's the world out there and there's us here. In that gap, there's separation, isolation, and fear—in particular, the fear of death. When we think we are a separate, solitary self, we will fear death because it means the ending of what we've taken to be our identity. But when we release the limitation of self, it opens into a much broader relationship to the world. We don't base everything around ourselves any longer, but in awareness we see that the whole world and all other beings arise within our own consciousness. We open to that more and more without this strict dualistic boundary.

Tonight, we want to understand how this idea of self gets formed and then how we can see it a little more correctly.

For most of us, the "I" is really the center of the universe. I'll use the words "I" and "self" interchangeably. We know the self is operating if we tune into our thoughts and hear these words—"I," "me," "my"—going by frequently. That's a clue. If you look closely at your thoughts, don't you hear those words often? Aren't most of the compelling thoughts about "I," "me," and "my"? That's both the sign of this incorrect understanding and the perpetuation of the belief. It's what keeps us hooked in over and over.

Our whole world tends to revolve around this concept of "I" or self. Yet it seems obvious, self-evident—but have you ever found it? It feels like it's in here somewhere, doesn't it? And yet, if you look for it, you can't find it. William James said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." He came up with more than a lot of us come up with. The Dalai Lama said, "When you think something is clear, but you can't actually find it, that's a sure sign of delusion."

We really carry around this feeling. Yeah, there's a self in here. There's an I at the center of this. And yet, we can't quite find it.

So the classical analogy in the tradition is we look at a braided rope made of different colors lying on the ground and we think it's a snake. And because we misperceive it, we get scared and we jump back. But when we slow down and look a little more closely and we see it's just a braided rope, then the fear goes out.

So the same understanding is true about our sense of the self. When we misunderstand it, we live in the fear of duality, of the ending of the self through death, of the separation from the world and the isolation. When we understand it correctly, that level of anxiety, separation, isolation, fear goes out. We live with a much more expansive relationship to life.

Our ordinary language reflects this confusion around the I. For instance, if I ask you, how tall are you? This is pretty easy. And I might say something like, I'm 5'10", or I'm 175 centimeters, or whatever. That comes easily, naturally, you don't have to think twice about it, and it's not a trick question. I'm 5'10".

But is that really all there is to it? When I say I'm 5'10", I really mean this body, right? So when I say I'm 5'10", and what I mean is the body is 5'10", then I'm equating I with the body. So here I'm basically saying I am the body.

And then let me ask a second question. What color are your eyes? So I'd say my eyes are brown. Oh, wait, I didn't say I'm brown. I said, my eyes are brown. Now I'm someone who owns a body. The body is mine. I'm the owner of it.

So which are you? Are you the body? Are you the owner of it? Can you be both? People who really think they're multiple selves usually get taken to a hospital. So is this really tenable?

Or we could go on. Sometimes we say, I'm happy or I'm sad. And here we're equating I with emotions. But we could also talk about my joys and my sorrows. So are you the emotions or the owner of your emotions? The body or the owner of the body?

Here are four ways that we construct an I. Our language constructs an I. And there's one other way that to me is quite deeply felt. What we really think is that I is somewhere inside the head, you know, between the ears and behind the eyes. And it's sort of looking out all the time and taking in all the different experiences that come to us. So I am seeing sights. I am hearing sounds. I am tasting foods. I am thinking thoughts. And there's this little being that dwells inside the head that you might call the observer that we feel is the real me.

So these are five ways that we create a sense of self. And we express it through our language all the time without thinking anything strange is going on. But can you be five people at once? Which one are you really? So it doesn't really make logical sense the way we use the term.

And what the Buddha said is all of them are not true. And the way he put it was this: in whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that. In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that.

One of my teachers put it a little more dramatically.

He said, "Everything you think is wrong." He was trying to wake us up. It might go a little far, but it's a good provocative thing to contemplate.

I also like this comment that came over talk radio—one of the few pearls of wisdom from talk radio. The comment was: "The mind, often wrong, seldom in doubt." That describes it, doesn't it?

So the way we believe in the I, the way we believe in the self, is a fiction that's kind of created by thought. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosopher, said that the self is a shadow cast by grammar—a shadow cast by grammar that we haven't examined. We haven't taken the time to look into it and see what's true and what's not in our use of language.

Ānanda is one of the central figures in the Pāli discourses. He was a cousin of the Buddha who became the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. And he is one of the sweetest beings in the Pāli canon—very warm-hearted, generous, kind, humble, very devoted to the Buddha. So he kept asking the Buddha questions to clarify his own understanding. He was not fully awakened during the Buddha's life, so he continued to ask questions to try to deepen.

At one point he came to the Buddha and he said, "The world is empty. The world is empty. What do you mean by the world is empty?"

And the Buddha replied, "The world is empty because it is empty of a self or of what belongs to a self." The world is empty of self or what belongs to a self. Basically, it's empty of I and my. There's no real foundation for I and my.

But our world doesn't feel like that, does it? Is your world empty of I and my? Mine isn't completely. So these notions keep coming up. We keep kind of believing in them. And a long meditation retreat is a time to really question them.

There's this interesting passage in the Visuddhimagga. The Visuddhimagga was a compilation of meditation practices and understandings that was put together in Sri Lanka in the fifth century, primarily by one author named Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa, one of the great commentators in our tradition.

In this passage in the Visuddhimagga, the author is drawing an analogy to a butcher who is cutting up the carcass of a cow. Personally, I find this analogy a little distasteful because I've been a vegetarian for a lot of years and I'm a supporter of animal rights. However, it's in the text, so I share it in that sense.

The text says that a butcher who is carving up the carcass of a cow, with which he's very familiar, wouldn't carve it going "cow, cow, cow, cow." Because he knows that being so intimately, he would go "ribs, sirloin, tenderloin, rump." And the Visuddhimagga says, in the same way, someone who really understands their own mind and body, looking at themselves or looking at another, wouldn't say "person," wouldn't say "human being." For one who has investigated the mind-body process closely, one sees much more precisely than that.

So the question is: when the Buddha looked at a person, what did he see? And therefore, can we learn to see the same way the Buddha did? So that we just don't go "person," either for ourself or for someone else.

He saw in one of two ways. There are two main ways that he saw us.

The first is he saw us as six types of sense processes: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and so forth. This is really clear in a discourse from the Saṃyutta Nikāya called the Discourse on Totality. It says, "Bhikkhus"—which we understand as practitioners—"practitioners, what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality."

First of all, this is an awesome thing to say, isn't it? We've had a lot of smart people in the West in the last hundred years. I mean, you think about Marx, you think about Freud, you think about Einstein. Did any of them say, "I'm going to teach you the totality"? No.

But here is the Buddha 2,600 years ago saying, "I'm going to teach you the totality. Listen up. Attend carefully and I will teach you the totality. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of things would not be speaking of anything they knew about." So this is it.

These are the six classes of sense organs and sense objects. I find this pretty amazing and radical. Here's the Buddha who ended up founding one of the world's great religions, and he's not going on about cosmic visions or a pantheon of deities. He says, what you need to be concerned about is your direct experience. You can't get any more down to earth than that.

This becomes the foundation for Buddhist psychology and Buddhist meditation practice. It's all about our six senses. And I'm sure you can see how our instructions have been unfolding so that we become familiar with how to be mindful of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects—mind objects being thoughts and emotions primarily. This is the domain of our practice. This is the domain of suffering. This is the domain of liberation. This is what we care about. This is what he taught about.

So this is the first way that he saw us: the six sense bases, internal and external. Bhikkhu Bodhi said that he used this map primarily to offer teachings to cut through craving, because we experience pleasure at these six sense bases. So it involves us with wanting.

But the other way that he looked at us, and the other way he taught, was to see us as the five aggregates. It's the same field of totality. He's still talking about the field of the six senses, but he's dividing it up differently. And it's a very interesting division to me. Where he used the sense bases to cut through craving, he uses the aggregates to cut through wrong view, and particularly the view of self. But it's interesting—he links it into the other two characteristics. So in a number of discourses, you really see the connection between impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. We'll get to that.

So as we tune into the way he saw people, we tune into the awakened mind. We tune into right view. And this may sound kind of intellectual—oh, the five aggregates, that sounds kind of very specialized and esoteric. But this has real implications for our lives in practice.

The time that it really came alive in my life, I was in my mid-40s, and I was a practitioner at that time. My older sister, who was 51 at the time, died unexpectedly. She'd been ill for a while, but we thought she was on a sustainable path with treatment. She

seemed nowhere close to death. And one evening, she was at home with her son. She fainted, passed out. He called the ambulance. They came and picked her up. And in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, she suffered a cardiac arrest. She got to the hospital, and they were not able to revive her. So she died quite suddenly.

It was a shock to me because I had just talked to her the week before and she'd seemed relatively healthy and happy in her life and full of energy. I couldn't figure out what had happened to her. A lot of you may have had this experience with death too. It boggles the mind how someone who was there and alive and breathing and big in their life, all of a sudden didn't exist anymore.

My sister was big in her life. She had a big personality. She laughed a lot. She had a lot of passion. Loved her family.

She was a spark, a spark in all of our lives. And then she was gone. I couldn't put it together. It was the first time in my life I'd really been brought up against this immediacy of dying and the puzzle that it brought up.

Her death threw me into a period of grief for a couple of months. Life seemed dark, and I'd wake up thinking about her not being there anymore. I'd feel depressed and missing her. I thought, there's something I need to learn from here dharmically, because I couldn't understand how she'd been so solid and then was not there.

The way that helped me understand her passing was the five aggregates. This was the first time I really took them up for serious reflection, and they made sense of it to me in a new way. As we go through this, I'll talk about how that unfolded. When I understood her death better, I could better understand my own death still in the future—I could understand the process better.

You may have heard mention of the five aggregates earlier in this retreat, because I think Carol mentioned them when she talked about the first noble truth. As the Buddha goes through his list of all the things that are dukkha, one of the things he names is the five aggregates subject to clinging, upādāna. Since this is the totality of our experience, he's basically saying our experience subject to clinging is unsatisfactory. It's a really important statement.

Let's talk a little about this word "aggregate." It's a translation of the Pali term khandha. In Sanskrit, the word is skandha. I don't really like the translation of "aggregate"—I've never liked it because it sounds so technical. It sounds like road paving material: pebbles and tar and I don't know what else. Or it sounds like something made up in a chemistry lab. It has this mysterious connotation.

The translation I like best is "kinds of stuff." These are the five kinds of stuff that make us up. I think it goes better with the Pali because khandha is a simple word that just means heap or bundle. It's just kinds of stuff that get collected. You could talk about a khandha of sticks if you're gathering twigs for firewood.

So there are these five kinds of stuff that make us up: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. I want to talk about each of these individually.

Material form—sometimes I'll just call it form. Sometimes the translations just use the word form. The Pali term is rūpa. What it means here is the whole physical world. Everything you can touch, everything you can see is all in the realm of form. The trees, the earth, the clouds, the rain, the water—it's all under the world of form.

Form also refers to the experiences of the five physical senses. It includes smells and tastes and touches as well as sights and sounds. So that's all the world of form—the whole physical world and the physical senses. It's a big part of our reality. For instance, when you hear the bell, that sound is in the aggregate of form, in the first aggregate.

Since this takes care of the whole world of matter, you might infer that the other four aggregates have to do with mind. And that's right. The first aggregate is matter; the other four have to do with mind.

The second one is feeling tone—our old friend vedanā. Sometimes we'll just say feeling to be brief, but be clear that it's this vedanā quality of feeling tone, not feeling as in emotion.

We've talked extensively about how central vedana is to the teachings and to our practice. Vedana is the second foundation of mindfulness and a central link in the chain of dependent origination. Here it's singled out as one of five aggregates that make us up, giving it a truly central role in the Buddha's teachings.

Why is that? I think we've explored this because the pleasant form of vedana tends to lead us into greed. The unpleasant form tends to lead us into aversion. And the neutral form tends to lead us into delusion. You might say that feeling tone tends to stimulate the kilesas in our response to them. Since the kilesas are where we get involved with suffering, feeling tone becomes a critical link in the unmindful response to experience that leads to suffering.

With the bell, most of us experience that as a pleasant feeling tone. The sound itself is nice, but even more, this is the sound of the end of a meditation period. That's like one of the best things that happens in a day, so we generally have really pleasant associ-

ations. But it might happen that this becomes an unpleasant association. You're in the middle of the best meditation you've ever had in your life and the bell rings. Then you know that all these people are going to get up and stampede out of the hall and you're going to lose your concentration. What a bummer.

But generally, it's experienced as a pleasant thing. Again, remember that the pleasant or unpleasant quality is not intrinsic to the object. It's how it lands in our own mind, personally. That's determined by our conditioning, our background, our tendencies, our current state of mind.

Sometimes you've probably had the experience where a physical sensation is felt as unpleasant. But sometimes even in the same sitting, as concentration deepens and the mind becomes steady, that sensation becomes neutral. Or going through the lunch line, I can tell some people really like beets. I don't like beets. They taste a little too much like earth to me. But a lot of people really like beets. So it's very personal, this feeling tone thing.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, in describing it, says something like: we feel into the experience, and the feeling tone comes out of that. It's our mind meeting the experience—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the second aggregate.

The third aggregate is perception. In Pali, the term is sanna. Annie gave a whole talk on this, so I think this is already in your understanding. I just want to say a few other things about it.

Perception in Buddhist language means recognition. I think in Western psychological terms, it more often means the bare sense data. But we use contact for that. So perception comes after contact and recognizes what's just been experienced. When you hear that sound, you recognize "bell." You recognize "meditation bell." That's perception.

If your eyes are open and you're looking around the room, you're perceiving many different things automatically. You perceive people and floor and shawls and windows and lights and Buddha images. All these just happen automatically as you look around.

In fact, the bare sense data of the eye is not people, shawls, windows, lamps, Buddhas. The bare sense data is just form and color. But we've learned to recognize them as all these different things. It's a learned response.

Now when we perceive something and put it in a category, sometimes that blocks us from taking a closer look at the thing. You might label something in the sensation in your leg as pain, and that just makes you draw back and not want to get closer to it. But if you get close to it with mindfulness and see its changing nature, its impermanent nature, it reveals a lot more about it than just that simple category or label of pain.

Or take this thing. Now you've learned to see it as a bell.

But if it was in another setting and you came upon it, you might not know what it is, or you might think it's a bowl for a monastic. Our monastics have very modest bowls, but I had a friend in Thailand who was a monk whose bowl was about this size. When I went on alms round with him, he filled it to the brim and almost overflowing, then fed many people back at the monastery.

So we could look a little closer and see it could be a bowl. It could be a planter—we could grow a nice flower out of this thing. You don't want to be too quick to stop with perception. You want to go into the experience and see what's really there.

Zen plays with this a lot. In those stories, the Zen master holds something up and says, "What is this? If you say it is a stick, I will hit you. If you say it is not a stick, I will hit you. What is it?" What I got from that is that if I went to Zen, I was going to get hit a lot. One reason I came to Vipassana.

This is the koan practice, and there's a funny story about this. Some friends were living in Cambridge in the 70s when two highly respected spiritual masters both came to town at the same time. There was Kalu Rinpoche, a very high Lama in the Tibetan Kagyu lineage, and Seungsahn, who was a widely respected master in the Korean Zen tradition. They thought, "Let's introduce them to each other."

In Asia, these traditions do not mingle. I bet many of you have mingled with other traditions—I have. But in Asia, that just doesn't happen. The Zen people stay away from the Tibetans, the Tibetans stay away from the Theravadans. So this was a great opportunity to bring together these two really awakened mind streams and let them meet each other. Who knows what will happen? It will be like emptiness meeting emptiness. Maybe we'll get enlightened from the dialogue.

They brought them to a friend's home and served tea and snacks. At a certain point, Seungsahn took the initiative and started a conversation. In typical Zen style, he picked up an orange, held it out to Kalu Rinpoche and said, "What is this?" Kalu just sat there doing his mala and smiling, unruffled. Seungsahn wasn't getting the response he wanted, so he held it out again and said, "What is this?"

Finally, Kalu leaned over and whispered something to his translator. The translator then said, "What he said was, 'Don't they have oranges in Korea?'" This was the meeting of the awakened minds. I don't think it deepened from there.

So this is the activity of perception. Here we recognize the sound as the bell, recognize it as the ending of a meditation period.

The fourth aggregate is the field called mental formations. The Pali term is saṅkhāra, and this refers to basically the whole range of mental activity—thoughts, emotions, moods, any state of mind, meditative states, the refined states. We've talked about this area a lot. All of this goes into the fourth aggregate, which is mental formations. It's also a very, very big field. Beautiful emotions, difficult emotions, refined meditative states—they're all in this category of mental formations.

It's basically all the mental activity except that feeling and perception have already been taken out and singled out as unique aggregates. For a long time, I found this list really puzzling. Why would these two be taken out of mental activity and highlighted? Partly it speaks to the importance that they have in our psychological process and in our Dharma understanding. And also it could be a little arbitrary. Why not move volition out from mental activity and isolate that? Volition is the heart of karma.

It's really important. Why not move attention out? Attention is either wise or unwise, lands on things, dwells, abides. It's a really important factor too. So I don't know why the Buddha took these two out and highlighted them, but he did.

If we wanted to be a little more simplistic, we could take feeling and perception and put them back in the whole basket of sankharas, of mental activity. Then we'd have three aggregates: form, which is the physical world including the body; mental formations or mental activity; and the next aggregate—consciousness. We'll come back to this threefold list a little later. Actually, this is the way the Abhidhamma divides up our experience, putting things into three categories rather than five.

In sankharas, we hear the bell, and I don't know about you, but when I hear the bell ending the meditation session, I relax. I start feeling a sense of ease in my mind and body, and sometimes I think, "Oh, now I could sit for a long time." That sense of ease and the thought "now I can sit a long time"—those are parts of sankhara, mental formations, mental activity.

The next aggregate is really interesting: consciousness. The Pali term is vijñāna. In Western language, sometimes consciousness has really broad meanings. I once applied for a PhD program in California called The History of Consciousness. I thought that

would be really fascinating. That's a really broad use of the term. Or we could talk about cosmic consciousness or consciousness raising—all those words in Western philosophy or psychology.

The Buddha's use of the word consciousness is really simple, very basic. It's just the knowing of sense data, of sense objects or sense experience. There are six types of consciousness: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness. It's just the bare knowing of a sense object—the knowing of a sight, the knowing of a sound, the knowing of a smell or a touch or a thought or an emotion, in the simplest way possible.

For instance, when you hear the bell—just that knowing is the activity of consciousness. Then other things happen in the mind in relation to it. You recognize, you perceive, "That's a bell." If you have perfect pitch, you might know, "Oh, that's C-sharp, just above middle C." If you're conceptualizing, you might think, "That's the sound of a Japanese bell that is used strictly in Buddhist temples and monasteries." You can conceptualize a lot beyond that, but the basic ear consciousness just hears, just reveals that sound. It brings that into our experience.

We're all conscious beings. What that means is we're having experiences at our sense doors all the time we're awake. It's consciousness that brings them into our field of experience. This is what it means to be a sentient being—we're having conscious experiences.

This flow of conscious experience seems to turn off when we go into deep sleep, if we faint, if we go under anesthesia. I don't have recollection of conscious experience in any of those states. Maybe there's something going on, but it's not what I know. So that gives a sense of what consciousness does—it brings experience to us at our sense doors.

It's the faculty of all sentient beings. It's not just humans that have this. Every creature has this. Frogs have it. Birds have it. As one Zen master said, all wriggling things have this kind of consciousness. But it's the simplest kind of knowing possible, before perception, before conceptual elaboration.

Now what's interesting is that for us to have an experience of that sound, there has to be both the sound and the consciousness. Just like for us to have an experience of breathing, we have to be conscious of the breath and there has to be a physical movement.

If we had a corpse, you could push down on its chest and some air would come out of its lungs. You could let up on its chest, and some air would probably go back into its lungs, and that seems like a breath. But as far as we know, the corpse is not having a conscious experience of breathing. We're having conscious experience of breathing.

So you can start to tune into that. You're knowing your breath, you're knowing the sounds, you're knowing the sights. When a sound arises, the way it's understood is that the sound and the knowing of it, the consciousness of it, are there together. It's one experience, but it's got these two aspects. And you can tune into either one. You can tune into the physical form aspect of the sound, or you can start to tune into your knowing of it.

Now, we don't usually give this meditation instruction, even through choiceless attention. But in the three-month course, we like to get you to turn your attention in this direction and look at that knowing quality itself. It takes a little while to tune into it. It's not obvious. But the first thing that you might have to inquire into is: how can one experience, the sound, have two aspects?

So let me ask, is this black or is it round? It's one thing, but it has two aspects, doesn't it? And you can tune into either one you want. You can focus on the blackness or you can focus on the roundness. So it's the same thing with hearing, or with any sense door. You can focus on the object, which is what we've mostly been doing, or you can start to tune in to the consciousness itself, to the knowing, because they're both there.

That's all I want to say about that meditation for now, but a little later in the retreat, we'll do something that brings that out a bit more.

So consciousness is with all the aggregates. It was with the knowing of the sound. It was with the knowing of the vedanā as pleasant. It was with the perception of this as a bell. It was with the feeling of ease. And it was with the thought. All those are arising in consciousness. So consciousness is there with every other aggregate.

A question that I'm going to leave you to reflect on is: is there anything in your field of experience that doesn't fit into one of these categories? Or is this list of the aggregates exhaustive in describing your experience? We're not going to go into that further. I'm going to leave you with that question, but I'm going to suggest maybe it is.

And if it is, then this gets pretty interesting. Because what it says is there's only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. And there's one big term in our vocabulary that isn't there: I, me, self. Not in there. Not necessary.

So there's no I that owns the aggregates. There's no I that's the center of everything. There's no I that's observing all the sense experiences from the place behind the eyes. In fact, that sense of an observer is only a laying claim to the activity of consciousness. It's consciousness that sees and hears and thinks and feels. No I.

So this is kind of amazing—that if we look closely at our mind-body process, we can't find an I within it. And these categories of the aggregates describe our experience completely. It means there's no need to bring in anything like a self or an I.

And yet the self seems to emerge over and over and over again, doesn't it? How does that happen? How does that come about? One way we can see it is that when we lose mindfulness in the present moment and we drift into thinking and papañca—I think Annie talked about this—papañca tends to run around I, me and mine. All our thoughts tend to be around I, me, and mine because that's where the charge is.

That's where the energy is. That's where the passions are. That's where the emotional investment has been. So especially compulsive thoughts tend to be fueled by I, me, mine, and our self-concerns. And yet as we understand it more and more, we start to let go more and more of this sense of self.

What the aggregates say is that the human being is just a collection of parts. And these parts, as you'll see, are to some degree impersonal. We all kind of have them. And it's a little bit like—if you can see what this object is from the back of the room, you can probably see it's a pen. It's a ballpoint pen. And of course, a ballpoint pen can be taken apart. And we see that when you take a ballpoint pen apart, there are these components. There's an ink cartridge and a spring and a barrel and a top. And right now that we've taken it apart, is it a pen? I wouldn't call this a pen. It has a potential to be a pen, but only when the parts are put together in a certain way and assembled—then it can again function as a pen.

So a human being is a collection of parts in the same way. And that's what the Buddha is inviting us to realize. And when they're put together in this particular way, it's called a human being.

So what this opened the door for me around was my sister's death. Because when I saw her as solid, it was because in my mind I had fused her personality—which is her sankaras. Personality and sankaras are covering the same territory. It was her mental formations, her way of being in the world, her sense of humor, her personal qualities, her big laugh. All these things were what I had come to know as my sister, joined with her body. So in my mind, I'd fused them. Personality and body were one.

And what I saw at her death is that the personality fell away. The sankaras were separated at death, and the body was there, and the sankaras weren't anymore. That made it a lot more understandable for me, a lot more relatable. And I saw the same thing's going to happen for me. When I die, this personality isn't going to be anymore. The body will still be here for a while, but this personality will go. In fact, personality is not a fixed thing. It kind of comes and goes and rises and falls and appears and disappears moment by moment by moment. So that's helpful to see too. Personality is impermanent. And it's not owned by anyone. I'm just manifesting with all these thoughts and emotions.

So that's one way that we create the sense of I. We think about things that we are invested in, emotionally invested in. We conceptualize things being put together in a certain way. But there's maybe a more immediate way that the sense of self, the sense of I, gets generated again and again.

So the first thing I want to mention: the sense of I is not stable. The sense of I goes through a lot of ups and downs during a typical day. Sometimes it will feel really strong. And this is usually when hindrances have been stirred up and we've gotten concerned about some sequence of events. Could be something that happened at breakfast. Could be something that happened five years ago. And we start to proliferate around what was done to me or what I wanted to do or how it didn't work out well or how it's going to work out better in the future for me. So all those activities go on when the sense of self is strong.

But at other times, when there's quite a bit of calm in the mind and body, the sense of I really goes kind of quiet, goes a little bit dark. And there's not a lot of I-ing and my-ing taking place. So start to notice that during the day, the sense of the power of self can fluctuate wildly—sometimes very dramatic and big and expressive, sometimes very soft, thin, relaxed, sometimes hardly there. So notice that.

So how is it that it gets built up? Again, this is from Ananda. He related this story much later in his life.

He said, when I was newly ordained, another monk told me, "It is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging."

This is profound. The notion "I am" comes when we take hold of something, not without clinging. This is why the sense of self gets so quiet in times of calm and peace—because we're not clinging. But once something comes along that stirs us up—a

memory, an anticipation, a strong physical sensation, a difficult emotion—we take hold of it. And in that taking hold of it, we energize the thoughts of "I." We create a self around it.

You can watch this in your experience. When something strong comes along, see how you relate to it and see if the thoughts of "I" don't start to spring up. And of course, this is what engages us into suffering.

So basically the sense of "I" arises out of clinging. And then Ananda continues: "By clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness." By clinging to any of the five aggregates, then the sense of "I" comes into existence when it wasn't necessarily strongly there before.

So when we grasp a phenomenon at any sense door, the sense of "I" starts to come in, and you can watch this happen. Take a look when there's a pain in the body somewhere. See if the word "I" arises with it. "Oh, now I have a pain. Now I don't feel very good." Or a meditation's going well. "Now I'm having a good meditation. Now my concentration is back." Again, the words "I" and "my" come in.

Does the word "I" ever arise on its own? Does it ever just pop up and go, "I"? It doesn't, does it? Doesn't it always arise in relation to something else? So it's by taking hold of something else and then we put an "I" or "my" around it. You can watch the birth of this "I" over and over and over again.

So what we basically do is we call this "selfing." Selfing comes out of grasping. Anytime there's grasping, there's going to be the arising of self. So as far as I'm concerned, grasping and selfing are synonymous. Same dynamic is being pointed to.

And you can take a look. See when the thoughts of "I" and "my" come. The "I" is always extra. We don't have to say "I have a pain." We can just say "pain." We don't have to say "I'm feeling upset." We can just note "upset" or "agitated." This is the beauty of mindfulness practice. Mindfulness practice sees what's there without adding "I" or "my." And the noting practice really clarifies this.

And then how does it feel when the sense of "I" isn't strong? What's that like? Well, it means we're not strongly grasping at that time. So how does it feel to not strongly grasp? It means in a way we've let go.

Ajahn Chah had this really lovely line. He said, "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. If you let go completely, there's complete peace." See what happens when you let go of clinging. How does that feel in mind and body?

So one of the ways that we see the impersonal nature of the aggregates—we'll go back to that simpler expression of body, mind states, and consciousness—sort of three aggregates.

You can see all of these not as yours, not as very personal. You can see them as expressions of nature.

This body came about because our father's sperm met our mother's egg. They united. They multiplied. We popped out into the world, were nourished on milk and water and air and sun and food, and we grew and grew and grew, and then here we are.

Did you have anything to do with the basic way your body turned out? How tall you are, color of your hair, color of your eyes, color of your skin? Did you choose all those? It's just nature. It's physical nature simply doing its thing according to physical laws. And yet we take a lot of ownership, don't we, of the body.

My teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, put it this way: This body came out of nature. It's part of nature. It never departed from nature. And it belongs to nature. Give it back to nature. That will be a big relief for you.

So the body is just physical nature.

What about emotions? Do you have an emotion that nobody else in the world has? Or do you have every emotion that all of us have? We all have the same emotions, don't we? We all know happiness and sadness and love and anger and all of them. So this is not personal nature either. The stories around them are, but the emotions themselves are not. I call this human nature.

And then there's the element of consciousness. Consciousness is the thing that is most alike in all of us. I don't think that one of us really has a grand consciousness and the rest of us have puny consciousness. We just all have this facility for knowing sense objects. Seems just the same to me. So this is sentient nature.

Physical nature, human nature, sentient nature. This is what makes us up. It's all nature.

When we can see it that way and not take pride and ownership and overlay it with "I" and "mine," it's very freeing. There's such a relief because we see there are bigger forces in the world than we normally acknowledge that are creating our life, creating our experience.

I'm going to close with one quotation, a little story. There was a practitioner at the time of the Buddha named Bahiya who lived in southern India. He wasn't sure if he was enlightened or not, which could have been a clue. Nonetheless, a heavenly being did him the favor and came down, read his mind and said, "No, Bahiya, you're not enlightened."

But he was a quite pure being. He had devotees and lived very simply, with strong renunciation in his life. And so this deva said, "Not only are you not enlightened, you're not even on the path to being enlightened."

And Bahiya said, "Is there an awakened one in the world today?"

And the deva said, "Yes, there is. He's now living in the town of Savatthi in northern India. And you can meet him."

So Bahiya picked up and left and walked hundreds of miles to find this awakened one, this Buddha. He came upon the Buddha while the Buddha was on alms round and said, "Please, sir, I've heard that you're a wonderful teacher. Please give me your teachings in brief."

And the Buddha said, "This is not an appropriate time because I'm on my alms round."

But Bahiya persisted and asked twice more, saying, "Please give me your teachings. Who knows what will happen? The future is uncertain."

You may not live. I may not live. Please give me your teachings.

So the Buddha gave him the teaching. And this is what he said:

"This is how you should train, Bahiya. In what is seen, let there be just the seen. In what is heard, let there be just the heard. In what is sensed, let there be just the sensed. In what is cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then, Bahiya, you will not be in that. When you are not in that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you are neither here, nor there, nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

And on hearing this, Bahiya fully awakened.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

When you are not in that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you are neither here, nor there, nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

CHAPTER 71

Forgiveness Meditation

Guy Armstrong · 49 min

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive forgiveness meditation as part of the brahmavihāra (divine abiding) series, particularly focused on mettā practice. While acknowledging this is a modern adaptation rather than a formal teaching found in the Pali Canon, Armstrong explains how forgiveness ceremonies are embedded within the monastic tradition.*
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> *The meditation unfolds in three parts: asking forgiveness from those we may have hurt, offering forgiveness to those who have hurt us, and extending forgiveness to ourselves. Armstrong carefully distinguishes between wholesome remorse (kukkucca) - which the Buddha considered beneficial for spiritual development - and destructive guilt that leads to self-judgment and aversion. He references the Dhammapada's teaching that "hatred never ceases through hatred, hatred only ceases through love," emphasizing how releasing old grudges frees energy trapped in past memories.*
>
> *The teacher provides practical guidance for working with resistance, suggesting practitioners can modify phrases when forgiveness feels premature, use vipassanā to hold difficult emotions, or return to mettā for self-care. He emphasizes that forgiveness doesn't require excusing harmful behavior or resuming relationships, but rather releasing the energetic tie to past hurts. This practice aims to unburden the heart so practitioners can enter the present moment with fresh openness, supporting deeper development in both samatha and vipassanā meditation.*

This evening, as part of our series on the Brahma Viharas and metta in particular, we're going to undertake a meditation on forgiveness.

It's important to announce this destination upfront because sometimes people don't want to go on this journey. You know how when you board a plane these days, they announce, "You've boarded a flight to San Francisco. If San Francisco is not your destination, this is the time to get off." So if you don't want to explore forgiveness, this is the time to step away.

This is not a formal Brahma Vihara as the Buddha taught it, although it's embedded within the Buddhist tradition. Within the monastic community, there are forgiveness ceremonies that happen at the end of periods of being together as a community. So while it's not foreign to Buddhism, this meditation is a modern adaptation. You won't find these exact instructions in the Pali Canon, but the spirit of it is there.

In tonight's meditation, we'll be bringing to mind or inviting recollection of three areas: ways that we may have hurt others, ways that others may have hurt us, and ways that we may have hurt ourselves. The meditation will take up each of these.

The purpose of undertaking a practice like this is for our own benefit. It's not about being good people in particular. It's really about removing a load on the heart that we may have been carrying for a long time. Life is a rough and tumble business. In the course of living, people—including ourselves—don't always follow the precepts closely, and we hurt one another. Generally, growing up without understanding how to deal with the effects of being hurt and hurting others, things tend to accumulate. Old hurts build up, old patterns of remorse build up.

This meditation particularly is designed to allow those things to come to the surface, and by being understood and looked upon with some acceptance and compassion, to be released. Really, the point of this meditation is to unburden the heart of old loads that it may have accumulated and been carrying.

I like the way Lily Tomlin put it: "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." If you thought by meditating you might make your past better, that's not going to happen. But we can change our relationship to it.

We bring this practice in at this point for two reasons. One is that in any long retreat, a lot of memories surface. In my first long retreat, I had so many thoughts that I had to make a list of the ten worst things I'd ever done and write them down just to get them out of my mind because I was really beset with memories. Partly, things come up in ways that we haven't been skillful. Memories may come up of ways that others haven't been skillful toward us. We want to be able to work with these, and by bringing greater acceptance and understanding, they can be released to a really large extent.

The other reason to bring it in now is that a week or so ago, metta for friend was introduced in these evening meditations. As you do metta for friend, often you review that relationship. With friendships, there are some things that have gone well and some things that have been difficult. Often it's the meditation on friend that brings up some of these old memories, both of hurting and of being hurt. This meditation then becomes useful.

We're going to invite looking at ways that we may have hurt others. Remember that we talked about the difference between what I call guilt on the one hand and remorse on the other. Remorse is considered a wholesome quality in the Buddha's teachings. We recognize that we've done something that wasn't skillful and we feel regret, we feel badly about it. By acknowledging that, it's considered a positive development in the Buddha's teachings. "Oh, I did something that wasn't skillful, that wasn't correct. I acknowledge that." That's a positive. We will feel badly about it, and there's a wholesome quality in remorse.

But that can tip over into the quality that I call guilt, where we really judge ourselves harshly for having done that thing. We beat ourselves up, we give ourselves recrimination, and we think what bad people we are. In the Buddhist teachings, that extra level of self-judgment isn't necessary and it isn't helpful. It's just coming out of aversion. It creates pain and it's not useful. We want to see the difference between feeling remorse, which is natural and wholesome, but try not to layer on top of it a lot of this quality of guilt and self-judgment.

One of the ways that we can work with these memories that bring remorse is to reflect on how we came to act in those ways. When you think about it, when you were younger, you probably didn't have the same understanding that you have now about how actions impact others.

And you probably didn't have the same mindfulness around emotions and the precepts. So I look back on the actions early in my life, especially in my late teens and early twenties, before I'd heard the precepts, when a lot of emotional turmoil was going on for me. And I reflect—I was really a different person then.

By reflecting in that way, you see you're not the same person now as you were when you committed these earlier kinds of actions. And so you can think, if you like, "Oh, that was a different person. So why should I feel guilty?" Of course, that's not quite true, because the karma continues to influence us. So it's not quite true, but it was a very different version of you.

When I look back on my actions, I see that at those times, leading up to those acts, there was fear, or there was confusion, or there was unhappiness. And looking in that way, I can see the causes and conditions that led me to act that way. When I understand that, I can feel a lot of compassion for that younger person. So that can be a helpful reflection—not quite the same person as now.

Now, in looking at ways that we've been hurt, as these come to mind and the mind is inclining toward forgiveness, you may find there's a big resistance and you think, "I don't want to forgive that hurt. It hurt too much. It went too deep. It was too big a deal. The magnitude of the act was too great, and I'm not ready to forgive."

That is totally fine. If you come upon memories, people, or situations where forgiveness is really not feeling appropriate, you don't have to go there. We'll be repeating a phrase, something like, "If anyone has hurt or harmed me, I offer forgiveness." But if a particular memory comes up, you don't have to say it about that person. You can switch to metta for yourself. You can bring somebody else to mind. If the feelings of hurt are really strong, you could move to vipassana and just hold them. Or if you like, you could acknowledge, "I'm really not ready to forgive this person, but someday I'd like to be able to." So you might say, "I know that it's my intention someday to forgive." That would be fine. That would still be significant.

When we come upon ways that we've been hurt, especially, know that it doesn't get resolved quickly. It can take some time, really, of living with these memories and touching them little by little. I think Jill talked about how to touch a difficult emotion and then back away to something neutral or positive. We can do that with these old memories. We don't have to be with it on and on and on at one time. Touch it a little bit, go away, feel safe, touch it again, go away, and so forth. So this is a process that takes some time. You don't need to rush it.

But until we start to relate to some of these old memories, we're tied to the past to a certain degree. Some of our physical and mental and heart energy has been held captive by past memories, and we're not able really to come fully and freely into the present moment. So again, a lot of this is about how can we release those burdens so that we can come freshly into the present moment with a state of some innocence—just like we were a child, that kind of fresh openness that children have.

Forgiveness extended to someone else who has hurt you also doesn't mean that we excuse their behavior or we condone their behavior. We don't say, "Oh, that was all okay that you did that to me," because it may have been really wrong and really inappropriate. So we don't surrender our discernment about whether that was an appropriate action or not. We might see really clearly that was really an awful thing that someone did. But what we give up is the tie to it as something from the past. And we can release that. So if that becomes able to be released, that's helpful. That feels good.

But it also doesn't mean that when you release some degree of that hurt, it doesn't mean that you have to like the person, or want to be in relationship with the person, or have them be a friend again. Sometimes going through these really difficult situations with other people, you realize, "That person's not safe for me. That person is really not trustworthy."

They broke the trust in our relationship. And so then you can say, "Okay, I want to release this old hurt, but I don't really want to be back in a close relationship with you." And that's perfectly fine. If it gets healed to the point that you can wish them well, that you can have metta for them, that's as far as you need to go. That's actually wonderful. That could represent a profound shift.

I think someone has mentioned this line from the Dhammapada. When we may have been hurt and may have held resentment, the value of letting go becomes clear. As the Dhammapada says, "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law." In a way, what we're doing is letting go of old grudges. And as the Dalai Lama said, "I do get angry, but in my heart I can't hold a grudge." That's what we want to be able to find—a heart that's so open and wide that anger doesn't really stick in it. If we can find that, then much opportunity opens for peace and deepening.

Now we can move into the meditation. We're going to do it in three parts. The first is asking for forgiveness from anyone we may have hurt or harmed. The phrase will be: "If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask for your forgiveness."

This "knowingly or unknowingly" part—you don't have to say it out loud, but you sort of realize that it's part of the deal. You may have hurt someone and not known it. So whichever way it worked, you recognize that's part of it.

In distinction to the metta phrases which we send to specific people, in the forgiveness practice we just leave it open. "If I've hurt or harmed anyone"—we're not directing it to specific individuals. We're saying the phrase, dropping it into a centered place, and just seeing what comes. Memories may arise, they may not. It's okay. You just continue to say the phrase and hold an open space to see if anyone is going to visit, to see if any memories or incidents come up. If they do come up, then you can let them be there for a while. And then you might want to direct it to the individual who's come. But it's up to you. You don't have to.

The second part of the meditation will be extending our forgiveness to others who've hurt us. And this is where you can just see how it feels. The phrase is going to be something like: "If anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive you."

You can just try saying the phrase not directed to anyone. If memories, images come up, you can see if that phrase fits that person. And there may be people you say, "I'm not ready to offer that phrase." So you can try: "Know that my intention is someday to forgive you." And if that doesn't fit, you can just let that person go. Continue to say the phrase. See if someone else comes. If strong feelings come up, you can move to metta for yourself or vipassana as a way to hold that.

The third part is to forgive ourselves for the ways that we've hurt or harmed others. So the phrase is something like: "For the ways that I have hurt or harmed myself or others, I forgive myself."

This third part can help the self-blame and self-judgment be eased. We can extend the forgiveness to ourselves too. We can let go of the blame, the guilt, the self-judgment around ways that we've acted because we can bring a heart of compassion to that younger person who didn't understand quite what they were doing.

I think that's enough foundation. We can move into the meditation. So please begin by sitting comfortably.

Yes, the question is: Is it okay to extend forgiveness or allow into forgiveness people who have passed on? Yes, that's absolutely fine.

In this phase, anyone who comes to mind with whom you've had a connection is welcome to enter your practice.

Now please sit comfortably. Let your mind settle, allowing your attention to rest into the body and feel yourself in sitting. Bring your attention into the heart center, the area of the center of the chest—this place where emotions are typically felt. As you connect with the heart center, let this be your avenue to connecting with yourself.

Begin with a sense of your own being, your character, and your good qualities. Simply think of your good qualities in this retreat: your dedication, your skillful effort, your returning again and again with mindfulness and metta. Grounded with an appreciation of your own goodness, you can begin to say the first phrase in the forgiveness practice:

"If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask for your forgiveness."

Continue to repeat this phrase. Sit with attention in the body, perhaps centered in the heart center or the belly. Simply stay open to whatever appears in terms of memories, images, reflections. Not forcing anything—just saying the phrase and seeing what comes.

If specific memories come of unskillful actions on your part, you can stay with that person for a while. Make the phrase personal to them if you'd like. Also reflect on your state of mind and heart at that time. What were you feeling that led you to act like that? Bring in compassion for that younger person.

Now let go of the reflection on asking for forgiveness and move into the second phase of the meditation. This will be extending forgiveness. In this section, the phrase is something like: "For ways that others have hurt or harmed me, I offer my forgiveness," or "If anyone has harmed me knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive you."

Begin to repeat the phrase, not necessarily directing it to anyone, and see what comes. If a memory comes and it just doesn't feel right to extend forgiveness, see if it might feel right to say, "Know that it's my intention someday to forgive you." If even that intention doesn't feel right, that's fine. No pressure at all on this. Let them move out and let someone else come into your mind, into your images, or you can return to metta for yourself for a bit.

From time to time, come back into the body. Feel the heart center, the belly. Feel whatever emotions may be present. Just allow any feelings—hurt or fear or resentment—to be there, to be felt, and continue to repeat the forgiveness phrase.

If strong emotions feel like they really block the intention of forgiveness, you could open to the emotions with vipassana, just feeling them, acknowledging. You could turn to metta for yourself, or a benefactor or friend, or self-compassion. Bring the mind back into balance using other skillful means.

Now let go of that reflection, letting go of any images or memories that have come with it. Just reconnect again with yourself as you're sitting, connecting through your heart center, your sense of yourself, your good qualities, your commitment and effort.

With that sense of your own goodness, start on the third phase of the forgiveness meditation, the phrase something like: "For the ways I have hurt or harmed others or myself, I forgive myself." Say this phrase of self-forgiveness and see what memories come, see if any images come.

If memories like this arise, just look for a moment: What was going on for me when I did that? How was I feeling? What did those acts come out of? Remember that our younger self may not have understood so well, or even more recently, we may have fallen into some kind of confusion, obscuration.

Now let go of that reflection on self-forgiveness. Just come back into the present moment and feel yourself in sitting, feeling the body, connecting with the heart center. Allow whatever emotions are present to be there, to be filled with acceptance.

Conclude with a little bit of loving-kindness for yourself, connecting with your good qualities.

With all you've put forth on this retreat—all the work you've invested in developing mindfulness, understanding, love, and compassion—these beautiful qualities that are so needed in the world. Reflect on what you've given to bring them about. So with deep appreciation for yourself and your dedication to this process, to this practice—because happiness follows goodness in some mysterious way—directing these loving phrases to yourself:

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy.
May I be healthy.
May I live with ease.

Now thinking of all of us in this meditation hall, all of us drawn together by this same interest, this same deep wish for welfare and happiness, send the good wishes of loving-kindness to everyone here:

May we all be safe and protected from harm.
May we all be happy.
May we be healthy.
May we live with ease.

And recognizing that this wish extends to all beings everywhere, send your metta outward in an unlimited way:

May all beings everywhere be safe from harm.
May they be happy.
May they be healthy.
May all beings live with ease.

CHAPTER 72

Kamma and the End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's revolutionary understanding of kamma as intentional action, contrasting it with other philosophical views of his time. Drawing from the Dhammapada and various suttas, he explains how the Buddha defined kamma as volition (cetanā) - the mental energy behind our actions of body, speech, and mind. Armstrong outlines the ten unwholesome actions and their wholesome counterparts, emphasizing how actions rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion lead to suffering, while those arising from generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom bring happiness.

The talk explores the relationship between kamma and the teaching of not-self (anattā), using the analogy of mind-streams to explain how karmic patterns continue without requiring a fixed self. Armstrong addresses common misconceptions about kamma, clarifying that the Buddha never taught that all suffering results from past actions, and emphasizes using kamma as a 'future GPS' rather than a 'rearview mirror.' He concludes by examining how dharma practice transforms our karmic stream, ultimately leading to the Noble Eightfold Path and the cessation of kamma in full awakening. This teaching offers both practical guidance for ethical conduct and deep insight into the mechanism of spiritual transformation.

The subject of tonight's talk is karma and the end of karma. It's an interesting concept in modern times because it's a word that has entered our vocabulary—at least in English and probably most European languages—but it's not very well understood in modern societies and non-Buddhist cultures.

A group of Western teachers were meeting with the Dalai Lama some years ago. He used to hold meetings in Dharamsala once a year, and in the course of the discussions, they were talking about this topic of karma. The Dalai Lama told the Western teachers that he thought it was more important for them to teach about karma than to teach about emptiness. Now, as someone who's written a book on emptiness, I found this a little hard to take in. But I tend to agree—it's more immediately practical. And so that's what I want to talk about tonight.

I'm going to talk about things that the Buddha taught about karma. At the very start, I'll say that I'm not able to verify all that he taught, but I figured I need to share it with you anyway. Not that you should believe it, but I think it might be useful to consider. So

you can make of it what you will, but I think it's important that you hear what the Buddha had to say about this topic, because I think if we understand it correctly, karma can be our best friend.

Karma has many aspects, and I'm going to talk about it in five different areas: karma itself, the results of karma, the relation to not-self, the relation to rebirth, and finally, the end of karma.

What is the Meaning of Karma?

Karma is a simple word that in Sanskrit just means action. The Pali word is kamma. It was just a common word in the Buddha's time that all the philosophical schools debated about. Every teacher had their own take on what karma was and what it involved.

Some teachers said that actions didn't matter—they don't have consequences beyond the immediate moment. Some people said there are results and after-effects of karma. Some people said you could go out and kill somebody and it wouldn't have any impact in your life following. Some people said actions were predetermined or that God determined all the actions that were happening.

There were all these different views around, and the Buddha had his own definition of karma, which was a new definition at the time. He said, "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call karma, for having willed, one acts by body, speech or mind."

This notion of putting the motivation at the center of the meaning of action was the Buddha's contribution. That was the new information that he offered as part of his teaching. We've talked quite a bit about this factor of volition—intention, urge, will, motive, or motivation. It's talking about the energy or the mind states that actions come from.

Actions are judged to be either wholesome or unwholesome depending on the motivation behind them. Unwholesome motivation comes from forces of greed, hatred, and delusion. Wholesome motivation comes from their opposites—qualities of generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. The Buddha actually called these three forces the roots of the unwholesome and the roots of the wholesome. They are where all action springs, either in a positive way or in a negative way.

So it's not the act per se, but the motivation behind it. For instance, if I said to you, "Someone was just observed cutting someone's stomach open with a sharp knife. Is that a good act or a bad act?" It depends. If it was a robber who was holding someone up to

steal their money, that's a very unwholesome act. But if it was a surgeon preparing to heal somebody's appendix, it would be a very wholesome act. The act itself is not the determiner—it's the motivation.

Or if a baby is sleeping on a bed at home, rolls over, knocks over a candle, and the candle sets the house on fire, there's no blame. There was no intention in that action, so no blame or unwholesome karma for that particular act.

It is interesting that according to the Buddha, actions have a moral force based on what the intention was.

You'll notice in this definition that actions take place in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. Of course we think of physical action as action. We think of verbal action as action. We're not often used to thinking of mental action as action. But in the Buddha's teaching, even thoughts and emotions have a force that comes out of their volition, out of their intention.

Fortunately for us, the Buddha was really clear about what the unwholesome actions are. He made a list.

He passed them on. It's something really helpful to reflect on and to learn about.

So he broke these down into ten unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind.

The unwholesome actions of body—you're going to recognize these—are killing living beings, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct. So these form the first three of our five lay precepts.

The actions of speech begin with false speech, which you recognize as the fourth of our lay precepts. Then there are three other actions of speech that are unskillful: using harsh speech, which basically means angry speech; divisive speech, which means to speak badly of someone to a third person, to turn that person's mind against the other person; and wasting time in idle chatter and gossip. Does this go on on the internet? A little bit.

And then he talked about three actions of mind that are not skillful: covetousness—wanting what belongs to someone else—ill will or hostility, and wrong view. This is an interesting one. Wrong view says if we misunderstand the way reality is or the way it works, we're going to act based on our misunderstanding and we're going to end up hurting ourselves or others, adding to the suffering in the world. So another way to say wrong view is ignorance. When there's ignorance in the mind, we act in unskillful ways.

The ten wholesome actions are to refrain from these. It's just like a lot of things—the Buddha put a lot of things in the negative way. So the wholesome actions are to refrain from the unwholesome. But then there are also a lot of wholesome actions that are built upon generosity and loving kindness. You could extend this list a lot. But he basically said, look, if you keep from doing the ten unwholesome things, you're on a good track.

So the teachings on karma are especially important when we're out in the world in relationship. And half of this group will soon be back in the world and in relationship. And for the rest of us, this is—in retreat, this is a useful time to contemplate action in the world. But the teachings on karma become really important when we're in contact with others and we're acting in a way that is wider.

So we aspire as practitioners to always act from the wholesome roots, to always act from generosity, kindness, and wisdom. But we also know our minds aren't always in generous, loving, wise places. So we aspire to that, but we can't actually control it yet. That's why the path of meditation, the *bhavana* aspect, the mental purification, is so helpful to our overall development on the path. As our minds and hearts become purified, then our actions naturally spring from the wholesome motives.

And there are lots of beautiful examples of this. There are these people who really exemplify what the Buddha called the bliss of blamelessness. There's a great joy in being able to look back over one's actions and feel good about one's conduct.

So somebody who really exemplifies that for me is the Dalai Lama. Some years ago, he was sitting down for an interview with Oprah Winfrey. You all probably know that she has a magazine called *O*, which is quite popular. And she's done more than anybody else I can think of in the modern age to bring a kind of wide view of spirituality to a very broad audience. This has been one of her main interests in her speaking and in her literature and her TV network. And it's a beautiful thing to offer.

So she was doing an interview with the Dalai Lama to be put into the magazine *O*. She started by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect," Oprah said. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued. "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Hmm. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

That's a beautiful mind. And you know, some of that peacefulness and depth of meditation is related to his pure conduct in the world. Because if we are doing unskillful things in the world, it will continue to stir up our minds and we won't be settled into meditation. So he is somebody who really exemplifies both of these beautiful qualities.

So that leads into the results of action, and the Pali term for this is vipaka. The basic teaching, as you all know, is that wholesome actions lead to wholesome results—that is, results that make us happy. Unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results—that is, things that make us unhappy.

This was said by the Buddha at the very start of the Dhammapada:

"Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

Some years ago, a friend and I were teaching a meditation class at a juvenile hall in the Bay Area. This was, I think, the first of its kind that I know of in the juvenile halls. It came about because one of the people who worked in the juvenile hall was a meditator and had invited us because she thought it might be useful to the young men who were there.

So we were invited into the maximum security wing. For those of you who don't know the U.S. system, a juvenile hall is where people under eighteen are placed while awaiting trial on serious charges. The kids in the maximum security unit were in there for things like robbery, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, and murder. Fairly serious stuff.

They're all under eighteen, and they're incarcerated, waiting for a trial that could determine years in prison or being released back to their homes. So you can imagine these young men were in a state of tremendous anxiety. There was also not a small amount of aggression within the unit they were situated in.

My friend and I thought: What? We're going to go in as two middle-aged white guys and we're going to teach these young men about the Dharma? Is this going to work?

But we just went in and presented a straightforward approach to meditation by focusing on the breath, then opening up to body sensations and talking about how to work with emotions. For them, I think this was as entertaining an hour as they had in their week, so they didn't resist coming. It was workable because their probation officer sat in the class with us. He was a big, solid guy, and we knew they weren't going to give him any trouble.

Then we got to the part on working with difficult emotions. For me, this is really where the meditation came to life. Cooped up, not knowing what the future of their lives would be, they suddenly had a way to look at their fear, look at their anger, and find ways to work with it. We saw some quite remarkable connections to the practice among these young men. They really found it useful.

We got to the end of the class—graduation day. We'd made up a certificate for them: "Certificate of Graduation from Mindfulness Training." We thought, okay, this is going to be our last time to meet with them. Should we talk about karma? I thought, well, I don't know. That might be a little too speculative or a little too heavy. But this was the last time we'd ever get a chance to talk to them. I think we should do it.

So we did it. What we did was present karma as the science of happiness: If you want to be happy, this is what to do. We gave a little discourse on karma and I said to them, "Does this make sense to you?"

And one person raised his hand and said, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around? Sure, of course that makes sense." It was fascinating to see how deeply this basic idea has penetrated our culture, even without a profound understanding—the fundamental principle had taken root.

At the end of the class, we handed out the certificates, and one of the men took his and asked, "Can I take this to the judge?" "Sure," I replied. "I hope it will work."

The Tibetans have a beautiful way of expressing the four Brahmaviharas. They call them the four immeasurables, and they have specific phrases for metta and compassion. The phrase for metta is: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness"—which is virtue. The phrase for compassion is: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow"—which is non-virtue. Just like the Dhammapada, this ties happiness and unhappiness to the purity of one's actions.

The Buddha expressed it this way: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of that they will be the heirs."

Their actions are the womb from which they are born. According to the Buddha's teachings, this was a direct insight of his—not a speculative view like those of other philosophers of his time. This was something he saw directly through his extraordinary abilities. And according to his understanding, this teaching, this law, applies whether you believe it or not. It applies whether you know it or not. It applies whether your religion believes it or not, and it applies whether your culture believes it or not. It's a universal law that governs all beings based on their actions.

I will also say that our growth on the path really depends on this law, and we'll explore that more later.

This reflection—that all beings are the owners of their karma—provides the foundation for the equanimity meditation as it has come down to us in the classical teachings. Jill spoke about equanimity meditation in her overview of the four Brahmaviharas. In the traditional teachings, going back over a thousand years, the phrase for equanimity is: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their actions"—and we might add—"depend on their actions more than on my wishes for them."

There was a touching scene—did some of you see the movie Kundun? It was Scorsese's film about the Dalai Lama's life. He brought such beautiful sensibility to a culture that was not his own in this biography of the Dalai Lama. At one point, he shows the Dalai Lama still living in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, being trained by tutors. Some of the finest minds of Tibet were offered to provide his upbringing and instruction.

Scorsese includes this scene where the tutors are instructing the young Dalai Lama on the Four Noble Truths. They ask him to restate the Second Noble Truth in his own terms. He responds, "The cause of suffering is craving"—that's the formal statement as the Buddha taught it. But his tutors say, "Put it in your own terms. Don't just give us a recitation. Make it personal."

I'm paraphrasing because I don't remember the dialogue exactly, but he then says something like, "Suffering comes from wanting things." His tutors respond, "No, that's not personal enough. Give us a statement in your own terms." He's perhaps eight or nine years old at this point. He closes his eyes, thinks for a moment, and then opens them and says, "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind."

The tutors respond, "Very good. Very good."

Most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. We may wish to project it onto other people in our lives or blame our present circumstances, but most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. This is the core reflection about karma.

All beings are heirs to their karma. Another way you could say it is their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own habits of mind.

Now, I want to say that it doesn't depend entirely on one's past actions or one's past habits of mind. It doesn't really hold up for me anyway that way. I think about the children who have been dying in Syria when hospitals are bombed, a government bombing its own citizens. I find it really difficult to believe that all those children are dying because of their past actions. I just personally don't believe that.

So one of the things the Buddha said is we can't figure out the details of the workings of karma—how certain results came about based on past actions. It's considered one of the four imponderables: four things the Buddha said you can't figure out by thinking. The details of the workings of karma, the range of the mind of a Buddha, the power of a concentrated mind, and the beginnings of things. I think you should share that with all the cosmologists. What he says is you'll go mad and experience vexation if you try to figure this out. I'm not sure which comes first.

I don't know if you've seen this in your life, but I've certainly seen it. Someone gets ill and a friend comes to them and says, "Oh, that must be your karma." That is such a not nice thing to say. And nobody knows. That's just a speculative view. It's not a kind thing to say, and it's not in any way necessarily true.

The Buddha never said that everything that happens to us is based on our past actions. He was invited to say that at one time. Somebody came to him and put forward this view and they said, "Other teachers say that. Would you say this is true?" And he said, "That's wrong to say." And he identified several other causes that lead to circumstances in our life. He mentioned illness, diet, climate, accident, assault—all these things could result in painful situations in our life. So he explicitly said you can't go around saying that everything that happens is the result of past karma.

The way I think about it is that there are lots of laws at work in our universe. There are physical laws, there are chemical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, and there are karmic laws. All these things have a place to play in this universe, and karma is not supreme above all of them. They're all going on.

So we need to take this teaching in broad terms: as we act from wholesome motives, wholesome things will come back into our lives. As we act from unwholesome motives, unwholesome things will come back into our lives. But what we can't do is take our present situation and try to say, "Wow, I'm suffering now. What did I do in the past that made this happen?" Maybe the Buddha could have seen that, but you and I can't. So to try and look in that way is just speculation, and it generally doesn't make us much happier.

This is trying to use karma as a rearview mirror. Here I am, how'd I get here? Oh, let's look in the past. We don't have that ability, so I wouldn't even bother. The main way to use karma is as a future GPS system. You want to go toward happiness? Here's the path. Turn right here. Turn left there. Karma will tell us what to do to aim toward happiness in the future. It doesn't really tell us how we got to where we are now. Many, many things have come into play.

Those of us who have been brought up in modern cultures based on science, maybe based on democratic ideals, often have a strong resistance to this teaching. Maybe it's because it says that we're to some extent responsible for our own happiness. Maybe we have a democratic ideal that we should all be equally happy. And so from the light of our view, this view which says we're to some extent responsible for our happiness might seem cold, might seem cruel, might seem heartless. And sometimes people think there's an implication: "Oh, if somebody's suffering, that means they deserve to suffer because it came out of their past actions."

This notion of deserving to suffer is not at all present in the Buddha's teaching on karma. I'm absolutely convinced that if the Buddha could have gone around to the most hardened criminals of his day and removed all the suffering from their lives, he would have done so without hesitation. While he didn't possess that ability, there is one story that beautifully illustrates his attitude—his encounter with Angulimala.

Under the misguided direction of a teacher, Angulimala had killed 999 individuals on his path to reaching 1,000 victims, collecting a finger from each person as proof of his deed. As he approached his thousandth kill, he decided to make the Buddha his final victim.

The Buddha was walking along a mountain path when friends warned him: "Don't go that way. The killer Angulimala is hiding in those hills, and he will kill you." The Buddha simply replied, "I don't think so," and continued walking.

Angulimala swooped down onto the path and chased the Buddha with a knife, yet somehow could never catch him despite the Buddha's steady, unhurried pace. Finally, in frustration, Angulimala called out, "Stop! Stop!"

The Buddha turned around calmly and said, "I have stopped, Angulimala, but you have not stopped."

At that moment, Angulimala realized this person was coming from an entirely different place. Intrigued, he essentially asked, "What's up with you?" The Buddha gave him the teachings and converted Angulimala on the spot. The serial killer immediately abandoned his plan to kill his thousandth victim, came to practice with the Buddha, and—as many of these stories go—became fully awakened in a relatively short time.

Here was a serial killer of his era, yet the Buddha didn't say, "You should suffer. I'm turning my back on you—good luck." Instead, he taught him complete release from all suffering.

Interestingly, when Angulimala went out for alms rounds in nearby villages after ordaining, people threw stones at him. They knew his history as a killer—perhaps some victims had been family members of these villagers. When Angulimala returned to the Buddha saying, "Bhante, they're stoning me," the Buddha replied, "Bear it, my friend, because if you had not practiced and become awakened, your suffering would have been far worse than this."

This wasn't because the Buddha believed in deserving suffering due to karmic law—Angulimala had already become awakened. It's simply how the law operates. Expecting to do something unskillful or hurtful without consequences would be like expecting

gravity not to function—like expecting a ripe apple to fall from its stem and not drop to the ground. Gravity operates. Karma operates. This is the universe we inhabit. We cannot stop these laws.

Hearing the equanimity phrase, some people mistake it for an excuse not to care: "Oh, beings are owners of their actions. Their mental habits brought this suffering upon them, so I don't need to be concerned. That's your problem, not mine." But this isn't equanimity—it's equanimity's near enemy, which Jill discussed: indifference, or uncaring.

True compassion doesn't concern itself with the source of suffering. Compassion simply wants to alleviate anyone's suffering, regardless of its origins—and suffering arises from many different causes, which we'll explore in a moment.

If equanimity practice or reflection on karma leads to indifference, the antidote is to strengthen metta and compassion. Bring loving-kindness and compassion toward the person you're feeling indifferent about, allowing these caring brahmaviharas to suffuse your equanimity. Ideally, we want all four brahmaviharas to awaken in our hearts together, not in isolation.

The results of action manifest in at least six ways. Carol discussed three of them in her talk on generosity—remember how she described the wholesome feeling that arises when you're about to give? Then the wholesome feeling present in the actual act of giving?

And in reflecting on your giving, you have a wholesome feeling. So in this way, our actions come alive in three different times: before we do the action, while we're doing the action, and after we reflect on the action. This is true of all our acts. These are three ways that we can feel the impact of an action, any action that we do.

The fourth way that they come back is our actions affect the way that people relate to us. If we relate to people from friendliness, from warmth, from care, from interest, then they respond to us in that same way. If we relate to people from not caring, from lack of interest, from hostility or criticism, then people will shrink back from us and not really want to approach. So this is the fourth way our actions come back.

The fifth way is in habitual states of mind. Why does the mind move when you're in meditation? And where does it go? It's just reflecting habit patterns. Our minds move into areas where we've invested energy, into areas where it's gone before. This is from the Buddha: "Because whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty, then their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire,

ill will, and cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of generosity, kindness, and compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of generosity, kindness, and compassion."

Basically through our patterns of thinking we wear a groove in the mind, and that gets played out again and again and again. There's this very nice quote that's often attributed to the Buddha. I haven't found it anywhere in the Buddha's teachings, but he might have said it: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit and habit hardens into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings." So this is just attending to our habits of mind and keeping them in a wholesome track.

One of the facts of life is that some of our habits of mind kind of got put there by forces outside of ourselves, and then we are left to replay them somewhat involuntarily. Instances like childhood abuse, instances of societal racism, instances of early trauma or traumatic loss go in so deeply before children have a chance to know what's happening or how to work with them that they kind of get programmed before we have any awareness of them. And then when we come into meditation, we find, oh, these are the habit patterns of mind that I have to work with now.

Even though we didn't request them, and even though we certainly wouldn't have chosen them, they are what we bring into meditation. These are the things we have to work with. So as adults, we recognize these are the habits of mind I've gotten. Whether that's fair or not, these are the habits of mind that I need to understand and transform.

So that's five ways karma shows up. And the sixth is the tricky one. The Buddha said that the results of our actions will show up in mysterious ways in the future, in ways we can't really understand. They may play out in this life. They may play out in some future life. And there's no way to know exactly how that's going to work. The detailed workings of karma are an imponderable.

But even the basics, the basic teaching that virtue brings happiness—how does that work? That's the basic teaching of karma. Virtue brings happiness. How does that work? That's a mystery. And what it really says is morality is not just an invention of the rational mind. Morality is woven into the very fabric of the universe through this law of karma.

Originally we may have thought that karma was a cold and heartless teaching because it put too much on personal responsibility. But when I look at it, karma infuses our universe with a moral core. The universe is fundamentally a moral place because the law of karma operates for all beings in this universe. To me, this is the caring view.

This is the heartful view of the world. I wouldn't really care to live in a universe that didn't have this moral dimension as part of its basis. But the universe we're in has this dimension.

So the next piece to look at is how karma relates to rebirth. And again, I can't verify all the Buddha's teachings on karma and I can't verify the Buddha's teachings on rebirth.

But I have had teachers who felt they could verify some of these teachings. So I believe some of it is empirically verifiable. I'm just not there yet.

What I would say is if you have a very skeptical attitude toward these two teachings, that's fine. We aren't asking that you believe in either karma or rebirth. But I would also say, what about keeping an open mind to the possibility? You don't have to believe, but if you move into denial and say it's not true, how do you know that? So often we find that we don't believe in something simply because we don't want to believe in it. But the scientific approach is to hold it as a hypothesis and examine it over years, see what your experience is, the experience of friends. And when you die, see where you wake up. These are things you can explore for a long time.

The teaching on rebirth says that the actions we follow through with in this life will affect our next birth. The Buddha gives some general outlines of how this would play out. He said something like, those who are generous in a birth will at some point in the future experience abundance in their life. Those who are kind to living beings will at some point in the future experience good health in this life or another life. Those who inquire deeply when they're around wise teachers will experience wisdom in their future life. This is part of the meaning of karma being the womb from which we're born.

There's another teaching on this: "Grain, possessions, money" - you realize this comes from an agricultural society 2,500 years ago - "grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, workers, family, and dependents, none of these can you take with you. You must cast them all aside. But whatever karma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession. That is your real possession and you must fare according to that karma. That karma will follow you just as the shadow follows its owner. Therefore, do good actions, gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings after death."

Your actions are your real possessions. They're the womb from which you will be born. Maybe you don't believe in this, but what if it happens to turn out to be true? Wouldn't you like to act in accordance with it? And if it turns out not to be true, but you

had simply lived a good life, that wouldn't be a bad outcome either. There's a whole discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya number 60 where the Buddha outlines this reasoning for believing in karma and rebirth.

Rebirth can also be understood as a moment-to-moment process. It's not the only way the Buddha meant it, but it is there in the suttas also. We are changing from moment to moment. A new sense of self is being born many times during a day, conditioned by the previous senses of self. This is going on all the time.

One of the criticisms of rebirth is: isn't there some lasting thing in a being that would have to be reborn in order for that continuity to take place? And the answer to that is no. Just as there is no lasting thing in you that goes from moment to moment to moment, and yet a consistent personality shows up moment after moment after moment, more or less. You don't go to bed and wake up as Deepa the next day. There's some consistent personality that wakes up the next morning that is you.

In the same way, there's some consistency that goes after death into the next birth that carries some of these karmic patterns, but there's not a fixed thing that continues or endures. One moment conditions the next, conditions the next, conditions the next. That's how it happens in this life. That's how it happens into the next birth. Ajahn Amaro had a nice way of saying this. He said, "The process of going from one life to the next is not very different from the process of going from one moment to the next." It's a nice one to reflect on.

Then we come to the question of karma and not-self. Because these two can seem contradictory. If there's no self, then who is affected by the actions, by the results of karma? In fact, one of the bhikkhus at the time of the Buddha asked the same question. The bhikkhu was in front of the Buddha and said, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" That is basically that question. And the Buddha said, "You haven't been listening to me." He didn't explain it, didn't answer it any further. He just said, "You haven't been listening."

But let's explore this a little deeper. Remembering that not-self doesn't deny individuality—each of us is a unique being. It's just that there's nothing fixed at the center. There's no core, no observer.

An analogy often used is that of a stream. You could walk down to Gaston Pond—not today, maybe not tomorrow, but one of these days when it's cleared and safe—and look at the stream flowing out on the north end. That stream has certain characteristics: it's relatively small, runs fairly fast, has pretty clear water that you can see tumbling downhill. It's definitely a stream.

But if you stand on the edge and look down, what is a stream really? It's flowing water. Is there anything fixed in it? No. You never step into the same river twice, as the old philosopher said. It's just a changing flow, but it has a pattern. That stream has certain characteristics.

If you drive west of here for about forty-five minutes, you'll cross the Connecticut River, which is also a stream but of a very different nature. It's broad, slow, muddy—looks completely different from the Gaston Pond stream. Yet they're both streams with individual characteristics, and we can give them names.

In Buddhist understanding, each of us is a stream. Particularly, we're considered to have a mind stream. There's a flowing river of thoughts and feelings and perceptions, views and opinions, likes and dislikes, warmth and coolness, generosity and selfishness that run through us, changing moment by moment. Yet there's a consistent pattern to this, which is what we call someone's personality.

Each of us has a unique way of showing up in the world based on the particular mix of all these qualities flowing through our mind streams. So it's always changing, nothing is fixed, and yet each of us has a unique combination of patterns. This is what we call personality.

Personality comprises the ways people think and speak and act and feel. Does this sound like karma? Thinking, feeling, speaking, acting—this is what constitutes the field of action. So personality is basically our karmic stream, running according to our conditioned habits of mind for a very long time.

Personality may be consistent, but it's not solid. It's not fixed. Although personality isn't fixed, do you find it easy to change? This is part of the understanding of practice, isn't it? Changing our habits of mind is not easy because they have tremendous momentum. The Buddha would say lifetimes of momentum lie behind these habits of mind.

As the Buddha taught: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin." Living beings are bound by karma like the chariot wheel by the pin. It's this habitual momentum the Buddha points to here. It's not easy to shift momentum we've been cultivating over at least decades, if not longer.

But the point of practice is to transform it—to transform the unskillful tendencies of mind into wholesome habits of mind. And as you all know, it's hard work. It doesn't happen overnight.

The good news is that nothing in our mindstream is fixed.

The teaching of not-self reveals that nothing in our mindstream is fixed, and this truth makes transformation possible. Our ignorance is not fixed. Craving is not fixed. Greed, aversion, and delusion are not fixed. They are all mutable, all capable of being transformed.

The difficulty lies in recognizing that these are strong karmic patterns. Dharma practice uses the principle of karma to transform karma—we are using karma to change karma.

When I came into practice, I carried many unwholesome habits of mind that felt quite compulsive. The greed, anger, reactivity, and confusion played out repeatedly in endless cycles. My mindstream was flowing in a particular direction, which I describe as a lake designed by M.C. Escher—where the outflow wraps around and feeds back into the source. What flows out becomes what flows back in, filling the lake again. We call this Lake Samsara, because it endlessly cycles the same material: fear, confusion, anger, greed.

Then Dharma practice enters like a tributary flowing from a different direction, carrying different content. Suddenly the volitions begin changing. No longer only greed, aversion, and delusion, but mindfulness, loving-kindness, generosity, wisdom, equanimity, compassion, patience—all the beautiful qualities begin flowing in. This transforms the karmic makeup of the stream.

As we change the karmic composition, the stream heads in a new direction. It no longer cycles back into Lake Samsara but flows toward the Nibbanic Ocean. Whether you thought you wanted to go there or not, that is where you are heading. I share this in the spirit of Yogi Berra, who said, "If you don't know where you're going, you could end up somewhere else." But now you know—you are flowing toward the Nibbanic Ocean.

This transformation becomes possible because nothing is fixed within us. Those old karmic patterns directing the stream need not remain, as the new karmic patterns of Dharma begin shifting us in a different direction. Liberation is possible because none of the old patterns are permanent. Ignorance, craving, clinging, grasping, becoming—all can be uprooted.

Karma explains the development of the path. The karmic power of intentions that we place into each moment of Dharma practice begins reshaping us, bringing far greater happiness into our lives. As we examine this factor of intention, we discover how critical it is to practice. I would say it is the only real tool we have for change.

Here we are as human beings, all sharing the same situation—afloat on a changing sea of circumstances that is unpredictable, chaotic, always shifting. Whether we look at mind or world, we see the same: change, impermanence, fluctuation, conditions not subject to reason, unpredictable and often chaotic.

We have only one way to steer on this ocean, and that is with our intention. Picture yourself on a boat upon this vast, changing ocean of life with countless unpredictable events unfolding. The rudder of that boat is your intention—this is how you navigate to safe harbor. By continuously placing intention behind the wholesome factors of the path, you reach safety. It is the only reliable rudder we possess: the intentions of mindfulness, loving-kindness, generosity, compassion, non-harming.

This brings to mind a dialogue from Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Advaita Vedanta teacher in Bombay.

And he mostly worked in dialogue with people. So one student came to him and said he wanted to talk about transformation and destiny. And Maharaj said, "Well, your own will has been the backbone of your destiny."

And the student said, "Well, surely karma interfered."

And Maharaj replied, "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life, but the attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character."

I love this statement: your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character. That's what we're doing here. We're shaping our character and we're shaping it in a way that only leads in one direction. It leads to peace and release and nibbana.

So the Buddha said that when one becomes fully awakened, there's no more generation of karma. It doesn't mean that one stops acting, but no new karma is being created. And that's what he called the end of karma. And he said, "What action is neither painful nor bright, with neither painful nor bright results, which leads to the end of action?" And he said, "It is this noble eightfold path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

Essentially, it is the letting go of all of our self-centered activities, all of our activities that are just about the small me and our small desires and small aversions. By letting that go and trusting this stream of Dharma to carry us, in a way, I would say, by stopping doing so much, we are carried along by wholesome intentions to that final freedom and final awakening.

So again, as the Buddha put it, it is this noble eightfold path that is the way leading to the cessation of karma, leading to the full awakening and release from suffering.

So let's just sit for a moment together.

Karma shapes the circumstances of your life. The attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character.

CHAPTER 73

Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

> *In this opening session of a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong provides essential meditation instructions rooted in the Mahasi Sayadaw lineage. He explains how mindfulness serves as the direct path to liberation, as outlined in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), where the Buddha describes the four foundations of mindfulness as leading in only one direction: to complete freedom.*
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> *Armstrong introduces three possible meditation anchors for beginning practitioners: whole body awareness in sitting posture, open receptivity to sounds, and mindfulness of breathing sensations. He emphasizes that these anchors help stabilize attention in the present moment before gradually opening to the full range of experience at all six sense doors. The instructions follow the systematic approach of Mahasi Sayadaw, the influential 20th-century Burmese meditation master whose method maps precisely onto the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness.*
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> *The talk contextualizes vipassanā meditation within the threefold training of sīla (ethical conduct), samādhi (concentration), and paññā (wisdom), explaining how simple present-moment awareness can lead to complete liberation when properly supported and developed. Armstrong also provides practical guidance for formal walking meditation and outlines the retreat structure, emphasizing a sustainable pace for the long journey ahead.*

Good morning, everyone. I hope you had a restful night because we had quite a rousing opening last night with the thunder and lightning right in the middle of our opening. I remember people used to tell me that in the land of Goenka retreats, they considered a major storm at the start of a retreat a really good omen. So I think we had a really good omen last night. I hope you slept well and found your way to breakfast this morning.

Today, as we talked about last night and as you've seen from the schedule, it's a light opening day. There's quite a bit of free time, open time, time for conversation or going for walks, helping pull some of the apples down from the many trees down below. They do get used in cooking, so bringing them down now will help you eat later. It's a good investment, and it's also just fun to do something in community.

I want to give preliminary instructions this morning for our meditation. Sally began last night, and I'll go over some of that same ground. But I wanted to step back and take a big-level view of meditation and our style of meditation.

There are so many different lineages of meditation in the world. I think every major spiritual tradition has its own approach. Certainly you find it in Christianity and Judaism and Islam and Taoism and all the yogic schools. In the Buddhist schools, there are many different techniques that could be applied.

In the realm of insight meditation, which of course we practice here because it's the name on the building, it tends to center around this practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is becoming a big word in the world today. It's amazing to me how widespread the interest in mindfulness has become, and a lot of it is through secular doorways—mindfulness-based stress reduction, secular mindfulness, mindfulness magazine, and so on.

But it was presented originally by the Buddha as the direct path to liberation. He says that really clearly in a discourse, the Satipatthana Sutta. The development of the four establishments of mindfulness is the direct path that leads in only one direction, and that is to liberation. So that is really the cornerstone of insight meditation.

All the different retreats that you'll attend here and at Spirit Rock are under this banner, with the exception of the Brahmavihara retreats. They're focused on metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity. So we're in the realm of mindfulness practice, and we will be for the six weeks or three months, including metta practice along the way.

What is amazing to me is that this simple quality—mindfulness has something to do with an attention to the present moment—that this simple attending to the present moment can take us from here all the way to complete liberation. In fact, if you didn't know you were heading in that direction, you're going there anyway. As I think Sally said last night, if you start and you continue, that's where it ends up. So just a warning: if you don't want to be on that path, you've taken the wrong flight.

How can it do that? We'll be talking a lot about mindfulness and how that works, how that function works. But I would say in the whole spectrum of mindfulness practices, they're distinguished by basically two things. One is what we choose to pay attention to. And the second is the way that we connect with what we're paying attention to. You'll see as the instructions go on, there are different ways of connecting. It may not be immediately apparent, but there are different ways of connecting.

Obviously you know there are lots of different things you can pay attention to. I'm sure you found that in your earlier retreats: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and emotions is the basic outline of what we pay attention to. The Buddha made this really clear in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the basis for Vipassana practice in general.

What was revolutionary in his teaching is that this simple faculty of paying attention in a certain way leads to liberation when supported by ethical conduct and when trained to lead onward to wisdom. So it's really these three branches that come together for us: the basis of ethical conduct, or sila, and we'll emphasize that when we do a formal retreat opening this evening. We'll all take the five precepts together as a community. The development of mindfulness is our primary meditation, and how that leads onward to developing liberating insight—how that leads to the wisdom that frees us, frees our heart and mind.

So we already know there are all these different things we can pay attention to with mindfulness: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions, and more. And then in terms of how we connect, sometimes we're instructed to really pierce the object with our attention, to make a really strong connection to the object called piercing it.

Other times we're more encouraged to be relaxed, receptive, and just let the object come and touch it gently. These two differences will have an impact on our attitude and our relationship to the experiences through our six senses. We'll give instructions on both the objects and the way of approaching as we go.

Once we have that as the field, in the three-month course, we give instructions in a specific way. It is a way that follows the teaching—and I would say very brilliant teaching—of Mahasi Sayadaw, who was a Burmese monk from the 20th century. I would say that Mahasi Sayadaw was the most influential meditation master of the 20th century. He established hundreds of centers in Burma. His followers have established hundreds of centers around the world, both in Asia and the West—this being one of them, Spirit Rock being one of them.

The beauty of his meditation instructions is that they map onto that whole range of experience that the Buddha outlined in a very precise and systematic way. We are going to try to convey what we understand as the essence of those instructions in this retreat. This is not just a random fancy of one of us. The IMS three-month team as a whole—meaning both part one and part two—have made the decision to adopt Mahasi Sayadaw's instructions as our basis. So that's what we'll be teaching.

Now you may come from a different lineage within the Vipassana world. You may have come from the lineage of Ajahn Chah or Ajahn Sumedho, the Thai forest tradition. You may have been practicing in recent years with Venerable Analayo, a bhikkhu who's resident just down the street and currently in retreat. You may have practiced with S.N. Goenka, whose instructions came from his Burmese teacher, U Ba Khin.

All of those approaches are fine. We're not exclusive about how you want to practice. If you want to bring in other approaches, talk with your teacher. Let your teacher know what you're doing, what you'd like to do, and you all can work it out. We're not rigid. We love the other approaches. Most of us have practiced in many other styles, found they brought a lot of benefit, and so we're very open to that. But what we'll be teaching are the Mahasi Sayadaw instructions, modified as they've evolved over many years of three-month teaching.

When Mahasi Sayadaw gave the instructions, he basically told everyone up front how to relate to experiences at all the sense doors. So on the first day, you'd get instructions about breath, body sensations, sounds, sights, thoughts, emotions, subtle experiences of mind. That's a lot to take in. We don't want to overwhelm you on the first morning. What we're going to do is kind of trickle these instructions out day by day, adding a little more detail until finally we cover the whole range.

The aim as we present meditation in this three-month retreat is for you to be able to be mindful with any experience you're having in any of the postures—sitting, walking, standing, lying down—at any time. Basically, if it's in your experience, it's grounds for our mindfulness practice. That's where we're aiming. Many of you have followed these instructions for a long time and you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't been at a three-month course, you may not have gotten them in quite this sequence of instructions. So that's the approach we're going to take.

We recognize that as we begin with simple objects like breath, body, sounds—as Sally did last night—it's not that you aren't having thoughts and emotions. You are. And you may know already, hopefully you do, how to work with them. Those instructions will come a little later, but if they're arising and you're able to be with them mindfully, please do.

We're going to begin by offering the suggestion that you start with something we call an anchor. In this style of vipassana practice, an anchor is an object that you come back to repeatedly out of preference, out of choice. Actually the three areas that Sally talked about last night are all suitable choices for anchors.

Classically, the anchor is the breath. When Mahasi Sayadaw presented the instructions, I think that was the anchor that was offered. As we've evolved the instructions over the years, we've found that it's helpful to offer a choice of anchors for meditators. We'll offer those three choices, and I'll explain them again in the guided meditation.

The value of an anchor is that in the early days of the retreat, you choose to come back to that same point again and again. You're with the anchor. You're with the anchor. You're with the anchor. Thoughts come. We're carried away in thought. At some point you wake up—oh, back to the present moment. What should I do? Oh, come back to the anchor. So we reconnect with breath, body, or sounds. And that sets us on the mindfulness track again.

We find that having an anchor is helpful because it tends to build up our ability to maintain stable attention in the present moment. Once that stability has grown somewhat, we like to open up to all the changing objects that are happening at all six sense doors. But if we go into all six sense doors immediately, it can feel a little overwhelming, distracting, and difficult to remain stable. That's why we're going to build up through this emphasis in the first few days on an anchor. I'll include that in the guiding as we start the meditation, and I hope you'll get a sense for it.

So with that as preface, welcome to the world of Mahasi Sayadaw. Please sit comfortably. Normally in our style of meditation we sit with closed eyes—this reduces the distraction a bit. But if you're used to sitting with eyes open and you prefer that, that's fine too. Mostly we sit with eyes closed.

As you settle into your meditation posture, rediscover that element that Sally talked about last night: the combination of uprightness with the spine being somewhat straight, and relaxation. You're starting from a point of ease, not needing to change anything in your present experience, but allowing yourself to rest in it.

As you settle into the present moment, take a moment to notice what's here. What's in your experience right now? There are body sensations. There are sounds. There's some mood that you've come in with or find yourself in. Thoughts may be coming and going. Images can arise and pass. There is a visual field, but with eyes closed, not much going on—just a little gray.

With that kind of wide open look at what's here, we can start to narrow the attention a little bit. Part of the training in mindfulness is developing the ability to guide the attention, to train the attention. So first we allow the attention to settle in the body posture as you're sitting. Feel the uprightness of the posture. Look throughout to see if there are any obvious areas of holding. You can relax the forehead. Soften the eyes. Let the jaw be unclenched. Let the shoulders drop. Let the belly be soft. And let your sitting base support your uprightness with strength.

As you sit with the attention on the whole body posture in sitting, can you get the sense that the body posture itself could be a focus for mindfulness? Can you possibly take in at a glance the whole body in sitting? From the top of the head through the torso and pelvis, the legs and feet. You may not get 100% with a glance—you might get 50, you might get 75. But see how that feels, bringing your attention to the whole body posture in sitting.

This reference point, the posture in sitting, can become an anchor. It's a reliable thing to come back to again and again because it's always there.

Now open your attention up and let it become wide. Let your attention open to all the sounds that are around you. Some may be in front, some behind, right or left, or overhead. Sounds from inside—my voice, the fans, each other. Sounds from outside. When your attention is open and a sound arises, you don't have to make any effort to hear. The sound arises and it's known spontaneously. You just have to be receptive, ready to receive, open and ready to receive.

You can have a sense in the meditation on sounds that it can be very restful. The way you're not directing the attention anywhere—you're just sitting in the middle of all the sounds, very open, in a receiving mode, not sending the mind out, just receptive. Receptive. Taking sounds as a focus can enhance the sense of easefulness, relaxation. So this is the second possible anchor: just an openness to sounds wherever they arise.

Now, bringing the attention back into the body posture, can you be open to the body in the same way as to sounds? That is, you're just in the mode of receiving all the different sensations throughout the body.

What's being felt within the body right now. We're not trying to keep the attention on the whole body—we're simply opening to what's happening in the body. Can we just receive that, without judging or trying to fix it?

As you connect with the body in this receptive way, you'll naturally notice the sensations connected with breathing. Every time there's an in-breath, certain sensations are felt. Every time there's an out-breath, different sensations are felt.

Now narrow the focus and bring your attention to the sensations of breathing. Breathing in, where are sensations felt in the body? Breathing out, where are sensations felt? And how is it just to feel those sensations—to notice them as breathing and simply feel them?

As to where you feel them or where you direct the attention with the breath, there's not one right way. Some people naturally feel the sensations most clearly around the tip of the nose. For others, it might be in the belly, or it could be in the chest. Or it could be through the whole body—keeping the perspective of the whole body while sitting and feeling the breath. See where for you it's easiest to connect with breathing. It could be in any of these ways. Then choose that as your primary focus in the meditation for now.

So the breath is the third possible anchor. Many of you have spent considerable time with the breath—it may be very accessible. If that's so, this can be an excellent anchor for you.

In the remainder of this sitting, play a little with these three choices of anchor: the whole body in sitting, sounds, or breath. See which one feels most reliable for you as a way to stay connected to the present moment. That's the purpose of an anchor.

Of course, whichever one you choose, thoughts will come, and you'll be swept away for periods of time. We'll lose the connection to the present moment, following some train of thought. Then after a while, we'll wake up from that thought excursion and be back in the present moment. Appreciate that return—that unwilled return to the present moment—and then choose to connect again with your anchor.

This willingness to come back from thought excursions and connect again with the present through your anchor—this is what will build the stability of mind and stability of attention.

So in your formal sittings today—and there are several more formal sittings on the schedule—please continue to play with this concept of an anchor. See if one of these focuses works well for you: body posture, sounds, or breathing, as a way to stabilize the attention in the present. That's really what we're trying to develop over the first few days of the retreat. Then as we go day by day, we'll open up the instructions, refine these guidances, and bring in other objects as we go. First few days, we're trying to stabilize.

Of course, today is really a day for settling in. You're in the three-month course—six weeks or three months. It's not a sprint. So don't knock yourself out in the first hundred yards of this journey. Enter at your own pace, at a sustainable pace for now. You can always pick up the pace later—don't worry.

As you go through the day today, there are formal structured sitting periods. Continue as you like with other sittings and formal walking during the day. There are also some informal times. We really wanted to build in time because you're coming for such a long stretch. If there are business items or personal items from home that you need to finish before you can really go fully into silence, please take today to do that.

A few words about the schedule today: After we finish this session, the managers will come in and give a talk about details of the retreat, answering any questions you have about logistics. We'll finish about 9:15 here, and then there will be a fifteen-minute break—basically a bathroom break. Please stay in silence through that break. Come back in for the managers' announcements at 9:30.

When the managers' announcements finish—they have 9:45 as their scheduled finish—I've never seen managers finish announcements in fifteen minutes, however may it be so—at 9:45 or thereabouts is an open time.

You're invited to participate in apple picking. You're invited to carry on your own practice as you like. And just a guideline for that open period, which goes basically until 11:45 on this schedule, but really until lunchtime: please keep all the buildings in silence—certainly the meditation hall, dorms, walking rooms, but even the dining hall. Once people start talking in there, if others are trying to maintain their mindfulness and quiet through the day, the dining room gets very, very loud. So throughout the building, please keep it quiet so those who wish to enter more fully into the silence can be supported in that. But if you'd like to be outside from 9:45 to lunch, and again there's a period in the late afternoon, feel free to talk, connect, help with the apples.

Take care of any personal business that's still remaining. As you go through the morning, if you'd like to do some more formal practice, I'll give really brief instructions for walking meditation. We'll really expand these starting tomorrow when we move into a full schedule of sitting and walking.

Many of you, probably most of you, have done formal walking before. There are some traditions where it's not taught. And so I'll just say briefly that the formal walking is about as exciting as the formal sitting. So that is to say, you're not going for a walk to enjoy nature. You pick a walking path, maybe twenty to thirty paces long. You walk from one end to the other, experiencing primarily your body in movement. A convenient focus is the activity in the legs and feet. But some people like to be with the whole body. Some people like to be more focused just on the sensations in the feet. That's fine. Starting off a retreat, I like to stay with the whole body or the legs and feet all together.

Find a pace. You can experiment with pace. We have more or less three gears that we talk about. One is normal pace. One is a little slower. And one is really slow—what we call the creeping or tortoise pace. So you'll probably see people doing all three. Find the one that keeps you relaxed and present. That's really the guideline: what keeps the mindfulness steady and continuous.

So walking from one end to the other, twenty to thirty paces. Stop when you reach the other end. Take a moment to orient in standing. Standing is also a great meditation posture. Mindfully turn and then walk back to the other end, trying to be with each step, with your chosen focus—whole body or legs and feet. Reach the other end, stand, turn around, walk back. So again, it's not so much going for a walk as just finding a comfortable and convenient way to sustain the mindfulness in the best way possible, meaning be present to your experience as best you can. Keep the same attitude of being relaxed and alert. It's a little harder to fall asleep in walking, so it provides good energy balance.

At three o'clock this afternoon, there will be in the hall a meeting for all of you called Being in Community. A few of us will lead you through some exercises, give you a little chance to connect with one another formally, and talk about what it means to be in a diverse and inclusive community as IMS is growing into and seeks to become. That will be from 3:00 to 3:45, and we ask that everyone please come to that. I think you'll find it enjoyable and interesting.

Then this evening at five with the light dinner, we go back into full silence. So the return to silence really marks the entry into the formal retreat atmosphere, and we will make that very clear tonight with a formal course opening. The 7:30 dharma talk tonight will be a formal entryway into a long retreat, and we'll also take the refuges and precepts together as a community to demonstrate our shared commitment to values and to care for one another.

Carol just suggested that I say a little bit about interviews. In this retreat, we will be meeting with you for individual interviews. Sally likes to call them practice meetings. I'm in the old school frame of thought where we've called them interviews for about forty years. But we're not really interviewing you for a job or anything. They're meetings to talk about how your practice is going. So we will begin with those on Friday in a few days. In this retreat, all your practice meetings will be one-to-one. So you'll be meeting one-to-one with two teachers who will alternate with you. Generally, you'll get two or three interviews in a week. The teachers do take days off in the long retreat.

These are affectionately called Teacher's Mental Health Days. So there will be a couple of days each week when we're not doing formal scheduled interviews, but there will be five days of one-to-one interviews every week, with you alternating between two teachers.

In addition, Monica is kindly offering optional sign-up interviews in the afternoons. Generally on a day when you haven't had a formal practice meeting in the morning, there will be the opportunity to sign up for a limited number of spots to meet with Monica for a practice meeting in the afternoon. This is really for people who have something actively happening in their practice—it's not just a chance to hang out with Monica because she's such a nice person, although she is, and you will enjoy hanging out with her. But please come to her if you have something related to your practice that you really want to talk about. There will be sign-ups on the board after the morning sit. I believe she will start to offer those tomorrow.

So that's all I can think of for now. We wish you well in this day of transition, and we'll continue to see you throughout the day. Enjoy your day of settling.

We now have a fifteen-minute break, basically a bathroom break. Please maintain the silence, and then the managers will be here at 9:30.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 74

Mindfulness of Breathing: Ānāpānasati Practice and Its Central Role in Buddhist Meditation

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong presents a comprehensive exploration of ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing), drawing extensively from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN 118). Armstrong examines why breath awareness holds such a central place across all Buddhist traditions—Theravāda, Tibetan, and Zen—and was praised by the Buddha as "a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling."

The talk begins by defining mindfulness through the lens of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, emphasizing the key Pali term pajānāti (knowing/understanding) that appears throughout the four foundations. Armstrong proposes that mindfulness is essentially "knowing our present experience" with the intelligence that opens into wisdom. He explores how mindfulness of the body serves as the foundation for all meditation practice, citing the Buddha's extensive praise of kāyagatāsati in the Aṅguttara Nikāya.

Armstrong discusses both the benefits and potential obstacles of breath practice. The benefits include its constant availability, neutral feeling tone, natural rhythm that brings sukha (pleasure) leading to samādhi, and its capacity to fulfill all four satipaṭṭhānas. He addresses common difficulties including striving, aversion to thoughts, self-judgment, and boredom, offering practical guidance for working with these hindrances. The talk concludes with the Buddha's teaching that mindfulness of breathing is "peaceful and sublime" and "calms unwholesome mental states whenever they arise."

In this evening's talk, I'd like to explore mindfulness of breathing in greater depth. While we've already discussed mindfulness extensively, I want to focus specifically on this foundational practice.

Most of you probably know that mindfulness of breathing stands as the premier meditation practice in the entire Vipassana lineage. Virtually every Vipassana teacher I've practiced with has placed it at the center of their instructions. The Buddha positioned it prominently in his teachings as well, as I'll discuss shortly. Moreover, this is the only meditation practice I know of that is shared in common among the three major Buddhist meditative traditions: Theravada, Tibetan, and Zen. All three traditions regard this as a primary practice, and I know of no other meditation technique of which this can be said. This widespread adoption speaks volumes about its significance.

Regarding the Buddha's teachings, he actually didn't offer many meditation techniques. Having read through more than 2000 pages of his discourses in English translation, I find relatively few devoted to specific meditation instructions. However, two discourses are most central for understanding mindfulness of breathing: the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, called the Satipatthana Sutta, found in the Middle Length Discourses or Majjhima Nikaya, and the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, also found in the Middle Length Discourses, called the Anapanasati Sutta.

I realize many of you may not be interested in becoming Buddhist scholars, but I will offer some scholarly details along the way for those who are curious. There aren't many opportunities outside the three-month course where you'll encounter this material. We'll discuss the sutta names in Pali and these collections of discourses in their original language. Once you hear these terms a few times, they become familiar, and perhaps subversively, you become a Buddhist scholar yourself.

The Satipatthana discourse, which is the central teaching on the foundations of mindfulness and truly the foundation for Vipassana practice, contains a crucial clue to the meaning of mindfulness. The Buddha never explicitly defines mindfulness—as Sally mentioned the other night, if you asked around, we could probably generate a hundred different definitions. Search the web and you'll find dozens more. When I examine the Satipatthana Sutta, however, I discover an interesting point that points to what I believe is a central understanding.

The Buddha describes four foundations in that discourse: the body; feeling tone, which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither; the mind and mind states as the third foundation; and the fourth foundation, somewhat mysteriously called dhammas, which I think of as dhamma principles—like mini-dhammas within the fourth foundation.

Let me read excerpts from all four foundations. From the first foundation, when the Buddha describes practicing mindfulness of breath: "Breathing in long, one knows 'I breathe in long.' Breathing out long, one knows 'I breathe out long.'"

From the second foundation on feeling tone: "When feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.'"

From the third foundation: "One knows a lustful mind to be lustful and a mind without lust to be without lust."

And from the fourth foundation: "If sensual desire is present in one, one knows 'there is sensual desire in me.' If sensual desire is not present in one, one knows 'there is no sensual desire in me.'"

Having heard these excerpts from all four foundations, one word stands out that links them all. That word is "knows."

This word "knows" is crucial. The Pali word being translated is pajanati, which shares a root with the Pali term sampajanya, meaning clear comprehension. This word pajanati indicates that something is being understood. When Bhikkhu Bodhi translated this discourse, he rendered pajanati as "understands," while Bhikkhu Nanamoli translated it as "knows."

This key word pajanati, used throughout all the mindfulness instructions, reveals that we understand what's happening to us.

And this is what Sally was pointing to last night in her talk on samasati—we know what's happening. We understand what's happening.

So I'm going to suggest that we take this as our working definition for mindfulness. At least I do. And that is: mindfulness is knowing our present experience. That's it in brief. And then the postscript to that would be: in the context of the Buddha's view of reality.

You notice this knowing is connected with the four foundations. The four foundations are the Buddha's own categories, so it's in relationship to these categories of experience.

I find this a really beautiful thing to understand from two points of view. One is it's really simple, isn't it? To know what your present experience is. Let's say you're in the middle of a thought storm. The thought train has been running for a while and you've been to Bali and your home and your future work and your marriage relationship. Then you come back into the meditation hall and you go, "Wow, where am I? Where have I been?" All you have to do to get back is to notice what's happening. You can just ask, "Oh, what's happening now?" That restores mindfulness. It's so simple—what's happening now. And you take a look.

The other thing that's beautiful about this approach is this word pajanati has understanding within it. That was Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation related to sampajanya. And what that means is there's intelligence there—there's intelligence in mindfulness. It's a native intelligence that we all have. All human beings have it. And when we're mindful, we're manifesting it.

This intelligence is the opening point of wisdom. This is how wisdom starts to develop in our practice, because it's an intrinsic part of mindfulness. And then it grows. Based on the properties that mindfulness brings along, the wisdom grows. But it's really right there in mindfulness—that's the start of wisdom.

So it's amazing that something this simple—"Oh, I know what's happening right now. I'm breathing in. I'm breathing in long. My mind is full of lust. I know what's happening"—it's so powerful.

This is a section from the end of the Satipatthana Sutta: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana—namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

How does this simple thing do all that?

The first thing I'd like to mention is this cartoon in the New Yorker that I thought was really quite insightful. It's in three panels. The first panel shows someone on their PC at work—they're sitting at a desk, working on their PC, typing away on the keyboard. But there's a thought bubble above their head, which is an image of them out on the golf course playing a round of golf. So that's kind of where they'd imagine themselves being.

The next panel shows them out on the golf course playing a round of golf. But there's another thought bubble, and that thought bubble is of them at home making love to their partner.

And then there's a third panel. The third panel is the person at home making love to their partner, and the thought bubble is of being back in their office at their desk on the PC.

This is kind of the opposite of "be here now," right?

This is what we might call "be anywhere but here" rather than "be here now." And this is precisely where our thoughts tend to take us, as Sally also spoke about last night. They transport us into past and future, into places where we are not.

When we engage in this mental time travel, we sometimes call it a distraction. We hop on a thought train—it's a kind of distraction that pulls us away from the present moment. Sometimes these fantasies can even be quite enjoyable; it doesn't seem too problematic.

But I invite you to take a closer look. When you've been riding a thought train and then return to the present, how is your mind? Is it calmer? More harmonious? More peaceful? More loving? More attuned to what's around you? Or is it agitated? Stirred up?

Has that past and future thinking brought up uncomfortable emotions? Often when we journey into the future, we might feel anxiety or desire. When we drift into the past, we might feel grief at loss or embarrassment about something we did. These thought excursions open us up to genuinely disturbing emotions. This is the price we pay for not being present.

Mindfulness undoes this pattern. It keeps us here and prevents these disturbances. They're not merely distracting—for the most part, they're genuinely disturbing in their effects. This is something you can notice in your own experience when you return from a thought excursion: What has the effect been? To calm or to stir up? You can investigate this for yourself.

This is what the Buddha called unwise attention. He taught that it's unwise attention when we direct our awareness to things that will lead to more suffering. It's wise attention when we give our attention to things that will lead to wholesome states of mind, beautiful states of mind. Mindfulness is one of those most beautiful qualities, and it brings other beautiful states along with it. It's a very wholesome seed for further development.

This is mindfulness in general. Within this broader understanding, the Buddha identified the four foundations of mindfulness. The first foundation is mindfulness of the body—truly the foundation of the Satipatthana practice.

In the Anguttara Nikaya, the numerical discourses, there's a remarkable passage where fifty suttas appear in sequence, all in praise of mindfulness of the body. This represents a powerful statement of emphasis. The Buddha truly highlighted this practice, saying: "When one thing is developed and cultivated, the body becomes tranquil, the mind becomes tranquil, extraneous thoughts subside, and all wholesome qualities that pertain to true knowledge reach fulfillment. What is that one thing? Mindfulness directed to the body."

So mindfulness of the body was truly central to his message. This is fascinating because ultimately meditation concerns itself with the mind. The qualities that cause suffering originate in the mind. The beautiful qualities originate in the mind. The hindrances are there. The enlightenment factors are there. The Brahma Viharas are there. They're all elements of the mind.

Yet the Buddha strongly encourages us to direct our attention to the body. Why might this be?

The body offers several profoundly positive aspects for meditation practice. One key quality is its constant availability. Mindfulness of the body can always be accessed, and it grounds our attention in a reality that's relatively stable.

The Buddha once said that if you're going to identify with anything—that is, create a sense of self around anything—do it with the body rather than the mind, because the mind changes so much more quickly than the body.

You can get a sense of this. I think one of the reasons that sitting meditation is so powerful is that we take our seat and don't move for long periods of time. It's not that it's wrong to move if you're in pain or getting sleepy—you may need to adjust the posture or stand up. But there is a virtue to having the body be still. The virtue is that stillness of the body communicates a stillness to the mind. It's almost like the mind soaks up, through osmosis, the stillness of the body.

Sometimes I've often felt in sitting that the body is there relatively like a rock, and the thoughts and emotions are just crashing, crashing, crashing. But the body is a rock that just stays steady. Over time—and it may be over years—that stillness communicates a sense of stillness to the mind and becomes a source of equanimity to us. We have the sense we can sit through anything. We're not afraid of sitting through anything because we've done it so many times and come out the other side.

One of my teachers in Thailand was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a great master from the twentieth century. He had a saying: "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body." He was a great scholar who loved to study, a great meditator who loved the mind. Yet he said, "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body." That's how important it is.

Being in touch with the body also keeps us in touch with our emotional life. When a strong emotion comes, it will be felt in the body. Sometimes that's the first thing we notice. Oh, the body's feeling shaky—maybe there's some anxiety. Oh, the body's feeling tight—maybe there's some anger. Or the body's feeling really soft—maybe there's relaxation in the mind. The body tells the truth. There are books: "The Body Doesn't Lie," "The Body Keeps the Score." It's becoming well known. We can use it to find out what's going on in the mind as well. It's very helpful that way.

Within the mindfulness of the body comes mindfulness of breathing. In the Satipatthana discourse, mindfulness of the body is the first foundation. Within the first foundation, mindfulness of breathing is the first paragraph, the first pointing. That's how central it was in the Buddha's teaching.

The Buddha himself—this surprised me when I found this out—after he was enlightened, he still went into retreat. That could have just been because he was the administrator of a large and growing body of unruly bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. It was like, "Let me have some peace and quiet here." But he still went into retreat, and he came out of a three-month retreat where he had practiced mindfulness of breathing for the whole thing. He said, "If anyone could say of anything that it is a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Tathagata's dwelling, it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one would rightly say this."

That's high praise. If it was good enough for the Buddha, maybe it's good enough for us.

So I want to talk about why breath can be a really useful focus. I'm going to talk in praise of mindfulness of breathing. But I also want to point to some of the obstacles that can come up with it. I don't want to sell it as the be-all and end-all in meditation. It's really good for some people, quite good for a lot of people, and not the best for a lot of people. So I want to talk about both the strengths and some of the potential pitfalls in mindfulness of breathing.

Why is it so useful? Number one, it happens by itself. Breath is part of the semi-autonomous system in the body, so it's always there. It's always happening, and we don't have to do anything to make it happen. So it's a focus that's always available to us. It takes care of itself.

It is basically a neutral object. Breath is not strongly pleasant, it's not strongly unpleasant—it has a neutral feeling tone. So it's not objectionable, but we also don't develop a lot of desire for it. That helps keep the mind in balance. Although it's not intrinsically pleasurable to a high degree, it brings pleasure with the mindfulness of it.

The first thing we notice when we can be with the breath is that we've stepped out of the disturbing thoughts. And in time we find, oh, that's kind of pleasant not to be bombarded by those thoughts and emotions. As we settle into the breathing, there's a sense of being able to relax more and more with it. So it does bring a sense of comfort and ease and some rest. That has a certain pleasant feeling in the body.

Once we discover the possibility for enjoying the breath as a focus, that enjoyment will bring us back to meditation more and more often. And that's a very helpful thing. To want to meditate is a wonderful opening. One other thing is that this quality of pleasure—the Pali term is *sukha*—is the proximate cause for concentration. As *sukha*, this feeling, develops in the body and mind, we become more contented. We're happy to rest there because it's pleasant, it's peaceful, and it's satisfying. So it's an opening for concentration.

As we tune in to the rhythm of the breath, we let the rhythm be natural. There's something calming about the rhythm. There's something soothing in it. You might just feel this for five seconds, but you can start to notice the breath has a soothing quality. That's part of its draw. That's part of its pleasure.

When I've done long retreats focused on the breath, what it reminds me of—the rhythm of the breath, and I may be making this up, but it's the image that came to mind—was being rocked at my mother's breast. Sally and I were in the San Francisco airport on our way here on Sunday, sitting around at the airport, and there was this young couple with a young daughter with them. I watched them for a while because I didn't have a lot to do, and they seemed like a kind family. The mother was often touching the daughter, just establishing that physical contact.

Then the mother sat down, leaned back in her chair a little bit, and the daughter crawled into her lap, put her head on the mother's shoulder and just kind of clung to her. The daughter was about three, I'd say, so she was still small, and she could fit on the mother's chest with her feet on the mother's legs. Her head was on her mother's chest, turned in my direction. The look on her face was one of absolute ease and comfort and trust. It was like there was nothing wrong in the whole universe for that little girl because she was on her mother's chest and being held. It was really a beautiful thing to see.

So that starts to come in—that sense of being rocked, being calmed, being soothed. The more we can let go of any attempt to control the breath, let the breath find its natural rhythm, and then that soothing quality starts to come through.

In the beginning, that's hard to do. It's hard to be mindful of breathing and not control it a little bit. We find ourselves directing: now breathe in, now breathe out, now breathe in. You may not say the words, but there's some intentionality often going on. That's okay. Don't worry about that. A little bit of control in the beginning is not a problem. But as the meditation deepens, the more that can be let go of, the more the natural rhythm of the breath can come through, the more we can let go and just be rocked by that.

Once we make a commitment to a certain focus in meditation, we know where we want to be when we are in the moment. That commitment really highlights when we're not there. So we'll know, oh, I wasn't with the breath for this period of time, which means I was away in some distracting thoughts, images, etc. The breath focus highlights the times we're away. And so it provides a very clear reflection of how the mindfulness is doing or not doing. We learn from that. We want to know when we're mindful and when we're not. The breath focus really reflects that in a very skillful way.

Breathing is a very elemental event. In the Buddha's language, one of the four elements is wind, the wind element. You could say air, the movement of air. Breath is all about the movement of air, which is nature, right? The air all around the planet—it's just part of nature. So an interesting question is, when does the air start being part of the planet and start being part of us?

We breathe it in, and there's a point at which coming in through the nose or through the mouth, it changes from being nature to being us, and then we breathe out, and it becomes part of nature again. How far does it go in before it becomes us? How far does it go out before it's not us anymore?

We start to see that us and nature, which we normally think of as external, not-self, are permeating each other all the time, going back and forth. This offers some interesting insights into anatta, not-self. The boundaries are to some extent constructed, conceptual.

Another fascinating aspect of mindfulness of breathing: the Buddha says in the Anapanasati Sutta that it actually fulfills all four foundations of mindfulness. It fulfills the body foundation right away—that's where it's based. In the second foundation, the sutta says, "I shall breathe in or out experiencing pleasure." There's the pleasant feeling tone of vedana, the second foundation. The third foundation of mind appears when the text states, "I shall breathe in or out gladdening the mind." Here's the mind state of gladness arising through contact with the breath.

For the fourth foundation of dhamma, "I shall breathe in or out contemplating impermanence." Wisdom can arise based on the changing nature of the breath. Is there anything really solid there? When you look closely at the physical sensations of breathing, is there anything solid or is it just like a ripple of tiny sensations? Up and down, in and out. Gone. Breathing lends itself to insight into anicca, impermanence.

And I love this instruction: "I shall breathe in or out, liberating the mind." Liberating the mind. Freedom in impermanence. The practice of breathing, mindfully breathing.

It's interesting—there's some new technology around these days to help train people in mindfulness of breathing. The whole breathing thing has become very secular. There's a company that has a headset you put around your forehead. It's basically an EEG machine, an electroencephalogram that measures your brain waves. There's an app on your phone that connects to the headset and tells you how your brain waves are doing.

A friend of mine had one of these on loan from the manufacturer. Sally and I were having dinner with them, and he offered to let me try it. I said, "Sure, I like technology." So I put this thing on and he revved up the app. He said, "Okay, now be mindful. Be mindful for five minutes. When you're mindful at a certain level, the app is going to make birds sing. That's the auditory feedback that tells you you're in some kind of a groove."

I started out and there were not many birds, but I thought I'm going to try mindfulness of breathing. I went to my nose where I've spent a lot of time in meditation, got very focused inside the nostrils. The birds really started going. The birds just went on and on while I was in touch with the air moving in and out of my nostrils.

Then at one point I thought, "I'm going to try kind of expansive awareness, sounds." The birds shut right up. It was so interesting. In a way, I thought, well, it's really measuring concentration because I was still mindful. I don't have 100% reliability on what the app claims to be measuring, but they definitely were on to something with those birds. It could be a really useful training device for a particular kind of meditation—not the be-all and end-all, but a very interesting pointing.

These are some of the beautiful things about mindfulness of breathing. Now I want to talk about some of the difficulties that can come, some of the obstacles. The first thing to say is breath may not work for everyone as a primary focus. I think we said that in the beginning. That's why we offered body posture and sounds as alternate anchors.

Because for some people, the breath is not the right choice. This doesn't mean you're a bad meditator or lacking some essential quality for awakening. It simply means that your particular system, the way it's constituted, will find some other focus more skillful for deepening practice. There's no blame or judgment in this.

One group I often see having trouble relating with the breath is people who have had asthma. If you've experienced asthma, especially as a child, and gone through that fear of not being able to get enough breath when young, paying attention to the breath can trigger that fear again and lead to panic. In such cases, focusing on breathing wouldn't be skillful, and there are other excellent focuses available.

Similarly, if you've had an injury—perhaps from a car accident that left an impact in your chest, whether from hitting an airbag or steering wheel—the memory of that trauma can be triggered by placing attention on the breath in the chest. This would also indicate that breath focus isn't the most skillful approach right now.

There can be other sources of trauma as well, whether from childhood or adult experiences. When focusing on breathing becomes triggering rather than calming, it's not helpful.

In such cases, we offer other focuses. One is the whole body posture. Perhaps the area affected by trauma recedes when breath isn't being focused on there, allowing you to be with the sense of the whole body sitting and gain stability from that practice. The stillness comes into the mind from the stillness of the body.

Alternatively, there may be a part of the body unaffected by past trauma, illness, or injury where you can place your attention. I remember one Asian master giving instruction to a student whose mind was too restless: "I just want you to be with the touch point of your seat in contact with the cushion. I want that to be your primary object for a long time." This approach successfully calmed the thinking mind.

There are many ways to move forward skillfully.

Beyond these physical considerations, there are particular mental reactions that commonly arise when we commit to focusing on breath. I want to discuss four of them: striving, aversion to thoughts, judgment, and boredom. Sound familiar?

Striving is very common. By striving, I mean the desire force—the force of wanting in the mind when it connects to the field of meditation. For instance, you may have had wonderful retreats in the past, or even good experiences with breath in this retreat, but they've passed. Then what happens? "I want them back." We'll do anything in our power to recreate that former experience.

Or we pick up experiences we've heard about from friends, read in books, or seen on social media, thinking, "That person had that experience. I want that one too." We try very hard to make it happen.

This represents a fundamental difficulty. Because the breath can lead to states of calm, peace, and pleasure, we often develop lovely meditation experiences through breath practice. But when they go away—which they always will—we desperately want them back. So we try hard to recreate that experience.

But trying hard is acting out of desire. When desire is present, we won't have peace and calm—these are counter-tendencies. All the good movements in meditation, all beneficial unfoldings, come from acceptance of the present moment just as it is. When we're dissatisfied with our current experience and trying to make it different, we're in conflict. Reality is one way, our desire another. Guess who wins? Reality always wins.

We must learn to recognize striving and do our best to let it go.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 8/11). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

Some years ago, I went to Burma to practice for six weeks with a Sayadaw I'd heard wonderful things about. His name was Paok Sayadaw. He had a monastery in the southeast of the country and was a deeply respected master of both concentration and insight. He had developed very powerful systems for both. I especially wanted to explore the concentration aspect with him.

When I arrived at his monastery and met him, he already knew I was coming. He'd heard that I was a teacher—though he didn't know whether I was a good teacher or a bad teacher, which was probably for the best. But knowing I was a teacher, he saw me every day for practice meetings where I would report my experience to him.

I want to say a word about Paok Sayadaw. He was a wonderful being and a wonderful teacher. He was always kind in every interaction I observed with him—with students, with other practitioners there. He was consistently kind. He had these twinkly eyes, and there was nothing he loved more in our relationship than to hear a good report on my meditation. That's what made him happiest—when I came in and reported some degree of progress.

We would have these practice meetings outdoors on his porch in the warm weather when it wasn't raining. I would often be behind other people waiting to speak with him, so I could hear their practice reports. I'd hear this young Burmese monk say, "Oh, I just spent yesterday in the meditation hall sitting for three hours in third jhana." Then I'd deliver my report, which was not quite so impressive.

Because he knew I was a teacher, I felt like I wanted at least for him to think I was reasonable. When I would go to sit, I'd notice this striving tendency come up. I wanted to experience something really positive that I could report to my teacher. I knew I was striving—I could feel what was going on in my body. My body got tight.

So I went to him to report this because I thought he would have a really good solution for my striving, really good advice for how to solve it. I explained that I was striving for a particular experience. His reply: "Don't do that."

Okay. So I went back to my little kuti and had to learn by myself how not to do that.

What I saw—and you've probably seen this a million times too—was that I was looking for a particular experience instead of just being with the breath the way it was. To be with the breath the way it is—this is innocence. This is our innocent interest in being with the present moment exactly the way it is, without trying to make it anything other.

When I could do that, just come back to the present moment with that innocent mind, things unfolded beautifully and the deepening started to happen. When I was with the breath in order to get somewhere else, nothing would happen. Caught.

Look at this "in order to" mind state. We aren't with the breath with that kind of motivation in the moment. We're with the breath partly out of an understanding that it leads to wholesome states, but in order for it to lead onward, we have to approach it with innocence, openness, and acceptance. Then everything opens up for us.

This is the first thing—striving—because the breath can lead into pleasant experiences and we want them to happen again.

Another thing that develops is that we can develop an aversion to thinking. We start to realize that we're with the breath except when we go off on these thought trains, and we might be gone for quite a while. While we're away on our thought trains, we're not developing the relationship with the breath. I can't tell you how many times I've thought, "Oh my gosh, if it just weren't for these thoughts, I'd be doing great."

This can develop into an attitude: "They shouldn't be happening. If I'm meditating, I shouldn't be thinking." Because thinking is obviously what's causing the problem. That's a real bind, because none of us are going to stop thinking anytime soon. If we think that we shouldn't be thinking, we're going to tie ourselves up in knots.

Asaida Utajaniya says very directly: our practice is not to stop thinking.

Thoughts aren't the problem. The problem is our not seeing them. Thoughts will continue to come—there's nothing we can do about that. If we get the idea they shouldn't be happening, we're going to try to suppress that energy, and that's going to bottle it up. Eventually, it's going to explode. So we have to remain open to the arising of thoughts,

but the aim is to see them soon enough that we don't get on the train. That's where mindfulness plays this protective role—it's a guardian of our mind states. We don't take those trains because they eventually lead to more dukkha.

This is where that phrase Sally introduced last night comes in: "not now." We see an appealing thought coming and we say "not now." Joseph Goldstein has a very nice phrase: "Nothing is worth thinking about." Take that to heart.

Now, of course, that's in a certain context. If nothing was worth thinking about, we wouldn't have made it here for this retreat together—we had to think to get here. But in the context of formal meditation practice, it's not worth thinking. Your most brilliant creative urges? Not now. Great insights that you want to explore further with long dharma reflections? Not now. Any kind of thought that comes up, you can say "not now" for the purpose of developing mindfulness.

There is a place for reflection in dharma practice, for sure. There are times to reflect on the teachings and how they relate to our own experience. On retreat, I tend to do those reflections during informal times—meal times, going for a walk after a meal, lying down before I go to sleep. And I tend to do them briefly, making sure to keep the thought on a short leash. A few reflections, then come back. Check in with the breath, check in with the body.

Sometimes we think that if we think about a problem long enough, we'll solve it. Meditation can look like a really good place to think objectively about our problems in the hopes that we'll solve them. I like this quote from Einstein—I'm sure you've heard it: "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them."

Basically, conceptual thought doesn't solve emotional problems. Where emotional problems get solved is from a deeper level of stillness. Then we take a new look at them. We see things in a new way—we're seeing with new eyes, we have a new view. To get to that level of creativity, we need to let the mind still, let the conceptual mind drop into a deeper place of heart and mind and body that is more like our real home. From that kind of place, emotional problems can be seen in a new light and resolved or softened or let go. They don't get solved by thinking.

The next area that becomes difficult with mindfulness of breathing is the problem of judging ourselves—self-judgment in relation to the meditation. It's very easy to think as we settle down for a period of connecting with the breath, "I want to be with every breath this sitting. I'm going to try really hard. I'm not going to let one breath get away."

I used to notice I had an anxiety in meditation around missing a breath, because I thought it was bad to miss one breath. That was making me tight. Finally I understood: I can't get every breath. So missing some is okay. That helped me to relax.

When thoughts take us away, we feel badly—both that they take us away and how long we were gone.

Especially that harsh inner voice saying, "Oh, I'm such a crummy meditator. I was gone for so long." We judge ourselves for not living up to some imagined standard.

So I want to ask you: what's the right amount of time to be gone? Do you know? Is it in your control at all? This is what's so silly about this kind of judgment. We're assuming that we're failing or falling short, but falling short of what standard exactly? What standard? Has anybody ever told you what the right time to be away is? No, there's no answer to that.

And then we feel badly because we're only with a certain number of breaths in a row and we think we should have been with more. What's the right number of breaths in a row to be with? Has anybody ever told you that? No. But we judge ourselves for not measuring up to a standard that is entirely unarticulated. It's never been spoken. And yet we're convinced we're falling short. Oh, this is sad.

You all are here because you've received tremendous benefit from this meditation practice. You wouldn't have come and committed your six weeks or three months if you hadn't experienced huge benefits. What this means is the meditation is working for all of you. All of you are successful just the way you are right now. You're succeeding in the meditation.

This retreat is going to be like your other retreats—you're going to succeed. You're going to learn a lot and grow in the Dharma. There's no possibility for failure with people who are committed the way you are, who have received the benefits the way you have. So simply don't believe those judging thoughts. You're making a good effort.

Steve Armstrong has a beautiful saying: "Make your best effort and let that be enough." It's a very good guideline.

The last challenge that comes with the breath is boredom. Anyone ever experience boredom with their breath? Because each breath looks suspiciously like the last one, doesn't it? "I've already been here ten thousand times today. What am I doing here again?" This is really common.

A couple of things to understand about boredom: boredom is basically aversion to the neutral. It's really important to see this because the breath is neutral—which is what makes it a good object—but we will occasionally get averse to it precisely because it's not enchanting us with desire or terrifying us with threat. It's so right in the middle that we think, "Who cares?"

Just notice that boredom is aversion to the neutral, so it's in the realm of aversive reaction. But the other component inherent in boredom is not enough interest. The antidote is to find a way to become more interested in your breath, in your breathing. Sally suggested a couple of approaches this morning with noting and counting. Over the next couple of days, other teachers will add more techniques so that you can truly come to rely on what Dawn spoke about—that spirit of gentle perseverance.

Just keep coming back, moment after moment, sit after sit. Keep returning to the breath. It may not be the most exciting object, but your relationship to it will deepen. You will discover things of genuine interest in it. We'll provide specific techniques in the morning instructions to help with that.

But there is always so much going on with one breath. Just look a little more closely. This means looking for more subtlety and looking for more detail. This is part of a factor of investigation, which is one of the enlightenment factors here, that really will help support and encourage your meditation and bring in energy. We need to bring in an appreciation for the fact that we're breathing.

So these are some of the really beautiful qualities about being with mindfulness of breathing and also some of the obstacles. We will mostly hit those obstacles at some point in our practice if we go long enough.

I also want to mention one other thing. This is a quotation from Ajahn Suchito, who was the abbot of Chithurst Monastery in England for many years. He's an English bhikkhu with a good sense of humor. He says that anytime you commit to a technique, you are eventually going to run into cravings. That is really true with mindfulness of breathing. You will want it to be a certain way. Of course, craving is difficult. But we need to learn to work with it in the context of our meditation practice.

Just because there are these obstacles doesn't mean you should throw it out unless there is something in your constitution that makes it not a suitable object, not the best object for your focus, in which case there are other excellent objects. So please talk to your teacher if breathing is bringing up particular difficulties as a focus, and your teacher can help you find something that just works better. That's totally fine.

In the beginning, we have to do this mindfulness stuff with a lot of prompting. We have to keep bringing our attention back and encouraging ourselves: come back and connect with the present moment. Over a long time, this habit develops a lot of momentum of being in the present moment. There can be more and more of a sense of resting in the present moment and then opening to all our experience. We'll open up the instructions as we go over the next ten days and move in that direction.

Then you can have a sense of what Ajahn Sumedho calls an intuitive awareness. You trust in this awareness that is just able to know and respond to all the changing elements of our experience and still stay in balance and still stay peaceful. This will come.

Let me close with a quote from the Buddha: "Mindfulness of breathing is peaceful and sublime. It is an abiding in happiness that breaks up and calms unwholesome mental states whenever they arise."

This is where we're heading. At the end of the talks, we'd just like to sit in silence for a few moments and let the words settle.

Thank you all very much for your care around the COVID protocols. Hopefully in another twelve hours, we can relax them and watch each other smile. That would be sweet.

We have about half an hour now for walking. Then at the last sitting of the day at nine, Greg will lead chanting again. I really encourage you to come. It's a beautiful text that he's going to be teaching. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 75

Morning Instructions: Mindfulness of Sensations in the Body, with Special Attention to Bodily Pain

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong provides detailed instructions for developing mindfulness of bodily sensations (kāyagatāsati), with particular emphasis on working skillfully with pain. Drawing from the traditional Buddhist practice of kāyānupassanā (mindfulness of the body) as outlined in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Armstrong offers practical guidance for meditators on how to relate to painful sensations without aversion or fear.

The talk addresses the common Western tendency to immediately medicate or avoid pain, contrasting this with the Buddhist approach of mindful investigation. Armstrong explains how to distinguish between useful pain that can deepen meditation practice and potentially harmful sensations in vulnerable areas like knees and back. He introduces the principle of working with pain rather than agony, emphasizing that pain can actually serve as a powerful meditation object when met with proper mindfulness.

Key instructions include maintaining an anchor point (breath, posture, or sounds) while allowing attention to naturally move to predominant sensations, investigating the bare physical nature of sensations without conceptual overlay, and noting practices for maintaining present-moment awareness. Armstrong also discusses the importance of softening mental aversion to pain, recognizing how resistance creates additional suffering through bodily contraction. The talk concludes with practical guidance on eating meditation and the optional nature of devotional practices like bowing, making this accessible to practitioners from various backgrounds while maintaining traditional Buddhist wisdom.

This morning in meditation, we're going to continue our focus on sensations in the body, the approach introduced yesterday. I want to add some specific instructions on working with pain, because of all the kinds of sensations that visit us in meditation, this is one of the most regular guests. We need to have a special awareness not only for the sensations of pain, but just as importantly, how we're relating to it.

When a sensation of pain arises, most of our mainstream cultural backgrounds have not given us very many tools for relating with it. The typical advice is to rush to the medicine cabinet and grab some Advil, or it launches a whole wave of opioid addiction

that has led to so many deaths in this country. Doctors make a living trying to take care of people's physical pain. Some of it is appropriate and accurate response, but much of it stems from an overblown fear of feeling any pain in the body.

In meditation, especially as we're encouraged to sit still for up to an hour at a time, we have many opportunities for revising our relationship to pain. This is truly an opportunity because there's tremendous learning in this area. Just because something is unpleasant doesn't mean that it's dangerous. The first conditioned response to pain is often: "It's attacking me. It's going to harm me. It's going to cripple me."

There are some pains we need to be wary of in sitting meditation, particularly in two areas, especially if you're sitting on the floor—though you should look out for them in chairs too. One is knees and the other is back.

With knee pain, I've had friends who decided to sit through very intense knee pain as a demonstration of resolve, of adhitthana—the determination in sitting. They got up to find they had injured themselves, putting too much stress on a vulnerable joint by sitting through pain that was actually a warning signal saying, "Take care of me."

The other area that can be overlooked is back pain. For meditators, much of the postural work rests in the lower back. If we stress that too much, we can cause greater weakness and instability. In these two areas—knees and back—you don't want to push blindly through pain, though you can push a little bit.

The way to test this is: if you get up and walk out of the hall, does the knee pain or back pain go away within a few minutes of walking? If it does, you're okay. If it persists longer than a few minutes, that's a warning sign. You might want to shift your posture for the next sit, or for another day, perhaps moving to a chair. If you're sitting in a chair and getting knee pain, lying down meditation might be better. That's perfectly fine. We can talk later in the retreat about how to practice lying down meditation. There's a risk there too—you might fall asleep—but there are ways to work with that.

With pain that's intense in the knees and back, be careful. Check it out afterward with a little walking. In general, working with pain is such a fruitful area for exploration, but we have a guideline: it's useful to work with pain, but not so useful to work with agony. Whatever that borderline is for you—there's no objective standard here—if it's veering on agony, then it's fine to shift your posture. Simply get up, stand for a few minutes, then sit back down, or make an adjustment to the way you're sitting. Sometimes even leaning forward or rocking from side to side can alleviate some of the pain, and then you can settle back in and start fresh. This is totally acceptable.

There are types of retreats where you are not allowed to move at all. I was sitting a Zen sesshin once—just once—and in the middle of it, one of the attendants came up and gave me a firm whack on the shoulder with a stick because I had moved slightly. I hadn't even been aware of it, but he had keen eyes. We're not like that. Nobody's going to be coming around and whacking you.

So if you need to shift your posture a little bit for ease in the sitting, that's totally fine. But in the guided meditation, I want to give instructions on how to work with pain when it comes. I don't need to talk about it beforehand, but I'll give those instructions as we go in the sitting. But remember, if it feels like the pain is too much, you're fine to shift your posture. Try to do that shift slowly and mindfully. Be present. Notice the sensations in the body as you shift. But it's fine to shift.

So a guideline on when to shift: when the pain is overwhelming the mindfulness. When it's basically really hard to stay present because the pain is strong enough that it captures the attention and our reactivity is strong. I'll talk more about that. Okay, so with that as a prelude, pain is useful, agony not so much. Feel free to shift if it's getting near that kind of border.

Okay, so we can begin the formal meditation. Please take your posture, which is both upright and relaxed. And you're probably beginning to realize that this balance of the posture really refers to a balance in the mind. We want to find a balance in our mind that's alert, energized, and interested, and at the same time relaxed, tending to calm, not striving. So the posture of the body sets the tone for the mind's approach, for the mind's attitude.

So first, just settling into the experience of the body and sitting. Letting go of any obvious areas of holding in the forehead, the eyes, the jaw, the shoulders, the belly, the hands, and having the sense that your attention can pervade the whole body. Mind can be in contact with sensations throughout the body. No part is closed off to our attention.

Throughout the body, there will be areas that are showing the arising of sensations. There may be areas where no sensation is apparent. That's fine. Don't worry about that or make a problem. That's the way the body shows up for us.

Opening the attention to sounds to bring in this receptive and effortless quality. Notice that sounds can be heard in front, to the back, to the right, and to the left, and even above with the fans in a 360 degree way. Consciousness goes all around us.

And with that same open and receptive attention, coming back into the body, feeling the sensations connected with breathing. Notice how some sensations arise on breathing in and different sensations on breathing out. You can start to tune into the feeling of an in-breath, a feeling of an out-breath. Energetically, they're a little different.

If the sensations of breath are more apparent to you in one specific area, then it may be quite natural to let the attention settle there, in the belly, the nose or the chest. Some people like to feel the breath through the whole body, maintaining kind of a frame of attention that takes in the whole body and noticing the impact of breathing within that. Some people like to feel the trace of the breath in the body, the way it enters the nose and expands the lungs and then expands the belly and reverses on its way out. Following the whole breath, one whole breath is also fine.

So hopefully at this point in the retreat, each of you has found a focus that serves well for you as an anchor. Whether it's breath, body posture, or sounds. Something that you can reliably come back to again and again. That's your avenue of connection to the present moment. A suitable focus. It's not disturbing.

And essentially the way we'll be suggesting today that you practice is to stay with that anchor as long as nothing else predominant is presenting itself in the body. So you're staying with the anchor and then if something stronger comes along felt as a sensation in the body that naturally calls the attention, don't stay fixed to the anchor. Don't feel you have to hold on to the anchor. Let the attention naturally move to where it's being called. Or maybe there's pressure in the knee. Maybe there's the touch of the hands. Maybe there's slight tension in the shoulder. When the attention is drawn there, let it move.

And as it lands with the new sensation, let it really feel it. Don't hold back. Let the attention go right into the center of the new sensation and allow it to be felt completely. Get to know its bare physical nature.

It might be an area of tension or tightness. It might be a sense of vibration, pulsation, or tingling. It might be warm or cool. It could be expanding or contracting. It could be pressure. Get to know it in its bare physical nature.

The part of the body where it's occurring is not this bare physical nature—that's a concept. Head, knee, shoulder, hand—these are concepts. But as we get close to the reality of the sensation, its physical nature will express itself in one of these forms: pulsing, tingling, vibration, pressure, warmth, coolness, and so on. See if you can notice just that physical nature.

Once the attention is drawn to that sensation, it's helpful, after you've felt into it, to name it. If you're using the noting practice, see if you can find a note that expresses its characteristic—pulsing, tingling, vibration, and so forth.

You can let the attention stay with that sensation as long as it's still predominant, as long as it's drawing the attention. Sometimes that's just a few seconds. If the sensation is strong, it may last for the better part of a meditation period. Either way is fine.

But if the sensation subsides and stops being predominant, then let the attention return gently to your anchor—breath, posture, sounds. Be open to the next predominant sensation and let the attention easily move there, connecting with its physical nature. If you're using noting, name it simply, with one word if possible.

Again, with the noting practice, try to keep the note really light—like five to ten percent of the overall experience. Direct most of the attention to just the sensation itself, feeling the sensation. You don't need to do anything with it but simply notice it, feel it.

If the sensation that draws the attention has the nature of being painful, then this can present a new kind of challenge. We want to develop real skill in relating to these sensations.

First, don't be afraid when some pain shows up. It's not actually dangerous. It's not threatening, except in very rare circumstances. But sometimes there's a reluctance to go into it, a reluctance to feel it. So notice if that's there—there's a little shying away, a mild form of disliking. See if you can overcome that and let the attention go right into the painful sensation and really let it be felt.

Notice its bare physical nature. Is it in the form of pressure, an ache, a pinching, a stabbing, contraction, heat, or cold? Name it if that's helpful, if you're noting. As long as that pain remains predominant, see if you can keep the attention with it.

You'll discover in doing this that you don't actually have to fix the pain or make it go away. Pain can actually be a good focus in meditation because it naturally draws the mind, and so the attention can naturally rest in it.

But there are a couple of other things that happen when we're with pain. One of them is that because of a long-standing habit of avoidance, the mind might want to skitter away into thinking. You might notice that when painful sensations are felt, thoughts ramp up as an escape hatch. If that is happening, see if you can note the thinking and gently return the attention to be with the painful sensation. As far as possible, learn to stay steady in direct contact with pain.

The other thing you might notice is different flavors of aversion coming strongly into the mind. Often there's an unease in feeling pain, so it's very likely that there will be some disliking going on, which could be mild or strong. When the disliking of pain is strong, it turns into felt aversion—a force in the mind that will cause a contraction in the body. When the body is in contraction through aversion, that contraction itself may feed the pain, strengthen the pain.

So if you can, notice the presence of aversion as the mind's reaction, and see if you can soften the mind in its relationship to the sensation. If you can soften the mind, that will have a softening effect on the pain. The pain may still be there, but it may soften a little and it will be held with a better attitude, more acceptance.

Sometimes the response to pain may be anger, resentment, irritation—"This isn't supposed to be happening in my meditation." If that grows, it will also cause a contraction in the body. Pain is not an indication that you've done anything wrong. It happens to all of us in meditation. So don't make it a grounds for judging. It's just part of the body's natural expression. Again, try to soften the attitude, soften in relation to the pain.

If you've been with the pain for a while, you may notice that the mind is getting weary. It's tiring. It takes effort to be in touch with pain again and again. So if you find the mind getting tired, find a way to give it some ease, give it some space. That would mean changing the focus of your meditation. You might open your eyes. You might go to sounds for a while. You might go back to your anchor. Find something neutral or pleasant in your field of experience and let the mind have some relief from that ongoing contact with what's difficult.

If it feels comfortable to stay in that more neutral focus, do that. It's fine. If you feel re-energized, you can bring the attention back to the painful sensation. If you ever feel overwhelmed with the pain, feel free to adjust the posture. Stand up. Shift. Slowly and mindfully. Then the meditation won't be interrupted as you make that slight shift. And again, if no particular sensation is drawing the attention, then be content to rest with your anchor—with the body, with sounds, or with the breath.

In this way, the meditation can become a very natural sort of flow within the body, posture, breath, sounds, or sensations that draw us. It doesn't need forcing. You'll discover this easy flow of attention with the anchor and then being willing to go a little beyond into the specifics of sensations.

As you're exploring sensations throughout the body and connect with an individual sensation, you can add at this point a little bit of investigation. Ask: Is there anything solid and unchanging in that sensation? Or as you pay attention to it, can you see its own nature of change—whether it be vibrations, pulsation, or tingling quality? Even with pain, does it go up and down a little in intensity, moment to moment? Add just a little bit of interest in looking for the manifestation of change in sensations.

So in your meditation today—and it may serve you for the rest of the retreat for that matter—as we unfold the instructions, the anchor is a very helpful place to prefer. If nothing else strongly is drawing the attention, it's really nice to have a place you're comfortable to rest the attention. But we're not clinging to it. If something else comes up that naturally draws our attention, our interest, we easily let it move there, let the attention move, and we make the relationship of mindfulness with the new focus.

Today we're practicing in that way with sensations. As we open up, we'll practice with other focuses as well. So continue to take your anchor and the field of sensations in the body as your focus for today, appreciating the opportunity to work skillfully with pain, even if difficult.

I'd like to address a couple of questions. There were two questions focused around thought, so I thought I'd start with that. One was highlighting the alternation between craving for peace and calm and the aversion to the thinking that blocked that. Does this sound familiar? This is the meditator's basic dilemma—what we're dealing with moment after moment.

Thoughts come in a lot for most of us, especially at this stage in the retreat when we're still settling. Sometimes they go on and on and on. So how to relate? First, the desire for calm itself is a form of striving. It's a wholesome intention.

It's a wholesome aspiration. But if it shows up as craving—which means there's frustration when it's not coming—then it moves into an unwholesome area called striving. So just recognize that the craving itself in the moment for a particular experience is not helpful. This is the second noble truth. We're landing in the realm of suffering. The more we see this again and again—oh, if I want this particular experience, I'm going to suffer—wisdom will learn from that. And we will let go more and more of that craving while still maintaining the aspiration to move in that direction. They're really two different impulses.

So we want to do what's skillful to develop states like calm, but if we want it already, this is not the patience that Greg was talking about last night. All we can do is plant the seeds, and we don't have to yell at them. We just plant them through moments of mindfulness. That's the best we can do. And then we let nature take care of their growing. We know we're doing the right thing to head in the direction of calm.

It was like when I used to go on road trips with my parents as a kid. We'd drive for two days to get to my grandmother's house. And us kids would be sitting in the back seat asking our parents, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" That's craving. Our parents knew the route. They knew how to drive and they knew how long it was going to take. That's patience. And we don't know exactly how long it's going to take. It's more than two days. But the destination is known. The destination of peace, freedom, whatever you want to call it, is known. It'll take as long as it takes. And we don't have to keep asking, "Are we there yet?" So this is the patience part.

We're going to talk more about working with thoughts in a couple of days in detail. But for now, I just want to say one thing I found really helpful. If there's a kind of thought that's running over and over and over—repetitive thought patterns—drop out of the thinking part and ask yourself: is there an underlying emotion here? Often there's something driving the thinking, and that's on the emotional level. It may not even show up in the words of the thoughts, but it's a mood and a feeling in the body that's providing the engine power for the thinking to take off from. If you can move from the thinking and connect with that emotion, you're at the source. That's where mindfulness can be most powerful. So if you can, move from repetitive thinking into the underlying emotion. That would be helpful.

Another question came up around bowing, and I don't really think we've explained much about that yet, so I'll just take a couple of minutes. Bowing in this setting is entirely optional. You'll probably see that most of us do some form of bowing to the Buddha when we come in or before we sit down, or bowing at the end when we leave the hall. And that's an expression of what I would call our devotion or our reverence or our appreciation for the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. They all kind of go together for us.

If you have that feeling of reverence or devotion, then I encourage you to express it in some way that feels right for you. If you don't have that, there's no need. It's fine—just come in and sit down. You don't need to make any gesture toward the stage. This is just a wooden statue. And so we're not reverent to a wooden statue.

But I want to say something about one thing the Buddha said. He said it's difficult to dwell on the spiritual path without reverence or devotion to something. He said, "I looked around the world with my psychic vision, and I did not see anyone more skilled than myself in ethical conduct, meditation, or wisdom." And that's not an expression of arrogance. That's just, for him, a statement of fact. And yet he said, "I wanted to dwell with devotion and reverence."

So I chose to dwell in devotion to the Dhamma. That is always present for us as an aspect of devotion.

I myself find devotional practices very rewarding, inspiring, and helpful. They really touch my heart. My heart has been touched by the Dharma and the teachings for so many years, and there's a lot of gratitude there for me. So I love to express it through devotional chanting, through bowing, through other offerings. The chanting that Greg leads in the evening is one form of that. Bowing can be one form of that.

But it's not essential. It's only if it speaks to you, if it's something that you feel drawn to. When we encountered these teachings in Asia, there were many more devotional elements in the monasteries and meditation centers where we practiced that we haven't brought over. So if you think we're at all heavy on the devotional practices here, you haven't seen anything yet.

Little by little, I think those of us in this country are starting to appreciate a little more of those devotional energies. They're powerful. There's a whole branch, as you probably know, in yoga called bhakti—bhakti yoga, devotional yoga—where that is the main engine of spiritual development. So it's a wonderful thing if it draws you. It may not at this point, but if it does, it's a wonderful thing to express.

What are we devoted to when we bow to the Buddha? It's not the statue. It is a representation of the physical human being, the man who lived 2,500 years ago. But this question came up in his lifetime. There was somebody who was following him and thought, "Oh, he's so handsome, this Buddha fellow. He's so handsome, I really want to be devoted to that." The Buddha happened to read the person's mind and said, "If you mistake this body for an object of devotion, you're missing the point." And he said, "One who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha. One who sees the Buddha sees the Dhamma."

So it's really in devotion to the Dhamma that we bow. And one of the aspects of the Dhamma is our own capacity for awakening. The same capacity the Buddha realized fully, we also have. It's in each of us. It takes a while to appreciate that, but that capacity

for enlightenment is within each of us right now. That capacity is what I feel devoted to. That capacity is what the Buddha manifested so fully. So if that connects, it's a beautiful thing.

A few announcements: There will be a guided meditation this afternoon in the Brahma Viharas, and we're going to start with an introduction to loving-kindness meditation. This is optional. It's at the 3:30 sitting. Greg is going to lead it this afternoon, so you can come and get a dose from his metta heart—a lovely experience.

Each Tuesday afternoon at 3:30, in that sitting from 3:30 to 4:30, one of us will be here to lead a guided meditation. If you're staying for the three months, what usually happens is the other team will go through the other Brahma Viharas in the second half—compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. They'll give guidance in that. In these six weeks, we're going to give guidance in loving-kindness because it's the foundation in our tradition for the other three.

So please come, even if you're a member of the "I Hate Metta Club." It's fine. Come and check it out.

We have a little gap, as you may have noticed, in the practice meeting schedule. This morning, three of us—Greg, Sally, and I—are doing our practice meetings. But today, Carol, Vance, and Dawn are off, and they're going to resume their practice meetings tomorrow. So please check the board. We've indicated whether we're Tuesday or Wednesday. Today is Tuesday, if you're lost.

So if you're scheduled to be seen—meaning you had a meeting two days ago—you'll be assigned to either today or tomorrow. Please check the board for your specific day, and note that you'll also have a day off as part of this adjusted rhythm.

Monica will be offering sign-ups this afternoon. If you don't have a scheduled practice meeting, feel free to sign up to see her then. In general, please check the bulletin board regularly—our basic minimum is once a day. This is where we post any notes from teachers or messages from outside, as well as your practice meeting schedule. Staying current with these announcements helps everyone and will be much appreciated.

Since I have two minutes left, I want to talk about eating meditation.

The dining hall is one of the most challenging places to maintain mindfulness during the entire retreat, in my experience. You walk in and there's so much happening—everyone's gathered there, sometimes creating urgency around the food. "Is there going to be enough? Do I need to get to the front? Can I slip in ahead of that person?" Tension runs high in the dining room.

The preparation for eating meditation begins as you're walking toward the dining hall. Put your mindfulness on high alert—start practicing carefully now because you're going to encounter various feelings and reactions. There may be that urgency, the press of other people, judgments arising, or fear of being judged. When we all come together, moving and acting in proximity, we see each other more clearly, which can trigger both judgment and fear of judgment.

As you enter, resolve to be extra attentive. What's the whole experience of moving into the dining hall? One helpful suggestion—I think Joseph offered this—is to shift to seeing meditation, mindfulness of seeing. This creates a spacious frame around the entire experience.

Once you're in line getting your food, attention to arms and hands becomes particularly helpful. You could even use noting: reaching, lifting the serving spoon, moving, dishing, replacing, stepping, lifting, serving, moving. Make mental notes of every movement of hands and arms—this keeps you connected to the moment-by-moment unfolding.

Then carrying your dish: walking, stepping, stepping, stepping, sitting, placing the dish on the table. As you begin eating, continue with arms and hands: reaching, lifting, moving, placing in the mouth, chewing, chewing, tasting, tasting, swallowing, reaching, lifting.

I strongly encourage putting your fork down after filling your mouth, and don't reach for it again until you've swallowed. This introduces space into the experience, because eating tends toward compulsiveness—our survival depends on it, so naturally there's urgency. But you can slow it down to truly be present with each moment.

This approach can create a continuous period of mindfulness. I encourage you to explore careful attention to all the activities of eating. We used to distribute raisins at this point in the retreat and guide you through an eating exercise, but we've decided you're ready now—you don't need that level of guidance anymore. We're trusting you to apply these instructions.

Please experiment with this. See if it keeps you present and centered. And given how wonderful the meals have been so far, it's certainly something to look forward to.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

CHAPTER 76

Concentration

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *Guy Armstrong provides a comprehensive exploration of concentration (samādhi) as a foundational element in Buddhist meditation and the Noble Eightfold Path. He distinguishes samādhi from the English concept of concentration, explaining it as the unification of mind (cittassa ekaggatā) rather than mere exclusive focus. Drawing from his experience teaching three-month retreats, Armstrong traces the historical development of concentration practices, from the Buddha's early teachers who emphasized formless attainments to the discovery of the Middle Way that balances samatha (tranquility) and vipassanā (insight).*
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> *The talk examines how concentration develops through continuity of mindfulness, referencing the sequential relationship between right mindfulness and right concentration in the Eightfold Path. Armstrong discusses various approaches to developing samādhi, including single-pointed focus (as taught by Pa-Auk Sayādaw), momentary concentration (kaṇika samādhi) in the Mahasi tradition, and Ajahn Sumedho's understanding of ekaggatā as "the one point that includes everything." He explains the five jhānic factors (vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, ekaggatā) and offers practical guidance for deepening concentration through formal walking meditation, noting practice, and maintaining continuity throughout daily activities.*
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> *This dharma talk provides both theoretical understanding and practical instruction for developing the stability and unification of mind that supports insight and liberation, making it valuable for both beginning and experienced practitioners on intensive retreat.*

So tonight I'd like to talk more on this theme of concentration. We've alluded to it and mentioned it here and there. Vance talked a little about the difference between concentration and mindfulness in one of the questions, and I want to go into more detail because it's such an important factor in our overall meditation and in the Buddha's Eightfold Path and teachings.

Concentration has been around in human history for a long time. Go back as far as there is history and there have been priests and priestesses and shamans who have used the power of concentration to develop relationship with spirits or nature or altered states of consciousness to make healing possible. That's been going on as long as history has been around, as far as I can tell, in just about every culture on the face of the earth.

In the Buddha's lifetime, about 2,500 years ago, as he was leaving home and starting to practice—this is the phase we call the Bodhisattva—he set off from his home on his spiritual quest. Normally, when we talk about a bodhisattva in our tradition, we're referring to Siddhartha Gautama before he became the Buddha, when he was journeying toward awakening. In the Mahayana tradition, there are many bodhisattvas, and perhaps you all are bodhisattvas. In the lifetime of our Buddha, he was the bodhisattva in recorded history and our canon.

I should fill in some of this history because there are misconceptions going around. He was not the son of a king. He was not a prince. There were two kings in neighboring kingdoms, Magadha and Kosala, but his father was not among those kings. His father was like a chieftain, the head of a clan, the head of a village. The Bodhisattva grew up with wealth but was not destined to become a king because the kings already had sons. Nevertheless, he left his luxurious lifestyle and renounced worldly life to go off on his spiritual quest to find the end of suffering.

The first two teachers we have record of him studying with taught him deep states of concentration. These were formless attainments of nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception. While he was practicing in those states, he was beyond the reach of suffering. They were temporary states of freedom, but he always had to emerge from them. Once he returned to ordinary consciousness, he again faced the inevitability of dukkha—aging, illness, death, and eventual rebirth.

Even though he had developed strong states of concentration and was so accomplished that his teachers asked him to teach alongside them, this wasn't what he was seeking. Thank goodness the Bodhisattva moved on and discovered for himself a true path to liberation—what we could call perpetual liberation, unshakable deliverance of mind.

The Bodhisattva set aside those strong concentration practices as inadequate, continued on his journey, and found his way to the path of liberation that we have practiced and you have practiced today. This factor of concentration remains very central in the Buddha's teachings, so I want to talk about that centrality tonight—what concentration is, what it means, how it's developed, what obstructs it, and some of the deepening levels that are possible for us as practitioners.

In reference to this centrality of concentration in many spiritual traditions, you see cartoons referencing it frequently these days. I think this indicates something archetypal in the experience of concentration—all these cartoons about the guru on the mountaintop appearing everywhere. There's something archetypal they're tuning into.

One cartoon I particularly liked shows a seeker climbing up a cliff. On a plateau at the edge of the cliff, probably in the Himalayas, sits someone dressed in yogic garb—basically just a loincloth—a male sitting in lotus position. The seeker comes over the top of the hill and sits in front of the master, presumably. The caption reads: "If I knew the meaning of life, would I be sitting in this cave in my underpants?" This I take to be on the wisdom end of the cartoons.

But there's also something archetypal in the image of meditators. For me, the archetype of concentration is someone, male or female, sitting still, eyes closed, wrapped up in a shawl. This personifies something essential about concentration.

What I love about sitting on a long retreat, as you all are doing, is that if I come into the hall early in the morning or late at night when it's fairly empty, there will almost always be somebody sitting like that—sitting still, wrapped up in a shawl, embodying that archetype.

Several things emerge from this archetype and from observing you when you're sitting like that. One is the quality of stillness. The body is unmoving and there's a sense that attention is drawn inward. There's this drawing of attention into stillness and a wrapped-upness that the shawl symbolizes. But the wrapped-upness is also an inner quality. With that inner stillness comes a sense of being withdrawn from the world and being in touch with some dimension of mind that's more satisfying than normal worldly activities.

This is what the image of concentration represents for me, and it's something you all have been developing. We've been in retreat now for ten days.

For some of you, 10 days might be the longest period of retreat that you've done, or perhaps the longest you've done in a while, since we've essentially been closed for most of three years. So this is already a substantial period of retreat, and I'm definitely feeling in the meetings that I have the factor of concentration developing for people. This is happening for you already.

But I was really struck by something. Many of you have been to Spirit Rock. There are a lot of people here from California, and many of you have visited Spirit Rock. You know there's a beautiful meditation hall perched up on the hill where the retreats happen, and dormitories where people live when they're on retreat. But that is a relatively recent development—Spirit Rock was purchased about 10 years before that meditation hall went up. So for the first 10 years, the field where the hall is now and the residences was all open land.

If you look at the shape of it, as you're looking toward the meditation hall from the road going up, on the right-hand side is a curve that faces the hillside going up to your left, and it kind of makes a natural amphitheater. And then there's a creek that runs by the meditation hall down the middle.

In one of the early years that Spirit Rock was there, we invited Thich Nhat Hanh to come and teach. We set up a big platform on the right-hand side for him to sit on, and then the amphitheater—the natural amphitheater, the slope of the hillside—was filled with about a thousand meditators. He came to teach a daylong.

Of course, maybe the Buddha could speak to 500 people at once and they'd all get enlightened, but today we needed amplifiers. So we set up big speakers on towers. Thay was on a big platform and everybody could see him due to the shape of the amphitheater. He started speaking and teaching meditation, and as I was sitting in the crowd, what I felt happening was that he was casting a spell of samadhi over the whole crowd. He just emanated stillness, and as you tuned into him—both his words and his body language—he communicated that stillness to a thousand people. It was like this layer of samadhi just settled over the whole crowd. You could feel it; it was tangible.

And then in a break, he took everybody for a walking meditation to the other end of the property. There's still this photo at Spirit Rock of Thay leading this troop of about 500 meditators walking behind him, going up to the other end of the property and then walking back. It was really a beautiful day and a beautiful manifestation of the depth of meditation—something contagious about it.

Concentration comes up in so many of the Buddhist teachings. It is the last factor in the Eightfold Path, and the Eightfold Path is somewhat sequential. So in a way it is building to this factor of concentration. It follows mindfulness, so if you think of it as a sequential deepening, concentration comes after mindfulness in the sequence.

Today in the media, there is all sorts of emphasis on mindfulness. We've got a magazine now called *Mindfulness*—you've really made it when you've got a magazine. So all the attention and most of the research is on mindfulness. There are so many academic studies now on the psychological benefits of mindfulness, the health benefits, the social benefits, and so forth.

But in the galaxy of the Buddha's teachings, in the Eightfold Path, concentration is the brighter star. It's one step further than mindfulness along the path. So I would say, let's wait for the magazine called *Concentration*. But the thing is, that largely depends on people practicing mindfulness long enough to reach it, which takes some time. You've probably noticed that. It takes time for concentration to develop.

As I say, just in the last few days, I've been feeling in the practice meetings the evidence of its developing in many of you that I've spoken to. But this is something that takes time. When we look at our practice over many years, concentration will continue to deepen, and that also takes time. It takes time really to grow concentration into great strength.

One of the things that Vance talked about in answering the question on concentration and mindfulness was a translation of the word samadhi, which is the Pali that we translate as concentration. And Vance said it's not a very good translation. I agree with that.

It misses the nuances or brings in connotations that aren't accurate. In English, concentration refers to an exclusive focus of attention. It's like trying to do homework—don't distract me with that music. Although how many students actually say that? They're more likely to say, "Please turn up the music."

Samadhi does not carry that connotation of exclusive focus. It can, but it doesn't have to. Samadhi isn't about a focus of attention, either narrow or wide. Samadhi is about the quality of mind. Vance talked about a possible synonym being this factor of stability. That's a good way to think about concentration. When concentration arrives, the mind feels stable.

One of the definitions found in the discourses is the Pali term cittassa ekagata—unification of mind. Cittassa means "of the mind," and ekagata means "unification" or "oneness." This is a beautiful way to understand what concentration, what samadhi, really means: the mind becomes unified.

How is our mind usually in daily life? Often distracted—running off to past, running off to future, getting involved in analyzing, getting involved in remembrance. Not unified. But when the mind becomes unified, something really powerful happens.

Wordsworth wrote: "The world is too much with us. Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." That distractedness wastes our powers. When the mind's whole energy is brought back together in that unification, the mind's natural power is returned to it. We find that when the mind comes back together, it becomes strong, stable, steady, and penetrating. This is really what's involved in the term samadhi.

Much more than just a narrow exclusive focus, it's the mind coming back into itself. Now it is concentrated in a sense—the same way frozen orange juice is concentrated. Frozen orange juice means that all the non-essential stuff has been squeezed out, and what remains is quite powerful. It's concentrated. That's the way the mind becomes. When it gets concentrated, it's strong. And that's what we're developing.

One of the first things that happens with that stability of mind is we start to feel peace. This is a wonderful development. When I came upon this in my early months of retreat meditation, I thought, "How come nobody ever told me about this peace being possible?" I hadn't known it in my daily life. My mind was so busy. I was trained to think—I went through university, and probably many of you had a similar experience. Going through university, we're trained to think, and I thought that was a solution to all my problems. So I kept thinking. Only through meditation could I find that settledness that brought a degree of peace.

I'm sure some of you have noticed and reported that when the mind acquires this kind of stability, thoughts are not so problematic. Thoughts arise, but due to the stability, they just pass away. There's enough presence that we don't grab after them, and they don't actually disturb this inner peace that has been growing. We're not so buffeted by the changing weather within.

It's really important that we start to recognize the presence of concentration in our direct experience, because as we recognize it, we find our way back to it more easily. We think, "Okay, this is a possibility." We start to learn how it arose.

This is part of the fourth foundation that someone will talk about, not too long. This is the path to bringing into existence that factor of concentration, which is one of the seven factors of enlightenment.

So we start to see that one of the characteristics is its stability. And what's stable? Our present moment attention. Our attention is stable in the present moment when the mind becomes concentrated. And that means that we can be with a number of moments of experience in a row with mindfulness. That's one of the great benefits.

So we start to notice when it's present. The Buddha recommended this in the Third Foundation: "The practitioner understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind." So we start to recognize it and how it arose. And also we'll see how it passes. It's not permanent.

When I first came upon it, I had an idea that meditation was like a linear development. And now that I'd reached this state of concentration, it was going to last. And I thought, "Wow, my life will be fantastic when I go back with this state of concentration. Nothing's going to upset me. I'm going to get great jobs and find a great relationship, because I'm going to be such a stable guy."

It didn't last past the next sitting.

So concentration is impermanent. It will arise. It will pass away. Don't worry. Once you've learned the pathway to it, you can develop it again.

So let's talk about why we would like to develop samadhi. I've already talked about part of it. First, it makes us calm. And that's a wonderful thing in and of itself. There is, with peace, the feeling of wellbeing and ease. And I think this is what so many of us have looked for in meditation, whether in the secular version through mindfulness-based stress reduction, or in this intensive version here on retreat—we're looking for a degree of peace of mind.

And as it develops, it's very satisfying. I don't know how one can live a happy life truly without some access to this kind of peace of mind. For me, it's just become a foundation, kind of a baseline that things may come along and disturb, but the mind knows how to find its way back there. And so there's a real sense of protection and refuge in that discovery and a source of happiness.

The Dalai Lama says, "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." Samadhi, collectedness, is a big part of this.

So first it makes us calm, and that brings a significant measure of happiness. And second, it sets us free if we continue to develop it in the direction of insight.

When the mind is stirred up, it can't see very clearly. We're thrown all kinds of ways by the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. And we can't really see so clearly the way things are. As the mind settles, now we can start to see clearly. From that base of peace, we can see things more the way they are.

This is from a discourse of the Buddha: "The purpose and benefit of concentration is the knowledge and vision of things as they are." I'm going to read that again because it's really important: "The purpose and benefit of concentration is the knowledge and vision of things as they are."

That is, when the mind settles, we can see things truly. We can see things accurately. We can see things the way they are. And what's the purpose of seeing things as they are? That's what leads to liberation.

So the same discourse goes on to explain how this seeing leads to liberation. So concentration is a really key ingredient on the path to liberation—a key ingredient for insight.

It's a little bit like, suppose you're on a merry-go-round, right? You've hopped on one of those painted horses and you're going round and round and round.

It's a lot of fun. But a friend of yours walks up to the side of the merry-go-round and holds up a newspaper. You're spinning by and you think, well, it must be important because my friend is holding it up. What does it say? Can't read it.

Then the merry-go-round starts to slow down. You come to rest in front of your friend and you can read the headlines: "Everything changes. If you hold on, you suffer. Letting go is freeing." Oh, I got it.

So that's what collectedness lets us see. We can read those headlines about the way things are in this life.

How does concentration develop? Again, as a few people have said, one of the key things we're going to say again and again—in Vance's talk it was the second job of the yogi—is to build in continuity of mindfulness. It is from continuity of moments of mindfulness that concentration develops.

When I say continuity, I don't want you to think that it's absolutely continuous, like one string going on and on. Rather, it's like there's a moment here and then we get lost. Then there's a moment here and maybe we get lost. Then there's a moment here and we get lost. That's okay. Later there'll be a moment here and a moment here and a moment here and a moment here. Then we get lost. And then we go back to it and build it up here and build up here, build up here.

So continuity doesn't mean absolutely continuous. It just means we put it in more and more frequently.

Joseph Goldstein loves to teach and talk about the noting practice. One of his metrics for you to use to gauge how your noting practice is going is what he calls NPMs—how many notes per minute are coming through? A note is a moment of mindfulness. How many moments of mindfulness per minute are coming through?

This may be a little too quantitative for some of you. Being a math minor in college, I love it, but you don't have to. So this is one way to think about continuity. A more accurate term would be frequency—the frequency of moments of mindfulness.

This is why mindfulness precedes concentration in the Eightfold Path. We put in right effort to develop right mindfulness, and right mindfulness is what develops right concentration. By and large, we can't jump from right effort to right concentration. That's not within our power for most of us. Someone like Dipa Ma, yes. Someone like you and me, not yet. So we have to go through mindfulness to get to right concentration.

Say you've been concentrated for a period and it falls away. What often happens? Oh, I want it back. If we try directly for concentration—I want to reproduce that feeling of concentration—it leads to striving. Because we can't regenerate that concentration. We have to go through the process of mindfulness. And not mindfulness with forcing and over-efforting, but a calm, relaxed interest in the present moment. That will lead onward to concentration.

So basically, it's about doing one thing at a time and giving it your full attention. The unification of mind means give it your full attention in this moment.

A lot of you probably have heard of this Korean Zen master who used to teach, who founded a center in Providence, Rhode Island. His name was Seung Sahn. He was very famous in Korea, and when he came here, nobody knew him. He didn't have a community. He didn't have a sangha. He went to work repairing machines in a laundromat to support himself while he established Korean Zen meditation in this country.

But he was a fantastic teacher and drew lots of students and became quite famous. He came to IMS one year at the end of a three-month course. I've never heard so much laughter in the hall as when Sansanim was speaking. He was really an interesting, creative teacher.

One of his ways of encouraging practice was to tell people: when you sit, just sit. And when you eat, just eat. This is like doing one thing at a time. But he was living in community with some of his students, as they do in the Zen world. And one of his students said, "But Sansanim, I've seen you at breakfast and you're sitting and eating at the same time."

Not at a loss for words, he replied, "When you sit and eat, just sit and eat." But do it wholly, do it wholeheartedly.

So it develops from sustained moments of mindfulness. There's this fifth century meditation text from Sri Lanka called the Visuddhimagga. It is one of the key ancient texts in our lineage in the Theravadan tradition. It was compiled by a monk named Buddhaghosa, and it's still used today as a basis for teaching meditation.

In the Visuddhimagga, which means "path of purification," there are forty different meditations recommended for developing strong concentration. They include things like corpses, kasinas—which hardly any of us have heard of—they're like colored discs or just color or representations of the elements that one focuses attention on. There are recollections about death, about Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. And then the last two are ones that are much more common in our community today: mindfulness of breathing and the brahmaviharas.

Any of these can be used as focuses to develop strong samadhi. Usually these kinds of practices are lumped in a category called samatha practices. Samatha is usually translated as tranquility. Specific practices are offered many times to develop the quality of tranquility and at the same time develop concentration or samadhi.

Samatha practices are contrasted with the other side, which is vipassana—insight practices. That's really what we're engaged with here. So we have practices of samatha, practices for vipassana.

In the Buddha's teachings, he didn't distinguish between those two. He talked about the development both of tranquility and insight, but he didn't say, "Do this to develop tranquility and do this to develop insight." More of the flavor you get from the Buddhist teachings at the time is that when you practice mindfulness, you will develop both samatha and vipassana. You will develop both calm and insight. So that's the way we tend to hold it.

Yet it is true that some practices will emphasize one more strongly than another. So for people who really want to pursue the path of tranquility, we do recommend at times in retreat practices like mindfulness of breathing or practices of the brahmaviharas. This is something that sometimes goes on in these six-week or three-month retreats. People will choose to focus on a samatha practice for a period of time. It's something that you don't decide on the spur of the moment here. You really need to work it out with your teacher ahead of time, if that's something you want to do. And that means your teacher needs to know your overall practice by that point. So it's not something that we do a lot, but we occasionally do.

The Buddha said this very interesting thing: that samatha and vipassana have different purposes. Samatha is for the abandoning of lust—and that's in the broadest possible sense, all forms of desire. In other words, the development of strong tranquility itself can offset desire because there's so much contentment in the present moment. The mind is not pulled outside. Samatha is for the abandoning of lust. Vipassana is for the abandoning of ignorance.

Ignorance is the fundamental blindness that keeps us trapped in samsara. When we cut to the root of ignorance and truly abandon it, then the heart and mind are truly free. Heart and mind are truly free and it's possible then to abandon the cycles of samsara, samsaric existence.

And just speaking again in praise of samatha, there's this very beautiful passage—one of the most beautiful passages in the Pali Canon, which I want to come back to in a later talk—where the Buddha talks about more or less a glide path into Nibbana, into the realization of the unconditioned or enlightenment. And one of the first steps in the glide path is the stilling of all mental formations. And the Pali is sabba-sankhara-samatha. Sabba-sankhara-samatha. The last word means the stilling. It's samatha.

Saba means all. Sankara means mental formations. Samato—all mental formations go to stillness. This is the entryway into the realization of nibbana. Based on that understanding, I sometimes wonder if a better translation for samatha might be "stillness." It has a deeper ring than tranquility. You might like to think of that—stillness meditation. It's a very appealing notion for me.

We've talked about samadhi as the unification of mind. A synonym for this is ekagata, which is included as a definition at one point. But ekagata has often been translated in this tradition as "one-pointed." You can see the similarity—unification of mind or one-pointed. Which do you prefer? I'm drawn to "unification of mind," but the concept of one-pointed also works and applies. It implies one point of focus, like the breath.

When I was practicing with Pa-Auk Sayadaw, this is definitely what we were practicing. The one point of focus was right underneath the nose, around the upper lip. That was the only point I was meant to attend to all day long. This is a powerful practice, as a number of people here who have practiced it will testify. Very powerful and very useful. I learned a lot from Sayadaw.

But it's not the only way that concentration develops. This single focus is one approach that features prominently in our tradition, but concentration can also be developed on changing objects. This is what the Mahasi Sayadaw instructions do so brilliantly.

We've already started to expand, haven't we? We began with an anchor—focusing on sounds, body, or breath. That was, in a way, a form of one-pointedness. We were restricting the attention, honing in on something. But then we started to open up to body sensations, emotions, thoughts, sounds. We'll keep opening to more potential places to focus.

In the Mahasi system, as this opens up, we may start by connecting with the breath, but we allow the attention to go to anything else that draws it, becoming mindful there. We are still developing mindfulness moment after moment, but with different objects. This is what you've been doing already as you've moved through these instructions. The mindfulness has been developing and the concentration has been developing.

As long as there are still these moments of mindfulness, even if the objects are changing, the concentration will grow. This is based on a concept called khanika samadhi. Khanika means momentary. So there's a momentary focusing, a connection with each new object. Then that drops and moves to the next, with a focusing on the new one. The samadhi builds up moment by moment on changing objects.

This works very well in the Mahasi Sayadaw system and can take one to very deep levels of concentration. You'll see it as it unfolds for you.

And it's another very effective way to develop concentration that's not just single-pointed. But it unifies the mind by bringing fullness of attention moment after moment.

Now there's one other approach to *ekagata* that I want to share. Ajahn Sumedho, who is a wonderful teacher in the Thai forest lineage—the first Western disciple of Ajahn Chah—established Chithurst Monastery in England and Amaravati Monastery in England, from which there are now many branch monasteries and nunneries throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. He's a really wonderful monk and teacher.

Ajahn Sumedho likes to translate *ekagata* as "the one point that includes everything." So it's not like focusing on this tiny area underneath the nose. What's the one point that includes everything? How about the present moment?

This really opens up from a narrow focus to potentially a very wide focus. How wide is the present moment? How wide is your consciousness? It's wide. And that's all in the present moment. So I love this approach also to the significance of *ekagata*. If the mind is fully in the present moment, however wide the focus, concentration will develop.

So these are three different approaches to this unification of mind. We will all continue to develop this factor as we continue with the retreat. It's really unavoidable. As long as you keep developing the mindfulness, the concentration will grow from it.

There is a wide range of individual abilities with concentration, much more so than with mindfulness. If we ask all of you to be mindful for a moment, I really feel each of you will get there. In that moment, mindfulness will be there—no problem for anyone here. If we ask each of you to become strongly concentrated by tomorrow, the results will not be uniform.

Concentration is an innate strength for some people. It's a little bit like athletic ability. I tend to limit myself to one sport because otherwise I get too distracted. The sport that I really love is tennis, because I've played it for a long time and I love to watch people play it well.

In the world of tennis, I've really loved watching Roger Federer and Serena Williams play because they have this natural athletic ability that involves power, strength, agility, speed, and hand-eye coordination. They are so fun to watch. Unfortunately, they're both retiring—so sad. But they've been beautiful to watch. They have abilities that I could never, ever have reached because they came in with that athletic potential.

Concentration works a little bit like that. Some people come in with a real power for concentration. I was not one of those people.

I remember being on a staff retreat here—I think it was around 1979. The staff here at that time was Carol and I together. I think we were eleven people in total running this facility. Now the staff is about fifty, but we have the Forest Refuge also. I don't know if we actually worked harder or we just ended up not doing as well, but anyway.

There were eleven of us, and in the winter we would have a week's retreat together. The center would close down, and we'd be on retreat together. We were four or five days into the retreat, and we were sitting in this upper walking room—we closed it off to save heat. Sometime through a sitting, I opened my eyes for some reason and looked at one of my friends who was sitting next to me, another staff person whom I'd gotten to know over the past year.

She was sitting there in some other space—not making it up, but genuinely absorbed. And I had never gotten to that space before.

And I just thought, "She's got something I don't got." But I realized that wasn't in my blood or whatever. So I was happy for her, but I wasn't there.

You may have heard stories about Dipa Ma. She had that. On one of her first retreats—it might have been her very first retreat, I'm not sure—she went deep very quickly. She was walking up to the meditation hall, which was at the top of a number of stairs, and all of a sudden she couldn't take another step. She couldn't move forward. She didn't know why. But she just stood there, like five minutes, ten minutes. And then finally she looked down—a dog had gotten a hold of her ankle. And she hadn't felt it. She was so wrapped up in her inner experience, she didn't know that a dog had bit her ankle. Finally it let go and she could continue walking. But she was so absorbed.

There's a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jumnian who used to come and teach at Spirit Rock. In his early years, his father had been a monk at one point and taught him meditation when he was young. His father had taught him meditation. At one point, Ajahn Jumnian, who didn't really like to meditate, was carrying out his father's orders and went into a deep state of absorption. And the father said, "Okay, you can come back now." Didn't return. "Come back now." He just stayed meditating. His mother would come over: "Darling, it's time for dinner. Please come." Didn't budge.

This went on for a day. And he showed no signs of wanting to leave his meditative state. It was probably quite comfy in there. Finally, his mother used her sweetest maternal voice and pleaded with him: "Please, darling, come back. We are missing you so much." And then he came out.

But his father realized at that point he had a meditation prodigy on his hands. So as he grew up, he was trained in both Buddhist practices—both samatha and vipassana—and also in a shamanic tradition in his village. He learned healing arts through his shamanic training.

When he was teaching at Spirit Rock, he would sit up on the stage, and you wouldn't see this most of the time—he was wrapped up in his monk's robes. But in the middle of a teaching once at Spirit Rock, he had his translator point out a woman in the audience and say to her, "Is your stomach upset now?"—because he had psychic powers.

The woman said, "Well, yes." She was a little surprised. "Yes, as a matter of fact, it is."

Then he opened his robe, and underneath he had this big vest that was full of hundreds of pockets and pouches and zippers and clothespins and so on. In that, there were amulets and statues and medicines and pills and lotions and potions. He took out this little bottle of white fluid and said to the translator, "Have her drink this. That will help her stomach." So she did. I don't know what happened after that—she didn't report back to us. But he had very strong powers of concentration.

So some people have it in spades. Others of us don't. I did not. But because of that, I realized that it was something I needed to develop. So I worked really hard to develop concentration. What I did—this happened mostly in the nineties—

I would come here in the fall to sit six weeks, practicing Samatha with the Brahmaviharas. After doing this a number of times in a row, and then practicing with Pauk Sayadaw for about two and a half months, my concentration improved significantly. It's still not great, but it's much better than before.

I'm deeply grateful for the time I spent in those periods of Samatha practice because I believe it changed the cells in my body. The relaxation and ease I discovered, the inner peace that emerged through that practice, transformed my body on a cellular level. I still feel the benefits today.

What blocks Samatha development? I think it's fairly obvious—getting lost in thought. When we're no longer developing mindfulness moment after moment, we lose the accumulation of power that mindfulness provides. As we get lost in thought, we stop developing concentration. That movement has been short-circuited.

The main factor—and this is why we stress it—is the continuity of mindfulness throughout the day. This is what will develop concentration. Things that obstruct it include excessive thinking and thought trains. Not just a single thought, but entire thought trains will block this development.

The other major obstruction is, of course, the hindrances. When Monica spoke about the five hindrances we work with, I'm sure you received the clear message that these obstruct mindfulness until we learn how to work with them skillfully. We can actually develop mindfulness with the hindrances present if we observe the hindrance itself rather than the object it's pointing toward. But if we become captivated by the object it's pointing to, we lose the development of mindfulness. The hindrances also obstruct the deepening of concentration.

I want to say one more thing about the positive development of concentration, specifically in the direction of jhana. Most of you have probably heard of these states called jhanas—states of strong concentration, often described as absorptions, because the

mind tends to become collected within itself, folded inward. This was the territory the Buddha-to-be was exploring with his first teachers, though we begin at a much more accessible level than the states he described.

Jhana is the outcome of sustained concentration development for many people. It is possible and achievable in this day and age for some practitioners. The entry point involves examining what are called the five jhanic factors. There are four jhanas total, and the entry point is the first one, with each successive jhana becoming deeper.

The first jhana is composed of five factors of mind. We work toward it by developing what we can of these factors, which then influence the growth of the other factors. If you're interested in developing concentration to the level of jhana, these are the five factors to monitor. We're not teaching jhana in this retreat, but I want you to know about it. You might consider exploring it on a future retreat if it calls to you.

The five jhanic factors are—I'll say them in Pali, then explain: vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā.

Ekaggatā we've already discussed—unification of mind. Pīti means rapture; you've probably heard about it from the seven factors of enlightenment. Sukha means pleasure or happiness, which you may have encountered from various sources.

Tonight I want to focus on vitakka and vicāra. In early translations, these were rendered as "initial thought" and "sustained thought." But what would initial thought have to do with jhana? What would sustained thought have to do with jhana? Not very much. These translations miss the mark because vitakka and vicāra aren't about thinking at all.

The way this has been taught to me is that vitakka means aiming for or connecting with the object of meditation—aiming or connecting. Think about this in relation to the breath. When you sit down to become mindful of breathing, what do you do? You direct your attention to the sensation of breathing. That's vitakka.

Once you land there, vicāra comes into play.

Vichara means sustaining your attention with that experience for a little while. Half a breath is enough. So you connect with the breath and then you sustain there. Half a breath or a breath is enough. That's what gets the concentration engine going.

So these two factors, vitaka and vichara, you can apply over and over and over again in your mindfulness. And it's helpful to start tuning into them. You aim for something, connect, and then you sustain it or you rub it. You rub it with your attention. So you have the sense you get close to the breath through aiming, and then you rub it. You rub that sensation by sustaining.

By the rubbing, you get really a feeling for what's there. You see its individual characteristics—rough or smooth, long or short—and you also see its universal characteristics. It's impermanent. If you try to hold on, it's unsatisfactory. There's nobody there doing the breathing. Aiming and rubbing is something we can do again and again with any of our focuses.

If you're interested in increasing the development of concentration here, what can you do? What specific steps can you take? There are a number. This is going to be the last part of this talk. I'm just going to run through a bunch of things. I'm not going to comment on them much. You can work with them or ignore them as you like. But here are some tips.

First, you can take a primary focus on the breath. You can continue with that as a primary object. Even as other objects come in when the attention is drawn, by staying with the breath as a primary focus, you're going to be building that stability more and more.

If you use noting or counting with it, it will heighten that continuity of mindfulness. Counting is not just for beginners. When I was practicing mindfulness of breathing with Pauk Sayadaw, he instructed me to use counting, and I used it in virtually every sitting for two and a half months when I was practicing with him.

Even if you're not with the breath as a primary focus, the continuity of noting will be very helpful for developing many moments of mindfulness. When you're using noting regularly, you really know when you're with mindfulness and you really know when you're not because the notes have stopped. So the noting practice is very helpful for sustaining the continuity of mindfulness.

Then in all the activities of the day, see if you can stretch out the continuity of mindfulness—in eating, in walking around, moving around your room, taking a shower, doing your service meditation, whatever. See what can sustain the continuity of mindfulness there.

Fourth, use walking periods for formal walking. There will be more moments of mindfulness, I will wager, in a period of formal walking than in a period of walking the loop. I'm just guessing, but there probably will. So I don't know to what extent everyone

is engaging formal walking in your daily schedule. If you're not yet, I really encourage you to try a period morning or afternoon where you do a sitting, move immediately to a formal walking, and back into a sitting. Just that degree of continuity, if you haven't been doing it so far, will make a notable difference.

Fifth, slowing down in all your movements. So when you're moving around the building, between the meditation hall and your room, between your room and the dining room, when you've finished a meal and you're coming back into the meditation hall, walk slowly, move slowly. One meditation master said, "Yogis should act like old persons." Act like you're already a little decrepit, even if you're not. And that will slow you down and bring in more mindfulness.

Guarding the sense doors. Now, sometimes people think guarding the sense doors means we shut them off. You know, "I should just keep my eyes down and not look anywhere else. And the less sense contact I have, the better. And it's better if I don't see or hear or smell or taste. That'll keep me more protected."

That's not the meaning the Buddha put on guarding the sense doors. It's fine to be open. What guarding the sense doors means is being very careful when you do see or hear or smell or taste. Don't let the mind proliferate off that.

Don't get caught up in reactive formations—judging each other, desiring each other, craving more of that food. Watch what happens on the basis of sense contact closely. Guard it that way. It's not that you can't look. Don't pursue what comes out of it. Let it go.

And the last thing to say is: to the extent that you are able to, without pushing too hard or striving too hard, extend your hours of formal practice in a day. That will definitely help in the development of the momentum of concentration.

When I would sit in retreats here—the three-month course and six weeks and so on—I would take the schedule from 5 in the morning until 9:30 at night as my starting point. When it said sit, I sat. When it said walk, I walked. And then I would, as the retreat went on, add on to that. Normally I found that six hours of sleep a night was fine for me. Sometimes I would reduce it further. But six hours was kind of a good cruising level for me. The rest of the day I was just doing sitting and walking.

Now, this works well for some people and not for everybody. So if you are young and strong and healthy, or you are older and strong and healthy—and I mean both mentally and physically really well—then you're in a position to try this. If you are suffering from bodily limitations, from ill health, from aging joints, from sore knees, if there's a lot going on internally with emotions and there's past trauma or history of difficulty,

this might not be the right fit. But strong, healthy, interested, keen, eager—this can be really useful. Talk with your teacher to see what makes sense for you. But it can be really, really helpful.

I apologize for going on, but I have one more quote. So I'm going to close with this quotation from the Buddha: "When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, and steady, I directed it to the knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taints. I directly knew: Birth is destroyed. The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more coming to any state of being."

So let's just sit for a moment, please.

When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taints. I directly knew: birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more coming to any state of being.

So thank you for your attention. We have about twenty-five minutes for walking now, and then someone will cheer you up at the end of the day. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 77

Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong presents choiceless attention as the culmination of mindfulness training. This approach involves deliberately releasing attachment to any meditation anchor and allowing attention to move freely among whatever experiences arise - sounds, sensations, thoughts, emotions, or breath. Armstrong contrasts three relationships to meditation anchors: exclusive focus (samatha approach), preferred but non-exclusive focus, and choiceless attention where no preference exists.*
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> *The practice embodies the natural flow of awareness while maintaining moment-to-moment mindfulness through vitakka (initial attention) and vicāra (sustained attention). Armstrong explains how this develops kaṇika samādhi (momentary concentration) without the striving often associated with single-pointed concentration. He addresses balancing this open approach with anchor-based practice, comparing meditation effort to tuning a lute or holding a bird - finding the middle way between too tight and too loose.*
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> *The talk includes practical guidance on noting whatever draws attention, managing the insecurity that can arise in open awareness, and alternating between choiceless attention and anchor-based practice. Armstrong also discusses the jhānic factors of pīti (enjoyment/joy) and sukha (pleasure/contentment), emphasizing how deep concentration requires the brightness of mindfulness to remain balanced and insightful rather than dull.*

Good morning, everyone. Nice to see your faces.

We are basically two weeks into the retreat today, and we have almost finished the instructions. A lot of mornings from now on we'll be sitting in silence. There will be a couple more days of instructions, but we're almost done. I don't know if any of us ever imagined that instructions would go on for two whole weeks, but here they are. We've really tried to examine the whole scope of activities you may run into. We've stopped short of telling you how to trim your toenails, but I think everything else we've covered.

This morning, what we're going to do in the instructions is put it all together. This is a style of practice that we call choiceless attention.

So far we've been learning how to be mindful of any experience that arises as we're meditating, whether we're sitting or walking or standing or eating, lying down or whatever. Now we want to join all those together in what I see as the logical outcome of the Mahasi Sayadaw instructions. Basically, when he presented his instructions, he

would give all this on day one. I think it's good that it's been parceled out a little bit. We get a little more familiar with each area, but now we have the possibility of putting it all together.

Before I give the instructions, I want to give a little background on this approach. I want to start by talking about how we relate with our anchor. We've talked about using three possible anchors: breath, body posture, sounds. For purposes of simplicity, I'm just going to talk about breath. But when I say breath, if you're using body or sounds, you just substitute your anchor for that. Those are all fine.

I want to talk about three possible relationships to the anchor—let's say breath. One is we take an exclusive focus on it, meaning no matter what else is happening, the world could be exploding next door, atomic bombs could be going off outside or inside our system, we don't move our attention from our chosen object. This is the approach favored when you're doing samatha practice. When I went to practice with Pauk Sayadaw, he gave me the instruction to be with the breath at my upper lip all the time, all day long—sitting, walking, standing, eating, whatever. This was the only point I was allowed to be at. This is very powerful for developing the factor of concentration. It also is tough to try to ignore everything else or leave it in the background.

The second approach to breath is that the anchor, let's say the breath, is the preferred focus for mindfulness, but it's not exclusive. This is kind of the way I think we've been presenting it so far. We encourage you to make a good connection with your anchor, but if anything else comes up that is predominant and naturally draws the attention, easily let go of the anchor and connect with that new experience with mindfulness. All the other experiences can be an equally good focus for mindfulness. But if there's nothing strong going on, then we tend to prefer being with the breath. This is the second way—it's not exclusive, but there's a preference.

In the third approach, which is what we're going to do this morning, there's no preference for the anchor at all. You deliberately let go of the anchor or breath or whatever. That sometimes requires kind of a conscious unhooking because over time the anchor becomes quite a gravitational pull. You don't even have to make a firm intention, but you sit down and you're naturally drawn there. So in some cases it may mean a little bit of conscious unhooking from your anchor.

Then we let the attention be with whatever calls it. It can be anything—sounds, other sensations, thoughts, emotions, feeling tone, intention. All these things may draw the attention from time to time and we let it go there. When we unhook the attention from the anchor, we let the attention flow freely. This is why it's called choiceless attention.

Now, through years of habit, it's often been described as choiceless awareness. But I think that's a little misleading because actually what we're not choosing is where to direct the attention. So the appropriate term is choiceless attention.

I want to do a little exercise first. When we use attention in the way that the Buddha used it, it is the faculty of mind that highlights one—let's call it an object—one aspect of our experience from the whole field. As you know, as you've noticed, there are a lot of things going on in any given moment. There are a bunch of different sensations through the body. Sounds may be arising. There's a mood.

There may be thoughts going through. The breath is still coming and going. Feeling tone is there all over the place. So there are many places you could put your attention, many places you could spotlight.

In this exercise of choiceless attention, you don't direct it. You're not choosing where to place it.

I want to ask you to do a little exercise first. This can be with eyes open or with eyes closed. Sit quietly. Don't do anything. And start to notice where your attention goes. Can you sense that left to its own, it does skip around a little bit? It might be with this sensation or that sensation, or with seeing or with hearing or with a thought or with the mood or with an in-breath. Left to itself, the attention will move.

In this meditation, we're letting it do that. No attempt to control it. The challenge is letting mindfulness land where the attention lands. And this can be anywhere.

We've gotten familiar probably with our anchor, and the attention finds its way back there again and again. Now when we open up, we're going to let the attention go anywhere, and as you've just seen, it will. It'll go anywhere.

This requires a very fresh and alert presence in the moment. Anything can pop up as the focus of attention, and when it does, that's where we want to establish mindfulness—just for that moment of that experience.

This is where the terms vitakka and vicara come in handy. When the attention lands on a new object, take enough time with it to connect and sustain briefly so that you really feel into that experience. If there's a sensation, you connect to it and you feel into it enough to know what kind of sensation this is. Is this a pulsing or a tingling or a pressure or a heat or a coolness or an itch? Sustain just long enough that you could, if requested, put a label on it. It's this kind of sensation.

Once you've connected to that extent, you don't need to stay there any longer. But that connecting and sustaining—vitakka-vicara—is an important piece for establishing the mindfulness with changing objects.

One of the beautiful things about this practice is it's very natural. There's no forcing in it. It's really hard to build up striving when the attention is allowed to move so naturally. We're just sitting back. Whatever arises is fine. Whatever comes into our field of view is fine. There's no pursuing anything or trying to land for a long time on anything—just the moment-to-moment receiving of where the attention has landed.

This can lead to a lot of ease and relaxation. In contrast to a samatha practice where we're really making a strong effort to be with a single object, this is very open, very easy, very natural, very relaxed. Please take the time to appreciate that aspect of ease and openness in this meditation.

Are we abandoning the development of concentration? No, because the mindfulness can still be steady moment after moment. This is the sense of kanika samadhi, momentary concentration. As the mindfulness connects with each new arising, we are still putting together, moment after moment, these experiences of mindfulness. That's what strengthens concentration.

This approach can lead to very strong concentration, but it's not narrow, single-pointed, and doesn't have to involve any kind of striving. It's very natural, relaxed, easy.

This is one way to describe this practice in terms of where the attention goes—being there for where it lands. The other way is it answers the question: what's happening now?

If I just popped into your mind in meditation and asked, "What's happening now?" you'd know. Oh, there's an in-breath. Oh, there's hearing.

Oh, there's pressure. So really simple—what's happening now? And that's the focus for mindfulness.

So either way you like to think of it—letting the attention move and keeping up with it, or just moment after moment asking what's happening now—both approaches describe this practice.

Because we're open to such a wide range of experience and there's no anchor, it's fairly easy for the attention to drift off and get lost in thought. Getting lost in thought obviously interrupts the moments of mindfulness. So it can be helpful to keep the attention in the present moment by adding noting to where the attention is landing.

For instance, as I'm sitting in my experience right now, I might note: seeing, pressure, in-breath, metta, thinking. Just like every two or three seconds, make a note that reflects where the attention has landed—whatever degree of detail you can see in body sensations, thoughts, moods, and emotions. And then be ready for the next landing of attention.

If you ever get lost because there are a lot of things going on—sometimes you go, "Should I be with that one? Is this one calling? My breath? Which is predominant? My breath is coming up again. Am I getting lost with my breath?"—if that ever happens, just go back to a simple experience. For some of you, it could be the breath, it could be sounds, it could be the body posture. Pick one simple thing, be with that until the mind calms a little bit, and then try opening again to the wideness of everything.

Let's try the meditation. I'll give instructions as we go.

Again, feeling in your posture this balance of energy and relaxation, alertness and calm, feeling the body in sitting. And from that connection with the sitting base, just noticing how many things are going on in your experience—sensations throughout the body, sounds coming and going, experience of breathing, a certain mood or state of mind, thoughts passing through, all with feeling tone.

First, to bring in the sense of openness, let go of any connection to your anchor, if it's breath or body, and open to the experience of hearing. Let the attention become very wide, spacious, extending in front and in back, to left and to right, above. If there are no clear sounds, you can just be in touch with the vastness of the silence.

Now, with that same open and receptive attitude, we can begin the practice of choiceless attention. Start to notice where the attention is drawn. It will keep landing moment after moment. It may stay somewhere for a while naturally—that's fine. It may sometimes go back to your anchor because it's so familiar—that's fine. But we're not trying to place it anywhere. We're just trying to be fresh and alert in the moment to notice what's being highlighted by attention.

The main thing is just to notice what's being highlighted. And hopefully it's an experience you've become familiar with through all the earlier instructions. You know how to relate mindfully. And the key thing is the noticing.

If you like, you can pair the noticing with a soft mental note, just naming where the attention has landed: out-breath, tingling, pressure, thinking, hearing.

See how it feels to be with this wide open attention that's allowed to go anywhere, to any sense appearance, and still be present moment after moment.

Sometimes you might find that the attention moves so fast that it's noticing like three things in a second. If that happens, then you don't need to try to connect and sustain to each one. Just the noticing is enough, and you don't have to try to note them. Just let that noticing happen if the attention is moving quickly.

Sometimes in this openness, having let go of our anchor, we might feel a little insecure, a little exposed or unprotected in that wide open space. If that happens, notice that mind state. Oh, insecurity, anxiety. And see if you can hold that connection with the feeling for a bit. Notice it's another emotion. And then at some point, if it feels like enough or too much, just come back to the anchor. Settle again in the present. And if you feel inclined to open again, then try again. This way we can approach the openness of this technique little by little.

What's happening now? Where is the attention in this new moment?

Can there be mindfulness with it? Without fixing on anything, we allow the attention to be free again, to go where it will.

If you connected with this meditation, this can be a really skillful approach for you for a long time in practice—certainly for the rest of this retreat. Its benefits are the openness, the ease, the relaxation, the lack of pressure and striving. You're not looking for any particular result, just being with what's appearing.

In comparison to being with the anchor, this practice can more easily lead to spacing out, getting lost in thought, because there's not that firm commitment to one point, one place you keep coming back to again and again. So part of the learning, I think, for most of you at this stage in the retreat, is going to be how do you combine this wide open attention to changing objects—with all the benefits that it has—with what you've already learned of the benefits of being with your anchor, such as the breath.

What I suggest, and your teachers can help you refine this or find your own way with it, is to do some kind of alternation between the two. That second approach to the anchor that I mentioned this morning—where the attention's not exclusive, but it's preferred. There's a preferred connection to one simple experience: breath, body, sounds. But in that, if something is strong and draws the attention, whether it's an emotion or a sensation or a thought, easily go to that new thing. If nothing particularly is drawing the attention, just stay with the anchor and you'll get all the benefits of the deepening concentration from that.

And then from time to time, venture forth. Let's open up and see what's out there. It might be scary. It might be beautiful. But I'm going to open up and check it out and see if the continuity with the present moment can still occur in that wide open field of changing experience.

If you have developed both of these meditation approaches to a degree of skill, you'll always find a suitable home. Feeling a little tight, a little over-efforting? Open up. Just let it be natural and relaxed. Feeling a little drifty? Tensions getting lost in thought more easily? Ah, come back. Collect a little more around your anchor.

Learning how to combine the two, how to alternate, when it's right to bring in one, when it's right to bring in the other—that can be your direction for a long time in practice.

A couple of questions. One I'm going to ask myself because this has come up in conversations over the last couple of days: "I really liked your talk on concentration, but when I tried to put it into effect, I got into a lot of striving. What should I do?"

Well, you already know the answer to that, right, from Sayadaw U Pandita? Don't do that. So you already know. How do you not do that? That's kind of the question.

The first thing is, when I gave a list of different ways that you could strengthen samadhi during the retreat, it came at the end of the talk and I didn't really take the time to put a frame of reference around all those suggestions. So a couple of key things about if you want to play with those suggestions: don't do them all at once. Phase them in gradually, play with the ones that appeal to you, and try a little bit at a time.

The second thing is, if you've settled into a way of practice that seems harmonious for you—body's not too tight in terms of striving, mind is present a lot more than it was when you began two weeks ago—that's good. You've already got a good meditation developing. So these things can be regarded as fine tunings. You're just getting a tune-up on your engine to make it run a little more smoothly or efficiently. You don't have to change anything. But if you want to, play with them one by one. And do it with a balanced mind.

This is a really important instruction in any meditation retreat: try to keep your mind in balance. If you find it's getting out of balance with over-efforting, then find a way to back off a little bit. Bring the mind back into balance.

When we talk about the level of effort, Vance used this beautiful image of holding a bird in the hand. If you hold it too tightly, you'll crush it. If you don't hold it tightly enough, it will fly away. It's just like our attention.

Another image the Buddha used was tuning a lute. If you make the strings too tight, it's going to make a really loud, unpleasant sound. If you make the strings too loose, they're just going to flop around and you don't get a pleasing sound from it. So you want to find the place where the strings are just right. That means a balance of effort that's not too harsh and not too loose. In other words, somewhere in the middle.

How do you know where the middle is until you've gone to one end or the other? Or preferably both. So I regard it as not misfortune to be caught up in striving for a while because you'll learn, "Oh, that was too much. I tightened the strings too much, and I need to come back with more relaxation." And then you might find yourself having gone too far in relaxation. The mind's drifting off a lot. That's not a bad thing either. Because once you know where the ends of that spectrum are, you'll have better luck at finding the middle.

Now the other interesting thing is that the middle is not a fixed point. The middle keeps changing on us. When the mind is calm, it doesn't take much effort at all to be present. So you can go way to the end of relaxation. When the mind is turbulent, it takes more effort to be present to find that middle point. So play with it. Look at the mind being in balance as a really important factor as you tune.

And then on the question particularly with sleep, I recommend moderation in sleep. And this is already happening for a number of people. I've heard this in the interviews. People will say, "You know, nine-thirty comes along, I've just done the chanting, but I'm not really sleepy yet." So don't go to bed if you're not sleepy. If you still have energy, you could do another walk, come back for another sit, and in that way the hours extend naturally.

Other people have said, "Yeah, I'm pretty much doing the schedule, but then I wake up at four. And I feel alert." Oh, good time to get up. It's starting to happen naturally. So you don't have to press too much on sleep, but listen to what your body is telling you. If energy's there, you don't have to go to sleep. If you wake up early, energy's there, you can get up.

You could try, if you want to experiment and not make a big commitment, just sit up in bed. Sit up on your pillow. Lean against the wall or the headboard and see what it feels like. Then you might be encouraged. "Oh, I'm alert. I'll get dressed, go to the hall, meditate." Let it unfold in a natural way.

Another question: Can there be too much samadhi? How to know and how to balance it? The answer to that is no. There cannot be too much samadhi because Dipa Ma, she took it to levels that I haven't even dreamed of yet. If you read her life story, which

is a very inspiring biography—I think it's just called *Dipa Ma*—she was an amazing practitioner due to the depth of her concentration, which went beyond being bitten by a dog and not knowing it. That's not actually a real onward-leading aspect of meditation experience. But she developed her concentration so strongly that she explored all the jhanas and formless attainments, and on the basis of that was able to develop psychic powers that were documented by a university researcher in Calcutta. She's just a very inspiring yogi.

So there can't be too much samadhi, per se. But you do want to refine your attention to it. As you go into samadhi, you can get wrapped up. And it becomes a little bit dull because it can become so cozy. Like that image of the yogi wrapped up in a shawl. It can get very cozy in samadhi. And what happens is the light of mindfulness cannot be present.

So what you want is, if you're going into samadhi, you want to keep it balanced with the brightness of mindfulness. What's happening now? What's happening now? What's happening now? If you're going into the development of jhanas, then that doesn't apply. But right now, what we're all doing is vipassana. And so as the concentration deepens, you really want to keep this brightness of mindfulness happening moment after moment after moment.

Another question that came in the bowl, and I think this is an interesting one.

What's the difference in feeling with piti and sukha?

So I think I mentioned that there are five jhanic factors: vitakka, vicara, piti, sukha, ekaggata. What's the difference between these two middle ones?

Piti is more or less the first one to develop. These factors are somewhat sequential. Piti is the first one to develop. It's usually translated as rapture, but I don't think that's a very good translation because it just aims very high. This is like being swept away. It puts too high a bar on the quality. Bhikkhu Analayo translates it as joy, and I think that's a nicer translation. It's also maybe a little too high in my estimation. I like to think of it as enjoyment.

When you start finding that you're enjoying meditation in the moment, to me, that's the first sign of piti. "Oh, this being in the present is kind of nice. This opening to sounds is really spacious, relaxes me. That's kind of nice." That's the start of piti. As it builds, as the enjoyment builds, it does get into joy. It can get into bliss. It can get to very strong physical expressions. Sometimes so strong, the energy is uncomfortable. That's okay, because who we have waiting in the wings is sukha.

Sukha is usually translated as pleasure. That's a good translation. Vance was describing the tones of vedana. They're described as sukha, dukkha, or neither sukha nor dukkha. So pleasure is a good translation. And it comes with an emotional sweetness that I like to think of. Sukha sounds kind of like sucrose or sugar. When sukha arises, there's a pervasive sweetness in the body and the mind. So it has this warm flavor that brings a deep contentment. And then there's the feeling that, oh, it's so good. The mind can just settle into itself because it's so inviting and there's so much contentment. One teacher translates it as happy comfort of body and mind.

So piti, there's enjoyment. There can be some bodily energy, but with sukha, there's a real wave of sweetness. Very satisfying.

A couple of announcements. This morning there will be a guided loving-kindness this afternoon at 3:30, so the second in the sequence, and Sally will be leading that. Vance's schedule for practice meetings went up a little before the sit, so if you think you might be meeting with Vance today, please check that after this sit. There's plenty of time.

There's a long history in meditation centers of what we call the window wars, where different meditators have different views on whether windows should be open or closed. And there have been occasions when the temperature of coolness or heat actually brought yogis to blows in the meditation hall. Not here, not here, but elsewhere. So we don't want that to escalate.

At some points in the past, we've assigned a service meditation to a yogi to monitor the windows. But if you think striving for samadhi puts pressure on yourself, being responsible for the windows in this hall is like unimaginable responsibility. So we don't want to put that burden on any of you. It's really too much.

So we've consulted with the staff and we've made a decision. We're going to leave windows open in the front and at the back all day long, all night long. If the temperature dramatically changes, we may revise that, but a staff person will do it. And the rest of the windows will be closed. So we ask you all to take what's given with the window situation. Some of you will be too warm.

C'est la vie. Some of you will be too cold. C'est aussi la vie. So please accept what's offered in the way of windows and know that the staff will manage it. There is ventilation going on all the time. There's an air circulation system that IMS has installed that is always on and will be circulating air. It's not going to get stuffy. So windows are open.

Air will be moving through. And if the window setting is not suitable for you, you might want to move to a window that has been preordained to be open or closed and find your balance that way.

I hope you really have a wonderful day playing with this choiceless attention. It can be really opening. And if at first you feel a little lost, go back to your anchor and try again. It's really a wonderful long-term way to be in the present moment.

Have a choiceless day.

CHAPTER 78

Seven Factors of Enlightenment (Satta Bojjhaṅga)

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong presents the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅga) as the most important list of wholesome mental factors for meditators. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains how these factors—mindfulness (sati), investigation (dhammavicaya), energy (vīriya), rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā)—develop sequentially and support one another. The first three are arousing factors that bring up energy, while the last three are pacifying factors that calm and stabilize the mind. Armstrong emphasizes the need for balance between these qualities, illustrating with practical examples from his own practice and stories from great teachers like Dīpā Mā and Milarepa. He concludes with Ajahn Liem's remarkable account of complete awakening, demonstrating that such profound realization remains possible today. The talk offers both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for recognizing and cultivating these essential factors in daily meditation practice.

You may have noticed that we've been a little heavy in the beginning of the retreat on working with difficulties. Monica talked about the hindrances, Vance talked about greed and aversion, and Sally talked about delusion. You may think, oh, that's all there is. So far, you've probably been rescued by Greg's teachings on metta. Thank goodness there's been something uplifting, right? Otherwise, it's been maybe hard going.

But the retreat is starting to turn a corner where we're really going to be encouraging you to pay as much attention to wholesome factors as difficult factors. The talk this evening is the start of that.

Tonight I want to talk about the seven factors of enlightenment. The Buddha talked about a lot of lists of wholesome factors—there's the Eightfold Path and the Brahma Viharas and the five spiritual faculties. But in my opinion, the list of the seven factors is the most important one for meditators. Because as you take up the process of meditation as part of the Eightfold Path, these are the factors of mind that carry you, carry us to liberation. These are the things that we want to start keeping an eye on as our practice unfolds, as it develops.

In the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, the Buddha only mentioned two lists of mental factors. One was the hindrances and the other was the seven factors. So I think this points to its central role, as he saw it, in the unfolding of our Satipatthana practice. Sally said that one of the ways we understand our Dharma practice is that we begin to starve the hindrances. We don't feed them any longer. And in turn, we grow, we build up the factors of enlightenment. So at this stage in the retreat, it's really helpful to start tuning into the growth of these wholesome factors. How wholesome can it get?

Dipa Ma was teaching a three-month course here one time. She was one of the teachers on a three-month course. And it was really sweet to see her because every afternoon after lunch, she would be doing walking meditation in front of her house. She was staying in the house across the street. After lunch, about one o'clock, you could see her there doing her walking meditation. Someone as developed as Dipa Ma still doing her walking meditation after lunch.

So one of the yogis at one point in the retreat asked her—they were trying to figure out, what's it like to be you? But they had to ask it in a more refined way. So they said, what's in your mind? And Dipa Ma replied, she only had three things in her mind: peace, concentration, and metta. That's a nice mind. That's a nice place to hang out. That was her mind. And she was still doing walking meditation. She was still developing the path.

This is from the Buddha: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future, all will do so by surmounting the five hindrances that weaken wisdom, by firmly establishing their minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by correctly developing the seven factors of enlightenment."

So here it is in a nutshell. We learn to work with the hindrances, we apply the four foundations, and we build up the factors of enlightenment. This is our path in a brief description.

So what are the seven factors? I want to go through them briefly and then I'll talk a little more about the group. They are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

When you look at this list, you see it starts with mindfulness, and that's the factor that keeps them all in balance. This is a little bit what Monica talked about in her talk, how mindfulness herds the other factors, keeps them in order.

The next three factors—investigation, energy, and rapture—bring up energy. So they're called arousing factors. And then the last three factors are called the pacifying factors. Calm, concentration, and equanimity settle that energy down and bring in basically the factors of tranquility.

So this is the broad sweep of the seven factors, and the Buddha said that they are sequential. One leads to the next, leads to the next, leads to the next. So we'll talk about how that works. They're sequential and they also support one another. So it's not like you have to get all the way through mindfulness and only then does a little investigation come up, and only then a little energy comes.

They all grow up together.

I don't want this talk to sound too idealistic because I think all of you have been experiencing these factors already, but sometimes briefly and sometimes not noticed. But it's really helpful to begin to notice them because when we understand how they feel, we also understand how they come into being and how they grow to maturity. This is part of what's pointed to in the fourth foundation. We are to understand their arising and their growth. So by putting more attention on these wholesome factors, we'll be fulfilling that fourth foundation, and it really helps them to grow.

"Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too, when a meditator develops and cultivates the seven factors of enlightenment, that person slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbana." So in other words, these factors are leading us to liberation. Whether you want to go there or not, that's where these are going. And I hope you like that destination because that's where it's headed.

So you can understand this in two ways. One is that these factors lead in that direction, and that's why they're called factors of enlightenment. The other way to understand it is that these factors describe a mind that is so balanced and so developed that it is next door to nibbana. So in a way, we can't make the opening to nibbana happen. The opening to the unconditioned happens by some kind of grace. All we can do is cultivate the factors that bring the mind close to that. And that's what the seven factors of enlightenment do. They bring the mind as close as can be developed to nibbana, and in a way the factors converge on nibbana. And at some point they get close enough that the mind tips over and opens into the unconditioned. So this is really our work, to bring the mind as close as we can to the realization of the unconditioned.

One small note: generally it's understood the first glimpse of the unconditioned is called entering the stream. One understands then the full possibility of freedom and one has entered the stream of the Dhamma. So this is called the moment of stream entry, this realization. This is where the factors of enlightenment are going.

There's a little bit of controversy around the word. The Pali word is bodhi and it can be translated as either enlightenment or awakening. So you've probably heard both. Different translators will use one or the other. It's interesting, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Analayo have recently had some dialogue through articles about which is more appropriate. Bhikkhu Bodhi favors enlightenment and Bhikkhu Analayo favors awakening. So you can take your pick.

I'm going to use enlightenment because it's a word that has fallen out of favor in Dhamma circles these days. Awakening seems more generic and more broadly appealing. Enlightenment sounds a little elitist, whereas awakening seems—oh, anybody can do that. Anybody can wake up. But it leads to titles like I saw for a workshop at one point at a different Dharma center: "Awakening Through Journaling." We're not encouraging that here. We don't think journaling leads into the seven factors of enlightenment by and large. So the word enlightenment means something special in the whole Buddhist tradition. So that's the word I'm using tonight. You can translate it in your own way.

So these factors are sequential. Mindfulness kicks it off, keeps them in balance. The first three bring up energy, the second three calm it down. And it really points to, we need to develop them in such a way that the arousing factors and the calming factors are balanced. That's what brings the right mind of meditation. And we've been pointing to this many times with our emphasis on body posture: have a body posture that is alert and energized, but at the same time relaxed. So this balance of factors is really needed. I'll talk at the end about what happens if it gets out of balance one way or another.

The first factor is mindfulness. We've talked a lot about mindfulness. Dawn just gave a talk on the First Foundation. Monica gave a talk on sati and how it brings factors together. I gave a talk on mindfulness of breathing. So I don't need to say a lot more about mindfulness.

You've been doing it. That's the most important thing. You've all been doing it.

I just want to emphasize this word in the Satipatthana Sutta: "breathing in long, one understands, one breathes in long." "Feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a pleasant feeling." This word "understands"—pajanati—is very closely related to sampajanya, which is clear comprehension. And this is the opening of wisdom.

So mindfulness has within it the movement to wisdom. One of the things that happens when mindfulness starts to relate to our experience is it gets interested. There's a wisdom aspect that's getting interested in what's going on, that's getting curious within mindfulness. And that's what leads directly to the next factor, which is investigation.

The Pali is vichaya dhamma. Vichaya means investigation. Dhamma, in this case, can be interpreted three different ways. It's kind of interesting. The Buddha explained it two different ways. The commentaries explained it another.

The first is vichaya dhamma as investigation of the dhamma—the teachings, the truth, nature, the way things are. That's the broadest sense of investigation.

Then the Buddha also described vichaya dhamma as investigation of states—meaning states of mind. What's wholesome and leads to freedom, what's unwholesome and leads to suffering. This is an important discernment to make to support our practice in the right direction.

The third meaning of dhamma, probably from the commentaries, is dhamma as phenomena. Dhamma is also used meaning all the phenomena of our experience. So investigating our experience.

It can be understood in our tradition in all these ways. They all have relevance. They are all useful. They're all useful ways to explore.

So how do we investigate? In meditation practice, investigation is mainly nonverbal. We could get really conceptual about any part of our experience. We could get conceptual about mindfulness, about the six senses, their objects, the sense bases, all of that. But this is not really the purpose of investigation. It's to feel our direct experience more closely.

So investigation means let our attention come closer to the object. And this is kind of illustrated well by vitaka vichara. We aim and we rub toward anything—toward the breath, toward sensations, to sounds, thoughts, emotions, moods, feeling tone, intention, sights, tastes, smells, anything that's part of our experience. We bring our attention close to it and then we rub to get the feeling of it. That's the investigation.

In that rubbing, we start to notice, oh, is this permanent or impermanent? Is this personal or universal? So as we rub, we're picking up these universal characteristics that lead to insight.

Investigation especially among the factors is a wisdom function. Mindfulness has it within it. Investigation is strongly a wisdom function. It really looks to understand the nature of things, the dhamma of things.

Sometimes people ask, how do I develop more wisdom in meditation? One answer is, develop this factor of investigation.

Like everything else, it has to be done with balance. One can over-investigate. And that means looking too much for something more. It's like we can get into trying to milk our practice and conceptualize around it. And that stirs the mind up more.

So this investigation described as wise attention in Pali is yoniso manasikara. Manasikara means attention. Yoniso is often translated as wise or appropriate or getting to the root.

The origin of this term reveals something profound: yoni means womb. So yoniso can be understood as a womb-like attention. This means we encompass the phenomena, we nourish it, we nurture it. There's a quality of warmth in this kind of investigation that we bring to any aspect of our experience.

This is a way of approaching nature through our experience. We want to be womb-like in our surrounding of it with attention.

There are various ways to investigate. Dawn spoke about in a guided meditation the other morning looking for the beginning, middle, and end of an in-breath—beginning, middle, end of an out-breath. Many of you played with that and found it really helped with continuity. Bringing an interest, bringing a curiosity can help us stay connected to what we're paying attention to.

Sayadaw U Pandita used to give meditators an instruction like this. He'd say, "All right, next time you come for an interview, I want you to report three sensations that you notice with an in-breath. Three distinct sensations. And just saying 'in' is not a sensation. It's things like pulsing or tingling or pressure or relaxation, expansion, contraction, warmth, coolness. Can you pick out three separate sensations that happen when you take an in-breath? And then can you pick out three separate sensations that happen on an out-breath? Come report that to me next time."

If you were reporting to U Pandita, that would pick up your interest. So people looked. I looked because my teachers asked it of me. And so you would go back to U Pandita and you'd report these three. And then he'd say, "Okay, next time bring me one more that's different. Keep investigating. Don't rest on your laurels. Keep looking."

This is fun if you want to play with it. We're not going to ask you for it, so you can be relaxed. But see if it brings in that interest in investigation that is the opening of wisdom. You notice when you're interested in something—like are there three sensations—the attention is there really naturally.

I was riding a bike the other day down Pleasant Street, and this deer walked across the road in front of me and then reached the other side of the road and then made this beautiful leap into the woods on the other side of the road. As soon as it came, my attention was just there with it, not forced, not straining. It was just a delight to see. This is investigation.

When we investigate, it takes some energy. That picks up and leads into the third factor, which is energy. The Pali here is viriya. This is an interesting word. We translate it as energy. It could also be effort, energetic effort, strength, courage, ardor, enthusiasm. All these things point to the mind state of viriya.

Viriya is this kind of effort and energy that's directed to the path. So just having physical energy in the body—that alone is not viriya. Viriya needs to be directed to developing the meditation, developing wholesome qualities of mind.

The root of it is the Pali word vira, which means hero. So you can think of this as a heroic kind of effort. Do you ever get the feeling in these two-plus weeks that you've been making a heroic effort? You have. You have. That's this factor of viriya. I think every one of you has been making a heroic effort.

And it has the same root as the English word virile—vira, virile, the same root word. The Buddha said, "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the work of cultivating wholesome states." So this is the quality of virya. We're willing to put in the work to develop the path even when it's hard.

Of course, this comes out of our motivation for practice. If we don't have motivation, we won't put in this kind of energy and effort. When I think about this quality, I think about the training that world-class athletes go through. It is arduous. You look at these figure skaters, gymnasts, somebody like Simone Biles—I think she's probably been training since she was like five years old, maybe younger. Hours and hours and hours of training go into the kind of agility and balance and strength that she has.

In the field of tennis, which is my interest, Andre Agassi used to train so hard in Las Vegas with his physio trainer that he would be running up hills until he threw up from fatigue. That's what the trainer demanded from him. And then I also sometimes follow pro bike riding. The Tour de France is awesome. A cyclist was quoted as saying, "Every

time I race, I know I'll have eight hours nonstop pain." And the training is the same. They train on hills. They train in the Alps. They train in the Pyrenees. Eight hours of nonstop pain. This is just for fame and fortune. You know? We're after something a lot bigger than that.

So it's beautiful to see you all making this kind of heroic effort. One three-month course, I was practicing—Joseph and Sharon were my teachers, and they were into a very virya kind of phase. They kept encouraging us to really shrink, shrink, shrink our hours of sleep. That was really hard. But we'd come into an interview—this is a phase they were in, they're not doing it now, we're not doing it now. Every time we walked into the interview, we'd have to report: How many hours did you sit, how many hours did you walk, and how many hours did you sleep? There was no hiding. I really worked hard to bring my sleep down and to try and come up to the standard that they were looking for. That was very useful, but it was a lot of work.

Virya expresses itself in this kind of heroic endeavor. It also expresses itself in perseverance. There was a Tibetan yogi, one of the most famous yogis in the whole Tibetan history named Milarepa, who was a fantastic yogi in around the 11th century. He spent a lot of his time meditating on his own in remote mountain solitudes. But he also developed some very strong students who would come and practice near him and get instruction from him. He had two primary students that I know of, Gampopa and Rechungpa.

At one point he'd been training Gampopa for a number of years in this remote retreat location, but he now thought it was time for Gampopa to go off on his own. So he was sending him off. Gampopa didn't really want to go because he had a great love for his teacher who was very inspiring to him. So they bid farewell. Gampopa was sad, but he was walking down the trail, leaving the retreat.

He got partway down the trail and Milarepa said, "Wait, wait, come back. I have one more teaching." So Gampopa walked back up to Milarepa. One of the things about Milarepa that was so outstanding is that he would dress through the Tibetan winters in just a pair of white robes, white cotton robes. He would practice through the winter in those robes because he had developed this practice called tummo or inner heat.

So Milarepa called Gampopa to him and said, "I have one more instruction for you."

And Gampopa said, "Yes, venerable sir, what is it?"

Milarepa turned around, flipped up his cotton robe, and showed him his backside. And what he said was, "There is nothing more profound than meditating on this pith instruction: the qualities in my mind stream have arisen through my having meditated so persistently that my buttocks have become as hard as a camel's hoof."

So this was the last teaching—develop buttocks that are as hard as a camel's hoof. He said, "My son, you must also give rise to such heartfelt perseverance and meditate." This is his last instruction to Gampopa, who went off to become a very famous yogi and teacher in his own right. So my noble children, please remember this instruction.

This quality of viriya can also express itself simply as perseverance. You don't have to stay up all night to manifest viriya. Sometimes it's just perseverance.

This is from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort which is simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this, you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

When there is this energy and the mind gets connected to our experience, eventually that brings about a kind of delight in what we're seeing. When the delight starts to come into the meditation, this is the quality we call piti. Usually translated as rapture, but to me rapture aims really high. Rapture to me is an experience of profound bliss, mind and body. And rapture doesn't start off like that. Simply noticing that you're enjoying the meditation, you're delighting in the meditation, is the sign of piti.

I'll call it rapture because it's the common translation—I don't want you to get confused when you go to read other teachings. But it can also be called joy. It can be called rapt attention. It can be called joyful interest. But there's that sense that in connecting to the present moment, some enjoyment of that starts to come in. This is piti.

You find out the meditation is kind of where you want to be. You're not so much forcing your mind back into the moment, but the mind starts to enjoy being in the moment—partly because we're stepping out of the disturbing excursions into past and future, partly because there is this innate pleasure in being here and being present. There's something satisfying about it.

One teacher in Australia—I don't know if anyone has mentioned this, I think someone may have—Ajahn Brahm, talks about discovering the beautiful breath in meditation. If you can start to see the breath or your anchor as beautiful, it really helps keep

the attention with it. So you can look for that. We can learn to perceive things as beautiful. Even if they start off neutral, we can start to see the beauty in something like the breath.

So rapture is a mental factor. All the seven factors are mental factors, but it's often accompanied by physical signs and accompanied by rising energy in the body. The energy can take different forms. The commentaries explain it as minor rapture, where there are kind of goose bumps all over. As momentary rapture, sometimes there's just a flash of energy like lightning that goes through the body. As showering, and this is where it feels like waves of energy are passing through the body, but they do pass through. There's uplifting, and one can feel almost as though one could float up off one's chair or cushion. This is actually the energy that when strengthened leads to yogis being able to levitate. This is not an illusion. Yogis who develop this quality actually have the ability to levitate. And then all-pervading, where the energy is throughout the body.

Mostly rapture is a pleasant experience. But sometimes the energy can become so strong that it's uncomfortable. If that happens, one may be tempted to back off from developing the factors to get more ease. But the general advice is to continue because as the factors continue to develop, this factor of sukha comes in, which translated would be pleasure. But it's a kind of sweetness of mind and body that brings a real mellowing to the experience of the energy of rapture. So we work through the little bit of discomfort, and as the meditation goes on, then there's a natural calming down.

But because the rapture is essentially pleasant, it naturally leads into the next factor in the sequence: tranquility.

Tranquility takes the energy of rapture and, once it's been joined with sukha, begins to calm it all down. The Pali term is *passaddhi*, which can be translated as tranquility, ease, serenity, calm, or relaxation. This is the first of the factors that begins to bring in peace, pacifying our experience of mind and body.

Because the rapture has had a pleasurable quality, and then it's joined with peace, it brings about a sense of inner contentment. The mind feels that it can settle in itself from that contentment.

Don't necessarily look for this contentment to be a full-blown experience that lasts a whole hour with strong intensity. In the beginning, this may be quite fleeting. But you notice it by the factor of calm—it feels okay. This okayness is the start of a contentment

that can really deepen. So you look for it in its less intense form at first, but it's a real form, a real appearance. These moments of calm, moments of tranquility—notice that there's something satisfying in that, even if it doesn't last long.

From the Buddha: "For one whose mind is uplifted by rapture, the body becomes tranquil and the mind becomes tranquil. On that occasion, the enlightenment factor of tranquility is aroused by the practitioner."

I really appreciate this expression of the body becoming tranquil. We don't often hear much about this in meditation, but the fact is that this tranquilizing of the body, this calming of the body, is a really important movement. Most of us, when we come into meditation—I was certainly this way—have had so many chaotic experiences in our lives that our bodies have accumulated a lot of stored tension. So when I sat down, the body wasn't tranquil. When I stilled it, there was all this wild energy running around that wanted to be released. But what it really wanted was to calm down.

In time, the body energy does calm down. When the body becomes tranquil and the mind becomes tranquil, that really opens the door for this contentment to come through. Then there unfolds, as it grows, a new ease in meditation. We can settle into the moment without so much struggle. We're not looking to get rid of things. We're not looking to develop anything special. Just the way it is becomes okay.

In this calming, thoughts also begin to settle. We're not being so assaulted by the movement of thoughts and emotions. When we first discover this experience of calm in meditation, it's often completely new. I had not known this in my outer life. This was something completely foreign to me when I first encountered it.

One meditator told me that when they first came upon this and tried to note it, all they could do was say, "Calm? Is this it? Is this what they're talking about?" Because it was a completely new kind of experience. So it takes time to get to know it.

In my meditative journey, it was like I'd crossed a stormy ocean with big thundering waves and pirates on the open sea and giant squid attacks coming at us. Then suddenly we landed in this broad harbor that felt calm and peaceful and safe.

There's this lovely poem by Emily Dickinson that points to this. I'm going to read it twice because the wording is a little archaic: "Futile the winds to a heart in port, done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden."

This "rowing in Eden" is the summation line. Let me read it again. If you're not a native English speaker, the word "futile" is an odd word not used very much—it means useless. She's saying the winds are useless when the heart is in port. And the word "chart" here means the map that a captain or pilot would navigate by with their ship.

"Futile the winds to a heart in port, done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden."

That's what it feels like—we've landed in Eden in our meditation.

So the mind discovers that its own peace and ease are quite natural things. Ajahn Amaro has this meditation instruction that really emphasizes this. He says, "Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body, and then pay attention to whatever disturbs that." And we see that if we aren't disturbing ourselves with our wandering thoughts and all the emotions they stir up, if we stop disturbing ourselves, that natural peace and ease is always accessible. It's always there. We can learn to rest in it. We can find a reliable path to that and learn to rest there.

When we discover that kind of contentment in meditation, the movement of desire doesn't seem so relevant. Why would I want to go there when I've got this here? So then the mind is less inclined to go away to past and future.

This is not necessarily an easy place to know what to do. I think Sally mentioned last night that when the mind moves into subtle or neutral experiences, we can often not know how to respond. And this can be a factor of delusion—that's the kind of not knowing. We might feel like, oh, nothing's happening now. And we might get a little bored.

I don't know if you've tracked this cartoonist, Gahan Wilson, who has done cartoons for many years. Toward the later phases of his career, he started setting a lot of his cartoons in Zen meditation halls. There's this one cartoon where there are two monastics, one older and one younger, sitting next to each other in the hall. The older one is leaning over to say to the younger one, and the caption just says, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

You might have felt that from time to time. Whoa, it's calm. What happens next? We're so used to dramatic emotions of highs and lows and intensity. When that goes out, it's like we're adrift. What happens next?

But calm can be a wonderful experience to soak in. So I would note it, recognize this is calm. It has been spoken of fairly highly by the Buddha and others. Appreciate the opening and learn to make a home there. It's a really wonderful ally on this whole journey. It is the foundation of contentment.

The Buddha said something interesting at one point. We don't talk about this a lot, but he said, "Peace is the highest happiness." I think it's really interesting to contemplate: Do we believe this? If we believe this, then calm, tranquility is what we've been looking for. If we don't believe it, we think, well, this is a nice stopgap, but what I'm really after is the next high, a more intense bliss, a more full-body kind of rapture. That's what really should be happening.

But according to the Buddha—and I don't think he was kidding—peace is the highest happiness. See if that starts to make sense to you.

One of the nice things about believing that is that peace is always accessible. When the mind lets go of past and future and all that it brings, peace is available. I find this a really interesting comment on human psychology. Somehow I don't think Western psychology quite understands this yet. But I think the Buddha's pointing was profound and accurate.

So then this tranquility is also onward leading. And of course where it leads is when the mind settles in itself, it becomes unified. This is the next factor of concentration. We talked about concentration as the unification of mind. The proximate cause—I don't know if I said it in the talk last week—the proximate cause of concentration is happiness. This contentment is really what allows the mind to settle and unify. That is where concentration develops from. Again, from the Buddha: "For one whose body is tranquil and who is happy, the mind becomes concentrated."

It truly is that simple. When the body is tranquil and the mind is happy, concentration naturally arises. On that occasion, the enlightenment factor of concentration is awakened within the practitioner.

Since we explored concentration in detail last week, I won't elaborate extensively here. But it's worth remembering that concentration offers two profound benefits: it feels deeply nourishing, and it opens the path to insight. This dual quality makes it such a valuable factor in our practice.

As the mind becomes unified, it develops a strength previously unknown. Before finding tranquility and concentration, the mind gets tossed about by every thought and emotion that arises within, by external circumstances that unfold around us—even in a protected environment like this retreat, events occur that can stir us up. As concentration deepens, the mind derives a strength and stability that remains unshaken by both internal experiences and external conditions.

This strength naturally leads to the next factor: equanimity, known in Pali as *upekkhā*. You may recognize *upekkhā* as the fourth of the *brahmaviharas*. I noticed a request for someone to speak specifically about equanimity, and indeed, someone will offer a full talk on this topic. For now, I'll share just a few essential points.

Fundamentally, equanimity is a state of mind born from strength—a quality that remains unmoved by pleasure and pain. When pleasurable experiences arise, they don't trigger greed. When unpleasant experiences emerge, they don't provoke aversion. Neutral experiences are simply noticed, as the mind no longer churns restlessly.

The root meaning of *upekkhā* comes from its etymology: "looking upon." It suggests the capacity to step back from entanglement in the flow of objects and observe from a place of stability.

Sometimes, particularly in English usage, equanimity carries the connotation of not feeling, or that emotions shouldn't be present—that if you're experiencing emotions, you haven't achieved true equanimity. This misunderstanding distorts the genuine meaning of *upekkhā*. True equanimity allows emotions to be present without being disturbed by them. It doesn't mean we cease to care.

In the *brahmaviharas*, the near enemy of equanimity is indifference—a complete lack of caring. When someone suffers and we think, "It doesn't matter to me; I'm equanimous about that," we've actually slipped into indifference.

This reveals the beautiful balance within the *brahmaviharas*. Equanimity must be supported by *mettā*, compassion, and *muditā*, or it will inevitably deteriorate into cold indifference. When equanimity is present alongside the other heart qualities, it maintains a balance that is neither cold nor detached.

One year, at the conclusion of the three-month retreat, we held a discussion group right here in this hall with all the practitioners who were completing their retreat. They shared their learnings and retreat highlights. Many spoke of gaining a new ease with life's changing conditions as one of their most significant discoveries. This capacity represents the essence of equanimity.

To me, this stands as the most reliable outcome of extended retreat. While it emerges in shorter retreats as well, it becomes more pronounced after longer periods of practice. We develop greater balance with life's changing conditions, no longer thrown about so easily by the inevitable ups and downs. It's truly beautiful.

I asked these practitioners whether this balance felt cold during their meditations, whether their emotions had been shut off. They responded unanimously: "Not at all. It was a place of tremendous warmth. Because I wasn't so disturbed, *mettā* and compassion flowed much more freely."

This captures the authentic meaning of equanimity. When we're settled, we gain greater access to love and compassion, not less. It's never a cold, withdrawn state. When equanimity begins sliding toward indifference, it simply needs to be warmed again through *mettā* and compassion.

Equanimity appears across multiple frameworks in our tradition: the *brahmaviharas*, the *paramis,* the factors of enlightenment, and the progress of insight described in the *Visuddhimagga*. In every one of these lists, it appears as the final factor, indicating that everything else leads toward this culmination.

In our tradition, equanimity represents the closest worldly state to *nibbāna*. When we reach equanimity in our development—properly balanced with the other factors—we find ourselves at the threshold of opening to the unconditioned. All these various lists point toward the same reality, the same unfolding development of awakening.

As you practice, you can start to tune in to when these factors are showing up. They don't have to be strong or overpowering or last an hour—they can appear quite briefly. Calm appears. Interest appears. A pleasurable experience in meditation arises. Some stability manifests. Some ease emerges. This is the arising of all these different enlightenment factors. So take care to notice them. The more you notice, the more you'll understand how they got there, and then also how to grow them. We want to learn what leads to them and what leads to their cultivation. That starts with noticing when they're present.

And then you want to keep them in balance. If the arousing factors are out of balance with the calming factors, the mind is likely to be alert but agitated. If the calming factors are stronger than the arousing factors, then the mind may be stable but dull. Sometimes we call this sinking mind. You've been developing calm, some degree of concentration, but then it feels like you're almost nodding off in dullness—this is sinking mind, because the energy has gotten low. The pacifying factors are high, but the energy is depleted. You need to bring up the energizing factors.

I try to practice in such a way that if my teacher came up and tapped me on the shoulder and asked about the factors, I would always know where mindfulness, energy, and concentration were in my experience. These three kind of sum up the whole system. Mindfulness originates and keeps everything in balance. Energy represents the

arousing factors. Concentration represents the calming factors. So start to monitor where these three factors are through your sittings, through your walking meditation, and through your in-between moments. See if they can be brought up and then balanced—mindfulness, energy, concentration. If you keep these three in balance, the path is really going to develop beautifully.

One of the questions that comes up is: Okay, you're teaching us to bring our mind to the doorway of enlightenment. Does this happen for people in the West? It does. Some opening to the unconditioned does happen with some regularity on long retreats, both at IMS and at Spirit Rock. This does happen in this day and age.

And so then the question is: What about complete liberation, the kind the Buddha was talking about? The Buddha said, "Practitioners, these seven factors of enlightenment, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering." The complete destruction of suffering. Does this still happen? It's rare.

But I'd like to read you a section from the autobiography of Ajahn Liam. Ajahn Chah was a great meditation master in Thailand who lived in the last century. He came here and taught at IMS in the early days—he was the first teacher for Ajahn Sumedho and Jack Kornfield, a truly charismatic monk and wonderful teacher. When he was no longer able to teach, he passed on the abbotship of his main monastery to Ajahn Liam. Ajahn Liam is still alive and is still the abbot in Thailand of Wat Ba Pong. He's still teaching. You can still meet him.

This is a description from Ajahn Liam of his practice one year when he was with Ajahn Chah. Around the middle of the rainy season, Ajahn Chah encouraged the monastics to practice with special intensity, so Ajahn Liam increased his efforts and results became evident.

This is from Ajahn Liam: "Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally, I would sit meditation until about ten or eleven p.m. and then stop to have a rest. But on this day, I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture. A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body, as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, an experience of the body becoming completely light and at ease, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness."

The body felt tranquil and light. This experience continued throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued unchanging for many years, all from that one time. It feels like there are no sankhāras, no proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before, all kinds of ambitions that I had—I don't know where they all disappeared to. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose.

There isn't anything to be concerned about now. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without change.

This is Ajahn Liam's confession, you might say, of his complete awakening. It's beautiful that he would be that revealing with us. He's still alive and teaching in Thailand. So this still happens.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. This same state still lasts on and has been stable, continuous, and without change.

So thank you for your attention. We have a little over thirty minutes now for walking meditation, and then the last sitting of the day with chanting.

CHAPTER 79

Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this profound dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses one of meditation's most challenging aspects: working with strong, difficult emotions that cannot be ignored or left in the background. Drawing on the third foundation of mindfulness (cittānupassanā), he explores the nature of unwholesome mind states rooted in lobha (greed), dosa (aversion), and moha (delusion).*
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> *Armstrong examines four primary afflictive emotions that commonly arise in practice: desire (wanting something pleasant in the future), fear (anticipating something unpleasant), grief (loss of something pleasant from the past), and anger (reaction to past unpleasant experiences). He demonstrates how these emotions are sustained by conceptual time—past and future thinking—rather than present-moment awareness.*
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> *Using personal retreat experiences and stories ranging from a five-year-old's wisdom about the "mad fish" to the Dalai Lama's imprisoned monk, Armstrong illustrates how these challenging states become our greatest teachers. He emphasizes three components of working with strong emotions: feeling the bodily sensations, recognizing the mental flavor or mood, and observing the accompanying storylines. The talk concludes with Rilke's poem about letting "everything happen to you, beauty and terror," pointing toward the transformative potential of meeting our difficulties with complete acceptance and understanding.*

The subject of the talk tonight is working with difficult emotions. At this point, we've talked quite a bit about how to relate to the hindrances and the kilesas. The thing about hindrances and kilesas is that they can span quite a large range of intensity. Sometimes they can be fairly mild. It still helps to tune into them, but you could almost at times leave them in the background and keep your attention somewhere else.

What I want to talk about tonight are when emotions come up that are quite strong and really can't be ignored or left in the background. You may not be having any of them recently, but you probably have had some in the past, and all of us probably will again in the future. So it's really helpful to learn how to work with these states. These are qualities like fear, shame, anger, loneliness, grief, wanting, humiliation, despair. They're kind of big events.

They can be big sources of suffering in our life outside and also in our life in retreat. Outside it's kind of interesting because they often come up in situations that are quite complicated. We have a child who has gotten addicted to opioids. What do we do? Or a partner leaves us or goes off and has an affair. Or there's a boss at work who's bullying us. In these outside situations, the situation and relationships are so complicated that the emotions sometimes get lost in the middle of all the other stuff that's going on.

But when we're in retreat, it gets really simple. There are two sources of suffering. There's physical pain and there's emotional pain. That's pretty much it. And so we really are brought right face to face with both of these. And as the First Noble Truth says, our job is to understand dukkha. These are the two primary forms of dukkha. We need to grow to understand them. So this is part of the curriculum. Not an easy part of the curriculum, but it's part of the curriculum.

And then as meditators, we're really lucky because we have a third source. And that is the wandering mind—the third source of dukkha. It doesn't stay where we put it. Now, for most people in the world, that's not a problem. But for us, that's a problem. So this is a very privileged form of suffering. Not quite as intense as the first two. But when we don't understand the big events of physical pain and emotional pain, they can be overwhelming. So in order to ensure our stability, we need to find ways to work with both of them.

The good news is that in working with emotional difficulties, we can gain access to a lot more freedom than we had in the beginning of meditation. This is one of the biggest immediate benefits of Vipassana practice. We can feel it start to happen right away, and it opens up a lot of possibility of freedom that we didn't know was available. So it's a wonderful area for us to explore and grow in because we change not just our relation to the emotions, we change the emotions themselves as we learn to work with them. They become less intense and they come less often. So this is something that can be seen in the course of our practice in a reasonably short period of time.

And this is something that we really do need to do. This is from Pema Chodron: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run 100 miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

So these are things we can't just run away from. We really need to meet and come to terms with them. Don gave a beautiful talk the other night about how when we meet suffering honestly, we can find that it transforms into faith and then gladness in the mind. So this is a beautiful pointing and a beautiful opportunity.

This is from Suzuki Roshi: "We say, pulling out the weeds, we make nourishment for the plant. We pull the weed out and bury it near the plant to make nourishment for it."

So even though you have some difficulty in your practice, those weeds will help you. You should not be bothered by the weeds you have in your mind. We should be grateful for the weeds because eventually they will enrich your practice. If you have some experience of how the weeds you have in your mind will change into mental nourishment, your practice makes remarkable progress.

In this talk, I want to explore how the difficulties we encounter with these emotions eventually come to sustain and support our journey to awakening, our journey to freedom. They really do become compost and enrichment for our unfolding.

What we're talking about tonight falls within the third foundation of mindfulness—the realm of citta. This Pali term is sometimes translated as mind, sometimes as heart, or sometimes heart-mind, because it encompasses both emotional and conceptual components. While we tend to think of the English word "mind" as conceptual and associate "heart" with emotion, citta contains both. The translation I prefer, though it's not common, is psyche. All these elements—both thinking and feeling—are part of our psyche. This is where these emotions land in our practice.

As you know, the states of mind in Buddhist teachings fall into two categories: wholesome and unwholesome. The unwholesome mind states are those that lead to suffering. This is a very pragmatic view, not moralistic. We're not immoral because we have these states; they simply lead us into suffering. Their roots are always some combination of greed, aversion, and delusion—what the Buddha called the roots of the unwholesome.

The wholesome mind states lead to happiness. Again, this is practical rather than moralistic—it's simply about what leads to the state we ultimately want to find. The roots of wholesome states are non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion.

This use of negation is quite interesting. In ancient India, these negative formulations were often used to point toward positive qualities. Non-greed—the opposite of grasping—manifests as either renunciation or generosity. Non-aversion becomes a synonym for metta; when there's no aversion in the mind, there's openness, acceptance, a

form of friendliness. Non-delusion is essentially synonymous with wisdom, with clear seeing, with understanding things as they are. So we could say the roots of the wholesome are generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

The whole point of the path is to increase wholesome states and reduce unwholesome states, which means we're more securely planted on a path toward happiness and away from suffering. This is the definition of right effort—this is what we're working toward.

Looking at these teachings over many years, I find it amazing how through the tools the Buddha gave us, we can shape the mind in any direction we want and to any depth we want. How would you like your mind to be? Would you like it to be loving? Do a lot of metta practice. Compassionate? Do compassion practice. Wise? Do investigation and vipassana practice. Calm and placid? Do samatha practice. Any direction you would like to go, there are tools to shape the mind that way to any degree you desire. It's quite remarkable.

We'll talk more about wholesome states as we progress through the retreat. Tonight I really want to get into the unwholesome.

With difficult emotions, we need two things to change. First and foremost, we need to change our attitude toward them. Normally our reaction is: I don't like it, I want it to go away, I resist it. This has to change to acceptance.

These difficult emotions show up—this is simply reality. There's no point in being in conflict with what is. We need to learn this fundamental acceptance. Remember, the A in RAIN is accept or allow. We must learn how to genuinely accept and allow these states to be present.

The other essential element is understanding them better. We need to comprehend the true nature of these difficult emotions, these afflictive states. They share the same nature as all other conditioned phenomena—they're impermanent, they're unsatisfying, and they're not me or mine. When we learn to see them through this lens, they become far less troublesome.

But why aren't they me or mine? They certainly feel like mine when they arise. They're not me or mine because we all have them. When you step back and take a broader view of where you're situated, we're all part of the human species. Every member of the human species carries all these emotions until they're truly awakened. So how can it be your personal mistake? How can it be your individual failing? This is simply part of the package that evolution has gifted us with. We don't need to identify with these states—we try not to identify. They're just part of the human package.

The first step in this process of understanding is knowing what we're feeling. And we must do this when we're actually feeling it. You cannot decide ahead of time, "I think I'll get rid of fear on this retreat," without actually experiencing fear. Liberation doesn't work that way. You cannot think your way through fear. You cannot think your way to freedom.

To become truly free of these states, we must relate to them as they're arising in the here and now. This might seem like unwelcome news, but this is how things actually work. We become free by engaging with these emotions as they manifest.

The first step is knowing what we're feeling. I don't know about you, but neither my parents nor my school teachers taught me how to recognize my emotional states. This wasn't part of my curriculum—not at home, not at school. So when I entered the meditation hall and was instructed to observe my states of mind, I had no idea what I was looking for.

But gradually, through descriptions like the five hindrances, the kilesas, the seven factors of awakening, and the Brahmaviharas, I learned there was an entire world unfolding within. I developed familiarity with this rich inner landscape, and it was wonderful to begin understanding the complexity that exists there.

Imagine if we taught children this awareness. How would society transform if children grew up knowing what they were feeling and understanding how to work skillfully with their emotions? It would be revolutionary.

There's a nonprofit organization called Mindful Schools, operating in California and expanding elsewhere, where teachers trained in insight meditation go into middle schools and teach children how to meditate with their emotions. The work is tremendously rewarding, with measurable, practical results.

Even with younger children, we have a sangha member in California who has practiced for many years and wanted to bring this learning into preschool. These are children three, four, and five years old. She established a preschool in Marin with the specific intention of teaching preschoolers how to meditate.

I couldn't imagine how one would approach such a task. You cannot simply tell a three-year-old to sit still and pay attention to their breath—they'll be running around within moments. But she truly understood children and was remarkably skillful. She began by teaching them yoga first.

There was considerable demand for places in her school, but she maintained one requirement: she wouldn't accept a child unless the parents were also meditators. She didn't want the children to become wiser than their parents.

The parents had to meditate to get their kids in. So here are these three-, four-, five-year-olds, and she taught them yoga first so that they'd be moving their body and stretching and getting their energy out. Then at the end of the yoga, she'd have them lie down on the carpet in the school and she'd lead them in a visualization.

The visualization is this: She had them close their eyes and said, "Imagine a big lake. There's a big lake, and you're the water. Now, in this water, there are all kinds of fishes that swim through. There's a happy fish. There's a sad fish. There's a lonely fish. There's a mad fish. There's an excited fish. But you're the water. You just let them all swim through. It's no problem. The fishes are just swimming through the water."

You probably know that for a long time, a body of water, like a lake, has been a symbol for consciousness. So the kids kind of grok this on some deep intuitive level, even though if you said to them "consciousness," they wouldn't have a clue what you were talking about. They're becoming the lake, and they're just watching the fishes swim through.

At the end of one of these exercises, she asked, "Well, how was that for you?" This five-year-old boy put up his hand and said, "You know, I could let all the fishes swim through except the mad fish. I couldn't let the mad fish swim through." She said, "Oh, you know, why was that?" And he says, "Because if you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you hurt people."

This is from a five-year-old. It's so brilliant.

We need to learn what we're feeling when we're feeling it. And it's not always easy. An example from my own practice: I was on a three-month course, sitting in the hall a lot. At the end of every sit, I'd go out that back door, go down the stairs, and go to a patch of grass that was still there—there's still grass there, there was more back then because it's gotten filled up with buildings and plantings. I'd do my walking back and forth on the grass below this hall.

I was about two weeks into the retreat, so I was getting settled and enjoying the walking. I walked out the back door and I was being really mindful: lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. Then I looked down to my path where I'd been walking every walking period for two weeks, and there was somebody there. I couldn't believe

it. What are they doing in my path? I've been in that path every walking period for two weeks. Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. Are they playing games with me? Did I cut in front of them in line this morning? Lifting, moving, placing.

I just kept mindfully walking down, and there was a bigger patch of grass. I found another patch of grass that, to my great surprise, worked just as well. I didn't think it would, but it did, and I did my walking. It was thirty minutes in before I realized I'm angry. It took me that long to see it.

I thought I was being really mindful, lifting, moving, placing, but I was missing the main thing that was going on. I hadn't picked up what I was feeling. I was angry. As soon as I saw it, like I'd been telling myself the same story—they shouldn't be there because it's my path—for 30 minutes. Finally, when I saw I'm angry, then I had a way to work with it.

So if we don't recognize what's going on, these hindrances just slip in under our mindfulness radar. I was in the present moment, lift, move, place, but I missed this thing that had slipped in. So that's delusion at work. We're not fully aware of what's happening. So always good to kind of keep one eye on the mind state as you go through your day mindfully. Keep an eye on what's going on in the mind because these things just slip in.

As soon as I could see it, I could release it. I thought, this is silly. And I could just release it. Until I knew I was so identified with being angry, I couldn't operate with it with any kind of skillful approach. So that's why it's so important to know what we're feeling, and if you can, to name it. You know, develop a vocabulary so that you recognize the different emotions that are coming. There's a kind of release that is possible when you align the note with the emotion that's being felt. There's a wisdom that develops when you're able to do that. So take a little bit of time and care. Develop a vocabulary that matches the range of your emotions. It's really helpful.

So as we've said many times, the key in working with hindrances and these emotions—the emotion is going to point us towards something else. Like it was pointing me to the guy who was walking in my path. And that's where my attention was for about 30 minutes. And then I was stuck. But as soon as I recognized what was going on inwardly, that is to the hindrance itself, then I could work with it and release it. So instead of going where the hindrance is pointing, come to the hindrance itself. That's the way that it can be released.

It's very interesting, this naming of emotions. There have been a lot of studies about how to manage anger because it's such a destructive force in the workplace and personal relationships and so forth. So there are a lot of anger management courses going on in the world and a lot of different techniques have been tried. So there was one study in an anger management class where they offered a few different approaches. One of the approaches they offered was just tell the people, every time you feel anger, just name it anger. Don't do anything else. Just name it anger. They found out that that approach worked as well as any of the other systematic approaches that they tried in calming down people's anger and tendency to fly off the handle out of anger. Just naming it was a lot.

So I want to talk about some of the states that we run into with difficult emotions. And I see, I'm on the end of listening to a lot of people, I see a number of states, a select number of states that come up again and again and again in reports from meditators. And rather than name them, I want to see if you can name them.

So one of the things I'm going to say is that if you have a really beautiful emotion like love or compassion, that can be totally in the here and now. You just see something beautiful and love comes up. You see someone struggling, compassion just arises. But these afflictive emotions tend to get tied up in time, in concepts of time.

Vance was talking this morning about how location is not an aspect of reality. It's a concept. Time is also not an aspect of reality. It's a concept. When you come into the moment fully, there's no past and future. Past and future are only thoughts. But these thoughts of past and future are needed to sustain these afflictive emotions.

So, bear with my background a minute. I want you to imagine a graph that has two axes, one horizontal and one vertical. You love seventh grade algebra, right? We're going back there. So the horizontal axis is going to be time. It's going to extend from the past on your left to the future on your right.

And the vertical axis represents feeling tone—pain at the bottom and pleasure at the top. The horizontal axis represents time, and the vertical represents feeling tone, marking off four quadrants.

Let's examine the first quadrant: pleasure in the future. If there's something pleasurable that you anticipate in the future, what emotion accompanies that? Greed. Yes—desire, wanting. That's what arises. Something pleasurable in the future generates wanting. This is the first of these strong forces that arise frequently for people.

Now let's take the lower quadrant: something unpleasant anticipated in the future. What's the emotional response? Basically fear. You might call it worry or anxiety, but these are forms of fear. That's another big one.

What about something pleasant in the past? And when I say it's in the past, I mean it's truly over. What arises then? Grief. When something has been pleasant in the past but is now genuinely gone, the response is sadness, grief, loss. That's the third emotion that surfaces again and again.

And what about something unpleasant in the past, particularly connected with people or persons? Anger. "Somebody did that to me," and we feel anger. This is the fourth of these major emotions. A subset of anger is self-criticism, self-judgment. We review our past, feel dissatisfied with it, and so self-judgment arises.

I find it fascinating that these unwholesome states of mind are propped up by time—by past and future. Relying on time in meditation is delusion because the present moment is where we want to be and is the only place we truly are.

These are the four major emotions I want to explore: desire, grief, anger, and fear. Let's examine each of these.

What I want to explore with each emotion are the three components of a strong emotion. When an emotion arises in a powerful, difficult way, there will be a response in the body. A subtle emotion like compassion might ripple through, and you might not feel very much. If you were feeling very subtly attuned to the body, you'd probably sense that ripple. But if you're not subtly in touch, it might pass through the mind without making much impact.

However, with these emotions, when they're strong, we feel them in the body. So the first approach is to bring attention to the part of the body where the emotion is felt. Let the attention go directly in and feel the sensations.

The second element is that each emotion has a particular flavor—a mental component. The flavor of wanting differs from the flavor of fear, which differs from the flavor of love or compassion. All difficult emotions have a physical expression and a mental tone or flavor or mood.

By connecting with the body where the emotion is felt, you can more easily stay in touch with the emotion itself. If you try to stay in touch only with the mood or flavor of the emotion—just the mental phenomenon—it's somewhat insubstantial and difficult to maintain connection with. But by grounding the attention in the body where the emotion is felt, you can stay connected to both the sensations and the mood of that emotion.

The third component is that there's usually a story being told in the thoughts. So examine the thoughts accompanying the strong emotion. Like with my walking path being taken by another meditator—the thoughts were saying they were wrong and I was right. Usually at the root of anger is something like "they were wrong" or "they did something wrong to me."

So take a look at all three of these components when working with difficult emotions. When that story went away and I saw it wasn't really my path, the anger crumpled. So the thoughts sustain the emotion. When you get a mindful handle on all three—the thoughts, the bodily sensations, and the mood—it's very helpful.

Let's examine the first of the difficult emotions: desire, something pleasant projected into the future. This happens frequently on retreat. We want a pleasant experience. Sometimes we're thinking about home, sometimes about friends, sometimes about someplace we'd rather be—any place other than here.

Notice how desire shows up. There's something comforting in wanting. You may find that when things are boring in the meditation hall, a pleasant fantasy arises because it brings comfort, bringing to mind something pleasurable. This happens often: "Oh, a little bored with my experience? Let's remember something pleasant."

But the desire that sources that fantasy brings a bittersweet feeling because the object isn't here now. Desire always has this unfulfilled quality to it. We always want something we don't have. Do you ever find yourself wanting an elbow? No, because we already have one. What we want is always something we don't have. So we think about it—it's comforting, but there's built-in frustration, built-in dissatisfaction. Craving is the cause of suffering, as stated in the Second Noble Truth.

Some years ago, I was teaching a retreat in Italy with Carol. I loved working with Italian yogis because I found them so fluent with their emotions. They talked easily about feelings, were well in touch with what they were experiencing, and weren't shy about discussing it. The practice meetings were very lively and interesting.

There was this one young man who came to the first practice meeting. When I asked how he was finding the retreat, he said, "I don't want to be here."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Well, this is August, the time when in Italy we go on vacation. Some friends of mine were going to the Caribbean, so I could either go there or come to this retreat."

"Why are you here?"

"I couldn't get a ticket to the Caribbean."

He was having trouble settling into the retreat because he kept thinking about his friends in the Caribbean—how warm it was, how beautiful the waters were, how great the food would be. They were there and he was here in this "miserable retreat." He just didn't want to be here.

I suggested, "Maybe the retreat isn't the problem. Maybe wanting something else is the problem. The desire itself is what's making this experience so frustrating for you."

He was willing to consider this possibility—that the desire was stirring him up, and that's why the retreat wasn't satisfying.

A few days later, at the second practice meeting, he had totally settled down. "I took your advice," he said. "I let go of thinking about the Caribbean, and then it was fine to be here. Now I'm enjoying it."

This is what desire does: it blinds us to the present moment and the possibility of what's actually here. Often with desire, we're not unhappy because the object is lacking—we're unhappy because the wanting itself is creating a gap, creating frustration. It wasn't the absence of the Caribbean that was making him suffer; it was the wanting.

That's a good thing to keep in mind. Another form of desire that often comes in retreat is sexual desire. Monica talked about this when she discussed the hindrances. I just want to add one little piece, as this has come up a lot for me in retreat.

One of the ways I found most helpful to work with it is to take a look at the direct experience of what's evoking the wanting. In my experience, when sexual desire arises, there are usually two compelling pieces. One is a visual image—for me, it's usually connected with a fantasy. Some image is there. And the second is sensations in the body. So the image is very pleasurable, and the sensations in the body are very pleasurable.

I switched from noticing the image and the sensations, which I would do with noting—seeing, seeing, sensing, sensing. That didn't cut it so much. But when I tuned to the feeling tone of the image and the feeling tone of the sensations, that really cut it. So I would just note pleasant, pleasant for the image, pleasant, pleasant for the sensations in the body. And that cut through it for me.

This has happened a number of times. I don't think it's just random, because I kind of saw what this fuss is all about—it's just pleasant feeling tone. That's all it is. It drives the world crazy, but it's just about pleasant feeling tone. So it was very helpful to unhook me from that feeling tone.

The next area to look at, the next strong emotion, is anger—a particular form of aversion. Notice how it feels. When anger is up for me, the body feels very tight, contracted, constricted. I feel it especially in my shoulders, neck, head. Everything's bunching up around that top part of the body, and there's a burning quality to the energy there. It feels like the area's on fire.

The storyline is usually, "I'm right and the other person's wrong." As we tell that story again and again with those thoughts, it's like the fire just keeps growing. Every thought adds another log onto the flame that's building. We can keep doing that. We want to keep making it hotter? Keep adding those thoughts of blame and self-righteousness. But that's what causes the anger to grow.

So the solution, obviously, is to stop thinking those thoughts, stop holding on to the blame, the blaming ideas and the self-righteousness. But one of the things that's tricky about that is sometimes those thoughts might be true. Sometimes the other person really has done something harmful, thoughtless, cruel even, and we've suffered from it. So sometimes it's hard to let go because we actually have a correct perception that they did something unskillful and we suffered as a result.

This is where it needs some careful investigation to see that the two don't have to be connected. You can have a clear perception that someone did something unskillful and unhook from the blaming thoughts about it. This takes some skill. It takes some subtlety. But this is an avenue to becoming free.

So another example from my practice. I was on a six-week retreat here, and I was doing metta practice. I'd been in a couple of weeks, and the metta was flowing, the phrases were flowing, the concentration was developing. The tricky thing here was my difficult person was also on the retreat. The person who had been most difficult for me over the past year of my life was also sitting that retreat.

And so in going through the building, we would often cross paths. As soon as we did, I would go, "I can't believe what they said. I can't believe what they did." And the anger would just start going again. So often I would be lost in it for like thirty minutes, and then finally, I'd get bored of it or something.

I'd come out and I'd reconnect with the metta. But that kept happening, and it wasn't pleasant. So I had to learn to work with it.

The way that I eventually got weaned from it was to feel how painful it was. I'd been cruising along with metta, and it was so satisfying and so delightful. And then I pitched myself into this hellfire of anger. I'd done it myself. And I was really burning. At some point, I just realized, I don't want to burn anymore. And so I gave it up as the only way I could restore peace of mind.

Sometimes we just have to feel the pain of anger before we'll know to let go. In the text, it's said that getting angry at someone is like picking up a hot coal to throw it at them, but first you pick it up and burn yourself. Or it's said to be like drinking poison and hoping that the other person gets sick—which they don't. Because the other person didn't know what I was going through at all. It was just all in my head. So it's a really self-injuring approach.

It's not easy to let go of anger because sometimes it is accurate. The Dalai Lama tells this story about a monk that he used to know in Tibet. He thought this monk was a good guy, but a kind of middling practitioner in the Dalai Lama's estimation. The Dalai Lama had fled Tibet in 1959 when the occupation started. This other monk did not leave and he was imprisoned for twenty years—his crime was being a monk.

After twenty years he managed to get out of prison and escape and come to India. At that time the Dalai Lama was trying to meet all the people who had come out of Tibet and found refuge in India because he felt so strongly connected to their plight and the cause of the Tibetan people. So this monk made his way to India and got to meet the Dalai Lama. In the course of the conversation, the monk said, "You know, I felt I was in prison for twenty years and I felt I was in danger." And the Dalai Lama said, "Oh, I can understand. You must have been feeling in danger of being tortured." And the monk said, "No, I was tortured. But that's not the danger I was talking about. I was in danger of getting angry. But I didn't."

The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk's level of practice. So this is a human possibility. I consider this very advanced practice, but it's a human possibility not to get angry even in a situation like that. I like to remind myself that that's something that people in my lifetime have experienced and worked with. And it helps me to put my problems in perspective.

Another way that aversion comes out is that it gets turned toward ourselves, and we fall into self-judgment, self-criticism. We might recognize there's this underlying criticism of ourselves. We have a feeling that we're not good enough in some way—we're not quite valuable as a person, not fully valuable, not valued by people. We can look back at our past and see, "Oh, this came from my parents or my teachers or my peers

and that criticism." But honestly, knowing the source of that doesn't release that feeling. In meditation, you may come upon the source, but it's not much help in becoming free of the feeling of self-judgment.

This kind of self-judgment can go quite deep and be very subconscious, and yet we're carrying it. I came upon it in my practice in early years, and I felt physically weighed down by it. I felt like there was a weight on my shoulders from not measuring up to some standard or other.

This is more difficult, perhaps, if you're a member of a marginalized community in this country or where you grew up. In this country, there's a dominant culture, which is white and heterosexual and middle class. If you're from a group that isn't aligned with that dominant norm, the message you get from the dominant culture—from the media and books and commentators—is that you're not as good as. This is a very tragic state of affairs, but this is a reality in our country today, in the U.S. at least. One may grow up with a feeling of not being as valuable because of one's ethnicity, because of one's sexual orientation, because of one's gender identity, and so grow up with this sense of not being lovable or not quite belonging here.

And it's subtle, right? But when we start to meditate, we can maybe really feel it strongly. And then we really need to use the tools of the meditation to hopefully work our way through those feelings. And the loving-kindness practice is really valuable for this. And so is solidarity with other members of those groups. Very, very helpful.

Something that really impressed me that I read shortly after it first came out was Michelle Obama's memoir. It's called Becoming, and it's a really beautiful book. You all know she was, if you're not from the U.S., you still probably know she was the first lady, wife of Barack Obama. And she's an amazing woman. She grew up in an ordinary household in a not very prosperous part of Chicago and went to schools that are kind of associated with not very prosperous areas of cities. And yet, she wanted to advance herself.

And so in her school years, she worked really, really hard. And she also had the support of her parents who were very loving. I think that's a big element of what saved her. And so through the work through her school years, she was able to get in one of the hardest to get into high schools in the Chicago area. So there she received really good education. And again, she worked really hard. And then she got a scholarship to Princeton. And at Princeton, she worked really hard and she got admitted to Harvard Law. And there she worked really hard and she got a job at this prestigious law firm in Chicago, which is where she met Barack. She was Barack's mentor when he came into that law firm. That's how they got connected.

She said in the memoir, it's very moving, she describes at every step of the way how she was plagued by self-doubt and the doubts of the authority figures around her that maybe she wasn't good enough. Because of her background and the color of her skin and all the difficulties she'd had in growing up, the self-doubt plagued her at every step. And yet she just moved into it and developed and grew. And you look at her self-confidence today, you just don't see that kind of doubt. But she really had to work to grow into the person she is. And that's why the title of her memoir is so impressive. It's called Becoming. It's sort of the story of how she became the Michelle that we know and love. Beautiful story.

So sometimes these patterns are fairly deeply rooted and will come up again and again. And it can seem like, oh my gosh, am I ever going to get free of this? And the reason they're so strong is that they're karmic patterns that we have repeated over and over and over many times over many years. It's our own now. When we were young, we didn't have an option. But now we're repeating these same judgments and opinions. That's what makes it a karmic pattern. And so it's gotten entrenched in our psyches. And so this can be frustrating.

I was on a retreat one time with Trudy Goodman. And one of the yogis raised their hands to ask a question. And they asked Trudy, and they said, "I keep seeing my same old stuff, and I'm so tired of it." And so Trudy's response was, "Whose stuff would you like to have?" Right? We're going to have somebody's. Might as well take ours.

So the next one is sadness. Sadness. And we've all had disappointments in life. We've lost friends or partners or relationships or jobs, family members. We know what that is like. One of the greatest losses probably is for a parent to have a child who dies. Personally, it's hard to imagine a greater loss for me than if I had a child who died. So in California, we had, as a Sangha member, a parent whose child had committed suicide. And that would make it even more difficult. And so there was a lot of grief, a lot of feeling of loss, a lot of sadness.

But this person was committed to the dharmic path and kept coming on retreat to try to work with and hold the grief that this brought about for them. Every retreat they'd come and the grief would be hard to bear—kind of overwhelming. It was really what their practice was about: just being with the grief and the sadness and that loss. This happened year after year.

Then one year, the person came back on the retreat and the grief was gone. The missing was still there, but the overwhelming nature of that grief had just been worked out. This is something I think it's really helpful to understand about grief: it has its own timeline. If we're able to open to and feel it, it will pass through.

Sometimes we're afraid to feel sadness or grief because we feel like, "Oh, it's too big a pool. If I open to it, I'm going to drown. If I really open to it, it's going to go on forever." But grief has its own timeline and timeframe. We can learn to open to it and hold it with mindfulness, and eventually it does move through. This is a really powerful demonstration of that for me.

The last of the big areas I wanted to talk about is fear. This is my personal favorite, because this was my big difficulty emotion for many years. The hard thing about fear is that every time it came up, I'd get scared. I didn't know how to handle it. It wasn't what I wanted—I wanted to be calm. The fear would come up and I'd think, "No, not that again." So it was hard to get in to feel it, but the instructions were to feel the body sensations, so that's where I would bring my attention.

My stomach was clenched. I had this fluttery feeling all up and down my chest. I felt kind of shaky and ungrounded. It was really unpleasant, but I could connect with the sensations in the body. What my teachers instructed me to ask was, "Are they bearable? Could I bear those sensations?" I didn't really think so, but I looked and I saw I was bearing them. I went through a whole sit and I had them and I came out the other side. I had been able to bear those sensations.

Then I tried to get close to the mental tone. But it's hard because the mental tone of fear is moving away from. Every time I got close to the mental tone, it would kind of repel my attention. It says, "You don't want to come here. This is scary. Don't get too close." But over time, I got closer and closer to the mental tone of the fear.

Then I looked into the belief I had about it, and it was something like, "I can bear this moment, but the next moment's going to be unbearable." That was kind of the story within fear. So I'd open up to those three parts and got more and more familiar with it.

At one point, one of my teachers said, "Okay, if you think you're accepting it, ask this question: Would it be okay with you if the fear was with you for the rest of your life?" So I asked myself that question—would that be okay? And the answer came immediately: no way. That was not going to happen.

But then I was in struggle with the fear, right? I wasn't really accepting it. So I had to look: why did I feel that? I couldn't open to it. All these reasons came up. If fear was always with me, I couldn't get into music the way I had been able to get into music. I couldn't open myself to a sunset the way I had been able to.

I couldn't fall in love again if I was full of fear. So there were all these future things that I wanted. But by holding out for them, I was making the present moment full of conflict and avoidance and fear. I was sustaining the fear.

So I gave up. I said, "Okay, I'm going to open to fear even if it wants to be here for the rest of my life. That's going to be okay with me." And I did open and I really meant it. And at that point, when I opened in that way, it broke something in the fear. It cracked its spine in some way. And fear has never had the same power over me again that it had before, because of that degree of opening.

For a long time in my practice then, I didn't care if fear came or not. If it arose—totally fine. If it passed away, totally fine. If it wanted to stick around, totally fine. If it wasn't there, totally fine. I really didn't care whether fear came or not. And from that point on, I knew that fear would come again, and it has come again, but it's never felt crippling. It's never felt like it really scared me because now I know how to work with it.

Once I realized that, I understood it wasn't just fear that I had learned to work with. I had discovered how to work with any emotion. I knew how to go through the same process with any difficult emotion that came up. And that gave me a huge amount of confidence. I just had the feeling nothing that's going to come on the emotional level can really deeply block me any longer.

So I had to dig really deep to get to that kind of relationship with fear. I had to find a kind of courage that I didn't even know was there to open that thoroughly to fear.

This is a quotation from Ajahn Liam. Do you remember I read something about Ajahn Liam the other night about his enlightenment experience as a disciple of Ajahn Chah? This is Ajahn Liam. He was in conversation with another abbot late in his practice life. The abbot asked him, "What was the hardest thing in your practice?" And Ajahn Liam said, "I'd have to say that the hardest thing was fear." And then he paused. "But just to say that it was hard isn't quite right. I would have to say that it was a worthy opponent. Working with it brought about the growth of a lot of wisdom. It was a worthy opponent."

And that was the same way it was for me. I had to grow my skills in meditation and my strength as a human being in order to discover freedom in relation to fear. And that growth and confidence has served me well ever since.

So these mind states that come along in your practice that look like a disaster—they may be your lifeboat. You climb on that lifeboat and it really fuels your journey to freedom, to awakening, to liberation. Because you develop strengths you didn't know you had. They're there potentially, but we all need to bring them out.

So in the beginning I kind of had the idea in practice that I needed to get out, get away from confusion in order to find freedom or awakening. Confusion is this agitated state of mind where we feel kind of lost and adrift and we're not sure what's what or where to go. I thought all that had to go away before I could find awakening.

Well, that's not the way I understand it now. The way I understand it now is that I have to find my awakened mind in the middle of the confusion. And it's finding the awakening in the middle of confusion that transforms it and makes it weaken and little by little fall away. And then awakening is right there for us.

So it's not like we get rid of this stuff and then we find awakening. We awaken in the middle of all these difficult emotions. Whichever one is our main song—

We awaken in the middle of that and we find stability, equanimity, acceptance, compassion, friendliness right there. And then we find awakening is not far away. This is what we're practicing for. And it's possible. It's possible in a retreat like this to unfold in that direction.

So I want to close with a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. He wrote a collection of poems when he was in his twenties—they're his most accessible poems. It's called The Book of Hours. He was traveling around Europe, especially Germany, but some neighboring countries, going to churches. He got into a Christian phase, and you can really feel the awakening of his spirituality as you follow the poems that he wrote on this journey.

The setting of this particular poem is that before God makes us and before he releases us into the world, he speaks to us. So this poem is what God says as we're about to be admitted to life:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your memory,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you:
beauty and terror.
Just keep going.
No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me.

Thank you for your attention, and you know what happens next. Good night.

CHAPTER 80

Q&A on Noticing Non-Self and Selfing

Guy Armstrong · 14 min

> *In this Q&A session from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses a practitioner's question about noticing non-self (anattā) without inadvertently creating a sense of self through the very act of noting. Drawing on teachings about the absence of a fixed self anywhere in our experience, Armstrong explores the dynamic process of "selfing" - the continuous construction of I-ing and my-ing that creates agitation through wanting and not wanting.*
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> *The discussion centers on developing perception (saññā) as a foundation for mindfulness practice, explaining how strong perception enables clear recognition of experience. Armstrong offers practical guidance on noting the absence of selfing, suggesting alternatives like "empty" when "non-self" triggers self-consciousness. He references the Buddha's teaching to Ānanda about the world being empty of self and what belongs to self, connecting this to the experience of natural calm that arises when selfing activity subsides.*
>
> *Using Joseph Goldstein's analogy of an inverted ramp, Armstrong illustrates how the mind's natural resting state gradually shifts from agitation to calm as practice deepens. This talk offers valuable insight into recognizing the correlation between the absence of selfing and the arising of natural peace, helping practitioners trust their perception and develop familiarity with states of non-self as a foundation for deeper meditation.*

Good morning, everyone. Nice to see your bright faces this morning. Hope it feels bright inside. You look good.

We have a few questions this morning, so I'll go through a few and see how far we get.

Carol spoke about noticing moments of self-arising and also noticing when they're not. It seems like as soon as I note non-self—is this even how you would note it—a sense of self arises. Is it possible to notice non-self without evoking a sense of I noting this? If so, how?

I think this is an interesting instruction. I didn't hear Carol's talk and I hadn't heard her give that instruction before, but it's an interesting one. One of the key pointings, I'm sure, in her teaching and as the note indicates, is that there's not a fixed self anywhere in this system. But a sense of a self does come into being at times.

The sense of self arises. I think Sally talked about this in her talk on Bahia as I-ing and my-ing. So it's the activity—and we could even call it the activity of selfing—that takes place. There's never a self there, but we construct one again and again.

To notice when the self is arising in that formation is very helpful. And then to contrast it with how it feels when there's not a sense of self arising. I want to point out that even though we may not notice a sense of self arising, there could be a subtle sense that we're not seeing. It's usually easier to notice the movements of greed and aversion because there's a movement toward something, either to hold on or push it away. But the activity of delusion is not so easy to pick up. So even at times when it feels like, "Oh, I'm not seeing a sense of self coming," there could be a subtle sense of self that's not being seen.

But don't go looking for that. Because we don't know what we don't know. That's why delusion is so hard to actively investigate. We don't know what we don't know. The only time delusion becomes clear is when we see the truth of something that had previously not been seen. And we can't force that. It comes when it comes.

So let's say a relative lack of self is seen. It's clear there's movement of wanting or not wanting, liking, disliking, holding on, pushing away. Those are clear activities of self. When those calm momentarily, there can be a sense of some relief. In this moment, those movements of I and my are not apparent.

So it is really good to notice that. Why? Because we want to find our way back to that more and more often. And as we do, our experience of that place where the self is not so active gets clearer and deeper. So as we settle in more and more to this experience of no obvious self, that deepens and then other layers of the self may be shown and then can drop away. So we get to more subtle experiences of the absence of self.

This is a really helpful thing to notice. So then the question arises, how might it be noted? Not-self or non-self is a fine note, if that works for you. I'm not able to interrogate the questioner at this point, and so I'm not sure why the noting necessarily brings up a sense of self, except that it could be a new experience.

As we move into this territory of not-self, it's new terrain for most of us. And so there can be a sense of excitement or thrill or a little bit of pride or an aha moment that can lead to a sense of self around that seeing. So that can happen and that's fine. If it's like that, just greater familiarity with the activity of noting the absence of selfing will lay that to rest.

When we first come upon something, it seems new, fresh, exciting. Once we get familiar with it, it's like, "Oh, there's that not-self again. So boring. Nothing exciting is happening." I mean, often when people get into calm, they go, "Nothing's happening. I want something to happen."

So this is similar. I want more selfing. No, not really. So if that's the source of the "I" arising with the noting, that will wear away in time. Don't worry about it.

Or it could be even the putting in of the word "self." Oh, "self" means "I." So then the "I" sort of wakes up. Are you talking about me? Wakes up again. So another note, maybe it's a little more verbally neutral, would be "empty."

We haven't really talked about this, but we will at some point talk about the sense of emptiness in dharma practice, because it's really very central. Ananda once came to the Buddha and said, "Venerable sir, you say 'empty is the world, empty is the world.' What do you mean by that?" And the Buddha said, "The world is empty because it is empty of a self or what belongs to a self." That is, it's empty of "I" and it's empty of "my."

So this word emptiness in the Buddhist discourses mostly points to this perception of the absence of a self. And this is something that hopefully will be happening for you all.

Let's talk for a moment about this term perception because it's an important term. Roxanne's going to talk about it more tonight. She'll unfold it more. In Western psychology, perception, as I understand it, often means the data of sense contact. Oh, there was a sound—that equals perception. Or there's a sight—that equals perception.

In the Buddhist language, the translations we use, perception means recognition of something. So if you hear that, the arising is just a sound. We call that contact. In the Buddha's language, that's contact. The perception is "hearing" or "finger snap." Both of those are recognition of the sound. That's a different level than contact. That's clear, right? The contact just happens by itself and the mind comes in and recognizes it.

It's said that the proximate cause for mindfulness to arise is a strong perception. That just means you notice something in your experience. Based on a really strong and clear perception, mindfulness comes and says, "That's what just happened."

So the noting practice really reflects this. And one of the reasons the noting practice is so powerful is it's strengthening that factor of perception: in-breath, out-breath, hearing, sensing, thought. So moment after moment, the perceptions are being brought to the surface and named. That's what's going on.

This highlighting of clear perception is what brings mindfulness alive. Mindfulness is knowing what our experience is in the present moment, and it's perceiving in these terms: in, out, sensing, hearing, thinking, and so forth.

Anything within our experience can be perceived. That's the foundation for choiceless attention. Anything we experience can be perceived. The experience of absence of selfing can be perceived. And when it's perceived, which is a natural function of wisdom, as your wisdom is growing, you're going to perceive this from time to time, it can be noted.

So the main thing is noticing it. Absence of self right now, as far as I can tell. And then find a note that suits. Could be "not self," could be "empty," could be something else that you discover. "No I," could be something like that. Find a note that matches, but trust your perception. Trust your perception, and this can become an extension of mindfulness.

At other times, you notice selfing is active, clear, and that's usually experienced as some agitation, because there's wanting and not wanting, liking and disliking, holding on and pushing away. Recognize that and feel the agitation of it. The activity of selfing usually goes with agitation. The lack of selfing usually goes with a degree of calming.

Start to notice that correlation. As you become more familiar with this calming, it may be momentary at first. It doesn't have to last the entire meditation period—it can be just for a few moments, but you feel calm. Notice that. Observe that part of this experience is the absence of any strong expression of selfing.

This is a perception you want to encourage, because eventually this kind of calm approach to your experience can become the baseline of your practice. Things will still come along to disturb it, but the calm can become the foundation. Then we begin to discover what I would call the natural mind, or the natural state.

This language emerges from the Thai forest tradition. It's not so much found in the Mahasi Sayadaw instructions or teachings, but you hear it frequently in the Thai forest. We come to realize that if we're not stirring this stuff up, the mind has an intrinsic peace that's very natural. We recognize this quality and realize it's completely unforced. You don't have to do anything to construct that peace. When you stop selfing—stop claiming "I" or "my"—the peace is there, and it settles more deeply.

This is an approach to looking at your experience that can really support relaxation and trust in that element of calm. When it shows up, notice the absence of selfing. Notice how that feels. Observe that you're learning to find your way back there more and more. This can become the baseline for your relationship to meditation, your relationship to others, your relationship to life, unfolding in a very natural way.

Let me share one final analogy, since we have a couple minutes remaining. Joseph used this frequently in the early years of his teaching—the analogy of an inverted ramp, or a U-shaped ramp. He said that at the beginning of practice, the mind is like a ball rolling up and down this ramp. Initially, we do a lot of work to get it up to the balance point at the top, where it's steady. But give it just one little push, and it goes sliding off one side or the other—into desire or aversion. It's very difficult to keep it steady at the top because the slightest push sends it tumbling.

As practice develops, this ramp levels out, and the mind can come to rest in the flat area in the middle. It will still move off a little with a push, but it's quite easy to bring it back. It's no longer an uphill struggle to return it to center.

Over time, that ramp inverts, with the U going down to the bottom. The mind more naturally rests at the bottom of that ramp. Things will still come along that push it up one side or the other, but it naturally wants to find its way back. Its karmic pattern becomes this returning to the resting point in the center.

We want to start observing this kind of development, and calm is really the doorway to begin seeing it. Notice the presence of calm, the absence of selfing. You can't force the duration of calm, but you'll observe that it begins to extend naturally. This is a sign of the meditation deepening in its own organic way.

CHAPTER 81

Kamma and the End of Kamma

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's profound teaching on kamma - not simply as 'action' but specifically as intentional action or volition (cetanā). Drawing from the Dalai Lama's emphasis on kamma's importance for Western practitioners, Armstrong explores five key aspects: the meaning of kamma as volition behind actions of body, speech and mind; how wholesome actions rooted in generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom lead to happiness while unwholesome actions rooted in greed, hatred and delusion lead to suffering; the relationship between kamma and anatta (not-self); implications for rebirth; and what the Buddha meant by the end of kamma.*
>
> *Armstrong clarifies common misconceptions, explaining that the Buddha never taught that all experiences result from past kamma - illness, accidents, and other factors also cause suffering. He emphasizes kamma as a practical teaching for cultivating happiness through ethical conduct (sīla) and mental purification. Using the analogy of mind-streams like rivers - constantly flowing yet maintaining unique characteristics - he shows how personality consists of karmic patterns that can be transformed through dharma practice. The talk integrates teachings on the brahmavihāras, particularly equanimity's recognition that 'all beings are heirs to their kamma,' while maintaining compassion for all suffering regardless of its origins.*

Kamma and the End of Kamma

The talk this evening is on kamma and the end of kamma. This word has come into our English vocabulary and is quite widely used in the wider culture, but it's not very well understood. I thought that a three-month course is a place where a talk on this topic can fit. It's not something we talk about on shorter retreats, so I want to address this topic tonight.

I'm going to take the authority of the Dalai Lama to justify this focus. He used to meet with groups of Western teachers who would travel to Dharamsala, perhaps twenty at a time, to discuss how the family business was going—how Buddhism was evolving in the West, what the problems were, what the issues were. At one of those meetings, he told the Western teachers that he thought it was more important for them to teach about

kamma than to teach about emptiness. Now, as somebody who's written a book about emptiness, I thought this was not very good publicity. But nonetheless, I do agree with it because kamma is more immediately practical for us than emptiness is.

So it is an important topic, and it fits if you take a step back and look at the Buddha's main teachings. Consider the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, and the Law of Kamma. All of these are basically about cause and effect: suffering and its cause, liberation and its cause, the chain from ignorance and how that leads to suffering, and then the law of kamma, of cause and the effect of kamma. There's an interesting similarity to all the main teachings, and it's basically because if you take the self out of the picture, then everything happens simply because of causes and conditions. So all these central teachings are pointing to that truth.

Tonight I want to tell you about what the Buddha said about kamma. First, because I think it's really interesting. Second, because I think it can be helpful. Third, because it's not often talked about in these retreats, and so it's not widely known exactly what his teachings are. But as I talk about it, I want to preface this with the acknowledgment that there's a lot of this I can't verify by my personal experience. A lot of the teachings on mindfulness and the development of the Eightfold Path and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment we can verify. But a lot of the teachings on kamma came about because the Buddha had a really profound vision that most of us don't have. For him, the insights into kamma were not speculative or theoretical. These were things he actually saw in his direct understanding.

So I want to make sure to pass that on to you, but without any assumption that you should believe it, because it's not something that's experienceable for most of us. Some people aren't comfortable believing things that aren't experienceable. So I would encourage you to hold the teachings on kamma at least with an open mind, because it's easy to say, "This is not true, this can't be true." But the fact is, we don't know that either. You may not know from firsthand experience that these teachings are true, but I would wager that you don't know from firsthand experience that they're not true. Therefore, I would encourage you to have an open mind. For myself, I've had to hang out with a lot of these teachings over years to get a sense of my own confidence and trust in them. So I'm passing on to you what the Buddha said, but it's of course for you to decide whether it resonates or not.

In this evening's talk, I want to look at this question of kamma from five different angles. One is what the word means. The second is what are the results of kamma. The third is how does it connect with the teaching on not-self, because these could seem to

be opposed. The fourth is how does this influence the idea of rebirth. And the fifth is what did the Buddha mean by the end of kamma. I'm going to touch on these five points tonight.

In her talk the other night on intention, Carol actually gave quite a good introduction and overview of kamma, so I don't need to repeat a lot of that at length. I'll just summarize the things she said. She didn't go into this detail, but I want to put this in: In the time of the Buddha, there were a lot of different opinions and philosophies around the notion of kamma. The word kamma is a Sanskrit word that just meant action. The Pali term is kamma with a double M. It just meant action.

Every different school had its own take on action. Some of them said actions don't really matter—that actions don't have results for the person who's doing them. You could murder somebody or you could heal somebody and neither of those would have any clear effect in your own life or in your own mind. Some people said that action was all predetermined, that it really didn't matter because it was all going to happen automatically anyway. Some people said it doesn't matter because God is doing it all, so there's no room for individual will. All these different philosophies were circulating, and the Buddha, with his insight, offered a new definition of kamma.

that is the one that we'll be using and talking about. He said, "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call karma, for having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind."

This factor of volition—sometimes translated as intention—is really the key. It is the motivating force behind the action. We could call it motive, volition, intention, will, impulse, or motivation. It's the activity in the mind that leads to an action—that is its volition.

As Carol said, actions are wholesome or unwholesome according to the volition that drives them. They can be driven by the three roots of the unwholesome—greed, hatred, and delusion—or the three roots of the wholesome: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

The meaning of wholesome or unwholesome is very pragmatic. Actions done from a wholesome motivation end up having a wholesome effect in our life, meaning they lead to happiness. Actions done from an unwholesome motivation end up having an unwholesome effect in our lives, meaning they end up causing some degree of suffering. It's not the act per se, but the motivation behind it that is the key.

Let's look at a couple of examples. If a baby is lying on a bed at night, rolls over, knocks over a candle in the baby's sleep, and the candle burns the house down, there's no karma. There's no volition in that action, so there's no karmic consequence.

Or the same action can have two different meanings. If I say to you, "I observe somebody slicing someone's stomach open with a sharp knife," is that good or bad? It depends, right? If a person was cutting someone in the abdomen in order to steal their money, that wouldn't be so good. But if a surgeon is making an incision in order to heal their appendix, that would be very good. It depends on the motivation behind the action.

The first thing I note about this that's kind of interesting is that actions have an intrinsic moral force—an intrinsic moral force that's based on the mindset from which they spring.

As Carol said, actions take place in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. We're comfortable with actions of body and actions of speech. We may not have thought before that mental events are also actions, but in the Buddha's teachings, they are. Thoughts also have volition. Emotions can have volition.

The Buddha was very clear on what the unwholesome actions are that we want to stay away from. Just to run through them briefly: three actions of body, which are killing living beings, taking what is not given, and engaging in sexual misconduct. Four actions of speech, which are false speech, harsh speech, divisive speech, and idle chatter and gossip. And three actions of mind: covetousness—wanting what belongs to someone else—ill will or hostility, and wrong view.

Here's what's interesting: wrong view is actually an unwholesome form of action. You can kind of see this because if we don't understand reality the way it is, we're going to act in the world based on misunderstanding, based on confusion. And that's going to lead to problems for others and for ourselves.

The ten wholesome actions are to refrain from these. If you just don't engage with these unwholesome actions, that's considered wholesome conduct. I would put a postscript on it, which is there are lots of forms of wholesome action that go beyond this. Forms of generosity, of loving-kindness, of compassion, acts that actively reach out to help are also wholesome. We'll get into that later.

Anyone reading this would think, "Well, I always want to act from a wholesome motivation, right? All my actions should come out of generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom." But is that possible? Not as long as greed, aversion, and delusion are still active in the mind. Then it becomes very difficult.

To me, this raises an interesting question about free will. If we really had free will, we could ensure that all our actions sprang from wholesome motives. But we don't. Greed, aversion, and delusion are compulsive forces in the mind that sometimes make us act in ways we even know at the time are unskillful. This is our situation.

But understanding them correctly and refining our actions more and more over the course of years of dharma practice means that our actions align more and more with wholesome intentions, wholesome motivation. This is really helpful for us. This is what guides us on the path to greater and greater happiness.

You can see this possibility in somebody like the Dalai Lama, who is so refined in his action because he is so refined in his heart and mind. Some years ago, he was being interviewed for O Magazine by Oprah herself. I really have to give Oprah a lot of credit because more than anyone else I can see in the West, she's been responsible for bringing really helpful forms of spirituality to a very wide audience. She has a lot of openness to different traditions, and she's really popularized a lot of these teachings.

Before there was a mindful magazine, there was Oprah. So Oprah starts this interview with the Dalai Lama, and she says, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?" That's an interesting question, isn't it?

The Dalai Lama paused a moment, and he said, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said.

"My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable," the Dalai Lama continued. "Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

That's pretty amazing. As engaged as he has stayed in worldly activity, and his meditations compared to those who have spent years in the mountains practicing meditation with single focus. That's pretty incredible.

One of the things I see in that answer is how the refinement of his conduct has created such a stable platform for his mind to rest in. To go to meditate and know you have no regrets—that's a good beginning. May we all start from a place like that. That's wonderful.

So that's the basic overview of the meaning of karma: wholesome and unwholesome actions in these three spheres of body, speech, and mind. The next question is, what about results? What can we say about results?

Sometimes when in the West we talk about karma, what we're really pointing to are the results. I think there was a pop song, "Instant Karma," many years ago, and I think it was really pointing to results of action. But karma just means the action.

The basic results: wholesome actions lead to happiness, unwholesome actions lead to unhappiness. And I think Carol also quoted these lines from the Dhammapada: "Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

Some years ago, I was teaching a course on meditation at a juvenile hall in California, in the Bay Area. I got invited in along with James Baraz, who's a good friend. The reason we got invited in is that one of the Spirit Rock meditators worked in this juvenile hall. If you're not from America, you may not know juvenile hall is where people are held who have been arrested for some suspected crime before they go to trial. And juvenile means they're below the age of eighteen.

So we were in a men's wing, and it was one of the more secure wings of this juvenile hall. Young guys who were like fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old were in there because they were being charged with things like theft, grand theft, murder, attempted murder, assault, and so forth. Some of it was fairly serious stuff. They were going to be tried in a matter of weeks or months, and this is where they were held in the meantime.

We thought, are they going to listen to two middle-aged guys who don't really understand what their lives have been about? But we thought, we'll give it a shot. We started off the same way we started here. We started with paying attention to the breath to calm the mind, attention to body sensations to land in the body. Then we opened up to thoughts and then emotions.

This is where the meditation started to gain some traction because you can imagine—you're fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old. You're in jail. You're going to go before a judge in a few months and you could be sent away to prison for years if you're convicted. Or you might be released back to your family, back to your home. And they didn't know which way it was going to go for them. So the level of fear in that population was quite high.

Also, as you might imagine, there was a certain amount of aggression within the group, and the level of anger was sometimes quite high. By giving them the tools to feel the fear and the anger in their bodies, it started to give them a way to work with and shine a light on all this turbulent energy they didn't have any understanding about. The practice proved to be genuinely helpful for them on the level of mindfulness of emotions, and some of them became quite engaged with it.

I remember giving them one simple instruction: "Do you fall asleep on an in-breath or an out-breath? Check it out and see." One of the guys kept coming back every week saying, "I still can't find it, but I'm still looking." They were really applying themselves to the practice. It was very sweet to witness.

So we came to the last class—the final time we would be meeting with them. Normally we would explore the precepts, practice in daily life, and introduce the teaching on karma. We wondered: should we go there with this group? This might not land well at all. After some consideration, we thought, it's our last meeting—we'll at least try it.

We briefly outlined the idea of karma and asked, "Does this sound like anything you've heard before? Does this sound reasonable?" One of the young men immediately said, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around? Sure, yeah, we've heard about that." So they could connect with the fundamental principle of karma.

One of the senior members of the group surprised us. After we left, he told the others, "You know, you should send metta to the people in the other gang because they have mothers and sisters also." That unexpected sweetness happened after our departure—a beautiful flowering of the practice.

We also created something special for them. We made certificates that we tried to design like diplomas, complete with curly cues and fancy script. Each one read: "This person"—and we'd write in their name by hand—"has successfully completed a course in Mind Power." It was mindfulness training, but we called it "mind power." We dated each certificate and signed our names. I think those certificates meant something to them. One of the participants looked at his and asked, "Can I show this to the judge?" We said, "Sure, we hope it will help."

This idea of karma was finding its way into their understanding. The way we presented it—as the science of happiness, the reliable blueprint for building happiness—seemed to make sense to them. If you want to be happy, you act from these kinds of motivations and you don't act from those other motivations. Honestly, that's how I understand it for myself.

Viewed in this light, the teaching on karma becomes our best friend. It offers a genuinely reliable path to happiness. You may not believe this, but having grown up in the Dharma over about forty-five years and maintained relationships with a consistent group of friends throughout much of that time, having watched my friends' lives unfold and witnessed my own life develop within these teachings, I have deep faith in this truth: acting from wholesome motivations brings genuine happiness.

This is another beautiful dimension of the meditation aspect of our practice. It refines the heart so that wholesome motivations arise more and more naturally. It becomes increasingly easier to act from that place and to restrain the impulses that emerge from unwholesome states. This restraint itself brings happiness, but then it factors into the actions we perform. It influences our karma—our actions of body, speech, and even thought. This creates another layer through which purification develops and generates momentum.

In Tibetan practice, they also hold the Brahmaviharas as essential cultivations. They call them the four immeasurables because they're intended to extend to all beings everywhere—in that way, they become immeasurable. They use slightly different language. For loving-kindness, the phrase is: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." For compassion: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." You can see how the teaching on karma is woven directly into these four immeasurables statements.

I want to explore in more detail this relationship between the cause of happiness and karma. The Buddha stated it like this: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions."

Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform for good or for ill, of those they will be the heirs.

You can see how important this teaching is. We inherit our actions and they show up either toward happiness or toward unhappiness. And again, as I said, this was a direct insight that the Buddha had. This was not a speculative philosophical view. This was something he saw operating. In fact, he saw it the night of his awakening. It's described in one of the discourses in the Majjhima Nikaya, how he surveyed the world and saw the truth of this.

According to the Buddha, this applies whether you know the law or not. It applies whether you believe this law or not. It applies whether your religion believes it or not. It applies whether your culture believes it or not. It's a universal law that applies to every sentient being everywhere.

Interestingly, our development in the path is based on this law. The path is a karmic unfolding, but I'll return to that point later.

As you know, the four Brahma Viharas are loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity. There's a phrase for the equanimity practice just as there is for metta, compassion, and joy. The traditional equanimity phrase is: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own past actions, more than on my wishes for them." This really illustrates how we inherit our actions. Our happiness and unhappiness depend on our past actions.

I don't know if you saw the movie Kundun. It was a film by Martin Scorsese, probably released about twenty years ago. It tells the story of the life of the Dalai Lama from childhood onward. It's a fictional account, not a documentary, but it's a really high-quality film. I highly recommend watching it if you haven't seen it before.

The film tells the story of the Dalai Lama's growth from a child living in Tibet, growing up in the Potala Palace in Lhasa. He had the very best teachers they could find to prepare him to be the spiritual leader of Tibet. There's one scene in the movie that I found really touching. He's about eight or nine years old, and his tutors are three old monks gathered around him. They're teaching him about the Four Noble Truths.

As part of the teaching, they ask him to tell them what the Second Noble Truth is. He says, "The cause of suffering is craving." The tutors say, "No, no, no. We want you to put it in your own words. Don't just parrot something back to us. Put it in your own words. What's the Second Noble Truth?"

The young boy thinks for a minute and says, "I suffer because I want things." They say, "Not good enough. Make it really personal, in your own words." He sits and reflects some more. Finally he says, "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind." They say, "Ah, very good, very good."

Most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. This is the pointing of this phrase in equanimity meditation. Our happiness and unhappiness depends on our own actions.

There's an obvious flaw in this strict formulation, which is—I'll tell you my problem with it. I look at the suffering of the children in Ukraine right now. Children have been killed, their parents have been killed, they've been injured and wounded, their homes destroyed, their towns destroyed. There's a huge amount of suffering going on for the children of Ukraine in certain areas. I don't believe that all of that is because of their past actions.

I mean, it's possible, but I personally can't see a reason to believe it.

So I take this phrase with a little modification, and we'll come to why that is later. But when we say, especially speaking for an adult, your happiness and unhappiness depend on your own habits of mind, that can be seen to be true. We can see that in our own experience. We can see it in our friends' experience. We can see it in people that we know well. Our habits of mind determine our level of happiness and unhappiness.

But one of the things the Buddha said you cannot figure out are the detailed workings of karmic results. This is actually one of the four imponderables. I think I mentioned the four imponderables in an earlier dharma talk. One is the range of mind of a Buddha. The other is the power of a concentrated mind. The third one is the detailed workings of karmic results. You just can't figure out how one action led to another, and another, and another, and ended up in this result. The Buddha said often that he could see in some individual's life how it had turned out, why it had turned out the way it did, but we can't see that. And so it doesn't help to think about it. The Buddha said that one who thinks about this will go mad and experience vexation. He didn't say which came first. Maybe both. The fourth imponderable is the beginning of things. Don't tell that to an astrophysicist. But that's what the Buddha said.

So there are ways that we kind of misuse this teaching. I've heard it misused. A friend gets a diagnosis of some serious illness and some other friend comes up to them and says, "Oh, that must be your karma." That's not a nice thing to say to someone. First,

because there's no way that person could possibly know the truth of that. That's a completely speculative view. And it's not helpful to the person who's ill. It would be much more helpful to refer them to good medical treatment.

So the Buddha never said—and this is one of the things I want to underline and make really clear, because this is one of the misinterpretations of the teaching on karma—the Buddha never said that everything that happens to us is the result of past karma. Never said that. In fact, there's one discourse where he was invited to say that. Some wanderers came to him and said, "These other teachers are saying that all pleasant and unpleasant feeling is the result of past action. Can you confirm that?" The Buddha said no. He said they shouldn't be saying that. It's wrong for them to be saying that. And then he identified a number of other causes of unpleasant feeling. They can be caused by illness, can be caused by diet, can be caused by climate, can be caused by accident, can be caused by assault—other sources of unpleasant feeling not connected to past actions.

Don't assume that everything that happens is because of karma. Karma is one of the laws operating in this universe, but there are other laws. There are the laws of physics, the laws of chemistry, the laws of biology, the laws of psychology, the laws of genetics. All these laws are at play, and the law of karma is also at play.

So the way that I think this teaching works best is to take a really broad view of it. How can we best support our happiness going forward? It's to act from wholesome motivations, as much as possible. Sometimes it won't be possible, but as much as possible, that will put us on this track toward greater happiness.

But to use it to say, "Oh, I've gotten a certain amount of unhappiness in my life right now. I must have done something really bad in the past"—that's not a skillful reflection. We don't know that. And so just to assume it kind of loads us up with more guilt that's purely speculative. We don't know why these conditions have come about in our life. And so to assume that it's something we did in the past, we don't know that. It's kind of like you want to use karma as a rearview mirror, right? "Oh, I got here. How did I get here?"

Looking in the rearview mirror doesn't reveal the truth. We don't know that our present circumstances are even karmic results in many cases. This kind of speculation is just ideation without grounding in reality.

Although I will say, there was one occasion when I saw this kind of karmic reflection used skillfully. When Dipa Ma first came to this country in 1980, Carol and I had just recently left staff, and she was housed in a home in western Massachusetts for a month

that was rented by Joseph and Sharon and some friends. We had gone off staff and were in our dharma bum phase at that time. Joseph and Sharon asked us if we would help look after Dipa Ma, so we moved into the house with her for a month and helped cook and clean and shop.

During this month, one of the friends who came often to visit—a student of hers—had gone down to New York. While he was there, someone had broken into his car and stolen his tape player. This was back in the days of 8-tracks, so you know how old that was. He came back to the house, and we were all sitting around at dinner while he told us the story. He'd parked the car on the street, came back, and somebody had broken in and taken his tape player.

This launched us into a whole discussion about big cities and how sad it is that this kind of thing happens when you're just being innocent, parking to go to a restaurant. We felt so sorry for him—the whole sympathetic routine.

Dipa Ma asked to have the conversation translated. She didn't speak English, but her translator gave her the overview of what had happened and what we were saying. She just looked at our friend with a little smile on her face and said, "You too have stolen."

That was it. "You too have stolen."

It completely flattened all the conversation about blame and victimhood. I don't know if she could see that karmically or she just knew that everybody has at some point taken something that wasn't given. But it was a good reminder of the universality of actions. Over so many years and so many lifetimes, we've all done everything. Somewhere back there is a cause for anything that can be showing up, but we don't know what it is.

Sometimes Westerners feel resistance to the teaching on karma, perhaps because we have very strong democratic ideals of equality—everybody should be equally happy. But we're not. This view says that we're to some extent responsible for our happiness. To some extent. When somebody's suffering, this can look heartless, like blaming the person who's suffering. Cold, uncaring, cruel even.

Some people take away the idea that the Buddha is saying some beings deserve to suffer. If you've done things in the past that are bringing this on, well, that's because you deserve it. You've done unskillful things, so that's your just desserts.

But it doesn't mean that. The Buddha never said that or meant that. I'm convinced that if he could have taken away the suffering from every individual on the face of the planet, he would have done it instantly. It's not within his power. It was not then. It's not now.

You can see this in the story of Angulimala, if you ever doubt this. Angulimala was a serial killer who was actually a very spiritually inclined being who had hooked up with the wrong teacher. This teacher had given him an instruction to collect the fingers cut from the bodies of a thousand people he had murdered. At this point in his development, Angulimala—mala means necklace, anguli means finger—had a necklace of 999 fingers, which he wore.

He was hiding out in the hills around the area where the Buddha was staying. The Buddha said, "I think I'm going to walk through those hills tomorrow."

His attendant said, "No, no, no, no, no. Venerable sir, please don't do that. There's a killer out there. He's just going to wait for you to walk on the path and bring out a knife and kill you."

The Buddha said, "I don't think so."

So he went ahead and walked on the path. As he was walking, Angulimala came running down from the hillside, jumped onto the path behind the Buddha and started running after him. But the Buddha kept walking forward at a good pace, and Angulimala could not catch him.

Run as fast as he might, he couldn't catch the Buddha. And finally he shouted out, "Stop, stop!" And at that, the Buddha just turned around and calmly said, "I have stopped, Angulimala, but you have not stopped."

That stopped Angulimala. He said, "This guy is on to something else." And so he came to him and basically asked to be his student. He said, "You've got something. I'd like to learn what it is." He saw the Buddha had no fear of him.

And so the Buddha took him on, allowed him to ordain within the Sangha, gave him instructions to free his heart and mind. And in a matter of a few weeks, Angulimala became fully awakened, because he had had a very deep spiritual inclination from being very young. So he became one of the Arhats in the time of the Buddha.

And when he went on alms round in nearby villages, people would stone him because they knew of his reputation as the person who had killed almost a thousand people. So he came back to the Buddha and said, "Every time I go on alms round, people

want to stone me." And the Buddha said, "You have to bear that. That's the fruit of your actions. But if you hadn't joined the Sangha and meditated, your destination would be a lot worse. So bear it. You just have to bear it."

So this was an act of compassion to a very entrenched serial killer. The Buddha was interested in bringing him out of suffering.

So it would be nice, perhaps, if people could engage in all kinds of actions and not suffer the consequences, but this is a law. Expecting to do unwholesome actions and not suffer some suffering as a result would be to expect the law of karma not to operate. That would be like expecting gravity not to operate. That would be like saying, "Yeah, the apple can get ripe and detach from the tree, but it won't fall to the ground." You can't suspend the law of gravity, and you can't suspend the law of karma. Unwholesome acts lead to unwholesome results.

And then people might think this is an excuse for not caring. We see somebody suffering, but we think, "Well, they brought it on themselves, so it's not my problem. Let them suffer." But this is not equanimity. In the tradition, this is the near enemy of equanimity, which is indifference. It's not caring. It's cold.

Compassion looks on suffering and says, "I don't care where it came from. I don't care if it's external. I don't care if it's internal. I don't care if it's mental. I don't care if it's physical. I'd like to help that person come to the end of their suffering." That's compassion. Indifference is not part of the Brahma Viharas. It's a near enemy. It's not a wholesome state.

So compassion wants to respond to suffering anyway.

So we can see these results of actions in a number of different ways. You can see the karmic result. You see it before we act. When Vance talked about thinking about being generous, there's a good feeling that comes. In the act of giving, there's a good feeling. After giving, we reflect on our generosity. There's a good feeling.

We see that our actions come back to us in ways that people relate to us. If we've been warm and caring and friendly to people, then they welcome us and want to have contact. If we've been cold or critical or angry or judgmental, then they'll pull back and not want to be friends with us. This is the fourth way we see the actions coming to result.

And in habitual states of mind. Why does the mind move when you're sitting quietly?

Why does it go anywhere at all? Why isn't it just still and peaceful? And when it does move, why does it go to where it goes?

As the Buddha taught: "Bhikkhus, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will or cruelty, then the mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will or cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of generosity, kindness, or compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of generosity, kindness, and compassion."

With our thoughts, we wear a groove in the mind, and that's where the mind tends to return. There's a lovely quote that captures this process beautifully: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit and habit hardens into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings."

Our thoughts form into intentions, the intentions form into actions, the actions become habits, and the habits shape our character. Then we're grown adults with all this conditioning.

But I want to add an important caveat. Some of these habits were instilled in us when we were really young. We may have suffered from abuse as children. We may have suffered from the racism that permeates society. We may have picked up intergenerational trauma. We may have had a traumatic loss early in life. When these things happen to young people, they go in so deep and form very strong coping habits that the children had no opportunity to reflect upon, to observe, or to try to modify.

We grow up as adults often carrying conditioning that we didn't really assent to, but that simply landed on us when we were too young to understand what was happening. So we often come into meditation bearing grooves in the mind that we didn't really choose. But then as meditators, we have no choice but to take responsibility for those grooves and to work with them. It's not fair, it's not really just, but this is where we find ourselves. And this is where, as adults, we simply have to work.

The sixth way that results show up is that they will occur in the future. It might be in this life, or it might be even a future life in mysterious ways that we can't understand or predict. And we usually can't verify. But this is an integral part of the teaching on karma.

This points to a really interesting connection: acts of goodness lead to happiness. How does that happen? That's the heart of the karmic riddle. How does that happen? It's a mystery. The workings of it are a mystery. But this is the heart of the teaching on karma, part of what the Buddha is pointing to.

This connection between virtue and happiness fascinates me, because it's intrinsic to sentient beings. It's not just an accident of Buddhist practitioners—it's intrinsic to sentient beings. What this says to me is that morality is not just an invention of the rational mind or some spiritual figure or religious leader. Morality is woven into the fabric of the universe. Goodness leads to happiness. This is in the very construction of the universe we're in—a universe that has sentient beings and hearts and minds. That's the kind of universe we're in.

To me, that's a heartful universe. If I lived in a universe where that wasn't true, that would seem like a universe lacking in morality, an amoral universe. To me, that would be the cold universe. But we live in a universe that has this caring built into it as an element of happiness. There's no escaping it.

Another place where this shows up is in relation to anatta, and this seems contradictory at first.

Because if there's no self, why does karma land here? Why do the results come back here if there's no self? There was a bhikkhu in the time of the Buddha who asked a question like this: "What self, then, will actions performed by the not-self affect?" Basically that question. And the Buddha's only reply was, "You haven't been listening to me."

But actually, karma and anatta need each other. You can't really separate them. They need each other. Why is that?

The teaching on anatta doesn't deny individuality. We are all unique beings. We have a unique history and we have separate bodies, and our consciousnesses are not exactly the same thing. So the individuality is true. It's just that within this process, there's nothing fixed. That's what the teaching of anatta or not-self means. Nothing is permanent and ongoing within this changing field of experience.

One way this makes sense is through the analogy of a stream. A stream is a flowing body of water. If you wanted, you could go down to Gaston Pond and look at the outlet, and there's a stream that flows out of it and then runs downhill a little way. You could stand and watch that stream and observe its characteristics. It's fairly small. The water is quite clear. At this time of year, it's pretty cold. And it's disappearing all the time. Every second, there's new water flowing by. And yet, there is something that we can call

a stream, and it makes sense. If I talk about the Gaston Pond Stream, you kind of know what is being pointed to. There's nothing fixed in it—all flow, changing water—but it has its own kind of personality.

If you drive forty-five minutes west from here, you'll come to the Connecticut River. That's a very different kind of stream. It's very broad, hundreds of yards wide. It's brown water. It's flowing much more slowly than the water out of Gaston Pond. So that stream has a different personality. It has a different look. And its water is also just passing by, passing by, passing by, nothing fixed. Yet that has a different shape and color and speed than the Gaston Pond stream. They're very different.

This is what beings are like. We all have unique presentation and characteristics. Within this mind stream, there's a flow of experience. We are like a mind stream, and it contains sights and sounds and smells and thoughts and emotions and views, all kinds of feelings flowing on, always changing. In it, there's nothing fixed. But each of our streams is unique. We're our own river.

Looking at this river, I want to ask: what is personality? What comprises a human personality? We look around and know people who are generous and who are not generous. We know people who are very warm and people who are kind of cool. We know people who are a little bit shy and people who are really extroverted and confident. All those things go into making up their personality.

To me, personality is about the way we think and feel and speak and act. Maybe that sums up somebody's personality—mental, emotional events. Thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting—these are the three fields of karmic action, aren't they? So maybe personality is just the karmic bundle that each of us manifests.

And it's somewhat consistent, isn't it? You look at yourself, you look at your friends. Our personalities are kind of consistent from day to day. You know, it's not like you're going to go to bed tonight and wake up as Dipa Ma tomorrow, or I'm going to wake up as the Dalai Lama. I wish it could happen, but it's not going to happen.

So the personality is somewhat consistent, and it's not easy to change, as you know from observing your thoughts and feelings and so on for all these weeks. It's not easy to change personality because these habits of mind, which have worn a groove, have lots of momentum. There's a karmic momentum to all these habits of mind.

Here's a quote from the Buddha, and I'm going to use the word action rather than karma, but it's the same thing: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin." Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin that holds it to the

axle. This is how fixed our habits of mind and heart are. Living beings are bound by our karma. We have so much accumulated momentum in these habits that has built up certainly over decades of this life, and maybe many lives before, that makes it hard to change.

But it can be changed. Nothing within this flow is fixed. The ignorance isn't fixed. The craving isn't fixed. The clinging isn't fixed. The becoming isn't fixed. All the kilesas are not fixed. They can all be taken out. So the purpose of the path is to transform these habits of mind.

And how do we do it? I want to move from the stream to a lake, and say that we are in a lake that was designed by M.C. Escher. And being designed by M.C. Escher, the input comes in one way, flows into the lake, the output goes another way, but it circles back in to become the input again. Right? That's the kind of lake Escher would design, isn't it? Going round and round and round with the same streams, habits of mind. This is Lake Samsara. And this is where we are. Our outflows become our inflows and we just repeat the same habits.

Now we come into Dharma practice. And what happens in Dharma practice is some new streams start to come in with new intentions and new volition: mindfulness, loving kindness, patience, generosity, sila, compassion, wisdom. So all these new streams start to come in and they start to affect the outflow. Now the outflow is not heading back the same way; it's heading in a new direction. And where the outflow is going is to the nirvanic ocean. You may not have known, but that's where you're heading. It's going to the nirvanic ocean because this is the purpose of the path. The path brings in new intentions that shape things in a totally new way in the direction of freedom.

So I'm going to close with this quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who's an Indian Advaita Vedanta teacher who lived in the last century. A wonderful teacher who mostly taught in dialogue. He didn't tend to give talks, but he would entertain seekers and have dialogues with them.

In one conversation, Maharaj made this statement: "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." And the person in the room, the questioner said, "But surely karma interfered." And Maharaj said, "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life, but the attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character."

That's what we're doing. We're shaping our character.

in the direction of wisdom, love, compassion, and peace. And that character will shape our lives in completely new ways—unexpected, wonderful ways.

So let's just sit for a minute with this truth: ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character.

[Silent pause]

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 82

Q&A on Kamma

Guy Armstrong · 21 min

In this dharma talk from a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses fundamental questions about kamma and its relationship to rebirth. Drawing from the Majjhima Nikāya accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment night, Armstrong explores the three insights that led to the Buddha's awakening: recollection of past lives, understanding of karmic consequences across lifetimes, and the destruction of the āsavas (taints).

The talk addresses whether belief in kamma requires belief in rebirth, explaining how the Buddha saw these teachings as intimately connected. Armstrong discusses what carries forward between lives in the absence of a permanent self, touching on the role of viññāṇa (consciousness) and karmic imprints. He examines the relative karmic weight of thoughts versus speech and bodily actions, emphasizing how mindful awareness can transform our relationship to unwholesome mental states.

Practical guidance includes understanding kamma as both constraint and liberation - while past actions create present conditions, meditation practice can 'undo' kamma through mindful witnessing of mental habits. Armstrong encourages practitioners to appreciate their rare opportunity to encounter and practice the Dhamma, rather than postponing spiritual development. The talk concludes with retreat logistics and community acknowledgments, maintaining the supportive container for deep practice.

Good morning, everyone. I hope you've been sleeping well, practicing well, and feel rested.

I ended the sitting a few minutes early because I wanted to pick up the topic of karma this morning. There were some things I didn't get to in last night's talk, some things I promised and didn't address. I wanted to touch on them, and I thought we might do some live questions. In fact, the questions in the bowl were exactly about the things I had hoped we would talk about, so we'll consider that sufficient. I'll address some of the questions from the bowl, and then we have a couple of announcements at the end.

The first question asks: "To fully believe in the principle of karma, does it require a belief in rebirth?" It depends—that's up to you. But it's clear from the Buddhist teachings that the Buddha saw the two as very closely connected. Let me tell a story about the night of his awakening.

This account appears in detail in one of the discourses in the Majjhima Nikaya. There are a couple near the front—suttas 4 and 26—that describe his enlightenment in some detail. He sat under the Bodhi tree and resolved not to get up until he had understood what he was looking for. As the night wore on, he had three major insights. In describing all of them, he says, "When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, steady, malleable and wieldy, I directed it in a certain way." Malleable means it can be shaped or formed easily, like soft clay. Wieldy means it has power, like a lightsaber that can be effectively used.

The first thing he directed his concentrated mind to was the recollection of his own past lives. He said that with his psychic vision, he could see one past life, two, five, ten, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand past lives that he had experienced. He reviewed them very quickly. That was the first insight of the night.

I'm going to add some interpolation here—this isn't described in the sutta, but I think it's likely it would have happened. After reviewing his past lives, the next question that would have arisen in my mind would be: why did they unfold in that way?

In the next insight, he directed his concentrated mind to understand why beings die and then get reborn in certain conditions. With his psychic vision, he could see many thousands of stories of people who had died and then were reborn, and how that unfolded the way it did. What he saw was that people who had embraced good conduct in the previous life had a fortunate birth in their next life, while people who had unskillful conduct were led into a painful birth. This, of course, is the basic origin of the law of karma. He doesn't use that term in describing this insight, but it's the basic seed of the teaching on karma. He saw it in his own vision before he was awakened.

Then what I think might have gone through the Bodhisattva's mind was: "Oh my gosh, even if I act really well in this life, I'm still going to be reborn. And that means dukkha." Remember that dukkha is birth, aging, illness, and death. This means that the wheel of samsara just keeps going and going for everyone—even one who acts as well as one possibly can act—the wheel of rebirth continues.

I believe this is what motivated the Buddha to seek something beyond birth and death, to seek the deathless. So in the final watch of the night—the last four hours—he took his concentrated mind and directed it to the destruction of the taints, which means essentially destruction of the kilesas, the destruction of all the unwholesome elements of mind. This happened for him right at dawn, when he realized the unconditioned state he had been looking for: the release from birth and death. This was the attainment of nibbana, of the release from all cravings. In that liberation, there was complete ending of dissatisfaction.

I think someone mentioned that he then spent the next seven weeks still by the Bodhi tree, enjoying the bliss of deliverance. Many more insights came to him during that time, and it was out of those seven weeks that he decided to teach the Four Noble Truths—his first and central teaching.

You can see in this account of the insights leading up to his awakening that there was the understanding of action conditioned by wholesome states leading to rebirth that is positive, happy, favorable, and agreeable. In the Buddha's teaching, in the Buddha's understanding, these two teachings on karma and rebirth are very closely tied. But it doesn't mean that they have to be joined like that for you.

The teaching on karma may make sense to you, but there's still skepticism about this idea of rebirth. When I came into the Dharma, I was coming out of a scientific background. My training was in physics and math and computer science. And this didn't hold any sway for me. But over years of living with this view, it's become really kind of obvious to me that it just makes sense. Basically, if there is still desire active at the time of death, that is going to carry something forward that will result in another birth.

In the Buddha's teachings, if one acts in a certain way, certain results will happen. One of the things he said is that if one is generous in this life, then in the future or in a future birth, one will be endowed with abundance. That is basically the fruit of generosity. If one cares for living beings in this life in a non-harming way, one will enjoy good health and a long life, either in this life or some future life. If one pursues wisdom in this life, the Buddha basically said by inquiring of wise people, that is interested to learn from wise people, then one will be reborn with a mind that leads to wisdom.

So basically the way that we acquire wholesome qualities in the future is to manifest them in this life. And then they grow in a future birth. So that's the basic teaching. And to me it just makes a lot of sense.

This is one of the Buddha's quotations about rebirth. Remember, he came out of an agricultural society, so these are agricultural terms: "Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, workers, families, and dependents—none of these can you take with you. You must cast them all aside. But whatever karma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession, and you must fare according to that karma. That karma will follow you just as the shadow follows its owner. So do good actions, gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings after death."

So this is the potential promise and reward that karma offers us: Live happily now and that will set the stage for future happiness as well.

Now, when I was meditating in the early years and I was running up against a lot of emotional issues—you know, I had fear and insecurity and confusion, a lot of stuff going on—I thought, wow, I must have really engaged in a lot of unwholesome conduct for all this stuff to be showing up in my mind. What on earth have I done? Of course, when I reviewed my life in the 60s, that provided some answers.

But what I think about, if you have thoughts like that, is just to think how fortunate a birth you are having. How many people of the seven billion people on the planet have heard the Dharma, understood the Dharma, and found time to practice the path to liberation? All of you have incredibly fortunate circumstances that brought you here and have cemented your relationship to the Dharma. So don't take these passing emotions as being definitive of your past or your goodness or your conduct. You're all very, very blessed.

And then there's the question of if there's no self, what carries forward from one birth to another? Trungpa Rinpoche had a kind of funny answer to this. He said, what gets reborn are our bad habits. But that's coming from a view that our basic nature is pure. So that pure nature will always go with us. Call it pure awareness or original mind, whatever. That will always be with us. Then what gets reborn are some bad habits. But our wholesome qualities go forward too. He liked to be a little bit cynical.

So how does that happen? In the list of the aggregates, the one that the discourses show as continuing to some extent is consciousness—the fifth aggregate of vijñana. And it's not clear exactly how, because the Buddha didn't lay out a lot of these details. He didn't consider them essential to liberation. But there are discourses where he clearly lays out that the ground for a new being to arise is the moment of conception, being joined with a consciousness from a previous birth.

So in the Buddhist scheme of things, this is how we all got here. At the moment of conception, some elements of a consciousness from our previous birth got merged with that embryo. And then they grew up together. How that consciousness carries the karmic imprints isn't clear to me. He didn't describe it.

But somehow, consciousness, even in its impermanent nature—arising and passing, one moment conditioning the next, conditioning the next, conditioning the next—this rising, passing consciousness somehow carried karmic imprints that joined with the embryo at the time of conception and led to the being growing up with this combination of consciousness and physical qualities. So that's as much as is stated in the discourses about what happened with that.

Another question on rebirth: if we have many more lifetimes to practice, why do we have to worry about getting enlightened now? My answer to you is, how do you know that your next birth will let you practice the Dharma? How do you know that you'll be reborn in a land where the Dharma is available, where there are authentic teachings, where you have the leisure and understanding to practice to liberation? There's no guarantee. No guarantee.

And that's why it's so important to take advantage of this rare and precious opportunity to clarify as much as we can within the mindstream. And that clarification then will carry over, hopefully, into the next birth. But it's good not to postpone when the opportunity is here.

Another important question on karma: Do thoughts have less karmic weight or impact than actions of body or speech? Yes. By orders of magnitude.

The understanding generally is that actions of thought are the least impactful, actions of speech a little more impactful, actions of body most impactful. You can think this through with an eruption of anger. If you become angry at someone but you restrain it, that restraint itself is a wholesome action. So there is the anger, which is karmically unwholesome, but the restraint is karmically wholesome, and the mindfulness of it is even more karmically wholesome. So you've got other qualities there with the anger that make it a not totally unwholesome experience.

But suppose you shouted at somebody out of that anger. Feel this the next time—I hope it doesn't happen for you, but if it does happen, feel how that acting out with the shouting and the raised voice intensifies the impact on you. Taking a step like that more or less locks the anger into our body and mind for a longer period of time. You can feel this experientially if you act it out. And then if you went to the extent of punching someone, that's going to have a lot of repercussions—worldly repercussions—and you're really going to be stuck with that result for a long time.

So thoughts themselves, especially if met with mindfulness, don't have that negative a karmic impact. They're strengthening the groove, but if mindfulness is there with it, they're not making it worse for the future. They're starting to wear it down.

Nagarjuna was a great philosopher of emptiness. To my mind, the wisest author in the Buddhist tradition after the Buddha himself. He was a philosopher somewhere around 100 AD in India. And he said very clearly, basically, karma is undone by meditation. So as we witness these karmic habits with true mindfulness, that wears down their impact like nothing else. And then as we become more and more awakened, some of those habits are actually uprooted. So karma is ended through meditation.

And that's the freedom from the past. This path leads to freedom from the past—past hurts, past habits, past trauma. This way leads out of all of that into a fullness of presence in the moment that's uncontaminated by past suffering. Part of the beauty of this path.

A couple of announcements: Today, Dawn will be seeing people in her practice meetings as regularly scheduled. Most of us will see people tomorrow. Dawn will be meeting with people today, and her meetings will be in the afternoon. So please check if you're planning to see Dawn shortly. Roxanne will be offering sign-ups today, and her sign-ups will also be in the afternoon. So please check if you'd like to see her tomorrow.

And then I want to talk a little bit about the ending of the first half of the retreat. It is coming. It formally ends on Tuesday. If you weren't aware of that, you get the gold medal star for present moment attention. So we bow to you.

But some of you may have simply noticed that some of the group will be leaving on Tuesday. For those staying for the three months, your schedule remains unchanged. Every aspect of the schedule continues going forward, so pretend nothing's happening.

For those departing, the schedule will shift starting tomorrow. On Sunday afternoon and Monday afternoon, we'll do some integration work with the six-week yogis. This will include a return to speaking in a mindful way and listening in a mindful way. There will be talks and discussions about taking the practice from here back into daily life, along with manager's announcements relating to all the details of closing up your room and other logistics.

There will be a manager's talk tomorrow afternoon after a meeting with the teachers. After the manager's talk, Period One yogis are welcome to pick up your phones. Then there will be some time late in the afternoon for conversation. If you want to check in with anyone at home, you can retrieve your phone tomorrow afternoon after the manager's announcements. Sunday afternoon will also include time with teachers and some time for conversation.

Due to this transition, today is the last affinity sitting time for the LGBTQI community for the six-weekers. The LGBTQI sitting at 2 p.m. will continue for the three-monthers without interruption, but if you're a six-week yogi, this will be your last time with that group. It might be a meaningful occasion to join up with a community that has supported you and that you've supported. We hold it as a silent group, but it might be a time, if you wish, to bow to one another and acknowledge the support and friendship of that community.

The BIPOC group at 6:15 can continue through Monday evening, so that one is not closing now. Similarly, with the BIPOC group, if you want to acknowledge each other with a bow at the end of the sit, feel free to do that. I know it's been a good support for many people.

We have another beautiful New England day ahead. We're in the peak of the fall experience, so I hope you enjoy it mindfully.

CHAPTER 83

Introduction to Emptiness Retreat

Guy Armstrong · 49 min

> *In this opening talk, Guy Armstrong introduces a unique retreat format combining silent vipassanā meditation with study of śūnyatā (emptiness), one of Buddhism's central teachings. He outlines how emptiness has evolved through 2,500 years of Buddhist thought—from the Pāli suttas through Mahāyāna developments like Prajñāpāramitā and Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy, to Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen. The retreat explores emptiness as the absence of fixed, unchanging essence in both persons and phenomena, while examining how the mind becomes empty through letting go. Armstrong emphasizes balancing theoretical understanding with meditative inquiry, warning against grasping emptiness as a fixed view that could diminish compassion. The format includes twice-daily Dharma talks, afternoon discussions, and extended periods of silence to develop both investigation (dhammavicaya) and concentration (samādhi). Sally Armstrong and Gil Fronsdal join as co-teachers, each bringing different perspectives to this transformative teaching that reveals the hidden nature of reality while maintaining appreciation for conventional truth.*

Good evening, everyone. It's lovely to see you all here tonight. I see a lot of familiar faces out there, people who've spent many, many hours in this particular hall, and also a lot of new faces that I don't know and look forward to getting to know over the week together. The three of us are very excited to be here. We've been planning this retreat for some time, and it's a topic that we all feel a lot of enthusiasm about. So I hope we'll be able to share that enthusiasm and have a terrific week together.

My name is Guy Armstrong. I'm one of the teachers here at Spirit Rock. And on my left, this is Sally Armstrong. The last name is not a coincidence—we're married. And on my right is Gil Fronsdal, who's the head of IMC Meditation Center in Redwood City. People often get us mixed up by name. So just again, I'm Guy. This is Gil. Those three-letter words starting with G are a little too similar, so we'll keep stating that.

We've been planning this retreat for about two years, and this is the first in what we hope will be a series of retreats here at Spirit Rock. We want to have one retreat every year that is specifically for senior students—something with a little bit different subject matter, not just the standard Vipassana 101 retreat, which we have here a lot. This is the first in an annual series. Next year, the theme will be the Abhidhamma, and that will be led by Steve Armstrong. So something to look for and put in your calendar if that interests you.

But this is a theme that we particularly wanted to bring to the forefront, to share something that has been important in our meditation and our reflection. The topic of emptiness has been one of the central concepts in Buddhist thought for the last 2,500 years. Maybe if you had to pick one concept, it would be the most often mentioned concept over all this time. Even as Buddhism has gone through many different evolutions from the early days of the Buddha and the Pali texts into the early Mahayana sutras, the Prajnaparamita and the writings of Nagarjuna, through the later Mahayana, the schools of the Yogacara or mind only, Chittamatra, and then as it moved out of India into China and the concept of emptiness infused the Chinese understanding of Chan and later in Japan as Zen—this theme of emptiness has been there running all along, although its interpretation and understanding have also changed over the centuries as it's moved from one culture to another.

The theme was enunciated more strongly in the Mahayana, that is the later versions of Indian Buddhism that migrated to China, Japan, and Tibet. But the concepts, the key concepts, the primary concepts are all there in the Pali works as well. So in the teachings of the Buddha, in the commentaries of the Pali scholars like Buddhaghosa, the concept of emptiness is found, is clearly enunciated, is developed from a few different angles. So it's very much there within our tradition of the Theravada.

Over this week, we want to look at a number of different ways the word has been understood and used over the centuries, but we'll draw mostly from the Theravada, partly because that's the lineage that we represent here at Spirit Rock, and also because it hasn't been pulled out or described so extensively from our tradition here at Spirit Rock. So it's something we feel we can contribute to the overall Dharma picture in the West.

As the write-up of the retreat talked about, I hope everybody understood, we'll be looking at this topic both in theory and in practice. That means we're going to connect it to readings, and I hope you picked up a copy of the study guide when you registered. If you didn't, hopefully the retreat managers will have additional copies. There should be enough that everybody has one. And we would appreciate it if you would bring this, which will form the main basis of our textual study. Bring it to the talks and later as the retreat unfolds to the discussions that we have. This will be what we'll read or study from.

But we also want to connect it to our meditation practice. The purpose of learning about emptiness is to free our hearts and minds. It's not just to become smarter or intellectually clever. So we want to find out how these concepts can inform our understand-

ing. And that happens through our meditative inquiry. So we're trying to structure the retreat in the way that will nourish the best of these two approaches, the study and the meditation practice.

If you've looked at the schedule, you'll have noticed that most of the day looks like a regular retreat of sitting and walking. But unlike a usual retreat, we're going to have two Dharma talks every day. One will be in the morning at 9:30, the other will be at 7:30 in the evening, which is sort of the usual time that we do talks here at Spirit Rock. And there will be times for questions around both of these talking periods.

So this will be the opportunity for us to stimulate some reflection and for you to start to play with the concepts that you want to feed into your meditation. But then the rest of the day will be in silence and will be a standard practice of vipassana or mindfulness.

So we want to try to find this balance where there's enough silence and quiet time that the concentration develops so that you experience that stilling of the mind that you associate with your retreat practice. But we also want to put in enough conceptual content that it starts to spark insight for you.

And in this way, we hope to balance the factors of enlightenment. We want to put a lot of emphasis into the second factor, which is investigation. And we also want to put a lot into the sixth factor, which is concentration. You could say the investigation produces some of the arousing alert energy and the stillness and the quiet will produce the calming. So this is the balance that we're trying to find in this format.

And we'll see how it goes. I don't want to say we haven't done it before, but we haven't done it quite like this before. So it's a little bit of an experiment and we look forward to your telling us how it's working for you.

When you stop and think about it, this word empty is kind of a funny word to put at the center of a religion or a philosophy. It's not that appealing a word, is it? For me, it conjures up ideas of an empty cupboard or a glass half empty or an empty house. And it has a little bit of a bare and bleak connotation in English. So I've always wondered, well, was that something that's just lost in translation? How can a central philosophy be built on a word like that?

But in fact, the word that the Buddha used and the word that's been used in generations after is basically a daily, everyday word that means the same as our word, empty. So, for example, you know that famous quotation of the Buddha where he's pointing in the forest and pointing out places for the bhikkhus. He said, "Monks, there are these roots of trees. There are these empty huts. Meditate or you'll regret it later." So the

empty huts - the word used is the same word as for emptiness. The Pali word is sunya. The noun form is sunyata or emptiness. So it was an ordinary everyday word in the Buddha's time. It's an ordinary kind of everyday word in our time.

So the meaning of this word is explained a little bit on page one in your study guide. You don't need to read it right now. You can feel free to read it later when you go back to your room. But we wanted to give a little bit of a description or explanation on page one so that you can keep referring to that as the basic sense or meaning of the word.

So when the Buddha used the word empty to refer to aspects of our experience, what is it empty of? What's not there? And as a simple way to remember this, you might describe it as empty of a fixed or unchanging substance or essence. This is kind of the simplest or universal meaning that we'll come back to again and again.

This has a few implications because if you look at what we take to be a human being, how the Buddha described a human being, a fairly important part of what we look at in meditation, it's empty of something. It's empty of some fixed core, some abiding, unchanging entity at the center. If you look at the phenomena of the world that come through our six senses, they're empty of some kind of lasting substance also. So these are two important ways that we're going to be talking about this word empty.

And a third important way, which we also mentioned in this explanation, is the sense that the mind can become empty through letting go of things that don't need to be there. You know how often our thoughts are involved in drifting into the future or looking back at the past, and we construct senses of existing and belonging out of those thoughts of past and future? Those don't really need to be there. And as the mind gets simpler, more focused in meditation, there's an emptying process that goes on. And this is also another key point that the Buddha was pointing to.

But a lot of our exploration is going to be around this sense that the world is not the way it appears to be. And this is kind of the promise of emptiness, that it can reveal to us some kind of hidden truth about the way things are, about the way we take ourselves to be, about the way we take the world to be.

So part of our reflections during the week will be inquiring into questions like, what is real? What's reality? What's real in a human being? What's real in the experiences through our senses? And therefore what's not real in those things.

Because these are kind of fundamental questions, one sometimes, actually I'll say often, in meditating on emptiness has a feeling that the rug is being pulled out from under one to greater or lesser extent. And this is one of the functions of this inquiry, is to see where have we assumed that there's solid ground where there may not be.

So as we start to pull that carpet out, as we collectively all work at pulling that carpet out, sometimes this material can be a little disconcerting, a little unsettling. What we thought was solid ground may not be. So just be aware that that is part and parcel of the investigation, and different feelings will come up about that.

And he said, in Tibet, people are poor, but in the West, people are suffering. And that was the end of that answer.

And I said, well, what do you think Western meditators most need to learn? This was my attempt to get something useful for our community. And he said, through the translator, "Emptiness." And that was the end of that answer.

So when Sally and I decided to do this retreat on emptiness, I thought back to that conversation with Mingyur Rinpoche. He felt that Western meditators particularly needed to understand emptiness. And I think there's wisdom in that assessment.

We in the West can be very solid about our sense of self, very solid about our opinions, very solid about our positions. We can get quite rigid in our thinking patterns and our emotional patterns. And the understanding of emptiness is particularly liberating for minds that tend toward solidity and rigidity.

It's a wonderful antidote to the kind of psychological and spiritual materialism that can creep into our practice—where we start to think that we're accumulating something, that we're getting somewhere, that we're becoming someone special through our meditation practice.

Emptiness cuts through all of that. It shows us that there's nothing to accumulate, nowhere to get to, no one to become. And paradoxically, this understanding can be profoundly liberating and joyful.

But as I mentioned, it can also be unsettling. So as we go through this week together, please be gentle with yourselves. Go slowly. Take breaks when you need them. Talk to the teachers if things feel too intense or if you're getting confused.

Remember that the point of all this is not to become a philosophical expert on emptiness. The point is to taste the freedom that comes from seeing through our solid sense of things. To experience directly what the Buddha was pointing to when he spoke of the liberation that comes from understanding the true nature of reality.

And that liberation is available to each of us, right here, right now, in this very moment.

He said, yes. End of that answer.

With the language barrier and everything, we weren't getting much conversation going. So we were walking around this path that's about eight feet wide around the top of Mount Tam, and I thought I'd try a different approach because I wanted to get to know him a little bit.

I said, "Can you tell me what's the difference between these two schools in Tibetan Buddhism—the school founded by Nagarjuna called the Madhyamaka, and the school of Dzogchen, which is a meditative school in the Nyingma tradition? What's the difference between the Dzogchen view and the Madhyamaka view?"

His eyes lit up. He said, "The first thing you have to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness, and I want to tell you about them."

So he sat us down right there on the path. All five of us sat in a circle—Mingyur Rinpoche, the translator, Sally, Mary Ann, and I. And he started going through the different kinds of emptiness and how that affected the view of the Madhyamaka and the view of Dzogchen.

So this topic can proliferate into a lot of talking and thinking, but we want to keep bringing it back to our actual experience. That will be our focus. While we're aware of the rich philosophical implications, keep bringing it back to how we feel it here and now. So don't worry too much about all the complexity that's available. We want to try to keep it relatively simple.

But because there is a lot of complexity, all of us will have our own perspectives on it. One of the things I look forward to is hearing what my colleagues are going to say, because I don't really know. We haven't talked about a lot of this beforehand. So you may hear one of us say things that the other person contradicts in the next dharma talk. I don't know.

We certainly have, as we've discussed a little bit going in, somewhat different angles on it. And we've selected the topics for our talks that reflect our personal interests. So I hope that will make it alive for you as well. But we have different views on how we understand it, how we apply it, how we meditate with it, and how we'll talk about it. So don't worry if there are some contradictions. There are grounds for differing views on this topic. But on the central views, I think you'll see that we all agree.

Just briefly, I wanted to say—and we'll talk about this more as we go—that as we uncover this hidden secret about the world, it doesn't deny the conventional way that we understand the world. The understanding of emptiness, the insight into emptiness, doesn't negate conventional truths.

I'll give you an example of how this can be misapplied. There's a wonderful quotation on the front page of the study guide taken from a basic Nagarjuna text: "Like a snake poorly grasped or knowledge inappropriately applied, emptiness viewed wrongly destroys a dim-witted person."

So it's easy to take hold of emptiness as a view and lose touch with another level of reality. I'll give you an example. I was watching television the other night, and someone was interviewing a politician who favors extending the tax cuts for the wealthy. You know, this is a topic that's really up in Congress and the administration these days. The interviewer, the journalist—I think it was CNN—asked the politician, "Well, why do you favor extending the tax cuts for the wealthy? Do they really need the money? Do the rich need the money?"

And the politician answered, "There's no rich, there's no poor. We're all interconnected," and he made this gesture. And I thought, that's applying emptiness wrongly. To negate the concepts of rich and poor blocks one's compassion, because on another level, there are rich and poor. And they're suffering because of the poverty. And they're suffering because of the richness.

Emptiness, when held wrongly—not seeing the immediate truth of it, but held as a fixed view—can close our hearts. It can have a dampening, reductionist effect on the world, as though we said, you know, normally we say this is a striker. This piece of wood wrapped in cloth is here to strike the bell and make a sound. If we look at it from the point of view of a quantum physicist, we say, "Oh, it's just atoms and molecules—just protons and neutrons bound at the center of the atoms and electrons orbiting at a great distance around them, and mostly it's space." And then we look around and see everything's just atoms and protons and neutrons. So what does it all mean? It doesn't mean anything.

But conventionally speaking, it still works as a striker. So conventionally speaking, there are still rich and poor. Often, it's important—or really helpful—to maintain the view of compassion, to keep unfolding the compassion as a practice within us as we deepen the understanding of emptiness. And that will prevent us from falling into this trap of grasping onto a view and applying it wrongly.

So compassion is a really important part of the understanding of emptiness. And we have one talk during the week on the connection of emptiness and compassion.

So this is basically just setting the frame of what we'll be doing during the week. As you look through the study guide, you can take a look at the kinds of topics that we'll be addressing, some of the material that we'll be studying and reflecting on.

And so now I'd just like to talk in a little more detail about the structure of the days as we go through them together. We will have two talks every day. Both will be preceded by sittings. So the morning sit will be from 8:30 to 9:15. We'll have a little stretch break, and then the morning talk at 9:30 will be an hour and a quarter, including time for questions and discussion. The evening talk—there will be a sitting at 6:45 till 7:15, a little break, and then an hour for a talk from 7:30 to 8:30, also including time for questions. So those will be the two main talking parts of the day.

Then most afternoons—not the first day, so not tomorrow, because we want to use tomorrow as a quiet day to settle—most afternoons at 4:15, there will be an hour time for discussion, mostly in small groups in the hall together. We'll seed the discussions with some exercises or questions. But it will be really a time for you to explore the meaning of the concepts as you understand them, as you experience them, and to share them with your fellow practitioners. So it's really a time for you to feel the working of sangha and share with one another from your own understanding and experience.

We've been doing a lot of this kind of work through the Dedicated Practitioners Program, which Sally has been running for a number of years now. So it's a style that I know many of you are familiar with and we're quite familiar with too. It makes a good complement for both the silent meditation and the lectures.

The rest of the day will be in silence, combination of sitting and walking. After the afternoon discussion, we'll close with a short sit so that the words can settle before we go into tea.

During the retreat, we will have regular interviews. Everyone will have two meetings, basically, with us. One will be in the form of a small group, and the other will be an individual interview. So those will start on Saturday with two days of group interviews and then two days of individual interviews.

As we go through the days, please do take care with the silence. It's really going to be the part of the retreat that brings the deepening, brings the factor of concentration that will allow the insights to go deep and be more transformative. As you get to know each other, as there's more talking during the day, there's going to be more temptation to speak to one another than on a regular silent retreat. So please take good care with holding the silence. You'll all find it a really valuable support.

Please do bring the study guide into the future talks and discussions. We'll be referring to the quotations and—did everybody bring a pen and some paper? Just want to get a sense. Okay, I think we can cover you all. We had asked that an email be sent to ask you to bring those. It wasn't able to go out in time, so it's our mistake for not getting the word to you, but we'll find ways to gather that.

And just one last word on logistics. Some of the sits are close to work periods, and I think particularly the sit after tea. There may not quite be enough time if you have a job after tea—and this is mostly pot washers and dishwashers—there may not be enough time for you to completely finish your job before the sitting. If you're one of those people who has work, then it's fine to come into that sitting a little late. Don't feel you have to stay outside, finish your work, and then are excluded from the sit. Because of the work period, if you need to come in a little late to the sit right after a meal, then feel free to do that.

Okay, I think that's all I wanted to say as a way of opening the retreat. I'm really happy to be here with all of you, looking forward to getting to know you and exploring this together. So now I'm going to turn it over to Sally who's going to talk for a bit.

So I'd also like to extend my welcome and greetings to all of you. As Guy said, it's nice to come in the hall and see both so many familiar faces, but also people that I don't know that I'm looking forward to getting to know. And I'm particularly happy to be at this retreat, teaching with Guy and Gil. Obviously more than good friends—one more than good friend and one good friend.

I appreciate this opportunity to work with Gil and Guy as a teaching team. Both are extraordinary dharma companions who bring their own unique gifts to our shared exploration.

I've been advocating for retreats like this at Spirit Rock because I believe it's essential to expand our offerings, giving people meaningful opportunities to deepen their practice and explore the full depth and breadth of the Buddha's teachings. This retreat represents an ideal beginning for our series of experienced practitioners' retreats.

Having served as one of the primary teachers in our Dedicated Practitioners Program through three complete cycles now—and knowing many of you have participated in that program—I've witnessed firsthand the transformative power of taking a specific dharma theme and exploring it through both meditation and dialogue. As we prepare to launch our fourth cycle, the interest continues to grow.

What sets these retreats apart is their interactive nature. Unlike our foundational silent retreats, these gatherings invite discussion, inquiry, and the kind of meaningful exchange that deepens understanding. For many of us, myself included, learning happens most effectively through dialogue—through the opportunity to ask questions, receive feedback, and engage in genuine inquiry together. This interactive approach creates a rich forum for authentic dharma investigation.

Even with the comprehensive study guide before you—filled with profound suttas that may initially seem impenetrable—please know that this teaching need not remain mysterious. I want to be clear about my role here: I'm essentially the "every person" on this teaching team. While Gil has formal academic training—didn't you complete graduate studies in Hawaii specifically focused on emptiness? And Guy, as many of you know, has read extensively throughout the suttas—I come to this material as a dedicated practitioner rather than a scholar.

I've read considerably but certainly not comprehensively. More importantly, I don't feel the need to know everything, nor should you. What I do know is that this theme of emptiness is profoundly important and entirely accessible. We can each understand what we need to understand for this teaching to become truly transformative—a gateway to deep awakening, genuine letting go, and authentic liberation.

This is the perspective I'll return to throughout our time together. You need not be a scholar or an advanced adept. The meditation practices we'll explore aren't obscure or esoteric—they're simply our regular meditation, approached through this particular lens. My intention is to present these teachings in ways that make immediate sense, that you can recognize and understand within your own direct experience.

What we're exploring isn't mystical or unknowable. Emptiness is a very accessible, understandable teaching. Naturally, at its heart lies profound depth and transformative potential, but we'll approach it organically, allowing understanding to unfold naturally.

All you need bring is your willingness to show up fully, maintaining an open mind and heart, staying present to what's happening right now. Everything else will emerge from this foundation. I'm genuinely looking forward to this week of shared exploration.

Thank you.

I'm certainly delighted to be here as well, and I suppose I'm the one who's filled with emptiness! Reflecting on this theme today, I'm reminded that a blank canvas offers infinite creative possibilities—you can paint virtually anything upon it.

In Buddhism, the concept of emptiness functions similarly. The word "emptiness" itself has been used not as describing a completely vacant canvas, but rather as pointing to something empty of any fixed, inherent meaning—which is, ironically, quite an "empty" thing to say about emptiness itself.

There are so many varied interpretations of emptiness down through the centuries and in the modern world. It's almost like a blank canvas onto which people have projected all kinds of interpretations and ideas about this beautiful word. But in thinking about that, I'm struck by how many people have found in the word emptiness something that's been incredibly meaningful for them—something that really touches their hearts, touches their intimate relationship with the world around them, their freedom, their compassion.

That's what I hope for as we explore emptiness together—that this won't be an abstract topic but something that will point us back to something quite beautiful in our hearts and minds, something that some people would call quite sacred, something that will touch you and be meaningful for you as we're here.

I think this is what this hall and Spirit Rock has been built for—for all of us to be able to meet ourselves, meet our lives in their depth, with all their struggles and sufferings and joys and possibilities for liberation. To find something really blossoming beautifully within us so that we can bring that out into our world as gifts to the people around us, to our community and our world. The topic of emptiness is really a beautiful way to hopefully access something that's quite precious and profound.

I want to emphasize that this is meant to be a retreat. I hope that all the talking we'll do—which is more than in usual retreats—doesn't distract you from this fact, or distract you from the possibility of using this time as a way to drop in, to touch into that which is most meaningful for you. To drop into that place where your heart can blossom and grow. My hope is that as you hear these teachings on emptiness, you'll be challenged by them, but challenged in a way that encourages you to come back to yourself, come back to your own direct immediacy of this life here.

In my Zen training, I loved that aspect of various emptiness teachings that pull the rug from underneath the places I stood. Rather than feeling like I was tumbling or falling and crashing, I felt like I was flying. So I hope that if some rugs are pulled, you grow wings in the process.

We have a beginning of a retreat. We have this formal way of starting, which is chanting the refuge and precepts. It's a way of collecting ourselves and collecting our intention to be here, of all getting on the same page. We create the retreat together.

We're the sacred custodians of each other's time here at the retreat. We support each other, we nourish each other, we protect each other, and we offer our practice as a gift to the people we're with.

In that spirit of collectively creating this retreat, we provide the basic support, the basic foundation that allows people to open their hearts, to look at themselves deeply, and to discover enough trust in life that at least here they're willing to look and open to some of the deepest places we can access.

The precept of not intentionally causing harm, not to kill, is very meaningful in a world where people often cause harm. The precept of not taking what is not given is very meaningful in a world where your things are usually not safe if you leave them on the street or leave them someplace. The precept of not engaging in sexual misconduct is very meaningful in a world where there's a tremendous amount of harm caused in the name of sexuality or ideas about sexuality. In a world where there's a lot of deceit, a lot of lying going on, it's phenomenal to come to a place where there's a group of people committed to being honest.

Here, there's more talking than usual because of the afternoon discussions and the question and answer sessions. Part of our understanding of the fourth precept is the idea of noble silence—that there are periods of time here where we're really committed to keeping the container and the stillness and the silence so as to allow something to bubble up and move through us.

In a world where people experience tremendous suffering because of alcohol and drugs, it's a phenomenal gift that we give our world—not just to our retreat, but to the world at large—that this is a place people know is a safe place from drugs and alcohol. It's a refuge and a support. We come here and try to create that container for all of us and for ourselves, to create the conditions of clarity for our minds and hearts so that some of this deep work can happen.

We call on the Buddha, we evoke the Buddha, we evoke the Dharma, we evoke the Sangha. Because we don't do this alone. We do it with the example of the Buddha, the possibility of awakening. We do it with the potential that we all have to have the mind free and awake. We do this together with the support of the practices, the teachings, and the Dharma. We do it with the support of community.

It seems very helpful to evoke and call and remind ourselves that we're doing something that people have been doing for many, many centuries. We're joining a beautiful current and stream of people who have offered the best of themselves in order to let the best of themselves come forth—the best possibilities of freedom, of compassion, of kindness, of goodness in their hearts into this world.

Retreats sometimes can be difficult, and it's good to remember that we're being held, supported by this wide field of goodness that is represented by the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and that is nourished by people living an ethical life, living by the precepts.

Since I understand that you're all somewhat seasoned practitioners, I'd like to invite you to chant this together rather than being led. There's the chant sheet so that if you don't know it, you can read along. I'll start and then you can join me.

[The chanting follows]

Thanks, Susie.

We want to finish the evening with a short sitting just to let the words and the energy settle back into silence. You have been sitting for a while already. If you want to just stand in your place and stretch for a few seconds, adjust your posture, please feel free to do so.

And we'll just sit for ten minutes or so, just as I said, to let the energy settle a little.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 84

Formation of Self-View

Guy Armstrong · 1h11

> *In this dharma talk from an emptiness retreat, Guy Armstrong investigates the formation of self-view (sakkāyadiṭṭhi) and how our sense of personal identity arises through identification with the five aggregates. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching in the Middle Length Discourses, he examines the four ways we mistakenly regard material form as self: seeing form as self, self as possessing form, form as within self, or self as within form—patterns that extend to all five khandhas.*
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> *Armstrong guides practitioners to observe how peaceful states in meditation often coincide with a weakened sense of 'I,' while disturbances typically involve contracting around 'I' and 'mine.' He explores the Buddha's declaration that 'the world is empty of self or anything pertaining to self,' explaining how this understanding leads to liberation from the burden of selfing. The talk includes practical guidance for recognizing the constructed nature of personal identity and cultivating the wisdom that sees phenomena as 'not mine, not what I am, not my self'—the path toward the unshakable peace of nibbāna.*

So to begin this morning's session, I'd like to ask about your experience in the meditation we just had. We were looking at disturbances that come into our experience in meditation. What are they about? What are the different things that can upset the mind? And how does that feel in the body when the mind gets upset about something?

A couple people be willing to share anything you noticed.

"I notice that the ease comes with this sense of extension into space. And it's so delicious to rest there. Then to turn into the body, to notice the effect on the body of something—one of those thoughts that you don't know where they come from started. There was something about Harry Potter. So then my mind went, 'Harry Potter, for God's...' And as soon as that complaint or exasperation came, I understand now why we use the word 'upset' because it seemed to lift up and overturn this wonderful, easy, out there, in there. But mostly, and then with the non-deva realm experience, after quiet came, it was very interesting to observe how that right ear—for me the right ear—was still hypervigilant, kind of had that energy of checking, checking, and to feel how that settles the mind-body process. It felt like, well, I hate to say these things, it just felt like my body were not too... that there was again just an ease when the other thoughts did flow through. It was just continually surprising to me how it's all about me. It's just so much self."

Good. Thank you. So noticing that a thought brought a sense of exasperation—why that thought?—a sense of upset from the energy coming up, and then a way to settle back into that vast peace and ease, and a comment that many thoughts that came were all about me.

Anybody else? We'll take just one or two.

"Fatigue and then this thing which always happens and gets more and more over long retreats of this something comes up that causes this physical jerking. And I know over long ones I've practically gotten epileptic, so still not sure what that's all about."

Thank you. So sometimes it's a movement in the body that comes and seems to disrupt the sense of peace.

"Mine was like the first speaker where there's this real expansion and it feels like it can hold—it feels like it's kind of floating—it can hold any pain, any of the big hurts. There's room. And then when a thought comes, there's a real tightness, and it goes to the small me. So I'm straightaway relating it to me. And then the other thing I noticed was there's an ache in my gut, which I really confuse with hunger. So there's this real sense, oh, I could eat, and that would rest it. And then I could physically make the expansion happen again and hold it. So it was a really interesting thing to see that I could do that."

Lovely, thank you. So feeling the expansiveness, the peace of that, the contraction into the small me, and then with breathing being able to let go of that constriction, tightness again.

Okay, thank you all. We'll come back to this later in our discussion this morning, but I just wanted to pull out some of the common themes that sometimes we can hold those waves that come through us in the space or in the peace. Sometimes we can't. They're disturbing, they're upsetting, and in that there's a sense of contraction, a tightening, a narrowing, a focus. That's what the disturbance tends to bring, often connected with "I," and then that can be relaxed, expanded again, and retouch the peace and ease.

Good. Thank you.

So that's a good introduction to what I'd like to talk about this morning. The topic is the formation of self-view. And on the study guide, we're up to page five now. This, of course, is not a simple thing. How the self comes to appear seems to exist. It's not trivial. It's considered one of the roots of our bondage, as Sally talked about last night with the three characteristics. I would even go so far as to say it has kind of cosmic implications.

I don't want to sound too pretentious here, but when you think about this process of coming into human existence, there's a deep mystery to it that we tend not to reflect on in our day-to-day lives. But how is it that this quality of consciousness got joined with this element of matter that is our body so that the body can be in the world and yet pick up the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and sensations of that world and then re-display the world through our sense phenomena, through our sense creations, really? As the Buddha said, within this fathom-long body is contained the world, its origin, its end. How is that possible? It's really a mystery that no one has explained.

I like to think of it along the lines, just to kind of set the perspective for what we're working with, of different creation stories or creation myths about how this all came to be. Of course, the theistic version is very common in our culture. A god was there from the beginning and created all the rest of this. And who knows how it works, but God knows, so that's all we need to worry about. It's never quite explained how God came to be there, but we don't worry about that part. So that's one approach to the creation story.

The predominant creation story in our day and age is the scientific one, which is a materialist explanation that at one moment there was nothing, and then there was the Big Bang. And through the Big Bang, the universe exploded incredibly fast into forms of matter, probably just protons and electrons at that point. And over time, that material substance collected, formed stars. Through the explosion of stars, that debris created planets. Through the enduring of planets over the ages, water collected, and with heat and some form of electricity, maybe lightning bolts, in this cosmic setting, some life started to appear in that water just through chemical reactions, blind chemical reactions of nucleic acids.

And those one-celled organisms which first appeared on this planet over three billion years ago, according to geologists and biologists, grew up and became you and me. That's basically the story of Western science. How did consciousness come in? Where did consciousness come from? For me, there's something that doesn't quite make sense—that consciousness could come out of dumb matter.

So for people like me, there's an alternate creation myth. And this we might call the mentalist creation myth. And in this creation myth, mind was first. Not matter. Mind was first. And there's the sense—I'm not telling this from any particular text, but it's suggested by a few texts—that in the beginning there were no objects. There was no matter. But there was something that could be called a kind of primordial sense of luminosity or a primordial potential for awareness. And that's all there was.

This was a non-dual state. Because it's all there was, there was nothing that could be known by it. But you might say it knew itself. So because there was no other, there was only peace and bliss, immovability and non-duality. Then something stirred. Something stirred within this vastness of mind, something stirred that was a reaching for something different or something other. And then it's said that fragments of this luminosity or consciousness separated, lost the understanding of their source and went looking for matter, and ended up finding or creating—the story isn't quite clear—bodies and the world. The consciousness inhabited the body and then was able to look out and have contact through the senses of the body.

This is an alternate creation myth. So which way do you lean? Do you lean to a scientific materialist view? Do you lean to, let's say, a philosophical idealist view based on mind? I don't know. Both of them have their merits and neither one fully explains the situation that we're in. One explains the fact of physicality, the other explains the presence of consciousness or mind, but I regard them both just as stories, or if you like, myths, if they have that quality for you. But reflecting in this way kind of opens us up to the mystery of how this all got started and how we originated, where we came from.

So, what did the Buddha say about this? The Buddha said, don't think about it. He said the beginning of things is one of the four imponderables, along with the range of mind of a Buddha, the power of a concentrated mind, and the specific workings of karma. And he said that anyone who dwells on this and tries to figure it out will experience vexation and go mad. So maybe we should send a letter to the cosmologists and let them know.

About where we are now, the Buddha said that matter and consciousness lean on each other like two stocks of reeds that have been tied up and are leaning and supporting each other. If you take one away, the other collapses also. So if you take consciousness away from this system, the life force of the body will collapse.

If you take the life force of the body away, consciousness will collapse. So in the Buddha's view, it's kind of a middle way between these two ideas, and both are dependent upon one another.

But at any rate, somehow out of this mystery of beginnings, we have accumulated into these bodies. And we find ourselves born and sort of wondering, what's this all about? Rumi put it very well. He said, "Where did I come from and what am I doing here? I have no idea." That's kind of our situation when we start to wake up. We don't know where we came from and we don't know what we're supposed to do. But here we are in this human setting.

So our human setting is described by the Buddha in the quote at the top of page five. It says, "Monks, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life. It is simply the eye and sight, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and taste, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of life would not be speaking of something they knew about."

So this is our situation. Somehow consciousness and form have become married, and the result is that we have contact through the six senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. Mind objects refers primarily to thoughts and emotions. Can also include meditative states such as concentration, equanimity, feeling, perception. Basically thoughts and emotions.

So whatever it is that has urged us into this field of contact, this is our situation, and it's really what we're here for. I was on my first three-month course a long time ago, and one of my fellow meditators asked Joseph Goldstein, who was one of the teachers. She came up to him outside a formal session in the hall, grabbed him in a hallway one time and said with great urgency, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean here on this retreat or here at all?" And she said, "I mean here at all. Why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Well, it's because you wanted to see and hear and taste and touch and smell."

That is kind of the Buddhist understanding. It's out of this longing for sense contact, for something different, for differentiation, that we have taken birth. Some kind of urge for those experiences. Nisargadatta Maharaj puts it this way: "Desire for embodied existence is the root cause of trouble."

It is, isn't it? Because as soon as we open ourselves up to this wide-ranging sense contact, as Sally talked about last night, we find that it's out of our control. We can't control sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mind objects. So we're bombarded. This is what it means to be a sentient being, to be a human being. We're bombarded by a mix of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences at the six sense doors, and it happens all the time. All the time we're awake, at least.

Can you turn that off? Not possible. That's asking, can I go unconscious? Not possible in our normal waking hours to turn that off. And it's this constant bombardment of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral experiences that forms the ground for our reactive mind. It really forms the ground for self. So we sort of distinguish ourselves apart from what we see and sense and hear and feel. So that gives us a sense of difference, a sense of separation. This body is separate from other bodies.

And this sense of separation gives the being, gives the human being a sense of isolation. Scientific researchers have started to investigate this quality of isolation and found that it's one of the most painful things about being a human. And the more isolated one gets, the more direct pain is experienced as a result of it. Also, being in a body, we sort of become the custodian of it. We're the guardian of it.

We have to take care of it. And this can be a burden, too. We have to protect it, defend it, nourish it, feed it, keep it safe, and so on. So all of this is the burden of the aggregates.

We have this body. It exposes us to great potential for pain and suffering. And there's a sense of fear. Almost every human being, unless deeply trained, has a fear of dying, fear of death, a fear of this experience coming to an end. This is all part of the consequence of this embodied existence.

So finding ourselves in this situation, we make a project. And this is the central work of the self. The project is: keep only pleasant experiences coming and keep painful experiences away. That's our basic strategy.

If you look at how it's expressed from children, from an early age, as it continues through adolescence into adulthood, this is what we orient our life's activity around—keeping the pleasant coming as steadily as possible. Permanent would be good. Permanent pleasantness would be a good solution. But again, as Sally said, because of the truth of impermanence, that's not possible to arrange.

Or at the very least, if we can't have permanent pleasantness, let's have permanent absence of unpleasantness. So anything that comes into the field of experience that's of a painful nature, we want to push away.

This sets up the basic work of desire on the one hand and aversion on the other. And as you investigate the mental reactivity that comes in the middle of peaceful periods, this is what the reactivity is about—pulling toward us what's pleasant, pushing away what's unpleasant. These are the reactive movements of greed and aversion.

They're also accompanied by the third of the kilesas, the third of the tainted mental states, which is delusion, because we fail to see that that's what's happening. As we grow up, we think this is just a normal, natural, unavoidable way to relate to life. It's only when we come to meditation and turn our mindfulness to the activity that we start to realize—maybe it helps us get a little more pleasure, maybe it helps us keep away a little of the unpleasant, but we are paying a huge price.

And the price is constant activity, constant turmoil, constant effort to control the environment, to control the inner experience so that it's only pleasant and never painful. This is the project of the self. This is how we try to take care of our needs.

And these forces spring into the mind again and again and again—desire, aversion, and the delusion of not understanding. These forces combined are called craving by the Buddha. He summed these up as the force of craving: greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is a quotation from the Buddha: "Obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving, beings have been wandering in this samsara since beginningless time."

So from the Buddha's point of view, this is not a momentary dilemma, a temporary dilemma, or a trivial dilemma. This is our inheritance as sentient beings. These twin forces of ignorance and craving are what propelled us into this embodied existence. And until we can resolve them, we are at the mercy of them.

So this is usually our situation as we meet meditation or spiritual practice, spiritual life of some sort. We start to feel the impact or the burden of this heritage. We start to feel the suffering that's involved in the turmoil of this approach to life. And we look for a resolution, a solution.

This is again from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "All yogas have only one aim: to save you from the calamity of separate existence." This believing ourselves to be separate is a calamity. This is the view that's responsible for all the struggle and turmoil. And we search for a way out of this extremely difficult and hard to resolve situation.

The suggestion, as Sally pointed to last night, is that this sense of separation is to some extent an illusion. Yes, the bodies are separate, but in many ways not much else is. Our beings interpenetrate one another. That's what sangha is for. You're part of my experience in this moment, and I'm part of your experience. Because of our ability to feel into each other's states of heart and mind, we share our beings with one another.

As we grow together in a sangha, we share our spiritual strengths with one another—our patience, our persistence, our loving kindness, our wisdom, our compassion. All of these are shared and felt within the community of sangha. So we're not entirely separate, but it looks like we are, and in the beginning we think we are because of this fixation on the view of self.

So one of the central inquiries in Dharma practice is to look into the sense of self—how it's created, in what ways it may be real, and in what ways it may be unreal.

The first thing we notice is that when we try to find it within our actual experience, it's not really findable. All we can find when we look are sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts and emotions, and mind. Mind in this context is consciousness, or what's doing the looking. So there are the experiences of the six senses and the knowing of them, the consciousness. That's it. There's no thing, no central entity that is the center of all that or experiencing all that.

William James said, "When I go to look for myself, all I can find is a tickling at the back of my throat." It's very elusive when we sit down and look. And the Dalai Lama said, "When something seems obvious, but you can't actually find it, it means that there's some delusion present."

So we are deluded about this thing we call I, which is the central feature of our existence. Almost everything we do and think about and care about has something to do with this I. And yet, we're deluded about it. So this suggests the first thing we should do in going to some depth in our Dharma practice is try to clarify this question: What is this thing we call I?

The confusion is revealed in our ordinary language. If I ask you, "How old are you?" it's not a hard question to answer. I would say, "I'm 62." But when I say I'm 62, what I really mean is this body is 62. My thoughts aren't 62—I just had some of these thoughts this morning for the first time. The thoughts aren't 62. My feelings aren't 62. They're being born right now and they're very much like a child's feelings in many ways. But the body is 62 years old. So when we say, "I'm 62," we're identifying I am the body.

But I could also ask you, "What color are your eyes?" And I would reply, "My eyes are brown." But this is a different relationship. Last time I was the body; now I'm somebody that owns eyes. These are my eyes. So now I become the owner of the body. So which are you? Are you the body or are you its owner? You can't really be both, can you? Or how many selves do you have?

We could also talk about it in relation to emotions. Somebody might ask you, "How are you today?" And you'd say, "I'm very happy, thank you," or "I'm sad today." So here, the I is the emotion—happiness, sadness, loneliness, fear, joy. But we could also talk about my joys, my sorrows, my happiness, my grief. And here the I becomes the owner of the emotions. So which is it? Are we the emotion or are we the owner of it?

So these are four different ways that the I manifests in our language, in our speech. And we tend to believe them all. That's what's so interesting. We don't normally see any contradiction in believing all of these.

And another central way that the I manifests, that we feel it, is that the I is located just behind the eyes, somewhere in the center of the head, maybe in the region of the brain, and it's what looks out on the world all the time as observer. And this is maybe one of the more deeply felt senses of I—the hidden observer.

One of the things I really enjoyed about doing practice in the style of U Ba Khin or S.N. Goenka was moving my attention through the whole physical body. Every piece being explored as fully as possible with really precise, minute, attentive mindfulness. I explored this area all over my head and inside my head and the feelings between my ears. I couldn't ever find that observer. Couldn't locate it.

Even modern brain research done through fMRIs that I'm sure you've read about also finds there's no central organizer within the workings of the brain. Many different independent activities are happening. There's no controller within the brain itself.

So here are five ways we might think of the "I." And this last one I would say is an identification with knowing, maybe an identification with seeing, because it's often connected with the eyes. And there's also no ground for that one. But it is interesting that we tend to attach the "I" to all these different kinds of experiences.

Let's take a look at quotation number 20, also on page 5. "Venerable Sir, how does personality view come to be?"

This term "personality view" is quite an interesting one. The Pali is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. It's the sense that one is a person or personality, and it's holding this view. Every time we express a word like "I'm 62..." and we haven't, let's say, seen through this false identification with the self as body, we're expressing a view about our personhood. Our person is 62 years old.

So this personality view could also be described as a self view or the activity of forming a self. Really what the person is asking is, how does a sense of self come to be formed?

And so this is the Buddha's answer: "Here, bhikkhu, an untaught ordinary person regards material form as self." Material form is all the matter in the world. It includes the body, but it's not limited to the body. It's also outside matter. But here, it might be useful to think of it for illustration as body and see how this works.

"Regards material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form." And then he goes through the other five aggregates in the same way. "That is how personality view comes to be."

So let's just look at some of these. "The untaught ordinary person regards material form as self." Do we ever take the body to be self? Yes. "Or self is possessed of material form." Do we ever think this body is mine? "The eyes are..." "These are my eyes." "This is my health." "Or material form as in self." This is kind of an unusual one. When you think about the body, do you ever think about the body being within yourself?

So let me ask you, in terms of the meditation we did this morning, which was an expansive meditation, what if you identified with that vast awareness as being who you really were, and this body was appearing within that awareness? Might that be a way that material form was seen as being in self?

So if we identify with the vastness of awareness as being who we really are, then body appears to be within self. "Or self as in material form." This is kind of the sense of the observer. "Oh, I'm really in the middle of the head behind the eyes. That's where I'm located. I'm somewhere in the body."

So what the Buddha is saying is that in relationship to the first aggregate of material form, we identify or we construct a sense of self in any one of these four ways. And you can see this in your experience, especially the first, second, and fourth are very clear and happen all the time. But this is considered to be misleading or deluded.

And we look at quote number 19, which is just above that: "In whatever way they conceive [of self], the truth is ever other than that."

Again, we have this word "conceive" that there was a question about yesterday. I bracketed the words "of self" because they're not actually in the text. The text is just "in whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that." But the commentaries and Bhikkhu Bodhi as a translator said that generally the word "conceive" is used to mean conceiving about oneself. So that's why I put those in bracket.

In whatever way we conceive of ourselves, the truth is ever other than that.

One of my teachers put it a little more directly. He said, "Everything you think is wrong."

So all these different ways—and then, of course, the Buddha goes through the other four aggregates in the same way—twenty different ways that identification is created, twenty ways that a view of self, a view of personhood can be created. The truth is ever other than that.

So what is the right understanding? We can look back to an earlier quote, number 11, which is on page three. To me, this is one of the most interesting of the Buddha's quotations on emptiness.

Venerable Ananda went to the Blessed One and said, "It is said that the world is empty, the world is empty, Lord. In what respect is it said that the world is empty?"

And the Buddha replies, "Insofar as it is empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self—that is why the world is empty." The Buddha then goes on to describe what is empty of a self, and it's all the six sense bases, internal and external, that we were just talking about.

So the world is empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self—or as the other translation I've often seen puts it, anything belonging to a self. This means that anytime we form and believe in these concepts of I and mine, we're not seeing clearly. This is the element of delusion that comes in.

There was another quote I think Sally mentioned yesterday. We're back on page five, quote number 14: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to."

Ajahn Buddhadasa offers a gloss on this in the next quote, number 15: "If one amplifies the meaning a little, it may be rendered as: no one should grasp at or cling to anything as being I or mine."

Because this is what we do, isn't it, when we take the body? We cling to the body either as being self or as belonging to self. And we have a lot of concern about the body, a lot of anxiety. We don't even like to get a little cut, much less lose a limb, much less lose our life.

Ajahn Buddhadasa continues: "As being I refers to the feeling called 'eyeing'—ahankara, the grasping at a soul or abiding ego entity. As being mine refers to the feeling called 'maying'—mamankara, the grasping at phenomena as being connected to ego or self."

I love these two words: ahankara and mamankara, which mean "eyeing" and "maying." We could think of it this way: The self is not a solid thing. We may have read a lot about Buddhism before we came to practice and think, "Oh, what I have to do is uproot the self." But there is no self there to begin with, so there's nothing to be uprooted.

The sense of self, though, can be felt. We can feel the grippingness, the solidity, the stickiness of the sense of I—my body, myself, my feelings, and so on. This sense of I is created, but it's not there from the beginning.

So we can say that the self isn't a noun. It's not something we're going to find within this mind-body process. The self is a verb. We could more properly talk about "selfing."

And so the question is: How does the self take shape? We create it.

How important this is, the Buddha described in the next quotation, number 16. He was in conversation with Sariputta, one of his chief disciples. I find this a very poignant passage because you can almost hear the Buddha's lament in it. You can almost hear it as a sadness about the efficacy, the usefulness of his teaching.

He says to Sariputta, "Whether I teach the Dhamma briefly or at length, those who understand it are hard to find." Remember, this was his concern about whether to teach in the first place. He said beings have a lot of dust in their eyes—they won't get it. And here he's been teaching for quite a while, and he says, "Those who understand it are hard to find."

Sariputta replies, "Then, oh Blessed One, now is the time for it. Now is the time to teach the Dhamma in brief or at length. There will be those who will understand."

And the Buddha puts it very briefly here: "Well then, Sariputta, this is how the training should be done. Concerning this body with its consciousness, let there be no self-centered imaginings of I and mine and no such bias. With regard to external objects, let there be no self-centered imaginings of mine and no such bias. We shall then abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom."

This is a pointer to that state of peace you all were talking about, that you've discovered in meditation—and then the arising of disturbance around finding places for I and mine to fixate.

This is really the area, the state of peace as somewhere around the third noble truth. And the disturbance, the clinging, the making of I, somewhere around the first and second noble truths—some activity of craving that solidifies, constricts into a sense of self, a sense of I.

So take a look and explore through your meditations those times when there is a sense of greater peacefulness and see if at those times the sense of I is weak. Notice how the frequency of thoughts about I die down. In this state of peace, the actual sense of the I being formed is not so strong. When a disturbance comes, it tends to whip up the I thoughts—I or my—and see what that does to the sense of a self being there in those moments.

Another way to think about this in relation to the formation of self or self-view: does the I ever arise on its own? Do you ever have a sense where it just goes, "I..." Or is it always I and something else? Is it always about me in relationship to this pain in my knee, this mood in my mind, this relationship in my daily life, this view or opinion about something? The Buddha said there are four kinds of clinging: we cling to sense pleasures, we cling to views, to rules and vows, and to a sense of self or a doctrine of self.

This is interesting to see. As you rest in some degree of peace and then find a disturbance, is that disturbance out of your control or did you have some part to play in it? Are you simply the victim of these disturbances or are you encouraging them in some way? For there really to be a disturbance or suffering, we have to take hold of it. We have to pick it up.

Someone mentioned that it was quite possible for different thoughts, moods, emotions to arise and pass, but there not be any reactivity around them. Other times we know very well that same thought, that same emotion could come and we make a big deal about it. So somewhere in relation to these events of our experience, it's when there's a fixation and a holding on to one piece of the passing show that the self is being created.

We could really say that the act of grasping itself creates a sense of self. So these three concepts go really well together: grasping, clinging, and fixation. Actually, in most of the Pali translations, grasping and clinging are translations of the same Pali word, which is upadana. You'll meet it again when we do dependent origination. So grasping usually refers in English to the momentary act where we first take hold of something. Clinging refers to the fact that sometimes that grasping happens for a while and doesn't let go. But they're both the same movement—there's a taking hold of.

So out of all the different elements of the passing show of phenomena, there's a fixation with our attention on one element and then a taking hold of. And once we've taken hold of, some narrowing happens. And in that, some kind of self is born, even if it's just: I'm the owner of this thing I've grasped, whether it's a problem or a pleasure. I'm defined by this grasping. It creates the sense of an I, simply because we've taken hold of it.

You can start to see this in your meditation practice. When we grow up as children, generally we have a lot more space. If we've had a reasonably cared for upbringing, we have a lot more space in the mind. Then as we come into adolescence and the ego form-

ation gets further and further down the road, we tend to be thinking a lot. And as we grow up into adults, that thinking gets rather continuous. Most of the thoughts end up revolving around I, me, and mine.

If we don't see them—that is the factor of delusion—if we're not seeing the construction of self, if we haven't seen through the false identification, then these thoughts, one after another after another, tend to create an ongoing steady sense of self. This is how the self starts to feel solid, because we think it again and again and again. And this is usually our experience as we come into meditation.

So as we come into meditation, mindfulness develops, the ability to be in the present moment, concentration develops, and this flow of thoughts starts to slow down. And then we start to see it's not continuous, but there's some space. We can tune into that space between two thoughts. Then we start to feel some of the peace that has been discussed because if you look at the space between thoughts and investigate its quality, it's generally of the nature of peace.

So then it may just be a brief moment of peace. More thoughts come in. We cling to those, the disturbance happens, we recreate the sense of self, we may be lost for a while. But as we continue our meditation, the mindful attention, the quality of concentration develops, the slowness happens, the sense of space starts to expand.

I'd say one of the greatest benefits of meditation, both in the short term and the long term, people describe as the development of the factor of equanimity. Equanimity is the last of the brahmaviharas and the last of the seven factors of enlightenment. And how it's felt is as a greater sense of inner space. We have more openness, more spaciousness, more acceptance of the coming and going of everything.

So as the equanimity develops, as the spaciousness develops, the self is being recreated less frequently, with less force, and because of the ongoing mindfulness, we're seeing it clearly.

We can see clearly the moment when a self arises out of a period of relatively little self. And then we can start to study that formation and how it makes us feel. Because normally the self and disturbance are connected. When selfing thoughts are going on and are strong, they're usually upsetting in some way because we're trying either to make things more pleasant or to make things less unpleasant. So there's that turmoil of activity.

Then we can start to see with what the Buddha described as wisdom. Phenomena come along, even if they're not pleasant, we don't have to make a self around them. So this is in the quote carried over at the top of the next page: "Bhikkhu, any kind of material form whatever... one sees it as it actually is with proper wisdom, thus: 'this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.'" And similarly for the other aggregates.

This is the activity of wisdom. One sees form, feeling, perception, formation, consciousness—but one doesn't put the label "I" or "mine" on any of it. In coming to relate with our own inner experience, as the Buddha was suggesting, the words "I" and "mine" aren't even necessary. Because truly, all there is is form, feeling, perception, formation, consciousness. Or if you like the six sense bases: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. There's no need for an "I" to arise in relation to any of it.

As our meditation practice deepens, this comes to be more and more our experience. These things are just arising, but they're not clung to as "I" or "mine." And this is wisdom—the wisdom that can liberate. Of course, sometimes the sense of "I" will still express itself, but when we're seeing clearly, we can see that and know that it's not true. We've investigated, we've seen the incorrectness of making that assumption, and we can let it go.

So when wisdom is active, there is not taking up the burden of self—even though there may be pain in the body, even though a difficult emotion may have come into the mind. The burden of self around these comings and goings goes out. And with that, the problem goes out.

Jack Kornfield had a wonderful meeting early in his practice days in Sri Lanka with an old monk who had a lot of happiness about him. This monk knew that Jack had trained in Thailand, and so he asked Jack, "Well, you've been practicing Buddhism. What's your understanding of the essence of what the Buddha taught?" And Jack said that the root understanding is that there is no self within this stream of phenomena, no fixed core. And the old monk said, "Yeah, no self, no problem." And he just laughed.

No self, no problem. When the self goes out, the problem goes out, even if there is still pain, even if there are still difficulties.

I just want to finish with a couple of quotes because I think they're so interesting. One from the Sutta Nipāta, one from the Middle Length Discourses: "Whatever be the phenomenon through which they think of seeking their self-identity, it turns out to be transitory. It becomes false, for what lasts for a moment is deceptive. The state that is

not deceptive is nibbāna." And below: "His deliverance being founded upon truth is unshakable. For that is false which has a deceptive nature, and that is true which has an undeceptive nature: nibbāna. For this is the supreme noble truth, namely nibbāna."

As these phenomena of senses pass through us, we're deceived into thinking that they're objects. When the word illusion is applied to our misunderstanding, what we mistake is temporary passings for something real and lasting. This is the deceptive quality when we haven't seen fully with wisdom. Something that lasts for a moment we ascribe a longer duration to. Really all the phenomena of our senses, internal and external, are just temporary flashings. Sally was pointing to that last night in the talk on impermanence. But when we take them as enduring objects, then we think there's something that we can hang on to.

When we see how they're all simply coming and going, that that's really the truth of things, no one at the center, then our understanding shifts. And this is pointed to in this last quotation from the Visuddhimagga: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is no doer of deeds, nor one who reaps their fruits. Empty phenomena roll on."

This view alone is right and true.

So by examining the self in this way and coming to see its constructed nature makes it easier to let go. When we can let go, we're returned to that place of peace and equanimity where everything has its life, all phenomena come and go, but we don't have to form a self-cling in relation to any of them. And when we don't form that self, then we're in alignment with the statement of the Buddha that the world is empty. We see the truth—the world is empty because there is no self or anything belonging to a self.

That's really what I wanted to share this morning, and we have time now for any comments, discussion, or questions.

A participant asked about the distinction between grasping, clinging, and fixation. I take fixation to be the moment where attention locks onto one of the phenomena that we're aware of and doesn't let go. So it's almost synonymous with clinging or grasping. Sometimes this word is helpful because it points to the fact that out of all the things that have passed through our experience, we fixated on one of them. We could be aware of anything at any of the six sense doors, but we've selected out one and fixed the attention on it, and then with grasping behind it, become fixated.

Now it's possible to direct the attention to something without the quality of grasping. We could select breath as a meditation focus and not have a quality of grasping about it. But when I use the word fixation, I mean singling out something and having some energy of grasping at the same time.

Another question arose about whether all thoughts are self-conceiving. Not all thoughts are self-conceiving. The Buddha uses the word conceiving, as I understand it, to refer to thoughts about self. There are many thoughts that are not self-conceiving or even self-referencing. A thought of generosity, a thought of loving kindness, a thought of compassion—these don't necessarily have to be motivated by any kind of selfing.

Someone shared experiencing fatigue and headaches when contemplating these teachings, asking how to work with that resistance. Many different hindrances come into the middle of meditation and into the middle of Dharma talks. I would work with it like any hindrance. The most important thing when it happens is not to try to keep focusing on the words and concepts or quotations, but to restore your inner balance.

I'd suggest letting go of the content of the talk and the quotations being referred to, and just be mindful of the sense in the body—the pressure in the head, the experience of tiredness that you feel. Breathe a little until you feel yourself coming back to balance. When you feel ready again and restored, then come back into the content. The main thing is to restore your own sense of balance first.

This is a really important and big topic, which is the integration, you could say, of the conventional and ultimate levels of understanding.

I had another whole piece of this talk that I just didn't have time for today, which is what the conventional sense of self means and how it's a valid thing to consider. For instance, the Buddha's teaching on anatta doesn't mean that everything in the universe gets coagulated into one primordial lump. We are still separate beings to some extent.

We have our own bodies, speaking conventionally. We have our own paths. We have our own hindrances. We have our own minds and emotions. For example, the Buddha became enlightened, but that didn't solve my problem. He clarified his mind stream. That didn't clarify my mind stream. So we are still acknowledged to be individual beings, with the responsibilities that involves.

From a conventional point of view, you could call this person a being, could call yourself a being, or you could call it a self. Conventionally, we could say this accumulation of mental and physical phenomena, which I call a being, I could also call my conventional self. That's perfectly fine as long as we understand that this is all changing. There's nothing fixed within it.

Then we come into the realm of what makes sense for selves or beings as modes of interaction. The discussion shifts to the realm of intention, because how we relate to each other depends on our intentions in carrying out actions of thought, speech, and body.

Here in the realm of intention, the important factors—wholesome, skillful factors to consider—are generosity, loving-kindness, compassion. Generosity, loving-kindness, compassion are really spoken of as relational factors. They're factors that have to do with one human being relating to another, with the assumption of different beings, separate beings.

That realm has its own laws. It's very important to understand it and work within it and not to discount it. It would be like the politician who said, "There are no rich, there are no poor, we're all interconnected." That's an example of using the ultimate level of understanding to deny the conventional.

So we want to be able, as practice develops, to work easily within the conventional level of human relations and responsibility and care for one another—care for children, care for family, for parents, and so on. That's a really important part of our human experience.

But if we don't join that with this other understanding that there's no abiding self or core in any of it, then we don't know how to free ourselves from the suffering or entanglement of the world of relationships.

Really, as we mature as practitioners, we want to be able to go back and forth between seeing the conventional way of looking, which makes for harmonious relationships and skillful development of our own hearts, and then also to be able to see this ultimate level of truth—of empty phenomena rolling on, coming and going—so that we don't cling.

The two come together because when we're not clinging, we're not disturbed inwardly, and that's a state that we're referring to as empty of self. That's a state from which generosity, love, and compassion come naturally. So the two really support one another. As we refine our outer relationships through generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, there's less inner turmoil for us to deal with. The mind calms more easily and we can see these deeper truths more evidently.

"In the past I was taught a method of focusing on the head, putting my awareness there as feeling that sense of ease and then noticing when any disturbance would happen. So that was focusing on one particular part of the body. In the exercise you taught us this morning it was more of a spacious awareness, containing everything. I'm won-

dering—I'm guessing that both are skillful under different circumstances and haven't experimented enough with the spacious practice to have much experience with that. But I wonder if you could give me some comments on under what circumstances you think either one might be skillful."

You know, there are so many different meditation techniques and all of them in our tradition aim to bring some natural sense of peace and ease. Some of them are very narrowly focused. A lot of people start off doing meditation on the breath just at the tip of the nose. It's a very narrow focus, but as it's developed, it brings about quite a lot of peace and ease.

Other people may feel the breath in the abdomen or the whole body. Some people like to work with the whole body posture as an anchor. Other people like to work with sounds or the vastness as we did this morning. Every one of those techniques is designed to bring in both the feeling of tranquility or peace and ease and the opportunity for insight. So it's a very personal question which one works best for an individual.

So I just encourage people to try different ones, see where they resonate, and then work with that for a while. In general, the basic guideline is that the narrower focus strengthens the quality of tranquility, while the broader focus strengthens the quality of relaxation. They both point in the same direction, and then it's simply a question of finding which one gives the right balance for your particular circumstances.

We need to stop there, as we have interviews in just a few minutes followed by a walking period.

A few announcements about the interviews, which will begin this morning in small group format. Gil is located in the council house across the drive where you registered. Sally is in room one, and I'm in room two. Those rooms are just beyond the bathrooms—outside the meditation hall, turn left down that corridor.

The purpose of the interviews is really for us to check in on your personal experience. We'd like to hear about how things are going for you personally—perhaps how you're settling into the retreat, how the meditations are developing for you, or how the themes in the talks are settling and integrating into your experience. The interviews aren't meant to be discussions of the readings or concepts themselves, though certainly as they affect you personally, that's welcome. Keep it personally based—that's really what we'd like to hear about in the short time we have with you.

One other announcement: we'll have practice leaders covering some of the sittings during the day. There's quite a full schedule for us as teachers with the talks, interviews, and discussion periods. For some of the sittings, we'll ask practice leaders to sit

up front and lead the opening and closing bells. If you'd like to do that, there's a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board where you can volunteer for any of the available sittings in the next few days. We appreciate your help.

Gil is thinking very practically—half of you will be seen today in interviews. If your name wasn't on today's list, it will be on tomorrow's. He asks that if you don't have an interview this morning, perhaps you could let those who do have interviews go to the bathroom first. This will ease the beginning of the interview groups.

Thank you for your attention, and enjoy the walking period.

CHAPTER 85

Morning Instructions on Dhammavicaya (Investigation)

Guy Armstrong · 39 min

> *In this morning meditation instruction, Guy Armstrong introduces dhammavicaya (investigation), the second of the seven bojjhaṅgas (enlightenment factors). He emphasizes that investigation in meditation is primarily non-conceptual, focusing on becoming intimate with our direct experience rather than analytical thinking. The teaching explores how investigation serves as the catalyst for paññā (wisdom) by bringing awareness closer to phenomena like the breath, bodily sensations, and mental states.*
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> *Armstrong provides practical guidance on investigating two key aspects when disturbances arise during meditation: identifying what the disturbance is about (whether related to the five nīvaraṇas, bodily discomfort, or mental proliferation) and observing how it manifests in the body. He warns against papañca (mental proliferation) - the tendency for thoughts to multiply and take practitioners away from direct experience.*
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> *The session includes a guided meditation that begins with establishing a sense of natural peace and ease, expanding awareness like vast space, and then mindfully investigating whatever disturbs that equilibrium. This approach provides practitioners with tools for developing both sati (mindfulness) and paññā through careful, intimate observation of their meditation experience.*

This morning in meditation, I want to introduce the factor that I discussed on opening night: the factor of investigation. Investigation is the second of the seven enlightenment factors. The understanding is that as we start to pay attention to our experience, we become a little interested in what's going on, and then we apply this factor called investigation—dhammavicaya.

Investigation in the context of meditation is different from what it might be in philosophical thought or ordinary life. It's mostly non-conceptual. So what we want to do in meditation this morning is investigate our experience, but in a non-conceptual way. Of course, we have to use concepts to describe it. You'll use concepts to report it, even to describe it to yourself. But the basic movement is not about thinking.

The real process we're going to be looking at is something Gil talked about yesterday: becoming intimate with our experience. As you notice the breath, for example, where do you feel it? Where in your body do you feel the sensations of breath most clearly? As

you experience the sensation connected with the breath, what is the physical sensation that you're experiencing? Is it tightness? Is it relaxation? Is it expansion? Is it contraction? We don't have to think a lot about that. What we need to do is bring this factor of awareness closer to the experience that we want to know about. This is the quality of intimacy.

How close can our attention get into the sensation of the breath? For instance, just right now, if you take an in-breath and feel your abdomen, can you bring your awareness, your attention, right into the sensation of that rising movement? As you breathe out, can you bring your attention right into the sensation of the falling movement? It doesn't require a lot of thought. It just requires coming close to our experience.

This is the main attitude behind this factor of investigation. As we come close with our attention to the experience, that's when we learn about it. We learn about its personal characteristic of expansion or relaxation or tightness or ease. We also learn about the universal characteristics that Sally talked about last night: it's always changing, and there's no self or essence inside it.

The purpose of investigation is to spark or ignite the factor of wisdom. When we think of bringing more wisdom into our overall practice—and wisdom is one of the key factors of mind that we're developing—the factor that we can initiate that starts it off is this factor of investigation. We'll be using it this morning and probably in a number of meditations throughout the week as a way of exploring our experience.

The tricky thing in using investigation is: don't proliferate. This is the trap. You start to get into it: "Let's see, I'm feeling that rising motion. Now, is that expansion or is that pressure? Let me see. If I look on one side of the abdomen, it feels like pressure, but that reminds me of where I had an operation when I was five years old, and I don't really want to think about that..." You see how the thoughts can take off.

As you investigate, keep thinking on a very tight leash. This requires some vigilance. You're going to use words a little bit to investigate, but you don't want to rely on the concepts to be the investigation. The investigation comes from the meeting of the awareness and the experience. So just be guarded, be vigilant about this tendency to proliferate with our thoughts. Bring it back to the direct experience of the moment.

In the meditation this morning, we're going to continue a little bit along the track that Gil suggested yesterday, which is to have this natural sense of peace and ease and then be alert to whatever disturbs it. And things will disturb it. You know, this is the second day of the retreat. In a normal week-long retreat, this is the evening we would give the hindrance talk.

Why? Because this is when they really start to wake up. So be aware that as you're adjusting to the retreat experience, the hindrances—sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt—are all becoming activated. Certainly today, if they weren't yesterday.

Just be mindful that this will be part of your experience during the day, part of your experience during the meditation. Don't expect that you'll be able to abide in forty-five minutes of unbroken peace and ease. If you can, I bow in your general direction. But if you can't, then you're like me this morning.

So the meditation instruction is going to be: rest in this natural peace and ease and observe the phenomena of the senses. I'll give some instructions on how to do that. Then notice whatever disturbs that natural peace and ease. Particularly, I want to ask you to investigate two things.

When a disturbance comes, number one: what's the disturbance about? It could be about a number of things. It could be about just one of the hindrance energies being present, and there's a discomfort from it. There could be a pain in the body that's starting to disturb your balance. It could be a thought about a daily life situation, something at home from either the past or the future. It could be a reaction to something that's happening here on the retreat, something that you don't like. It could be a judgment about yourself that comes up, a way that you don't think you're good enough or lovable enough.

So notice just what the disturbance is about. And the second thing to investigate, once you've noticed it: how does that feel in the body? When there's a disturbance in the system, it will generally be reflected in the body in some way. So how would you describe that? Is that a feeling of being agitated? Is it a feeling of being tight or tense? Is it a feeling of being hot or cold? Is it a feeling of being shaky or fluttery?

These are the two things to investigate. What's the disturbance about? You can sum it up really briefly: thought about home, judgment about retreat, something like that. And second: how does that feel in the body? Then staying with that, if it passes, just return to being with the natural peace and ease and the phenomena that are coming.

Those are the basic instructions. This will be our kind of entryway into working a little bit with this factor of investigation, the second factor of awakening.

Please sit comfortably. You can begin the meditation by just bringing the attention into your experience of the body. Sitting in a relaxed way in the here and now. Not needing to change anything about your experience. Letting the body be as it is. Relaxing as far as possible into the body as it is.

Relaxation is an expression of trust. We can trust the present moment in the way that it is. Let your mind be the way it is. Any mood that's present, notice it and allow. Any thoughts that are passing by, just allowing them to come and go.

As a way of suggesting this quality of natural ease, I'd like to invite you to let your awareness become really wide, filling the whole meditation hall, expanding beyond so that your awareness becomes like a big empty sky, or like vast space surrounding you on all sides—above, below. In this vast space, just noticing any sounds that arise there. Could be sounds from inside the room, the sounds of one another, sounds from outside, the sound of my voice. If there are no sounds, then just become aware of the vastness of the silence.

This awareness is like a big empty sky. All the sounds just appear and disappear. And then also becoming aware of sensations throughout your body. Sensations are also appearing, changing, passing in the same open space of awareness. You might have the sense that they're like little points of sensation, little points of feeling that are glimmering like stars in the sky at night.

Just allowing sounds and body sensations to come and go in this empty space of knowing. As you rest in this knowing, see if there's a sense of peace. See if there's a sense of ease.

Sometimes we find ourselves supported by this vastness. Things can arise and pass, and they can be held in a place of peacefulness.

Notice too that thoughts and moods can come and go within this space of awareness. Allow them to arise, express themselves, and pass through like clouds drifting across the sky.

We can simply rest with all this knowing of phenomena. There may be a sense of ease in it.

Then notice whatever comes to disturb that ease. What is the disturbance about, and how does that feel in the body? This is our investigation.

Remain clearly mindful of your present moment experience—sounds, sensations, thoughts, emotions. Investigation rests upon the foundation of mindfulness. Only when we're clearly in touch with this moment can we bring our attention closer to investigate it.

What's the nature of peace? What's the nature of disturbance? What's the response in the body?

This investigation into the very fabric of our experience reveals the wisdom that lies within each moment—the understanding that all phenomena arise and pass away in the vast, unchanging space of awareness itself.

CHAPTER 86

The Emptiness of Phenomena

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

In this dharma talk from an emptiness retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's teaching on the emptiness of phenomena, drawing primarily from the Phenapindūpama Sutta (Connected Discourses) where the Buddha compares the five aggregates to insubstantial things like foam, bubbles, and magical illusions. Armstrong argues that this teaching on śūnyatā (emptiness) is present in early Buddhist texts, not just Mahāyāna literature as commonly assumed.

The talk explores how our experience through the six sense bases (āyatana) and five aggregates (khandha) - form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness - reveals the constructed nature of all phenomena. Armstrong uses scientific understanding of perception and personal anecdotes to illustrate how what we take to be solid reality is actually momentary appearances arising in consciousness without substantial existence.

Through careful investigation of our meditative experience, we begin to see how sensations, thoughts, emotions, and even visual appearances are constantly flickering in and out of existence. This insight into the dreamlike, rainbow-like nature of phenomena naturally leads to disenchantment, dispassion, and ultimately liberation from clinging. The teaching concludes with reflections on how understanding emptiness cultivates both wisdom and compassion, embodied in the figure of Avalokiteśvara (Quan Yin) who perceives both suffering and its empty nature.

So far in the retreat, we've talked quite a bit about the emptiness of self—the absence of an enduring or fixed entity within mind and body. We've explored the aspect of not-self, examining how self gets formed and how the sense of self comes into being.

Tonight I want to talk about the emptiness of phenomena. This is the other side of the emptiness of all appearances, a topic that the Mahayanas have claimed as their own for the last two millennia. Over that time, they've been criticizing us poor Theravadans, claiming that we don't have this understanding. They say, "You see, we Mahayanas have both emptiness of self and emptiness of phenomena. But you poor benighted Theravadins, all you have is emptiness of self. So you're only halfway there."

What I want to do tonight is take a key text from the Buddha's discourses that is all about the emptiness of phenomena and refute 2,000 years of mistreatment.

We've been investigating our experiences as human beings this week. Normally, when I look at a human being, I tend to see a person. When I see you all walking, doing your meditation, when I see you come into the hall, I think, "Oh, there's a person."

In the Visuddhimagga, it says that this is not very wise or very educated seeing. They compare this to a skilled butcher carving up a cow who, as he carves the different pieces of meat, keeps saying "cow, cow, cow." But a skilled butcher who knows the carcass very well would instead be saying "sirloin, tenderloin, rump, ribs."

So someone who is skilled in investigating the mind-body process would not just say "person," according to the Visuddhimagga. They would see it in more detail. They would see the components that they've become very familiar with. This is part of what we've been exploring over these days.

I suspect that when the Buddha looked at a person, he saw in one of two ways. The first way is as we read in the Sutta on Totality: "Bhikkhus, attend! I will tell you the totality of life. It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. That's all there is." These are the six senses.

When I first read this, I thought it was very interesting that it outlines human experience, but I wondered: when I sit down and practice and become aware, I'm aware of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, sensation, and mind objects, but I don't usually notice eye, ear, nose, tongue, body as organs, and mind as an organ. Why do you think the Buddha put those in? Why didn't he just say the totality is sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, sensation, and mind objects? Did he miss the point? Was he hallucinating? Is there some importance to these other six things?

I'd suggest the reason he put them in is to show that sight, sound, and so forth are dependently arisen. They don't exist on their own—only because we have the sense bases as a body, a human being in a body, do we allow that contact and those experiences of the senses to arise. If he had just said there's only sight, sound, and so forth, it would have seemed like those existed independently. Including the sense organs shows the dependent nature of their arising. So I think it's an important piece.

That's one way we train ourselves to look through the six sense bases—both internal (meaning the organs) and external (the phenomena that arise in them).

The other key framework the Buddha used is the one we've been exploring today as Sally has presented it: the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

Are these describing two different totalities? Is there one totality described by the six sense bases and another described by the five aggregates? No. They're describing the same totality of experience, just slicing it up differently. If you'd like to go through and make the association of how the six sense bases map onto the five aggregates, that's extra credit—you get a lot of merit for that. It's actually a fun thing to play with, to see how they line up.

I think it was Bhikkhu Bodhi who said that the Buddha tended to use the six sense bases to show how to cut through craving, since our desire and aversion tends to form around sense bases. But he used the five aggregates to cut through wrong view and establish right view. That's what we've been reading all along: "One sees with proper wisdom thus: material form is not myself, feeling is not myself," and so forth. So the aggregates tend to be used when the Buddha is teaching us the right way to understand the world in order to free the mind and heart.

Sally talked a lot about these five aggregates, and you all explored them in your exercise this afternoon.

Perception may be the most underrated faculty that we possess and not often talked about in our teachings. Notice that the very start of the chant we've been doing in the evening, the Heart Sutra, says that Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the Prajnaparamita, perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was released from all suffering.

This quality of perception is associated with insight. When we have an insight, it usually comes because we perceived something new about our situation, about our experience, about the world.

Here's another example where the Buddha uses the word in a powerful way: "When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for existence. It eliminates all ignorance. It eliminates all conceit, 'I am.'" This is powerful. Just the perception of impermanence developed and cultivated again and again leads to full awakening. So this perception is a powerful quality in us.

The other factor I wanted to touch on briefly because it will bear on our discussion tonight is consciousness or vijnana. As Sally explained clearly, it's consciousness that knows all the arisings of our experience.

The way I understand it happening is that when we have an experience like a sound, the sound is material form, the first aggregate. The knowing of it is the fifth aggregate, consciousness, which is mental. These two rise up together in a unified whole so that a

human experience of hearing a sound has both components. It has a physical component, which is from the material world—the sound—and it has a mental component, which is the knowing of that sound.

They come up at the same time. They're joined together. I would say that as a human, it's a unitary experience for us. Hearing is just one moment of experience, but we can look at it as having both these aspects. There's a sound, which is physical, and there's the knowing of that sound, which is mental, and that's the activity of consciousness or vijnana.

Just as an example of how these two things can be together: in holding up this little bell, is it round or is it gold? It's both at the same time. You can't really separate them. You can see the two aspects depending on where you focus, but it's both at the same time—both round and gold.

Similarly, with an experience like hearing a sound, it's both things together. You can focus on seeing one or the other. You can focus on the sound or you can focus on the knowing of it. But they're inextricably linked together, arising together.

It's also said that in every moment of experience all five aggregates are present for us. Simple example: when you hear the bell at the end of a sitting, there's the sound, which is of the form aggregate. There's the feeling tone, and that sound at the end of a sitting is usually very pleasant—one of the most pleasant sounds of the day.

There is the perception. You recognize that that's the bell that ends the sitting, the clear recognition and understanding. Then there's usually a mental formation that accompanies. There's a thought: "The sitting is over." And I don't know about you, but so many times I hear that bell and the thought is, "Oh, now I could sit forever." Then there's a sense of great ease because the sitting's ended. Those formations of thought and the ease—that's the mental formation, the fourth aggregate.

And the knowing of all of those is the activity of consciousness. The sound, the feeling tone of being pleasant, the perception of bell, the thought and the emotion—consciousness knows each of those as they unfold.

So why is it liberating to understand our experience in terms of the five aggregates? Basically because we start to see as we investigate: that's all there is. There is only form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. Examine as we might, there's nothing else there.

And so what's missing? The "I" that we normally think is at the center of all this, that experiences each of the aggregates, that owns them, that sees them.

But as we examine our experience closely, there's nothing else in the mix. The sense of I arises from a certain stickiness among all the aggregates coming together so rapidly. We don't see them apart, and they happen so quickly that it feels like an I is created by all that coming together. But when we look closely with refined mindfulness supported by concentration, there's nothing else there. There are only the aggregates.

I'd like to turn to the quotation on page eleven, number thirty-five under the heading "Emptiness of Phenomena." This is from a sutta in the Connected Discourses called "A Lump of Foam."

"On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is—past, future, present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?'"

Given that one of the key uses of the word "form" is this body, basically the Buddha is saying here that our body is void, hollow, and insubstantial like a lump of foam—and similarly for the external world. This is not our normal understanding of these things. So in what way could we say that a body is like a lump of foam?

A few years ago, I was teaching a retreat here—I think it was a February retreat—and giving a dharma talk at this same time of day. From outside, there came this kind of wrenching sound. It was a plaintive, tearing, heart-wrenching sound that happened in the middle of the dharma talk. I mentioned it but kept going and completed the talk. Afterwards, I went out of the hall toward the source where we'd heard the sound, and there was a young deer dead not far from the council house.

A couple of staff people had also come out to check, and they said they'd seen a couple of large dogs running away around the time that the deer was killed. It looked like the dogs had attacked the deer and broken its neck because its neck was bent back at a very unnatural angle. A bunch of us gathered around the deer and did loving-kindness for it, wished its spirit well on the journey, and held it as best we could. The caretakers who live on the land said they would arrange for the SPCA to come take it away.

The next morning, the body of the deer was taken down near the front of the property, near the parking lot where you all left your cars, and was left by the side of the road, hoping that the SPCA would come and pick it up. But they never did. So over the next few days, we got to watch what happened to the body of that young deer.

Every day, a little more of the body just disappeared. Some of it was decay, but for the most part, it was being eaten by other animals that were around and coming by and finding it. After a few days, all that was left of that deer was pretty much the hide, the hooves, the skull. All the bones had been picked clean. Some of them had been carried away. There was very little left. We were able to observe that process day by day.

That brought home to me that this body, too, is like a mass of foam. It can be here very substantially today and in a very short period of time just be gone—disappeared, decomposed, turned into other elements, turned into nutrients, gone into the earth, gone into other beings. It can vanish like that.

The words that Bhikkhu Bodhi translated as "void and hollow and insubstantial"—interestingly, the word śūnya or "empty" doesn't appear in this sutta. But I asked Bhikkhu Bodhi about these words. The word being used for "void" is the Pali word rittaka, which means "devoid of." The word being used for "hollow" is the Pali word tuccha, which literally means "hollow." The Buddha often used this word to describe or scold a monk who didn't really have much substance, who misspoke the Dhamma. The Buddha would call such a monk a tuccha purisa, a hollow man, not a person of substance.

Bhikkhu Bodhi said these two words, rittaka and tuccha, are synonyms for śūnya, synonyms for "empty." So even though the word śūnya isn't used here, the meaning is clearly the same. It could have been used here if the Buddha had wanted to.

Further on in this sutta—I wish I'd put it in the handout; I'm sorry I omitted it, and I can't understand how I left this out because this is a very interesting passage too—the Buddha compares the aggregates to a magic show. This passage goes like this:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, that a magician would display a magical illusion at a crossroads. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a magical illusion?"

In this continuation of the teaching, the Buddha takes us through each aggregate, asking what substance could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness? It's like a magic show, he tells us, and he beautifully summarizes this understanding with a poem that appears in our handout:

Form is like a lump of foam,
Feeling like a water bubble,
Perception is like a mirage,
Volitions like a plantain trunk,
And consciousness like an illusion.
So explained the kinsman of the sun.

"Kinsman of the Sun" is simply another name for the Buddha. But let me clarify one analogy that might not be immediately clear—the plantain trunk. A plantain is a type of banana tree, and if you've ever observed a banana tree, you'll notice something remarkable: it only grows once. After the fruit ripens and is harvested, the trunk decays and falls over because it lacks a solid core. The banana trunk grows up just once, and without that solid foundation, it inevitably collapses. A new one must grow for any more fruit to develop. It's a perfect symbol of hollowness, of emptiness.

So all five aggregates are compared to these profoundly insubstantial images: a mass of foam, a water bubble, a mirage, a hollow trunk, and a magical illusion. This is the very nature of our human experience.

What's the point of comparing our experience to a magic show? Well, magic is truly amazing when you don't understand how it's constructed. Have you ever watched a magician and been completely in awe of what they could accomplish? I have, and it's mind-boggling.

I was reading about Harry Houdini, the great magician from about a century ago. Houdini would perform this incredible trick repeatedly: people would tie him up with ropes and chains, binding his entire body with his hands secured behind his back. Then they would lock those chains with a padlock, place him in a wooden box like a coffin, and nail it shut. Finally, they would toss that box into a cold river where it would sink.

Houdini's feat was to free himself and surface without drowning. When he performed this escape, it seemed like pure magic because spectators witnessed every step—they saw him being tied, locked, nailed into the box, and thrown into the frigid river water.

But was it really magic? According to his own accounts, he had ingenious solutions for each form of confinement. First, the rope binding his hands was deliberately not tied tightly, allowing him to free his hands. For the locks securing the chains around his body, he concealed tiny wrenches in his mouth. Once his hands were free, he could retrieve these tools and, even in the darkness underwater, pick the locks.

Of course, this required time, so he had trained himself to hold his breath for three minutes, even in the shock of cold European river water. He would undo the chains and ropes, but still remained trapped in the boarded-up box. His final trick: one side was very lightly attached, and he could kick it out before swimming to the surface.

The crowd would gasp, "Wow, it's magic!" It's genuinely impressive, but once you understand the method, it loses some of its mystique, doesn't it? It's still remarkably skillful—I certainly couldn't do it—but you realize it's simply a collection of techniques, not magic at all.

What the Buddha taught about the formation of the aggregates follows this same principle: when we see them clearly as they really are, we become disenchanted. The enchantment of the magic show dissolves because we understand its workings. We comprehend the insubstantial nature of how it's all been assembled.

This is precisely why we investigate. We discover the secret of how this self, this being, has been constructed—how the sense of self gets built, how clinging attaches to various aspects of our experience, how that clinging can be released, how the emptiness of self can manifest in that space of peace and spaciousness.

Becoming disenchanted, the teachings tell us, the mind becomes dispassionate. And becoming dispassionate, the mind becomes liberated.

So this is why we want to see through the magical illusion in this way. Because it takes out the "I" at the center that we hold as a center.

There was one period of time a few years ago when I was on an extended period of retreat at home, and I was reading several different versions of this book by Nagarjuna, the Mula Madhyamaka Karika, which is referenced on the first page of the quotations if you need the title. The whole thesis of the book is emptiness. He unwraps one layer of substance and peels that away. You think you're getting a stand on the next layer of substance, and then he unwraps that and peels that away. Going through the twenty-some chapters of the book, little by little, everything gets taken away.

I was very into this analysis while I was sitting, and I was quite open and focused. And I had a dream about it one night. In the dream, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, looking at my reflection. I asked the question: "Why is emptiness important?" And the image in the mirror replied: "Because it means that you don't exist."

Of course the body exists. Of course feeling exists. Perception, formations, consciousness. But this "I" that we take to be at the center of it isn't really there in the way we think it is. It means that I don't exist. So the world doesn't contain me as a problem. Again, this is pointing to the absence of "I" in the middle of it.

I want to talk a little more about this form being like a lump of foam, because again, this is hard to understand. One of the beauties of our particular meditation practice is that as we get focused, we start to investigate physical sensations really closely. As you investigate physical sensations closely and your concentration strengthens, what happens to the substance? As you're investigating the sensations in the body, as a retreat goes on, the substance tends to go away, doesn't it? You just feel kind of the momentary flickering nature of a sensation anywhere you turn your attention. You just feel pulsation, vibration, tingling, like little lights pulsing on and off. All you see is the nature of change—nothing fixed or solid in the whole experience of the body through the sense of touch.

When you turn your attention to other aspects of experience, you get a similar sense. Sounds become very fleeting. An airplane might fly by, and you can follow that sound until it's completely gone. But all along the way, you just feel its vibratory, changeable nature, and you feel it fade away until it's gone. Sounds are just momentary, arising and passing.

Tastes and smells are really hard to capture, aren't they? You ever go down and really want to smell the food, and you can smell it for a while, and then the smell just becomes harder and harder to find, as though it's floated out. Tastes are similar—an explosion of taste with the first bite, and as you chew, chew, chew, it gets thinner and thinner until it goes away.

Many of you report in interviews that as your mindfulness gets stronger, you turn your attention to a thought, and as soon as it's seen, it falls away. A thought collapses as soon as mindful attention is placed on it. This is a more difficult area, but we often hear reports of this too: even emotions that might normally come and be difficult to deal with—a flicker of anxiety or fear or anger—can arise and you see it so clearly that it just dissolves right in that moment. There's no way to sustain any sense of substance around it.

So through our meditation, through clear mindfulness and concentration, we start to see how all these senses are just coming and going, just flashing into existence momentarily and then passing away.

But for me, the experience that was always hardest to get that sense with was sight. When I would look out on the world, it seemed unchanging. If your eyes are open now and you look at this lovely pale yellow wall behind me, it looks pretty constant, doesn't it? If you touch the floor, it feels pretty solid. But sight especially doesn't seem to change. It seems to reveal a real and solid physical world that we are embodied within.

So how can we look into this sense particularly, which is hard to see the insubstantiality in? Science can be a little bit helpful here. Although science generally tends to posit a materialist and—in the nineteenth century—quite solid worldview, modern science has really revealed through quantum physics the space in all matter, the formation of fundamental particles like protons, neutrons, and electrons. There's a lot of space in every atom—more space than matter. That's one way that it suggests the emptiness of what we see.

But another way that is just a little more immediate for me is to think about how light works, how a sight arises. We know from science that for a sight to arise, light from some source has to fall on an object, get reflected off that object, come to our eye, land on the retina, which then transmits an electrical signal along the optic nerve up into a certain region of the brain where it ignites certain neurons. And then something really amazing happens: the consciousness of the sight appears.

What's the connection between neurons firing and consciousness happening? I have no idea, and I don't even know how scientists are going to start to solve that riddle. But for now, you and I know that that's what happens. Somehow, through this chemical interaction in the brain, consciousness reveals a sight.

When we think further, we realize if we go far enough into the earth, we go out the other side and there's only space. So the ground that we take for granted is only resting in the middle of vast space. The earth doesn't have any ground—it's just hanging in the middle of vast emptiness.

This ground is also just held in our consciousness. What we take as ground is merely a sensation of hardness. It's also held in consciousness, and we realize that consciousness itself doesn't have any ground. What is your consciousness resting on? Nothing. Nothing. Consciousness is just hanging there.

So all the phenomena of the world are simply arising in this consciousness which has no ground. We don't know what's actually out there, but we know that how we experience the world through our sense phenomena is insubstantial—only arising in consciousness.

As I understand it, our world of the senses is what the Buddha considered to be reality. This is the reality that he described and encouraged us to look at. I don't think he ever tried to comment on what kind of reality is out there. He was talking about the reality of the six sense bases and the five aggregates—everything coming through the factor of consciousness, which itself is groundless.

There's another fun way to play with this. If I ask you what color this book is, it's pretty clear, right? Let's say it's primarily blue. So we say the book is blue. But again, because you understand through science how light works, actually what's happening is that the blue is being reflected off the book to your eyes, and that's why we see blue. All the other colors are being absorbed.

So truthfully, wouldn't it be more accurate to say the book is everything but blue? The blue is being lost and bounced back.

So where is this color blue? Is it in the book? Or is it only in your consciousness? I'd say it's only in your consciousness. This color blue is not necessarily found anywhere in the book, but it's arising in our senses, and that arising is real.

So this is the world that we actually inhabit. This is the reality of our human experience. We don't know the real world beyond our senses. The world we inhabit is the world of our senses. It's a representation of reality held in consciousness.

Normally, what human beings do is assume that's the real solid world out there. And they don't take the time to reflect that what's arising is only an appearance in consciousness.

So sometimes the vocabulary is helpful to remember. Instead of talking about objects in the world—objects like this striker or objects like this book or objects like the wall—let's talk about them as appearances. Everything that's in our experience is just an appearance, and it's constructed from some interplay between whatever's there and our sense apparatus.

In this way, this is why the Buddha described consciousness as a magic show. The Tibetans called this whole thing a magical display. It's arising in consciousness moment after moment after moment. And the arisings have their own laws. There are physical laws and chemical laws and biological laws governing all the arisings. It's not chaotic, but it is kind of magical that this world keeps appearing.

It's often compared to a dream when we start to see this insubstantial nature. And it's kind of interesting to reflect—in just a moment of experience in waking life or in a dream, can you tell the difference? Now, of course, you know it's different when you wake up. Then you know it was a dream.

I remember a dream one Christmas Eve when I was about ten years old. I had a dream that I went downstairs into my basement and the basement of our house had been filled from floor to ceiling with toys. And they were all for me the next morning. And I was so happy. I couldn't believe it. This is like everything I wanted. And I woke up and then I knew it was a dream. It was so disappointing. But I knew it was a dream, so I could let go of it quickly.

But what if we knew this was a kind of a dream? Would we cling as hard as we do? The reason we look into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness, is so we don't hold on as tight. Emptiness the same way. As we investigate these empty appearances and see their insubstantial nature, the more clearly that's seen, the less tendency there is to hang on because it's kind of dreamlike.

So there are a lot of similes that are used for this kind of insight. The ones in our text tonight: a lump of foam, a water bubble, a mirage, a hollow trunk, a magic show. You're probably familiar with a list from the Diamond Sutra, one of the Mahayana texts: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world, like a star at dawn, a flickering lamp, a bubble in a stream, an echo, a mirage, and a dream."

Which do you like better, Theravada or Mahayana? They're both pretty good, aren't they? And aren't they the same pointing? It's exactly the same pointing in this sutta as in the Diamond Sutra.

Another image that's used a lot is the image of a rainbow. It's a beautiful one because it's so clearly appearing in the sky and yet there's nothing to grasp there. There's actually nothing colored in the sky. It's just the effect of sunlight doing two reflections off of water bubbles—one refraction and reflection off the back of a water bubble, splitting according to the prism-like effect of the water bubble. It looks like there's something there, but there's actually nothing in the sky that's red or orange or yellow, green, blue, indigo, or violet. Just an appearance. It's also compared to a rainbow.

Of what use is this kind of insight? It doesn't solve our human problem immediately, and it takes a long time to incorporate—or you might say to integrate. But just like the Buddha said, if the perception of impermanence is cultivated and developed, it leads to

the end of desire, the end of ignorance, the end of the conceit "I am." Similarly, these insights into the emptiness of phenomena—emptiness of appearances—lead in that same direction. But we have to cultivate them. We have to continue to develop them.

There's a wonderful text from the Mahayana tradition from a teacher named Atisha called the seven-point mind training. It's just a series of pith instructions, and one of these instructions is: "In post-meditation, be a child of illusion." What this means is when you're not doing formal meditation practice—when you're not practicing awareness in a serious way—when you're walking around, going to the meal, taking a shower, getting dressed in the morning, in post-meditation, post-formal meditation, be a child of illusion.

The meaning is: remember this insubstantial nature of things. It's not saying that everything is an illusion. The illusion is if we take them to be solid and real beyond representations from our senses. The illusion would be attributing reality and solidity to those appearances, forgetting that they're constructed by the senses and consciousness.

Seeing this is like an insight into impermanence—it's something we have to develop again and again. It doesn't solve the problem right away. There's a short passage from Leonard Cohen that I like from a song called "The Street": "I know the burden's heavy as you wheel it through the night. The guru says it's empty, but that don't mean it's light."

So you might know yourself that it's empty, but it doesn't immediately make it light. But in the long run, it does. It makes it a much lighter relationship with the whole world—with the body, with external things, with people, with emotions, with birth and death. Everything becomes lighter.

One of my teachers, a Tibetan teacher, put it this way. He said, "Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever." That's maybe a little strong. But how about: everything that appears has no substantial existence whatsoever? It's all just a momentary flickering, triggered by the senses and brought into consciousness, held in consciousness. Just a momentary flashing into existence.

So how do we actualize this insight in our practice? As both Sally and Gil have said a number of times, we don't need to do anything different than what we're doing. It's the close attention to the details of our experience that reveal this stuff. It reveals the impermanence. It reveals the unsatisfactory nature. It reveals the lack of owner or controller or center of the experience. The closer you bring your attention to it and the more stable that attention is, the more these qualities will just be seen, just be revealed. Emptiness is one of them that shows itself in the same way.

Cultivating the perception of impermanence will help this seeing. Impermanence is kind of like the easiest way in to emptiness and to not-self. It's something that we can always understand, and change is fairly easy to see. So developing this perception of impermanence will start to open these other doors as well.

Emotions are sometimes another of the stickiest points. Even when you can see—oh, I get it, the wall's not solid—fear seems solid. Or anger seems solid. These can be the most impenetrable. It's good to practice when the mindfulness is strong and the emotion is weak. When that combination is there, that's when the mindfulness of an emotion can just make it go poof. And you can see how light and cloud-like it is.

At other times, the mindfulness isn't as strong. The hindrance is thicker. That poof doesn't happen. It's not possible to see the emptiness right then. But just keep practicing and the emotions get thinner. They get more transparent, easier to see through as we go.

So this may have sounded like a kind of cold and rational and maybe even heartless analysis, but it's not meant to be that way, and it's not that way for me.

The time I first became deeply interested in the aggregates was after my older sister died. I have two older sisters, and one of them passed away about fifteen years ago. She wasn't that old—she was fifty-two. She had been ill for a while, but not seriously ill. She had a chronic ongoing condition, but nothing life-threatening.

One evening, she went into cardiac arrest. The paramedics were called but could not bring her back. She died in the emergency room that same evening. It was a huge shock to all of us—she had three children who were in their late teens and early twenties, a tremendous loss for them and for me too. I had felt really close to her.

I went through what happens with grief: a couple of months of depression and darkness, not wanting to get out of bed in the morning because I didn't see the point. What confounded me about her passing was the suddenness of it, though death is always sudden. We may be preparing in the lead-up to it, but the moment of death is always sudden.

What I couldn't quite understand was how she had been so vital and present and real and herself just a couple of days before—I had talked to her on the phone, and she was healthy for her condition, relatively healthy. Then two days later, she wasn't here anymore. How could that happen? It boggled me. I couldn't figure it out.

The only way I started to make sense of it was to understand myself, and then by extension her, in terms of the five aggregates. Then I saw how this appearance of a being—a substantial, solid character with a personality—I saw how it got put together. And then I saw how it could come to an end.

Since then, it's not like death isn't a mystery to me anymore. I still wonder, where did they go? But the process isn't as boggling as it was before. And this reflection reveals tremendous compassion, because it's our shared human situation. The way these aggregates came together to make up this human being—in the same way, they can fall apart.

I want to read you a passage from a senior students' class some years ago, a group of Spirit Rock students. We were talking about this fact of emptiness of self, emptiness of phenomena, and I asked them to reflect on it at home. This is what one person reported in the next weekly class:

"It's spooky. I would look at everything, like this Japanese lamp that I love, and I'd see that it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When I went from an object and saw it's an appearance to a person and saw they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're also fragile."

So emptiness is not meant to take us into a cold vacancy, but really to awaken this heart quality of connection and loving-kindness and compassion. This is clearly in the teachings of our tradition as well.

You probably know the figure of Kuan Yin, who is the female representation of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, whom we've been chanting about. Kuan Yin became the feminized version when the bodhisattva went to China. Kuan Yin is said to be the deity, the enlightened being, who listens to the ten thousand cries of joy and the ten thousand cries of sorrow in the world. She's always listening and always hears when we call on her.

Kuan Yin is a bodhisattva. That means she's not a beginning meditator. So Kuan Yin understands that there's suffering, but she also understands there's no "I" at the center of the suffering. Suffering arises when we try to hold on to what's changing, which is why one meditator described it as rope burn. Suffering is rope burn, but there's no one holding the rope.

She understands there's suffering, but no "I" who's doing the suffering. So her smile—her half-smile—is this beautiful balance of wisdom and equanimity, compassion and equanimity. Through seeing emptiness, the heart becomes less burdened, less caught. But out of this opening, the fact that our heart isn't burdened, come loving-kindness and compassion. That's Kuan Yin looking on the world with its joys and sorrows.

This quotation has been attributed to Kuan Yin in the myth of her being: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness."

Whom can they harm?

The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

So we have time for walking and then we'll have the last sitting a day with chanting.

CHAPTER 87

The Empty Nature of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 1h08

> *In this dharma talk from an emptiness retreat, Guy Armstrong guides practitioners in shifting attention from meditation objects to awareness itself. Drawing on the Thai Forest tradition and Yogācāra teachings, he explores the paradoxical nature of mind as both empty and knowing. Armstrong discusses how consciousness functions as the activity of knowing while the agent behind it—mind—remains unfindable yet present. He references teachers like Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho, and Tibetan master Śabkar to illuminate how this empty awareness can be accessed as a meditation technique for releasing clinging and opening to the heart's natural responsiveness. The talk addresses the concept of Buddha nature (tathāgatagarbha) as the potential for awakening present in all beings, examining different Buddhist schools' views on whether mind is permanent or impermanent. Armstrong offers practical guidance for resting in this aware emptiness while phenomena arise and pass, suggesting this approach as another pathway to the selflessness central to liberation.*

The theme this morning is the empty nature of awareness. Normally in Vipassana practice, all the instructions and all our attention is directed toward the objects that we're paying attention to: breath, sensations in the body, sounds, moods and emotions, thoughts and so on. But in the meditation that we just did, the big mind guided meditation, there was an instruction to turn the attention not to the objects, but to the awareness itself.

When you make this shift from focusing on objects and then turn the attention to the awareness itself, this creates an inner shift in experience. People describe this shift in various ways: entering something like a hypnotic state while still remaining present and noticing; experiencing twisting, falling, shifting, a bit of confusion; questioning; loss of boundaries; feeling wobbly. In many of these descriptions, the word that comes to mind is groundless—this direction takes away some kind of ground. Others describe it as a kind of relief from the claustrophobic nature of the mind, like stepping outside in the morning.

One particularly insightful observation is that awareness doesn't care what comes in front of it. It could be anger, it could be a thought of universal brotherhood—it doesn't make any difference. Sometimes this quality can be a little confusing.

All these comments indicate that when we turn toward this direction, some kind of shift happens. Perhaps a common feature is a loosening of our normal fixation or what we're usually set upon, placing it into a bigger container. Sometimes it's not clear exactly what that bigger container is, and we might feel a little adrift or tumbling in the middle of that.

By clarifying what this experience is, we can make this a reliable part of our meditation. We can take some of the conceptual confusion out and lean more into that quality of relief or release and the impartiality that emerges. This is a valuable technique that I've found really useful in my years of practice.

It's important to note that Dharma teachers use the word "awareness" differently and have different meanings. Every time a Dharma teacher says awareness, it's always good to ask them what they mean by that, because it's a slippery word. Sometimes it's used to mean mindfulness. Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma has a book called *Awareness Alone is Not Enough*—but by awareness, he means mindfulness. He's saying mindfulness alone is not enough. What mindfulness needs is wisdom. Mindfulness is a means to awaken wisdom. Wisdom is really what liberates.

Other teachers use this term as consciousness, and this morning in our discussion, that's what I'll use it as. We'll use it synonymously with consciousness, but in a slightly different context. Consciousness we usually use to mean the knowing of an individual object—sight consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, and so forth. It's that which knows one thing arising. I'm going to use awareness to mean this quality that you were feeling into during the guided meditation: the extent of consciousness, the range of conscious activity, that broad, vast quality. But it's still consciousness.

It was very interesting to me, after doing years and years of vipassana practice, to discover that I could tune into this quality of consciousness itself. It reminded me of something I'd read in D.H. Lawrence. It's fascinating how artists sometimes go really quickly to the essence of what's happening in the mind. Lawrence had a passage—I can't remember it exactly—but it said something like: it's as though we've been sitting by a fire, and we've been really entranced and enchanted by the objects that are illuminated by the firelight, but we've never thought to look at the fire itself.

The role of awareness is to illuminate the objects of the world and of the body, but this is the time we can take a look at the light itself. What is that light of awareness or consciousness? What is its nature? This, in some way, is more or equally fundamental, equally important.

As we investigate this quality of awareness or consciousness, some of the confusion and drifting that was mentioned is an indication that it's not so easy to find this quality of mind. Because awareness is not an object. Consciousness is not an object. Everything else that goes on we can say takes form and is an object: sound, sensation, breath, thought, emotion. Even though emotion is a little insubstantial, we can still take it as an object and pay attention to it. But awareness isn't an object like that. It's what's knowing.

So when you're asked to become aware of awareness, that's a little bit of a double bind, and that's part of the confusion in this practice. Yet it can be really suggestive, and I think many of you felt some shift happen when you made even that attempt, even though it's not a clear meditation instruction.

This is from Ajahn Chah: If you have difficulty finding awareness, it's like you're riding on a horse and you're asking, "Where's the horse?" It's happening all the time. It's filling our world. It's making our world. And then we go, "Well, where is it?"

Ajahn Sumedho put it like this: Just like the question, "Can you see your own eyes?" Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes, but I can't see my eyes. I'm sitting right here. I've got two eyes, and I can't see them. But you can see my eyes. Looking in a mirror, I can see a reflection, but that's not my eyes—it's a reflection of my eyes. But there's no real need for me to see my eyes because I can see.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? If I started saying, "Why can't I see my own eyes?" you'd think Ajahn Sumedho is getting weird. So we may not be able to see awareness like an object, but we know that it's active, that it's functioning, because we're aware. There's no doubt about that, is there? As you're sitting here, you know you're aware.

Wei Wu Wei is a very interesting writer. He was an Englishman living in Hong Kong who started to get into Chan and Zen writings.

And then he crafted his understanding into these pithy little aphorisms. One of them that he offered is: "What we are looking for is what is looking." This captures the essence of our inquiry. We're looking for this quality of awareness, but that very awareness is what is doing the looking. That's not so easy to find.

Think of awareness or consciousness as this knowing of phenomena—the appearances that arise through our senses. It's not an object because it's more of an activity. Knowing is a verb, and consciousness is performing that function. That's its very nature.

But as you become familiar with this understanding—that consciousness is the activity of knowing—then a question naturally arises: If that's the action, what is the agent? What is it that's doing the knowing?

Joseph Goldstein likes to give this as a meditation instruction. You'll be walking along, and instead of saying "I feel the sensations in my feet or legs," he'll suggest you phrase it as "sensations are being known"—putting it in the passive voice so there's no "I." Sensations are being known. And then he poses the question: Known by what? What is doing that knowing? Can you look and find it?

What happens when you look?

There was a little shift in the mood of the room when I asked the question, "What is the agent?" Did you notice a shift in yourself? What was that shift? How would you describe it?

"Really looking," someone offered. Yes, really looking.

"Imponderable," said Betsy. "A koan."

"Not knowing. More spacious, less me."

Sarah added, "Dropping into it, dropping into awareness."

These are all excellent reflections of what happens. The mind kind of stops. The thinking mind pauses. The ego's constant self-referencing ceases, because this inquiry really is imponderable. And in that stopping, there's an intensified quality of looking and seeing. Like a koan, it brings that heightened sense of interest: What's there?

And yet, did you find anything? Could you locate that agent?

No.

This is actually significant. You may think it was frustrating, but it was actually profoundly significant.

This is from a Tibetan teacher named Shabkar, who was a great yogi in the early 1800s—actually late 1700s, early 1800s. He spent years and years in a cave in the wilderness, and then wrote many wonderful teachings. His book that speaks to me most deeply is called "Flight of the Garuda." This is his account of the looking:

"Now, come up close and listen... When you look carefully, you won't find the merest speck of real mind you can put your finger on and say, 'this is it.' And not finding anything is an incredible find."

Friends, to start with, mind doesn't emerge from anything. It's primordially empty. There's nothing there to hold on to. It isn't anywhere. It has no shape or color. And in the end, nowhere to go.

So this is a kind of discovery in meditation. When we look to find this agent and we don't find it, we just are in this space of knowing or looking or awareness, whatever you want to call it. That's an important move. That movement is a beautiful place to be, meditatively speaking.

There are a number of words in Pali that we tend to translate as "mind." I don't really want to get into that complication. There's citta, there's vijnana—more often translated as consciousness, but sometimes as mind—and mano. Mano is the word that's used in the six sense bases. When it says eye and sights, ear and sounds, and so forth, it says mind and mind objects. That word is mano.

But let's say for the purpose of our conversation, we'll use "mind" to mean this agent that's doing the knowing. So let's just define mind as that which knows. Other things that are part of mind's activity—like thoughts and emotions and feeling and perception—we'll call those the objects of mind, as described in those six senses. So mind is what we're going to use for this discussion. Mind is what's doing the knowing, which is consciousness. Is that clear enough?

The question is, I said a moment ago we looked and couldn't find an agent, and now I'm saying the agent is mind. But maybe it's mind that's unfindable. Maybe there is something, but we can't find it. I'm using "awareness" synonymously with consciousness, which is doing the knowing, which we can feel. We can feel the knowing taking place.

I asked you a moment ago if you knew you were aware, and finally heads nodded. So you know you're aware—that means you know consciousness is taking place. We can know consciousness. You can't find it as an object, but you can feel it happening. So think of consciousness as the activity of knowing. We can feel that knowing is happening.

If you doubt it, think about what it means to be unconscious. When you faint or fall into a coma or go to sleep or go under anesthesia, you're not conscious for some period. What does that mean? It means things aren't happening to you. You lose the awareness of things happening. But as long as you're awake and your senses are functioning, you know things are happening. That knowing is consciousness.

So we ask the question: what is the agent of consciousness? We can't find it, but we're going to use this term "mind." Maybe it doesn't even exist. Maybe I'm putting a label on something that doesn't even exist, but we're just going to play with that. That's what this exploration is.

So I'm asking you to take a little bit of a leap of faith. If I use the words "the agent behind consciousness," you could grant me that and we'd all know it might be fictitious, because you can't find it. But I just want to shorten it and use the word "mind" in this exercise.

Other times in general Buddhist language, we might use mind to mean something else. We might use it synonymous with consciousness. But just for this morning, I want to use mind to mean that which is doing the knowing. And then we want to explore whether that might exist or not exist, or if it exists, in what way it might exist.

Someone asked about experiences of hallucinating or being intoxicated, questioning how that relates to consciousness and whether it creates a separate person. The question touches on whether we're really unconscious when we're asleep or when we're drugged. I used that as a simple example of how to think about what being unconscious would mean - the experience of not knowing for a period.

This isn't really central to our discussion of whether there's consciousness present during sleep or dreams, which there probably is. But the general experience of not knowing is something we all touch from time to time. I was just trying to illustrate what knowing might feel like by contrast.

Let me clarify: the period of not knowing isn't really critical to our exploration. Whether you do or don't know isn't the central point. There have been periods when I fainted, for example, and coming out of the faint, there was a time I don't remember anything happening. So that's all I can say - I don't remember anything happening. It's not that nothing was happening. Maybe I was aware of something, but I have no memory of it. So it feels to me like nothing was happening and that I was unconscious then, but I can't swear to that.

If you can relate to the question of consciousness as being awake and knowing things, that's all we need to move forward.

This not finding - looking for the agent that we're calling mind and not finding it - is a sign, as Shabkar said, that there's some emptiness to it. This agent of mind, not findable, not discoverable, so we could say that points to its emptiness, its empty nature.

But knowing is happening. So this agent, what we call mind, you can't entirely say it doesn't exist because knowing keeps happening from it. We say that its nature is two-fold: it's empty and it's knowing. These are the two qualities of that agent that we're calling mind - empty and knowing.

There's a quote from the study guide: "This mind, O monks, is radiant, but it is obscured by visiting defilements." The Buddha also points to the sense of the mind being radiant. He doesn't exactly define what he means by that mind, but there is this sense.

This quality of knowing is sometimes described as awareness, sometimes described as luminosity, clarity, or radiance. All these words are used for this power that cognizes. The cognizing power has the ability to illuminate our experience, to illuminate phenomena as they arise.

The empty aspect of this mind is like space, as we saw in the meditation when we talked about this field of awareness as being like vast space, vast empty space. There are two qualities connected with this emptiness and space-like quality.

The first is that it can hold all the phenomena. Just as space holds all the phenomena of the physical world, mind holds all the phenomena of the sensory world, of the six senses. The second quality, because of its basic emptiness, is that nothing is there from the beginning. Anything that appears in this thing we're calling mind can also go away. Nothing is there from the beginning—it's part of its basic emptiness.

Part of what this means is that any afflictive emotions, any karmic patterns, any ignorance, any suffering aren't there from the beginning, so they can end. This is the side of dependent arising that we've been talking about from the beginning. Whatever is of the nature to arise also has the possibility of ceasing. This is the beauty of this empty quality of mind—anything that arises can also end.

When we do a meditation like this and we look at this nature, we probably see both these qualities together. There's an empty quality, which is like sky or space, and there's a knowing quality, which is the awareness, the functioning that illuminates all the phenomena. These two always go together.

We say that the basic nature of mind is emptiness and awareness combined. Ajahn Buddhadasa said we should call the mind emptiness, but because of its awareness, we call it mind. Its basic nature is empty from the beginning—everything within it can come and go. But because of this cognizing power, its functioning power, we call it mind. These two aspects of emptiness and awareness are always joined. They make up the nature, the basic qualities of mind.

We've been talking a lot during the retreat about when there's not clinging or grasping or selfing, then something shifts within us. Out of that place, which we're calling emptiness of self, there's more space. There's more equanimity. There's peace. There's ease. Also from that empty space, the beautiful qualities of heart come out easily, naturally—qualities like love, compassion, joy, contentment. When we're not bound up in the struggle of grasping and clinging and selfing, another way to that empty place is to notice this basic nature of mind. It's the same kind of space that we're talking about opening up. It's the same kind of inner quality that we're talking about coming to.

As we've been talking about emptiness of self, this looking for mind takes us to the same destination. Another way to empty of self is to notice the mind's basic nature, which is this combination of emptiness and knowing.

It's said that when we can recognize that—you look in, you see it's emptiness, but there's still knowing—then there's a third quality that's active, and that's called responsiveness. Sometimes this factor is described as unceasing compassionate activity. The meaning is that when we are empty of self, when we see that empty nature, then compassion can flow out naturally. Love can flow out naturally. Joy can flow out naturally.

When we recognize this empty aware nature, then it opens up the third aspect of the nature of mind, which is responsiveness or sometimes called unceasing compassionate activity. That responsiveness rests on the recognition of emptiness and awareness. It's another way of saying when the self is empty and you know it, then these beautiful qualities come out naturally, come out easily.

This is a continuation of that quote from Shabkar: "Mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive." This has the three parts we talked about—intrinsically empty, the empty aspect; naturally radiant, like the quotation from the Buddha, this is the illuminating quality that cognizes phenomena; ceaselessly responsive, which is the opening up of the beautiful qualities of love, compassion, wisdom, joy, and so on.

"When you say ceaselessly, does it imply permanent?"

Let's say always available. But we'll come back to that question. You could say there are actually two different interpretations of this ceaselessly responsive. One is that it's always responding by knowing. I've heard some teachers put it this way—it's always responding by knowing, and that's ongoing.

The other way that I've heard it explained is when there's the recognition, then it responds with the beautiful qualities of love and compassion.

So this threefold makeup includes the clarity aspect, a cognizing aspect, and an empty aspect. The empty aspect is seen by the clarity aspect. These three aspects of emptiness, awareness, and responsiveness together make up what's called Buddha nature.

I want to talk a little bit about what that word means. This concept was not in the Buddha's teachings. It was not in the early Mahayana. It came in the later Mahayana from a school called the Yogacarans, who emerged about the 4th century of the modern era in India. Sometimes they're also called the Chittamatrans or mind-only school.

The Sanskrit word that's been translated as Buddha nature is actually Tathagata Garbha. Tathagata is the word the Buddha called himself—the thus come one, the one thus come. So it means a fully awakened being. Garbha means womb. So it doesn't exactly mean Buddha nature. It actually means womb of the Buddhas.

These three qualities of mind are the ground or the womb from which fully awakened beings come, or from which full awakening comes. But in the original Sanskrit, the sense is more of a potential than of a fixed or abiding quality. When it's called Buddha nature, it feels like it's something fixed here and now. When it's considered as a womb, then it's more of a potential.

So think of it as somewhere in between these two. It means that every human being has this seed or potential of Buddhahood within. And more than every human being, every sentient being has these qualities. The dogs and cats and turtles and birds and cows and worms all have this potential with these three parts.

Sometimes people say that because there's Buddha nature, it means that compassion is permanent or a fixed part of us. But I understand it rather as the potential being there, but it comes out when circumstances are appropriate. Even when someone is quite awakened, it's not necessarily the case that compassion is present in every mind moment.

If an awakened heart looks on suffering, then compassion emerges. If an awakened heart looks on joy, then sympathetic joy emerges. If an awakened heart isn't being stimulated, then perhaps it just rests in equanimity. So there are many different beautiful qualities that come out of this responsiveness. Compassion is one, and that potential is there for every one of us.

So, is this quality of mind permanent or impermanent? Let's go back a minute to consciousness. Consciousness or vijnana is the fifth of the aggregates. Is consciousness permanent or impermanent according to the Buddhist teachings? Impermanent, yes.

All the aggregates are characterized by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. So this quality of consciousness comes and goes. I would say the same for awareness, the way I'm using it here today.

But when you look at this field, does it seem to come and go? When you look now, is awareness happening? And when you look now, is awareness happening? The knowing of the awareness isn't always happening because it depends on our turning our attention to it. But every time you look for it, is it there?

Is awareness internal or external? As the guided meditation highlighted, awareness is both inside and outside in one of its ways of being. So I understand it as being kind of beyond the qualities of internal or external.

And to what extent we share it—my understanding is that there is some individuation even within awareness or consciousness, so that there's a kind of individual consciousness, stream of consciousness within each being.

And of course they interpenetrate each other, but there's some separateness to the consciousness.

Tony raised a comment about this awareness being here now, dependent on this organism. If we didn't have the body and the five senses, we don't know what would happen to that awareness. This raises the question: is awareness coming and going? When we fall asleep, is it not active?

Let's hold that question in the background and see if this next piece will help resolve it. What I'm going to suggest—and this is just a model, a way of looking that I don't want to nail down—is that this agent called mind might be permanent, or let's say not subject to arising and ceasing. But the functioning of that agent through knowing objects comes and goes.

This is just one model. Some schools like this approach; some schools within Buddhism hate it. I'm simply presenting one possibility here. This thing we're calling mind may not be subject to arising and passing, but its activity—which is knowing individual things—is always coming and going. The suggestion that there may be some degree of awareness through sleep, through anesthesia, through fainting, would be supported by this concept of mind being permanent.

And death? That's the big question, another profound inquiry.

Let's say at least for the span of a human lifetime, maybe this mind is not subject to arising and passing. But its activity as knowing is coming and going all the time. Then what happens at death?

First, there are different schools on this basic question. The core Theravadan schools that you might find influenced by the Abhidhamma and the Visuddhimagga—as you might find in Burma and Sri Lanka—would throw this concept out the window, rejecting anything like mind not subject to arising and passing. But other schools—many of the Mahayana schools, certainly the Yogacara, and to a certain extent Chan and Zen schools that have been influenced by Yogacara, including Dzogchen and Mahamudra—would go along with this view that this agent called mind is lasting.

At least—we'll just take it as permanent for the duration of this body, not subject to arising and ceasing.

In Theravadan Buddhism, there is one element that's not subject to arising and passing. What is that? The unconditioned nirvana. The suggestion in these other schools that hold mind as not subject to arising and ceasing is that mind and nirvana are synonymous. That's why this becomes such an interesting question.

What this says is that it's not awareness that's permanent. It's not consciousness that's permanent. Rather, it's the source of—or that behind, that which is doing the knowing—that may be permanent. Another way to say it is maybe nirvana has a quality of cognizance associated with it.

This is difficult to conceptualize, but let me give an example of how you might reconcile these two views. Consciousness is impermanent—we all agree on that. But maybe this source of consciousness is lasting.

Here's an image: Let's say you're on the outer edge of the solar system and you're looking away from the sun. Your back is to the sun. As you're looking out into space, what do you see? Let's say you're looking at an area where there are no stars, just for the sake of argument. What do you see?

Blackness.

Is it the black that's a color black, or is it the black that's an absence of light? It's a total absence of light, isn't it? But is there actually light in that space? Your back is to the sun. The area you're looking at is filled with sunlight, isn't it? It's pervaded by sunlight. So there's light but we don't see it—that could be considered the unborn at this point.

Now let's say from below a meteorite comes streaking through that space. Do you see it? Yes. There's a bright flash of light off that meteorite, which is the reflection of the sunlight off the object back to us. That's the born. That's an appearance. That's an arising in knowing. So in this example, mind is the sunlight filling empty space. Consciousness is that flash of light as the meteorite streaks through. As the meteorite passes away, what happens to the image of it? Gone. Arise and pass.

This is just an image. Analogies aren't perfect, but it suggests a way that this agent called mind could be lasting, but the activity called consciousness could come and go.

This is the presentation from some schools, and one of the schools that follows this is the Thai forest tradition. You'll find this concept strongly in teachers like Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mahabua, Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Buddhadasa. They all express this in different ways.

I have a nice quote from Ajahn Jemnian about this. Ajahn Jemnian is a Thai forest teacher who's been at Spirit Rock for a number of years. This is from a dialogue we had with him in 1997:

"Within this body, there are the six elements: earth, air, water, fire, space, and consciousness. The best way to develop a great awareness—and the word he used for great awareness was mahasati, great mindfulness—is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

So there's that sense that the knowing continues because it's the activity of what doesn't pass. All the phenomena come and go. When we rest in the knowing, then we touch that peace. We have that peace that is unchanging.

Yes, that's a good question. The question is, within this faculty of mind, there's another quality—which is a will or intention—that chooses which phenomena to notice. What is that faculty, or how does that work beyond conditioning?

Many of those choices of volition are strongly conditioned. Maybe all are strongly conditioned. But it's certainly a central quality of being a sentient being. It's a really key part of the path also, because it's through that quality of intention or volition we not only direct our attention, singling out what to attend to or be aware of, we direct our actions of body, speech, and mind. So that becomes the whole field of karma or volitional action.

I'll talk about that tomorrow night—what this whole field of karma is and how through practice and sustained attention that force of intentionality gets smoothed down somewhat, gets refined and gets developed out of more wisdom.

Yes, I mean, it's quite possible. The comment was that in that video where the gorilla appeared but some people didn't notice it, likely that information was fed into our brain and our neurology and was known at some level, but we just didn't tune into or perceive it.

And maybe, therefore, knowing is permanent.

I think I would say that it may be the activity of knowing is permanent, but what is known keeps changing. And so with each one, there's kind of a new moment of knowing, new moment of knowing, new moment of knowing. But the activity may be ongoing out of this unceasing, the unceasing nature of the agent or the mind.

Yeah, thank you.

Let me just finish up one piece and then we'll open it up for general questions.

So the question is then—some people like this model, some people really don't like this model. Whether you believe it or not, it can still be a skillful means in meditation. In other words, this guided meditation that we did this morning on the big mind can work whether or not you believe there's such a thing as Buddha nature, whether you believe there's any ongoing quality to mind.

And the way that you can use it, if that meditation is helpful, is basically to tune into the quality of awareness. And if you can see the awareness and the emptiness together—this spaciousness, this lack of fullness, the fact nothing's been there from the beginning—you kind of understand that everything that's arisen can or will pass away, then that's another avenue to this emptiness of self or freedom from clinging.

So one of the main things that happens for me when I turn back to look at awareness itself is clinging drops. If it's very strong, then it won't. But in a lot of cases, if the clinging is weak to medium, and I turn back and look, that drops the clinging. So it can be simply a skillful means to empty the self through releasing some kind of grasping or clinging. So please try it in that way if this appeals to you.

How could you do it as a meditation practice? At any point—there doesn't need to be clinging there first—at any point, you can do that turning toward awareness. And there are a few ways to do it. One is to kind of look back. You know when Ajahn Sumedho

talked about not being able to see his eyes? What would it be to look at what is seeing? So you can ask, who is seeing? And that's kind of a way to get back to that sense of awareness.

Another way is this spaciousness that we talked about with the big mind meditation. Getting in touch with the big field of awareness. The space-like quality. Sometimes a word that works for people is simply "aware of awareness." That does that turning. Turning back. So explore some different ways, see what works for you.

And then if you want to practice with it as a practice, you can make that turning, kind of notice that empty, aware presence, and then just rest there. And as you rest there, as Ajahn Jimnian was describing, everything can come and go. But this place of knowing—as he said, is the place of the deathless. That's always available. Anytime you want to drop into that, that's there. So it has kind of an undying quality.

So in that place of rest, everything comes and goes, but you're not moved. You're not stirred by them. Then, sooner or later, some kind of grasping will happen again. Some kind of configuration of self will come. When that happens, notice it. Sometimes just the noticing of it will release it and you're back into that emptiness. Other times that won't happen. In that case, turn the attention back to awareness again.

So develop a technique. This part of it is a technique of turning the attention to notice awareness. Once you've looked, then some seeing happens. This is the moment that's like the koan or the not knowing or the just looking. Then just rest there. You don't need to do anything from that place. But awareness still happens, knowing the things arising and passing.

So that's a sequence. Notice the awareness, the empty quality, rest there. If a formation of clinging or grasping or selfing happens, turn and look again and rest again. So that's a way to use this as a meditation technique.

Okay, so at this point we can open up if there are questions.

[Question from Sarah]

So I'm wondering if there's a next step. Because for me, the last few years has been about not just noticing awareness, but then going to "and who am I?" And then noticing that I am that awareness. So then I'm still sensing a duality in this approach here. And I'm curious if there's then, coming to "and who am I?" in that?

I mean, earlier, it's funny because earlier I was going to say, well, how about using the word mystery versus mind as the agent? And then you used the word nirvana. I was like, okay, that's closer for me. So for me, it's the mystery. And then what am I? I don't know.

That's been the exercise and the inquiry for me for the last ten years—who am I? And then realizing that. And I can go in and out of that, but coming back to the awareness still feels like duality versus, well, who am I? Oh, I am that. And then that eliminates the duality for me.

So the question or comment was about awareness introducing a duality. I guess I see it a little differently. I think that awareness and what it knows seem to always come together. There's always awareness and something being known together. Like we were talking about the bell—is it round or is it gold? It's got two aspects, but there's just one thing happening. So I don't see the intrinsic duality of awareness and phenomena. We can discriminate the two sides of that, but they come as a single experience. I guess that's the way I would express it.

So you see it as the same? You're saying that we're saying the same thing?

Well, I'm not sure that we're saying exactly the same thing, but regarding the duality—maybe you could say a little more about what duality you see in this description with awareness?

I guess I just see there's still a separation between this idea of me and then awareness. And so how does one reconcile that? And to reconcile it, I ask the question, who am I? And then that helps bring the... It's like duality disappears. Boom. I actually am that awareness. I am the phenomenon that is there, that is resting in that, that creates everything too. Like, yeah, there's just all of a sudden no separation. Not that I live in that place 24-7 at all. But the inquiry for me goes to who am I versus going back to what is awareness. It feels like there's still like a millimeter of separation going on.

I guess I'd say from a Buddhist point of view, the "I"—if we say "I am awareness"—the "I" isn't actually necessary. There's awareness and there are phenomena, but we don't have to place the "I" either in the phenomena, which is what we usually do—this body is me, that car is mine—or in the awareness.

There's a tendency in doing this kind of practice to identify with the witness or the awareness. And we say, "Oh, now I realize I'm not the objects, but I'm the consciousness." But from the Buddha's teaching, that would just be identifying with another aggregate—identifying with the aggregate of consciousness rather than the individual objects that consciousness is illuminating.

And that's why in the Buddha's description of the aggregates, there's not a need to place an "I" anywhere. So we don't have to say that we're the objects.

We don't have to say we're the owner of the objects. We don't have to say we're the consciousness. We don't have to say we're the owner of the consciousness. It's just all these different factors of mind and materiality coming and going and interacting. So I would look at it from this perspective: Is the "I" a necessary piece of that equation? Perhaps it's not.

A participant asked about free will and volition: "Given that intention is conditioned and everything else is conditioned, how does that leave space for free will? I have heard in Buddhist talks that there is space for free will. How is that possible, even given that everything is conditioned?"

This is obviously a profound philosophical question that has persisted through the ages. The more one investigates this factor of volition, the more one sees its conditioned quality, which really starts to undermine one's belief in free will.

But if one goes in the other direction and says that everything is deterministic, the Buddha analyzed this position and noted that it leads to a lack of effort. We give up trying because there's an idea of fatalism—we feel we can't influence the stream of intention, and therefore of karma, and therefore of outcome. So that's not a useful view to hold either.

What I've found on the path is that it's useful to act as though there's choice. We discover that one of the factors that influences volition more and more is the factor of wisdom. As we understand how the path works, then that understanding starts to bear on the arising of volition and the discernment about which volitions to follow and which to drop. The practice works if we act as though we have that choice.

The growth in the factor of wisdom and the spaciousness of mind that comes from meditation gives us more of a feeling of choice, and then the path unfolds. So without being able to resolve totally the question of free will or not, it's skillful to act as though there's choice.

Another participant observed that the very fact that we're talking about conditioning and developing the mind would suggest free will, which is what we're exploring in this retreat—conditioning the mind in wholesome ways, training it in wholesome directions.

A final question came about where Nagarjuna would stand on the idea of a permanent mind. I think he would toss it out completely. The one Mahayana school that doesn't tend to endorse this view are the Madhyamikas, who are followers of Nagarjuna. He was pretty relentless in his pursuit of emptiness.

CHAPTER 88

Emptiness and Karma

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

In this dharma talk from a retreat on emptiness, Guy Armstrong explores the essential relationship between emptiness (suññatā) and karma, demonstrating why cause and effect has been a central theme throughout Buddhist practice. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "empty phenomena rolling on" arise and pass according to causes and conditions, Armstrong examines how karma operates as the "science of happiness" - the understanding of which actions lead to wellbeing and which to suffering.

Armstrong explains how karma, rooted in cetanā (volition or intention), connects right understanding to right action through the Noble Eightfold Path. He details the ten unwholesome actions across body, speech, and mind, and emphasizes how careful attention to the precepts creates the "bliss of blamelessness" that supports deeper meditation and liberation. Through stories ranging from young people in juvenile detention to Mahā Ghosananda's work in Cambodian refugee camps, he illustrates how karmic understanding applies universally.

The talk addresses common Western misconceptions about karma, clarifying that it doesn't mean "deserving" suffering or that all experiences result from past actions. Instead, Armstrong presents each person as an individual "mind stream" - unique yet constantly changing, where moment-by-moment intentions serve as our "rudder" for navigating life. This integration of anattā (not-self) and karma reveals how transformation is possible precisely because nothing is fixed, culminating in the Buddha's teaching about karma "neither dark nor bright" that leads to liberation through the Noble Eightfold Path.

From the beginning of our retreat, we've talked quite a lot in relation to this topic of emptiness about cause and effect. In a very early talk, Gil talked about this general form of dependent arising: when this is, that is. When this is not, that is not. We've often alluded to the Four Noble Truths—the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, the way leading to the end of suffering. Sally talked about the twelve links of dependent origination, the step-by-step causes that lead to suffering. So there's a reason that this has been a significant theme running all the way through.

Why is cause and effect such a significant theme in terms of emptiness? I think it's because when we take the "I" out of our understanding of the universe, then we see that there are just phenomena arising and passing according to causes and conditions. When we have the whole universe mapped onto the "I" view, we think there's an agent

in the center of everything, that everything revolves around and is somehow influencing it, causing it, making it unfold, keeping it going. When we see that that "I" isn't at the center of everything, then we really see how everything comes and goes according to its own causes and conditions. And that's what the unfolding of the universe is: empty phenomena rolling on.

So we come this evening to another of these areas of cause and effect, one of the other great laws that the Buddha talked about again and again—the teaching on karma, the cause and effect of karma.

As we head back into daily life, our main field becomes not the field of silent contemplation, although we hope that still continues both on the cushion and off, but much more of our attention has to go into the field of action. So it's really helpful at this point in the retreat as we near an end to take a closer look at this field of outer action—actions of speech and body, and how they depend on actions of mind.

Let me tie this into the Eightfold Path. You know that the first spoke of the Eightfold Path is Right View. That's the beginning of the section on wisdom. The Eightfold Path consists of three sections: one on wisdom, one on ethical conduct, one on meditation. It begins with Right View. If we don't understand something, we won't take the rest of the steps. So it begins with right view, and the middle section is on conduct or action. What's the appropriate action to further the path? The Buddha spells these out as right speech, right action, right livelihood.

What's the link between right view or understanding and right action? There's one other piece of the Eightfold Path that goes in between those two: Right Intention. So we have right view, right intention, and then the area of right action. Intention provides the link between our understanding and our action. As we understand the world, so we act in it. And one of the key elements of right view or right understanding is the teaching on karma. So the Buddha is basically saying if you want to act appropriately in the world and use your actions to further your path, further your awakening, then right intention is the key component from understanding that makes that link.

I think it's for this reason that the Dalai Lama made this statement. Somebody asked him, "I'm going to be speaking to Westerners about Buddhism. Would it be better to talk to them about emptiness or about karma?" He said it'd be better to talk to them about karma. So we may have been wasting your time this week—we could have gone here a lot sooner. Because this is so important in the field of action and as it affects our whole path, it's important to understand this properly.

I sort of think of karma as the science of happiness. If we want to be happy, what action should we take? This is really the point of the teaching. This is the cause and effect relationship—what leads to happiness and what leads to unhappiness.

One of the things I have to say in talking about karma is that a lot of it I can't verify from personal experience. So I'm going to tell you some of the things the Buddha said about it, which he said that he could verify from his own insight. But it takes an extraordinary mind to be able to verify the workings of karma through direct experience. I'm not that person. My aim is to let you know what his teachings were, and then you can figure out how you want to relate to it.

I don't think it's my job to convince you, only to let you know what he said, although I think it would be to everyone's benefit if we were convinced. That's my intention—just to let you know what he said.

So I'm going to talk about basically four aspects in tonight's talk. One is what karma is, how the results of karma appear or happen, how karma directly relates to emptiness, and what's involved in the ending of karma. These are the four topics for the talk.

The word karma you probably know is Sanskrit. The Pali word is kamma. I might use either one tonight. And the word again is one of those simple words that the Buddha took—it just means action in Sanskrit or Pali. It's just an ordinary word that means action.

In the time of the Buddha, all these different philosophical schools had lots of different views and opinions about action. Action matters or it doesn't matter. There are consequences to action or there aren't any consequences to action. Action is determined already or there's free will in action. All these different philosophers and spiritual teachers would debate about all these points, but nobody really seemed to know.

The Buddha came along and made a unique contribution to the understanding of what action pivots on. And this becomes the meaning of the teaching on karma in his teachings. That is, he pointed to the crux of it as being this quality—the mental quality of volition. Or sometimes we say intention, but be aware it's a different word than the intention in the Eightfold Path. That's right intention in the path, which is samma-sankappa. Volition here is the Pali word cetana.

But I might use volition, I might use intention. As I'm using them in the rest of the talk, I'm referring to this factor that's involved in karma. This is quote 66 on the last page of the handout:

"Volition, O monks, is what I call action. For through volition, one performs the action."

Synonyms for volition: intention, urge, impulse, motivation. So you get the sense that what the Buddha is pointing to is the mental force or emotional force that drives the action to take place—this impulsive energy that the action comes out of, some energy of mind or heart that makes action happen.

The word karma refers to what we do in the present moment. We've heard this phrase "instant karma"—it's entered the pop culture. But that's really pointing to the result, and that's a different word. That word is vipaka. So we talk about karma and then vipaka, its result, which comes later. Karma is just the action in the present moment.

The Buddha considered—this was his teaching—that actions are skillful or unskillful depending on the quality of the volition. If the volition's a wholesome one, the action is skillful. If the volition's an unwholesome one, the action is not skillful. He said that the roots of the unwholesome are our three old friends: greed, aversion, and delusion.

So actions that are influenced by or under the spell of the kilesas—greed, aversion, and delusion—are considered to be unwholesome or unskillful actions. Given what we've been talking about this week, when greed, aversion, and delusion are operating, that's what we've been describing as craving or being caught up in the self. This operation of these kilesas makes the feeling of self, brings about craving and therefore clinging, and they blind us to seeing clearly. When we're under the spell of greed, aversion, delusion, we don't see so clearly.

When these are absent, or at least weaker, and we have non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—we could put those in positive terms—that means the forces in the mind are non-greed, more like generosity or letting go. Non-aversion or non-hatred is more like loving-kindness. Non-delusion is wisdom.

So the wholesome roots of action—when the mind is being shaped by generosity, by loving-kindness, by wisdom—then we trust that the action that comes is a wholesome action coming out of those volitions, those roots.

The Buddha described the action that he's talking about as happening in three spheres. Body and speech, clearly—that's what we normally take as action. But he also talked about mental activity as being action of mind. So the three spheres of mind, speech, and body are all in the area of karma. Even thoughts and emotions have karmic weight and can be either wholesome or unwholesome.

Now, just so that we wouldn't have to always be examining our volition to see what things to do or not to do, the Buddha also talked about a list that he called the Ten Unwholesome Actions. This is really helpful because it makes a very clear guideline of what he suggested not to do, to refrain from. The Ten Unwholesome Actions are divided into spheres of body, speech, and mind.

And he answered, "'Once when I was young, I shot a bird with an air gun. After I shot the bird, it occurred to me that this beautiful little creature was probably enjoying its life, and I had brought its life to an end for no purpose. For many years afterward, whenever I saw a beautiful bird, I remembered that negative deed. Even now, at age sixty-eight, that feeling still comes to me.'"

So here's the Dalai Lama, and he's still feeling remorse for this one action of killing a bird when he was a child. And Oprah asked, "'How do you handle that feeling?'" And he said, "'I purify the negative action by feeling regret, and I try to engage in more wholesome activities.'"

What strikes me about this exchange is the extraordinary level of sensitivity that the Dalai Lama has maintained. Here's someone who has devoted his entire life to nonharming, who has faced the destruction of his country and the suffering of his people with incredible equanimity and compassion. Yet this one childhood act of killing a bird still moves him to regret.

This gives us a sense of how refined this practice can become. Now, I'm not suggesting that we should torture ourselves over every small mistake, but there's something beautiful about maintaining this level of sensitivity to the preciousness of life and the weight of our actions.

The cultivation of this sensitivity is actually a sign of spiritual maturity. As we develop in practice, we become more aware of the interconnectedness of all life, more sensitive to how our actions ripple out and affect others. What might have seemed like small matters before begin to carry more weight as our awareness deepens.

This is one of the ways that ethical conduct and meditation practice support each other. As our mindfulness grows stronger, we naturally become more aware of our motivations and the consequences of our actions. And as we become more careful in our conduct, our minds become more peaceful and concentrated, which supports deeper insight.

The Buddha often emphasized this reciprocal relationship. Good conduct creates the conditions for good meditation, and good meditation naturally leads to more skillful action. They're not separate practices but aspects of an integrated path of awakening.

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued, "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

So I hesitate to say that this is exactly where freedom from remorse leads, but it certainly goes in this direction. And he's only had about fourteen more lifetimes than us to practice it, so he's a little bit ahead of most of us.

This is the area of karma—taking care with the outer action and the intention. The Buddha also talked about what happens, what are the results of taking that care. This is a famous passage, the opening of the Dhammapada, where the Buddha says: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow will follow you, like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you, like your shadow, unshakable."

This is the basic message of the teaching on karma. Wholesome actions lead to wholesome outcomes—that is, happiness. Unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome outcomes or suffering. That's the basic message. Again, this is one of the fundamental laws of cause and effect that works in the universe according to the teachings of the Buddha. You can see that this is also in that general form of dependent arising: when this is, that is; with the arising of this is the arising of that. It's just another form of that general teaching on cause and effect.

It's interesting that karma has become a common word in the culture today. Even if it's not quite clearly understood yet in the West, at least it's got a kind of fluency here.

A few years ago, I was teaching a class at a juvenile hall in San Mateo with James Barnes. We'd gotten an invitation from one of the nurses who worked with the kids to come in, and so we offered a six-week meditation class to them. We were in the maximum security unit—juvenile hall. If you're not American, you might not know this is where young people are held who are below the age of eighteen and not yet ready to go into the adult jail system before they're on trial.

So they were all awaiting trial. They were under eighteen, and they were awaiting trial. And in the maximum security system, they were charged with things like assault, grand larceny, attempted murder, murder. Some of them were sixteen, seventeen years old. They were in for really serious things.

You can imagine what it's like being that age, tossed into this holding pen, not knowing when your trial's going to come, not knowing what the outcome is going to be, and the fact you could be sent away for the next twenty years of your life. Think of the anxiety that those boys would be living with and the state of fear that they probably experienced. Combined with the fact that there are probably some fairly aggressive characters in that mix, you've got a mixture of fear and aggression that's really hard to live with, plus the uncertainty about their future.

So we went in and taught them meditation, and we taught it pretty much like we do in classes here. We started with the breath, we went into the body, and then we went into emotions. We taught them how to bring mindfulness to their emotions, and in doing that, that it was possible to create some space. Some of them became really motivated meditators—one, because they had a lot of time on their hands, but two, because they really needed the tools. They would lie down in their beds at night, this fear would just be going through their body, and they didn't know how to deal with it. Of course they didn't have any tools to deal with it, and mindfulness gave them a way to deal with it.

So they started to get a little receptive to us.

And those were rough places. I mean, here you have people who have lived through unimaginable trauma, who have lost everything—their families, their homes, their entire way of life. Many had witnessed unspeakable violence. The refugee camps were overcrowded, under-resourced, and tensions were running extremely high. There was a lot of anger, a lot of despair, a lot of people who had nothing left to lose.

So Maha Ghosananda made a decision that, from a conventional standpoint, looked completely foolhardy. He decided to go into these refugee camps—essentially alone, as a monk with no protection—and start teaching the dharma. He would walk into these places where people were carrying weapons, where violence could erupt at any moment, where the accumulated rage and trauma of years of brutalization were concentrated, and he would simply sit down and begin to teach.

Now, what's remarkable about this is that he was putting his complete trust in the law of karma. He believed absolutely that if he went in with a heart of loving-kindness, if his intentions were purely to serve and to help heal these traumatized people, then he would be protected by the natural law of cause and effect. Not protected in some magical way, but protected because kindness generates kindness, because compassion creates the conditions for safety, because when you approach others without ill will, you're much less likely to be met with violence.

And it worked. Not only did he not get killed—which many people expected would happen—but he began to have an extraordinary effect in these camps. People who had been consumed by hatred and revenge started to find some peace. Communities that had been fragmenting began to come back together. He would teach them the basic Buddhist practices—mindfulness, loving-kindness meditation, the understanding of karma—and gradually, the atmosphere in these places began to shift.

What Maha Ghosananda understood is something that goes to the very heart of Buddhist practice: that the law of karma isn't just some exotic metaphysical concept. It's describing something quite practical about how our actions create the conditions of our experience. When we act from greed, hatred, and delusion, we create the causes for suffering—both for ourselves and others. When we act from generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom, we create the causes for happiness and peace.

This is why the Buddha called this teaching a "universal law." It's not dependent on belief systems or cultural conditioning. It's simply describing how consciousness works, how actions and intentions shape our experience. Whether you're a Buddhist or a Christian or an atheist, if you approach others with genuine kindness, you're more likely to be met with kindness in return. If you approach life with generosity and honesty, you create conditions that support wellbeing. This isn't mysticism—it's psychology.

So Mahagosananda moved there to begin teaching them. I can't even imagine what it would have been like to be in those refugee camps. Probably most people had lost relatives, close family members, friends in the genocide because something like a million people out of six million died during that time. So everybody there would have had their hearts broken. They would have been enraged at what they'd witnessed.

Mahagosananda's task was to minister to them, to bring the healing message of the Dharma back to people who had lost their whole monastic order, lost the Buddhism in their country. What he conceived was that there needed to be reconciliation first and foremost—that nothing could proceed if the antagonism and conflict continued.

One of his main teachings was these pamphlets he printed with a chant in Pali, which many of the people had heard years before when they had been living in a Buddhist culture and could remember. It contained this great verse from the Dhammapada: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law."

Mahagosananda would hold these services once a week and hundreds of people, maybe thousands, would come to attend. He'd teach through loudspeakers, but mostly what he wanted to get all the refugees doing was chanting this Pali verse: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love."

But there were still Khmer Rouge in the camps, and there started to be death threats against him because they could see how much power this old monk had with people, how much respect and love he commanded. Some of Mahagosananda's supporters collected money—probably Western aid workers—and said, "We need to get you to France. You go to France, you'll be safe. You won't be killed. Look, we've collected the money. Go to Bangkok, buy a plane ticket, and get to Paris. You'll have safe haven."

So Gosananda took the money, took the train to Bangkok. But a few days later, he came back. They said, "What happened?" He said, "Well, we were running out of brochures, so I got some more brochures printed up." He had ten thousand more brochures printed that said, "Hatred never ceases through hatred," and passed all those out through the camp. That was his trust in this law, this eternal law.

When the Buddha was talking about the results of action, he put it pretty strongly. He said, "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform for good or for ill, of that they will be the heirs." This is the way the cause and effect relationship is understood.

Notice in this passage, the Buddha's not talking about the five aggregates. He's talking about beings. Just be aware that this is not one of the passages that points to the emptiness of things. This is one of the passages that's talking about relational activities, how we relate in the world. In that case, you don't need to look at the breakdown into the minute parts.

Westerners often feel some resistance to this message on karma—that beings are heirs of their actions—as though it implies that if someone is happy, that's their doing, and if they're unhappy, that's also only their doing. As though beings maybe deserve the suffering that they've got. That can seem like a really heartless view. You see someone in suffering and you say, "Oh, that's your bad karma. Too bad."

But that's a distortion of the teaching. First of all, there's no concept of deserve in karma. It's like the apple didn't deserve to fall to the ground and get smushed. That's just what gravity does. But also the Buddha didn't have any idea that beings deserve to suffer.

Do you remember the story of Angulimala? Angulimala was a spiritual practitioner whose teacher told him—because he wanted to get him in deep trouble—to collect a thousand fingers from people that he murdered. So Angulimala went out in the forest and started accumulating these fingers, which he wore on a necklace around his neck. Anguli means finger, mala means necklace.

So he wore this finger necklace, and he got up to 999 fingers. He only needed one more. And the Buddha was walking by Angulimala's area on that day. People told him, "Don't go there. Angulimala will take you as his thousandth victim." And the Buddha said, "I don't think so."

So the Buddha walked by. Angulimala tried to catch him to kill him, but through his psychic powers, the Buddha kept walking and Angulimala could never catch up to him. Finally, Angulimala shouted, "Stop! Stop!" And the Buddha turned around and said, "I have stopped, Angulimala. Now you stop. Your mind is on fire with greed, hatred, and delusion. Now you stop."

So they met. Angulimala said he'd never met anyone who wasn't afraid of him before. If there was anybody in the whole range of the suttas who deserved to suffer, I would have thought it would be Angulimala. The Buddha didn't see it that way. He taught him the Dharma. Angulimala practiced sincerely and with great effort. In a fairly short period of time, he became fully awakened—one of the arahants. The Buddha wanted him to come out of his suffering. There's no concept that beings deserve to suffer or should suffer. But sometimes the law just takes us there.

The other view that sometimes corrupts this understanding is: "Oh, that person's suffering is of their own creation. That's their problem, not my problem." That's also not what the teachings say. Compassion wants to alleviate suffering wherever it sees it. It doesn't matter what the causes are. The urge of compassion is to feel that suffering and

want to take care. This quality of turning away from suffering is called indifference, and it's the near enemy of the brahmaviharaof equanimity. I think Sally talked about the near enemies. This is the near enemy of equanimity—indifference.

So we act, different fruits come to us. We can't understand all the details about how they happen, but they happen in certain ways. The Buddha said if you try to figure out how these actions come from karma, you'll experience vexation and go mad. This is one of the four imponderables—very complicated.

But he never said that everything that happens to us is a result of karma. He was asked one time, "Does all the pleasure and pain that comes to a being depend on someone's past karma?" And he said no. People who say that are wrong. He said you can look around the world and see other causes of pleasurable and painful feeling. He mentioned causes like illness, diet, climate, accident, and assault. These are other operative causes that also bring pleasure and pain to our experience.

The law of karma is one more, but it's not the only law. In our current language we might say there are physical laws, chemical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, and the law of karma. Many different kinds of cause and effect are operating. The law of karma is one, but it doesn't mean that everything that happens to us is because of past actions.

Sometimes the law of karma feels very weighty because we're in a difficult situation, difficult circumstances, and I've had people say, "I wonder what I did that was so bad that got me here?" We can't use karma that way because we can never answer that question. We don't know if it was one of our past actions or one of these other causes. That's like trying to use karma as a rearview mirror—what was on the road behind me? We can't see that.

But what we can do is use karma as the steering wheel of where we want to go in the future.

So how does that work? This is where karma and emptiness come together. At first glance, these two seem really contradictory, or they did to me anyway, because emptiness says there's no abiding or fixed self in this whole system, and karma says something that you do previously will come back to you. It's not that it comes back to somebody else. It comes back to you.

So a monk at the time of the Buddha was obviously confused by this and said to the Buddha, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" And the Buddha basically said, "You haven't been listening to me."

Actually, karma and emptiness need each other. I think Gil talked about this early on. They require each other for all this thing to make sense at all. So let's talk about how this teaching on not-self interfaces with the teaching on karma.

First of all, the not-self teaching doesn't deny individuality. The Buddha's enlightenment solved his problem. It didn't solve ours. Each of us has a body. Each of us has a mind. And although we're interdependent, we're also to some extent independent. We each have an individual nature.

So I'd like to think a little bit about the image of a stream—the little creek that runs behind the dining hall. We tend to call that Spirit Rock Creek. I don't think it has water right now, but it will in a few days. It runs really well through the winter.

If you ever sit by the side of a creek and watch it for a while, it's very interesting to reflect on this concept of not-self. A river or a creek is a useful term. You know, if I say Spirit Rock Creek, everybody kind of knows what I'm talking about and where it is. And it's different from the Mississippi River—very different. So everybody knows that's the body of water we're calling Spirit Rock Creek.

But if you sit down by the edge of it and you look at it, is there anything fixed? First you have to ask, well, what's the creek? For the purpose of this discussion, the creek will be the body of water—maybe in geological terms we should also include the banks, but I want to talk about that body of flowing water that runs between the two banks.

Is it fixed when it's running? No. You know that old statement: you never step in the same river twice. It's changing in every moment. There's new water passing through. The water that was here five minutes ago is no longer here at all.

So the stream is a really good image for not-self. There's always stuff going on, but it's always changing. It's always new. It's useful to talk about Spirit Rock Creek. We know what we're talking about. It's different from other bodies of water. But if we look in it, there's nothing fixed.

In some schools of Buddhism, they talk about each of us as a mind stream. Within us, there is always this flow of mental activity—the saṅkhāras of the aggregates, the fourth aggregate—and feeling and perception. Mental factors are happening, emotions are going through, thoughts are arising and passing, and intentions arise and pass. And out of intentions, we sometimes act through body, speech, and mind.

So each of us is individual. We're unique. We have a different body of mind stream within us, but they all kind of work the same, and none of them are fixed.

Of the objects that are flowing in our mind stream, one of the key ones is this element of intention because intention is the core of karma. If we start to bring forth wholesome intentions and we start to not act on unwholesome intentions, that starts to change the flow of the stream. And this is really what the path is about—choosing what actions are skillful, what actions are not, which intentions we follow and which intentions we don't.

Then we start to see that the path itself is a karmic unfolding. The path operates by laws of cause and effect based on the quality of intention and the qualities of mind that we choose to strengthen and the qualities we choose to weaken.

So let's say we come into Dharma practice and our mind stream is flowing. As we all have when we first come, there's plenty of greed, aversion, and delusion in that mind stream, and plenty of actions coming out of greed, aversion, and delusion. Such a stream has a certain destination—let's call it Lake Samsara. Our stream's flowing along with this mixture of wholesome and unwholesome, moving toward Lake Samsara with our mix of pleasure and pain.

Then we start to hear the Dharma, and we begin to drop in new intentions. We start to drop in intentions for loving kindness, for compassion, for wisdom, for patience, for generosity, for stillness, for understanding and empathy. Little by little, it starts to change the flow of the stream. It doesn't feel like much in the beginning, but as we keep strengthening those intentions and those qualities start to arise in us, the whole direction of the stream moves in a different way. Instead of going to Lake Samsara, it's flowing toward the Nirvanic Ocean.

The only thing that's changed is our moment-to-moment intention. When you really think about it, that's all we have to change—that's all we can change.

For me, coming into the Dharma was like being adrift on an ocean that seemed chaotic. I didn't know where my life was going, didn't know if it was moving toward happiness or not, or how to guide it or where to go. I felt really adrift, a little bit lost. Then we start to hear the Dharma and understand we have a way to steer. We have a rudder on this boat that's in the midst of the chaos of life, and that rudder is intention. That's how we steer the boat.

So we start to direct our intention toward these wholesome ends, and we let that be the activity of our inner work of meditation or bhavana. We let that be the guiding force for our outer relationships and actions of speech and body. Then we're in tune with the wholesome side of the law of karma: "Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

Now, the only reason that karmic transformation can work is because there's nothing fixed in here from the beginning. If our ignorance was fixed, we couldn't change it. If our hatred was fixed, we couldn't change it. If our suffering was fixed, we couldn't change it. But nothing's fixed. That's the message of not-self—nothing is fixed in here. That's the groundless part. It's a little unsettling sometimes, but that's what makes liberation possible. Because nothing is fixed, we can shape it the way we want.

The power to shape our hearts and minds is entirely up to us. It just depends what direction we want to go and how many moments of intention we're willing to shape in that way. That's our Dharma practice. That's where you see the fruit in somebody like the Dalai Lama, who's been shaping it for so long. You get an idea of the possibility, the degree of development from this shaping process that only happens moment after moment after moment, based on this factor of intention. That's the engine of the whole path.

Let's look at a couple of the quotes on page 20. Here's one that someone mentioned early—it might have been Sally—number 67: "The Blessed One took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said to the bhikkhu, 'Bhikkhu, there is not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change. If there was this much form that was permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned. But because there is not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering is discerned.'"

So not only is there nothing on the outer form that's stable—not even a small smidgen—there's nothing of the inner either. And therefore this transformation of mind and heart is possible.

For karma to be able to unfold in us, we need this foundation of emptiness—the emptiness of self, the openness, the non-fixedness, the non-stuckness. And then as the path develops, we start to see this transformation taking place.

This is a quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj about this process. He was a teacher of Advaita Vedanta who died around 1990 in Bombay. He worked in the form of dialogue, and in the course of one such exchange, Maharaj said to a questioner, "Your own will was the backbone of your destiny."

Can you sense how that intention, as we understand the shaping quality of karma, creates a kind of trajectory for our life? Your own will was the backbone of your destiny.

The questioner responded, "Surely karma interfered."

Maharaj replied, "Karma shapes the circumstances. The attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character."

Your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character. This is the teaching about intention as our rudder in life.

The Buddha said that when one comes to the end of the path, one who is fully awakened—the arahat—has come to the end of karma. This is a really intriguing idea. I have no idea what it means. He says it in a number of places. Does it mean that there's no self-centered volition happening anymore? Or does it mean that intention is still active, but the fruits of karma are getting burned up really quickly, so there's no result of karma? I don't know.

But in the last quotes on page 20, he talks about this process of the ending of karma. In quote 69: "These four types of karma have been understood, realized, and made known by me. Which four? There is karma that is dark with dark result, karma that is bright with bright result, karma that is dark and bright with dark and bright result, and karma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result leading to the end of karma."

This is very cryptic, but there's some kind of unusual karma that leads to the end of karma, and he calls it neither dark nor bright. This is explained a little more in passage 70:

"And what is karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result leading to the ending of karma? Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

As he says again in quote 72: "It is this noble eightfold path that is the way leading to the cessation of karma."

It's very interesting characterizing the path as neither dark nor bright karma, because normally one would think of the path as the brightest kind of karma. But he says it's neither dark nor bright. My intuition—and I don't have any strong source for this except a little reference in quote 69—is that he says, "What is karma that is neither dark nor bright? The volition to abandon the other karma."

It's as though in coming into the path, we come into this place of deep letting go. Letting go of preoccupation, of obsession, of selfing. Letting go of this controlling instinct that is so integral to the self. Letting go of effort and striving for a result, trusting

more in faith. Letting go of all the mental formations that we're accustomed to generating over and over again, and opening to that place of the stilling of all formations, the abandoning of effort, the abandoning of striving, the abandoning of action and volition.

And then from that place where there is so much stillness, so much surrender to the way things are, perhaps out of that there's an opening to the deep realization and liberation that is really the end of karma.

So let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 89

Where Does Happiness Come From?

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

> *In this dharma talk from a February monthlong retreat, Guy Armstrong investigates the fundamental question of where happiness originates, drawing from the Buddha's teachings and personal observations of a remarkably joyful monk. Armstrong outlines five progressive sources of happiness found in the suttas: sense pleasures (appropriate for laypeople when enjoyed ethically), merit (puñña) through the practices of generosity (dāna), virtue (sīla), and loving-kindness cultivation (bhāvanā), concentration (samādhi) which brings inner peace and stability, insight (vipassanā) leading to understanding of impermanence and non-clinging, and finally awakening itself—the unconditioned happiness beyond all suffering.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that happiness is not random or mysterious but can be cultivated through reliable practices tested over millennia. Armstrong skillfully balances teachings for both monastic and lay practitioners, acknowledging that while renunciates may abandon sense pleasures, laypeople can ethically enjoy them while developing higher forms of contentment. He illustrates these teachings with vivid examples, from museum visits that naturally evoke joy to extraordinary acts of generosity, showing how meritorious actions create 'streams of the wholesome' that fulfill our deepest aspirations. This practical approach to Buddhist happiness offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners clear guidance for cultivating lasting well-being through dharma practice.*

The subject of this evening's talk is: where does happiness come from? I think this is an important question for us to reflect on because the whole journey is about happiness. The Buddha framed it in the Four Noble Truths as the end of suffering, but that's just different language for the development of happiness. When suffering ends, there is something in our hearts and minds, there's something in our nature that brings happiness forth. So we don't have to think of these as two separate questions. When suffering ends, happiness is present, or we can talk about it as the development of happiness.

When I look around the world, I see such a wide range of happiness in the people that I meet and see. It's always been curious to me, why is that range the way it is? Is happiness just something random and mysterious and unpredictable? Some people are blessed with it and other people are not? Does it all have to do with our parents? That would be a convenient explanation, but hopefully that's not the final word. Is it sort of fatalistic or some kind of destiny that we can never really figure out or understand?

As practitioners, hopefully we all understand our journey as being about the development of happiness, the movement to happiness. The question is, what makes that journey possible? What makes it work? Because happiness is a very important concept in dharma practice, not just in current popular expressions, but all the way back to the words of the Buddha. This quality of happiness comes in again and again. Although the Buddha talked about the end of suffering and used that kind of negative language, there are also many words for the beautiful states of happiness of heart and mind in the suttas and in the Pali.

Just to mention a few, because I know that you're familiar with some of these. The word sukha is usually translated directly as happiness. For me, it means a very settled kind of contentment—not necessarily a bubbly or overflowing happiness, but a very settled, contented state of mind. I like the association of sukha with sugar. It may be the same root, I'm not sure, but the sweetness of sugar is kind of suggested by this word sukha. It has a sweet quality of contentment.

The word piti, which I think many of you know from the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, is often translated as rapture. It's a meditative quality when the mind discovers a delight in being with the meditation subject. So it's sometimes translated as a joyful interest. When we connect with our experience in a way that makes it come alive and is delightful, that's a factor of piti in the mind, one of the enlightenment factors.

There's the word ananda, which means bliss, which you hear as the name of the Buddha's companion, a very sweet monk that Sally mentioned the other day. This word appears in many monks' and nuns' names. There are a group of nuns living in San Francisco. I don't know if you've had the good fortune to meet them yet. They're under an umbrella organization called Saranaloka. They intend to establish a permanent nun's residence, hopefully in the Bay Area or Northern California. I think it's very inspiring for women practitioners to see the nun sangha taking root here. One of the nuns in that community is named Ananda Bodhi—the bliss of awakening, the bliss of enlightenment.

There are other words too, but I don't need to do a Pali primer this evening. I just wanted to suggest that this word happiness is very important in Buddhist practice, going back to ancient times.

There's a wonderful modern scholar who I want to recommend to you named Bhikkhu Analayo, who is a linguist, a translator, a researcher. He wrote a very wonderful book called Satipatthana: The Direct Path to Realization, which is a commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta. I regard him as a very authoritative speaker on our tradition. In the book Satipatthana, he said this of the path: "The entire scheme of the gradual train-

ing can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." I like this coming from a monk. It's deeply within our tradition, this development and refinement of joy in our practice.

This question of where happiness comes from came to me strongly this past summer. I was sitting in a retreat with a teacher in the Buddhist tradition who is a monk, and I was struck many times during the time that I spent around him by the level of his happiness. It was just very apparent and tangible—one of the most remarkable things about him. He laughed easily. He smiled a lot. He was very playful. I got to see him both behind the scene and in his teaching role. In both settings, he had this joy that was just very easy to touch and contagious. Because of that, he had a certain charisma.

A lot of people loved this monk. I'm not going to say who it is because I don't want to foster a cult of personality, and I don't want to make statements about him that might not be accurate. I want to share my inferences about him, my impressions of this fellow, without being bound to defend particular claims about any individual.

As I watched him, so struck by the degree of his happiness, a question arose in my mind: where did that come from? How can this one person have such a strong experience and expression of happiness? I should mention that this isn't just subjective interpretation. He was taken to one of these MRI machines—you know how they're running tests on advanced meditators? These functional MRIs look directly at the centers of activity in the brain as one is meditating or experiencing the present moment. They recognize certain neural patterns as being indicative of happiness, and his numbers were off the chart, which led some people to call him the happiest person in the world. Of course we can't know that because we haven't all been tested—that person could be here. But at any rate, he had a very high degree of happiness.

I started to reflect: what is that due to? As a practitioner himself, he has had some hand in developing the happiness that he enjoys—maybe a lot of hand in developing that level of happiness. So I began to reflect on what I understand from the Buddha's teachings about the growth of happiness and where it comes from. I thought that as I understand the teachings, there are basically five ways that the Buddha talked about happiness being developed.

Those are the ways I want to share this evening. The reason I want to do this is to bring happiness out of the realm of the mysterious or the random or the fatalistic—out of a sense of destiny—and communicate my belief that happiness is achievable for each of us by following these practices. I think what the Buddha was pointing to is that we

can each create the heart and mind that we wish to have, that we wish to enjoy in this life. These are, I feel, reliable guides to developing our own happiness. As practitioners, it's just a question of faith and then effort to carry out this kind of development.

Let me name the five first and then talk about each one of them. But before I do, I want to say this is not an exhaustive list. There are lots of routes to happiness. I'm sure you have your favorites. Our good friend James has written a book and leads a class called Awakening Joy. He has thousands of followers and it's transformed people's lives—some Buddhist principles, some principles of his own discovery that have helped people find great measures of happiness. They may not all fit in the five I'm going to name tonight. So the list is broader than what I'm going to talk about. You may have your own ways.

I did a short search on the word "happiness" on Amazon this evening before I came, and 20,000 results popped up in the category of books. So there are a lot of books on this topic. In fact, Sylvia told me that when she was writing one of her books—Sylvia Boorstein, who teaches here—her publisher suggested a title and told her that the best-selling books in this general field have three words in the title: freedom, happiness, and easy. So it's a tip for all you authors out there.

These may not all be so easy, but they are all really reliable. They've been tested for thousands of years. They do seem to work.

The five I want to talk about tonight, in kind of increasing order of happiness, are: sense pleasures, merit, concentration, insight, and awakening.

The first is sense pleasures, and it may seem a little odd to hear a Buddhist talk about sense pleasures as a valid type of happiness, because you probably know there are some strong warnings against sense pleasures, especially for monastics, in our tradition. But let me read you the way the Buddha defined the term of sense pleasure and you'll get a sense of their power.

This is from the Samyutta Nikaya, and the Buddha was talking to his attendant Ananda: "Ananda, there are these five chords of sense pleasure. What five? Forms cognizable by the eye"—that basically means sights—"forms cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing. Sounds cognizable by the ear," using the same description. "Odors cognizable by the nose. Tastes cognizable by the tongue. Sensations cognizable by the body that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing."

Now who can resist that? This is the appeal of sense pleasures. The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on these five types of sense contact are called sensual pleasure.

So this is a big part of life as laypeople. I assume for most of us, these five kinds of sense contact and their pleasurable quality constitute a significant portion of what makes lay life enjoyable to the extent that it is.

I was reminded of this recently. Sally and I went to a museum exhibit in the fall—a number of you probably saw it too. The de Young Museum in San Francisco had borrowed many paintings from the Musée d'Orsay in Paris because the museum there was undergoing renovation. They divided the collection into two exhibitions: the first called "The Birth of Impressionism," and the second featuring the post-Impressionists.

In September we went to see this exhibit of some of the greatest French Impressionist painters who ever lived. The works were arranged chronologically, so you walk in seeing the earlier period of Impressionism—paintings by artists like Manet and Degas who were somewhat more on the realistic end. As you move through the exhibit, advancing in time, you eventually reach the later works of Renoir, Monet, and Pissarro.

I noticed as I walked through that a smile began to spread across my face. The beauty of what I was looking at, especially in the later galleries—that raw play of light and color—was simply delightful. I wasn't trying to smile or thinking about smiling; I just observed the smile growing on my face. That's the realm of sense pleasure: beautiful sights, beautiful sounds, beautiful touches that bring a certain uplift to the mind.

Part of what makes our lay life as pleasurable as it is comes from these different kinds of experiences. It could be sharing a wonderful meal with friends at a good restaurant, listening to your favorite music, making love, or enjoying a beautiful sunset.

When we come on retreat, many of these experiences become inaccessible to us. The loss of those sense pleasures is often one of the more difficult adjustments we make entering the retreat experience. You may find yourself missing friends from home, a comfortable chair, television, movies, music, or all the familiar comforts you're accustomed to.

The Buddha spoke of this as part of the sorrow of the renunciate life. Giving up the pleasures of lay life and entering this more austere lifestyle creates conditions for sadness—a natural missing of those things. Over time, as we continue practicing, joy arising from the meditation practice itself gradually takes the place of those missing sense pleasures. But there's a transition period where the mind can feel somewhat sad at moving away from the pleasures of daily life.

As I mentioned, the Buddha offered many warnings about sense pleasures that were specifically directed to monastics. When we read these teachings, we may develop something of a guilt complex about enjoying sense pleasures as laypeople. Let me share just one passage—there are many, but this one is particularly significant.

This comes from the very first discourse the Buddha gave after his awakening, when he set in motion the wheel of the Dhamma. Finding his five former companions in Sarnath, he explained the Four Noble Truths. Before presenting those truths, here's how he prefaced his teaching:

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness and sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, and unbeneficial. Without veering toward either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision and knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

But notice—this teaching was directed to "those who have gone forth into homelessness," that is, to renunciates. In teachings to monastics, the Buddha also compared sense pleasures to a bone dried up with no meat remaining, or to dreams that are fleeting and insubstantial.

For laypeople, however, the Buddha did not condemn sense pleasures. In fact, he said that one who enjoys sense pleasures may be praised, provided that person has come by their wealth lawfully and uses it not only for personal enjoyment but also shares it to bring happiness to others.

So for laypeople, sense pleasures are perfectly acceptable. For monastics, it's not so much that they're wrong as that they constitute a kind of diversion from the spiritual path.

We have a foot in both worlds. We live our lay lives in the everyday world, and when we come here, we adopt a renunciate lifestyle. It's quite interesting to be in this position where sometimes we're living more or less by a monastic ethos in a renunciate style, while at other times we're fully engaged in lay life.

I feel we must listen to both sides of this discourse to understand when sense pleasures are appropriate and when it's skillful to let them go, as we're practicing here. On retreat, we're practicing mostly in a renunciate style.

But to think that they're wrong for lay people would be misinterpreting the Buddha's teachings. They do give an uplift to the mind, and it's helpful to acknowledge that.

I remember one time Sally and I were having lunch over our kitchen table and we had just pulled some fresh chocolate chip cookies out of the oven. I was eating one, and I remember saying to her, "You know, it's really hard to be unhappy when you're eating a fresh chocolate chip cookie." So just tune into that way that delightful sensual experiences uplift the mind. As lay people, we don't have to resist that or condemn it.

But then the Buddha continues in that quote where he describes the five chords of sense pleasures being lovely and agreeable. He continues in this way: "Though some may say this is the supreme pleasure and joy that beings experience, I would not concede this to them. Why is that? Because there is another kind of happiness more excellent and sublime than that happiness."

So sense pleasures are just the first in our list, and there are other pleasures more sublime than that. As I was observing this monk who I was around last summer, I looked at his relationship to sense pleasures. As a monk, he doesn't really have a lot of them, so he was not very attached—I never saw him being attached. But I would see him enjoying food and having slight preferences for this kind of food or that kind of food. Sense pleasures didn't play a big role in his life or his happiness.

So the second area of the development of happiness is around this word called merit. Merit is the translation of a Pali term, *puñña*. A lot of Westerners have a real reaction to this term merit. Maybe it reminds us of somebody who was like the teacher's pet at school who always brought the apple in for the teacher. Maybe it reminds us of collecting merit badges when we were in Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts. It just seems a little too goody-goody.

But this translation is in wide use in the Buddhist world. I don't think we're going to change it overnight, so I'm going to use it and live with it. But let me talk a little bit about what *puñña* means. *Puñña* is basically just skillful action or wholesome action—action from a good intention. And the understanding is that when we act from that kind of good intention, a caring intention, a loving intention, a giving intention, then happiness comes from that.

You probably all recall this famous quotation from the Dhammapada, which I think Carol mentioned in her talk last night. This is from the opening verses: "All states come from mind, are preceded by mind, are ruled by mind. Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

So *puñña* just refers to these acts of speaking and bodily action that come from a pure heart and mind. And the Buddha said, if we always act from that kind of place, happiness comes to us. Happiness follows us like our shadow, unshakable.

As practitioners, as we gain some trust in these teachings, we can take this message to heart as a kind of practice direction. And the more we have faith and trust in this as an avenue, and the more we're inclined to have our actions come from good intentions, loving intentions, generous intentions, we can create for our lives this kind of happy outcome. It's not mysterious. It's not random. It's karmic. It's just one of the outcomes of the law of karma.

In the Buddha's lifetime, his basic instructions for lay people were to do meritorious actions. Most lay people in his time, most lay people in Buddhist countries today, are not interested in pursuing this kind of intensive meditation practice that we're engaged in here. If you go to Thailand or Burma or Sri Lanka, you'll see that the majority of lay people are more interested in doing things like visiting the temples, the nunneries, the monasteries, and making offerings, doing some chanting, doing prayers. But they rarely sit down and practice in the way that we do.

Originally, when I went to Thailand, I thought, "Wow, that's not taking the teachings very seriously." But actually, there's a stream of the Buddha's teachings that is designed for lay people that emphasizes this kind of activity. So even in the Buddha's time, he didn't expect most lay people to practice like this. Generally, at the time of the Buddha, if you wanted to practice like this, you became a renunciate. You became a nun or a monk, at least for a period of time.

Because we have a foot in both worlds, I think it's really good for us to learn about the lay practices as well as these more secluded practices. And I think as teachers, as we brought these teachings to the West, we haven't put very much emphasis on these lay practices, the practices of merit. So partly why I want to mention this tonight is to put it forth as another way that we can bring happiness into our lives as lay people. We don't have to wait for the next retreat. There are lots of things we can do in lay life that encourage this development.

When the Buddha talked about skillful action in terms of merit, he talked about three main activities or three main areas, which in the Pali are known as *dāna*, *sīla*, *bhāvanā*.

Or in English, dana is generosity, sila is virtue or wise conduct, and bhavana is a very interesting word we might translate as mental development or development of heart and mind. When bhavana is used in the sense of merit, it generally refers to the area of loving kindness and compassion.

I'll say a little more about each of these three as excellent practices in lay life.

Generosity is one of the most accessible practices for us as lay people, and it was one the Buddha taught over and over again. It's the first of the ten paramis which were described as the way to Buddhahood. And it's something that you see a lot in Asia. Over the course of this retreat, Carol and I will both probably talk about our experiences of generosity around the monasteries in Asia because it's quite extraordinary. Hanging around this scene for a long time, you just run into some outrageous examples of generosity.

I was coming back from a retreat one time and a woman who had been on the retreat gave me a ride, and I got to hear her story. Her story was that she had been a management consultant—very highly trained, highly functioning professional—until she was about fifty. In the course of her career she had saved quite a bit of money. She had invested in the usual vehicles, plus she had bought property and invested a lot in real estate.

Then she got into meditation practice in our style, Vipassana practice. She was so inspired by the practice and its roots, because she'd visited Asia before, that she decided she wanted to give all her money away and support especially nunneries and also monasteries in Thailand. So she went over to Thailand with the intention of retiring from her career, supporting the nunneries especially and also the monasteries, and then settling down in one of them to live and practice for the rest of her life.

She cashed in her securities. She sold all her real estate around the states except for one property, which she kept. She took the money and started giving it away to these different spiritual centers there. She settled in and prepared to live out her days in probably a nunnery environment.

But then something happened. She got sick. It was a kind of sickness that was fairly serious, life-threatening, and she felt she needed to come back to the West to get treatment. So she uprooted herself from Thailand. She sort of lost her practice and living situation, came back here, and only had one property left. She sold that to pay for her health care. She got well, fortunately, and then she resumed her career as a management consultant to support herself again. She continued to do meditation practice.

So it was at this point that I met her and heard her story. She'd given away all her money. She had gotten ill, and she had to come out of her retirement to start over again. But what I found so beautiful—she had given away hundreds of thousands of dollars, I don't know the exact amount, it could have even been a million—and then she was almost broke. And she had no regrets. She would have done the same thing again, she said.

For me, that was a really beautiful pointing to the power of generosity because I could see how that impulse had sustained her over the years that she was planning it. When you think about doing something generous—not something you have to do, like giving an uncle a gift because it's his birthday, but something you really want to do—it's joyful to think about that, to think about a gift that would really please someone. When you buy it and then offer it, there's a wonderful feeling because it makes the other person happy. And then afterwards when you reflect on it, you get that warm feeling all over again because it's a beautiful thing to recollect.

So this is the force of generosity. It brightens the mind. It uplifts the mind. It gives us beautiful qualities to reflect on afterwards.

And there's something else that generosity does that's more subtle, often not seen or acknowledged, that I want to point out. Generosity works because we're able to put ourselves in somebody else's shoes. We're able to look at someone else and understand what their need is because we can imagine: if I was in that situation, here's what I might feel and here's what I would need. The generosity really rests on this sense of connectedness or empathy.

Then underlying it is something like: I have so much, they have a certain need, let me give some of what I have so that their life can be improved. Underlying generosity is this deep feeling of connectedness. And I would even go so far as to say some intuition of oneness.

We understand that we're really not separate from the person that we're giving to. We can feel their situation as though it was our own. So we act out of that sense of connection. And when we act and make the offering, that action sets a kind of karmic seed in the mind that implants that sense of connectedness even more deeply. Acting on a belief through our body and through our words implants that in our karmic stream more solidly. So that's part of the power of the act of giving.

The second of the bases of merit, as the Buddha called them, is this quality of sila—virtue, or wise conduct, or integrity. We all know what that feels like when we violate it. We know that it causes harm to others and it causes a lot of remorse in ourselves. Simil-

arly, when we know someone who has a lot of integrity, they create a kind of zone of safety around them. When you're around someone who's very careful with their conduct, you feel safe, the other people that come into contact with them feel safe, and conduct is generally good around that person. I mean, how many people do cruel things around the Dalai Lama? I bet not very many.

So that sense of integrity creates an atmosphere of safety. Everyone who comes into that presence can feel it or is touched by it, benefits from it. The Buddha talked about this kind of integrity as being a different kind of gift. He says that when we follow care with our conduct, we're giving unlimited beings freedom from fear. This is the gift of harmlessness that we offer when we take care with our own conduct.

The third of the bases of merit is this factor called bhavana, or mental development. I just want to mention the etymology here. The word bhava in Pali means being or existence or becoming. It refers to a quality of coming into existence. The bhavana makes an emphasis on the kind of process that's going on. So what I think of the word bhavana as pointing to is bringing into existence or bringing into becoming. It's often a synonym for meditation. So it really refers to when we do certain practices, we are bringing those qualities into existence in our hearts and minds.

Bhavana is often associated in this basis of merit framework with the practice of loving-kindness, generating a loving heart, a compassionate heart toward ourselves and others. I love this image that when we practice loving-kindness, we're creating our heart. We're bringing our heart into being. That is part of the gift that practice offers us. This is really what we're doing with all of our meditation practice—we're bringing ourselves into being in a beautiful way.

There was a French poet, Paul Valéry, an imagist poet who wrote toward the end of the 19th century. One of his unpublished works from his lifetime were his private notebooks that he wrote in every day. He kept a long series of these things called cahiers, notebooks. He did them very consciously as a spiritual practice. When they were published posthumously, you could read through and they were not just his poems, but his reflections on his readings and some poems and some essays and his thoughts on a wide, wide range of topics. But he did it as a spiritual practice. And he put it this way: he said, other people are writing books, but I am making my mind.

That's the sense of bhavana. With bhavana, we make our mind and heart. We shape it in the direction that we choose. And in this sense of merit, we shape it toward loving-kindness, compassion, and connection.

Here's what the Buddha said about the fruits of merit from dana, sila, bhavana: "There are these streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nourishments of happiness, which are heavenly, ripening in happiness, and which lead to whatever is wished for, loved and agreeable, to one's welfare and happiness."

It's understood in our tradition that these streams of merit lead to the fulfillment of our aspirations—whatever that aspiration is. So the streams of merit may lead to different results for different people. They lead to what each of us wishes for. If what we wish for is a comfortable life in the world and some material prosperity and basically harmony of mind, then the accumulation of merit can lead in that direction. If what we wish for is true freedom of heart and mind, or liberation, then the streams of merit will lead in that direction, of course if also supported by wisdom.

These are very helpful things for us to develop and actualize. They lead to what is wished for. When I looked at the lifestyle of this monk that I was around last summer, I could see the merit just being formed all the time with him. He was very generous with his time, with his teaching, with sharing his understanding. He was someone who took very little personal time for himself, but was always involved in activities that gave to others, receiving people, reaching out.

He went into this deep absorption that lasted three days. His parents tried calling his name, shaking him, but he was completely unreachable. They became quite frightened and called other people to help, but nothing worked. Finally, after three days, he naturally emerged from this state.

When he came out, he told his parents that it had been the most wonderful experience of his life - far better than playing with the other children. From that moment on, he became passionate about meditation. By the age of twelve, he was teaching meditation to adults in his village.

Meeting Ajahn Jumnian is an extraordinary experience. He carries this quality of deep peace and steadiness that you can feel immediately. There's something almost magnetic about being in his presence. This is the power of well-developed samadhi - it creates a field of peace around a person that others can sense and benefit from.

This brings us to the fourth avenue to happiness, which is wisdom or insight - the Pali word *panna*. While the other three paths can bring temporary happiness and peace, wisdom offers something more permanent. Wisdom sees through the fundamental delusions that create suffering in the first place.

The Buddha taught that there are three root causes of suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion. Wisdom directly addresses delusion - our fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of reality. When we see clearly how things actually are, rather than how we imagine them to be, suffering naturally decreases.

The insights that bring this freedom are not intellectual understandings, though intellectual understanding can support them. Rather, they are direct, experiential realizations that change our relationship to life at the most fundamental level.

One of the most powerful of these insights is the recognition of impermanence. When we truly see that everything is constantly changing - including ourselves - we begin to hold everything more lightly. We stop grasping so tightly to experiences, relationships, and even our own identity, because we understand that everything is in flux.

Another crucial insight is understanding what the Buddha called *anatta* or not-self. This doesn't mean we don't exist, but rather that what we think of as "self" is much more fluid and interdependent than we usually imagine. When this is seen clearly, the desperate need to defend and promote the ego relaxes, and a natural compassion emerges.

The third fundamental insight is recognizing that trying to find lasting satisfaction in changing conditions leads to suffering - what the Buddha called *dukkha*. When we truly understand this, we stop looking for happiness in all the wrong places and begin to find the peace that doesn't depend on external circumstances.

So his father knew what was going on because he had been a strong meditator himself. He knew that this young boy had fallen into a strong state of concentration, but the boy wouldn't surrender it. So the father kept talking to him, saying, "You're in a strong state of meditation. Come out. You can find it again. Don't worry." Ajahn Jinnian wouldn't leave. And of course, you know what would reach a young boy. His mother talked to him. So his mother finally sweet-talked him and told him how worried they were about him, and her heart was heavy with worry. Finally he came out, responding to her love.

Once they realized that he had this talent, they began to train him both in vipassana style and concentration styles of meditation. He developed a very strong concentration practice. You can feel that in him today. He has very high energy. I've never seen him get tired. I've never seen him unhappy. He says that he hasn't had anger in twenty-five years. And I believe it. Every time I see him, he's energetic and happy.

So when he was first coming to Spirit Rock, we thought, well, maybe he'd like to go out sightseeing in the area, you know—Point Reyes, Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco. People would ask him, "Would you like to go to see the ocean? Would you like to go to see the city? Would you like to go to see the bay?" And his answer would always be the same. He'd say, "You know, if you want to take me somewhere, I'm happy to go. But are there people who'd like to hear the Dharma? Then I'd like to teach them the Dharma. But if you want me to go, I'll be happy there. And I'll be happy teaching the Dharma. I'll be happy anywhere. So it's all okay with me." But there were usually people who wanted to hear the Dharma, so Ajahn Jinnian would give teachings there.

He had a kind of bubbly, infectious energy that partly came from his depth of concentration and loving-kindness. Loving-kindness is a path to concentration as well. So just to know, this is one of the factors that develops very naturally on these kinds of retreats. I think Carol mentioned that this morning in response to a question. What you're doing now in your vipassana practice will develop concentration very strongly as long as you apply that moment-to-moment mindfulness.

So concentration will develop for all of you while you're here. Some people choose to take a long period of time like this and devote it to especially strengthening this factor of concentration. And Carol mentioned some specific practices called samatha practices that we offer. And for those, there will be a few people on this retreat practicing those particular kinds of practice out of a particular interest. But that quality will develop for all of you.

So I'd just like to read one description from the Buddha about one of the states that develops from strong concentration. This is a description of the first jhana. There are eight jhanas in all, so this is the entry point: "She enters and abides in the first jhana with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. She makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, fill, steep, and pervade her body so that there is no part of her whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure."

When this experience is accessible, imagine your whole body being filled with rapture and pleasure and being so fully in the present moment that there's no worry about the future and no regret about the past. That state brings a certain degree of happiness. Again, it's temporary, so we can't pin our whole meditation career on temporary states. But it's a very strong experience and gives a lot of confidence, a lot of happiness.

One of the things I noticed about the monk that I was with is that he had a lot of inner peace and a lot of stillness. Even in a busy day—we had to go out, give teachings outside, come back, give teachings, meet people, film videos—his mind was very balanced, steady, and still through it all. A lot of practice had gone into that.

The fourth of the areas of the development of happiness is insight, or we could call this wisdom. We're going to be talking about this a lot over this month.

This is the theme of this retreat, really. So I'm not going to spend much time on it tonight.

Just to say that as we pay close mindful attention to our experience, we feel its individual characteristics. A breath is long or short, relaxed or constricted, calming or agitating. We feel each breath differently.

But as we pay close attention, we also start to notice the universal characteristics of the phenomena that we're paying attention to. We notice every phenomenon we pay attention to is of the nature of arising and passing. Everything comes and goes. This comes very naturally out of bare moment-to-moment attention to what we're experiencing.

As we notice this coming and going of everything, the truth of impermanence just becomes more and more obvious. Sometimes it's presented in dramatic ways in our practice. Sometimes it's presented in more subtle ways. But that truth comes home to us. I'd say every day in a long retreat like this, as we see that again and again at deeper and deeper levels, we see everything's coming and going. What sense does it make to hang on to what's naturally passing? It really doesn't.

So we learn not to cling as much, not to hold on as much, because nothing is lasting very long. That light approach to our experience gives a lightness of mind. And that was another thing I very much appreciated about this monk. He didn't seem to take anything too seriously. He touched everything he did with a very light heart and a light gesture. A lot of ease came out of that understanding of the nature of things.

The fifth element, avenue to happiness, is the quality of awakening itself. As insight deepens, stillness settles in very new and, I could say, unshakable forms. There's the possibility of the mind opening to that which is unchanging beyond the phenomena that are arising and passing. This is what's referred to in our tradition as the process of awakening, the opening to this unconditioned element.

When that awakening happens at different degrees for different individuals, it has the power of removing from the mind altogether certain kinds of stains or fetters that bring suffering. In the end, it has the potential to remove all the causes of unhappiness from the mind stream permanently. And that is what the Buddha referred to as the complete end of suffering.

This is possible through the deepening of insight and this experience of awakening. This is really what's referred to as the experience of full liberation, full awakening, full enlightenment. When the mind is so free from the causes of suffering that it can really be said to be completely released and freed.

So I asked this monk about the experience of freedom, the causes of freedom to this degree, and his response was, the primary cause of that freedom is happiness.

So all the other practices that we do—enjoyment of our lay life, the development of merit, cultivating the quality of concentration and developing wisdom through insight—all those streams can go into the access to and the release of this factor of liberation, the highest kind of happiness that the Buddha talked about.

So let's just please sit together for a minute in silence and let the words settle.

CHAPTER 90

The Seven Factors of Awakening

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *In this dharma talk from a February monthlong retreat, Guy Armstrong presents the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga) - the fundamental mental qualities that the Buddha identified as leading directly to liberation. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and other core teachings, Armstrong explains how these factors work sequentially and in balance: mindfulness (sati) establishes awareness, investigation (dhammavicaya) deepens understanding, energy (vīriya) provides momentum, rapture (pīti) brings joy, calm (passaddhi) settles the mind, concentration (samādhi) creates stability, and equanimity (upekkhā) maintains balance. Using vivid examples from great teachers like Dīpamā and practical meditation instructions, he shows how these wholesome states naturally arise when we 'starve the hindrances and feed the factors of awakening.' Armstrong emphasizes that while we cannot control the moment of awakening itself, we can cultivate the mental conditions that prepare the mind for liberation - creating what he calls 'the meditator's best friend' on the spiritual journey.*

There was a story that made the rounds around the time of 9/11, one that came from the Native American tradition. Many of you probably heard it at the time.

A young boy had gone to school one day and had a very hard time because his classmates were picking on him and giving him great difficulty. He came home from school disturbed and related the story to his grandfather, saying that he wanted to go back and fight with the other kids who had picked on him. He asked his grandfather what he thought he should do.

The grandfather said, "Oh, I know this place well. I have had these same struggles all through this life." He continued, "It's as though there are two wolves living inside me. One of them is angry, enjoys hatred, and wants to seek vengeance. But the other wolf is kindly, full of concern for people, and wants to find harmony with everyone, even those who have hurt me. They struggle inside for my heart. Each one tries to dominate and wants to win."

The young boy said, "So grandfather, which one wins?"

The grandfather replied, "The one that I feed."

I like this story not only because it has great relevance for our life and for spiritual life in general, but also because the vocabulary is very similar to language the Buddha used in describing the course of our spiritual journey. The Buddha talked often about how our journey unfolds by starving the hindrances—those five difficult energies that Winnie talked about last week—and feeding what are called the factors of awakening.

So I want to talk tonight about these positive qualities within us that it's the purpose of our practice to feed and make grow, as we simultaneously weaken or starve the hindrances so that they tend to fade away.

There are seven qualities that the Buddha talked about, and he gave them the name "the seven factors of awakening." You may have also heard them called "the seven factors of enlightenment." The root of the word in Pali is *bodhi*, which comes from the same root as Buddha. It means to awaken. This translation of "enlightenment" is a strange Westernism, but really the word in Pali clearly points to waking up, awakening. So I'm going to use the term "the factors of awakening" here.

We shape our minds through cultivating these seven wholesome qualities through the practice we're doing, as we weaken the afflictive forces—you could call them the hindrances or the *kilesas* or the taints. This is how the meditative journey unfolds. This is how our spiritual path unfolds in this tradition.

These seven factors lead us to awakening and describe the mind that you might say is perched on the edge of awakening. They are capable of great depths of development. There may not be a limit to the development of these seven qualities. We get a sense of that potential when we meet great teachers who have developed these qualities extensively.

I mentioned the other night the Thai teacher Ajahn Jimnian, who has come to Spirit Rock many times and I'm sure we'll have him again. He was a great concentration prodigy when he was a child, but he also has a lot of insight and has developed his mind through Vipassana as well as Samatha practice. He said once, a few years ago, when talking about the development of his own heart and mind, that he hasn't had any anger in 25 years. And it seemed like that when you met him. That's a great development.

The other teacher that impressed me greatly in this regard was Dipa Ma. Dipa Ma was an Indian woman from Bengal who trained in Burma with great teachers there and then studied under Anagarika Munindra, Joseph's first teacher, for many years. By

the time I met her, she was probably about 60. Her first visit to the United States was around 1980, and I got to spend a month looking after her when she came to Massachusetts.

I got to see her both in her teaching role and behind the scenes, and in both roles, she seemed the same. I was especially interested in watching her outside the meditation circle. She brought with her daughter, whose name is Dipa. Dipa Ma is just a name that means "mother of Dipa." So Dipa came, along with Dipa's son Rishi, who was four years old at the time.

Rishi was quite a little whirlwind when he was four. What was wonderful is we would take them out shopping in the nearby town and go through shopping malls because they wanted to buy clothes and sheets and bedding to take back to India, where you could get higher quality items here.

So we'd be going down the aisles of the department stores and Rishi would be kind of running out front, pulling hangers down. Clothes would be flying all over the floor, and it was generally just chaos in his wake. And then Dipa Ma would be running behind him, trying to put things right and hopefully slow him down—this little sixty-year-old woman in her white robes, flapping behind her as she ran down the aisle of the department store. And there was always a little grin on her face.

I thought, if she can laugh at trying to control a four-year-old in an American department store, that's good integration. Dipa Ma had that kind of unflappable quality.

And then in the Dharma seat, you got a sense of her tremendous inner strength. She's one of the strongest people I've ever known. Joseph Goldstein would sometimes go to visit her and she would say, "Oh, you look like you've been busy. I think you need to sit for a couple of days." But she didn't mean sit and walk and sit and walk. She meant sit down for two days and don't get up. That was her idea of sitting for a couple of days.

She was teaching at IMS one time in a fall retreat, and people were always struck by her presence. She had a very strong emanation. So they asked her, "Well, what's in your mind?" They were trying to get a handle on it—what's going on in there? What's in your mind?

She said, "There are only three things in my mind. There's loving kindness, there's concentration, and there's peace. That's it."

That's a pretty beautiful mind. That's what she was like. She sort of radiated all those qualities. There's a lovely biography of her out that's just entitled *Dipa Ma*. And I found that women practitioners especially relate very strongly to her. We don't have a huge number of teaching figures—women teaching figures in this tradition—and she is a really wonderful one to relate to. So I really recommend that book to you all.

These are the qualities that we grow and can grow to a great extent. The Buddha made, as you know, a lot of lists. There are a lot of lists of the unwholesome qualities of mind. There are a lot of lists of the beautiful qualities of mind. But I would say for meditators, this is maybe the most important list of qualities of mind.

Of course, in the beginning, it's really important to get to know the hindrances, the list that Winnie talked about earlier last week. As the retreat progresses, you gain more facility at working with the hindrances, and those become a little less important as the retreat goes on. You start to move into these beautiful states of mind with more frequency.

And then the list that gives the best map of these beautiful states of mind for a meditator on this journey is the list of the seven factors of awakening. So I hope you will regard them as great tools on your journey. I kind of regard them as the meditator's best friend, because these are the forces in the heart and mind that will carry us to awakening, carry us to liberation. This is from the Buddha. They lead to awakening. Therefore, they're called factors of awakening. Very sensible.

I'll just mention what they are and then I'll talk about each of them in a little more detail. The seven are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. They are all described as maturing in release. That is, when we first encounter them in our practice, they're small growths. Our practice in the initial stages is dominated by the hindrance forces and especially desire and aversion. And as these factors of awakening come through, they're small in the beginning and they look weak. It's easy to overlook them.

But as we continue to cultivate them, they grow up and they grow stronger. And when they mature, their result is release or freedom or liberation. This is their function. It's their destination. This is from the Buddha also.

Investigation in the context of Buddhist meditation is more of a direct knowing, a kind of intuitive inquiry that happens through awareness itself. It's the quality of mind that wants to know experience more intimately, not through thinking about it, but through being present with it in a receptive, open way.

When mindfulness shows us what's happening—breathing, sensation, emotion, thought—investigation is the factor that leans in with interest. It's like the difference between noticing that there's a flower in the garden and actually moving closer to really see it, to know its texture, its fragrance, its particular way of being. Investigation brings that same quality of interested, receptive attention to whatever is arising in our experience.

This isn't an aggressive probing or an analytical dissection. It's more like gentle curiosity. When a sensation arises, investigation might notice: Is this sensation hard or soft? Is it changing or stable? What happens to it when I don't resist it? When an emotion comes up, investigation observes: Where do I feel this in my body? How does it move? What is its essential nature?

The Buddha sometimes described investigation as the factor that distinguishes between what is beneficial and what is harmful, what leads toward freedom and what leads toward more entanglement. So investigation has a natural wisdom to it. It begins to see the patterns of our experience, recognizing what brings suffering and what brings peace.

As this quality of investigation develops, it naturally energizes the mind. When we become genuinely interested in our experience, when we start to see the fascinating interplay of mind and body, of arising and passing away, energy begins to build. This is how investigation leads to the third factor of awakening, which is energy or effort—*viriya* in Pali.

This energy isn't the kind of striving effort that comes from willpower or determination, though those qualities certainly have their place in practice. The energy that arises from investigation is more like enthusiasm. It's the natural energy that comes when we're engaged with something we find genuinely interesting. Think of how you feel when you're absorbed in an activity you love—there's an effortless quality to the energy, a sense of being naturally drawn forward.

In meditation, this manifests as a willingness to stay present, to keep showing up for whatever is arising. It's the energy that sustains our attention through difficult moments and keeps us engaged during periods when practice feels routine or challenging. This energy has a brightness to it, a sense of being alive and awake to the moment.

Investigation emphasizes a non-conceptual awareness. The better way to think about it is that investigation draws our attention closer to our experience so that we can feel it more intimately. That's how we investigate—not by thinking about the exper-

ience, but by taking an experience like the breath and moving the attention closer to it so that mindfulness knows it better, knows it more closely, knows it in more detail, knows it more thoroughly, feels it more directly.

When this happens, there's quite a lovely movement that happens in the mind. We have a natural affinity for the present when we get interested enough to get close to something.

A simple example: I came up for tea tonight and got to the dining hall just before tea time. I looked up toward the meditation hall and there was a small herd of deer grazing on the lawn out there. Further up the hillside, the late afternoon sun was casting those long shadows and that kind of golden light on the hills all the way up to the ridge. It was just a very beautiful scene.

Of course, our Spirit Rock deer are different. They're not like the deer in the rest of Woodacre. These are really cooled-out deer. What you'll notice is you can get fairly close to these deer, and they don't get afraid. I think it's the result not of genetic traits passed along—because we have deer at our house ten minutes from here who are spooked much more quickly than these deer—but of being around people who are peaceful, moving slowly, and non-threateningly.

There was this lovely group of six deer just grazing very slowly and meditatively out on the lawn. I was transfixed by the sight. I just stood at the entrance to the dining hall for a while, watching them because it was so beautiful.

When the interest is there, when the curiosity is there, the mind is naturally drawn to closer contact with what we're feeling or observing. It's a natural process.

Then you get a feeling for this other word the Buddha used a lot for the kind of attention we give in meditation. It's often translated as wise attention. I might rather call it careful attention. The Pali word is *yoniso manasikara*. *Manasikara* means attention. *Yoniso* is the Pali word being translated as wise, or, I would say, careful.

Now the root of this word *yoniso* is *yoni*. If you know Hindi or Pali or Sanskrit, this refers to the womb. So probably a more literal translation of this word is womb-like attention.

People sometimes criticize Buddhism for being too masculine or too patriarchal, but in the Buddha's elaboration of this very central kind of meditative attitude, he calls it a womb-like attention. What's involved in that image of being womb-like? The womb is embracing, sheltering, nurturing, and holding with care and love. This is the kind of attention we're asked to bring to our experience.

Mindfulness in its fullness is said to be without greed, hatred, or delusion—*alobha, adosa, amoha.* This word *adosa* literally means without hatred, but the Buddha often used this negative language to imply the beautiful quality of it. Within this womb-like attention, there's a sense of the absence of hatred, which is actually pointing to the presence of loving-kindness, the opposite of hatred.

I think of mindfulness as having intrinsically this warm, nurturing, womb-like quality that establishes an embracing kind of relationship with our experience. Investigation can deepen this relationship of mindfulness to the experience that we're with.

Investigation is one of the factors that can be strengthened very directly by your effort in the present moment. Let's look at some simple examples of that.

Let's say you're experiencing the breath and you want to heighten this feature of investigation. How could you do it? I think James led a guided meditation the other morning that went through a few different ways to bring a greater sense of interest and investigation. I'll just mention a couple here.

One is that with every in-breath, there's a beginning, a middle, and an end. With every out-breath, there's a beginning, middle, and an end. Can you see each of those three stages in an in-breath and an out-breath? When you look to find them, you're heightening investigation and you're bringing the awareness closer to the object of the breath.

Here's another suggestion. Sayadaw U Pandita, who's a very demanding meditation teacher, would ask his students at the beginning of a retreat as they were first coming into relationship with the breath, a question like this: When you breathe in, can you notice three distinct sensations in that in-breath? And when you breathe out, can you notice three distinct sensations that are part of that out-breath?

In other words, we might think as we begin that an in-breath is one sensation. But if we look more closely, there are lots of sensations on an in-breath. An in-breath lasts a few seconds. Whether you follow it at the abdomen or the nose, you'll feel a lot of little dancing particles of sensing coming alive and passing away.

Moment by moment in an in-breath, moment by moment in an out-breath. So can you find and name three distinct sensations in an in-breath, three distinct sensations in an out-breath? And then he would say, "I want you to report them to me in the next interview. So you're really going to be on the spot in a few days." Believe me, you get motivated to look closely.

And then you would come back and report to him your three sensations. And then he would say, "Okay, next interview I want you to tell me one more that you haven't seen before." So again, one is motivated to look closely.

If we're investigating our emotions, we might look at three aspects of an emotion. The mood or coloring that it has in the mind—the way joy tastes different than contentment, the way that irritation tastes different than frustration. So look at the tone or the mood directly. Look at its expression in the body. If the emotion is strong, you'll feel it somewhere in the body. And the third is to look at what kinds of thoughts come with an emotion. Emotions tend to generate thoughts that are like them. So those are ways of investigating the emotion. Look at those three aspects of the experience and get close to each one.

This quality is one of the most direct expressions of the faculty of wisdom. We often talk about our practice as being, in the end, all about wisdom. It's really what we activate that enables us to understand our experience. And it's the understanding that frees us. Experiences come and go, but wisdom grows. And the more wisdom grows, the more we understand what's happening and the less we get caught. So wisdom is really the high person on the totem pole in Buddhist practice. It's the liberating factor. It's what we're really working toward.

But how do you activate it? What is wisdom? It's kind of an abstract concept. It's not conceptual either. It doesn't come from thinking about things. Insights are its expression, but insights are not always there. They come when they come and they're not always there, and you can't force them by thinking about them. That doesn't work.

So how do we support or activate wisdom? Investigation is one of the most direct ways because we're asking the question, "Let me know more about what this experience is. Let me see more deeply into it. Let me understand it more thoroughly." So we're activating that wisdom factor immediately with the growth of investigation.

As you develop this quality of investigation, one of the things you'll notice is that it generates an even greater sense of interest in what we're experiencing. And with that greater sense of interest comes a kind of alertness. It's as if the mind wakes up. There's a brightness of energy and we want to look even more closely, and that kind of waking up quality and the added alertness that comes leads to the next factor, which is energy.

Investigation brings with it the arising of energy. Energy is a direct translation of the Pali word virya. But there are many translations of this word. None of them quite hit the mark. So let's talk around the word by the different translations. Another translation that's often used is effort. And then another popular translation is energetic effort,

because people couldn't decide whether it's energy or effort, so they just shoved them together. Some of the other words I like to translate virya are courage, ardor, and my current favorite, enthusiasm. When we're enthusiastic about our meditation, we give energy to it. And that picks up our practice a lot.

From all of these, you'll get a sense of what's involved in virya. It is a kind of energy. It can be both of body and of mind, and you'll experience it both of body and of mind. It's the energy that keeps us awake and refreshed and coming to sittings. It's the energy that makes us want to look closely. But it's energy not in a random way—energy that's directed toward the path.

This quality reflects the very nature of mind itself. As the Buddha taught: "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the responsibility of cultivating wholesome states."

This quotation illuminates both the direction and the attitude that underlies virya. The energy flows toward wholesome states, but there's something more—an unmistakable heroic element. Virya comes from the Pali root *vira*, meaning hero. This heroic quality is essential because the work of abandoning the unwholesome and cultivating the wholesome isn't easy.

As you well know, unwholesome states carry tremendous momentum built through endless repetition of our karmic patterns. For years and years—perhaps lifetimes—these tendencies of greed, aversion, and delusion have gathered force behind them. When we enter into direct relationship with these patterns, we feel their impact again and again, moment after moment. Yet in the midst of this challenge, we must simultaneously develop wholesome qualities.

This is the great work of practice—anything but simple. Virya is the element in mind that enables us to return to this relationship moment after moment, transforming whatever unwholesome states we encounter into the beautiful qualities that represent our deepest potential.

The strength of virya depends largely on our level of motivation. None of you would have undertaken the work you have without strong motivation driving you forward. When I contemplate motivation, I find it helpful to look at other fields of human endeavor, particularly professional athletics.

Take tennis, a sport I've long been passionate about. I've played for years, love discussing it, watching matches on television, attending tournaments live. What fascinates me most are those who truly excel. Consider today's top players—Roger Federer and Ra-

fael Nadal. Their athletic conditioning is superb. They can spend five hours on a blazing hot court, running at full speed, battling each other with fierce intensity. Federer barely appears to perspire, while Nadal looks as though he could continue for five more hours without missing a beat.

Their physical conditioning is remarkable, and the financial rewards substantial—Federer's earnings likely exceed twenty million dollars. When Andre Agassi dominated the circuit, I read extensively about his training regimen. Living in Las Vegas—that desert city where heat dominates most of the year—he worked with a demanding coach from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. This coach would take Agassi into the hills surrounding the city, forcing him to run sprints up steep inclines in the scorching mid-day heat until Andre would vomit from sheer exhaustion. Only when he reached that point of complete depletion would his coach say, "Good, that's enough for today. Now you can shower."

This was Agassi's chosen path to the level of athleticism he sought. Yet of all the athletes who've impressed me with their dedication, professional cyclists remain the most extraordinary, especially during Lance Armstrong's era. Though he won the Tour de France seven times, what captivated me wasn't just his success but his mastery of one of the most grueling feats humans undertake.

The Tour de France spans nearly a month—July into August—crossing some of France's highest mountains, through the Alps and Pyrenees. Day after day for more than twenty stages, with only occasional rest days, these athletes must ride at maximum intensity against the world's finest competitors. They're literally riding their hearts out.

Lance once explained that his advantage came from an unusually high tolerance for pain. Every time he mounted his bicycle for a race, he knew he faced eight hours of unrelenting suffering. That was simply the nature of his chosen sport—what all cyclists at that level accept as their reality.

But consider: what drives such dedication? Fame and fortune, certainly. Yet how does this compare to the motivation for liberating the heart and mind?

That's like small stakes compared to what we're doing. But each of us is making that same kind of heroic effort in our way. Every time we come in here and we're willing to meet the physical pain or the restless mind or the pain of the heart that may be years and decades old, we're exhibiting that same kind of heroic quality with our meditation.

Sometimes meditation encourages us to really take this heroism to our limit. I came on one three-month course during a year when the teachers were all practicing and studying with Sayadaw U Pandita, this demanding teacher from Burma that I mentioned, and they were teaching in his style. So we were told when we entered the retreat that we were expected to sleep four hours a night, not more, and we should be doing continuous mental noting for the twenty hours that we were awake.

I was a little taken aback because I was used to sleeping six hours a night in retreat. I could cruise pretty well at six, but I'd never tried to get down to four. And I did mental noting some of the time, but I had not been used to doing it all twenty other hours. So I thought, okay, this is the instruction, I'm going to do it. And then every day in the interview, my teachers would ask me, "How many hours did you sit, how many hours did you walk, and how many hours did you sleep?" So I'd have to keep track of that and report to them.

After many sleepy sittings and sleepy walkings and even sleepy standings, I did manage to get my sleep down to four hours a night. And then I found that I could cruise at that level. I mean, it was hard work, but the sleep was not a problem after a certain time. I'd go to bed at eleven, I'd get up at three, and I got kind of used to that rhythm. And then I did the noting practice very continuously in the other twenty hours.

I have to say it was one of the most fruitful periods of meditation practice that I've done. It was definitely the hardest, but I also learned a tremendous amount. Some things I don't think I could have learned any other way. So it was very valuable. It was a challenge to my level of energy. It was not easy. But now that I look back, I'm really glad that I did it. It was very fruitful.

So that's one model of viriya, of the heroic approach to practice. But there's another kind of viriya that is simply about perseverance. Energy that simply goes on and on and on will also reach the goal. So it doesn't have to be this most intense kind of all-out effort, but simply doing our practice steadily on and on and on will also reach the goal.

There's a great figure in Tibetan history named Milarepa, who I'm sure you've heard of, a great eleventh-century yogi who spent most of his time out in the wilds and caves, living on nettles, dressing very simply in a white robe and doing inner heat practice to stay warm. Milarepa had a couple of very famous disciples, Gampopa and Rechungpa, both of whom went on to found great schools in Tibetan Buddhism.

This story is about Gampopa. He was completing a period of training under Milarepa and had gotten lots of teachings, lots of empowerments, lots of transmissions, and was about to go off on his own and do his own solitary retreat. Very sad to leave his teacher, but he knew that he had to go off to do his practice. So he was taking his leave of Milarepa and started wandering down the mountain path to go off into his own hermitage.

He got partway down, and Milarepa said, "Wait, come back." Gampopa came back. Milarepa said, "There's one more pith transmission that I want to give you." Gampopa was very curious, very eager. Oh, this is really the heart of it. So Milarepa turned around, he turned his back to Gampopa, flipped up the hem of his white robe and bent over, showed him his backside, which was described as being as hard with calluses as the hoof of a camel, and then said to Gampopa, "This is the secret of my success. Persistence in meditation is really what you need. I've only gotten to where I am by meditating with this kind of dedication. So as you go off, please also meditate with this kind of diligence to achieve your own success."

So just that carrying forth, carrying on. This is from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, the Burmese teacher we've mentioned a few times: "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort which is simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this, you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

Of this perseverance, Bhikkhu Bodhi had a really lovely comment in a book of his on the Eightfold Path, where he said, "In order to reach the goal, you only need two things. You need to begin and you need to continue."

And if you do those two things, the outcome is assured. That's the persistent quality of virya, just keeping going.

So as we make our effort, as we exert ourselves in this practice with this bright, alert energy, in time it brings the next quality, which is called rapture. The Pali term is piti. We use the term rapture because it's gotten somewhat standardized, but it's an odd word, isn't it? Do you use it much in everyday conversation? I hardly ever hear this word outside of religious context, so it's a little peculiar. But I think a better translation is something like rapt attention or joyful interest.

So this brightness that comes when the energy is there and we're making a connection to our meditation subject—we find a kind of joy in coming into relationship with it. In the beginning, say when we're with the breath or the body, it just seems like a lot of hard work. Doesn't seem like much fun. But as the interest rises, as the energy rises,

over time this becomes a happy kind of activity. Our relationship to the object starts to light up with some kind of pleasure, some kind of enjoyment as we connect with it. And it's this enjoyment of the focus that is pointed to by the word piti or rapture. So we find that we like being where we're turning our mind.

In the beginning it seems like a lot of work and there are many things that are far more interesting, but at this point we like being there with the object. Even the breath, which seems very neutral and not particularly sexy, starts to seem appealing.

There's a teacher in Australia named Ajahn Brahm. If you follow Buddhist news, you will have heard of him because he carried out an ordination of bhikkhuni in the Theravada tradition. I believe this was the first Western bhikkhuni to be ordained, to take full ordination, which means 254 precepts for a woman. It threw the monastic community into something of a tizzy because it was quite unorthodox. Ajahn Brahm wanted to make a strong statement, and he did so, and there have been follow-on ordinations of other women in the bhikkhuni lineage.

Ajahn Brahm teaches concentration practice on the breath. One of the phrases he uses to incline people to that practice is to tell them to look for the beautiful breath. When you can discover the beautiful breath in your practice—discover the beauty that is with the breath—then your mind will go there naturally, easily, in an unforced way. And this is the quality of rapture, piti.

It's a mental factor, born out of our relationship—the mind's relationship to the subject—but it's a quality that has physical expression. When people are describing rapture or piti, they'll often talk about the energy that comes in the body. It's an arousing factor and brings up energy in the body.

Classically, there are different descriptions. There's minor piti, which is a kind of trembling all over the skin. There's momentary piti, which is like a flash of lightning of energy in the body. There's showering piti, which is like waves of energy passing through. There's uplifting piti where the body feels very light, as though it could lift up and float away. This is the quality responsible for yogis being able to levitate.

Do you remember when Maharishi Mahesh Yogi used to teach levitation? They'd go off into those retreats in Indiana—everybody who wants to come levitate, come for a meditation retreat. I was very skeptical about those retreats, especially about the advertisements. But I met someone this summer who was on those retreats, and she said many people were bouncing across the hall because they had learned to lift. They

couldn't quite sustain it, so they'd come back down, but they were moving under the power of this kind of piti. The Buddhist texts also describe this phenomenon, so this is what's responsible for levitation.

And there's an all-pervading rapture where it fills the body. Mostly, this is a pleasant experience. There's the joy of being with the object, and then as the energy comes up, there's a pleasurable quality to it. It's often paired with this word sukha. Descriptions of the jhana speak of rapture and pleasure filling the body and pervading the body.

But in the early stages, as the rapture gets strong, the energy is sometimes so strong that it's not pleasant. It can become a little too intense or even overwhelming at times, and its experience is uncomfortable. There's simply too much of it happening. This is the culmination of the arousing cycle of the seven factors of enlightenment.

That over-strong energy of piti is dealt with by the second half of the seven factors as they unfold. The pleasure in being with the object takes away much of the mind's restless movements to past and future out of either sense desire, because it's already pleasurable, or aversion, because the current experience is pleasurable.

So the mind starts to settle based on the likableness of this present moment experience of rapture. The mind discovers through meditation itself—not through external objects, people, or relationships—a source of pleasure and happiness. It finds its fulfillment to some extent here and now, just through the meditation. That cuts down many of the movements outward toward pleasure or in reaction through aversion. And so it begins to bring about a settling of the mind in the mind-body experience, a settling within ourselves.

This is the development of the next factor, the first of the tranquilizing factors, which is called calm. The mind isn't moving around so much, things start to calm down, and one's mind settles within the mind-body present. It is this deepening of calm that starts to modulate, starts to soften, starts to temper the piti energy if it's gotten too strong, if it's gotten a little too intense.

This experience of calm is not something that happens often in most people's daily life. When meditators come upon this, sometimes for the first time in practice, it's occasionally a little unexpected. A common reaction is, "This is not very interesting. This is kind of boring. I mean, look, a few days ago I was having a lot of strong emotions. I was really processing this old relationship that I hadn't come to grips with before. There was a big opening in the heart that was accompanied by a lot of pain, but a lot of re-

lease. The energy was up. It was really interesting. I had something to talk about in my interviews. And then that all sort of went away, and now, well, really, I have to tell you, I'm sorry, but there's nothing happening in my practice anymore."

This state of "nothing happening" is actually quite an interesting point because it's announcing the emergence of the quality of calm. And as you probably know, the Buddha said that the state of peace was really a pretty good place to be.

At first it may seem like it's not very interesting because the experience is fairly neutral. And boredom is basically an aversion to the neutral. We can deal with it in two ways: we can become more comfortable with the presence of the neutral, or we can heighten the quality of investigation to get more interested in what's going on. Boredom is basically a result of not looking closely enough to find interest.

We can work with it in either of those ways, but mostly we want to start to appreciate the sense of peace that is growing, that we're discovering, and let ourselves simply sink into it and let it continue to enlarge. If we just accept it and settle, it will continue to enlarge by itself.

Then it leads into the next of the factors, which is concentration. Concentration, you remember, is this quality of collectedness of mind. So calm comes as we start to find some fulfillment within. Concentration comes as we deepen that willingness to let go of the mind going out and come more and more to collect the energy in the present moment in our experience of mind and body.

This experience of concentration brings a certain quality of strength into the mind. As you've discovered as you've been exploring it here on the cushion, when we sustain our attention in the present moment for a while, there's something that feels really solid in our awareness. It feels like it's not so easy to be shaken by a passing thought, by a mood, or even by a pain in the body—a much greater steadiness of attention even as things are changing around us.

The strength of this quality of concentration is important. In the years before we built the retreat facility here, this hall and the residences, this side of the road and the hillside on the other side formed a kind of natural amphitheater. Once every year or two, we invited Thich Nhat Hanh to teach here. We built a platform for him on the other side of the creek that was high enough that people could see him, and then we would all sit in this natural amphitheater on the ground and his voice would be amplified. We would have 1,500 people here for a day of teaching from him.

It was quite extraordinary—his presence in this setting. He has such stillness of body and slowness of speech that it was as though his stillness cast a spell over the whole 1,500 people on the hillside. The spell that he cast was of concentration. Just by his presence and tuning into it, everybody there just settled in, and the whole crowd became very quiet. There's a photo of him taking almost a thousand people from that day for a walk up the road to the end of the path in those two meadows—silent walking meditation. It was very beautiful.

Concentration has two major benefits. One is that it brings with it a sense of well-being. The quality of peace and the sense of self-sufficiency just feels great. In some ways, it's what we're looking for through meditation—it's one piece of what we're looking for.

The other great benefit is that when the mind gets still, that is the best foundation for insight to arise. When the mind's moving all over the place, we can't see so clearly. It's like you're on a merry-go-round, spinning round and round and round, and a friend comes up with a newspaper and holds it in front of you and says, "Can you read it?" No, because you're going by too quickly. But as the merry-go-round slows down...

You come to a halt in front of your friend, and then your friend says, "Now can you read the newspaper?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what does the newspaper say?"

"It says life is change. If you hold on, you suffer. There's not really any self there in the first place. So just let go."

It's concentration that lets us read the news and understand that's the way things really are.

As we develop this sense of stillness and steadiness, the mind gets stronger. All the changing movements of pleasure and pain that normally create stirrings in our mind—our human situation basically is we're stirred up by greed and aversion in reaction to the passing show of pleasure and pain. That's the whole problem. As the mind gets stronger, the passing show of pleasure and pain doesn't make so much impact. And when it doesn't make so much impact, those things actually get less significant. They don't stir us as much. We don't have to care about them as much. And we find that the mind can stay in balance even as the passing show goes on.

This is the last of the seven factors called equanimity. Equanimity is no longer being so moved by the changing factors of pleasure and pain. Equanimity is a very high state of the conditioned states that we can develop. It's the last of the seven factors of enlightenment. It's the last of the ten paramis. It's the last of the brahmaviharas. And it's the last stage in the progress of insight described in the Visuddhimagga before awakenings. You might say that equanimity is the closest conditioned state to the unconditioned.

So this is the culmination of the seven factors of awakening. When all of these are brought together and in balance, then the mind has this alert stillness that's really poised either for good mundane insight or for supramundane insight, for the opening to the unconditioned.

Let me close with two quotations from the Buddha:

"Because these seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to Nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering."

"Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future—all will do so by overcoming the five hindrances that stain the mind, by firmly establishing their minds in the foundations of mindfulness, and by cultivating the seven factors of awakening in their true nature."

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 91

Mettā: Tenderness & Connection

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a February monthlong retreat, Guy Armstrong delves into the profound but often subtle benefits of mettā (loving-kindness) practice. While the immediate effects of loving-kindness—increased warmth, reduced self-judgment, and diminished criticism of others—are readily apparent, Armstrong focuses on two deeper transformations that emerge gradually: tenderness and connection.*
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> *Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on the eleven benefits of loving-kindness practice, Armstrong explains how mettā develops our innate human sensitivity into a spiritual strength. Through the brahmavihāras (divine abodes), we learn to hold both joy and sorrow with an open heart, cultivating what Chögyam Trungpa called our "soft spot"—a vulnerable tenderness that becomes our gateway to genuine compassion.*
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> *The talk explores how loving-kindness practice reveals our fundamental interconnectedness, breaking through the illusion of isolation that causes so much suffering. Armstrong shares the Buddha's teaching that through countless rebirths, all beings have been intimately connected as family members, leading to the Metta Sutta's instruction to cherish all beings "even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child." This recognition can blossom into bodhicitta—the awakening heart that aspires to liberation for the benefit of all beings. Through stories ranging from whale rescues to the Dalai Lama's responses to criticism, Armstrong demonstrates how mature mettā becomes a source of strength, wisdom, and fearless compassion in daily life.*

So it is unusually cold today. In case you wondered if that was really real, it is really real. On top of Mount Tam, which is the highest peak in Marin, there are three inches of snow tonight, with about two more inches expected. So that's really unusual. So it is really cold.

That's why tonight I wanted to talk about mettā. I thought it would warm us up a little bit. Really, I want to do it because we haven't talked a lot about mettā, and I'm a very big enthusiast of this practice. It's really a wonderful practice that brings so many benefits to us. Some of the benefits are somewhat clear early on. Some of them are not so apparent, and those are the ones that I want to talk more about tonight—the ones that are not so apparent.

But early on from doing the loving-kindness practice we can feel the growth in us of more warmth and more sweetness and more relationship with the people that we bring in, the friend and benefactor and even perhaps the difficult person. So we feel that warming up of our emotional field very immediately with the practice of loving-kindness.

We notice that as we feel better about ourselves, as the mettā for ourself starts to grow, other problems immediately go away. We feel less in conflict with ourselves, less self-judgment. We tend to feel less in conflict with other people. Someone commented in an interview today that as the mettā for self has grown, the judgments of others have gone way down just very naturally.

I noticed that a lot when I was doing intensive mettā practice. I started off, as we usually do in a retreat, with a reasonable amount of hindrances, a reasonable harvest of hindrances to work with. But as the mettā started to kick in, the judgments went completely away. Any judging thoughts of other people just disappeared. So these are some of the things that we notice immediately.

The Buddha talked about eleven benefits of loving-kindness practice. I'm going to read them a little slowly so that you can kind of feel into each one. These apply to a mind that has really become mature or steeped in loving-kindness: One sleeps easily, wakes easily, and has pleasant dreams. People love you. Devas and animals love you. Devas protect you. Weapons can't harm you. The mind is joyful. The face is serene. You die peacefully and you have a good rebirth.

It's almost worth doing for those reasons. It's a good list.

But tonight I want to talk mostly about two benefits that aren't so obvious right away, but these are kind of like slow-growing insights that dawn on us over the course of doing mettā over a period of time. These may be two of the deeper shifts that happen to us, and I'm going to call them tenderness and connection.

So this quality of tenderness is something that grows little by little. You know the best things in meditation grow little by little. A lot of things can happen with a bang, but things that come quickly also tend to pass away quickly. Or as one of my teachers said, experiences are like clouds—they come and they go. But realization is like space. You sort of don't notice it. And wisdom, he was tying this with wisdom, grows slowly.

You can think about this when you think about the real lasting fruits of your meditation practice. One of the main ones is equanimity, the balance of mind that lets you be even with all the changes that life presents. This quality of equanimity can't be rushed.

It's not something that you can figure out in one retreat. It takes a lot of steady application over years to develop a strong sense of equanimity, but it's one of the most lasting strengths that we can have in our lives.

So the growth of tenderness and connection are a little bit like this too. They don't necessarily hit us over the head right away, but they grow slowly and strongly and they're really important.

This quality of tenderness—there's kind of an inherent tenderness to being human because we're very sensitive beings. We're very sensitive to changes of pleasure and pain. The fact that our skin is not covered by a thick fur is one factor that makes us more sensitive than most other creatures. The horses down there in the front field, I don't know if you've noticed, but sometimes it can be raining and they won't go under cover. Notice that? This rain will be coming down, you know it's cold, and they just stand there because they have very thick coats and thick hide.

It doesn't penetrate so much, but we're very sensitive as human beings. And then we take this innate sensitivity and in the practice of loving kindness, we're developing it every moment by tuning into our metta person and going, "Are you well? I hope you're well. Are you happy? I hope you're happy. Are you healthy? I hope you're healthy." This is what we're doing all through our metta practice. We're kind of checking in: How is this experience of life for you?

As we tune into the compassion practice, which I think James introduced today, then we also tune into the potential for suffering. So we're always, through the Brahma Viharas, we're always kind of holding people's hearts in our hands and saying, "How is your experience of life? Is it happy or is it sorrowful? I care about that. I want it to be happy. I don't want you to be in sorrow." So we're developing this sensitivity or tenderness in every moment of doing our practices of love and compassion for people. We're waking the heart up to the joys and sorrows in life, our own and others'.

This is from Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche on something that he called our soft spot: "It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for tenderness. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate. A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere, so we are not completely covered with a coat of armor all the time. What a relief."

So this tenderness is kind of a vulnerable thing, but it's also our way into feeling and our way into opening the heart. One of the reasons we're vulnerable is we know at any time anything can happen. Anything can happen. And so we're faced with the potential of loss, of hurt, of pain, really at any moment. As you know, you can go into a doctor's office for a checkup. They do one test on you, and a few days later you get the message that changes your life. It can happen any time.

Other things. One of our friends was making a spiritual journey and a little bit of a vacation to India a few years ago. And he was there with his partner. They were staying in a bungalow very close to the beach. And he went out on the beach one morning to do some exercise and just enjoy the tropical air. This was down near Madras. But the morning happened to be December 26, 2004.

And he was standing on the beach. And all of a sudden, this big wave came up and knocked him over. He said, "That's strange. Usually it's a very placid beach." And so he got up, and as he was standing up, he watched the wave going out. And he noticed that it left this huge gulf behind it. It swept too much water out to sea and he got alarmed and he went into his bungalow and pulled his partner out and said, "Come on we've got to get to some higher ground." So another wave was coming so they jumped up on this brick stone wall.

And he grabbed a hold of a palm tree, and his partner grabbed a hold of him, and they just stood there, anchored as well as they could, about four feet above the beach. And then the second wave came. And you probably know that's the wave that was the real tsunami that killed thousands of people in that part of the ocean, India and Thailand and Sri Lanka. But because he hung on to the palm tree and his partner hung on to him, they were okay. They were rattled as the wave came up, but they hung on and they were all right. There's one point where you don't want to follow the advice of non-clinging. Clinging saved his life, so that was helpful.

But anything can happen. Just a normal day in South India.

Another kind of interesting story is the life of Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche. He was a very great teacher in the last fifty years of the twentieth century, one of the great Dzogchen masters of Tibet. He was born in ancient Tibet and grew up in that system where he spent many years in retreat, received teachings and training from great masters, and practiced really deeply.

In 1949 the invasion happened and things started to become more difficult for the Tibetans. Finally he fled in 1959 with the Dalai Lama. He fled to India. He was highly recognized at that point—thirty-seven years old and very well known, a great master. But he was in a strange country where the Tibetan community had not gotten well established. So his life was a little bit of a wandering life.

He said, "Sometimes I gave empowerments to great assemblies of people, including dozens of tulkus and thousands of monks. At other times, I was utterly poor, living hand to mouth on the streets in Calcutta, wandering around with my hand out begging for pennies. So many unexpected ups and downs. Who can describe them?"

We just never know.

A few years ago, I was teaching a long retreat at IMS on the East Coast. There was a young man who had come to practice, very devoted to meditation practice, Dharma practice, and he became very inspired during the three months. At the end of the time, he wanted to go off and ordain as a bhikkhu somewhere—maybe the U.S., maybe England, maybe Asia. So he went home and was putting his life in order so that he could go off and devote his whole life to Dharma practice when he came down with this mysterious illness.

It affected his digestion so seriously that he couldn't eat a normal diet. And he had a lot of pain, bodily pain, no matter what he did. So the possibility of going off to ordain was no longer an option because his health wouldn't allow it. So here he was, young, seemingly in the flush of youth, on fire for practice, and his body wouldn't support him. What to do? Not an easy situation.

I've kept in touch with him over the years. He's still very into practice, practices when he can. His health is improving. He's understood more about diet. The situation is still not easy for him.

So life throws us these unexpected situations. How do we respond? How does the heart get strong enough to hold these kinds of changes, to hold these unpredictable events that can be so difficult to adjust to?

One of the beautiful things about the system of the Brahma Viharas is that it shows us how an awakened heart can respond to the joys and sorrows of life. Metta is the heart opening, compassion shows the response to suffering, sympathetic joy shows the approach to happiness, and equanimity holds it all in balance. So it gives us an overview of what's possible for our human potential.

But then how do we develop it? How do we move into that wisdom?

I like this quote from Bob Dylan. This is from his memoirs, Chronicles. He said, "My grandma was filled with nobility and goodness. Told me once that happiness isn't on the road to anywhere, that happiness is the road. Had also instructed me to be kind because everyone you'll ever meet is fighting a hard battle."

This is that attitude of caring and compassion that can pervade our relationship to life if we let it. And it means opening up in each new moment and seeing who we're in touch with and what's happening for them and what's happening for ourselves. This constant tuning in to the experience of sentient beings is what creates this connected feeling. It's really quite amazing.

So then there are these stories that illustrate these moments of connection that are very strong. There was a story that appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle a few years ago. Most of you probably know that humpback whales do annual migration from further north down the coast of California. Then they go to Baja California in the spring where they breed. They have their babies in the warmer waters.

So one December, there was a female humpback whale that was going by the coast near San Francisco, actually near the Farallon Islands, which are about fifteen miles off the coast here. Some fishermen came upon her, and unfortunately she had run into an area where crab fishermen had set up their traps. The way that crab fishers set up their traps is they lay out these nylon ropes with what are called crab pots hanging off them. The crabs get caught in the pots and the fishermen reel them in. Well, the thing is that these ropes with the pots are really quite heavy.

So she had gotten tangled up in numerous ropes, some wound around her body four times—around her back, her flipper, her tail, and her mouth. Each line carried about a thousand pounds of weight from the crab pots attached to it. The fishermen who discovered her could see that the ropes were cutting deeply into her flesh, and the tremendous weight was pulling her down. She was struggling desperately to swim to the surface for air, fighting a losing battle against the relentless downward pull. Without intervention, she would inevitably sink beneath the weight.

The fishermen called the Marine Mammal Center on the Marin headlands, and a rescue team was quickly assembled. It took several hours to locate her, but when they arrived with a group of divers, the enormity of the challenge became clear. How do you approach a creature of such immense size and power? One flip of her tail could easily kill a human being. Yet here was a whale drowning, and they faced the terrible choice between risking their own lives and watching her perish.

The divers chose to enter the water.

Armed with curved knives, they began the painstaking work of cutting through the ropes. One diver later described working around her massive head, carefully cutting the line that encircled her mouth. "Her eye was right there," he said, "watching me, winking at me. It was an epic moment of my life." Can you imagine swimming alongside that enormous, gentle eye as you work to free her from her bonds?

After an hour of careful, dangerous work, they managed to cut through all the lines. The moment the whale realized she was no longer burdened, she began swimming in circles in what appeared to be pure joy. Then something extraordinary happened—she swam deliberately to each diver and nuzzled them, one by one.

One rescuer described it this way: "It felt to me like she was thanking us, knowing that she was free and that we had helped her. She stopped about a foot away from me, pushed me around a little bit and had some fun. She seemed kind of affectionate, like a dog that's happy to see you. I never felt threatened. It was an amazing, unbelievable experience."

Such moments are rare gifts. Imagine that kind of heart-to-heart exchange with a mammal of such magnificent size, feeling her sentience and joy at being freed. These are the experiences that break through our ordinary barriers and remind us of something profound about connection.

This is precisely the kind of connection that the brahmaviharas make possible for us. It's so powerful because most of the time, we don't recognize how deeply connected we actually are. We forget. It's remarkably easy to forget, because the ego-mind has this persistent trick of making us feel isolated. We tell ourselves that we're fundamentally different, unique in some essential way—either better than others or worse than others. One way or another, we convince ourselves we're separate, not like everyone else.

By repeating this story to ourselves over and over, we begin to believe it completely, and it creates an profound sense of separation. "I'm not really part of the human family," we tell ourselves. "Everyone else belongs, but I don't fit because of this quality or that quality. I'm outside. I'm on the outside."

The brahmaviharas directly challenge this sense of isolation. I remember teaching a retreat for scientists a couple of years ago—we occasionally hold meditation retreats specifically for people in the physical sciences, social sciences, and neuroscience, because there's such growing interest in the intersection between neuroscience and contemplative practice. We want neuroscientists to experience these states from the inside, not just study them from the outside.

During one of these retreats, as we were discussing metta and the nature of connection, one scientist mentioned a recent study showing that one of the deepest sources of unhappiness for people was precisely this sense of isolation.

One of the greatest normalizing qualities was a sense of being connected. And you can look at this culture where so many threads of connection have gone. The family is not held together so strongly. The communities are not so functional. And people often feel isolated in their apartments or homes. This creates a deep sense of unhappiness, as though we are not part of the family—the human family. So metta shows us something different.

I want to talk about how this happens. First I want to read a little bit of this poem from Naomi Shihab Nye called "Kindness." She's a Palestinian-American poet and has some really beautiful creations. This is just a fragment from a poem called "Kindness":

"Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend."

What I love in this passage is the line, "till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is all sentient life. All sentient life knows sorrow, knows happiness, knows pain, and knows pleasure. And as we sink into this realization through loving-kindness practice, we start to realize that we're all in that same boat. All of us are dealing with these basic problems of the succession of pleasure and pain that's out of our control and how anything can happen. Our life can be taken away. Our health can be taken away. Our loved ones can be taken away. We're all that vulnerable in the same situation.

So this is one of the great connecting truths of the Brahmavihara practice. Our basic concerns are the same. Those four phrases that you've been working with—they apply for everyone. Safety, happiness, health, and ease. We're all looking for the same things. So that's one level of connection. We see that basically it's the same heart in each of us, open to the same kind of joy and sorrow, and open to the same possibility of love in each of us.

Then there's another way we're deeply connected that the Buddha talked about. The Buddha had different kinds of psychic vision that are described in the ancient texts, in the suttas. And with that psychic vision, he could see back into the history of different people's lives and existences. And he said, from looking at that vision, all of us have lived so many different lives in the past and have been in touch with each other over many different lives in the past. And he said because of this truth of being born and dying and being reborn again and again and again, countless times since beginningless time, we've crossed paths in really intimate ways. He said, because of this, it's not easy to find a being who has not been at some time in the past, your mother or your father or your sister or your brother or your son or your daughter.

So you may or may not believe in this whole teaching on rebirth and past lives, but what if it was so? What if that was true? And just looking around the room tonight, that we all have been family to each other maybe many times before. There's a possibility that we're much more intimately connected than we ever imagined that we were. The Buddha said it's like that. He said that he could see that was so. And so what if that was true? What if the person sitting next to you had been your mother? What would you want to do for her or him?

And that's where we come upon the line that's in the sutta that we've been chanting every night from the Metta Sutta: "Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world." The instruction is to treat every being as though they were our own child. That's the possibility that the loving-kindness practice directs us to look at.

So another little story. Jack Kornfield, the founder of Spirit Rock, has a daughter named Caroline who's about twenty-five now. She's in law school at Berkeley. She's planning to become a human rights activist through her work as a lawyer.

So she was driving from Berkeley back to Woodacre one day, traveling along the six-lane stretch of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard near the ferry crossing where the ferry departs for San Francisco across the bay. The traffic was slowing down in a way that seemed unusual for that time of day, and she couldn't understand what was causing the delay.

As she drew closer, she discovered what was happening: a mother duck was attempting to cross the road to reach the bay, followed by six little ducklings. Cars were slowing down and coming to stops, trying to navigate around them. But this being Marin

County, nobody really wanted to stop completely—heaven forbid being five minutes late to catch the evening news. So traffic crept forward while people drove around the duck family, honking their horns in growing frustration.

When Caroline and her friend reached the scene, she stopped her car right in the middle of the road. Her friend got out to flag down the other vehicles, ensuring they came to a complete stop. Caroline then carefully shepherded the duck family across three lanes of traffic to the center divider. The mother duck hopped up easily enough, but the little ducklings couldn't make it—the divider was too tall. So Caroline gently gave each duckling a boost up to safety.

Thinking the rescue was complete, Caroline watched as the mother duck hopped down on the other side, preparing to cross three more lanes to reach the bay. Immediately, traffic in the opposite direction began exhibiting the same behavior—slowing down, honking, drivers getting out of their cars wondering what the holdup was. So Caroline and her friend stopped those cars as well, escorting the duck family across until they finally reached the other side with a clear path to the water.

This is what caring for all sentient beings like they're your only child looks like—that quality of love that puts the welfare of others above traffic schedules and personal convenience. It's one of those gestures that moves us deeply.

This attitude of caring for all living beings as though they were our children can blossom into what's considered a very powerful motivational factor. Let me explain this development step by step.

When we genuinely care for all sentient beings—as you've been practicing in the loving-kindness meditations over these past days—we develop a sincere wish for people to be happy. In compassion practice, as you'll discover, this extends to genuinely wanting people to be free from suffering. But if we truly want someone to experience complete happiness and freedom from suffering, what does this actually require?

They need to awaken, don't they? As long as we remain unawakened, we're trapped in this cycle of birth, death, and suffering, with our hearts continually clouded by confusion and reactivity. So when we take loving-kindness and compassion for all beings to their logical conclusion, we realize what we truly want is for everyone to awaken.

This raises an important question: How can we help others awaken if we haven't awakened ourselves? The answer is, we probably can't—not effectively. Someone like the Buddha could guide others to awakening because he had completed that journey himself. But without having traveled that path ourselves, our ability to truly help others remains limited.

This understanding gives rise to a particular motivation: "Let me awaken so I can help others awaken and transcend the boundaries of suffering, moving into true happiness—the deepest happiness possible."

This specific motivation has a special name: bodhicitta. "Bodhi" means awakening, and "citta" means heart or mind. It's sometimes translated as "the heart of awakening" or simply "the awakening heart." As our heart begins to awaken and this sensitivity and interconnection permeates our being, we naturally want to bring all beings along with us on this journey.

This aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all beings—so that all beings can be brought to freedom—forms the core of the Bodhisattva movement and the Bodhisattva vow. It's the foundation of the Bodhisattva path.

It's as though this unlimited, boundless love and compassion we sometimes touch in practice returns as motivation for our own spiritual development. "I want to awaken as the most effective way to help others emerge from suffering and discover true happiness."

This is called the practice of bodhicitta, and we can incorporate it more or less as an expression of our love and compassion. We can make it part of our intention in meditation practice. This is why we sometimes say we meditate for the sake of all beings.

We wish to awaken for the benefit of all beings.

Now, that's not easy to maintain. That's a very lofty aspiration. So it's not like it has to be a big flame that's burning us all the time in our practice, but just a little candlelight that can inspire us from time to time to practice for others. We can start a sitting and remind ourselves that that's our inclination. At the start of every sit, I say something like, "May I come to awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings." It's just a reminder that that's a piece of my motivation. And then that can grow.

We don't expect it to grow huge. It's very difficult to make that huge, but it's a piece. It can be a piece. Even the Dalai Lama says for him, it's not huge. He says, "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is. That is all."

This is, in a way, a grown-up side of our own love and compassion—this factor of bodhicitta. If it appeals to you, it's helpful to do it as a practice. If you like it, you could say it at the start of every sitting or every walking, every period of practice. Remind yourself it's part of what you're here for, if that connects for you.

Metta also has a big influence on our intention and our conduct. Really, the care for others, this loving kindness for others, is a true source of our commitment to sila, to compassionate, wise conduct. When we practice the precepts, we're offering people that sense of safety, what the Buddha called freedom from fear.

This development of sila can be taken a long way also. Normally, for most of us, I like to think we don't take the precepts expecting to keep them perfectly. We take them expecting to break them. That's why it's a training. We don't think we're going to be perfect with this. We know we're going to fall short. That's okay. We learn each time. But then you look at somebody who's really developed this practice, and it's pretty impressive.

A few years ago, Oprah Winfrey interviewed the Dalai Lama, and the interview got published in her magazine, O. I have to say, I keep getting more and more respect for Oprah because of the way she brings these teachings and so many beautiful sources of wisdom to such a broad audience. First there was her afternoon talk show and then the magazine, and you probably know she started her own TV network called the Oprah Winfrey Network. In describing it in an interview when it was launched, she said, "What I consider the Oprah Winfrey Network to be is mindful television."

She really understands she wants to make a positive impact in people's lives, and she has access to a lot of people. She's featured on her show or in her magazine people like James Baraz, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein. I think Joseph was in O doing an interview about non-attachment in relationships, for which he gained the nickname Dr. Love. Oprah's kind of infiltrating these nuggets into mainstream society, and I think it's really wonderful.

So she was interviewing the Dalai Lama, and it became quite interesting. She began by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent. There was awe in her voice when she continued, "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

Regarding service to Tibet, the Dalai Lama said, "Service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators—even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind—I don't lag too far behind."

So he's only about sixteen lifetimes ahead of us on this journey, so we'll catch up. That's the possibility of development that's there. And this refinement of meditation that he has is what allows him to practice his *sila* so effectively. The two go together.

When the mind has a lot of greed, aversion, and delusion rampant, it's very hard for conduct to become purified. But as the mind gets more and more quiet and established in loving-kindness and compassion, it's much easier for the conduct to reflect that kind of skill.

Carol talked a lot about generosity the other evening, and loving-kindness is also the source of generosity. We have to tune into what somebody else needs and wish for their happiness before we're inclined to be generous toward them.

There are a lot of dark forces in the world today. I can't speak so much for Europe and Canada, but for the United States, this is probably as sour a mood as I have felt in many years—a very pessimistic mood in the nation. So it's rare when we can look around this society and see glimmers of hope.

But one of the big ones was pointed to by a recent book by Paul Hawken. I just want to read you the title. He called his book *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*.

What he's pointing to, the research that he did, was thousands of individuals and small foundations who are motivated by a sense of generosity and justice and caring, going out independent of governments, just making an attempt to do in the world what they can. He started to catalog all these organizations and came up with something like a million that he found around the world—just people who have dedicated their lives or come into some money and dedicated a chunk of their money to doing good in the area that they can access immediately.

He gives many examples. I'm sure you've heard a lot. Dr. Paul Farmer in Haiti, Greg Mortenson with the schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, schools for girls there. So many different movements.

But just from our scene, we have three friends who are doing relief work in Burma through three different groups. Carol talked about the money that she took in and the work that she does every year looking after nunneries and providing food for villagers who lost a lot through the cyclone. We have another friend who has made schools in Burma his main priority. Every year he's gone in and taken about $100,000. In Burma you can build a school for $25,000, so every year he's gone in and established four new schools in different, usually remote rural areas of Burma, the money provided by generous donors. Once you establish a school, the government generally will commit to send a teacher. So it's not just putting in a building and then it goes away—the government has continued to supply teachers for these schools.

Then another of our friends has really given up his life in business and devoted his work life to a nonprofit called Foundation for the People of Burma. He's one of our past board presidents—I don't know if you know, Sally is currently president of the Spirit Rock Board, and he was the president before her. His name's Hal Nathan. In 2009, I think it was, Hal raised something like $650,000 for the people of Burma and went in and worked with established nonprofit groups to deliver healthcare and sanitary drinking water in many villages that had nothing because the government doesn't provide.

So all these individuals are just taking it upon themselves, out of their care and kindness, to make the difference that they can in the world. I've never seen anything like it before, and it's happening all over. It's quite impressive.

This movement of good-heartedness is active in the world. It's really happening. We come to appreciate it as one of the mature aspects of dharma practice—maybe one of, along with equanimity, one of the real great testaments to dharma practice.

I like this quotation from Alice Walker, you know, the author of *The Color Purple*. She said, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness, because this can inspire everything."

I think Winnie said that *metta* and compassion are two of the three aspects of right intention, the second factor in the Eightfold Path. This good-heartedness, as you could say, is a path factor—a central path factor.

So Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche goes on from that story I read a little earlier about the soft spot, which is talking about an outer wound on the body that's sore that we don't want to touch. He continues: "There's also an inner wound called *Tathagatagarba* or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion."

When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and to communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made up of one complete sore spot altogether. That is called bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore.

This is the truly ripened heart of compassion that is in the world to give, that is in the world simply to make a difference, to alleviate suffering, to bring happiness. This kind of attitude was expressed beautifully in a short poem by the Japanese hermit monk Ryōkan, when he said, "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this floating world."

As we begin to feel that we truly are doing this for all beings, all beings become part of our consideration in our practice and in our daily life. What will best support us? And then as this quality of tenderness grows, we find that far from making us weaker, it actually makes us stronger. Originally we think, "I can't be tender in the world—I'll get wiped out. People will take advantage of me and use me if I'm too soft." But we discover that as we develop this tenderness along with the other qualities of mindfulness, equanimity, and joy, it makes us stronger. We find new skills, new powers for dealing with all the difficult mind states that come our way.

Take, for example, criticism. One of the things that's hard to deal with in the world is praise and blame. When we get criticized, it's painful. We had a very interesting lesson on this from the Dalai Lama in this very room, on this very spot. He was here several years ago at a conference of Buddhist teachers. About two hundred of us assembled for a few days and spent a day and a half with him here.

The format involved different people presenting topics to him to get his mind turning, then asking for a response. Sometimes it was a little bit like turning a fire hose on him—somebody would present, then somebody else would present, then somebody else, and then we'd ask for a response. After one such sequence, someone said, "Well, Your Holiness, what do you think?" And he replied, "Oh, all gone from up here. Don't remember anything. First somebody talks, and then I could think of something to say, but then somebody else talks. I forget it all. Nothing left." He laughed heartily, totally unconcerned that he'd forgotten it all.

One of these presenters was rather bold—I would say a little bit cheeky. He started off saying, "Well, Your Holiness, I'd like to ask you about Buddhism's place in the world today. It's becoming very popularized. We see advertisements for a perfume named Samsara, or a resort that says it will carry you to nirvana the first day. And you yourself, Your Holiness, are the biggest popularizer of them all. This risks trivializing the Dharma and losing its essence. What do you think about that?"

The Dalai Lama fell silent and reflected for a moment. Then he answered in a way that really moved me. He said, "Some people, you see, call me living Buddha, or they call me the God King. No, I am not. I am just a simple Buddhist monk. But other people call me counter-revolutionary or a wolf in monk's clothing. But you see, I look back at my own intention. If my intention is sincere, then that is what is important. How others perceive me is up to them. I don't care." He said that very strongly: "I don't care."

That was such an expression of confidence from knowing his own mind, from a mind free from ill will and confusion. I thought, "That's amazing that he can feel that," because he's in a position of such responsibility—more than just about anyone I know. He's perhaps the only person who may be able to help the six or seven million people still left in Tibet. Something like a million people were killed after the invasion, and the hopes of the Tibetan people for their culture and any degree of freedom rest on his persona in the world.

And yet he can still say, "How others perceive me is up to them. I don't care." That's the strength of loving kindness and compassion and equanimity.

With anger, the heart of metta is one where it's hard for anger to gain a foothold. It's said that loving kindness creates a mind that is so spacious, anger can't stick. It's compared to tossing a bucket of paint through space—it can't stick to the space. And anger can't stick in a mind that's full of loving-kindness.

I'm sure you've read that Aung San Suu Kyi was recently released from house arrest, and she's given a few interviews. I didn't expect anything else, but she said it very clearly in one of her first interviews: "I have no anger toward the military leaders. No anger. I'm ready to sit down and talk with them at any time for the benefit of the people of Burma."

I know, and you probably know too, that she practiced a huge amount of loving kindness during her house arrest. She was under house arrest for most of the last seventeen years. During that time, she was receiving instructions from a well-known Burmese

Sayadaw, and part of what he instructed her in was loving kindness. She did a lot of loving kindness practice, and with that, she was able to deal with what I imagine would have been a lot of anger, so that she doesn't have it now.

I was reminded also of something that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said along these lines: "Never succumb to the temptation of being bitter. As you press for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline using only the instrument of love." That is why he was such an amazing leader—that he could follow that. He could see the huge injustices that were being done and keep his own heart in a place of love as he moved forward, as he taught, as he acted, as he spoke.

So this development of tenderness and the insight into connection has a very healing quality in our life, in our heart, in our practice. Sometimes it touches parts of difficulty from the past. Memories come up, hurts come up, resentments come up.

This is from an Australian poet, Michael Leunig: "When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it. Let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it. Let a bird lean in the hole and sing a simple song like a tiny bell and let it ring."

So when we come upon these difficult places in practice, we hold them with this heart of loving kindness. And the loving kindness changes those wounds. They heal under its warmth and under its light.

We commit ourselves more and more as our practice goes on. We commit ourselves to this idea that we don't have to move out of the place of loving kindness. When I came into dharma practice, I thought, "Well, my anger is a useful thing. I'm always going to keep it so I can be strong if somebody infringes on my rights." But the more we practice and see the strength that comes from loving kindness, the more we trust in the possibility of being able to always act from that place.

It doesn't mean that we don't act forcefully. It doesn't mean that we don't act strongly. It doesn't mean that we're shy about speaking our truth or speaking to power. You can see that in the Dalai Lama. You can see that in Martin Luther King. But we let it come from this place of compassion and care. That is a possibility.

Because we always remember through metta how much alike we all are—that we all want safety and happiness and health and ease. We all want the same. And you start to wonder, how different are we anyway?

You look at our bodies—they're small variations, but they're much the same. Two eyes, two ears, a nose, a tongue, a mouth, a heart. You look at our minds, and we all know sadness and fear and anger and wanting and longing and embarrassment. And we all know love and compassion and joy and contentment and happiness.

So what is so different? Same body, same heart. It's kind of like one organism that's been poured into different jars, and then those jars have gone off and had different experiences.

And so they've gotten shaped or colored a little bit differently. But basically it's the same jar with the same stuff in it. And so metta makes us realize that. We're all basically the same. And that's a deep kind of understanding of connection.

There's this beautiful quote from Rumi's teacher, Shams of Tabriz: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." These are not true distinctions in the eye of loving-kindness. We see the unity that underlies all the apparent differences. And that takes away this sorrowful sense of isolation or separation or not belonging, not being connected.

So I just want to close with this end of the interview Oprah had with the Dalai Lama. And before I quote him, I just want to mention that in the Mahayana tradition, the Tibetan tradition, compassion is the primary brahmaviharā. In our tradition of Theravāda, loving-kindness is the primary brahmaviharā. But these two are very, very close. So when we say mettā, we could say compassion, and when we say compassion, we could say mettā. Think of them as virtually the same.

So Oprah finishes by asking the Dalai Lama, "In my magazine, I do a column called 'What I Know for Sure.' What do you know for sure? The one thing on which you have no doubt." The Dalai Lama did not hesitate: "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For happy life and happy world, there is no doubt."

So let's just sit for a minute together. Loving-kindness is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world.

CHAPTER 92

Nature of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong delves into one of Buddhism's most subtle and important topics: the nature of consciousness and awareness. Building on the foundation of the five khandhas, particularly the fifth aggregate of consciousness (viññāṇa), Armstrong addresses a fundamental question that has divided Buddhist schools for millennia: Is there something unchanging in the nature of awareness that relates to the unconditioned (nibbāna)?*
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> *Drawing from both Pali suttas and various Buddhist traditions, Armstrong carefully distinguishes between consciousness (viññāṇa) - which the Buddha taught as dependently arisen and impermanent - and a broader understanding of mind or awareness that some traditions view as having unconditioned aspects. He explores how different Buddhist schools, from orthodox Theravāda to Thai Forest tradition, Yogācāra, and Tibetan lineages, have approached this question.*
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> *The talk offers practical meditation guidance for investigating the nature of awareness itself, turning attention inward to recognize what is doing the knowing. Armstrong presents this exploration as skillful means (upāya) that can lead to the release of grasping and a direct taste of the emptiness and openness that characterizes our deepest nature. He concludes with beautiful teachings on integrating this understanding of our empty, aware nature with our conventional responsibilities as embodied beings walking the path to liberation.*

Sally talked two nights ago about the five aggregates and the fifth aggregate of consciousness, or in Pali, *vijnana*. This aggregate always raises a lot of questions because it's not like the others. Tonight I want to talk in more detail about this fifth aggregate of consciousness and its relationship to other words that we hear in Buddhist dialogue, such as awareness and mind.

There's a fundamental dilemma that has emerged from questions since Sally's talk. The Buddha described all five aggregates as impermanent, and yet when we look, it seems like this quality of consciousness is always there, as long as we're not asleep or knocked out. It seems like consciousness is always happening. So the fundamental dilemma is: is consciousness impermanent or is it permanent in some way?

This is an important question because in Buddhist understanding, there's only one Dhamma, only one thing that's not subject to the law of impermanence. Nirvana, *nibbana*, the unconditioned. There's only one element that's not subject to conditioned arising and passing. So if there's any truth in the supposition or the intuition that there's something in the nature of consciousness or awareness that is unchanging, that means it is related to the unconditioned, nirvana.

The reason this is important is that it's only the realization of nirvana that can completely free our hearts and minds from the fetters that bind us. This suggests that potentially exploring this quality of awareness could lead to some deep understanding or liberating understanding. I want to put that in as a motivation because otherwise this discussion could seem just intellectual and abstract. But in fact, maybe the whole future of your enlightenment is riding on it.

I want to make one disclaimer about this evening's talk. You probably know that after the Buddha became enlightened, he thought that maybe he wouldn't teach. The way he put it was, this Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and hard to understand. And if I were to teach it and no one understood, that would be vexatious for me. I can't say that tonight's talk will necessarily be profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So I'd encourage you to be in a very receptive mode for this talk and don't try to figure it out too hard. There will be some pointings and indicators to experience. Let yourself ride those pointers and don't worry too much about all the intellectual stuff.

In order to clarify this topic, we'll come at it from a few different angles. I first want to go in a little more detail into this question of consciousness that Sally introduced two nights ago, the fifth of the aggregates. She explained it as the knowing of objects at the six sense doors. This is the important thing to understand: it's the knowing of an object, of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mental object. It's said that there are six types of consciousness, but we don't need to worry too much about that. Just knowing that it's consciousness of phenomena will be enough.

The understanding is that consciousness, that knowing, arises with the object and passes with the object. And that's why it's considered impermanent.

Even in the Buddha's day, some of the *bhikkhus* had the idea that what he was pointing to was something permanent and something that would survive the death of the body and then go on to the next life. This *bhikkhu* was walking around making this statement, basically that this consciousness is permanent and continues. The Buddha heard about it and said, "I want to talk to that *bhikkhu*. Send him up to see me."

So the *bhikkhu* came to see the Buddha, and the Buddha asked him if he was in fact saying that. The *bhikkhu* said, "Yeah, I said that." And the *bhikkhu* said, "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the rounds of rebirths, not another one." Basically, this is his way of saying it's permanent.

And this is the Buddha's reply: "Misguided man. Have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in this way? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness is dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness. But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp."

Then the Buddha goes on to explain that consciousness is dependently arisen because it depends on the meeting of a working sense organ and a sensory object. In other words, if the ear is working and a sound arises, then there is hearing consciousness. But if the sense organ wasn't working, if the sound did not arise, there would be no hearing consciousness.

So the Buddha explains that consciousness is dependently arisen, and therefore it also passes away. Does this make sense? This fundamental understanding from the suttas is unequivocal. If we were to say otherwise, the Buddha would call us "misguided man or woman." We cannot argue with this understanding of vijnana—this is orthodoxy, 2,500-year-old canonical orthodoxy.

Now I want to introduce another word: mindfulness. We've been talking about mindfulness extensively, describing it many times as the knowing of our experience in the present moment. When a sound happens, consciousness reveals the sound, but mindfulness recognizes "a rising phenomenon—sound," something like that. It knows hearing. These two are very different properties.

As long as you're awake, do you have any choice about being conscious or not? Can you turn your consciousness off? Can you say, "Let me not hear, let me not feel body sensations"? No. Consciousness, although dependently arisen, operates pretty much on automatic pilot.

Can you choose to be unmindful? Are there times when you are unmindful? Rather regrettably, yes. So mindfulness requires some intention or volition. It takes a little work for us to be mindful. Consciousness happens all on its own—the sound arises, we know it. But mindfulness takes effort to be present.

What about this word "awareness"? Where does that fit? Mindfulness and consciousness are central to the Buddhist teachings. Consciousness is the fifth of the five aggregates describing this mind-body operation. Mindfulness is a critical factor in the Eightfold Path—the Pali word is sati. But what about awareness? Does anybody know a Pali term for awareness?

There is none. The Buddha never used another word that we need to translate as "awareness." What has happened through the years of Buddhadharma being translated into English is that different people have used this word to mean different things. That's why it's confusing, especially in the context of the suttas, the original Pali teachings—there's no word that corresponds to it.

Carol has used it to mean mindfulness. This is how Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses it. He has a book titled "Awareness Alone is Not Enough," which you could just as well say "Mindfulness Alone is Not Enough." The implication is that what's needed is wisdom accompanying mindfulness or awareness. But other teachers might use it to mean consciousness.

I want to suggest there's a spectrum of meaning between mindfulness and consciousness, and awareness can be a slippery customer that slides between those two ends. It's a fascinating word in how it slides. On one hand, awareness connotes the spontaneous quality of consciousness. I could ask you, "Is there awareness present in your experience right now?" and you'd say, "Yeah, I'm aware—I'm receiving sense impressions." That would be synonymous with consciousness.

But awareness also has a connotation of some intelligence. "Were you aware of your intention before you said what you said?"

That's a phrase in which "awareness" is used like "mindful." Were you aware also means were you paying attention? Were you noticing? Were you really with it? There's a little bit of a wisdom factor there.

So awareness is this very convenient word that we can toss in to mean whatever we want it to mean—sometimes the automatic nature of consciousness, sometimes the choice-fed or volitional nature of mindfulness. So it's slippery, and when a teacher, especially in this hall, uses the word awareness, it's good to ask what they mean by it.

Now, in some other traditions, like certain Tibetan traditions, they use it more consistently and aligned with their Tibetan vocabulary and understanding. It may have a more precise meaning. But as we use it, it's a little bit floppy.

So tonight, I want to use awareness more or less synonymously with consciousness. For instance, let me just invite you into a meditative state. You don't have to close your eyes, but if this was a meditation instruction, think how this would feel: Allow your mind to become like a big empty sky, and notice that all the appearances simply come and go within the vast space of awareness.

Have you heard an instruction like this before? So here, awareness is being equated with this big space, and things are just coming and going within it.

But I'm going to use awareness in a little bit different connotation than the word vijñāna or consciousness. I'm going to use consciousness for the knowing of an individual object—the arising of a sound, hearing consciousness; the passing of the sound, hearing consciousness passes. But I'm going to use awareness to mean this broad field in which many different things come and go. What's coming and going is all being known through consciousness, right? There are just lots of little individual acts of consciousness happening in that field of awareness.

So some people have come and said something like this: "Well, when I feel the sensations in my body, I know that's consciousness. But out here, there's just pure awareness and there's no object. There's just pure awareness. That must be the unconditioned—there's no object there."

So I want to take that away right now. There is an object there, and what's being known is physical space. Partly when you rest in this vast space of awareness, what is giving it that spacious feeling is physical space. When you hear a sound, it's at some distance from you, and that sense of distance is built on physical space. So when people are sensing that physical space, it feels like they're not knowing anything, but in fact, you're knowing physical space.

I want to say also that just as consciousness always has an object, the same is true for awareness, the way I'm using it. Awareness always has an object, so it doesn't exist on its own. Even though it's this vast field, we don't experience it empty of phenomena. We experience it with different kinds of phenomena, and of course they change, but there's always something being known. There is no such thing as awareness without something being known in our normal experience. There are altered states in which that can be revealed, but that's a different talk. For the purpose of exploring our normal experience, awareness always comes with things being known.

So we're going to explore a little bit the nature of this awareness, this human awareness that we have, and every sentient being has. To be a sentient being is to have awareness like this. As we look into this awareness, can you grab hold of it?

If I ask you to find your awareness... Can you kind of locate it and then show it to me? Not really. It's elusive. You know, just like this fifth aggregate, vijnana, is elusive. Awareness is elusive in the exact same way.

The reason is consciousness—we'll go back to consciousness for a minute because it's simpler. Consciousness is not an object. Consciousness is that which holds other objects. Anything we know as an object—a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, touch, thought, emotion—is being held in consciousness. That's what an object is. It can be known by consciousness, but the consciousness can't grasp itself. So it's tricky to find. It's subtle.

Part of the understanding is that consciousness and the object arise together. And that's what I want to suggest. When you hear a sound like this, there's only one experience happening. But that one experience which you are all having has two aspects. One is the sound and the other is your knowing of it. And it's really important to see that these are distinct aspects of the one experience.

So how can one thing have these two aspects? If you look at this circular bell, I could ask you, is it round or is it gold? It's indistinguishable, isn't it? There's only one object here, but you can look at it either in its roundness or you can look at it in its goldness. It's the same with any sense experience. You can look at it in its physical aspect of sound—that's in the first aggregate of rupa—or you can look at it in the fifth aggregate of vijnana, which is your knowing of it.

So awareness, the same thing. There's a thing being known and then there's this knowing that we do. So awareness is subtle. It's just consciousness—we're using them synonymously. It's hard to grasp because it's not an object, but we know it's there.

Ajahn Chah was talking about how this factor of awareness is hard to get a hold of. And he said, "It's like you're riding a horse and you're going, 'Where's the horse?'" Because we're aware all the time, aren't we? We know awareness is happening, but it's hard to find. So this is our situation.

Ajahn Sumedho, a disciple of Ajahn Chah, explained it this way. It's just like the question, can you see your own eyes? Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes, but I can't see my eyes. I'm sitting right here. I've got two eyes, and I can't see them. But you can see my eyes. But really, there's no need for me to see my eyes because I can see. It's ridiculous, isn't it? If I started saying, "Why can't I see my own eyes?" you'd think, "Ajahn Sumedho is really weird, isn't he?" Looking in a mirror, you can see a reflection, but that's not your eyes. It's a reflection of your eyes. There's no way that I've been able to look and see my own eyes. But then it's not really necessary because there's knowing.

So in the same way, we can't quite grasp this factor of consciousness or awareness. But we know it's happening.

Wei Wu Wei was a British student of Zen who wrote in these pithy, mysterious, short epigraphs. And he put it this way: "What we are looking for is what is looking."

So it's tricky. It's tricky.

So I like to think of this factor of consciousness or awareness not as a thing but as an activity. Knowing is a verb, isn't it? So it's something that's happening. Consciousness is a happening. It's not a thing. It's a doing. It's a function. Something in us has the function of revealing or illuminating our experience. A sight goes by, consciousness reveals that. It reveals the world to us. It lights up, it illuminates all the events of our experience. So there's an activity that is the knowing.

So then the interesting question is, what's doing the knowing? Look. The activity is happening. Knowing is happening. Objects are being known. By what? If there's an activity, there must be an agent. What is doing the knowing?

What I want to suggest is that consciousness comes and goes, so awareness of things comes and goes, but that which is knowing does not come and go. So in a way, we could say that there's a capacity for consciousness that is a dimension of our being, an integral part of our being. It's what makes us a sentient being. There's a capacity for consciousness. It's here.

And I'm going to suggest—there's just a view. I'm going to explain, there are different views. My view is that that capacity for consciousness does not come and go. That capacity for consciousness is unconditioned. This is just a view. I'm going to give you the opposition's view later. But this is our hypothesis. So it is some mysterious dimension within us whose functioning is revealing all the events of our six senses. And that is what is stable—that dimension, that faculty, whatever it is.

Now, I want to come back to experience and kind of practical matters for a minute. When I first asked that question, what is doing the knowing, did you feel any kind of shift inside? Did you feel a little shift in your experience? Because I felt a shift in the room. What was that shift? How would you describe it? What happened?

"Don't know." So this is one very common reaction. This is an important and honest reaction. I look for that thing that's doing the knowing. I don't know what it is.

"Yes, I'm not positing an I, but I am suggesting the possibility of a something. So you're right, I am positing something. It's not an I, and we'll get to that."

"When you said that, the sense that I had was that even though it was something that we were all experiencing, it wasn't personal."

Her comment was that when she turned in that direction, even though it was something we're all experiencing, it wasn't personal. Anybody else? Because there could be a number of things that happen in that moment of shift when you look in that direction.

The question is, am I referring to the citta? It's in that direction. Yes.

So did anybody feel stopping? A kind of stopping of thought or conceptualization? Anybody feel a widening? Anybody feel a heightening of interest? Sense of investigation?

From the point of view of skillful means in meditation practice, this kind of turning—whether there's something there or not, maybe I'm positing something that doesn't really have any reality—opens us up in new, interesting, and mysterious ways. It opens us to something that may be transpersonal, that brings a level of interest and stillness and openness. So as a meditation technique, it could be very useful.

On the metaphysical plane, I recognize there are questions or doubts about whether such a thing exists or not. That's a very fair question. So let me address this from the Buddhist tradition.

This question of whether such a thing is or not has been, in my opinion, the primary fault line in Buddhist philosophy for at least 2,000 years. There are many schools on one side who say, yes, there is something there. And there are many schools on the other side who say there is not something there.

In particular, orthodox Theravadans—strict followers of the Pali lineage, such as followers of the Visuddhimagga and most of the teachers in Burma—will answer the question, no. There's nothing real there. Later in the Mahayana, followers of Nagarjuna, who was a great philosopher in Buddhism around 100 AD, also say no. Nothing there.

But on the other side, if we want to have a football match, there's one team. The other team would be followers of a later Mahayana school called the Yogacara, whose descendants include Chan in China, Zen in Japan, Tibetan schools of Dzogchen and Mahamudra—basically the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages—as well as the Thai forest tradition. If you listen to teachings from Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadasa, Ajahn Mahabua, Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Amaro, you'll hear this referred to again and again.

So even in the Theravadan lineages, there are two different views on this. If you're worried about being politically correct, there is a weight of opinion, scholastic opinion on both sides. What that says to me is I can be a good Buddhist and view it either way. Both ways have their strengths and their weaknesses.

So I regard it as a skillful means. If you find this kind of looking and exploration helpful for your meditation practice, feel free to use it with the confidence that many thousands of practitioners have used this over thousands of years to come to awakening. If you feel that it is positing something unnecessary and you don't want to go there, take that view. Many thousands of practitioners over thousands of years have come to awakening following that view.

I wouldn't get too hung up on the philosophy because either one can take you to freedom. Rather see what suits your own temperament and supports your way of opening and exploring the way things are for you.

So, end of the philosophy.

I want to suggest that maybe what this thing is that knows—that's doing the knowing, the unchanging thing—might be something that we could call mind in a limited sense. This might be what we would call mind.

In this kind of terminology, normally in mind we would include things like feeling, perception, mental formations. I'm going to talk about those as the contents or the objects of mind. And I want to focus on this faculty that knows.

So for the purposes just of this talk, I'm going to call that which knows—this agent that's doing the knowing—mind. And then I want to explore a little bit what this thing we call mind might be like.

First of all, its nature is to know. That's what it does. That's its basic activity or role or function in existence.

But there's another quality that is equally important to this knowing. Do you remember when we did just that short meditation? We talked about the big empty space of awareness.

Take a look at this thing we're calling mind, that which knows the changing phenomena. Is there anything stuck in that entity? Is there anything fixed that has been there from beginningless time? Or is this mind of the nature to allow anything and everything to come and go and pass through it?

Can this mind allow any and all changing phenomena to come and go?

So in that sense, I would say in itself, it's empty. It doesn't have anything that's crowding it up or taking up space, because everything that appears within it is of the nature of arising and passing. So we say its essence is emptiness. In this vast space of mind, nothing is fixed. It's originally, or by essence, empty.

There's another way to arrive at this understanding of emptiness. When you looked for mind—that which knows—could you find it? Could you come up with anything substantial? Something with a personality, red hair, located in one corner of the ceiling? Could you locate it anywhere? No.

This not-finding is actually significant. This is from a Tibetan master named Shabkar, who lived in the 1700s, perhaps the 1800s:

"Now, come up close and listen. When you look carefully, you won't find the merest speck of real mind you can put your finger on and say, 'this is it.' And not finding anything is an incredible find. Friends, to start with, mind doesn't emerge from anything. It's primordially empty. There's nothing there to hold on to. It isn't anywhere. It has no shape or color. There's no trace of its having been there."

This unfindability—its not being an object—also points to its emptiness. It doesn't have substantial form.

When we consider this thing we're calling mind, these two factors always go together and can't be separated: the emptiness and the awareness. It's always empty, but it's always revealing things. This is the nature of our mind—this union of emptiness and awareness.

Ajahn Buddhadasa from the Thai forest tradition said, "We really should call this mind 'emptiness,' but because of its awareness, we call it 'mind.'" I hope you can see how these two qualities are inseparably together.

Now, how can we make this a meditation practice? This turning to look at what's doing the knowing can become a meditation practice for us. How can we use it practically?

The basic approach is working with what we've got, which is awareness itself. Normally, awareness is directed outward. In daily life, we're constantly keeping an eye on people, places, things, even our own body—which can seem outward in this sense—thoughts, emotions, all the phenomena arising around us. So awareness habitually flows outward.

What would happen if we took that awareness and turned it back on itself? What if we suggested to ourselves to become aware of awareness itself? Instead of turning out, we would turn in. What would you find? Do you get any kind of shift?

It's subtle. It's like an eye trying to see itself—you realize you're not going to be able to find it exactly. But the exercise of turning, just like asking "what's doing the knowing," might create a shift. That's something to explore experientially.

Meditation. Again, you don't have to close your eyes, but let your awareness become broad and expansive. Within that space, everything arises and passes. Put your attention on that vast space of awareness.

Does that make a shift? What happens when you feel that shift? A thrill? A sense of expansion, moving out? As you feel more spaciousness, what happens to the sense of grasping? Does it sometimes fall away?

Grasping is basically a contraction into smallness. You can feel it as a constriction in the body, accompanied by thoughts of "I." When we move to this more expansive awareness, sometimes that grasping just relaxes.

One of the things this shift accomplishes is taking our attention away from objects and placing it in the knowing itself. This can be a skillful means for releasing any holdings—a doorway to dropping clinging or grasping.

Normally our attention fixates on objects, and we often relate to them through clinging or grasping, creating a constriction of the small self. When we move our attention to the vastness of awareness, we take the emphasis off that fixation. In moving away from the fixation on objects, the grasping can release.

I want to share another comment from Ajahn Chah about this emptiness: "The roof is a becoming. The floor is a becoming. But in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. When there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness."

The suggestion is that as you connect with the emptiness of mind, you're connecting with something unconditioned or undying. One way to understand it as undying is that it's always available—always there when you turn to it. This space is not subject to coming and going. It's deathless.

Now I want to make one more philosophical gesture. We have the Theravadan view from the suttas that says consciousness is strictly coming and going. We have the view from other traditions that says this bigger thing called mind may not be subject to com-

ing and going. Can we reconcile these two? Is it possible to have a foot in each camp and validate both views? That's where I personally stand, and I want to share my way of understanding it.

To do this, I'd like you to join me in a thought experiment. In physics—I majored in physics in college—we were taught that we could prove things in three ways: mathematical proof, experimental proof, or thought proof, called a gedanken experiment. If the gedanken experiment was logical and well thought out, we could establish things.

So in this experiment, imagine you're standing on the edge of the solar system with your back to the sun. We won't worry about spacesuits and vacuums—that's taken care of through new technology. You're looking away from the sun, out into space, into a part of the sky where there are no stars. The sun is at your back, you're looking into a starless portion of sky.

What do you see? Nothing.

What color? Yes, it's just black, isn't it? The black of the night sky where there aren't any stars. So you're looking out away from the sun, totally black.

Is there light there? Right. There is light, isn't there? Because our back's to the sun. So the sunlight is actually pervading that empty space. But we don't see it. It's full of light, but we don't see it.

So as you're looking into that blackness, which is pervaded by sunlight, let's say a meteor flashes up in front of your eyes. Do you see it? Yes, because the light gets reflected off an object back into our eyes. Then the meteor goes away. Any more light? You don't see it, do you?

So the light only gets reflected back if there's an object that does the reflecting.

I want to suggest that this sunlight pervading empty space is the cognizant or aware nature of mind. And the flash of light that comes when the object appears—the meteor—is the impermanent flashing of consciousness. The impermanent flashing of consciousness couldn't happen unless the steady sunlight, which was always there, was in place.

So that sunlight pervading empty space is what I'm calling the illuminating power of mind. But the temporary flash that comes and then goes is this impermanent factor of consciousness that only knows because an object is present for a brief period and then passes away.

Ajahn Jumnian, who's another Thai forest teacher, said that because of this relationship, consciousness has both conditioned and unconditioned aspects. Can you kind of get that feel? It couldn't happen without the light that's always there. But nothing gets revealed until there's a condition for it to be reflected back.

So the source of consciousness is ever-present, but it can't function without an object. So that's the way I hold it. Both traditions can be right in their own way and make sense in their own way.

For us as meditators, then the interesting question comes to be: if this skillful means connects for us, how can we access it? Tomorrow morning, I'll lead a longer meditation that's on this theme of turning the mind to the awareness. But I'd also suggest that you can play with it in a few other ways.

For some people, this notion of taking the awareness which is normally out and turning it back on itself can be very evocative. You can even think of a hand gesture that does that turning for you.

I don't know if any of you have heard of a British writer named Douglas Harding. Harding was a follower of Ramana Maharshi and was in India contemplating the question, "What am I?" or "Who am I?"—a question that Ramana Maharshi, a Vedanta teacher, used a lot. And he'd been contemplating this question for months. This is another question that kind of turns in that direction.

One day he was hiking in the Himalayas. Because he'd been asking this for so long, the inquiry was just kind of going on. All of a sudden, his mind stopped. The thought activity stopped. And he came to this place of deep peacefulness.

Then he said what he did was he looked down. And he saw, of course, his body. He saw his two trouser legs disappearing into his shoes. He saw his two sleeves disappearing into his arms. And then he tried to find what was above that. He looked and he realized, "I have no head."

He said where he was expecting to find a head, he only found the vast space of the world, completely full of mountains and trees and rivers and snow. And that was the title of his most famous book: *On Having No Head*.

So again, this image—you look at the body and you get up here, you look back, and it just opens into the world: the vast empty space of knowing.

Another way that is helpful for some people to go in—maybe you're in the middle of a thought and you ask the question, "Who's thinking?" You're in the middle of feeling some emotion and you ask, "Who's sad?" And that also can kind of light up that empty space. So we'll talk about that a little more tomorrow morning.

I want to close today with a couple of quotations—one poem and a quotation from the Buddha. A lot of the maturing of dharma practice is coming to integrate this understanding of our nature as being empty and aware with the understanding that we're a human being in a separate body and responsible for our actions. We need to be able to see from both ways: to see the emptiness and then to see the responsibility of a human individual.

This is Rumi's discussion of that integration:

Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller. Checkmate this way, checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish.

And then I'll close with a quotation from the Buddha on the nature of the unconditioned:

One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

Let's just sit together for a minute, please.

CHAPTER 93

Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

> *Drawing from Thai lay teacher Upāsikā Kī's phrase "unentangled knowing," Guy Armstrong explores the nature of spiritual freedom as both path and goal. The talk examines how we become caught through the process of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), particularly the crucial links of contact, vedanā (feeling tone), taṇhā (craving), and upādāna (clinging). Armstrong demonstrates how each moment of clinging creates a temporary "self" that experiences birth and death, leading to dukkha.*
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> *The key insight centers on discovering the gap between vedanā and taṇhā—the space where feeling tone doesn't automatically trigger reactive craving. This non-reactive awareness, supported by samatha (tranquility) and vipassanā (insight), allows practitioners to experience what the Thai Forest tradition calls "the deathless"—a state unentangled from becoming. Armstrong offers practical approaches including checking attitudes for greed/aversion/delusion, resting in open awareness like space or water, and recognizing the unfindable nature of mind. He emphasizes that these moments of freedom are available throughout daily life, not just in formal meditation, representing places where the spiritual path and its ultimate goal converge.*

The nature of our spiritual journey is that we are traveling from something that we could call suffering or bondage to a state of release or freedom. As we make this journey, it's really important that we become acquainted with both halves of this traverse.

We spend a lot of time, certainly early in retreat, exploring the nature of how we're caught. We spend a lot of time with the first two noble truths, a lot of time with the hindrances and the afflictive emotions, a lot of time looking at greed, aversion, and delusion. As the retreat progresses, it's important that we also give good care and attention to the second half of the journey, which is the nature of freedom.

Tonight I want to talk about freedom—how it is both a goal of our practice, but also how the discovery of it becomes our path. Freedom becomes both a path and a goal along this journey.

The subject of tonight's talk is called "Unentangled Knowing." It's from a phrase by a lay woman teacher in Thailand named Upasika Ki. Upasika simply means lay woman supporter. She had a meditation center and taught, which was rather unusual for a lay

woman in Thailand. She started in the 1950s and taught into the 1970s. Her teachings have been collected in what I consider a very beautiful and inspiring book called *Pure and Simple*. I'll be reading a couple of quotes from her tonight.

This phrase, "unentangled knowing," is the way her translator, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, explains her instruction. For those who aren't native speakers of English, this is a very unusual word, so let me explain it for a moment. A tangle is a twisted mass of strands like hair or string that happens when they all get knotted up together and snarled. Like if you have long hair and ride in a convertible, then come to the end and try to put a comb through it—you can't because it's gotten tangled. "Entangle" is the verb of making that tangle happen. "Unentangle" is making it all come straight again after being tangled. So this is a kind of knowing that leads to unentanglement.

Here is the line from Upasika Ki that we'll return to later: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside."

The image of the tangle appears often in the Buddha's teachings. It refers to the way that our desires and our fears meet with the objects of the world and get us caught and ensnared and bound with conflicting wants and fears and hopes. One line from the Buddha points to this: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn."

There's another quite famous quotation that comes from the Samyutta Nikaya and forms part of the Visuddhimagga, a sixth-century commentarial text. Somebody comes to the Buddha and asks him a question: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama this question: Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

Here we have again this process of unentanglement that needs to take place for our journey. It means all our inner conflicts and the ways that we're knotted up inside, bound up with different forces of craving, need to come apart and be released for the mind and the body to be clear and straight.

The Buddha's answer to this question was that the one who succeeds in disentangling the tangle is one who develops sila, samadhi, and panna—virtue, meditation, and wisdom—which is what we're doing here. So you're all on the way.

Unentangled knowing is a phrase that Upasika Ki uses to refer to a state of mind that is very aware, very mindful of what's happening, but isn't enmeshed or entangled with the objects of our experience. Tonight I want to communicate something of what that feels like or looks like.

This is not a meditation technique. I wish it were that simple, that we could just say a few words and you could go to the technique. It's more of a pointing to a state of mind and a relationship. So hopefully by these pointings, it might give you some hints in your practice of how to find this state of being. It's really a state of mind or a state of being that constitutes a relationship to our experience. It's not as simple as saying "place your attention on the breath."

All the different quotations and passages I read are hints at what this is like. I think that these moments of being unentangled happen to all of us here many times during a day, but we may not be prepared to notice it. So I also want through this talk to encourage you simply to notice when this way of being is present and to appreciate the quality of freedom that is inherent in it. This is also an encouragement to discover the freedom that can be there along the way—freedom as we journey.

But before we talk about freedom in more detail, I want to discuss this question of bondage in a little more detail. How is it that we get caught? How is it that we get tangled up in the world of appearances?

The Buddha described this in great detail in a teaching that he called Dependent Origination. In the teaching of Dependent Origination, he outlined twelve links...

sometimes depicted as a circle that explain in a moment-by-moment basis how suffering arises and we get caught in it.

Now, parts of this chain—for it's referred to as a chain of these twelve links—are somewhat philosophical. They're very interesting, but I don't want to go into the philosophy so much tonight. Instead, I'm going to focus on the experiential component, which comprises roughly the four middle links of the chain. There are four links that form the heart: five previous links, then these four links, and then three further links. I'm going to focus on the four links that are the heart of dependent origination because they really point to our experience.

In order to look at this closely, I want to ask a question and invite you to reflect on our basic situation as sentient beings. What's a basic situation that sentient beings share, or that we as human beings all share?

One way I would describe it—something that's true in every moment of conscious experience—is that we are constantly having sense experience through the six sense doors. This is true for you, it's true for me, it's true for Buddhas, it's true for unenlightened beings. We are continually having sense experience through the six sense doors. And it is out of this experience that we become caught, that we become bound.

The Buddha described this beautifully in a sutta called the Sutta on Totality. He was talking with a group of monks and said, "Monks, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

That's quite a statement. Not many teachers have said something like that. Freud couldn't say that. Einstein couldn't say that. Karl Marx couldn't say that. The Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of things."

So he said, "And what is the totality of life? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, and the mind and objects of mind. Anyone who would describe a totality beyond these six would not be describing something they knew anything about."

So this is it, isn't it? This is the field of human experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects—primarily thoughts and emotions.

It gets pretty simple when you look at it this way. Joseph Goldstein is fond of saying, "There are only ever six things happening. That's all there is." And yet all the complexity of modern life and all the tangle of our inner experience is built around our relation to these six things.

Each of these expresses itself through—and I think we've talked about this before—a moment of contact. In a moment of contact, there is the coming together of the sense object, the sense organ, and the sense consciousness. So when your eyes are open, you may see the front wall. That's a sight. Your eye is working so that image appears, and your consciousness holds it, reveals it, knows it, displays it to you.

This moment of contact has with it a valence, a feeling tone that the Buddha called vedanā, whose nature is to be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

So this is the operative experience that we are dealing with moment after moment from a dharmic point of view. We are constantly being, you might say, assaulted with these experiences at the six sense doors, most of which we have no control over and which always continue to alternate in their qualities of being pleasant, sometimes intensely so, or painful, sometimes intensely so, or neutral.

It's no wonder this kind of drives us crazy. How do we hold ourselves in equilibrium knowing that at any moment we could be met with intense pleasure or intense pain or neutrality? This is the challenge of being human, and it's why we get so disturbed by all the arisings at the sense doors.

We talked quite a bit earlier in the retreat about the importance—the critical importance—of this feeling tone. Because it's the basis for the reactive states of mind. If the feeling tone is pleasant, it conditions a quality of holding on or desire. If the feeling tone is unpleasant, it tends to condition a reactive formation of aversion, of wanting to push away. And if the feeling tone is neutral, it tends to condition a reaction of delusion. We don't pay attention because it's neither gratifying nor threatening. We say, "It doesn't have anything to do with me. I can just space out on this one."

So these qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion are all triggered by this element of feeling tone.

This then gives rise to the next link in the chain of dependent arising. It is said that feeling conditions the arising of craving. Remember that craving, although it sounds like a desire force, actually means the preference of the mind. Craving can mean wanting what's presented, or it can mean not wanting what's presented—preferring something else. Desire and aversion are two sides, really, of the same coin, which is having a preference.

So we're kind of, in this habitual way, always reacting to our experience. "I like this. Let me keep it. I don't like that."

Let me push it away. Or there's the delusion of simply ignoring what's arising, turning away from it altogether. This is the next step in the chain of dependent origination called craving, which then leads to the following link: clinging.

On a moment-to-moment basis, clinging is understood to always follow right after craving. It's simply a matter of building up and intensifying. The mind turns and relates to some pleasant or unpleasant experience. An urge arises—either to hold onto it or push it away. Then the next thing that happens is we actually take hold of that object with the mind in some way, which is the act of clinging.

Once there's clinging, suffering is an inevitable result. So the chain goes: contact, feeling, craving, clinging—and I'll skip a couple of steps because there's more than I want to get into right now—leading to suffering. And then it picks up again. "Okay, we got caught on that one. Here comes another one. Here's more contact, another opportunity for feeling, craving, and clinging." This is how the wheel keeps turning and how we get hooked on the round of samsara.

Each of these moments of clinging gives birth to a kind of "I." You can see this if you look at the history of your life as a person. We come into the world as young babies. Consciousness is very open. But these delightful and threatening experiences start happening: mother, love, breast, food, school, teacher, graduation, work, taxes, death—you

know, Britney Spears, all the rest of it. This whole parade of objects goes by us. Some of them are very seductive and some of them are very threatening. So the mind is always, just by its conditioned habits, reeling from this changing array. And as we form grasping or clinging to these things—either to the pleasant or to the unpleasant—we take birth as a new "I."

Let me give a couple of simple examples of this in the retreat setting. Yesterday there was a very nice tea—the potato bar. There were baked potatoes and a whole range of toppings: butter and sour cream and cheese and chives. You could just lay on as much as you wanted. And then I thought, "What about the poor eight-precept yogis who have innocently come down to the dining hall looking for their little glass of filtered juice with no solid substance at all, and they get a whiff of the potato bar?" Oh, that's potential for suffering.

I could imagine if I had been an eight-precept yogi yesterday, coming in and seeing the potato bar and thinking, "I haven't been eating very much this whole retreat. I've been pretty hungry since about four o'clock today, and I have a glass of filtered juice to look forward to. There's the potato bar. It smells so good. It looks so good. I'd really like to have it, but I'm not going to. I can't have it because I'm observing my eight precepts. But I really wish I could." And then we start thinking about how good that would taste, or other kinds of food that we might like. Pretty soon we've taken birth as the hungry yogi.

We can be born in that state for like an hour. You can think about food for quite a long time on a retreat like this. So we take birth as the hungry yogi, and then sometime later—maybe by the time we go to the sitting, or during the sitting—we let it go. And the hungry yogi, which is not far from a hungry ghost, passes away. So there's been a birth and a death over that hour.

In that case, we have a kind of painful birth. It's not much fun to be hungry and desirous for an hour, feeling like you're missing out on all the good stuff. There's a painful birth, but death may be welcome because it's an escape from this hungry "I."

But the other side is this: suppose you come in and you have a really good sitting. It's very clear, you're very present—not very pleasant, sorry—very present, without many distracting thoughts. You feel a certain degree of stillness and strength in your mindfulness. You're able to be with things moment by moment and not get disturbed by thoughts and emotions. You start to realize, "Oh, this is the factor of concentration that people have talked about."

And my body feels pretty relaxed. My mind feels steady. There are not a lot of hindrances coming up. This is a pretty pleasant state. You think, "I knew this kind of sitting was going to happen sometime this retreat, and I finally got it. Now I'm in the groove. I've got the retreat really going now."

And then the bell rings. It's time to get up and walk. You do your walking, but you sort of can't wait to come back because the next sitting is going to be so good again. Of course, you come back, and what's that sitting inevitably like? Concentration gone, restless thoughts, a lot of emotion, mind can't find the breath or the body, and it's really difficult. There is expectation, disappointment, struggle—"I can't accept this, this is not the way it's meant to be. What did I do wrong?" We start blaming ourselves and judging ourselves.

So here, we took birth as the concentrated yogi, and we thought that birth was going to continue. We thought we'd have a nice long life as the concentrated yogi. We couldn't wait to get back and live another round. But we come into the hall and the concentrated yogi is gone. That pleasant birth has ended, and that dying is painful.

So here it was a pleasant birth, but a painful passing. In any case, if we cling based on pleasure or pain, there's suffering as a result. Either the birth is pleasant and the death is painful, or the birth is painful and the death is welcome. Either way, there's suffering. This is the result of clinging. We either suffer soon or we suffer later due to change, due to impermanence. So clinging doesn't lead to happiness. We can see that again and again on a moment-by-moment basis.

What we start to see is this very act of taking hold of something in our experience, whether it's the smell of the potato bar or the experience of the concentrated mind. Once we take hold of it, in some way we've set up a self, and that self is always involved in birth and death.

Andrew Olenski, who's the executive director of the study center in Barre, writes: "What becomes clear through this analysis of moment-to-moment experience is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds onto or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

So grasping takes place—it's another activity that doesn't require a self, but it generates the self, the sense of self. It's not that grasping is done by the self, but rather self is done by grasping or created by grasping.

Before we come to meditation, and this is true I think of most people in the world, we don't know any other way than to cling. We cling to one thing and generally only let it go when there's something else to switch the clinging to. So life is a succession of these cycles of dependent arising where clinging is just done over and over and over again. That's why life without meditation feels so tiring, so exhausting—like we're just on this round over and over again.

The analogy that's used in the tradition is of a monkey. You've probably heard the mind described as monkey mind—it's just always running. One of the analogies is that a monkey, as it swings through the branches of the jungle, holds on to a vine and won't let go of one vine until it's got another one to hold on to. That's what the monkey mind does in our daily life.

Ajahn Chah made the comment that even in spiritual life, seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing that we're clinging but not being able to let go. So I'm sure you feel this a lot. You know there's some struggle, you know there's holding, and it's not possible to release. This factor of clinging is around a lot.

But as meditators, we do find another choice starts to open up. We do find there's a possibility.

And we can find it by looking into this chain of dependent arising. Contact is inevitable. We have contact, the Buddha had contact, enlightened beings have contact. That's going to keep happening at the six sense doors—alternating pleasant and painful. Feeling, therefore, happens. An alternation of pleasant and unpleasant happens for Buddhas, happens for us.

But the next step is not necessary. Feeling does not have to give rise to craving. It's possible for us to know the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral quality of contact and not move into greed, aversion or delusion. This is a very important point. This is where the chain of dependent origination can be cut.

If there is enough mindfulness, enough steadiness of mind, we don't have to form a reaction to the feeling. And then we can, as it were, rest in that gap. There opens up a space between feeling and craving. The non-reactive state feels like spaciousness. And this is the opening into equanimity.

So we discover a new possibility that wasn't there before we looked closely. You could call it equanimity. You could call it acceptance. It means that we can be with pain and not have to hate it. It means we can be with the pleasant and not have to hold on to it. We accept their coming and we accept their going and we don't get disturbed.

This really becomes the sweet spot in meditation. This is the place where if you look in your meditation and you don't find greed and you don't find aversion and you don't find delusion, the meditation takes place much more easily. One teacher said the whole of the Buddha's path consists of resting in the gap between feeling and craving. The whole of the path is resting in that space between feeling and craving.

So we can start to explore what that feels like. When feelings are present but you're not reacting to them, you're fully aware but non-reactive, what does that feel like? Generally, it feels comfortable. But the quality that I want us to start tuning into is the freedom of it.

Because here the mind is not being driven by conditions. Generally, the untrained mind is completely driven by the changing conditions. With pleasure, we act with greed. With pain, we act with aversion. But now all of a sudden we're discovering that conditions can be there and we're not driven by them—that the mind can find a place that's not fixed by the conditions that accompany it. And this is what freedom's about. Freedom is finding a place that's not determined by these conditions.

Ajahn Chah talks about this as seeing conditioned things as conditioned things and seeing the Dhamma as the Dhamma. I'm going to read a little section from one of his teachings. It's a little long, so I hope you can stay with it because there's a nice pointing here:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself. The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

"The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are, as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know directly."

So this is Ajahn Chah's pointer for stepping out of conditions, stepping out of conditioned things. And this is what in the Thai forest tradition they call the deathless. This gap between feeling and craving is not the source of a new birth.

There's no "I" emerging because there's no grasping happening. This gap is always available. It's a space that can be found in any moment, in every moment. And that's why it's talked about as deathless. It doesn't partake of birth and death. So we can always tune to it when we like.

There's a dialogue that the Buddha had. In the Sutta Nipata, a group of Brahmin youths come and they each ask the Buddha the most important question that they've been holding. One Brahmin youth asks the Buddha, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you have liked to ask the Buddha that? What's it like on your side for one who is freed?

And the Buddha replied, "The sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." He has nothing and he is unentangled in becoming.

I want to share again this quote I mentioned in an earlier talk by Ajahn Chah on becoming. He was giving a Dharma talk, probably in an open-air hall. Open-air halls in Thailand have roofs and floors, but there are no outside walls—just pillars holding up the roof. It was probably a setting like that.

So Ajahn Chah was speaking and he said, "The roof is a becoming, the floor is a becoming, but in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness."

So the deathless is this place where we're not becoming. That means we haven't taken birth by grabbing hold of something. Resting in that gap means that we're in something that's unborn and uncreated, an open kind of space.

This is from Ajahn Chimney, another teacher in the Thai forest tradition: "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and the word he used here was mahasati: maha means great, sati means mindfulness, so a great mindfulness—"The best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

So can we start to recognize this quality in our experience, in our meditation, of not having taken birth? The quality of resting in that space between feeling and craving, where the reactive formations are not happening.

The Buddha said that the path, the Eightfold Path, has the deathless as its ground, destination, and goal. To me, that indicates the path itself partakes of this freedom. The path has the deathless as its ground. The path comes out of the deathless. So this resting in the deathless is both a freedom here and now that we can experience—have the fruit here and now—but it's also part of the path, meaning that the more we rest there, the more that furthers the journey to the final freedom, the final liberation.

The path and the goal come close together. And you can start to feel this as you develop that ability to rest, that there's a satisfaction in that. There's a kind of fulfillment in that ease.

One of my teachers in Thailand was a great forest monk named Ajahn Buddhadasa. He was both a scholar and a meditator. He was resting in this place a lot. His mind was very unmoved by changing circumstances. And as a young monk, I found that kind of disorienting, because I would come up to talk to him, ask him a question or something. And he wasn't like a Western Vipassana teacher who welcomes you into the room and makes sure you're settled and gives you a tissue if you need one—very welcoming and friendly.

Ajahn Buddhadasa never really moved out of his meditation. So I came up and he just sort of held me in his meditation. I was another arising in his consciousness, and he was neither drawn toward me nor repelled by me. But I wasn't used to this kind of coolness as a way of relating, and I thought he just wanted me to go away.

Later we arranged to have regular teachings with him, and I felt his metta more in that exchange. But in my early exchanges with him, I didn't feel that there was a metta attitude toward me, and I felt like I was imposing on him. It was only after I got to know him better I realized he was just holding me like he held everything.

He didn't mind if I was there. I could have stayed there all morning. There were roosters that gathered around his feet and hopped up on his bench. He didn't mind them either. There were some dogs that sat around his feet who loved to bark at the Western monks. I swear they could tell that we didn't really belong there, and they would hound us. But he didn't mind them either.

So he didn't mind me, but I couldn't pick up on that. He was just meditating with me. He was unentangled by my being there.

One starts to see that this ability to rest in this way, to not fall into reactive formations, depends on two things that we've been cultivating all along: samatha and vipassana.

Samatha is the quality of tranquility that develops naturally out of all the practices we've been doing, whether you're doing meditation on breath or body, or choiceless attention, or one of the brahmaviharas. All of these serve to calm down the mind-body system. Normally when Westerners come into meditation, we've been very amped up by our culture. Our culture is overly speedy in terms of a harmonious way to live. And as members of that culture, we've all gotten mostly too speedy before we come into meditation. That's why it's so hard for the mind to slow down when we first start to sit. It's busy, busy, busy. It's hard to stop the thinking mind. If we look within our body, we often find the same thing. The bodily energy is going a little too fast.

When we come into meditation, we have a big history of doing, and sometimes it's very hard to stop the mental doing and come to any tranquility. But moment by moment, just making touch with the present moment, relaxing in the present moment, allowing it, the mind starts to slow down. This is the quality of samatha. And as you have all slowed over the course of these three weeks, there's a lot more natural mindfulness that comes. You notice sometimes it feels like you're effortlessly present. You can just be here and notice things moment after moment without a lot of work. That kind of effortless mindfulness comes out of this base of samatha or tranquility. That's needed in order to have this experience of resting without becoming reactive.

The other thing that's needed is the quality of vipassana or insight, seeing things clearly. Our practice is designed to encourage you to examine the objects that come at the six sense doors again and again to see what they're like, to see that they're of the nature to arise and pass away, that they're not self or owned by self. And especially to examine the energy of the hindrances and not to get so caught or reactive with mind states of fear or sadness or loneliness or wanting, just to allow those to also come and go, to know them clearly, but not to get caught in a struggle with them.

So this careful examination of all the arisings at the six sense doors really gives us an intimate familiarity with our experience so that when the samatha collects, the understanding collects, we're able to abide in the midst of all these changing phenomena and not be pulled out by them, not have to get entangled with them out of confusion, out of wanting, or out of resistance.

This is not a practice that someone could walk in at the beginning of a meditation retreat and fall into, this kind of resting and open knowing. But it is a practice that some of you are experiencing now. I hear descriptions of it in the interviews. That's why I wanted to talk about it tonight.

There are a few different meditation approaches that lend well to this quality of open attention without getting caught up. We've talked about all of these in little ways. I just want to do a review.

One of them is the practice we've learned from Sayadaw U Tejaniya of checking the attitudes. Do you remember this practice? We're noticing things at the sense doors, and we very often check: how am I relating to those things? Am I relating out of greed, aversion, or delusion? We check by asking ourselves simple questions.

To check greed, we say: am I wanting something to be happening that isn't? To check aversion, we ask: am I resisting something that's happening and want it to stop? To check delusion, we ask: am I not in touch with what's happening?

There's a very simple way. Ask these three questions and we can find out if the mind is in a reactive place or if we're relating wisely to the things that are coming and going. Generally, when one starts this practice, one might be connecting in choiceless attention or with a chosen object, using that to anchor the attention in the present, and then turning back regularly to check the attitude. Could be five times a sit in the beginning. And then you can do it more often. You can do it ten times a sitting. And then you can do it more often. So that eventually, your main practice, especially as this quality of resting develops, can be: is the mind in a reactive formation or not? Or is the mind in this place of freedom?

This also resonates really well with Upasika Kee, who puts it this way: your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. This means watching the mind states, the reactive formations of mind.

When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's so worth checking on.

Do you get the sense of that—that you can just kind of abide with taking a look at where the mind is going in relation to the things that are arising? Am I trying to hold on, to grab closer, to push away? Am I ignoring? Just keep looking.

Ajahn Chah has a nice metaphor for this. He's talking about looking at all the different states of mind that come and how they get attached to objects. He said, "If you want to see a train, just go to the central station. You don't have to go traveling all the way up the northern line, the southern line, the eastern line, and the western line to see all the trains. If you want to see trains, every single one of them, you'd be better off waiting at Grand Central Station. That's where they all end. Just look right here," he pointed at his

heart, "at Central Station. Greed arises here. Anger arises here. Delusion arises here. Just sit here and you can watch all these things arise. Practice right here because right here is where you're stuck. Right here is where the determination arises, where conventions arise, and right here is where the Dhamma will arise."

So this is a practice direction: just stay at the heart and notice its movements.

When I practiced with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, he was so firm on this point. I said to him, "You know, I could observe the movements of the hindrances much better if I followed the breath for a while. Can I just follow the breath for a while?" And he said, "No."

"But my mind would really be a lot steadier and I could pay better attention. Can I just follow the breath?" "No."

He insisted, for me anyway, just to stay there watching the movements of the mind. That was the only practice he would let me do.

The second of the approaches we talked about quite a bit before—it's an open awareness where you turn the attention to awareness itself. But I want to give another image for it. We talked about it as a sky before in the guided meditation, but another image that's helpful I first heard from someone who teaches children.

One of our Sangha members runs a Dharma preschool. If you live in Marin and have children who aren't in school yet, it's like a heaven realm for your kids, because she has about twenty kids and all the parents are into meditation and have given her permission to run this preschool as basically a Dharma training for these young kids. So she teaches them yoga. They do spiritual stories together and they meditate in silence together. These three-to-five-year-old kids, she says, will stay silent for like thirty minutes at a time because the atmosphere is so inviting. And it's not a strict silence—if they want to talk, they can come up and sit on her lap and whisper in her ear, so they know they have some outlet.

So she teaches them meditation, usually after she does some yoga. She'll have them lie down. But she says with children, you can't use words like "awareness" and "mindfulness"—that's too abstract. Or even "emotions"—that word is too abstract. So she uses the image of a pond.

She says, "Lie down and imagine that you're in the middle of a big pond and all these fish are swimming through it. You can watch the fish come and go. There might be a happy fish that swims through. There might be a sad fish that swims through. There might be a loving fish. There might be an angry fish. Just be the water and let all the fish swim through you. And it's no problem."

At the end of one meditation, this little boy who was, I think, five years old, raised his hand and he said, "I have a problem."

And she said, "What's that?"

He said, "I can't let the angry fish come."

And she said, "Well, why is that? What happens?"

And he said, "Well, when I forget that I'm the water, the angry fish makes me do things that hurt other people."

So this image of water is actually quite a nice way to think of awareness. Not long ago, I was standing by a pond, and the surface was basically still. It wasn't windy, but it was raining—there was a light rain falling. And each little drop, you know, you just see how it impacted the still surface and caused these ripples. And then it would fade. But of course they were going all the time, all over.

And that to me was an analogy for sense impressions. So it's kind of like our awareness is this flat pond, and sense impressions are being dropped in moment after moment after moment. Now, if we can stay in the flatness of the pond, we don't have to make a big swirl around any of the sense impressions. But if we forget, then we make a big fuss, and it gets the water very stirred up to the point where we lose that flat, even, peaceful nature of the surface.

Again, Upasika Ki: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside.

So this is the same encouragement. We stay with this inward staying knowing, and we look for anything that will disturb it. And we just don't allow the mind to go out and grab a hold outwardly—whether outwardly is sounds and sights, or whether outwardly is bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions. We don't let the mind travel very far from this peaceful knowing of its own nature.

This is from a French poet named Paul Valéry. It's interesting how artists have these very cool insights. He described his process this way: "I only refer to my pure self, by which I mean absolute consciousness, through which one turns loose from everything else." It's kind of the same experience. Turning to the knowing cuts the fixation with other things.

But we don't lose touch with the world. We stay connected to the heart and its movement, but that doesn't cut us off from people or risings or sounds or emotions or anything else. We know them, but we don't let ourselves get entangled with them.

And then the third way that I also mentioned in an earlier talk was seeing the empty nature of the mind. And in turning to the empty nature of the mind, it's sort of like you recognize that this mind is basically unfindable, and you let your attention go into this limitless, unfindability. And as you do that, it kind of takes the pressure off any attempt to hold that's close.

And this unfindability is important dharmically. There's a story in the Zen tradition about Bodhidharma, who was an Indian monk who took Buddhism to China for the first time. And in doing so established, it said, the Chan lineage in China. And it said that he meditated in a cave for nine years, a cave in the snows.

And at one point, a very devoted student came and wanted teachings from Bodhidharma. And his name was Hui Ko. And he waited outside the cave and he waited outside the cave, and it was snowing and very cold, and Bodhidharma wouldn't give him any instructions. So finally, to prove his sincerity, he cut off his arm and he tossed it in and said, "I'm really sincere." We might have some qualms about allowing that yogi on a retreat like this, but it seemed to work because Bodhidharma finally responded.

And he said, oh, Hui Ko, as he tossed the arm in, said, "Your disciple's mind is not pacified. I beg you, Master, pacify it."

And Bodhidharma said, "Show me your mind and I will pacify it."

And Hui Ko replied, "I have searched for the mind, but I have never been able to find it."

And Bodhidharma replied, "There, I have pacified your mind."

And at that moment, Hui Ko was enlightened and became the Dharma heir of Bodhidharma and the second great founder of Chan in China.

We find a pointing like this also from the Buddha. He was talking to his son. The Buddha had a son when he went away and left the household life. And when he came back later, enlightened, his son was seven years old. His son's name was Rahula, and he taught his son. And eventually Rahula became an Arhat at age seven.

So this was part of the Buddha's teaching to his son after he had returned. "Rahula, develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like space."

It's as though as we let our attention go into this limitless and unfindable space, we become unhooked, unbound from the phenomena of the sense world. We don't lose touch with them—we're still there—but the heart finds itself in a free place and in a free relationship to them.

So start to tune into these moments of the day when you're relatively clear of greed, aversion, and delusion, and start to notice the freedom that's there. Sometimes these moments are very ordinary. They don't announce themselves with big banners—"Liberation, turn right." They just arise as quiet moments of ease.

They could be when you're walking. They could be in a sitting. They could be in the dining room at lunch. They could be when you're folding laundry or taking a shower. Notice when the heart is momentarily clear and appreciate the ability to rest there. Appreciate that freedom. That's where the path and the goal have come together. And you can just rest with that kind of awareness.

I'll close with a quotation again from the Suttanipāta, another one of the Brahmin youths who's asking questions of the Buddha—again, a very heartfelt question. This youth asks the Buddha: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir. The island is the refuge in the middle of the flood."

And the Buddha replies: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is nibbāna, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

So let's just sit for a minute together: having nothing, clinging to nothing. That is the island. There is no other.

CHAPTER 94

Loving Kindness; Reflecting on our Goodness

Guy Armstrong · 36 min

> *In this guided meditation from a mettā retreat, Guy Armstrong explores a crucial but often overlooked aspect of loving-kindness practice: reflecting on our own goodness. Drawing from the Buddha's repeated recommendations, Armstrong explains that the proximate cause for mettā to arise is seeing the good in someone—including ourselves. This practice challenges Western conditioning that may view self-appreciation as pride or arrogance.*
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> *The session provides detailed instructions for cultivating mettā, beginning with connecting to the heart center and consciously reflecting on our positive qualities and kind actions. Armstrong guides practitioners through the traditional sequence of directing loving-kindness toward oneself, a benefactor, those nearby, and all beings everywhere. He emphasizes how recognizing goodness in others—their generosity, compassion, wisdom, and kind heart—naturally opens our hearts and can transform difficult relationships.*
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> *This approach to mettā practice, rooted in the brahmavihāra teachings, offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a concrete method for developing authentic loving-kindness. By grounding the practice in genuine appreciation of goodness, rather than forcing artificial feelings, practitioners can cultivate sustainable compassion that extends naturally from self to all beings.*

Every day at this time we'll have a guided meditation. Normally what we'll do in the afternoons is move through the other Brahmaviharas so that we'll give pretty detailed instructions for how to meditate with compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. We also add forgiveness, which is almost like a fifth Brahmavihara. So in the other afternoons we'll be moving through those, but we felt it was a little too much for the first day, so this afternoon will be a guided meditation on loving-kindness.

But I'm going to emphasize something that has been mentioned but not maybe fully developed. And that is the importance in doing metta practice of reflecting on our goodness. The Buddha recommended this again and again. And when we hear this as Westerners, it kind of comes out of the blue. It seems like an instruction we may never have heard before or we thought was vaguely sinful. Because it sounds like a form of pride. Like, I should step back and think about the good things I've done? Isn't that a little arrogant or something?

But it's said that the proximate cause for loving-kindness to arise is seeing the good in someone. So in order for metta to arise toward ourselves, we need to see the good in ourselves. And all of you have a lot of good in you. I haven't met all of you yet, but I can tell. So it's just a matter of discovering where that lies.

In the meditation, I'm going to give a few instructions for how to discover those qualities in us. And I wanted to explain it at the beginning so you won't feel shy or like you're going off into strange territory, but this is really an integral part of the metta practice. We learn to do it for ourselves. We also learn to do it for our benefactor and the other individuals that we'll be bringing in later. And it really is a good way to open the heart to somebody. If you're having a struggle with somebody in your life and you can turn and remind yourself of their good qualities, it can often shift the relationship, even if it's just a little bit. So that will be included in the meditation as we go into it.

So please sit comfortably. Be relaxed in your sitting posture. At the same time, be a little bit upright. Have a sense that your spine is supporting you with some strength, that you feel some dignity in your posture. If you're comfortable, you can let your eyes gently close. If you're more used to meditating with your eyes open a little bit, that's fine too. Generally, we allow the eyes to be softly closed.

You might begin by letting go of any obvious areas of holding. And let the forehead be smooth. The eyes be soft. The jaw be relaxed. The shoulders be dropped. Let the belly be soft, not clenched. Then let the hands rest easily on one another, in your lap, or on your thighs.

So bring your awareness into your body as you sit, feeling the whole body, open to the whole body, just letting it be as it is. And then bringing the attention into the heart center, area in the center of the chest. And maybe feeling this area from the inside, not just on the surface. The heart center is a place where a lot of emotions get felt, get experienced.

So as you connect to the heart center, come in touch with your sense of who you are. And you might do this by just feeling your body and mood, just as they are here and now. Usually a very familiar sense of the body, familiar mood. You might like to bring up an image of yourself. Sometimes it's helpful to recall an image where you see yourself in a place that makes you happy, remembering a photo when you were smiling.

And so as you connect with yourself, either through the felt sense or through an image, take a few moments and reflect on some things you like about yourself. Some of your good qualities as a person. If you met somebody who was just like you, wouldn't that be wonderful? Someone to share your sense of humor, your good taste in retreat

centers, your love of nature. Taking a few moments to reflect on the things you appreciate about yourself. Could be your care for the environment. Your willingness to look after pets. Generosity with friends. Care for those who are struggling.

Sometimes when put in this abstract way, it may be hard to find many of our good qualities even though they're there. So another way in is to remember some good things that you've done—some things you've done for others that show your caring, show your kindness.

Take a moment and reflect on some actions you've done that have benefited others. It doesn't have to be a big thing. It can just be little things. A time you reached out to a friend who was sick, or checking in on an aging parent, or an act to preserve our environment. Donating to a good cause.

And as you remember a few of these small things, take a look back and remember: what was the intention? What was my motivation in doing that act? And so getting in touch with the fact there's some kind of generosity, some kind of kindness or compassion, some caring about another. These are all forms of goodness that have been shown through our actions in the past.

And anytime we do loving-kindness for ourselves, it's helpful to remember a few of these. These are the grounds for us to feel friendly, appreciative toward ourselves. So we begin with a kind of faith that these good qualities are already there in us. They've been shown through many actions in the past. And so metta is a natural fit where there's goodness, where we can see this kind of caring.

So we can start to direct the phrases of loving kindness now to yourself with that faith in your own goodness:

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy and peaceful.
May I live in harmony with my body.
May I live with ease.

So continuing to just gently repeat the phrases of loving kindness for yourself. And if one phrase really connects, you can stay with it for a while.

And if you feel ready, you can move on to the benefactor. And so bringing in the benefactor perhaps by saying their name, bringing up an image of them. Imagine them sitting in front of you or next to you. Whatever active imagination you can do to bring the sense that they're alive in the room at this moment. Because when you get a strong sense of their presence, the connection is easier.

So once you've connected with the benefactor, you can also take a few minutes to reflect on their good qualities. What are the things you really love and appreciate in this person? There can be quite a few, so take a little time with this. So it's like looking at your benefactor from a lot of different angles. Like you'd look at a piece of crystal to see all the facets. You might see their happiness, contentment, their generosity, compassion, their skill in communication, the care they take with their conduct and speech, their wisdom, their good heart.

It's helpful to do this a little bit each time you begin to meditate on someone. Remember what you like about them. And then it's also helpful to remember sometimes they've been kind to you. Benefactor is often someone who's helped you, supported you, taken you under their wing, shown you the right way. So let yourself recall some of those particular incidents when you've been with a benefactor and felt their benefits.

So now having a sense of their good heart, confidence in their goodness, you can begin to direct the thoughts of loving kindness to your benefactor:

May you too be free from danger.
May you have mental happiness.
May you have physical happiness.
May you take care of yourself happily in this world.

You can take your time with each phrase because offering it with this sincere spirit really is an act of generosity. So it's like offering a gift to the person. You can take the time to say it and then sometimes afterwards you might like to feel how that felt to offer that phrase, that wish. And you can come back and place the attention in the heart center and just feel how that felt—to connect with your benefactor, wish them well, have that connection.

When you've rested a little bit the mind at the heart center, you can begin again with the next phrase. If it feels like the presence of the benefactor has faded and it's hard to connect with them, you can renew that sense of their presence by doing what you did at the beginning: saying their name, bringing up an image, recalling their goodness. And then begin again with the phrases.

And then as a way of ending the sitting, you might begin to send some loving kindness thoughts to the people right around you—although sitting right around your seat, if you can remember any faces or socks or clothes, holding those people in your heart...

And extending the same phrases, have a sense that maybe it can radiate around you, the wish.

"May all of you be safe and protected from harm."

We all have the same deep wishes.

"May all of you be happy. May your body support you with strength. May you live with the ease of well-being."

You might reflect on their goodness at this moment, reflecting on all the work they've done today. Not an easy practice. Appreciating their determination and courage and effort. Extend the phrases again to them.

And then letting the loving kindness go out in an unlimited way, including all beings everywhere. All beings have the same basic wish to be happy and not to suffer. So letting your wish extend in all directions—above and below, right and left, back and front.

"May all beings everywhere be safe and protected from harm. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings live with ease."

CHAPTER 95

Mettā: Near and Far Enemies

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

In this dharma talk from a mettā retreat, Guy Armstrong provides a comprehensive exploration of the near and far enemies of loving-kindness. Drawing on the traditional Brahmavihāra teachings, he explains how the practice of mettā naturally brings up both wholesome and unwholesome mind states. The near enemy—attachment tinged with desire—manifests in our relationships as wanting approval, needing more closeness, or clinging to pleasant experiences in meditation. The far enemy—ill will or aversion—appears as self-judgment, anger toward others, or fear. Armstrong shares personal stories from his own practice, including insights from his time as a monk in Thailand and experiences working with difficult people on retreat. He emphasizes that encountering these challenging states is not a mistake but an integral part of the practice's purifying process. The talk offers practical guidance for working with these obstacles, including the use of forgiveness, switching to compassion phrases, or applying mindfulness. Armstrong concludes with Śāntideva's teaching that all joy comes from wanting others' happiness, while suffering arises from self-centered concerns, highlighting the transformative potential of genuine mettā practice.

When I was in my early twenties, before I had encountered meditation practice, I started to have very strong openings in the area of love. I connected with this experience through relating with people and through relating with nature. Although we haven't talked about it extensively, I know that nature is a really important piece for many of you in your metta practice. You almost can't go out and look at the hillsides and the deer and the turkeys without getting some connection of loving kindness for this landscape. So it was through people, through nature, through art, through music. This was the most fulfilling thing that I had discovered in my life, at least in young adult life.

But it wasn't very stable for me. These experiences of love would be very intense, but they'd come and go quite randomly. I didn't know what was behind their changing nature. For me, one of the big draws to Dharma practice was wanting to find out how to stabilize and live more from that place.

One of the things I discovered pretty early on is that to have regular access to love, I needed to understand wisdom. The wisdom was basically about not holding on, not clinging. That was an important piece. The other thing that was really important for me was discovering the practice of loving kindness. In our tradition, in our lineage, this is the avenue to love. And it's a very reliable one. It's been practiced and undertaken by

men and women for 2,500 years, this very kind of practice that we're doing here. It does work. You look at somebody like the Dalai Lama and you can tell it works. This is great ground for our faith in this practice.

But one of the other things I came to learn is that the practice is not just a straight line to metta. We don't just come in and immediately get there without moving again. The practice is best understood, I think, not as a zip line to that destination, but rather the practice of metta is really an exploration. In that exploration, we go around many different mind states that all come together to lead in the direction of loving kindness, but we touch many other places along the way.

If we have the idea that only metta is valuable and all these other places are mistakes, then we'll have a lot of problems in our metta practice. But if we understand that metta and all these other points we touch are all really valuable places to learn from, then all of our metta practice makes sense. Then it all becomes workable and it's all part of the unfolding of the Dharma.

The terrain that metta wanders around—and it does this better than any other practice I know—is the territory of the heart's response, or we could say responses. What we're really exploring is how the heart responds to the changing conditions that life presents us. As human beings, we have lots of changing conditions. There are beautiful things that happen to us, sort of medium things that happen to us, and sometimes disastrous things that happen to us. The heart has different responses, some conditioned, some less conditioned, to all that changing situational landscape of our life. So what we really want to learn about is: how is my heart responding?

This perspective accomplishes two things. Number one, looking at the metta practice this way opens up a broader view of what we're doing. It makes it easier to accept all the things that come. Number two, it shows that there's a lot of understanding that comes out of this practice. Not only are we retraining the heart to respond in the most beautiful way possible, but we're also learning about how its responses affect us in all the directions that it goes. So there's a lot of insight in this practice.

I don't know if you've ever felt this, but sometimes as a metta yogi, I get an inferiority complex with vipassana yogis because they're a little bit smug. They say, "Well, okay, you're 'opening the heart,' but we've got insight. And insight is the real thing because that's what's going to liberate us. All you're doing is poking around and feeling a little better." But I want to say that we have a lot of insight, too. So you can stand up to those vipassana yogis and say you're also on a great path of understanding and learning.

The first area that we start to explore is the area of the Brahmaviharas themselves—loving-kindness and the other three. This term Brahmavihara is made up of two words. Brahma refers to something heavenly or divine. It's a pointer to a really refined way of being and way of feeling and manner of existence. The term vihara means a spiritual home. Often a monastery or a nunnery is termed a vihara, a place to live that has a spiritual connotation. So we could call this combination Brahmavihara our divine home, or heavenly abiding, or sometimes it's called our best home.

All these, I think, are good translations.

The original teachings of the Buddha in the Pali Suttas describe these Brahmaviharas in different ways, but here's a passage that comes again and again from his words: "I will abide pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will." He repeats this formulation for the other three: compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity.

This is where the journey of exploration is leading—to pervade the whole universe with this mind of loving-kindness that's abundant, exalted, and immeasurable. Immeasurable because it's vast and because it doesn't exclude any beings. It can reach and include the whole range of sentient life throughout the universe without hostility and without ill will. This is a beautiful place to be.

Because it's so lofty a vision, we understand that we only reach the fullness of this state from time to time. It's like a peak experience when we experience the Brahmaviharas in this degree of fullness. It's not that we expect to be there all the time, but we can start to get a taste for it. The immeasurability expands as we practice more and move into that space.

In our tradition, we take loving-kindness as the foundation for all four Brahmaviharas. In the Mahayana traditions, compassion is more often taken as the foundation, but in our tradition, we see loving-kindness as the foundation. We understand that when the heart becomes open with the caring of loving-kindness, then when it looks on suffering, it automatically morphs into compassion. Compassion comes naturally when the open heart of loving-kindness sees suffering.

When that open heart looks on someone's happiness, then automatically what emerges is appreciative joy. We get happy with their happiness. If the open heart isn't being stimulated in any particular way, then it can rest in the balance of equanimity. Equanimity doesn't mean that there's no feeling, but it means that the mind is balanced and peaceful amid the changing conditions.

First we begin in this retreat by exploring loving-kindness in a simple way. We develop it through these simple phrases. Sally talked about it this morning, saying that in this practice we're really just planting seeds. I want to emphasize that—every phrase that we say plants a seed, because these phrases are expressing an intention.

The basic practice is we bring someone into our heart and we feel, "I hope you're happy." That's all it is. But that is the heart of the metta practice—to hold someone, "I hope you're happy"—and then we say it in different ways.

This "I hope you're happy" is an intention that comes out of our heart and mind toward the other person. That intention carries power because intention is the root of karma. What we're doing is planting karmic seeds of these caring and loving intentions moment after moment after moment. The way that karma works, this develops a force over time. This develops a power, and it results in fruit, because karmic actions have fruits. Wholesome intentions bring wholesome fruits.

Exactly when those fruits come, we can't say. It's just like if you're a gardener and you plant a tomato seed in your garden—can you tell when the tomatoes are going to come? No. You put it in there and you give it the right conditions: water and plant food and sunshine and hopefully warmth. But if you get too impatient and you go in there and scrape away all the soil and try to pull up the little sprout, you're going to rip it out.

We have to be really patient and understand that our job as gardeners is to plant the seed, but it's not to tell the plant when to grow—because only nature can do that. We remember that a synonym for nature is Dharma. So we plant the seed and Dharma provides the growth, provides the fruits. But it will do it at its own pace, given whatever the conditions are.

That's why in the metta practice all we need to take care of is that simple intention: "I hope you're happy," in its different forms. If we do that, we've done our job. We've planted those seeds moment after moment after moment, and then we can just trust the Dharma to provide the water and the sunlight and the warmth for those seeds to grow.

There was a lovely moment in our interview group yesterday when we were talking about the fact that there's insight in the metta practice, and we were discussing different aspects of how to do the practice. Someone said, "From the comments in the group, I'm starting to understand that all we really have to do is say the phrases and take what comes." I said, "That's exactly right."

If we could just give that as one simple instruction, we could be done: Just say the phrases and take what comes. That really is the whole of the practice.

Of course, we want to refine it a little bit. We want to say the phrase and mean it. So it's not just a mantra. In mantra practice, you say the words and the words take care of the energy or the vibration. The words do the work. But in the metta practice, we want to say the words and mean them, because it's the meaning—I hope you're happy—that provides the power of that intention. So the more you can mean the phrase when you say it, the purer or clearer or stronger that intention becomes. And that intention is the karmic engine of the practice. That's really what makes this practice work.

All you have to do is sincerely care when you say that phrase. It sounds easy, doesn't it? All I have to do is sincerely care. But you know, about sixty times a minute and eighteen hours a day, it gets hard to do it again and again and again. Yet each time, this is all the practice needs: that simple intention of caring for ourselves and for someone else.

There's no technique that produces the caring. This is why it's a creative practice. We have to find the caring. And if we find the caring, we found the metta. It's a practice where we're asked to basically produce it on the spot. You want to have metta? Let's see it. You want to have metta? Okay, produce it in this moment.

That's really what we're doing—producing this metta out of our own heart and understanding moment after moment after moment. That's all it is. That's all we're doing. But that's not so easy. It's easy to do it once. It's not so easy to keep doing it moment after moment after moment. But the more we understand, the easier it gets, because we understand we just have to do that, and then we let go of the outcome.

I think Kamala said that on the first morning: We let go of the outcome in the sense of wanting it to change the person. And I think Sally said something this morning about letting go of the outcome in terms of trying to produce an immediate result. We say that phrase, we mean it, and then we take what comes. Because there's a deep trust that the exploration of the heart's response will lead us to greater understanding, greater love, and greater freedom.

So we don't mind if we wander. Because everywhere we wander, we're going to learn and we're going to open. It's a slow transformation, but it's happening with each phrase that we can say with sincerity. And the Buddha put it this way: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled."

That's what we're doing—filling the jar moment after moment. It's like the image Sally used this morning of the rain falling on the rock and wearing it away. Slowly, slowly, moment by moment, we're changing our hearts.

One of the ways that we change our hearts is this: normally our intentions run to self-centered motives. I'm sure you've noticed. Normally we're thinking about what we can get from here or how we can prevent fear or threat from arising over there. So instead of those self-centered motivations that activate through our thoughts, we're replacing them with caring thoughts. This is the first and most straightforward way we purify the mind. We're dropping the self-centered motivations and putting in caring motivations. This starts to change the way we feel, starts to change the way we are.

But there's another way that we clean the heart or purify it that I want to talk about. Metta practice really acts as a scrubbing technique. It gets in and goes after those old accumulations of hurts and fears and rejections and sorrows and disappointments. And it's interesting the way it does this, because it does it through relationship reflections.

We reflect on ourselves, our benefactor, friends, other people in our lives, all beings. Through these relationship reflections, much of this old accumulation begins to surface.

This is the other part of the exploration. We start to encounter the accumulated material in the mind—and it doesn't feel like loving-kindness, though it was dislodged by loving-kindness. It's rather like taking a magnet with a certain orientation and running it through the body. Loving-kindness has a really strong positive pull, and as you draw that through the system, everything that's unlike loving-kindness gets drawn to the surface.

I'm sure you've experienced this. We turn to ourselves and wish ourselves well, and suddenly all the reasons we shouldn't be happy come to the fore. Or we direct our thoughts to the benefactor—"I wish you well"—and some little regret or feeling of hurt arises in response.

This is not a wrong direction. This is not a mistake. This is what metta practice does. This is how it purifies us. In order to clean up these old hurts, we first have to shake them loose. By bringing them into the light of awareness, we create the possibility of releasing and transforming them. This is why this practice is so healing, so deeply healing—because eventually it goes through all our relationships and cleans them up.

Relationships are mostly where we've been hurt. Human beings generally get wounded through interactions with other human beings. That's why this relationship-oriented reflection is so powerful and reaches so deeply into us.

As we explore and these other reactions arise, they too become an integral part of the practice. They're so integral that in the Brahmavihara system, they're given their own designations. As you learn the complete map of the Brahmaviharas, you discover

they encompass not just the four divine abodes, but each divine abode also has a near enemy and a far enemy. The whole map actually contains three states for each Brahmavihara—twelve in all. We'll explore all of these together during our time this week.

The near enemy for each Brahmavihara is a state that closely resembles the wholesome state but carries an unwholesome tinge. It's like an imposter, masquerading as a beautiful state while missing the mark. The far enemy is the direct opposite—and the opposite of a beautiful state will always be an unwholesome state.

The near enemy for loving-kindness is a kind of affection or liking that's tinged with desire. The far enemy is the opposite of loving-kindness itself. As we've discussed before, the opposite of goodwill is ill will, hostility, or what we might call aversion generally.

So the near enemy relates to desire, the far enemy to aversion. Do these sound familiar? Desire and aversion are the first two hindrances, the basic deluded movements of mind we all experience. We're pulled toward the pleasant and want to push away the unpleasant. This is the reactive mechanism of samsara—what keeps us bound.

Metta encounters these same forces. The near enemy manifests the desire force, the far enemy the aversive force. They appear through the Brahmaviharas as well. But exploring these responses means exploring the terrain of the heart's reactions. We learn how the heart responds to relationships with wanting and how it responds with pushing away.

These are the two responses I want to explore this evening—the near and far enemies.

The near enemy involves liking somebody but with a quality of holding on, attachment, desire, or wanting woven through it. You can see how this operates. You move through life and encounter people you really like. There's this instantaneous feeling of metta with them—you like how they look, how they dress...

You like the way they speak. You like the way they carry themselves. You like the way they think. In that, there's a lot of metta, because there's an appreciation and a kind of love for the person's being. But then, because of our conditioning, we think, "I want more of that." And so we form a desire or an attachment in relation to that person. That desire or attachment is what creates the problem in the relationship.

Metta has this warmth. Love is very uniting. When there's pure love with somebody else, there's a real feeling of union and drawing closer. Well, attraction also has this. Desire has this. And that's why sometimes they're hard to tell apart.

Let's talk about how this desire force plays out in some of these basic relationships.

With the benefactor, if it's somebody that you respect, what we often want is their approval, or their attention, or their recognition, or their acceptance. I was meditating for a long time on a six-week retreat. I used one benefactor who was a teacher of mine. I discovered as I was doing this practice that my ability to really open to him suffered from part of this attached feeling. I really appreciated him a lot. I had a lot of pure metta. But I had wanted a friendship with him that wasn't going to happen because for him we weren't on equal footing—he was my teacher and he saw me as a student. So the friendship wasn't really going to develop, although I would have liked it to.

I had to let go of that in order to just really open to my benefactor and appreciate who he was and all I'd received from him. It wasn't that I resented not having that kind of friendship, but it limited my ability to feel wholly and purely loving toward him. Often with the benefactor, that's the dynamic—we want maybe a little more than they're able to give.

With a friend, this dynamic often comes in. Sometimes it's one-sided, where there's more desire on one side and less on the other. We may be the one wanting more closeness, more contact, more intimacy, more connection. We feel the friend after a while start to pull away because they don't want it quite as close. It comes up in little things: "I invited them for dinner, but they never invited me back," or "I called them last week and they never returned my call." We start feeling insecure and not knowing where we stand. Then we start to withdraw. Sometimes friendships drift apart because there's not the mutuality of where the people are heading.

It's also easy to get resentful. If we're in the situation of wanting more contact and we're feeling rejected, it's easy to become resentful. We can also become resentful if we feel the other person is too needy in relation to us. The resentment can come from either side. Sometimes friendships end because of that imbalance, and sometimes that's appropriate. But it's unfortunate if the friendly feelings end because of resentment or frustration.

It's quite possible to have a friend who's distant—not exactly the friendship you want, but you could still have a lot of metta toward that person. Often what we find as we go through our friend meditation, which we'll start tomorrow morning, is that some of these old disappointments and hurts or rejections or feeling the other person was too needy have really clouded our ability to feel the metta. As we reflect on our friend and their happiness and their safety and their health and their ease, all these things come to light. We can see how maybe we've been obstructed in our metta for them by these old feelings. Once they come to light, there's a possibility of releasing them.

Forgiveness is a really powerful ally, especially in the friend relationship. That's why we wanted to introduce it early, so that you could begin to work with it—not just for yourself, but also when the friend is introduced tomorrow. Often we find there's a lot of forgiving that has to take place between even our closest friends, or sometimes especially with our closest friends.

Another place where there's a lot of desire is in our intimate relationships. Romantic love has this attractive quality with a very strong component of desire or wanting. There's usually desire for companionship, sexual desire, desire for appreciation and affection, desire for sharing mutual interests—all the friend dynamics. But you can especially see with romantic love, if the desire isn't getting fulfilled, how quickly the love can turn into aversion. Many romantic relationships become very conflicted because one partner feels they're not getting their desire satisfied. It can become even violent and abusive because of the frustration of the desire component.

Often romantic love starts with a big component of metta and appreciation.

But if this other side of desire isn't seen, then that part can cause problems.

I've often thought that there should be a romantic love song that captures this whole dynamic. A lot of pop songs are about this, and there should be a pop song that says something like, "I want you, I need you, I love you, and I'll kill you if I can't have you." That's kind of the gist of it, isn't it? I love you until I hate you.

And that's why often we don't use the word love when we're talking about metta—because it gets mixed up with this culture's idea of romantic love.

Sometimes it's not so easy to tell the difference between metta and romantic love or this desire component. But just a couple of things to reflect on:

Romantic love is usually limited to just a few people. Like if you look around this group, which is about 100 people, the number of people that you might want to fall in love with is probably pretty small. So romantic love and this desire force is usually very limited, but metta is meant to be universal. And I expect you will feel at the end of this retreat that you could feel metta toward everybody here. Even if there are difficult people here, I expect you will feel metta for them over the course of the week together. So far, I haven't seen many difficult people, which is lovely. I mean, this seems like a really nice group, and I hope you'll find metta for all of you really easily, because that's the way this group feels to me.

And the other thing about romantic love is that it's more focused on my desires and less concerned with the other's actual well-being. That's another difference with metta.

So most intimate relationships have a mix of metta and desire, and it's why we don't usually use our romantic partners as our friend in the practice. When we talk about the friend category tomorrow, I'll recommend that you pick somebody who's not a romantic partner for you. And the reason for that is that it's hard to tease out these two strands in our romantic relationship right away. But if you pick somebody who's a friend where there's not a romantic attraction, then the metta is usually purer or a little cleaner, and then it's easy to tell the difference. And when you move to a romantic partner, then you can feel how it changes. So that's our recommendation for an intensive retreat generally.

Over time, we really refine this relationship to our partner. Sally and I have been together now for—it's getting close to 30 years, I think it's 28. And in the beginning, I had a lot of desire mixed in with my affection for her. And it continued—we would fight about my desires. I'm sorry to say, but I was a young practitioner then and I didn't know any better.

And then I started reading books about the Bodhisattva path. And I got very inspired. Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. And I took the bodhisattva vows with one of my teachers. And I was reflecting a lot on becoming free so that I could help all beings come out of suffering. So I had this very inspired motivation to help all sentient beings come through their own suffering and awaken.

So I'd be doing these reflections and then I'd be thinking about what I needed from Sally. And I thought, wait, this doesn't make sense. I'm going to save all beings, but I need her to save me first? So I really started looking at that question of need and whether—for a Buddhist practitioner, I don't want to say anything about people in general, but for a Buddhist practitioner—whether the idea of need, in terms of emotional need from a relationship partner, can really be justified. And that's been my reflection and direction since I started considering that, the bodhisattva ideal, and I argue less now. I'm happy to say.

So another form of attachment that comes out of the metta practice is we can want the object of our metta practice to be a certain way. We'll be wishing them well and we'd think, well, you know, you'd really be a lot happier if you changed this. Or I would really like you better if you changed this. And maybe we even want to make a metta phrase that kind of encourages them to be a better person, the way we would see them being a better person.

So I was teaching loving kindness once in a weekend retreat, and a woman raised her hand and said that as her benefactor she was using her son, who was currently in college and living at home. And she said she got to the line that said, "May you live with

ease," and she said, "Wait, he's living with way too much ease already. I wish he'd get up earlier and do his homework on time and clean up after himself. This is like way too easy." So she wanted to change her metta phrase to, "May you develop more discipline and have more backbone."

So I said that that might not quite have the quality of acceptance that loving kindness is meant to bring about. So I encourage her to stay with the standard phrase and just reflect on it a little more.

Another form of attachment or desire is that we get attached to the experiences that we have in the metta meditation. It is a beautiful practice and it opens us at times to really beautiful states and kind of peak experiences, both of loving kindness and of concentration. And then there can be a strong desire to have those again.

So this came clear to me. I was doing a long metta retreat and I was about 10 days in and the metta and the concentration were both developing really nicely and I was really enjoying the retreat. And then something came from the outside and it shook it up. It threw me off track and broke the concentration, broke the metta, and I felt like I was starting over.

But I really wanted to get back to where I was, so I worked really hard. I put tremendous pressure on myself, said the phrases as regularly as I could, and tried intensely to see the person and direct the phrase to them on the out-breath. But I was tying myself up in knots, and it was because I wanted that experience. The practice had become fueled by desire.

So I went to see my teacher, who was Joseph Goldstein at that time, and I told him, "Joseph, I lost it, but I'm trying really hard to get back, but I just can't get there. It's so frustrating." He just stopped and said, "Guy, this practice is not for us. It's for the other." That completely cut through the holding. I got it. I have to care about the other person—not self-centeredly care about my experience right now. I have to develop the caring for the other person because that's the whole engine of this practice.

When we sincerely care about the other person, all the fruits come. But if we try to grab hold of it and control the metta to make some immediate result, then it becomes self-centered and it doesn't work. So this is a really important lesson on right effort. We have to go back to the simplest, most innocent intention, which is just to care for the person, ourselves or another. If that's there, everything else comes. But if we try to force it, that puts too much pressure on the heart.

One of the things we have to learn about the heart's responses is that the heart doesn't respond well to pressure. It doesn't respond well to forcing. It doesn't respond well to the mind telling it what it should be feeling. What it responds well to is a relaxed place of listening. This again is where the insight and the understanding become so important. If we settle back and just want to learn how the heart works, it will tell us. It will show us. But we have to go into that receptive, open, curious, innocent place in order to do it. Then it will reveal everything to us. But if we put too much pressure, it'll close down. It gets very shy, and it won't open nicely.

So these are some of the areas of attachment and desire that come up in metta practice—that's the near enemy. The far enemy of ill will or aversion also comes up frequently in doing metta practice. It is the opposite of metta practice. In the Abhidhamma, the manual of Buddhist psychology, when they list the fifty-two states of mind that human beings are capable of, they don't include metta by name. The word they use for it, the Pali word, is adosa. "A" means "not," and "dosa" means hatred or aversion. So they point to metta by describing it as the absence of aversion.

The absence of aversion or ill will shows that the mind is ready to move into metta. We see that when the near enemy and the far enemy are both absent, metta is possible. And when metta is strong, it prevents both desire and aversion from coming up as reactions. It blocks desire because metta is inherently happy and satisfied, so there's no need for anything else. And it blocks aversion because it's so loving—it opens with affection to our experience.

But aversion does come up in doing metta practice. It's an important part. One of the ways it comes in is in regards to ourselves. We start to send metta to ourselves and we remember all the different ways that we've failed ourselves or we've fallen short of our expectations for ourselves—things that we've done that are unskillful, ways we've hurt people, ways we've hurt ourselves. That whole ground is what the forgiveness practice really helps to clear up. And it can bring a lot of self-judgment, a lot of feeling that we're not worthy or not lovable or not adequate.

This is delusion. It was really beautiful—the Dalai Lama came to the meditation center in Massachusetts early on, and someone raised their hand and asked him a question: "I feel that I'm not lovable. How can I work with this?" And the Dalai Lama, in what seemed kind of uncharacteristic, just said very strongly, "You're wrong." He was pointing out that every human being is worth loving, is worthy of love, because our basic nature is beautiful. Our basic nature has openness and compassion and love within it.

We need to recognize those good qualities. But many of us in the West carry this element of self-doubt, of self-judgment, of not feeling particularly good about ourselves.

I had just ordained as a monk in Thailand and was traveling up to practice in a forest monastery north of Chiang Mai. My preceptor said, "Look, on your way, I want you to stop at this monastery in Chiang Mai. It's my branch monastery. There's another Western monk there whom I respect. I want you to get to know him a little before you go off on your own."

So I traveled up to Chiang Mai and went to this branch monastery where there was a Western monk who had been in robes for about fifteen years. I had been in robes for about three weeks at that point, so I was very eager to learn.

The first morning I was there, he took me out on his alms round. You probably know that the way monks in Thailand are fed is they take a bowl and walk down the street, and the lay people come out and put food in the bowl—this becomes the monk's main meal for the day.

So I was going out on alms round with him early in the morning, probably about 6:30. The first thing I noticed was the size of his bowl—it was not much smaller than this bell here. It was the biggest alms bowl I had ever seen. And I must say, he himself looked pretty well fed, so I thought, "This will be interesting."

He went out in front as the senior monk. I walked behind him, and then two novices came behind us. The novices are the junior monks, usually under the age of twenty. I thought this was odd—I didn't know why these junior monks were coming, because they don't usually go on alms rounds. But I was just there to learn.

We started going down the street, and this guy knew half the town. Everywhere we went, people were lining up to offer him food. I found out that he spoke fluent Thai, meditated in silence in the morning, and then in the afternoon received visitors. Parents would come see him, children would come see him, and they'd ask advice about their meditation practice, their family life, their business. He was like a pastor to the community—very giving, very warm, very loving, very accepting.

On this alms round I saw he was clearly loved by these people. Within a couple of minutes, both our bowls were completely full. I thought, "We'll go back to the monastery now." But we didn't. We ducked down in an alley, and then I saw why the novices were there. They opened up their robes, and each had a plastic bag hanging off each shoulder. So we took the food from our bowls and put it in their plastic bags until our bowls were empty. The novices covered up, and we went back down the street with our bowls empty.

So they got filled again. We went into another alley and did that again, and so we went out on the street again. We filled up our bowls three times, and then we went back to the monastery. Everybody ate well that day. Based on his loving kindness, we fed ourselves, a bunch of other monks, the junior monks, the nuns, and even the temple dogs with the food we brought back.

I really enjoyed hanging out with him, and as we spent time together over those couple of days, I remarked on how well-liked he was, what metta there was between him and the community. He told me it wasn't always like this. He said, "I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred, because I had a lot of it when I came in. But I worked with Vipassana, I worked with metta, and it really changed my heart and my mind."

And it was so apparent—he was a being who emanated a lot of metta, and he received a lot of metta in return.

This is a common reaction as we start to meditate, as we direct metta to ourselves—this sense of self-judgment and inadequacy. But metta is very good medicine for it. The Buddha said that metta is the antidote to aversion, so particularly aversion towards self. Metta is really strong medicine.

Reflecting on our good qualities, good intentions, and good deeds is a powerful way to cultivate confidence in our own inherent goodness. In Buddhism, we understand that our basic nature is fundamentally good—this is what's pointed to by the term Buddha nature. Trusting in this understanding becomes an essential part of our world-view.

We can strengthen this conviction by reflecting on our virtuous qualities and beneficial actions. One powerful practice is to reflect on all the dharma practice you've undertaken. This work is not easy—being here, generating intentions for loving-kindness, and sitting hour after hour requires tremendous commitment. The fact that you're willing to engage in this discipline day after day stands as strong testament to your paramis: your courage, determination, loving-kindness, equanimity, and other wholesome qualities. Simply being present for this practice represents profound and powerful action.

Another helpful approach is remembering yourself as a young child—perhaps four, five, seven, or eleven years old. Connect with that childhood innocence, purity, and good-heartedness that still exists within you as part of your essential makeup. Send metta to yourself as that young girl or boy, touching that wellspring of innocence that remains alive in all of us.

You might also reflect on times when you felt truly loved and consider the people who genuinely love you. A particularly beautiful way to practice metta for yourself is to truly embody the role of receiver. When we send metta to ourselves, we serve as both sender and receiver, though we typically find the sender role somewhat easier. Sometimes it helps to simply focus on receiving.

Try imagining yourself sitting with a semicircle of your dearest friends and benefactors before you, all directing the metta phrases toward you. Your only task is to sit and receive their love, receive their metta. Working with a benefactor proves especially helpful because we can open our hearts to loving-kindness through someone we truly care about. This gives us that direct experience: "Oh, metta is alive in me. Metta exists within me in this very moment." When we feel metta alive within us, we cannot doubt our own goodness, because we're filled with that beautiful quality, that wholesome state, that luminous experience.

This points toward that poem you've probably encountered by Galway Kinnell called "Saint Francis and the Sow," where he writes: "Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing." This beautifully captures what we're doing with metta for ourselves—we're teaching ourselves again our own loveliness so that we can have faith in that goodness and flower from within.

Often this reaction of aversion or ill will directs itself toward someone else, manifesting as anger or sometimes fear. It's quite common to be practicing loving-kindness and simultaneously experience strong anger toward another person. This happened to me during another long metta retreat where, by pure coincidence, my difficult person was also attending the retreat. This was someone with whom I'd had numerous disagreements and conflicts over the past year, someone who had hurt one of my friends in what I felt was a deeply unfair way.

We would sometimes cross paths during the retreat while I was practicing "May all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful." Then I'd return to my room, sit down, and begin thinking about this person and all our interactions from the previous year. I'd become genuinely upset, really angry, spinning through that old territory again. I could get caught in these cycles for twenty or thirty minutes, unable to bring my mind back into metta.

If you've experienced this, you know that anger in a sensitive retreat environment feels particularly painful. When your body has been open and your energy feels very alive and sensitive, anger creates an intense contraction that feels absolutely terrible. I was being crushed by the anger I was feeling, and I simply didn't want to continue this pattern.

I had been somewhat indulgent, letting myself get carried away, but I became truly committed to finding a way through it. So I began examining the anger more closely. I saw that one aspect of anger contains what we call ill will. Good will means wanting someone to feel good, but ill will—as part of anger—means wanting someone to not feel good. I realized that part of my anger involved wanting this other person to not feel good.

Then I recognized that this was just one step away from cruelty. In Buddhist understanding, cruelty occurs when someone is suffering and we actually enjoy their suffering. I saw that I stood just one step away from being cruel toward this person. While I could accept seeing myself as an angry person, I couldn't accept seeing myself as cruel. Yet I recognized how close I was to that edge. In that moment, I simply decided I had to let it go.

So I'd heard that one could practice metta for one's difficult person. I'd heard that. And I thought, that's too hokey. You know, I don't even want to like this person, so I don't want to practice metta for them. But I was desperate. So I tried it.

And it worked. I found that I actually could generate a sincere wish for them to feel well. And that transformed the ill will into good will. And as soon as I could make that move, the anger started to just fade away.

So this was a powerful lesson for me. Number one, not to indulge in anger, but to be really respectful of its power for damage, first to ourself. Of course, I wasn't able to express it, thankfully. But then if we express it, you know, the damage that it can inflict on another and on relationships. So I developed a real respect for its power and I put a lot of care into working with metta as the way to undo the ill will. So I just offer that. In a few days, we'll work on that directly with a difficult person. But it was an important part of the learning for me.

So the other way that aversion tends to go is to fear. Fear. If we don't like what the world is presenting, either we'll push it away, which is kind of the response of anger, or we're afraid of it and we withdraw from it.

So a few years ago, a woman was practicing metta in a retreat here. And by the way, if you like a week of metta, you would love a month of metta. And every February, a few of us here teach the month-long retreat. And there are always a few people who come and do metta for that month while other people are doing vipassana. So I just want to let you know that's an option if you want to do an extended period of metta.

So a woman was here in February doing a month of metta, and in the middle of the retreat she received a phone message that a relative had died. And she had to leave the retreat to go to the funeral. Wasn't a super close relative, so she wasn't terribly distraught, but she had to leave the retreat. And she was in an open and sensitive place.

So she said, "I'm really nervous about going traveling and especially through the airport because airports are so chaotic. The lines and the bustle and the security checks and the pat-downs and you don't know if you're going to miss the plane because it all takes so long and there's jostling at the counter. I really feel nervous about going into the airport. What should I do? Should I go back to vipassana?"

And I said, "No, continue to do the loving kindness. Send loving kindness to all the people who are around you at the airport." Remember Sally told the story of the original origin of loving kindness being how the Buddha taught the monks not to be afraid of the tree spirits? So it's the same principle. If you're in a situation where you might be afraid, try doing loving kindness to all the people around.

So that's what she did. She went through the airport and sent metta to the check-in agents and the security agents and all the other passengers and flight attendants boarding the plane and the passengers on the plane. And she said, "As long as I could stay in that state of metta toward them, I didn't have any fear or anxiety." So it really is a powerful protection against fear. And so if fear arises, again, I encourage you to go to metta.

And again, that's where it's great to have this ally of a benefactor where you feel their very presence can fill you with some strength and a sense of refuge and a sense of connection.

So I'll talk tomorrow morning about more detailed ways to work with these near and far enemies when they come. Basically, you can continue to work with loving kindness. You can change to a compassion phrase, which I'll mention briefly. We'll do a guided meditation on compassion tomorrow afternoon. Or you can switch to vipassana for a while and just be with the emotions in a mindful way. These are three strategies for relating to them.

But as we start to develop this relational practice of the brahmaviharas, we start to feel more and more connected to the life of human beings, the life of creatures, all sentient life. And we start to appreciate this verse from Shantideva from the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. And we'll let this be the closing for this evening.

"Whatever joy there is in this world all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

So let's just sit together for a minute, please.

Whatever joy there is in this world all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world all comes from wanting only myself to be happy.

So thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking meditation, then we'll have the final sitting with some chanting.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

CHAPTER 96

Loving Kindness, Movement of the Heart

Guy Armstrong · 46 min

> *In this dharma talk from a mettā retreat, Guy Armstrong explores the practice of loving-kindness meditation (mettā-bhāvanā) with particular attention to working skillfully with hindrances that arise. He introduces the classical understanding of 'near enemies' (subtle forms of attachment and desire) and 'far enemies' (aversion, ill-will, anger, and fear) that can emerge during brahmavihāra practice.*
>
> *Armstrong offers three practical approaches for working with these challenging mental states: continuing with mettā phrases when hindrances are mild, shifting to compassion practice when they become stronger, or turning to mindfulness (vipassanā) when neither loving-kindness nor compassion can penetrate the difficulty. The teaching emphasizes holding all experiences—including difficult emotions—within a container of acceptance and friendliness rather than resistance.*
>
> *The guided meditation introduces the third traditional category in mettā practice: the dear friend, following work with oneself and one's benefactor. Armstrong provides practical guidance for selecting an appropriate friend—someone with whom the relationship is relatively uncomplicated and where physical attraction doesn't interfere with pure loving-kindness. This systematic approach follows the traditional progression found in classical texts like the Visuddhimagga, helping practitioners develop stable foundations in the brahmavihāras while learning to work skillfully with the full spectrum of human emotional experience.*

Today as part of our exploration of the movements of the heart, we want to take in not only the Brahma Vihara of loving kindness, but also tune in when the near enemy or far enemy is present, if they come. They'll probably come sometime in the next few days. So I want to talk a little bit about how to work with these forces when they arise in the mind.

Near enemy, remember, are different forms of desire or wanting or attachment in relation to our experience or the people that we bring in. The far enemy is the different forms of aversion or ill will, anger, resentment, fear, self-judgment that come. So as you're saying the metta phrases, if one of these states arises in the mind, don't be concerned. It's a natural part of the unfolding.

There are a few different ways to work when these states are present. If this hindrance—that's a classical description for the difficult states that arise in meditation—if the hindering energy, near or far enemy, is relatively mild, then you can just continue to say the metta phrases, continue to connect to the individual and leave it in the background. The way this works is that eventually the hindrance kind of gets held in the circle of metta that you're creating.

Normally when the hindrances come up, we don't like that they're there. We don't want them there. We want them replaced by metta. There's usually resistance to having them. That resistance itself is part of the far enemy of aversion. So rather than reacting with aversion to the arising of these hindrances, we want to have an attitude of metta or friendliness or acceptance toward these states. We don't need to judge them—they're part of all of us and they will come from time to time. We just want to learn about them when they're there. So we allow the metta to kind of encircle them and hold them, and then we don't need to make too big of a fuss about them.

So that's if they're fairly mild. Just allow them to be in the background, continue to connect with your person and express the metta intention.

But if the state gets stronger—very strong desire, very strong aversion, ill will or fear—you'll go to generate the metta intention and you won't be able to. This negative state is so heavy and thick that it really blocks the intention of caring. We can't find any sincere caring for ourselves or someone else. So if it's like that, the metta phrases won't really have any energy behind them, and then it's more skillful to form a direct relationship with this hindering energy.

There are two ways to do it. One is compassion, the other is vipassana, or mindfulness. I'd suggest going first to compassion. This afternoon we'll have a full guided session on compassion, but for now I'm going to suggest you work with a simple phrase, which could be either, "May I hold this pain with compassion."

This acknowledges that the difficulty is present. Metta sometimes, in the emphasis on happiness, aims too high when one of these hindrances is there. So we can just say, "May I hold this with compassion?" And you can just call it pain, you can call it difficulty, you can name it—ill will, anger, fear, judgment, whatever you'd like. "May I hold it with compassion"—and just say that phrase for yourself, the compassion phrase for yourself, again and again, just as you've been saying the metta phrases.

Over time, that opposing energy will start to settle down, become weaker. When it does and you feel you can return to the metta intention, then do that. You can drop the compassion phrase, go back to your metta phrases, and just carry on with your practice as before.

If you're with the compassion phrase for quite a while and it doesn't seem to be shifting anything—there's no loosening of the resistance, there's no change in the way you're relating—then move to mindfulness practice. Drop the phrases and just sit with an awareness of the experience of this state. You can feel it in your body, feel it in your mind, in the emotional field, and just pay attention to it like you were doing a meditation in Vipassana on a difficult emotion. Then after some period of time, normally that kind of attention will allow the state to come through, open up. We don't resist it. We want to allow it to express itself. And then that will let it move through.

It may take two minutes. It may take five minutes. It may take an hour. It may take longer. But at some point it will move through. And when it does or gets weaker, then go back to your metta phrases.

So these are the three lines of response: If it's not too strong, let it be in the background, continue with metta. That's number one. Number two, if it's stronger and blocks the metta intention, switch to compassion—do compassion for yourself and think, "May I hold this with compassion." And the third way: drop the Brahma Vihara practice and turn to mindfulness. Just be present, allowing the experience of the emotion in the mind and body.

May none of these arise for any of you. Today in the metta meditation we're going to expand again the field of individuals.

And to the self and benefactor we'll add this third individual who's called the friend or the good friend or the dear friend.

As you think about who you'd like to bring in to this category, there may be a few people who want to come audition for the role to have a spot at the table. So it's fine to check two or three people out during this period and feel who would be the best fit for your friend.

It's best to pick someone where the relationship isn't too complicated. Often with friendships, there come in a number of mixed feelings. The simpler the relationship is, the more accessible the metta will be, the straighter metta will be with the friend. So look for a friend where the relationship is not too complicated.

If you pick a friend who's in a lot of suffering, the tone of the metta will tend to lean more toward compassion, which is okay, but it's helpful to pick someone where there's not overpowering suffering so that the metta can come through as metta.

As I mentioned last night, it's good to pick someone where there's not a strong physical attraction so that the desire force isn't so mingled in with the metta. Again, the metta can just be cleaner with someone like that.

So feel free to try a few different friends in this category as we go through the meditation this morning. And as with the benefactor, over the course of the morning or the day, try to settle on one person that you'd like to use as your friend consistently for the rest of the retreat.

To kind of warm the field up, we'll again go through some period with metta for ourself, metta for benefactor, and then we'll introduce the friend partway through the sitting.

So please sit comfortably.

Beginning again by coming into your body and letting go of any obvious areas of holding. Relaxing the face, the shoulders, the belly. Feeling yourself sitting, feeling yourself breathing.

Bringing the attention into the heart center, just the area of the center of the chest. Feeling a few breaths in and out through the heart center. Let the heart center be your avenue for connecting with yourself.

Getting a sense of your own personality and character, your being. Remembering what you like about yourself, your good qualities. Remembering some kind actions you've done toward others. And remembering your wish for happiness, which is a beautiful thing in all of us. It's what leads us to the path and leads us to growth.

So beginning with a conviction in your own basic goodness, knowing that happiness follows goodness, the metta wishes are rightful for you. They're appropriate.

So beginning to direct the thoughts of loving kindness to yourself:

May I be safe from harm.
May I be happy and peaceful.
May I be peaceful.
May I live in harmony with the body.
May I take care of myself happily in the world.

Occasionally after saying a phrase or a set of phrases, you might come back and touch again into the heart center and just notice whatever feeling is present. It could be an experience of loving kindness, its flavors of love, affection, acceptance, patience. There could be one of the hindering energies of near or far enemies—wanting, aversion, fear, judgment.

Just making space for that to be, letting it be just the way it is, not trying to force any particular feeling in the heart, letting the heart tell us what's happening. Allowing all the emotions to be held in the space of friendliness toward ourself, our whole experience held with acceptance.

And now if you're ready, bring in your benefactor. Feeling their presence in the moment through remembering what they look like, the sound of their voice, saying their name. As you feel your benefactor's presence, remember the qualities that you appreciate a lot in them and the ways that they've helped you. So as you stay connected to your benefactor and their goodness, directing the thoughts of loving kindness to them.

And now if you feel ready, you can bring in the person that you will take on as your dear friend. A friend is usually someone who's in more of a peer relationship with us than the benefactor is. You may need to look among a few of your friends and try a couple to see who will be the best fit.

It's helpful as you begin the exercise with the friend to find someone where the metta is fairly straightforward, not colored with too much ambivalence or attraction.

So please take a moment and select the person you'd like to bring in as the friend. As you select the person, then try to feel their presence here and now, as though they're sitting in the room in front of you. You could bring up an image of them or say their name. Remember times that you've spent together.

As you connect with your friend, remember all the things that you really enjoy in this person. All their beautiful and noble qualities—good heart, generosity, care for justice, for the earth, kindness, intelligence, responsibility. Remember the ways that they've shown you their love for you, the ways they've touched you. Remember their own wish for happiness.

their longing for peace, their struggles and joys, their vulnerability. And as you hold all of this in your awareness, allow your heart to extend loving wishes toward them.

Begin to send to your friend the same phrases you've been cultivating for yourself and your benefactor. Feel free to let the words vary slightly if that feels more authentic:

May you be safe and protected from harm, as I wish to be safe.
May you be happy and peaceful.
May you be healthy and strong.
May you live with the ease of well-being.

Periodically return your attention to the heart center, simply noticing whatever emotions are present there. Allow all the different feelings you have about this friend to coexist—the warmth and appreciation, but also perhaps small traces of hurt, envy, or moments of distance that exist even in our closest relationships. This is the beautiful complexity of friendship. Hold it all with acceptance and metta, allowing your predominant intention to be one of genuine caring and well-wishing.

If you can refresh the image of your friend before each phrase or set of phrases, this will keep the connection alive and personal, making the metta more vibrant and immediate.

For today's practice, please continue working with the friend throughout your meditation periods. You'll likely discover that different individuals evoke different flavors of metta within you. The benefactor might kindle one quality of love—perhaps respect or gratitude—while the friend awakens another—maybe tenderness or joy. Some practitioners find the benefactor category really opens their heart, while others discover the friend is their gateway to metta. Both responses are perfectly natural. Give substantial time to each category so you can experience how they each support and strengthen your practice in their own way.

In your sitting and walking periods today, continue to begin with yourself for ten to fifteen minutes or longer if you feel drawn. You can include the benefactor for a shorter time—perhaps five to ten minutes—but dedicate the majority of each period to the friend, really exploring and deepening this relationship through metta.

Questions and Responses

One practitioner shared that his friend feels like such a brother that he finds himself naturally saying "may we be happy" rather than "may you be happy." This inclusive approach is perfectly fine. You might even find yourself walking together down the path in your imagination, held together in that loving "we."

Another question about dealing with sleepiness during metta practice: Use all the same techniques you would employ in vipassana meditation. Open your eyes, straighten your posture, take a few energizing breaths. And absolutely feel free to stand for

your metta practice—it's much harder to fall asleep standing up, and standing meditation demonstrates beautiful energy and commitment. Don't hesitate to stand right in the middle of a group sitting if needed.

This afternoon at four o'clock, we'll begin exploring the other Brahma Viharas with a guided meditation on compassion. This introduction will be especially valuable as you continue working with difficult emotions that arise during practice. Compassion becomes an invaluable tool for meeting both your own suffering and the suffering of others with wisdom and kindness.

CHAPTER 97

Brahmavihāra: Equanimity

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong completes his brahmavihāra series by exploring upekkhā (equanimity), the fourth and seemingly paradoxical divine abiding that lacks the emotional warmth of mettā, karuṇā, and muditā yet serves as their essential foundation. Armstrong clarifies that equanimity is not emotional deadness but rather a quality of balanced awareness that emerges when reactive patterns of grasping and aversion settle, creating space for the other brahmavihāras to flow naturally.

The teaching examines upekkhā's etymology as "looking on" - a state of observant awareness that remains unshaken by the arising and passing of experiences. Armstrong discusses how equanimity prevents the brahmavihāras from falling into their near enemies (indifference for upekkhā itself) and far enemies, while requiring their warmth to avoid becoming cold detachment. The practice involves contemplating beings as "owners of their actions" - a reflection on the law of kamma that acknowledges how happiness and suffering arise from conditions beyond our control, fostering acceptance without resignation.

Through guided meditation instructions, Armstrong demonstrates how equanimity practice differs from the other brahmavihāras by cultivating balance within ourselves regarding others' joys and sorrows, rather than sending loving intentions outward. This teaching offers both classical kamma-based phrases and accessible alternatives like "things are just as they are," making this profound practice available to practitioners regardless of their relationship to Buddhist cosmology.

This afternoon we're going to complete the series of the Brahmavihāra instructions with instructions for equanimity, which is the fourth of the Brahmavihāras. In a way it's rather an odd Brahmavihāra, because it's not in itself emotional. It doesn't have that quality of love, compassion, or joy that the other three possess. So it kind of sticks out, and you might wonder what it's doing in the Brahmavihāras, but I'll explain that as we explore it more deeply.

Equanimity is one of the highest mundane states in the realm of the Buddha's teachings. The highest state is the non-mundane or supramundane or transcendent state of nibbāna—the unconditioned, the goal that the path of liberation leads to. But short of that attainment, equanimity is probably the highest state on the journey to nibbāna. It is the last of the Brahmavihāras. It is the seventh of the seven factors of enlightenment.

It is the tenth of the ten pāramīs. In the Progress of Insight described by the Visuddhimagga, it is the last stage before enlightenment in that sequence of unfolding. So it's a very highly regarded quality of mind in the teachings of the Buddha.

So what is it? When I first heard the term and explored equanimity, I thought it meant absence of emotion. I thought it referred to a kind of deadness, the sort of feeling you might associate with a stone Buddha—about as much feeling as a stone Buddha would have. That's equanimity. But that's a real misunderstanding.

Actually, a better word to get into the feeling of equanimity is balance—balance of mind. If you look back over your experience of these five days, when your mind was in balance, how did that feel? And let me ask by contrast, when the mind is in balance, what's not happening? What's absent? Reactivity.

Usually the mind is caught up in these swings of grasping or aversion, of liking or disliking, and that's what creates the sense of being tossed around on the turbulent waves of our emotions. When the reactive formations of grasping and aversion die down, then the mind is said to be in balance, and we're not subject to so much push and pull.

In those times, does that feel good or bad? It feels pretty good, doesn't it? Because it brings in a quality of peace that we don't always have in daily life. When your mind is in balance, is mettā more or less accessible? It's more available, isn't it? When grasping and attachment aren't swinging us and the mind can rest, isn't there a natural ease with mettā, with compassion, with joy?

This quality of balance, rather than making the mind dead, makes it responsive, makes it sensitive, makes that natural flow of love, compassion, and joy easy—makes them open up in a really unforced and uncontrived way. So this is the role of equanimity in the Brahmavihāras. It supports the emergence of the other three. When it's not there, it's hard to find the other three. But when it is there, they can come out easily and naturally.

Also, because of the peace and calm of it, equanimity prevents the other Brahmavihāras from tipping over into their near or far enemies. So equanimity supports the purity of the other three Brahmavihāras and discourages the hindrance aspects of the near and far enemies of the other three. It's really needed as we deepen and strengthen this practice.

The word equanimity is a translation of the Pali word upekkhā. And you'll see it on the name of the fourth dhamma hall: mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā. The etymology of upekkhā is "looking on." So you get that sense that it's a kind of meditative state that's looking on. It's in touch with things that are coming and going, but it's not being thrown around by them all because there's this quality of observation that's happening.

That's the sense—that upekkhā is settled back, looking on to everything that's going on, but not caught in it. It's a mind that's not caught in the arisings. So there's a kind of coolness in upekkhā, a kind of cooled-out quality. One of the synonyms for nibbāna is coolness. So you can see that it's getting close in the mundane realm to that transcendent quality of peace, the peace that can't be broken or disturbed.

But if it gets too cool, then it fades into its near enemy, which is indifference. As a Brahmavihāra, the near enemy of upekkhā is indifference—"Okay, I'm not moved by what's going on, so I don't care about it."

So somebody could be suffering next to me, but I'm cool. I don't mind. It doesn't bother me. But that lacks compassion—it lacks the warmth of compassion. So that's indifference.

True upekka has the support of the other brahmavihāras. So if someone is suffering, the movement of compassion comes through. If we look on someone who's suffering and the movement of compassion isn't felt, then there's some quality of indifference going on, and compassion has slid into its near enemy.

So just as metta and compassion and appreciative joy need upekka to support them, upekka needs metta, compassion, and joy to warm it. Otherwise it gets too cooled out and too laid back. We're really looking for a balance in the mind that has warmth and balance at the same time. That's the critical role that upekka or equanimity plays in all the brahmavihāras.

All the brahmavihāras can be practiced intensively the way that you're practicing metta this week. Someone asked about this in an interview today. We could do a seven-day retreat on compassion. We could do a seven-day retreat on mudita. We could do a seven-day retreat on equanimity. Those are powerful things to do.

I once took a six-week period where I spent ten days on each of the four brahmavihāras. It was very interesting. This practice of equanimity especially was so insightful because it is basically a wisdom reflection.

Equanimity in vipassana practice is mainly developed around not being so moved by pleasant and unpleasant experiences at the sense doors, the six sense doors. But in brahmavihāra practice, equanimity is about not being so disturbed by what's happening in the lives of sentient beings—ourselves and others—as it alternates between pleasure and pain.

We apply it to the same people that we've applied our metta practice to, in compassion and joy. We notice how, as beings meet their joys and sorrows, they go through stages of happiness and unhappiness in response to the joys and sorrows. And we get either elated or distressed about what they go through as well as what we go through. Those are the near and far enemies of compassion and joy.

This practice of equanimity—what we're doing is looking at the ways people meet their joys and sorrows and finding our own peace of mind in relation to it. It doesn't mean that everything terrible that happens to somebody, we say, "Oh, that's okay that that happened." You know, somebody took advantage, hurt someone else, stole from them, robbed them, assaulted them. "Oh, that's okay that that happened." It's not that—that would be the deadness of indifference.

But we find an ability to remain at some peace in ourselves, even as we look at all the different joys and sorrows that happen in the world. That peace or balance gives us greater ability to act appropriately in the world, whether it's to speak to someone who's causing harm or to take action for social justice, environmental justice, and so forth. Again, it's not a deadening or a turning away, but it's a strengthening with balance in the midst of the joys and sorrows of life.

The classical phrase used in the teachings to develop equanimity is a challenge for most Westerners, but I'm going to give it to you straight up. No pulling punches with this group. The classical phrase is: "Beings are the owners of their actions. Their happiness or unhappiness comes from their past actions more than from my wishes for them." This is a statement of the law of karma.

It's saying that basically beings meet happiness and unhappiness based on their karma. Now I want to say that as I understand this, this is a very broad brushstroke teaching. The Buddha never said that everything that happens in a person's life is because of karma. We might think that. You get ill and a friend says, "Oh, that's your bad karma coming back." You ever have friends like that? Not accurate. The Buddha never said anything like that.

But very broadly speaking, you can see, especially in the realm of the heart and mind, the habits that we act on over and over again become the direction of our hearts and minds. Someone who acts from loving kindness and compassion and generosity—the mind becomes brighter and happier. Someone who acts from greed and hatred and confusion—the mind becomes darker. So it's in that general sense.

But I would never say something like, "Well, every baby who was born into the Holocaust and was killed, that was because of their bad past karma." We can't—I could never know that, and the Buddha never said anything like that. So don't take karma as a rearview mirror.

You know, something happens now, and we think, "Oh, let me look back and think about what might have caused that." It doesn't work for us to do it. We can't see, we can't know. Take karma as a forward view, a pathfinder. This is the forward GPS. If we act in loving, kind, generous ways now, then positive results will come back to us in our lives, and we can trust in that.

So in that broad brushstroke, you can see how to some extent beings meet their joys and sorrows according to the unfolding of their past actions, especially their mental actions. But for a lot of people, this just doesn't make sense. It's too cold and distant. So there are lots of other ways to talk about the equanimity phrase.

Another nice one is to say, "Beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature." And we understand there are lots of laws operating in this nature. The law of karma is one, but there are physical laws, there are chemical laws, there are biological laws, there are laws of physics. If a car hits a person, the person ends up not feeling so healthy. So all these laws play in, and it just illustrates that what happens in our life comes from many, many causes and conditions.

What that does when we see it is it takes out the idea that I can control this. We have this underlying assumption. Ego has this underlying assumption: I should be controlling my happiness or unhappiness. But it doesn't work. As you can see from this week, we don't have much control over what goes through our hearts and minds. But we understand that our hearts and minds are formed from many past causes and conditions. And the equanimity practice is built on that acknowledgement and deepening of that insight.

So the classical way is to mention the teaching of karma, but there are other ways to say it that don't have to depend on karma. So I'll just mention a few. "Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature." Or, "All beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature."

An even simpler way is, "Things are just as they are." This is a great equanimity phrase. Who can argue with that, right? Things are just as they are. Yet it brings that sense of acceptance or being at peace with.

Another way to say it, doing a Brahmavihara for someone is, "I care for you, but I can't control your happiness or unhappiness. No matter how I might wish things to be otherwise, things are just as they are."

A very simple way to say it is, "May I accept things just as they are? May I accept this just as it is?" All these phrases have the flavor of equanimity, and that's the important thing—to bring our own heart and mind into some acknowledgement of the truth of what is now. It doesn't mean we don't work to change that in the future, but right now to come into peace with it, we develop this quality of equanimity.

Another difference with equanimity as a Brahmavihara is we're not sending it to other people. We're not trying to make them equanimous. We're trying to find equanimity ourselves in relation to their life.

So then you can start to see how it offsets the near enemy of compassion, which is despair or grief about the overwhelm of suffering. "May I come into balance myself with the way things are for this person?" Or with mudita, the far enemy of envy, when somebody seems to be doing a little too well, a little too happy in their life, then this quality of balance lets that be the way it is. And understand that maybe there were particular laws that brought those conditions into effect for that person.

So this is the understanding behind the equanimity practice. As we get into the meditation, I'll mention the phrases again so you don't have to remember them all. And then they'll be posted along with all the others on the board outside so you can take a look at them later.

So, ready to dive in? Okay.

And I have to say, I find this a really powerful practice. When carried out, it does have the quality of bringing more peace into the mind. With all the different Brahmaviharas, we start where they're easiest. And where equanimity is easiest is for the neutral person. So, it's true, isn't it? That's who we'll be starting with.

So, sit comfortably. Just let your awareness come into the body. Feel yourself breathing.

Coming into the heart center, connecting with the breath there. And then invite in your neutral person. If you can, get a picture of them. Remember where you've crossed paths. You may not know them well, but let yourself feel what you know of their character and any intuitions about what might be making them happy, how they might be meeting with sorrow.

Appreciate again that the neutral person is a whole universe of life experience and meaning—a whole range of happiness and unhappiness. Then you can begin to repeat this equanimity reflection.

I mentioned the classical phrase and a few alternatives. "You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness or unhappiness depends on your past actions more than on my wishes for you." Or "Beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature." As you say this, remember that the laws include karma and a number of other laws—physical, chemical, biological, environmental.

"I care for you, but can't control your happiness or unhappiness." "Things are just as they are. May I accept this just as it is?"

Try on a few of these phrases and see which one you resonate with most. Then select one phrase that you'll use in your equanimity practice. Try to hold your neutral person's felt presence as you say the phrase so that it really applies to a person—to this person.

Now bring in either your friend or your benefactor, wherever you feel a stronger connection right now. As you connect with this person whom you know better, let yourself remember the range of happiness and unhappiness in their life right now—things going well, things that are difficult. Then repeat your equanimity phrase for your friend or benefactor.

"You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and unhappiness depend on your past actions more than on my wishes for you." Or "I care for you but can't control your happiness and unhappiness." Or "Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature." Or "May I accept this just as it is?"

If you'd like to try this, bring in your difficult person. If you'd rather not, just continue with your friend or benefactor. If you'd like to try a few minutes with your difficult person, bring them into the equanimity.

As you connect with them, also get a feel for the range of happiness or unhappiness in their life. Has their mind been shaped by compassion, by love, by generosity? Has it been shaped by more painful obscurations—selfishness, hatred, fear? Then reflect with

your equanimity phrase: "You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and unhappiness depend partly on your past actions. Beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature. I care for you but can't control your happiness or unhappiness."

Finally, bring in yourself as a subject for equanimity. Come in touch with yourself through your felt sense here and now, through the body and mood, or bring in an image of yourself—a memory or photo.

As you connect with yourself, bring to mind the range of joys and sorrows in your life at this period. In recent times, what things have been going well? What things have been difficult or painful?

I hope you can feel how the other brahmaviharas all help to hold this range of joy and sorrow. You can look at them through the eyes of metta, of compassion, appreciative joy, and hold them in that way.

Then repeat the equanimity phrase for yourself: "I am the owner of my actions. My happiness and unhappiness depend on my past actions more than on my wishes for me." Or "I care for myself but can't control my happiness and unhappiness." Or "Things are just as they are."

Anyone want to run out of the room screaming? Sometimes it can be hard to get in touch with. Was it interesting for you? It can be a really interesting reflection.

I find it a useful meditation with family members who are having a hard time, because with family members we can feel the pain and naturally want to go to compassion for them, but we also feel this huge responsibility: "I must be able to fix this. If I just do the right thing, I'll sort out my sister's life for her." And we can't do that.

And so this meditation reminds us of that. One way that I sometimes share as an equanimity phrase is: "All beings have their own journey." This just kind of bows in that direction. Everybody has their own journey, and the amount that one person can influence another's is limited. It's really about our own individual choices. So with family members, often combining compassion with equanimity gives us a good way to hold the big picture.

Do you have any questions or comments?

"Maybe I'm picking the wrong phrase, but I like the one that starts with 'for myself'—you know, 'I can care for myself, but I can't control my happiness and unhappiness.' Not having mastered impulse control and still having some reactivity left, I just kind of

want to tweak the happiness part. I assume you're talking about not the moment-to-moment happiness, but a deeper happiness and unhappiness. I want to say something like... it kind of reminds me of the phrase 'you can't control what happens, but you can control how you respond to it.'"

So her comment was about this phrase applied to herself: "I care for myself, but I can't control my happiness or unhappiness." If I can interpret it a little bit, it seems like it abdicates too much responsibility, because another phrase that she likes would tweak it in the direction of saying, "I can't control what happens to me, but maybe I can control how I respond to it."

Just to remember that there is always free will in responding to the moment—but we can't always control that response either. Even with the best of our intentions, the freedom of choice isn't there, the balance of mind isn't there, the spaciousness isn't there. And so we find ourselves reacting in ways that bring unhappiness in the moment and then maybe in the future.

In the deepest sense, we are all not at a level where we can control our happiness and unhappiness thoroughly. An enlightened being can, because they've trained their mind in that way. So this is just an acknowledgment that even on a moment-to-moment level we can't always control it, but we get better at influencing it.

"I find myself at times, when I experience equanimity, sensing a certain attraction and grasping for it because it feels so grounding and so wise—and then it just disappears immediately into desire or something like that. Do you have a reflection on that?"

The comment is that when he experiences moments of equanimity, very soon there comes a grasping or attachment or clinging to it, and then that dissipates the equanimity—because grasping is actually the far enemy of equanimity.

This is actually the case for all the subtle meditative states that arise in practice. We have to develop a new kind of talent—letting the beautiful states be there without clinging, because the clinging dissipates them. So whether it's equanimity or tranquility or concentration or even loving-kindness, if we hold on too tight, that will dissipate them.

Early in practice, it's just a matter of collecting enough attention that the beautiful states start to come into being—so that's happening, which is wonderful. Then the next level of skill is how to trust in that, knowing we don't have to do anything to make them linger. So we just get more and more confidence that we can rest there without having to do anything about it. But that's the level of learning we have to do next.

So just look at that with all the beautiful states that come: "Can I just allow this to be?" Sometimes just saying "Trust in the Dharma, let things be as they are" will incline us in that way. It's a skill that we develop gradually.

"It's easy for me to feel compassion for something going on in the world, or a friend, and then also to understand equanimity whenever I have it. But I think for myself, I have a second dart when I'm feeling some kind of emotional response that perhaps I think I shouldn't be feeling. And then that just gets me more tight and bound up."

I wouldn't go quite as far as absolute control. Meditation is a mind training, and as it develops more and more, we get more and more influence over our reactivity. Control is the wrong word because it's not coming from... control makes it sound like there's a controller, an entity within that starts to manipulate. But it's not felt like that.

It's more like wisdom—the growth of wisdom and loving-kindness holds the reactivity better so that it is smaller and doesn't lead into action so much. So I like to think of it more as influence. All along the path, we get more and more influence about our response to things in life. But until we're really free, we don't have complete choice. So we still get humbled sometimes by the way our responses come out, and we just want to accept that too.

Especially looking at all the craziness that goes on in the world, we're going to have a lot of emotional reactions to that for a long time.

So we just want to then accept that—okay, let me hold this with compassion. Sometimes in doing an equanimity practice, it's good to bring in another Brahma Vihara. "Oh, let me hold this with compassion."

A student asked about the far enemy of upekkhā, and then shared: "I found myself caring, knowing that I can't control others' unhappiness and happiness. I felt like it was a little bit of struggle to do with family and friends, but I found a complete roadblock when I was supposed to turn it to myself because I felt like it was paradoxical. If I can't control my unhappiness and happiness..."

This echoes the earlier question we explored. First, the far enemy of upekkhā is attachment and aversion, or you could say agitation—agitation born of attachment and aversion.

Regarding the second question about not being able to control our own happiness or unhappiness—well, then what can we control? You could even ask, what's the point of meditation then?

This phrase "I cannot control your happiness and unhappiness" is not a classical formulation. It's something we've developed to capture the feeling of the equanimity practice. What meditation and the whole Dharma teach us is how happiness and unhappiness come about.

What we learn is that happiness and unhappiness arise from conditions. If we want to have happiness in our life, we have to start planting the seeds in this moment that will let that grow. For instance, by planting a seed of mettā now, you're laying the foundation for happiness to arise a little bit now but also even more in the future.

We come to understand that if we want to grow happiness in our own life, we have to plant lots of little wholesome seeds. In life in the world, these seeds generally take the form of dāna, sīla, bhāvanā. Dāna is generosity, sīla is ethical conduct, and bhāvanā is mental training—especially in this field, the training of loving-kindness.

In lay life generally, a life that is really built on generosity, ethical conduct, and loving-kindness will bring a lot of worldly happiness. It doesn't necessarily bring the wisdom of liberation, but it brings a lot of human happiness. If that is our goal, we know how to develop that. We know how to act in that way.

But we also understand it takes time for those seeds to get planted and to grow. So we start to develop confidence that we're building in our life the happiness that we want, and we're refraining from the actions that lead to unhappiness. But we have to be patient with the growth of it.

The understanding is: I can't always control it right now, but I gain, through this practice, a greater and greater ability to make that happen and to trust in that.

Another student offered: "I use modifiers, like 'I cannot fully or ultimately control it.'" That's helpful. I wouldn't even use "ultimately" because ultimately we can—but it's a way down the road.

Another student raised an important point about using the phrase for the difficult person: "It kind of came out as, well, this is what you get."

There's an element of truth in that perspective. When we see that to some extent we're responsible for the creation of our own state of mind through many, many moments of mental habits we've reinforced and acted on in the past, it brings a level of individual responsibility for our well-being that is kind of radical in the Western way of thinking.

Western culture doesn't have a good understanding of how a mind gets to be the way it is. It looks random or like luck or good fortune. But in the teachings of the Buddha, our states arise because of having planted these seeds of action for many, many years.

What we acknowledge is that people who are in an unhappy state—and often the difficult person makes their suffering easy to see through their anger or aggression or fearfulness, confusion—we see how that perpetuates their own suffering.

But what's not in the law of kamma is "you deserve to suffer." That's not there at all. I just look back on the character of the Buddha. If he could have met everyone he encountered and simply taken away their unwholesome qualities of mind and brought them to liberation in the moment, he would have done that. There was no sense that beings deserve to suffer. It's just that by the laws of the mind, we do suffer sometimes from our own actions.

To think that's not going to happen would be like thinking that an apple would ripen and come off the tree and not fall to the ground. So we start to hold even the difficult person's state and their responsibility for that state with compassion. Instead of what's actually a touch of cruelty perhaps—enjoying their suffering—we can hold their suffering with compassion at the same time as we understand their responsibility for it.

A participant offered a comment reflecting on the previous evening's discussion: "It must be painful for some of these people to walk around so angry all the time." Yes, it is painful for them to constantly live in that state, just as it is painful for us to be exposed to them. That's the reflection—we tune into the pain they're going through that makes them act in that way. Painful for them, painful for us.

I'm curious—did the karma phrase resonate for some of you? Good. This is indeed the classical expression, and if it works for you, there's a lot of insight in it. Whatever phrase works for you, I hope it will bring that kind of equanimity, acceptance, and peace to balance and support the other brahmaviharas.

Thank you for trying this practice and for exploring how we can hold both compassion and wisdom when facing difficult people. The cultivation of equanimity helps us respond with greater balance, seeing clearly without losing our capacity for love and understanding.

CHAPTER 98

Mettā and Connection

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

In this dharma talk from a mettā retreat, Guy Armstrong examines how the four brahmavihāras (loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity) along with their near and far enemies provide a comprehensive map for responding appropriately to life's pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Drawing on teachings about impermanence and the contagious nature of mind states, Armstrong explores how mettā practice reveals our fundamental interconnectedness and breaks down the sense of isolation that causes much suffering.

The talk weaves together stories of courage and compassion—from tsunami survivors to whale rescuers to Cambodian monk Maha Ghosananda's response to genocide—illustrating how an open heart becomes stronger, not weaker. Armstrong discusses the beautiful image from the Avataṃsaka Sutta of Indra's jeweled net, where each being reflects all others, and explores how this understanding naturally gives rise to bodhicitta (awakening heart), ethical conduct, and generosity.

The teaching emphasizes that beneath our apparent differences, we share the same fundamental nature and desires for safety, happiness, health, and ease. Through mettā practice, we discover that we are essentially "the same heart poured into different vessels," leading to the profound recognition that in the garden of love and compassion, the distinctions between I, you, he, she, and we dissolve into our basic unity.

I hope those of you who were talking survived the exercise well. And a little shopping therapy always helps to restore balance—that's really why we provide the tables in the lobby.

Someone asked a Zen master one time, "What is the value of a lifetime of practice?" And he replied, "An appropriate response."

When I first heard that, I was really disappointed. For me, that was very undramatic for a Zen master. I thought for a Zen master, the value of a lifetime of practice is that when you come to the moment of death, you sit up spontaneously in full lotus, you utter a haiku that expresses your full dharma realization that has never been heard before, and then you pass away, still seated in full lotus. I thought that would be an appropriate response.

But the value of a lifetime of practice being an appropriate response mystified me until I started thinking about it more. And I came to really appreciate what a profound answer it was. Because what it asks of us is that in every moment of life, when we respond, we do that in an appropriate way. So this is not only the value, but it's the guideline for a lifetime of practice.

How do we do that? One of the beautiful things about the four brahmaviharas that we've been practicing and their associated states of near and far enemy is that it gives us this comprehensive roadmap to look at the way we respond to life.

And life is always changing. The essence of it is that it's constantly hitting us with pleasant experiences and unpleasant experiences and some neutral experiences in the middle. But it's this alternation of pleasant and unpleasant that keeps us off balance. And we develop these habits of mind in relation to those changing conditions.

So I want to take a look at these states—brahmaviharas, near and far enemies—in a little different lineup, just slicing it a different way. The four brahmaviharas that we've been working with—loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity—show us an awakened response. You could say the response from an enlightened mind, or you could say our own mind, when it's free and balanced.

As we've been able to touch these places, we know that these responses are in us. We know that in our human capacity, each of us has these responses as potentials. And then the practice is to bring them out more and more, even as painful and pleasant situations meet us.

But the near and far enemies give us another description of how we could also be responding. So we look at the list of the near enemies and they are: liking with attachment, grief or despair, over-exuberance, and indifference.

Think about that list: liking with attachment, despair or depression, over-exuberance, and indifference. Now these aren't deadly sins, are they? These near enemies are not overwhelming sources of our greatest dukkha. These are just the normal way that in our neurosis we meet things. I think the near enemies are the normal neurotic response of humans to life. Nothing really extraordinary about them. But they're all based on some unclarity, unwisdom, unfreedom, lack of understanding in the mind.

Then the far enemies would go through that list: hatred, cruelty, envy, and agitation. Now we're getting into serious terrain. These are the states that provoke a lot of suffering in our own lives and in the world. And of course we see how these are potential within us too. We've seen and felt and experienced these in our lives also.

So we have the set of awakened responses, the sort of normal neurotic responses, and then we have the heavy kinds of suffering. And anytime we're in relation, we can see where on this map of twelve we're coming from. And it gives us an idea of the quality of our heart and mind at that point.

You can think of it like reacting to the stock market. For those of you who've put any money in the stock market and equities and funds over the last ten years, you've had the experience to have some of these occasions for these things to arise. The stock market goes up, we get elated, we get exuberant, we get over-exuberant. The stock market goes down, unpleasant thing happens, we get depressed. And the stock market here is just a symbol for all the things in our life that go up and down, which they do all the time.

So the Buddha said we go up and down with these changing conditions because we haven't really understood. We haven't really understood that they're all impermanent. He said that's what we lose track of. So we get swung into highs and lows not realizing that each of these changing conditions is going to change again.

As wisdom arises and we get less moved by the passing show, then we can abide more in this place of equanimity or balance of mind. It's not so thrown either into the neurotic functioning or the heavy suffering as the changes of life present. But we find the possibility to go more and more into this free or awakened kind of relation to life.

I think the beauty of this whole map—the map of the twelve—is that as we go back into life, daily life, we're in a relational setting.

as opposed to here, which is mostly inner and solitary. Back in life we're relating all the time to people and events and changing situations. We can use this map to look at how our heart is responding. What's skillful? What's really suffering? What's just a little bit off?

As we carry out this investigation, we start tuning into the movements of our heart and the hearts of others. We begin to see what hurts and what leads to happiness, both for ourselves and others. This exploration brings profound benefits that take a while to develop, but they are deep.

One is that we become more and more tender with ourselves and with others. We grow more sensitive. As you tune into the impact in the heart, you start to feel concern, care, love, compassion, happiness. So we tenderize the heart by touching the play of life in ourselves and others.

This is from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for tenderness. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate. A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief."

This quotation points to this tenderness as also being a kind of vulnerability. It's where we feel life, but it's also where life touches us. We realize that our sensitivity means we're vulnerable all the time because at any moment, anything can happen.

This really came home to us with the experience of a friend of ours. He's a Dharma practitioner who was having some practice time and vacation in Asia a few years ago. He was out on the beach in the morning—a beautiful southern tropical beach—doing some exercises, enjoying the view of the ocean, when suddenly he saw a wave that was a little too big. He happened to be out there on December 26, 2004.

This wave that was a little too big came up and knocked him over. He said it wasn't too scary, but when it went back out, there was this really unusual trough. It was much deeper on the outflow than it should ever be, and that concerned him. So he immediately went to grab his partner who was still sleeping and brought her out of the bungalow, where she was actually sleeping under a big chest of drawers that could have fallen over and crushed her if anything happened.

He took her by the hand and they climbed up on this concrete wall that was about four feet tall. Then he hung on to a palm tree growing beside the wall and she hung on to him. You probably know the next chapter. The bigger wave came—the second wave of that tsunami in 2004—and it was the second wave that was the killer.

So that wave killed tens of thousands of people on that day. My friend was in southern India. It hit there, it hit in Sri Lanka with devastating impact, it hit in Thailand, and it hit in Burma. The huge wave came. My friend was holding on to the palm tree and his partner was holding on to him and they were okay. The wave passed up and then it passed back and they were still standing on that wall. So he survived. He was on a beach near Madras in southern India. One time when the practice of non-clinging was not advisable...

But by holding on, they were both okay. But who would know? You wake up, it's a beautiful beach, it's a sunny morning. Who knows what's going to happen?

This can happen to any of us. Any of us could walk into a doctor's office the next time we have to go and find out that we have a disease projected to be terminal. This could always happen to us. So as human beings, this vulnerability and unknowing is just part of our life's condition.

I was teaching at IMS a few years ago, and a young man was on the three-month course. I was teaching the first half.

And he was very inspired by the Dharma and had a great love for the practice. His intention was to go to Asia after the retreat, to ordain as a monk and immerse himself in long-term practice. He felt a deep calling to be in silent retreat for an extended period.

We talked extensively during the retreat and I kept in touch with him afterwards, offering support for his plans. I believed he would thrive in the robes and do well in Asia. But as we continued our correspondence, he shared that he had developed a mysterious illness affecting his digestion so severely that he couldn't eat without excruciating pain.

Going to Asia with an abdominal problem is not recommended—mostly you go there healthy and come back with digestive issues. His condition became quite severe. He couldn't find a diet that prevented him from doubling over in pain after every meal. So he couldn't go to Asia. He couldn't ordain. He couldn't enter retreat because he had to tend to his health. The pain made it difficult to maintain full-time employment. Despite visiting numerous specialists, doctors couldn't diagnose his condition.

Here was someone young, healthy, bright, full of love for the Dharma and the best of intentions—yet this curious illness blocked his journey. We never know if something similar might happen to us. Fortunately, over the years his condition has improved somewhat. He's learned to work with it better, moderate his diet, and receive some medical treatment. He can practice again, though he's not quite ready for Asia yet. He continues to make progress and maintains his love for the Dharma, but hasn't been able to fulfill that original vision.

We never know what will happen or how we'll respond. We can't always control circumstances. But as we tune into this reality, it awakens our compassion for ourselves and one another because we're all in the same boat—the same place of vulnerability.

Bob Dylan writes in his memoirs: "My grandma was filled with nobility and goodness, told me once that happiness isn't on the road to anywhere, that happiness is the road. She had also instructed me to be kind because everyone you'll ever meet is fighting a hard battle."

As we open to this human situation and the possibilities of difficulty, we develop a connection to life that comes from a different place. Sally shared a whale story the other night—the whale tangled in fishing nets. She mentioned another incident off our coast near the Farallon Islands. I'd like to read from that account.

This humpback whale, a fifty-foot female, had become entangled in crab pot lines—fishing lines with heavy pots dangling at the ends. Four lines, each weighing nearly a thousand pounds, were dragging her down. The Marine Mammal Center sent out a boat of divers to rescue her by cutting the cords.

This is from one of the divers: "The whale floated passively in the water the whole time, giving off a strange kind of vibration. When I was cutting the line going through her mouth, her eye was there winking at me, watching me. It was an epic moment of my life."

Can you imagine working on the whale right next to her eye? He spent about an hour cutting through that line while other divers worked around her. When the whale realized she was free, she began swimming in circles in apparent joy. Then she swam up to each diver, nuzzled them, and moved to the next one.

"It felt to me like she was thanking us, knowing that she was free and that we had helped her," one diver said. "She stopped about a foot away from me, pushed me around a little bit and had some fun. She seemed kind of affectionate, like a dog happy to see you. I never felt threatened. It was an amazing, unbelievable experience."

Can you imagine the connection they felt with her? That is tenderness. That's beauty. These connections—to the people in your meditations, to one another, to the animals here on this land—are very special. We shouldn't gloss over them because there's deep meaning here.

These connections, when we feel ourselves in another's shoes or understand what someone else is experiencing, ease our sense of isolation. We've been teaching retreats for scientists for years, both here at Spirit Rock and at IMS, because neuroscience has become so connected to the Dharma. This didn't happen by accident. Some neuroscientists were meditators who became close to the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama, with his

great appreciation for science, personally and enthusiastically endorsed these yearly gatherings of meditators—many from Asia—and Western scientists, because he felt there was tremendous potential there.

These retreats grew from that recognition. We felt it would be valuable for scientists to have first-person experience of what they were investigating.

This insight resonates deeply with our meditation practice. So if scientists could understand what meditation was about, they could design research more effectively, ask more compelling questions, and truly comprehend what the meditators were experiencing.

The scientists needed a name to present this project to their superiors. Attending a retreat like this wasn't simply a meditation retreat—it was called "first-person research." There was indeed extensive first-person research happening at these scientific retreats, creating a wonderful exchange of understanding. Toward the end, the participants would engage in dialogue with each other.

During one of these retreats, a scientist shared something particularly striking. Among the many different research projects—and I cannot recall which specific study this emerged from—they mentioned that recent research suggests perhaps the deepest source of people's unhappiness is a sense of isolation.

This isolation manifests on multiple levels. In our country today, community has largely broken down. The nuclear family structure has become unstable, the extended family is often absent, and the wider community frequently provides no support at all. We grow up in the West without a sense of deep connection, which differs markedly from established societies in Asia.

This sense of isolation manifests within us in a way that makes us believe we are truly unusual. We lack sufficient close, extended contacts to recognize how normal we actually are. We are all genuinely normal, but we remain unaware of this truth. Each of us grows up within our individual cylinder of personality, convinced we are strange, when we are not. We are remarkably alike.

The Brahmaviharas begin to reveal this interconnection. As we develop these qualities through practice, they break down our sense of being different. This is, in many ways, the consequence of excessive emphasis on individualism. Western cultures place tremendous emphasis on individual rights, while many Asian cultures prioritize social cohesion and accepting some sacrifice of individual choice to align with the community.

Here in the West, we have become overly individualistic, breeding this profound isolation. Within this individualism, we define ourselves by how we are individual or unique. As we mature, we tell ourselves countless stories about how we differ from others. We convince ourselves we are different because we suffer more, or were more wounded in childhood, or because we are the best athlete in school, or achieved the highest SAT scores.

In both directions—whether we consider ourselves better than or inferior to others—we continuously tell ourselves these stories as a distinctly Western emphasis. Each time we repeat these narratives, we believe them a little more deeply, and this isolates us further. What we forget are the stories about how similar we are to everyone else.

The ego, the self-sense, does not focus on connection—it focuses on separation. We create this separation through these stories of our self-image. By repeating them continuously, we come to believe we exist in some isolated corner, when we do not. We share at least as many similarities as we do differences.

I want to explore how both the Brahmaviharas and insight work to reconnect us. There is a beautiful image from the Avatamsaka Sutra, a Mahayana text that formed the foundation for Huayan Buddhism, Dzogchen, and Mahamudra, called the Jewel Net of Indra.

Imagine the universe as a vast net—a rope net spanning all of space. At every intersection where two strands cross, there sits a gem. The entire universe resembles this rope net with gems at each crossing point.

These gems are all different—crystals, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires—with varying cuts, weights, and facets. Yet each is a gem, and every gem is translucent. When you gaze into one gem, it reflects all the other gems in the universe. Each gem contains reflections of all others.

This serves as a metaphor for sentient beings. Each gem represents one being. We differ from one another, yet we are also translucent. Light shines into us and through us. If you could truly open up any individual, what you would discover is all the rest of us. Your experience right now is composed of everyone else in this meditation hall. This is only possible because you are fundamentally empty.

So she thought, "What's going on here?" She slowed down and got in the slow lane, and as she approached the light, she could see that there was something in the fast lane. And as she got closer, she could see that it was a mother duck with about six or seven ducklings, and they were all just sitting in the middle of the fast lane.

The mother duck wasn't moving. The ducklings were huddled around her, and Caroline could see that the mother duck had been hit and was dying. And all these cars—this is a busy road—all these cars had just stopped. Traffic in both directions had come to a complete halt. People were getting out of their cars. Somebody was directing traffic around the duck family. People were on their cell phones trying to call animal rescue services.

And Caroline said she just sat there and started crying, because she realized that everyone had stopped. Nobody was honking their horns or getting impatient. Everyone recognized that this was a mother with her children, and she was dying, and the children didn't want to leave her. And somehow everyone understood that this was more important than getting where they needed to go.

Caroline said it was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen—this spontaneous expression of compassion for this duck family from all these strangers who happened to be driving by. And I think this really captures something about how metta works. There's a natural arising of care and protection that happens when we recognize suffering and vulnerability, especially when we see the bond between beings who love each other.

This is how the heart naturally operates when it's not caught up in its own agenda, when it's not too busy or distracted to notice what's happening around us. The Buddha called this "mudita"—sympathetic joy and care that arises spontaneously when we're present enough to see clearly.

And I think this also points to something profound about how interconnected we really are. In that moment, all those drivers weren't separate individuals trying to get somewhere. They became part of something larger—a community of beings responding to the suffering of other beings. The artificial boundaries we usually maintain between "me" and "not me," between "my concerns" and "their concerns," just naturally dissolved in the face of genuine need.

This is why the Buddha taught that the brahma-viharas—these divine abodes of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—aren't really practices we have to force or manufacture. They're expressions of our deepest nature when the obstacles to love are removed. When we're not caught up in fear, anger, jealousy, or self-preoccupation, these qualities arise naturally, just like they did for all those drivers who stopped for the duck family.

There was no reason for the traffic. It was just inching along, and as she got up to where it was slowest, she saw what was happening: a mother duck was trying to cross the three lanes of traffic.

Cars were stopping and swerving around her, trying to go on their way—because in Marin, nobody wants to be five minutes late for dinner, for goodness' sake. So they were still moving, and the mother duck was going in between the cars, with six little ducklings behind her.

Caroline and her friend reached this point and said, "This is no good." She stopped the car and blocked her lane. They both got out and slowed down and stopped the cars next to them, giving the mother duck a clear path to walk to the median and hop up. The six little ducklings walked to the median, but they couldn't hop up. So Caroline scooped each of them up and put them on the median.

Problem solved, right? No. Three more lanes to get to the water.

Cars were slowing down on the other side, people honking and shouting, "Get moving! What's going on?" So Caroline and her friend went over and stopped that line of traffic. They let the mother duck and six ducklings walk across three more lanes, and then they had a clear shot to the bay.

I thought that was such a beautiful gesture. Just stop, you guys. We're going to let these ducks go across. That's protecting as one would protect one's only child—cherishing all living beings like that.

This brings us to a really lovely quality that's discussed in Buddhist practice, one that grows out of this universal love and universal compassion. When we have this feeling of metta for all beings, as Sally led us in this morning with such beautiful imagery, we want all beings to be happy, don't we? I hope you could touch that possibility. Any being we can imagine, we want them to be happy.

As compassion can be extended in the same way, we don't want them to suffer. This is love and compassion together—we want them to be happy and we don't want them to suffer.

What's the best way we can affect that? We can't control the outcome right now, but what's the best way we can influence it? In other words, if you really wanted someone you cared about to be as happy as possible and truly not suffering, what would you want them to do? Wouldn't you want them to wake up and become inwardly free? Isn't that the best security for happiness and release from suffering—this complete inner peace and freedom?

From the Buddhist point of view, it is the best way to help someone attain happiness and come out of suffering. So if our goal is to help all beings become free, what's the best way for us to affect that? Is it to set up a scholarship fund for Spirit Rock? Or would it be to practice ourselves so that we became free and understood the path out of suffering and toward true happiness?

That's the thinking in the Buddhist understanding anyway—that if we can attain our own freedom, then we're in the best situation to help all other beings come out of suffering and into genuine happiness.

This motivation to free ourselves in order to be of greatest benefit to all beings is called bodhicitta. These are two words: bodhi means awakening, and citta means consciousness, mind, or heart. So a beautiful translation of this is "awakening heart"—the awakening heart.

When we have this aspiration to free ourselves so we can best help others achieve happiness and release from suffering, this can become a motivation in our practice that we reflect on, strengthen, and restate to ourselves again and again. It's really just an outgrowth of unlimited love and compassion—the most pragmatic approach to activate our love and compassion for others.

This is something highly recommended in many schools of Buddhist practice: to reflect on your wish to help others in this way, to become free ourselves as the best way to help others become free. This wish then forms the foundation for the Bodhisattva path and the Bodhisattva vow. It's really a statement that "I want to become free so that I can help all beings become free."

This can become a very important direction in our practice. It's a beautiful practice because it will sustain us all the way through. If we have a more limited aspiration, we might give up before the end.

But this one would sustain us all the way through.

So I say something usually at the start of every sit that reminds me of this aspiration. It's something that I would like to accomplish. At the start of sits, I say something like, "May I come to awakening in order to benefit all beings." That may sound a little grandiose, but it's just putting our little bit into the stream. Even the Dalai Lama says he has a hard time really making this a big practice.

So it may not appear like a big burning bonfire right now, but even a little candle flame is good—a little suggestion of this. The Dalai Lama says, "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is. That is all."

This is one way that we can feel that connection and use that connection as a motivation for ourselves.

Loving kindness is also the source of ethical conduct. When we took the five precepts at the beginning of the retreat, that's really founded in loving kindness and compassion. We don't want others to be hurt by our actions. We want them to be safe in our presence. The Buddha said when we activate that intention, that care with our conduct, we are giving all the beings around us the gift of fearlessness. You know how it feels when you're around somebody who's really safe in their actions, who's really careful? They create a kind of atmosphere where people feel safe around them. And when you feel safe, then you can flower. This can be refined a long way.

So a few years ago, Oprah Winfrey was interviewing the Dalai Lama. I have a lot of appreciation for Oprah and the way she takes brilliant spiritual teachings and offers them to a wide audience. She has taken people like the Dalai Lama, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and James Baraz, and introduced them to a very wide readership. James's class attendance doubled after his appearance with Oprah.

She was interviewing the Dalai Lama and started off by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?" She was asking him about his conduct and how he felt about that.

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "Okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

Of course, part of that beauty of mind and that clarity and stillness and peace is because of his care with his conduct—that lets him enjoy a lack of guilt or remorse or confusion that lets his mind settle. So he's been doing this a little longer than us. We're probably about fourteen lifetimes behind at this point, but we'll catch up. We just have to keep going.

Loving kindness is also the source of this quality of generosity. Kamala talked this afternoon about the practice of generosity and its central role in the Buddha's teachings. Generosity is founded on the sense of empathy that we care about others.

There are a lot of things going on in the world these days that are very discouraging. You read a news report, you read a newspaper—it hasn't gotten a lot better in the last week. So it's easy to have a pessimistic view of the world today. But there are also a lot of beautiful things going on that don't make the papers.

Paul Hawkins's second most recent book—I'm going to read the title—

Paul Hawkins' book is called "Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming." He documents the countless non-profits, non-governmental organizations, and individual foundations that have emerged from people simply caring—whose mission is to promote health, justice, education, and general welfare for people all around the world.

This represents a huge movement happening in both small and large groups. Consider the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation with its endowment of approximately fifty billion dollars, or take smaller, closer-to-home initiatives. Hawken conducted extensive research and identified about a million of these groups. This is beautiful—almost everywhere you turn, you hear such stories.

Dr. Paul Farmer's work in Haiti exemplifies this. Greg Mortenson's efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, despite some criticism, have accomplished tremendous good. Even within our own community, I know four separate friends doing work in Burma.

Kamala and Steve run a schools project there, raising at least one hundred thousand dollars annually to build schools. In Burma, you can construct a school for twenty-five thousand dollars. Over the years, they've built approximately twelve to twenty schools that wouldn't have existed otherwise, since the government isn't providing that funding. Once a school is built, however, the government will provide a teacher.

Another friend collects donations through an email list and last year brought sixty thousand dollars to provide relief to villagers affected by the cyclone, while also supporting nunneries that don't receive as much assistance as the large monasteries. She visits and supports a very small nunnery where two nuns had been planning long-term retreat practice. When the cyclone hit—Burma's version of the tsunami—many children were orphaned after their parents were killed.

Suddenly, twenty young girls from that area found themselves without families. These two sisters set aside their retreat plans and decided what they really needed to do was create a small nunnery where they could raise these twenty girls. Of course, they lacked the financial resources, but they committed themselves to finding ways to have the girls fed, clothed, and educated.

Initially, they lived in ramshackle conditions with leaking thatched roofs and ten girls crammed into a room about six by ten feet for sleeping. Carol and her friends discovered this nunnery and have steadily brought more resources, enabling them to build larger buildings and provide better classroom facilities, books, and robes. When you visit now, you see these twenty little novices with their shaved heads and pink robes—absolutely adorable—receiving support because people care.

Another friend, Hal Nathan, previously served on Spirit Rock's board. Sally currently serves as board president, and before her, Hal held that position. As a deeply valued sangha member, Hal established the Foundation for the People of Burma, annually gathering about six million dollars to bring healthcare to Burma, primarily in rural areas where no health services would otherwise be available.

We witness this phenomenon everywhere. People become inspired and, from their own sense of loving-kindness and compassion, take on these projects, offering assistance to those who desperately need it. This represents one of the most encouraging developments I see in today's world. All of this springs from care.

Alice Walker, author of "The Color Purple," offers this insight: "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." We begin to feel this ourselves. We start looking for it, recognizing how it manifests in the world, embracing it as our own value.

Trungpa Rinpoche continues from his quote about the sore spot: "There's also an inner wound called Tathagata-garbha or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and to communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. That is called bodhisattva fever."

That vulnerability is compassion. We truly have no way to defend ourselves anymore. Yet what's beautiful is that as the heart opens in this way, it gains strength. Opening the heart doesn't make us weaker—it makes us stronger.

Consider another story about the Dalai Lama, who operates on a vast stage of global spiritual leadership and has for years carried political responsibility, bearing the weight of Tibet's future on his shoulders. Several years ago, he came to this very hall for a meeting with about 220 Buddhist teachers. The format involved people making presentations to him and then requesting his response—perhaps not the ideal structure, but the one we used.

So one person would present, then another person would present, then another person would present, and then say, "Your Holiness, what do you think about all that?" And at one point I remember he just said, "Oh, nothing left up here. First person present, I had something to say, but now that's gone. I don't remember anything." And he just laughed about it. So straightforward about it.

But some of the presenters were rather direct or I would say even a little cheeky with him. So one of the presenters wanted to ask the Dalai Lama about the popularization of Buddhism that was going on in our culture. And I'm sure you can see there are things like perfume called Samsara. Resorts will advertise with taglines like "In two days here you'll be in nirvana." This is beginning to happen. It's getting commercialized. So this person mentioned all this popularization that's going on and he said, "And you, Your Holiness, are the biggest popularizer of them all. There's a risk that Buddhism is going to become trivialized and commercialized through this. So what do you think about this?"

The Dalai Lama was just quiet for a minute while he reflected on it. And then he said, "Some people, you see, they call me Living Buddha. Other people call me God King. No, I am not. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk. But others call me counter-revolutionary. They call me wolf in monk's clothing. But you see, I look back at my own intention. If my intention is sincere, then that's what is important. How I'm perceived is up to others. I don't care."

I thought that was beautiful. But you know, it takes a strong heart not to care. You're being attacked on the front page of the New York Times and called a wolf in monk's clothing. He says, "I don't care. I look at my own intention." That's a strong heart.

One other story about a strong heart. Metta in the face of fear or anger. It's said that when the mind gets very spacious with metta and when metta is strong, anger can't stick in it. It's said the way if you take a bucket of paint and you throw it through space, the way it doesn't stick in space is the way anger doesn't stick in the mind of metta. There's no place for it to grab.

Maha Gosananda was a Cambodian monk who died a few years ago. When the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, he was living in Thailand. He'd gone there to practice years earlier with Ajahn Dhammadharo in southern Thailand. While the genocide was going on, in which most of the monks and nuns were killed—there had been one to two million monks and nuns in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge, and there were hardly any, like 60,000 afterwards—while all that was happening, Maha Gosananda was living in Thailand. He lost something like seventeen family members in the genocide, and of course many friends who he had been in the robes with before.

Then when the political system changed—the Vietnamese invaded and the Khmer Rouge were pushed out of power—it became safer to live in refugee camps along the border with Thailand. At that point, Maha Gosananda moved into the refugee camps to give some Buddhist support and teaching and solace to his people, the country people. While he was living there, he began to teach what he understood would be needed for the healing of his country.

He had a lot of grounds for anger. He'd lost his sangha. He'd lost almost all his family members. But that didn't change his attitude. So he started holding large gatherings on the holy days, and tens of thousands of the refugees would come and gather to hear his talk on the Dhamma, because there weren't so many monks or nuns left anymore.

And what he had them do—he printed up brochures and handed them out, having them chant a passage from the Dhammapada, that classic Buddhist text. The passage is the fairly famous one that says: "Hatred never ceases by hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law."

So he was preaching nonviolence, love, compassion, and reconciliation. He was attracting a lot of interest and a lot of followers. Well, this threatened the Khmer Rouge's power because they were also in the camps, trying to wield what power they had. So there began to be threats against Mahagosananda's life.

His supporters became very concerned and said, "Look, we want you to stay. We want you to survive." He had become, about this point in time, the patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism because he was the most senior monk left. "We don't want to lose you. You're too important for your country. So look, take some money, go to the capital, Phnom Penh, get a flight to Paris, and you'll be safe there. The Khmer Rouge won't get you in Paris."

So Mahagosananda took the money, got on a train, and was away for about a week. When he came back, his friend said, "You're not supposed to be here—you're supposed to be in Paris!" What he had done with the money was print up fifty thousand more brochures with the chant "hatred never ceases through hatred," so he could pass more of the chant books out to the villagers in the refugee camp.

So this is metta in the face of anger, metta in the face of fear. There's enormous strength in this state of mind.

This kind of connection opens up to us. Metta reminds us how much alike we all are. We all want those things in the metta phrases—we want safety and happiness and health and ease in life. All sentient beings want that, human and non-human.

So we start looking around and we start to feel: we have the capacity for the brahmaviharas, we want the same things, we know the near enemies, we know the far enemies. How different are we on a heart level? And as we start to share with other people and hear their stories, listen to how their hearts are moving, we see it's just how our heart would move too in the same situation. We start to feel like the same heart has just been poured into all these different vessels.

And the vessels are not that different either. Two eyes, nose, mouth, ears, heart. Our vessels are not that different. Same heart, same human consciousness, same vessel—we've just had different life experiences along the way. So we have gotten shaped, and our collection of qualities becomes unique, becomes singular. But what it's based on is all the same. Fundamentally, there's no real difference in our makeup.

Ego picks out all these apparent differences of gender and age and race and class and ability—of intellect and athleticism and so on—and makes all these discriminations. When we're lost in that world of dividing, we forget what we all share, because we are basically the same being that's gone through different experiences.

So I'll close with this lovely poem from Rumi's teacher. Not much is known of Rumi's teacher. His name is Shams. He came from a town called Tabriz. But this poem is attributed to him:

"I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

Let's just sit with that for a minute. I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of love and compassion, these are not true distinctions.

So thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking meditation, then we'll have our last sitting with chanting of the sutta.

CHAPTER 99

Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this dharma talk from a July retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the First Noble Truth and our obligation to understand dukkha (suffering). Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he focuses on the third foundation of mindfulness - contemplating citta (heart-mind) - to explore how we can work skillfully with difficult emotions.*
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> *Armstrong identifies five primary afflictive emotions that arise from our relationship to time and pleasure/pain: sadness (pleasant past), anger/resentment (unpleasant past), desire/wanting (pleasant future), fear/anxiety (unpleasant future), and self-judgment. He emphasizes that these emotions are conditioned arisings characterized by anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and anattā (selflessness).*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing these emotional states through mindful naming, understanding their storylines, and developing acceptance rather than resistance. Armstrong shares personal retreat experiences and teaching stories to illustrate how mindfulness, along with the brahmaviharas (especially mettā/loving-kindness), can transform our relationship to difficult emotions. He concludes with Rilke's powerful reminder that 'no feeling is final,' encouraging practitioners to let all experiences arise and pass naturally within awareness.*

The Buddha's teaching was all around suffering and the end of suffering. In his very first discourse on the Four Noble Truths, he said that our obligation or our endeavor with regard to the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, was to understand it. That's what's to be done in regard to the First Noble Truth. So the understanding of suffering is really the starting point for the whole path.

When we look at the extent of suffering in the world and think that we need to bring an understanding to that, it seems too complex. It seems overwhelming, the reach of suffering in the world and all the causes and conditions for that suffering to arise. In our daily life, we probably know people with really difficult family situations, relationship situations, personal situations that just seem very hard to sort out or understand.

A son is using drugs and his life has fallen apart and he can't support himself. An aging mother is developing Alzheimer's, advanced Alzheimer's, and the family can't afford a facility to provide the kind of care that she really needs. Or the head of the

household has lost their job in the current economic downturn, and there's no source of income for the family to be able to support themselves. These kinds of situations are all over on an individual level.

On a societal level, there's the plague throughout society, wherever we look, of poverty, racism, inequality, and injustice, people not being able to be supported and cared for adequately. And on a global level, humans are getting really close to ruining the planet that gave birth to us through climate change and global warming. Along with that, a mass extinction of species is expected. So all these conditions from the personal level to the societal level to the global level can seem impossible to figure out or resolve.

Sometimes that's why it's nice to come into retreat, because the question of suffering becomes a lot simpler. As we settle in here, and in a way we are stepping out of the broader societal problems and family problems for a while, then we bring that intention to understand suffering back to a very personal level. In our direct experience, what is the source of suffering?

It soon becomes apparent when I get into retreat that there are basically only three kinds of suffering. There's bodily pain, which can come from just the posture and sitting too long. It may come from illness. It may come from injury. But there's bodily pain in all its different manifestations. There's not much that we can do about that through meditation practice often. Sometimes it will change as we go, but we can't always control it.

Then there's mental pain, or you could say emotional pain. We're familiar with all the different kinds of afflictive emotions that can visit us. Qualities like loneliness and fear, anxiety, anger, wanting or yearning, sadness and grief. All of these emotions visit both in our daily life, but here we really get to see them as our common companions. In Mahayana Buddhism, it's said there are 84,000 of these afflictive emotions. That gives a sense of the extent. But that was from a long time ago, and life was simpler then. So they've probably doubled by now.

These are the two main things we deal with again and again: physical pain, mental or emotional pain. And then as meditators, we have a third kind of pain that people in the world don't have. And that's frustrated meditations. We can come down and intend to connect with the breath or the body, and yet the mind wanders. When we notice that, sometimes that can get really frustrating. It wanders and we fall into sleepiness. So we have the pain of meditation that doesn't accomplish the goal that we intended to accomplish, this quality of a wandering mind.

If you go out and ask the general person in the street, did your mind wander very much today? Number one, they wouldn't know what you were talking about. Number two, they wouldn't care. But as meditators, we have this privileged circle of pain that we deal with. Restlessness, lack of stability, wandering mind, lack of concentration.

Tonight I want to talk particularly about this second kind: the kind of pain that comes from difficult emotions or afflictive emotions. These are the source of most of the big sufferings in our lives, sometimes in retreat or in our daily life. These are the emotions that are stirred up by the encounters with life, which take many different forms. If people don't understand these emotional reactions, they can be really debilitating. The experiences of depression or anxiety or grief or panic can be so overwhelming in someone's daily life that they are no longer able to function effectively. So these can be a very big burden in outer life. They can be a very big burden in retreat life.

I think one of the biggest blessings of mindfulness meditation is that we can learn to work with all these states. When we bring the meditation to bear on them, we can start to understand them. They all become workable. Originally I came into meditation and I was really drawn by the image of the Zen master who had conquered all these emotions and eliminated them.

I had the idea that at a certain level of development, I would possess about as much emotion as this stone Buddha behind me. That was a youthful, idealistic misunderstanding.

In my understanding now, we don't aim in the near and medium term to get rid of these states at all. Perhaps in the long term, someone like the Buddha or a fully enlightened being has managed to free his or her mind from all the influence of difficult and painful emotions. I believe in that possibility. But in our medium-range practice goals, that needn't be our aim—it's somewhat unrealistic.

What we can aim for is to explore these states of mind and through exploration understand them so deeply that a lot of the sting is taken out of them. In that way, a certain confidence comes into our lives and practice—that whatever life throws at us and however the heart responds, we have the tools to deal with it.

What I really love about our practice that we've received from our teachers is the range of these tools at our disposal. The tools of mindfulness, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity give us enough to understand this whole range of difficult emotions and bring them into workability, so we can be with them and suffer less and less as our practice develops.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's creepy, splendid, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing." There's tremendous encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method.

I feel this is really true. This journey opens up an exploration that is very interesting and rewarding—one of the most immediate sources of freedom from our meditation practice.

Classically, this area of meditation comes under the third foundation of mindfulness in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. This is the foundation that concerns itself with what in Pali is called *citta*, which is generally translated as "mind." But it doesn't mean just conceptual mind. *Citta* encompasses both emotional states as well as the thinking part of mental activity. Sometimes we call it the heart-mind—heart and mind together.

In Thai, where I practiced for a while, the word for mind is *jit*, which is a direct borrowing from the Pali word *citta*. If you ask a Westerner where their mind is, most of us will point here to the head. But if you ask a Thai person where their mind is, they will point here to the center of the chest—this is where they understand the *jit* to be. In Buddhist thinking, many texts point to the center or root of the mind being in the heart center, not connected with the brain.

There's a wonderful story that illustrates this. You all know there's extensive neuroscience research now investigating the effects of meditation to scientifically validate it. One of the foremost researchers who got the whole thing going is a PhD at the University of Wisconsin in Madison named Richie Davidson. I don't know if he tells his professional colleagues this, but he was a longtime Vipassana meditator first, and he got the idea to validate through science the effects of meditation he had discovered for himself. His work was inspired from the beginning by an aim to validate meditation in the eyes of the scientific community.

He developed over the years a great friendship with the Dalai Lama, who strongly supported this project. Richie was the one who did the groundbreaking work where they placed senior Tibetan lamas in MRI machines and mapped their brains through various advanced states of meditation. The results were off the charts in the areas of stillness, compassion, and happiness—dramatically different than anything scientists had seen before.

The Dalai Lama invited Richie to Dharamsala to talk about the research and demonstrate some of the effects. Richie couldn't exactly ship an MRI machine over there—it's bigger than a station wagon. What he took was a cap made of leather with strips going down along the top of the head. From the strips hung electrodes that reached down to the scalp and measured the brain's electrical activity. Each electrode was wired to a computer that could generate a map of brain activity—a simpler form of what they were doing in the MRI.

So Richie was demonstrating this equipment in Dharamsala to His Holiness and about 500 Tibetan monks. He put on this black leather cap with the electrodes and thirty wires dangling off the back, running into a computer, and he felt pretty silly—it doesn't look very noble.

At the end of his demonstration, the monks broke up laughing. Richie thought it was because he had looked so silly. But a Tibetan monk stood up and said, "We were laughing because you think you're going to measure the mind up here, but everybody knows it's actually located here in the chest."

They thought it was simply silly to try and measure the mind in the head.

So we talked a little bit with Richie about how we could possibly measure the impulses around the heart, but we haven't figured that one out yet.

This is the terrain of the third foundation of mindfulness from the Satipatthana Sutta. That section of the ancient text begins like this: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind?" Understanding that mind here includes both heart and mind. By the way, in this context, bhikkhu—which normally refers to an ordained monk—the commentaries say refers to a sincere practitioner of this meditation. So in the context of this sutta and this retreat, we are all fulfilling this term of bhikkhus for the purpose of meditation.

"How does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

This quotation revolves around these three qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion. You can recognize two of them are emotional—desire and hatred—and one of them is more cognitive—delusion or misunderstanding. So you can see how even in the sutta, it weaves together the affective and the cognitive parts of what mind does.

The qualities of absence of greed, absence of hatred, absence of delusion give rise to all the beautiful states of mind—and we'll talk a lot more about those later in the retreat. The qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion in different combinations give rise to all the painful or afflictive qualities of mind. And that's the area I'd like to talk about tonight.

With these painful emotions, there are basically two things that need to shift as we undertake our practice with them. The first is that our attitude has to come much more toward an accepting relationship to them. Normally when these states come in, they're the last things we want. When I first started practicing and fear or resentment or anxiety came in, that was the last thing I wanted to see. I came here to get calm. I wanted to get peaceful. I wanted to get insight. I didn't come to get this stuff. But that attitude doesn't work so well. We can't just push those things out, so we need to develop an accepting relationship with them.

The second big shift is a greater understanding of their nature. We need to understand their particular nature—how anger works, how fear works, how wanting works. But we also need to understand their universal nature. These states are conditioned arisings, and the Buddha said that of all conditioned arisings, they are subject to the characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

Impermanence means they come, and therefore they will go. All these emotional states, once they arise, are also going to pass away if we let them. They are unsatisfactory, and of course the painful ones are inherently unsatisfactory, so that's clear. And they're selfless in that we don't own them and they are not our identity. They're not who we take ourselves to be. They're just passing visitors like clouds.

Once we start to understand them in relation to these three characteristics, they lose a lot of their power and enchantment. Essentially, in seeing these three characteristics, we see the empty nature of emotions. When I say empty, it doesn't mean that they don't exist, doesn't mean that they aren't real, doesn't mean that they aren't something we feel, but we see their essential insubstantiality. And when we see that insubstantiality, we can't take them as seriously as we did before. So that's part of the investigation and the insight that I'll talk about tonight.

In working with all these states, the first step is to know what we're feeling when we're feeling that. Now, I don't know about you, but I never got taught this as a kid. My parents did not go out of their way to say, "Dear Guy, what are you feeling today? Did you have a good time at school? Did people treat you well? Oh, did you feel hurt? Do you feel resentful? Do you want to fight with that guy who belittled you?" This was not the dinner conversation at my house.

So when I came into meditation, I felt there was a whole landscape of my heart that I had to figure out with the help of my teachers, but I basically had to figure out for myself with their guidance. And I just think it would be such a huge contribution to the world if we could teach children in school simply to know what they're feeling. That kind of emotional intelligence would, I think, solve a lot of the problems in the world. And there's an organization that's starting to do this in this country.

They're based in Oakland called Mindful Schools. They have this fabulous program of going into public schools at the elementary and junior high levels, teaching children mindfulness and using it to explore how they feel. The changes are remarkable. Students will say things like, "Now I like to meditate right before I go to bed because it makes me so peaceful," or "When I'm mindful, I don't get angry and hit my little sister." It's really a wonderful program, and there are now about a thousand teachers who've been trained to take this practice into schools. It would be terrific to see this grow.

Here in Marin, we have a Sangha member who runs what is essentially a Dharma preschool. She's a longtime meditator who has found enough parents connected to this Sangha and other Sanghas who want their children to have basically a Dharma-oriented upbringing. She's received their permission to turn her preschool into a Dharma training ground. She has children who are three to five years old, and she tells them stories from the Jatakas, teaches them yoga and meditation, and has quiet periods that last up to thirty minutes. If you can imagine a group of twenty-three to five-year-olds being quiet for thirty minutes at a time, there's some kind of magic happening there.

She explained that when you teach meditation to children that age, you can't use words like mindfulness, investigation, and attention to the object—it's too abstract for them. So she teaches them with images. She told me about one class where the children were doing yoga, and at the end they lay down on their backs as she began leading them in meditation. She said, "Okay, close your eyes and imagine a big lake. In this lake, there's all this water. Let your mind become the water. Through this water, all kinds of fish are swimming. There can be a happy fish and a sad fish and an angry fish and a loving fish. But you're the lake, and you just let all these different fish swim through. Let them come and swim and go through."

She guided them like that for a while, and after the meditation, she asked the children how it was. This four-year-old boy raised his hand and said, "Well, I could let all the fish come, but I couldn't let the mad fish come."

She asked, "Why not?"

He replied, "Well, when the mad fish comes, if I don't know I'm the water, it makes me do things that hurt people."

A four-year-old got it. When he's the water, he can hold it all.

So it's easy not to know what we're feeling. This came really clear to me during one long retreat. I was sitting about two weeks in and was fairly settled. I was walking out from the meditation hall, feeling I was pretty continuous in my mindfulness, noticing the movements of my feet with the lifting and moving and placing notes. I reached the area where I had been walking—I'd walked there every walking period for two weeks, very steadily—and there was somebody in my walking path.

I couldn't believe it. Everybody had been at this retreat for two weeks, and I thought, "Don't they know I've been on that path for two weeks? Did I cut in front of the line at breakfast?" Still very mindful: lifting, moving, placing.

I walked a little farther. "Are they trying to play some head game with me? They must know it's my path. What is going on?" Lifting, moving, placing.

I kept walking and had to find a different path, so I took another patch of grass which, to my great surprise, worked just as well. I couldn't understand that. Every once in a while I'd shoot them an evil look because they were still in my path. Lifting, moving, placing—I felt I'd really been mindful.

It was only about thirty minutes into the walking period that I realized: I'm angry. It took me that long to see it. I felt I was really present, but I missed the most important thing that was happening in my experience.

I was angry. I was with the steps but I missed the main thing that was going on.

This is kind of how these afflictive states or these hindrances work. They fly in underneath our mindfulness radar and convince us to turn our attention to the outside situation. I was so focused on the person who had taken my path and why they were wrong and why I was right that I missed my inner process. So with all these emotional states, that's what they tend to do. They grab our attention and direct it to an outside focus, and in doing that, they take us out of our own experience.

When I realized I was angry, then I had the tools to work with it. I knew how to feel it in my body. I knew how to examine my thoughts. I knew how to release it. So within a minute or two, it was gone. Until I had seen it, I was just locked into the mechanism of it, and there was no way for me to step out.

One of the key underpinnings that keeps these difficult emotions in place is some kind of view or belief about the situation. I'm going to call this the storyline of the emotion. In my case, the storyline that kept the emotion going was I thought that it really was my walking path and they were wrong and I had a right to it. So take a look at this with anger and see if this isn't often the case—that there's a belief or a view underneath that they're wrong and I'm right. And as long as we keep telling ourselves that story, then it sustains the anger. When we turn our attention to the emotion itself, that takes the juice away from the outer situation and then we can start to relate to it with the tools of meditation.

So the first step is to name what's present. In my case, anger or resentment. In other cases, fear or wanting or loneliness or irritation or sadness or grief or envy. There's something powerful about that naming process. And so even if you're not doing noting generally during the day, this silent mental labeling that Kamala mentioned this morning is very helpful to name these difficult emotions. It creates some space around it.

Among the scientific research studies going on was a group studying anger management. They took a group of people who had problems controlling their anger and not letting it act out with others, and as the experiment, they gave them the assignment simply—this is all they did—every time they felt anger, to name it as anger. There was no other instruction, there was no other intervention. This turned out to be a really effective way of anger management, just to name it. Compared to a control group that didn't do anything, these people had a much more successful outcome simply by naming the emotion that was present.

So there's something powerful when we name it. It's like we bring a kind of wisdom to it. Now I know what this is. And then that reminds us, I know how to work with this. As meditators, we learn—now we know how to work with this. So there's not just anger there. Now there's mindfulness, some awareness, maybe some compassion for ourselves, maybe some wisdom that's accompanying it. So in the middle of the difficulty, we're bringing in a bunch of really helpful and positive factors just by naming it.

There are certain states of mind that I see again and again, both in my own life and in meditators that I talk to, that are the big group of these difficult emotions to work with. I want to suggest that all the difficult emotions that we get caught in have to do with time. Time is not necessarily a factor with the beautiful qualities. You can just see someone and have a moment of loving-kindness or a moment of compassion. You can walk out the door and see the light of the sunset and have a moment of joy. These can

come in a moment, go the next moment—it's all fine. But a difficult emotion that we get caught with that makes us suffer is going to have something to do with extending over time or relationship to time.

The other thing that difficult emotions are about is pleasure and pain. Our life as human beings is full of a succession of moments of pleasure and pain, sometimes very strong, sometimes rather subtle. But it's the memory or the holding on or the accumulation of those moments of pleasure and pain that cause the stickiness in living.

So there are these two factors: time and pleasantness. We can put time on the horizontal axis, going from past to future, and the pleasure level on the vertical axis, going from pain up to pleasure. There are four ways to combine these.

So let's look at these. I want to say that there's a difficult emotion connected with each of these four quadrants.

Let me ask you: if something has been pleasant in the past—here's this quadrant, pleasant in the past, which means it's no longer here, no longer available—what emotion do we tend to have for that?

Okay, desire is something people often say, but I think desire is really about projecting into the future. Let's say it's not there at all anymore. What then?

Sadness. Grief. This is the source of sadness or grief—something that was pleasant in the past but is no longer available to us. An old relationship, an old friendship, an old house, death of a loved one. This is the terrain of sadness and grief.

Now, unpleasant in the past. And I want to make it a little more specific—unpleasant or painful related to another person. How do we react there?

Anger. Exactly. If someone has done something unpleasant to us in the past, we tend to hold it with anger or resentment. So that's the second big one.

Pleasant in the future. You've already said this. If you're looking forward to something that's really going to be delightful, this is desire—the whole field of desire, yearning, longing, wanting.

Unpleasant in the future. You're looking forward to something that you expect will be painful or difficult. What comes up?

Fear. Fear, anxiety, nervousness. Just a week ago, less than a week ago, I had to give a presentation in front of the Marin County Board of Supervisors. Spirit Rock was applying for a kind of big change in our overall building plans, and Jack Kornfield was out of

town, so I gave the presentation. I had a sense of dread about it for about two weeks before I had to do it, from a combination of the sense of responsibility and not knowing the people and the crowd and all of that. Fortunately, it went really well, and we got approved. It was so irrational, right? We don't need to dread these things, but it's just the way the mind works. I dreaded it.

So I want to suggest that these are the four kind of primal emotions that human beings have dealt with for a long, long time: sadness, anger, desire, and fear.

One subset of the anger is if it gets directed toward ourselves. If we feel that we've messed up and either hurt ourselves or somebody else, then what comes up is guilt or self-judgment. So it's kind of a powerful variation on the anger piece.

These are the five I want to talk about tonight: sadness, anger, self-judgment, desire, and fear.

Let's start with desire or wanting. This can come up often in retreat, maybe particularly because this atmosphere is fairly devoid of sense pleasures. The meals are great, the nature is beautiful, but there are long stretches in between those meals where the body may be aching and the mind is running and meditation is kind of boring. So desire often comes in at those times to provide us a little bit of a pleasant fantasy realm.

We may find ourselves wanting our home, our comfortable couch, dinner with a friend, a TV show, something that we've really enjoyed from our home life. This happens a lot.

But one of the things that we see if we start to explore this movement of desire is there's a little bit of a bittersweet quality in it. Because thinking about that person or place or thing is kind of pleasurable, right? You bring in that memory, that wanting, brings in an element of pleasure that's comforting. But at the same time, we don't have it. And that not having it is suffering, subtle or big. There's that missing that's there.

So desire always has these two things.

There's like a beautiful thing and there's this longing, which has always a current of frustration or unfulfillment, lack of satisfaction in it. Because for some reason, we never seem to want what we already have. Ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? No, but if we didn't have it, we would really miss it. But we don't want what we've got.

This desire force came through really clearly a number of years ago. I was teaching a retreat in Italy, which is a lot of fun because I just found the Italian yogis so kind of honest about their emotions and fluent. They had a fluency with their emotions that I didn't have until I started practicing. They were able to be in touch with how they felt and to talk about it.

Of course, there were a few cultural changes we had to modify. We held the retreat at a rented Catholic nunnery, and they were used to renting it out to other people. When they set up for lunch the first day, they wanted to bring out carafes of red wine on the lunch table. So we had to adjust that part of the meal serving. And then there was an espresso machine right outside the meditation hall. As soon as people left, ding, ding, ding, ding—wake themselves up.

Early in the retreat, this young man came in. We were talking through an interpreter, and he explained to me that he was really having a hard time settling in because he didn't think he really wanted to be here. So I said, "Well, what's going on? What are you thinking about?"

He said, "Well, I'm not sure I wanted to come on this meditation retreat."

I said, "What were your options?"

He said, "Well, some friends invited me to go on a ten-day trip to the Caribbean with them." This was August, so this was the holiday season. "And I could have gone to the Caribbean."

"Why didn't you?"

"All the plane tickets were sold out. So I came here."

So I can understand why that would create a little rub. We were the consolation prize and he really wasn't so into being there.

But then what we did is we just worked with this factor of desire. "When you think about the Caribbean and the beautiful beaches and being with your friends and swimming and everything, there's an element of desire there that you would like. And that makes this situation look not so great. But maybe the problem is not that this situation is bad, but it's the thinking about the other that has you stirred up. So see what it's like if you don't think about the Caribbean."

He came back in a couple more days, and that advice had totally worked for him. He said, "Okay, I let go of the vacation idea. I just planned on being here. I really settled. I've arrived, and now everything's fine."

Take out the force of desire—the present moment is often not so bad. The storyline underneath his unhappiness was: "If I had been in the Caribbean, I would be happy. And not having it, I can't be happy." But in fact, that was just a belief. When he let it go and could just be here, it was fine. It was the wanting that had made for the discontent.

In meditation, once we settle in, the desire force tends to go not so much to homesickness, wanting to be back in our comfortable homes. It starts to find itself within the field of meditation itself. One remembers a sitting that one had in an earlier retreat, or one remembers a particular insight that came when one was doing walking meditation on another retreat, and often that's what we want back—the peace of the sitting or the uplift and inspiration of that insight.

Or as we go through the days here, the concentration will come together. We'll have a sitting where the body's very relaxed and the attention is naturally present moment to moment to moment. We'll go out and walk. We'll come back very excitedly for the next sit. Not there anymore. And often there's a strong desire...

how can I get that back? How can I make that happen again?

In sitting meditation, I look for this quality of desire through tuning into the body. When it feels like the body is tensing and going forward, that's a sign to me of the desire force being there. Often I don't know what it is I'm wanting, but if I look into my thoughts to identify what I'm thinking about, sometimes that reveals the content of the desire, and then perhaps I can let it go. I look for that straining forward, that toppling into the next moment, and the counter is to settle back into this moment. There's a sense physically of moving backward, becoming more grounded in the body, dropping a little lower with a sense of relaxation.

There's a word for the general tone of negativity, which is aversion, and I want to talk about that. The general tone of negativity or disliking takes many different forms: hatred, anger, ill will, impatience, irritation, depression, despair, grief, judgment, blame, resentment. There are countless flavors of this state.

How does it feel when aversion is in the mind? Everything seems inadequate or incapable of satisfying us. There's a story from the time of the Buddha. He was standing in a grove with a group of monks when a jackal ran out of the forest. It stood in the clearing for a minute, then bolted into the hollow of a tree where it lay down, but didn't stay long. It popped up and ran into a cave where it lay down, then got up and ran back into the forest.

The Buddha pointed this out to the monks: "Did you see that jackal? It wasn't happy in the forest, wasn't happy in the clearing, wasn't comfortable in the tree hollow, wasn't comfortable in the cave. It wasn't comfortable walking, standing, lying down, or sitting." The jackal blamed its discomfort on the forest, the clearing, the tree hollow, the cave, on standing and walking and sitting and lying down. But the problem wasn't with any of these—the problem was that the jackal had mange, a very itchy skin disease that's very hard to bear.

When we're in a state of aversion, it's as if the mind has mange. Nothing feels good. Everything rubs us the wrong way.

There is a classical antidote for aversion: loving kindness. The meditation that Sally led this afternoon is the antidote the Buddha recommended for this general quality of aversion. Whether it's a state of despair, irritation, or grief, the practice of loving kindness helps to clear that.

Sadness is one form this disliking takes. It comes out of disappointment or loss—a very significant feeling that often makes us feel helpless. There's worry that if we open to it, we might become overwhelmed or drown in it. Even in meditation, we can tend to keep it at bay, not letting ourselves fully feel it.

But this is only a worry that it will be too much, that we can't accommodate it, that it will overwhelm us or cause us to get lost. We need to trust in the qualities of mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion to hold whatever sadness is in us. Most of us have had disappointments, losses, some degree of sadness or grief. It's a frequent visitor during meditation retreats.

I encourage you to let that sadness come, let it express itself if it's there, open to feeling it. It's only by feeling it that we can allow it to arise and then manifest its impermanence. All kinds of grief will pass through if we give them enough time and space. They have their own schedule, but if we open the channels and let them come, our wisdom is capable of holding them while they go through their process of release.

When anger arises—another form of aversion—it often comes when we sit and remember old events in our life, people who have hurt us, people who have caused us harm. So it's very important to learn to meditate with this emotion also.

With anger, the body gets tight. There's a kind of burning quality. And the thoughts that come tend to be thoughts of blame—that the other person is wrong and we ourselves are right. So it's very helpful to meditate with this.

It's really important to listen to these thoughts because we find that the blaming thoughts are the things that keep the anger going. Anger is kind of a fiery state, and what sustains the fire, the fuel for that fire, is the blaming thoughts. If we drop the blaming thoughts, the fire will die out. That's all that really needs to happen. But as long as we keep tossing on more logs, the fire will keep growing.

But it's difficult because it's like, if I don't think those blaming thoughts, it's like I'm condoning what that person did. And that wasn't right. And sometimes that's really true. You know, the problem is we're telling ourselves "I'm right and you're wrong," but sometimes that actually is true. So what do we do then?

This is a story from the Dalai Lama. He said that when he was still living in Tibet prior to 1959, when he escaped to India, he knew this monk—one of many monks in one of the monasteries there. And he judged this monk as just having kind of middling practice. Then the Dalai Lama escaped to India, living now in Dharamsala. And then something like twenty-five years later, this monk showed up in Dharamsala and asked for a meeting with the Dalai Lama because he likes to visit with people who've managed to escape.

So of course the Dalai Lama inquired after his welfare and said, "How was your time there? I understand you were in prison." And the monk said, "Yes, yes, I was in prison for twenty years and I often felt I was in danger." And the Dalai Lama said, "Did you feel you were in danger of being tortured?" And the monk said, "No, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I meant I was in danger of becoming angry, but I didn't." The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of this monk's practice.

So that demonstrates a possibility. I mean, it's an awesome possibility. It's way beyond what I feel myself capable of. But it's a possibility that we can apply to lesser situations. Maybe someone does harm us, and that's clear. And we see clearly that was unskillful conduct on their part. And our reaction may be of anger, but it is possible not to hold that. It is possible to let go of those blaming thoughts, even though we're right.

For me, there's only one thing that has persuaded me to let go of those blaming thoughts, and that has been the pain of anger itself. I would be in the middle of a meditation retreat, very open and sensitive. My body had been just dropping tension for weeks or months. I'd be in a very open and sensitive place. Some situation would come up and I'd get angry in my thoughts about it and my body would go into this strong contraction. And I wouldn't be able to release it. I'd feel like I was just in the grip of a big pair of pliers. And I'd still keep thinking the blaming thoughts.

And finally, you know, after enough times, it got so unpleasant. The suffering of anger itself was so strong that I became deeply motivated to let go. And I was able to learn to do it better and better. I still get caught from time to time, but I know the way out. If I can just get to the point of letting go of the blaming thoughts, then the anger will decline.

And I began doing it out of concern for my own welfare. But of course, I see how it also benefits the world. If I can release my own anger, then I don't spill it on others. So in Buddhism, it's often the case that we come to this understanding: what benefits us also benefits others, and what benefits others also benefits us. The two aren't really opposed.

This quality of burning ourselves in holding anger before it goes to another is pointed to by the classical texts in a couple of different ways. One thing they say is that becoming angry at somebody is like picking up a hot coal to throw it at them, but it burns us first. And the other way that it's described is that becoming angry is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will get sick.

If we feel ourselves being angry, it's not to judge that experience.

We all will have anger from time to time. It's not to consider ourselves a bad meditator or to try to suppress it. Really, inwardly, you want to let anger just rip—to be able to rip within you without any censorship. Outwardly, you want to be really careful about how you express it. But inwardly, in meditation practice, you want to let it come on as fully as it is wanting to. And then investigate it, explore it, explore how it's created, how these thoughts build it and sustain it, and explore the impact in your own mind and body. That will give the encouragement and the direction to be freer in relation.

When this sense of anger or judgment gets directed toward ourselves, then it becomes a very heavy weight to bear. It affects our confidence in the world and our ability simply to feel good about ourselves. It seems in the West we have kind of an epidemic of this quality of self-judging now. Here it's so often seen in retreats—it's something people are working with.

Some years ago, a group of Western Buddhist teachers were meeting with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala and asked him how to work with this problem in the meditators that they met. The Dalai Lama couldn't understand what they were talking about. "Not liking oneself? What do you mean? Can you explain this to me? How does this come about?"

He had to go around through all the Western teachers in the room—there were about twenty of them—and ask, "Do you feel this?" Yes. "Do you feel this?" Yes. "Do you feel this?" Until all those teachers acknowledged that this had been a difficult part of their own practice. Then he started to understand. But he said in Tibet, children are so valued and so loved by their parents and extended family and community that they don't grow up with this sense of being inadequate or unlovable. It's just not part of their culture.

The storyline or underlying belief with self-judgment is something like—and all these storylines I'm suggesting are really for you to investigate for yourself to see what the truth is for you—but it's something like, "I'm not good enough, I'm not worthy enough, or I'm not lovable enough." But it's simply not true.

It's almost ironic—it's sad, but it's ironic—that meditators have this problem because you all have devoted a lot of your life to developing love and compassion and wisdom to benefit yourselves and the world. If there was a group of people that I would say are good people, this kind of group is it. You all have a commitment to integrity and developing positive qualities. From my point of view, as I've met with you, you are good people. But it's so hard for us to feel that ourselves, and it's so hard to have confidence in that.

This is one of the reasons why the practice of loving-kindness is such a powerful force in working with this. When we start to feel that loving-kindness is really alive in us—even if we're feeling it for other people, like friends, family members, benefactors, children, pets—we know that there's something really good inside that's alive and awake and manifesting in us. The presence of loving-kindness within us gives us a lot of self-confidence and a lot of trust in our own goodness. It's a very powerful practice in many dimensions, and this offsetting of self-judgment is a big one.

The last of these primal emotions I want to mention is fear. I love talking about fear because it was my teacher. For many years, this was the main hindrance that I worked with in meditation, and I learned so much from it. I can honestly say I don't have any regret about going through all the fear I went through because it woke me up in so many different ways.

I also feel that if you take any one of these hindrances, which is your primary one, and you really work it to reach a strong degree of freedom, you'll also know how to work with the others. It's not like you have to learn every one anew. Through working with fear, I felt like I came to terms with all the difficult emotions that I've experienced.

With fear, I had it a lot in the early years of my practice and I hated it. When it first started to come and it came on strong, I absolutely hated that state of being in fear. Finally, one of my teachers gave a talk that opened the door for me. What he said in the talk was, "See if you can bear the physical sensations that accompany fear."

So that's what I took as my challenge, because I could grapple with the physical experience of it. I just started to feel, anytime fear would come, I would feel how I felt in my body. I would feel that tightness in my abdomen, that kind of fluttery energy that starts to rise through the chest, maybe the sweating under the arms, a sense of lightness and lack of solidity that comes with fear. And I would ask myself, "Can I bear this?"

Because with fear, the curious thing is, we come from a place of feeling, "Yeah, well, maybe I can bear this moment," but the belief is the next moment is going to become unbearable. Something disastrous is going to happen in the next moment. But that's just another view. That's the storyline of fear.

Something terrible is about to happen. But if we come into the moment and ask ourselves, can I bear this moment? Then maybe the answer is yes.

So I learned to bear the physical expression of fear. Then I turned to the mind and I said, what's that flavor? What's that mood like? The closest I could get was it was a wanting to run away from, want to flee. And that was hard to get close to because the movement is, I want to flee. So it was really hard to bring mindfulness to touch that bare emotional quality of fear. But I learned to do it.

So I was able to bear it in the body. I was able to bear it in the mind. And I no longer quite believed something disastrous was going to happen. But I was still resisting it. So then my teacher said, okay, if you're going to really accept it, could you accept this fear being here for the rest of your life? That became the acid test.

So I asked myself that question the next time fear came: could I accept this for the rest of my life? And the answer was no. No way. Of course I couldn't. So then I said, why? And I said, well, I couldn't enjoy music the way I like to. I couldn't merge with the sunset the way I like. I couldn't fall in love. So I kept resisting it.

And then I realized that I was giving away my own peace. I had a choice. I could either find peace here and now through accepting my experience or I could continue to fight it. And finally, I didn't care what I was going to lose. I accepted it. And I said, okay, if this state is like this for the rest of my life, it's okay with me. And it truly was.

And when I did that, the power started to drain out of the fear. By that full acceptance of it, just the way it was, it lost some kind of grip over me. And ever since that time, it's come again many times, but it's never had that kind of grip again. So I felt that I now know how to work with this visitor. And over time, it's almost become a friend.

You know, when it came again around the supervisors this past week, it wasn't pleasant, but I didn't mind it being there because I knew that I could just practice through it and that it was going to pass.

This is why all these emotions are safe. They're all going to pass. So all we have to do is open, let them come, and by their own nature, they'll also go. So truly, we don't have to be afraid of any of them. We open to them with real acceptance. We let them express themselves. They're not fun, but by their own nature, they will also pass. So we don't have to make them go away.

So I'd like to just close with this poem from Rilke, the German poet. It's from a little book called The Book of Hours. And the scenario is that he's imagining the words that God says to us on the day that we're created, just as we're launched into this life.

"God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory. Go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final."

Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness.

Now, give me your hand.

So let's just sit for a minute together. Let everything happen to you—beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

In this moment of sitting together, we return to the fundamental truth that has woven through our entire exploration: the impermanent nature of all experience. Whether we encounter beauty or terror, joy or sorrow, each arising is temporary, each feeling will pass. This understanding becomes our refuge, our steady ground in the midst of life's constant change.

The invitation to "give me your hand" speaks to the intimacy possible when we truly embody the dharma. We're not alone in this journey of awakening. There's a companionship available—with the teachings, with the sangha, with the very fabric of existence itself. When we stop trying to control our experience and instead let everything happen to us, we discover this profound interconnectedness.

"Just keep going" becomes our practice mantra. Not the going of endless striving or pushing through, but the gentle persistence of staying present, of continuing to open, of meeting each moment with fresh awareness. This is the courage the dharma asks of us—to keep showing up, to keep practicing, even when the path feels uncertain.

As we conclude this exploration together, may we carry forward this reminder that no feeling is final. In our joy, we remember impermanence and stay humble. In our suffering, we remember impermanence and find hope. This wisdom becomes our constant companion, teaching us to hold all of life more lightly, with greater compassion and deeper understanding.

The country they call life awaits us, with all its seriousness and wonder. We meet it now with open hands and awakened hearts.

CHAPTER 100

Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the journey from suffering to freedom through the lens of "unentangled knowing" - a quality of awareness that knows objects without getting caught in grasping. Drawing from the teachings of Thai laywoman Upāsikā Kee and the Buddha's analysis of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), Armstrong explains how we become bound through the chain of contact, feeling tone (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), and clinging, leading to suffering (dukkha).*
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> *The talk explores how freedom can be found in the present moment by resting in the gap between feeling and craving, where the mind remains balanced without falling into greed (lobha), aversion (dosa), or delusion (moha). Armstrong references the Satipaṭṭhāna practice and teachings from Thai Forest masters like Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Buddhadāsa, showing how this unentangled awareness touches the unconditioned realm and offers a taste of nibbāna.*
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> *Three meditation approaches are presented: turning awareness back on itself rather than focusing on objects, developing sati-paññā (mindfulness-wisdom), and regularly checking the mind's relationship to experience for the presence of the three unwholesome roots. The talk concludes with the Buddha's teaching that "having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island" - pointing to complete freedom from aging and death through non-attachment.*

As Steve described in his talk the other night on the Four Noble Truths, the journey of the Buddhist path goes from suffering to the end of suffering. There are many different words for this usual state of suffering that we find ourselves in, sometimes called bondage or clinging or grasping, or known by the term samsara, which points to the depth of habit that's involved in it. Similarly, there are many terms for the end of suffering. It can be called nibbana, freedom, release, liberation, enlightenment, awakening. All these terms describe the journey and the spectrum of the journey that we're on. We go from the state of bondage to the state of freedom.

In tonight's talk, I want to discuss this quality of freedom and how it relates to the path, how it's a part of the path itself. The subject of this talk is unentangled knowing.

For those who are not native English speakers, this term "unentangled" is an odd term. The word tangle refers to a twisted mass of usually yarn or string or hair that's gotten all mixed up, like when you've taken a ride in a convertible and then when you

go to comb out your hair, it's all twisted together. Then we put the word "entangle" in front of it, and that's the verb—that's how things become knotted, twisted, and snarled up. The word "un" in front of "entangle" means we undo that tangle that has been formed.

This term "unentangled knowing" appears in a translation of a talk from a Thai lay-woman teacher. Lay teachers in Thailand are a little bit rare to begin with. Lay women teachers are rarer still. This woman's name was Upasika Kee. Upasika means a lay woman supporter, and Kee was her name. She taught from the 1950s through the 1970s, and she has a wonderful book that's a collection of her talks called *Pure and Simple*. She was relentless in pointing practitioners back to the very central question of dharma practice, this question of bondage and freedom. All her talks hit this point again and again. Her book is highly recommended—she's a very strong teacher.

This is the sentence that this phrase comes from. She was pointing people to develop, quote, "an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside." We'll come back to this quote and fill it in a little bit later. This is the gist of the talk.

This image of the tangle was used by the Buddha often. It appears frequently in the suttas in describing our usual condition. He commented at one point in the Anguttara Nikaya: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn"—craving creating the tangle of all our desires running in so many different directions that they get twisted up with one another and we get enmeshed in competing desires.

In the Samyutta Nikaya, there's this exchange where a questioner comes up and asks the Buddha a question. You should know in this exchange that Gautama is his family name, the Buddha's family name, and so some people called him Master Gautama or just Gautama. The questioner comes up and says: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle." Things haven't changed very much, have they? "So I ask of Gautama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

Well, this is our project, isn't it? We're all here to disentangle this tangled knot of craving and suffering that we find ourselves in, in the habituated patterns of mind. The Buddha's reply is that one who develops virtue, meditation, and wisdom disentangles this tangle. That's what we're doing here: sila, samadhi, and paññā.

What Upasika Kee was pointing to is a quality of mindfulness or awareness that knows objects without getting caught in grabbing after them and holding on to them, so that the mind stays balanced in relationship to a changing field of experience. This is a

pointer to the same quality that Kamala talked about last night in her talk on equanimity—finding that balance that lets us know all the arisings and passings, but keeping steady, keeping a balanced mind in relation to them.

It's the same pointing tonight. I want to draw out or emphasize the freedom quality that's intrinsic in that place of equanimity and that is one of the reasons we practice for unentangled knowing. We're fully aware—that's the knowing piece—and we're not entangled, meaning that we're not getting hooked into latching on to these objects out of greed or aversion. We're seeing clearly. Greed is not happening through hanging on, aversion is not happening through pushing away, and we're fully aware, so delusion isn't happening either. Unentangled knowing is a state that's relatively free from these three afflictions of greed, aversion, and delusion.

These moments happen for us. You could call them moments of equanimity or moments of unentangledness throughout the day, but they may be subtle and pass quickly. If we're not trying to tune into them, we miss them. This talk is also an encouragement not to do anything different in your practice, but to begin to notice when the mind is in this place of balance and non-reactivity. In that place, begin to feel for yourself the kind of freedom that you can feel in a moment here and now.

As part of the talk, I want to review a few approaches to meditation that head directly in this general direction. All of our practice heads toward this greater equanimity and freedom. There are three practices I'm going to talk about in the second half specifically oriented to bringing out this quality of unentangled knowing.

But before we venture into the realm of freedom, we must understand more clearly how we become bound, how we become caught. Let me describe in some detail how bondage unfolds on a moment-to-moment basis.

The Buddha's fundamental outline of bondage and freedom is the Four Noble Truths, as Steve described the other night. But in another teaching, he describes this process in greater detail through a moment-to-moment unfolding—what is usually called the chain of dependent origination. He traces twelve links that occur in a sequence where one gives rise to the next, leading us repeatedly to the place of suffering.

These twelve links are quite complex and could occupy an entire talk in themselves, but I'm going to focus on the central four, setting aside the first five and the last three. While those outer links become more philosophical and complicated, understanding these central four will give you the heart of how to practice with dependent origination as we can feel it moment by moment.

First, we must open to our basic situation as human beings. I want to suggest that all human beings—young and old, male and female, enlightened and unenlightened, of all genders and races—share the same fundamental experience: in any moment, six things can be happening.

The Buddha pointed to this in a sutta called the Sutta on Totality. With a group of monks gathered around him, he declared: "Listen monks, attend carefully and I will teach you the totality of life." That's quite brave, isn't it? Freud didn't say that. Marx didn't say that. Einstein didn't say that. Here was the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, announcing: "I'll teach you the totality of life."

He said: "It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind-objects. Anyone who described a totality different than this would not be knowing what they were talking about."

When you think about it, this is our whole human experience, isn't it? This is what's happening for us in any moment, in every moment. There are sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and mind objects—mind objects being primarily thoughts and emotions. We can receive these data because of what Buddhism calls the six senses: the five physical senses and the sense door of the mind. This is what makes this set of arisings possible.

In any moment, it's really quite simple—there are only ever six things happening at most. Sometimes none of those are happening. This makes meditation practice easy, doesn't it? You just have to be aware of these six things. Really simple.

Here's where we enter the chain of dependent origination. The first five links pass by, and the sixth link is called contact. Contact is the coming together of the sense organ—like the eye—the sense object—like the sight before you in the visual field—and the consciousness related to that sense organ.

If you're asleep, under anesthesia, or passed out, that consciousness is not so active. In those situations, you're not experiencing sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch in any obvious way. But when you're awake with your eyes open, you experience seeing. When you're awake with functioning ears, you experience hearing.

The coming together of consciousness, sense organ, and object is called contact—that's simply the Buddha's vocabulary. Contact basically means these data of the senses. When a sound arises, that's an item of sense contact for you—sound contact, or hearing contact.

Our basic situation is that contact is happening through these six senses constantly while we're awake. Can you stop this from happening? Can you simply say, "Ears don't hear, nose don't smell, mind don't feel"? Can you do that? No. These phenomena happen whether we want them to or not. Our situation as human beings is that we're constantly being contacted by different phenomena through the six sense doors.

This wouldn't be problematic if everything were pleasant all the time.

But they're not. They alternate. Sometimes pleasant, sometimes painful. So we're sitting here, we're sensitive beings, and these things are impacting us all the time. How do we respond?

This brings us to the next link in the chain of dependent origination, called feeling tone. The Pali word is *vedana*. Feeling tone means that every one of these moments of contact might be pleasant, or it might be painful, or it might be neither—what we'll call neutral. Pleasant, painful, or neutral.

This is important because it conditions the reactive formations. When something is pleasant, if we're not paying attention, what do we do in relation to it? We hang on to it, don't we? We want it to last, so we take hold of it and try to make it last. If something is painful, what do we do? We want to push it away. Notice that in order to push something away, you first have to take hold of it. You have to grab it and then push it. So if we want to hold on to it, we grab it and bring it closer. If we want to push it away, we grab it and then push. But in either case, the grabbing happens in order to do that.

If it's neutral, notice what your relation to neutral experience often is—it's boring. It doesn't grab us one way or another, so we just space out. We don't really pay attention to the neutral, just like neutral people in our lives. As the metta meditation reveals, we can just ignore them. They don't inflame our passion.

Delusion accompanies neutrality. Greed accompanies the pleasant. And aversion accompanies the unpleasant. These are manifestations of what's called craving. The second noble truth that Steve talked about, *tanha*, is the reactive mind—this quality of thirst that wants things to be different than they are.

Even though craving sounds like a desire force, it encompasses both the wanting to pull the good close and wanting to push the difficult away, because desire basically wants to keep things always pleasant. So it likes the pleasant and doesn't like the unpleasant. Craving encompasses both greed and aversion.

Because we don't notice we're doing it, there's usually delusion involved also. Most people in the world, when they push and pull, don't know that they're pushing and pulling. They don't know greed and aversion are operating, so they're not seeing clearly the reaction of their mind. Delusion is also present. Craving generally rests on greed, aversion, and delusion, and you can think of it as synonymous with these three.

Craving is provoked by the feeling tone, and then it leads into this grabbing hold of, which is called clinging. So altogether, the sequence goes: contact has a feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. That feeling tone tends to condition a reaction of greed, aversion, and delusion, and that leads us to grab hold of the object. Once we've grabbed hold of something, the chain goes on to suffering. Basically, suffering—either gross or subtle—is unavoidable once the grasping has happened.

Let me give you some examples to make this more real. Let's say you're a yogi on the eight precepts, which a number of you are. Lovely to see you undertaking the practice of renunciation. You go into the dining hall at tea time to get your modest glass of juice, and you see this little sign: "Ice cream on back table." And you think, "Why did I take the eight precepts now? Ice cream is my favorite food, and I can't have it? Well, maybe I'll take some and put it in the yogi fridge overnight." But it's ice cream—it's going to melt if you put it in the refrigerated compartment. And you can't be an eight-precept person being seen hoarding ice cream. That wouldn't look good on the yogi resume.

So then, you know, you could get into a whole story about this. Maybe I should go off eight precepts just for tonight. I'll have a little bit of protein first and then I'll be ready and I'll go over and have the ice cream after. And I could just go back on eight precepts tomorrow night. But I wouldn't feel totally committed. I made this pledge. I'm just going to do it. I said I would just do it, but I'm really hungry tonight. I didn't really take enough lunch, and now I'm feeling hungry, and I love ice cream. Why did they have to put it out tonight? Why couldn't they have waited until the last lunch? And what am I going to do about this?

And so you could get caught up in this spinning for a while, and you could kind of feel disappointed for like the next hour about being hungry and not being able to have the ice cream. And then at some point, you know, this whole issue would just fade away and it'd be over and gone.

So in a way, by taking hold of the ice cream thing, you've kind of taken birth. You've become a new person, a new you. And this is the you who is the hungry yogi on eight precepts. And as long as you keep thinking about and missing the ice cream, you can

sustain that you for like an hour through the having taken a hold. And this is an incarnation that has a little bit of dukkha in it because it's founded on missing and lacking and wanting.

So we say here that we've taken birth, that by grabbing hold of that and thinking about it—my habits, my desire, my like, my favorite food, my hunger—we create a new I in this time frame that is like a little birth. It's like we've given birth to a new person who is, let's call it, the hungry yogi. So the hungry yogi exists for like an hour. That lifespan is full of wanting and incompleteness and frustration. And at the end of the hour, the hungry yogi passes away. And then you're just back in walking meditation, appreciating the hills and the sunset light and all of that. It's fine again. But that birth, which is born from grasping, was not a happy one.

Okay? So there are also happy births. You come into a sitting, you sit down, really present. Oh, I feel great in my body. My attention stays where I put it. The mind isn't wandering. I'm starting to feel steady and stable. My body feels relaxed. My mind is still. This is the meditation I've always knew I could have.

So by becoming, let's say, aware of that and then grasping it, then we become someone—I'm a good yogi in a concentrated state. And now I'm a good meditator and I love it. I've struggled up to now, but now I love meditation. So we go out for a walking period. We go through our walking. We're pretty present and we sort of can't wait. I can't wait to get back and be in that concentrated state again. I just know it's going to be there for me.

So we go back in and we're really looking forward. I'm going to have that excellent sitting, my very best sitting all over again. It was so blissful and peaceful. And we sit down and it's all gone. The body's kind of cranky and the mind is all over the place. A lot of thoughts, a lot of energy, a lot of restlessness. We can hardly find the breath, much less stay with it. And then we're hugely aversive. How can this happen? I'm a concentrated yogi. How can this go away now? I'm really frustrated. I'll try really hard to get it back.

And so we get really close to the breath and think, "I'm not going to let one go by." And then we just get tighter and tighter and our concentration leaks away. In this case, by claiming the good concentration and the result, the fruit of the meditation, we've identified with it and given birth to the good yogi or the concentrated yogi. We think that will extend into the future. So we have this new identity. We take it out for a walk. We come back and it goes away. And then that going away is painful. The concentrated yogi dies at that point, and it's a painful death.

So either we grab hold of something painful and then we have an unhappy life but a pleasant death, or we grab hold of something wonderful and we have a happy life but a painful death. Either way, there's suffering that comes out of our having clung and formed this new identity.

In either case, eventually we come back to balance. We do return to this state of balance where we've let go of the holding. We've released it. And then we're again open to everything that's coming and going, more or less. This is the place in meditation we become more and more familiar with.

If we review our whole life, it's been like this all along. We've been aware and things have been coming and going. Things have come like mother, breast, food, father, school, middle school, romance, crushes, rejection, high school, college, career, taxes, Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, MTV—the whole thing unfolds from there. All these experiences coming through our consciousness, through contact. Some of them we really like and want to hold on to, and some of them are really scary and threatening, and we want to push them away or pull back. So finding this place of balance in relation to all these changing appearances is not so simple. But if we take hold, we end up suffering.

We start to see that when we hold on to something, we take birth as a new I, a new self. We get this understanding about grasping or clinging or holding on that Andrew Olendzki describes in one of his essays. Andrew Olendzki is the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, a study center right next to IMS in Massachusetts, and he's a Pali scholar. He says, "What becomes clear through this analysis of moment-to-moment experience is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds onto or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

This is a very perceptive comment. It's not that the I does the grasping. Grasping happens through an action of mind, but when it happens, the I comes into being. The I is formed out of our taking hold of something. This is the way the self gets created moment after moment.

Mostly for people untrained in meditation, life consists of what is called monkey mind. If you've ever seen a monkey swing through the forest, it'll hold on to one vine, but it'll only let go of the one vine when it sees another vine that it can hold on to. It lets go of one in order to hold on to the next. And then it'll let go of that one in order to hold on to the next. So the monkey is always holding on or about to hold on. And that's how it makes its way through the forest.

So mostly in our life, we go from holding on to one thing and taking birth and passing away and then holding on to the next immediately. In spiritual life, we start to see this. We start to see the grasping and we can feel the pain of it. It's not always easy to let go. Ajahn Chah said seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing you're clinging and not being able to let go. This seems fairly accurate in my experience. But we learn a lot from watching this unfold moment by moment, and maybe there's another choice. Maybe there's another way to respond.

If the chain of dependent origination just takes us over this same ground—contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and on to suffering—that's just bondage again and again and again. But there has to be a way out. There has to be freedom somewhere or the Buddha wouldn't have taught that we could become free. So where is the freedom? Is there any freedom now or is freedom only going to be something that's at the very end of the journey when we attain Arahantship or full liberation twenty lifetimes from now? Is there some freedom available here and now? Which is another way of saying, can this chain be broken from contact, feeling, craving, clinging?

Referring back to Kamala's talk on equanimity last night, do you ever have the experience of being with a pleasant experience and not have craving arise?

Does that happen? Yes. Do you ever have the experience of being with unpleasant experience, painful experience, and not have aversion arise? Yes.

This is possible. And this is what equanimity is all about. Through strengthening the mind and paying close attention, we can start to relate to pleasure and pain without falling into craving. This is the big insight of dependent origination. We can find freedom in relation to our experience on a moment-to-moment basis, and the freedom is based on feeling the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral without sliding into craving.

Classically, this is where the chain of dependent origination gets broken. And when it's broken here, it doesn't have to lead to suffering. It doesn't lead to suffering. If we don't move from feeling to craving, the link does not progress to suffering. This means we're experiencing pleasant and unpleasant contact, but the mind doesn't go into greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is an area we want to investigate in our practice. At what moments is the mind free of greed, aversion, and delusion? We'll come back to this a little later and pinpoint it more precisely. But when we're there, we could say we're resting in a space or a gap or an openness between feeling and craving.

One Buddhist teacher said, "The whole of the path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving." This is all we have to do: notice clearly contact and the feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—and hold the mind in balance so we don't slide into craving. That short circuits the trip to suffering. It simply doesn't happen.

Begin to explore this in your meditation practice. What does that feel like? When feeling is present, but you don't slide into greed, aversion or delusion, what's the feeling there? Generally, I would say the feeling is of spaciousness and equanimity. And in that kind of equanimity, there's freedom.

In that moment, by not being embroiled in reactivity, we have a space that feels free. It feels open, can feel light, can feel peaceful, can feel wide. From that space, loving kindness and compassion and joy come more easily. This is a place, at least relatively, of freedom.

That kind of gap, that resting, is not being determined by the conditions at the six sense doors. Pleasure and pain are coming, but we're not falling sway to their conditioning. We're resting in a place not determined by them. In this, we're moving a little bit out of the conditioned realm and into the unconditioned realm.

This is from Ajahn Chah, Jack Kornfield's first teacher. It's a little long, but please be patient. It's a beautiful piece:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

"The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are—as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

When we rest in this gap, we're not taking birth. We're not taking on a new self, a new incarnation. And because we're not taking on a new incarnation, we're not subject to death at that point. Another word used for this coming into birth is "becoming."

Many people came to talk to the Buddha during his life and asked him countless questions. There's one particularly sweet passage in the Sutta Nipata where these Brahmin youths have all gotten together and come to visit the Buddha. Brahmins at the time were in a school not particularly appreciative of the Buddhist teachings or lineage. It was the established ecclesiastical order of the Buddha's time, connected with what later became Hinduism. So there's something very sweet about these Brahmin youths coming to seek counsel from a teacher outside their own lineage.

So one youth whose name is Todaya asks the Buddha, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you like to have asked the Buddha this? Wow, what's it like where you sit?

So the Buddha replied, "That sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." No desire, having nothing—that is, owning nothing—unentangled in becoming. So that means not generating this new self through clinging over and over again.

Ajahn Chah had another pointer. You can imagine him teaching in Thailand in an outdoor hall. The temperature is very mild there even in the evenings, so most of the talks are given in halls outdoors. There's a floor and pillars going up on the sides that support the roof, but there are no walls. It's just open air.

You can imagine Ajahn Chah in one of these settings. He points and says, "The roof is a becoming. The floor is a becoming. But in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness." So you can imagine—you can stand on the floor. There's existence here. You can stand on the roof. But in the space between and the empty spaces going out, there's nowhere to stand. So that's emptiness.

To put it bluntly, he continues, "We say that nibbana is this emptiness."

So what he's saying is that when we rest in that gap and don't go into the formation of self, we are resting in a kind of peace that is related to the goal of the whole path—this supreme peace that is the goal of the whole path. The reason it's related is because this moment of peace is not so constructed. It's not something that we've put together through effort, but rather by non-activity, by non-clinging, that this kind of peace is disclosed in the mind.

So we're touching on something that Ajahn Chah said was somewhat fundamental. He said this is something that's unborn and uncreated and partakes, therefore, of not dying—partakes of the deathless. No self being born, no self dying. It's always available. It's always present. That has to be one of the qualities of something that's not subject to conditions, to coming and going—always available, this peace.

This is from Ajahn Jhumni, another Thai forest teacher: "Phenomena show their dharma of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

In the Thai forest tradition, this is a frequent pointing—that as we rest in this place that's free of greed, aversion, and delusion, we are touching a little bit or having a little taste of this unconditioned peace that is the goal of the whole path. We can start to feel in this when greed, aversion and delusion are absent or relatively absent—we can start to feel the freedom of that because the freedom we're tasting is a little taste of the freedom that's at the end of the path.

But this freedom is also the way to walk the path. As we rest with awareness, the path continues to unfold ever deeper and deeper in our practice. In a way, you could say that the freedom is the goal. Even this taste here and now is the goal, but it's also the path, because it keeps deepening in that direction. So it's a way of understanding that the path and the goal have come together for us. When you start to feel that, you can feel a lot of trust, a lot of confidence, because all you have to do is refrain from clinging, pay attention and don't cling. Simple. Simple but not easy.

One of my teachers in Thailand rested here a lot. This was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who there's also a photo of in the gratitude hut. There's a photo of Ajahn Chah as well. Ajahn Buddhadasa was one of the most inspiring monks and teachers in Thailand in the last half of the last century. He was an iconoclastic monk because he was not afraid to speak out on social issues. He would speak out against the government and even high officers if he felt they were not treating the people well. For some time he was frowned upon by some of the authorities, but he continued to speak his mind.

I went to practice with him at his monastery in southern Thailand. He was remarkably available, living in the forest his whole adult life in great simplicity. Every morning he would sit on a bench near his small cottage, surrounded by forest roosters that pecked the ground at his feet and large temple dogs that seemed to have an uncanny ability to detect Westerners, nipping at our heels while leaving the Thai monks completely alone. So approaching Ajahn Buddhadasa was always something of an adventure.

You could simply walk up to him as he sat on his bench. As a monk, I would offer my three bows before him, and then I was free to ask whatever I wished—I could discuss Dhamma with him. He was utterly available. Yet I found myself deeply unnerved and somewhat intimidated by his presence, for he possessed this profound equanimity where everything arose and passed without his reacting to it. He was simply meditating all the objects of his experience, and that included meditating me.

I would sit down, and he wouldn't really acknowledge my existence. If you visit a typical pastor or teacher, they welcome you warmly—offering you a chair, asking if you need tissues, expressing delight at seeing you. This was decidedly not Ajahn Buddhadasa's style. I would make my bows, and he would meditate me, resting in this place of great equanimity. I took this as rejection, thinking he didn't want me there. Only later did I realize that he was completely equanimous about my arising and passing—he simply didn't care whether I came to talk with him or got up and walked away. I was just another phenomenon in his field of experience, and he had truly settled there. I never witnessed anything disturb that fundamental equanimity.

Ajahn Buddhadasa spoke extensively about the lack of satisfaction in conditioned things. This becomes part of our experience as we begin to find this balance. We observe the changing experiences in the conditioned realm and recognize that they are all subject to coming and going—none can provide lasting satisfaction. We start to discover that this place where we can rest, free of greed, aversion, and delusion, is actually more satisfying than sense experiences. We begin to develop an attraction to this place, this resting in the gap, this refuge of freedom and equanimity. This is truly where we want to be, and we naturally start to lose interest in the objects themselves.

Something that can support this shift—and it happens quite naturally for many people, though not for everyone, so it's not necessary to force this transition—is moving our attention away from focusing on objects toward focusing on the quality of awareness itself. We become disenchanted with the objects that arise because they lack permanence, don't endure, and cannot deeply satisfy. But we grow fascinated by this quality of knowing—you could call it awareness or consciousness—that remains constantly present, holding these objects, receiving them, knowing them.

Ajahn Buddhadasa called this quality *satipanya*—an interesting conjunction not commonly found in Buddhist teachings, but present in the Thai forest lineage. The word *sati*, meaning mindfulness, combined with *panya*, meaning wisdom, suggests this quality of awareness that observes our experience with a blend, a union of mindfulness and wisdom. This is where we want to settle in our meditation practice. This is what we seek to discover—this combination of *satipanya*.

One way to cultivate this is by turning our attention from the objects toward the knowing itself. If you prefer to stay with the objects themselves, that's perfectly fine—the *satipanya* will grow there as well. Don't worry about changing anything you've been doing. But some people find this alternative approach helpful: turning the attention to awareness itself, moving away from looking outward toward looking back, examining what is looking. The language that points in this direction includes turning the attention back, turning the mind back on itself, turning awareness back on itself, becoming aware of awareness, looking back at awareness.

To get a taste of this, you might let your eyes roam around the room right now. If you wish, even indulge a little—let your gaze linger on things you find beautiful, people you enjoy, images of the Buddha and Prajnaparamita, the flowers, and allow yourself to delight in them.

Just let your eyes roam among the trees outside, the hills. See if in doing that, there is a little bit of energetic pull toward those beautiful objects—as though something is being drawn out through the eyes toward them.

Now take that outward-going energy and turn it back to what is looking. Take that awareness and direct it back on itself. Does it feel any different when you do that? What feels different? How does it feel? What shifts? More spacious? More peaceful? Not relating to the things? Not grasping?

I heard someone say, "I can't do it." That's perfectly fine. I'm just making suggestions to play with, and we'll make other suggestions you can explore too. Sometimes this will connect for people, sometimes it won't. Don't worry if it doesn't—it's just an alternative approach.

Some people report that instead of being drawn outward, which can lead to grasping, this approach settles us back a little more. It brings spaciousness, an element of peace, and non-attachment into the moment's experience. As you drew the awareness back, did you lose track of visual objects? You're still seeing, aren't you? You can still relate to the world, but you're in a more settled-back place, which has an aspect of non-grasping—which is freedom—and spaciousness, which is equanimity.

For some people, this meditation approach can lead rather directly into this place of unentangled knowing. We take the emphasis off the outer objects and place it back on awareness itself, and that movement can cut some of the entanglement, some of the tendency to focus and grasp at objects. This is a very interesting thing to explore, and what we end up exploring is the quality of awareness itself.

This is referred to in the Buddhist teachings as the fifth aggregate called consciousness. The Buddha described human experience through the aggregates, and one of them is consciousness—the knowing of a sound, a sight, a taste, a touch, a smell, a thought, an emotion. The knowing of that. Every time we're awake, we're knowing something.

When we hear a sound like this bell, we can look at two aspects of it. There's the sound itself—a fairly nice sound, pleasant, especially because it means the end of the sitting. It's a really nice sound for meditators, with pleasant overtones. But then we can also notice our knowing of it. You're aware of it, right? When you hear the sound of the bell, you're aware of it. So there's something in you that is conscious of it, that is knowing it. Those are all synonyms.

We can tune in directly to that knowing quality, which is present with every bit of sense experience. It's not that there are two separate things—the knowing and the bell. The way I understand it, they both arise together. When you hear this, there's just one experience.

That's just one thing. But in Buddhism, we like to look at human experience. So there's one thing, but we can know two aspects of this—the sound and the knowing of it. That may seem odd, that there are two aspects of one experience, but it happens all the time. Like I'm going to hold up this bell. Is it round or is it gold? It's just one thing, but it's both round and gold, right? So it's one thing that has two aspects we can tease out.

When I strike the bell, one experience arises. There's the sound and there's your knowing of it. What we're doing is placing our attention on consciousness itself, feeling that knowing taking place in us. When we do that, we take a step back from the world of objects.

Normally, especially in Western culture, we think the world is made up of objects. We just take that for granted. Oh, the world is made up of earth and roads and buildings and women and zafus and men and walls and lamps and ceilings, trees and flowers. We think that's what the world's made up of.

But in Buddhism, the world we want to look at is the world of human experience. That's where suffering happens. That's where freedom happens. That world is made up of consciousness knowing land and roads and buildings and floors and women and men and ceilings and lamps and so on. Everything that arises is known in human consciousness. When we start to see it that way, that gives us another refuge—one that's not immersed in, not stuck in the world of objects. It gives us another place to go.

Finding this quality of consciousness is not so easy. Ajahn Sumedho has this nice description. He said, it's just like the question, "Can you see your own eyes?" Not so easy, is it? Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes, but I can't see my eyes. I'm sitting right here. I've got two eyes and I can't see them. But you can see my eyes. But there's no need for me to see my eyes because I can see. It's ridiculous, isn't it? If I started saying, "Why can't I see my own eyes?" you'd think, "Ajahn Sumedho is really weird, isn't he?"

Looking in a mirror, you can see a reflection, but that's not your eyes. It's a reflection of your eyes. There's no way that I've been able to look and see my own eyes, but then it's not necessary to see your own eyes. It's not necessary to know what it is that knows because there's knowing.

Ajahn Chah put it similarly. He said, "Don't worry about not being able to grasp this awareness or find this awareness. You're riding on a horse and you're asking, 'Where's the horse?'" It's working for you. So just notice your awareness to the extent that you can notice it. This is one way, one meditation approach to step back from enmeshment with objects.

I want to mention one other briefly. In the last several years, some of us—I think all four of us teachers—have been relating to a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who I think Steve originally met in Burma and has since brought over to the West. Sally and I had a chance to practice with him at IMS when Steve brought him over a few years ago, and Kamala has spent time with him also. We've really appreciated his teaching.

Steve mentioned something the other day—or maybe Kamala said it—about not being so concerned about the objects of mindfulness practice, but more concerned with the quality of your awareness. This is a pointer from U Tejaniya, who says, "Follow your usual meditation technique. You can be aware of sounds or breath or body, emotions or thoughts, but always notice how are you relating to them." He had three simple questions to check your relationship, and he said, "Check this often."

Are you relating to them with greed? You'll know this if you want something else to be happening. So you're experiencing a moment, but you look and you see you want something else to be happening—then there's greed in the mind. Or are you wanting something to stop happening? The pain in the knee, the ache in the back, the mood of restlessness. Then there's aversion at play. Or are you not in touch with what's happening? Are you spacing out? Then there's delusion. So he says, check: What's the attitude of the mind to your experience? Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion? And you can feel into these just in the moment.

So the way I began to practice with these, I was using many of the same objects that we've talked about here—breath, body, sounds, thoughts, emotions. And then regularly I would start to check: is there greed, aversion, or delusion? If there is, you don't judge that; you just become aware of the greed, the aversion, or the delusion. As I got more familiar with it, I could check more often. So I started checking maybe five times every sitting. I'd ask these three questions. If there was greed or aversion or delusion, I'd know it. Then as I got more familiar, I would check like ten times a sitting. And as it got more familiar, I would never stop checking. My main meditation was checking my mind to see if it was tilting into greed, aversion, and delusion. So in that way, the meditation becomes: am I falling into craving, greed, aversion, delusion, or am I free of it? And that's all in a way that one needs to do.

This again is from Upasika Kee: "So your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's so worth checking on."

When you practice in this way, you release the fixation on the passing objects and you put the attention where it's really most important, and that is: what's my heart doing? Am I falling into greed, aversion, or delusion? So in a way, it's the same movement back from the world of objects and into the world of our own awareness.

And Upasika Kee puts it in this way: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside. So we keep our attention directed inwardly at the very state of our own heart, looking for its reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion. And if they don't come, then we simply rest in that unentangled knowing which has the quality of freedom, contentment, spaciousness, equanimity, and vitality—because it's a very awake place. We're in touch with everything that's happening, but we're not caught.

So this inward turning doesn't mean we cut off from the world. As you saw with placing awareness on awareness, we still see, we still hear, we can speak and relate and so forth. But it means part of our attention, the most important part, stays with the movements of our own heart and mind. That's our first priority.

This is freedom here and now. This is also the path. Practicing in this way opens us up to more and more freedom as the path unfolds. So it is full and rich and contented here and now, and it's also onward leading, develops all the factors of the path.

So I'll just close with this quotation again from the Sutta Nipata, when the Brahmin youths were coming up to question the Buddha. This was a later Brahmin youth named Kappa. He said to the Buddha: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir." The Buddha replied: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island.

That is nibbana, the total ending of aging and death.

So thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking and the last sitting.

CHAPTER 101

Week 1, Part 2: Introduction to the Suttas

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this second part of the introductory sutta study class, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of the Pali Canon's organization and content. He examines the three baskets (Tipiṭaka) - Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma - with particular focus on the five Nikāyas within the Sutta Piṭaka: the Dīgha, Majjhima, Saṃyutta, Aṅguttara, and Khuddaka collections. Armstrong discusses which texts represent authentic Buddha-vacana (word of the Buddha) and provides practical guidance on approaching these ancient teachings.*
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> *The talk addresses several challenges Western practitioners face when studying the suttas, including teachings directed specifically to monastics, cultural elements from 2,500 years ago, and complex philosophical concepts. Armstrong explains the relationship between renunciation practices for monastics versus lay practitioners, emphasizing that the Buddha spoke differently to different audiences. He also tackles difficult issues around gender in the texts while maintaining confidence in the core dhamma teachings.*
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> *Throughout, Armstrong emphasizes how sutta study develops sammā-diṭṭhi (right view), the first and final factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. He presents the texts as reliable tools for understanding how an awakened mind perceives reality, offering practitioners a way to check their own understanding against the Buddha's profound insights into the nature of existence, suffering, and liberation.*

So what I'd like to do now is examine in more detail this outline of the Pali Canon on your second page of the handout, to look at what's here.

We talked about the three baskets of the Vinaya, the Suttas, and the Abhidhamma. The Vinaya is of not much concern to us as laypeople. If you're going to become a monk or a nun, you want to read the Vinaya. If you're not, you don't need to. The Abhidhamma is a very detailed and I would say difficult field of study that not many of us have the kind of inclination to dive deeply into. So for the most part, we don't worry about the Abhidhamma. Where we focus our study is on this central basket, the Sutta Pitaka.

So let's look at that in a little more detail. It's a combination of actual discourses from the Buddha, what are purported to be discourses from the Buddha, and later additions. My study has mostly been the actual words of the Buddha, and that's what I recommend for you also. So let's talk about which pieces of the Sutta Pitaka are actual discourses of the Buddha.

This Sutta Pitaka is broken into five Nikayas or collections. Looking down the list, it's the Digha, the Majjhima, the Samyutta, the Anguttara, and the Khuddaka. Of these, the Digha, the Majjhima, the Samyutta, and the Anguttara are all considered the word of the Buddha. There's this Pali term, Buddhavacana, which means Buddha voice. All these four are considered the word of the Buddha—either spoken by the Buddha or spoken by a disciple with the approval of the Buddha. So sometimes you might hear Sariputta speaking it, but the Buddha approves it. There's a really nice discourse in the Majjhima number 44 that's spoken by a nun, Dhammadinna, who I think was the foremost woman proficient in expounding the Dhamma in the Buddha's day. But generally, they all carry the authentic imprint of the Buddha, Buddhavacana, word of the Buddha.

Then the Khuddaka Nikaya is considered a minor collection or lesser collection, and it's got a mixture of word of the Buddha and other material. So in this one, the words of the Buddha are Dhammapada, Udana, Itivuttaka, and Sutta Nipata. The others are more commentarial.

I want to show you what this adds up to in modern translations. This is the Udana and Itivuttaka. The Dhammapada in a very good translation by our own Gil Fronsdal—highly recommended. Sutta Nipata, which is a really engaging and interesting text, though there's not a great translation out. This is the Anguttara Nikaya in five volumes from the Pali Text Society, but Bhikkhu Bodhi's next effort is going to be a whole new translation of this. Don't bother with this translation; wait for Bhikkhu Bodhi's, which should be out in about a year. Or if you can't wait, there's a selection from the Anguttara in this book called Numerical Discourses of the Buddha—also very good. The Samyutta Nikaya, my version was in two volumes originally, the blue book, but this has now been reprinted as just one. The Majjhima Nikaya. They're always spoken of in the order that they're listed here. And then finally, the long discourses, the Digha Nikaya, translated by Maurice Walshe.

So this is the stack of Buddhavacana. In the original Pali, the Digha was three volumes, the Majjhima was three volumes, the Samyutta was five, the Anguttara is five, and each of these little ones are one each. So we have close to twenty volumes here of

the Buddha's words from 500 years before the birth of Jesus. What do we have of Jesus? Perhaps a hundred pages? All the Gospels? A hundred pages of teaching, most of which are overlapping? How did this survive? How did we get this much?

So there's a lot here. Study could last you for the rest of your life if you want to take it up.

Let me say a little bit about each of the five main Nikayas. The Digha Nikaya is considered kind of an introduction for outsiders. It has a lot of stories and a lot of myths. The meaning of digha is long, so these are long discourses.

The Digha Nikaya contains profound dhamma, yet it presents challenges for beginning students. It appeals to the consciousness of ancient Indians because it connects with their mythology, weaving familiar stories into the teachings.

The Majjhima Nikaya offers a collection of middle-length discourses that strikes a perfect balance between narrative and profound instruction. You'll discover all the central points of the Buddha's teaching here, accompanied by enough stories, conversations, dialogues, and debates to keep the reading engaging. This harmonious blend of entertainment and enlightenment makes the Majjhima the ideal starting point for anyone wanting to read the suttas comprehensively. Our sutta today comes from this collection.

The Samyutta Nikaya serves as the professional meditator's handbook. It contains the most detailed instructions and discriminating analysis of Buddhist doctrines, offering the most in-depth exploration available. If you were sent to a desert island to meditate in solitude, this would be the essential text to accompany you.

The Anguttara Nikaya became the repository for all the remaining discourses that didn't fit neatly elsewhere. They're arranged by numbers, reflecting the Buddha's fondness for lists—the five hindrances, three characteristics, seven factors of enlightenment, and so forth. Anguttara means "many-factored," and the collection is organized numerically from the Book of Ones through the Book of Elevens.

In the Book of Ones, the Buddha declares: "There is one thing, O bhikkhus, which more than anything contributes to the growth of wisdom, and that is association with the wise." The Book of Twos continues: "There are two things, O monks, which one should never forget in one's practice," and so forth.

The Anguttara contains the finest advice for lay practitioners. Though not organized by topic, it holds remarkable suttas about household life and relationships. Here's one intriguing teaching: the Buddha said that if a couple wishes to remain together in their next lifetime, it is possible. If they are similarly matched in faith, wisdom, generosity, and ethics, and they resolve to stay together, they can indeed be reunited in future lives.

The Anguttara also contains a wonderful discourse on wealth. Sometimes the monastic teachings give the impression that we should feel embarrassed about having money, but this wasn't the Buddha's view. He saw lay people as important, necessary, vital sources of support for monastic communities. He spoke in praise of lay people who gained wealth lawfully and used it wisely—for their own enjoyment, supporting their families, and performing good works by helping others. This kind of practical guidance fills the Anguttara.

The Khuddaka Nikaya contains miscellaneous sections, some extraordinarily beautiful. The Udana and Itivuttaka offer particularly moving passages, while the Sutta Nipata represents one of the oldest texts, least altered over time, making it deeply engaging.

Before we explore why we might want to study these texts, let me pause for questions about this historical overview and the contents of the Pali Canon.

A student asked about the origins of the Mahayana tradition and whether it was one of the original eighteen schools or evolved separately.

The origins of Mahayana remain unclear to scholars. Some suggest it emerged from a group called the Mahasangikas, who split off around the area of Calcutta and developed a different Vinaya. However, no one has definitively pinpointed the Mahayana's source.

Around four hundred years after the Buddha's death, new scriptures began appearing. The first were the Prajnaparamita Sutras—Perfection of Wisdom teachings—which emphasized understanding emptiness and the Bodhisattva path. These texts seemed to appear without clear historical roots, at least as far as current scholarship can determine.

Regarding language, the Mahayana Sutras were composed in Sanskrit, as were the canons of some earlier schools like the Sarvastivadins and possibly the Sautrantikas, though only fragments of these survive today. The Pali Canon remains the only complete early Buddhist collection that has survived intact.

Other schools grew up in China that flowered and developed in different directions. The Huayan school emerged from a later philosophical movement in India called the Chittamatra. They evolved along their own trajectory. Tiantai was another school that originated in China, and the Pure Land School also began there. When Pure Land reached Japan, it became the foundation from which the Nichiren schools developed.

There are numerous other schools, but the predominant ones we encounter in the West are Theravada, Mahayana—mainly Zen—and Vajrayana, the Tibetan tradition. I tend to discuss these three because they all use meditation as their primary vehicle.

The Mahayana has a distinctly different emphasis because it places emptiness at the philosophical center. As far as I know, it was the Mahayana that developed the description of the paramis or paramitas as the path. Because their emphasis is on the bodhisattva path, the goal itself differs. In Mahayana, the aim is not to become an arahant or simply awakened—the goal is to become a Buddha. This is a much loftier aspiration.

Some scholars suggest that this goal changed when fewer arahants were being produced. It was as if the thinking became: "Well, if we can't reach that attainment, let's create an even more elevated goal that we know we won't achieve in this lifetime. That will explain why we didn't get there, and we can continue over many lives."

The Mahayana tradition has more association with lay practice than Theravada, which has maintained a very monastic focus. Mahayana developed more of a lay flavor, so you'll find greater openness to engaging with sense pleasures.

There was a particularly interesting movement that emerged from Mahayana—the Chittamatra school, also called Yogacara. They presented the goal, the unconditioned, in a way that wasn't so removed from the six senses. In the Theravadan description of the unconditioned, one gets the sense that you must disconnect from material reality to access nirvana. You'll hear this clearly in some schools' descriptions—that the six senses must fall away before one can connect with the unconditioned.

The Yogacara Chittamatra school said no—you can access the unconditioned with all six senses functioning because it's here now anyway. If it's unconditioned, it doesn't arise and pass, so it must be present. Therefore, the six senses can't block it.

This opens up the possibility of ultimate reality and conventional reality coming together. It provides a philosophical avenue where there isn't such separation between the ultimate and the day-to-day. Another way to express this is that it allows for daily experience to be infused with the divine. This understanding emerged from the Yogacara tradition.

You make an excellent point about the Mahayana's open canon. This openness continues even today—someone might discover a hidden treasure text purportedly from a deva or Buddha. This represents another major characteristic of the Mahayana tradition.

Regarding pronunciation, yes—when you see those diacritical marks, they indicate specific sounds. We'll discuss pronunciation more as we delve into the sutta.

So it's a good question. When you have an N with a tilde, it's an NY sound. And if Vinaya had been spelled with a long accent over the A, it would be Vinaya. But it's not, so the A is more of an "uh" sound—Vi-nuh-ya.

Someone asked about how tantra came in—what was the influence on Mahayana and where did it come from? In northern India, around the 7th and 8th centuries, Hindu practitioners had been working with energy currents in the body for many years. They found that a powerful way to activate those energy currents was through sexual union, so they developed spiritual practices that use the energy of sexual intercourse to activate bodily energies that could be devoted to awakening or purification.

Tantra really has several levels of meaning. First, there is simply knowing the bodily energy independent of sexuality. Second, there's figuring out how sexual energies can be integrated and used within that. Then these were furthered by devotional relationships to different deities. The deity brings out a certain quality of energy in the heart and mind, and this is reflected in the body.

These three elements together—the control and manipulation of physical energy, sexual energy, and deity devotionals—came from Hinduism and were appropriated by Buddhist groups around the 7th to 8th centuries in India. In Tibetan Buddhism today, Vajrayana is more or less synonymous with Tantra.

Some schools use Tantra to understand the working of physical energy through pure meditative approaches, using visualization of deities. Some schools practice this and also include sexual union as part of their spiritual practice. So it's a different approach than Theravadan monasticism.

There are many books on Tantra in the West now, most of which focus on the sexual aspect. But underlying it is a rigorous system of understanding bodily energy and how to work with it.

Regarding Dzogchen and Mahamudra—these grew out of the Yogacara Chittamatrin school. Philosophically, they maintain that permeability between the conventional and ultimate. The meditation practices were brought to Tibet by Padmasambhava around

the 8th century. Padmasambhava came from the Swat Valley of Pakistan. These tantric practices evolved into highly refined meditative practices that focus on the nature of mind and came into Tibet through India.

Bon was a native Tibetan religion that influenced Tibetan Buddhism, though I don't know many details beyond that. I think it's a shamanistic religion, so it probably fit well with the energy work that Tantra introduced. The idea of tulkus—reincarnated masters who can choose their rebirth and be recognized—was a Tibetan creation, not found in any Indian system.

Yogacara developed around the 4th century in northern India. Vasubandhu is associated with the philosophical foundation of that school.

I wanted to discuss why we bother studying this material. First, very simply, the suttas contain valuable information about how to live, practice, and understand. When you consider the aspects of the Eightfold Path—sila, samadhi, paññā—they cover all of these exhaustively and in detail, sometimes in ways we may not have heard before.

Secondly, as we discussed with the three kinds of wisdom, reading is a powerful way to develop insight. When you hear about the Buddha's insights, it plants a seed. Through meditation and investigation, the care you bring to those questions waters that seed and makes it flower into insight.

It's like when you first heard the concept of not-self in a dharma talk. Wasn't it perplexing? You might have wondered, "How can that be?" Yet if you got curious—"What do they mean the body isn't the self? What do they mean my thoughts aren't me?"—and began investigating, that inquiry opens up to moments of insight that can be truly freeing. "Oh, this fear—it's not me, I don't own it."

In the same way, the Buddha recorded very deep insights and understanding in his discourses, and all of these offer new ground for us to reflect upon and investigate, fertilizing our own practice. One of the key ways I see the suttas is as incomparable tools for developing the factor of right view.

Right view is the start of the Eightfold Path. It's also the end of the Eightfold Path. Everything starts from there and everything culminates there. Essentially, the whole path is to transform the way we see the world and the way we understand the world. The suttas are telling us again and again how the Buddha saw the world—which is simply a way of saying how a free, awakened, unattached, unhindered mind sees this world of experience. We can use that to check our own understanding.

The Buddha will say things that startle us. That's good, because it leads us to reflect: "What would it be like if I looked at things that way? Where am I blind? Where is there a corner of attachment or delusion that I haven't looked into so fully?" It can really shake us up a little bit and get us to examine our own take on the world, keeping us going straight on the track.

Ajahn Chah used to tell a story in response to students who questioned his seemingly contradictory advice. One meditator would come in and receive one piece of guidance, then the next meditator would receive completely opposite advice. When asked about this apparent inconsistency, he said, "Look, I see people going down a path I know really well. Some people I see wandering off to the right, so I shout, 'Go left, go left!' Other people I see wandering off to the left, so I shout, 'Go right, go right!' It's just to get them back on that center track."

The suttas serve as an excellent way for us to know if we're on that center track. If we start diverging from the Buddha's understanding too greatly, it's good cause for questioning. Of course, we have to have faith in these words before we can use them that way—we don't take it blindly. But once we start to study and acquire some faith, it becomes very useful for refining our take on the path, on life, on right view.

This brings up the whole question of concepts and learning about concepts. Our meditation practice has been kind of anti-conceptual from the beginning, which is great—it's what we've needed. We needed to get back to direct experience. We had that as children, then sort of lost it in all the years of schooling. Meditation gave us a way to get back: breath in, breath out, body sensation arising and passing, thought coming and going. This is anger, this is joy, this is fear, this is contentment. We learned what it was to be with our own experience without too many concepts.

But now, having done that, we can start to bring in some concepts again. One of my teachers explained how concepts work using this analogy: If you go out in the garden and dig for a morning, your hands get dirty. You can brush off the dirt, but when you come in, they're still a little muddy. So you run a little water and put soap on your hands and wipe them. Then what you've got is a big soapy dirty mess that you have to run under clear water to get rid of. Only then are your hands really clean.

Dharma concepts are like soap. Worldly concepts are the dirt. We come in with all kinds of mistaken worldly concepts like "this is me," "this is my body," "these are my emotions." Those are not correct, so we have to take up dharma concepts to clean those off. But then we get stuck with the dharma concepts: "Oh, I'm all about not-self. I know you're not quite there yet, but I'm about not-self."

We don't want to attach to dharma concepts either, and that's why we need meditation to wash off the dharma concepts so the mind is just clean and bright and not fixated anywhere. But we have to really get in and apply those concepts first. Concepts like the five aggregates, dependent origination, becoming—this word bhava, what it means to take birth. We need to grapple with those until we can track them in our moment-to-moment experience. Once we've understood, then we can let go. Because all the concepts are really just encouraging us: let go, let go, let go.

But we have to apply them in every little corner where holding comes before we can let go.

Inspiration is another reason to read the suttas. There are some very moving, inspiring, dramatic passages, and we'll come to one today that I hope you'll enjoy and find inspiring.

Not so often will Western teachers say to their students, "Go all the way for liberation. Go for full enlightenment. Make that your goal." But the Buddha does it all the time. He's always saying that. It's good for us to hear that. It kind of picks up our idea of what's possible.

One of my students just got into reading the Majjhima and we were talking about this. I said, "Do you find it a little daunting that the Buddha says things like this?" She said, "No. It's great. It's great the Buddha was telling people to go for it. What else would you want the Buddha to do?"

So it's like that. You meet this voice that's talking from the depths and pointing to the depths again and again. I find that reading these texts really strengthens the quality of faith. You just get a sense of how reliable this voice is.

Now the question always comes up: how reliable is this voice? These things are 2,500 years old. They've been passed on through who knows who, through talking, through writing down in foreign languages, coming over here. How reliable is any of this? Do we know that any of this is the word of the Buddha? No, we don't.

But if you start to hang out with that voice, you get a sense of where that voice is coming from. Because one of the things I find—I think the thing I find most amazing in these texts—I've probably read close to 3,500 pages of the translations plus footnotes from these books. There's almost no internal disagreement. There are one or two statements I kind of disagree with. One or two in 3,500 pages. There are a lot I simply don't know about. There are a lot I kind of write off because they're cultural and don't seem relevant today. But when this voice, the Buddha of the Pali suttas, talks about the way

things are, the way the mind is, the way we get caught, and the way we get free, I haven't seen any disagreement, any discrepancy, anything I thought was off through all those pages.

So I think it's unlikely that many different voices contributed to this. I think there are places—and the scholars can tell you more about where, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Venerable Analayo can tell you about where things have been inserted. I think it's very clear that there were editors to this work who inserted stock passages, inserted some other stories, inserted some cultural references that aren't so meaningful today. But if you listen to the sections that talk about the Dhamma—that is, the way things are—I find it completely reliable.

And that's astounding because that voice of the Buddha is talking about topics of great philosophical and doctrinal subtlety. This is not simple stuff that's being covered here. There are very small distinctions between existence and non-existence, being and non-being, that are being pointed to without any sense of two different points of view going on.

I was talking with Wes Nisker about this. After 2,500 years, it must have gotten turned around a little here and there. And he said, "Probably, but it works." That's the other thing. Even if there are some discrepancies, the gist of it works.

And so reading these texts and starting to get some trust in the fact that this works and that the voice is consistent, you start to feel that you can really have some faith in the Dhamma, some faith in the Buddha as he's portrayed in these pages.

And then something that has always interested me is, what did the Buddha really say? We hear so many things. If you sit in the hall at Spirit Rock, you will hear many different quotes. And I've listened to a lot that are not accurate—"the Buddha said this"—and I know that he didn't. So this is the way to find out what the Buddha really said about many different topics. I find it really trustworthy in that way also.

So there have been changes, there have been additions, there have probably been some deletions. I consider them relatively minor. The core of the teachings I think is very reliable here.

But I want to talk now a little bit about what's tough about reading these because there are some areas of the suttas that are really grating on modern Western sensibilities.

So the first thing that you'll see is many discourses are directed to monks and nuns. Those teachings don't work so well for lay people. And we might feel, you know, I should be taking up the practices that monks and nuns are, but we're not monks and nuns. It doesn't make sense for us to try to take up all the practices of monks and nuns when we're living as lay people.

So, simple question. What's the big dividing line between a monastic life and a lay life? Dinner. The evening meal. That's a big one. What else? Children. Sex. Money. Possessions. Movies. CDs. Fiction books. All these things are part of our lives as lay people, and they're fine. The Buddha didn't say anything against these for lay people, but they're not allowed in the monastic code.

So if we listen to a teaching that explains to monks and nuns why they shouldn't be engaging in these things, it's easy for the mind's tendency to think, oh, I shouldn't be either. But the Buddha never meant that and never said that. So we have to keep our ears up when the theme is renunciation.

Renunciation is a really powerful practice. That's what Sally taught on this morning. It's the central piece of the monastic life. Very helpful because you could say it's the lifestyle of letting go of cravings. It is an approach to spiritual life that says, anytime craving comes along for anything in the sense realm, I'm not going to follow it because I've given it up to start with. I'm not going to have an evening meal. I'm not going to have sex. I'm not going to have money. I'm not going to have children. I'm not going to have possessions. I'm not going to enjoy shows, singing, jewelry, makeup, costumes. I give up all of that.

Just reflect for a minute, what would your life be like if you gave up all those things? Let's say you could be supported, right? But you didn't have any spare money to spend. You'd have the requisites of food, lodging, shelter, and healthcare, but you didn't have any other money to spend. What would your life be like? Or without your partner, without an intimate partner, without listening to music or going to movies? You'd just about be a monk or a nun, wouldn't you? So you might as well ordain and get supported.

So all of us are in lay life essentially to have access to these sense pleasures. When you think of it, that's essentially what it comes down to. There's nothing wrong with it. Other people will choose a totally renunciate life and follow that guideline, and it works very well for them. But for various reasons, it's not so appealing for us. That's fine.

So when the Buddha gets on a rant against sense pleasures, which he does, against sexuality, which he does, you have to realize that's for monastics to support their level of renunciation. It's not directed to us as lay people. He spoke differently to different audiences.

The comment is we're somewhere in between, and I fully agree with you. This is also a really interesting place to explore. Where are you in between? To what extent do you resonate with the teachings on renunciation?

Because we have all benefited from retreats, from silent retreats, we have all tasted some of the power of the renunciate lifestyle. When you're doing a retreat up the hill here, you're slipping into a renunciate lifestyle. If you take the five precepts, you're giving up some things. If you take the eight precepts, you're giving up most everything else.

So I find this a really interesting seam to keep investigating. We make these choices day by day. Where on this spectrum from overindulgence in sense pleasures to complete renunciation of sense pleasures do we want to be? This is both a general question about lifestyle and a day-to-day question. A friend calls up and wants to go out to a concert. Do we do that, or do we stay home and meditate? Any of you could have been home watching the Packers this afternoon. Instead, you're here talking about suttas. This question about where I want to renounce and what it will benefit me is such a fascinating ongoing place to inquire, given the place that we're in.

I'll tell you the way that I think about it. I approach it in two different ways. I think of my practice when I'm at a facility like up the hill as my renunciate practice, and I plan to spend a certain amount of every year in a situation like that so that I'm carrying out a renunciate lifestyle for part of my year. When I'm at home, I play with different schedules where I renounce to different degrees.

I've actually just finished a four-week home retreat where I sit for about five hours a day, but I keep up a little bit with email. I go to the gym or exercise virtually every day, listen to a dharma talk in the evening, but I chat with my wife over meals. That's it. I don't go out for social things. I don't watch movies. I don't go out listening to music. For me, it's a lovely way to live. I could just keep going like that for a long time.

So playing with this spectrum is really fun. I encourage you to do it not out of a sense of guilt or shame or "I ought to be," but with the understanding that the idea behind renunciation is that one renounces a lesser pleasure or a lesser happiness in order to gain a happiness which is greater. The idea of renunciation is to find a deeper, truer, more reliable source of happiness. So play with that. See what things contribute to it.

The other thing that will rub—and it will probably always rub—is that the suttas are not very friendly to women. Simple example: the Buddha resisted, according to one sutta, accepting women into ordained life, even though the person asking was his stepmother, Mahapajapati, who had nursed him after his mother died, to whom he owed a great deal. It's recorded that when the Buddha agreed to accept women into ordination, he said, "Oh, but if I do this, the life of these teachings will only be half of what they would have otherwise."

Now, I have good news on this score. Venerable Analayo, who is a wonderful scholar of the text, who's reading Chinese now as well as Pali, says that he doesn't believe this part of the sutta is authentic. Through his investigations, both of the internal facts and inconsistencies in the historical record of that sutta and by comparison to Chinese sources where some fragments of the canon have survived, he doesn't believe that account is authentic—either the Buddha refusing three times to ordain women or the statement that the length of the sasana will be cut in half. So that's nice to know.

Nonetheless, there are other insults to women all along the way. In the monastic discipline, a nun who's been ordained for fifty years is supposed to bow down to a monk who's been ordained for one day. That's how the seniority goes. The most junior monk is senior to the most senior nun. These things can really upset one. Many of these traditions continue to the present day because this is dictated by the Vinaya. The Vinaya has not changed essentially since twenty-five hundred years ago. These are the rules of conduct that govern monks and nuns in the world today. They won't be changed overnight. So this is really not so suitable for our Western sensibilities.

But a few things. First, it's really clear this comes out of Indian culture of twenty-five hundred years ago. This is the way the whole society was structured. Whatever you may feel about the Buddha's creation of his own culture in the sangha, he did not go about trying to change the outer culture. He pretty much took the outer culture as it was. He talked about ways that people needed to relate to one another in partnerships and raising families, ways that kings should relate to subjects, but he did not actively go out and try to overthrow a monarchy or establish a different social order. His own sangha was very different. He threw out all the caste rules.

and he didn't go out and try to abolish the caste rules in the wider society.

What I see is that he left the outer society largely as he found it, and his own views were probably conditioned by it to some extent. He did take a significant step in admitting women at all, because generally women were not admitted to holy life at that time, so that in itself was quite radical. But he placed them in a lower status within the hierarchy.

Now, was that simply so the rest of society wouldn't react negatively and withdraw their support from the entire monastic community? Or was it because he genuinely viewed it that way? I don't know. We may never know.

Sometimes when people encounter this cultural element in how the Buddha delivered his teachings, they ask, "Well then, was he really enlightened? Could he truly be enlightened and still have those cultural blind spots?" My only response is that I believe he was free of greed, hatred, and delusion, and I also think his worldview was shaped by the society around him. Personally, I think both of those things can coexist.

This situation from the Buddha's time has continued down to the present day. I know people who choose not to support current modern Theravadan monastics because women aren't supported equally. I understand that perspective and wouldn't try to dissuade anyone from it.

My personal view is that this situation cannot and will not continue in the West, though it may take fifty, seventy-five, or even a hundred years to change because there's tremendous momentum behind the Buddhist tradition in the Vinaya. Many Western monks are deeply committed to this change—they welcome it and want to see it happen. But they can't break away entirely on their own or they'll lose their connections to their Asian roots. Many monastics find themselves in this middle ground of disagreeing with the current state while lacking the power to change it overnight.

Personally, I feel empathy for their struggle and hope that progress will come sooner rather than later. But I believe it must move forward. It has to evolve in the West, or Buddhism in that form won't survive here. That's simply my personal perspective, but it's one of the tensions you'll encounter in these teachings.

The third challenge is that intellectually, this material is quite dense. Some texts are very concise, complicated, and broad, requiring time to digest. Just be patient with yourself. Once you learn the basic vocabulary, you'll find your way in.

Here's the essential vocabulary—and I'll run through it quickly since you probably already know most of it: Four foundations of mindfulness, five aggregates, six sense bases, five hindrances, three kilesas, ten fetters, five spiritual faculties, seven factors of awakening, four brahma-viharas, twelve links of dependent origination. Once you grasp this basic vocabulary, it will carry you through most of the suttas, because the Buddha essentially taught the same core principles repeatedly for forty-five years, adding layers of subtlety.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Yes."

"The discord this creates in me is about the relationship between having a monastic system and how it exists today. You could argue that 2,500 years ago there was a necessity. But the fact that Buddhist teachings were directed so heavily toward monastic life—not to say they weren't also directed to laypeople—seems to create a pathway suggesting that this really is the way to enlightenment, as opposed to the other way. Why have a monastic system at all? I'm grappling with that. It reminds me of being raised Jewish and having Catholic friends say that if you didn't embrace Christ, you could never go to heaven. It's like, 'Oh really? If I didn't do it that way, I couldn't?' That same feeling is coming up around this, and I'd like your insight."

So the question is about why the Buddha created a monastic system. Are you asking whether he's saying it's a superior way to live, or that it's the only way?

"Is he saying it is the way?"

He is absolutely not saying it's the only way. There are records in the suttas of laypeople attaining enlightenment at all four stages, including full enlightenment.

The question is about distinguishing cultural elements from core teachings when reading the suttas, particularly regarding karma.

The way I approach this distinction is to look for fairly clear Indian cultural references—specific devas dwelling in particular heavenly realms, detailed cosmological hierarchies, and other elements that seem tied to the cultural context of ancient India. These often appear cultural to me.

However, the broader framework underlying these specifics—that there are realms of existence beyond the human realm, that rebirth occurs, and that karma determines where one lands in this cycle—these seem integral to the Buddha's description of how things actually are. Whether we can verify this from our own experience is another matter, but it's clear the Buddha presented this as fundamental truth, not cultural accommodation.

Take the Buddha's repeated assertion that "there is no discoverable beginning to this samsara—beings have been wandering in this cycle of birth and death, hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, since beginningless time." He emphasizes this consistently throughout the texts. I don't think it's merely a figure of speech.

The teachings on karma and rebirth are so thoroughly woven throughout the suttas—book after book, story after story—that I believe they represent core elements of what the Buddha taught. Sometimes I hear suggestions that the Buddha didn't really mean these teachings, that they were just skillful means to draw in Hindu practitioners. But given how extensively these concepts appear, I think one would be misleading oneself to dismiss them as mere cultural artifacts.

This doesn't mean we have to believe these teachings. You can focus entirely on what's immediately experienceable here and now—mindfulness, ethical conduct, mental cultivation—and work with that for years, perhaps your entire life. That approach will serve you well.

When you encounter teachings in the suttas that don't resonate or feel comfortable, don't worry about resolving them immediately. Leave them as open questions. You don't need to figure everything out now, and you certainly don't need to believe everything to benefit from the path. The beauty of the dharma is that much of it can be verified through direct experience, and that experiential understanding can develop gradually over time.

The distinction between cultural and essential isn't always clear-cut, and sometimes you may need to discuss these questions with teachers or study commentaries to develop better discernment. Context matters enormously in these determinations.

You don't have to believe anything that you don't want to believe in this teaching.

In talking with Gil about this question, he offered a beautiful perspective: "If I were certain that there is no reincarnation, would you change your practice?" I thought about that and said no. I find that quite meaningful.

There's actually a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 60, where the Buddha presents this same inquiry. He asks: if you don't believe in rebirth, how would you live your life? The response comes: "Well, I'd want to be kind to people, I'd want to take care of my family, and I'd try to purify my mind so I didn't harm others." The Buddha responds, "Great."

He then asks: "And if you did believe in rebirth, how would you live your life?" The answer: "Well, I'd try to be kind to others, take care of my family, and purify my mind." The Buddha's response: "Good." So it comes out to the same.

You mentioned his teachings spanned 45 years—is that how long Ananda was connected with him to preserve all of this for us?

That's an excellent question. The Buddha taught for 45 years, from age 35 to age 80. However, Ananda was only his attendant for the last 25 years of his life. So there was indeed a period when Ananda wasn't present to record the discourses directly. Yet some of the recorded discourses seem to have occurred fairly early in the Buddha's teaching career.

I have a sense that the Buddha repeated many of these earlier teachings for Ananda's benefit at some point later on. There's a compelling example of this dynamic: In the Satipatthana Sutta, there's an encouragement to practice mindfulness on the unbeautiful aspects of the body—the asubha meditation on the thirty-two parts, contemplating what's not beautiful within us. The Buddha taught this practice and then went off on retreat.

When he returned, there were significantly fewer bhikkhus than before. Why? A number of monks had committed suicide because they were so disturbed by the unbeautiful aspects they were contemplating. Recognizing this harmful outcome, the Buddha said, "Let's not emphasize that practice so strongly. Instead, let's teach mindfulness of breathing."

This is how the Anapanasati Sutta came to be promoted—to counterbalance the emphasis on asubha meditation, which was not producing beneficial results in the monastic community. I believe this shift occurred fairly early in his teaching career.

Why don't we take one more brief break, and then we'll return to complete our exploration of the sutta.

CHAPTER 102

Week 1, Part 1: Introduction to the Suttas

Guy Armstrong · 43 min

> *In this opening class of a four-part series, Guy Armstrong provides essential background for studying the Pali suttas. He addresses the cultural and intellectual challenges Western practitioners face when approaching these ancient texts, which represent a "foreign country" spanning 2,500 years of history. Armstrong explains the Buddha's teaching on three types of wisdom: suttamaya paññā (wisdom from hearing/reading), cintamaya paññā (wisdom from reflection), and bhāvanamaya paññā (wisdom from meditation), emphasizing how study complements rather than replaces direct practice.*
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> *The talk traces the remarkable preservation of the suttas, from their oral transmission beginning at the First Council in Rājagaha through Ānanda's prodigious memory, to their first written recording in Sri Lanka around 100 BCE. Armstrong outlines the structure of the Tipiṭaka (Three Baskets): the Vinaya Piṭaka (monastic rules), Sutta Piṭaka (discourses), and Abhidhamma Piṭaka (detailed psychological analysis). He discusses the historical development of the 18 early Buddhist schools and the survival of only the Theravāda tradition with its complete Pali canon.*
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> *This introduction prepares students for deeper sutta study by establishing historical context and encouraging an approach that combines scholarly understanding with meditative wisdom, following the example of teachers like the Dalai Lama who integrate both intellectual rigor and heart-centered compassion.*

This is the first class in a series of four on the suttas, and it will be really helpful if you have a copy of the handout. There was a question earlier about whether you needed to buy a book for the class. You don't need to, because in each class we'll photocopy the text that we'll be studying. But if you want to pursue it further, I really recommend starting with the blue book called *In the Buddha's Words*. We'll talk about that more as we get into the study specifically.

Today's class is going to be in two parts. In the first half I want to talk about a general approach to this material because this is not the easiest material to read or study. So I want to give a little background and talk about how to approach it and why we would want to approach it, and some of the obstacles we encounter as we do.

There's an enormous distance between 21st century Westerners and the India of 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Making this transition involves questions of philosophy, history, culture, social norms, ways of seeing the world, and ways of understanding. Really, when you enter the world of the Pali suttas, you're entering a foreign country. And it's more foreign than going to India today, which God knows is unsettling enough. So you'll meet a lot of unusual people and unusual ideas, unusual practices in the pages of these texts. I want to give some perspective on how to relate to all that first, and we'll talk a little about why we bother.

In the second part of the class, I want to focus on one text in particular. That text is found in the middle-length discourses, what's called the Majjhima Nikāya. It's Sutta number 26, where the Buddha relates his own search and journey to enlightenment.

I want to talk culturally about where we are in the West today, having grown up in the 20th century and now finding ourselves in the 21st. We find ourselves with certain attitudes of mind that make it difficult to make the shift into this kind of study. For one thing, we're starting to use our conceptual apparatus—you could say our intellect, our thinking mind—when we get into the suttas. And this is something that many of us are in recovery from having overdone.

When you think about the main institutions that have formed us—schools and churches, synagogues, organized religion—neither of those have been entirely satisfactory for most of us. In the educational system, from my point of view, we've been way too intellectualized and there's not been enough attention, if any, given to the inner life, to happiness, and the possibility of development. On the other hand, in the religious sphere, Western religions have tended to focus on dogma a lot and also neglected ways to increase the sense of well-being and happiness, not given such skillful tools for inner life.

So many of us have been in kind of rebellion from our intellectual history through colleges or whatever, and we've been in rebellion from the religion that we grew up under because it wasn't speaking to us personally so effectively. As we connect with the Pali discourses, we are connecting with our intellect and we're connecting with the religious tradition. And both of those things can be off-putting. You're going to get, as we get into these suttas, a clear dose of traditional Buddhism. And it will at times seem quite religious. There will be things that resonate and things that don't resonate.

When I reflect on where we've come—Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein started teaching Vipassana retreats in California almost 40 years ago, I think the first one was in 1974. So 40 years on, we still don't have an organized study program at Spirit Rock specifically for the suttas. There's DPP, which is experience and study, but we still don't

have an established study program. It's kind of interesting. I think it's taken us this long to recover from the beating our intellects took growing up. And we need to combine this love of learning with a delight in the outcome.

These texts can offer exactly this combination of learning and delight. While there are some cultural adjustments we need to make, I hope you will discover genuine joy in reading these teachings and find that they truly enrich both your practice and your understanding of what you're undertaking.

From my perspective, it's not my job to convince you that everything the Buddha says in these texts is correct. My role is simply to introduce you to them and allow you to reach your own conclusions. You don't need to believe everything in these texts to be an effective practicing Buddhist. I encourage you to approach the readings with an open mind, taking what resonates with you and not worrying too much about the rest.

I will discuss some of the challenging aspects that can be off-putting, but I want to prepare you for these beforehand. Consider this a kind of inoculation—understanding what might be difficult in the Pali suttas so that when you encounter these elements, you'll have some resistance to being put off by them.

When I contemplate how I want to grow in Dharma personally, I often think of His Holiness the Dalai Lama as an aspiration. How many of you have attended his multi-day teachings? Not just a public talk, but extended teachings lasting four or five days?

Those who have know that in public talks and at the beginning of his extended teachings, he embodies the warm, outgoing bodhisattva of compassion. He can put an entire room into joyful uproar, touching people's hearts and making immediate connection on that fundamental level. He possesses this remarkable ability whether he's addressing the United Nations or speaking to 200,000 people in Central Park—he makes that direct heart-to-heart contact.

But if you stay for several days of his teachings, he transitions out of that mode into the role of pedantic Buddhist philosopher. He will explore the subtleties of the Heart Sutra, Madhyamaka teachings, or Dzogchen texts and practices with tremendous precision and scholarly rigor. So he possesses this deeply scholarly and intellectual dimension that emerges during formal teaching, alongside that beautiful heart quality that can connect with anyone when he chooses to engage it.

In my view, this is how our practice should develop. We should cultivate that engaging heart quality while simultaneously developing our understanding of these texts, because I believe it's our comprehension of the texts' depth that can point us toward corresponding depth in our meditation practice.

Until we begin to read about what's possible through Vipassana practice, we won't aspire to it. But as the texts reveal the possibilities and depth that the Buddha uncovered, we can find inspiration to go deeper, to venture further than what we've experienced ourselves. I believe that study serves as an excellent guide for our meditation practice.

At a recent teaching I attended with the Dalai Lama, he quoted an old Tibetan master—I can't recall if he even mentioned the name—who described three aspects of Dharma practice. I think this applies to us as well. This master said: "When I meditate, I bring to bear my study and my critical reflection on my meditation experience. When I study, I bring to bear my meditation and my critical reflection. When I critically reflect, I bring to bear my meditation and my study."

These three facets should engage us all in furthering our path: meditation, study, and critical reflection.

Remarkably, these were identified by the Buddha himself 2,500 years ago in a passage from the Dīgha Nikāya, where he described three kinds of wisdom.

He called the first *sutamaya paññā*. You probably know that *paññā* is the word for wisdom. *Suta* means hearing, and *maya* means "made from." So this is wisdom that comes from hearing. When you listen to a Dharma talk and begin to see things differently, when you have insights or understanding from a teaching—this represents *sutamaya paññā*. This was the only form available in the Buddha's time, since there were no written scriptures then. Everything was transmitted through hearing, though reading fulfills the same function today. We could say reading or hearing—*sutamaya paññā*.

The second level is *cintāmaya paññā*. *Cintā* means thinking. This is the wisdom that comes from reflecting upon what we've heard in light of our experience. We all need to engage in this process. We hear a teaching about the cause of suffering, about right speech, about the Eightfold Path. We must reflect: is this true in my life? As we move through different actions, times, and circumstances, we need to examine whether these teachings accurately describe what happens to us. Through this process of mentally chewing over the teachings with our thoughts and concepts, we come to verify what we've heard.

The final level the Buddha described is called *bhāvanāmaya paññā*. *Bhāvanā* means mental development and is sometimes synonymous with meditation. This represents the insights or wisdom that arises from our direct meditation practice.

When the mind has been stilled through the cultivation of samadhi and we are able to see more clearly the way things are, then insight and knowledge arises based on that clear seeing. This is the meaning of the term yata-bhuta-nyana-dasana, knowledge and vision into things as they are.

So this is the third type of insight, and this is the most liberating. Sometimes you'll get a deep flash from just hearing. Sometimes you'll get a deep flash from a reflection. But most often the liberating insights come when the mind has been stilled through meditation, and then that still mind is turned to contact with reality—that's bhavana-mayapanya.

So a complete program of Dharma practice involves all three of these aspects. In the forty years roughly that Vipassana has been available in the West, we focus so strongly on the bhavana part because frankly I think we were all in a state of emergency. I know I was. When I came into meditation practice, I had some burning suffering that I needed to have some cold relief water put on. And meditation was the direct vehicle to that.

As we continue and gain more ease in our personal lives, then I think that's a very good time to bring in the study element. We have some meditation experience, some degree of harmony. Then we can look for where the greatest depth can come. And then study plays a wonderful role here.

Tibetans have another analogy that our Dharma practice is like climbing a tall mountain. It's tall. We know there's a long way to go. But they say that meditating without studying is trying to climb the mountain without a map. But studying without meditating is like trying to climb the mountain with your feet tied together. So we really need both.

I was reminded of this map, the importance of the map piece recently. Sally and I were going on a hike with some friends. Sally's my wife and she taught here this morning, so we're doing a whole day between us. We were going on a hike with some friends and we got to the trailhead. There was a hiker already walking down the trail, so I just popped out of the car and dashed off after the hiker I saw going down the trail. But what I didn't notice—and then a few people started following me—what I didn't notice is that he was going to a dead end. But Sally didn't follow me because she'd found the map. So she figured out where the trail actually was and started going that way, and so we all had to turn around and follow her because she had the map.

So studying can let us avoid some of those dead ends. You might go a long way down a certain track before realizing it's kind of a dead end, and the study can put us back on track.

I want to talk a little bit about the background to these texts. This is one of the books that has come to us, the Middle Length Sayings or the translation of the Majjhima Nikaya. The fact that we can hold a book like this in our hands today is very improbable. These words were spoken purportedly 2,500 years ago, more than that. And the fact that they have come down in such seemingly complete—I won't say completely complete, but seemingly complete and useful form—is miraculous.

When we start to hear the story about how this book comes to be, it sounds to me like something out of Raiders of the Lost Ark. I mean there are all these mysterious things happening. There are secret texts that are filed away in hidden chambers and guarded by celibate acolytes in caves and forests for centuries and centuries while wars and kings and different struggles go on in the background, and it's amazing that it survived at all.

So I want to tell a little bit of the history of how these texts have come to us. It'll give you some sense of the rarity of what we have here.

After the Buddha died, a group of senior monks—they were all considered to be fully awakened—came together in Rajagaha in northern India in a gathering called the First Council. And they spent the rains retreat, which is three months long, in a group of caves just in the hills above Rajagaha.

There were three main players at this gathering. There were many, many enlightened beings, it said, but there were three main players. Maha Kasipa was the remaining senior disciple of the Buddha's—went back a long time, because both the Buddha's main disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, died before him, so they were no longer available. So Maha Kasipa was kind of the senior monk remaining. He was a very strict and tough guy. He was an ascetic monk and held people to very tough standards.

The second person who was very key was a monk called Upali. And Upali had in his memory all the rules of the monastic discipline and was able to recite them at that council and so gathered up all the codes that governed the monks and nuns.

And the third person was Ananda. Ananda had been the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. So he had been personally around him nearly every day. He listened to many, many discourses. And if he had missed a discourse, if the Buddha was giving it to someone else, Ananda would ask him at the end of the day, "What did you say? Please relate it to me because I want to remember it."

It was Ananda's recollection that provided the material for the suttas. Sutta, the literal meaning is thread, but the translation we use is discourse. So when we talk about the Pali discourses, these are the suttas—the actual words that the Buddha spoke during his lifetime, primarily as recollected by Ananda at that first council.

The timing of this council places it around 483 BCE, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi's estimation. While scholars debate the exact dates of the Buddha's birth and death, this translator of our text suggests that the Buddha died 483 years before the birth of Christ. The first council occurred in the six months following that time.

Now, it may seem really unlikely that one person could remember all the discourses of the Buddha. That's quite a feat of memory. But Ananda was known for having a prodigious memory. And just as a counterpoint to that, there are monks in Burma today who can recite all the suttas at will. They hold contests where senior monks will start reading a sutta anywhere—they'll pick open a book and start reading in Pali, then ask another monk to continue. The monk simply picks up and continues from that exact point. Then they'll choose a different volume and pose the same challenge to another monk. These monastics can do this flawlessly. There are monks in Burma today who have memorized the entire canon in Pali, which isn't even their native language. So I think it's entirely possible that Ananda could have remembered all of that. He had a very clear mind and exceptional memory.

Now let's examine the structure of what has come down to us. If you look at the second page of your handout, titled "An Outline of the Pali Canon," you'll see that the teachings are organized into what are called three baskets, or Tipitaka.

The first basket is the Vinaya Pitaka—the monastic rules that were recited by Upali at that first council. There are six volumes in English translation of the Vinaya. I don't know anybody who's read them all. But if you want a kind of Cliff's Notes guide to the Vinaya, Thanissaro Bhikkhu has written a wonderful book called *The Buddhist Monastic Code*, which explains these rules in accessible terms. It's an excellent place to explore if you want to understand what these regulations are about.

There are approximately 227 rules for monks and 254 rules for nuns. This disparity exists not because nuns are intrinsically more prone to transgression, but because their lives required more protection given the social conditions for women in ancient India. The Vinaya contains all these written guidelines and their corresponding offenses. It's essentially a complete legal system that the Buddha developed as circumstances arose, complete with penalties, judicial procedures, standards of evidence, and so forth.

The second basket is called the Sutta Pitaka—the basket of discourses where all of Ananda's recitations are collected. This is broken down into smaller collections, which we'll examine shortly.

The third basket is the Abhidhamma Pitaka, which translates as the basket of higher dhamma. It's concerned with extremely detailed analysis of moment-to-moment experience. You could say it describes human experience told completely from the perspective of no concept of self—just moment-to-moment unfolding of sensory contact, factors of consciousness, mental factors, and so on. This comprises seven volumes in the Pali Text Society edition. I also don't know anyone who's read all of these.

However, there are accessible guides. As noted on your handout, if you're interested in the Abhidhamma, an excellent introduction is *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* by Bhikkhu Bodhi, which offers a readable summary of this complex material.

There is one teacher in our group who knows the Abhidhamma quite well—Steve Armstrong. He completed an Abhidhamma retreat here in October of this year, which I hear was very well received. If you're interested, I think he'll probably offer it again if we invite him back. Marianne, are we going to invite him back? You said five years? Well, we'll work on Steve to return sooner than that.

These are the three baskets. In terms of the historical background, let me share the legend behind the Abhidhamma. According to tradition, the Buddha spent one rains retreat in a heaven realm, and it's said that the Abhidhamma material had to be delivered in one sitting.

And that's why he went to the heaven realm—because it was hard to sit for three months uninterruptedly in an earthly body. In the heaven realm, his mother had taken her rebirth, and so he gave the teachings to his mother in her next incarnation. His mother died shortly after he was born. So it's said that he gave the teachings to her in one straight sitting in a heaven realm. And then daily he would manifest in his earthly body and deliver the summary of the day's teachings to Sariputta, who was considered the foremost in wisdom of all the disciples. And Sariputta collected it and that became the basis for the Abhidhamma.

Now, if you believe that, I have a bridge toward San Francisco I'd like to sell you. Scholars don't think it happened that way. Western scholars believe that the material in the Abhidhamma was collected over about 250 years after the Buddha's death and assembled by later monks. They seem in universal agreement on this process, and they can sort of track the aging of the assembly of the Abhidhamma. So if you talk to a committed Buddhist in a traditional country like Burma, they will believe that the Abhidhamma came from the Buddha himself. But if you talk to a Western scholar, they'll say, no, it was collected by later practitioners, and so actually resembles more of a commentary than a direct transmission from the Buddha.

So in these things, I tend to side with Western scholars. I have faith in their scientific approach, and I view it as a later collection, but one that has a lot of valuable insight and incredible minute understanding of the processes of mind and body. So very worth study, but not necessarily the words of the Buddha.

Whatever was around, certainly the monastic basket and the discourse basket was transmitted for 400 years only orally. There was writing at this time—500 years BCE, there was writing—but it was only used basically for record keeping with things like finances and imperial accounts. So emperors would use it to note down who had paid taxes and where they had made donations and how many bushels of grain they'd received in the recent tax year. But writing wasn't considered suitable for putting down the highest spiritual teachings because it was felt that writing could get corrupted too easily. Somebody could miswrite a word, it would be copied wrongly by someone else and the essence would be lost. They felt it was more faithful to reproduce these teachings by memorizing them and transmitting them orally from one person to another.

So what happened over these 400 years is that different groups of monks and nuns picked different sections of the text to memorize. So one group would be in charge of the first section of the Majjhima Nikaya. Another group would be in charge of the first section of the Samyutta Nikaya, and so forth. And it would be their responsibility to chant these regularly, to teach new people how to memorize them and chant them and what they meant, and to pass that on over the years.

So this went on this way for about 400 years. And in that time, these texts migrated to Sri Lanka because one of the great emperors of India, a fellow named Ashoka, became a convert to Buddhism, I think around 250 BCE, and then sent his son, I believe, as a missionary to Sri Lanka to establish Buddhism there. His son established Buddhism there. The transmission of the text was taking place. But a king came up in Sri Lanka who persecuted Buddhism. It was a threat to what he believed. So he began persecuting the Buddhist monks and the nuns and trying to destroy their religion. And as he was

doing that, it's said that some of the texts were in danger of getting lost—that one section of the text, almost all the monks and nuns had died out who were responsible for that, and there was only one person left in Sri Lanka who knew those texts.

So when it got to that point, the elders said, oh wait, this is too risky. We could lose everything under this king. And so they decreed that the text should at that point be written down. So this happened about 400 years after the death of the Buddha, about 100 BCE—the first time that these texts were first written down. And they were written down in this language called Pali, which was an ancient language, alive at the time of the Buddha most likely, but it's dead today, so we don't know exactly. We believe the Buddha probably spoke Magadhan, not Pali, but Pali may have been closely related to Magadhan. That area that the Buddha grew up in was called Magadha in ancient India.

Pali is similar to Sanskrit, but it's less refined. Sanskrit has always been the high language of Indian literature, especially scriptural literature. And it's said that if you know Sanskrit, hearing someone speak Pali is like trying to speak Sanskrit with pebbles in your mouth. So it's a little cruder form than Sanskrit. But it's complete. It's philosophically refined and complex and very workable.

So the Pali suttas were alive in India. They were written down in Sri Lanka by 100 BCE. Over the few hundred years after the death of the Buddha, what happens to a big group of people after the founder dies? Do you observe this? They start arguing, don't they?

When there's not that central figure to hold it together, the arguments break out. That's exactly what happened after the Buddha's death. Arguments broke out and people started interpreting the doctrine differently. They started interpreting the monastic discipline differently. This led to a splintering into eighteen different schools in about the four hundred years following the Buddha's death.

That figure is an approximation because there are some schools that can be considered one school, or if you look at it differently, they could be divided into even more schools. But eighteen is the general number.

To give you a sense of some of the disagreements: one of the influential schools that arose to the east, the Mahasanghikas, said that monks and nuns could have money. The Buddhist discipline was always based on a vow of poverty, not handling gold and silver or money. This group said no, monks and nuns should be able to handle money. Neither side would relent, so that caused a split.

One school I really like the name of—the Pugalavadans. Isn't that great? The Pugalavadans. Their doctrine was that the self existed. They said it was somewhere between a concept and an ultimate reality, but that there was something called a self which had some real existence. Doctrinally, that's at odds with most of the other schools which say everything that you can recognize is not-self. So the Pugalavadans had a different stance.

It was only at about this point—100 BCE, four hundred years after the death of the Buddha—that the Mahayana showed up at all. Nobody knows the exact origins of the Mahayana. Their teaching is similar to the early schools, but they emphasize the path of the bodhisattva, the active role of compassion, and the central role of emptiness in understanding the philosophy. None of them are so different, but it's a different emphasis. This has formed the major divide over the centuries since—Mahayana and our school.

Now our school, the Theravada, was one of those eighteen. The curious thing is all the other schools died out. The Theravada is the only one of the early schools that has survived in practice to the current day. Fragments of other canons are around. Every school had its own canon. They would rewrite some of the scriptures. They would rewrite especially the Abhidhamma, maybe the Vinaya. No complete canon has survived except for the Pali canon, which is connected with the Theravada school.

As I read the descent and the splintering of these schools, it does seem to me that the Theravada has come down in a very straight line from the original Sangha of the time of the Buddha. Some other schools were clearly splitting off—the Mahasanghikas with their different Vinaya, the Pugalavadans with a different doctrine of self. But as I read the evolution of these eighteen schools, I believe the Theravada is a straight lineal descendant of the early Sangha. So I feel it's pretty well in line with the original teachings as far as we can know them.

When the Mahayana came along, you may have the impression—because Mahayana is almost exclusively the school in Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan—that once the Mahayana arose, it took over. That by its intrinsic philosophical superiority and elegance of its compassionate heart, it won over all the believers it touched. It's not true.

The two schools coexisted side by side in India for about a thousand years. Some early Chinese visitors recorded their visits to India and kept journals that can still be read today. They recorded that there was actually a majority of early Buddhist practitioners as opposed to Mahayana practitioners in the monasteries they visited in India at the time.

We don't have a convenient term for all these early eighteen different schools. They're often referred to as carriers of Nikaya Buddhism. So this is the Majjhima Nikaya. Nikaya just means these collections—collection. These collections of early discourses is what the followers based their teachings on, so they were often known as Nikaya Buddhists. Sometimes it's just called early Buddhism, Nikaya Buddhism. We can't really call it Theravadan Buddhism back then, because that was just one school. But there were seventeen others at the same time that all had basically the same philosophical approach. The Mahayana took it off in a different direction.

Over the years, what has come down to us is the Theravada and the Mahayana. Later in Indian history, about the seventh century, Buddhism became very influenced by the tantric practices of Hinduism. Those tantric practices as they came into Mahayana formed, as it went to Tibet, Vajrayana Buddhism. So those are the three main schools that we have today of meditative practice.

Then, in India, around the eighth to the twelfth centuries, there were successive waves of invasion from Turkey. This is when Islam entered India. In those waves of invasion, the Muslim invaders destroyed most of the monasteries. Scriptures were burned and lost.

You can still see the scorch marks on the wood if you visit Nalanda today, not far from Bodh Gaya, where the university was destroyed by fire. In the excavations, archaeologists have found bowls that appear to have been abandoned mid-meal—people immediately putting down their food to flee the scene of invasion and destruction.

Buddhism in India essentially ended around the twelfth century. While Hinduism couldn't be wiped out because it lived in every home, on every street corner, woven into every family's practice, Buddhism could be eliminated because it was concentrated in monasteries. It was predominantly a monastic tradition, making it vulnerable to systematic destruction.

But by the time Buddhism ended in India, it had already been successfully transplanted. The Theravada school and the Pali suttas were established in Sri Lanka. Through the Silk Route, the Mahayana version traveled north through Kashmir into Tibet and China. From Sri Lanka, Buddhism extended sometime around the eighth to tenth centuries to Burma, Thailand, and Southeast Asia. Later, it could repopulate into India from these neighboring countries.

The unfolding of Buddhism across Asia tells a remarkable story. At various points, virtually all of Asia was Buddhist or largely Buddhist. Starting in India, where it coexisted alongside Hinduism for centuries, Buddhism spread west to what is now Pakistan

and Afghanistan. You may remember when the Taliban destroyed those large Buddha statues in Bamiyan—those dated from the third century CE, evidence of Afghanistan's once-strong Buddhist presence.

To the east, Buddhism migrated throughout Southeast Asia and Indonesia. The magnificent monument of Borobudur in Java, built around the eighth century, stands as testament to this expansion. To the north, Buddhism became predominant in Tibet and central to Chinese culture, spreading from there to Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Across this vast swath of Asia—from Afghanistan to Japan, including Mongolia—Buddhism flourished for many centuries, coexisting harmoniously with local traditions like Shinto in Japan, Confucianism and Taoism in China.

Today, Buddhism finds itself somewhat in retreat across Asia, challenged by the twin forces of capitalism and communism. Communism has had devastating effects in China and Tibet, while capitalism's advance in places like Thailand has diminished the energy among youth for traditional practice. Communist influence also affected Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Yet beautifully, Buddhism is returning to India, completing a circle that began twenty-five centuries ago.

Visiting these ancient sites in India proves deeply inspiring. The Indian government now preserves and maintains the places the Buddha frequented during his lifetime, opening them to pilgrims and practitioners. Standing in these locations, you realize the incredible lineage we're part of—a tradition spanning 2,500 years that has inspired magnificent architecture, art, and sculpture, fostered large communities of dedicated practitioners, and attracted people willing to devote their entire lives to carrying forward these teachings.

We join with all of this vast heritage. It's extraordinary to realize our roots reach back so far into history, connecting us with countless generations of seekers and sages who have walked this path before us.

CHAPTER 103

Patterns of Becoming 1: Introduction

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

In this opening talk of a series on the construction of self, Guy Armstrong explores how we generate a sense of 'I' through predictable patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. Drawing from the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18), he examines the progression from sense contact to mental proliferation (papañca), showing how perception leads to thoughts that create our experience of becoming. Armstrong discusses the three root patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion as strategies the mind uses to cope with impermanence and insecurity. Through personal examples and contemplation of karmic patterns, he illustrates how repeated mental actions solidify into character and self-view. The talk emphasizes mindfulness of the body as essential for understanding our emotional inheritance and points toward the peace that emerges when we stop the endless cycle of becoming. This foundational teaching sets the stage for a deeper exploration of dependent origination and the path to freedom from the construction of self.

Thank you.

I want to explore with you over the next few weeks the patterns around the creation of the self in the teachings of the Buddha. I'm sure you know that the Buddha said this sense of self is not intrinsic to the experience of being a human in a body, but is something that we generate out of our views and beliefs and concepts. And at the same time, this sense of self is what limits us so strongly.

When you look at the basic human potential, we have this limitless awareness with a capacity to fill it with a boundless sense of loving kindness. That's the reality of our nature. And yet, how often do we open to that immensity? Or how often is our attention contracted and constricted and made small by this sense of self and self-concern?

You can track it moment by moment. How many moments during the day were you in that vast space of openness and boundless loving-kindness? How many moments of the day was there concern about how am I doing? So we generate this concern about the I over and over and over again out of certain predictable ways of thinking and feeling and acting. And it's this regeneration again and again in the belief in something solid being pointed to with the sense of I that creates a lot of the sense of bondage.

So I want to explore in these talks over the next three weeks how this sense of self gets put together, and then how the tools of the Dharma allow us to understand it, not be taken in by it, and return the mind to that original sense of vastness, openness, and boundlessness.

In one way the description of the limitation is really simple. Pascal talked last night about clinging and the four types of clinging. The Buddha said at one point, "Don't cling to anything whatsoever. One who has heard this has heard all the dharmas. One who has practiced this has practiced all the dharmas." That's really simple, right?

Or consider the second and third noble truths. The cause of suffering is craving. The third noble truth, the end of suffering, is the end of craving. Oh, it's so simple. So it's just craving or clinging. But each of those has lots of layers and operates in so many subtle ways in our minds and in our experience that the mechanics of suffering actually get pretty complex.

So what we want to look at is all the mechanics that go into the creation, the generation, the continuing regeneration of this sense of self because it's our fundamental human activity, reasserting the I and the mind and how that involves us with suffering and then how we can get free from it.

The concepts that I'll bring in tonight and over these talks are drawn from the very central teachings of the Buddha. So we'll touch on the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, karma, not-self, conceptual proliferation, becoming, the end of karma, nibbana, and freedom. All these central teachings are pointing to the same thing: where we get caught and limited and small and how we release that to return to our basic openness and vastness. All the teachings are pointing to the same movement. So that's what we want to explore in some detail.

And I also have to warn you, this is the first time I've tried to put this stuff together. So it's still a little chaotic in my own mind. The risk is that you're going to get bored and I'm going to feel stupid. So just to set expectations accordingly.

The thing that I notice at the beginning of a retreat is we come into this quiet place, we don't have very much to do, we've dropped all our outer activity which was so busy and kept the mind in such a momentum of thinking and feeling and doing and planning and creating. We come into this really simple environment.

Does that mental activity stop? Not right away, does it? I mean, the first few days, that's what we hear from you a lot in interviews. "Wow, the mind is still so busy or so restless." In between, it falls asleep, but when it wakes up, it gets really busy again.

So why is that? You know, why can't we just look at the situation and say, "Oh, I don't need to be so busy now. I'm in a meditation retreat. I can just stop thinking." Why is it so difficult to stop?

I think the thing is that that level of doing has a lot of momentum. And it's driven partly out of habit and it's driven partly out of deep emotional tendencies. So we'll look at that a little bit.

But this process of stopping is very valuable in meditation. And a lot of you are mentioning how it's slowing down and sometimes coming to real peace already in these first few days. And of course this is really important. This quality of non-doing is a very high value in Buddhism. Of course we need to do in our worldly life. We need to do in our meditation. But in meditation it's all leading to this ability to not do.

Non-doing is indeed a very high value and profoundly freeing. Carol and I were on staff at IMS in the late 70s together with another good friend, Steve Armstrong, who remains close to us today. We did a staff retreat early on when we were there, and at the end of the retreat, we discovered that Steve had spent his time drawing up an advertising brochure for IMS. That's what Yogi Mind does—it gets really creative.

Steve had a set of colored pencils and created a three-page fold-out brochure advertising Insight Meditation Society. It featured things like "the vacation of your dreams: no talking, no swimming, no eating after noon, no tennis, no golf," and on and on. The motto for the center, positioned prominently at the center of the opening page, was: "It's better to do nothing than to waste time."

We can take that as a pointer. It's better to do nothing than to do lots of things, in fact. But this isn't so easy, even for people at fairly advanced levels of practice.

One of the teachers who has inspired me in recent years, and whom some of my friends follow quite closely, is a young Tibetan Lama named Mingyur Rinpoche. He has an organization that spans the world, with monasteries in Nepal and India, headquarters in Minneapolis, and thousands of students around the globe. I would say he has thousands of monks and nuns, and another set of thousands of lay students. He's a very impressive being, probably about 35 now, possessing this combination—much like the Dalai Lama—of very deep meditation practice and broad outer vision. He has many projects in the world, but he's someone who has completed extensive retreat practice and study, with a profound meditation background and philosophical understanding.

So here he was, 35 years old, with all this responsibility—monasteries, nunneries, monastic followers, lay followers. About a year and a half ago, Mingyur Rinpoche announced he was going to drop it all and go into three-year retreat. This past May, he

was in Bodh Gaya preparing to leave. Everyone thought there would be time to say goodbye, wish him well, make sure he got on the right bus, and pack his toothbrush for him. Then one day he simply wasn't there anymore. People went to bring him his lunch and found his room empty. He had left without his toothbrush, his passport, or any money. He had simply walked away into the middle of India because this call toward realization through non-doing was so strong. He had felt a deep call since he was a teenager to return to three-year retreat, and he left his entire worldly organization, commitments, and responsibilities in the hands of others.

I can't tell you how inspired I was by this. This is what the old masters used to do—they would say that the realization of the Buddha's teaching is more important than trying to take care of things in the world. I really admired his example and look forward to doing something similar at some point. Not three years—Mingyur Rinpoche isn't married.

So where does all this energy behind doing come from? I want to suggest a kind of source. If we look closely, I think on some level we all know that the world isn't really a secure place. We've noticed the changing nature of things. We've tried to construct happiness over 20, 30, 40 or more years, and it hasn't really come to a lasting, solid place yet. We're aware of the impermanent and insecure underpinning of the whole enterprise.

I think it's as a defense against seeing that total amount of change, impermanence, and lack of security that the psyche wants to try to construct something lasting—and that's why it embarks on the enterprise of the self. We can't find consistency out there, so let's see if we can find it in here, in this concept around "I."

One of the ways we go about this—the "I," as you've noticed, likes pleasure and doesn't like pain—is to try to feed it. How can we keep the pleasant coming and the unpleasant not coming? And let's not look too closely at what we do while we do that.

I would say these are the three fundamental strategies of mind that let us cope with the truth of insecurity, the truth of impermanence. The first is the force of desire. Because I know things are always going to be changing, let me try to keep the pleasant coming all the time. This is the mind movement of greed or *lobha*.

The second basic strategy is to try to be secure by always pushing away the unpleasant. This has two modes. One is the aggressive mode, which really pushes against what's unpleasant or threatening—the mode of anger. The other is the fear mode, which instead of pushing, tries to pull back and move away from anything threatening.

Both of these are the motive force of aversion. Then the third strategy is simply not wanting to look too closely at what we're doing, because if we did, we'd see it wouldn't work. This clouding over is the work of delusion.

So these are the three poisons: greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed and aversion are always accompanied by delusion, or they wouldn't be able to sustain themselves. Delusion also keeps us out of touch with what's happening, providing another way of insulating ourselves or taking a step back from the impingement of that contact Pascal spoke about last night.

These are the three basic forces of mind, and it's important to see that these are strategies. They're not accidents that happen to have been planted in the psyche by some alien force. These grow out of the human heart. This is how we all try to cope with the uncertainty of existence, with our situation. When Carol mentioned in her talk that the essence of samsara is trying to correct, these are the mechanisms we use to carry out that correction.

You can see this in the days you've been here already. Why are the sittings not completely peaceful? Because we're trying to make the body a little more comfortable, or do away with that pain and tension that's cropped up in our shoulder blade. Or we're trying to return to that concentrated, peaceful sitting we had earlier in the day. Or trying to feel again the great loving-kindness we had for our benefactor. Or trying to push away the fear, anxiety, anger, or resentment that's arising in the moment. We keep trying to make it just a little bit better. A little bit better. And this is the action of greed and aversion supported by delusion. It keeps us from peace, from rest, from ease, and from non-doing.

This is basically the activity of the self. Now, there's another word for this kind of activity because it has motivation: this is karma. Karma in the Buddhist language is simply action with an intention or motive. So another way to describe this is that we're constantly acting, trying to get something from the situation. And it's all about myself—all these little adjustments.

Did you spend a lot of time today worrying about the global economy? Do you spend much time worrying about the unemployment rate being at 8.3 percent? I mean, maybe we should be spending more time worrying about climate change, for example. But most of our worries tend to be about me.

Ajahn Amaro, who's now the abbot of Amaravati in England, has this great talk title. He has a talk on becoming—which is also about the formation of self—and the subtitle is "Why Public Speaking is More Terrifying Than Worldwide Nuclear Destruction." It kind of is, isn't it?

Because we sense this underlying uncertainty, openness, and impermanence, we want to build a sense of I that can bring in some degree of solidity. We need to keep fortifying that sense of I because it's not inherently there. So every time a new experience comes along, we need to sweep it into this creation of self. As we go throughout our day, we take the events of the day and use them to recreate the sense of I. We generally create some kind of self-image or self-view that lasts over time, which we can bolster through this process.

We form a self-image that should extend over time so we can have the sense that the I is something. Interestingly enough, karmic patterns tend to reinforce that image. It's like the patterns and the image start to reinforce each other, so things that begin as just a single passing thought solidify over time.

This is one way it's been expressed: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit, and habit hardens into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings." This quote has been attributed to the Buddha, but I haven't been able to find it in the texts and I don't know the source of it.

But I want to read it again because it's quite important: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit, and habit hardens into character."

You know, especially at my age, having observed a lot of the passing years and seeing the formation of character, I really feel the reality of this. And once character is formed, it's not so easy to undo. I wish I had known this when I was twenty, because character is really so much more malleable when we're young. So I really just want to welcome all the young people in the audience and express how happy I am that you are receiving this wisdom while you're growing up, when you still have so much openness available.

It's interesting that neuroscience is confirming a lot of this. The formation of character out of habit that's repeated many times is captured in what neuroscientists say: neurons that fire together wire together. As they repeat and repeat and repeat a similar associated action, they get wired together in a way that makes it likely that pattern will

happen again and again. I was curious about the source of this quote and thought perhaps it had come out of recent research in the last ten years. Actually, this came from a neuropsychologist in 1949, so this understanding has been around for quite a while.

Our own actions—of mind, of speech, and of body—really shape the mind and its patterns, its habits, the character that gets formed from them, even when it's not appropriate to the setting. Just like coming in from a busy life, the momentum of our thinking actions carry over into here.

There are many different patterns that happen for people. The one that I brought into meditation was a habit of fear. I can sort of trace the origin of this in my early twenties. I had some very confusing episodes as I was getting into early adulthood that left me with a lot of fear in my body, which then came out as I got quiet and meditated.

One year in England in the early eighties, I'd gone over to do a period of retreat with Christopher Titmuss and Christina Feldman. This was the forerunner of Gaia House, called East Farmhouse—a beautiful little rented house out in the country in Wiltshire, not far from Salisbury. It was rented from a retired colonel from the British military who didn't have a clue what we were doing there.

One of the people in the organizing group was an honorable—that means he's the son of a lord, and he can put "honorable" on his checking account. When the colonel saw that there was an honorable involved in the organization, he said, "He must be a good guy. Son of a lord—I'll rent the house to him." So the honorable's name was on the lease, but the colonel didn't know what was going on in the house. He would periodically drop in to visit.

So he came at one time during a meditation period, and they showed him around the house—he wanted to make sure things were being taken care of. They took him into the conservatory and the kitchen and the front room. But the meditation hall in this little house was in a small back room that looked out onto the back garden—you might call it a drawing room or a parlor.

They felt they had to show him that room too. Well, that's where the meditation was going on. They opened the door for the colonel, who of course had no idea what was happening. It happened to be a period of standing meditation—twenty-five people standing stock still and silent in the middle of the colonel's drawing room. They opened the door and he looked upon this sight. Then they closed the door, and all he could say was, "Well, you certainly have them well trained, don't you?"

So that was our summer at East Farmhouse. It was really a beautiful location. We were there in July, and one evening—the colonel was not there—I was doing standing meditation in the back garden. My eyes were closed and I was standing out on the grass. This fear was coming, as it came often in those days in my practice. I was just trying to be grounded and feel it in the body and open to it in the mind. It just kept coming.

For some reason, in the middle of that standing meditation, I just decided to open my eyes.

And I was standing next to a tree that was in bloom. The petals were scattered all around me. The sun was going down and the garden was bathed in that golden light of evening's last rays. The birds were beginning their twilight calls, preparing to settle for the night. The whole scene was held in this soft British air, with just enough humidity to make it feel like something out of a storybook—like something from Jane Austen. It was so beautiful, so soft, so utterly reassuring.

I just thought to myself, "Wow, it's really a scary world, isn't it?" Here I was in this state of fear in a beautiful and completely safe environment. The fear had no relation to where I was or what I was doing. It was so out of place. But that's what happens with these patterns, these karmic patterns. I was simply continuing to frighten myself for no reason whatsoever.

These habits, these patterns that we find ourselves in, come into the mind and naturally they come into the body as well. So often as we come to practice, we see the movements of mind and feel those directly in our body. This is why it's so important that we begin retreat—and I really trust everyone who's practicing this way—by learning to bring mindfulness throughout the body, so that we can truly feel the life of the body, make space for all the emotions that live there, and get to know our emotional life through meeting it in the body.

Sometimes there's a lot of old information stored there that we need to really fill with our awareness, pervade with our awareness, so that it can be felt and then released. This mindfulness of the body, which is the first foundation the Buddha taught, is so essential for coming to know ourselves and connecting with this heritage of our own karma, our own actions—mental actions and outer actions.

All these past actions create patterns that express themselves in our feelings, in our thoughts, and then in our actions in life. I'm sure you can see in your own personality what some of these patterns are. Everybody has patterns of strength that come from wholesome qualities: kindness or generosity, understanding, happiness, contentment. Those patterns fill one's life. And we all work with patterns of difficulty.

As meditators, you've probably become quite familiar with what those patterns are for you. For many of us in meditation, these patterns of our mental actions become the single biggest challenge in life as we come to understand our makeup and conditioning—the patterns that live within us, within our mind and within our body.

The one I had to work with for a long time was fear, and I received a great deal—I really appreciate its presence because I learned so much from it. For others, it could be self-judgment or shame. It could be various kinds of addiction or dependencies. We all work with different aspects of these legacies.

When people have been abused early in life, sometimes the patterns they're left with are not so much from their own generation, their own creation, as what has been imposed on them through that mistreatment. But nonetheless, they continue to live until they're understood and can be released. There's not as much of a sense of ownership with them.

We start to understand ourselves in this way, and these patterns and our self-view begin to reinforce each other. I understood myself as someone who was fearful. Then the fear would continue, and that would confirm this understanding, this view, which would hold it in place. The self-view supports the pattern. The pattern supports the self-view. How do we work beyond it?

There's an interesting sutta that describes how some of this gets rolling. It's called the Honeyball—number 18 in the Majjhima Nikaya. There's a story with many of these suttas, so I want to tell the story as well, because you get a glimpse of the life of the Buddha and the culture of that time in India. This was about 500 BCE.

The Buddha was living at this time in Kapilavatthu, which is where he had grown up. After much wandering, he returned periodically to the place of his childhood. Many of his monks and close disciples came from there, including his attendant, Ananda. Ananda is with him in this story, so we assume this is in the Buddha's later years, because Ananda became his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life—from the time he was fifty-five onward. So let's say the Buddha was in his late middle age, prob-

ably somewhere between fifty-five and sixty years old. He was quite established as a teacher by this time and never betrayed much self-doubt. He had developed great confidence by this point.

So he was in meditation when someone approached him whose name was Dandapani. From the name and the commentary, the name refers to a stick, and we understand that he was walking with a stick—a golden stick, according to the commentary. Even though Dandapani was a young man, he carried this golden stick, giving the impression that he was something of a dandy, as the name suggests.

At this time in India, spiritual seekers delighted in debating one another. It was like ultimate cage fighting, but on a verbal level. If you could knock the other person out of the ring, you established yourself as the best teacher in that area.

Dandapani probably came from that background when he approached the Buddha. After what the text calls "courteous greetings"—though one wonders how courteous they actually were—he stood to one side, leaned on his stick, and asked the Blessed One: "What does the recluse assert? What does he proclaim?"

This was not a very respectful greeting for the time, so you get the feeling Dandapani was just waiting for the Buddha to say something so he could launch an attack.

The Buddha, who was no fool, replied: "Friend, I assert and proclaim such a teaching that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world."

That response cut the ground right out from under Dandapani. When this was said, Dandapani shook his head, wagged his tongue, and raised his eyebrows until his forehead was puckered in three lines. Then he departed, leaning on his stick.

We can see that Dandapani was frustrated by the Buddha's refusal to engage in contention with him. The Buddha then related this story to the monks and went off for a rest. The monks, talking among themselves, wondered: "What exactly did the Blessed One mean by a doctrine whereby one doesn't dispute with anyone?"

A senior monk named Mahakaccana was present. Mahakaccana was said to be the monk who was foremost in explaining in detail what the Buddha had explained in brief. So they asked him what the Buddha meant, and Mahakaccana delivered the bulk of this sutta.

He explained it like this: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact."

As Pascal mentioned last night, when the eye is working and there are sights to be seen, these come together in eye consciousness—the experience of seeing. This is what we're doing all the time when our eyes are open. Eye consciousness is arising with different content as different forms and sights meet us.

"With contact as condition, there is feeling." Again, as Pascal explained, this feeling can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. This is how we get impinged upon all the time with this changing array of pleasure and displeasure in life.

"What one feels, that one perceives." Now we're getting close to the heart of the sutta, which is this quality of perception. Perception means something a little different in Buddhist terminology than in Western philosophy or psychology. In Western thought, perception typically refers to the sense data itself—I perceive means I have a sight.

In the Buddhist teaching, that's called contact or seeing consciousness. Perception is a higher-level function of the mind, more cognitive, that recognizes what has been seen and puts it in a category. In looking around this room, what we really see is patches of form and color—that's all the eye actually sees. But then there's this organizing principle in the brain that puts everything into categories, and we see men and women and cushions and chairs, walls, lamps, doors, paintings, and so on.

That recognition piece is the act of perception. We're classifying the world into categories that we know based on memory. Perception is a fascinating thing to investigate because the world kind of springs up from perception, and that's what this sutta is pointing to.

"What one perceives, that one thinks about." This is true, isn't it? When we recognize something, we'll often start to think about that thing we've just seen.

"What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates." And here's the catch—we don't just think about things in a simple way.

"That's a thangka of the Buddha. It's painted in the Tibetan style. It represents Shakyamuni Buddha, who is Gautama Buddha in our tradition," and let it go like that. But we start going, "Wow, that is such a cool thangka. I'd like to have one like that in my living room. Now, Marianne has some art down in the bookstore. I know I shouldn't go down during the retreat, but if I don't, somebody else might get there first. And I do have my checkbook. It's up in my room, but I could go now, right after the sitting, and get the checkbook and go down and look for that thangka. And if they don't have a thangka like that, I think a metal Tibetan Buddha would be just as good. I saw last time I was in there, there were some bronze ones, there were some gold ones. One was a little more expensive, but oh, my checking account is so low. Uh-oh. I don't know if I

have enough money to write a check. What? Could I call my partner who's at home and get them to deposit a check into my account? If they write my bank number on the back, the bank will accept the deposit. Now, what is my bank number? But I'm not sure my partner has enough money for the Buddha either, so I better call a friend."

This is where the proliferation starts from just the thinking. And this is described by the Pali word papañca. It's much nicer than proliferation. Papañca.

So this is where the trouble begins. Because as we start to mentally proliferate, we don't always stay in neutral territory. It's only a few steps from the thangka to our checkbook to the absence of money in our checking account. How are we going to get it there? And so on. And that creates anxiety and worry. So because the "I" is so central, our thoughts tend to run around the "I," and that creates disturbance.

And so this is what the Buddha points to—actually Mahākaccāna, but essentially the Buddha—points to in the next line: "With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye."

Perceptions and notions beset a person. So listen to how this is unfolded. At first, it's just kind of a passive process. Eye consciousness arises. With contact as a condition, feeling arises. That's just passive. It's just happening, impersonal.

Now we turn to action. What one feels, that one perceives. So now there's kind of an active mental component, which is the recognizing and classifying of the thing. What one perceives, one thinks about. So once we've identified the thangka, then we think about it a little bit. Tibetan thangka, Buddha image, Gautama Buddha. So this is active, but it's not really yet problematic because it's staying close to the source. We're still in charge, as it were.

But notice what happens in the next line: "With what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions and notions beset one with regard to past, present, and future." All of a sudden, we're not in charge anymore, but stuff is starting to assault us. Based on past associations, based on our patterns, based on our karma, based on our clinging and cravings, we become the victim of our own thoughts and feelings.

So these thoughts and feelings come together. Sometimes a thought triggers a feeling. Sometimes a feeling triggers a thought. They run together. And papañca brings it all back to us. So we expose ourselves to kind of the craziness of the mind just running on at that point. And that's the activity of papañca.

And it starts from perception. That's what the sutta is pointing to—this first recognition of a thing. So if we just say man, woman, chair, wall, door, light, there's nothing too charged, right? That's pretty easy.

But what if the perception is of something that we care about? Let's start with something simple. If I say "car," you can perceive that, right? It brings up an image. Fairly neutral. Car—pretty generic. It's a tool we all use.

What if I say "Prius"? How do you feel? We like Prius. Environmentally friendly. My friends drive them. Fifty miles to the gallon. Not so expensive. Uses electricity. Good feeling, right?

Now what if I say "Hummer"? How does that feel? Oh, too big. Gas guzzler. Uses too much petroleum. Pollutes the atmosphere. Not so happy about Hummer.

So we have different perceptions based on our values. Or you could say that perception carries a felt meaning. There's some kind of mood with this action of perception. And it's the felt meaning which we've acquired through association, through our own investment, that triggers a lot of the feelings with perception.

Simple example. I did a six-week retreat one year doing loving-kindness practice at IMS on the East Coast, and my difficult person was on the retreat. So I would go along and I was having a lot of metta—self, benefactor, friend. It was rolling really well. Then my difficult person would walk across my field of vision. Perception of difficult person, and I'd spin out into anger. I'd remember all the difficult things that had happened in the past year. And I could be lost for ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes.

I'd been in a state of a lot of metta. My body was soft and open and relaxed. And then I moved into this anger, and it was like everything turned into a steel trap. It was so painful to go into that. So it took me quite a while to learn how to work with that situation again. And it came out of all the past associations that I had with that person and then all the papañca that came in relating to the past, what I might say in the future—that whole range of relationship stuff based on the papañca, based on the perception.

Here's another one: empty chair. Pretty neutral, right? What's the big deal about an empty chair?

But depending on the setting, empty chair can have really different perception qualities. So if I'm in a social setting—could be a meeting, could be a conference, could even be a retreat—and I get to the dining room early, and I sit at a table where nobody else is sitting, but I have two empty chairs beside me, that feels fine. As the dining hall starts to

fill up and all the other chairs are filled in, if my chairs are still empty, oh, that starts to feel a little weird. I start to feel isolated, unlikable. "Oh, nobody wants to sit next to me. What's wrong with me?"

Nobody likes me.

So the empty chairs start to take on a threatening quality—I begin to perceive them as something menacing. And then somebody comes along and sits in one and I feel so grateful. Oh, I've been rescued. Rescued from my loneliness. Thank you.

So that's one empty chair experience. This relates to how papañca, according to the teachings, comes in three flavors. It can be generated out of craving, out of views, or out of the comparing mind. This particular scenario was generated out of some view—oh, maybe people don't like me, maybe there's something wrong with me. Some view about myself, about not being self-worthy.

Here's another papañca example with an empty chair. I'm on an airplane with the aisle seat, having gotten on early. People are boarding, and I'm watching everybody come down the aisle. I feel genuine compassion for people because traveling is so stressful these days. Here comes a mother down the aisle with two children, carrying all their gear as well as her carry-on. I feel tremendous compassion and friendliness toward them.

The airplane is filling up, getting nearly full, and the seat next to me is still empty. Wow. Now I really like the empty chair. I might have a whole flight from San Francisco to Boston with an empty seat next to me. Suddenly everybody coming down the aisle becomes a threat. I hope they don't take my empty seat. I don't want them to sit there. And if they look like they're about to, I become genuinely aversive.

This time, the perception is that the empty chair protects my space—this is the craving aspect. I like my space on a long flight. Same empty chair, but a completely different perception based on that particular assumption or papañca. The first example was the view component; this one is the craving component.

Let me share another example of perception. When I was sitting that retreat over Thanksgiving, we spent quite a few hours in the hall during the day—about eight hours total with everything combined. Some periods were quite long, and my legs would get sore. I'd adjust my posture in the middle of a sit or during a talk, trying to sit through but getting better as the days progressed.

There was a monk on the retreat, sitting up front, who would come in for the afternoon sit. He'd settle down on his cushion at about two o'clock. We'd break for walking period—I'd get up and walk, come back in, sit. He was still sitting. We'd sit through the next period or talk, then get up again. He'd still be sitting there. He would start at two and continue until about five without moving.

Meanwhile, here I would be, squirming after an hour or so. I'd tough it out, then get up for walking meditation, thinking to myself, "Oh my God, I'm such a crummy sitter."

After all these years I'm supposed to be a meditation teacher and I can't sit like that. Here he was, younger than me, though admittedly with many years of monastic training and countless hours of sitting. I thought, I'm such a crummy meditator.

Then at the end of the retreat, one of the other women who had been sitting approached me. "Wow," she said, "you really sat well this retreat. You sat like a rock." I couldn't believe it. I was squirming all the time, but apparently when she looked at me, she saw someone sitting absolutely still. In her mind, I was a good sitter because she was comparing herself to me. But when I compared myself to the monk, I was not a good sitter.

The same experience, yet entirely different depending on whether you're comparing up or down. It's all relative. There's no intrinsic worth to my sitting on that retreat, but I could feel either inferior or superior, depending on where I chose to place my attention, how I chose to perceive.

These are really simple things—empty chairs, length of time sitting. But what if the perception involves your partner, your child, your parent, your body?

A couple of weeks ago, Sally and James and I had the opportunity to visit an anatomy lab at a college in Santa Cruz. We spent time sitting and standing next to bodies that students had dissected. These were cadavers from a hospital, and the students had dissected them quite thoroughly.

I found myself standing with half a skull in my hand that still had the brain in it. At first, when we stood next to the bodies, the faces were wrapped in cloth. We could see the opened bodies and examine the organs. Partway through, the professor removed the wrappings from the faces, and it became deeply moving.

The particular body we stood beside first was an elderly man. He was quite small—not that tall to begin with, and as we age, we shrink. As we approach death, we tend to shrink even more. His face held an expression that wasn't passive. It didn't look like he

had died in complete peace. His mouth was open, and there was a suggestion of anguish at his death. It was profoundly moving because you could sense the end of his life in his facial expression. And it wasn't going to change.

The purpose of these reflections and experiences is to imagine: what if that was me? What if I'm looking at my own face as a little shrunken old man? This could happen next year, or in ten or twenty years, but it's going to happen. What if I was looking at myself?

This is a perception with the power to trigger papañca—a perception that can grab us based on our clinging to this body, our investment in loving and caring for this form we've tended for so long. While many perceptions we encounter throughout the day are fairly light, some come along that are quite striking.

We want to start noticing when a perception forms that we begin to proliferate around. What are the moods and emotions that arise in that proliferation? Because of both our self-image and the patterns of mind we've developed over countless actions, we have predictable responses to things. As meditators, we begin to know our own patterns: I'm a fearful person, or greedy, or aversive, or shameful, or self-critical, or addictive.

We start to see how when we meet new incidents and perceive something, the proliferation spun off from that perception—the way the mind spins out around it—recreates our sense of self. The sense of self is not intrinsic to that experience. Like the empty chair, there's nothing inherent there. But my perception of it can fill it with content from my patterns, my karma, my mental habits, my emotional inclinations.

So we want to be alert to this. When we spin out, how are we spinning? What is the response showing us about the "I," about the self? And is it possible at times that we have a perception—even around something meaningful and charged—and we don't spin out? What's the quality of that experience? What's the quality of that kind of moment when we have a perception that may be meaningful, yet we don't proliferate around it?

It may be deeply felt, but we don't spin out through over-proliferation about it. What happens then? We're holding that experience in the silence. We're receiving that experience. We can feel it—we can feel the pathos of it, we can feel the compassion in it, we can feel the loving kindness in it—but we're not spinning out with it. We hold it in this silence which has a kind of intrinsic peace.

And so there's not the creation of the self again. There's not the regeneration of the self-image. There's not the reconnecting to that old pattern, which is our way of becoming and finding a self-identity to establish ourselves in.

Likes and dislikes, which we do constantly, are largely about establishing "me" again. We meet someone, and we have to decide whether we like them or not. Why? Because that recreates the self with its tastes. Instead, we can just see—there's that person. We can feel their essence, but we don't have to take a stand for or against. Then we're not recreating the self with its wanting and not wanting, its likes and dislikes. Things are just held in this great spaciousness.

This is what we're developing here: the ability to hold experience in this great kind of non-reactive spaciousness that sees things as they are. When the old patterns come in, they tend to blind us to a degree. They narrow the sense of possibility in our universe to the predictability of self, and so we're just recreating this limited world again and again.

When we start to discover this place of quiet and peace, we begin to open up to a much greater range of possibilities. Things can touch us more deeply, and we start to experience that there's a greater choice in how we respond to that situation, how we respond to life in that moment. This is the dawning of freedom. It has to do with this quality of openness that's not covered over with all the conceptual activity.

This is the pointer to the end of karma going on and on in its predictable patterns. As we find these openings through our meditation of peace, we start to see this unending flow of karma, which is wrapped up with self and the patterns and the self-view and the reinforcing of limits again and again. We can step out of that—or better to say, we don't step out of it. It is halted. That flow of becoming is halted. Then we are at peace with that original openness and vastness that is our nature, that is our birthright.

So this is the discovery. This is the unfolding. This is the release. That peace is not a constructed thing. That silence is not a constructed thing. It's what happens when we stop doing. When we stop doing, that peace is revealed.

We have come out of—I don't know if you remember from the opening night when I talked about the Buddha's quest—searching for something beyond birth and death, something beyond the constant law of change. This peace is beyond birth and death. This silence is beyond birth and death. This stopping is beyond birth and death. As we start to touch that in our meditation practice, we're beginning to get the glimmer of something that lets us step outside the endless cycles of birth and death. We step outside the round of becoming and find our place of ease in the deathless, in the unborn.

I mention this so that you can start to look for those periods of quiet. Now, I don't want to say that's the end of the journey. This peace is onward leading. It unfolds more and more, ultimately—the Buddha says—up to the fullness of liberation. But this is the entry point. Once we have this, we have the taste of the goal. Then we just need to keep walking until we reach it.

Thank you for your attention. We'll continue to develop this theme in further talks.

Let's just sit for a minute in quiet together.

A final word from the Buddha: "In my enlightenment, I discovered the unborn, unaging, unailing, undying, supreme security from bondage, nibbana."

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 104

Patterns of Becoming 2: The Five Aggregates

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this illuminating dharma talk, Guy Armstrong continues his series on patterns of becoming by examining the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) as described in the Mahāpuṇṇama Sutta (MN 109). He explores how we construct the sense of self through identification with material form (rūpa), feeling (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa). Armstrong demonstrates the Buddha's analysis of twenty ways we create self-view through these aggregates, showing how we regard each aggregate as self, as possessing self, as containing self, or as contained in self.*
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> *The talk includes the powerful teaching given to Bāhiya, where the Buddha instructs: 'In the seen, let there be just the seen' - pointing to experience without the added sense of 'I' or 'mine.' Armstrong emphasizes the practical application of recognizing 'this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself' (netaṁ mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā) as a way to cease the constant creation of selfhood. Through understanding the aggregates as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self, practitioners can develop disenchantment, dispassion, and ultimately liberation from the cycles of becoming.*

The talk tonight is on patterns of becoming two, the five aggregates. This is the second in a series of talks on this theme of how we generate the sense of self based on changing impermanent aspects of our experience and how that happens in familiar and continuing patterns of becoming.

Last time we talked about this process based on the factor of perception and the proliferation based on what we perceive or papañca. Tonight we're going to talk about it from the point of view of the five aggregates. And next week I'll talk about it based on dependent origination and also put more emphasis on the release factor, how we get free from these cycles.

But in all three of the talks, the basic theme is the concept that the self is not a steady, intrinsic, ongoing part of our experience, but is rather something that we generate over and over again by our own volitional actions. So tonight we're going to look at another way that that generation happens.

And this formation of self isn't a trivial thing. It's the root of our bondage. It's the root of the misunderstanding, the root of ignorance with which we approach existence. I want to take a kind of big view for a moment and say that it is based on our coming into

existence as an individual embodied being in life. And it's this individual embodiment that is partly responsible for the sense of separation that we mistakenly take to be ultimate or absolute in some way, but isn't truly an ultimate or absolute separation from other beings or from nature. But we mistakenly take this individuality to be confirmation of a separate ongoing self.

Now in modern Western culture, this taking birth is supposed to be a thing of great celebration. Oh, you're so lucky to have been born and life is so wonderful and it's all to be celebrated. But from a Buddhist perspective, this taking birth is a little bit problematic because taking birth also involves us in aging, illness, and death. Not only that, but this individual separateness, seeming separateness, also leads us to a sense of isolation, loneliness, and then fear. We feel cut off from the root of our being, which is nature in its many aspects, both physical and mental.

So again, the biggest picture we might reflect on is how this came to be. Rumi has a nice little poem that points to this when he says, "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." I really like his honesty. This is our situation when we wander into the spiritual path. We don't really know what this life is supposed to be for or about. We may still not.

So I love this pointing because there's this deep mystery at the root of our individual existence. How did this come to be? How do we find ourselves in this world of so much beauty and so much suffering, with a quality of intelligence and compassion and capacity for wisdom with all these other beings? It's extraordinary.

When I was sitting my first three-month course, a friend of mine, somebody I got to know on the retreat, came up to Joseph Goldstein, who was teaching the course, in quite a state of urgency. She grabbed Joseph in the hallway and took him by the arm and said, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean here on this retreat or here at all?" And she said, "Here at all. Why are we here at all?" And Joseph said, "Because you wanted to see and smell and taste and touch and hear."

That's an interesting comment, isn't it? The Buddhist understanding is basically that we were drawn back into birth by sense desire, by wanting to experience what could be experienced through the five senses. But then that's what gets us in all this situation involving birth, aging, illness, death, and all the complications of living.

Nisargadatta Maharaj was a great teacher in India. He lived in Bombay and died in the early 90s, who wrote a book about his teachings called *I Am That*, which for my taste is second only to the Buddha's teachings for depth and power and beauty. And Maharaj put it this way: "The desire for embodied existence is the root cause of trouble."

So this wanting to experience the things of the senses is what involves us in all the difficulty of life. And this is the cycle of samsara, wanting again and again and again to have this kind of sense contact.

And again from Maharaj, "All yogas have only one aim, and that is to save you from the calamity of separate existence." So that's also the purpose of the Buddhist teachings. So maybe the way to be saved is to question this sense of separation, this sense that we are actually an isolated self going through this journey.

So we can take a closer look at the creation of this sense of I. Really, for all of us, before we encounter the Dharma, the I is the center of the universe. Even after we encounter the Dharma, for a long time, the I is the center of the universe. Everything revolves around this me, and it seems so self-evident, but have you ever been able to locate it? Have you ever been able to locate this self, this thing called I? Where is its hiding place? Where is it found?

The philosopher William James put it this way: "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat."

The Dalai Lama offers us profound guidance here: when we are certain that something exists but cannot actually find it, this is a sure sign of delusion—evidence that we aren't understanding correctly. The classical analogy illustrates this perfectly: imagine walking along a path in the woods, seeing something lying on the ground and being absolutely certain it's a snake. You jump back in fright, but when you look more closely, you discover it's merely a piece of colored rope twisted together.

This is exactly our usual habit with the self—we see it and think it's a snake. But the purpose of yoga and dharma practice is to investigate carefully. When we finally see things as they truly are, there's no more fear. This is the understanding the Buddha spoke about.

Part of this confusion around "I" is created by our very language, and we can easily observe this confusion through some of our habitual ways of talking and thinking. Let me ask you a few questions to illustrate this.

First: How tall are you?

This isn't a difficult question. I would say I'm 5'10". When I say "I'm 5'10"," I say it without thinking twice—it's automatic. Whether you're 6 feet or 5'4", whatever it may be. Here we are equating the "I" with the body. The body is 5'10", so we're saying "I am the body, and I am 5 feet 10 inches tall."

Now let me ask another question: What color are your eyes?

Easy question. I'd say my eyes are brown. But here you are suddenly not the body—you're not the eyes. You're the owner of the eyes. "These are my eyes." So are you the body, or are you the owner of it, somehow separate from it? You can't really be both, can you? Not logically.

What if we look at the mind in the same way? Sometimes we say "I'm happy" or "I'm sad," equating ourselves with the feeling—"I am happy, I am sad." Other times we talk about "my joys and my sorrows." So again, are we the emotion, or are we the owner of the emotion?

These are contradictory ways we use "I." But perhaps the most persistent way we feel the "I" is imagining it's somehow located right behind the eyes in the center of the head, always looking out on the world. We imagine it's what receives all the impressions of sight and sound and smell and taste and touch—some kind of observer back there that's really receiving everything and pulling all the levers, like a command and control center.

Not there either.

All these ways of thinking are incorrect. The Buddha put it quite straightforwardly: there is no self to be found. One of my teachers put it even more bluntly: "You are not there."

These ways we imagine the self to be cannot be verified empirically. They're simply not true. You cannot find such a self within the mind-body system.

But let's go a little further. Let's examine this formation of self more closely.

When we look around this room and see all the people here, as we look, we normally think: "that's a person, that's a person, that's a person." In the Visuddhimagga, one of the ancient commentarial texts from the 6th century, they say that someone who looks and sees "a person" hasn't studied the situation very closely.

They offer this analogy: if you're a skilled butcher carving up cattle to sell pieces of meat, as you're cutting, you don't think "cow, cow, cow." You think "rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs," and so forth.

In the same way, someone who has closely examined human experience doesn't simply say "person." They've looked much more precisely than that and have developed more accurate categories.

So when the Buddha looked, I don't think he saw "person." I think he saw in a much more refined way—examining the whole field of human experience and asking: What actually constitutes a human being?

So it's mind and body and all the experience. One way is the six senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and the objects of mind. That's one way that he often used to describe human experiences. He used it again and again and again. It maps very nicely onto our meditation practice. A lot of the instructions follow this schema of the six senses, and it's a complete description of human experience. Everything that happens fits within it.

The Buddha employed this device mainly to cut through cravings. He talked about how pleasant experience arises at the six sense doors and how we want it to be a certain way and don't want it to be another way. So the six sense model is used to cut through craving.

But the other way that he described again and again our human experience was the five aggregates. And this model he used to cut through wrong view. The formation of self, the belief in self, is wrong view. The best way in the Buddhist description to undo that is the five aggregates. So that's what we're going to explore tonight—how self gets generated around the five aggregates and how to loosen that identification.

Just as we learn to see ourselves and others through this map of the five aggregates, we learn to see the way the Buddha saw. And we learn to see without the false sense of I or self. And that's the power of it. We align ourselves with right view and that uproots wrong view in the mind.

Some people have told me they find this theme kind of intellectual and not very interesting. For that reason, it seems a little too abstract. And I just want to say that the time that this schema came alive for me was after the death of one of my older sisters. It was about fifteen years ago now. She was five years older than me, and she died when she was reasonably young in her early fifties. And she died quite suddenly. She'd been relatively healthy. She had a long-term illness, but she was quite healthy up until actually the day of her death. So it came as a shock to all of us, and I'd been on the phone with her just a week before, and she was very alive and vital.

My sister was a strong personality. I loved her. I was close to her. Very energetic presence in her family and our family, and a delightful person. And when she died, I really had a hard time understanding how someone who had been so solid a week before could just not be there anymore. And I went through a period of grief that lasted a couple of months and darkness and depression and so on.

And then as I was in that and starting to come out of it, I really had an urgency to understand what death meant or what is dying. What happens when a human being dies? And the way that I came to understand it that made the most sense was through the five aggregates. And so it helped me really come to terms with what is living here and in death, what goes? And how do they get—how does what leaves get separated from what remains? It's so mysterious.

The five aggregates will be the topic. The word in Pali is khandha, the five khandha. In Pali, it just means heap or bundle. The Sanskrit word is skandha. You might hear it referred to by either of those terms. And it's just a common, ordinary term in the day. So it could be thought of as the five heaps that make us up, the five bundles that make us up. Aggregate sounds a little too technical to me, like we're on some road-building exercise and there's asphalt and gravel and all that. I'm not so fond of it, but it's the common usage.

The translation, though, that I like best is kinds of stuff. So these are just the five kinds of stuff that make up you and me. And I don't think any of it is too hard to come to terms with.

So the five kinds of stuff that make us up are material form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Some of these we've talked quite a lot about already, so I'll touch on them briefly, but I want to go into each of these five.

So the first one is material form, or usually tonight I'll just say form, but it means matter. So the Pali word is rūpa.

But most drug dealers, it turned out, did not like Montovani. They found it deeply unpleasant. So when the Montovani music came on, they would scatter just as effectively as when the police showed up. The store manager never had to call the police again—he just turned on the Montovani.

This illustrates perfectly how feeling tone is not inherent in the object itself, but arises from the interaction between consciousness and form. The same music that might evoke pleasant feelings in some people creates strong aversion in others. This is why feeling tone, or vedanā, is classified as a mental aggregate rather than part of the material form.

The third aggregate is perception, or saññā in Pali. This is the mind's capacity to recognize and identify what it encounters. When you hear that bell, perception recognizes it as a bell sound rather than, say, a car horn or someone's voice. When you see the Buddha statue behind me, perception identifies it as a Buddha image rather than a tree or a person.

Perception involves pattern recognition. It takes the raw data coming through our sense doors and organizes it into recognizable categories. This happens almost instantaneously and usually below the threshold of conscious awareness. We don't usually notice the moment of recognition; we simply experience already knowing what something is.

But perception can be quite conditioned and variable. What one person perceives as beautiful art, another might perceive as ugly decoration. What one culture perceives as food, another culture might perceive as inedible. Our past experiences, cultural conditioning, and personal associations all shape how we perceive and categorize our experience.

The fourth aggregate is mental formations, or saṅkhāra in Pali. This is perhaps the most complex of the aggregates because it includes all the mental factors that arise along with consciousness—things like attention, concentration, mindfulness, compassion, anger, joy, doubt, and countless others.

These formations are the various ways our minds respond to and shape our experience. They include both wholesome mental factors like loving-kindness and generosity, and unwholesome ones like greed and hatred. They also include neutral factors like attention and memory that can serve either wholesome or unwholesome purposes.

You might think of mental formations as the mind's toolkit—all the different ways consciousness can configure itself to meet whatever arises in experience. Some of these formations arise habitually and automatically, while others require cultivation and training.

The slightly sentimental and swelling orchestral sound drove the dealers away. They would clear out of the parking lot and go somewhere else because it apparently drove them crazy. So I experienced Mantovani as pleasant, but they experienced it as very annoying and interfering. We have different responses based on our conditioning—it depends on how we feel into the experience.

Sayadaw Tejaniya talks about this in a helpful way. He says feeling is like a verb, an active engagement of our mind with sense experience that gives it a certain quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. But this quality isn't intrinsic to the thing itself, which is why feeling tone, or vedanā, is a mental quality rather than physical.

The third aggregate, the second aspect of mental activity, is perception. The Pali word is saññā. We discussed this in the first talk as the basis from which proliferation happens, and perception operates continuously. As we look around this room, we categorize the sights into recognizable things—people, chairs, cushions, walls, lamps.

Some of these categorizations carry rich associations, like when we see a friend or partner or someone we know, while others remain fairly neutral without much emotional charge.

What's fascinating is that perception is a learned activity. The raw data of sight consists simply of patches of color—form, color, and movement. You can glimpse this more clearly if you cover one eye. When you remove depth perception, you can see more distinctly that there are just patches without intrinsic organization, but we learn to organize them into meaningful wholes.

This became vividly clear in a story Oliver Sacks tells about a patient who had been blind since very early childhood—he had some sight as a very young child but then lost it until midlife. An eye surgeon believed they could perform an operation to restore this man's sight, and Sacks was consulting as a neurosurgeon throughout the process.

The momentous day arrived. The surgery had gone well. The patient was still in his hospital bed with eyes wrapped in white bandages, about to have them removed. The surgeon, family members, and Sacks were all present. Everyone expected that with this unveiling there would be a miraculous moment of "Wow, I can see!"

They removed the bandage. There was just silence and a somewhat confused, puzzled expression on the patient's face. The doctor asked, "Can you see?"

Later, the patient described his experience. He said, "When the bandages were taken off, the whole world was just a jumble of form and color and movements and blur. I didn't know what anything was. But when I heard the voice asking 'Can you see?' I recognized it as my surgeon's voice. So I assumed that blob drifting toward my eyes was his face. But other than that, I didn't know what anything was."

He had to completely relearn the process of perception. Those neural pathways hadn't developed properly or had been lost because his sight loss had occurred so long ago. He never became very skilled at perceiving. He achieved some basic functionality in the world, but it never became second nature. He was never able to quickly reestablish that faculty of perception.

Carol mentioned last night how perception can mislead us when we don't see accurately. The Buddha identified ways we perceive permanence when the truth is impermanence, or happiness where the reality is suffering.

Perception can also limit our seeing to mere concepts when there's richer reality beneath. For example, you're sitting in meditation and feel some discomfort in your knee, which you label as "pain." This may be an accurate perception of the feeling around

that sensation—it can indeed be experienced as painful. But sometimes when we use the word "pain," we stop at the label and forget to investigate the actual experience. These conceptual labels can block us from seeing more deeply and intimately into the true nature of our experience.

Much of Zen practice revolves around how we perceive. Consider this bell: if you encountered it somewhere in the world without context, would you know it was a bell? Might you think it could be a planter? A very large monk's begging bowl? If you turned it upside down, could you put it on a statue as a hat?

All those things could happen, couldn't they?

In Zen, the koan is often something like, "What is this?" If you say it is a striker, I will hit you. If you tell me it's not a striker, I will also hit you. Quick, what is this?

What I got from those stories was that if I sat Zen, I was going to get hit a lot. And that's one reason I ended up in Vipassana.

So in Zen, they like to do these duels about perception and can you see the thing in itself and not label it. There's a story about this.

Back in the 70s, we were all coming out of the hippie era and discovering the wonders of Eastern religions and mysticism. Great masters were starting to come to this country for the first time in a long time.

Some meditation students in Boston discovered that two great masters from different traditions were in town at the same time. They got them together at the house of some friends who told us this story later. I wasn't there, but I heard the story.

One of the masters was the Korean monk Sansanim, a Korean Zen teacher. The other master was Kalu Rinpoche, a very warm, beautiful, wise old monk in the Tibetan tradition.

So they brought them together in a living room, offered them tea, and hoped that they'd recognize each other's enlightenment and there would be these great sparks of wisdom from their meeting and recognition.

It didn't quite go like that.

First there was the language problem. So they had translators. They both had good translators. But then it turns out there's this thing about spiritual traditions—they see things a certain way or expect things to be a certain way.

So they sat down and had a little chit-chat. Then Sansanim went into his Zen thing, which is he picked up an orange and held it out toward Kalu Rinpoche and very intently said, "What is this?"

Kalu Rinpoche just sat there doing his beads, doing some mantra, very peaceful, totally undisturbed, just reflecting.

Sansanim thought, "He's not quick enough." He held out the orange again: "What is this?" Waiting for the answer of the koan.

Finally, Kalu Rinpoche turned to his translator and said, "Don't they have oranges in Korea?"

This perception can be a lot of fun to play with, to see when we get it right and when we miss it.

So when we hear that rupa has pleasant feeling tone, we recognize it as, oh, that's the bell. That sound is the bell. And we know, moreover, that's the bell that ends the sitting. So we're free to get up and walk.

The fourth aggregate is called mental formations. The Pali word is sankhara. This is really a very broad and very important category because it includes all our emotions, thoughts, meditative states of mind, wholesome factors that develop in practice—like the factors of enlightenment, the five spiritual faculties, the Brahmaviharas—as well as the difficult afflictive emotions of fear and anger and greed and jealousy and so on. All of these are in the category of mental formations.

We talked last time about how these basic movements of greed and aversion stem from an attempt—we're trying to accomplish some kind of security for ourselves through these movements of greed and aversion and the covering over with delusion.

These are also sometimes called volitional formations, which means that there's some motivated energy behind them. We'll talk more about this when we get to karma, but volition forms the essence of karma. Karma is action with a volition, and this category has a strong volitional component. These mind states are expressing some kind of intention or volition.

When we first tune into how often greed, aversion, and delusion color our motivations, we often get this question: is there anything that's not coming out of greed, aversion, and delusion? Because they seem so central.

But there are. There are beautiful motivations of kindness and generosity and non-harming and restraint.

Now, a lot of these ways that we feel are repetitive and conditioned and form patterns in our life and in our mind. I want to come back and pick that up after we've explored the selfing a little bit. But I'll just make a note of it now and we'll come back.

So... some minutes into a sit, we hear the sound of the bell. Feeling tone is pleasant. Perception is "bell" and "sitting." Then some formations come. Often we think at this time, "Oh, now I could sit forever."

I feel so good. I could sit forever. And there's often a real wave of relief at that point. So these are the formations that attend the bell.

The last aggregate is consciousness. The Pali word is *vijñāna*. We've talked about this a little bit and we'll explore it more in other talks. Consciousness is just that capacity of mind that you could say receives all the sense data. When we're seeing, we're conscious of a sight. When we're hearing, we're conscious of a sound. When we're smelling, we're conscious of a smell, and so on. When we feel an emotion, we're conscious of that feeling. It doesn't add anything to it. It's just the factor of mind that is revealing experience to us—you could say receiving it or holding it, however you like to think of it.

Every moment that we're awake, we're having conscious experience of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and feelings. This is just the very bare knowing of the thing before feeling happens, before perception happens. Just the datum, like "white square," which we interpret as walls. It's the consciousness in us that gives that experience anytime we're awake.

As we watch the bell ripple through all these other aggregates, it's consciousness that knows it at every step. Consciousness knows the form, consciousness knows the feeling, consciousness knows the perception, and consciousness knows those formations of relaxation and relief and thought.

So these are the five aggregates. An interesting thing about this list is that they're all present in every moment of experience. The six sense doors may be there or may not be there. You can't always analyze smell, for instance, because sometimes we're not smelling anything. Sometimes we're not really tasting anything. But the aggregates are there in every experience, so we can investigate them and relate to them at any point. We can start to investigate our experience through this map.

An interesting question to ask is: is it an exhaustive map? That is, can every part of our experience fit into one of these five categories or groupings? I'll leave that with you to explore, but I want to suggest that it can. The five aggregates cover our whole range of experience as human beings in the realm of the senses. Every sense experience can be included in here.

But there's a fairly central concept that isn't here. And that is the I. There is no mention of an I or a self anywhere in this list. And yet we're saying maybe it includes all the aspects of human experience. So this is the reason that it can be so helpful to look in this way. We start to understand our experience independent of this notion of I.

There's no center where all these things are landing. There's no being behind the eyes that's receiving all these. In any moment, there's just form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness happening. All of these are fairly independent processes. They don't have a controller. They don't have an actor. They're just aspects of nature that are unrolling according to their own causes and conditions. And this is what human beings are made up of.

So one has to ask: Is there an I in this, or does this constitute a self? One way to ask that question is to say, maybe if taken apart, the self is nothing more than a bunch of aggregates, sort of put together in a certain way.

Here's an analogy. Assume everybody can recognize what this is. It's a pen, right? Everybody would agree to that. It's very easy to identify.

But if we examine this more closely, like the butcher carefully separating the cuts of meat in a cow, we see that it's actually composed of only five smaller parts: an ink cartridge, a barrel, a tip, a cap, and an end. That's all there is.

So now, is this a pen? We could debate that, but we wouldn't all agree so easily, would we? This individual part isn't really a pen. It becomes a pen when we assemble it properly, when the parts work together to support each other, when it fits in our hand in a certain way and allows us to write—when it carries out the function for which it was designed.

Now it's back to being a pen. But the pen doesn't really exist as a separate thing. It's simply a conglomeration of parts arranged in a particular way.

This is how the Buddha taught us to understand the human being. There is a being here—we recognize that. This recognition is helpful. It's useful that when Scott goes to bed tonight, he goes to his room, and when I go to bed tonight, I go to my room, and we don't mix that up. This conventional understanding serves us well in social discourse—"my room" and "Scott's room."

But this doesn't mean there's actually something called "I" within this conglomeration of pieces. When we look closely, like that skilled butcher, there are only form, feeling, perceptions, formations, and consciousness. There's no "I" that glues it all together.

Yet we don't see this. We've been entranced by the word "I" since we were young enough to understand language, and we've invested it with a sense of self, a sense of identity.

So how do we create this sense of self? The Buddha was asked this question directly. In the Majjhima Nikaya, sutta number 109, "The Greater Discourse on the Full Moon Night," someone asked him how this view of self comes about—sometimes translated as "personality view." The Pali word is sakkāyadiṭṭhi. How do we create this view that there is a self, and what constitutes it?

This is who we think we are. We create this identity and extend it over time because we don't want to face the impermanent, unsolid nature of reality.

Here's the Buddha's answer: "An untaught, ordinary person"—meaning someone who hasn't encountered the Buddha's teachings—"regards form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form."

We create the "I" based on form in one of these four ways. The Buddha then repeats these same four formulations for feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. He identifies twenty ways that human beings construct their sense of self based on the aggregates—four ways for each of the five aggregates.

This reflection could carry you through the rest of the month, or two months for those staying that long. But let's examine just a piece of it. Let's look at how this relates to form.

The Buddha says a person "regards form as self." The simple statement of this is: "I am the body." We explored this early on. When asked, "How tall are you?" we answer "5'10"." We think, "I am the body." This is one way we create self around form.

Or we regard "self as possessing form"—that is, "This body is mine" or "This is my body." "My eyes are brown." This is a second way we create a sense of self based on this aggregate of form.

Or form as in self. We might say something like, "This body is part of me. I'm bigger than this body, but this body is a part of who I am." That can be felt sometimes too. That's form as in the self.

Or self as in form. That's "I dwell within this body." That's the observer behind the eyes piece.

In this very compact way—and some of the suttas are like this, really dense—the Buddha has outlined twenty ways that we create a sense of self based on the five aggregates where there really isn't an intrinsic self there. So this is what we can start to see happening in our own experience. This is what we call identification. Identification is where we take an aspect of our experience and say, "That's I or mine."

When we talk about experience to each other, it's fine to use the word I or mine. "I had a sitting where my concentration was really steady for the whole hour." That's a fine thing to say in an interview. You don't need to say it to yourself. When you describe your experience to yourself, you don't need to use the word I or my. So you can notice when the thought of I arises and notice that maybe it's something extra.

Here's an interesting way to consider it. All the different experiences—we load them up with a sense of I, but do they need it? For instance, we might say to ourselves, "I have a pain in my knee." Do we really need to say "my knee"? Or could we just say, "There's a pain in the knee"? Or, "I'm feeling afraid right now." Do we need to say "I," or can we just say, "Fear is arising"? Or, "I'm feeling really happy right now." Oh, happiness is arising.

So an interesting question is: does the I ever arise or exist by itself? Or does it only get generated when we lay claim to some other part of our experience? Do you ever discover the naked I? Or is it only I related to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness? This would be interesting to know, because maybe the I is only dependently arisen, always based on something else that's happening to us. And what if we don't label it as we're feeling? Don't label it "I" as we're feeling it. How does that feel?

Part of the view of self—personality view—that we create is to extend over time. We think the self extends over time. If we didn't, we wouldn't be afraid of dying, right? If it was somebody else that was going to die, whether it's a year from now or ten years or fifty, it wouldn't bother us. But we think it's I that's going to die. So therefore, there's anxiety about that. We create this sense of self which we want to endure over time, and we pin it on these aspects of our experience.

But then in the sutta, the Buddha continues, saying: If we identify with form, he asks the bhikkhus he's talking to, "Is form permanent or impermanent?" After Carol's talk, we all know, right? Form is impermanent. "Is what is impermanent totally satisfactory or eventually unsatisfactory?" We have to say eventually unsatisfactory, because it's going to change. "Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself'?"

So we take things that we know are going to change and we say, "This is who I am." And we want to extend that I over time, but those two don't go together. All the things that we're claiming as I or mine eventually pass, and then the I is kind of stranded, disappointed, hit by that unsatisfactoriness.

The Buddha goes through these questions after form, also for feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. So he was then asked, "How does one see so that in regard to this body there is no I-making and my-making?"

When Bahiya finally reached the Buddha, the Buddha was walking on alms round in the town. Bahiya approached him and said, "Blessed One, please teach me the Dhamma. Please teach me the Dhamma for my welfare and happiness."

The Buddha said, "This is not the right time, Bahiya. I am on alms round."

But Bahiya was persistent. He said, "Venerable sir, it's hard to know what dangers there might be for the Blessed One's life or for my life. Please teach me the Dhamma for my welfare and happiness."

Again the Buddha said, "This is not the time, Bahiya. I am on alms round."

But Bahiya asked a third time with the same urgency.

Then the Buddha gave him this teaching: "When, for you, Bahiya, in the seen there will be merely the seen; in the heard, merely the heard; in the sensed, merely the sensed; in the cognized, merely the cognized—then, Bahiya, you will not be 'by that.' When you are not 'by that,' you will not be 'in that.' When you are not 'in that,' you will not be 'here' or 'beyond' or 'between the two.' This itself is the end of suffering."

This is such a beautiful, condensed teaching. In the seen, merely the seen. When we see something, we don't need to add "I am seeing" or "I like what I see" or "This is mine." Just the seeing, without the one who sees. In the heard, merely the heard—just sound arising and passing away, without a listener. In the sensed and cognized, the same—just bare experience without the elaboration of self.

When you are not "by that"—when you don't identify with or position yourself in relationship to experience. When you are not "in that"—when you don't locate yourself inside the experience. Then you are not "here" or "there" or anywhere in between. The whole construction of self in relationship to a world collapses, and what remains is the end of suffering.

It is said that upon hearing this brief teaching, Bahiya immediately became fully awakened. Shortly afterward, he was gored by a cow and died, but he died as an arahant, completely free.

This story illustrates the power of this simple practice of not making I or mine. When we can meet experience directly, without the overlay of self-construction, liberation is possible. In each moment, with each sensation, feeling, or thought, we can practice this same instruction: merely what is, without the one to whom it belongs.

So he arrived in Savatthi and went to the dwelling place of the Buddha, asking for an audience, but the Buddha was on alms round in the town. Bahiya immediately went to the town and noticed this very noble being with a great deal of calm, poised bearing—a kind of regal countenance—walking up and down the street collecting his alms.

Bahiya immediately approached the Buddha, bowed down at his feet, touched his head to the Buddha's feet, and said, "Blessed One, I have come a long way. Please teach me your Dhamma. I want to understand."

The Buddha said, "Bahiya, this is not the time for it. I'm collecting my alms food."

Bahiya replied, "Oh, Blessed One, I have come a long way. Who knows how long you will live or I will live? Please teach me the Dhamma in brief so that I can understand."

The second time he asked, the second time he was turned down. The Buddha said, "No, this is not the time for it. I'm collecting alms food."

So he asked again the same thing: "Who knows how long I will live or you will live? Please teach me."

The Buddha said, "All right, let me give you this teaching in brief. Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Bahiya, who was already ripe and developed, heard that and fully awakened on the spot. The Buddha could then continue his alms round, which he did. An hour later, Bahiya was walking across a field where a cow was guarding a young calf and evidently felt threatened, charged Bahiya, gored him, and he died.

Think back to his question: "Who knows how long you will live or I will live? Please teach me the Dhamma." The Buddha taught, he awakened, and an hour later he had died. But this teaching that he received is one of the pithiest pointings in all of the suttas to this truth.

"In the seen, let there be just the seen" means there's no "I" added to that experience. "Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's sit together for a minute in quiet.

Therefore, all five aggregates should be seen as they really are with proper wisdom thus: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

CHAPTER 105

Patterns of Becoming 3: Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

In this third talk of the 'Patterns of Becoming' series, Guy Armstrong examines how dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) describes the moment-by-moment creation of suffering through contact, feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), and clinging (upādāna). Drawing from the Thai Forest tradition and teachings of Upāsikā Kee, he introduces the concept of 'unentangled knowing' - a way of relating to experience that doesn't get caught in reactive patterns. The talk focuses on the crucial gap between feeling and craving, where freedom becomes possible. Armstrong explores how breaking this chain prevents the construction of self and offers a taste of the 'deathless' (amata). He presents practical approaches including checking for the presence of greed, aversion, and delusion, and turning awareness back on itself. The discussion includes references to the Sabba Sutta and teachings from Ajahn Chah on conditioned versus unconditioned phenomena, offering both theoretical understanding and practical meditation guidance for finding freedom within the cycles of becoming.

So this will be the third talk in this series called Patterns of Becoming. The title of this evening's talk is Unentangled Knowing.

We've been exploring for a few evenings how the construction of self happens again and again and how that puts us into a vulnerability to suffering. We've looked at it through the perspective of perception leading to proliferation, as was described in the Honeyball Sutta. We've looked at it through the view of the five aggregates and how clinging to any of the five aggregates exposes us to personality view.

Tonight we're going to look at it through the map of dependent origination, which is the most detailed description that the Buddha gave of how suffering gets created again and again and again.

In all these talks, we've been exploring primarily the process of the creation of self, which is some kind of bondage, some kind of grasping that leads to suffering. But tonight, I want to put a little more emphasis on something I touched on the first night but didn't go into deeply, which is the factor of release—how we get released from these cycles and how we find freedom in relationship to all our experience.

I think it's a very deep question for all of us as practitioners how we understand freedom. There is obviously a great freedom that comes at the end of the path. The path does have an end. As it's said, it's good in the beginning, it's good in the middle, and it's good in the end, and it does have an end. That end is when the mind is completely free of the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. This is what full awakening is about.

That might be a long time from now. It might not happen this retreat. For those of us who are on the slow path—and I definitely include myself—it might not happen this retreat. So do we have to wait until that happens to have a real taste of freedom in our life in a very practical and felt way? Or is some measure of freedom available earlier? Is it available now to us? And what would that look like? What would that feel like? And how does that come about?

That's the topic I want to explore more this evening. I'm going to do it through this concept called unentangled knowing. This was a term that was used by a laywoman teacher in Thailand named Upasika Kee. She describes it in a wonderful book called *Pure and Simple*, which I highly recommend.

First of all, it's unusual to find women teachers in Thailand because the Dharma world there is very dominated by monks. Secondly, she was a laywoman. She wasn't even a nun, so she called herself Upasika, which just means a laywoman supporter of the Dhamma. So she's known as Upasika Kee. She taught from the 1950s into the 1970s and died sometime in the 1970s. *Pure and Simple* is a recording of a collection of her talks with a great translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. It's highly recommended—one of the most inspiring books of teachings I know of from a woman in our tradition. She was a very powerful and clear teacher.

So this is her term, unentangled knowing. If you're not a native English speaker, this is an odd word. Unentangled doesn't come up very often. So just a word on the derivation. Tangle, of course, is a twisting or knotting of different strands or threads. They get all jumbled up together and it's hard to pull them apart—like your hair if you ride in a convertible, or a kitten playing with a ball of yarn that quickly gets tangled.

Entangled is the verb about how that comes about. And "un" means the undoing of the entanglement. So it is about how we get disentangled from the tangle that we are in.

The Buddha used the word tangle often to describe our situation. It's a nice metaphor because it points to the way that different desires sort of conflict with each other. When we try to follow them all, they weave a knot, and we don't know how to release it because desires pull us in all these different directions.

Upasika Kee had this very nice pointing: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside." That will be the theme we'll explore—what this inward staying, unentangled knowing is about and how it releases this tangle, which the Buddha described in a number of passages. Here's one: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn."

And you can see this tangle manifested vividly in our political landscape, in the grasping for power and money that unfolds in every country across the earth—a world truly enveloped by craving.

There's another beautiful quotation that opens the Visuddhimagga, though it originates from the suttas themselves. A questioner approaches the Buddha and asks: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

The answer forms the foundation of what the Visuddhimagga attempts to explain. It's essentially one who develops ethics, meditation, and wisdom. This is precisely what we're engaged in here—disentangling this tangle of conflicting forces within the heart that inevitably lead to suffering.

So this "unentangled" points directly to the tangle itself—the way we become caught up with the objects of our experience. But the phrase "unentangled knowing" points to something remarkable: the possibility of a relationship with our experience that remains free, uncaught.

We want to explore both dimensions this evening. I'd like to suggest that this unentangled knowing is actually arising for all of us in many moments throughout each day during a retreat like this, but we may not be noticing when it's happening. We might be missing an appreciation of this very state of mind.

James spoke extensively last night about recognizing and appreciating the wholesome states of mind that arise naturally. This unentangled knowing represents another central wholesome state that we can learn to feel in our daily experience, feel in our formal meditation, and begin to appreciate. As we start to know it and value it, returning to this state becomes much more accessible—as James also emphasized last night.

So we'll explore this opening, this way of relating to experience, and discuss several different meditation approaches that make it accessible, that point directly toward this understanding.

Just one word of caution: much of the vocabulary I'll use tonight comes from one particular tradition within Theravada—the Thai Forest tradition. Those familiar with the teachings of Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Man, Ajahn Mahabua, or Ajahn Sumedho will feel a natural affinity with this description. Those more oriented toward classical Burmese or Sri Lankan approaches might find it somewhat unorthodox.

We have both these lineages represented at Spirit Rock—the lineage of Mahasi Sayadaw from Burma and Ajahn Chah from Thailand. I actually believe this blending constitutes one of our center's greatest strengths. From the Burmese tradition, we inherit excellent tools for developing precision in mindfulness. From the Thai Forest tradition, we receive a quality of openness and emphasis on heart qualities. I think we achieve a beautiful integration here.

Much of tonight's teaching will flow from the Thai Forest perspective, of which Upasaka Ki was a representative.

Now, we want to explore through the framework of dependent origination first how we become caught—how the tangle forms—and then how it can be released.

The chain of dependent origination stands as one of the Buddha's central teachings, perhaps his most profound insight. In it, he described a sequence of twelve causal conditions that begin with ignorance, unfold through a series of sequential developments, and culminate in suffering. The understanding is that upon reaching suffering, we begin the cycle anew, reinforcing ignorance and circling the wheel again to arrive once more at suffering.

So dependent origination offers a moment-by-moment analysis of how we create and recreate the experience of suffering. In its progression from ignorance to suffering, it reveals the cycle of bondage. But the Buddha always taught how this cycle can be undone, and we'll examine that closely as well.

There are twelve links altogether. I won't address most of them tonight—that would constitute another entire talk, very interesting but not our focus this evening. I'm going to bypass the first five links, which become somewhat philosophical, and also set aside the last three links, which are similarly philosophical. Instead, we'll concentrate on the central four links that directly relate to our meditation experience.

To introduce this, I want to share one of the Buddha's teachings called the Sutta on Totality, one of the discourses in the Sutta Pitaka. We've discussed many times that as human beings, we constantly experience phenomena through the six sense doors—this forms one of the Buddha's primary descriptions of our condition.

In this particular discourse, he addressed this directly: "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of life?" This is one translation. "What is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

That certainly captures our attention, doesn't it? Who else has made such a declaration—"Listen, I'm going to tell you the totality of life"? Marx didn't make such a claim. Freud didn't do that. Einstein didn't do that. Yet here's the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, saying: "I'm going to describe the totality of life."

So what is it?

Anyone who would try to describe a totality beyond this would not know of what they were speaking. So this is kind of remarkable, isn't it? Whatever human life is about, there are only ever six things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects—which is basically thoughts and emotions. This gives a beautiful simplicity that maps to our meditation practice and provides us with what I feel is a very sound perspective on what we need to do.

All we need to do is learn how to relate skillfully to these six types of phenomena. Easy, right? That's all we need to do. Simple perhaps, but not always so easy.

These six types of phenomena are constantly arising. They're known by the different six sense consciousnesses, and the coming together of the sense object, the sense organ, and the sense consciousness is what is called contact. We talked about this with the honey ball discourse. As beings, our world consists of constantly experiencing contact at the six sense doors from the impingement of sense objects known through the sense organs.

And why is this problematic? Because these contacts aren't always pleasant. We keep getting bombarded by this ever-changing mix of pleasant and unpleasant experiences that we ultimately have no control over. That's why the life of sentient beings is so uncertain and insecure and unpredictable. That's what we're exposed to—we're sensitive, and we keep getting exposed to that bombardment.

This is the first of the links of dependent origination that we'll focus on tonight: contact. It simply describes how we keep getting bombarded by sense impressions at the six sense doors.

We've talked before about what the next step in the chain is. When there's contact, some of it's pleasant, some of it's painful, some of it's neither pleasant nor painful—neutral. This is the quality called feeling tone, vedanā, or sometimes simply abbreviated as feeling. It's on the basis of vedanā that we experience this mix of pleasure and pain and that we then react. I think we've explored this quite extensively.

So in the chain of dependent origination, contact leads to feeling. Now, if we're not being mindful, based on feeling tone, we're likely to slide into a reactive formation of mind. With the pleasant, what's the reactive formation? It's greed, isn't it? Desire, wanting. With the painful, the reactive formation is aversion. And with the neutral, delusion—we lose touch, we space out, we don't pay attention.

The feeling tone is what gives rise to these reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion, which are the kilesas—the fundamental forces that cause suffering in ourselves and in the world. Taken together, the Buddha gave a name to these three kilesas: craving, or taṇhā.

Even though craving is a word that points to the desire aspect, craving actually encompasses all of these. Of course, there's the desire force for the pleasant. Aversion is also an expression of a different kind of desire—it's a desire not to experience the painful. So both greed and aversion are movements of craving. Delusion is there to cover over the activity of greed and aversion, because if we saw it clearly, we couldn't do it.

Part of the great discovery of a retreat like this is that you start shining the light of mindfulness on these activities of greed and aversion, and you dispel the delusion. When we start to see the constant movement cycling through wanting and not wanting, liking and not liking, we start to get tired of it. We start to get fed up with the way it keeps the mind in turmoil. And that force of clear seeing, of wisdom and discernment, starts to slow down the momentum of the greed and aversion—it slows down the momentum of craving.

But if mindfulness isn't there, these forces will just carry on as they've been doing, the Buddha said, since beginningless time.

Let's examine this a little more closely. A contact happens—let's say it's pleasant. A pleasant feeling tone arises, the force of liking or wanting comes in, and then, if you look closely, the mind starts inclining toward that object. It could be a sense of relaxation in the body. It could be a pleasant taste at a meal. It could be a beautiful mind state of loving-kindness or compassion.

As soon as there's that inclining of the mind toward the object, out of desire for it, the next thing that happens is we take hold of it. There is some grasping there—some clinging, taking hold of that pleasant object. And then we might start to make a story about it.

Now that we've taken a hold of it, we have something to build up a story around. But first we have to take a hold of it. If it just passed through our experience, no story would arise. This is the part of the honey ball where perception leads to proliferation. So this grasping is the taking a hold of that creates the basis for all the stories. We'll go through a couple of examples, but the key thing is once we've taken a hold, suffering becomes inevitable.

So grasping or clinging—the word in Pali is the same: upadana. Sometimes we translate it as grasping, which is like the first act of taking a hold. Sometimes we translate it as clinging when we more notice we've been holding on for a while and that's continuing. It's the same word. It's this locking into or fixating upon some aspect of our experience based on its pleasant or unpleasant nature. And then the chain of dependent origination just goes on from the clinging to end up in suffering. Once clinging has happened, there is suffering. It may be mild, it may be great, but it's inevitable.

So the central four links—contact, feeling, craving, and clinging—are the ones that we can examine in our practice and look at on a moment-to-moment basis. And we start to see that this is what confronts us from the time we're infants. From the time we're infants, all these varied objects of the world come into our experience. And we start developing relationships with them.

Mother. Breast. Food. Father. School. High school. Attractive people, college, sex, work, job, career, taxes, income taxes, Britney Spears, MTV, Barack Obama, global economic crisis, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. All these different things come into our experience, some beautiful, some scary, and so we hang on to them. We fixate on all these parts of our experience.

When we grasp, we create an I. We make a self around that—the self that likes or dislikes, that wants or doesn't want, in relation to that thing. We talked about this last week with the five aggregates.

Simple example. You're on the eight precepts. You go down to the dining hall at tea for your little glass of juice, which the cooks have very kindly put out. But you notice something really good on the main table. There's this soup that smells better than anything you've had since the Thai restaurant two months ago. And you get a waft of this, and maybe there's some cheese out with the crackers—a nice brie.

And you start thinking, "Oh, I wish I weren't on eight precepts tonight. I didn't eat enough at lunch and I'm starting to feel really hungry, and all I've got is this miserable glass of juice and these people are having soup and brie. Maybe I could just go off eight precepts for one night. Because I was so good at lunch, I ate moderately, but I didn't realize there was going to be such a good tea. And gosh, that smells so good, and I'm really hungry now. And look at all of them—they're enjoying their food so much. I've been such a good yogi. I should do it. I should just drop my eight precepts. I didn't write the kitchen, though. I might be causing to run out of food. Maybe I better not do that. Oh, I'll just have my glass of juice and walk out."

So we walk out and maybe we regret our decision. We kind of chew on that for a while. And we go up the hill and maybe we do our yoga or we do a sit or a walk. But inwardly, we're kind of stirred up and blaming ourselves: "Why did I take eight precepts in the first place? I don't think it's really so good for my digestion."

So at this point, we've really fully taken birth as, let's say, the hungry yogi. The hungry yogi walks up the hill, still stirring and thinking about the food down there. But after a while, we let go of it. We always let go of it, don't we?

It doesn't matter how significant an experience feels on retreat—we always let go of it. Perhaps we're doing yoga, perhaps settling into meditation. We let go and the mind comes back into balance. This always happens. We've taken birth, but the mind returns to balance.

This coming back into balance is crucial to notice. This is a return to what Upasaka Ki calls the normal mind—a touchstone for her teachings. I would actually say it's not so normal; it's rather unusual in the world at large. I prefer to call it the natural mind. So we return to this natural mind, and we're balanced again. Things have cooled out and we're not suffering. What's happened is we've taken birth, then that hungry yogi birth passes away, and we're back in the natural mind, a balanced place.

But here's another example. Let's say we're sitting in meditation a few weeks into retreat, and the concentration has developed. In this sitting, we find the body really relaxed. The mind is very present, effortlessly. We notice thoughts coming and going, but they don't actually take us out of the present moment. If we want, we could stay with breath after breath—quite easy and comfortable. It doesn't take strong effort. We're relaxed and just present. It's so delightful.

And then we think—or I thought when I started, because I had a linear idea of practice—the rest of the retreat's going to be like this now. Wow. It went all through the sitting. Let's take this out for a walk. Then walking, pretty present, still concentrated, really feeling the sensations of the feet. This is great. My whole life could be like this.

Imagine if I could do my job like this. I would be so impressive. I'd get a great salary because I could deal with the clients nobody else could deal with. And in my relationship, I could be really supportive of my partner even when they do those crazy things. I wouldn't get upset at all—just have a wonderful, loving relationship. This is fantastic. I can't wait to go back and sit again and get a taste of the rest of my life.

We go back in and sit again—and the concentration's over. The mind is all over the place. We've been stirred up by the fantasies. We can't connect with the breath. We don't feel relaxed in the body. There's tremendous energy. We've lost that beautiful sitting and that concentrated mind and that ideal life. All gone.

This is painful too. This takes a while to let go of, but eventually we do, don't we? That passes—more water under the bridge—we come back into balance, the natural mind returns, and we carry on. So we recover.

In the first example with the hungry yogi, we took birth by clinging to an unpleasant experience—a sensation of hunger and desire for food. It was a difficult birth. We were stirred up, agitated, an unhappy self. But when we died, it was something of a relief.

When that hungry yogi died, oh, return to peace. So in that case, it was an unhappy birth but a pleasant death.

But when you're a concentrated yogi, the good yogi takes birth. It's a very pleasant birth. "Wow, super yogi. Just what we've been waiting for and working toward all this time. It's finally here. I've got it." So we attach to that. It's really a kind of heaven realm birth, to tell you the truth. The hungry yogi is a bit of a hungry ghost realm birth. The good yogi, heaven realm birth—really easy, everything's delightful, but then it doesn't last. We pass out of that heaven realm, and the birth was pleasant, but the death is painful.

So either way, if we hang on to pain, it's a painful birth, pleasant death. If we hang on to pleasure, it's a happy birth and a painful passing away. But either way, we construct a self out of the pleasant and painful events of our experience, and it leads to suffering. Either way, this construction of a self brings us into suffering.

Things like a good meditation or a pleasant meal are relatively minor in the overall scheme of things. The bigger things are these patterns of becoming that we've talked about—the patterns of becoming that are based on the creation of who we take ourselves to be. We all carry some kind of self-image. As long as we're not free, we have some view about who we are. This points to sakkāya-diṭṭhi that we talked about with the five aggregates.

We form an identity in order to create something solid and lasting in a world that's only characterized by change. That's what the construction of self is basically about—something enduring in this world of change. And then we use the events of our perceptions and proliferations to reinforce that self-view or sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

If we have a view that has a lot of self-judgment, that we're not adequate, then we'll take the things that happen as confirmation of that view. Like when I talked about having an empty chair next to me in a conference dining hall—the empty chair meant, "Oh, nobody liked me. Nobody wanted to sit near me." It's just an empty chair, for God's sake. But if it's coupled with self-judging, it means something. It means I'm not worthy or adequate.

So a lot of the content of retreat gets taken up, and a lot of the proliferations are about these patterns of becoming some kind of self-view in some way or another. If it's not about inadequacy, it may be about achievement. You're sitting and you have a great idea related to your work at home. And it's brilliant. So you want to go back to your room and write, maybe write the first chapter of that novel that's going to make you the first great American Dharma author. We're still waiting for that book—the great American Dharma book. You're going to be the first one to write it and you'd better get it down now. And it will lead to all kinds of fame and fortune because there are a lot of Buddhists in the world today. And the Dalai Lama will probably invite you to teach with him because you're such a great representative.

So this is another form of becoming that comes up. Some of the most difficult kinds of patterns to deal with are when the emotions that are coming are the difficult part of our self-view. Like when I worked with fear for so many years, every time the fear came up, it reminded me, "This is the biggest problem in my life. I don't know how to liberate it. It seems like it's always been here. It's here now," and that leads to a projection: "It's always going to be here in the future."

So we construct this self-view based upon this ongoing pattern related to a painful emotional experience, which could be fear or self-judgment or a sense of being betrayed or abandonment—many different forms of this. The difficult emotions feed into the self-image and reinforce it, offering more proof that that's actually what's happening, that that's the way we're put together and that's going to continue.

So these are all different forms of becoming, tied into who we take ourselves to be or who we'd like to be. And these patterns become quite burdensome, some of the most burdensome things we experience in retreat. Whether it's patterns of aggrandizement and becoming something in the world, or whether it's patterns of the opposite side of conceit—the negative, inferior kind of conceit and self-judgment—either way, we tend to hold these tightly and believe in them. This is part of the workings of karma.

Andy Olendzki, who's the head of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, put it very beautifully about this process of self and grasping. He said, "What becomes clear through this analysis of moment-to-moment experience is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds on to or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

So you ask, well, what does the grasping? There's no answer to that. This is a faculty of mind that inclines toward an object and then fixates on it out of some emotional drive of desire or aversion. So the grasping takes place and it's the grasping that constructs the sense of self. And once grasping has happened, the self is created. That means birth has happened and that means death will happen. And there's suffering in that whole chain, which typically gets repeated again and again.

There's this image in Asia that's spoken about that's quite similar to this process. If you've ever watched a monkey swing through the trees of a jungle, they'll be hanging on to one vine and they'll swing and they won't let go of that vine until there's another one very close that they see they can grab hold of. So they'll let go of one only to take up the next in a split second. And then they'll swing on that and only let go to take up the next in a split second. This is the way the undeveloped mind relates to experience—grasping at one moment after another to keep reconstructing the sense of self, the experience of "I," because the untrained mind believes that's where security is.

So the great thing is, meditators have another choice. And it's so wonderful when you start to see this, and all of you are able to see this at times. The question is, can this chain be broken? It seems so inevitable: contact, feeling, craving, clinging. Can it be broken?

What the Buddha said is that the most logical place for the break is between feeling and craving. And that's what we've spent a lot of time talking about—that it's possible to have a pleasant feeling without going into greed. It's possible to have an unpleasant feeling without going into aversion. And you all have been talking about this in interviews day after day, so I know this is happening in your experience.

So what happens? A pleasant thing is there, but the mind isn't driven into greed. An unpleasant experience is there and the mind isn't driven into aversion. This is the way out.

Start to look at the experience when there's that space between feeling and craving. Basically, when craving doesn't arise based on feeling, then clinging doesn't happen and it doesn't lead to suffering. So by not taking hold, you've stepped out of the whole cycle. This is basically the cycle of samsara. And by not taking hold, you have stepped out. So this is what gets us off the wheel.

And it basically means pleasant experiences there, unpleasant experiences there, neutral experiences there, but we're not taking hold of it. So we're not falling into greed, aversion, and delusion. So it basically means the mind is equanimous or balanced, and we're out of that cycle.

This place where the mind is not in greed, aversion, or delusion is what we sometimes call the sweet spot of meditation. This is a kind of special place when it happens, and it happens a lot during the day. If we start to look for it, it happens in formal times and it happens in informal times. It happens when we're intending it with strong mindfulness, and there are lots of moments where it just happens on its own, but we may not notice it.

So this is the central pointing of dependent origination—not to let feeling drive us into craving, which means greed, aversion, delusion. So we start to get a sense of some space opening up between a moment of feeling and a moment of craving. And just letting that space happen is the place we want to allow the meditation to develop.

So one teacher put it this way: the whole of the Buddhist path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving. The whole of the path.

So start to explore what this feels like. You're not taking birth, yet you're authentically present and aware. It can be profoundly alive. You're not grasping hold. Different practitioners use various words to describe this state—restful, easeful, peaceful, balanced, equanimous, non-conflicted, free from struggle and agenda.

The word I want to emphasize for your exploration is freedom. This is a place of genuine freedom because the mind isn't being controlled by the conditioned events that unfold. The conditioned experience of the pleasant tends to drive the mind toward greed. The conditioned experience of the unpleasant tends to drive the mind toward aversion. The conditioned experience of neutrality tends to drive the mind toward delusion. But these reactive formations aren't arising. You're not being determined by conditions. The mind is not being determined by the changing circumstances of experience.

Because of this freedom from the conditionality of experience, there's a subtle taste of what is not conditioned—what is unconditioned. Another way to express this is that we can see conditioned phenomena as they truly are, and we can perceive the Dhamma in its authentic nature.

Let me share a passage from Ajahn Chah that illuminates this understanding:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable—material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself. The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

"The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are—as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

Resting in that gap means we're not grasping and we're not subject to birth. We're not generating a new identity through clinging. Not being subject to birth, we're not subject to death. In this gap, there's a subtle taste of what's called the deathless—a synonym for nirvana.

In the Thai forest tradition, they describe this experience as a preview of nibbana, like a coming attraction. It's not the complete realization but rather what Ajahn Buddhadasa called "temporary nibbana." It's not the full experience of the uncondi-

tioned, but it offers a genuine taste. The peace we feel there is a partial expression of the absolute peace of the unconditioned. It's as if the obscurations have lifted enough for us to sense how that peace naturally emanates.

Imagine walking and suddenly catching the aroma of bread baking somewhere. You can follow that fragrance to its source, to the bakery itself. When we first experience this peace in meditation, it's like catching that initial whiff of the unconditioned. Following it leads us to the very source of that peace.

There's a beautiful series of suttas in the Sutta Nipata where a group of Brahmin youths approach the Buddha with sincere questions. In ancient India, the Brahmins represented the religious elite—wealthy, holding a monopoly on sanctioned spirituality, masters of countless complex rules and privileged knowledge systems that were difficult to access.

Then appeared these wandering ascetics like the Buddha—penniless, clothed in rags, surviving on alms, dwelling in wilderness and forests. They were spiritual revolutionaries, challenging the established Brahminical order. Many Brahmins resisted, dismissively calling them "those bald-pated recluses coming to town."

But in this particular encounter, these Brahmin youths approached the Buddha with genuine curiosity, truly interested in exploring and understanding the depths of spiritual life.

So there's a series of dialogues, and this is one of them. This Brahmin youth named Todaya says to the Buddha, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you have liked to be able to ask the Buddha that? What is that liberation like?

And the Buddha replied, "That sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." By not holding on, we don't get entangled in this manufacturing of self again and again and again. So this word becoming appears a lot in the literature.

This is from Ajahn Chah. And just imagine that this talk is being given by Ajahn Chah in a Thai Dharma hall. So a lot of the Thai Dharma halls are basically open-air pavilions. They have a floor. They have a roof and pillars around the outside supporting the roof, but no walls because the climate is so mild. So a lot of Dharma talks in Thailand are given in these open-air halls.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "The roof is a becoming, the floor is a becoming, but in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana

is this emptiness." When we're not standing on anything through clinging, that is our emptiness. That is our temporary nibbana. That is our freedom. We're not taking birth. We're not creating something. And we're not dying.

So our meditation starts to reveal this kind of deathless place. It's not so much that we've fabricated it, that we've constructed it by a lot of doing. It's by refraining from doing. It's when feeling is there, but we don't grasp at it. It's when we restrain the craving and clinging that this place opens up. So it's not particularly created through activity. It's created through non-doing.

I don't know if you remember from the first session—I talked about what an important place non-doing has in the Dharma. This is where that really becomes clear. It's through not taking hold, not getting stirred up, and not forming reactions that this place of the deathless opens up to us.

Because it's based on non-doing, not something constructed, it's always available. It's available when we stop the doings.

This is from Ajahn Jumnien, another teacher in the Thai forest lineage: "The best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

So it's kind of nice because everything's still coming and going. It's not that we've cut off experience. And because there's full awareness—you have to be pretty aware not to crave—because there's full awareness, we know them all. So there's this clear knowing of everything that's coming and going, and it's still mixed, pleasant and unpleasant. But because of this balance, we're not reacting. And that's what opens the door to this Dhamma, to this deathless.

As we start to feel the freedom that's in this place, we can start to see that maybe this is at least partly what we're practicing for. Because it's free, it opens up a lot of other beautiful qualities. When we're not constricted, you could describe it as peace or ease or balance or equanimity. It's also kind of the open door for love and compassion and joy and insight for wisdom to arise. So when there's that experience of freedom, there's a lot of potential there. So I like to think of it as something of a goal in practice.

You know, it would be interesting to reflect on what you described as your intention for this retreat when you talked about it in the group on the first day or what you reflected about later. But look and see if in your intention and aspiration there isn't something like this that's a real part of it.

As we start to get a taste of this kind of freedom, we start to realize: maybe this is what I've been looking for. This deathless place that's out of the cycle of suffering and creates the open door for all the beautiful qualities to come through. So it's kind of a goal, but we aren't stable in it yet. So we don't want to stop the path.

Now, what's the most effective way to move along the path? Maybe it's through this goal. Maybe this resting in the deathless is the most effective way to weaken the kilesas, to weaken the force of craving, because it's kind of retraining the mind. And the door is open for wisdom and insight to come through this. So maybe this is not only the goal, but it's also our best understanding of what the path is.

In this way, the path and the goal kind of come together. And the goal has that sense of fruition and some satisfaction, some arriving. So it really lets us appreciate the journey that we've gone through in meditation to reach this point. We can just appreciate the journey and appreciate ourselves for taking it and realize that we're manifesting, to some degree, some of our aspiration.

And then also because it's not stable yet—this place, we come into it and we lose it—it can renew our dedication to keep walking until it's stable. We want to be able to abide in this through any situation. So we need to keep walking the path, but we kind of understand this now becomes the path for us also.

When we hit this point, sometimes there's a little bit of a shift in the way we want to practice. And Carol has alluded to this a number of times when she's talked about how it doesn't matter what we're paying attention to and that the awareness itself can get more interesting than the objects that we're aware of.

What's being suggested there is a kind of move from a focus on the objects to a focus on the quality of the mind that's knowing. And that's what this shift to the understanding of this resting in the gap between feeling and craving is also pointing to. Let's look at the mind itself and see if we can abide in that place of balance, that place of unborn and undying.

So a couple of ways in. I'll talk about two tonight and then we'll do a guided meditation in the morning that will offer another one.

One way in—we've talked around this, but I don't know if we've said it so clearly—comes from some teachings from a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He points to a way to work with attitude that leads in this direction.

One of his teachings is about looking at the attitude of mind or how we're relating to our experience, moment by moment, to see if reactive formations are coming in. So he says, one of his teachings says, ask the question: In this moment, is there greed, aversion, or delusion in your mind? And you can ask this question fairly often.

Well, sometimes it's not that easy to know the answer when you look. So he's got some other questions to clear this up. He said, okay, are you wanting something else to happen that's not happening? That occasionally happens, doesn't it? That's the presence of greed. Are you wanting something to stop happening? That sometimes happens too, right? Knee pain, mental state, wandering mind. That's aversion. Are you not in touch with what's happening? Are you spaced out, lost in thought? He said, that's delusion.

Now usually by the time you've asked the question, you're not deluded anymore. So usually the answer when you ask, "Am I out of touch?" is no—we're back in touch. But often, very often, we'll see one of the first two: greed or aversion.

If that happens, then pay attention to that attitude of mind. Take that as a subject for the mindfulness. You don't have to judge it. You don't have to try to make it go away. Just become mindful of that. Greed feels like this. Aversion feels like this. Let that be your meditation subject.

When I first started doing this practice of checking the attitude, I was doing kind of an open, choiceless attention using light noting. And then about five times a sitting, I would just turn back and look at the attitude in mind. I would ask these three questions, and if there was a formation, I would stay with it for a while.

Then after asking the questions enough times, I got really familiar with the practice and I could just turn and see if there was greed, aversion, or delusion. I didn't have to go through much thinking about it.

Once I could do that—just turn and see the attitude—it became quite comfortable to do it more often. So I would do it maybe ten times in a sitting. Just check. Then I found that if my attention was stable in the present moment, I never had to go back to the objects. I could just stay with that quality of attitude as my main focus.

So I would just hang out in this place of balance and look for when the mind left it. It takes some stability to do that, but if you've got some stability, it's quite a nice practice to do.

Upasika Kee says the same thing: "Your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's so worth checking on."

So she's saying the same thing. Stay with the balance of heart and mind, and notice if it's moving out to some form of grasping. If not, just stay there in that balance. This is one meditation that works very nicely that way.

The other meditation is to take a look at the quality of consciousness itself. You can play with this one just in the last minutes of the talk. Let your eyes be open and send your interest around the room and fall on the different objects. Some of them may be pleasant—looking at the Buddha images or the flowers on the altar, some of the nice shawls people are wearing, quality of light and wood in the hall. Some of them may be unpleasant or striking you in an unpleasant way—a little bit of chaos up here on the platform that I often wish we could clean up, some disorganization in the hall, some color that doesn't strike you as particularly appealing today.

So let your eyes just roam around—different people, pleasant, unpleasant, different focuses. Feel yourself being drawn into likes and dislikes. Let that all happen.

And now, turn that consciousness, turn that awareness to look at itself. Turn it back inwards to what is doing the looking. Who's looking? Who's looking? There's looking, looking, looking, going out, out, out, liking, disliking. Who's looking? Look back inside at the center. Where is that coming from? This is turning consciousness back to look at itself.

And you may feel, when you do that, that some little shift happens inwardly. Anybody feel a little shift from that? Okay, maybe subtle. We'll do one tomorrow morning that will probably be a little easier to find.

This is also a way to practice that cuts down the fascination with objects and lets the mind rest in its own capacity more. Again from Upasika Kee: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way. In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside."

So we're turning inward. We stay with the awareness or the consciousness or the heart. And that cuts the fascination with the other objects of the senses. It makes life simpler, makes practice simpler. And it can feel like a kind of home.

This inward turning that she describes doesn't mean we cut ourselves off from the world. When you turn to awareness itself, do you lose touch with the room, with the people, with the sights? No. We're still fully aware of everything, but we're simply not as entangled or enmeshed with it all.

This can be another skillful way to practice. Both of these directions—checking on attitude and turning awareness back on itself—share this quality of disentangling us from complications with the phenomena of the senses. They allow us to find an approach to meditation where we can rest in this quality that's free from birth and death, this gap between feeling and craving.

Let me close with a quotation from another of these dialogues with the Brahmin youths that the Buddha was having. This youth was named Kappa, and this is the question he put to the Buddha:

"For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replied: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

So let's just sit for a minute together.

Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. That is Nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 106

Patterns of Becoming 4: Kamma and Rebirth

Guy Armstrong · 1h04

> *In this fourth talk of the Patterns of Becoming series, Guy Armstrong examines kamma (action) as the foundation for understanding how we create repetitive patterns of selfing and suffering. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that kamma means intentional action (cetanā), he explores how wholesome intentions rooted in generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom lead to happiness, while unwholesome actions rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion lead to suffering.*
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> *Armstrong discusses the ten unwholesome actions detailed in the suttas and explains how understanding kamma provides "the science of happiness" - reliable steps toward any form of wellbeing. He addresses Western resistance to teachings on kamma and rebirth, clarifying common misunderstandings while emphasizing that the teaching doesn't imply beings "deserve" their suffering. The talk explores six ways karmic consequences manifest, from immediate feelings to future results.*
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> *The discussion of rebirth examines how consciousness continues from one existence to the next, carrying karmic patterns that shape new births. Armstrong references the Aṅgulimāla story and scientific research by Dr. Ian Stevenson to illustrate these teachings. He concludes by pointing toward the Noble Eightfold Path as "the action that leads to the end of action," setting up the next talk on liberation from compulsive patterns.*

The talk tonight is the fourth in this series called Patterns of Becoming, describing how we create the self over and over again in these repetitive patterns that trap us in unhappiness or suffering, and how we release from these patterns.

The patterns I've been describing are basically karmic patterns. They're patterns that fit within the understanding of karma, the activity of karma, and the way out is also in the field of karma. So this evening, I want to explore this topic of karma as the foundation for understanding the next talk, which is how we come to the ending of these patterns.

Tonight I want to explore three aspects of action: karma itself, its results, and this question of rebirth.

The Dalai Lama was once asked if he had to choose between teaching Westerners about emptiness or about karma, which did he think was more important? He said it would be more important to teach about karma. We've talked quite a bit about emptiness in different ways on this retreat, but tonight I want to talk about this teaching on karma.

Bhikkhu Bodhi was giving an address to a group of Western teachers of Vipassana a few years ago at the study center in Barré, Massachusetts. He made the statement that if you don't teach karma and rebirth, you're not really teaching Buddha Dharma. So I want to be sure to fulfill Bhikkhu Bodhi's prerequisites tonight and make sure that at some point in this retreat we touch on these two themes, which are quite central in the teachings.

This word karma has entered our vocabulary in the West. You see it a lot, but it's not very well understood in the culture generally. I think the reason it's so important for us as human beings and as practitioners is that it's the science of happiness. If you want to become happy, there are very predictable and consistent steps that can be taken to lead to any kind of happiness you want to achieve. You can find human happiness, you can find heavenly happiness, and you can find the happiness of liberation through the different steps of the path once you understand how karma works. In this way, karma becomes our best friend along the path. In order for it to really serve us well, we need to understand its workings. Then it can take us anywhere we want to go on any of these destinations.

Much of what I'll talk about tonight is something I can't verify. A lot of our dharma talks discuss things that you can experience and we can experience and maybe we have experienced. This is not true for much of this topic. It takes extraordinary vision to be able to understand and see with insight the workings of karma. The Buddha said that he had this kind of vision. When he talked about karma and its law, he wasn't talking from a speculative view—it would be nice if maybe the universe worked this way. He was talking about what he could actually see with his concentrated, clear mind.

This is not something that most of us can verify. Maybe never in our life will we be totally able to verify it. But I feel it's important to consider it. The Buddha thought it was very important. He talked about it quite a lot. As a teacher, I don't think it's my job to tell you what to believe when it's something you can't verify. But I do think it is my job to tell you what the Buddha said about it, and then to leave it in your hands to figure out your own relationship to it.

Please understand that in what I share tonight, I'm not saying that you have to believe this, but I'm saying it might be worth considering and having an open mind that it could possibly be true. The Buddha had a pretty good track record on the things we can verify. Maybe there's just a chance he was right about this too. If we just open ourselves to that possibility, that's enough.

The word karma is a Sanskrit word and it simply means action. The Pali equivalent is kamma, K-A-M-M-A, and it also just means action. It's another one of these words that was common in the language at the time that the Buddha took and put a special meaning to. But basically it just means action. I might use the words karma and action interchangeably through this talk.

In the time of the Buddha, every philosophical school had some kind of opinion about action. They'd get together, and this is one of the main things they'd argue about. Some of the schools said action mattered. Others said it didn't matter. Some schools said action had no consequences. Other schools said action had consequences. Some schools said that all action is predetermined—you can't affect the action in your life because it's all set already. Other schools said, no, there's absolutely free choice and you can choose any action that you want.

But from the Buddha's point of view, all these were speculative views because the teachers didn't have direct experience to know what they were talking about. Whereas the Buddha said that he did.

The Buddha gave the word karma a new interpretation, a new definition, and this is the central piece of the meaning. He said, karma is action with volition, or you could use the word intention.

The Pali word is *cetanā*, and it's the word that we've been using in the meditation instructions as intention. It is the driving force in the mind that causes our actions of speech and of body to come through.

Now one slight refinement: the Buddha also considered thoughts and emotions to be volitional actions. So we say that this field of karma encompasses actions of body, of speech, and of mind, and they are karmic because they're intentional. They're volitional. Other synonyms for volition could be urge, impulse, motive, or motivation. So it's saying that they're actions that come out of some inner direction, some impulse to achieve some aim. And that's what puts them in the field of karma.

Moreover, the Buddha said actions are either wholesome or unwholesome depending on the quality of that volition or intention. If the volition is wholesome, the action is wholesome. If the volition is unwholesome, the action is unwholesome.

So, what do you think unwholesome actions come out of? Our three old friends: greed, aversion, and delusion are considered the roots of the unwholesome. Their opposites are considered the roots of the wholesome. The opposite of greed, the Buddha defined as renunciation—basically letting go, giving up. But you could also think of it as generosity, because in generosity we renounce something that we have. The opposite of aversion is loving-kindness, and the opposite of delusion is wisdom. So you can think of the wholesome roots as generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

Then actions get influenced by either unwholesome or wholesome conditions in the mind. That's what gives them their karmic weight, their moral weight. So it's not the act per se; it's where it comes out of in our hearts and minds.

A simple example: an infant is lying on her bed, sleeping, rolls over and in her sleep knocks over a lamp that shorts a wire, causes an electrical fire, and the house starts to burn. Fortunately, because I don't want this to be a bummer, her parents come in and rescue her. She's fine. But the house might burn down. There's no karmic weight in her action because it was simply accidental, even though it led to a fire. No karmic weight.

Or consider a karmic action. Someone takes a sharp knife and slices open the belly of someone else and blood comes spewing out. Is that karmically wholesome or unwholesome? Could be either, couldn't it? If it's a surgeon who's healing out of compassion for the patient, it's wholesome. If it's a robber who's trying to steal the person's money or property, it's unwholesome. So it's not the action but the intention behind it that determines this kind of force.

And of course, as we look at our lives realistically, a lot of actions have mixed motives. If we look at our daily activities, we might give somebody a gift, which is very generous, but then we crave some recognition or appreciation or gratitude. So there can be a mixture of intentions in our actions.

Just looking, as an example with desire and aversion, at understanding how they become intentions or motivations, we see the basic thrust of desire is to gain something pleasant. The basic thrust or impulse of aversion is to push away what's unpleasant. The basic thrust of fear is to withdraw or back up from something that's unpleasant or threatening. So we see how a lot of these moods that we feel have hidden agendas or unspoken intentions in them.

The Buddha was quite clear about what kinds of actions particularly carry on this unwholesome activity. And he taught a list of what he called the ten unwholesome actions. I'm just going to go through them quickly so that we know the ground. They're very familiar from our practice of the precepts. Three of them are actions of body, four of them are actions of speech, and three of them are actions of mind.

So the three unwholesome bodily actions are killing living beings, taking what is not given, and engaging in sexual misconduct—sexual conduct that harms. And if you look at these, of course these form the basis, refraining from these is the basis of the first three lay precepts: non-killing, non-stealing, refraining from sexual misconduct.

The four unwholesome actions of speech are lying—and that relates to the fourth precept, which is to refrain from speaking what is untrue. The other three unwholesome actions of speech are using harsh or abusive speech towards someone, speaking maliciously of someone else to undermine their reputation, or engaging in idle chatter and gossip. This one's fairly light. But you can see how, number one, it's not a good use of time. Number two, it uses the events of other people's lives for entertainment or judgment. That's the motive behind gossip. It's not very supportive, generally.

And the three unwholesome actions of mind, he said, were covetousness, which is about wanting what someone else has; ill will, wishing another person harm; and, most interestingly, wrong view—not understanding things the way they really are. Because when we have wrong view about the world and about ourselves, we act based on a false understanding of reality. And that gets us into trouble.

The ten wholesome actions are simply to refrain from the ten unwholesome actions. This is wonderful because it gives us a guideline—a very practical guideline—for our daily lives. Once we understand the importance of karma and the results of karma, we have really clear standards by which to guide our external actions. It's extraordinarily helpful, especially in our outer life. The Buddha was very strong about taking great care with our conduct.

He said that one who has taken real care with their actions for quite a while enjoys what he called "the bliss of blamelessness"—a certain freedom from regret or remorse. When you come into a situation like this where things are really quiet for a while, often, if you haven't experienced this before, a certain amount of life review takes place. You start remembering things you've done that weren't so skillful, and one can be filled with regret. The mind can become very clouded as a result—heavy with self-judgment.

But having taken care with our conduct, we are free from that kind of regret. It brings the bliss of blamelessness and allows the mind to settle more easily in happiness, which leads to concentration, which leads to insight, which leads to freedom. So this moral foundation is a really important part of the meditative path.

How far can this be developed? I like to think about people like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who's been working on this for a long time now. The Dalai Lama had an interview a few years ago with Oprah Winfrey. This is one of the great things I think Oprah does—she brings great spiritual teachings to a very broad audience, and I really appreciate that. There's nobody else who does it quite like she does.

She started the interview by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable, not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experience with more advanced meditators—even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind—I don't lag too far behind."

Part of the reason for his meditative skill is this bliss of blamelessness. His mind can just rest very happily in its own nature because he doesn't have any regrets about his conduct. A beautiful statement.

So we're only about thirteen lifetimes behind him. We'll get there too.

This is the field of action, which has moral weight based on volition. And then the central teaching of the Buddha is that actions do have consequences. They have consequences based on the nature of the intention behind them. The basic message is that wholesome intentions lead to wholesome consequences, while unwholesome intentions lead to unwholesome consequences or unhappiness.

Ruth Dennison, a great elder in our tradition, has a way of putting things very succinctly. She said, "Karma means you don't get away with nothing, darling."

This is the law. The Buddha also said this very crisply near the start of the Dhammapada collection of verses: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief."

Speak and act with an impure mind, and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. This is the basic message of the law of karma.

And this understanding is becoming more accepted in Western culture. Some years ago, James and I were teaching a class to some young men in a juvenile hall in San Mateo. A friend of James worked in the juvenile hall and managed to get us the invitation to go in. These became the class series that eventually grew up and were taken over by the Mind-Body Awareness Project and the Lineage Project. This was the beginning of it.

We taught a six-week series on meditation, which we didn't call meditation because we figured they wouldn't be into it. We called it "Mind Power" so that they could dig it. At the end of the six weeks, we handed out certificates with each person's name stating they had completed a six-week training in Mind Power. One of the young guys—and you know, in juvenile hall, people are under the age of eighteen, awaiting trial—asked, "Can I take this certificate and show the judge?" These kids, whose whole life could be in front of them, don't know what's going to happen when they actually go to trial.

We'd been teaching them the usual suspects of mindfulness: being with the breath, being with body sensations, being with emotions, feeling emotions in the body. This emotional work was really helpful for them because, first, they were a captive audience, so to speak, and they were very receptive to the teachings. They had a lot of time on their hands. And juvenile hall, like most prisons, is emotionally a very charged place. These young men don't know what's going to happen to their lives. There's a lot of anxiety, and at the same time, there's a certain amount of aggression going on. They had a lot of time just to feel what was happening. It was not easy for them. So learning to relate with fear and anger were very helpful tools.

Near the end of the class series, we thought, "Well, we should say something about sila, shouldn't we? Should we say something about the precepts? Should we talk about karma?" James and I sort of looked at each other and debated it back and forth. We finally decided we only have one chance to speak to these guys—let's do it.

So we introduced the notion of karma and said something like, "If you act out of anger or fear, it's going to come back in your life in unhappy ways. But if you act out of kindness or caring, it's going to come back to your life in happy ways. Does that sound like something you've ever heard before?"

One of the young guys put his hand up and said, "You mean 'what goes around comes around'?"

"Yeah."

He said, "Sure, we can relate to that."

So that idea is already there in the culture. It just needs to be spelled out more. They got it quickly.

The Tibetans have a series of phrases for the brahmaviharas that are a little different than ours—quite similar, but a little bit different. And embedded in their phrases for loving-kindness and compassion is some of this same teaching. They call these states the four immeasurables because they're boundless states.

The phrase for loving-kindness is: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." It's beautiful because it puts the understanding of how happiness comes about directly into the wish for happiness.

The compassion phrase is: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." This becomes a daily kind of reflection that one might do in the Tibetan tradition.

The Buddha said that this law applies to all beings. It's a universal law. It doesn't matter if you believe it or not. It doesn't matter if you know it or not. It doesn't matter if your religion believes it or not.

It doesn't matter if your culture believes it or not. It applies to all beings because these forces of the wholesome and the unwholesome are in everyone. And particularly, our growth in the path is based on this same law, which we'll explore further next time.

So far in the Brahmavihāras, we've gone through loving kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy. In a couple of days, we'll introduce the practice of equanimity. It turns out the practice of equanimity in the Brahmavihāras is based on the teaching of karma.

The classical phrase I'll mention now—and you'll be given the opportunity to practice with it in a couple of days—is: "All beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are their relations, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of those they will be the heirs."

Sometimes for Westerners, this is a bit of a shock. This seems like kind of a tough phrase. If your mind doesn't relate to it easily, we have some softer versions that we'll be happy to offer in a couple of days' time. But this reflection points to how beings, to some extent, create their own destinies or their own journeys through life, and everyone has their own way.

It's a reflection that can be very helpful with friends and family members. Do you have any of those people in your life who keep making the wrong choices? You see it coming, and you want to tell them, "Don't do that. If you do that, it's going to be a train wreck. I can see it coming." But they don't want your advice, right? They never want our advice. So we allow them to make their own choices and we see how that leads in many cases to their own suffering. But that's how they have to live out their own choices and their own direction.

The Buddha in the suttas actually stated this phrase even more strongly: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their relations, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of those they will be the heirs."

This is quite a powerful reflection when you carry it in a sustained way like we do with Brahmavihāra practice, because we start to see how our very being is emerging from our own past actions. Moment after moment, we are born, we are taking birth from our own past actions in these patterns that go on over a whole lifetime. These patterns of acting and feeling and thinking that we are the owners of. When we start to understand in this way, it brings about a tremendous sense of personal responsibility. If we want the outcome to be favorable, we have to start the work from within our own hearts.

I find that Westerners often have a strong resistance to this notion. In Western culture, it's not familiar, and it conflicts with some of our cultural values. I think especially in the West, we have very strong democratic ideals about equality. The second para-

graph of the Declaration of Independence, where the United States declared its freedom from Great Britain, starts by saying, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal."

This notion of equality goes very deep in the West, and it's a wonderful, inspiring ideal that I think points to a deep truth. It's inspired political movements all around the world in really beautiful ways. But somehow it comes along with another idea, which is something like people should be equally happy. And that doesn't seem to be the case. It just doesn't seem to work like that.

So when we say that people are to some extent responsible for their own happiness, it seems like kind of a cold worldview. Where's the compassion in that? Where's the caring? It can seem very cruel sometimes. As a reading into this teaching on karma, sometimes people think, "Oh, well, what the teaching is saying is that beings deserve their pain and they deserve to suffer. If they've done unskillful actions, then they deserve to suffer."

That is not implicit at all in the law of karma. The Buddha taught for forty-five years out of compassion to end people's suffering. I'm very convinced that if he could have looked within the heart of every person he met and plucked out the source of suffering, he would have done it. He didn't have any idea that people deserve to suffer.

A classic example is Aṅgulimāla. Aṅgulimāla was a sincere spiritual seeker and student who unfortunately took advice from a not-so-skillful teacher who told him that in order to progress on the path, he needed to murder a thousand people, collect a finger from each individual, and wear those severed fingers in a necklace. His name meant "finger necklace."

So Aṅgulimāla had hidden out in the forest and killed everybody who walked by until he'd reached the number 999. He just needed one more to make the teaching complete. The Buddha was planning to walk his way. So the Buddha's supporters said, "Don't go that way. Aṅgulimāla is staying there and he will rush out and kill you."

And the Buddha said, "I'm not worried. That's the way I'm going to walk."

So he walked that way. Angulimala came to attack him, but he wasn't successful. And when he encountered the Buddha, he was so impressed by the Buddha's dignity and poise and lack of fear that he bowed down and asked to become his student.

So at this point, the Buddha could have said, "Oh, sorry, but you deserve to suffer. You're a serial killer. And I think you just need to have your karma play out and you'll reap a lot of suffering and you deserve that." He could have done that, but he didn't.

The Buddha ordained Angulimala, taught him the Dharma, taught him how to practice, and in a relatively short period of time, Angulimala was awakened. He remained a bhikkhu for the rest of his life, remained a part of the Sangha.

When he would go out on alms round, people still thought of him as the mass murderer, and they would attack him and not offer him food and throw things at him and want to injure him. And Angulimala came back and told the Buddha about that, and the Buddha said, "You just need to bear that. That's part of your karma. But your mind is free." And his heart was cleared of all that hatred.

So the teaching on karma doesn't imply anything about deserving to suffer, but it is a law. To expect that we can do unskillful things and not suffer would be like expecting an apple to come off the stem and not fall to the ground. The law of gravity says if the apple comes off the twig, it's going to fall to the ground. There's no way around it. You can't stop the law of gravity and you can't stop the law of karma except through deep spiritual realization, which we'll talk about more next time. And that's how Angulimala got out of the worst situation of his suffering due to the Buddha's compassion, due to the Buddha's wanting him not to have to suffer the consequences of those actions.

Another way we sometimes take this that's also off the mark is we think that karma becomes the reason not to care. We see someone in suffering and we think, "Oh, well, it's their actions that took them there, therefore it's their fault, so it's their problem, so I don't have to care about them." That's also a misunderstanding.

That attitude is called indifference. Indifference is the near enemy of equanimity. As you know, the near enemy is an unwholesome state that masquerades as the wholesome. Indifference is not the appropriate attitude toward any kind of suffering. So the proper attitude is compassion. When the heart is awakened and open, the response to suffering is compassion.

So it doesn't matter where the person's suffering came from. It could be a purely physical cause. It could be some mental cause. It could be an accident. It could be some kind of attack or assault. It could be many sources. It doesn't matter where it came from. Compassion wants to relieve the suffering. Indifference is off the mark of the teachings. So we often talk about in teaching equanimity, take care that it doesn't slide into indifference. And if it does, then the equanimity needs to be warmed up with more loving kindness and compassion so that it has that balance.

So these results of action come through in at least six different ways. There are six ways we can understand the results, the consequences.

We feel it before we act. If we're thinking about doing something wholesome, it feels good. You know, when Carol talked about the generous actions that she and her friends carried out in Burma, I know that as they were planning those actions, they got great feelings about the people that were going to be able to be supported by them. And when we think about doing something unkind, it doesn't feel so good, even before we do it.

In the moment we're acting, we feel that quality of the intention. When we're doing something loving and generous, it feels good in the very moment. When we're doing something unpleasant, unkind, it hurts in the moment. Sylvia Borstein has this lovely expression: "Anyone causing great pain is themselves in great pain." And you can feel that, can't you? That harming and hurting.

After the action, as we recollect it, we can feel wonderful about the skillful things we've done and we can feel a lot of regret about the unskillful things. So in the metta practice, we often encourage this recollection of our past skillful actions, actions of love and generosity, as a way to feel good about ourselves as people.

The fourth way that we feel these consequences is that our actions come back to us from other people in the ways that we've related to them. So if we've been kind, supportive, generous, loving, affectionate toward people, then when we meet them, they're happy to see us.

They're very open. They're warm and generous and welcoming back. If we've been cold or critical or judgmental or angry, then when we meet those people, they're not so open to us. They're not so welcoming, not so inviting to us.

The fifth way that we can feel these consequences is in habitual states of mind. And this we get to know through observing these karmic patterns in our own meditation practice and in our lives. We find that our minds fall into fairly predictable grooves. And those grooves have been created just by the repetition of those habits of mind before, again and again.

This is from the Buddha: "Because whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, then their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

So through this repeated activity, we form this groove in the mind that by habit we tend to fall back into again and again.

These are five ways that we can feel the results of karma experientially, pragmatically, in our own observation.

Then there's a sixth way, and this is the kind of mysterious way that most of us cannot verify. And that is that our actions bring results in the future in some kind of unpredictable and unexplainable way. And this is mysterious. I don't know how this works. How is it that kindness brings happiness? How is it that kindness brings good things into our life? I don't know. But the Buddha said that he could see that from his own direct experience, that this actually is the case.

So this is the point at which when one says, "I don't believe in karma," this is the point that people don't necessarily believe in. And you don't have to believe in this. As long as you see the other five ways which are verifiable and come to trust in that, that's plenty to fuel your practice. But I encourage you to think about, consider this other possibility a little bit. Because it's kind of a profound comment on the universe that we live in.

Originally some people think that the teaching on karma is cold or heartless or uncaring because it puts so much into personal responsibility. But I see it differently. You know, after hanging out with this teaching for a while, what it says to me is the truth of morality, goodness and ungoodness is woven into the very fabric of the universe—that this is a universal law that applies to all sentient beings everywhere. This is not just something that's constructed out of evolution for social ease in generating a better society. The Buddha's teaching points to this being an essential element in the fabric of the universe for sentient beings.

What that says to me is that we live in a moral universe. Not just a moral evolved human society, a moral universe. That this law has been there from the very beginning. So to me, this teaching warms the universe up. It doesn't feel cold and heartless. It feels like there's a heart of caring at the very center of sentient life. And it's the kind of universe that I want to live in, where morality is an integral part. And that's part of what the Buddha was pointing to.

Now, the way these actions play out are mysterious and they're complicated. The Buddha said that if you tried to figure it out, you would go mad and experience vexation. Which comes first, I'm not sure. But they both sound not so helpful.

So we can't figure it out, like how the karmic results unfold. All we can do is take it on some faith that this might be a possibility and then explore. So he called this one of four imponderables that are not advised to reflect on. The other three are the range of

mind of a Buddha, the kind of insights a Buddha can come to; the beginning of things, the origin of the physical universe; and the third is the range or the power of a concentrated mind. These are beyond rational comprehension.

Another misunderstanding is sometimes we believe that everything that happens can be attributed to karma. So the Buddha was asked about that one time. He said, "Is everything painful or pleasant that happens to us the result of our past action?" And the Buddha said, "It's not like that. You can't say that." He said things come from other causes. And he mentioned illness, diet, climate, accident, and assault. So the understanding is there are several kinds of causes in the universe—physical, chemical, biological, genetic, psychological, etc.

And karma is another one. So karma is one force that causes things to unfold, but it's not the only one.

With this teaching of the mysterious unfolding, I would encourage you to keep an open mind about it. If we say, "I don't believe that—that's false, there's no basis for that view," that's just another speculative position because we don't have the insight to know whether it's false. You can simply keep an open mind and hang out with it.

As I've sat with this concept over time—it was foreign to me when I started practice—and as I've watched people's lives unfold over the thirty-five years I've been in the Dharma, knowing people for that length of time, I've come to have considerable faith in this teaching and the mysterious ways that it works. But it took me a long time to arrive at that understanding. Just hang out with it, let it sit there, evaluate it over time, and see where you end up.

I want to talk a little about rebirth, because part of these karmic results have to do with future lives. Again, this teaching on future lives and rebirth is an integral part of what the Buddha had to communicate, and he considered it important. He wouldn't have taught it if it were merely incidental. He knew much that he didn't bother sharing, but this teaching on rebirth weaves through many, many discourses. It's not something that appears just once, which you could discount by saying, "Oh, that was added by later editors." It comes up again and again in many different suttas, on many different occasions, in many different contexts.

The understanding here is that the actions we carry out in this life influence the conditions of our next birth. After death, there is some continuity that takes place. There will be a birth in the future after our passing away that bears some connection to our

life now. To see the full playing out of karma, one has to look at this possibility of future lives. Without this perspective, I don't think one can really come to have much faith in this teaching.

Consider a simple example: Pol Pot, dictator of Cambodia from 1976 to 1979, responsible for a regime that killed twenty-one percent of the population, exterminated the professional classes, monks, and nuns, and virtually eliminated the educated class and all the Buddhist clergy of the country. Pol Pot was driven out of power by the Vietnamese in 1979, but he formed a kind of shadow government near the border and lived until about 1998 when he died. Some suspect he was poisoned, but that's not entirely clear.

When I look at the trajectory of his life, I do not see any suffering proportional to the horrific crimes that he committed through his regime. I have to consider that the suffering that will eventually come to him is being played out in his next life—probably currently being played out. Sometimes it's not possible to see this cycle of karma and the unhappiness that results from actions within one human life. But the Buddha often talked about wholesome actions leading to happy births, unwholesome actions leading to unhappy births, in a way that makes this understandable.

The Buddha talked about the effects of specific actions which he could see. He said things like: killing living beings will lead at some point to a lifespan that is not long; injuring living beings will lead at some point to a lifespan characterized by ill health. But on the positive side: not killing living beings will lead to a lifespan that is long; not injuring living beings will lead to a lifespan that is healthy. Being generous in our actions will lead to a life in which we experience abundance at some point; being stingy will lead to a life where we experience lack or scarcity.

What he didn't say—and I want to make this clear—is that you can take current conditions and use karma as a rearview mirror. In other words, you cannot say, "Because I'm having health problems, therefore it means I killed living beings in my past life." He never said you could use it to look backwards and draw conclusions.

In this understanding of karma, we cannot use it as a rearview mirror. Some people become concerned about this—if they're experiencing suffering in this life, they worry it means it's a result of unwholesome past actions. There is nothing in the teachings that provides ground to support that conclusion. Please don't take it in that way. We cannot see that clearly. That would just be a speculative view. So we shouldn't judge ourselves, and we shouldn't judge others, on that kind of basis. We don't know if suffering came through karma, accident, assault, genetics, or what—it could arise from many different directions.

The Buddha said again that karma is the womb from which we are born. In that agrarian society of India 2,500 years ago, grain was a form of wealth. "Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, and dependents—none of these can you take with you after death. You must cast them all aside. But whatever karma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession, and you must fare according to that karma. That karma will follow you just as the shadow follows its owner."

Therefore, do good actions. Gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings after death.

Now, you may not believe in this teaching about karma and rebirth. You don't have to believe it. But what if it's true? What if the Buddha was right about this the way he was right about all the things we've already verified? How would you want to live your life? We'd really want to be careful, wouldn't we? We'd be mindful not to harm and motivated to do a lot of good.

So the Buddha said this is a good bet to make. Act as though it's true whether you know it or not, believe it or not. Act as though it's true. If it is true, then you'll have the rewards in this life and in future lives. If it's not true, you'll still have a great life in this life. This is described in a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 60, if you'd like to read it. So it's a good bet.

But what's happening in rebirth? The question is: what is it that gets reborn?

I have to interject here with Trungpa Rinpoche's quick reply to this question. "You want to know what gets reborn? It's your bad habits." He's saying that from a perspective where the beautiful habits of mind are all intrinsically there in consciousness, so of course they carry forward. And the individual patterning is made out of bad habits. But that was a little cynical throwaway.

So let's talk about it in more detail. We can understand this process of rebirth either as one life to the next or moment to moment in this life. We've talked about this process of becoming and taking birth based on contact, feeling, craving, clinging. This is the moment-to-moment description of being born again and again. And then there's also the dying and taking a new birth description. The process of karma in both is pretty similar.

Let's think about it for a minute in the moment-to-moment birth in this life. Say you walk into a meditation period and you're very untroubled about your basic identity. You walk in and you're Sari or you're Klaus or you're Don, and you know who you are and you sit down. You know who your personality is. You sit down and in the middle of

your meditation you have a very clear recognition: everything is changing. Sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touch and thoughts and emotions—they're all just coming and going. There's nothing fixed in this whole process. You see clearly it's all impermanent.

Bell strikes. Stand up. Oh, Sari's back. Klaus is back. Don is back. The personality reassembles, doesn't it? You can be in this vast openness, clear seeing of impermanence, nothing lasts—stand up, personality's back. It's like that, isn't it?

There are these ways that we feel ourselves that we could call patterns of our personality—familiar ways we think and feel and believe and see that go on, even though our moment-to-moment experience is totally impermanent, nothing fixed, totally changeable. But these patterns which kind of tell us who we are, that are consistent, continue.

So that's how, when I come out of a meditation, I don't get reborn as the Dalai Lama. Much as I might like to stand up and be him, I get reborn as Guy with my kilesas and all. So these patterns, both the beautiful qualities and the difficult qualities, kind of get recreated over and over and over. And this is that groove in the mind.

It's curious because if we look minutely, there's no continuity. There's nothing we can put our finger on and say, "This is continuing from one moment to the next." But somehow these patterns have some continuity.

So the way that happens is that one moment of consciousness conditions the next, and that moment conditions the next, and that moment conditions the next. This process of conditioning—one moment shaping the next, shaping the next, shaping the next—is what carries these patterns along. That's why we seem so similar hour by hour and day after day.

This process is basically the same process that leads to some continuity in the next birth. They're not very different. Ajahn Amaro put it this way: the process of going from one life to the next is not very different from the process of going from one moment to the next. Because one moment conditions the next, even though nothing single is carrying over, there appears to be continuity. And that's what happens with death and rebirth.

Let's look a little more closely at the mechanics of rebirth—how it's understood in our tradition. The Buddha did not describe it clearly. He considered it one of those things that one didn't need to understand in order to become liberated, so he didn't give

many details about it. There are only a few hints, but there are a number of hints that are quite consistent. I'll tell you the way that it reads and a little of my interpretation of what that means.

The first thing is that the suttas talk several times about what he called the descent of consciousness into the womb. What's being pointed to here is very different from the Western materialistic view that consciousness is generated as a result of the physical development of the body. The Buddha rejected that view—the Western scientific materialist view that egg and sperm come together and the cells multiply, then the being grows up and consciousness is just a byproduct of the complexity of chemical reactions that occur when the brain gets a sufficient number of neurons. The Buddha rejects that view.

He says, and I'll read this exact quote: "Bhikkhus, the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place through the union of three things: the union of the father and the mother, the mother's season, and the being to be reborn." In other words, the father's sperm meets the mother's egg, they join and form a union, and into that union comes a consciousness that's been associated with some past life. It's only the coming together of those three things that creates the ground for a human being to grow in the womb.

This is another way he described it: "If consciousness were not to come into the mother's womb, would name and form develop there?" Name and form is a translation of the Pali nama-rupa—one of the aspects of the chain of dependent origination, basically the beginning of a human being. So the Buddha was asking one of his other monks, "Would name and form develop there?" "No, Lord." "Therefore, consciousness is the root, the cause, the origin, the condition of name and form." And name and form is the start of the new being.

This is how it's explained by Bhikkhu Bodhi: "It is the stream of consciousness coming from the preceding existence that functions as the nutriment consciousness—that nourishing element, nutriment consciousness—by generating at the moment of conception the rebirth consciousness which brings forth name and form, the beginning of the new human being."

How this happens is not explained. But somehow there is some continuity of consciousness from the past existence in which the karmic patterns are perpetuating themselves. This joins with the sperm and egg, the fertilized egg, to form the new being. That's why children come out with such distinct personalities right out of the womb—because they are carrying the karmic patterns of that past life.

The important thing is that the karmic patterns we're creating now not only fill the rest of this life, but to the extent that we don't become free of them, they also are the grounds for the arising of bondage and suffering in a future human existence.

The reason the Buddha talked so much about karma and rebirth, I believe, is to encourage us to clean up this chain. We can't just assume that if we don't clean it up in this life, it's going to end at death. According to the Buddha, it doesn't. This chain—which until we get free includes bondage and the suffering of birth, aging, illness, and death—will go on and on and on until the mind becomes free.

When the mind becomes free, there is no more volition driving more becoming. There is no urge toward birth and becoming. So when an enlightened being dies, there is no reappearance of name and form. There is no reappearance of the five aggregates. The chain of samsara has been ended at that point.

Again, this may be something you believe or don't believe. I would just encourage you to keep an open attitude about it and just ponder it as a hypothesis. To me, it's the hypothesis that best explains all the observable facts of this world.

I came into this world with a certain personality and karmic patterns already formed. I don't know where they came from because I can't see that past life, but I feel I arrived partly shaped. I observe this same phenomenon in many other people.

If you're interested in exploring this scientifically, there is a professor at the University of Virginia named Ian Stevenson who researched this area for forty years. He studied approximately 2,600 case histories of young children who claimed they could remember their previous lives. He collected their data, examined the records of the people they identified, and attempted to verify the children's claims. If you read his books, it becomes difficult to find any other explanation for these kinds of continuity apart from the truth of rebirth.

If you remain skeptical, I encourage you to explore the writings of Dr. Stevenson. He is not a zealot, nor does he present his findings as absolute proof. He simply states that he cannot find any other logical explanation for all these case studies.

This is the force of karma—the evolution of karmic patterns and mental habits driven by intentions that, when we begin to understand them, are mostly unconscious and carry a large degree of unwholesomeness that binds us to suffering. This is what becomes illuminated by the light of mindfulness.

Next time I want to discuss how we come to the end of these compulsive patterns and how that liberation frees our heart and mind. But as a preview, I'll leave you with this quote from the Buddha: "What is the action that leads to the end of action? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the end of karma."

Let us sit for a moment together with this teaching.

What is the action that leads to the end of action? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the end of karma.

Thank you for staying present with these teachings. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 107

Patterns of Becoming 5: The End of Karma

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the apparent contradiction between the teachings of karma and anatta (not-self), revealing how these foundational Buddhist concepts actually support each other. He explores how personality patterns are formed through repeated volitional actions (karma) and how mindfulness practice can free us from these binding formations.

Armstrong uses the metaphor of mind streams to explain individual continuity without a fixed self, showing how our personalities are simply karmic patterns we've identified with. He details how meditation practice - particularly the development of mindfulness and the brahmaviharas - creates new wholesome karma that gradually dissolves old conditioning. The talk culminates in an exploration of the Buddha's three insights on the night of his awakening and the discovery of the "unborn, unailing, undying" awareness that leads to complete liberation.

Drawing from the Majjhima Nikaya and Udana, Armstrong presents the noble eightfold path as the karma that leads to the end of all karma, offering practitioners a clear understanding of how dharma practice leads to the cessation of becoming and the end of suffering.

So last time we looked at this creation of self, how nothing is staying the same from moment to moment. But because of each mind moment conditioning the next, there is this sense of the continuity of these patterns of becoming, which are basically the repetition of volitional actions, which is called karma. We talked about how we get kind of enclosed in these actions, and tonight I want to talk about how we can get free, how meditation practice releases us from these patterns.

I hope this is well-timed because by the end of the retreat we should be talking about release, right? You want the fourth noble truth at the end and not the second noble truth. So that's where we are in this process of release.

To start again, we're going to look at this question: the relationship between karma and the teaching of not-self. When you first think about it, they seem kind of contradictory, don't they? The teaching is, my actions come back to me. Where's the self in that?

Somebody in the time of the Buddha, one of the bhikkhus, asked him this very question. He said, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" Oh, that's good. And the Buddha basically said, you haven't been listening to me. You haven't got it.

So these teachings of not-self but karmic consequences coming back to us are, on the surface of it, contradictory. But as we go through it, I think you'll see that these teachings actually really need each other. The teaching of not-self depends on karma. The teaching of karma depends on the understanding of not-self. They're really related.

One of the things we have to remember is the teaching on not-self doesn't deny individuality, right? It doesn't mean that when we see anatta, we have this blissful merging with the cosmos and all is one. That's not the Buddhist understanding of things.

We may understand this by thinking of the concept of a stream. I like to look at the streams that are flowing on this property, and there's an analogy here. The streams don't have very much water in them this year, unfortunately, because of the lack of rain. But if you look at the water that's flowing, you might think, oh, this is the Spirit Rock stream, right by the meditation hall here.

What is this stream? I looked up the definition on the internet, so it must be true. It said that a stream is a body of water running in a channel or current bounded by its banks. But the main definition is a stream is a body of water.

So we look at that stream and we ask what it is. Does it change? Is the water changing? It's always changing, isn't it? You remember Heraclitus said you never step in the same river twice. You look at that stream, it's a very predictable, consistent formation. But if you look at the definition of the body of water, there's nothing constant in it. It's always moving. And yet, this stream is different from the Mississippi River. So it's very helpful to know the Spirit Rock stream and how to relate to it. And it's different from the Mississippi River.

By the same analogy, each of us can be considered a mind stream. This is a word that's used in Buddhist teaching. We're a mind stream. And we've got ever-changing thoughts, impressions, perceptions, feelings, emotions, moods, ideas, images running through this mind stream. Also, of course, the mind is receiving sense impressions from the five physical senses. There's nothing constant in there, but there is a continuity to the stream.

So the stream that we call Carol is different than the stream we call Sally. And if you mix them up, you'll be in the wrong interview. And if they mix them up, they'll be in the wrong bed. We want to keep that straight.

So this is a very useful designation. It keeps things simple. Nothing is steady, is fixed in this mind stream, but there's a formation there that we can come to know and understand. Just like this stream has a certain shape and it has dams at certain points, it has currents and eddies at certain points, a big river might have a whirlpool in a certain place. So also there are patterns in each of these mind streams, and we can come to understand them.

In Western terms, we talk about this as personality.

From a Buddhist perspective, what do we mean by personality? Consider the common, ordinary understanding of personality. When you think about different people, they all have different personalities. Someone is generous, someone is not. Someone is caring, someone is indifferent. Someone is angry, someone is loving. Someone is funny, someone is gloomy. All these qualities are simply characteristics of different personalities.

When you examine the term itself, isn't personality basically about how we think, how we speak, how we feel, and how we act? This essentially sums it up.

This understanding of personality—if it concerns thoughts, feelings, speech, and action—closely parallels our definition of karma, which is volitional actions of body, speech, and mind. What we call personality, what makes each of us unique and individual, is really just these formations of our own volitional activities carried out again and again, expressed through these three spheres of action. It's simply karmic patterning.

There's nothing solid there, but the patterning remains relatively consistent. From one day to the next, one year to the next, we can observe a continuity. We see that our own personalities, our own mindstreams, have been conditioned by our own volitional actions. That's essentially all personality is—the repetition of volitional actions, which is karma.

This forms the basis for our self-view, which is why we call these patterns of becoming. We observe this repetition within ourselves, become familiar with this type of personality, and identify with it. We declare, "This is who I am. I'm the angry person, or the caring person, or the helping person, or the generous person." This forms our fundamental view of who we are.

We're identifying with a self, with these formations—mental formations, *sankhāras*, volitional formations, karmic formations, whatever you wish to call them. We're speaking about the fourth aggregate of *sankhāras* here. We're identifying with these phenomena which are all impermanent. They may arise and pass in us with some regularity, but they're all impermanent. There's nothing fixed there.

We form this concept that we project into the past: "I've always had this personality." We extend it into the future: "I'll always be this personality." Because it becomes so substantial, it feels like a burden. This concept of self that we create begins to weigh us down. In practice, it's one of the key elements we ultimately work with.

We don't see how this "I" has been formed. We began forming it very early on. We don't perceive it until we begin to examine it in practice. It's formed from our various volitions, and by the time we observe it, it's somewhat established. But we haven't been aware of its creation yet.

This entire flow of becoming is rooted in ignorance, rooted in delusion. It exists because we haven't paid attention to its formation.

There are many kinds of personalities we encounter in the world. We each have a personality. We meet other people. Everyone has a personality, and there's a very broad range. Many of them are characterized by different aspects of greed, aversion, and delusion. I want to share a brief list I've compiled of different personalities I've encountered in my adult life. This isn't from the DSM-IV or any clinical manual—just observations from lived experience.

As you hear these descriptions, I invite you to reflect on what kind of personality each represents. We all have these tendencies of mind. But when we speak of it as a personality, it means someone has organized their life around this as a fundamental urge.

That's what gives it the weight of personality. This pattern has become deeply established, repeated countless times, until we come to know ourselves and others through these familiar grooves of being.

So these are some of the underlying foundations of personality. I'm going to base them on greed, aversion, and delusion. As I mention each one, you might reflect on which of the three kilesas is most operative.

Let me go through them slowly. Types of personalities: dependent or addictive, craving for attention, ambitious, controlling, fearful, aggressive, perfectionist, self-critical, melancholy, lost or confused.

All of these movements of mind become foundations around which an entire life can organize itself, always trying to satisfy that particular tendency. They're all volitional—urges seeking satisfaction.

Now, these are the unwholesome patterns. But patterns can also emerge from a mixture of wholesome and unwholesome qualities. You may know people like this: the compulsive helper, someone who's going to help you whether you want it or not—and who's not your mother. Or the very strict moralist, someone who's ethical but holds it very tightly. You encounter these people often in monasteries—the ones who are experts in the Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline. They tend to hold it really closely and expect you to hold it really closely. There's a mixture there, some wholesome, some unwholesome.

When we think about personalities that are truly wholesome—people who are loving, kind, generous, compassionate, joyful—we don't tend to think about these as patterns because the compulsive element isn't there. The constraining element is absent. We think of purely wholesome qualities as expressions of freedom, free choice.

The patterns that create difficulty are the ones arising from compulsion, and compulsion is always based on ignorance. These are the patterns I'm mainly going to discuss the undoing of. We don't need to undo wholesome patterns if they're flowing from freedom in our hearts.

But we wake up in practice and see some pattern in the way we approach life, and we discover it's not so easy to change. This is one aspect of the noble truth of dukkha—not so easy to change these habits of mind. We find ourselves caught in patterns that bring suffering, and it's not so easy to step out or transform them.

The Buddha's teaching is entirely about stepping out of these patterns. But he used different language—the language of kilesas, of craving, of clinging, and of becoming. That sounds rather dry and abstract, doesn't it? "Clinging" doesn't exactly get your juices flowing. But when I speak of fearful, ambitious, controlling, aggressive, self-critical—this is juicier, more immediate. This is the ground where Western psychology takes its stand, looking at individual characteristics.

But don't think they're any different. This is precisely what the Buddha was pointing to. We simply need to interpret his language in light of our unique personal experience of living. Each of these personality patterns, if compulsive, contains elements of the kilesas—elements of craving, clinging, and becoming. He's pointing to these very individual experiences that you and I know intimately, though we experience them differently because we have different personalities.

Don't be misled by the apparent dryness of his language. He's pointing to this very immediate, personal material that all of us are working with.

I think this is beautifully expressed in this quotation from the Buddha: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin."

This is karma. The word "action" here is karma.

So our volitional actions have bound us, have limited our freedom in the same way that a wheel is fixed to the axle by a pin. All the teachings are about how to undo this fixing, how to undo this bondage that our own actions have put us into. This is the sense of karma as a burden and an obstacle—living beings are bound by karma like the chariot wheel by the pin.

But if this was all there was, we'd really be in trouble. This is the territory of the first and second noble truths. The key is that within this stream of volitional actions, nothing is fixed. Nothing is even constant from one moment to the next. There is this essential openness, spaciousness. There's an essential freedom at the center of our beings. What this means is that anything that's in there can be changed. That's the purpose of dharma practice—to free us from these patterns that we have formed that constrict the mind and heart and bring suffering.

Let's talk about how dharma practice does this and how patterns get undone through what we've been doing here for the last month. Many of you have spoken about seeing these habitual thoughts and difficult emotions, and learning to work with them. These habitual patterns that arise in the form of thoughts and feelings—this is old karma. When we get quiet physically and sit down, we see the mind keeps moving in these old, rather predictable patterns, which we've repeated again and again.

As we come into meditation, we feel ourselves at the effect of these patterns. We experience qualities of anger and sadness and fear, judging and self-criticism, desire and wanting, longing. The meditation practice is to notice this old karma, which is a pattern, and to bring mindfulness to it. That's always the instruction.

This is where it gets very interesting. When mindfulness meets these old habit formations, something different can happen. This is the unfolding of freedom. Sometimes when mindfulness sees an old thought, the thought doesn't grip us in the same way. When mindfulness meets an old emotion, the emotion doesn't grip us in the same way.

Why is that? Because we're very aware. And we're very wise. Mindfulness has wisdom that knows how to see this as just another arising phenomenon. If the old emotion or thought comes up and we buy into it again and react in the exact same way that we have, then we're reinforcing the old karma and there's no change. But if the old pattern comes up and we see it with mindfulness, there's a new response. We don't have to believe the thought. We don't have to believe the feeling means that we're a bad person or unworthy. If we're afraid, we don't have to believe something awful is going to happen. We just see, "Oh, that's the emotion of fear. It arises, it persists, passes away. No problem."

When we can bring that kind of mindfulness to the pattern, there's a new response. There's a new kind of personality being shaped in that. The response of mindfulness is based in freedom. It's not based in compulsion. All of a sudden we have choice with these things. I don't have to do that act. I don't have to believe that thought. I don't have to feel afraid of my fear. I don't have to feel angry at my anger. We feel this freedom coming in through the power of our awareness and our mindfulness.

We start to see the door opening. This is really a big shift. We start to see the door opening. But then, you know what? Sometimes it closes again. We have all this wisdom. We understand we don't have to believe in it. We don't have to buy it. We don't have to get upset by it.

But many times again, we will find ourselves caught. We'll observe the pattern in action yet somehow still cannot see it clearly enough to remain free. This can be deeply discouraging and frustrating.

This is where we need faith to see the process through. Sometimes we lose that strong mindfulness and fall back into the old pattern. But the next time, mindfulness will be there again—stronger—and we'll see more clearly, with an even greater opening to freedom. Still, it can be maddening to see the conditioning coming, to know what to do, and yet find ourselves unable to do it.

I love an exchange that happened when Trudy Goodman was teaching at Dharma Prajna Parami a year or so ago. During the discussion period, someone asked, "I'm so tired of seeing my same old stuff coming up again and again." Trudy's response was perfect: "Whose stuff would you like to have?"

The truth is, it doesn't matter. We all have our conditioning, and we all must work with it. All these patterns are binding in their own way.

This represents an intermediate stage in our relationship to the patterns. We know enough to understand what needs to be done, but we cannot always do it. We feel caught sometimes, but not all the time. And this is actually beautiful—it's a sign that the practice is working, that mindfulness is developing.

Once you begin to feel that momentum, the pattern is essentially doomed. Because you've understood how not to buy into it, not to believe in it, not to identify with it, it's as if you've cut a tree at its root. When you sever the root of a tree, the leaves don't all fall off that day, but the tree cannot survive because it can no longer receive nourishment. It will live, and the leaves will remain strong for a while, but not forever.

This is the crucial shift. When mindfulness enters, the pattern begins to lose its power in two fundamental ways.

First, we stop identifying with it. We no longer claim it as "I" and "mine." We simply see it as fear arising, or anger arising, or sadness arising. We don't construct a new sense of self around it—just an emotion arising and passing away.

Second, as mindfulness strengthens and continues to grow, the pattern loses its impact on us. It cannot touch us as deeply or move us in the way it once did. A strength of mind and wisdom develops that provides protection and refuge.

As mindfulness dissolves the pattern's power, the pattern itself begins to fade away. Sally Clough Armstrong used the term *virāga* in her recent talk on transcendent dependent origination, pointing to this same phenomenon. In her presentation, it was the *kilesas* as a whole that were fading away. But we can each feel our particular patterns fading—those specific ways that the *kilesas* have crystallized in our experience and our lives.

We discover that we don't need to work these neurotic reactions out on the level of the neurosis itself. There is a greater strength that emerges through the Dharma and takes care of it for us. We don't have to trace back to what our mother or father did, or examine how patterns developed during our teenage years. Simply being present and understanding the empty nature of these formations does the work.

As the patterns fade, the emotions themselves remain—they're not completely uprooted. But they become the emotions that everyone has: anger, fear, sadness, wanting. They resume their natural place in the flow of life. Children have these emotions, we have them, but they're no longer binding forces that define the center of our being.

This is our work as practitioners. The Buddha expressed it beautifully: "A wise one makes straight this restless mind as a fletcher straightens the shaft of an arrow." A fletcher is an arrow maker. We can imagine the practice as straightening our minds from these entangling reactions we've believed in through long misunderstanding.

This intermediate stage of the path requires tremendous patience.

These patterns can come up and be seen, come up and be seen, grab us and drop us many, many times over years. So we don't know how long it's going to take for them to undo, for them to release. But we do know that it will happen.

The Buddha offered this beautiful image: "Suppose, bhikkhus, an ocean-going boat rigged with ropes, having been exposed to the water for six months, has been dragged to the shore for the winter. Then the ropes that had been affected by wind and sun, when soaked by the monsoon rains, will easily go to waste and rot away. It is similar with a bhikkhu who applies herself to the meditative development of her mind. Her fetters will easily be loosened and rot away."

This meditative development is bhavana—the cultivation of the wholesome qualities of mindfulness and concentration and all the factors of enlightenment. This is the development of the path, and it's helpful to know where the path is leading because the path is its own unfolding.

Here it's useful to reflect on a quote from one of the great wisdom masters of the last century, Yogi Berra, who put it this way: "If you don't know where you're going, you could end up somewhere else." So let's think about where the path is going so that hopefully we can end up there.

We're developing our bhavana, our meditative development. We're generating wholesome mind states that begin with mindfulness. Mindfulness is the first of the factors of awakening, and it's the key to unfolding all the others. In parallel, we're also developing the brahmaviharas—loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

I feel it's very helpful for Westerners to develop these two movements together, because mindfulness is basically understood as the wisdom training, while loving-kindness and the brahmaviharas represent the opening of the heart. The brahmaviharas have the potential to bring so much self-confidence. When we start feeling that goodness unfolding in ourselves, we can really trust what's in our own hearts, relax into it and let it take us. And that brings a lot of ease and happiness.

Mindfulness and wisdom start to unfold, bringing along qualities of energy and determination, renunciation, calm, non-identification. This is a very potent process unfolding in our minds through our dharma practice.

What's happening is we come into practice and we've got this old stream of becoming. Generally we're not so wise when we start to meditate. We have this stream of becoming that's been formed in not understanding and is mostly based on the kilesas. As we sit, we feel all that. We begin to see that this cycle has been going on over and over in our lives. Often we can trace it back to childhood and teenage years and all through our adulthood—these different personality tendencies.

And where it has taken us again and again is to lake samsara, just recreating the suffering over and over in the same kind of predictable ways. It's helpful to see that this has happened out of our own intentions. Basically, the kilesas are all expressing intentions. These personality styles are all expressing intentions. So this intention, repeated, has brought us to this place of lake samsara.

But now there's a new river coming in. This is the river of the dharma. To these old intentions, these habitual patterns, we start adding the intentions of mindfulness, loving-kindness, compassion, investigation, energy, calm, concentration, equanimity, joy, non-identification, wisdom. All of these are intentional too.

That stream flowing into the lake starts to turn the flow. Lakes are fed by rivers, so there's an inflow and an outflow. Now we flow this stream of intentions into this river that's going into lake samsara, and it starts to divert it. It starts to turn it in a new direction, and that direction is the nirvanic ocean. So we're no longer flowing to lake samsara—we're going to the nirvanic ocean. That's where we're headed. That's the only place we're headed.

If these streams of becoming, these old patterns of becoming, really referred to something fixed in us, we couldn't divert that river. All the dharma in the world couldn't shift it. If ignorance was planted in the heart forever, if greed was planted in the heart, if self-criticism was planted in the heart forever, all the dharma couldn't move it.

But it's because our basic nature is open and empty that nothing is fixed in us. These old patterns have a lot of power—they've been active for a lot of years, some would say lifetimes—but they're not fixed. And so these wholesome forces come in and they start to wear away the patterns of misunderstanding, the patterns based on ignorance and craving.

We can become liberated because our being is not fixed, and the dharmic elements only lead in that direction. This stream of intention, which is also karmic, only leads in one direction.

So we understand the path itself is a karmic unfolding. We are taking advantage of the law of karma by generating these wholesome intentions moment after moment after moment. Basically, mindfulness and metta. Those are the primary intentions we work with, and all the rest springs from that.

As we generate those intentions moment after moment, we're changing inwardly the karma of our being. This is part of the new karma that's getting added, and it sends us in a completely different direction. If one doesn't believe in karma, it's very hard to explain the workings of the path. The workings of the path depend on karma.

So we start to see that intention, even though it feels light in the beginning—remember the first moment you were taught to become mindful? Did that feel like a transformative life experience? It didn't for me. It felt like a sore butt. But you see how you keep applying that moment after moment for a month, and it goes to a really deep place.

So this intention to be present, to pay attention to our experience, generates enormous power—enormously liberating power—as we just keep doing it moment after moment after moment. We see that our tool, our basic tool, is intention. To tell you the truth, it's our only tool. It's our only tool to change the karmic flow: to put in new intentions.

Tibetans have a way of pointing to this that's really succinct. They say everything rests on the tip of motivation. Everything rests on the tip of motivation. So we start to put these new intentions into the karmic stream.

You know, it's kind of like when I came into Dharma practice, my life was chaotic. I had some happiness, I had some unhappiness, I had no idea what caused either one, and I just felt vulnerable to the winds that were going to blow me. So it's kind of like, to continue the lake analogy, before we understand how this all works, we're adrift on the sea. A current comes and sweeps us that way, and another current comes and sweeps us that way. We may go to happiness, we may go into suffering. But it's all out of our control. It seems so random. The chaos is happening outwardly, the chaos is happening inwardly, and we have no way to steer. We don't know where the harbor is.

As we listen to the teachings and find out where to put our intention, we find the rudder. Intention is our rudder on this chaotic ocean of life. And if we hold to that rudder, it will take us to the harbor. The only direction of the teachings is to the harbor. So this is the value of intention. It lets us steer our lives because it influences the whole karmic flow.

This is a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj. A questioner put this question to him. He made a statement. The questioner responded. This is a dialogue.

Maharaj said, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny."

And the questioner said, "Surely karma interfered."

So tease this out. Your own will is a synonym for intention. So Maharaj is saying it's your intentional actions that have shaped your destiny. And the questioner says, "Well, surely karma interfered."

Maharaj: "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life. The attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character."

Your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character. And how do you do it? Through your own will, through your own intention, through setting your own karmic direction using the tools of the practice.

So there are two kinds of threads in the teachings of the Buddha. One is if you want worldly happiness and the other is if you want liberation. If you want worldly happiness, the basic prescription is dana, sila, bhavana—generosity, morality, and development of the mind, primarily loving kindness. These are basically enough over time to take us to normal worldly happiness.

But some of us want another dimension, and that's the dimension of liberation. That needs a different set of instructions. So let's talk about what leads to that happiness of liberation, which the Buddha said is the highest happiness.

This is where we get into the teaching on the end of karma. The Buddha said that for one who has fully awakened, such a person has come to the end of karma. This is a mysterious statement, and I don't pretend to understand everything it means. But essentially it means that they are no longer bound by action in any dimension or in any way. There can still be the results of past karma—like when the villagers were assaulting Angulimala when he went out for alms, even after he was awakened. Past karma

can still come to fruition. Mahamogalana died in a very unhappy way that the Buddha said was the result of some of his past actions. But the arhat, the liberated one, is not generating any future karma, anything that's going to play out in future circumstances.

So how is this? I think that something like this was pointed to by the Buddha when he talked about the night of his enlightenment. There are two suttas in the Majjhima Nikaya, numbers 4 and 26, that describe the night of his enlightenment from slightly different angles. They're very worth reading.

From Majjhima 4, he said that on the night of his awakening, his mind became very concentrated. He called it purified, bright, and malleable. When the mind is malleable, we can turn it to whatever we want to turn it to. So he said he directed his mind that night to the recollection of his past lives. He recollected one past life, ten past lives, a hundred past lives, a thousand past lives, a hundred thousand past lives. You may believe this or not, but this is what it says about the night of the Buddha's enlightenment. He recollected, "I was born here and I lived this kind of life. Then I was born there and I lived that kind of life."

Now, there's a little connection between the three insights that night. There's a little connection between them that isn't in the suttas, but I kind of imagine. So I imagine after that, the Buddha goes, "Well, why are those lives formed like that? What was responsible for creating lives like that?"

So then he took this concentrated mind and turned it in a different direction. He turned it to see many, many beings passing away and reappearing, dying and being reborn, and to try to understand how it came about that people were born in such different circumstances with such different strengths and weaknesses. He saw in that second insight of the night that it was owing to their actions that beings reappeared in the world in a new birth according to their past actions, that their circumstances were shaped by that.

So now there's another little interlude. And here I'm going to suggest that he saw good actions led to a happy rebirth, harmful actions led to an unhappy rebirth, but in both cases they led to rebirth. This is interesting because if you think of it in terms of becoming and the self, you can see how we can do good things from a self-centered viewpoint. "I'm going to go out and fix the world and it's I that am important. I'm going to be very generous because I'm such a good and helping person. I'm going to be so strict with my morality because I am going to be perfect in that realm."

So there can be self even around good actions, good karma. Here I'm thinking the Buddha thought, "Well, doing bad is certainly not the way to go. That leads to unhappy birth. But doing good has its limitation too. You still get born and go through birth, aging, illness, and death. What could be the way to real liberation? What could be the way to a peace that doesn't ever stop?"

So he said then he turned his eye, his purified mind and his eye, to the destruction of the taints. The taints are another grouping for these impure qualities of heart and mind that lead us into suffering. He said that at that moment he understood the Four Noble Truths. He understood that the taints were being destroyed in him, these afflictions that bound him. At that point, he realized his own liberation.

So what was this understanding that brought him out even of the realm of good karma into the complete liberation of mind? That's the interesting question. What leads to the end of karma, being hooked on karma at all?

But I want to talk a little bit about this moment of awakening—and we'll come back to that question. He expressed it in a couple of different ways that really point to this ending that he had experienced. One quote, from Majjhima 26: he said he saw right then, "My deliverance is unshakable. This is my last birth."

Now there is no renewal of being. This is my last birth. I have stepped out of that cycle of becoming, of being born and aging and getting ill and passing away. I've stepped out of it.

And then there's this famous poem that's in the Dhammapada that you probably will recognize: "Through many a birth, I have wandered through sorrow, seeking but not finding the builder of this house—this body, this mind, this self. Painful is birth again and again. House builder, you are seen. You will build no house again. All your rafters are broken. The ridge pole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving." House builder, you are seen, you will build no house again. This is the end of becoming, the end of birth, the not even taking up good karma.

So then the Buddha follows this. There's good karma, there's bad karma. And then he says, what karma? Well, let me put it a different way. There's karma that he called dark leading to suffering. There's karma he called bright leading to happy states. And then there's this third kind: the karma that leads to the end of karma. What is the karma that leads to the end of karma? It is this noble eightfold path—namely right view, right in-

tention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. It's the eightfold path that leads to the end of karma. So it's the eightfold path that leads to the end of becoming.

So as you put yourself on this eightfold path, it's helpful to understand that that's where it leads. There are good habits being cultivated, but basically the eightfold path is leading to stepping out of birth altogether. And you can understand birth on a moment-to-moment basis if you don't like to think of it as rebirth. Either one is fine, but we're stepping out of the process of becoming anything at all.

So we've talked about this in an earlier talk. We talked about discovering this quality of awareness within ourselves that is present, knowing all the changing phenomena, but is not involved with them, is not caught up with them. And we've given some different names to this. Carol has talked about this as the pure citta that's free of the three kilesas. Upasika Ki used the phrase "unentangled knowing." One teacher talked about resting in the gap between feeling and craving. Or Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it as temporary nibbana. These are all pointing to that same experience—an open awareness that's not caught up in the phenomena.

This kind of awareness has a flavor of unbecoming, has a flavor of unborn, has a flavor of undying, has a flavor of unconditioned. It's not constructed out of other elements. It's there when we stop doing. When we stop grasping, it's there.

So again, the Buddha describing his insight on that night of awakening: "I discovered the unborn, unailing, undying, supreme security from bondage—nibbana." This open space of the pure citta, of unentangled knowing, is unailing. It's healthy. And that's why the ability to rest there is so healing. Because we are resting in an element that is essentially free and unailing and undying.

So again, it's why we don't have to work it out on the level of the emotions, which are all subject to coming and going. We discover this other dimension. And it's this unailing element that rots the fetters. This is the sunlight and the wind on those ropes and sails that have been drenched in the monsoon rains.

So the Buddha said, "If there were not this unborn and unbecome and unconditioned, there would be no escape possible from what is born, become and conditioned. But because there is this unborn, unbecome, unconditioned, there is an escape possible from what is born, become, and conditioned."

So this unborn element, this unailing element, has the potential to free us from all the patterns of becoming, which we've created again and again through our own volition.

So what's the essence of this quality? There's something in it about peace. There's something in it about calm. There's something in it about stillness. There's something in it about non-doing.

Here's one of the descriptions of nibbana, the fullness of nibbana: the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all attachments, the destruction of craving and cessation. That is nibbana.

So in this full awareness of unentangled knowing, we can stop doing. We can stop all the different forms of activity and just rest in that stillness. Someone mentioned in an interview the other day that their meditation for a while was like a completely flat lake on which no wind was blowing. So there were no ripples at all. That is that quality of the stilling of all formations.

In that place, we let go of all kinds of self-centered activity, even good self-centered activity. We let go of it all. And then there's a stillness we feel. We can trust in that stillness. We can rest in that stillness. We don't have to do anything with it. We can rest in it, and out of that stillness some other dimension may emerge.

I had one particular meeting that revealed to me something of this other dimension. I was in Kathmandu visiting a teacher in the Tibetan tradition, Satni Rinpoche. I had received teachings from him over a number of years and wanted to visit him at his home monastery in Kathmandu. So I stayed in Kathmandu for a couple of weeks and would go up and receive teachings from him.

While I was in town, there was this very highly regarded older Tibetan Lama staying at Rinpoche's monastery named Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche. I'd heard a lot about him—he's a famous Dzogchen master in his lineage. Rinpoche asked me if I wanted to meet Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche. Actually, let me back up a bit.

A friend of mine was a student of Nyoshul Kempo and asked me to give him some dana. So I told Rinpoche I'd like to offer some dana, but I could just give him the envelope and he could offer it to him. He said, "Wouldn't you like to meet Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche?" I said no, I don't need to. You can just offer the dana. Because I sort of thought, you've seen one Rinpoche, you've seen them all.

I sat with that for about a day and thought, no, I would like to meet him. I've heard a lot about him. Friends have spoken really highly of him. I would like to meet him.

So it was all prepared. It was a little bit of a formal occasion. It happened in one of the shrine rooms where he was staying. He got dressed in this kind of gold robe, and an interpreter was there and Satni Rinpoche was there and Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche's wife was there. I came in feeling nervous because I'd heard a lot about him and heard he was a very special teacher.

I went in and did my three bows when the time was right. On my knees, I approached him and offered the envelope containing the dana that my friend wanted to offer him. He received it from me. Then he took my head in his hands and looked right into my eyes.

At that moment, something shifted in him. What I remember is his eyes moved a little bit apart, like he was looking way in the distance. His gaze opened up into something I had never experienced before. Looking into his eyes, there was this kind of stillness and vastness that I didn't know was possible. His mind was—it was just like looking into some still ocean and it just seemed like it went forever into him. Even to say his mind was still wasn't accurate. There was no mind there to be either still or moving. There was just this presence that was completely undefended.

His eyes were just open and completely unguarded. I was looking right into his vastness. Then my self-consciousness came up. I got nervous because I thought, he's so undefended. I guess I'm also undefended. He's going to see my nervousness, and I felt uncomfortable. At that moment, something kind of closed in me.

But I just had the feeling that if I could have kept looking into his eyes a little longer... But then the moment passed. Yet it was an amazing revelation, a kind of transmission of what's possible for us. What level of development is possible that he could move into a space like that?

I have no doubt that he was resting completely in the unconditioned, completely unmoved by the sight of me or the room or anything. And that he had the ability to do that at will. He just moved there and he was simply there. This gave me a sense of how the Buddha could have transmitted awakening to so many people as he did, because I believe he had at least that stillness and more to share with people.

So this is possible for us. This is part of our potential as human beings, through this practice, through the practice of the Dharma.

I want to close with one final quotation from the Buddha. This is from the Udana, also on this state of nibbana:

"One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit together for a moment, please.

silence

One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 108

The Three Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the three characteristics (tilakkhaṇa) that the Buddha identified as fundamental to all experience: impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), and not-self (anattā). He clarifies what the Buddha meant by 'conditioned things' and distinguishes between the conditioned realm and the unconditioned dimension of Nibbāna.*
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> *Armstrong weaves together traditional Buddhist teachings with contemporary research, including Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert's findings on happiness, to illustrate how poorly we predict what will bring lasting satisfaction. He shares personal stories from his ordination as a monk in Burma under Pa-Auk Sayadaw, the challenges of practicing through difficult conditions, and contemplating impermanence through direct encounters with death and aging. The talk includes the Buddha's five daily reflections on aging, illness, and death as 'heavenly messengers' that inspire spiritual urgency.*
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> *The heart of the teaching reveals how deep meditative investigation shows the fluid, dissolving nature of all sense experience—sounds, thoughts, emotions, and even bodily sensations lack the solidity we assume. This understanding naturally leads to non-clinging, which Armstrong identifies as the doorway to freedom. He concludes by pointing to peace not as the absence of activity, but as the unchanging context within which all experience arises—an 'unentangled knowing' that offers refuge regardless of conditions.*

Sharon and Sally both talked in the last couple of nights about the factor of wisdom and how important it is in meditation practice. Sharon talked about how loving-kindness practice really changes us by developing understanding through the interconnection that comes from metta practice. Sally talked about how in some Buddhist traditions, wisdom is paired as a complement to mindfulness, understanding that they go together and that the role of mindfulness is really to foster wisdom.

We could say that wisdom is the most important thing that develops during Dharma practice. Experiences come and go. Concentration comes and goes. Mindfulness comes and goes. But the things that we understand change us, and those changes travel with us for hopefully the rest of our lives.

This is a funny word in the West, the word wisdom. It doesn't have a generally acknowledged meaning in our culture, so it has a special meaning within the teachings of the Buddha. It's not just about book knowledge, although that can play a role. It's not just about IQ. It's not even about emotional intelligence alone. And it's not just about accumulating life experience. In the lineage of the Buddhist teachings, wisdom means the understanding of life the way it is—which means our inner experience and our outer experience, what their constituent parts are really like, what our human experience is all about.

Insight meditation comes from an Indian word, vipassana, which we could understand as seeing things the way they are. So you could say the goal of our insight meditation practice is to see things in our experience the way they truly are. And the understanding is that this is the avenue in our lineage to a true and reliable happiness.

This factor of wisdom is a natural capacity that we all have, but it needs to be woken up. We wake it up through paying attention. And then as it starts to wake up, we develop it and strengthen it through various kinds of examination and investigation.

So where should we look to see the way things are? The Buddha suggested looking specifically at three aspects of our experience that he called the three characteristics or marks of existence. These three marks apply to all existent things, all phenomena. The way he described it, he said that all conditioned things are impermanent; all conditioned things are unsatisfactory; and all things are without self. These are the three marks: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and this aspect of not-self.

There are a couple of words here that need some description. What is a conditioned thing? A conditioned thing is something that comes from prior causes and conditions. It's something that is subject to coming into existence, and by virtue of having come into existence based on underlying conditions, it will also pass out of existence when those conditions change.

All the aspects of mind and body that we've been practicing with here are conditioned. Sensations of the breath, the sounds that come and go, the sensations in our bodies, the thoughts and emotions that are passing through—these things all have underlying causes. They come, they last for a while, and then they pass away. These are considered conditioned things, every one of them.

All conditioned things are impermanent, meaning they're subject to arising and passing. All conditioned things are unsatisfactory. This word needs some explanation too. It doesn't mean that all conditioned things are unpleasant. A lot of conditioned things are very pleasant. We can have pleasant experiences with the breath. We can

have pleasant experiences of sounds. We can have blissful sensations in the body. We can have beautiful emotions—love and compassion, happiness. So it doesn't mean that they're unpleasant, but what it means is that none of those things has the ability to give us a lasting sense of happiness. None of them is capable of providing a deep sense of satisfaction, which we yearn for. As humans, we have this longing for a deep and reliable sense of being satisfied, and none of these things that arise and pass have the ability to give that to us because of their impermanent nature.

Then the last statement is a little different. All things are not-self. It doesn't say all conditioned things, but all things. What the Buddha is pointing to here is that there is one element, or you might say dimension, of our human nature that is a thing in his language, but it's not a conditioned thing. So what is that?

It means there's something within us that's not subject to arising and passing. There's something within us that isn't caused by prior conditions. There's something within us that isn't impermanent.

So he gave a special name to that. He called it Nibbāna, or Nirvana in Pali. It's a subject of a lot of mystery in Buddhist writings and thinking because it's hard to put your finger on exactly what that thing is. We're not going to try to define it yet. We'll point to it a little later in the talk. Just be aware that everything is not self. That means all the conditioned things as well as this mysterious dimension of Nibbāna is not self. None of these things are self.

So by the Buddha's recommendation, we want to explore these three statements through our direct experience and see if we think they're true or not. The flavor of his teaching is not to say something and expect us to believe it. The flavor is, here's the way I see it—check it out and see what you find. So the recommendation is to check these statements out and see what you find in your own personal experience, directly.

There's a story from the Jewish tradition. You may have heard this from other traditions as well, but I rather like the Jewish version of it. The story is around King Solomon, who ruled around 900 BC. King Solomon, it's said, had a minister who he felt was getting a little too prideful. He was a chief minister and obviously a very powerful individual, and the king thought he was getting a little too full of himself. So he decided he would take him down a notch.

He gave him an assignment that he didn't think the minister would be able to carry out. The king said, "I hear there's a magic ring somewhere in the world. And this magic ring has the power—if you give it to a happy person, it will make them sad. And if you give it to a sad person, it will make them happy. I want you to find this magic ring because I want it. And I'll give you six months to do it."

So the minister felt his reputation was on the line with this assignment. He asked around all over the kingdom and spoke with travelers who'd been through other realms, asking if they knew of such a ring. And everybody said, "Never heard of such a thing. I don't know that there is one. You'll never find it."

He was running out of time. The six-month deadline was coming. There was going to be quite a big banquet where he was going to be asked to present this ring to the king, and he was very afraid of failing. So in desperation, he went to the local marketplace to a very poor ring seller—a man who didn't have any fancy jewelry or a big stand, just a very poor man. And he said, "I need to find for the king a ring, a magic ring that will make a happy person sad and a sad person happy. Do you have such a ring?"

And the ring merchant said, "Wait just a minute." Then he took up a simple gold band and with a tiny stylus he etched in it three syllables. And then he handed the ring to the minister.

The minister went to the banquet. The king said, "Well, minister, where's my magic ring? You've had six months to find it." And he was sure that the minister wouldn't have found it.

So the minister says, "Yes, your majesty, and here it is."

The king took it up and read the three syllables, and the smile dropped from his face. Because those three syllables said: This too will pass.

That was the magic saying that would make a happy person sad and a sad person happy. So this is really a teaching on impermanence, isn't it? And a teaching on equanimity.

Now the fact is, it won't make a happy meditator sad, because we've already figured that out. But generally it would make a happy person sad. So this truth—this too shall pass.

It's an interesting reflection that we can bring to every single moment of our experience. And it's always the case. We know this, right? We're not dumb. We've been reading dharma books for a long time. We know that everything changes, and yet somehow we haven't fully grokked the full implication of that truth.

How do we know that? Because life keeps surprising us.

Here's a simple example. Most of us learned probably in the seventh grade that what we think of as solid matter is actually full of atoms and molecules composed of electrons, protons, and neutrons that are whizzing around through mostly empty space. And we can't even find an electron, actually. It's just kind of a probability smear somewhere in the space of an atom—an unfindable particle. But how many of us actually experience the world as mostly empty space? Even though we believe that to be true, don't we mostly experience this world as full of solid things, this physical world? Generally we do, so we haven't quite integrated that teaching on impermanence that the scientists tell us is true.

Other things surprise us too. I was in the middle of a dharma talk at Spirit Rock a couple of years ago, and we heard this kind of dreadful cry. It was a cry like a baby was crying. The caretakers went out to investigate, and I went out after the talk to see what it was. A deer had died—had probably been killed by some dogs. So the deer was there near the meditation hall. A group of us had gathered around it, and we said some loving-kindness and well wishes for it. It had already died when we got there.

The caretakers then called the Humane Society, who offered to come out to the campus and pick the deer up and take it away. So they moved it down out of the meditation retreat facility to the entrance and waited for the Humane Society to come. Unfortunately, they never came.

So over the next days of the retreat, I would pass by that deer virtually every day. It was by the side of the driveway, and I would watch what was happening to it. Because of all the scavengers on the Spirit Rock land, that deer disappeared rather quickly. We have turkey vultures, we have raccoons, we have mice and rats, we have lots of ants and insects. Within a few days, the bones had been picked clean. There was no flesh left—there was fur and bones. And the rest of that deer was just gone.

So how is it that a creature can be so alive a few days earlier and then so completely gone a few days later? It was shocking to me. Why? Because I hadn't really fully taken into account the deer's impermanence while it was alive. It shocked me. It surprised me.

By my age—if a lot of you are kind of around my age—we've probably all had the experience of having friends die, loved ones, parents, siblings. And it always has come as a shock to me that someone can be so alive one day and then the next day not there. How does that happen?

So although we know in our mind this truth of impermanence, we don't always know it in our gut. It keeps surprising us. You could say that a lot of our dharma practice is about realizing this truth more and more thoroughly so that life doesn't surprise us in that way. It doesn't shock us so much.

We know this truth is accurate on a cosmic level. Earlier generations didn't know this, but we know that the sun itself wasn't here nine billion years ago or so. The Earth wasn't here about four and a half billion years ago. And in a few billion more years, the sun will burn out and all life on Earth will end because it will be heated by the sun's burning out. So all life on Earth will be gone in just another few billion years. We know that scale of impermanence is also true.

And in some cosmological theories, even space goes away. If the expansion that's happened results in another contraction back to a very small core of matter, space may even disappear. So we can see this truth on a cosmic scale.

We can also see this truth at the scale of our own lives. And this is interesting to explore, because we receive a certain message from the culture that the way to happiness is through acquiring more—more stuff, more money, a bigger house, a newer car, a better stereo, the latest iPhone or computer. Acquiring more seems to be what the culture thinks makes for happiness.

But we all know that's not the whole story, or we would never have come here. We may still wonder why we came, but at least we know that acquisition alone wasn't going to do it.

There was an interesting article in the New York Times about a book by a researcher at Harvard named Daniel Gilbert. He was researching this question of happiness and unhappiness and what makes for it. What he found is that we're not very good predictors of what will make us happy. The New York Times article was entitled "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness"—the way we usually go about it.

He studied people who had good things happen to them and who had bad things happen to them, then measured their happiness level over time after that event. He found, for example, that getting a new car—like a new BMW, for somebody who really wanted one—did increase their happiness level for a while, but then it tapered off

again, basically back down to the level it had been at before. This was consistent across many subjects. Whatever the thing was, it produced a glow at the beginning, an increase in happiness, but then it fell back down to the standard level.

But then he also looked at events that were painful—if somebody broke an arm or leg or lost a job. He found that those events did make people unhappy, but the unhappiness didn't last as long as they expected, and their resilience brought them back to the happiness level they were at before. So the good things didn't last as long in their impact, and the bad things didn't last as long in their impact, as people had thought they would. We couldn't predict accurately what would make us happy or unhappy. That was a very interesting finding.

The article summarized: on average, bad events proved less intense and more transient than test participants predicted. Good events also proved less intense and briefer as well.

There is a nice conclusion from this. Dr. Gilbert said, "Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience, but it is unlikely that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist told them they should." This is probably true. He even said he was ambivalent about his own conclusions: "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations. I don't think I want to learn too much from my own research in that sense."

It's interesting. We don't really want to understand the full implications of impermanence. There's a resistance to seeing that truth, that things change in that way. But when we reflect on this study, we realize that what it can strengthen is our trust in equanimity. Sharon talked about how these changing conditions, the vicissitudes of life, come and go all the time. Equanimity is about staying even, staying balanced in the midst of all that. And this study supports that conclusion—that we can learn to be calmer if the wisdom is there to support it.

So we've understood that external events in the material world aren't going to finally do it for us. We come into the spiritual world and discover, as we stay with it, new sources of joy and happiness and satisfaction. I'll just say from my own experience that the richness of satisfaction I've found from meditation practice has been much greater than the satisfaction I used to find from things in the world. It's both greater in magnitude and more reliable.

We come here and new realms open up to us that have really a lot to offer. We find joy in loving-kindness. We find joy in being able to open the heart to compassion and deep connection with others in a way that's truly fulfilling. It shows us what life as a

human being can be about and the richness that can be in it. We find through developing this present-moment attention of mindfulness that the mind can collect, develop concentration, and come into states of peace that I, at least, had never known before I meditated. I had never known this level of peace and the contentment that can come with it.

Of course, then what happens is we want to repeat those experiences too, or we want them to last all the time—and they don't either. The heart is sometimes open and deeply connected and joyful, and then it will close. We work over several days in retreat toward an experience of collectedness and feel a great sense of calm and relaxation and ease, and it lasts for a while, and then it changes. The mind becomes active again, the body feels restless, and there are a lot of thoughts and emotions.

So here too, we find ourselves going through the ups and downs of change—pleasant and collected experiences, difficult and random experiences. If we are wanting things to always be on the pleasant side, then we're not going to find this very fulfilling. We're going to run into friction with that wish.

This experience also teaches us a lot about impermanence, the changing conditions of heart and mind and body. And as we go through these ups and downs again and again and again, we start to realize: oh, maybe it's always going to be like this. And maybe that's okay.

Maybe I can find my balance in this changing ocean of conditions. Maybe that's possible.

But in between, there are a lot of these ups and downs. And it's funny how we come to meditation expecting these states to last. It's so interesting. Even though we know cognitively about impermanence, when we hit a state, we think it's going to be there for a while.

I remember when I was five years old, I got measles. And I hated it. I didn't like being sick in the first place, but then I hated the way my face looked. I had these red spots all over. I remember being convinced—I told my mother this—I know those red spots are never going away. I was absolutely certain I would have that on my face the rest of my life. But somehow it passed.

A few years ago, I went to Burma to go on a meditation retreat, a six-week retreat. I arrived right at the start of the rainy season. There's a three-month rains retreat in all the monasteries in Southeast Asia, and this one started at the beginning of September. I arrived right at the start, and the teacher, a concentration master named Pa-Auk Sayadaw, agreed to ordain me. I'd been a monk years before in Thailand, twenty years be-

fore, and I'd left it a little too early. I'd always had a longing to be back in the ordained life again. So I was able to go and meditate, and then he offered to let me ordain again as a monk—something I'd wanted to do for a long time, to re-experience the beauty of the monastic life.

I arrived one day late in the afternoon, about five o'clock. I was shown to my hut, and the next morning I was taken into town, still a layperson, to buy my robes and bowl and other monkly accessories to prepare me for the six weeks I was going to be there. Then right after lunch that day, I shaved my head, went through an ordination ceremony, and put on my new robes. So there I was, less than twenty-four hours after arriving from America—a Burmese monk.

It was kind of a shock because the transition had been so quick. I hadn't been ordained for a while. I'd kind of forgotten how to tie my robes, to tell you the truth. I felt a little awkward. But I loved having the opportunity to do that.

We were right at the start of the rainy season, and that's when it started raining, almost on cue. The day I got ordained was really sunny, and the next day the rain started. If you know the tropics in the rainy season, it's intense. It was coming down about three inches a day in this part of Burma, the southeast part.

My kuti was a fifteen-minute walk uphill from the meditation hall, where I had to go about five times a day for group sittings—the shortest of which was an hour and a half in length, and the longest was two hours. We'd collect at a central dining hall to get our meals, and I'd take my meal back to my hut to eat it.

So there I was, trying to adjust to monastery life, undergoing this very rigorous schedule common at that monastery, and also starting to practice the concentration practice that Sayadaw taught: keep your attention on the space above your upper lip all waking moments of the day. This was the only meditation object—right here, no other. It was rigorous.

The rain was coming down. It came for about two weeks without any break. I didn't see the sun for about two weeks. I remember one day walking back to my hut after the midday meal was served. I was carrying my bowl in one hand, the lid on top holding a dessert that I was really looking forward to. The bowl was hot because it was freshly steamed rice and stir-fried vegetables. In my other hand was an umbrella because the rain was really coming down. I was walking up this rocky, muddy path in a pair of plastic flip-flops while my robe was falling off my left shoulder. I was trying to squeeze

that up while Burmese laypeople were bowing to me because they really appreciated that a Westerner would come and try to practice, leave behind the affluent lifestyle and come to Burma.

At that point, I started to think: What am I doing here?

It went like that for at least two, two and a half weeks. I got very discouraged. I've practiced through a lot of different conditions, but these were the toughest I'd ever experienced. I kept telling myself: This is going to change. The rain isn't going to last the whole six weeks. Surely it's going to change.

You'll get better at tying your robe. You won't need the umbrella every time you go out. And you'll get used to spending eighteen hours a day at your upper lip. But even though I told myself all of that, I was really getting discouraged. It's funny to look back on it now, because the conditions were kind of extreme. But at the time, it wasn't easy at all.

Also, I was eating just one meal a day—a vegetarian diet of basically rice and stir-fried vegetables, very little protein. Over those six weeks, I lost almost half a pound a day, and I didn't have a lot to lose in the first place. I was losing weight like crazy.

So I was getting very discouraged. And I happened to have brought with me a little altar piece, which was a photograph of the Dalai Lama. I love the Dalai Lama. I find him maybe the most inspiring human being on the planet. So I had this photo of him there, and I thought, I'm going to ask for advice. I'm desperate. I don't usually contact the spirit world or anything like that, but I thought, "Your Holiness, I'm really having a difficult time. Can you give me a word of advice?"

Immediately—and I don't actually think this came out of the spirit world—but immediately his voice appeared in my head. It was very clear, and it had his Indian-accented English. He said, "Yes. Stay optimistic, cheerful, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support."

That actually picked me up. It really picked me up. I thought, stay positive—I can try that. So I tried. I took that advice, and sometimes I could do it. Even in the midst of everything, I'd say to myself, stay optimistic, stay cheerful. And I could put a smile on my face and feel great about being there. Other times, the rain was coming down and I was in one of those two-hour sits, and I wasn't so optimistic or confident. But sometimes I could do it.

When I couldn't, though, it felt like this was going to last forever. And that was the place from which I had to ask for the advice—I thought I was stuck. I really thought that gloom and discouragement was going to last. And that's how those states are, aren't they? When they descend like that, it's hard to remember this truth of impermanence. It's hard to remember that things are going to change. And yet, they do. They do.

But the good states—sometimes when they come, we have the same expectation. When I first started getting quiet in my retreats, I thought, oh, it's always going to be like this now. My life is going to be just like this forevermore. And of course, that didn't stay either. So even though we know about impermanence, sometimes it's hard to really remember it when these conditions happen for us.

Another way that we see impermanence in our life—and I see it a lot given where I'm at in my age—is in the aging process. I've seen my body go through a lot of changes over especially the last ten to fifteen years. And in fact, this fact of aging is said to be one of the things that inspired Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha-to-be, to set out on his spiritual journey. It's said that when he was still a young man of twenty-nine, he journeyed outside his palace, visited a local town, and saw an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. Seeing those three beings woke him up to the truth of impermanence.

So aging, illness, and death are what are called in this tradition the heavenly messengers, because they bring down this kind of remembrance for us. Remember where this is headed. And it provides a real motivation for our practice and for understanding now, while we still have our health and our well-being.

So our bodies do this. We don't ask for it, but our bodies do this. And this started to hit me actually quite a long time ago. In my thirties, my hair started to go gray. I still considered myself very young. Sally and I were at a monastery somewhere in England, listening to a Dharma talk. We'd sat together, listened to the talk, and then I wandered off. Somebody turned to her and said, "Well, who was that man you were with?" She said, "What man?" They said, "Oh, that middle-aged man you were with." I thought, wow, I'm only thirty-five and I'm already middle-aged? It was shocking. And then it gets more shocking.

You know you're in this phase when you hang out with a bunch of friends at a meal table and the talk turns to what we call the organ recital. How are the kidneys? How's the liver? How's the spine? A lot of these conversations happen when you get to be my age.

It's not easy to lose our capacities through aging. We lose physical capacity, we lose mental capacity, we lose our looks. I was really struck by the honesty of a conversation a few years ago when I was sitting with this really wonderful American monk who's lived in England and run a monastery there for a long time, named Ajahn Sumedho. He's very honest and also funny about his process. He said, "Yeah, you know, I think I look ugly now." He was in his early seventies then. "And it's not much fun. Aging is not what the self likes." But then he added, "It's very interesting from a Dharma point of view." And it really is. We learn so much from this process. We understand what life is about. We understand what aging is about. We start to understand what death might be about.

There's an interesting passage from the Mahabharata, the ancient Indian epic—a collection of poems, stories, and plays from a long, long time ago, with many stories nested within it. The Bhagavad Gita is tucked within it as just a small piece. In one dialogue, someone is asked, "What's the greatest miracle in existence?" The answer comes: the greatest miracle is that everyone is surrounded by death but believes that they themselves won't die.

It's kind of true, isn't it? It's hard to take in this heavenly messenger. It's hard to take in this truth about our life. I think the psyche has some defenses against recognizing that fact, that truth, because it's unsettling when it's called to mind. But it's a very powerful reminder of the truth of impermanence.

One of the other heavenly messengers for the Buddha was seeing the corpse that day, seeing a dead person. So it's become part of our lineage that if one has the opportunity, one visits and contemplates dead bodies. Sally and I just had the opportunity to do this a few weeks ago in California. A friend who's also a meditation teacher has a connection with a professor who runs the anatomy lab at a college in Santa Cruz. He arranged for us and some other friends to go down, and she opened up the lab to us, letting us view and touch the dissected bodies that her students had been working with.

It was fascinating because we seldom get this opportunity. Now you know what meditation teachers like to do in their spare time. There were a few of us down there—it was good mutual support. We weren't sure how it was going to feel. The bodies were brought out from the cold room, from the refrigerator where they were stored.

They were uncovered and we could stand next to them. They had already been dissected, so the instructor just took various layers off. We were able to look inside the chest cavity. We were able to look inside the skull. And I was able to actually hold half of a skull that still had the brain inside it. It was very heavy. I hadn't expected it to be

that heavy. And to hold the liver of this man who had died probably a year before—they'd had him for a while. It was also very heavy. I was surprised how much mass is in the liver.

And then, of course, the important reflection is: that will be me someday. That's kind of shocking because we all like our bodies and we don't like to think that they will become that, but that is the truth of things. It's considered a very healthy reflection in our tradition to realize that and to have that contact and to know that that is the outcome of life. It continues to inspire me to want to practice and to understand.

Because there is this kind of inbuilt defense against seeing that reality, the Buddha recommended that we reflect daily on these truths, in order to keep them in our mind and to inspire us to understand while we still have health, vitality, intelligence, and energy. So he recommended that every day we reflect: I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging. I am of the nature to grow sick. I have not gone beyond illness. I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death. Just to remind ourselves, use our time wisely while we still have it.

Then, as we come into meditation, a whole other dimension of impermanence starts to open up to us. In our reflective life outside, we can bring in these reflections on aging, illness, and death, and it starts to shift the way we understand life and the way we value the preciousness of our time. But there's another level of insight that comes out of meditation that I want to talk about.

This message of quantum mechanics—that everything is in rapid change, that all physical matter is in flux—has a correlate in meditation experience, but it's not so easy to find. As we attend in a really continuous way, like through a retreat, to the moment-by-moment knowing of breath, body, sounds, emotions, thoughts, smells, taste, touch, we start to look at each of those sense experiences, each of those sense doors really closely, and we can ask: Is there any solidity there? Just like quantum mechanics reveals the lack of solidity in physical matter, this meditative exploration, supported by mindfulness and concentration, can let us look at the question of solidity in the experience of our six senses.

For instance, tuning into sounds. Any solidity in sounds? Or are they all just of the nature of appearing, disappearing, coming, going? None of them last very long.

What about thoughts? Solid? Thoughts are so ephemeral. I think Sally was talking about that when she was guiding the other morning. What is a thought? If we look at it closely with mindfulness, it may just go—right on the spot, it can just pop. If we don't look at it closely and invest in it, it can run our life. But if we look with mindfulness and steadiness, the thought is just this little blip.

How about emotions? Have you found a solid thing in the emotional world? Has any emotion lasted more than a few hours since you've been here? Usually at most maybe a couple of days. And then even while they're here, have you ever tried getting a hold of one? They're so cloud-like. We can feel them if we slow down, but they're very subtle appearances.

What about the body? We know what the body looks like from the anatomy books, right? There are solid hunks of bone and flesh and tendons and organs. But is that the most reliable guide to the body, the anatomy photographs?

Or is a more reliable guide our own awareness? Perhaps our own awareness and its intimacy with the body is a more reliable way, a more reliable place to look.

So what does your awareness reveal about the sensations in your body? Is any body sensation truly solid? Or if you look closely, is it always kind of changing and pulsing, getting bigger, getting smaller, turning on and turning off, growing and shrinking, vibrating, changing moment by moment? Look closely if you haven't done this, and see if you don't detect that fluidity, even in the sensations that seem most solid in the body.

When we look closely with the mind that's concentrated, the body also is just coming, going. Sensations just arising, changing, and dissolving. When we look closely, every facet of our experience with this still mind of meditation, what we see is things dissolving. The solidity that we normally assume the world has—it doesn't have that solidity when we look this closely.

We might be able to tell ourselves everything's impermanent, but when we look this way through meditation, we really know it. We know it firsthand, even closer than the book on quantum mechanics. We know how fluid everything is in our human experience. And then it starts to be clear that we can't hold on. The reason we can't hold on is there's no solid thing there to take hold of. We get this in our marrow—that we really can't find a solid thing to latch onto.

The Buddha said that this level of impermanence is like someone being swept down a river. There's a strong current carrying them downstream. They don't want to be carried downstream, so they keep reaching for things on the bank to take hold of, to stop their flow. But everywhere they reach, they just clasp a bunch of grass and it pulls out

in their hand, and they keep being swept down the stream. This is our situation if we're looking to hold on to the things of the senses. None of them are solid enough to be able to support us.

This is from Rumi: "Think of how phenomena come trooping out of the desert of non-existence into this materiality. Morning and night they arrive in a long line and take over from each other. It's my turn now. Get out. This place of phenomena is a wide exchange of highways with everything going all sorts of different ways. We seem to be sitting still, but we're actually moving, and the fantasies of phenomena are sliding through us like ideas through curtains."

Seeing in this meditative way generally brings about one of two responses. In the first place, it's very liberating. You start to see that all the patterns and emotions and thoughts that we were struggling with, that seemed so dense and impenetrable, are just all poofs—and that nothing is binding the mind. That's wonderfully freeing and uplifting and delightful and true.

And then we stay a little longer with that understanding, with that seeing, and we start to wonder: what's next? If none of those things are solid or can be held onto, where do I rest? Then it gets scary. But that's not the end of the journey. There's more to come.

Impermanence is revealed through our meditation practice, and it opens the door to these other two characteristics. Conditioned things are unsatisfactory because they're not solid. We can't hang on to them because they're not really lasting long enough to be clung to, when we understand them.

So what happens when we try to hold on? Well, either we take hold of something painful—like a difficult emotion or psychological pattern—and then there's pain right away. We're holding on to pain, so that's painful. Or if we hold on to something pleasant, like a beautiful state of meditation or concentration, if we hold on to that and cling, then we suffer when it goes. Either way, it's unsatisfactory. There's some suffering for us, some unhappiness, if we're clinging.

This is from Suzuki Roshi: "Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin."

These two characteristics are very closely related. The third, not-self, requires a little more investigation, and I'm just going to touch on it briefly. When you think about the idea of the I or the self that's at the center of our world—our world revolves around ourself—you start to realize there's an assumption of continuity that's intrinsic in the idea. If there wasn't, we wouldn't worry about dying, right?

If you thought it was somebody else who was going to die, no problem. But it's because we think it's *I* who am going to die that there's a problem. So that shows there's an assumption of continuity from who we are today to who we are up to the moment of death. It's this continuity that is questionable.

Let me put it more precisely. The assumption that there's any lasting entity in this mind-body process that will continue from now through every moment up until our moment of death is not accurate according to the Buddha's teaching. When we look at this changing flow of experience at all the six sense doors, we start to realize nothing stays constant from one moment to the next, let alone one year to the next or one decade to the next. There's nothing fixed in here that can be that solid "I" that's going to persist. That's why impermanence also reveals this teaching on no lasting self in the middle of all this.

So how do we come into alignment with this? I don't know if any of you have seen the movie *Bedazzled* with Brendan Fraser. It's one of my favorites. He is in a pact with the devil, and it's based on the Faust myth. He gets to request the perfect life for seven different lifetimes, but every time he expresses the wish, he misses some vital element that makes it really miserable. In one life, he's a kind of debonair intellectual in New York City—a well-known author and something of a bon vivant. People are really attracted to him, and he's a philosopher with thoughts on the meaning of life. In one conversation, he says, "Why does the existential dilemma have to be so damn bleak? Yes, we're alone in the universe. Yes, life is meaningless and death is inevitable. But is that necessarily so depressing?"

I love that line. And in a way, it's very dharmic. Because if you look at people who have been contemplating the truth of this for a long time, there's generally a lot of lightness and joy in them.

There is this fact that the teaching on impermanence sounds at first like some bitter pill that we just have to swallow and kind of stoically accept and resign ourselves to. But that's not the point. The point is that this wisdom, this understanding, is a way to free the heart and mind. That's why the Buddha taught it. This is the doorway to our freedom.

Why? Because we learn not to hold on to what can't be held on to. We learn not to cling, and that non-clinging is freedom. It is freedom and it's a doorway to greater freedom, both. Ajahn Chah put it this way: if you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. If you let go completely, there's complete peace. This is the pointer.

There's a beautiful chant in Pali that is chanted in Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. You've probably heard this line: *Anicca vata sankhara*. It means "all conditioned things are impermanent." The chant goes on—it's very brief. It says: All conditioned things are impermanent. Their nature is to arise and pass away. To live in harmony with this truth brings the highest happiness.

This is where the happiness of the path points. Understanding the nature of conditioned things, not clinging—this is what frees the heart and mind to be here, to be present, to be light, to be open. It's a state of non-clinging that's the doorway.

This is from the Buddha: "When one establishes the perception of impermanence in all formations without exception, the mind inclines to complete peace."

So we need to carry on this work of perceiving impermanence again and again and again in all situations. It's not just one insight, but we need to see it over and over and over in every situation that comes our way. Then this quality of peace starts to become more evident.

I want to explore a little bit with you this quality of peace and whether it's a conditioned thing or not—or whether this quality of peace might be that link to the thing that's not conditioned, that dimension of the unconditioned.

I'll start with silence. I think there are two ways to understand silence. One way is that it's when there aren't any sounds. This is a pretty quiet meditation hall. Sometimes there might not be any sounds and then you say, wow, it's really silent in here.

But there's another way that silence can be understood—as the context or the background from which all sounds come and go. Does that make sense? If you understand silence in this way, as the container of sounds, is that silence broken when a sound appears? Or is that context still there? That context is still there, isn't it? Can you tune into it sometimes, even when a sound is present? Can you feel the extent of that silence? If you practice, you can.

Now let's look at peace and activity. There's a way in which peace can be understood as the lack of activity—all activity is stopped. But there's another way that peace can be understood as the context within which activity happens. If we understand peace in

this way, things can arise—sense experiences can arise, sensations, thoughts, even emotions. And if we learn, we can still tune into that peace that's the underlying context for all those arisings. That peace isn't being broken by the arising, just like the silence isn't really shattered by a sound.

So that peace isn't dependent on conditions. It doesn't matter if there's activity at the sense doors or not. That peace is still available, and we can tune into it at any moment, once we learn to. That is analogous to, it's a taste of, a foretaste of, it's very close to that unconditioned element that the Buddha was pointing to—that really, truly complete peace.

In our meditation, we can start to feel this. Things keep happening. Things are arising and passing, but we're not holding on. In that not holding on, we can feel that kind of deeper peace. And this is a quality of meditation that one teacher called "unentangled knowing." We're fully aware things are happening. We're not cutting off any sense experience, but we're still and unmoved on some fundamental level because we're not getting entangled in holding on to the comings and goings.

This place is free from suffering. It's free from unsatisfactoriness. There's nothing to complain about in that place of unentangled knowing. And this is the place we find refuge and safety. It can be found in any moment when we can tune to it. It's available in any moment. And we learn more and more how to find it, how to recognize it, how to rest there, how to come back to it. And that is our safety.

I'll close with this quotation from the Buddha. And just to mention again—that peace is not dependent on conditions. It's there regardless of the activity that is happening. Here's the quote:

"One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

CHAPTER 109

Morning Instructions - Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · 52 min

> *In this retreat instruction, Guy Armstrong introduces the practice of choiceless attention (sometimes called open monitoring), a meditation approach that moves beyond anchored concentration to rest awareness openly on whatever presents itself in each moment. Rather than maintaining preferential attention on the breath, practitioners learn to ask 'What am I noticing now?' and allow mindfulness to naturally flow between the six sense doors - sounds, breath, body sensations, emotions, thoughts, and mental formations.*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes that this open approach builds upon all the foundational meditation instructions for working with individual phenomena. He guides practitioners through the transition from focused attention to receptive awareness, noting that when the mind becomes scattered, one can always return to the breath as a home base before opening again. The instruction includes practical guidance for working with the natural tendency of attention to move rapidly between objects, and addresses common challenges like feeling obligated to 'produce' experiences or losing trust in the method's natural unfolding.*
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> *This teaching is particularly valuable for practitioners who have developed stability with breath meditation and are ready to explore the more spacious dimension of mindfulness practice, cultivating what the teacher describes as effortless, natural meditation that flows with the changing nature of experience.*

In the instructions this morning, I want to introduce one other approach that we've talked around, but I want to make more explicit. It's a style that I'll call choiceless attention.

In our meditation so far, we've relied a lot on our primary anchor, which is the breath for most of you, and treated it with a preferential attitude. It becomes our home base—we start there, we stay there. If anything strong takes our attention, we'll go away, but then generally we'll come back and focus again on the breath. That's a very good approach for developing stability of attention in the middle of changing experience.

In choiceless attention, we let go of our preference for the breath and simply focus on whatever's presenting itself in this new moment. It's like every moment, the mindfulness has to be really fresh and awake, and you're answering the question, "What am I noticing now?" And then a moment goes by. "What am I noticing now? What am I noticing now?"

You'll find as you do that, what you notice keeps changing. In one moment it might be a sound, in the next moment it might be a body sensation, then you might feel a thought, then there might be an in-breath and an out-breath, then you might notice a mood, then another body sensation. If you look closely, the attention keeps moving between these different experiences all the time. In choiceless attention, we're not choosing where to place the attention, but we're letting it do its natural thing of roaming. We just want to be there to be mindful of wherever it's landing.

This is a very open kind of approach to meditation. It can feel very natural and even effortless if there's enough stability to support it. But because of this openness, sometimes it's easy for the thoughts to slip away, and it's easy to become distracted. So if that starts to happen as you're practicing the choiceless style, come back again to your primary anchor—the breath—recollect the mind there, and once you feel steady, then you can try opening up again.

This choiceless attention builds on all the meditation instructions that we've done so far. I'll mention them briefly as we go into it, but the instructions for sounds, breath, sensations, emotions, and thoughts are all necessary so that you know how to relate to those phenomena before we move into this more open or choiceless approach.

We'll play with that during this period. And if you find it suitable, you can bring it into your meditations for the rest of the day as well.

Beginning again, sitting comfortably, being relaxed in your body and yet also upright, so you feel alert, awake, but at ease. Letting the eyes gently close.

You can open the attention to sounds if that helps you bring in a sense of receptivity and effortless awareness. As you rest with this attention that's fairly wide, open to all the sounds that arise, notice that everything else is also held in this open space of awareness. The sounds come and go. The breath rises and falls. Sensations in the body are pulsing or vibrating or twinkling. Thoughts can enter and pass. And the mood or emotion is there too as a background.

These are all just the natural functioning of our six senses. And in choiceless attention, we can be aware of any part of that which presents itself.

Out of that whole range of appearances that we meet, bring the attention first to breathing. Feel the breath through the whole body or in the area where it's clearest to you—it could be in the abdomen, the chest, or at the tip of the nose.

Notice any other sensations that are apparent throughout the body. Just feel their bare physical actuality of tingling or pulsing, pressure or warmth or coolness, ache or bliss. Let that sensation be directly known with mindfulness. Bring the attention close to it, feeling it just the way it is. Mindfulness is equally able to be with an unpleasant sensation as with a pleasant sensation.

Notice the mood or emotion that's present. It could be one of the hindrance energies—wanting or aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt. It could be one of the beautiful qualities of mind—concentration, peace, metta, compassion—not needing to make that state of mind go away or last any longer than its nature is to last. Just be present to feel it just the way it is, to know it.

These moods aren't you or yours. They're just like clouds, systems of weather coming into this space of awareness. They arrive, they last for a while, and they pass too, due to their own causes and conditions.

Notice any thoughts that are appearing, persisting, and then passing away. When mindfulness is strong, you can see thoughts as another present moment phenomenon without getting lost in their content. You'll still know the content, but it won't throw you off your present moment seat of staying anchored in the present, letting the thought arise and pass.

Anything now that arises in our field of experience as we sit can be the subject for our mindfulness. We can pay clear attention and know it just as it is.

So now allowing the attention to become choiceless, not directed in any particular way—not necessarily to breath or body or sounds, just open. Open in a way that you have a real interest and a freshness of looking. What am I noticing now? And then let the mindfulness connect with that.

Not needing to become fixed on it. Let the mindfulness simply rest there if that's its choice, if that's the choice of attention. But open in the next moment to the next arising, the next thing that presents itself. What am I noticing now?

So in this way, the meditation becomes very fluid, very natural and unforced. Just resting in the present moment, noticing what's appearing. Again, if you find yourself carried away with a train of thought, just notice when you return from that, appreciate that moment of being back. And then just asking again, what's happening now? What do I notice now?

If you ever become confused or uncertain what to pay attention to, just go back to your home base. Return to the breath, your anchor. Reestablish that connection. Collect the mind a little more. It's always there for us, this anchor that we've developed the relationship with. Going back, settling in, and when you feel collected again, if you like, you can open up again to this completely open attention in a choiceless style. Just noticing what's happening now, moment after moment.

So a couple of announcements before we take comments and questions. You may have noticed this is the last full day of the retreat. If you haven't noticed that, you get the gold award for present moment attention. So that's really good.

In context, this is the last full day. And on this retreat, we'd like to allow time for you all to get together with each other for some discussion. And we'll do some of that this afternoon and some of that tomorrow morning. So there will actually be two opportunities for you to meet in smaller groups and to talk about the impact, perhaps, of mindfulness in your life and your work.

So we'll begin some integration this afternoon at the 2:15 sit. We'd like to ask everyone to please come to the sit at 2:15. We'll start with a gentle return to mindful speaking with one another, and then that will be the prelude to dividing into smaller groups and having some discussion among yourselves. Then we'll come back into the large group and we'll hear from the smaller groups so we'll get a sense of the creative juices at work in the whole group when we come back together.

Tea time will be a little later today. We'll go back into silence at tea time and then in silence for the rest of the evening and through breakfast tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning, again, at closing, we'll have more opportunity for talking about taking the practice home and into the world, and also for you to discuss with each other. So that's the general flow of the rest of today and tomorrow. We'll end about 11 tomorrow morning.

So in the meantime, we are still in the momentum of the retreat. You all have worked very hard to get to this point. A lot of moments of mindfulness have built up and the noble silence has supported it. So please take care with this retreat container.

Right through the morning, through lunchtime today, the break after lunch, and then coming into the 2:15 sit, please keep the support of that silence as we go through this last morning of silent practice together, and then we'll start to open it up at 2:15.

Okay, so that's the outline of the day. Any comments on your practice or questions? Yes, seated at the back.

"I found that liberating. I feel like when I have to follow my breath, I feel constricted. But my question is, can you follow more than one sense simultaneously? Or are you just time slicing it and catching them both?"

Good question. He said he found it freeing—that when he was with the breath, it felt a little constricting. When he could open it up, it felt a lot freer for him. And the question is, can you follow two things at once? Or is that apparent following of two things at once really just rapid time slicing?

I'm going to leave this as an open question and not answer it because I think it's more useful for you to investigate it yourself and come to your own understanding. It's a really interesting thing to explore.

Here's the way I would put the question: Can attention be with more than one thing in the same moment? Or does attention only focus on one element, one phenomenon of our whole experience in each new moment?

I'll leave that as an open question for everyone to explore. Often with these questions, the investigation is the fun part, and the conclusion isn't even as important as what you learn by doing it.

There was another question. Yes?

The questioner said he found himself naming everything his attention went to, and asked if there's a difference—is it possible to notice without naming?

It is possible to notice without naming, and the naming is actually fine too. Remember, we've talked about the noting practice where with the breath we might note "rising, falling" or "in, out." We can do that with all the phenomena that our attention lands on and give just a short label for each one.

That can be very helpful, as it is with the breath, in maintaining a real continuity of noticing. The mental note or label is optional, but if you find it helpful, if it comes easily and you don't find that it interferes, it can be really good support.

We could be sitting and we might notice: rising, thinking, hearing, touching, hearing, touching—just like that. In each case, we want the majority of our attention to be with the direct experience and have the note be really soft, kind of in the background, so the verbal doesn't overwhelm the direct experience. But it can be a very helpful way to keep reminding ourselves to keep paying attention.

He mentioned needing to give his attention a little direction not to move so quickly. How did you give it that direction not to move so rapidly?

"I found myself becoming restless as my attention was jumping all over the place, so I sort of followed it while directing it. I'm not sure how to explain it."

His comment was that when he let his attention go, it started moving really quickly. Anybody else have that experience? Sometimes that happens. You'll just see ten things in a second for a while. Obviously you can't keep up noting with that rapidity, even though something's being known in each of those moments.

In the Abhidhamma, which is the classical Buddhist text on psychology, they analyze these movements of attention in very fine detail. They say basically there are many mind moments in every second. I don't know what that number is—I've heard seventeen trillion tossed out, but I frankly don't believe that. But if you measure how quickly we can perceive, I think it could be twenty to forty things per second. Perception might be on the order of a twentieth or fortieth of a second.

Sometimes in meditation, we can actually see things move maybe not quite that fast, but more than we can keep track of. At that point, if it feels restless, it's fine to slow it down a little bit. One of the metrics I use is to emphasize a noting about every two seconds—the pace I was demonstrating a couple of minutes ago. That's the pace I would note at, at least in the beginning, though it can get a little quicker too.

There might be little movements in between that you don't pay so much attention to, but maybe every couple of seconds you notice something fairly major and note that if you like. That will help slow down that rapidity of movement.

But if the mind is steady with it, there's no problem with that rapidity. If it leads to restlessness, it's fine to slow it down. Sometimes it's just interesting to let the attention go as quick as it wants to and see what happens. Maybe it will continue like that. Maybe it will play itself out and settle down on its own. Either way would be fine.

We'll take one last question before moving on.

"This sounds like the rebellious adolescent in me, because when you gave me permission not to focus on my breath, then I went right back to my breath."

"Did you do that?"

"Yes. How was that?"

"Oh, wonderful. All you have to do is tell me not to do it."

Her comment was that the rebellious adolescent came through—when I gave permission to go away from the breath, she went right back to the breath, and that was wonderful. Before anyone had given you permission to move away from the breath, had you been wandering wide open?

"Yes."

So if we say wide, you go narrow. If we say narrow, you go wide. Perfect. Go both ways.

One more question from our honorable questioner.

"It's an observation and an invitation for comments if you think it would be helpful. I find it difficult to not try to produce a note. For instance, if I don't notice an emotion for a while, there's this little 'oh no, I'll never have an emotion again' sort of tendency to check my emotions rather than just wait for them to present themselves."

So taking a look to see if there's something there?

"Yeah, almost. I wouldn't say trying to produce something there, but checking in. Having practiced with the breath so much, not trusting it will ever go somewhere else."

His comment was about turning to the open instruction—he felt almost an obligation to produce something. He's so familiar with the breath that it's very easy to go there. In particular with emotions, there's a need to almost check to see if something's happening because he doesn't want to miss it, since emotions aren't noticed very often. It could be with any of the sense doors because he's so accustomed to being with the breath.

This is one of the adjustments one makes when moving from a practice that's really strongly focused around an anchor like the breath and then opening it out. You have to find your way in that open space, and there are a lot of confusing currents that can come in. Sometimes people report feeling lost or overwhelmed in the spaciousness. It's kind of like the breath has been so small and cozy—like sitting with your best friend—and then you're thrown into the New York subway at rush hour. So it takes a while to get adjusted to the bigger frame of reference.

I would say the thing that can be helpful is if the breath still stands out, let yourself notice that. Don't feel like you have to not notice the breath. Sometimes that's what will happen out of habit when nothing else much is going on. Trust the method. Trust it.

The other thing is really coming to this meditation with a sense of receptivity. You know how we've talked about when you open to sounds—you can just be sitting still in the middle of a concert hall and just let sounds come to you. You don't have to go out to find them. Similarly, when you open up in this way, think about just being in a really receptive place. You don't have to conduct the symphony. You're just there to listen to it.

The symphony is happening at the six sense doors. There are six instruments playing this symphony. So you just settle back. Now it's the ear. Now it's the body. Now it's thought, and you're just there to receive them all. Strengthen the receptivity and just let things come. They'll come.

If you like, play with this balance between focus on your anchor and this open, choiceless attention. If you feel a little scattered, come back to your anchor and collect.

When you feel a little collected, try this venturing into the wider space, which can bring in a sense of ease and effortless meditation. You can play with that balance through your sittings today.

So please have a mindful day. Notice that your thoughts may go to the future this morning, and continue to notice that as thinking.

The practice invites us to discover this natural rhythm between gathering and opening, between the focused attention that stabilizes the mind and the spacious awareness that receives whatever arises. In this dance between concentration and mindfulness, we find a meditation that is both grounded and free, both purposeful and effortless.

As you move through your day, carry this same quality of aware presence. When the mind gets caught up in planning or projecting, simply notice this as the activity of thinking. Return again and again to this moment, to what is actually here. This is the continuous practice—not just on the cushion, but in every moment of our lives.

CHAPTER 110

Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from an insight meditation retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses one of the most immediate and practical benefits of vipassana practice: learning to work skillfully with difficult emotions. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), particularly the third foundation of mindfulness (cittānupassanā), Armstrong explains how emotions are part of mental nature and subject to the three characteristics of existence: impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and not-self (anattā).*
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> *Armstrong identifies four primary difficult emotions that arise from our relationship to pleasure, pain, and time: sadness/grief (connected to past pleasant experiences), anger/resentment (past unpleasant experiences), desire/longing (future pleasant experiences), and fear (future unpleasant experiences). Through personal stories and practical guidance, he demonstrates how mindful awareness can understand the components of emotions: bodily sensations, mental mood, and supporting storylines.*
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> *The talk introduces the RAIN technique (Recognition, Acceptance, Interest, Non-identification) as a systematic approach to working with afflictive mental states. Armstrong emphasizes that while complete freedom from difficult emotions may take lifetimes, we can immediately begin transforming our relationship to them through understanding their impermanent nature and learning not to resist what arises. This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners concrete tools for one of meditation's most valuable applications in daily life.*

The Buddha's teaching was all about—and I mean this literally—understanding how we suffer and how to come out of it and find happiness, the deepest kind of happiness possible.

When we look at life in the world, the kinds of suffering that we see in our friends and on the planet seem so complex that many of them seem insoluble. A son is using drugs and doesn't listen to anybody else's advice. Our mother has Alzheimer's and it's very painful to watch her decline. Our marriage starts to unravel because a partner is unfaithful and very painful. And not to mention the global issues of climate change and wars and racism and genocide. It seems overwhelming, the amount of suffering.

But when we come into this setting, everything becomes much simpler. The kinds of suffering that we're subject to even become really simple. This is encouraging because when we can see them so simply, we find out they're workable. They're really workable and quite solvable with the tools that we have.

There are really three ways we notice suffering in this setting. The first way is bodily pain. Anybody had a dose of that today? Usually first days of retreat, that's a very big part of the experience. You're sitting and there's pain in the neck or the back or the seat gets sore after a while or the knees start to ache from that old skiing accident. This is very common and it's unsettling. It's scary. We don't know where it's going to lead. We're sometimes confined with that pain for forty-five minutes at a stretch, so it's difficult. Meditation doesn't promise to end the physical pain. We can change our relationship to it, but meditation is not always a remedy for physical pain. Some pains it is. A lot of pains it is not. Some of this is unavoidable.

The second big area of suffering that we feel here is in our states of mind, in the difficult emotions that we find when we sit and are quiet and just with ourselves. The whole range of painful emotions that humans are subject to will come, among all the people here, in various forms: wanting and loneliness and sadness and fear and envy and pride and anger, resentment, self-judgment and criticism. Many more different flavors will come and be experienced in this setting, not necessarily because anything here triggers them, but because they're habits of our minds. We start to realize that in this simple setting, we see the habits of our mind so clearly.

The good news is that our meditation is a very powerful tool for working with difficult emotions. In the long run, the practice offers the possibility that we can actually be completely rid of these difficult emotions. But that's a long-term project. That's not one retreat. It's not one three-month retreat. It's probably not one lifetime. The teachings and the practice offer that possibility, which I find very inspiring.

I've had the good fortune to meet people, as I've practiced over all these years, whose minds seem to be pretty free of most negative emotions. I remember particularly Dipa Ma, who some of you may have heard of, a very highly developed teacher from India, who came upon meditation out of a deep sense of despair when she lost her husband and two children to illness. So out of that grieving, she had to find a root, and her root was meditation. She was a very accomplished practitioner, a very accomplished yogi.

At the time that I met her, fairly late in her life, she was once asked, "What's in your mind?" Because everybody was struck by her presence. She said, "There are only three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and loving-kindness." That was it. I never saw her deviate from those three, except occasionally a little joy snuck in there.

I really have faith from some of the teachers that I've met that this degree of freedom is possible. But it's not necessary for us to reach that level to find a really satisfying amount of happiness in our life. The tool of insight meditation and mindfulness give us the way, the route to work with these difficult emotions so that they don't become such a burden in our lives. As they become less burdensome, other more beautiful emotions begin to open up.

In Mahayana Buddhism, which came around about four hundred years after the death of the Buddha, it was said that of these difficult emotions, there were 84,000 different ones. That's a lot for us to work with. Of course, that was 2,000 years ago, and things were simpler then. By now, there are probably 168,000 or something.

But the good news also is that the beautiful emotions we will be exploring—love and compassion, joy, balance of mind, mindfulness, concentration, equanimity, peace, calm, tranquility, happiness, contentment—are equally available to us.

I think there are 84,000 of those too. So as we get more space around the difficult emotions, then these more beautiful emotions come in naturally because they're a natural part of us as well. So we cultivate them through our mindfulness practice, we cultivate them through our metta practice, and that development starts to bring them out in all those different flavors.

So those are the two kinds of pain that we see very clearly when we come on retreat. The third type is a type that we enjoy as meditators specifically. The person in the street doesn't enjoy this third class of suffering. It's the suffering of the distracted mind.

Because if you go to the person in the street and you ask, "Has your mind been wandering today?" they're not going to know what you're talking about. But if you ask a meditator, "Has your mind been wandering today?" Oh man, it drove me crazy. I couldn't believe how restless it was. You know, I'd connect with a breath for two breaths and then it was gone. It was so frustrating.

So we have this third kind of suffering, which I consider a fairly high class suffering, but it's our own special kind: the wandering mind of the meditator.

In the talk tonight, I want to focus specifically on this second area—the difficult emotions which are huge burdens in our daily life and sometimes in our retreat life until we learn to work with them—and how the tools of meditation can help us get a new relationship with them. It's not in the near term that we aim to get rid of these. If it was possible, the Buddha would have told us how. But in the near term, for most of us, that's not a possibility. But it is possible to completely transform our relationship to them and

in that find a huge amount of freedom. This is one of the most immediate benefits that people will find through mindfulness practice, through Vipassana. It's very real and it's very accessible. So that's what I want to talk about tonight.

These meditations about the states of mind and emotions come, for those of you who are familiar with this, in what the Buddha called the third foundation of mindfulness. The first foundation is the body, which we've talked quite a lot about. Second foundation is feeling tone, which we'll talk about later. The third foundation are all these qualities and states of mind. And the fourth foundation is basically the dharmic principles of the Buddha. These are areas that we can pay attention to. So this was identified specifically as the third foundation. Therefore, it's a central part of the Buddha's teaching.

The word that he used for this foundation is citta. It's worth explaining a little bit. I may often use the word mind, but emotions in Buddhism are considered part of mind. So we will sometimes, to emphasize that, we will say heart-mind or heart and mind. And both of them are included in this word citta. Citta is frequently translated as mind, but a better translation probably is psyche. Because psyche has both the cognitive and the emotional components. And it's important to remember when we say mind, we mean the emotions too.

If you ask someone in the West, generally, again, man or woman in the street, where is their mind? Where do you think most people will point? Yeah. Mind's generally understood without too much controversy to be up here.

But if you ask someone in Thailand, "Where is the mind?" The word they use is jit. Where do they point? Yeah. The center of the chest in the heart area. And this is kind of a classical Buddhist understanding that the actual seat of the mind is in this area we call the heart center, the center of the chest.

A friend was giving a demonstration to some Tibetan monks over in Dharamsala of the neuroscience that is growing up in Western research centers. So he took over some simple equipment—a cap with some electrodes connected to a computer—and he put it on to model it for them and showed how all the wires fed into the computer and it decoded the electrical signals. And he took it off, and the monks, there were about 500 monks in the audience, they broke up laughing. And he thought it must be because he looked so silly with the cap on his head. So he asked them, "Why were you laughing? Was it because of the cap?"

They said, "No, no, no, it wasn't that. It was that you're trying to measure the mind here when we all know the mind is located here." They thought that was so silly.

So I'm waiting for the neuroscience that figures out how to measure the mind here.

That will be really interesting.

So this word *citta* encompasses the cognitive aspects and the emotive aspects, and we're going to talk tonight about the emotive aspects of mind or the heart-mind.

In coming to greater freedom with these difficult states of mind, we need two things. The first is a shift in attitude, because mostly when these states come up, we don't like them, and we try to push them away, or we judge them as something that shouldn't be happening. That's a problem. That resistance is a problem. That's our normal conditioning, and we need to unlearn that. We need to open to these states with acceptance. That's the attitude shift.

The second thing is we need more wisdom. We need to understand the makeup of these emotions. In particular, we need to understand how they are part of nature as everything else we experience is part of nature. Usually in the West, when we say nature, we mean that stuff—trees and grass and clouds and rain and sky. We're so fortunate here to be surrounded by beautiful physical nature. But in the Dharma, we understand nature also to mean the mind. This body is a part of physical nature and it obeys the same laws as the rest of physical nature. The mind is also part of nature. So there's physical nature and then there's mental nature.

We need to understand that these states, these difficult emotions are also part of nature, and that means they obey or they manifest these qualities called the three characteristics of everything that exists. Everything that exists in nature is characterized by impermanence, by unsatisfactoriness, and by not having a self. These emotions are the same.

When we understand their nature, they are passing and transitory phenomena. They don't belong to us and we are not them. We are not our anger or our insecurity or our grief or our loneliness or our self-judgment. We've spent so much time believing that we are—oh, this is who I am, this particular pattern. It's not the case. We all have all of these. They're all part of nature, human nature. And so we understand that for all of us, they arise like the weather. They manifest for a while, and following their nature, they pass away.

That's why it's safe to feel them. We start out thinking, "I don't want to feel it. I can't feel it. I've got to push it away." But when we realize they're part of nature, we just let them show their nature. They arise, they play, and then they go. Without our doing anything, they go. And that's why we don't have to fuss with them. So they arise, we feel

them, we acknowledge them, we name them, we get to know them, and then we watch them pass. Their passing is what we trust in. It's why we don't have to push them out because they will go on their own.

As we understand this nature, that all these emotions are manifesting the three characteristics, we become much more transparent to them. They arise, they persist, they pass away, and they don't have to bother us. They don't have to harm us. They don't have to make us do stupid things in the world. They can flow through us in our equanimity. Our balance can be there.

So let's investigate these a little more closely. The first step in working with difficult emotions is to know what we're feeling. This is not as easy as it sounds. I'll tell a little story from my own practice that shows this.

I was about two weeks into a six-week period of retreat, part of a three-month course, but I was just there for six weeks. I had settled in after two weeks. I was feeling very present, very mindful. Every day I had done my walking meditation on the same path down on the grass near the meditation hall. So morning sitting had ended and I went out from the meditation hall and was walking down to my walking path when I noticed there was somebody there.

I couldn't believe it. I'd been walking on that path every walking period for two weeks. I thought, didn't they see me? Is this a vendetta or something? Is this a Vipassana vendetta?

And I was walking very mindfully. I really noticed lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. I thought, did I cut in front of them at breakfast today? Are they getting back at me for that? Lifting, moving, placing. I thought, they're not very sensitive. If they were very sensitive, they would know that was my spot. Lifting, moving, placing.

I got down there running more stories like that, found another walking path, which to my great surprise worked just as well for meditation. And thirty minutes into the walking period, I realized I'm angry. I'm angry at this person who is in my walking path. I had been angry for about thirty minutes and I hadn't known it. I thought I was really mindful. I was lifting, moving, placing, but I was missing the central fact of what was going on, which was I was pissed off.

Now that's kind of hard to believe, but this is how these hindrances operate. Even when we have our mindfulness radar up, they slip in underneath. We don't know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. That's when we're in danger. If I could have had a conversation with that fellow, it would not have been a good outcome.

So not recognizing that we're angry puts us in danger. Recognizing that I was angry gave me the way out. Oh, I know how to work with this. I could let it go and settle into my walking and be open again.

The first most important thing is to know what we're feeling. The reason these things are called hindrances is that they rob our mindfulness. We lose our mindfulness to them by getting involved in their story and the drama that they build up. The story I got involved in was a story I created—he's in my walking path and it's really mine and it should have my name on it and he should have known that. As I kept running that story over and over, I locked myself into that drama, not even knowing I was angry.

That's the way the hindrance works. It blinds us. It blinded me to seeing the most important thing going on—I'm angry. It's that blindness that robs our understanding, robs our wisdom until we start to notice, oh, there's that emotion. This is the really crucial step: knowing what you're feeling. Being able to name it is really helpful. I suggest that as you work with these emotions, you name them when they come.

What happens then is, instead of directing all my attention to the guy who stole my path, I was directing my attention to my own experience. As long as I'm focused on him and what he did wrong and why he did it and what I'm going to do to him and how we're going to talk about it, I can't free myself. When I can turn the attention back home to my experience, then I can release what's going on.

Another way of talking about the hindrances in terms of mindfulness is misplaced attention. We're placing our attention on the external circumstance or person instead of the inner world where it's rooted. As long as we're fixated on the outer circumstance, we're not going to be able to liberate or come to a freeing relationship to that emotion. But when we can turn the attention here, which is the right place to put the attention, then we have the possibility of freeing ourselves in that moment.

As we turn our attention to these difficult emotions, I want to encourage you to look at three particular areas. If the emotion is strong at all—and it's mostly strong emotions that make us suffer—it's going to have an impact in the body. This is a great place to ground your attention because the body will hold your attention. We've been working with the body for two days now. You've learned how to connect.

Let's say I'm feeling angry. I might feel a pressure in the chest and a burning around the neck and shoulders. I turn my attention there. I can feel it in the body and I stay in touch with it there. As I feel it in the body, I know the sensation—tightness, pressure, heat—and I'm also staying in touch with the anger. So if it's strong, find it in the body.

Where are you feeling it? Where is it manifesting?

Second, turn and feel that mood or color in the mind. You know, anger feels different than even impatience, feels different than happiness, feels different from fear. Just on a... the flavor of the emotion, the taste of it, which is a mind quality, feels different from anger to joy to fear, whatever. So let yourself taste that flavor of anger or whatever.

And then the third piece is if the difficult emotion is being sustained for a while, if it's lasting for a while, it's being supported by a belief that we could call a storyline. We've made up a story that justifies the emotion and keeps it in place. My story was he's taken my walking path and that's wrong. That's what fed the anger. And as long as I kept thinking those thoughts, the anger kept getting built up. When I could see that the storyline was a creation of mine, then the anger could just die down.

Again, the anger will manifest impermanence if we don't keep stoking it back up. Taking out the storyline lets the emotion just wilt away, which all emotions are ready to do when we withdraw our investment. So start to notice the sensations in the body, the mood in the mind, and the story that supports it. We'll go through some specifics to give some more examples of this.

And this is what mindful awareness does. Mindful awareness starts to understand how the emotion has been put together from these different components. And understanding that, we're not so enchanted by it, we're not so deceived, we're not so gripped by it anymore. So this is the wisdom factor starting to come in with the emotions.

In my own practice and working with lots of people over the years, it seems to me that there are four emotions particularly that are kind of primal and that we all feel and work with and that constitute the most difficult ones. Then there are some subgroupings. And I want to see if you can tell me what these are.

So I'm going to suggest difficult emotions get born around experiences of pleasure and pain. This may be a new concept, but I'm going to suggest and you can think about this. The reason life is so difficult is because we have a mix of pleasure and pain. If life was always pleasant, it wouldn't be problematic, would it? It's the alternation that makes life difficult. So the alternation of pleasure and pain makes for difficulty.

The other thing that makes for difficulty is time, or you could say memory and anticipation. When we're completely in the present moment, it's hard to be overwhelmed by a difficult emotion. Difficult emotions depend on a sense of time.

So let's say that pleasure and pain are on a vertical axis. This is for all of you who really liked algebra in the eighth grade. Pleasure and pain are on a vertical axis. Pleasure up here, pain down here. And time will be on the horizontal axis, with past over here, the present, a very tiny point in the middle, and then the future over here. So again, for you algebra buffs, this creates four quadrants, right?

So let's start off with past pleasant. So that's up here. Let's say that something was really pleasant in the past. What emotion might you have in relation to it? Now, past means it's not here now. So, hmm? You'll have a memory of it for sure, but there's an emotion around it.

Missing it. Could that be sadness? Yeah. Sometimes people will answer this and say desire, but that's if it could reappear again. But let's say that it really is gone. Then sadness or missing is more the emotion, isn't it? So sadness or grief is one of the primal emotions that we all work with.

Let's say it was unpleasant. We're in this lower quadrant. Unpleasant in the past. And just to narrow it down, let's say it was connected to somebody. Somebody did something that was unpleasant for you in the past.

What emotion arises around that? Anger. Resentment. This is another of the big ones. Of course it doesn't have to, but that's the trigger for anger. Some degree of pain that happened in the past is the trigger for anger. We don't always succumb, but that's the trigger.

Okay, let's move into the future. Pleasant in the future. How do you feel about that? Hope. It's good. What's another synonym? What's a stronger synonym? Desire. Desire, longing, hope, yearning. This is the kind of emotion that we feel about pleasant things in the future.

And what about unpleasant things in the future? Fear. Fear. So we have sadness or grief, anger, desire, and fear.

So I want to suggest that these are maybe the four most primal emotions that we humans work with, live with, or are subject to. And at times, each one of them can be overwhelming and very, very painful.

Now, there are different subcategories that I'll get to with some of these, but these are the four that I mostly want to talk about tonight.

So let's take, as an example, desire. This is a movement of mind looking for a pleasant experience. It comes a lot in retreat. You've probably seen it a lot here.

How many of you have wished you were home sometime in the last couple of days? Some nice thoughts of home? No? Congratulations. How many of you wish for more chocolate chip cookies at tea?

So often in retreat, there's a missing of the pleasant things in our life - the ability to choose our own food or sleep in our own bed or be really warm when we get up in the morning or be with friends and go out for a nice meal. Often it comes. It's maybe not a big source of suffering, but often that wanting comes when we're here.

I was teaching a retreat in Italy. Actually, Carol and Sally and I were all there. It was a lot of fun to work with Italian yogis. They're very frank about their emotions. It was a kind of emotional culture, and they knew their emotions well and were at ease talking about them.

The retreat setup was a little different. It was at a Catholic convent, and when we first went in the first night for tea, there was a carafe of red wine on every table. So we had to ask them to remove that. More suffering. And then you grow up.

But we did not take away the espresso machine that was outside the meditation halls. Every time at the end, ding, ding, ding, ding, people were awake.

So at one point early on, I had an interview with this young man, very nice young fellow, and I said, "How's the retreat for you?" He said, "Oh, I really don't want to be here. I'm really having a terrible time, not happy at all." I said, "Well, why are you here?" He said, "Well, my friends invited me to go to the Caribbean with them or I could have come here." I said, "So why did you choose this?" He said, "Well, all the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out." That's why he was at the retreat. He said, "But while I'm here, all I can think about are my friends in the Caribbean and the beautiful sand and the water and the warm sunshine."

Just so I don't want to be here.

So we talked about this a little while. I said, "So you're wanting to be somewhere else. What if that wanting wasn't here? Is this situation actually bad in itself? Is it really unpleasant being here?" He thought about it and said, "No, you know, it's not so bad, but I really want to be there." I said, "But what if that wanting wasn't there? Would it be so bad to be here? Go check it out. In those times when the wanting isn't there, see if it's that bad."

So he went away and practiced. I saw him again a few days later. He had let go of the wanting, had settled in fine, and was really enjoying the retreat. It was so interesting because that's what wanting does—it makes us think that we would be happy if we were somewhere else, and since we can't be, we can't be happy here. That's what strong wanting does. It blinds us to what's good where we are.

So wanting has this bittersweet quality. You can notice this when you're feeling a little bit of suffering around wanting—check out the bittersweetness. It brings in a pleasant object, and that's the sweet part of it. But you don't have it, and that's the bitter part of it. So desire is always like that. It always has this frustrating quality. When there's a little suffering around it, there's the suffering of frustration, because what we want are things we don't have. Do you ever want a hand at the end of your arm? No, because you have one. If you lost it, you would really want it.

So desire is inherently frustrating. It seems to hold the possibility of gratification, but the lack of the object makes it dissatisfying. And we can't find that real contentment that comes from being present.

The next general area I want to talk about comes under the heading of aversion, which is a word we use a lot in dharma talks because it's one of the fundamental tendencies of mind. Basically, again, because we're driven by pleasure and pain, we want the pleasant and we want to push away the painful. That movement of pushing away the painful is what we call aversion. And that movement of wanting to hold on to the pleasant is what we call wanting or desire.

So aversion has lots of different blooms. I'll just name a few: ill will, anger, hatred, impatience, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, blame, resentment, depression, despair, resistance. Get the flavor? It's a big one. It's one of the fundamental movements and expresses itself in many different ways.

In general, the storyline under aversion is something like: "I can't be happy because this is here. This painful experience is here and it's blocking my happiness." When we're in a state of aversion, everything sort of rubs us the wrong way. Everything doesn't fit right, is not suitable, is not quite to our liking.

Long term, the antidote that the Buddha talked about for this general tendency of aversion is loving kindness. It's kind of interesting—if you notice that there's a lot of aversion in your general approach to life, and sometimes that's just the way it is, loving kindness is a very good practice to offset that. You can kind of think about it because

you can feel into aversion how it makes the mind tight and stiff and hard. Loving kindness opens and softens and sweetens that mind. So it undoes the tightness of aversion with this soft opening. It's a very good general direction for people with aversion.

So I want to talk about a few aspects of aversion, one of which is anger, one of the four primary ones. You'll notice that when you're angry with someone, you will tend to think certain thoughts that blame that person, just like I was doing with the person in my walking path.

Notice how when you're angry with someone, you tend to think certain thoughts that blame that person, just like I was doing with the person in my walking path. You can see that the more thoughts you think, the more the anger builds up. You're justifying your point of view and blaming the other person. Those anger thoughts tend to be the same again and again.

We could say the storyline with anger is "I'm right and they're wrong." We tell ourselves that over and over and over. That very telling builds up the anger. Then we feel it in the body—the body becomes tight and burning. We feel that fiery tone in the mind from the flavor of the anger.

What happens if you stop telling yourself the angry thoughts? The anger fades. This is a really useful thing to know. If you want to get out of anger, stop telling those stories. Then you'll see the anger doesn't have the support and it fades.

But of course, in the beginning, our thinking is very compulsive, and we don't feel we have much choice about what we think. As mindfulness develops, we have more and more choice about thinking those thoughts. The curious thing is that we can see the pain of anger, and we still choose to continue to think those thoughts. It's so funny. We sabotage ourselves in doing that. But at least we know there is a way to let the anger fade, and that is to stop thinking those thoughts.

Now, one of the things that's tricky is sometimes those thoughts are true. People do terrible things in the world and hurt us and other people deeply. When we think, "I'm ethically right and they're ethically wrong," that may very well be true. But is it helpful? That's the question. Is it helpful?

The Dalai Lama tells this story. He left Tibet in 1959, which was ten years after the Chinese invasion and occupation, when he saw that it wasn't going to get any better. But there was a monk that he knew there who stayed behind, and eventually that monk was imprisoned and spent twenty years in prison for the crime of being a monk. While he was in prison, he suffered a great deal, but he eventually was released and escaped from Tibet to come to India.

The Dalai Lama in those years was trying to meet all the refugees who came, especially monks who managed to get out of Tibet. As soon as he came to India, he found the Dalai Lama and had a meeting with him. The Dalai Lama remembered him from earlier, and he remembered him as quite an ordinary monk, nothing special. The Dalai Lama asked him, "Well, how was your time in prison?"

The monk said, "Oh, I felt I was really in danger."

The Dalai Lama was very concerned and said, "Do you mean in danger of being tortured?"

The monk said, "Oh, no, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I was in danger of getting angry at my captors. But I didn't."

That was the level of his practice. Who was ethically right in that situation? Who had all the grounds in the world for anger? And yet he didn't allow himself to get angry at his captors. The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk's practice. He was much better developed than he had thought before.

This is a real human possibility. This is beyond me—I am not at that point where I could do that yet—but I am a lot better than I used to be at letting go of anger sooner and sooner when it comes.

As we explore and investigate in this way, we start to see that when we become angry, we suffer first. Tune into the feeling of anger, the tension in the body, the kind of burning quality in the mind. It's not a pleasant experience. In the texts, they say that getting angry at somebody is like picking up a hot coal that you want to throw at them. But you've picked it up and it burns you first. Especially explore if you're angry while you're here—whoever you're angry with doesn't even know it. But you're suffering.

Another analogy is drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

For me, feeling the suffering of anger was the biggest encouragement to let go. I had to feel my own suffering in anger time and again before I said, I don't want this anymore. And it was a great motivator in letting go sooner and sooner. So it's important to feel that pain of anger. There's a lot of learning there.

Now, we can still act in the world when someone has done something that's ethically wrong. We can still act in the world, and I believe we'll be clearer in our actions if our mind isn't clouded by anger. So maybe we can use a little bit of the strength of anger to make us determined, but then let go of the delusion of the cloudiness in order to act properly. And sometimes that means acting forcefully.

One variation of anger is when we turn it toward ourselves. In the West, we tend to do this a lot in the form of self-judgment, self-criticism. It almost seems like our culture has created generations of people who don't like themselves very much and find every opportunity to criticize themselves. We are lacking—we find ourselves lacking in so many qualities. I'm not good enough. I'm not lovable enough. I'm not attractive enough, I'm not smart enough, I'm not thin enough, I'm not making enough money. We can never quite feel good enough about ourselves.

So the story is that we're not quite good enough or lovable enough. And this is felt as a kind of burdensome pressure that doesn't let me feel hopeful or confident or tall with optimism—a burden that weighs me down. And it's very widespread. We hear it a lot in retreats. People comment on this, that especially as they get quiet, they hear a lot of thoughts judging themselves. You're not doing this right. You're not doing that right. Not good enough in many different forms.

A group of Western teachers was meeting with the Dalai Lama some years ago and asked him how to work with this problem. And the Dalai Lama could not understand what they were talking about. He had no experience of it and he had not seen it in Tibetan culture. And so people had to explain it time and time again before he started to get a flavor of what they meant. And he went around to each of the Western teachers and said, "Have you experienced this?" "Yes." "Have you experienced this?" "Yes." Every Western teacher there knew what this was like from their own personal experience. And the Dalai Lama hadn't. And it's not really in Tibetan culture.

So this is definitely something that's workable through meditation. Again, the development of loving kindness is a huge asset in this way. Because when loving kindness grows, we start to feel, oh, there's goodness inside. This is a goodness that's always been there, but it maybe hasn't been so strong. We haven't seen it clearly. As metta develops, we start to feel, oh, there is real goodness inside, and we feel better and better about ourselves.

So when you notice the judging thoughts, take a moment to just feel the impact, that kind of burden that it puts on us to be perfect. And notice you don't have to believe the thoughts. The way through self-judgment is not getting rid of the thoughts, because that would be more aversion. But the thought can be there and we don't have to believe it. We don't have to take it so seriously. "Okay. That's the judging mind again." We could say, "Thanks, Dad. I appreciate your concern for my perfection." But we don't have to believe it.

A way to lighten it up was recommended by Joseph Goldstein. He said, when you hear a judging thought, add on the words "and the sky is blue." "I'm a crummy meditator, and the sky is blue." So learn to see them with some degree of understanding. This is just a judging thought.

It's an old pattern. It's not true. The people who are most tuned in to this self-judging mind are meditators, but I happen to think meditators are the best people in the world because you all are devoting your time and energy to making your hearts and minds clearer and adding more love and wisdom to the world. That's what we need. I think you all are doing the best work on the planet, and yet some of you may be feeling this self-criticism. It's not warranted. You all are good people, and I hope you will feel that and believe in that.

So another of the emotions that we come upon is sadness or grief. We've all had lots of disappointments in life. I think there's grounds for sadness in every person I've known. Some of us have had bigger losses than others. Some losses take a long, long time to heal from. I don't want to minimize the work involved in grieving. But sometimes it feels like when there's been a big loss, it can feel like we can't start to open to it because we'd drown in it. We'd get lost. We'd never come out. But that's just a belief. That's a story.

What I've seen is that even in the biggest kinds of loss—and I'm thinking of parents who lose a child to suicide, which I think is one of the probably most devastating things that happens in a life—even then, the capacity is there with meditation to touch that grief and little by little open it up and let it come through and let it pass through. A huge amount of healing can take place if we're open to starting that process, being able to feel it and touch it, and then also finding a way to open to the beautiful aspects of life, which loving kindness also reveals to us. My general impression is that grief has a timeline, if we're willing to open to it, that it also will pass, although it can sometimes take some time.

The last of these primal emotions I wanted to talk about is fear. I want to especially talk about this one because it was one that I learned a huge amount from in the early years of my practice. It was such a constant companion for me in years of practice. At times it became a very, very intense kind of overpowering experience. I had to develop wisdom in relationship with it or I really would have been lost.

When fear comes, the storyline is something like, "This moment may be bearable, but there's a calamity about to happen." If you feel into fear, it's that feeling that something awful is about to descend. Yet, even though the fear is there, the calamity usually doesn't follow. We can first just start to question that, and maybe it's safe to let the fear be felt. That was the way in for me. What if I just feel the fear?

My teachers directed me to feel it in the body. That was where I put my attention. Many, many times when fear would come, I would feel the body sensations and I would try to open with acceptance. There'd be a contraction in the belly. There'd be a fluttering in the chest. There'd be sweat under the arms. I would just try to open to those. The question I ask myself is, can I bear these sensations? Because normally when fear comes, if it's strong, in the beginning it feels unbearable. I didn't think I could bear it. But I found that I could bear those sensations. Yeah, I can feel that. I'm not going to die from a fluttery chest or a contraction in the belly. I can bear that.

Then as I was able to bear that, I could start to explore that mood in the mind. Fear is tricky because the essence of fear is, let's get away. Let's escape. So trying to get close to that mood was, let's not feel this. It was hard. It's subtle. It's tough to just feel that fear directly. But I was able to do that. I found that I could bear the emotion.

I could bear the sensations. I no longer quite believed the storyline. But still, sometimes fear would be very strong, and I didn't like it. I could bear it, but I really didn't like it.

At a certain point, I had to dig deeper. The question I asked myself was: am I really accepting this or am I just pretending to accept it so it will go away? At that point, I was kind of pretending.

So I said, if I really was going to accept this fear, could I be okay with it if it was here the rest of my life? That was the question I asked. I thought that's the bottom line with this. If I really accept it, then if it stayed forever, could I be okay with that?

The answer immediately came: no way. I could not accept it being here the rest of my life.

So then I inquired, okay, why? Well, if fear was always here, I couldn't enjoy a sunset the way I used to. I couldn't get high listening to music the way I used to. I couldn't fall in love the way I wanted to.

I said, okay, so you want to hold out for getting high sometime in the future. And that's why you're going to keep fighting now, fighting the fear now. In other words, you don't want peace now if it means the possibility of giving something up in the future.

When I saw that, I said, no, I want peace now.

So I finally surrendered. I said, okay, I'm going to open to it whether it stays the rest of my life or not. And I did. I went through a period of working with fear where if it came, that was totally fine. If it didn't come, that was totally fine. I had no preference either way.

When I opened to it to that extent, something about that grip of fear in my mind broke. It could never hold me the same way that it had before. Curiously, that complete acceptance or complete surrender to the fear broke it. It broke its spine in my mind.

So this is possible for us. Fear has come many times since, but I know how to work with it. The fear doesn't scare me. I can be with it. I can work with it. I can work with acceptance. Of course, a lot of things haven't happened yet. There's no telling what will happen later. But so far, so good.

All these emotions are capable of this kind of transformation and this kind of taking the grip out of our minds of these strong, afflictive emotions. What transforms them is this deep, unconditional acceptance with the understanding of their nature. They come into the mind, they express, and then they pass away.

I want to suggest a simple way to remind yourself of the nature of these states when they come. We can practice with this tomorrow morning again in the instructions. It's a little acronym called RAIN, R-A-I-N. It was developed by a Vipassana teacher. If you go through these four steps of RAIN with your difficult emotions, you'll start to get a really good handle on a wise and mindful way to relate.

The four steps are recognition, and that's the naming process. When we can name the state, it creates space around it. Like when I could name my anger in walking, I could start to work with it. So we recognize the emotion that's there.

The second step is acceptance. We work to not resist because you may have heard this line: what we resist persists. What we open to can pass. So we work to accept rather than resist these states.

The phrase "like this" invites interest—what is it like? How does that feel in the body, in the mind? What kind of thoughts come with it? And "like this"—there's no I or mine in that. Anger is just this arising, and it's like this. Your experience of anger is not so different from my experience of anger. It's all part of the human package, all these emotions—part of human nature, part of the human package. Not I, not mine.

I'd like to close with a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke that he wrote when he was in his early twenties. He was in a very Christian phase of his life, from a book called *The Book of Hours*. The scenario in this poem is that God has created a being and is about to launch them into their life—this life that you and I are living—into the world. But before doing that, he gives them a little pep talk. So the poem is the pep talk.

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your memory,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going.
No feeling is final.

Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

So let's just sit for a moment together, please.

Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me.

Thank you for your attention. We'll take questions in the morning or comments. Thank you.

We have about fifteen minutes for walking meditation, and then we'll come back and sit for the last period of the day at nine o'clock. It won't be a full thirty minutes, and we'll begin with chanting to wake everybody up.

CHAPTER 111

Factors of Awakening

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong presents the seven bojjhaṅgas (factors of awakening) as essential wholesome mental qualities that support the path to liberation. Drawing from the Buddha's systematic approach to mental cultivation, he explains how these factors work sequentially and synergistically: sati (mindfulness) initiates the process, followed by the energizing factors of dhammavicaya (investigation), vīriya (energy), and pīti (rapture), then the calming factors of passaddhi (tranquillity), samādhi (concentration), and upekkhā (equanimity).*
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> *Armstrong skillfully illustrates each factor with practical examples and personal anecdotes, showing how mindfulness answers "what's happening now?" while investigation brings us closer to our experience through yoniso manasikāra (wise attention). He emphasizes how energy (vīriya) - with its heroic quality derived from 'vīra' (hero) - fuels our dedication to abandoning unwholesome states and cultivating wholesome ones. The teaching progresses through rapture's joyful interest in meditation itself, to the profound settling of calm, the natural unification of samādhi, and finally equanimity's balanced responsiveness.*
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> *The talk concludes with the Buddha's promise that these factors, when developed and cultivated, "lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbāna." Armstrong presents this as both a practical roadmap for daily meditation and the mind's preparation for moments of liberation, emphasizing that while we cannot force awakening, we can cultivate the conditions that make it possible.*

We talked the other night about the difficult states that come and bring suffering into our hearts and minds, and also about the beautiful states that we can open to and discover within us. The Buddha, of course, made a lot of lists of both.

On the side of suffering, you're probably familiar with lists like the hindrances, the fetters, and the taints. He talked a lot about these as ways to understand how we suffer and the deep roots of our suffering. But he also talked about just as many, if not more, wholesome qualities—beautiful qualities of mind. He put these into lists as well: the Eightfold Path, the Five Spiritual Faculties, the Four Brahma Viharas, and others.

As we read the teachings and understand how the path works, we start to see that the heart of the path is to grow the wholesome qualities of heart and mind and reduce the unwholesome. That's really what meditation is all about, and insight as well. We see

that the mind has so much potential in this way—that we can pick the kinds of qualities we want our minds to manifest. By practices oriented in those directions, we can shape the mind to be what we want it to be. Of course, it's still subject to impermanence, and it takes a lot of work and training to do that. But we can shape it in any of the wholesome directions that we choose. We can also shape it in unwholesome directions, but that's not recommended.

As an example of this shaping in a wholesome direction, there's a nun in Burma called the Metta Nun. All she does all day, every day, is loving-kindness practice for all beings. So you can be pretty sure that in the hours of daylight in Burma, somebody is sending you metta. It's a beautiful reflection. Imagine what her mind is like, having practiced metta day after day for years and years in her simple life as a nun. It's a beautiful inspiration to me. We can do that ourselves in whatever direction we want. We can shape our minds by our choices.

You may know this story from the Native American tradition that became popular around the time of 9/11, called the Two Wolves. The story goes that a boy comes home from school one day and talks to his grandfather about how he's been picked on by some other boys at school. It made him really mad, and he wanted to fight back and hurt them the way they had hurt him. He said, "Grandfather, what should I do?"

The grandfather said, "I know this very well because there are two wolves inside me. One wolf is angry and violent and wants to rage against injustice and hurt the people who have caused it. But the other wolf is peace-loving, loves harmony, wants to be friends with everyone, and doesn't want to give in to hatred. These two wolves are battling for control of my soul."

The young boy said, "Well, grandfather, which one will win?"

And he said, "The one that I feed."

I like this language because the Buddha used very similar language. The list that he talked about, particularly for meditators—and one that I don't say this very often, but I think this is worth memorizing—I think it would be good for you all to memorize this list and know it in your own experience in your meditation practice—is the seven factors of awakening, sometimes translated as the seven factors of enlightenment.

These factors of mind are a meditator's best friend. They will support you on your path and lead you to awakening. The way the Buddha described them is that by feeding these seven factors of awakening, we are starving the five hindrances. That is what leads to awakening or enlightenment. This image of feeding and starving is right there in the ancient texts.

The seven factors are usually described in the texts in a certain order because they have a sequential unfolding. They are: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. As the Buddha said, "They lead to awakening, therefore they're called factors of awakening." He described all of them as maturing in release or liberation. That's their destination. As they develop, that's where they take the mind.

"Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too, when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, she slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbana"—the term for the highest kind of freedom that's possible.

In developing these factors, they lead us in the direction of freedom and liberation. They also describe, when brought to maturity, the mind as it's poised for that moment of awakening. The understanding in our tradition is that the mind develops in a certain way...

And when it's in a perfect state of balance, as we'll see from these factors, it's ripe for opening to a glimpse of the unconditioned, nibbana.

That moment where the mind moves beyond the conditioned realm and contacts this unconditioned element called nibbana is what constitutes enlightenment or awakening in our tradition—in the Buddha's description, in our understanding.

So these are both the factors that lead to that awakening, and they also describe, when brought to maturity and balance, the mind that's poised for that movement, for that opening to the unconditioned.

The Buddha described them as sequential, so I'll describe them in that way. But we also need to understand that each one reinforces the others. You will experience them all along your journey, and they keep feeding back into one another, creating a circular quality as well. When you consider the whole path unfolding, there's a sequence that the mind goes through, and these factors illuminate that progression.

The reason we emphasize these factors is that you want to be able to recognize when they're present in your meditation. You want to know how they come into being and how they become strengthened. They're very wholesome in themselves, and even if the journey doesn't carry all the way to enlightenment, the development of these qualities will be pillars of your practice. Having them alive in your mind is the path of meditation—this is how we develop through insight meditation.

The first of these is mindfulness, which we've talked about extensively. It's been our practice throughout the week, and it starts the chain going. It's like when you have milk at the right temperature and add yogurt culture—it starts the whole transformation into yogurt. Mindfulness works the same way. You introduce the culture of mindfulness into your mind, into your practice, and it begins to unfold these other factors.

The next three factors are energizing—we call them arousing factors. The final three are pacifying or calming factors. That's the essential balance of the entire set. Mindfulness initiates them and also helps balance the energizing and pacifying factors. This describes the fundamental balance that this set of mental factors creates.

Essentially, we're aiming in practice for a mixture, a balance of energy and calm. You'll hear us in meditation instructions encourage you to find that mix in your body posture—find a posture that's relaxed (the calming piece) but also upright (the alert or energizing piece). The body expresses this balance we're developing in the mind.

We've talked extensively about mindfulness this week. Sally gave a complete talk on it a few nights ago, so I don't need to elaborate much. I want to leave you with what I consider the definition of mindfulness. You can read many books on mindfulness without finding a clear definition, so this is my personal understanding of what mindfulness is.

Mindfulness is the factor of mind that knows what our present moment experience is. Just that simple.

You could say mindfulness answers the question: What's happening now?

You can see that you can be in the present moment—like the thief, the rock climber, or the surgeon—but not be answering the question, "What's happening now in my experience?"

Consider a dog. Is a dog in the present? Almost all the time. Is a dog mindful? No. It lacks that self-reflective quality that can observe and note, "This is my present moment experience."

For instance, you open a can of food at 5:30, the dog's dinnertime. The smell emerges, and the dog immediately bolts to the dish. Does the dog ever think, "Oh, hearing, hearing. Perception of can opener. Rising of aroma—Frisky's meatloaf, associated with mealtimes. Pleasant, pleasant. Should I go to my bowl or not?"

No. The dog doesn't go through that process. The dog lacks mindfulness.

The baby is also very present, but hasn't yet developed this self-reflective quality. The baby is not answering the question, "What's happening in my experience right now?" But mindfulness answers that question.

You can see that it's a factor we can turn on or off in any moment. It's not that hard. Carol mentioned, "How hard is it to feel the touch of your hands?" It's not hard, but remembering to do it is hard. So this is mindfulness—a factor that has some wisdom, some intelligence in it, answering the question: What's happening now in my experience?

When we start to become mindful and pay attention to our experience, we lead directly into the next factor. We become interested. We become curious. We want to know what's there. When you start to wake up, you have this alert interest—especially in a place like this, but anywhere—this alert interest in what's happening in your experience. This leads to the second factor of investigation.

Investigation builds off the mindful connection and wants to look more deeply. It wants to know more deeply: What's the nature of this experience? We've talked in different ways about this factor of investigation during this retreat. There was a question earlier about using a life situation to inquire into and contemplate, and that can be appropriate and very useful in its own time and place.

The main thing I want to say about this factor of investigation is that primarily it's not conceptual. We're investigating our experience, and we don't need so many words to do that. To give you an example: when you're feeling your breath, if you want to know your breath more intimately or in more detail, do you have to think about it? Or can you just bring your attention closer to the sensations of breathing and feel it more deeply?

That's the way this factor of investigation is meant to work. It's meant to encourage us, based on mindfulness, to bring our attention right together with the thing we're experiencing and know it that intimately, so that the awareness and the focus come right together. Then we know it as closely as it can be known.

You can see this kind of attention coming naturally when you get interested in something. For instance, when you go by on your way to the dining hall and see the mother robin in that nest, isn't your attention just right there? There's not a forced effort in it, but the interest just draws you in to what she's doing. Or when you see the sun setting on Discovery Point and those rosy pink tones coming in, you just want to look. You want to be close to that experience. That's the factor of investigation.

We can assist this factor with some cues or questions. For example, if the breath is a good anchor for you, a way to get more intimate with it—more continuous and with more detail—is to see if you can experience with each in-breath the beginning, middle, and end of that in-breath. And if you can experience with each out-breath the beginning, middle, and end of the out-breath. See if you can sustain that recognition breath after breath after breath.

This does two things. It makes for greater continuity in the mindfulness, so there's less tendency to stray. And it allows you to perceive more detail in the experience. Because when you start to look that closely, you realize the in-breath isn't just one thing. We start by saying, "Just be with the in-breath"—okay, that's just one thing. You're with the in-breath. But when you look at beginning, middle, and end, you see there are lots of little sensations arising and passing, moment by moment, in the course of an in-breath. Same with the out-breath—many little sensations arising and passing that make up the out-breath.

In seeing this finer level of detail, you drop down and start to see the truth of impermanence that Sally talked about last night. It's not like the in-breath is one solid thing that lasts for a while. The in-breath is actually made up of very rapidly changing sensations, whether you're experiencing it at the belly or in the nose. As you look closely, you'll find that.

This kind of attention the Buddha described with a phrase that is quite lovely: *yoniso manasikāra*. It's usually translated as "wise attention," but the meaning is more poignant than that. For those who know a little about Indian culture, *yoni* is the word for the female organ and *lingam* is the word for the male organ. If you go around to Hindu temples, you'll see lots of representations of lingams and yonis because they're sacred in Hindu worship.

So *yoni* we could translate here as "the womb." *Manasikāra* means "attention." *Yoniso manasikāra* literally means "attention that's like the womb." It's not like a cold, clinical, detached, microscopic observation. It's the way that a womb supports the baby growing inside it—nourishing, embracing, and supportive.

So that's the quality of attention that we want to bring into this investigation. Sally used the phrase "kind attention" in describing mindfulness, and this term yoniso manasikara really unfolds that meaning. This is how we become more familiar with our experience—by becoming very intimate with it and embracing it with this kind of nourishing and caring attention.

We discussed this approach briefly when we talked about emotions. When you want to understand an emotion well, you bring your attention to the experience in the body. You look for the flavor in the mind or heart, and you notice what thoughts are associated with it. Again, you're getting to know the emotion in all the different ways it manifests by coming very close. When we understand it in that way, we see how it's put together and we're not so enchanted or deluded by it. We understand its makeup because we've looked at it so closely and carefully.

This factor of investigation emerges from what you might call the wisdom aspect of mindfulness. People often ask, "How do I bring wisdom into my meditation? How do I awaken that factor?" Investigation is the premier way, the direct way, because you're opening up the aspect of curiosity and wanting to understand as you look more closely and investigate to feel more directly. You're directly awakening the wisdom faculty.

In concentration practice, investigation is not that important a feature. Concentration practice is designed simply to still the mind. One of my teachers, Pauk Sayadaw, who's a master at concentration practices, told me, "Don't investigate while you're doing this practice—it disturbs concentration." He was referring to the deepening of stillness, basically saying to turn off the investigation faculty. But for vipassana practice, where the whole purpose is to awaken wisdom, the investigation faculty is key. You want to have it alive and growing.

This aspect of interest and curiosity naturally brings up the next factor in the sequence: energy. When you're interested in something, you get energized, don't you? It brings about physical energy and mental energy, and that's the next of the seven factors.

This is not just random energy, however. It's energy directed toward what you could call the path. Sometimes the word used here is "effort"—the kind of effort toward the accomplishment of the path. If you put the two together and think of it as energetic effort, that's a nice way to hold this factor.

The word in Pali is virya, and it carries deep connotations because the word vira, which is the root of virya, means "hero." You can think of a hero or heroine arousing great energy to carry out a really difficult task. This word vira shares the same root as the Latin virile and the English word "virile," which has its root in Latin—the same root as the word "hero."

When you put all that together, you get the sense that this factor of virya, which we're translating here as energy, could equally be effort, energetic effort, ardor, enthusiasm, courage, or determination. It encompasses all those aspects of giving yourself wholeheartedly to the work of meditation that you're carrying out.

This is how the Buddha described it: "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the responsibility of cultivating wholesome states." I hope you can sense the heroic quality of this undertaking. It's what all of you have been doing day by day in being here.

I mentioned the other night all the wholesome qualities that you've all been generating and working on during these days—the moment-by-moment practice. This virya really demonstrates that: the moments you've created of mindfulness, of loving-kindness, of patience, of determination, of wisdom, of courage. These are all summed up in this quality of virya—the moment-by-moment effort as we confront the difficulties in the mind, the emotions, the kilesas, and transform them into wisdom and compassion. That's a heroic journey.

Now, the degree of virya that we bring to this path depends on our level of motivation, which depends on our inspiration and our understanding of what we're doing here—what the path is about and what it means to us. There are many gradations of motivation among practitioners.

Some people find the path and go into a cave for twelve years, like Ani Tenzin Palmo. I don't know if you've read her story—she's an English woman who ordained in the Tibetan tradition and literally spent twelve years in a cave in India practicing. That's the outcome of great inspiration and motivation.

You see this in other fields too—people doing incredible kinds of training. I just read an article about a Kenyan athlete who won the marathon in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The kind of training he went through was unbelievable: twenty-four-mile runs almost every day, climbing very steep hills as part of that routine at high altitude, so that when he came down to Beijing near sea level, he would be tremendously conditioned.

from his high-altitude training. Week after week, year after year, he maintained this rigorous schedule to stay in championship condition. I believe he set a world record time winning that Beijing marathon.

My particular sports obsession is tennis, and I'm drawn to the generation of the Sampras-Agassi rivalry. Andre Agassi used to train in Las Vegas with Gil Reyes, an athletic coach at the University of Nevada. Reyes was this big, strong, inspiring figure who

would take Agassi into the hills of Las Vegas in the middle of summer and make him run uphill until he vomited. That was his training regimen. Once he threw up, he could call it a day, go home, and have an energy drink.

People do these incredible things merely for money and fame—they're not even trying to get enlightened. Imagine the energy we could put into spiritual practice.

One teacher in our circle who emphasized this energy factor most strongly was Sayadaw U Pandita, a Burmese master and Dharma heir of Mahasi Sayadaw. While Mahasi had many successors, U Pandita took over his main monastery in Rangoon and was a true Dhamma warrior. Though I didn't practice with him personally, Carol did and survived to tell the tale—we bow to her endurance.

Sayadaw U Pandita expected practitioners to maintain twenty hours of daily practice with only four hours of sleep. I began a three-month retreat when several teachers were studying with him and teaching in this format. Joseph and Sharon at IMS were practicing this way, and that became their instruction to me: practice twenty hours a day, sleep four.

I didn't think I could manage it, but during daily interviews they asked how many hours I'd sat, walked, and slept. There was no escaping the accountability. So I kept working at it until I actually achieved four hours of sleep nightly with mindful practice filling the rest. It was tremendously powerful—an experience I treasure, though I don't practice quite so intensively now. I'm a bit older, perhaps gentler, but I'm grateful I undertook that training when I had such energy and fervor.

However, effort need not be so extreme. It can simply mean perseverance—just continuing. I love this quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great modern scholar and translator: "There are only two requirements for reaching liberation. One is that you start, and the other is that you continue. Then the outcome is guaranteed."

This we can all do. We can start and continue, and liberation will unfold.

Consider Milarepa, perhaps Tibet's most revered yogi from the eleventh century and ancestor of many Kagyu masters. Though his teacher Marpa gave him considerable hardship, Milarepa eventually integrated all the teachings and retreated to practice alone in remote mountain caves for years. He's said to have attained the highest realization within one lifetime through pure dedication.

You'll recognize him in Tibetan art by his simple white cotton robe. He mastered tummo—inner heat generation—enabling him to survive mountain winters. Legend says he lived on nettle broth, which sometimes gave his skin a greenish tint in paintings.

Milarepa had two famous disciples: Gampopa and Rechungpa. When Gampopa had received all necessary instructions and started down the mountain path to find his own retreat cave, Milarepa called him back, saying he had one final pith instruction. When Gampopa returned, Milarepa turned around, lifted his white robe, and showed his buttocks—callused as hard as camel hooves from years of sitting in meditation.

And then Milarepa said to Gampopa, "There is nothing more profound than meditating on this pith instruction. The qualities in my mind stream have arisen through my having meditated so persistently that my buttocks have become like this. You must also give rise to such heartfelt perseverance." So just the power of continuing is so important. It's all we need to do.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who I think we've mentioned a few times, who Carol has sat with in Burma and Sally and I sat with on the East Coast, puts this in a beautiful way also. I'd like to read you his words: "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort which is simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

When we have energy in our practice, as you may have felt this afternoon, things become very vibrant and alive. And when things become alive, it's satisfying in some way. It creates a kind of happiness in our experience. That leads to the next factor in this sequence, which is called rapture.

Rapture is a translation of the Pali word piti. I think rapture is actually a rather unfortunate translation because it has so many connotations from the Christian fundamentalist viewpoint. It denotes a state of intense ecstasy and self-surrender that isn't necessarily captured in the word piti. It's somewhat over-dramatized. Perhaps better translations would be "delighted interest" or "joyful attention."

Piti refers to this quality when the meditation starts waking up and you begin to really enjoy being with your object—whatever it is, whether it's the breath or the sounds of nature or the sight of the robin or the ease that might come in your body as you relax. It's finding delight in the meditation itself. This is a special kind of joy. It's not

like getting joyful because you're thinking about the new raise you're going to get when you go back to your job at the end of the retreat. It's not that kind of joy. It's a joy in the present moment arising from the meditation itself.

In this enjoyment with the object, we find it's where we want to be. It's not forced anymore. We're not having to apply tremendous effort to stay with it. There's this growing pleasure in being with the object, being in the moment. A number of people have mentioned this quality of enjoyment coming into their practice during interviews, and that's the quality of piti or rapture.

This is generally a very pleasant experience—indeed, one of the synonyms is joy. But it's often accompanied by physical expressions because the energy has preceded it. The physical expressions can manifest as momentary jolts of energy, a sense of showering energy that starts from above and flows through the body, or all-pervading energy where the entire body feels alive with this flowing energy. Sometimes the degree of energy can be a little too strong to be pleasant, and it turns into somewhat of a burden—this physical manifestation of the factor of piti.

When that happens, it's something to discuss with one's teacher. The encouragement is simply to stay with it, not to back off from the process that has brought you there. Just bear the energy for a while, because as the practice continues, it starts to smooth out. The rapture becomes less burdensome as the meditation continues to deepen.

Essentially, one has discovered a happiness that comes from the mind's relationship to its own experience. This provides a gateway to the next factor in the path, which is calm. The happiness has entered the meditation and we stop having to look outside so much for our satisfaction or fulfillment. The fulfillment begins to arise through the inner experience of the meditation. As that happens, this searching, questing, craving, longing that keeps us stirred up—all of that starts to settle, because the fulfillment has been found internally.

This quality of calm is the next factor. Now we're moving out of the energizing factors—the three energizing factors of investigation, energy, and rapture—into the calming factors, and this is the first one. The experience of calm begins to arise, and we feel it both in the body and in the mind.

It's significant that we feel it in the body. Often when we come into meditation, the body is something of a jangle of nerves. We've accumulated tremendous tension through the overstimulation of our culture and the overwork of our particular society.

And so we come in and the body is often vibrating with too high an energy level that it's accumulated and hasn't known how to release. So as the calm starts to settle, it's felt through the body as well. The body can really relax, maybe for the first time.

This word in Pali is passaddhi, for the calm, and it's sometimes translated as relaxation. It's almost like for the first time now the body can really let go and settle down and relax. So then we can come more and more fully into this present moment with a sense of peacefulness, both mentally and physically.

Thoughts are not stirred up as much as before. It doesn't mean they stop, but they're coming at a more leisurely pace. Because the body is calming and relaxing, there's not as much pain in the body. And the calming also means that the kind of flood of difficult emotions has slowed down quite a bit.

The feeling is like we've crossed this stormy ocean and we've come into a safe harbor. There's a sense: I just want to rest in this safe harbor. There's this beautiful poem by Emily Dickinson that points to this. This is an excerpt from a poem of hers called "Wild Nights":

Futile the winds to a heart in port
Done with a compass, done with the chart
Rowing in Eden

That's a little bit of what it feels like. We can float on this place of calm. "Rowing in Eden" is a sense of having arrived in this safe harbor. It's only temporary—this is not the end of the road—but it's a very nice turning of a corner, a nice discovery.

We find that this peace and ease has always been available to us, but we've been stirring it up with our own reactivity. And now we've found a way not to stir. We find it's always available when we're not stirring.

There's this beautiful meditation instruction from Ajahn Amaro, who's an English monk and now the abbot of Amravati Monastery in England. At a certain point in a retreat, he'll give this instruction. This is the only instruction he'll give in a morning session:

Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of the mind and body. And then notice what disturbs it.

That's it. Once we discover there is this access to peace and ease, we can simply rest there. This is a really satisfying thing to discover, that this is possible for us, because in a way, it's part of what we've been looking for all along. I think there is a really deep longing for peace in our life. And this is the corner in turning in meditation where we discover it.

Sometimes it's not so striking in the beginning. People will be going along, having had a few days of settling in, a little bit of turbulence, and then they'll come to an interview and report, "Well, there's really nothing going on now. I was really restless for a few days and my body was aching. My body feels okay now. There's really not much going on. I'm sort of sorry to report this, but there's not much happening in my practice."

So I'll ask them, "Well, is it basically peaceful?"

"Oh, yeah, it's pretty peaceful. But there's not much going on. It's basically calm. Yeah, but it's kind of boring because there's nothing happening. I thought I'd have more emotions to purify and process."

It takes a little bit of time to realize the importance, the significance of this. Because we're often so accustomed to intensity, big highs and big lows, when those go away and the experience takes on a little bit of a neutral feeling, we don't quite know what to make of it. Sometimes an element of boredom comes in: nothing happening.

This is like the first touch of calm. It may seem boring because for once the experience is kind of neutral. It's not insanely great and it's not crazy bad. And we're not used to that neutral. Boredom is basically aversion to the neutral. But when we can see this, oh, there's some potential here.

You know, the Buddha said peace and calm were pretty good things to develop. And this is just the beginning. So trust in that and let yourself go into it.

There's a cartoon that sums up this state of perhaps disappointment. It's a Gary Larson cartoon about two Zen monks sitting in a zendo. One's a little older and one's a little younger. The older monk is leaning over and whispering something to the younger monk, and the caption says, "Nothing happens next. This is it."

That's sort of this stage of just beginning to touch the calm. But we need to have the trust that this is actually a really wholesome unfolding and just to rest in it. You don't need to do anything with it. You don't need to try to pump up the calm either. You just need to trust and rest in that.

One of the Buddhist statements that I really like in relation to this is the comment that peace is the highest happiness. Generally in Western culture, I don't think we believe this. I think we generally look for something more intensely pleasurable, some kind of high that's higher than just peace. And we think that's the highest happiness.

The Buddha said really clearly, peace is the highest happiness. And I think this is an important lesson in human psychology. This is truly what satisfies—finding the access to peace. As we really start to feel it and trust in it, we start to open the door to contentment. We don't have to run around outside looking for more things, looking for special experiences, looking for intense highs or gratification. We start trusting in the fact we can just rest in this peace, which is always available when we don't disturb it.

We also discover that it's possible to encourage this peace. In the Anapanasati Sutta, which describes the meditation on the breath, the Buddha has these very nice lines: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe in tranquilizing the mental formation." And same for breathing out. So we find we can use the breath to bring about this factor of tranquility or calm in both mind and body.

As we settle into this calm and trust in it and let go of so many other wrong kinds of effort and craving, then the mind starts to collect within itself. It's as though we can just let the mind drop into our experience of—you could say—the whole body. And as it drops in that way, it starts to collect, come together and unify.

This is the next factor in the sequence, which is concentration. Concentration is the translation of the Pali word samadhi. And again, it's not a very good translation because in English, concentration means I'm going to take a narrow focus. Don't distract me with anything else. You know, I want to focus on my timepiece here and read the luminous dial. Don't distract me with any questions about tomorrow.

Samadhi doesn't have this sense of exclusive focus. Samadhi refers to the mind that has come together, which could happen from a narrow focus like the breath, but it could also happen from a very broad focus like sounds. So samadhi is this unification of mind where we've basically given up these jumps into past and future, into analyzing and rehearsing and planning and all that extra movement. We've let go of all that. The energy is collecting naturally through the power of calm into the mind and body coming together.

And we find when that happens, the mind feels different. It feels stable. It's not swayed so much. It's not so restless. It feels steady. We can stay in touch with the present moment, moment after moment for extended periods of time. It has a sense of

well-being. It feels good when that happens. And it feels strong. By recollecting all this energy that we've been sending out, the mind discovers its own natural strength. And this is a great feeling.

There's a mistaken kind of understanding that concentration comes from a lot of effort. And I think maybe Sally mentioned this the other night. It's not about efforting.

The proximate cause of concentration is happiness. So again, it simply points to this relaxing within, trusting the sense of well-being and letting that collect all our energy.

Concentration offers two key benefits. First, it feels good. The mind feels strong, peaceful, and capable of accomplishing things—it provides access to peace. As the Dalai Lama teaches: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." Samadhi forms a fundamental component of this inner peace.

The second great benefit is that concentration leads to insight. When the mind is restless and moving all over the place, it cannot see clearly. Driven by craving, restlessness, and aversion—all those factors Carol described that blind us to clear seeing—it lacks the stability for genuine understanding. As it settles and collects and we turn our attention somewhere, we begin to see things as they truly are.

Imagine we've been riding on a merry-go-round, seated on one of the horses going round and round. One of our friends stands beside the platform holding up a newspaper, but we're moving by so quickly we cannot read it. The merry-go-round just keeps going, going, going. With samadhi, however, it begins to slow down. It slows and eventually stops in front of our friend holding the newspaper. Then we can read it, and it says: "Life has changed. If you hang on, you suffer. The way to peace is letting go." Then we get it. Insight comes when the mind is still—we can understand and let go.

This quality of concentration can be developed to extraordinary degrees. The Buddha taught that the range of the concentrated mind is one of the imponderables—one cannot even reflect on the possibilities of a concentrated mind. Such development leads to states of deep absorption called jhana and even to psychic powers. But for us, well-being and insight are enough.

When the mind has become strong in this way, that concentrated mind is not so easily moved by the passing experiences of pleasure and pain. This leads to the seventh factor: equanimity.

Equanimity refers to a mind that is not disturbed by the transitory fluctuations of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Normally our minds are spent being rocked by the jolts of pleasure and pain, creating that sense of restlessness and instability. When the mind becomes concentrated, its strength provides stability in the face of these movements of pleasure and pain. This stability expresses itself through the mental quality of equanimity—meaning we are not disturbed by the momentary flows of pleasant and unpleasant.

For a long time, I thought equanimity meant not feeling. I imagined it meant becoming emotionally shut down because nothing mattered or moved you anymore. But this was a complete misunderstanding. In fact, in the early part of my practice, I tried to emulate what I thought that goal was, ending up repressing my feelings in ways that were not helpful at all.

What actually happens is this: as you discover this quality of equanimity, you find there is a kind of ease and balance in being with the waves of life. I prefer the word "balance" even more than "equanimity" here. When we are in a state of inner balance, the heart actually opens much more easily to the beautiful emotions.

Consider your own experience this week. At times when you felt peaceful, balanced, and well, didn't your heart respond more easily with love, happiness, joy, and compassion? This is what equanimity points toward. We find this inner balance and feel—ah, the burden is off. When the burden lifts, the heart can respond.

So equanimity is not a dead, unfeeling, uncaring place at all. It is a place of great richness, depth, and openness. This quality of equanimity...

This quality of equanimity appears at the end of the seven factors of enlightenment. It's the culmination of the seven factors. It's also the last factor in the list of the paramis, the last factor in the brahmaviharas, and the last factor in this list from the Visuddhimagga called the Progress of Insight that describes the journey to awakening. It's the last in all these lists.

So I would say that it's the fruition in mundane terms of the path and the closest mundane mental state to the unconditioned. It's the best approximation to nibbana that we can make by our effort.

When we have developed all of these factors, something beautiful emerges. The mindfulness starts them. Investigation, energy and rapture pick the energy up. Calm, concentration and equanimity settle it. When these are in balance, there's the stillness of concentration and there's the alertness of energy and investigation. The mind is in this perfect poise for meditation.

This is where meditation goes really well. It goes well from the point of view of feeling well-being and trust and confidence and happiness, and it's the platform for insight. From this point the mind can not only see into the three characteristics that Sally described last night, but also where it can, if the grace comes of that moment, open to the unconditioned, to that moment of enlightenment or awakening.

There's no way to force or make that opening by effort. All we can do by effort is to develop these seven factors and bring them into that balance and then rest there. And then grace can provide that opening into awakening.

I'll close with this quotation from the Buddha on these factors:

"Bhikkhus, these seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering. Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future—all will do so by overcoming the five hindrances, by firmly establishing their minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by cultivating the seven factors of awakening in their true nature."

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

These seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 112

Formation of Self-View

Guy Armstrong · 1h12

> *In this dharma talk from an emptiness retreat, Guy Armstrong investigates the fundamental question of how selfhood comes into being. Drawing from the Sakkāyadiṭṭhi teachings, he examines how we create identity through four ways of relating to the five khandhas (aggregates): regarding form as self, self as possessing form, form as within self, or self as within form. Armstrong explores the Buddha's teaching that 'in whatever way they conceive of self, the truth is ever other than that,' highlighting how the sense of 'I' strengthens during mental disturbance and weakens in spacious awareness.*
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> *The talk addresses the paradox of embodied existence - we take birth to satisfy sense desires, yet this very embodiment creates suffering through separation, vulnerability, and the constant project of seeking pleasure while avoiding pain. Armstrong discusses how the activities of 'I-ing' (ahaṅkāra) and 'my-ing' (mamaṅkāra) continuously recreate selfhood through clinging (upādāna), referencing the Buddha's ultimate teaching that 'nothing whatsoever is to be clung to.'*
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> *Practical meditation instructions focus on recognizing the space between thoughts and the natural peace that exists before the arising of self-view. The talk concludes with the liberating wisdom of seeing all phenomena as 'not mine, not what I am, not my self' - the antidote to craving (taṇhā), conceit (māna), and wrong view (diṭṭhi).*

So I want to start this session by exploring some of what you might have investigated during the guided meditation. We were looking at opening into a receptive awareness to bring a sense of peace and ease. And then what comes in that disturbs that? What's the nature of the disturbance and how does it feel?

Will, what did you notice?

"What I've been battling with is reflecting on all the things in life that I feel a great amount of guilt about. And it's very distracting. I hope you have a magic answer for me on how to become more present and not go there."

Thank you. Remorse over past actions is a big thing that comes up in silent retreats—regrets about little things, regrets about big things that we've done. And they tend to stay with us with some charge until, in my experience, we've given enough time to let the awareness come in contact with them and for us to feel the remorse that's coupled with the guilt.

We say that the guilt isn't so helpful because it adds an element of self-judgment, but it's important to feel the remorse. And it's hard to know how long it will take for that healing to take place, but we need to keep feeling the remorse part as long as it's coming up strongly.

And then the other side is, if there are times when we can simply say, "don't let the thoughts go down that road," and we can just bring them back and stay connected with something in the present, that's skillful. Sometimes something more active than just the experience of breath or body is helpful, such as loving kindness or compassion practice—a more active practice.

How did it feel in the body? What was the bodily experience?

"Tightness in the chest and kind of an uneasy feeling in the stomach."

Thanks. I'm feeling better about it now. This is something that's going to wear down. I guess we call that purification—just letting it wear down to where it has less of a charge. I still remember things that I did as a child that were unskillful, and I still feel some pain around them. My father took me out hunting when I was a kid, and so I learned to shoot birds with a shotgun. And when those memories come up, I still feel badly about them. But they don't weigh me down the way they did when I first started to recollect them.

So the disturbance manifested as contraction and unease in the stomach.

Patty, what did you notice?

"In that particular sit, I was interrupted by moments of spacious awareness and I was predominantly dealing with body pain and sensation. And it kept me very present-oriented. I mean, I stayed in the present, I watched the sensations change and every once in a while there'd be relief and then I could just be so grateful that I went into spacious awareness for a few minutes. But primarily it was hard to find the spacious awareness."

So the disturbance was around body pain and then there were times of relief. Was the relief because the pain went away or because there was a different mental relationship to it?

"I think it's because the pain went away because I was trying to be very kind to myself. I pretended it was somebody else's body pain and so I sent loving kindness to her and to it. It changed moment to moment. And when it changed to lessen, I could relax into that spaciousness. But for the most part, it was intense."

So intense body pain felt as a disturbance. Was there an emotional reaction to the body pain?

"There was yesterday when it was new."

Yesterday I had a hissy fit that I'm too young for this and I don't want this and this better not be the rest of my life. And I did that yesterday. And today I realized that wasn't useful.

"So was the emotional response to the pain this morning equanimous?"

"Pretty much so. I could find kindness pretty quickly. I was uncomfortable and kept saying, you know, unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant, but I wasn't getting all bent out of shape around it."

"Could it be said that you were, even though the pain was there and intense, you were somewhat at peace with it?"

"Intermittently."

"All right. Thank you. And then when there was the reaction to the pain, how did the body manifest? How did you feel that reaction in the body? Not the pain itself, but kind of the reaction to the pain."

"There was definitely a tightening in my brain. I mean, I felt a tension in my head."

"Yeah. Tightness and tension. Yeah. Thank you."

Let's take maybe one more. Anything anybody noticed about the center at the back?

"The image that kind of helps me with the spaciousness is not the sky but a big pool of water, so very, very wide boundaryless pool. And it's nice because a lot of the sounds don't disturb me because they kind of imagery of like raindrops falling in and just a little ripple in that, but it's still the water. When a big noise, it's kind of like a wave coming through, but it's still water. So that was lovely for me.

But what does disrupt me is thoughts. And I have thoughts all the time. I mean, it's just amazing how many thoughts I have. And a couple of things I noticed. One is that the energetic feeling of it is almost as if the spacious water collects into a funnel up. You know, like everything goes up into my head, that's kind of logical, that's where thoughts would go, but I just notice, oh, I am totally in my head.

And the other thing I notice is that I like my thoughts. Not that they're all pleasant, but I mean, I like thinking. And that I feel more comfortable there than I feel in that spaciousness. The spaciousness makes me a little queasy after a couple of seconds. It's a little too vulnerable. And I'm very comfortable thinking. And so it feels like, oh, now I know where I am. So it's interesting to discover that I sort of take refuge in my thoughts from the vulnerability of that wide open spaciousness."

Thank you. So a couple of things to comment on in that description. I love the image of the pool, and actually it's one I've used in talks, and that the sense impressions are like drops of rain falling on the surface, just like ping, ping, ping. Every sense impression is like that. And I think Carl Jung used the lake, big body of water, as an image for consciousness. Or when that image comes in a dream, it symbolizes consciousness. So I think that's a very nice way to get into this natural peace and ease.

And then the comment that thoughts kind of come like a funnel rising up implies that the attention is taken off from the breadth of the lake and kind of concentrated, and you mentioned coming up into the head, and then the loving of the thinking. This unfortunately is the meditator's dilemma.

We love to think, we love to proliferate, and it gets us into trouble.

So what I wanted to draw out from the comments and what many of you probably experienced is that there can be this initial expansiveness, whether through the sky image or the lake image, and there's a quality of peace in that.

In that expansive awareness, what's the sense of I like? Big or small, relatively? In that expansive place, the sense of I is relatively small, isn't it? Kind of weak.

Then a disturbance comes and it implies some narrowing of focus. People mention tension, tightness, contraction, tension in the chest, the narrowing of thought energy. There's a coagulation of that broad energy into something small. This smallness brings a sense of tightness or constriction or limitation. And there's something reassuring in it. That's why we keep coming back to it.

What's the sense of I like when the thoughts and disturbances are causing that kind of contraction? Stronger, right? So the wide open attention—sense of I is not so strong. Disturbance comes along. The disturbance is mainly about me, right? Past actions or my pain or what I love to think about. Then with that sense of contraction and smallness, narrowing of focus, the sense of I goes up.

What we want to explore in this session is what this sense of I is all about and how it gets created. Sally spoke last night about how within all the field of our sense experience, or the five aggregates, there is really no self in that. She spoke very convincingly. I was convinced there's no self.

And yet here we are this morning—the self is coming up again. The I is establishing itself. We're believing it. We're feeling it in the body. It matters to us. So what is this interplay between this open state, which we've all touched and can recognize—there's no inherent I in this. In that open place you can see there's nothing stuck or fixed. There's no inherent self there. And then the narrowing and concentration of energy and the coagulation into self again. What is that dynamic all about?

The Buddha certainly pointed to this sense of self as one of the primary forms of our bondage, maybe the primary form of our bondage to suffering. The ignorance which is at the root of the chain of dependent origination is largely about not seeing this. The covering over of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self that Sally spoke about last night is an active force in the mind that blocks us from seeing things the way they are. That's how we get caught in this self-belief.

I also want to suggest, just by way of perspective, this is not a trivial or small problem. At the risk of sounding pretentious, I think it has cosmological implications. When you think about the creation myths that different cultures come up with, every culture has something to explain how all this got here.

In our day and age, there are a couple of predominant ones. One is the theistic creation myth—that before anything appeared, there was this God with a capital G, and God made all this. But those never explain how the God element got here. So they're not quite satisfying for someone who wants a more philosophical, intellectually nuanced solution.

The other creation myth popular in our culture is the scientific view. In the philosophical realm, I would call this the materialist view, which says that in the beginning there was the Big Bang. From a very small concentration of only matter, the matter exploded throughout, creating the expanding universe. After some billions of years, it collected enough into stars and then planets that life could form on a planet such as ours.

The estimate of the Big Bang, the most recent estimate, is 13.75 billion years ago. Then after 10 billion years of empty matter in space, on Earth at least, life started to emerge about 3.5 billion years ago in its most primitive form. The understanding is that it was just chemical reactions in pools of water, perhaps struck by lightning and fueled by a chemical-rich soup that allowed the first microbes or bacteria to form.

And from that humble, purely chemical beginning, more and more complex organisms evolved until one day there was intelligence. Exactly when that emergence occurred remains unclear, but the materialist explanation holds that intelligence—and we could say consciousness—was born out of dumb matter. Personally, I find it difficult to understand how unconscious matter can give rise to intelligence, yet this remains a prevailing cosmological view.

There is one other perspective I want to introduce—an Eastern religious view that likely originated in India, though I don't want to pin it down too precisely. This view proposes that in the beginning there was mind, not matter—mind. There existed some sort of elemental consciousness, and that was all there was in the universe. Because there was nothing else, there wasn't really anything for that consciousness to know. There was no other object to be known, only perhaps this capacity for self-knowing. But there was some kind of intelligence there from the very beginning.

Then something within that unitary consciousness stirred and developed an appetite to experience other. It broke off from this primal unity of consciousness and became a separate knowing. Suddenly there was something to know. Out of this dance, mind created matter. Mind created the worlds that we encounter today. How fascinating—a creation myth that places mind at the center, mind at the beginning.

The Buddha didn't take sides with either view. In fact, he warned that anyone who speculates about the beginning of things will go mad and experience vexation. So we won't try to resolve these questions definitively, but we can observe that in some mysterious way, consciousness and this body have become joined.

In the Buddhist understanding, this consciousness will sever its connection to the body at death, and some form of it will continue into another birth. Some rippling effect will carry forward into another existence. But how did we arrive here in the first place? How did this individuality come to be? Somehow this sense of selfness is intimately tied up with our experience of individuality, yet the origins remain quite mysterious.

Again, the Buddha didn't declare whether mind or matter was primary. What he did teach is that body and consciousness lean against each other like two bundles of reeds that have been tied together. Imagine taking a bunch of reeds, tying them up, and setting one bundle on the ground. Then tie up another bundle, set it down, and lean them against each other. Body and consciousness support each other in precisely this way. Remove the body and consciousness collapses. Remove consciousness and the body collapses. He understood them as interdependent—not one based on the other, but mutually arising.

This is the mystery we want to explore: how selfhood and individuation happen, and how these two aspects of our existence relate to each other. Rumi captured this beautifully when he wrote, "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." That's essentially our situation.

We don't know where we came from, we don't know how we got here or why we're here, but at some point in the meditative journey we wake up and begin to examine our experience. What exactly is this human experience?

This inquiry is described on page five in the study guide. Today's topic is the formation of self-view, and quote number thirteen describes our fundamental situation. The Buddha is speaking to a group of monks and asks them, "Monks, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

What a remarkable claim. Have you ever known any other thinker or speaker to make such an assertion? Einstein didn't attempt it. Freud didn't try. Marx didn't dare. Yet here is the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, declaring: "It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who claims to describe something beyond this as the totality of life would not be speaking of something they actually knew about."

You'll probably recognize this list.

These are the six internal and external sense bases. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects are the objects of the six senses. Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind are the sense organs from which we experience the six kinds of sense appearances. The Buddha is saying that's all there is—these six senses and the appearances connected with each one. This is what our lives are based around.

I was at my first three-month course quite a few years ago, and one of my friends on that course was seized by the perplexity of this situation. She came up and grabbed Joseph Goldstein, who was teaching, grabbed him in the hallway of the lobby, and said, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said very calmly, as he always does, "Do you mean here on the retreat or here at all?" And she said, "Why are we here at all?" And he said, "Well, it's because you wanted to see and hear and smell and taste and touch."

In the Buddhist understanding, we basically take birth in order to satisfy this longing for sense contact, for sense desire. That's what it's all about, from one way of looking. Out of this desire, which the Buddha said has been going on for a very long time—this is a quotation from one of the texts—"Obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving, beings have been wandering in this samsara since beginningless time, searching for sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch."

So here we are in this individual existence, and it turns out to be problematic. Unfortunately, it's not possible to keep pleasant experiences at those five sense doors coming all the time. We can't control it that well. From the Buddhist point of view, we're drawn to birth because of this longing, but we can't quite satisfy it because of that impermanence that Sally talked about last night. We find that being in a body, being separated out in consciousness, is problematic.

There's a wonderful Indian teacher—I don't know if you know him—Nisargadatta Maharaj. He's from the Advaita Vedanta tradition, and some of his dialogues were collected in this marvelous book called I Am That—highly recommended reading. This is an answer to a questioner. Maharaj said, "The desire for embodied existence is the root cause of trouble." The desire for embodied existence got us here, but it's the root cause of trouble.

Because once we're in a body, this sense contact is out of our control. We want things to be pleasurable, but they're not always. The body is very vulnerable. It's subject to pain, subject to illness, subject to aging, and subject to death. And in all the other senses, we can't keep the contacts always as we want them.

Moreover, this embodied existence gives rise in us to a sense of separateness. Because our bodies are separate, we believe in this separation as absolute and true and real, but it's not. Our bodies are separate, but our minds interpenetrate each other. Just like we pick up on each other's love and compassion, or we pick up on each other's anger or sadness or frustration. We interpenetrate to the extent that I'm part of your experience right now and you're part of my experience. We could say that you're in me right now and I'm in you right now. So our bodies are separate and we believe that means we're separate, but that separation is only apparent. We're not finally separate from one another.

Researchers are studying many different things these days related to psychology and meditation. One of the things they're finding is that one of the deepest sources of human unhappiness is a sense of isolation. It makes us deeply unhappy. I think you could say the same for animals. If you take a herd animal or a pack animal and separate them from that natural gathering, it tends to make them neurotic or depressed. As community has fallen apart in the West, we feel that sense of isolation even more keenly, and I think it's a real problem in Western culture these days. It reinforces that sense of being separate.

So this individual existence, embodied existence, gives us a sense of separateness. Also, once we have a body, we have to take care of it. We have to feed it and clean it and protect it and defend it, keep it out of harm's way, out of the way of pain, injury, and

death. That gives a sense of fear, a sense of worry and concern. And of course, underlying it all is the fear of dying. We all recognize from an early age that at some point this body will reach a natural end and our death is inevitable.

With this unexamined sense of separateness and the fear around the body, we kind of make a project. You could say this is the project of the self: keep the pleasant things coming as steadily as possible and keep the unpleasant things away. This is what human beings are basically concerned with. We can feel that in our meditation. The disturbances that come in meditation are basically about this problem.

How do I keep pleasure coming as continuously as possible? How do I keep pain away as permanently as possible? Because this is our main wish, it becomes a project that doesn't have an ending. Through investigation, through meditation, we realize that sense contact cannot be controlled.

This alternation, this rapid alternation of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral contact at the sense doors is simply our human condition. It was the Buddha's condition. His awakening didn't end this flow of sense data. You read in the texts places where he will say, "Ananda, you give the Dharma talk tonight. My back is paining me and I want to lie down." So the Buddha was also subject to these same frailties of the body and uncertainties of the body.

This constant search for pleasure and to ward off pain constitutes the ceaseless, unending project of the ego, the project of the self. When we grow up, we think this is the only way to live. We think this is natural, unavoidable. "I'm just human." It is human. But there is another way. As we see when we come into meditation, we start to discover we have some other choices.

What I want to point out is that this is not a slight disturbance or a slight problem. This is the human dilemma. What do we do with the vulnerability of separate embodied existence and being subject to pain and separation from pleasure that involves? That's our situation.

As we start to wake up to this, this sense of I, the separate being, starts to be felt as something of a burden. We have to look after it, we have to defend it, we have to feed it, we have to nourish it, we have to protect it. That's why Maharaj says in another quotation, "All yogas have only one aim, which is to save you from the calamity of separate existence." Believing ourselves to be separate is a kind of calamity because that's what involves us in all the struggle and all the turmoil.

As far as I can tell, it is only spiritual life that offers a way beyond seeing in this way. It is only spiritual life that offers a way out of the calamity of this apparent separateness. And it is only apparent. It's not ultimately true. It is true that our bodies are subject to uncertainty and pain, but it is not true that we're fundamentally separate or isolated or distant from one another.

We can see at times the truth in this lack of separation, the truth in the no abiding self at the center of everything, but the sense of self continues to come back, the sense of separateness. So let's take a closer look at that. We can search for this in our meditation, and I think meditators need to search to find where this self is.

William James, the philosopher, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." He was lucky. Buddhists often find less. The Dalai Lama said, "When something seems very clear to you, but you go to look for it and you can't find it, that's a sure sign of delusion."

The self seems so obvious, doesn't it? Of course there's an I. But when we look for it, we can't find that thing. Some of the confusion around self is easily seen in our language. If I ask you, "How tall are you?" That's easy to answer, right? It's not a trick question. I'd say I'm 5'10". In answering "I'm 5'10"," which everybody would accept as a commonly true statement, no problem, what I'm really saying is my body is 5 feet 10 inches tall. I'm not talking about my thoughts. I'm not talking about my emotions. I'm talking about this body. So here I'm identifying I with the body. I am the body and I'm 5'10".

But I could also ask you, "What color are your eyes?" And I would say, "My eyes are brown." Oh, now I'm someone who owns eyes. Now I'm not saying I am the eye. I'm not saying I'm brown. My eyes are brown.

So there's someone who stands apart from the body who owns it. Are you the body? Or are you the person who stands apart, who's the owner of the body? You can't really be both, can you? How many selves do you have?

We can do the same with emotions. We talk about "I'm happy" or "I'm sad" and then we're identifying ourselves with an emotion, an object of mind. Or at other times we'll talk about "my joys and my sorrows." And then we identify ourselves with the owner of our emotions. So we could be the body, we could be the emotions, we could be the owner of the body or the owner of the emotions.

Or as Sally indicated last night, one of the most common and deep-rooted ways we take ourselves is that I live behind my eyes in the center of my head. And I look out at the world through this command and control center. And that's who I really am—this observer that's somewhere in the center of the head. And that eye is the one that experiences all the things at the six sense doors.

I did a lot of retreats in the style of U Ba Khin as taught by S.N. Goenka and Robert Hover and other teachers. One of the great things about that practice is that you are encouraged to place your attention in absolutely every corner of the body and explore it through this practice of sweeping. So I spent a lot of time putting my attention in this area behind my eyes and between the ears, never found a self there. But it was a really useful exploration because I went through every bit internally and on the surface. I couldn't find the eye anywhere, although it felt like it was somewhere. But I looked for it and couldn't find it anywhere. So I think in meditation it's helpful that we try that, that we look to convince ourselves it's not lurking there somewhere in one of those corners.

How does this sense of self come about? How does it arise? Let's look at quotation number 20, also on page 5 of the study guide. The term being used here, personality view, is a translation of the Pali sakāya-diṭṭhi. And it basically means the belief in personhood, personness, the belief in an ongoing self.

The Buddha replies: "Here bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person regards material form as self or self as possessed of material form or material form as in self or self as in material form. He regards feeling, perceptions, formations, consciousness likewise. That is how personality view comes to be."

So what the Buddha is describing is that we take an aspect of our experience—and here he's singling out material form, rūpa, the first of the five aggregates—and we're identifying with it in some way. That is, we're claiming a self based on the relationship to form, or let's say, this body.

This is a little bit dense and a little hard to penetrate at first. Let's just go through these. He offers four ways that we create this identification with regard to, let's say, body.

The first is we regard body as self. Do we do that? Yes. "I'm 5'10"," and we believe it. I am 5 feet 10 inches tall. We regard body as I.

Or self is possessed of body. Do we ever say, "This is my body"? Often. "My eyes are brown."

Or material form as in self. Now this is a little different. When we did the meditation this morning and you were invited to open the awareness wide, to take in all the sounds that were coming and going and the sensations that were coming and going, could you imagine yourself identifying with that awareness and saying, "That's who I really am"? I'm really that wide open awareness in which everything is happening. Could you imagine?

So if you say self is this big awareness, is body located within self? Yes. So this is the sense one regards body as in self. We identify with the awareness, and then we think the body is in that self, which is truly me. The awareness is truly me, but the body is within that.

So regards material form as in self, or self as in material form.

So this is the eye that's behind the eyes and between the ears—that's where I really am, in the center of the head. So these are four ways in which we commonly create a sense of I based on a relationship to the body. This is what we do all the time, and it's not correct.

If you look at quote 19, just above that, the Buddha says, "In whatever way they conceive of self, the truth is ever other than that." Note that "of self" is in brackets—it doesn't appear in the Pali in the original text, but this word "conceive" is usually used in the text to refer to this conceiving about oneself. It's the same root as the word "conceit," which is one of the ten fetters and one of the last five fetters to go. It only goes at full awakening. *Māna* is the Pali.

So this sense of conceit and conceiving in this context is about conceiving about ourselves, conceiving about a self. In whatever way they conceive of self, the truth is ever other than that. One of my teachers put it more directly. He said, "Everything you think is wrong"—where self is involved, at least.

I want to draw out one other thing about what we ascribe to self, and why it's injurious to regard any of these things as self. There's something we don't talk about a lot, but when we conceive of a self, there are a few assumptions that are bound up in that. Or you could say a few assumptions that are bound up in the notion of I.

The main one is continuity over time. If you truly can see this body and mind as arising, passing, arising, passing, arising, passing, moment by moment—as Sally described in the talk last night, as the true teaching of impermanence—nothing is lasting even over more than a moment. Then you would feel yourself being born and dying,

being born and dying, if you took yourself to be this. But we don't feel like we're being born and dying, being born and dying, moment by moment. Generally, we feel we're continuing and sensations are coming and going, sounds, etc.

So there's implicit in this idea of I or self—there's a commitment to continuity or, you could say, some permanence. If that commitment, belief in continuity were not there, we wouldn't be afraid of dying, the true physical death that's at the end of this life. The reason we fear that physical death is because, for most of us, it means the end of this thing we call I. That's what's threatening.

So one of the assumptions about self is there's a belief in continuity or permanence. Another of the assumptions is that there's a belief in control. As Sally read last night, "If form were mine, I should be able to say to it, 'Form, be like this.'" So I should be able to control what is mine, what is myself. But we can't.

And the last one I'll mention is that the self is really considered to be unitary or just one thing. People who believe they have multiple selves are usually medicated. So for most of us, it means we believe there is only one self. And that plays an important role. If you say, "Well, yeah, but I am the owner and I'm the body and I'm the thoughts and I'm the emotions and I'm my liver and I'm compassion and the experiencer of sounds," that's being multiple selves. Liver is not the same thing as compassion. If you want to be the liver, you can't really be compassion. Maybe your liver has compassion, but you can't be it. So we have to find out where that one self is to be found, if it is to be found.

The Buddha put it this way—this is actually going back on page three, but it's one of my favorite quotes from the canon. It's quote number 11, just at the beginning of the quotation: "Venerable Ananda went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, 'It is said that the world is empty. The world is empty, Lord. In what respect is it said that the world is empty?'

"And the Buddha replies, 'Insofar as it is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Thus it is said, Ananda, that the world is empty. And what is empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self?' And then he goes through the six sense doors."

In other translations, I've seen this said, "The world is empty insofar as empty of a self or anything belonging to a self." So that undercuts the notion of I or mine, that a self can possess anything. Basically what the Buddha is saying is that when we say I or mine in relationship to the experience of our senses, we're falling into delusion.

We're not seeing things the way they are. And at the same time, it seems to be here. So how can we look into this? We've come to understand the self isn't necessarily inherently there in every moment. We experience sometimes when it's quite weak, other times when it's quite strong. How does it get brought into being? How does it reappear after going relatively quiet for a while? How does it come back into being?

On page five, quotes 14 and 15 talk about this to some extent. Quote 14 is one of the more famous quotes from the Pali Canon where the Buddha says—it puts the Dharma in one pith statement: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to." The Pali being *Sabe, Dama, Nalam, Abhinivesaya*. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to. And it's not included here, but after that he says, "One who has heard this has heard all the dharmas. One who has practiced this has practiced all the dharmas. One who has understood this has understood all the dharmas." This is really it. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to.

And then Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of our Thai forest teachers no longer living, put it this way in quote 15: "If one amplifies the meaning a little, it may be rendered as no one should grasp at or cling to anything as being I or mine. As being I refers to the feeling called I-ing, *ahankara*, the grasping at a soul or abiding ego entity. As being mine refers to the feeling called my-ing, *mamankara*, the grasping at phenomena as being connected to ego."

I love this statement. It connects grasping with the formation of I and mine. It talks about the forming of I and mine as verbs. I-ing and my-ing. This is really an important understanding. As Sally said, we can't get rid of the self because there's no self there to be found and gotten rid of. But the truth is we create self again and again and again through the activities of I-ing and my-ing, *ahankara* and *mamankara*. In our meditation, we can start to see this. We can slow down the process of creation enough that we can start to see it happening.

Just one more thing to pull out from quotes 14 and 15: basically, the I-ing and my-ing happen because of grasping. When we grasp at something as being I or when we grasp at something as being mine, it's only clinging that establishes the sense of self. And in fact, you could say that selfing and clinging are synonymous.

So in the middle of this vast open space, natural peace and ease, something comes along that has some kind of connective fuel of greed, hatred, or delusion. We grab hold. There is grabbing hold of it—not *I* grab hold of it. There is grabbing hold of it, fueled by these underlying forces. And that grasping is what creates a sense of self. Nothing else. We can start to see that happen.

In quote 16, the Buddha describes this process as well. "Whether I teach the Dhamma briefly or at length, those who understand it are hard to find." Isn't this poignant? To me this is one of the most poignant teachings in the whole of his dispensation. You can almost feel the disappointment—not necessarily suffering, but some disappointment there. And he's with Sariputta, one of his two chief disciples.

Then Sariputta says, "Oh Blessed One, now is the time for it. Now is the time to teach the Dhamma in brief or at length. There will be those who will understand." Sariputta is the cheerleader. "Come on, Buddha, you can do it again. Somebody will get it."

So the Buddha replies, "Well then, Sariputta, this is how the training should be done. Concerning this body with its consciousness, let there be no self-centered imaginings of I and mine and no such bias. With regard to external objects, let there be no self-centered imaginings of mine and no such bias."

We shall then abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom. Let there be no self-centered imaginings of I and mine and no such bias.

This formation of I and clinging to I is a bias in the world. It treats this embodied existence as more important than that embodied existence, and it continues to reinforce the fuels of greed, aversion, and delusion.

So in our meditation, this stilling of the mind that happens to some degree in meditation retreats is so important because it gives us a background—a state of receptive, relaxed attention from which the uprising of the clinging of I can be seen clearly.

In daily life, for the untaught ordinary person who hasn't been exposed to meditation or these teachings, I is being regenerated on such a continuous basis, so frequently and with such strength and conviction, that it's very hard to tease it apart. This teasing apart really relies on coming into a meditative frame of mind where the pace of grasping and the pace of thinking has settled enough that we can start to look from a foundation of some steadiness of attention, calm, or peace.

From that place, we can see the clinging happen and the uprising of I and mine as an experiential activity, a volitional activity—something that is coming from an internal will or urge. Then we really see that the I is not intrinsic. It's not steady and ongoing. It quiets down for a while, and then it rises up through our own volition. And then it settles down again, and then it rises up through our own volition.

We become familiar with how the times of peace have a certain subtle satisfactoriness in them. It's not big bells and whistles like pleasant sensory contact, but there is a satisfying, nourishing, contentment-leading subtle experience in the state of calm and

peace. Of course we love the fireworks of our thoughts and the sense contact and all that too, but over time one does develop a taste for this quality of peace and non-entanglement.

And then we see the I arise again with clinging. So this is interesting to investigate. Does the I ever arise without taking hold of some facet of our sense experience? Or is it always my knee pain, my back pain, my sadness, my home, my relationship—always defining itself in relation to something else? Do you ever sit there and the I just goes "me"? It doesn't usually happen. It's usually by taking hold of something else.

So it is conditionally arisen, dependently arisen out of this factor of grasping to something else. And that's all it is. It's just coming out of taking hold of different parts of our experience. We could call it grasping. We could call it clinging. We usually use grasping for the act in the present moment, the new taking hold. And we use clinging to refer to something that has been grasped and which grasping is continuing. But it's the same word in Pali—upādāna.

How can we start to let go of some of this movement of I-ing and my-ing in the sense of bondage and separation and fear and greed that it conditions? When we come into meditation, as I mentioned, usually our thoughts are going so quickly, grasping is going so quickly, the self is being recreated so quickly, we can't see anything else. But as the thoughts slow down and as the movements of mind slow down, we start to open up some space.

Such an important, valuable discovery in meditation—I think Gil referred to this yesterday. We start to experience a space between two thoughts. One thought has ended and there's a pause before the next thought begins. What's the quality of that space like? What does that feel like? Usually that quality is a quality of non-suffering. It has a quality of some kind of peacefulness, non-disturbance.

This can be a meditation. Can we start to tune in to the quality of the experience of that space between two thoughts? And as we do, it tends to open up more. As we arrive there, as we connect with it, as we learn to rest there, that space tends to open.

This place also has a sense of equanimity. There's a feeling of perhaps a gathering of strength through resting in that place. Because it leads in the direction of contentment, of non-disturbance, there's a sense of a gathering of the strength of the mind so that when the next contact comes, even if it is unpleasant, there's not much of an aversive reaction. And if it is pleasant, there's not much of a greedy reaction.

So we start to find by resting in this place some kind of balance. This balance, which we often call equanimity, is one of the highest factors of the mundane factors of mind that are developed through meditation.

It's the seventh of the enlightenment factors, the fourth of the Brahmaviharas, mentioned again and again throughout the teachings. This equanimity, I believe, is one of the most durable qualities when one leaves retreat and returns home. It's often what people report in making the transition back into daily life.

"You know, my concentration was shot by the second day of meditating at home. I didn't have that kind of peace. The loving-kindness wasn't quite as rich as it was. But you know what? It was okay. I had a lot more space around all the things that were going on in my life."

That's equanimity, and we can cultivate it by discovering this space between thoughts, leading in the direction of peace. Peace, calm, equanimity—these are all important factors to develop. But the most important is how we understand differently, how we see differently. That's the development of wisdom.

Let's continue with quote number 20. The Buddha had been discussing how personality view arises through identification with the five aggregates. He's then asked: "Well, Venerable Sir, how does one know, how does one see, so that in regard to this body with its consciousness, there is no I-making, mine-making, and underlying tendency to conceit?"

"Bhikkhu, any kind of material form whatever, one sees it all as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: 'This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.'"

This is the activity of wisdom. We come to understand that these arisings, even though we may have clung to them and formed some immediate notion of self, it's not really true. It's not mine. I am not this. This is not myself.

The commentaries say that these three phrases point to three important underlying tendencies of mind. "This is not mine"—or rather, its opposite, "This is mine"—is the outcome of tanha or craving, a form of wanting or greed. "This I am not"—or its opposite, "This I am"—is an expression of mana, defining oneself to be something or other. "This is not myself"—or its opposite, "This is myself"—is an expression of sakkayaditthi, or simply ditthi. These three short phrases are said to be expressions of tanha, mana, and ditthi—craving, conceit, and views—summed up very briefly here.

The Buddha continues: "Seeing thus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with material form, disenchanted with feeling, with perception, formations, and consciousness. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, one's mind is liberated. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge it is liberated. One understands: birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being."

Now while this discourse was being spoken, through not clinging, the minds of sixty bhikkhus were liberated from the taints. The Buddha had something.

I'll end this session with the last few quotes on this page. "Whatever be the phenomena through which they think of seeking their self-identity, it turns out to be transitory. It becomes false. For what lasts for a moment is deceptive. The state that is not deceptive is nibbana."

This final quote is from the Visuddhimagga: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is no doer of deeds, nor one who reaps their fruits. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true."

So, just an invitation. In your meditations, please pay attention to the space, the natural peace and ease, and then how the self gets formed in grasping and disturbance out of that.

These are profound questions that really get to the heart of practice. When we work with concepts like anatta alongside teachings on karma, it can feel like we're holding two seemingly contradictory truths.

Let me address the question about remorse first. Remorse may indeed be triggered by thoughts of "I" connected to a memory of past action. The way it typically unfolds is that a memory arises in the present moment, and there could be a sense of remorse or guilt—though these are slightly different experiences.

Remorse can actually be felt without a lot of I-ing and my-ing when it arises from recognition and understanding of karma. Yes, in a way it was this mind-body that performed that earlier action, but we also recognize it's an entirely different mind-body now. However, the karma from those earlier events continues through this mind-body continuum. We'll explore karma more deeply later in the retreat, but it's closely connected to what you're asking.

There is no one who receives the fruits of karma, as pointed out in that beautiful Visuddhimagga quotation, and yet the results of my actions don't land on you—they land here. Karma is a fascinating phenomenon to explore in relation to understanding that there's no abiding self, and yet there is continuity in the mind-body process.

So a memory can arise from the past, remorse can be felt, and remorse doesn't have to be a quality of suffering. This is why I was trying to distinguish it from guilt. With guilt there is suffering. Remorse can be an honest acknowledgment that something was a mistake, without a strong sense of self but with recognition that "I am the owner of my karma."

Regarding the five daily recollections—"I am of the nature to age, I am of the nature to get sick, to die, to be separated"—and why the last one, "I am the owner of my actions," seems different from the others, this touches on dependent origination as well.

The first four recollections are indeed about relinquishment, recognizing impermanence. But the reflection on karma serves a different purpose. It's really helpful for reminding us to be very careful with our actions and not break the precepts we've undertaken. When there's a breaking of a precept, then there's ground for remorse or guilt, confusion of mind, and so on. The importance of that reflection in this sequence is to encourage us to be really careful moment by moment, because we are always acting in body, speech, or mind. Karma is being generated at every moment. It's an encouragement to keep our actions really wholesome as we practice.

There's something else important to say about those reflections. The Buddha used reflections like this—"I am of the nature to age"—many, many times without being concerned about the apparent contradiction of using "I" while teaching that there is no fixed self. He said it's fine to use these words conventionally, understanding that this mind and body do form a continuum. It's just that every element of it is constantly changing. There's nothing fixed, no abiding element that has continuity within it.

But the continuum—which is the conventional sense of a being, you could say the conventional sense of a self—does go on. It's the recognition that due to impermanence, that will change. Perhaps it would be clearer to say "this body is of the nature to age," or "this mind and body will be separated," or we can simply understand that the word "I," used conventionally, refers to this ever-changing process.

Somebody asked this question in most metta retreats: How can you say, may I be happy, when there is no I to begin with? So I have a metta phrase that corresponds with the Vipassana understanding, which you're welcome to use if you prefer.

You could say, "may I be happy," or "may Sally be happy." Or you could say, "in this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena, conventionally designated as Sally, may the mind state of happiness arise ever more frequently." You could use either one. They're both fine. I find it a little easier to just say, "may Sally be happy." But it means the same. Same meaning.

One more question on the aisle.

Thank you. I actually, there's many things you talked about and I've got many confusions, but two which I just wanted to focus on. One is you proved to me that if I go looking for a self, I won't find it. And I feel if I go looking for consciousness, I won't find it. So why is it reasonable to believe that consciousness goes on? That's number one. And number two, without the self, where's the free will coming from? If everything is a process of karmic causes and conditions that are going on, how does free will arise and where does that come from? Those are just two of my confusions.

Great. Two good questions. I think you've been over some of this material before. So the first question about consciousness—his comment is he can't find the self and he also can't find consciousness. It's true in a way, and yet there's another way that we are able to know that we're conscious, and that knowing that we're conscious is some kind of finding. So it's not finding consciousness as an object, like we would find the breath or a body sensation or even emotion, but do you have any doubt that you're conscious?

Yes.

Okay. So generally we know that we're conscious, but we have a little trouble pinpointing exactly where it is or how it can be found. So I prefer to think of consciousness as an activity rather than an object. So if we think of it as the activity of knowing, then I get some sense—oh yeah, knowing is happening. I get that. I can't quite put my hand around it, but knowing is happening. And so that's enough to work with. So that knowing activity, the Buddha said, may be able to continue after the body dies.

And the second question about free will is a very interesting one, too. The Buddha didn't come down on the side, I would say, of free will or determinism as a philosophical outcome. But he did come down against determinism. And he said, if one takes up a view—he called it fatalism—that everything is preordained and you don't have any choice or control about its direction, then one will not make effort. So he rejected determinism on the very pragmatic ground that if you believe it, you won't be motivated to take up the Eightfold Path, of which effort is one of the key spokes. So determinism was rejected.

Free will he didn't describe exactly. But certainly as we come to more understanding of karma and where volitional activities come from, we see how strongly conditioned our actions are—actions of body, speech and mind. And it certainly puts some question around the concept of free will. However, we can't toss it out because that tosses out effort.

So what I will say is that there is a factor in the mind called volition, which is the decider. Remember George W. Bush's famous comment, "I am the decider." We often—ego often thinks that. I'm the decider. In fact, volition is the element in the mind responsible for motivating actions, and you could say for making those choices. And volition is another impersonal—that means non-self—but highly conditioned element within the mental factors.

So volition can be influenced by wisdom, by love, by compassion, or volition can be influenced by desire, by aversion, by confusion, in different ways. So volition acts and is in that way a deciding factor, but it's conditioned by the elements, the qualities of mind that are present at the moment of acting.

And as someone on the path, it's best to act as though you have free will. It works. It works to act as though you have free will to cultivate the path factors. Even though, as we see, our will is not totally free. Like, you could come down and say, "I want to be effortlessly present with the breath for 45 minutes." But we don't usually have the will to make that happen. But it's best to act as though you have free choice and the path can unfold.

The path unfolds through our willingness to engage with it, even within the constraints of conditioned existence.

Okay, thank you. Unfortunately, I think we're out of time at this point for this session. So right now we move into interviews. I hope you've checked—some of you will be seeing Sally or Gil or myself at this time in a small group interview.

One word about the interviews: we want them to be discussions as you continue exploring these teachings in your practice.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 113

The Emptiness of Phenomena

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

Guy Armstrong addresses the Mahāyāna critique that Theravāda Buddhism only understands emptiness of self (anattā) but not emptiness of phenomena. Drawing from the Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta (SN 22.95), he demonstrates how the five khandhas reveal that all phenomena—form, feeling, perception, saṅkhāras, and viññāṇa—are like foam, bubbles, mirages, plantain trunks, and magic shows: appearing substantial but lacking solid existence.

Armstrong explains how our human experience consists entirely of consciousness knowing sense contact, with no separate self required. All appearances—including the physical world we take as ultimate reality—are constructions held in the groundless bubble of consciousness. Through personal reflections on death and meditation insights, he shows how seeing phenomena as empty appearances rather than solid objects cultivates both wisdom and compassion.

This teaching integrates traditional Theravāda analysis with profound contemplation of consciousness, offering practical ways to see through the illusion of substantiality while maintaining an open heart toward the suffering inherent in our shared human condition.

The subject of the talk tonight is the emptiness of phenomena. So far in the retreat, we've been focusing most of our attention on the emptiness of self, using the five aggregates and the six sense bases to show how through non-clinging, we cease to regenerate the sense of self over and over. This is the way emptiness is mostly used in the Theravada—to be synonymous with anatta, the lack of abiding self at the center of our experience.

For 2000 years, the Mahayanins have been challenging us about this. They've been saying, "You have emptiness of self, but you don't have emptiness of phenomena. You don't really have the whole Dharma. We have the whole Dharma and you're missing half of it."

What I aim to demonstrate tonight is that we have the whole Dharma too. We do have emptiness of phenomena. It's just tucked away in corners and hasn't been focused on as much. But it's here, and I want to explain how we find it in the Theravada and some of its implications—because it has what I consider to be profound implications.

We're going to start looking at our human experience through a couple of different schemas. In the Visuddhimagga, it's said that when an awakened person who has carefully investigated mind and body looks at a person, they don't say "person." Rather, they see in more refined terms. When the Buddha looked at a being, I don't think he generally saw a being, a human being, a self, as the first thing.

The Visuddhimagga says that somebody who looks at a person and says "person" is like a skilled butcher who's cutting up the carcass of a cow and as they cut, goes "cow, cow, cow." The skilled butcher wouldn't do that. They would be cutting and saying "rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs." Similarly, someone who has looked closely at this mind-body process wouldn't see generic person.

When the Buddha looked, he saw in one of two ways, which we've been discussing. One is the six sense bases, as pointed to in the Sutta on Totality. Remember that? "I'll teach you the totality of life. It's the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, and so forth." The other way is the five aggregates, which Sally explained in many different forms today. Both these ways see the human being in a more detailed manner that brings an element of deeper understanding and less tendency to cling.

This became important for me almost twenty years ago when my older sister died. My sister was only fifty-two at the time. She was a few years older than me, and her death came completely unexpectedly. She'd had a chronic condition, but it wasn't immediately life-threatening. But one day she succumbed and went into cardiac arrest, and the technicians couldn't bring her back. So it was a shock for all of us.

She was someone to whom I was quite close. In addition to the waves of grief that I went through, I felt a darkness for a couple of months in my life—waves of more sadness, less sadness going on day by day during that time. I was able to move through that. But her death really perplexed me.

I had spoken to her just a few days before she died. She was somebody with a big personality, a big heart, a big sense of humor, very caring, very personal, a warm, affectionate kind of person. She had been so full of life and so alive and seemingly so solid the week before, and then she was just gone. I'm sure you all know this experience. It's just so perplexing. What happened to that solid, energetic, loving, caring being that was my sister?

The reflection that helped me most figure out what happens in death, what is involved in the transition from a living being to a dead person, was the five aggregates. In tonight's talk, I hope to touch on some of the insights that helped me understand that better. When I came to a greater understanding of what a person is and therefore what dying means, it was easier to let go and understand the naturalness of this process.

I say this to emphasize that this is not just an idle intellectual pursuit we're engaged in when looking at these teachings of the Buddha. These are really bearing on questions of life and death and the deep meaning of our relationships and our own existence. It's been very relevant and very helpful for me, and I hope it may be for you also.

We've been through a lot today—form, feeling, perceptions, formations, and consciousness. I just want to touch on two very briefly to bring out a little more. We've spent a lot of time in other retreats on form, feeling, and formations. So I want to say one more thing about perception.

Perception is a powerful and underrated factor in our experience, and I believe that putting more emphasis and investigation in this area will prove very rewarding. It plays a particularly significant role in developing insight. In insight meditation, the factor of perception is crucial because insight basically means—well, let me ask you: does insight mean you see something new, or does it mean you see something old in a new way?

It could be both, but very often it's the latter. You're sitting in meditation and suddenly you see things in a way where there's no clinging and you don't make a self around it. You're seeing the same sensations and thoughts, but you're not constructing a self around them.

One quotation from the Buddha points to this importance of perception in the shift we need. He said that when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust, eliminates all lust for existence, eliminates all ignorance, and uproots all conceit of "I am." Notice what he's saying—the perception of impermanence. This is the area for insight, something we can turn the mind to and perceive to some degree by investigating, cultivating, and inclining the mind. We can perceive impermanence more frequently than we do, and that perception, when we develop and cultivate it, leads to all these kinds of freedom.

The second aspect I want to explore further is consciousness, which is central to tonight's theme and has been discussed today as well. As Sally mentioned, consciousness is the knowing quality taking place with any of our sense experience. It's the bare factor

of knowing sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and emotions. Human beings have consciousness, dogs have consciousness—all sentient beings have consciousness. It's what enables them to relate to their environment and learn how to survive.

The interesting point I want to bring out is that sense experience and the knowing of it arise together. They're not two separate things. You won't find consciousness beforehand and then a sense experience that you see them meet—they come up completely together. For instance, when there's an in-breath, there's a sensation of rising in the abdomen and falling in the abdomen. You feel that. Feeling that is another way of saying you know that, another way of saying there's consciousness of that. If there were a corpse, you could press on that abdomen in and out, and the physical experience would be happening in that body, but there would be no knowing of it. The knowing is right there with the experience.

In other words, our human experience always consists of knowing sense contact. If you go to sleep, then you don't know sense contact for a while, and consciousness isn't active. So the two are always coming up together. Human experience is sense contact and the knowing of it—there's nothing else going on.

Let me offer another context. The domain of Buddhism is human experience—our human experience. The domain of physics is the interaction between objects and studies of mass and movement of physical objects. The domain of chemistry is the interaction among atoms and molecules. The domain of biology is the study of living organisms. The domain of Buddhism is human experience. The Buddha was not very interested in anything apart from human experience because it's here that there's suffering and the end of suffering. Our human experience is always about knowing sense data—there's nothing else going on.

This is the point I want to clarify. We have here a couple of bells, and I want to use them to illustrate that knowing and the experience—the sense data—are together. But we can look at one aspect or the other. They're not separate things, but we can choose to focus either on the sense object or on the knowing of it. But it's one experience. That's the important thing—there's only one experience, but it has two aspects.

Okay. This bell that you just heard briefly—is it gold or is it round? It's just one bell. It's gold and round, and you can tune into one side or the other of that unity.

So with an in-breath, a sound, an emotion—there's the object and the knowing of it fused as one experience. That's what human experience is: this fusion. We're conscious, we're knowing it. A corpse may have an experience, but the knowing isn't there. So our whole human experience is this union of knowing and objects, knowing and objects. And we can tune in to one side or the other.

Mostly in our meditation instructions in this lineage, we've been giving the instruction: when you're with the breath, feel the sensations. But as Sally indicated today, we could also say, tune into the knowing side of that. That's the consciousness piece. You can learn to tune into consciousness in that way.

So consciousness is subtle, but it's not unknowable. It's not unfindable. We'll get into that. It's not quite graspable, but you can feel it working. You can feel it happening.

Okay, five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. Why is this so liberating? Because there's one central element missing.

Now, back up a second. Form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. Can everything in your experience be fit into one of these categories? In other words, is this an exhaustive description of human experience? Can everything fit in one of these categories?

What about the unconscious? I would say the unconscious is not a reality until it makes itself felt in the conscious. The unconscious is a concept developed by Western psychology, but it can mean one of two things. It could mean something that's active but is too subtle for us to pick up and recognize. The word that Buddhism uses for that is delusion.

For example, I decide to give a gift to somebody, but really what I'm interested in is getting the recognition from them. But I'm unaware of that motivation. That motivation is at work, but we would call it unconscious because I'm not aware that that's happening. So an unconscious motivation is: I want recognition. That distorts the act of giving. And it may come across really weird to the person because I keep hanging on and going, "Did you like that gift? Did I get you what you wanted for your birthday? Was that like the coolest birthday gift you got this year?" That's an unconscious motivation, but if we were more attentive, we would recognize it.

So I will say that from my point of view—Buddha's point of view—the unconscious is not real until it expresses itself in consciousness in some way.

Then the Buddha also talked about things he called latent tendencies. So we have latent tendencies such as desire and becoming and ignorance that aren't apparent because they aren't active right now. We can recognize that those things may be there somewhere, but they're not significant until they act, until they're brought into consciousness. And when they come, latent tendencies are in the fourth aggregate of sankharas. They're one form of mental formation.

The five sense objects all go in the first category of rupa. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch are all in the category rupa. And then thoughts and emotions are in the category sankhara—the fourth. Actions really go in the fourth aggregate as well, volitional formations.

It does include actions of body, speech, and mind. So everything in human experience can be accommodated within these five aggregates. This is important. If you don't think it through tonight, think it through later. This is an important question.

Alice pointed out that Nibbana is outside this list. Most of us are not experiencing Nirvana, clearly. So it is the one thing that is outside this list. But generally, let's say sense experience—all the elements of our normal waking experience—can be fit into one of these categories. So for now we'll say it's an exhaustive list. Everything can be fit in there.

So there's one big element that's not named there. Form, feeling, perception, volitions, consciousness. Where's the I? There isn't any. This describes human experience exhaustively and it doesn't require an I or a self to do that. So that's why it's liberating to see in this way.

When we see our experience as the five aggregates or as the six sense bases, we see it without this overlay of self. And I believe that's how the Buddha saw. So when we start to see this way, we're starting to see the way the Buddha saw. We're training ourselves to see without ego, to see the world of human experience without ego. That's the significance of it.

So this is kind of freeing. There was one point in my practice when I was doing a home retreat and studying this book by Nagarjuna called The Root Verses on the Middle Way. There are a few quotes from it in the study guide. It's a treatise on emptiness. He just keeps looking at every form of existence that one could solidify, and then he shows the emptiness in that. I'd been really plunged into this in the middle of a period of retreat time.

One night while I was sleeping, I had this dream. I was standing in front of a full-length mirror and the me that was standing in front of the mirror asked the question, "Why is emptiness important?" The person in the mirror answered, "Because it means you don't exist."

That's the significance of emptiness. It means that we don't exist as an object, as a center of things, as a problem. There are these processes of nature that are going on. There's no owner, and they don't constitute an enduring entity. And when we can see in this way, it takes some of the burden out.

You may know this story. Jack Kornfield, after he had been a monk in Thailand, was visiting this old monk in Sri Lanka. The old monk knew that Jack had done some Dharma practice in Thailand, and he said, "Oh, so you've been practicing Buddhism for a while. Tell me, what's the essence of the Buddhist teachings?"

Jack said, "Well, the essence, as I understand it, is that there's no abiding self at the center of this human experience."

And the old monk said, "That's it. No self. No self, no problem." And he just laughed. No self, no problem.

And that is the meaning of it. That's the importance of it. When we take the self out, it takes out some of the problem.

This also leads into emptiness of phenomena. They're connected. I was talking to one of my teachers once and saying, "Should I look on the side of emptiness of self or look on the side of emptiness of phenomena?"

He said, "There's only one emptiness."

So we're going to explore this manifestation—the emptiness of phenomena. Let's look at page eleven, quote number thirty-five. This is called the Sutta on a Lump of Foam from the Connected Discourses.

It says: "On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or

present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—a person inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?'"

This is a little shocking, isn't it? Isn't form the most substantial thing you can think of? What is more solid than form? But here the Buddha is saying no, form is exactly like a lump of foam.

In this passage, he doesn't actually use the word śūnya, which means empty, but he uses a couple of words that are synonymous. He uses the term "void"—this term in Pali is rittaka, meaning devoid of, very close to empty. And then the word "hollow"—the Pali word used is tuccha. This was used by the Buddha at one point to scold a monk who lacked substance, calling that person a tuccha purusa, a hollow person, hollow man. So both are synonyms of śūnya, even though that word isn't used here.

So how is form like a mass of foam? I was teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock one year, and at this time of day I was giving a dharma talk when I heard a really eerie shriek from outside. It was like a baby crying or screaming. A couple of staff people went out to see what was happening. I continued with the dharma talk.

When the talk ended, I went out to see what was there. A deer had been killed, lying right over by Upeka, on that little grassy area, and its neck was twisted way back. One of the staff people said that when they had gone out, they had seen a couple of large dogs running away. So apparently the deer had been attacked, and it looked like its neck had been broken. It was dead. By the time we got there, there was nothing we could do.

We formed a circle—some yogis came out—and said some prayers and sent loving-kindness for the deer. The caretakers called the Humane Society, who said they would come and take away the dead deer the next day. So the caretakers moved the deer down near the front of the property, actually near where you all park, and waited for the Humane Society to come pick it up. But they never came. I imagine they had other more pressing things to do.

So the carcass of the deer sat out there. It was very interesting to watch it day by day because it just started disappearing. Other animals came and fed on it—probably vultures and coyotes and raccoons and maybe even bobcats. There were bobcats on the land and other scavengers. Day by day, there was a little less there, a little less there, until within a week, there was really only the hide and the skull left, and the bones that remained.

I thought: something that was so solid and vital a week before—poof—gone so quickly. So in that way, form is like a mass of foam. It seems substantial, but it can go really quickly.

Then the Buddha continues in this sutta—I haven't put it all in here—but he compares the five aggregates to a magic show. This was an interesting reflection. If you've ever been entranced with magic, a lot of teenage boys go through a fascination with it. I did for a while. I looked into the life of Houdini. Harry Houdini was this great illusionist and escape artist around 1910, and he would do some very impressive tricks.

They would tie up his hands and clasp them behind his back. They would circle him round and round with chains and put padlocks on the chains. Then they would put him in a box, a wooden box, and nail it shut on every side. And then they'd throw it into a river so that he would sink. But every time they did it, a few minutes later, Houdini would swim to the surface. And every time, people couldn't believe that he'd done it again because they'd seen him tied up and bound and padlocked. It was like magic. How did he escape again?

But there were tricks. And when you know the tricks, it's no longer magic. So the tricks were: his hands were tied not very tight. The first thing he did was wiggle his hands free. Then inside his mouth, he had some very small picks and wrenches. He would pull them out when he got his hands free. And then he was an expert lock picker. He could undo the locks that were binding the chains and unwrap the chains. And then one of the sides of the box was nailed very lightly—it was almost false nailing. He could knock that out and then swim to the surface.

But one other skill was needed: he had to hold his breath for three minutes underwater because that's how long it took him to do all this other work in the dark, cold water. So when you put all those skills together, it's quite difficult to do, but it's not magic. It's an impressive display, but it's not magic.

So the Buddha said that's what consciousness does. And then the Buddha goes through this whole list of similes:

Form is like a mass of foam.
Feeling is like a water bubble.
Perception is like a mirage.
Volitions are like a plantain trunk.
And consciousness is like a magic show.

The plantain trunk we might have to explain. The banana tree—plantain is a form of banana—does not have a solid core. If you ever look at one, it's just green leafy stalks overlapping each other, forming enough strength to hold the plant up with the fruit. But when that fruit finishes, the tree basically dies. There's not a trunk there to continue it. So it's got a hollow core, basically.

And consciousness is like a magic show. So explained the kinsman of the sun.

Let's take a look at this area of consciousness being like a magic show. How is that?

As I mentioned the other night, we live in a culture that puts a lot of emphasis on the material. Western culture hasn't very well investigated the mind—not to the depth that Eastern cultures have, either Hinduism or Buddhism or Taoism. In some of those Asian wisdom traditions, matter is not primary; mind is primary. Or you might say consciousness is primary.

What happens if we look from the side of consciousness at our experience? What does that look like?

First of all, in meditation, we start to get a sense of the lightness of sense experience in the senses first. We come into meditation and we feel the body is solid. Do you remember the first time you started to see it's only sensations? It's only changing sensations of pulsation and vibration and pressure and coolness. That there isn't anything solid in the felt experience of the body? That's kind of radical when we discover that.

People who have done retreats with S.N. Goenka usually have experienced that by the end of the retreat. It's just a flow of sensations that make up this thing we call body.

As the mind stills, we start to see how sounds just come out of nowhere and then disappear. Thoughts arise, and if they're seen clearly, they often just go poof. Emotions which seem like such strong motivators—when we can see them clearly, it's hard even to find them. Oh, I know I was feeling that sadness, but where is it? It's just like a cloud.

All these sense impressions become very light. There was that great book by Milan Kundera called The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Our meditation leads us into that kind of relationship.

But there's one of the senses that's hardest, for me anyway, to find the lightness in, and that is sight. When I look at a room, at people, at walls, at floors, it really looks solid. So let's investigate that and see: is sight really as solid as it looks?

Let's use a little bit of our scientific knowledge. We know that the way sight is generated is that light falls on an object in the form of photons, reflects off that object to our eyes. Sight can only arise if light lands on our retinas and then stimulates an impulse through the optic nerve that goes to the brain. Then some kind of processing happens that nobody understands, not even the neuroscientists. And then boom—a sight appears.

So that sight seems to be solid and unchanging, but when you reflect, it's actually being continually refreshed or regenerated by these millions of photons landing on the retina each second. And if that flow of photons stops, the sight disappears. So the sight is not a solid thing at all, but it's being on-off, on-off, on-off, on-off so fast that we normally can't see it. I will say that yogis in deep meditation can see that flickering nature, but normally we don't. But we can use a little scientific reflection to validate that it is just flickering on-off, on-off, on-off.

So then one starts to wonder: in the Western worldview, we normally take the physical world as the ultimate reality. That's the way we're conditioned to think. This is what's real. And I am born into this physical world called planet Earth. I am trapped here for the duration of my lifespan. When I die, I go away and this physical world, which is the ultimate reality, continues. That's the standpoint from which we understand and look at it.

But I wonder if this physical world is the most fundamental fact, or if perhaps consciousness is equally fundamental. Remember I mentioned that the Buddha said that body and consciousness support each other like two stalks of reeds. So what if consciousness is equally important as this physical world?

In examining this process of seeing, we have to question: are we seeing the real ultimate physical world? Or is light simply landing on our eye, being processed in the brain, and then we're constructing a representation of the world through our senses and brain that's held in consciousness? Can we ever see the real absolute physical world unvarnished, or is it only known through our senses and brain's processing? It's the latter, isn't it?

This physical world that we take as ultimate, absolute, true, unquestioned, is only a construction of our own senses, brain, and consciousness. Who knows what relationship it bears to the physical reality out there. Animals see it differently than we do. We know they don't see in color as one example. They may detect things that we're unable to detect—different spectrums of light. So we've taken this representation that's a float-

ing phantom in consciousness, and we've ascribed to it this ultimate, grounded physical reality that it just doesn't have. All the sense impressions are only appearances in consciousness.

Now, we also tend to think—it's very comfortable to think that there's a ground underneath us. And physically we can feel that. We feel the pull of gravity and the ground feels solid. But what's underneath this ground? If you go to the other side of the earth, it's just empty space. It's just hanging in empty space. Even this physical thing doesn't really have a ground. It's just a relative floor.

But the interesting thing about consciousness is it doesn't have any ground. It doesn't need a ground. What's the floor of your consciousness? It's just a bubble. Consciousness is just a bubble.

One of the things I used to like to play with was color. Color is so amazing, the way it exists. If I hold up this book, I think everybody would probably see that it's blue, right? But then I started to wonder: well, where is blue? Normally we think, oh, blue is here. But again, if you know the laws of physics, you know that the reason it looks blue is because all the other light is being absorbed and only the blue is being reflected back. That's why it looks blue. The blue gets reflected to our eyes and so we see blue.

But actually what's absorbed here is all the other colors of the spectrum. So actually this book is anything but blue—it's everything but blue.

So where is blue? It's only in your consciousness, isn't it? It's not in this physical reality. Blue is only an appearance in consciousness.

Here's another one that particularly interested me. When we go out at night under the sky—on a clearer night than tonight—we can see all these stars, right? The vastness of consciousness becomes really apparent. So, is your consciousness actually reaching out to that star? Or has light from that star traveled all those millions of light years, impinged upon your retina, and then the brain and consciousness created this appearance of vast space? Your consciousness doesn't reach to that star, does it? I'm not saying consciousness is bounded or limited or finite, but I don't think it's reaching out to Alpha Centauri tonight. So again, consciousness creates this sense of space, this vast sense of space.

We don't live in a reality of the physical world. We live in a representation of reality constructed by our senses and our consciousness. And everything that appears is only an appearance in consciousness, which has no ground. This is the sense of the emptiness of phenomena. The physical world does not have the substantiality we attribute to it. It's only an appearance.

One nice way to remind ourselves of this is to change our language. Instead of talking about objects, we can talk about appearances. Everything that we used to call an object, we can start to see as simply an appearance. It's just an appearance in consciousness.

That's why the Tibetans call this whole thing a magical display. They call it a magical display, but they probably don't know that they're taking that image from this old Theravada sutta, where the Buddha compared consciousness to a magic show. But that's where it comes from. Or in the Diamond Sutra: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world, like a star at dawn, a flickering lamp, a bubble in a stream, an echo, a mirage, and a dream." These images are also closely related to this old sutta. Sometimes it's also compared to a rainbow. A rainbow appears, but there's nothing substantial there with those colors.

One of my teachers put it this way: Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. No solid existence. Maybe there's something solid out there. But Buddhism is concerned with our human experience. In our human experience, everything that appears has no solid existence whatsoever. Things are only appearances in consciousness. This is the meaning of the emptiness of phenomena. Nothing in our field of experience is solid or grounded. It's all groundless and held in this bubble of consciousness.

There's this wonderful set of teachings in the Mahayana called the Lojong Training or the Seven Point Mind Training, created by a seventh-century teacher named Atisha in India. It's a wonderful set of slogans to study, and I recommend it. But one of them that I really like says, "In post-meditation, be a child of illusion." That means when you're not formally meditating, when you're walking about and experiencing the world with your eyes open, be a child of illusion. Or you could say a student of illusion. Meaning, we often create the illusion that this physical world is solid and the ultimate reality. But it's not. Remind yourself: this is only an appearance in consciousness. Everything we see is only an appearance in consciousness.

This opens the door actually to seeing ourselves in a new way also. And I want to talk a little about that.

When I was a monk in Thailand, one of the great privileges of being a monk is that we were allowed to witness autopsies. So I was thirty-two years old, and I went down to a hospital in the center of Bangkok, very near to the parade ground, if you know that part of the city. A lot of buses coming and going, a lot of people walking through this busy part of Bangkok, and went to a nearby hospital, Siriraj Hospital. And I had never

stood next to a dead body in my whole life. I walked into the coroner's office and there was a dead body laid out on a stainless steel table. It was a young woman who had drowned in one of the klongs, one of the canals. And I was able to stand next to her.

I'd been meditating quite a bit in the monastery at that time, and so I was very open and very sensitive, and here I was next to my first dead body. So that was powerful enough.

But then we sat in the operating theater, and she was brought in on a table, and the coroner began to dissect her in carrying out the autopsy. I'll spare you the details, but he took apart basically every part of her abdominal cavity and her brain in order to remove the organs and weigh them. We were able to just sit there and watch that happen. And then he brought out two other bodies. That took about half an hour, the first autopsy. And then he brought out two other bodies and did the same procedure for them. So we got to watch those also.

And then we left and I was with a friend and we headed back to the monastery. I remember walking out onto that parade ground and watching people walk by—couples walking by holding hands, parents with children in strollers, an old woman carrying a shopping bag of groceries over to the bus stop. And everyone I walked by, I saw as a walking corpse. That's a phrase that came to my mind. They're all just walking corpses.

And this wasn't depressing. It was very enlivening.

And then I had to reflect: what's the difference between those who are walking and alive and those bodies I had just been standing next to and watched being disassembled in the coroner's office? What I saw was in the people who were walking, the difference was there was this spark of consciousness that I could see shining out through the eyes. And then there was the body. That was fundamentally what I saw. There was a body, which was just like those corpses, but then there was this spark of consciousness.

But as I reflected on it, that spark of consciousness was totally here and now. No past, no future. Just here and now, awake, alive, taking in the sense input. But there's this peculiar capacity we have called memory. So we can store up these moments of consciousness as vignettes to bring up later. And the bringing up of them over and over gives us a sense of past and future and a continuity through the present. But that was all a mental construction. The reality was there was the body, which was totally of the present moment. There was this brightness of knowing, which was totally of the present moment, and there was nothing else. There was really no past and no future in reality.

That's where I got a sense of where my sister had gone. What ended was only this brightness of consciousness, which was so insubstantial to begin with, so light to begin with. And also seeing in this way, the brightness of consciousness in the body were all the same. This consciousness is not very different. These bodies are not very different. So seeing in this way—this is a situation for all of us. We're just this brightness, but we're deceived by memory into constructing a continuous self enduring through past and future. But there is only this bright awareness.

So seeing in this way can also be a little unsettling. We mentioned this at the beginning of the retreat. There isn't the solid ground that we thought there was. There is only consciousness and the appearances that it holds, none of which are substantial or solid. And we are not very far away from the reality of a corpse. Just that brightness of consciousness and knowing.

That's why the Tibetans say that it's not easy to bear the truth of emptiness. It takes some time sometimes, and it takes some heart to bear the truth of emptiness when it's seen on this level and to this degree. But at the same time, they say emptiness is the womb of compassion, because we see we're all in the same boat.

Some years ago, Sally and I were teaching a class for some senior students of Spirit Rock, and we were going through this material with them. We asked them to reflect and give us feedback on how it felt for them. So a week later, one of the students came back and put it this way. She said, "It's spooky. I would look at everything like this Japanese lamp that I love and I'd see that it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When I went from an object to say it's an appearance to a person to say they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time."

When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile.

For me, being able to see in this way means that I can turn from seeing someone as a personality with a personal history and psychological patterns and past and future and problems and joys and all that, to in a moment seeing them essentially as a body plus consciousness. I recommend that you play with this. Play with it with some of your friends, partners, loved ones. You know them really well. Imagine them as a personality enduring over time and see how that feels. And then turn to see them as essentially what we all are in this moment—body plus consciousness—and see how that feels. I encourage you to play with it. I think it can evoke a lot of compassion.

Kuan Yin is the bodhisattva of compassion in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. It's said that her special gift is that she hears all the cries of the world, the cries of the ten thousand sorrows. She's listening and hears the difficulties that we all face. So she hears that suffering, and Kuan Yin is not a beginning meditator. Kuan Yin's a bodhisattva and she's a pretty advanced meditator. That means she understands that there's suffering, but there's no "I" at the center of this to whom the suffering is happening.

One meditator described it this way: "Suffering is just rope burn." You get that image? All these things are passing through and we try to hang on and we can't. So Kuan Yin understands that. There is suffering, but there is no "I" at the center that is doing the suffering.

This understanding is a beautiful blend of wisdom and compassion. The wisdom of seeing the emptiness gives the heart ease. It gives the sense of freedom, the understanding that no one is permanently damaged by this process. But the compassion gives the ability to stay open and related and wanting to help in the ways that we can to the situation that all of us face.

So this blend of wisdom and compassion—you'll feel it in statues of Kuan Yin, like the statue at the back, and her posture of royal ease. That's the liberation, but the heartfulness is also there. You see it in the half smile of the Buddha, which is that expression of equanimity, balancing wisdom and compassion.

Through seeing the emptiness, the heart becomes less burdened. And in that unburdening, then we have the capacity to feel the suffering that we meet in life, our own and others. And our heart, because it's not so burdened, can open better with love, compassion, kindness—whatever the situation needs.

I'll close with this quotation that is attributed to Kuan Yin, who's not known to have been a historical being, but who cares: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?

CHAPTER 114

Morning Instructions: Big Mind

Guy Armstrong · 42 min

> *In this guided meditation session from an emptiness retreat, Guy Armstrong leads practitioners in cultivating expansive awareness through the metaphor of 'big mind' - consciousness likened to open sky or empty space. The session systematically opens attention to sounds, bodily sensations, and mental phenomena, inviting practitioners to recognize how all experiences arise and pass within the boundless space of awareness.*
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> *Armstrong guides meditators to observe sounds appearing and disappearing like phenomena in empty space, bodily sensations glimmering like stars in the night sky, and thoughts drifting like rootless, homeless clouds. The meditation emphasizes looking directly at the nature of awareness itself - recognizing it as clear, invisible, without boundaries or foundation, yet containing all experience without being composed of it.*
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> *This practice draws from Mahāyāna-influenced approaches to śūnyatā (emptiness) meditation while remaining grounded in experiential investigation. The session concludes with integrating this expansive awareness into walking meditation, suggesting how this 'big mind' perspective can extend beyond formal sitting practice into daily activity.*

This period will be a guided meditation on the theme of an expansive awareness. It's helpful in this meditation if you can be comfortable, relaxed, and relatively still. The stillness of body will really help to support the stillness of mind. But do it in a relaxed way. Don't struggle with your posture. Be comfortable, relaxed and quiet.

We'll begin by opening our attention to sound, letting the awareness become wide, expansive, taking in all the sounds that are coming and going. Could be sounds from inside the room, sounds of one another, sound in my voice. Could be sounds from outside. And because the hall's fairly quiet this morning, I'm going to ring a bell from time to time just to drop in a little sound. But the sitting will end when the big bell rings three times.

When the awareness is wide in this way, we can get the sense that it's like a big clear sky or like empty space in which all the sounds just appear and disappear. And when there are no sounds, you can let that big empty sky just reveal the silence, the reach of silence, allowing the sounds to arise and pass in this big empty space of awareness—not resisting any sound, not holding on to any sound. Letting them all appear and disappear in the open space of knowing.

This awareness is like the sky. It's clear and doesn't have any limit. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness.

Now becoming aware of sensations throughout the body. Sensations arise as points of feeling, points of sensing. They rise and change, glimmering like stars in the sky at night. All within this big empty space of awareness. In our direct experience, there's no head, no shoulders and no back. There's no chest, no arms and no legs. There are only these points of feeling, points of sensing arising, glimmering and changing in this open space of knowing.

This awareness doesn't have an inside or an outside. There are no boundaries or separations. There are just sounds and sensations arising, changing, passing, all in this empty space of awareness. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness. Let the mind be soft and open and still, not moving toward or away from any appearance.

Now becoming aware of thoughts and images. Thoughts and images are just like clouds drifting through the sky. They don't have any roots and they don't have any home. They're just arising, drifting and passing all in this empty space of mind. Look at the nature of this awareness. It's clear and invisible, like the sky, without any form or boundary.

This awareness is, but it doesn't quite exist. It contains all things, but it's not composed of them. This awareness is empty and doesn't have any foundation. It's insubstantial like the sky or space. To see if it's like that, look at the nature of your own awareness.

For the last minutes of the sitting, putting this all together. Sounds appear and disappear. Sensations arise and change, glimmering like stars in the night sky. Thoughts and images drift like clouds, rootless and homeless. All in this big empty space of awareness. To see if it's like that, look at the nature of your own awareness.

So we'll have a short break now and maybe see if you can walk in this big empty space. Maybe walking can happen in the empty space of awareness also.

CHAPTER 115

Emptiness and Karma

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

In this dharma talk from an emptiness retreat, Guy Armstrong explores the intricate relationship between the Buddha's teachings on emptiness (suññatā) and the law of karma. Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya's fundamental teaching that "volition (cetanā) is what I call action," Armstrong explains how actions arise from wholesome or unwholesome motivations - the three roots of greed, hatred, and delusion versus their opposites of generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

The talk addresses common Western misconceptions about karma while demonstrating how understanding cause and effect deepens our comprehension of not-self (anattā). Armstrong uses the metaphor of mind-streams flowing like rivers to show how individual karma operates without requiring a fixed self. He explores how dharma practice itself becomes a karmic process, where new wholesome intentions gradually redirect our mental patterns from saṃsāra toward nirvāṇa.

The teaching culminates with the Buddha's profound teaching on four types of karma, including the mysterious "karma that is neither dark nor bright" - the Noble Eightfold Path itself - which leads to the complete end of karma in liberation. This talk offers practical guidance for ethical action while revealing the ultimate transcendence of all volitional activity in awakening.

One of the main themes we've been touching on since the beginning of this retreat is cause and effect. Gil mentioned it very early when talking about the general form of dependent arising: when this is, that is; this arising, that arising; when this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases. We talked about it in terms of the Four Noble Truths—suffering and its cause, liberation and its cause. Then Sally discussed the detailed chain of the twelve links of dependent origination.

It's not an accident that when we address emptiness, cause and effect comes right to the foreground. When you take the self out of the picture—when you remove the idea of a controlling entity—you see that everything in the universe arises according to certain causes and conditions in very lawful ways. The universe unfolds lawfully through different causes and conditions from different directions and sources.

One of these central laws I want to discuss tonight is the law of karma, and I want to explore how it operates. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, I think it's really needed to complete the understanding of not-self. Second, we're all moving back into daily life now, and when we return to daily life, we're moving into the field of action.

This week we've been studying primarily in terms of the Eightfold Path, focused mainly on right view. We've been examining the view that understands the selfless nature of things, the empty nature of things, the lack of solidity and substantial essence in anything. Now we're returning to the field of action, which in the Eightfold Path is described as sila: right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

There's one important link between the path factor of right view and this whole field of action. Right intention—samma sankappa in the Eightfold Path—is the bridge between right view and right action. This is closely connected with karma as well.

The Dalai Lama was once asked if he had a choice between teaching Westerners about emptiness or teaching them about karma, which should he teach? He said karma. So perhaps we've missed the boat this week, but we're going to try to fill it in this evening.

Teaching about karma is interesting because it's one of the topics we can't verify so easily. I can't verify the Buddha's teachings on karma, and I doubt that many of you can verify them experientially. I can't tell you from my own experience whether this is true or not, and I don't think it's my job to try to convince you that it's true. But I think it is my job to tell you what the Buddha said about karma. Then it's up to you to figure out how you want to hold it and relate to it.

Personally, I think it's helpful to believe in, and coming from the man who gave us the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, it might be worth considering. He might have had some insight here.

I want to explain two things this evening. First, the basics of karma and how we can relate to it in a sensible way, because there are some misconceptions and obstacles for Westerners. Second, how it relates to the theme of emptiness, because at first it can seem contradictory.

Let me begin with some basics of what karma is. The word karma is from Sanskrit; the Pali word is kamma. Both were simple words in the Buddha's day that meant action. As I use the terms tonight, I might say karma, kamma, or action—I'm using them all synonymously.

This was a big topic of discussion in the time of the Buddha. Wanderers and philosophers would cross paths and debate with one another about the meaning of action. There were all kinds of different views. Some people said actions mattered; others said actions didn't matter at all. Some believed there was no ability to make choice, that everything was determined in a fatalistic way.

Some people said there were results from action; others argued there were no lasting results from action. All these different debates were swirling through the spiritual communities.

But the Buddha introduced a revolutionary perspective on the central importance of action. He taught that what truly matters is action with volition. As he stated clearly—this appears in the first quote on page 20 of the study guide—"Volition, oh monks, is what I call action. For through volition, one performs the action." This comes from the Numerical Discourses.

The word "volition" translates the Pali term cetana. Sometimes I'll say "intention," even though this can be confusing because we often use "intention" to translate the second path factor, samma-sankappa. They're related but not identical. I apologize for any confusion, but I may use either "intention" or "volition" to translate cetana, which lies at the very heart of karma. Other synonyms that convey this meaning include urge, motive, impulse, or will.

The essential understanding is that actions arise from some inner movement within us—the motivation or driving force, some kind of emotional energy that makes the action happen, that brings it forth.

Actions are considered to take place in three spheres: body, speech, and mind. So thoughts and emotions have volitional energy behind them. This is why the fourth aggregate of sankharas is sometimes translated as "volitional formations." The energies of desire and hatred, joy and compassion, all express some motivation.

Karma refers to the action as it happens in the present moment. The results of that action are given another term: vipaka. In the West, we tend to mix them up—like that John Lennon song "Instant Karma." I think he's really talking about results, but the proper term for that is vipaka. Karma truly means the action as it's happening in the moment.

Here comes the revolutionary aspect of the Buddha's teaching: actions are considered skillful or unskillful depending on the volition behind them. He was clear about what constitutes skillful motives and what constitutes unskillful ones.

When an action arises from the energies of greed, hatred, and delusion, he labeled these as unskillful actions. He called these three forces "the roots of the unwholesome." When an action comes from the forces of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion, those actions are considered skillful. Non-greed could be understood as generosity or renunciation; non-hatred as loving-kindness; non-delusion as wisdom.

It's that urge that makes an action skillful or unskillful. An action could be described similarly but have two very different motivations. For instance, if I tell you I saw somebody plunge a knife into a person's belly and blood flowed out—is that skillful or unskillful? Was it a thief trying to rob the person? Or was it a surgeon removing an appendix to heal an illness? The action might appear similar, but the moral weight is entirely different.

We must look at the motivation from which actions arise to determine their skillful or unskillful nature. Of course, when we examine our own actions closely, many are mixed. We have a combination of wholesome, beautiful motives alongside motives that are more self-centered, desire-based, or anger-based. These actions are considered mixed in their karmic weighting, their skillfulness or unskillfulness.

As we return to daily life, this field of action becomes not only important but genuinely fascinating. It's so interesting to tune into our own intentions and observe the mixture of motivations influencing us.

I've had several conversations here about life choices. One thing that seems crucial when making important decisions is that we wait until the mind settles and we can trust that the energy surrounding the decision is based on clarity and wisdom—and certainly kindness toward ourselves—rather than arising from confusion and a tangle of wanting and not wanting.

To me, one of the greatest values of retreat is that it allows our inner turmoil to settle enough that we can begin to see with some clarity. When that clarity is present, it provides a good foundation from which to make significant choices or decisions or to take action.

This process of tuning into our own intentions as we speak, as we act in the world, even in the thoughts we grasp and follow—this is very significant in terms of karma and deeply interesting as a way to explore what's happening inside us.

The basic guidelines as we move into the world as committed practitioners are the five precepts: not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, not misusing drugs and intoxicants. These can be refined to quite subtle degrees.

Mostly we take the precepts—perhaps we'll do this tomorrow morning before leaving retreat—and we aspire to follow them. But I don't really expect myself to follow them perfectly. I take them expecting that I'm going to break them at some point in some way, but I try to use that as an opportunity for learning.

We recommit ourselves again and again to this aspiration of causing no harm in the world. How do we live in such a way that we truly cause no harm, make no unskillful ripples through our life's choices and actions? This is a really important inquiry.

When we can do this successfully, we enjoy something the Buddha called "the bliss of blamelessness."

The interviewer was moved to a profound state of wonder. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about," she said slowly, letting the words settle. "That's a good life. That's a great life—to have no regrets."

When asked about his service, the Dalai Lama responded with characteristic humility: "Regarding service to Tibet, service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced practitioners—even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind—I don't lag too far behind."

You get the sense that part of the reason his mind can settle so evenly and deeply is this foundation of care in his actions—to have a life free from regret. What a beautiful aspiration for us.

This is the area of karma. We look at our actions, their impact on others, their impact on ourselves, and we understand that actions do have consequences. They have implications. This is one of the early verses in the Dhammapada, where the Buddha says:

"Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

This is the basic teaching on karma: that if we act out of wholesome motivations, happiness will come into our life. And to the extent that we act out of unwholesome motivations, sadness and unhappiness will come into our lives.

This is wonderful instruction because it can provide a template for our whole life—for our meditation practice and our life in the world—to follow in a way that gives us the greatest likelihood possible of happiness. And then we also understand how we can create choices that lead to unhappiness.

I imagine you know people in your life where you can see examples of both of these. When you know somebody about whom you would say, "Wow, they're a really good person," can you look and see how their choices help establish their happiness? I have people I can see like that. And then do you know other people whose lives have a lot of unhappiness, which leads to confusion, and they keep making the wrong choices, and you see the effects of that in their life?

So we can kind of see this lived out—looking at our own life, looking at the lives of people that we know. Fortunately, I think this idea is getting popular in this culture. Karma isn't quite understood fully, but a little bit.

I was teaching a meditation class in Juvenile Hall some years ago—it was a great privilege, actually. One of my co-teachers, James Baraz, had a friend who worked as a nurse in San Mateo Juvenile Hall, and she was able to get us admitted to teach a six-week beginning meditation class. We were in the maximum security wing, so these were young men, usually sixteen or seventeen years old, who had been arrested and charged with things like assault, armed robbery, murder, and different kinds of felonies like that.

We didn't know if this class would fly at all—a couple of old middle-class guys coming in and talking about Buddhism and meditation. But we decided to give it a shot and see what happened. One thing that was very conducive was that they had time on their hands. You might say we had a captive audience.

Not only that, but emotions were running very high for these young men because they were awaiting trial. The trial might mean they would go to jail for years, or it might mean they could be released back to their families. Here they were, not knowing what the outcome would be. So there was a lot of fear, and a certain amount of aggression present in that population—another cause for fear. Of course, they didn't know how to deal with the fear they were experiencing.

The main thing we emphasized was how to work with strong emotions—to feel them in their body, generate mindfulness, and create space around them. The people who took to the practice found it really helpful. We got a lot of positive feedback, and the project kept continuing after we left, eventually transforming into the Mind-Body Awareness Project and later the Lineage Project.

As we were getting near the end of the class, James and I said to each other one morning, "Should we teach them about karma? And should we teach the precepts?" We really didn't know how that would go down. We thought, this is the last chance we'll probably have to meet with these guys. Let's do it.

So I gave the talk and presented it as the science of happiness—if you want to get happy, this is what you might want to think about. I explained how wholesome motivations lead to wholesome results, unwholesome lead to unwholesome, and so forth. Then I asked, "Does this sound like anything you've ever heard before?"

A young guy raised his hand and said, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around?" Sure. So it was very accessible for them, and they took it in very easily.

Later—this is kind of a postscript—we also taught them the loving-kindness practice. Someone who went in after us as a follow-up with this group said that one of the guys who was in there was a gang leader. He explained to the other guys in the group how they should practice loving-kindness for the rival gang members because they also had mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers. It was very moving.

So this understanding is becoming more widespread, and it really can change lives when it's seen and we take it as a direction.

The Tibetans in their teachings also have what we call the Brahmaviharas, the divine abidings. They call them the four immeasurables—a term you can also hear in the Theravadan tradition—for metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity. They're called immeasurable because there's no limit to the beings they can be extended to. They're boundless states.

But they phrase them a little differently, and this teaching is embedded in their phrases. The phrase for loving-kindness is: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." For compassion: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." These are the phrases they say to themselves as they're practicing love and compassion.

The Buddha taught this as a pretty universal law for human beings. It basically doesn't matter if we believe it or not—the law applies. It doesn't matter if our religion believes it or not—the law applies. It doesn't matter if our culture believes it or not—the law applies in quite a universal way to all human beings everywhere.

The Buddha stated it in quite a strong way in several places in the texts. Here's one quotation: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge."

Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of that they will be the heirs.

Westerners often have some resistance to this notion—one, because it's not immediately verifiable, which is understandable. But I think there's a kind of inner resistance. Perhaps it goes back to our democratic roots. Very early in the formation of this country, the Declaration of Independence states—and I paraphrase—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all persons are created equal.

Somewhere in this comes the notion that maybe everybody should be equally happy. But according to the teaching on karma, we are to some extent responsible for our own happiness. Certainly the actions of others—society, parents, and so forth—will affect our happiness. But the teaching on karma can seem kind of cold or uncaring or cruel to say that people have some responsibility for their own happiness.

Sometimes there's also an overlay of, "Oh, it means if they're responsible for their unhappiness, then they deserve to suffer." I don't think this is in the Buddha's teachings at all. This notion of anybody deserving to suffer—I don't find in his approach at all.

The simplest example you probably know about is Angulimala. He was a spiritual student, quite a sincere spiritual student, who unfortunately got some bad advice from a teacher. His spiritual teacher told him—this is out of a bad motive—that what he needed to do to advance in his practice was to kill a thousand people, cut off a finger from each one, and deliver it to the teacher.

At the point at which we pick up the story, Angulimala was said to have killed 999 people and taken a finger from each one and woven it into a necklace which he wore around his neck. He was looking for his thousandth victim to complete his commitment when the Buddha was going to be walking by where Angulimala was living. People said to the Buddha, "Don't go there. Angulimala will come and kill you." The Buddha basically said, "I don't think so."

Undeterred, he walked by. Angulimala approached him to try to kill him as his thousandth victim. The Buddha eluded him and Angulimala yelled after him, "Stop, stop!" The Buddha turned around and said, "Angulimala, I have stopped, but you're still burning with greed, hatred, and confusion. You stop. Stop."

Something about that turned Angulimala's mind. He said he had never seen anyone who wasn't frightened of him before. So he approached the Buddha and bowed down and asked to be instructed.

Now, you're the Buddha. Here's a guy who's killed 999 people. If there's anybody who deserves to suffer, isn't this guy pretty high up on the list? If you're the Buddha, would you teach him? Or would you let him stew in his own karma?

The Buddha taught him. Not only did he teach him, he ordained him. He admitted him into the Sangha. He gave him teachings. And in a relatively short period of time, Angulimala became awakened, became liberated, became one of the arahants.

So I don't think the Buddha had any idea that anybody deserves to suffer. If he could have plucked out the suffering of every being he met, I think he would have done that. But it's not in anyone's power to pluck out that suffering.

By the way, it's said that Angulimala continued to go for alms round in some of the villages where he had killed people. The villagers threw stones at him because they still thought of him as the mass murderer who had killed their friends or relatives. He would come back and complain to the Buddha, "I went for alms, but the people hate me, they stoned me."

The Buddha said, "Bear it, Brahmin, bear it, practitioner, because this is your karma for those actions for which, if you hadn't developed in spiritual practice, you would be suffering for a long, long time. So just bear it. That's the result of your actions."

So I don't think the notion of deserving is there in the teachings on karma at all. But doing unskillful actions and expecting not to have suffering consequences would be like an apple coming off its stem when it's ripe and not falling to the ground. You can't arrest the law of gravity. You can't arrest the law of karma. It's just part of the way things work, according to the Buddha.

Another way people sometimes take it as being a heartless view is that one might say something like, "That person is suffering. I see their suffering, but it's their fault. They created it. Therefore, I don't have anything to do with it."

I'll turn my back on them. That is not wisdom. That's indifference.

The Buddha talked very clearly about compassion being appropriate in all situations. Indifference is closing off the heart. So we can rationalize why we shouldn't care about someone's suffering, but that's still indifference that closes off the heart of compassion and care. The heart of compassion wants to address suffering, whatever its cause—whether it's karmic or psychological or physical or biological, whatever it is, compassion wants to address the cause of suffering.

So it's a misuse of the teachings to say, "That's their problem, not my responsibility." Indifference is actually considered in the Brahma Viharas the near enemy of equanimity—an unwholesome state that looks like equanimity, but is not.

So we can see how actions create consequences in at least six ways. I'm just going to mention them briefly.

When we're thinking about doing an action, if we're thinking about doing something wholesome, generous, loving, or kind, we feel good just thinking about it. If we're thinking about doing something that's going to be hurtful, it doesn't feel so good. So we feel it already in planning it.

In doing the action, it feels beautiful to give or to love or to help. And it feels awful to hurt. As we get sensitive, we can feel that in the moment. So in doing the action, we feel it.

And then when we contemplate it later, we feel what it was like—the goodness of generosity and kindness, the awful feeling of regret if we've hurt or harmed someone. So these are three ways: planning it, doing it, remembering it.

Then our actions have consequences in the way people relate to us. If we are consistently warm, friendly, thoughtful toward people, then they will like to see us coming and they will welcome our presence. If we're judgmental and critical and angry or resentful, then they'll feel that energy and they'll close off and they'll back up and they won't be so welcoming.

The fifth way is in habitual states of mind. When we enact certain patterns again and again, they wear a groove in the mind. The Buddha pointed to this centuries ago. Neuroscientists are finding the same thing when they say neurons that fire together wire together. Whether you think of it as a karmic pattern or a brain pattern, these things get reinforced and a groove is developed in the mind.

This is from the Buddha: "Monks, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, then their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness and compassion, then their mind will incline to thoughts of renunciation, kindness and compassion."

Then there's this one other quotation that I really like a lot. I've heard it attributed to the Buddha, but I don't believe that it's anywhere in the text. I don't know what the source is, but he could have said something like this, so I'll just repeat it as though he had. This is how these impulses become set and formed as habits of our personality that develop into character. So this is the fifth way.

The sixth way that we can see our actions have consequences is one we can't see. And that is what the Buddha often talked about—how our actions have results in the future in mysterious ways that we cannot understand the mechanism of. You hear stories like this in the suttas all the time.

Somebody has a life situation. For example, there was a man at the time of the Buddha who was very wealthy, but he lived in very miserable circumstances and didn't let himself enjoy any of his wealth. So he ate crummy food, he didn't have comfortable clothes, he lived in a miserable little dwelling, although he actually had a lot of wealth. The Buddha said, "Oh, that's a result of an action in a past life. He gave to an awakened being, which is a very wholesome thing to do, but then he regretted it later out of stinginess." So he said the result of the gift was that he has wealth, but the result of the stinginess was that he couldn't enjoy it.

So the Buddha would talk about these things that he could see. He said that he could see the workings of karma in ways that we can't. And the range of mind of a Buddha is vast. So he pointed to these things, but it's not something that most of us can verify. So this is the area that's mysterious. We can't quite tell for ourselves whether it's true or not. But this is just one of six ways that we can see how our actions have consequences.

Mostly when people say "I don't believe in karma," they mean this sixth way. They can't see these mysterious workings. But we can all see the first five—the ways that our actions have results in our life.

In fact, the Buddha said you can't figure out the detailed workings of karma, how it unfolds in the future. It's one of four things he called imponderable. And he said that one who speculates about them will go mad and experience vexation. I'm not sure which order that's in, but either way—not a good idea.

Another thing that sometimes gets confusing about karma is that people try to use it to explain everything that happens. The Buddha was once asked, "Does all pleasant and painful feeling come from our own past actions?" It's another way to say, "Does everything that happens in your life come from your past actions?"

And he said that people who claim this don't know what they're talking about. You can't really say that because you can see there are other kinds of results that come from other sources in the world. He pointed to causes like illness, diet, climate, accident, and assault. He said you can see things are also caused by these forces. So it's not right to say that everything comes from past actions.

The way I would interpret that in modern terms is that karma is one law in our universe, but there are a number of other laws too. There are the laws of the physical world, laws of chemistry, laws of biology and genetics. So there are many different kinds of laws at work, one of which is the law of karma, but it doesn't deny the operation of the others.

Sometimes people use a current situation—like if you're struggling or have an illness—and they'll say, "What did I do in my past actions to bring this on?" We don't know that it has anything to do with our past actions. Bodies break down for their own reasons. We inherit certain tendencies of mind from our parents. We don't know it has anything to do with our actions.

This is like trying to use karma as a rearview mirror. Here's the present—what happened in the past? We can't do that. If you and I try, we're just making up speculation. We can't see. So don't even try. There's no point.

Where karma is useful is as a map to drive down the right road in the future. We have choices now. These are the ones we want to make based on the teachings on karma. We can't interpret the past—we don't know. So let's use it going forward. That's the skillful way.

Now I want to talk about how that works. This really comes to the idea of the relation of karma and emptiness. These two seem opposite at first. Let's take it as emptiness of self—karma and anatta. How can karma land when there's no self? There's no self doing the action. How can it land?

This was raised by a bhikkhu at the time of the Buddha. This monk asked the Buddha, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" The Buddha basically said, "You haven't been listening to me." That was really all he said. But this is the question, isn't it?

To approach this, the first thing to say is that the teaching on not-self doesn't deny individuality. There's Gil and there's Sally. They're not the same, and it's good that they understand that. Sally doesn't wear Gil's boots home tonight.

Gil doesn't drive Sally's car away after the retreat. That's very helpful. So the individuality is still here, but there's nothing fixed in the individual.

A useful way to understand this is through a term in some Buddhist traditions called the mind stream. It's said that every sentient being has a mind stream or is a mind stream. In this mind stream arise all the different sense impressions, thoughts, feelings, concentration states, meditative states, and so on. Each of our mind streams is somewhat different.

Like there's this little creek running down by the meditation hall. We could call this Dharma Hall Creek, and it has its own particular way of being. It's good to designate it. "I'll meet you by the Dharma Hall Creek." We can designate that—it's helpful. We know it's different from the Mississippi River. I'm not meeting you by the Mississippi River; I'm meeting you by the Dharma Hall Creek.

But if you go and look at the Dharma Hall Creek, there's this flowing body of water. That's really what a creek is—the flowing water. It's not the same from one second to the next. You never step in the same river twice. The water's always changing—new water all the time. But there's something about the form of it that has some constancy and consistency. It will change too as the rains get bigger or smaller, but there's some consistency to it.

Each of us is this stream of being, and particularly a stream of mind states. That's where karma is important—a flow of experience. It's tending in a certain direction, and this direction kind of describes our personality. What is personality? Isn't it the flow of thoughts and feelings and speech and action that each of us embodies? Isn't that basically what determines your personality—the way you think and feel and speak and act in the world? This sounds very much like karma: volitional formations of body, speech, and mind.

As I understand it, personality is basically just these karmic patterns that we have become habituated to, which have hardened into character, that repeat again and again, that we support and reinforce by our own choices and interests and tendencies. So personality is the sum of our karmic patterns. Always changing—sometimes generous, sometimes not; sometimes loving, sometimes not. Always changing, but personality is somewhat predictable. We each have our own grooves, you might say.

But within that flow of the mind stream, nothing is fixed. Nothing is fixed. It's always changing. Now, it's not so easy to change in big ways—that's why dharma practice takes so much work. That's why the Buddha put it this way: "Action makes the world go

round." Here the word he's using is *karma*. "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action, like the chariot wheel by the pin."

You can feel this in practice—how these grooves that we've worn in the mind are very hard to unstick. We're bound by our past volitional actions, and it's hard to move out of them. But it's not impossible. Anything that's within the mind stream can be changed. Nothing is stuck in there.

Our dharma practice uses this principle for our transformation. Or another way to say it is: the path is a karmic unfolding. Our path unfolds by the principle of karma.

We come into practice carrying mostly unconscious tendencies of mind that have shaped our character in a particular direction. Our inner flow moves in a certain trajectory. Generally, for most of us entering the Dharma path, we're flowing toward Lake Samsara—cycling into birth again and again, not understanding, repeating unwise choices, heading inevitably toward that familiar destination of suffering and confusion.

But then we take up Dharma practice, and a whole new set of intentions begins entering this mind stream. We cultivate the intention toward mindfulness, toward loving kindness, toward wisdom. We develop intentions for renunciation, for stillness, for understanding. All these fresh intentions arise as we generate, strengthen, and repeat them moment after moment in our formal meditation practice and throughout daily life.

These new intentions flowing into our consciousness begin to change the entire karmic river we've been riding. They start to reorient the very direction of our stream. At first, this influx appears quite minor—it doesn't shift the overall current very much at all. But as these wholesome intentions build up and gain power, as we become more skilled and strong in our practice, they truly begin to alter both the direction and contents of our inner stream. Now it starts heading somewhere completely different: toward the nirvanic ocean. This is how our Dharma practice redirects us.

This entire transformation rests on understanding karma, because everything centers around our intention in this present moment. As we change our volitions, the direction of our stream—our life patterns, our very trajectory—becomes completely transformed. These new intentions can turn us around precisely because nothing in that original stream is solid or fixed. Yes, ignorance has been a major player. Yes, craving has dominated the flow. But these forces aren't permanently stuck there. Our fresh inten-

tions can uproot these old patterns. We all know they have certainly weakened them for us, and eventually they can uproot them entirely, to the degree of complete liberation.

This is karma working through our practice.

The way it appears to me is this: you and I, all of us in life, are floating on a sea of constantly changing conditions. All the shifting circumstances of existence, internal and external—our inner world of emotions and thoughts, our outer world of relationships, livelihood, politics, environment, ecological developments. We're exposed to all these changing situations over which we have very little control.

So we drift on this sea which contains many aspects of chaos. The world doesn't always function well. The environment doesn't always support us. We remain exposed, vulnerable to countless forces and changes. Everything seems rather chaotic, with no clear sanctuary in sight.

Yet we possess one navigating tool on this uncertain sea: our intention. Intention serves as our rudder, the one instrument that can steer our boat through all these shifting and unpredictable conditions. When we align our intention with the principles of Dharma—with the principles of wisdom—that boat heads toward safe harbor.

So we begin cultivating those intentions I mentioned: mindfulness, loving-kindness, wisdom, compassion, simplicity, generosity. These lead us in the right direction.

There's a dialogue with a teacher I mentioned earlier, Nisargadatta Maharaj, who works primarily through direct conversation with students. Someone was discussing with him their sense of direction in life, their destiny. Maharaj responded, "Your own will was the backbone of your destiny."

The person replied, "Surely karma interfered." This reflects the common understanding in India that past actions push us in certain directions beyond our immediate choosing.

Maharaj's response was profound in its simplicity: "Karma shapes the circumstances. The attitudes are your own."

"Ultimately your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character." This is the profound message of karma. We take up skillful intentions that form our character, and these have amazing consequences in our life.

If you've been practicing Dharma for some time, you've probably witnessed this yourself. Did you make all those positive changes happen? Are all those positive changes only in your inner life? Or do you see positive changes in your relationships and your circumstances? I believe our Dharma practice truly impacts our outer life as well. It takes time—it doesn't happen overnight—but I have deep faith that this inner development expresses itself outwardly as well.

This is the promise of karma. It can steer us to happiness, it can steer us to refuge, and it can steer us in the end to freedom.

The Buddha spoke of this liberation in some of his more enigmatic quotations, where he talks about awakening as being synonymous with the end of karma. In the Anguttara Nikaya, he says: "These four types of karma have been understood, realized, and made known by me. Which four? There is karma that is dark with dark result, karma that is bright with bright result, karma that is dark and bright with dark and bright result, and karma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the end of karma."

What is he talking about?

As I understand it, karma that is dark comes from unwholesome motivations—greed, hatred, confusion, cruelty. Karma that is bright is action done willfully with the motivation of moving toward the positive: generosity, loving-kindness, positive actions inspired by the wish to do good. Then there's action that's mixed—you give somebody a gift, but you want recognition back. That's dark and bright together.

Then there's this karma that is neither dark nor bright with results that are neither dark nor bright, leading to the end of karma. The end of karma is a synonym for liberation, for arahantship. The Buddha said that the fully awakened one has come to the end of karma.

So what is this karma that is neither dark nor bright? The Buddha explains: "It is the volition to abandon the dark karma with dark results, to abandon the bright karma with bright results, and to abandon the dark and bright karma with dark and bright results."

This means at some point—and this is my interpretation, as it's not spelled out so clearly—we stop trying to do anything at all. We definitely don't want to do harm, but in the refinement and subtlety of meditation, we also stop trying to cultivate beautiful states like generosity and loving-kindness, and of course, anything mixed. We're

abandoning volition. We're letting go of individual will. We're not calculating our life at that point. We're opening up to the fullness of not-doing, letting the stream of Dharma carry us wherever it will.

The Buddha becomes more specific in the next passage: "And what is karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the end of karma? It is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

That is the Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path, as I understand it in its refinement and depth, is a way of deeply letting go of personal desire and action based on personal interest. It's such a complete letting go that it opens into the profound stillness of awakening from a place of great trust and non-doing—the end of karma.

But it remains something of a mystery. So let's sit for just a moment with that mystery: the karma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither dark nor bright results, leading to the end of karma is just this Noble Eightfold Path.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 116

Brahmavihāras: Mettā

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

In this dharma talk from a February retreat, Guy Armstrong introduces the four brahmavihāras—the divine abidings that the Buddha repeatedly emphasized as essential for spiritual development. These heart practices are mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), mudita (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity). Armstrong explains how these complement vipassanā practice, with the Buddha describing two types of disciples: dhamma followers (wisdom types) and faith followers (heart types).

The talk focuses on mettā practice, which cultivates unconditional caring without seeking anything in return. Following traditional methodology, practitioners begin where it's easiest—with oneself and a benefactor—before extending to more challenging relationships. Armstrong guides the cultivation of mettā through four traditional phrases covering safety, happiness, health, and ease of living. He emphasizes that mettā doesn't require intense emotion but rather sincere caring, and practitioners should trust the process rather than forcing feelings.

The session includes practical guidance on working with resistance, selecting appropriate benefactors, and maintaining steady practice even when feelings fluctuate. Armstrong addresses common challenges like self-judgment and the complexity of adult relationships, offering skillful alternatives such as visualizing people as children or switching to compassion practice when difficult images arise.

So we're beginning today this afternoon practice, which we'll do every day, of a guided meditation in one of the four Brahmavihāras, or in English, the divine abidings.

These are four states of mind that the Buddha talked about again and again in the texts as important to cultivate as an aid to our overall development in the Dharma. And these four qualities—we'll have time to explore all of them for a little while in the month of February. Normally, if you go on a shorter retreat of seven days, you just have time to go through one. It's usually loving kindness. But because we have four weeks, we'll go through all four.

We're going to spend more time on the first one, which is loving kindness. The Pali word is mettā. Actually, we call it "metta," but that's a mispronunciation. It's "mettā." So those of you who are living in the first dorm, you are in Mettā. It's even sweeter than "metta," isn't it? Kind of has a nice ring. But because we're so used to the English pronunciation, I'll probably just call it metta.

And the second of the four is compassion. The Pali word is karuṇā. The third is appreciative joy or muditā. And the fourth is equanimity or upekkhā. So we named these four residence halls after these divine abidings. We could have named them after the four noble truths—dukkha and taṇhā—but we thought that wouldn't be as appealing.

So these are the four practices. The first three are very strong heart practices: loving kindness, compassion, and joy. The fourth is the balancing factor or strengthening factor that's really the foundation for the other three. It's a cooler quality emotionally, but it's very important as a way to hold the opening of the heart.

We really recommend these practices as a complement to the Vipassana practice. And some people will find they love these practices more than the insight practice. The Buddha talked about two kinds of disciples. He said there are those who are Dhamma followers—we could say wisdom types—and there are those who are faith followers, and you might say faith or heart types.

In our tradition, the wisdom practice, the Dhamma practice is Vipassana, this development of clear seeing of the way things are, and it's the one that frees the mind. The heart qualities are really important also for our development because they lend a sweet quality to our experience of life. And they give the mind the strength or the confidence or the buoyancy that lets us let go. And it's the letting go that opens us to insight. So the Vipassana practice and the Brahmavihāra practices really support one another and make a good combination as we walk this whole path.

For the first two weeks of February, we're going to focus on the development of loving kindness through the cultivation of this quality of mettā.

Mettā, as many of you know, is a kind of love that's not self-centered. So it's a kind of caring for ourselves and others that isn't looking for something back. You know, with romantic love, there's a wish for something in return. And if that something isn't forthcoming, the romantic love tends to stop. But this altruistic caring of mettā cares about others without putting strings on it, without asking for conditions. So we say sometimes it's an unconditional caring for ourselves and for others.

It's intended to be developed and felt for all beings everywhere. We'll get to this point, but we'll work up to it. Traditionally, we work up to it through several different categories of individuals before we open to all beings everywhere. So we'll probably spend the first week and a half working with different individuals on the way to all beings.

The recommendation is, with all the Brahmavihāras, start where it's easy. Isn't that a nice relief? Vipassana often seems like we have to go into the hardest stuff first before we get to the dessert. But with the Brahmavihāras, go where it's easiest first and use that as the foundation to work to where it's more difficult.

So in the teachings of the tradition, the person who it's generally easiest to care about is oneself. So that's where we'll start. We'll start by sending the caring to ourselves. Then who's next easiest? Someone who's just been generally very kind to us. And this is the person that we're going to call the benefactor. So these are the two people that we'll bring into the meditation today: ourselves and the benefactor. And I'll explain each of them in a little detail how to practice with this.

Even though it's said in the tradition that self is the easiest, often when we do this practice, we find self is the hardest.

Because as we tend to feel caring or loving towards ourselves, all the reasons we're not lovable can come to the front. Objections come and reservations come, and we hold back from a real sense of tenderness for ourselves. So we want to put some extra time and effort into this developing of loving kindness for ourselves. We'll recommend that you include it in every period, even as we go through the different categories up to all beings.

So what is this quality and how do we develop it? Basically, as you start to care for somebody, what you find is you hope for their welfare. That's kind of the essence of caring—you wish for the person's welfare. If you have a sincere wish that someone be well, whether it's yourself or another, that is the essence of loving kindness.

We'll develop this quality by repeating phrases that express that wish in different ways. Some of you may already have very established phrases for loving kindness. It's fine to use those. If you don't, then we'll recommend that you start with some form of the traditional phrases.

There are four traditional phrases that are used to develop this sense of caring. They can be applied to you or to anybody. The first is you take a look at the person's situation in life and you hope that they're not in danger. How are we in danger? We can get harmed from outside or we could harm ourselves from within. The difficult and dark

places that our own minds go to are generally more harmful to us than what happens to us day by day from other people. So this wish for safety is felt by everyone and it applies to both external safety and internal safety.

Second area that we look at is someone's overall sense of mental well-being. You could say their quality of happiness. If you want yourself and your friends to be well, you wish for their mental well-being or their happiness.

Third, you wish for their physical well-being. You hope that they're not ill or injured or suffering a lot of physical pain.

And fourth, we hope that people find their way in the world easily. In terms of making a living, being able to support yourself, having supportive relationships of friends and family, you hope that goes well for people.

So these are the four areas that the traditional phrases of loving kindness will cover. As we get into the meditation, I'll suggest some different ways that you can say these four wishes.

The beautiful thing about these four phrases that we'll offer in variation is they apply to everyone. They apply to all human beings and they apply to all non-human beings. You can think about the squirrels that you see running up the trees and you can wish these same four things for them. You can think about beings on other planes, if that's part of your view of the cosmos, and you can have these same four wishes for them. So they're very universal.

As you get familiar with the phrases and how they apply to every being, you start to see that we all really want the same things. All beings everywhere have these same basic wishes. So this universal nature of our aspiration is something that joins us with all of life.

The practices of the Brahma Viharas are considered very uniting. They take away all kinds of divisions—divisions based on age or race or gender or class or part of the world that one lives in or ethnicity, even the differences between human and animal start to get worn away as we see we all want the same things: safety, happiness, health, and ease.

So these are the four things we'll focus on in the traditional phrases. As I said, if you have phrases you're already comfortable with, you don't need to change them. But these four phrases are good phrases. They've been used for 2,500 years, and they work. So they come with that endorsement.

The feeling of loving kindness doesn't have to be a very strong one. Sometimes people think, well, if I'm going to be becoming more loving, I have to have a really strong, passionate feeling for someone to say that I feel loving kindness. But it's not like that. It can be a little flicker of just sincere caring. I just care that you're well. That's the beginning. It can grow to be much stronger, but it doesn't need to be.

So as we do the meditation, which we'll do by repeating these four phrases again and again, don't try to push your heart into feeling anything. Trust in the practice and let whatever feeling comes, let it come. It will grow in its own due course.

The head already puts a lot of pressure on the heart to feel certain emotions and not to feel others. In the loving kindness practice, we want to give ourselves lots of care also. Part of that is don't put pressure on your heart.

As you repeat these phrases, let the words settle into your heart rather than just passing through your mind. Feel the quality of intention behind each wish.

May I be happy and peaceful.

And here you can think of happiness in whatever way feels natural to you - perhaps a sense of contentment, or joy, or simply the absence of suffering.

May I be healthy and strong.

This includes not just physical health, but mental and emotional well-being as well.

May I live with ease.

May the difficulties of life not overwhelm me. May I find a way to move through challenges with grace.

Continue repeating these phrases at your own pace, letting them resonate in your heart center. If your mind wanders to other thoughts, that's completely natural. Simply notice where it went and gently bring your attention back to the phrases and the intention of caring for yourself.

You might find that certain phrases feel more natural or meaningful than others. Feel free to emphasize those, or to modify the language slightly if that helps the meaning come alive for you. The traditional phrases are: "May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be safe, may I live with ease." But you can also use phrases like "May I be at peace" or "May I be free from suffering."

The key is finding words that genuinely express your wish for your own well-being. Don't worry if you don't feel a strong emotional response right away. Sometimes the practice works more quietly, planting seeds that will blossom later. Trust the process and simply maintain the intention of kindness toward yourself.

As we continue, notice any resistance that might arise. Sometimes we find it difficult to offer ourselves the same kindness we would readily give to others. If you notice self-criticism or the voice that says you don't deserve happiness, simply acknowledge those thoughts with compassion and return to the phrases. This resistance is normal and part of what we're working with in this practice.

Let the rhythm of the phrases create a gentle, soothing quality in your mind. Like a lullaby of loving wishes for yourself.

May you live with ease.

So we're expressing the same wishes for wellbeing, but now directing them toward this person who has shown us kindness. As you repeat the phrases, notice how it feels to send these good wishes to someone you care about. Often there's a natural warmth that arises, a sense of genuine care flowing from your heart to theirs.

And just as with the self-directed practice, after completing a round of phrases, pause and return your attention to the heart center. Feel the resonance in your body of having sent loving wishes to your benefactor. Notice what emotions are present—perhaps gratitude, affection, or simply a quiet sense of connection.

Sometimes with the benefactor, the loving kindness flows quite easily. This person has earned a place in your heart through their kindness, and it feels natural to wish them well. Other times, you might notice thoughts arising about their current circumstances, worries about challenges they're facing, or even guilt about not being in closer contact. Whatever arises is perfectly normal. Simply return to the phrases, trusting in the power of your sincere intention to wish them well.

The benefactor stage serves as a bridge in our practice. We move from the sometimes challenging territory of self-love to the more accessible realm of caring for someone who has cared for us. This helps establish the feeling of metta more strongly in our system before we venture into more challenging categories of beings.

Take your time with the benefactor. Let yourself really feel what it's like to send loving wishes to someone who has been good to you. This feeling of warmth and care that you cultivate here becomes the foundation for extending metta more widely. We're strengthening the muscle of loving kindness, learning to access and direct this natural capacity of the heart.

May you live with ease.

And just continuing to repeat these phrases directed toward your benefactor. Try to stay connected to the sense of your benefactor's presence. Sometimes if the phrases are getting a little dry or impersonal, then renew your connection to the benefactor—bring them to mind again, see their image, hear their voice. So you really feel the wishes are directed to this particular being.

Remember that metta is not about necessarily feeling a strong emotion so much as having a sincere wish for the other's welfare.

May all beings be safe from harm.
May all beings be happy.
May all beings be healthy.
May all beings live with ease.

So these are the basics of the loving kindness practice. If you find it helpful, you can bring it in throughout the day in any sitting. You could do ten or fifteen minutes. You might take one sitting a day where you do the whole period of loving kindness. It can be a very helpful mood softener.

Even as you're starting a Vipassana sit, just remembering that the intention is really to be kind and take care of ourselves can bring a softer attitude as we go into the mindfulness practice. So you can experiment a little bit with combining these, and we'll do a guided meditation every day at this time and then bring it in throughout the day if it's helpful for you.

At this time, we have some time for questions. A lot of you have heard and done much metta instruction and practice and may prefer to go to walking. So if you'd like to just stay quiet and begin the walking, please feel free to go. If there are questions, we can take a few minutes for those.

[Question about grace and whether talks are being recorded]

So the question is, could I say something about grace and its connection with ease? And the second is, are these being recorded?

The second is easier. Some of them are being recorded. Max is going to be here some afternoons to record, and they will be available later. What I think we'll try to do is record every time we add a new category. Like today we did self and benefactor, and we'll do this for a couple of days. So the instructions won't change so much for a couple of days. Then we'll add another category and another category. So we'll try to record the changes. Most of it hopefully will be recorded.

Grace is a word that isn't used a lot in Buddhism, but I like the answer that I think it was Sasaki Roshi who gave. He said something like, in regards to grace, God has already done his part and now the rest is up to us. So that's one angle.

Another angle is that by putting our sincere energy into our practice, good things happen for reasons that we can't always explain. And so by setting the seeds of our good intentions, grace follows based on that. So I think this particular practice is a really good way to invite the quality of grace.

[Question about attachment arising during metta practice for health]

Traditional metta has brought me joy when directed to myself—it feels good and nice. However, right now there's something I want so badly for my physical health that when I did the four phrases and got to "may I be healthy," even though I'm generally healthy, there's something I really want for my physical health. Instead of it feeling good, I feel myself constricting. I know I also want to accept things just as they are, but at the same time, I notice my wish for my physical health becomes permeated with grasping, and I wonder what you could suggest about working with constriction and attachment.

This is such a beautiful and honest question. What you're describing is exactly the dharma in action—you're seeing how desire and attachment work, how they create suffering even in the context of a loving practice.

It's a good question. When she practices the phrase for health, instead of feeling caring, it reminds her of something she's concerned about regarding her physical condition, bringing up worry and anxiety rather than the intended loving-kindness.

This can actually happen with any of the phrases. I've known people who, when they make the wish for safety, find memories arising of times they didn't feel safe, or become aware of current situations where they feel vulnerable. When this occurs, it's better to find a different phrase.

You could either skip that particular phrase on health, or use something that cultivates acceptance of present conditions. One alternative people have found helpful is "may I live in harmony with this body." This invites the mind toward equanimity and opens us to accepting things as they are right now.

I'd suggest either approach—find a phrase that genuinely brings equanimity and acceptance, or simply focus on the other three phrases. Both are skillful responses.

Another participant raised a fascinating question about wishing all beings to be safe and happy, noting that in nature, many beings need to eat other beings to survive. Sharks, for instance, aren't going to be healthy without consuming other creatures. How do we reconcile this with our loving-kindness practice when the happiness of some beings requires the death of others?

This touches on why equanimity serves as the necessary foundation for all the Brahmaviharas. When we contemplate sharks eating seals, it can bring up worry, reservation, and certainly compassion. There are several skillful ways to work with this.

One approach is to develop greater trust in our equanimity around such situations, accepting that this is simply how nature functions without seeking a final resolution. Another is to let these images guide us naturally from metta to compassion practice. If the image of a shark eating a seal arises, we can extend compassion to the seal, and perhaps even to the shark—after all, it's not particularly pleasant to survive by killing others.

When disturbing situations arise during metta practice, we hope our equanimity can hold them, but if it's not quite steady, moving consciously to compassion is perfectly appropriate. Then we can deliberately turn our attention to beings who don't harm others in order to be happy, changing our focus rather than wrestling with an unresolvable logical dilemma.

There's no perfect philosophical solution to this aspect of existence, but there are practical ways to work skillfully with it. I'd recommend the practical approach, remaining open to how your relationship with these realities might evolve over time. It is indeed a heart-wrenching truth of animal existence.

A participant shared a beautiful insight about working with resistance toward adults. She noticed that when sending loving-kindness to adults, complicated relationships sometimes create obstacles. However, when she envisions them as children, her heart naturally expands with pure caring. She finds the same openness when seeing the child within herself during self-directed practice.

This is actually quite skillful. Many of us can more easily access unconditional caring when we see the innocent child within the adult. There are several ways to work with this recognition.

In about ten days, we'll explore the "difficult person" category, where we deliberately choose a complicated relationship and practice extending sincere caring to that individual. When we can find genuine metta for one challenging person, it demonstrates the possibility of extending it to others with whom we have complex dynamics. So there's real value in occasionally staying with the difficult adult relationship, even when the loving-kindness doesn't flow easily.

At the same time, it's perfectly fine to shift perspective and see them as a child, allowing that pure form of metta to flow through. Both approaches have merit, and we simply acknowledge that some adult relationships carry complexity that affects our practice.

They're going to take a bit of work, and so we're going to put in the work and see if it can shift. This is one of the beautiful uses of this practice. Once we discover the power of this tool of loving kindness, we can use the formal meditation to transform these complicated relationships.

Because ordinarily, the wish for the other's happiness isn't the first thing on our mind when we relate to them. But we find if we can tune into their welfare and our wish for their welfare and come from that place, it can completely change the quality of the relationship. And then they start to feel it too. That's what's remarkable about these things. As we change inwardly toward a difficult person, they start to feel it and they change in relationship to us.

So that's one way to go. The second way, as you mentioned, is to think of them as a child. Another way is to think of their suffering, and it moves into more of a compassion flavor than a metta flavor. You could still use the metta phrases, but you focus on their suffering or pain, and what comes through is more compassion—but it's still a way to hold them.

And the fourth approach, which is what I usually recommend, is to go to someone easier. So at this point, if you're engaged and the person you bring in is complicated, go where it's simplest. Benefactor, good friend—and we'll get to the difficult relationships a little later. Thank you. It's a great thing to work with.

Maybe time for one more. Was there a question? Yes.

Just kind of a utilitarian question. After repeating the phrases twice, he felt he was done. Should he keep repeating even though he doesn't really have much feeling with it?

And the answer is, yes. I did this practice—I've done this several times on six-week retreats where this was all I did for six weeks, was repeat these phrases all day long, in sitting, in walking, in meals, in showering. The feeling keeps changing. That's the beauty of it. Impermanence manifests through this practice all the time.

So it may go flat for a little while, but then it will wake up again, and it'll get stronger, and it'll get really strong, and then it'll go flat again. And then we want to give up, but we just keep going. And then it wakes up again and it gets strong again. So the steadiness with keeping the phrases going is an interesting way to look at what the heart does with that.

Because the heart keeps opening and closing. And it's one of the things we learn. I don't know of any heart that stays open all the time. So I think its rhythm is that it opens and there's metta feeling. Then it closes for a while and things are neutral. And then we keep going and it opens again.

So for me, it's really interesting watching the seasons of the heart as we just keep steady with our effort in saying the phrases. And it becomes interesting to watch how they change and how our response changes. Yeah, I encourage you to just try it. Just try it.

Okay, so it's quarter to five. We have thirty minutes of walking before tea. And so I hope you'll take the metta with you as you walk. Walk happily. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 117

Self and Proliferation

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the deep psychological mechanisms behind our mental restlessness and proliferative thinking. Drawing primarily from the Honeyball Sutta (MN 18), he traces how perception leads to thinking, then to mental proliferation (papañca) - the endless elaboration of thoughts that keeps us trapped in cycles of craving and aversion. Armstrong connects this process to the three kilesas (greed, aversion, delusion) and explains how our attempts to construct a solid sense of self through these mental formations actually create the very insecurity we seek to escape. He offers practical insight into how mindfulness can interrupt this cycle by meeting experiences directly without the overlay of past conditioning and future projections. The talk emphasizes how touching the silence beyond proliferation gives us a taste of the unconditioned peace that leads toward liberation, making this essential listening for understanding the mechanics of suffering and the path to freedom.*

I want to start from the theme that Heather talked about the other night, which is how we go on and on with our thoughts based on some kind of non-acceptance of the basic situation that we find ourselves in and how we can put a period to that—not do that any more than needed.

Tonight I just want to look a little more deeply into the dynamics of that situation of running on with our thinking and what's involved. Because I think that it's closely related to our sense of a self.

You know, the Buddha said that the sense of an I is not intrinsic to our experience as a human being in a body, but rather it's something we construct and create out of our own thoughts and views and beliefs. And that when we strongly affirm and believe in this sense of self, it constitutes a kind of bondage.

And you can feel this in a moment-to-moment way in your practice. We've probably all touched to some extent an experience where we realize that our nature includes this vast awareness, limitless awareness, that can be filled with a sense of boundless loving kindness directed to all beings. But how often do we live there? And what takes us out of that boundlessness? Something keeps shrinking the consciousness back in and closing us up in some kind of contraction.

And when we look at this, what creates this contraction, it's usually around some sense of I and me and mine and some concern about self. So we can take a look at this dynamic—the times in the day when we're open in this very unbounded way, and then the ways that we feel that narrowing and constriction due to the interests of self. What's going on with that?

And I think that when we start to look at this dynamic closely, we'll see that we generate this small sense of self again and again and again. It's not intrinsic to our momentary experience, but we recreate it over and over with pretty predictable ways of thinking and feeling. Each of us has our own particular patterns and tendencies of our personality, but we each have some that generate this small sense of self in rather expectable ways again and again.

So I want to look a little bit tonight at how that sense of self gets built up and constructed and what keeps it going.

In one way, the Buddha's description of our situation in that constriction is very simple. Here's one quotation: "Nothing whatever is worth clinging to. One who has heard this has heard all the dharmas. One who has practiced this has practiced all the dharmas." Sounds simple, right?

Or the second and third noble truths: The cause of suffering is craving. The end of suffering is the end of craving. Wow, that's just craving and clinging. That's all I have to deal with.

But it's complicated because these operate on so many subtle levels and layers and get into every facet of our life and our personality and our heart and our mind and our body and our relationships and our work and everything that it generates quite a tangle. The Buddha talked about this again and again—the tangle that has to be unraveled for us to come to freedom.

So the mechanisms of our suffering are actually quite complex. And yet we have the ability through meditation to understand them and to see them. All the Buddha's basic teachings are pointing to this tangle and the threads that make it up.

So if you look into the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, karma, not-self, becoming, the five aggregates, the end of karma and nibbana, they're all about this central dilemma of how we keep constricting through this sense of self and how we can open and release into the space of freedom. So all these basic teachings are connected.

So I'm going to talk about a number of them tonight as we explore this formation.

I want to start with something that Heather talked about, about how active our minds are when we find ourselves in retreat. Probably most of us have come out of pretty busy lives. I've heard a number of reports in the first days about people being tired because life was so busy and catching up on sleep and feeling exhausted. And that's normal for early days of the retreat.

So most of us come out of pretty busy lives and we come here. And then all of a sudden, all that doing and planning and creating and constructing isn't needed anymore. Right? Does the mind know that? Just because the outer activity stops, does the mind stop? Not usually.

Along with the reports of sleepiness, the most common other hindrance reported is restlessness. Restlessness. So in between the periods of fatigue and sleepiness, the mind is sort of going at quite a high rate. You know, probably pretty similar to the way it was going when we were out in our life last week. Things are starting to slow down now—I'm hearing this in the interviews also—but it's taken a while.

So we come into this situation where we can drop our outer doing, but there's this momentum built up in our mental activity and in thinking and planning and so forth that doesn't stop, even though it's no longer needed, even though it's no longer necessary. Why is that? Why can't we just say, mind quiet down? I don't need you right now.

Let me just sit here peacefully and enjoy my meditation. Why does this engine keep on running and running and running?

There seems to be some momentum there, and I think that momentum is not just random or accidental. I think there are deep forces in the heart and mind that are driving it. So we want to look into that.

Now, I'm not suggesting that your goal in meditation should be to stop all thoughts. First, it's not possible. Second, it's not necessary. So please don't interpret this as saying no thought should arise for a good meditator. That's not what I'm saying.

But there's a difference between a thought arising, being seen and let go of, and plunging into the swirl of mental activity, taking hold of it, engaging and furthering it. That's the activity that we don't need to do. We don't need to keep energizing those thoughts and driving them forward and buying into the storm that they create. That's a level of doing that isn't necessary.

So thought can arise, pass away—no problem. No problem for a meditator. But this active engagement in the thinking process based on past and future causes us to lose our mindfulness. We get lost in the created fiction of that conceptual world. And so this is what we want to look into. Where is this coming from? And is it necessary, or is it possible to stop that kind of doing, that level of activity?

This stopping of doing activity—or you could call it non-doing—is quite a high value in Buddhism and in meditation. This is something that we want to explore. Of course, we need to do in daily life, physically. How much we need to think about it ahead of time is a matter for some refinement. But here in meditation, we don't need to do a whole lot. When you're sitting on the cushion, when you're walking back and forth, not much thinking is needed to do that. And so is it possible to find some non-doing in these simple activities? And if we can, there's a real sense of freedom in it.

Some of my friendships in the Dharma go back quite a few years. In my early days at IMS, I was on staff there for a couple of years with good friends like Carol Wilson and Rodney Smith and Steve Armstrong. In those early years, we were doing a staff retreat. We took a two-week period and the staff went into retreat while other people cooked for us. One year, Steve exercised some of his free time to create this brochure for IMS—a parody kind of brochure.

The symbol on the front of it was a Dharma wheel with eight spokes. It said "Insight Meditation Society" and advertised the advantages of coming on retreat: "No talking, no swimming, no eating afternoon, no golf and no tennis." It said, "The vacation of your dreams!" in that style. But what I remember best about it was the motto on the front cover of the brochure, where Steve said, "It's better to do nothing than to waste time."

So this is kind of our goal as meditators—to do nothing. And it's not as easy as it sounds. We can stop doing with our body, but we keep doing with our minds. So what would it mean to stop doing with our minds?

Just as an indication of the value of this, I want to mention a young Tibetan Lama who I've met and practiced with a couple of times named Mingyur Rinpoche. I think he's now about thirty-six years old. A few years ago, he was in the midst of building a very large worldwide organization. He had a center in the U.S. based in Minneapolis, a center in Asia based in Hong Kong. He has in Asia several monasteries, hundreds of monks and nuns, lay students across Asia, and thousands of students here in America and Europe. He's a very respected young Lama.

He did his first three-year retreat at age thirteen. At that age, he felt a strong draw toward meditation. He asked his father for approval—his father was a famous Tibetan Lama also—and received his approval.

So Mingyur Rinpoche went into retreat at age 13. He completed that retreat and at age 16 he said, "It's not enough. I want to do another." So he signed up for another three-year retreat at age 16. About a year into that retreat, the head teacher, the retreat master, died. What were they going to do? Cancel the three-year retreat, or find another leader?

One of the heads of his lineage, a very senior monk, said, "We'll pick a new retreat master, and it will be Mingyur Rinpoche"—who was 17 years old at that time. That's the kind of background and stature he has within the Tibetan community—highly respected from a very young age.

After he finished his retreat practice, he went into something like nine years of formal monastic studies, developing a very deep philosophical training as well. He has a broad vision for bringing meditation into the world in the West and Asia, not only through monasteries but to lay people. He has active programs in education and hospitals and a great vision of outreach.

Through his personal magnetism, he had attracted many students and created two large organizations. They were flourishing with retreats and teachings and books and videotapes. This was all in full swing when he announced, "I want to do another three-year retreat."

His students and administrators were very supportive because they know how much practice means to him. They prepared to cover all the activities of the organizations while he went away for three years. About a year and a half ago, he took off for another three-year retreat. As far as I know, no one I know has seen him since. He's wandering somewhere between India and Nepal and maybe Kashmir, practicing in remote mountain hermitages.

Why would a young, budding lama, growing in stature internationally, leave all his worldly activities like that? Because the value of stopping is so important. The value of retiring into seclusion—which you all have here—to do that inner work of ceasing and developing the mind and heart. It was such a strong draw, he left all that aside for three years.

This quality of non-doing is very highly regarded in all the Buddhist traditions. In appreciation of it, we want to look into the energy behind our own doing. What is it that drives all this mental activity? Is all this activity of the mind just a random vestige, like an appendix that doesn't mean much anymore? Or is there something significant going on? Is there some deeper fuel for this engine?

I want to suggest that there is. I think it's quite significant, all this activity.

The way I see the situation is that all of us at some point in the past have had a glimpse of the underlying uncertainty of human life, of all sentient life. We've seen the nature of change, the light or empty nature of the world and our senses. We've intuited on some level that there's nothing very reliable there that we can take hold of and hold onto. The world isn't solid in the way that we often assume it to be. I think we all know that on some level.

As a defense against seeing that deep nature of change and the lack of solidity and substance outwardly, I think we've all tried to create it inwardly by constructing a solid sense of self. If we have a sense that there's an "I" somewhere in here that goes on and on over time, that seems to provide some continuity that the outside world can't offer. This tries to create a sense of security that we haven't been able to find externally.

I think we have all constructed what we hope will be an inner refuge against the incessant waves of change that life presents—through some sense of ongoing identity, a continuing sense of self or "I."

Let's take a look at some of the details. How would one go about constructing such a thing? How would one feed a self like that?

Well, one of the things we notice is the "I" likes pleasure and doesn't like pain. So one of the ways we can feed it is to keep giving it pleasure and keep the pain away. Then this "I" seems to be somewhat safe. But how reliable is that strategy? Can you always do that? Of course not. We can't always do it, but we keep trying.

So we keep looking to adjust what life is presenting to us to keep this self fed and secure. We have three main strategies for doing it, which the Buddha pointed to again and again and again. The first strategy is the force of desire.

The word that's often used in translation is greed. It's a translation of the Pali word *lobha*. And that is the tendency of mind that keeps trying to get pleasure coming our way.

The second tendency is called aversion or *dosa* in Pali. It expresses itself in two ways. There's an aggressive form of *dosa*, which pushes away the unpleasant. And there's an avoidance form of *dosa* which shrinks from the unpleasant. One might be called anger, one might be called fear. So together those are our ways, our strategies for separating ourselves from the unpleasant.

And the third piece that's needed to keep the rest in place is not looking at it too closely. And this is the operation of delusion or in Pali, *moha*. Because if we look too closely at what we were doing, we would see it doesn't really work and it doesn't make sense. And that would undermine the whole project of self.

So these three things go together. The Buddha called these the three *kilesas*, roots of the unwholesome: greed, aversion, and delusion. And together they constitute the enterprise of self. And they underlie all this unconscious doing that we keep engaging in again and again and again.

So this doing is not just an accidental or random thing, but it's an outgrowth of these very deep forces connected with our search for security. But this search for security inwardly, through feeding the self, through constructing an ongoing self, also isn't truly successful. Because the inner landscape is changing also and we can't control the outer. But we keep trying because we haven't really examined the nature of our activity. We haven't examined these movements of greed, aversion and delusion. So we keep trying to fix life. Again and again and again, make it a little bit better.

So the Tibetans have a saying that the essence of *samsara*, which is this endless cycle of taking birth and dying—which can be understood on a life, death, rebirth, and a new life level, or can be understood as the creation of a new self moment to moment. Either way you want to understand *samsara* is fine. The essence of *samsara* is trying to correct. We keep trying to fix life, to align with this project of self.

So it's why our sittings aren't always so peaceful. You know, we want the body to feel a little more comfortable, or we want to push away the pain that's come into the shoulder. Or we want to recapture that peaceful sitting that we had earlier in the day. Or we want to feel again this really beautiful loving kindness that we had for our benefactor. Or we don't want to feel some fear or anxiety that's surfacing in the moment. And so we keep trying to make things just a little better, just a little better. We keep fussing with and tinkering with our basic experience moment after moment after moment. And all that doing, based on greed, aversion, delusion, blocks the sense of peace. We don't know how to stop it, because this project has such deep roots and we've put so much into it, it keeps going from a lot of momentum.

This ongoing activity we're engaged in comes from a deep motivation. And because the factor of motivation is there, it connects with the Buddha's teaching on *karma*. *Karma* just means action out of a motivation, out of an intention. And the compulsive nature of these activities is born from the intentions of greed, aversion, and delusion.

And when we look at them closely, we'll see that all these thoughts that keep running, running, running, running, running are mostly about I, me and mine. And they're not always so important. You know, we can get quite involved with really minor thoughts and then we can neglect sort of other big areas. Did you spend very much time today worrying about the global economy? Or the unemployment rate, which is currently at 7.9% in the United States? Or the 5 million people who are about to have their homes foreclosed because of the banking crisis of a few years ago? I mean, those issues are a bit larger than most of the concerns we go on and on about. But we go on and on about them because they're my concerns. So this is kind of the nature of our inner dialogue. When we stop and slow down physically, we start to hear it.

Ajahn Amaro kind of captured this contrast in a really beautiful talk title. He gave a talk on becoming, and it was subtitled, "Why Public Speaking is More Terrifying Than Worldwide Nuclear Destruction." Because it's about me.

So we have this dilemma. I mean, it really is, it's our existential dilemma as people. There is this underlying openness in existence.

And part of that openness is a lack of permanence, a lack of solidity. And yet we have this quest for security. The human heart is not happy in lack of security and has this deep urge to find it.

And just a postscript while we're on this topic: the Buddha considered that his path led to true security. So it's not the case that there is no security in life, but there is no security in the changing elements of conditioned existence. This hunger for security is answered through the fulfillment of the path. That's why he called the goal a refuge. But it is not found through the construction of self or through the changing elements of existence.

So once we've embarked on the creation of this self, we need to define ourselves in a certain way to give our personality a sense of continuity. We construct a self-image or self-view, a belief in who we are. And in order to maintain it, we have to take the events of the day and sweep them into our self-view. This is another part of what the activity is about.

Something happens to us during the day and we affirm, "Yes, that confirms my sense of being unworthy," or "That confirms my sense of never getting a fair deal in life," or "That confirms my sense of being better than everybody else here, of being smarter or more compassionate or something." So we take the events of the day and we reconstruct the self on those events to match who we take ourselves to be. And those patterns are fairly predictable because who we take ourselves to be needs to be ongoing.

This is summed up in a really nice quotation. This quotation has been attributed to the Buddha. I've never found it in the texts and I don't believe it's there, but let's pretend that it is because it's a great quotation: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit and habit hardens into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings."

I'm going to read it again because there's an important point here: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit and habit hardens into character. Therefore watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings."

So we have all shaped and we are all shaping our character out of our thoughts and our intentions and our actions. And then that becomes the person that we take ourselves to be. This aspect of character then feeds into our personality view, our self-image, who we think we are. So our own actions shape the mind and then that mind takes a momentum that carries forward even when it's not appropriate.

I remember early in my practice, I was doing a three-month retreat in the summer in England. It was at the retreat center that was the precursor to Gaia House, the first Gaia House. It was in Wiltshire before Gaia House was bought in Devon. It's actually where Sally and I met. She was managing the retreat, and I came to sit for the summer, and that's how we got to know each other.

So I was a yogi there. And England in the summer can be really beautiful, as you may know. One evening, I remember it well—I was doing standing meditation out in the back garden underneath a tree, probably a fruit tree like an apple tree or a pear tree that was flowering. I was doing standing meditation. My eyes were closed. I was on the lawn right next to this tree that was in full bloom.

My inner process was that at this point in my practice, I was going through a lot of fear. So fear was coming up strongly in my sittings and my walkings and in my standing. I was experiencing fear right then. So I was deep in my inner world and the thoughts and the feelings were going through and I was really caught in this emotion of fear and resisting it and hating it and so forth.

And something made me open my eyes. I opened my eyes and it was this beautiful, soft, British summer evening. The air was just mild and the blossoms were around me and that golden light of late in the day was falling on the garden and some birds were calling in the neighbor's yard. The grass was green. Everything was beautiful. I felt held in this beautiful, tender nature space.

And then the thought went through my mind, "Wow, yeah, it's really a scary place, this world." The contrast was just so amazing between what was going on in my head, which was just the momentum of images and feelings that I'd been developing for years, and the reality of the moment, which was open and clear and loving and beautiful.

So dharma practice is to take us out of these fabricated illusory realms of our projections and bring us back into the world of the present, which is in the end, even though it's not totally reliable, more reliable than our fabrications.

So we come back into the present and find the life and vitality and openness there.

As we come into practice, most of us have a lot of old momentum going—a momentum of habits, of thinking and feeling. This is part of what we meet when we're on the cushion. If these feelings are strong, which they are for most of us, we also find them in the body.

A lot of our deepest ways of relating to the world have become embedded in the body. This is why it's so important in the early part of the retreat that we give the instructions on how to be with the breath, using the breath to find your way into a grounded relationship with the body, and then how to stay in the body and explore everything you find there. Because a lot of old emotions are touched in the body. And a lot of the healing of meditation is about feeling them, opening to them, accepting them and letting them move in a way that they haven't been able to. They've been held in the body, and in that holding they've been frozen. So as we open up with mindfulness and tenderness, loving kindness, these can come up and come through.

We discover as we come into meditation that we have shaped our own patterns of relating to the world. Obviously, these have been strongly influenced for many of us by childhood events, relationships, abandonment, mistreatment, cruelty, abuse, neglect. Many unwholesome forces have come to bear on us. Out of responding to those, we've developed ways of relating that haven't always helped us.

So we come into those patterns, and for many of us who have found a way to support ourselves, have family life, these patterns of our personality are felt as the biggest problem in our life. We've learned how to take care of ourselves physically, to support ourselves financially, to build even loving relationships with friends and family. But the sense of freedom isn't so accessible if these patterns are strongly operative and we feel bound by them. We feel the constriction of that small sense of self from their operation.

So we start to come to terms with our anger or our fear, with our addictions or our dependency, our self-judgment, our sense of lack of self-worth, of not being lovable. This is all part of the field of meditation. You could say this is one of the hearts of the field of meditation: coming to terms with our personal legacies from the past, felt in the body, felt in the mind, felt in the heart.

We understand that these habits of mind and activity form into character. Based on what we've seen, we form an image of ourselves. That image then gets believed in, reinforces the hardness of the character, and then we keep affirming it by bringing the new events of our life into alignment with it so that the sense of continuity is uninterrupted. This is the dilemma that we find ourselves in. The patterns support the self-view and the self-view supports the patterns.

So how did this all get started? How does it keep going? The Buddha had an interesting commentary on this in a text from the Majjhima Nikaya—that's the middle length collection—called the Honeyball Sutta. It's number 18 in the Majjhima.

The sutta opens with the Buddha living in a part of India where he'd grown up. It's the area of Kapilavatthu. So he's back in his hometown, basically, as the Buddha. You get a little bit of a sense as the sutta opens of the life in northern India at this time, which is almost 2600 years ago.

It was a time of great spiritual ferment. Wanderers all across that region of India carried different philosophies, different teachings, different meditation practices, different beliefs. All these spiritual seekers would wander around and meet each other. The way they'd usually relate is they'd have these intense debates. "Here's what I think.

What do you think? That's what you think? Here's an argument to that." It's kind of like a knockdown drag-out through the verbal realm. The person who was left standing was considered to have won, and his school prevailed.

At the beginning of this story, a man approaches named Dandapani. The name literally means "stick"—stick in hand. The commentary says that he was not an old person, but he always leaned on a golden stick. You get a sense of this person as a little bit flamboyant, a little bit vain. Carrying around the golden stick was a sign of his wealth and somewhat ostentatious.

So he approaches the Buddha, who's seated on the ground. He doesn't sit down near him, which would be a more respectful thing to do, but he stands on his cane and says to the Buddha, "What does the recluse assert? What does he proclaim?" In the language of the time, this is kind of provocative. It's not really a polite way to address someone. It's kind of, "What do you think? What are you trying to teach?"

The Buddha undoubtedly picked up on that energy and replied, "Friend, I proclaim such a teaching that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world."

He completely took the ground out from under that kind of argumentative stance of Dandapani. And he said, "No perceptions underlie such a one who is free of craving." No perceptions underlie such a one—he was pointing to himself—who is free of craving.

And then it said that Dandapani sort of wagged his head and furrowed his brow and then strode off with his cane, obviously unhappy with the reply. So that's a little bit of a quizzical expression: "Perceptions no more underlie such a one."

So the Buddha went off to take a rest after recounting this story, and the monks were puzzled and asked another monk, "Well, what did he mean by that?" And so this other monk named Mahakaccana responds and explains what the Buddha was pointing to.

And this is what Mahakaccana says in his explanation: "Dependent on eye and forms, eye consciousness arises." This is kind of a stock phrase in the text, and what it means is, in order for us to see, we have to have a working eye, we have to have visible forms out there to see, and we have to be awake and functioning and have eye consciousness. When all three of those are there—the eye, something to see and we're conscious—then sight arises and that's called contact, seeing contact.

So he continues, "The meeting of the three is contact." So that's how a sight arises. Right now, you're experiencing contact as you look into the hall and you see everything that you see.

"With contact as condition, there is feeling." And here the feeling that's being pointed to is the Pali word vedana. It means a feeling tone. What you see is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither—you might say neutral. So you might like what you see. You might dislike what you see. It might be kind of neutral.

You can take a look at your sight right now. My sight is quite pleasant. The meditation hall is beautiful. You all are sitting quietly, attentively. It's quite pleasing, the visual sight for me right now.

"What one feels, that one perceives." So now we need to look at this word "perceives" and what is going on with this word "perceives."

In Western psychology and philosophy, I think the word "perceive" is used in a little different sense. I think it just means the sense data. So when you see a sight, you're perceiving through seeing. That sight is the perception.

But in Buddhist language, perception means something different. In Buddhist language, the sight itself is just called contact. And then after contact, there's something else that happens called perception. And what perception is basically is recognition.

So perception is a little mental activity that happens after contact where you recognize what you're seeing. So as you're looking around the room now, you may not be noticing it, but you're recognizing elements such as woman, shawl, man, mat, wall, statue, flowers, and so on. Those things are perceptions. Those categories that you are able to put things in is the act of perceiving.

Now really, all there is, if you go back to the basics of sight, there are just patches of form and color. That's all sight is. If you close one eye, you see that even more clearly. You take away the three-dimensionality of it. There's just patches of form and color, but we've learned to interpret them as woman, shawl, man, mat, floor, wall, etc. So that's the act of perception. It takes things, puts them into categories based on memory.

So then, "What one feels, that one perceives."

Now, this perception has an emotional component to it. If we perceive something simple like the bell, there's not much charge around this perception. So we tend to leave it alone. But with other things, there's some charge, there's some meaning.

You know, it's a simple example, kind of a light way to look at it. If I say "car," that's just fairly neutral, right? It doesn't have much emotional impact one way or another. What if I say "Prius?"

Do you like? Is this a like? Like? I love to see a Prius because it means people are committed to helping the planet, saving gas, not polluting. I feel warm feelings when I see a Prius. What if you see a Humvee? Not so easy to like, is it? Too big. I feel a little scared when it's next to me. It's using a lot of gas, polluting the atmosphere more. So even a simple thing like a car, when we get to specifics, the perception of a Prius is one thing, the perception of a Humvee is another. Simple things can take on quite a bit of charge.

If I'm in a big group and it's time to go to lunch—I get to lunch early because my first meditation teacher told me that was a good thing to do—I'll go in and take one of the first seats in the dining room. This might be a conference, a meeting, could be a dining hall on retreat. I'll go in and sit with my meal at a table in what's still kind of an empty room, and often there are two empty chairs next to me.

As the room starts to fill up, those empty chairs take on a certain meaning. So I perceive there's an empty chair—in the beginning it's very neutral—but if the room is filling up and both the chairs next to me are still empty, I start to wonder: do I not have any friends here? Why does nobody want to sit with me? People are sitting with all the other people who sat down, but no one is sitting with me. Now the empty chair, that perception is frightening, because it means nobody loves me. Nobody wants to sit by me. And then I become so grateful when somebody sits down and fills that empty chair.

So even an empty chair, which is like nothing, takes on meaning, takes on emotional meaning. If I'm on an airplane flying from San Francisco to Boston, I get on early and I have an empty seat next to me. I have a very different attitude toward that empty chair. Then everyone who comes on the plane is a threat because I want to keep my empty chair. The first scenario is more desire, the second one is more fear, but both of them are different kinds of attachment—all about an empty chair. Empty chair seems like nothing, but I built a whole drama around it out of my likes and dislikes.

So imagine not just empty chair, not just Prius or Humvee. Imagine when perception is one's child or one's dear friend or one's partner or one's body or one's body and illness or one's body and aging. Then the perceptions become much more loaded, much more charged. A lot of emotions come around those kinds of perceptions. So the perception of things opens the door to our whole range of connection and relationship and strong feelings.

So this sutta continues: "What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates." Mental proliferation is the translation of the Pali word papañca. And this is a word that I think you'll relate to quite immediately because it's this unreined-in quality of thinking that Heather was talking about a couple of

nights ago—how once we get on a roll with our thoughts, they just go on and on and on and one thought leads to another through associations and different objects, and then those bring up a whole storm of emotions and feelings.

A simple example: sitting here in the hall, you look up at the front, you see that Buddha statue and you think, "I need a Buddha statue in my meditation room. My altar has just a little tiny one—I need a big Buddha statue like that. Maybe I'll go down and look in the store. Marianne has some nice Buddhas." I'll go look in the store, but I looked before and didn't see quite the one I wanted. If I had my cell phone on, I could look online. There are some good online shops, but I turned my cell phone into Beth the other day. Maybe I could get it back on the pretext of needing to call my caretaker at home. Would Beth believe me if I said that? Or would that be a violation of the precept? Okay, I think I can get online, and then which credit card should I use? Now, that one's maxed out. I think this one's okay, but do I have enough to pay for it on the automatic debit card?

So a simple inclination like "I'd like to have a Buddha," and we're into questions of truth and honesty, we're into sneaking down to do some shopping, we're into going online and checking out the stores, and do we have enough cash? Proliferation gets us into trouble.

So that's how the sutta unfolds. It begins quite straightforward: "What one perceives, that one thinks about." That's not a problem, as Heather pointed to as well. The first few thoughts we have about something are natural and harmless. We could simply place a period there and be done with it. But we often don't.

The sutta continues: "...with what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms."

Notice how this sequence has progressed. It starts off being quite passive, beyond our control, and completely benign. The meeting of eye and forms brings contact. With contact, there is feeling. There's no choice there, not even an activity—just natural process unfolding.

Then it becomes slightly more active: "What one feels, that one perceives." Here we have some mental activity as perception takes place. I recognize the car or the person or the statue. "What one perceives, that one thinks about." Still no problem. We can think logically, accurately, staying on the mark.

Now comes the crucial shift: "With what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions beset one with respect to past, future, and present." The proliferations now spiral beyond our control, wandering into past and future as well as present. When we enter past and future, we create grounds for hope and fear, for worry and regret. All of this begins to assault us.

We're no longer in passive mode. We're not even in active mode. We're in "being beset" mode. Suddenly we find ourselves victimized by the very patterns of thinking and feeling that fuel this mental proliferation.

As thoughts spin out of control, launching into past and future indiscriminately, they return to haunt us. They trigger our hopes and fears, our worries and regrets. The thoughts trigger emotions. Once we're caught in emotions, they trigger more thinking: "How do I get out of this? How do I deal with this? What am I going to do with this in my life?" The spinning continues, all based on our old patterns, because the "I" is operating throughout this entire process—the "I" with its concerns, self-image, and accumulated karma weaving through everything.

How can we get free from this? How can we become unhooked? Is it possible to have a perception—even a meaningful one like our own body, the memory of a partner, our work, our child, or even a pattern like the fear I felt under that fruit tree in England—and not spin out about it? Can we encounter something that carries emotion, feeling, and meaning for us, and meet it directly without proliferation?

If we can, that's the opening for mindfulness. Then mindfulness can establish a new relationship with that experience that isn't overlaid with all the accumulations from the past—our patterns, hopes, fears, assumptions about ourselves, our self-view. We can meet it fresh.

When we hold experience this way, without proliferation, we discover it within the context of silence. There's a silence of mind that we begin to touch. That silence is inherently peaceful because it's not assaulting us. We're not being beset by past and future. We're simply in direct, clean relationship with what's here in the present moment.

So we're not creating the self again. We're not proliferating it. We're not moving into self-assessment. We're not sweeping it into the creation of an identity. There's just this direct knowing through mindful attention in the present moment.

In a way, what we're doing is putting aside our likes and dislikes and just saying, here it is. Let me just connect with it just as it is. You know, these likes and dislikes are an integral part of who we take ourselves to be. We like certain things. We don't like other things. We like some people. We don't like others. We like some political parties. We don't like others. It's integral to our self-identity.

Often you meet a new person, have some conversation, and you have to decide: do you like that person or do you not like that person? That goes on for me sometimes—do I like them or do I not like them? That's an unnecessary question. Clear awareness can see a person, see a person's strengths, see their personality, see the limitations of the personality, and just rest there. We don't have to sum it all up with a like or a dislike.

When things are held that way, we see them accurately. This is not rose-colored in any way. But we don't have to proliferate about them or make up a story about them. And then things get held in a lot of space. They get held in that silence and in that peace.

This is what we're developing here with our moment-to-moment mindfulness as we explore all the different aspects of our experience. We're developing the capacity to meet things with a spacious and non-reactive awareness that just sees things the way they are and doesn't load them up with our projections and likes and dislikes, and doesn't load the encounter up with all of our past history, self-assumptions, and projections about our own continuing identity.

When we don't load up our experience that way, there's a lot more openness, a lot more space, and it lets our mind return to that limitless nature that is our birthright, that is a basic part of us.

This is where the practice is heading. This is what we're doing here. As we open into that peace, we find out that's not a constructed thing. It's not constructed out of our thoughts or out of our patterns. It's there all the time when we open to it. That silence is not a constructed thing. It's always available.

Its always being available means it's beyond the cycle of being born and dying. It's beyond the cycle of arising and passing away. So we are starting to come in touch with something that is a true refuge, not subject to birth and death. As we tune into it more and more, we find ourselves coming out from the cycle of birth and death, coming out of samsara, because we've stopped trying to fix it. We've stopped trying to project on it. And we're just meeting it the way that it is in this vast peace.

But this is not the end of the road. It's not that we're doing our meditation, we discover a little bit of peace, and that's that. This kind of peace is onward leading. This is the path. This becomes the path. And the Buddha said that opening to this peace, undoing this construct of self, leads us to the fullness of liberation, leads on to that unconditioned element of Nibbana.

The wonderful thing is we may just get a little taste of that silence or that peace, but it's a genuine foretaste of what's possible. We're finding a taste, a hint, a clue, an aroma of something that's beyond birth and death, of something that's beyond arising and passing. And as we put more and more of our faith in that, that deepens and it leads us, inclines the mind to that liberating understanding, the realization of the unconditioned, of the deathless.

This is our practice here.

So let's just sit for a moment together and let the words settle.

CHAPTER 118

Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 15 min

> *In this morning instruction from a month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong continues the progressive teaching approach by expanding from breath awareness to include body and sound meditation. He introduces the crucial concept of finding a meditation 'anchor' - a primary object of mindfulness such as breath, body posture, or sounds that serves as a reliable home base for attention.*
>
> *Armstrong explains how mindfulness naturally moves to predominant experiences while maintaining the anchor as a grounding point. He provides detailed guidance on working with bodily sensations, including painful ones, emphasizing the importance of receptive awareness rather than effortful observation. The teaching demonstrates how awareness can inhabit the body from within, creating an integrated rather than observational relationship with experience.*
>
> *The instructions cover practical aspects of posture, the balance between effort and ease, and how to work skillfully with challenging sensations through acceptance and softening. This foundational teaching shows how all experiences - whether breath, body sensations, or sounds - can become objects of mindfulness practice, supporting both formal meditation and daily life awareness.*

In the instructions for the meditation this morning, we're going to continue to unfold the instructions on the body, which Temple introduced yesterday. Just to give a little bit of a sense of the flow of the instructions, we're introducing them day by day so that eventually everything that comes into your experience while you're sitting will be a subject for the meditation, can be the focus of mindfulness.

So the meditation is not just about the breath or just about the body—it's about all our experiences as we're sitting, as we're walking, as we're moving around through the day. But we're introducing them a little bit at a time so that we can learn well how to work with each area that we're exploring.

In the first few days, as you're seeing, we focused on the breath, a little bit on sounds, and now on the body. We encourage you all to find what we call an anchor among these three subjects. An anchor in meditation is something that becomes a primary focus for you that you come back to again and again to ground your attention when nothing else particular is going on.

So you sit, nothing is striking in your field of experience. Oh, where do I put my attention? Ah, where's my anchor? So it's sort of like a home, a meditation home that you can always come back to. You develop a good, steady relationship with it. The attention learns how to settle on that subject and it's always available to you.

For many of you, the breath will be your anchor, your primary subject. But for some people, the breath isn't so comfortable. There may be a sense of tightness. It could be a history of breathing difficulties that get triggered by focusing on the breath. In that case, a different anchor would be helpful for you, something like sounds or the body.

The body is an excellent anchor—puts us in touch with something that's always available and connects well into the emotional life. So as you're meditating through today, over the next days, see what suits you as your meditation home, as an anchor in your practice, something you come back to again and again, hopefully among breath or body or sounds.

Begin the meditation by sitting comfortably, being as relaxed as you can, and still being upright. This balance of uprightness and ease is a pointer to the mental attitude that makes right effort. We want to be energetically with our experience without pressing too hard on it, without getting tight around experience.

If we relax too much, mindfulness will slip away from the present moment. If we push too hard, the body and mind will become tense. Finding in our posture the right balance that expresses this mental attitude of right effort—a balanced effort.

Let go of any obvious areas of tension—the forehead. Let the eyes be soft. The jaw is relaxed. Shoulders are dropped. And the belly is soft.

Just let your awareness inhabit the body, fill the body. So that you simply sit and feel the body in sitting, know the body in sitting. We're not knowing the body as a separate observer from outside or behind or at a distance, but we're knowing the body by feeling it from inside, awareness integrated throughout the body.

So you can have a sense just of resting the awareness within the body. In this way, the body posture can itself be an anchor for your meditation. The posture itself can be the focus that you come back to again and again.

As you sit comfortably, then open your attention to the realm of sounds, letting your awareness become wide, expansive, opening to any sounds that arise from inside or outside. It could be the sounds of one another, sounds of the building, sound of my voice, sounds from outside. And if there are no sounds, you can just rest your attention in the wide extent of silence.

Notice how any sounds that arise are heard without any special effort. You don't have to go looking for them. Just as you rest, the sounds are known spontaneously. This can be a doorway to finding a very receptive kind of attention—just as though you were listening to a symphony in a concert hall. Just being still and everything is known.

Then bring the attention back into the body. As you feel the body, the same receptive attention can know the sensations of the breath, just resting easily. The in-breath is felt and the out-breath is felt. You can bring your attention to a particular part of the body if you like, where the breath is clear—the nose, the chest, or the abdomen. Or you can leave the attention spread throughout the whole body, feeling the impact of the breath through the whole body, each in-breath and out-breath.

As you're attending to the breath, from time to time another sensation will arise in a part of the body that is strong, naturally draws the attention to it. So if this happens, easily let go of the breath. Let the attention move where it's called to this new sensation.

and just feel that sensation in its bare physical nature—tingling or pulsing, vibration or pressure, heat or coolness, ache or pain or stabbing, blissful, bubbly. You can let the attention stay with that new sensation for as long as it's drawn there.

We notice how the attention will move from time to time to something that is predominant—to what you might say is the strongest feature in our field of experience. If you have an anchor, such as breath, sounds, or posture, then you'll find the attention will be drawn from time to time to other sensations in the body because they become predominant or strong or noticeable.

So we don't resist that draw of the attention. We allow the attention to move there naturally, and we establish our mindfulness in relationship to that new arising. Feel that new sensation as long as it's calling us, as long as it's predominant. It could just be a slight twinge that passes in a few seconds. It could be an ongoing ache that goes on the better part of an hour. So you could be with the sensation for a few seconds, or you could be with it for most of the meditation. Either way is fine.

If the sensation subsides and stops drawing the attention, then allow your attention to return to your anchor. And when another sensation comes, again allow the attention to go there and feel that new sensation in its bare nature.

Sometimes painful sensations will arise in parts of the body—the pressure on the cushion, the knees, or the shoulders. When a painful sensation comes, because it tends to be a compelling subject, it can be a good focus to keep the attention in the present moment. So allow your attention to go there, allow the awareness to go right into the painful sensation.

Have a sense that you can explore it with your awareness. You can pay attention to the details of the sensation. Explore how far it extends all around it. And then also notice the mind's reaction or relation to it. Is there a reaction of fear, anxiety, dislike, or worry? Resentment of the pain? If so, notice that and see if you can soften the attitude—soften the mind's relationship to one that accepts the pain, allows that sensation to be the way it is, and still feels it.

If the mind stays aversive, it tends to lead to more tension in the body. If the mind can soften and relax, then at least we give the body a chance to relax with the pain. So notice the pain, notice the mind's relation to it. Have your attitude be one of allowing, softening, acceptance.

And then if the pain becomes too strong, bringing about a lot of concern or worry or turmoil, feel free to shift your posture. You can move slowly, mindfully—lean forward or put the knees up. Take a little break. When you feel refreshed, you can go back into the sitting posture and continue, keeping the continuity of the mindfulness going.

And if you're ever unsure what to attend to, just return to your anchor—breath, body posture, or sounds. Some place you can always come back to and stay simple with.

CHAPTER 119

Morning Instructions, Day 7 - Mindfulness of Thoughts

Guy Armstrong · 29 min

> *In this seventh day of retreat instructions, Guy Armstrong guides practitioners into the challenging territory of mindfulness of thoughts (vitakkavicāra). Drawing from the comprehensive awareness taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains why this aspect of the four foundations of mindfulness is introduced later in retreat practice—thoughts are particularly seductive and can easily pull us away from present-moment awareness into proliferation (papañca).*
>
> *Armstrong offers a practical "thought game" exercise, asking meditators to visualize thoughts appearing on a blank screen, observing their arising, persistence, and passing away without getting caught in their content. This approach transforms our relationship with thinking from being "subjects of our thoughts" to seeing each thought as merely "a little bubble, insubstantial, fleeting." He emphasizes that mindfulness (sati) can be cultivated with any object, including thoughts, and that the goal is not to eliminate thinking but to develop a wise relationship where discriminating wisdom (paññā) evaluates thoughts rather than being compulsively driven by them.*
>
> *The teaching integrates this mindfulness of thinking into the broader framework of retreat practice, maintaining connection with one's meditation anchor (breath, body, or sounds) while opening awareness to include thoughts as just another phenomenon in the field of experience. This instruction is essential for developing the mental clarity and freedom that allows practitioners to see the constructed nature of thoughts and their limited relationship to reality.*

In the meditation this morning, we're going to extend the instructions to take in the whole area of thinking. The reason that we wait this long in the retreat to introduce thought, even though it's quite a central activity, is that it's one of the more difficult arisings to actually be mindful of. As you know, it's so easy to get swept up into the content of the thought.

What we want to do in meditation is to develop a new relationship to our thoughts that sees them with mindfulness as a present moment happening. Every thought has this present moment nature of arising, persisting for a little while, and then passing

away. Mindfulness can notice that happening without getting sucked into the content of the thought. But this is a challenge because it goes against our years of investment in our thoughts, our belief in our thoughts, our being seduced by our thoughts.

The mindful relationship to thinking offers us a tremendous amount of freedom because we see that a thought is just a little bubble, constructed in the moment, bearing often little relationship to reality. And yet thoughts and our belief in them govern our lives. They govern our choices, our actions, our speech, our life direction. So it's very important to establish a clear and wise relationship to thinking, and that's what the meditation today is designed to lead into.

As you develop this mindful relationship to your thoughts, you won't lose touch with the content of the thinking. Don't worry that you're giving something up. You'll still feel the content and see the content and understand it, but you won't be as compelled by it. Then thoughts can be examined with discriminating wisdom to assess them for their truth or untruth, their usefulness or potential harmful nature.

Please approach the meditation this morning in the nature of an exploration of what is this phenomenon called thinking. It's such a powerful force and yet when we look at it, each thought is nothing more than a little bubble, a blip, insubstantial, fleeting, of much less import than a physical sensation in its bare nature. And yet thought rules the world. Most people are subjects of their thoughts.

It's not that we dismiss the value of thinking. Thoughts are necessary for us to live and function in an orderly manner. But as one spiritual teacher said, thought makes an excellent servant, but a terrible master. We want to transform the relationship where wisdom evaluates thoughts rather than thought dictating things on its own.

So far in the retreat, you've probably experienced thinking as something of an enemy, because it is the one thing that carries us away from the present moment and causes us to be lost in past and future. It's the being lost in past and future that generates this proliferation of concepts and ideas that beset us. So there is certainly a danger to thought running wild.

But thoughts are not a problem if we can bring mindfulness to them. They're not the enemy. Mindfulness can be developed on a thought just as well as it can be developed on a breath, a sensation, a sound, or an emotion. Mindfulness doesn't care what the object is. So thought can be a fine object for mindfulness. It's just a little bit tricky.

In the meditation instructions this morning, I'll review where we've been in the instructions and then give a little specific way to work with thought and then open it up to a more general way of working with thoughts. When I say thoughts, you can inter-

pret it either as an image that comes, that expresses a situation and an activity, or a string of words. Some people are more image-oriented, some people are more word-oriented. So we can use thought in this case to refer to either one. They both have the potential to pull us in out of the present moment.

Begin the meditation by taking a posture that's upright and easeful. Come to rest the awareness in your body, having the sense that the whole awareness can fill the whole body. By whole awareness, I mean an awareness that's wholly in this present moment. This is the fullness of collectedness.

Let go of any thoughts or images that you may be carrying in from a period of work or walking. Just arrive here, being present and at ease in the body. Open to sounds, if that helps you bring in a receptive, effortless attention. Return the attention to the body where we can feel the impact of breathing and sensations throughout the body.

Feel the body as it breathes in. Feel the body as it breathes out. Don't try to stand separate from the body as a detached observer of breath, but feel the breath within the body with that full awareness that fills the body. Just sit, rest and feel.

If there's one area where the breath is experienced most clearly, you can let the attention rest in that area, around the nose, the chest, or the belly. Or you can stay with the experience of the whole body breathing.

As you're attending to the breath, you may notice from time to time other physical sensations that are strong and draw the attention. If that happens, let the attention move easily, naturally to the new sensation, just being aware of it in its bare physical nature: pulsing, pressure, warmth, tingling, vibration, coolness, ache, bliss.

Or you may notice an emotion or a state of mind that calls the attention. Could be one of the five hindrances of sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt, or their variations of fear or shame.

loneliness, self-judgment, resentment, despair. They could be one of the beautiful qualities of heart: happiness, compassion, love, peace, interest, joy, calm.

If the emotion is strong enough, you'll feel it somewhere in the body. So let your attention connect with that experience in the body and let that ground the awareness. It's easier to stay connected with the body than with just a vague mood. Feeling the body sensations, you'll also feel the emotion. You can go back and forth between noticing the sensation in the body and the emotion that you're feeling there.

Now we're going to open up to become mindful of the whole area of thought. We're going to play a little game for the first few minutes with thoughts. Imagine the visual field as a kind of blank screen, like you're sitting in a movie theater and there's a blank screen. From time to time a thought will cross that screen, will appear on it.

So we're going to drop the focus on other parts of our experience. Just kind of notice that blank screen that's in front of us. I want to ask you to pay close attention to the first thought that appears in that field on that screen after I finish this sentence. When you've noticed a thought, you can just come back and feel the breath or body. Just rest again, bring your mindfulness into the present.

In giving attention to thought in this way, see if you can discover that mindful relationship to a thought that sees it as a phenomenon in the present moment. It doesn't have to take us out of the present moment into past and future. Instead we can stay grounded, present and mindful as the thought arises, expresses itself and passes away.

Once again, bringing our focus to that blank screen and just alert to the first thought that comes after this sentence. Then return the attention to be grounded again in your anchor—breath or body or sounds. Make sure your connection to the present is clear and firm.

Now we'll open up to this thought game for a little longer. We'll just create a little space of time. In that space, try to notice each and every thought that comes onto the screen.

Then come back again to rest with your anchor, just collected in the present moment. Notice what happened during that period where you were intending to be mindful of thoughts. Could you stay present and mindful for that entire period, noticing each thought that came? Or did you find that some of the thoughts had that sticky, seductive quality that caused you to lose your mindfulness in their content?

We're starting to understand that there are two different ways of relating to thought: being lost in the content and losing mindfulness, or sustaining the present moment attention so that we can see the thought as it rises, lasts and vanishes.

This time we'll take a little longer period with that blank screen. Explore. Take enough time to explore. Perhaps you'll get lost. But then you can return and again take up the thought game—just seeing each thought with mindfulness.

Connect with the blank screen. For a period of time, let thought be your primary focus for mindfulness. Notice each and every arising and passing.

Then come back into the present moment, reconnecting with your anchor and steadying the attention in the here and now.

Now see if it's possible to integrate this mindfulness of thinking into our general meditation practice. You may like to start by connecting with your anchor and then opening to the overall field of experience, noticing any other sensations or emotions that come. See if you can include thought as just another phenomenon in your overall field of experience. Notice them when they arise. You might even use the soft label "thinking." Then in the next moment notice where the attention is landing: breath, sounds, body, mood.

See if it's possible to integrate this mindful relationship to thinking in the context of your overall meditation. If you find yourself ever getting lost in trying to pay attention to thought or confused about what to attend to, just drop everything else and come back to your anchor. That's why it's so helpful to have this home in meditation that's always there for us, always available. We have a simple and developed, cultivated relationship. Anytime you like, feel free to try the thought game again.

It's a way of exploring thought as your primary meditation focus. Just imagine that screen sitting in front of you like a cat outside a mouse hole—no other purpose than waiting for the mouse to appear. And then noticing when a thought comes, expresses itself, and goes.

Not resisting the arising of any thought and not promoting the continuation of any stream of thought. Just letting thoughts come when they come and go when they go, living their own life like any other phenomenon in the vast field of awareness.

This practice invites us into a spacious relationship with our mental activity—neither pushing thoughts away nor getting caught up in their content, but simply witnessing their natural arising and passing. In this way, we begin to see thoughts not as problems to be solved or stories to be believed, but as temporary visitors in the open sky of consciousness.

Through this gentle observation, we cultivate the profound understanding that we are not our thoughts. We are the aware presence that witnesses them. This recognition can be deeply liberating, freeing us from the tyranny of believing every mental formation that appears and allowing us to rest in the peaceful awareness that is always already here.

CHAPTER 120

Morning Instructions Day 12

Guy Armstrong · 45 min

> *In this retreat instruction from day 12, Guy Armstrong introduces the technique of 'choiceless attention' - a natural approach to meditation that allows awareness to move freely between all aspects of experience. After establishing familiarity with breath, body, sounds, emotions and thoughts, practitioners learn to unhook from any anchor and simply notice where attention naturally lands moment by moment.*
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> *Armstrong explores the Buddhist concept of manasikāra (attention) as a mental factor that constantly selects and highlights different elements of our six-sense experience. Rather than directing attention to a specific object, this practice involves following attention's natural movement while maintaining mindfulness of whatever arises - whether breath sensations, sounds, physical pressure, thoughts, or emotions. He offers two ways to approach this: asking 'what am I aware of now?' or simply following where attention lands.*
>
> *The teaching includes practical guidance on using soft mental noting to stay present, and how to balance this open awareness with returning to an anchor when the mind becomes scattered. Armstrong emphasizes developing both narrow focus for stability and open attention for ease, explaining how experienced vipassanā practitioners can alternate between these approaches. This technique represents the culmination of retreat instructions, offering a completely natural way to practice that 'hardly even feels like meditation' while cultivating continuous present-moment awareness.*

This morning in the instructions, we're going to introduce a technique that is the logical conclusion of all the instructions we've been giving so far. We've given instructions on how to be with the breath, the body, sounds, emotions, and thoughts. This makes up the majority of your experience as you're sitting in silent meditation.

This morning, I'm going to introduce a technique that I'll call choiceless attention. It highlights this one particular factor of mind, which is attention. I want to talk about that a little before I give the meditation instructions.

What is attention? In our experience, there are many things going on all the time at the six sense doors. But if you'll notice, one of them is always being highlighted. It's like you focus on one thing at a time and relate to that. That focusing property is the activity of attention.

In Buddhist terminology, this is *manasikāra*. It's a factor of mind that selects one element from all our different sense experience and brings our awareness to that in particular. This is happening all the time and it's changing. Attention is a common mental factor that is in every moment of experience.

Just take a look right now at what your attention is doing. It generally doesn't stay in one place for very long. It will attend to the sound of my voice. Then you'll notice a sensation in your body, perhaps a pressure. Then you'll notice an image of someone in the room. Then you'll notice the temperature of the air on your hand or your face. Then you'll come back to the sound of my voice and so on.

The attention, if left alone, is always moving and shifting, picking out, highlighting, focusing on different aspects of our experience, moment after moment. This movement of attention is one of the symptoms of restlessness in the mind. Part of the meditative training is being able to direct attention by our conscious choice. So we say, "I'm going to place my attention on the breath, in the belly, and leave it there," and not have it roam so much.

As we know, this is a very challenging task because attention doesn't naturally stay in one place. But by training, we can get better at that skill of directing the attention and have it stay somewhere. So in the early part of the retreat, we were directing the attention often to an anchor. We encouraged you to find an anchor in the breath, the body, or sounds, and be there if nothing else was strongly calling you. But from time to time, other things would. And then you'd go be with a sensation or a thought or an emotion, then come back to the anchor.

In the meditation this morning, we're going to unhook from the anchor altogether. There's going to be no preference for breath or body or sounds. We're going to let attention go wherever it will. That's why this technique is called choiceless attention. We're not choosing where to direct it. We're letting it go. But we want to notice where it lands.

Our task is to see where the attention is falling in each new moment and be mindful there. Anything that we notice can be the subject for mindfulness. This approach to meditation is so natural, one hundred percent organic, it hardly even feels like meditation. All we're doing is letting the attention be natural and noticing where it is.

You may find that you'll notice an in-breath, and a moment later you'll notice a sound, and a moment later you'll notice a sensation, and then you'll notice an out-breath, and then you'll notice a thought. In fact, this practice, this technique can be

supported by the habit of mental noting or labeling so that in each new moment you might note where the attention is landing with very simple words like "in," "pressure," "planning," "calm," "hearing," "out," and so on.

There are basically two ways to think about this practice. It's the same practice, but I'm going to explain them both because some people resonate with one and some with the other. One is, this practice is just answering the question, "What am I aware of now?" In each new moment, what am I aware of? And then you let yourself become mindful of that. The other way to explain it is you're following the attention, seeing where it lands, and noticing that. Same practice, two different descriptions.

The noting is optional. You might play with it during this period because if it's helpful for you, it can really be useful in getting us to stay in the present moment. It cuts down on the tendency to be lost. Because if the notes aren't happening, it's because we're lost in thought. So the steady nature of the note reminds us, "I'm staying connected to the present moment."

What we're aware of is not so critical. The fact that we're aware or mindful is the key thing.

So in approaching this meditation, I'll suggest that you begin by paying attention, bringing attention to the anchor. Stabilize a little bit there, and then I'll invite you to open up and let go of the anchor and try this new technique of choiceless attention. Because there are so many different objects in choiceless attention, sometimes it gets confusing. What should I pay attention to? Am I thinking too much? Should I go to this or that? If that happens, make it simple again. Just come back to the anchor.

Beginning the meditation, find in your posture both ease and alertness. Relax any obvious areas of holding in the body. And then connect with your anchor. It could be the breath, could be the body posture, could be the field of sounds. Choose to direct your attention to your primary subject and let it remain there as steadily as possible while the attention stabilizes a little.

Now let your attention release from the anchor and be open. First take a few moments just to be aware of the vastness of the field of our experience. This can include sounds both near and far away. It includes all the sensations within the body, including breath, any thought that arises and passes, any mood or emotion or state of mind, all within this current field of awareness.

With the attention unhooked from the anchor and just free to go where it will, notice in each new moment where the attention has fallen, what experience is being highlighted, which of the six sense objects is being known. Then establish mindfulness, how-

ever briefly, with that experience in this new moment. Don't cling to that new experience, so the attention again is just free. Then notice in this new moment: where is it landing? Be mindful of that just for a moment.

You may find that by habit the awareness or the attention naturally lands on your anchor. That's fine. It's not a problem. It may be there for several moments in a row. We just don't make the effort to direct it there. If it lands there, no problem. But it's always free to move on and our mind stays fresh, alert, interested to see where it will go next.

This approach to meditation almost takes the effort out because the movement of attention is so natural. But at the same time we have to be very awake to notice what's happening. Let that interest really be present. What am I knowing now? What's being revealed in this new moment? Being mindful of that.

If you'd like, you can experiment with the noting practice. Just keep a steady naming of what you're noticing in each new moment. Maybe the timing is such that you make a new note every couple of seconds. When you make the note, make it in a very soft voice, like a whisper, so it doesn't become too intrusive. Your noting might be something like: in, out, hearing, pressure, memory, image, in, cool. See if it helps the attention stay connected to the present moment and avoid the tendency to be drifting off in a chain of thinking.

Sometimes you might find that the very openness of this kind of practice makes it hard for mindfulness to stay steady, to stay continuous. If you find yourself drifting into more thinking, then come back again to the anchor. Spend some time just being mindful of that simple focus. If it feels like the attention steadies a bit there and you like, then you can open up again to the choiceless attention, to all passing phenomena.

We have these two differing styles of practice now that we've introduced. One where you take a fairly narrow focus on your anchor, direct the attention there, stay with it in an ongoing way. The other instructions have been moving to this more open style, concluding today with this total openness, which brings in a quality of naturalness, ease, relaxation, receptivity, where the attention can just go to whatever is drawing it in a given moment.

Generally, we recommend that vipassana meditators develop both of these styles in their sitting practice. The narrow focus really helps for stabilizing the attention, bringing some steadiness of mind. Once you have that as a foundation, then the open attention brings in this greater sense of ease and non-doing.

And you can just feel in the spaciousness how there's a kind of easy way to relax in that big space. The big space holds everything.

Meditation generally goes best by alternating between these two approaches. Spend some time with your anchor, bring some stability in, get the mind a little steady. When it is, open up to the bigger space. But what happens is the bigger space tends eventually to lead to spacing out. And when you find you're spacing out and getting lost in thought, come back and reestablish the mindfulness in the narrower focus of your anchor.

This dance between focused attention and open awareness becomes a natural rhythm in practice. The concentrated focus gives us the stability we need, like establishing a strong foundation. From that foundation, we can then safely explore the vast openness of awareness itself. But awareness without some grounding can become diffuse and unfocused, so we return again to our anchor when needed.

This interplay between samatha and vipassana, between concentration and insight, between doing and non-doing, reflects the very heart of Buddhist meditation practice. Both qualities support and enhance each other, creating the conditions for wisdom and understanding to naturally arise.

CHAPTER 121

Afternoon Brahmavihāra Practice - Compassion

Guy Armstrong · 46 min

> *In this guided meditation from a February retreat, Guy Armstrong introduces karuṇā (compassion) as the second of the four brahmavihāras (divine abidings). Building on the foundation of mettā (loving-kindness) developed over the previous two weeks, Armstrong explains how compassion naturally arises when an open heart encounters suffering - described traditionally as "the quivering of the heart in response to suffering."*
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> *The teaching explores the elegant architecture of the brahmavihāras: mettā as the foundation, karuṇā emerging when mettā meets suffering, muditā (appreciative joy) arising when mettā meets happiness, and upekkhā (equanimity) balancing all three. Armstrong discusses the near enemies of compassion - pity (looking down on suffering) and grief (being overwhelmed by suffering) - and emphasizes how equanimity prevents these wholesome states from tipping into unwholesome territory.*
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> *The guided practice introduces a "suffering person" category and uses phrases like "May you be free from your suffering" or "May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion." Armstrong particularly emphasizes self-compassion as "finding gold on the path" - a transformative way to relate to our own difficulties that acknowledges pain while offering a new relationship to it through the heart's natural capacity for care.*

For the past two weeks, we've been developing the quality of loving kindness as the foundation for all the Brahmavihāras. In today's guided meditation, we're going to open into the second Brahmavihāra, which is compassion.

Sometimes you might make a lot of the distinction between metta and compassion, but they're very closely related. If you read Tibetan Buddhists, Mahāyāna Buddhists in general, they always talk about compassion and give it a very high place in their whole system. If you listen to Theravādins, we more talk about metta. So we could have a little inter-tradition conflict here. Which is more important? Metta or compassion? Love or compassion? Either one works.

But making this turn at this point, I think you'll get a sense of the beautiful and elegant architecture of the Brahmavihāras in the tradition in which we hold them, Theravāda. Metta is the foundation. And metta, as you all know, is the open heart that

cares about any individual, any sentient being. We can wish for their welfare, for their happiness, for their safety, and it can be applied universally. Human realm, all other realms—all beings have the same wish.

So we take this open heart that wants the welfare of others and then in compassion, we turn it on to suffering. When the open heart of metta is turned on to suffering, the quality or the flavor that comes through is compassion. It's no different than that. The open heart of metta, looking upon suffering, moves into compassion. It's classically described as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering.

Just to continue the architecture one more turn, what happens when the open heart looks on happiness? You meet someone with a lot of happiness in their life. What flavor does that evoke? That's appreciative joy or mudita, sympathetic joy. Our heart resonates in happiness with their happiness.

So metta opens the heart. When it looks on suffering, compassion emerges. When it looks on happiness, appreciative joy emerges. And these are all held in balance. All three of these are held in balance by the fourth of the Brahmavihāras, which is equanimity. If there is not equanimity, the first three Brahmavihāras will tip into their near enemy if we're lucky or their far enemy if we're not lucky. Equanimity is what allows the Brahmavihāras to be held in a mind with strength and stay wholesome because it's very easy to fall into either the near or the far enemy.

So compassion is the response of the heart to suffering. That means that in order to cultivate the flavor, the authentic flavor of compassion, we have to come into contact with some form of suffering, different forms of suffering.

In the metta practice, we were encouraged to look on what's beautiful or lovable in someone. In the compassion practice, we're going to take different individuals and we're going to let ourselves feel their suffering. We're going to deliberately call to mind things in their life that are difficult. This could be physical difficulties, could be emotional difficulties, difficulties of finding one's way in the world, difficulties in relationship. Different things will come to your mind.

So this practice is sometimes sobering. It's not like metta where we can get—I'm sure you felt this at times—just very delightfully warm and loving and uplifted and cheered often by thinking of people's potential for happiness. That's a beautiful quality in metta and very uplifting. But in compassion, we're going to be looking moment after moment at the difficulties in life ourselves. And this is not to develop a gloomy view. It's to open our heart to the truth, the first noble truth, the second noble truth, as it manifests through our life and through the life of every sentient being.

In compassion, just like in metta, there's a very beautiful universal quality that happens when we realize that I have suffering, you have suffering, every sentient being that we turn to has some degree of suffering in life. So we let that really come in in the compassion practice. If we can hold it with equanimity, it really softens our heart, tenderizes us to what life holds for everyone. Every single being faces these difficulties.

The near enemy of compassion has two kind of flavors. Sometimes it's called pity. Pity is this sense of looking down on someone who is suffering. In that looking down, there's a holding ourselves above. So when compassion gets mixed with conceit or the comparing mind, and we hold ourselves as better than the person who's suffering, what comes through is looking down on them or pity. This is one distortion. The other one is maybe more common.

And that is, it's said the near enemy is grief. This doesn't mean the grief of loss, because that will happen naturally when the heart is open. If someone dies or a relationship ends, there will be grief. It's more grief for the world. Or you could say being overwhelmed by the amount of suffering we see in ourselves, in someone else, or in the world. The sense of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of suffering—grief in that sense. It's close to despair.

When we feel that the suffering in the world is too much for us to bear—either our own, another's, or the whole range of suffering—it's too much to bear. That's also the near enemy of compassion. We're in touch with it, but it's not held in the balance of equanimity, and so the mind tips into an unwholesome state.

And why is it unwholesome? Because if we're feeling overcome by the magnitude of the suffering, we're not in a position to help. We want compassion to be able to make our heart inspired to help. Compassion has an active component. It's not just enough to look on the suffering from a distance and let our heart get refined. In compassion there's an urge, there's a wanting to solve the pain, wanting to address the pain that we feel. So if this quality of grief is there—despair—we don't feel we have the capability to help, and that doesn't allow compassion to function. We want to keep that balance where we can feel the pain but not be overcome by it. That's the quality of compassion.

The far enemy of compassion is cruelty—when we see suffering and we enjoy it. That can happen sometimes with ex-relationship partners, for example, but we don't necessarily go there right away. So we want to be on the lookout for the true feeling of compassion. We want to be aware of these enemies, the near enemies or the far enemy of compassion, and just recognize them when they come also.

The compassion practice develops just like the metta. We bring individuals to mind and we say a phrase. In this case, in compassion, we only use one phrase—not so many to remember. If you remember at the beginning of your metta practice, this retreat or a long time ago, how long it took to memorize those four phrases, that was quite a challenge to have them flow easily. So compassion is even simpler. There's just one phrase.

The classical phrase, and I recommend you try it, is "May you be free from your suffering." Or "May I be free from my suffering." Or "May all beings be free from their suffering." That's a classical phrase. It's a good phrase. It's worked for centuries, and I recommend it to you. It has the essence of the feeling.

But some of us find that phrase brings in a little attitude of "get rid of." "May you be free from your suffering" easily goes into "I hope you can get rid of that suffering," and sometimes that brings in an aversive reaction, a suggestion of aversion. So it doesn't work as well for everyone, and it's not the phrase that I use.

The phrase I use is "May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion." Or if you like, substitute something more specific for pain and sorrow: "May you hold your illness with compassion. May you hold your fear with compassion. May you hold your grief with compassion." Just tailor it a little if you want to the person, because it might evoke more feeling. But the general sense is pain and sorrow, and every sentient being has some. "May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion."

Another one that some people like is "I care about your suffering."

Or I care about your pain and sorrow. That's also a very direct way to say it. Works really well for some people.

So these are the three I'll suggest. You can play with all of them. You might want to try to pick one over the course of this meditation today, the one that resonates most for you, that gets you best aligned with that feeling of compassion.

But notice in all of them, we're pointing to the person's difficulty. So this is integral to the practice. We want to come face to face with the suffering of life as it's manifesting through the individual we're with. I'll repeat the phrases as we get into the meditation so that you don't have to write them down now.

With the Brahmaviharas, we tend to start the meditation where it's easiest. So with loving kindness, we started with ourselves because we basically care most about ourselves. With compassion, we're going to bring in a new individual, a new category. It's a person we're going to call the suffering person.

So I'll invite you early in the meditation to pick someone in your circle of acquaintances who's going through a hard time right now, so that their difficulties will be really apparent to you. And again, it's helpful if the relationship isn't too complicated so that their difficulties aren't too tied to your difficulties. Like a business partner and your enterprise is going under or something like that. So that you can have the equanimity to look on their suffering and keep a sense of balance.

For today, we'll bring in the suffering person to start, and then we'll also bring in ourselves. So as you work with yourself, again, play with the phrase. You could use a little different phrase for yourself. You could say, "May I be free from my suffering?" But when you get to yourself, you may want to say, "May I hold my suffering with compassion," or "May I hold my pain with compassion?" Feel free to experiment a little bit with the exact phrase that you use.

So let's begin the compassion meditation. The way it will unfold over these few days—we'll do it over the next four days—is that we'll bring in the same categories that we brought in for metta with the addition of the suffering person. One new category, and then the rest will be the same.

Please sit comfortably, being relaxed in your body, being present just here and now. And to feel just a little bit of the mood of compassion, just taking a reflection that every being that takes birth faces some pain and sorrow. Either physical pain, emotional pain, facing loss, facing illness, old age, and death.

Wherever we look around the planet, here in the West or in the East, in the North or in the South, we can find this quality of suffering everywhere we turn. And everywhere we look, we can have that wish: may their pain be alleviated. May they be free from that form of suffering. May they be free from all suffering.

So we can begin with our expansive, boundless connection to life and wishing: may all beings that live be free from suffering. And may they hold their pain and sorrow with compassion.

And then bringing to mind someone you know who's currently going through a hard time. It could be in big ways—facing financial difficulties or loss of their home or loss of a job, relationship difficulties, aging parents, children in trouble, unhappy time in life, facing illness, facing old age, possibly dying. So take a few moments and see in your circle who you might like to bring in as the suffering person. Please take a moment and select that person.

And once you pick them, bring them into the moment with you so that you can really see them, feel them, hear them as though they're alive right now with you. And as you connect with them, remember your connection, any degree of warmth and friendship you've had with the person, times you've shared. Remember their potential for happiness, for well-being. So there's a foundation of loving kindness as you look on them.

But now they're going through some difficulties. And so let yourself bring into your mind the problems they're facing. You might imagine them in their home or the situation where they're feeling the suffering of it. Whatever the source of the difficulty, you can feel its impact on them, the weight of it that they carry, recognizing that this is something that could happen to any of us.

And so as you hold them, connect with their difficulty, and send them your wish with a compassion phrase: May you be free from your suffering.

Or may you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion. Or I care about your pain and sorrow. Try these different compassion phrases. See what connects for you and just hold them in your heart and repeat this phrase to them.

Let there be a little space between the phrases so that you can just drop back into your heart center and feel their situation again. So that compassion like metta is felt through the body. Don't try to make any particular feeling come. Just connect with the person and say the phrase and then notice how you're feeling. And let the practice evoke whatever mood is going to fit.

If you find some difficulty in connecting with the person you've chosen, then you might try another being. Remember that you could try an adult, a child, an animal, a pet. Remember that compassion is a brahmavihara, a divine abiding and not a state of suffering. If you find yourself suffering with a person, you might just imagine how Kuan Yin might see them. How would the bodhisattva of compassion be able to look upon this being and see with equanimity?

And now bringing ourselves in for the practice of compassion. Coming into this moment, into your body again, feeling yourself as you sit here and now. Coming into your heart center and letting that be a connection to who you are. So in touch with yourself, some of your good qualities and your potential for happiness, your sincere wish for happiness. So that we begin by holding ourselves with the open-hearted attitude of loving kindness.

And then letting our attention bring to view things that are not going so easily in our life right now. Could be little things, could be big things. Could be we don't like tempeh for lunch. Could be we don't like the cold air coming in from the north today. Could be

bigger difficulties in our meditation, hindrances or physical pain. Could be difficulties in our life outside—relationships or money or work, family. Could be our illness, our aging.

And as we recall the difficulties we're having, remembering that any of us could be having these. Our suffering doesn't mean that we've done it wrong or that we're an unworthy person. These are universal qualities. So connecting with what's difficult in our life and then embracing that with this wish of compassion. May I be free from my pain and sorrow. Or may I hold the suffering with compassion? Or I care about my suffering. Trying the different phrases with yourself, seeing which one best expresses what you want for yourself. And then as you stay in touch with your being, with your nature, aware of the difficulties, just continuing to repeat the compassion phrase for yourself.

Suffering can make us feel separate and isolated, but if we can hold it with compassion, it can make us feel united, joined and connected in the suffering that all sentient life experiences.

If you start to feel a little overwhelmed by the difficulties that you're facing, getting into that near enemy territory of grief, then change the focus a little. You could go back to your suffering person or you go back to something more uplifting like loving kindness for your benefactor. So check the development of the meditation and if it's in an area that feels a little uncomfortable, it feels a little too much, find another place in the brahmaviharas, probably in loving kindness, that can restore the balance of mind, can bring in some brightness and uplift. And then once you feel balanced again, you can continue the compassion for self.

And in the last minute of the meditation, extending this sense of compassion, of care out in a boundless way to all beings everywhere. Recognizing that all beings who take birth want to be happy and don't want to suffer. But every being has some degree of suffering in their life—having that sincere wish that all beings everywhere may be free from their suffering, that they hold their pain and sorrow with compassion. May all beings be free.

So I think this meditation of compassion for self is really, really useful as you walk the path. One person, one teacher said it's like finding gold on the path, because it really can give us a different way to relate to the pain that we run into. You know, mindfulness can hold things to a certain extent, but then mindfulness reaches a point maybe where it's not shifting things very much. And we can feel stuck, even with a lot of mindfulness.

Bringing in compassion for self at that point, whether it's with emotion or physical pain, gives us a new relationship to it. It's a new way to hold it. It doesn't deny it. Like metta can sometimes seem too idealistic. You know, we're really struggling and we go, may I be happy? That's like fantasy land. But this meditation touches, acknowledges the pain that's there and says, you can hold this with compassion. That's a possibility for you. And so it can bring in a real level of peacefulness.

in our relationship to it, where we're not having to have it go away, but we can hold it with a different spirit.

So I really encourage you to try this during these guided meditations—develop the compassion meditation—but also try it if you get into a hard place in your life or your practice outside of these guided meditations. It's really a tremendous tool.

The beauty of this practice is that it meets us exactly where we are. It doesn't ask us to pretend everything is fine or to bypass our genuine struggles. Instead, it offers us a way to be present with our difficulties while wrapped in the warmth of our own compassionate heart. This shift in how we relate to our pain can be profoundly healing and transformative.

When we learn to hold our suffering with compassion rather than resistance, we discover that we have more capacity than we imagined. We find that we can be present with life's challenges without being overwhelmed by them. This is the gift of compassion practice—it doesn't eliminate our difficulties, but it changes our entire relationship to them, offering us a refuge of kindness even in the midst of struggle.

CHAPTER 122

Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *Drawing from the Thai Forest tradition and teachings of Upāsikā Kee, Guy Armstrong examines how we become entangled in experience through the process of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda). He focuses on four key links: contact at the six sense doors, feeling tone (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), and clinging (upādāna) - showing how each moment of grasping constructs a temporary sense of self that inevitably leads to suffering. Armstrong demonstrates how freedom is found in the gap between feeling and craving, where we can rest in what Ajahn Chah calls the 'natural mind' - an unconditioned peace that doesn't require construction through effort. He offers practical guidance from Sayādaw U Tejāniya for checking our attitude by asking: 'Is greed present? Is aversion present? Is delusion present?' This 'unentangled knowing' allows awareness to remain clear and present without getting caught up in the constant arising and passing of phenomena, offering a taste of the deathless (amata) quality that points toward full liberation.*

A couple of talks ago I talked about how we construct this sense of self again and again and how our proliferations of thought lead us into that territory and how the sense of self is felt as limiting and constricting and leads us into different kinds of unhappiness and difficulty.

Tonight I want to talk some more about how that sense of self gets constructed, and then I also want to look at how it can be released.

Hopefully the motivation for all of us in doing Dharma practice is to some extent a way to find greater freedom in our life—freedom of heart, freedom of mind. And I think there's an important question to ask around this question of freedom: will we know it when we see it? And does freedom only come at the very end of a long, long path?

Because there is the possibility of that kind of freedom. That's what the Buddha pointed to again and again. He called it an unshakable deliverance of mind where the heart is freed from the constrictions of greed or aversion or confusion. So we might know when we hit that point, but that might not happen this retreat.

In a shorter term, is there such a thing as freedom? And what would that feel like? How would we know it when we encounter it? How can we recognize it? Because if we can recognize that and feel it coming alive in our practice, it can give us a lot of confidence, a lot of faith, and a lot of sense that the practice is taking us in the direction that we want to go. And it's very supportive.

So the talk tonight is titled Unentangled Knowing. This is a term that was used by a Thai laywoman teacher named Upasika Kee. For those of you who aren't native English speakers, this is a funny term, unentangled. Tangle, you probably know, means twisting or snarling or knotting up of different threads or yarn or string that makes a mess that's hard to pull apart. Then the verb entangle is just the process of making that tangle happen. And then putting "un" in front of it means we don't go into the creation of that tangle. So this is what Upasika Kee is pointing to in meditation: How do we keep from getting all tangled up in our experience?

Because the Buddha used this concept of a tangle over and over again to point to the way that we relate to the experience of living. He put it in a couple of different ways that I'll just mention briefly.

One quote: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." This is a powerful image. Everywhere you look in the world, you can see this, can't you? How people's actions for getting or pushing away cause so much confusion and pain and harm to one another.

Or here's another quotation. This quotation was used as the opening to the Visuddhimagga, a 6th century commentarial text—a standard meditation manual in our tradition. This is the opening framing of the Visuddhimagga:

"A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle." True, isn't it? "So I ask of Gotama this question"—this is a Buddhist family name, Gotama —"who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

The answer that the Visuddhimagga gives is that one who is developed in conduct, in meditation, and in wisdom disentangles this tangle and goes toward freedom.

So Upasika Kee used this image in one of her talks, "An Unentangled Knowing," and I first want to just mention who she is. She has a really wonderful book that's been translated into English of her talks called Pure and Simple. It was translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, and I really recommend it. It's a very good Dharma book and one of the best books by a woman in our tradition that I'm aware of.

She started to teach in the 1950s, and then she died in 1978. So she taught for close to 30 years in a small setting in Thailand, but she became very well known. Thanissaro Bhikkhu says that she was the foremost woman teacher in Thailand in the 20th century. So that's a strong statement. One does not find so many women teachers in Thailand because the monks have a little bit of a monopoly on the Dhamma. But she stood out for the depth and the purity of her teaching, and also because she was a laywoman. She wasn't even an ordained nun. She taught as a layperson. And yet her Dhamma was very deep and profound.

So this is the quote that I want to build the talk around today: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside."

Maybe that'll give you a little bit of a flavor.

An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside. So I'll go through this in more detail as we go, but I wanted to frame it in that way.

What she's pointing to is a knowing—another synonym for awareness or mindfulness—that's clearly in touch with all the elements of our experience without getting caught up or tangled in them. In order to understand how we can be with our experience with awareness but not get tangled up, we want to do what the Buddha did, which is to analyze how we get tangled.

You'll notice that the Buddha was very precise about explaining how suffering and this bondage and limitation happen. And by understanding it clearly with wisdom, we understand how to release it and how to be free.

I think this unentangled knowing is happening for all of us in many moments during the day. This is not something that will be new for you, but we may not be tuning into it. So I hope by looking at the way that we often get caught and the way it is to be released, you'll start to notice when it's happening and that will accelerate the process of freeing ourselves.

Toward the end of the talk, I also want to describe a few meditation approaches that lead in this direction of unentangled knowing.

As I begin, I want to mention that the vocabulary in this talk is drawn largely from the Thai forest tradition. Upasika Ki taught in that tradition, and I'll use many references from that lineage. It's a little different from the vocabulary and some of the understandings you'd find in other Theravadan schools.

For example, our meditation instructions come from the teachings of Mahasi Sayadaw. He was a Burmese monk, very orthodox in terms of his place in the Theravadan tradition and connection to the Visuddhimagga and the Abhidhamma. This brings about tremendous precision and clarity in relationship to the events in our experience.

The Thai forest tradition is a little more open-minded, I would say. It has more of a heart quality. What's interesting about Spirit Rock is that we hold both these lineages in our teachings here. Our meditation instructions and much of our approach comes from the Burmese side of Mahasi Sayadaw, and yet much of the spirit and the reverence for nature comes from the Thai forest tradition.

It's kind of interesting to marry these two schools, which have not been so married in Asia. In Asia, the schools are going down their own tracks, and here we're bringing them together. So tonight I want to talk largely from the perspective of the Thai forest.

We want to understand how the constriction happens, how the self gets constructed in order to see how we can release that. The model that I want to use tonight for showing this construction of self is that of dependent origination—what may be the most profound insight of the Buddha.

But I don't want to go through the whole chain tonight. Dependent origination is described in terms of twelve causal links that begin with ignorance, lead through momentary experience, and land in suffering. And then the suffering tends to cause more ignorance and starts the chain again. So it describes the way beings get locked into the cycle of suffering again and again until we find a path. By understanding how it arises, we also learn how to release it.

In dependent origination, there are twelve links, but tonight I only want to focus on four—what I consider the heart of the chain for a practitioner. The first five links get kind of philosophical, and we don't need to go there tonight. Then there are the four very experiential links, and then the last three links are also kind of philosophical. So we're just going to go into the links that I think map most closely onto our experience.

To begin, I want to come back to something we've talked about before. What's our basic situation as human beings or sentient beings? I think we've said that we are aware, and in that awareness, we are always having contact. Things are impinging on our senses of varying natures.

This is one of the discourses where the Buddha talked about this, and he started by addressing the bhikkhus. In this context, I think someone mentioned bhikkhu means a dedicated person of practice. So male or female, lay or monastic, you are all bhikkhus for the sake of this retreat.

He said, "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully and I will teach you the totality of life." I love this as an opening. Who would dare to say this? Einstein didn't say it. Marx didn't say it. Freud didn't say it. But here's the Buddha 2600 years ago: "I'll teach you the totality of life."

And what is the totality? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who claimed to describe a totality other than this would not know what they were talking about.

I love this description because it frames our experience in a way that's really simple to understand. I think it's the genius of the way the Buddha saw that he could see life in such simple and direct terms. So many other systems—and I would include Einstein, Marx, and Freud—get so conceptual, they're built on proliferation.

The Buddhist system brings us into direct experience. You may have heard the phrase, perhaps from Gestalt therapy, "lose your mind and come to your senses." This points to the same truth. We are trying to extricate ourselves from the entire web of conceptual proliferation, which is so complicating and not always truthful, and return to the direct moment-to-moment experience of life.

The direct moment-to-moment experience is remarkably simple. There are only ever six things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, and objects of mind—primarily thoughts and emotions. If you master your relationship to each of these six fields, you master life. It's that simple. But it's not that simple, is it? Still, this gives us a very clear framework to approach our experience, and it's the framework from which our meditation is drawn. We're learning to be mindful in these six sense spheres of sight, sound, smell, taste, sensation, thoughts, and feelings. This is where mindfulness is established.

There's one other essential element we need to bring in. When we encounter sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, we're aware of them. That awareness is a key piece, or we could call it consciousness. When a sound arises, we hear it. That hearing has an element of awareness or knowing—consciousness. There's a knowing of the sound that arises with the sound. If the sound arose next to a dead body, would the awareness be there? No. Consciousness has departed from the body, so there wouldn't be any hearing experience. But we're awake, we're alive, we're conscious, and we hear the sound.

So there's the sound and the hearing of it because our ears are working. The meeting of these three—the sound, the ear, and the consciousness—is what makes for contact. Because we're conscious, we're experiencing contact at these six sense doors.

This is the first link of dependent origination that we'll start with: the link of contact. It simply means that our senses are alive, we're conscious, they're functioning, and we're having experiences of seeing and hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking and feeling. Contact is happening at the six sense doors all the time when we're awake. Can you turn it off? Can you simply say, "I'll stop seeing" with your eyes open, "I'll stop hearing"? No, it's happening all the time. So this is the first link—actually the sixth link in the chain of dependent arising, but the first link we'll look at tonight.

Contact is happening constantly at these six sense doors. Then contact leads to the next link in the chain: feeling tone, or vedanā, which Temple spoke about several nights ago. This means that as contact is happening, these six kinds of sense objects are being registered as pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful. Can you choose whether the contacts feel pleasant or painful? Can you monitor it and say, "Let all my contacts be pleasant"? Not possible, is it? The contacts come through and the difficulty is they vary widely. Some are very pleasurable, some are very painful, some are fairly neutral. We're simply on the receiving end of that effect. This variation is what makes life challenging. We don't know what to expect. It's part of the uncertainty.

Feeling tone is so central and important because it's the basis for reactive formations. When the feeling tone is pleasant, if you're not paying attention, what's the conditioned reaction to pleasant feeling? Greed, isn't it? You want to hold on, keep a hold of the pleasant. What's a conditioned reaction for something that's unpleasant? Aversion—we want to push it away. What's a conditioned reaction for something that's neutral? Delusion. We don't notice it because we're so preoccupied with the pleasant and the painful.

So these three conditioned reactions of greed, aversion, and delusion go together to make up the next link in the chain. If we're not mindful, the conditioned reaction is summed up with the word craving. Craving is the force that Sally talked about a few nights ago. It's the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. It emphasizes the desire force, so it seems more closely related to greed.

But if you think about it closely, aversion is also expressing a kind of desire. Aversion says, "I don't want this experience, I want that experience." So it's expressing a strong preference too. Craving can manifest as either greed or aversion. And the delusion is we don't see it. We don't see how greed and aversion operate and keep the mind spinning. When we start to see it, which mindfulness uncovers for us, then we start to realize this doesn't work so well. And we start to let go a little more of those reactive formations.

So you could say that craving encompasses greed, aversion, and delusion, or is made up of greed, aversion, and delusion. And it stands for the reactive formations toward pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral objects brought about through contact. So craving is the next link in the chain of dependent arising. We have contact. Based on contact, there's feeling. Based on feeling, the reactive formation is craving.

And then feel what happens when craving comes in. There's the first kind of recognition that there's something happening there that might be either pleasant or repellent. You want to go toward it or you want to go away. The mind leans toward it and then the next thing that happens is we take a hold of it. Obviously we take a hold of the pleasant to hold on, but in order to push something away, we have to take a hold of that too in order to push away. So this taking a hold quality is known as grasping or clinging. So that's the fourth link that we're going to look at tonight.

Out of the reactive formation comes this movement toward that takes a hold of. And that's how craving leads right into clinging. The reactive formation leads the mind to fixate on that thing that has captured our attention and then to take a hold of it, either to pull it toward or to push it away.

So you can sort of see the way the links go. There's contact. The contact brings feeling. The feeling conditions craving, and the craving leads us to fixate, take a hold of, and cling.

Now these four steps happen so quickly that it's very hard to separate them out. It's almost like there's a pleasant contact and we've taken a hold of it. So don't think that in your mindfulness you're going to be able to break it down. "Oh, there's contact for a few seconds. I'll get cozy with that. Then a few seconds later some feeling tone will come up and I'll see that forming. I got that. And then a few seconds later there's some wanting. Then the mind slowly inclines to take a hold of it."

I wish it were that easy. But instead it's like knee pain, grasping, "Ah, ah, ah."

So you have to kind of explore this territory again and again to pick out the individual pieces. All four can go by in a second. But as the mind slows down, as the concentration develops, you start to pick it up. You pick up maybe one of them in one sequence. And in another sequence, you pick up another one. And then you see another one. So little by little, as the mind slows, you'll start to get a feeling. But you need to examine it and explore it in your direct experience a number of times in order to see these four links working together. And then you'll see it's quite a brilliant description of moment to moment, how we go from contact, which is just automatic for a sentient being. All sentient beings are having this contact to getting tangled with it. It's the craving and

clinging that make for the tangle. Because we want to stop time and take a hold of something or make it go a different direction. Then we become entangled with the simple facts of our experience based on these reactive formations of liking and disliking.

So you can see this happening over and over again in life from the time that we're babies. All these different objects come into our world and we have to make relations to them.

That's kind of what growing up is about—finding our relationship to all the features of life. So we start making relationship with mother and breast and food and father and playmates and school and homework and high school and attractive people and college and sex and work and career and Lady Gaga and MTV and Barack Obama and the global economic crisis.

In all of that, there are going to be things we really want to hold to and things we really don't want anywhere near us. And our life gets tangled up in all these likes and dislikes, becomes so complicated.

The basic message of the chain of dependent arising—we've just gone through one section of it—is that once you've gone into clinging, there's going to be suffering. That's the heart. Clinging leads inevitably to suffering, and we'll go through why that is with a couple of examples.

Let's say you're an eight-precept yogi and you wander down to the dining hall this evening feeling a little hungry, but you want to go down for that nice glass of juice that the cooks are putting out for you. So you wander down and as you walk in the door, you get the smell of the tom yum soup. Oh, those Thai spices—they're like the best. And you're so hungry, and you start thinking, "Why did I ever take eight precepts? A little hot Thai soup would be so nice tonight. Why did I do that?"

And then you see the peanut butter. Oh, no. Missing the spreads, too.

So you go over and pour yourself your little glass of juice and sit down at a table and watch other people enjoying their peanut butter and crackers and smell that tom yum soup. And you go, "Why did I ever do this? I'm so hungry. Maybe I should just go off tonight. Could I just go off for one night? But then I'd throw off the cook's count and people have seen me with my juice and they'd think I was being a really bad eight-precept yogi if I did that. Maybe I could come back in later, sneak in after they've all gone and get a little bit of the crackers and peanut butter. But I wouldn't feel so good about

myself if I did that. And so, oh, this eight-precept thing—I should never have done this in the first place. I should have just gone on a system where I could eat if I wanted and didn't eat if I didn't want."

You can sort of go on like this for a while, right? One can spin out for a while on the food issue on eight precepts, for sure.

So what's happened is there's been a contact, which has been pleasant. There's been a craving, and it's led to a judgment of one's own situation and a disliking: Don't like this eight-precept stuff.

In that taking hold of the food situation—being on eight precepts and being hungry—what we do is we construct a new self. We construct the self which is, "Now I'm the hungry yogi. I'm the hungry yogi who's dissatisfied with the eight-precept resolution." And then we dwell in that for a while. We take birth as that hungry yogi. Might be for thirty minutes, might be for an hour, might have gone into the next sitting. Feel the stomach rumbling; the juice didn't fill it up. I'm still feeling hungry.

So we take birth as this hungry yogi for a while, and it's not a very happy birth. And then eventually that clinging is released. We're not going to carry this issue around the rest of the retreat. At some point, we're going to drop it. And when we drop it, the mind comes back into some kind of balance, which it always does. Upasaka Ki calls this the natural mind. When the mind comes back into balance and things are cool again, that's the natural mind.

So we've dropped the fixation on the hungry yogi. We've come back into balance, natural mind, things are nice again. So what we could say is that hungry yogi died for us to return to the natural mind. Here we had the formation of a new self. It was a new birth, the hungry yogi. And then after a while, that being, that self was temporary and it died. So we had a painful birth, but the death was actually quite pleasant. Taking hold of something difficult, we have a painful birth but a happy death.

Now suppose you come in at 6:30 and you have a really concentrated sitting. And then there's the delight of mastering the subject of concentration and being at ease, being relaxed, being effortlessly present, being able to stay steady with my attention minute after minute. And then we start to think, "I'm really getting the hang of this meditation."

Now that I've got it, the rest of the retreat is going to be like this. I finally figured it out. I'll be able to meditate like this, and I think I'll be able to take this back into my daily life. So I found the secret. I'm going to be able to be like this in my relationships, in my job, with my family. This is so cool. I'll just be so mellow in everything I do—wise and compassionate. Gosh, this is great.

And then we get up and 7:15 comes and the bell rings. We go outside and trip over something, or somebody's in our way on our path to the restroom, and all that nice mellow energy fades. We get a little disgruntled and our faith is shaken. Maybe I'm not going to be able to carry this forward anymore. We get very stirred up and come into the dharma talk just wanting some nice reassuring words from James, but unfortunately the talk is on some difficult theme like dependent origination. Oh no. It's such a bummer.

So here, the birth has been quite pleasant. We've taken birth as the good yogi, the concentrated yogi, the successful yogi. And it's a very pleasant place to be. We look at the rest of our life and it looks really open and beautiful and inviting. Our relationships, our daily life, our work—they all look great. It's a wonderful birth, kind of a heaven realm birth. I can float through the rest of my life on this concentration cloud. It's really groovy.

And then we go out, a few things happen, and it breaks up. That death is really painful. There's such a longing to be back in that concentrated state.

So here we've taken hold of something pleasant, but when it changes, that being dies and that death is really difficult. With the hungry yogi, we had an unhappy birth but a pleasant death by taking hold of the food issue. By taking hold of the concentration issue, we had a very pleasant birth but a painful death.

So either way, whether we hang on to the pleasure or the pain, there's suffering—either immediately or when it changes. Clinging inevitably leads to some kind of pain, immediate or through impermanence. So that "I" dies away, and one way or another, we suffer.

What we're starting to see is that this taking hold of, this act of clinging or grasping—and they're the same word in Pali, by the way—we use different words in English, but the Pali word is upadana. We use "grasping" to refer to the act of first taking hold, and we use "clinging" to refer to the ongoing quality of holding on. It's the same word in Pali, and that's this link of upadana.

What happens is when we hold on to something, we make a self. We take birth as a new "I" through this holding on. And in birth, there's going to be some kind of suffering. So this grasping is synonymous with the creation of a new self.

Andy Olendzki, the scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, explains this well: "What becomes clear through this analysis of moment-to-moment experience is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds onto or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

The key thing is that grasping is not something that you or I do, but rather when grasping takes place, a new sense of self is born. And that's all that it is. That's all that the sense of "I" is—just a momentary action of grasping.

So you might ask, well, who is it that grasps? But there's no answer to that question. There is no one behind the grasping. Grasping is just this process of fixating and clinging. There's nothing else there. There's no one there, but it's a capacity of mind to fixate and take hold of. That action creates the sense of self. And that's the only place the sense of self comes from—it is born from this.

If you've ever watched a monkey swinging through the vines in a jungle, you'll see that what the monkey does is grab hold of one vine and swing, not letting go of that one until there's another one there that they can grab onto to go a little further. So the way the monkey moves through the jungle is by grabbing one vine after another and swinging on it.

So for most of us, until we're trained, we live in that same way—always grasping something, never letting go of one thing until we have something new to take hold of and build the self around.

So where is there any freedom in this? Is there any freedom, or is this inevitable—this grasping and being born and dying and suffering? Which is another way of asking: can this chain be broken somewhere? When you look at dependent origination, one link leads to the next, to the next, to the next, and they all lead to suffering. So can the chain be broken somewhere?

Classically, the way that breaking is understood is between feeling and craving. We've talked about this—that when a pleasant experience comes up, but you don't fall into greed around it, there's peace. When an unpleasant experience comes up and you

don't fall into aversion or hatred, there's peace. We've talked about bringing acceptance, bringing openness to a pain in the knee or a difficult emotion, or letting the beautiful state of metta live and breathe without trying to fixate or hold on.

This is really the heart of dependent origination in terms of our own experience. Can we bring acceptance around that element of feeling tone—to allow the unpleasant, allow the pleasant, allow the neutral—and not get carried away in reactivity? If we can, then the chain doesn't lead to craving, clinging, birth, and suffering. If the feeling tone exists but we don't develop craving around it, the rest of the chain doesn't continue.

So this is the classical place to find some degree of freedom. One teacher said, "The whole of the Buddhist path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving." It breaks the cycle of conditioned arising leading to suffering—resting in the gap between feeling and craving.

Now, in terms of vocabulary, this might sound like there's a time gap between feeling and craving—that you must be able to find a few seconds there to discover and come to equilibrium in. But it's very quick. To say it more exactly, it's becoming aware of feeling and not generating cravings. That lack of reactivity opens up some space, which might be felt as a gap. But very often, the feeling is there in one moment and the craving is there the next, and there's no experience of a gap. That's okay—it's been happening for a long time this way. It can happen a few cycles more.

But if there's a feeling and you don't respond with craving, what does that feel like? What is it like when there's a pain in the knee but you're not strongly averse to it? What is it like when there's a pleasant sit and you're not holding on to it? There's some kind of peace in that, isn't there? You can feel it. We hear it from you in the interviews—you're already reporting that.

We could call it peace, ease, calm, non-reactive, equanimous, balanced, steady, stable. The word I want to use tonight for that place is *free*. We're not confined. We're not limited. We're not taking birth at that time. As you explore this, I invite you to tune into the quality of freedom in that. The heart isn't being burdened with reactivity at that time. We're not out of touch—we can still see all the elements of our experience. That's not a problem. But by not reacting, we're finding some degree of peace or freedom.

So this degree of peace or freedom that we're coming into—is it constructed? Is it something we brought about by a lot of doing? Did we create that peace through effort in the moment? Or did it come when we stopped doing? If we stop craving, is that peace there?

Yes.

So this is an important thing to check out—we don't have to manufacture peace.

We just have to stop disturbing it with craving, with greed, aversion, and delusion.

So this is one of the pointings of dependent arising: that when we acknowledge feeling and we don't move into craving, there's a natural kind of intrinsic peace that's there in the mind. It doesn't disconnect from the things that are coming and going. It doesn't disconnect from contact. But we find a different relationship to it.

The things that are coming and going—they're all conditioned. But in this kind of peace, we're finding something that's not so conditioned. It's not so constructed by our effort. It's kind of like it's always there if we let it be. That "always there" quality points to something less conditioned, less subject to arising and passing, less formed by changing causes and conditions.

This is from Ajahn Chah. It's a little long, but I hope you'll appreciate it:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself. The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

"The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are: as transient, imperfect and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

Finding this space where feeling has arisen but craving hasn't arisen is the ability to rest, is the ability to discover peace, and there's the taste of the Dhamma in this. We're not taking birth, we're not turning into some new form of I, new form of self.

The Buddha wandered around northern India for forty-five years after his awakening, teaching. The dominant religious strain in northern India at that time was Brahmanism, which was generally a fairly wealthy ecclesiastical class who had a bit of a lock on recognized religion of the time. They had many rituals and chants and sacred texts that they based their faith and understanding on.

The Buddha was one of these wanderers outside the established religious system, questioning, looking at things in different ways, taking fresh viewpoints and practicing meditation. So it's interesting—sometimes he would go into these villages, being an outsider, just a wanderer, and come up against these established Brahmins. Some of them would really resent his presence because he was kind of a challenge to the orthodox order. But then there are these very sweet encounters where some of the Brahmins are genuinely interested in what he has to say.

There's this one section in the texts where a group of young Brahmin men come up and ask the Buddha questions. It's kind of touching because they're stepping outside their own tradition and really inquiring in a fresh way. Here's one of these questions from a Brahmin youth who asks the Buddha: "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?"

Wouldn't you have liked to ask the Buddha this question? What is liberation like for one who is freed?

And the Buddha replies: "That sage is without desire. They have nothing. They are unentangled in becoming."

So this "becoming" is another image for the construction of a self—how we become the hungry yogi or the concentrated yogi or the lonely yogi or the partner or the daughter or the father, whatever. We become all these different things through our own construction. This word "becoming" is quite central to the generation of self in these teachings.

This again is Ajahn Chah. You can imagine him delivering this talk in an outdoor Thai hall, a sala, because the weather is quite comfortable. They don't need walls and windows and heat. Many of the outdoor halls are just a floor and pillars around the outside supporting a roof, but the whole thing is open air. So he would often speak in these open-air halls.

This talk was probably delivered in a place like that. He's addressing the people who are listening, and he said:

"The roof is a becoming. The floor is a becoming. But in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness."

Nibbana, you might know, is the fruition of the path—the end of suffering. Nibbana is this empty space where there's no becoming, where there is no taking a stand. Resting in the gap between feeling and craving is resting in that empty space where there's no becoming. And to put it bluntly, nibbana is that space.

Now, he's using the term nibbana a little bit loosely here. So someone from an orthodox Theravadan tradition would say this is heresy—this is not the proper use of the term. But in the Thai forest tradition, you hear this kind of language. So we're going to say that it's not the final nibbana or the ultimate nibbana, but it is a taste of nibbana. This peace that we experience when we don't fall into craving is a taste of liberation, a taste of the ultimate peace.

This is sometimes also called the deathless. Why is it deathless? Because it's not come from taking birth. It's not come from something constructed, because everything constructed will pass away. But this space comes not from doing or creating—it comes from not doing. When we stop disturbing, that space is already there.

So through this ability to rest in this gap, we start to get a little bit of a preview of freedom, or we could say a little taste of freedom here and now. In a way, this can become a kind of fruition or goal. We're reaching our goal here and now, and we may reach it many times in a day. And so to start to recognize when these moments come where greed, aversion, and delusion aren't arising, where craving isn't arising, and feel into the quality of that space—feel into the peace or ease or freedom or openness.

One of the other things you'll discover is that this peace is also where the beautiful states of mind come through quite easily. When we rest in that peace, the heart isn't so burdened and then it's easy to move into loving kindness, compassion, forgiveness, joy, contentment, happiness. So start to investigate—feel into the quality of heart and mind when the reactivity isn't forming as a new kind of self. And then that can be the scent that we follow to the fullness of freedom.

This little taste of freedom is a little bit of the goal, but it's also a path. If you rest in that state and you get to know it, that peace, it is onward leading. It keeps leading to more and deeper experiences of that peace and ease and freedom. So it's a little bit like—we were talking about this at tea time—being near a bread factory. You know how great it is to drive near a factory where they're making bread because the smell is like

nothing else? So you get a whiff of that and you may be a couple of blocks away and you don't know exactly where it is, but if you keep following the direction where the smell gets stronger, you get to the factory.

So this little whiff of freedom—if we keep following it, let that be the scent of freedom, and we keep following that, it leads us to the fullness of freedom. So we trust in that.

We're not cut off from anything. Contact is happening, we're open, we're knowing, we're aware, but we're free in relationship to everything that's happening. The six sense doors are alive, awake, rich, but we're not caught up in them.

This is from Ajahn Jumnien and another teacher in the Thai forest tradition. The best way to develop a great awareness—and the term he was using here was maha sati. Maha means great, sati means mindfulness. The way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their nature of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless.

So see what happens when you rest your attention in that open space. Let it fill that space in between feeling and craving and see what that's like. The awareness is there and full. Phenomena are still coming and going, but we're not caught. So what is the quality of the mind at that point? And could the quality of the mind itself be where our attention lands?

So far we've been emphasizing using breath, body, sounds to anchor. But as our meditation develops and there's more stability, sometimes for people an interest develops in what's the quality of mind that is aware? What's the quality of mind that is knowing? So there's this kind of natural shift that can happen away from just objects to the knowing itself. And this is a little where Upasaka Kee is pointing with that phrase of unentangled knowing.

This is Upasaka Kee: "So your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact."

If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's so worth checking on.

So basically she's saying, is the mind resting and knowing its own clear nature, or is it going out and trying to take hold of objects? If it's taking hold of objects, troubles will arise.

This is the way Ajahn Chah described the same exact kind of practice. If you want to see a train, just go to the Central Station. You don't have to go traveling all the way up the Northern Line, the Southern Line, the Eastern Line, the Western Line to see all the trains. If you want to see trains, every single one of them, you'd be better off waiting at Grand Central Station. That's where they all terminate.

Just look right here, he pointed to his heart, at Central Station. Greed arises here. Anger arises here. Delusion arises here. Just sit here and you can watch as all these things arise. Practice right here because right here is where you're stuck. Right here is where the conditioned arises and right here is where the Dhamma will arise.

It takes a little stability to be with the heart and its movements in that way. So there's one practice I want to recommend as a way in to this way of looking. It's a practice that is taught by Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who we've mentioned before. Someone mentioned that he asked these three questions: Are you aware? What are you aware of? And what's your relationship to it?

So this third question, he expands in more detail by asking three more questions. To check on the movement of the heart in any moment, you can ask yourself: is greed present? Is aversion present? Is delusion present? And if it is, just pay attention to that experience of greed, of aversion, or delusion.

Now that's sometimes not so easy to see. So you can refine the question. How do you know if greed is present? You ask yourself, am I wanting something else to happen? It does arise like that, doesn't it? We want our experience to be another way.

Is aversion present? You can ask the question, am I wanting something to stop happening? That happens a lot too, doesn't it? The knee pain, the difficult mind state, the restlessness, the boredom.

Or to see if delusion is present, you can ask the question, am I not in touch with what's happening? Usually once we ask that question, we're back in touch. So the answer usually once we ask is no.

But this is a way you can check in any moment. Is there greed? Am I wanting something else to happen? Is there aversion? Am I wanting something to stop happening? Is there delusion? Am I not in touch with what's happening?

You can ask these three questions several times during a sitting. As you get comfortable with looking that way—we call this checking the attitude—you can ask more often. And as you get really comfortable, you can make checking the attitude your primary practice.

Let your attention rest in the heart where Ajahn Chah is pointing, where all the trains come from, and just see if there's a movement into greed or aversion or delusion. Recognize each of them as they happen. And when we're aware in this way, we can stay very centered and very alert to the movements of the heart.

The mind that's aware in this way, this is Upasaka Ki again, the mind that's aware in this way doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. That means out toward objects. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way. In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside.

So the flavor of this practice is when the attention is somewhat steady, we bring it to bear on our own heart and the movements of our own heart. And we just start to look: am I heading off toward wanting?

Am I heading off toward disliking? Am I heading off to spacing out? And if we are, we just become mindful of that. And that mindfulness starts to bring the attention back into the center, back into this balanced, peaceful ease of non-reactivity. And that can be our primary way of looking, our primary meditation focus.

I'll close with one more quote from one of these Brahmin youths. This is in the same section where the other Brahmin youth was talking to the Buddha. This is a Brahmin youth named Kappa who asked the Buddha: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger"—it's just an image for the realm of samsara, of birth and death—"overwhelmed with aging and death, tell us the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replies: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is Nirvana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death.

CHAPTER 123

Brahmavihāra Practice

Guy Armstrong · 45 min

> *In this concluding talk from a month-long retreat sequence, Guy Armstrong offers deep teachings on upekkhā (equanimity), the fourth of the brahmavihāras or divine abodes. He emphasizes that equanimity is not emotional detachment but rather a balanced awareness that allows feelings to arise without disturbance, providing the foundation that prevents mettā, karuṇā, and muditā from falling into their near and far enemies.*
>
> *Armstrong explores how equanimity requires both wisdom—understanding that present conditions arise from countless past causes—and trust in the lawful nature of existence. He offers various phrases for practice, from the traditional "all beings are heirs of their karma" to gentler alternatives like "things are just as they are" and "I care for you but cannot control your happiness." The guided meditation systematically extends equanimity from neutral persons through difficult relationships to all beings everywhere.*
>
> *This teaching illuminates how the four brahmavihāras work together as an integrated system, with equanimity providing stability while being warmed by the other three divine abodes. Perfect for practitioners seeking to understand how balanced awareness can serve both inner peace and compassionate engagement with the world's joys and sufferings.*

This is our last day on the whole sequence of the Brahmaviharas that we're presenting. Today we're going to be leading into equanimity for all beings, and that rounds out the set.

I want to say a few words about equanimity before we start. I want to begin with a story from Sylvia Boorstein, one of our dear teachers. She had a friend who came up to her from one of the classes and said, "I finally found the best way to answer the question when people ask, 'How are you?' You know, you get that question all the time and you don't know whether to be sincere or phony when you answer."

So Sylvia's student said that she found a reply which was, "I couldn't be better." And that's a true statement that works in all situations, doesn't it? I couldn't be better. So I recommend that to you for your social life back in the world. But I also recommend it as a foundation for equanimity practice.

Because in a way, equanimity, whether we're looking at ourselves or someone else or the world, equanimity says it couldn't be better. It says it couldn't be otherwise. It says the way the present moment is is the result of so many past moments and so many different causes and conditions that this present moment could not have arrived here in any different way than it is arriving.

Given the truth of that, our job as meditators is to come into harmony with it. Otherwise we're fighting with reality, and you know who wins that battle. It doesn't mean we shouldn't in the next moment go out and try to change the causes and conditions that have created this moment. There's a lot of injustice in the world and wrongs and things that need to be corrected. But we feel it's better to try to do that work from a place of a balanced mind than from the place of a disturbed mind.

So as meditators, if we can come into a peace of mind, a balance of mind with the way things are now, that not only makes our life happier, but it gives us the right platform to go out and do our work in the world. Whether it's helping other people or changing the world or carrying out simple tasks.

This quality of balance of mind is in some ways the most important and central thing we're doing through the day. And when that balance gets disturbed and we fall into a strong reaction, the basic instruction is do what's needed to bring the mind back into balance. Balance is just another word for equanimity.

So equanimity shouldn't be confused with absence of emotion. I got that impression. I looked at these stone statues of the Buddha for a long time and I thought, "Oh, he's not feeling anything. So that's the way we want to end up, is not feel anything." And then I suppressed my emotions to try to align with that ideal. And that was really painful and a misunderstanding.

It's not about not feeling. Equanimity is about allowing the feelings that are there to be there and not be disturbed by them.

In particular, equanimity is what gives the mind strength. And that strength is what keeps us from falling into the near and far enemies of the brahmaviharas. If you take a look at the whole map of these Brahmaviharas and their near and far enemies, you come up with twelve different states and they describe a very good map of the heart's movement, where the heart can go.

Briefly, the way I understand it is the Brahmaviharas themselves are refined, cultivated, developed, beautiful qualities of heart and mind that we work towards and access more as we practice. But they're not always a given in our emotional life. We have to work towards them.

The next category down are the near enemies, which look like the Brahmaviharas, but have an unwholesome component. I think we've talked about all of these: attached affection, pity or grief, overexuberance, and for equanimity, it's indifference—cutting off feeling. So I see the near enemies as the basic neurotic, egoic relationship to life. They're not dreadful states. They're just states based on self rather than consideration for all beings. So the near enemies are kind of normal neurotic reactions to life.

The far enemies are the distorted, very reactive, painful responses to life.

So what keeps the Brahmaviharas from falling into the near and far enemies is equanimity. Metta that transcends attachment needs the foundation of a balanced mind. Compassion that doesn't fall into pity or grief needs the foundation of equanimity. Appreciative joy that doesn't fall into over-excitement needs the balance of equanimity. So it's when we get to this fourth Brahmavihara that we understand how they all four work together.

And then equanimity needs the warmth of the other three. If equanimity doesn't have, underlying it, metta, compassion, and joy, then it is cold. It is indifference. It is not feeling.

So metta, compassion, and joy have to warm up the heart so that true equanimity can reveal itself. When you're in a place of very refined equanimity, there may not be a lot of emotion present. You may be sitting in quiet meditation in the hall or in your home, where the suffering of the world, the joy of the world may not be impinging on you. Then equanimity can be a very refined, spacious, cool place to abide. That's perfectly fine.

But how do you know if it's equanimity or indifference? Bring to mind someone in a place of happiness, joy, or suffering and see if the heart moves with either mudita or compassion. That's how you can check it out.

So we want this kind of balance where the heart is supple, pliable, responsive, warm. But when it rests, it can simply rest in this very cool place of balance, not disturbed by our life, by others' lives, by life in general.

This takes two developments. One is wisdom. We need to see that everything that comes arises from many past causes and conditions, and it could not be otherwise. This is an equanimity phrase if you like it: "Things could not be otherwise." And it needs this element of trust. We have to trust in life itself. We have to trust the Dharma, the laws of this universe.

So if we have both those things—understanding and trust—then we can relax and the mind can be at peace. This particular reflection of equanimity really helps steer our minds to that kind of safe harbor. So it's a very powerful practice. Once, in a long retreat, I did ten days of intensive equanimity, and it was a very wonderful experience and deep in learning. So it's a practice that we can stay with for a long time, and it really shifts our understanding of how life unfolds. I recommend it to you.

If you don't like the karma phrase, as I imagine Kate and Heather both explained, there are many other phrases. So I'm going to read alternate phrases, as I imagine they did too, just to make sure you have a full range.

The karma phrase is: "All beings are the heirs of their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their past actions more than on my wishes for them." That's the classic phrase.

But here are some variations:

"All beings meet their joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature."

"All beings have their own journey."

"Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature."

"I care for you but can't control your happiness or unhappiness."

"I care about you, but I can't control the outcome of your life."

"I wish you well, but cannot keep you from suffering."

"Everything arises from past causes and conditions."

"Things are just as they are."

"This moment is just as it is."

"Things couldn't be otherwise."

So we will hold different individuals, we will hold all beings, and just use one of these phrases—the one that resonates for you without resistance—to try as you consider your life, their life, the process of living.

Let's begin the meditation. We'll start with the neutral person.

Please bring to mind your neutral person and see them as clearly as you can. If you've held them in metta, in compassion, in appreciative joy, you'll have some sense of different aspects of their character and some of their joys and sorrows. Let yourself intuit some of their joys and sorrows.

As you hold the neutral person, reflect that there are causes and conditions for the way their life has unfolded. Different events have made them the person they are. And among those events are their own intentions, the habits of their mind.

So if you'd like to use the phrase on karma, I find it most helpful to think of it in terms of the habits of the person's mind constructing their happiness or unhappiness moment by moment. Whatever phrase you like, begin to repeat that phrase as you hold the neutral person in your heart.

"You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and unhappiness depend on your own habits of mind."

Now bring in either your benefactor or your good friend, whichever you'd like to connect with. As you bring in your benefactor or friend, you've gotten to know them well through these weeks of meditation.

So as you hold them, let yourself remember the good things and the difficult things in their life. Get a sense of their joys and sorrows. You may notice some movements of metta, of compassion, or mudita with this person because your heart is alive and responds to them. Allow those feelings to be there.

And then as you stay connected, just repeating your equanimity phrase: "Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding by a lawful nature," or "You will meet your joy and sorrow according to a lawful nature."

And then letting go of the friend or benefactor and bringing in yourself. Connecting with the image of yourself or just feeling yourself as you sit here and now. And you know really well the range of happiness and unhappiness in your life. You've touched on it through metta, through compassion, through joy. So coming in contact with the realm of your own experience, the range of it. And in touch with your deep wish for happiness, wish not to suffer.

And then can we each find a balance of mind in relation to the situation that we're in? Can we find this peace and acceptance of the way our life is today? So perhaps trying different versions of the phrase to see which one resonates with how we hold

ourselves: "I am the owner of my actions. My happiness and unhappiness depends on my own habits of mind," or "Things are just as they are. This moment is just as it is. I couldn't be better."

And if you feel ready now, we can bring in the difficult person as a way to prepare for all beings. So if you like—you don't have to, but if you like to try it—then imagine your difficult person, bringing them into your field of awareness, seeing them if you can, perhaps at a distance, not too close.

And as you connect with a difficult person, remember the things in their life that are going well, the things in their life that are difficult. Remember their basic wish also is to be happy and not to suffer. And yet you may be able to see how their very actions lead them into more unhappiness, or how they could lead to happiness.

And so repeating for them an equanimity phrase that feels appropriate: "You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and unhappiness come from your own habits of mind," or "I wish you well, but can't control your happiness and unhappiness," or "You meet your joys and sorrows according to a lawful nature."

And now beginning to open up the sense of equanimity, of balance in a limitless way. And we'll begin just with those of us in the meditation hall and perhaps just the few people who are sitting closest to you. And have a sense that your awareness can hold those who are somewhat near to you.

And as you connect with them, letting the image of different people just come into your mind for a few moments each. So you get a sense of your Dharma brothers and sisters who are sitting close by, who you've been sharing this month with. And as their face comes into view for a few moments, let yourself feel into their being and anything you felt about their joys, their difficulties in this time together. And appreciating the strength of their character continuing with the discipline of the practice.

And as you hold them in your mind, you might just feel if there's metta, compassion, joy for them. And then having a sense that this feeling of equanimity can extend outward from you and include them in their being, in their life, in their situation, in their hearts and minds. "Whether I understand it or not, things are unfolding according to a lawful nature. All beings meet their happiness and unhappiness by a lawful nature. I wish you well, but can't control your happiness or unhappiness."

And then opening your awareness further to take in everyone in the hall at this time. And as you hold us all, let different people come into view for a little while. And just feel the different beings that are here. Let different images come so that this sense becomes personal. You're feeling a human life as you say the phrase.

And as different people come, let yourself feel their being, their happiness or unhappiness that you've seen or felt. With a sense of caring for all the support you may have gotten from them. And directing the equanimity phrase in a broad way to everyone in the hall: "All beings are the heirs of their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own actions of heart and mind."

Our lives are unfolding according to a lawful nature. So have a sense that the equanimity can be very wide and take in all of us, but at the same time it can become quite personal. You can think of one person and reflect on the phrase, touching them. And as you let different people come to mind, you'll feel the range of experience that a human life involves. Let the experience touch you and see if it can be held in balance.

Then opening your awareness in a really unlimited way. Open to all beings everywhere—beings on the land and beyond, beings we can see and those we can't, human beings, creatures, all other beings. Every being that is born faces this mixture of happiness and unhappiness, wishing to be happy and not to suffer, but life is mixed. Feeling the tenderness, the difficulties, the joys for all beings.

As you extend to all beings, let different beings come into your mind for a while. Beings at home whom you've left to come here—partners, children, parents, family, friends. Let yourself feel how their happiness and unhappiness is shaped by their own habits of mind, by their own actions. And beings further away, in states of health, in states of illness, in situations of ease or distress, in poor countries or in rich countries. All the animals, those who are free physically, those who have been captured, those treated with love and those treated with cruelty. I care for you, but I can't control your happiness and unhappiness. All beings are the heirs of their karma. All beings find their happiness and unhappiness through their own habits of mind.

May all beings be peaceful.
May all beings be happy.
May all beings be liberated.

I hope you get the sense of the vastness of this practice too, that it's not just a cold and unfeeling relationship to life. It can really hold the joys and sorrows and find our own balance of mind with it all. Reflecting on the all beings reflection really tends to bring out the universal quality of the range of experience in life—how we hold that with our own balance.

CHAPTER 124

The Attitude In Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk from an insight meditation retreat for experienced students, Guy Armstrong presents a comprehensive framework for cultivating the proper attitude in awareness practice. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching from the Sabbāyatana Sutta on the totality of experience through the six sense doors, Armstrong explains three essential principles: relax (letting go of control and the grasping mind), observe (arriving fully in the present moment), and allow (accepting things as they are without inner resistance).*
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> *Armstrong provides crucial clarification of key Buddhist terms, distinguishing between viññāṇa (consciousness - the basic knowing quality present in all sentient beings) and sati (mindfulness - the intelligent understanding that recognizes experience within the framework of the four satipaṭṭhāna). He explains how awareness in English encompasses both meanings, sometimes referring to spontaneous consciousness and other times to mindful understanding. The talk emphasizes how resting in pure awareness naturally embodies the three characteristics of nibbāna: freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion.*
>
> *With references to Chan master Shitou's teaching and practical examples from retreat life, this talk offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners essential guidance for developing the inner relationship necessary for liberating insight practice.*

This evening I want to talk on the topic of an attitude for awareness.

There are two things I want to touch on in this talk. First, I want to go over some of the specific terms and technical language that we'll be using throughout this retreat. Philip touched on much of that this morning and described them beautifully, showing how they relate together and impact our experience. I want to expand on that a little bit.

The second thing I want to talk about is how we approach our practice—the spirit that we bring to it. This is quite an important part of practice. This is not just a mechanical process of following instructions that lead to predetermined results. There needs to be an inner relationship to what we're doing. This is sometimes described as having the right attitude in meditation, or taking the right approach. So I want to talk about the attitude with which we can approach our practice. This applies not only to this particular retreat, where we'll focus a lot on awareness, but to our meditation practice in general.

One teacher described this kind of right attitude with three simple words: relax, observe, allow. I think these are three really good guidelines for us for this whole week together. So I'll talk about each of these aspects.

In relaxing, we are both intending to relax the body and intending to relax the mind, insofar as they will do that. Sometimes they will not do that. Learning to relax the body is something that in the West we spend quite a bit of time on. We have developed the technology of massage and hydrotherapy and reflexology and all those different kinds of touch to bring relaxation to the body. Even then there are some aches and pains and tensions that just won't release. But we generally in the West haven't had a lot of understanding of how to relax the mind. This is really where the heart of relaxation has to come from.

How can we relax our mind? There are many things that make the mind not relaxed. The challenges of daily life bring movement from within our own mind that lead away from relaxation. We have reactions of wanting or not wanting, of desire and aversion, and all those forces tend to make the mind tight and unrelaxed.

In our meditation practice, we can get tight if we're afraid of doing it wrong. Sometimes we think if we miss one moment or do one stretch of meditation wrong, we're never going to get it and we're going to be a bad meditator forever. So we can get tight around that. We find, of course, that we can make all kinds of mistakes in meditation and somehow things keep unfolding. It's sort of amazing that despite some of our bad habits, it doesn't actually stop the meditation from working. That's very reassuring to find out.

Sometimes the mind can become unrelaxed if we really want something special to happen. I had quite a lot of this in the beginning of my practice. I had a quality that's generally considered good in meditation practice, especially in the beginning—something that's sometimes described as zeal. I had a lot of zeal in the start of my practice, but I have to say it was a little out of balance. Part of it was that I really wanted some result, like enlightenment or liberation or something major to happen, and I was pressing.

This was pointed out to me not long after I'd moved to California. My wife and I moved there some years ago, and not long after we arrived, some of our friends in the Dharma community were going to see a psychic. So I thought, I'll go see the psychic. That's kind of what you do when you go to California. You get your driver's license, you go to see a psychic, and then you've really landed.

She and I went to see this psychic together and we walked through the door. As we walked in, the psychic sort of did this big recoil from me. He said, "Hold on, you want it so much. Don't you know that God comes to those who don't want him so strongly?"

That was actually a really good intuition about this zeal that I was approaching meditation practice with. I have to say, I'm glad that I had that zeal, especially in the early part of my practice, because it's a tremendous motivator. It fueled really good years of serious practice. So I especially recommend it to young practitioners—don't worry about having a lot of zeal. It can carry you a long way. But at some point, and when I saw the psychic it was probably a good point, we need to start learning to bring it into balance. Otherwise we can burn ourselves out with that kind of dhammachanda, desire for the Dhamma, in meditation.

So there are all these different forces in the heart and mind working to bring contraction.

Our basic sense of self-centeredness and self-concern works to contract us. And to undo that, we have to learn this quality of relaxing. Really, in essence, this quality of relaxing is about letting go—about not clinging, not holding on, not controlling. But it's not something that comes so easily, so we want to investigate it and incline in that direction often.

You'll often hear us in the instructions point to this quality of relaxing. We mean to relax the body as much as possible and to begin to learn how to relax the mind, to let go a little bit of the mind's tendency to grasp and control.

When we're able to relax, this sends a very important message throughout the system. It sends a message to the brain that says something like, "Things are all right. Everything is basically okay." If we can bring that quality of relaxation in, then the mind knows it, the brain knows it, then the body gets the message and everything can start to settle a bit.

There is a deep reason in the Dharma why we can trust and what we can trust in. I want to relate this koan that comes from a Chinese Chan master many centuries ago. His name—which I'm not sure of the pronunciation of, but I read it as Shi Tou—was a Chan master some generations after Hui Neng, who I think was the fifth Zen ancestor and author of the Platform Sutra.

Shi Tou was in a dialogue with a seeker who was coming to him for advice and teaching. This seeker came to him and said, "What am I supposed to do?" And Shi Tou's reply was, "Why are you asking me?" So we might use this too during this retreat, so be forewarned.

He says, "Why are you asking me?" And the seeker says, "Where else can I find what I'm looking for?" And Shi Tou replies, "Are you sure you've lost it?"

"Are you sure you've lost it?" is another way of saying, "Are you sure you're not complete and whole and perfect just as you are?" It's a profound pointer to the basic nature of our own minds that each of us has, embodies, is. This basic nature, of which awareness is a direct expression, has a quality of awakeness, of purity, of never having been stained or corrupted.

As we start to trust in that and feel that, then we know we have something we can really trust in and relax into. The discovery of this is really the grounds for a quality of —we could call it—faith. The Pali word is saddhā. Faith is kind of a mixed word for Westerners because often we take it to mean belief, but it's maybe better translated as trust or confidence.

We discover this quality in ourselves, this basic goodness and purity, through our direct experience. Awareness plays a vital role in that. Awareness sort of leads us into the knowledge of that and the experience of that, the trust in that. Once we know that that is there within us, that's what we can relax into. We realize we don't have to make something up to make ourselves different than we are. There is this basic goodness, this basic nature that we just have to relax into, and it will hold us, it will support us, and it will respond with loving kindness, with compassion, with understanding, with insight.

I think for all of us on the teaching side, this quality of exploring awareness has been so helpful because it's led us into a trust in this basic nature. We'll talk more about that as we go through the retreat.

Sometimes we might describe it as relaxing, sometimes we might call it letting go, we might call it dropping. Another nice phrase is just settling back into the present moment. As we stop trying to make anything special happen, we can just settle back into the way things are right now. In that settling back with presence, with awareness, this nature will start to reveal itself, will start to be felt.

Once we touch this relaxation, the next word in attitude is observe. Observe is not my favorite word for this, but it's not bad. We could also say pay attention or be mindful or be aware. Observe is a nice short way, but observe sometimes feels a little too dualistic—like I'm removed and I'm going to watch from a distance something that's happening. Maybe a better word is feel. Feel into, sense, soften into our experience.

At any rate, once we relax, then we want to start to pay attention. What is our experience? What's happening? We learn to pay attention to many different aspects of the experience we're having. The key, of course, is that it's happening in the present moment. This is what we want to learn from—a present moment experience. And again, we have many tendencies that take us out of that.

There's this New Yorker cartoon that sums this up really well. It's got three panels.

The cartoon depicts something profoundly true about human consciousness: whatever we're doing, it's so easy to find ourselves somewhere else entirely. When our experience becomes this fragmented, we start to feel scattered and incomplete. We lose the collectedness of samadhi, that gathering together of awareness that has been mentioned. As we learn to collect our attention in the present moment, however, we begin to experience a quality of wholeness—being fully together here and now—which allows us to genuinely learn from our experience.

This quality of observing requires first arriving here, gathering ourselves so we can truly give our heart and mind to learning from our present moment experience. The result is profound contentment, happiness, and satisfaction. I don't believe it's possible to find genuine satisfaction while living in that fragmented way, where half our vital energy is lost to past or future. But when we call that energy back into the present moment, contentment and fulfillment naturally arise.

A visitor once came to see the Buddha and his community of monks and nuns—I believe it was a king, one of those who maintained strong relationships with the Buddha and supported the monastic community. He told the Buddha, "I've visited many different spiritual teachers and traditions, and often I find people arguing, quarreling, being disputatious. The atmosphere feels very disharmonious. But when I come here, your people are orderly and quiet, and everybody looks so happy. Why are your followers so happy?"

The Buddha replied simply: "Because they abide in the present. They abide in the present."

This ability to abide in the present removes much of life's complication and restores tremendous energy, bringing great joy and happiness. Thoreau captured this beautifully in *Walden*: "I feel a little alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily without getting there in spirit. What business have I in the woods if I'm thinking of something outside the woods?"

You might notice this phenomenon during walking meditation or simply walking in nature. Are we really here where our body is? This is the training of meditation—we go off again and again, and gently we bring ourselves back. We'll unfold these instructions day by day, learning to pay attention to many aspects of our experience: objects like breath, body, and sounds. In this retreat especially, we'll focus on the quality of awareness itself—this knowing element that recognizes all phenomena will be central to our exploration.

The third element, "allow," means that in meditation, whatever is happening in the moment, we let it be as it is. It may not be what we wanted or what we would have ordered, but it's what's happening. We work to bring our heart into alignment with the way things are. We come into the present to see reality clearly, and this quality of allowing brings our heart into harmony with that reality.

In the present moment, things couldn't have unfolded any other way. There are countless causes and conditions that have led this moment to be exactly what it is. For it to have emerged differently, all those causes and conditions would have had to be different. So in any given moment, that moment has unfolded in the only way it could, based on past conditions. Our meditation practice then becomes: How do we respond to create the next moment skillfully, wholesomely, in ways that bring satisfaction, happiness, and freedom from suffering?

One of the students at Spirit Rock shared a lovely dialogue with her teacher. She said, "People often ask how I am, and I've learned to reply, 'I couldn't be better'—because it's literally true. In this moment, I couldn't be better. If I could have been, I would be. But this is what is in this moment."

This moment couldn't be different. Yet so often we fight with that reality. Of course, when you fight with reality, you know who wins. But we frequently do resist the actuality of the present moment. This message of "allow" invites us to let our heart and mind soften and open to the way things are right now.

It's important to note that this describes an inner relationship—

This is not saying what action you should take back in the world to address social injustice, unfair circumstances, damage to the earth, or harm to others around us. That's a different movement entirely. But learning this inner quality of allowing enables us to settle with greater peace into the reality of the present moment, and that settledness provides a wiser foundation from which to choose our response.

If something needs to change externally or internally, we come from a place of settledness and equanimity in order to most skillfully make the next step. For instance, in meditation on a day like today, you may have observed many moments of not wanting to accept things as they are. The first day of retreat often brings considerable friction with the way things are.

Someone's in the shower when I want to be there. What's served at lunch isn't what I would have ordered. Someone is making noise in the meditation hall behind my seat, and I really want things quiet. A back pain arises after forty minutes of sitting, and I really don't want to feel it. Many different things arise, and our habitual response is to push against what we don't like and try to make happen what we do.

It's fascinating to observe the mind and its activity from this perspective, especially on a day like today. You may see that you've been quite busy trying to make countless little adjustments—just to feel a bit better, just to get ahead in the lunch queue, just to make things a little quieter in the hall. We're constantly adjusting our experience.

When we first notice this habit, it doesn't seem like a big deal. It's just a little habit of mine. Everyone does it. It's natural. We like some things, dislike others. But we don't initially notice the effect this has. We're trying to control our experience, and there's always a price for attempting control. That price is the surrender of some freedom.

As we examine this habit of adjusting, making things a little better, putting off discomfort just a bit more, we begin to see it keeps the mind perpetually busy and prevents us from settling into a deeper peace that embodies allowing. In the Tibetan tradition, they teach something profound about this pattern.

You've probably heard of samsara, the wheel of birth and death that according to the Buddha we cycle through again and again. It can be understood as many lifetimes of being born and dying, or as a moment-to-moment phenomenon throughout each day where we take birth in different personalities, psychological states, and physical conditions—all lasting briefly before dying off as something new emerges.

However you understand it, Buddhist philosophy holds that this cycle, this incessant wheel, is wearying. Through repeated birth and death, one grows tired of the struggle inherent in that cycle. Finding freedom in relation to changing situations is discovering nirvana in relation to samsara—one of the fruits we might discover through meditation practice.

In the Tibetan tradition, they teach that what keeps the wheel turning is trying to correct things. The essence of samsara is our attempt to correct it. Here lies a profound pointing: this quality of resting in peace, where we release control, can lead into the dimension of nirvana—deep, satisfying peace.

One beautiful aspect of the awareness we're exploring—which Philip hinted at this morning when he described it as mirror-like—is that it doesn't care what it reflects. So often we care deeply. We want pleasant experiences and resist unpleasant ones. But awareness truly doesn't care. It reflects the beautiful, harmonious, peaceful, and pleasing with the same accuracy as it reflects what's difficult, conflicted, or painful—whether physical, emotional, or external.

Awareness possesses this capacity to accurately reflect anything that appears before it. As we let our attention enter that realm, our being begins to absorb some of that impartiality. We start to inhabit that dimension that's equally at home with both pleasant and unpleasant appearances. The more we surrender to that quality of awareness, the more our being discovers that peace, trust, and refuge Leela described last night.

This quality of awareness and its inherent peacefulness and impartiality becomes a living refuge, an actual sanctuary for us. As Chan master Shito taught: "Your essential mind is absolutely still and completely whole, and its ability to respond to circumstances is limitless."

We begin to trust it not only as our resting place for peace and contentment, but also as our capacity to meet the world skillfully. By resting in awareness, we don't lose touch with any of our senses or our connection to the world. Rather, it enriches our connection to the world.

And awareness also has this beautiful quality of responsiveness, that it can meet the situation with what's appropriate—love or compassion or happiness or patience, all the paramis. So this is the practice of right attitude: relaxing, giving ourselves to the observation, wanting to learn from our experience and allowing things to be the way they are. This is our platform for exploring the objects of our experience and the quality of awareness that comes.

Now I want to look at some of the key terms we'll be using and try to get a little more precision about our definitions. I think we've all been using them in a consistent way so far, but let's examine more deeply what we actually mean by these terms. I want to particularly look at the words consciousness, mindfulness, awareness, and attention.

Before diving into definitions, I want to say one of the things I really appreciate about retreats is their simplicity. We have a very simple lifestyle here. We eat and we sleep and we walk and we sit, we spend time in nature, we open our eyes, we close our eyes. A very simple life that's really common to all humans. And that kind of simple life brings us back to some basic questions. One of the questions I like to think about is: what is our most basic situation as human beings? And how do we find freedom in relation to it?

One way of framing this is through a short poem from Rumi, where he wrote: "Where did I come from and what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." That's kind of our existential situation, isn't it? As adults, we start to wake up. We're here. Why are we here? What am I supposed to do? I don't know. This body and mind didn't come with a user manual. They didn't tell us at birth what we were supposed to be doing with our human life. What are we supposed to do?

One of the things that I like to feel into when I'm on retreat is what does it mean to be a sentient being? We are all sentient beings like the birds and the chipmunks and the people who are driving by on the road. What does that mean? Well, I think sentience means that we are experiencing things. We are knowing things. We are conscious beings. If you think of it, basically what it means is as long as we're awake, things are happening and we're aware that they form our experience.

So in the present moment, you're feeling body sensations, you're seeing the room, you're hearing my voice, you're having a certain mood, and some thoughts are going through your mind. All these experiences are just going, going, going. We don't have to do anything particular to make them happen. In fact, could you stop them? As long as we're awake, some form of that is just going to keep going, going, going, whether we want it or not. That's what being sentient involves. We're constantly being bombarded, you might say.

The Buddha described this in a beautiful little discourse called the Discourse on Totality. He started this way: "Bhikkhus"—a word that's usually translated as monks, but it really means committed practitioners, those who are exploring the nature of their experience like you are—"I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully, and I will speak."

This is a pretty bold claim, isn't it? I'll teach you the totality of life. You think about the twentieth-century intellects. Marx didn't say that. Einstein didn't say that. Freud didn't say that. Here's the Buddha 2,600 years ago: I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully.

What is the totality of life? It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and objects of mind. This is called the totality of life. Anyone who attempted to describe a totality beyond this would not know that of which they were speaking.

So I love this passage because it directs us to what I would say is the Buddha's map for us. This is a certain map we call the map of the sense doors. In Buddhism, they are considered to be six sense doors—the five physical senses and the mind, which is another door primarily bringing through thoughts and emotions.

This is the range of our experience, and our meditation is to become familiar with all of this. That's why we give, in a standard vipassana retreat, so many instructions about how to pay attention to sights and sounds and sensations and breath and thoughts and emotions. This forms our world. This is where we get caught and suffer. This is where we can find release and freedom as we learn to relate wisely.

So I'll suggest—not right now, but later—take a look at this list, the six sense doors and their objects, and ask: is there anything else in your experience that's not covered in that? Or does that in fact describe the totality of life for you? It's something to reflect on later.

In this passage, one of the things that makes up the totality of life is mind—mind and objects of mind. Objects of mind, you can think of basically as thoughts and emotions. But what is this thing called mind?

Mind in this passage refers to that which knows all the other things. Mind knows sights and sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, thoughts, and emotions. Or we could say that's an aspect the Buddha called consciousness. The word he used in Pali is vijñāna. This is such an important word that we'll probably refer to it again and again, and it's useful to know in this retreat. Vijñāna relates to knowledge or cognition—the ñā syllable means knowing or cognizing. It's the heart of vijñāna.

So it's the mind that knows all these different objects. Another way to say it is that we're conscious of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, thoughts, and emotions. This is the activity of consciousness that knows these sense door objects in their most basic nature.

For instance, when we look at the eye door, what are we actually seeing in a moment? You might see this more clearly if you close one eye. If you look out, what we really see are just patches of form and color. That's the data in the eye door. We've

learned that that's a woman, that's a man, that's a cushion, that's a floor, that's a wall, that's a lamp. But the basic eye door data is simply patches of form and color. In that very simple, primitive, uninterpreted way, that's what the eye door reveals.

Similarly, the ear door can reveal sound, but the conscious knowing of that sound doesn't interpret it as bell or bell that ends a sitting. That's an addition. That's in the realm of what we could call perception. Consciousness reveals the sound. The perception or interpretation explains it or recognizes it.

So vijñāna is this quality of our mind. It's really the essence of our mind's activity that's knowing and presenting to us all the different objects of experience at these six sense doors. That's what consciousness does. It presents the world to us in this very bare form. It's pre-verbal. It hasn't been interpreted. Just the bare sense data. This is vijñāna.

It's happening all the time as long as we're alive and awake and the sense doors are working. If your eye, ear, nose, tongue, body are working, these are going to be happening. We can't decide not to feel them. We can't decide to turn them off. Also, this consciousness doesn't require that we be particularly intelligent. It's happening all the time quite automatically.

We have it. Do animals have it in your intuition? Are animals conscious? Yes, they're probably having these same experiences through their sense doors. Babies?

Are babies conscious? Can they see and smell? Yes, they respond to these things. It looks like they're conscious also.

So consciousness is in all living things, all sentient things, let's put it that way. Worms have this, sloths have this, the Buddha had this, Einstein had this, the birds have this. Everything that is sentient has this quality of consciousness.

Now let's talk about mindfulness. Mindfulness is another step up, you could say, in intelligence—in relating to the objects of the senses revealed by consciousness—because mindfulness understands what they are. For instance, consciousness reveals the sound; mindfulness recognizes it as hearing or as a sound. Consciousness reveals a pain; mindfulness understands it as sensation with unpleasant feeling tone.

It's very interesting that the central discourse of the Buddha's on mindfulness is called the Satipatthana Sutta, Foundations of Mindfulness. The word in Pali for mindfulness is *sati*, which originally meant "remember." So I think of it as remembering to notice what's happening, remembering to be in the present.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, as the Buddha describes the four foundations, there's a word that recurs again and again. Every time he describes how to do mindfulness meditation, the word he uses is *pajanati*. *Pajanati* is related etymologically to the word *sampajanya*, which you may have heard before—it's usually translated as "clear comprehension."

For instance, when the Buddha says, "Breathing in long, the bhikkhu understands, 'I breathe in long.' Breathing out long, the practitioner understands, 'I breathe out long.' She understands the mind affected by desire as the mind affected by desire. She understands the mind unaffected by desire as mind unaffected by desire," and so on.

Everywhere the Buddha describes this practice of mindfulness, the word he uses is *pajanati*, which gets translated as "understands." This is very interesting. Mindfulness requires this understanding, which means there has to be an intelligence behind it. There has to be a certain amount of intelligence to understand our experience in the framework of the four foundations, which develop the quality of mindfulness.

This is another aspect of cognition, but it's a higher level functioning. In fact, you could say we've looked at three different levels of cognition. *Vijnana* reveals the pure sound before words—maybe it's F sharp or something on a scale—it reveals that pure pitch. The next level up is perception that recognizes it as, "Oh, that's the sound of the bell." So there's a recognition factor based on memory. The next step up is mindfulness that understands that this is a sense object arising at the hearing door.

That's mindfulness. It knows it as an object of the six senses arising at one of the sense doors. You don't have to go through that thinking every time, but essentially that's what mindfulness is doing. It's locating it within the framework of the Buddha's map, the totality of life—the six kinds of sense objects and their doors.

This intelligence is the opening to wisdom. This factor of wisdom is so important in the Buddha's teachings because it's only wisdom that can liberate our hearts and minds. We can get peaceful and still just through meditation training, but it will end when we get up off the cushion and encounter the world, unless it's accompanied by understanding, by wisdom. So mindfulness is the entry gate for wisdom to come in.

The word is *panya* in Pali, for wisdom. One of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, liked to pair these two words, and he didn't often refer to it as mindfulness—he called it "mindfulness-wisdom." What we're developing here is mindfulness-wisdom, and he called that *sati-panya*. He regarded it as a native quality of our mind. *Sati-panya*.

So mindfulness has this quality of intelligence that understands things in the context of the Buddha's map. As we practice mindfulness, we're waking up that wisdom factor in us. That's so key because it's understanding that liberates the heart and mind—understanding of how we suffer and how we release that suffering.

Krishnamurti had a book with a lovely title pointing to this called *The Awakening of Intelligence*. That's what we're doing in every moment of mindfulness practice. We're awakening this native intelligence that will liberate us.

So I want to contrast this quality of mindfulness and the quality of consciousness.

Consciousness is happening all the time. Even if you want to, you can't turn it off. And there are many times we would like to. I flew from San Francisco to Boston the day before the retreat started. I would have loved to turn off consciousness for about six hours. I couldn't do that. So consciousness is always there.

Is mindfulness always there? Was your mindfulness there uninterrupted today? No. Mindfulness kind of comes and goes. There are times that we're really in the present and knowing our experience, understanding our experience. There are many other moments when we get carried away by a thought train or we feel very sleepy and too dull to really notice what's happening. So mindfulness comes and goes.

Generally, does it take some intention to be mindful? Yes. Consciousness is happening spontaneously, doesn't require any effort, can't stop it. Mindfulness isn't always there and usually needs a little bit of inclining the mind in that direction for it to be activated.

Dogs have consciousness. Does a dog have mindfulness in the way the Buddha uses it? If you have a dog and it's dinner time and you go over near the bowl and you pull out a can of dog food and you bring out your can opener and you go "rip, rip, rip," does your dog perk up its ears? Usually then they come right over to the bowl and they want to see what's in there.

Does the dog ever go, "Hearing is arising at the ear door. Perception is telling me that that's the sound of the Friskies can being opened. A pleasant aroma is arising at the nose door. Perception is telling me that that's the chicken flavor for tonight. A thought arises that my bowl will soon be filled with food. So the question arises, should I walk over thoroughly mindful to my bowl and check out whether the food is there yet?"

That would be a mindful dog, but usually that's not the way dogs work. They just go, smell, boom, and they're there, or hearing, boom, and they're there. So dogs are driven by many things—hunger or fear or loyalty or affection—but they don't stop to notice the motivation or the force from outside. The understanding in Buddhism is that the dog does not have the ability to develop mindfulness. But we do.

What about babies? Are they mindful? Sadness comes up. Does the baby know, "Oh, this is sadness"? When the breast comes near, do they know, "Oh, this is desire"? Probably not. Are they in the present moment? Yes. Is the dog in the present moment? Yes.

So we can be very present moment oriented, but not have this quality of mindfulness active, at least in the way it's described in the Eightfold Path, this quality of samma-sati, right mindfulness. This is the understanding of consciousness on the one hand, which all sentient beings share, and mindfulness on the other, a higher level of intelligence which humans can develop but not all beings have.

So what is awareness? It's kind of interesting, isn't it? This is an important point. There is no word in the Buddha's language, in the Pali language, that needs to be translated as awareness. The words he used are viññāṇa and sati—consciousness and mindfulness. There's no third word that we need to translate as awareness. So that's kind of interesting.

Is awareness more like consciousness, that it's happening all the time and quite unprompted? Or is it more like mindfulness, that it's there some of the time and not there others? I'll give you my opinion. You can find your own, but I'll give you my opinion. Sometimes it means one.

and sometimes it means the other, and sometimes it means somewhere in between. So it's a wonderful word in English because it sort of spans this range.

For instance, if I say, "Are you aware right now?" Yeah, if you're awake, you're aware. If somebody is thinking, when you are thinking, do you lose all awareness? No, you're aware of what you're thinking about. What you're thinking about may be the square root of 16 or something, but you're aware of something. You're not aware that that's a thought, but you're aware of something. So in that way, it's used like consciousness.

But then it could also be used like mindfulness. Like I could say, "When you said that to me, were you aware of your motivation in saying it?" And then it means, were you mindful? Did you know what motivation was present when you said that?

So in this way that it kind of slides between these two, it's a beautiful word. It's very expressive. It's a really nice English word. We're using it as the theme of this retreat. But also be aware that it's not very precise in the way that the Buddha's language is. Vijnana, very precise. Sati, mindfulness, is very precise. Awareness is kind of slippery.

And so this richness of the term awareness can actually help us, can help our intuition settle into kind of both aspects of what are going on. There's the knowing of individual things happening quite spontaneously, and there's this intelligence that can meet them and understand them. And both of those are pointed to by this term awareness.

So there's a little potential for confusion here, but I hope you won't let it worry you too much. As you use the word yourself, look into what you mean by it. Are you leaning more toward the spontaneous knowing of things like consciousness? Are you leaning more to having this wisdom factor like satipanna of mindfulness? We will use them in both senses. And so that ambiguity is kind of just part of the retreat. We're quite comfortable with it. And so I hope you will be too. And it's very interesting to keep looking into these, you could say these two aspects of the English term awareness. It's a beautiful term and really helpful to us.

So we'll be presenting lots of different meditation objects at the six sense doors, and then we'll keep wanting to turn and look back at this quality of knowing of them, the consciousness and then the higher level cognition of mindfulness, both of which we might describe as awareness.

So as we've said a few times today, don't worry too much whether you're with the sense object or you're tuning into the knowing of it, this consciousness factor that's receiving it. Because either way, the quality of mindfulness will be activated. And the quality of mindfulness opens the door to understanding and liberation. So either way is fine. And we'll sometimes talk about the objects and we'll sometimes talk about the knowing or the consciousness of them. And either way, the practice will be going great.

So don't spend too much time sort of spinning around about, "Am I with the knowing or am I stuck in the dreary old object?" Those dreary old objects work just fine for us. So we'll go back and forth and we'll get more fluency in that going back and forth.

So I'll just close with this little quotation from, actually it's from Sariputta. He was asked at one point, "What is nibbana?" You probably know this term—nibbana is the ultimate goal of the path of mindfulness. It's a state of deep and complete peace and the end of conflict, inner conflict. And he said, "Nibbana is the destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, and the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbana."

So these qualities, when you start to look at the nature of awareness itself, these qualities are absent in this pure nature of awareness. So as we tune into this knowing faculty, with its associated wisdom, we are stepping out of the samsaric forces of greed, aversion, delusion, and inclining the mind toward the goal of the path—this ultimate peace of nibbana. That is what we are doing moment by moment. So as we rest there, as we find out how to rest there, we get a little bit of a taste of that peace already, and it's leading into its own deepening.

So this will be the path of practice for this week. And if we understand in this way, we kind of bring the path and the goal together. Resting in this place of knowing is free from greed, aversion, delusion, and it leads onward to the full purification, the full liberation of nibbana.

This is our direction for the week.

At the end of the talks, we'd just like to have a little bit of quiet time, a minute or two, just to let the words settle. So we'll just sit for a minute or so together in silence, please.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 125

Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 54 min

> *In these morning instructions for experienced insight meditation practitioners, Guy Armstrong explores the balance between cultivating a broad field of awareness and maintaining connection with specific meditation anchors. Drawing on participant questions from the previous day, he guides meditators in developing both expansive sky-like awareness and focused attention on individual objects such as breath, body sensations, and sounds.*
>
> *Armstrong addresses common challenges faced by experienced practitioners, including how to work skillfully when attention moves away from chosen anchors, and the importance of maintaining compassion and loving-kindness (mettā) throughout practice. He emphasizes that awareness in its pure nature is free from greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha), naturally expressing qualities of kindness and care. The instructions include practical guidance on establishing familiarity with meditation anchors while remaining open to the natural flow of present-moment experience.*
>
> *The session concludes with a question-and-answer period addressing concerns about meditation technique, the role of compassion in practice, and managing the inevitable friction that arises in sustained meditation practice. This teaching offers valuable insights for practitioners seeking to deepen their understanding of awareness itself while maintaining the heart qualities essential for wise practice.*

Yesterday in the question period following Philip's instructions, one of you mentioned that sometimes awareness was easier to feel in a broad way, like a broad field of awareness, rather than the specific awareness of an individual object, like a body sensation or breath.

In the instructions this morning, I want to give encouragement to connect with that broad field of awareness, if that's helpful for you. And then also a suggestion to come back and re-look at the awareness in relationship to individual experiences—breath, body, and sounds. Perhaps, as I mentioned at the ten o'clock sit yesterday, choose an anchor from among those three that will be the focus that you return to again and again.

Because we will spend a little bit of time on sounds this morning, and the hall is so quiet, I may add a little additional sound. You'll know the sitting has ended when there are three bells from the big bell. Don't stop before then—keep meditating.

Please settle comfortably into your sitting posture, grounding the attention in the body, letting the body relax and letting the mind relax. Things are okay the way they are and we don't need to get anywhere else. Just settle into the present moment, feeling its sufficiency, letting the body be as it is, letting the mood be the way it is, and letting thoughts come and go as they will. Not chasing after them, but not pushing them away. Just letting thoughts come and go, but we don't have to be led around by them.

Find your connection to the earth through the sitting base that you can relax into, and the uprightness of the torso and head, letting the spine rise toward the sky. This whole living body filled with awareness from head to toe in every corner.

Now let your awareness become expansive and wide, open to all the sounds that are appearing and disappearing. If no sounds are apparent in any moment, just become aware of the extent of the silence, the vastness of silence. You might have the sense that your awareness is like a big clear sky stretching out without any limits, or like empty space in which all the sounds inside and outside arise and pass away—a space big enough to hold near sounds and distant sounds.

In giving attention to sounds, to hearing, let the attention be very receptive, not needing to send the mind out toward the sounds, but just resting in the center of all the sounds and letting them come to you. We don't need to do anything for sounds to be heard. As we rest, they're known effortlessly, spontaneously. So we just stay relaxed and present and the sounds are known.

Now become aware of sensations throughout the body. Sensations are arising, changing, fading. Also in this big empty space of the broad awareness—we might say this broad field of awareness—it's like space. Feel the sensations. And also recognize the awareness that lets them be known, this field of consciousness in which they come and go.

Among the sensations in the body, we meet again the experience of breathing, letting the breath just come naturally in its own rhythm, but feeling in the body the effect of breathing in, the effect of breathing out. You may notice a whole breath—the way the air enters through the nostrils, causes the chest to rise, causes the belly to expand on the in-breath and on the out-breath, how the abdomen falls, the chest falls and the air exits the nostrils. Or you might like to bring your focus of attention to one part of the body where the breath is clearer—at the tip of the nose, in the area of the abdomen, or in the chest. Then be quite continuous in the awareness of the in-breath and the out-breath.

It can be helpful to have an anchor that you come back to again and again in your meditation. Something that becomes very familiar and a home base for you. It could be sounds, could be the body posture as you sit, could be feeling the breathing. See where your attention falls easily, where you can connect easily. Then give your attention today to establishing a relationship with that experience. And as you do, tune from time to time into the quality of awareness that's revealing the experience. Right where the experience is, that's where the knowing is also—in sounds, in body, in breath.

If you find it helpful, you can reconnect with this broad sense of awareness being like a big clear sky or like empty space in which all the sounds and all the sensations arise and pass away. So you can be in touch with this sky-like nature of awareness. You can be in touch with the individual experiences. You can be in touch with the knowing of the individual experience. All of these are fine approaches in our meditation today.

If you're ever uncertain of where to give your attention, that's when it's helpful to have the anchor. Just a simple object—sound, body, breath—that you can come back and connect to with mindfulness again and again, allowing all facets of the experience just to be the way they are, just revealed through this impartial awareness that's open to all phenomena.

Stay connected with your anchor, clearly mindful moment by moment—sounds being known, sensations being known, breath being known. Can you tune into the knowing? Can you feel that knowing of the individual experience as it happens? Just let your intuition operate as you get close with your attention to that direct experience of the phenomenon. Intuit the knowing as it happens.

And then again, simply connecting with the appearance, sound, body, or breath. And just before the bell sounds, you might connect again with this broad sense of awareness, with its nature of being like a big clear sky, like empty space in which all the sounds just appear and disappear.

Do you have any questions this morning about your practice, about the instructions or the talks?

"I'm not sure if I have a good anchor because I'm trying to correct the body posture and it lasts about three seconds. It seems like maybe there's a feeling that the anchor needs to be the only thing that's in my consciousness and mindfulness. When some other object comes in alongside the anchor, there's a sense of disappointment and incorrectness. Then I've tried to become mindful of that..."

Great question. He finds that he can be with an anchor for a couple of seconds, and then something else arises. His attention gets drawn there, and he feels disappointment when attention moves away from the anchor. Then it becomes confusing as to where he should be.

This happens to all of us. As the instructions develop, we'll make this more of a choiceless paying of attention so that whatever arises can become a wonderful focus for mindfulness. Even at this stage, you can start working with that.

It's perfectly fine to move attention away from the anchor. Whether you're with sounds or with tinnitus—which itself can be an excellent meditation focus—you can tune into that as one of the sounds in the space. Then other things will be noticed: sensations in the body, perhaps aches or pains or pressures or lightness. You can tune into those, connect with them, feel them, feel the knowing of them. When they're no longer so compelling, you can return to the anchor.

Begin to play with that sense of freely moving away from the anchor at times. If something else arises and draws attention, let mindfulness become established with the new experience. When it's no longer compelling, no longer naturally drawing the attention, the anchor is always there to return to.

It's like beginning to play. At this stage we're working with body sensations, sounds, and breath. As the retreat progresses, we'll also open up to include emotions—beautiful emotions, difficult emotions—and the activity of thoughts. We want to eventually move our attention easily to any of those. For now, this is a good time in the retreat to start opening up to your anchor and to these simple experiences beyond the anchor. Feel free to make that movement. Come back to the anchor when there's nothing else really drawing attention naturally.

"Could you speak a bit about the role of compassion as we work with different anchors and focal points of attention? I find that early in my practice I was able to bring a sort of lightness of compassion and then experiment more, but over the last few years I've gotten much heavier. I'm able to soften, but it still feels like there's a lot of friction as I move from one anchor to another focal point."

An important question about the role of compassion in relation to the attention we bring to meditation. He mentioned that earlier in his practice he could bring a sense of compassion or lightness into meditation. Now he's feeling more friction as he works with the anchor and moving away from it.

This is such an important part of meditation's development. Leela did a guided meditation on loving-kindness yesterday at the 3:30 sitting, and we often include this in retreats because the heart qualities of love and compassion are so needed for us to hold the experience of meditation and the difficulty of being a person. It's not easy being a human being, as has been said many times.

That sense of care and compassion needs to start with ourselves first. We recognize the struggles in daily life, struggles in meditation, and we want to bring a warm, caring, allowing attention to that. Wherever we feel conflict or heaviness or sadness or unhappiness, we want to take a moment, acknowledge that, and meet it with this sense of care. You could call it compassion. You could call it loving-kindness. Just acknowledge that this too is part of our human experience.

In this retreat, we're focusing on these less personal aspects of awareness—mindfulness, consciousness, attention—as a theme to develop because you're all experienced meditators. But we recognize that just because you're experienced meditators, suffering hasn't gone out of the picture yet. It's really important that you hold as a background the Four Noble Truths, the ubiquitous quality of dukkha that comes with being a person, and how to keep the heart open as we meet the suffering that will come on the cushion as it does in daily life.

So whether it's the suffering of the body and physical discomfort, whether it's the suffering of mind states that come—sadness or longing or frustration—whether it's suffering that comes specifically in relation to meditation—frustration that you don't feel you're getting it, that you're sliding away, that you can't touch awareness, that you're losing the anchor—all these big and little kinds of disappointment and conflicts that come, we really need to continue to bring an open heart, whether it's loving kindness or compassion for yourself, into this moment by moment.

If you find that the formal meditations are helpful, which Leela introduced yesterday and will do again in this retreat—whether it's metta or compassion—feel free to bring those in at any point during the day. It's not an anchor in this retreat, but it can be an anchor in other retreats, and it's a very helpful attitude to carry all the time. And if that attitude isn't quite naturally present, do a little of the formal meditation as Leela led yesterday and evoke it for yourself so that you're holding your experience with that kindness and caring. It's really an important quality.

I talked just a little bit last night about how awareness really in its pure nature is free from the influence of greed, of hatred, and of delusion. So we start to see as we tune into awareness that it has this naturally kind and compassionate quality. When desire and aversion are absent, the mind is in a pretty pure space, and then love and com-

passion can come out of that. So we're heading in that direction. Sometimes we'll talk about it formally and sometimes we may not, but it's really behind all the instructions and very helpful to bring in. So thank you for bringing that up this morning.

I'm going to stop here with the questions. We need to have a few announcements, and I want to stop a little early because we're starting the interview groups this morning.

Most of you have probably been in interview groups before and kind of know what they're for, but just to make it clear, it's just a chance for you to meet with one of us, talk about your experience in the meditation so far, what's going well, what's been difficult, and to check in about how the retreat's going for you. We'll meet over these two days with everyone in a small group of about six or seven people. We'd like to hear from everyone in the course of the group. Then as we move through the first couple of days, we'll start to meet with you one-on-one.

These group meetings will start today, and we'll see half of you today. If your name wasn't on the list today, you'll be up tomorrow. Please check if it's not up tomorrow—it either means you're not really here, or we just don't have a sheet for you yet. The interview questionnaires, if there are any still outstanding, please give them back to Elizabeth. So we'll see everybody today or tomorrow.

This is not a grilling. This is not a quiz. This is not for us to evaluate you. This is just for you to ask some questions, and it actually helps to hear each other's questions in the small group. So it'll be a little more personal and you'll hear from other people as well.

Leela will be in the welcome room, which is the room where you registered, just across the hall.

CHAPTER 126

The Five Hindrances - Part 1

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *In this opening dharma talk for a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong begins an exploration of the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇa) - the mental forces that obstruct meditation and spiritual development. Drawing on the Buddha's water bowl analogies from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, he examines three hindrances in detail: sense desire (kāmachanda), sleepiness and torpor (thīna-middha), and restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca).*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes that hindrances are universal human experiences that "fly under our mindfulness radar," seducing attention toward external situations while obscuring inner awareness. He distinguishes between unwholesome desires (taṇhā, rāga) and wholesome enthusiasm (dhammachandā), noting that sense pleasures aren't inherently problematic for lay practitioners when approached with moderation and wisdom.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for each hindrance: recognizing their bodily felt sense, examining our relationship to them without judgment, and applying appropriate antidotes when mindfulness alone isn't sufficient. Armstrong stresses that how we respond to arising experiences matters more than what arises, emphasizing acceptance and compassion over resistance. He concludes by noting that liberation requires first surmounting these five hindrances before establishing the four satipaṭṭhāna and developing the seven bojjhaṅga.*

The subject of tonight's talk is the five hindrances. I'm actually only going to talk about three hindrances, though I figured calling the talk "the three hindrances" would really confuse people. You probably know this list fairly well, but especially at the start of a long retreat, it's beneficial for us all to remind ourselves what these qualities are, how to recognize them, and how to work with them.

Tonight I'll cover part of the list, and in a few days Joseph will talk about the rest. If you recall, the five are sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. I'll discuss sense desire, sleepiness, and restlessness. Joseph will cover aversion and doubt in a few days. Until he talks about those, you're not allowed to have them—they're not workable yet. But you can have the others.

These hindrances are forces in the mind that come very often to us, certainly in our life as meditators on retreat and in daily life as well. It's really important that we learn how to see them and clearly understand how to work with them.

When we use the word "mind," we're usually translating the Pali word citta, but it really refers to qualities of both heart and mind. If you ask someone in Thailand where their mind is—the word for mind in Thai is jit, which comes from citta after Thailand has been steeped in Buddhism for so many years—they'll point to their heart center. If you ask someone in the West where their mind is, they'll probably point to their head. In Buddhism, we understand that this word citta, which we usually translate as mind, encompasses both feeling qualities and cognitive qualities. I'll use the word "mind" for that, but it includes the whole range of emotions we have as well.

Bonnie was talking last night about the genius of the Buddha. One of the most incredible things about his understanding was the way he could see all the different forces that come into our hearts and minds and see clearly which ones were to be supported and developed and which ones were not going to be helpful and therefore were ultimately to be abandoned. As she said, it is possible to abandon the unwholesome, and that's why he asked us to do it.

Much of his teaching was about which states of mind lead us into suffering and which states of mind lead us to happiness and eventually liberation. He used different lists for these qualities. For the suffering states, you might read the list of the taints, the kilesas (usually translated as defilements, though I'm not fond of that word), the list of the fetters, or the list of the hindrances. For the beautiful states, you might read lists like the five spiritual faculties, the seven factors of awakening, the four brahmaviharas, or the four iddhipadas—the bases of spiritual power.

Each of these lists has a different purpose and connotation, so I want to talk about what the list of the hindrances is about. As I understand these lists of difficult states: the taints refer to the most deep-rooted tendencies of the human heart and mind that are present in all living beings—the fundamental building blocks of suffering. The kilesas—greed, aversion, delusion—are usually used to refer to action. They're called the roots of unwholesome action, influencing thoughts, speech, and bodily acts. They're seen as the fundamental influencers of action and are very related to karma. The fetters are the list of things that bind us, which get released at different stages of development until there's no more bondage at all.

What are the hindrances? The way I understand it, the hindrances are especially directed to meditators—to those of us who are developing the path through the Eightfold Path and particularly meditation. As we develop in our meditation on the journey to awakening, the hindrances are the forces in the mind that obstruct that journey, that block or oppose that development to awakening until we become aware of them and understand how to work with them, how to become mindful of them.

In one of the suttas, the Buddha said that the hindrances are forces that overcome mindfulness and weaken wisdom. That's a strong statement—they overcome mindfulness and weaken wisdom. In another sutta, he used an analogy for the hindrances. He said it's like there's a swift river flowing toward the ocean with a very strong current that will carry everything along in its path. But then someone comes along and opens some irrigation channels on both sides of the river, and big flows of water get carried off into those side channels. The main current going down the center of the river is no longer as big or powerful or fast as it was before.

What he was implying is that hindrances are like opening side channels on our stream to awakening. As we set in motion the Eightfold Path, we generate this strong current that's going to carry us to liberation. The hindrances open side pockets that take some of that energy off and drain it away. Basically, when the mind is overtaken by hindrances, our strong movement to awakening is getting diverted and weakened.

Another way the Buddha described the hindrances is he said they are makers of blindness. If we are overtaken by them and don't know how to work skillfully, they make us not see clearly what's going on. The Buddha used analogies for these five hindrances, comparing them to a bowl of water that's getting influenced in different ways.

For each of the hindrances, he used an analogy for some kind of disturbance in the clear water. So he basically said if the water was clear, a person could lean over it and see clearly their reflection in the water. But the hindrance puts another element in the water that makes the reflection not come through clearly. So he said if a person with good sight should look at their own reflection in the water, they would not see it as it really is. This is the misleading effect of the hindrances.

He said, "When obsessed by a hindrance, one does not see as it really is one's own good, nor the good of others, nor the good of both." This is all to say that the hindrances are fairly important. I don't want you to get discouraged by this, but to recognize the magnitude of the situation in relating to them and to make a real effort to understand and learn how to practice with them.

One of the things that's tricky about the hindrances is that they kind of fly under our mindfulness radar. You know, as you're practicing, you have your mindfulness antenna out and you're looking for anything that's going to arise from any of the six senses. And often you may be very clued in to the body or breath or sounds, but being aware of the mind is a little more subtle and a little harder. So these hindrances kind of get in under our early warning system and implant themselves in the mind, sneaking in on us like that.

I'll give you a simple example. This is one of the hindrances I'm not supposed to talk about tonight—it's just an example. So I was practicing here one three-month course, and it was a couple of weeks in, so I was getting pretty present. After the morning sit, I went out the back door to go down to my walking path, which was on the grass below the new building. That grass was still there a long time ago.

So I was heading down the steps out the back of the meditation hall, and I thought I was being pretty present—lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. And then I saw that there was somebody already walking in my walking path. Unpleasant sight. So I kept being very mindful: lifting, moving, placing. And I started thinking, "How could they be in my walking path? I've walked there every walking period for the last two weeks." Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. I thought, "They must not be very sensitive, or they would have noticed, and they wouldn't want to take it away from me." Lifting, moving, placing. "Did I cut in front of them at breakfast today? Is this some kind of head game?" Lifting, moving, placing.

So I kept walking. I found another patch of grass, which, much to my surprise, worked just as well for walking meditation. And I was doing my walking, and about thirty minutes in, I sort of realized, "Oh, I'm angry." I was annoyed at the person who was walking in my path, and all those thoughts could have clued me in to the fact that I was annoyed and resenting the person, but they didn't. I thought I was being really pretty continuously mindful, and I was missing the biggest thing that was going on, which was that I was getting angry.

While I was getting angry, all I was doing was blaming them and trying to cast doubt on their sensitivity, on their choice, etc. And while I was caught like that, there was no way to get free of the anger because I hadn't even recognized it. So that annoyance just crept in under my mindfulness, took a seat in my mind. I was totally captivated by it, and I thought I was being mindful.

So this is what the hindrances do. They sneak in with a seductive storyline. And my storyline was basically, "They shouldn't be in my walking path"—like it should have had "Guy Armstrong" emblazoned on it from day one. But as soon as I could recognize, "Oh, there's anger here," then I could start to relate to it. And then it was pretty easy to release it because I saw it was actually pretty petty. Sometimes it's not so easy to release even when we see it, but the first thing is we need to see it. We need to see what's there.

And the hindrances are fairly major events in our experience on retreat, so it's really important that we start to tune in and recognize them and then work with them. The tricky thing about the hindrances generally is that they lead our attention into the ex-

ternal situation. So my attention was focused on the person and the path, and where it wasn't looking was my own inner experience. So that's what the hindrances tend to do—they tend to focus us outwardly, and we kind of dwell on that.

I sort of ran this storyline over and over with something the Buddha called unwise attention. It wasn't helping to run the storyline. I was giving attention to a story that wasn't going anywhere, except generating more annoyance. The only way to release was to direct the attention where the wise person would, which would be: what was I feeling?

When I did that, there was a possibility of releasing it.

You could say that every hindrance is an example of misplaced attention. We are generally seduced into putting our attention on an outside situation or a misleading situation. What we really need to do is turn the mindfulness on the hindrance itself—on our own state of mind. Then it becomes workable. Then it's not a big obstacle.

In fact, as we start to practice with these hindrances with mindfulness, they open up a lot of new areas of freedom. Generally, these are the habits of mind that catch us, the habits of mind that enmesh us in repeated suffering. As we start to be able to notice them, recognize them, and work with them, that has the potential for opening up many areas of freedom in our practice and in our life. So they're very rich for opening and for growth, these qualities.

One of the things I find really beautiful in the world today is this area of applied mindfulness that Bonnie mentioned last night. Mindfulness is becoming quite a buzzword in the whole culture, going out in so many different directions. One direction I think is really exciting is its movement into schools.

There's an organization in the Bay Area called Mindful Schools. I don't know if they're on the East Coast yet or not, but they've trained like a hundred people to go into public schools from elementary to middle school and teach children how to be aware of their emotions. The first step for anyone to develop empathy is to recognize what they're feeling and how that feels to them. So children are being taught from a really early age to notice their own feelings of sadness and fear and anger and joy and excitement and interest. They're getting a whole vocabulary that was never explained to me in my primary school.

This kind of learning is actually going on in tens of thousands of schools, if not a hundred thousand schools across the country now. And I just think, wow, what if a whole generation of children could grow up understanding their emotional world? That would be so good for the whole planet.

I'll tell one little story because it really touched me. One of our sangha members in California is leading groups where she's teaching this to children. But she said with the children she teaches who are pre-kindergarten, you can't really use formal concepts like mindfulness, awareness, and emotion—it's too abstract for the kids. So what she does is lead them in a relaxation exercise, get them to lie down on the ground, and then tell them to imagine that their whole world is this lake that lots of different fishes are swimming through.

A sad fish can swim through the lake. A happy fish can swim through the lake. An angry fish can swim through the lake. But they don't have to worry so much about the fish. They should be the lake. That's her instruction: "You be the lake, and you let all the fish swim through."

After one time doing this, she asked the kids, "Well, how was that for you? What was that like?" This little boy raised his hand—he was four years old, I think—and he said, "I could let all the fishes swim through, but I couldn't let the mad fish swim through."

She said, "Why couldn't you let the mad fish swim through?"

He says, "Because when you don't remember you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt people."

From the mouth of a four-year-old. So it's beautiful. Children have this intuitive wisdom. They can get these concepts early if presented skillfully. I thought this was a really lovely example of that.

Of course, one of the difficulties when the hindrances come is we usually don't like them. Who wants sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt? Often when they arise, there's some resistance to them, and there can often be judgment: "This shouldn't be coming. I shouldn't be having this. If I was a good meditator, this wouldn't be happening." So we're putting up a wall that tends to block them. By adding judgment or resistance, we're just compounding the situation.

A really important thing to look at is what our relationship to the hindrance is when it comes. As far as possible, just be really open, allowing, and accepting that that energy is there.

Because truly these forces are in all of us. It's not like "your aversion" or "my desire." This is just a very impersonal human quality. All of them are going to come to all of us as we meditate, as we take the journey down that swift river. They're all going to appear. So we don't need to own it as "I" or "mine" or "who I really am." We don't need to resist it because just as they come, they'll also go, like the weather.

As these hindrances come, learning not only to recognize them—and I think it's most helpful to name them—but also to ask the question: how am I relating to it as it arises and as I'm feeling it? Am I resisting, judging, aversive, or can I really just allow it as a part of my humanity, just a part of my human experience?

This is hard to believe, but we say it often, and I think it's really important: what is happening in our meditation—that means a particular arising—is not really as important as how we're responding to it. I'm going to say that again because it's so important: what's arising in our meditation is not as important as how we're responding to it.

Generally what arises is what I would call old karma, old habit patterns that have been set in motion for maybe many years, maybe since childhood, maybe from before. They have a momentum that's just going to run and that we don't even have to put a lot of energy into sustaining. They're going to arise. But what's really important is: from our current understanding, our dharma wisdom, how can we respond in this moment? Can we respond with some acceptance, with some compassion, with some kindness for ourselves, with understanding the nature of these impermanent visitors that just come for a while and then pass on their own terms?

Make this an important part of looking at hindrances. Not only what is arising, but how are you relating when it's there? And not to judge that either, but just to realize that the response is really where we establish our dharma practice. These old karma things can come from nowhere, can come just from habit pattern. But our dharma practice is about: how do I meet this present moment? And that we have more choice in.

The first of the hindrances I want to talk about is called sense desire. The Pali term is kamachanda. These two words are significant. Kama means sensuality. You probably know it from that old Indian text, the Kama Sutra, which is not a Buddhist text, I might add. If you haven't heard of it, it's a manual for lovemaking. So kama is sensuality. Sometimes it's synonymous with sexuality. In that instance, it's the Sutra, which is considered a holy kind of text on sexuality. You wouldn't find that from the Buddha's teachings.

But in this case, it means desire in the realm of the physical senses, which includes sensuality and sexuality. So sometimes kama is translated as "sensual." Kamachanda could be "sensual pleasure" or "sense pleasure." We're translating it as "sense desire."

The first thing I want to talk about is this word "desire." Desire has gotten a bad rap in Buddhism. It's kind of logical when you think it's the cause of suffering, right? If craving's the cause of suffering, that's not a person you want on your side. But there are many different words in the Buddha's language that get translated as desire, and it's important to understand the differences between them.

The word that's the cause of suffering is usually translated "craving," and that word in Pali is tanha. So tanha generally has an unwholesome connotation. Another word that comes in a lot, kamachanda, translated as "sense desire," is considered one of the hindrances, so also not something to blindly follow. Raga is a word that's often translated as "lust." It can mean lust for many different things. It also usually has an unwholesome connotation, as does lobha, which is usually translated as "greed" in that list of greed, aversion, delusion. These all have connotations that are leading to the unwholesome, although I'm going to qualify that in a minute.

But there are other words for desire which are not considered unwholesome. One of the key words you'll hear is chanda. Chanda means a desire, but it's not qualified as necessarily unwholesome. Chanda can be combined with wholesome qualities or it can be combined with unwholesome qualities. One could talk about lustful desire using the word raga. One could talk about sense desire using the word kama. Then it takes on a questionable connotation. But chanda can be paired with the word dharma and talk about dhammachanda.

Then it's more like our zeal, our love, our enthusiasm for the Dharma and our practice of it. So if we didn't have dhammachanda, we wouldn't be walking this path together. If you didn't have a huge amount of enthusiasm and commitment and love for the Dharma, you wouldn't be here. So this quality of zeal or enthusiasm we talk about as dhammachanda, and it's the whole origin of the path.

I was thinking about that quotation that Joseph used, I think, on the opening night when he quoted Maya Angelou and said, "The ache for home lives in all of us." For me, that's kind of an expression of dhammachanda also. The ache for home, for me, is kind of a deep spiritual longing. I want to find a home that's beyond change, a home that's a real refuge beyond impermanence. And that's a way that I actually feel the call for the spiritual journey.

So sense desire in this context means desire for pleasant experiences in the five physical senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. These are huge areas of human pursuit. If you just sort of take a step back and think about the way the world works, there has always been this desire for more in the field of material goods. How many centuries has one country been fighting another for land or resources? How many cen-

turies has one country been exploiting another, taking it over and colonizing or oppressing it for land and resources, essentially money, material goods? And to the extent that we do it today, how much are we harming our earth to carry out what seems like an endless kind of desire for more?

I just recently watched a video. You may have seen it. Joanna Macy took a plane flight over this part of Canada, which is called the Athabasca oil sands or the Alberta tar sands. What they've discovered is over this huge stretch of northeast Alberta, they think there's as much petroleum underground there as there are petroleum reserves in the whole rest of the world combined. But it's very hard to get out because it's under the ground in this very sticky, sandy mixture of petroleum and sand and clay and minerals.

So in order to get it out, they're having to go deep to dredge it up and then refine it and ship it. This area—quite a bit of it has been mined in what is essentially open pit strip mining. Quite a lot of the acreage has already been used in that way. Joanna Macy is an environmental activist and Buddhist, as you probably know, was flying over in an airplane and videoing what she was seeing. I know Canadians have heard about this for years, and probably many of you have heard about it, but I'd never seen the extent of it. I was shocked.

The area that this oil lies under is like 54,000 square miles, which is about the size of New York State. Joanna said that when they were flying, they flew for some hours in this small plane and didn't reach the end of it. And what she showed on the video just looked like that whole area had been strip mined. It was just raw and bare and opened up.

There's this kind of insatiable desire, hunger for more in the material realm. There don't seem to be any limits to what humans will do to acquire it. It's this huge force that's been with us for a long time.

In a lighter way, it's kind of fun to just think about in our capitalist society what industries are built up around satisfying these sense desires. I was just reflecting—this is not in any way a complete list, but I just will toss it out.

In the area of sight, think about the industries that are built on satisfying our desire for pretty sights. The first one that came to my mind was fashion. But it wasn't monastic fashion because you can't build much of an industry off monastic robes. But high fashion, you know, Dior and Lagerfeld and Prada and all that stuff—a lot of money there, and then the trickle-down effect. Anyway, I'll just go through these. Cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, hairstyles, bodybuilding, photography, movies, and there are probably a lot more.

In the area of sound, listening to pleasant sounds, the whole music business. So CDs and MP3s and iPods and iTunes, stereo systems, headphones, live concerts, symphonies, music festivals—all of that is so people can listen to pleasant sounds. Multi-billions of dollars.

Tastes. Okay, we all need to eat. But there are a lot of really expensive restaurants that people don't really need to eat at because the simple foods at IMS will actually serve your nutritional needs, not to mention the delicious meals that we get every day. So special restaurants, fad restaurants, special foods, exotic foods, desserts, beer, wine, cocktails—all of that money going into these special tastes that people pursue.

Smells. This is kind of an interesting one until I started thinking about it. Perfumes was the obvious one that came to my mind. That's a big market.

And then scented cosmetics, deodorants, air fresheners, fabric softeners, scented detergent—the list continues from there.

And then touch. This might be less obvious, but massage, bodywork, chiropractics, pain medications, and sex workers all involve the pursuit of pleasant sensations through touch.

So there's a significant portion of the economy devoted to pursuing sense pleasures. It's fundamentally a movement of mind that seeks pleasant experience, and it can arise very frequently during retreat. You might find yourself thinking about being back in your comfortable home, in your own bed, sitting in your living room chair, watching a movie on your TV, enjoying some special food from your refrigerator. These fantasies can become quite compelling.

At the end of one retreat, after I had been here for quite a while, I started feeling homesick. I began imagining my living room. What was interesting was that I was fairly concentrated, and the level of detail with which I could visualize my living room was extraordinary. I could almost see every thread in the carpet and every book on the bookshelf. It was really amazing. I felt such a pull of homesickness to be back somewhere familiar and comfortable and homey. I wanted nothing more than to lie on my couch eating from a box of chocolates. That looked like heaven at that point.

Sometimes it's about fantasies of places you'd like to visit. You hear people talk about Burma and imagine wanting to see the stupas and monasteries, the pleasant sights of travel. It might be someone you particularly miss, or someone here that you find attractive—the Vipassana romance that can develop on retreat.

All these different kinds of wanting can arise very easily in a retreat setting because our life here is pretty austere. It's quite natural for this to happen.

Take some time to explore this quality of desire. What does it feel like when sense desire is present? I often find there's a kind of soothing quality to it because it brings in something pleasurable and familiar. It's almost as though I want to add something sweet to counter the simplicity of this environment.

But when I feel into it more deeply, there's something about the experience that isn't quite satisfying. There's this sweet thing, but I don't actually have it. With any kind of desire, there's this gap between what we want and what we have—or in the moment, don't have. Tune into that. Desire has an essentially incomplete quality to it, and that's why it always comes with some dissatisfaction. If the desire is really strong, it could bring a lot of dissatisfaction.

Just observe this nature of wanting. We usually don't want what we already have. Have you ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? No, because it's already there. If you didn't have a hand at the end of your arm, you would really want it. But because we have it, we take it for granted.

I want to emphasize that there is nothing wrong with sense pleasures for laypeople. There is a path in Buddhism for those who want to go beyond sense pleasures altogether—the path that Bhante has chosen, which he spoke about the other night as the renunciant path with its 227 precepts for men or 254 precepts for women who take full ordination. That is a wonderful path, and essentially in the life of a renunciant—a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni—there is no real opportunity to pursue sense pleasures. They can't choose their own food, can't choose their lodging, can't really choose their dress, can't choose to travel for recreation, can't handle money, so they can't go out and buy what would be pleasant. There is an entire venerated path within Buddhism that specifically sets aside the pursuit of sense pleasures.

But the rest of us aren't on that path. As laypeople, sense pleasures are part of our life. Coming here, we give up many of them. If you take the eight precepts, you give up even more. But in our daily life, we're open to sense pleasures. We may be in a loving relationship that has sexuality as a very natural component. We may choose to eat foods that please us, to enjoy music, to make music, to be creative through our relationship with music. All of that is fine. There's no problem with any of that unless we become obsessed by it.

What's important for us as laypeople is to keep examining our relationship to sense pleasures and notice if addiction, obsession, or compulsion is arising. Then we may need to investigate further and discover greater wisdom. But if we're moderate in our enjoyment of sense pleasures and we're not harming other people, sense pleasures in moderation are perfectly acceptable in lay life.

So don't interpret the presence of sense desires as something to judge yourself for.

It's a natural part of our life as lay people.

I mentioned that the Buddha used an analogy of water with all the hindrances. The analogy for sense desire is that the bowl of water has been colored by different kinds of dyes. So you can imagine these different colors swirling around—beautiful blues and golds and reds—in a bowl of clear water. It's very attractive, but when you put your face over it and look in, it doesn't really reflect back so clearly because it's tinted with all these other colors. So it's not a clear seeing of things as they are.

We notice this when we become fixated on an object of desire. When we get fixated on something we want, we don't notice what else is there. We can't appreciate our current situation.

Let me share an example from a retreat I was teaching several years ago. Carol and I were teaching in Italy, which was a lot of fun. The Italian culture is different—there was an espresso machine right outside the meditation hall, so at the end of every sitting, boom, boom, boom, we're drinking shots. We were in a convent that rented its facility out to different groups. The first day we showed up for a meal, there were carafes of red wine out on the dinner table. So we had to go and talk to the servers and say, "We don't do this in a Buddhist retreat setting." They kindly took the red wine away.

One thing I found about the yogis is that they were very open and quite fluent about their emotions, willing to talk about what they were feeling. Early on in the retreat, a young man came into an interview and said, "I'm having a problem with the retreat."

"Oh, what's up? What's the problem?"

"Well, I don't really want to be here."

"Okay, why did you come?"

"Well, this is our holiday time, and I could have spent my holiday going to the Caribbean with my friends or coming on this meditation retreat."

"So why did you come here?"

"Because all the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So I got it. We were second choice.

He was spending his retreat thinking about being in the Caribbean with his friends on a nice sandy beach with that beautiful blue water, swimming every day. So it was a little hard for him to adjust to the atmosphere of the retreat, especially once we took the wine away.

I said, "Look, I think the problem is that you're thinking about the Caribbean. Maybe if you could let go of that, what's going on here is not so bad. Why don't you just see if it's really that problematic being here, or if the problem is just that you're thinking about this other thing and you can't really appreciate what's here."

So he went away, practiced, came back and saw me in a couple of days. He said, "Yeah, I've settled in. It's fine here. I'm enjoying the retreat. I let go of the Caribbean."

That's the way it is with desire. When desire is strong, we feel discontented. But the discontent isn't because the object is missing—the discontent is because the desire is present. So just letting go of the desire, then we can settle in and see what's really here. Life is usually not problematic in the moment. We come into the moment, it's more neutral, and then we can open to it.

So how do we work with desire? First, just be mindful of the feeling of desire and your relationship to it. One thing I notice about the feeling of desire is there's a straining forward quality. I feel it as a tension in my body, as though I'm leaning forward trying to get something else or somewhere else. That's often the first thing that lets me know desire is present.

It may be something you're looking for outside—some pleasure back home or some imaginary future. This is a little outside the realm of the five senses, but I often find on retreat that the straining is for a meditation experience. I want to recreate a sitting where I was comfortable, relaxed, present, concentrated. I want that feeling of ease in the body. That's what the straining forward is about.

What I'll try to do is pick up on the desire from the straining energy, some tension in the body, and then I'll ask, "What have I been thinking about?"

and the thoughts are usually a clue to what it is I'm wanting. Then if I can see that, it's a little easier to let go.

So let yourself just feel that. What does desire feel like in the body, in the mind, and how are you relating? Is it okay? Can you accept? Can you bear it?

If you've been with the mindfulness of the feeling for a while and it doesn't seem that anything's shifting—after being mindful for a while, maybe either the hindrance will weaken a little bit or your identification with it will weaken a little bit. The calling it "I" or "mine," the judgment, the taking it personally might weaken a little bit.

If you've been mindful of it for a while and neither of those has relaxed at all, then you might move—and this is kind of general for hindrances—to an antidote. There's an antidote for every hindrance. The first approach: be mindful for a while so you really explore it and get to know it. If nothing's shifting, then at some point you can try an antidote.

The antidote for desire, the classical antidote, is to reflect on the unattractive. And generally, this would be the unattractive aspect of the thing you want. So if you're thinking about a Caribbean vacation, you might think about how expensive it is, how much time it takes to fly there, sitting on a long plane flight for all those hours, getting sand in your shoes when you get to the beach. It's really a drag when you're on those sandy beaches. You could think about that.

If you're thinking about an attraction to a person, you might think about that person as they age. If you're in your twenties, you may not have seen this cycle long enough, but I'm in my sixties, and I know what happens when people age. That's a very effective reminder for me.

You can reflect on the unbeautiful aspect. You can reflect on the impermanent nature of what you're thinking of. Because even if it's a beautiful thing, the satisfaction we get from beautiful things diminishes. Whether it's a new car or a new house or a new partner, that initial glow does wear off and then things become routine. I'm sorry to say.

So that's the antidote approach with desire.

With sleepiness—and I want to assure my colleagues, we only have another thirty minutes to go in the talks. They'd fall off their chair if they thought I was serious.

So sleepiness. I know you all know what this feels like because you've just started a long retreat. I like the old Victorian formulation, which is sloth and torpor. I like that language because the sloth is kind of physical and the torpor is kind of mental. And the other reason I like it is in the early years on staff, we had a maintenance crew who were not really known for their work ethic. And so they were nicknamed McSloth and McTorpor. Kind of brings them back to me.

So, you know, drowsiness, sleepiness, dullness, lethargy, apathy, sluggishness—all these great evocative terms for this kind of foggy cloud that can descend on us at any point during the day, especially early in the retreat. It can come from a lot of different causes, actually.

Coming into a retreat, almost everybody goes through it. And I think it's coming out of a life that is usually fairly full, fairly busy. The mind has relied on stimulation in the outside life—of interaction and conversation and activity and movement—to kind of pick up its energy. And then we come into this setting, which is so tranquil and uneventful, and nothing is happening, and the mind just kind of goes... it kind of collapses because it's not getting stimulated anymore.

And then a few days later, what's interesting is it kind of settles into that non-stimulation and starts to wake up and find its energy from a different source, which is kind of its native interest in its own experience. It's really a beautiful quality. And then you know at the end of retreat how energized you are, because the mind has found a different source of energy that isn't dependent on outside stimulation. And then you take that into the outside world, and you meet with stimulation, you can get really tripped out, right? The integration period—you can get really kind of spinning. But it is beautiful. The energy comes up from a new source, and then it really sustains us more or less through the retreat.

Sleepiness can come back in after the first four or five days. If sleepiness is coming in often, there are a couple of things to check out. One is, are you really getting enough rest? And sometimes people have trouble sleeping in this environment, adjusting to a new situation. So lack of sleep can obviously be a cause. But there are a couple of other causes.

And one is that we may have learned how to use sleepiness to avoid feelings. So sleepiness can be a defense mechanism, a kind of denial or escape from something that's going on inside that's a little unsettling or threatening.

So we might find that that habit occurs here, and it can arise when things get a little uncomfortable. Just take a look. See if it feels like this is a habit that you've also seen in your outer life - of shutting down or dissociating or not wanting to feel some of what's going on for you.

Then sometimes, even if it's not like a groove in the mind or a big habit, something might come in that is a little bit disturbing. It could be just a body sensation. It could be a mood. It could be a little twinkle of a memory that just doesn't feel so comfortable. And sometimes that fog will come down like a curtain so that you don't have to look

more closely at it. So if you have the experience where you're sleeping well, you don't have this long-established habit, generally your body feels good during the day, but from time to time you get this blanket of fog descending, just take a look and inquire: what was the last thing you noticed before the fog came down? Sometimes that could be a clue to an experience that is being guarded against, is being defended.

So how to work with sleepiness when it arises? First thing again is to notice it and name it if you can. Sometimes the sleepiness is so thick you can't even get out the word. That's about all you can get out. Sometimes these dreamy images are going by and you really can't even fight your way back to the present moment. So sometimes that's not possible. But as it's descending, maybe just notice: sleepiness, sleepiness.

And then notice if there's aversion or not. Often we resist being sleepy, but in fact, I think the aversion strengthens the dull quality. At times when I've been able to accept the sleepiness, it's brought more energy. So again, check your relationship. Practice mindfully with it for a while.

In the Buddha's analogy of the bowl of water, sleepiness is when the bowl of water is covered over with algae and water plants. You can't see through because there's just this thick mass that's covered it over. The antidote to sleepiness is to arouse energy. That's what's lacking. It's just a state of low energy. So whatever you can do to arouse energy will be helpful. And you've probably heard the traditional list: open your eyes, sit up, take a few deep breaths, stand up, go for a fast walk the next time you go out for walking. And then be moderate with sleep because dullness can come from oversleeping, and moderate with food.

The last of the hindrances that I'll talk about this evening is restlessness and worry. Restlessness is the other side of the spectrum from sleepiness. Instead of too little energy, it's too much energy. So it feels like the body and the mind are kind of on overdrive. There's a lot of energy in the body, a lot of thoughts, lots of emotions, and it can feel like kind of just a swirl is going on inside - of agitation and some confusion and too much happening.

So if one has the idea that in the middle of this one should be able to find, let's say, the breath very clearly or a detailed body sensation very precisely, you can get really frustrated. Because when the swirl takes over, you're lucky to be able to stay in your seat. Sometimes when restlessness is strong, it's all we can do to keep from jumping up and running out of the meditation hall because restlessness can be really uncomfortable.

So just naming it as restlessness is very helpful. That is the step of mindfulness in relation to it. So it's not a precise mindfulness like you might have with your breath, of noting clearly each in-breath and out-breath. It's kind of like stepping back and looking at a bigger frame. But we step back and we say, "Oh, what's going on is restlessness or agitation or just a swirl." And maybe that's as precise as we can get, but that's precise enough for mindfulness to be established. So that's a skillful thing to do.

How to work with the restlessness from that point? If it's fairly mild, you may be able to resolve it by going to an anchor like the breath, using the breath's calming quality to bring calm in the mind to balance that energy, and you'll feel settled, balanced, and collected. If the energy is stronger than that, the restless energy is stronger than that, then trying to be precise again is going to feel too much like bottling it up. You're going to feel like you're bottling a genie up in a very tight package, and it's going to feel more explosive.

If it starts to feel like that, then it's much more skillful to go really wide. Sounds are a really good focus if the experience is of a lot of restlessness. So make your awareness really wide and open. You can let sounds lead you that way. If it's very quiet, you can just be with the extent of silence or just the sense of space - big sense of space - and let that space just hold the swirl and the stirring and the agitation. This is the advice that Suzuki Roshi gave when he said to give your cow a big pasture.

Give your cow a big pasture. Give your mind a big field to roam around in when it's very restless, and that will help it to quiet down.

The analogy of the water bowl in this situation is the bowl of water stirred by the wind, rippling, swirling, and churned into wavelets. You know how when a lake or pond is really stirred by wind, you can't get a clear reflection looking into it. You can't see things as they really are if you're looking for a reflection.

The antidote is calm. First, establish mindfulness, noticing the restlessness is present, seeing if there's aversion to it, and just working to accept the experience, allowing this combination of factors to unfold. If you've done that for a while and it doesn't feel like the restlessness is shifting or the identification is shifting, then work with calm. You can use the breath for some calm. You can use space. Walking meditation can help. You can try it two ways. If the energy is really high, you might want to walk it out—walk quickly, and that can use up some of the energy. If the energy is just middling, then you might want to walk at a moderate pace and use that moderate pace to work toward calming.

What's so painful about the quality of restlessness, which by the way doesn't go away until full awakening—it's one of the last fetters to be dropped—is that it blocks our access to peace. It is the opposite of peace. It's the absence of peace. The mind is jumping from one moment to the next, and that's why it's also tiring. Sometimes you can go through periods of restlessness, get very tired, and then move into periods of sleepiness.

I want to read this quote from a Tibetan teacher, Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche, that offers the antidote: "Rest in natural great peace, this exhausted mind, beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thought, like the relentless fury of the pounding waves in the infinite ocean of samsara." Especially remember that first line: rest in natural great peace.

The foundation of our experience is peace. You could call it emptiness, but more simply, it is peace. It's natural, it's always available, and it's always possible to rest if we can connect with that. Remember that possibility of resting in this natural great peace.

As practice unfolds, the work with the hindrances takes on a few different levels. First, mindfulness leads us to understand them, open to them, and be much less in conflict with them, and that creates a lot of ease. As the quality of concentration develops, concentration has the power to suspend the hindrances temporarily. We can feel periods when the hindrances are not arising at all. The Buddha said that experience is like being released from prison or recovering health after a long illness. Finally, with different stages of awakening, the hindrances are completely uprooted not to appear again.

I would like to close with this quotation from the Anguttara Nikaya where the Buddha talks about the course of practice and the way this river to awakening works: "All those who have been liberated or who are being liberated or who will be liberated first surmount the five hindrances that weaken wisdom, and then, with their minds well established in the four establishments of mindfulness, develop correctly the seven factors of enlightenment. It is in this way that they all have been liberated, or are being liberated, or will be liberated."

Let's just sit together for a minute, please.

CHAPTER 127

The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

> *Guy Armstrong presents a comprehensive exploration of the five khandhas (aggregates) - rūpa (form), vedanā (feeling tone), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (mental formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness) - as the Buddha's primary teaching method for understanding anattā (not-self). Drawing from personal experience of his sister's death, Armstrong demonstrates how these five categories completely account for human experience without requiring any permanent 'I' or self.*
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> *The talk examines how we mistakenly identify with and claim ownership of experiences that arise naturally through physical and mental processes beyond our control. Armstrong references the Bāhiya Sutta from the Udāna, where the Buddha teaches: "In the seen, let there be just the seen... then there will be no you in terms of that." He explains how this understanding of not-self doesn't lead to coldness but rather to the heart's natural opening in love and compassion.*
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> *Through practical examples and classical analogies, Armstrong shows how the conventional sense of self is constructed through what the Buddha called ahaṅkāra and mamaṅkāra (I-making and mine-making), and how recognizing the impermanent, unsatisfactory nature of the aggregates can lead to freedom from this unnecessary burden.*

The subject of tonight's talk is that the five aggregates are not self. I want to explore through this schema of the five aggregates—one of the lists the Buddha used very often—this concept of self or I. I'll use the words "I" and "self" more or less interchangeably as we examine how this sense of self gets created and how it can be understood.

I think you all know that in the Buddha's understanding, this sense of self is not really necessary for the experience of being human. It's not considered a solid thing that we're endowed with from birth, but rather it's a concept that, if adhered to tightly, is generated by our own views and beliefs and then becomes a limiting factor in our life.

In fact, you could say that it's one of the key meanings of the word ignorance, which starts the whole chain of dependent origination that leads to suffering—this misunderstanding of the sense of I or self. As we develop a conviction in the true existence of this I or self, that becomes the basis of a lot of self-concern upon which is built hope and fear. Those movements of hope and fear narrow the mind and limit our attention and

limit our empathy. An unlimited kind of awareness with a boundless heart of loving kindness gets smaller and contracted by the activities of self-concern and leads to a lot of suffering. This is why we really want to understand how this works, because this is one of the central pointings of the Buddha.

For most people, the I is really the center of the universe. Just like many centuries ago, they thought the Earth was the center of the universe and then discovered it actually wasn't, for most of us the I is the center of our universe. It's the concept that everything else revolves around—our thoughts and our plans, our ideas, our dreams, our wants and likes and dislikes, and our life direction. And it seems so obvious and self-evident. What could be more obvious than this I?

But have you ever been able to find it? Have you ever been able to locate it? You've been looking closely at this mind-body experience. Have you found a single thing called I? William James said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." The Dalai Lama said, "When something seems so evident but we search for it and can't find it, it's a sure sign of delusion."

The classical analogy is that there's a piece of rope on the ground made up of different colors braided together. One takes a quick look at it and thinks it's a snake and then jumps back in fear. But in fact, if one perceives it correctly and sees that it's actually a rope, then the fear goes away. And that's our understanding of self. When we perceive the self within this mind-body experience, there's fear. And when we can see it more clearly, some of that fear and worry lessens and eventually can go out altogether.

So let's start to look at some of the confusion around this use of the word I or self with a few questions. These are not tricky questions—they're straightforward questions.

The first one is: How tall are you? You can hopefully answer that fairly easily. I would say I'm 5 feet 10 inches tall. If you're from Europe, maybe you're 170 centimeters tall. Most of us know that answer. But when we say that without thinking, what do we really mean? We really mean this body is five foot 10 inches tall, right? My thoughts aren't 5'10", my insights aren't 5'10", my metta isn't 5'10". It's just this body that's 5'10". So when I say I am 5'10", we're saying I am the body, and it's five feet 10 inches tall. Here we're identifying I am the body—one common way.

But let me ask another question: What color are your eyes? I would say my eyes are brown. It's very common language—my eyes are brown. Well now I'm no longer the body but I'm something separate from the body that has eyes. So I turn into the owner of the body. First I'm the body and now I'm the owner of the body. Can you be both of those things? Which is right? Which are you?

We do the same thing with the mind. Sometimes we'll say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." So there's the identifying of I with the mind state, the emotion—I am the emotion, happy or sad. Other times we'll talk about "my joys and my sorrows."

So now I'm not the emotion anymore. I'm the one who owns the emotion. So are you the body or the owner? Are you the emotion or the owner?

Another way that's really common to feel the "I" is to think that where we actually are is somewhere behind the two physical eyes, in the center of the head—maybe in the middle of the brain somewhere. We're like this central experiencer that everything comes into and happens to, and it's really all happening inside the head, somewhere behind the eyes. We're the one who sees sights and hears sounds and thinks thoughts and is the doer or the receiver of all the sense experience.

Actually, it's very interesting. One of the things they're finding in brain research is that there's no central control faculty in the brain. So it's kind of what the Buddha talked about a long time ago—there's no single controller even in that gray mass.

These are five ways of feeling ourselves to be, and there are more, but they're all not quite right. They're not really true in the final analysis. The Buddha said, "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." That's a pretty strong statement. However you imagine the self to be, the fact is ever other than that.

One of my teachers put it more strongly. He said, "Whatever you think is wrong." That was kind of to the point. And it reminded me of something I heard on the radio one time. I think it was a sportscaster who said, "The mind—often wrong, seldom in doubt." That's kind of our experience.

So we want to look into this sense of "I," and we can do it through some of the Buddha's classical teachings. When the Buddha looked at a person, I don't think he saw a self the way that we tend to. He generally described us in one of two ways—kind of the whole human experience.

One of them I'll read to you from this sutta called the Sutta on Totality, from the Samyutta Nikaya. The Buddha said, "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of existence?" That's a bold statement, isn't it? "Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality. It is

simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond that as the totality would not be speaking of something they knew about."

This is very interesting. Joseph is fond of saying there are only ever six things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. So this points that out, and it makes our task really simple, doesn't it? All we have to do is know those six things and not hang onto them. Easy, right? A little more complicated.

But this is a nice list. This is the list of the six sense bases called internal and external, and it maps onto our meditation instructions very well because our instructions are usually directed to some form of sense experience: knowing body sensations, knowing sounds, knowing thoughts, knowing emotions, knowing sights, smells, tastes, and so on. Bhikkhu Bodhi said that the Buddha usually used this list to help people cut through craving, because craving tends to orient around sense experience.

But there's another list that the Buddha used as often as the six sense bases, and that is the five aggregates. He's talking about the same totality of experience, but he's dividing it up in different ways. And in this list, the Buddha usually talked about it, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi, to cut through wrong view—and that is the misunderstanding of what constitutes the self.

So the five aggregates was kind of the Buddha's preferred way of looking at this question of self and where we misunderstand it. The value of our looking at this schema, this other map, is that as we look to see ourselves and others in this way, we look to see human life without the false sense of "I," without the conceptual overlay. We look to see things more as they really are.

So the five aggregates that we'll talk about this evening—the term "aggregate" is a translation of the Pali word khandha. In Sanskrit, the word is skandha, so you may hear Mahayana teachers talk about the five skandhas. It's the same list. The term "aggregate" is a translation I don't really like because it sounds very technical. It sounds kind of like road base, to be honest. You mix some asphalt and some concrete and cement and some mixed aggregate, and then you've got road base.

So instead of that, another translation I find more accessible is components—these are like five components that make up our experience. But even more simply, I like to translate khandha as "kinds of stuff." I think that conveys the essence best. These are the five kinds of stuff that make us up: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. We'll explore each of them individually.

But I want to preface this by saying that when I first encountered this list, I thought it was too technical to be interesting. I didn't see how it would have any relevance to me as a person, as a human being. I thought it was a little too philosophical and intellectual.

It was over fifteen years ago now when one of my older sisters died. She was quite young—fifty-two. I was five years younger than she was, and her death came completely out of the blue. It was a real surprise. She was not in the best of health, but she was not seriously ill at the time. Yet one day in her house, she slipped into a coma. The paramedics couldn't bring her out of it, and she was dead within about twelve hours.

So it was a tremendous shock to her family and her children and, of course, to me, because I was pretty close to her at the time. I'd been on the phone with her a week before, and my sister was somebody who had a big personality. She was a very warm and funny person, and when you were around her, you couldn't miss the sense of her vitality. She was energetic and always enthusiastic about what she was up to.

So when she died, it was a shock of loss, of course, but I also couldn't understand how this being who had been so vital and engaged and active and alive a week earlier no longer existed. It just didn't compute for me. How could somebody who was so solid disappear and not exist any longer?

This became the motivation for me to start looking into: what is this mix of body and consciousness and thoughts and feelings that constitutes a human being? What is this mix? And how is it that at death the body is just left and everything else is gone? That's what was so puzzling.

The five aggregates became the most helpful way for me to understand this, which is ultimately a mystery. I can't say I understand birth and death, but it helped me to understand them better. The way it helped me was that I saw that a person was not just a unitary thing, but actually consisted of these five different processes, all going on in the same bundle or unit, but they are five very distinct activities that are happening. As I could begin to see the separate nature of them, I got a better sense of how they come together in us while we're alive and function together. But they're different activities.

So that's what I'd like to explore this evening.

The first of the khandhas, the first aggregate, is form or material form. The Pali word is rupa. The most dramatic part of rupa is the body, but rupa includes all physical form, all matter. All physical matter is included within rupa, both our own body and externally.

Here is the Buddha's definition of rupa: "Any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate."

So it includes this body and everything we see in the outer world. In fact, rupa is often translated as "sights," so there's a strong connection with form as what we see. But it also includes all the interactions among physical forms—sounds and tastes and smells as well as the touch of the body and all the sights that we see.

For example, when the bell is rung, that sound is in the form aggregate. This is considered part of the material world and part of material form, and therefore part of rupa. So in one fell swoop with this word rupa, we've included all five physical sense bases. In the six-sense-base outline, the first five are the physical senses—they're all subsumed under rupa.

Now what we have left is mind and mind objects.

So the other four aggregates are mind and mind objects. This gets more interesting. Let's look into this mind in a little more detail.

The first mental aggregate is feeling tone or vedana. This is the same quality that Andrea talked about in the instructions the other morning. So you know from that that feeling tone comes in three flavors: pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The significance of this, of course, is that these form the basis for craving. In the chain of dependent origination, craving is activated by feeling tone. As you were probably working with, the feeling tone of the pleasant is what stimulates, if we're not mindful, the reactive formation of greed. The feeling tone of unpleasant can stimulate the reactive formation of aversion. And the feeling tone of neither—shorthand we say neutral—can stimulate the reactive formation of delusion.

So I wondered about this: how is it that delusion is part of craving? We ignore things, we overlook the neutral, and that's an aspect of craving. Why is that? Because the neutral itself doesn't seem like it evokes craving. So the way it makes sense to me is that when craving is active, all we care about are the pleasant and the unpleasant. We're looking for those. And because we're focused on those out of either greed or aversion, we just don't care about the neutral because it neither entices us nor threatens us. So we tend to overlook it.

You can see this—take a simple example of colleagues at work. If there's someone you really like, you dwell on that person with thought, don't you? If there's someone who's really difficult, you dwell on that person with thought. If there's somebody who doesn't rub you one way or another, it's very easy to forget about them, isn't it? This is kind of the way pleasant, unpleasant, and neither work in our sense experience.

The interesting thing is that feeling tone is in the mental half of the aggregates. So when we hear the sound of the bell, generally that's a pleasant tone. Intrinsically it's kind of pleasing. But it's even more pleasing because it marks the end of a sitting. That's one of the eight best moments of the day, when that bell rings. So we really come to—Pavlov dogs—we really come to like that particular sound, so it generally will strike us as pleasant.

But it's interesting: it's our own mind that is giving it that tone. It's not intrinsic to the sound itself. Sayadaw U Tejaniya sort of describes this—he uses feeling in this sense rather as a verb. It's like we feel our way into the association with that sound. We impute pleasantness as an activity of the mind.

How do we know that? Because some people experience things as pleasant which other people experience as unpleasant. Simple example: When I was growing up, my mother liked to play records, albums of Mantovani recordings. If your experience with music goes back to the 1950s, you will recall that Mantovani was a conductor who had an orchestra that played a lot of movie soundtracks. So it was kind of these lush orchestral arrangements with swelling strings and big crescendos—sentimental movie music, very emotional generally. My mother really enjoyed that kind of music. So I grew up listening to it, and I didn't mind it too much.

Some years ago, there was a 7-Eleven store in Southern California that was having a problem with people coming into the parking lot to deal drugs. When people were dealing drugs in the parking lot, other customers didn't want to come in because it didn't feel safe to them. So the store owner would go out and ask the dealers to leave, but they wouldn't. Then he'd call the police and ask them to leave, and then they'd leave, but then the police would go away and they'd come back. He didn't know what to do about the drug dealers in the parking lot.

So what he did is he put Mantovani on his sound system, cranked up the outside speakers, and the drug dealers fled. Because they did not find Mantovani pleasant.

So my mother found Mantovani very pleasant. The drug dealers did not find Mantovani pleasant.

And that's because feeling tone comes out of the mind, not intrinsic to the thing itself.

So the next of the mental aggregates is perception. The Pali word is saññā. And I think probably Bhante talked about this a bit the other night when he talked about papañca and the Honeyball Sutta, where saññā is a key term in the Honeyball Sutta.

Perception in the Buddhist language means something different than it does in Western philosophy and psychology. I think in Western philosophy and psychology, perception usually means the sense data itself—like a sound might be considered a perception. But in the Buddhist language, it's different than that. So you might have to unlearn some of that Western language for a minute.

Perception here means really recognition. That is, something arises in one of our senses, and we recognize what it is based on prior experience and familiarity and memory.

So, simple example: as you look around the room tonight, if your eyes are open, you probably see women and men and chairs and cushions and lights and floor and ceiling and statue. And you recognize all those things. And it's happening so fast that it's virtually automatic. It's a categorization feature of the mind that's connected to memory.

We're doing it all the time; we don't know that we're doing it. But often as the mental process slows down in meditation, we can see these perceptions happen. A sound arises and we recognize not only sound—we might recognize truck. Or there's a sound in the hall; we recognize hearing, we also notice sneeze, something like that. So the recognition is happening, sometimes with words, sometimes wordlessly, but still you know what it is.

And we think this is just kind of the way things are. We don't realize that we've learned through repeated contact to recognize these things. But a little story from Oliver Sacks illustrates this. He's the neurologist who works in a hospital and has a lot of fascinating case studies.

So he had a chance to work with a patient who had been blind since he was a young boy. Maybe three years old or so, he lost his sight. And then medical technology evolved and they developed the surgical tools that would let him see again. And by that point, he was in his mid-50s.

So they performed the operation on the man, and he was recovering in his hospital bed and the day came to take the bandages off his eyes. So his family was there, the surgeon was there, Sacks was there. They took the bandages off and they expected him to go, "Wow, it's fantastic, I can see again." But the man didn't say anything. He was still lying back in bed and he didn't really respond.

And finally, the man said that he couldn't make any sense of what he was seeing. There was a visual field, but all he could really see was patches of form and color, and he didn't know what they were. Until, he said, this kind of white object started looming from the distance toward him and seemed to say, "Can you see me?" And he recognized the surgeon's voice and he thought, "That must be my surgeon's face coming toward me." But he couldn't perceive the objects of the room in the way that we do without even trying.

So the story goes on. The man did a lot of rehab and a lot of training, and he eventually learned to perceive again fairly well. But some of those circuits hadn't been wired up in the developmental stage when he was younger, and he never recovered full perception again.

So this quality of perception is something that we definitely learn, and then we use almost automatically.

And something else about it is that it comes from repeated recognition, repeated contact, and some familiarity. So it's not just as simple as woman, man, cushion, chair, wall, because the things we see have emotional resonance that comes through in the perception.

So when you see an old friend, you don't have to think, "Oh, I've known this person for 20 years and we had these experiences together and this was beautiful and this was difficult." But just seeing your friend, that whole gestalt comes through as you perceive them. So perception is also very rich with meaning. Sometimes the meaning is accurate, sometimes it's not so accurate.

Simple example: If I say "car," that's a fairly neutral word. There isn't much emotional resonance, is there? And we generally don't get too emotional about "car."

But what if I say "Prius"? Do you like Prius? I really like Prius. I don't have one.

I kind of envy my friends who do. It seems like half my friends have Prii. But I really like them because I think they're one of the best cars to combat climate change and global warming. Fifty miles to the gallon—wow, that is so cool. So I have a very warm association with Prius.

And then I think about another car—Ferrari. I have a different resonance with Ferrari. I think, wow, it's a pretty cool car, but gets twelve miles to the gallon. So I think probably the engine's too big, not so good for global warming. So I have a different resonance with that.

So perception also is not always reliable. The difference between Prius and Ferrari—that can be pretty fact-based. But as Bonnie said in talking about the vipalasas, we see things as permanent which are actually impermanent. We see things as offering lasting happiness which do not provide that. We see things as self which are not self, and so on.

So we have to be watchful of our perceptions. Because they come so quickly, it's not always so easy to see them. We have to be watchful and mindful to notice when they're forming and to check them out to see if they're accurate.

I heard this very touching story this summer. I was listening to a woman who was talking about race in this country, and she had a very interesting history. She was European American, and her first husband was also European American, and they had a daughter. So the daughter had grown up some, and then her husband died, and she married again. Her second husband was African American, and they had a daughter. And so this daughter, being mixed race, was taken in the wider world as an African American. And the first daughter was taken as white.

And what this woman said that was so moving, and of course sad, is that those two girls had very different journeys in their life. The first daughter had all the privilege of being accepted into the world based on her whiteness, and all kinds of doors opened for her. And the other girl, being perceived as African American, did not have all those advantages, and the doors didn't open for her in the same way.

She didn't have to go into a lot of detail, but I could just imagine the milieu of both those girls growing up and the different responses they would get from classmates, from teachers, from classmates' parents, from boys in high school, from professors in college, from sororities, from employers.

What was so moving about it was that both girls got the same kind of love and care at home. And so they grew up with a sense of self-love and self-respect. And for one, that self-love and self-respect was mirrored in the outer world. And for the other, it was not. And that's kind of heartbreaking—that beautiful young children don't get mirrored based on who they truly are, but get mirrored based on people's distorted perceptions based on race or ethnicity. So that's a sad fact of our life in America today, and one that I hope we can overcome for the benefit of all those beautiful children who are growing up here.

So very simply, when we hear the bell and we recognize it as a sound and we recognize it as the bell that ends the sitting, that's the activity of perception going on all the time. And we can start to pay attention to when that categorization happens, when that naming happens for us.

The next of the mental aggregates is a big one. It's called mental formations, sometimes called volitional formations or karmic formations. This is the one that includes all the other thoughts and mind states and feelings that aren't included in feeling and perception. So this includes all the range of the hindrances and the difficult emotions, all the movements of greed, aversion, delusion, all the beautiful states of heart and mind—qualities of love and compassion, refined meditative qualities of mindfulness, concentration, equanimity. All of these are lumped under mental formations.

These are the objects of mind, along with our thoughts. So it's basically thoughts and mind states that make up this whole vast category. And the reason they're called volitional formations is that most of these mind states are expressing something. Desire expresses a kind of intention. Anger expresses a kind of intention. Loving kindness expresses a kind of intention. Even refined states of mindfulness and concentration are there because we've intended them, because we've grown them as habits in the mind.

So this intentional or volitional quality is also why they're sometimes called karmic formations—volition or intention being the root of karma. We understand that within this aggregate of mental formations are all the factors of the path. Bonnie was talking about how we nourish the wholesome factors, and this is what accelerates our journey along the path. These are all found here.

For example, when we hear the bell marking the end of a sitting, we may feel, ah, now I can relax. And then the thought might come: Wow, I could sit forever now.

So that quality of relaxation or ease, that thought "I could sit forever," these are mental formations. This is in the basket, the aggregate, called sankharas in Pali.

The fifth of the aggregates, the last mental aggregate, is called consciousness. The Pali word is vijnana. This is a very subtle experience to tune into. It is something that we can find and know directly in our meditation, but it's not easy to take hold of. It is the knowing quality.

Consciousness is that receptive element, as the Buddha described it—that receptive element of mind that knows all the other objects. So consciousness knows sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, thoughts, and emotions. It receives them. It holds them. It's how we experience the world. It is this factor of consciousness that gives rise to our experience in life.

Again, a simple example. When you hear a sound, there are actually two things going on. Mostly, we've just talked about the sound. I don't know what that is—it might be F sharp or something like that. The sound has a material quality that we can identify, and it's in the field of rupa. But because you're a sentient being, you're a conscious being, you're hearing it. If that sound was struck and there was no one in the room, the sound waves would happen, but there would be no hearing taking place, because this hearing depends on our being conscious.

We can start to feel in our meditation practice what's the sound, which is the rupa part, and what's the knowing of it. That's the consciousness piece. It comes as one experience, but it's got these two aspects that we can start to feel into.

So how is it that one thing can have two aspects? Let me ask you: Is this round or is it black? It's round and black, isn't it? But you can focus on the roundness or you can focus on the blackness by choosing. Similarly, when a sound arises, you can focus on the physical quality or you can focus on—oh, there's knowing in the mind of that sound. And that knowing is this element of vijnana.

So it's not something you can take direct hold of because it's doing the holding. It's holding another object, but if you draw your attention close, you can start to intuit how this knowing is taking place. It's a very interesting practice as you start to come close to that.

So these are the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. One of the interesting things about the aggregate list as opposed to the sense bases list is that all five aggregates are present in every moment of experience. So you might have an experience where there's not a sound or where there's not a taste or where there's not a smell. Some of the sense bases might not be there. But the five aggregates are always there in some form, doing their thing. So they're always available. When you want to tune into them, they're always there.

When I first started working with this list, I thought, this is kind of a funny list. It drags out things like feeling and perception, but it doesn't drag out other special things like volition and attention. Those are really important factors too, but they aren't dragged out of sankharas into this special, unique category. Why is that? But it doesn't matter so much.

When the Abhidhamma goes through what makes up a human being, they only have three categories. What the Abhidhamma does is to list rupa, which is our rupa; citta, which is like our vijnana, consciousness; but then it throws feeling and perception back into sankharas and just calls these mental factors.

This is very interesting because when you look at a person you can see—oh, there's a body, there's consciousness, which is this brightness of knowing, and there are all the states of mind. That's a very interesting way to look at people, and to look at yourself. Basically what we are is a body, plus consciousness, plus mental states. That's it.

When I saw that, I understood how my sister could die and I could lose her. Because the body was still there, but the consciousness and the mental states, which had always been joined, weren't. So that's what breaks apart with dying.

I don't know where consciousness and mental states go, if they go anywhere. But I understood that ending better than I had before.

So it doesn't matter really whether it's three or five or eight aggregates. The important thing is: is this list exhaustive? Meaning, any aspect of your experience—can you toss it into one of these five categories? I'm just going to ask that for tonight. You don't have to answer because it takes some reflection. If you can toss everything that's part of you into one of these five categories, then it's an exhaustive list. It covers everything in our experience.

I'm going to suggest it is exhaustive. I'll let you reflect on that.

And then why is that important? Because there's a big word that's missing from this list. And that big word is *I*. There's no I in this list. So what the Buddha is saying is that in our experience, there is form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness, and that's sufficient. That's all that's needed. The I is extra, not required—a redundancy. Can it be taken out? The Buddha said it could.

That fascinates me—that we could see our experience as these five things and not overlay it with any conjecture about I or self. In fact, he said this is the way to the end of suffering. He talked about this overlay as what he called *ahankara* and *mamankara*, which literally means "I-making" and "mine-making." So he says we construct the I by concocting a sense of "I" or "mine."

So how do we do that? He talked about this in a number of suttas, and let's go through it a little bit. First, he said, take a look at these five aggregates from the point of view of permanence, happiness, and self.

So he said, "Take a look at form. Is form permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Very good. So then, is what is impermanent capable of giving lasting happiness, or is it ultimately going to be unsatisfactory? If something's impermanent, can it give lasting happiness?"

"No, venerable sir. Ultimately unsatisfactory."

"Very good, bhikkhus. Now, is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded as 'this is mine, this I am, this is myself'?" In other words, why would we invest ourselves in something that we knew was going to change and not give happiness? Would that be for our benefit?

So the bhikkhus, being very smart, said, "No, venerable sir, that would not be for our benefit."

This is a very succinct way of relating to your experiences with form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness—or for that matter, the six sense bases. What if you find yourself seeing them as "this is mine, this I am, this is myself"? Then we can reflect on that.

So then the question comes: how does the self actually get generated? I want to ask another question. Do you ever find the I all by itself? Looking through the body and mind and sense experience, does it ever just stand out? "This is the I. I've got it." Or is I always coming in in relation to something else?

So there's a thought about being at home, then the phrase comes: "I'm thinking about my home." There's a pain in the leg and there's the thought: "I have a pain in the leg." Is the I only coming into being based on other things?

I want to suggest that for your reflection. Do you ever find the I standing on its own, or is it only being established in relation to other things?

The Buddha taught that this is what constitutes I-making and my-making—taking ownership of or identifying with different aspects of our experience. Yet this I-making and my-making is not necessary, not required.

One of the places we most easily identify is with the body. How can we relate to it without so much sense of I or mine? The body usually brings up many emotions for us. We like our body or dislike certain aspects of it. We feel proud of some things about it, embarrassed about others. But essentially, did you have anything to do with the way your body came out?

Think about emerging from the womb and then growing up. Did you have anything to do with how tall you are, the size of your bones, the overall shape of your frame, the color of your hair or skin, the color of your eyes? We can affect the body somewhat through diet and exercise and care and good cosmetics, but the basic makeup of the body didn't come from us.

We take ownership of it, but how did it come? Our father's sperm met our mother's egg. The cells combined and multiplied. That organism was nourished in the womb. Birth happened, then it grew on food and water and air. The aging process began—we grew up and got bigger, then the aging process continued to where some of us are now. All beyond our control. We didn't ask for it. We didn't control it. It just happened.

Why? Because the body is part of physical nature—just part of physical nature, not under our control, not under our direction, not under our will. So why do we claim it?

Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of my teachers in Thailand, put it this way: this body came out of nature, it's part of nature, it's never departed from nature, and it belongs to nature. So give it back to nature. That will be a big relief for you.

But we claim it, don't we? We think it's I or mine. We didn't have that much to do with it.

Emotions are also part of nature—part of mental nature. We all have all of them. We all have wanting and love and fear and sadness and grief and anger and joy and compassion. They're just part of the mental nature.

This teaching comes from the Buddha on how to see with wisdom: "All form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: 'This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.'"

We can apply this. When we see ourselves making I and mine around any experience, physical or mental, we can remind ourselves: not me, not mine, not who I am. We can say that about every aspect of our experience—not me, not mine, not who I am.

This kind of pointing was beautifully summed up in one of the suttas from the Udana. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it—the story of Bahiya.

Bahiya was a practitioner in a different part of India. He had many students and had developed wonderful spiritual qualities. Enough of his students thought he was enlightened that Bahiya himself wondered: Am I enlightened? Of course, that question might have been a clue.

One day he was visited by a deva. Bahiya said, "You know, I have many students and I'm their teacher, but I wonder if I'm enlightened." The deva was very straight with him: "No, Bahiya, you're not enlightened."

You're not even on a path to enlightenment. Sorry to tell you. But there is a teacher in northern India who is fully enlightened, who is fully awakened. He's called Gautama Buddha. And he's residing in this particular town.

As soon as Bahiya heard this, being such a sincere seeker, he immediately picked up and started walking hundreds of miles to find the Buddha. He finally came to the small town where the Buddha was said to be staying. He found some monks and figured that might be where he'd find the Buddha, but the Buddha wasn't there. The monk said, "No, he's out collecting his morning alms. But he's just down the road. You can probably go find him."

Bahiya walked into the town and saw this very dignified, majestic being walking with great poise and equanimity. He thought that must be the Buddha they were talking about. So he approached and said, "Venerable sir, are you Gautama Buddha? I'd like to ask you a question."

The Buddha said, "Yes, I am that person, but this is not a good time. As you can see, I'm on my alms round."

Bahiya said, "Venerable sir, please give me your teaching in brief. I've come a very long way. Please give me your teaching in brief."

The Buddha said, "I'd be happy to meet with you later, but I can't right now. I'm collecting my morning meal."

Bahiya asked a second time, and the Buddha again said no. He asked a third time: "Please give me your teaching in brief. Life is uncertain. We never know how long either of us may be alive."

As these stories often go, by the time you ask the Buddha the third time, he has to agree. So he said, "I will tell you, Bahiya, in brief." This is the teaching he gave him called the Bahiya Sutta:

"This is how you should train. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. And in the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here nor there, nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Bahiya was so ready and his paramis were so well developed that he came to full enlightenment on the spot from hearing that short discourse from the Buddha. He awakened fully to the truth through this door of not-self. When the Buddha said, "In the seen, let there be just the seen," what's missing is the I, the one who says, "I am seeing," or "I am seeing my body." The I is not there. In the seen, let there be just what is seen. On that, Bahiya awakened.

It's said that later in that same day, Bahiya was crossing a field where a cow was protecting her baby calf. The cow felt threatened by Bahiya's presence in the field, charged him, and gored him right in the stomach. Bahiya died that day from the goring. But fortunately, before he died, he had heard the teaching and fully awakened to the truth of the Dhamma, knowing that time was short.

This is the investigation, the inquiry that opens up this field of understanding what's meant by not-self. Self is something we add to a situation. If we don't add "I" or "my," our original relationship to what is seen and heard and cognized can be free of self, free of that burden.

It may sound intellectual or like we're developing some cold scientific view, but it doesn't feel like that. Because the more the burden of self is taken off our shoulders, the more the heart relaxes and opens. The more the heart relaxes, then these beautiful qualities can come through—trust, faith, confidence and joy, balance, love and compassion. When the heart is unburdened, it naturally opens and connects with the world.

So I close with this quotation, which you've probably heard many times, but I find it particularly fitting for this exploration. It's from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who said: "Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows."

This is the marriage of insight and loving kindness. When we see through the construction of self, we don't become cold or disconnected. Rather, we discover this beautiful dance between the wisdom that recognizes no-thing-ness and the love that embraces everything. Between these two poles, our life flows.

Let's just sit for a moment in this understanding.

When there is no you in terms of that fabricated self, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here, nor there, nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

The Buddha's teaching points us toward this profound simplicity—this recognition that what we take to be our burden, our self, is actually something we're adding to the pure awareness that is always already here. In seeing this clearly, we find not emptiness, but fullness. Not disconnection, but the most intimate connection possible with all of life.

Thank you for your attention to this teaching.

CHAPTER 128

Seven Factors of Awakening

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong presents the seven factors of awakening (bojjhaṅga) as the mental qualities that propel practitioners toward liberation. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching that we must "starve the five hindrances and feed the factors of awakening," Armstrong explains how these seven factors work sequentially and in balance to create the conditions for insight.

The talk covers each factor in detail: sati (mindfulness) as the foundation that maintains balance; dhammavicaya (investigation) as wisdom-based inquiry into present experience; viriya (energy) as heroic effort and enthusiasm for practice; pīti (rapture) as joyful interest that makes meditation delightful; passaddhi (tranquility) as the natural calm that emerges from contentment; samādhi (concentration) as collected awareness rather than narrow focus; and upekkhā (equanimity) as balanced responsiveness to changing conditions.

Armstrong emphasizes the practical balance between arousing factors (investigation, energy, rapture) and calming factors (tranquility, concentration, equanimity), with mindfulness maintaining equilibrium. He illustrates these teachings with stories of accomplished practitioners like Dipa Ma and contemporary examples, concluding with an inspiring account from Thai master Ajahn Liam's awakening experience, demonstrating that profound realization remains possible in our time.

The Seven Factors of Awakening

The subject of the talk this evening is the seven factors of awakening, or beyond the hindrances.

You probably remember the story that Bonnie told in her first talk about the Native American grandfather, the Cherokee grandfather, who was talking to his grandson who'd come home from a day at school where he'd had a hard time with other kids. The grandfather told the boy that he had two wolves who were battling inside him. One was angry and looked for vengeance. The other was kind and wanted to help people. The grandson asked, "Which one will win?" And the grandfather replied, "The one that I feed."

I like this story both for the amount of wisdom it holds and also because it really resonates with the Buddha's language in terms of developing our own mind. In the suttas, you find references where the Buddha says that what we want to do in practice is

starve the five hindrances and feed the factors of awakening. This is the way he thought of it and the way that he described it. You start to see that most fundamentally, what our practice is about is shaping our minds in this particular direction. We develop the tools and the understanding and the skills to shape our own minds.

That's a radical understanding. Most people in the world don't have any idea, first, that this would be a desirable thing to do, or second, that it's possible. And yet with the tools of the Dharma, we are shaping our mind. The word in Pali that's used for this work is *bhavana*. It's the same root as the word *bhava* as in *bhavatanha* or the craving for existence. So it's pointing to the fact that there is a kind of development going on, a creating going on, and it's aimed at our own heart and mind. That's the beauty of our practice. Over time, a meditator can develop a great range of skill in this shaping.

I'm sure you all have heard of the Indian teacher Dipa Ma. She first came to this country in 1980. Joseph and Sharon had spent time with her in India and brought her over. Carol and I had the opportunity to spend a month living in a house with her, looking after her while she was here. She was a very impressive being.

People ask, "Well, is it possible to be really deeply awakened in this day and age?" Dipa Ma was someone in whom I didn't see even a flicker of a hindrance. I didn't see a flicker of anger or reactivity or greed or anything that was off. She was very patient. She had a four-year-old grandson with her who was a little bit of a wild being at that time. I remember taking her through department stores where her grandson Rishi would be racing out in front and pulling clothes off the hangers and bringing things down from the racks, and they'd be falling in the aisles. Dipa Ma would sort of be trotting after him with her white skirt flapping behind her and this sweet smile on her face. I thought if she could be patient with a four-year-old, she was pretty cooled out. And she was.

She taught a number of retreats here on her visits to America. At one retreat, someone asked her, trying to get a read, "What is in your mind?" Her reply was, "There are only three things in my mind. There's loving kindness, there's concentration, and there's peace. That's it." That's a beautiful mind. And she manifested that all the time.

For those of you who are interested in her, there's a wonderful book that was written by someone who teaches here, Amita Schmidt. The book is simply called *Dipa Ma*. It's both a biography and account of some of her teachings. Very inspiring, and you know probably there isn't a surplus of great women teachers in our tradition, I'm sorry to say. It's very interesting because in our pool, the numbers of women and men teachers is just about equal. But coming from Asia, that wasn't so much the case. So among the ven-

erated Asian teachers, Dipa Ma is one of the few women, not the only, but one of the few women. This book connects very strongly, I find, for women practitioners especially. I recommend it to all of you. A very inspiring being.

She was a good example of someone who had developed her mind so well that we could call it tamed. This was an expression the Buddha often used for the mind that was well developed.

A mind that had become tamed and free of its reactive formations. Such a mind becomes a friend and a support to one.

In an earlier talk, Joseph and I described the five hindrances that arise and how to work with them. Of all the Buddha's lists, this is perhaps the most crucial for identifying the obstacles that obstruct the practice of meditation. For those intent on developing the path toward awakening, the hindrances are the factors of mind that block that current until we learn to recognize them and work with them.

Similarly, the seven factors of awakening are the qualities that speed that current along, that truly support and strengthen and propel that movement toward awakening or enlightenment. I'll use these two terms synonymously—awakening or enlightenment—as they're simply different translations of the Pali term *bodhi*.

As we begin to understand this in our meditation, these factors become our best friends. They are the ones that propel our path. We might say that we can't accomplish this through our own will alone, but as we generate these factors, they do the work for us. They carry out the movement toward awakening.

This quote bears repeating here: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future, all will do so by surmounting the five hindrances that weaken wisdom, by firmly establishing their minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by correctly developing the seven factors of awakening."

These seven factors are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. The Buddha said of these factors, "They lead to awakening, therefore they're called factors of awakening." They're all described as maturing in release—meaning when we learn to work with them, strengthen them, and build them up, they lead to liberation. That is their destination.

They can also be understood as the factors present in the mind at the moment of enlightenment. When one is poised on the threshold of awakening, it's these factors in the mind that create the condition for opening to the unconditioned. This opening cannot

happen by an act of will. We cannot choose it or dictate it. But what we can do through practice and effort is cultivate these seven factors, nurture them, and bring them into balance. Then such a mind is poised for awakening, poised for insight. That is our task.

The Buddha compared this journey and these factors to the rafters that hold up the roof of a peaked house. Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline toward the roof peak, so too when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, she slants, slopes, and inclines toward *nibbana*. These factors lead to the unconditioned, lead to awakening. That is their very nature.

The Buddha described the seven factors as sequential—one leads to the next, which leads to the next. That's how I'll explain them tonight. But we also understand that any of the seven factors will support the others. It's not merely sequential development, but somewhat circular. They continue to help each other. One doesn't need to fully develop one factor before beginning to develop the next, but this sequential understanding helps us see their relationship.

The first factor is mindfulness. It not only starts the chain but also serves to keep them in balance. The next three are called arousing or energizing factors: investigation, energy, and rapture. They all pick up the energy. The last three are calming factors: tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. They balance the rising energy and bring in calm.

The overall balance requires the energizing factors and calming factors to be roughly equal. This is why you'll hear us say in the meditation instructions, "Find the balance of mind that keeps you tranquil and alert." The alertness represents the energizing factors, the tranquility represents the calming factors. We suggest finding this balance in the body because that expresses it in the mind.

Let's examine some of the factors. We've talked extensively about mindfulness, so I won't spend much time on it tonight. I do want to repeat, or at least paraphrase, a definition that Andrea gave early in the retreat in her first talk on mindfulness.

A simple way to remember what mindfulness is—and therefore also how to practice it—is understanding what our experience is in the present moment. Or you could say mindfulness is knowing what our experience is in the present moment. Put that way, it's a very simple thing to do. You just look in the moment, what's our experience, and when we know it, that's mindfulness.

What's interesting is this very simple understanding has these profound implications and unfoldings in meditation experience. When we first come upon mindfulness, it doesn't seem like a big deal: Oh, I know I'm breathing in. I know I'm breathing out. I know I'm experiencing a pleasant feeling. I know I'm experiencing the mind affected by desire. I know that the enlightenment factor of calm is arising in me.

This doesn't seem like a big deal, but somehow this is a very important factor of the mind that leads to many, many other wholesome states. Its power is hard to feel at first, but for people who've been practicing for a while, as you have, you can start to see the tremendous power that it generates.

In the Sutta, I want to mention one little thing. The key term in my mind is *pajanati*. It's the term used again and again in all four foundations of mindfulness that Bhikkhu Bodhi has translated as "understand": One understands breathing in long, I breathe in long. One understands experiencing a painful feeling, I feel a painful feeling. One understands the mind unaffected by desire as the mind unaffected by desire.

This term *pajanati* is the key operational term in mindfulness. It's simply knowing our experience in these different domains of the four foundations. All the rest starts from there.

When we start to look at what's happening in our experience and we just know it very simply like that, we tend to get interested: Oh, what is the experience of breathing in? What is the experience of breathing out? That looking more closely is the second enlightenment factor, which is investigation. The Pali term is *dhammavicaya*.

There's a little disagreement within the tradition about what the word *dhamma* means here. The word *dhamma* has a number of meanings. It is the Buddha's teaching —as such, it's the second refuge. It refers to the ultimate truth of things. One sees the Dhamma, and that constitutes awakening. It can be used simply as a term that means thing or phenomenon. So all the experiences at the sense bases can be called *dhammas* —things that are happening. It can also be used to refer to mind states. In the fourth foundation of mindfulness, the word that's used is *dhammas*, sometimes translated as "objects of mind."

When Andrea gave her talk on investigation, she described it as the investigation of states of mind, and there certainly is justification in the suttas for describing it that way. In a broader sense, I find the factor of investigation wakes up when we bring an interested, alert curiosity to any of our experiences at the six sense doors. I understand it as looking closely at our experience at any of the sense doors.

For example, in developing a relationship with breathing, one could get interested in what is the quality of the in-breath. In bringing the attention closer to the sensations of breathing, investigation is happening. This is a very useful thing to do. One reason is that investigation is a function of wisdom. In the list of the seven factors, it's the most direct expression of the wisdom side of the mind. By activating investigation, we are waking up the natural intelligence that is wisdom in us.

We recall that it's not investigation in a conceptual sense. This investigation is bringing our attention closer to our experience and rubbing against it more intimately so that we know it more fully. For example, with paying attention to an in-breath, one of the things that Sayadaw U Pandita would ask in interviews is: "All right, you're experiencing the in-breath. Tell me three specific sensations that you feel when you breathe in." This is an interesting exploration.

A question like this invites the quality of investigation, and then you'd return for your next interview and report on those three sensations. So you'd better find them. This is wonderful when a teacher makes you accountable for something, because it really makes you look. And then he would say, "Tell me three different sensations you find in the out-breath." This becomes an interesting investigation. And then you have to report that in the next interview.

You could play with this if you like. You don't have to report it to anyone, but you could experiment with it and see what that exploration does to the quality of interest you bring to breathing in. We notice when we get interested in something that it makes the mind more alert and bright. Sometimes that interest comes quite naturally.

I was sitting at home, I think it was two weeks ago when I was preparing a talk. It was a Sunday afternoon, and suddenly two deer appeared in the grass outside the cottage where I'm staying. One of them was acting like I had never seen a deer behave before. It must have been born this year. The other was older and doing regular deer things like grazing. Basically, deer spend their lives grazing.

But this younger deer was doing what I could only call gamboling—something that lambs do in the spring after they've been born. It was running around after the other deer, kicking up its legs and jumping for no apparent reason other than the joy of expressing its bodily delight. It was running back and forth while the older deer kept its head down eating grass.

As I watched them, my whole energy and attention went into seeing those deer, especially the younger one. I must admit, I had a fondness for the younger one. This is what happens when we get interested—our attention collects around that experience. If we can get interested in the process of our body and mind, our attention will collect around that, and the mind will become bright and alert.

This is part of the increase in energy which leads into the next enlightenment factor: energy. The interest of investigation tends to bring up energy. The Pali term here is *viriya*. This is basically the root of effort, so it's sometimes called effort, or energetic effort. Other aspects of this third factor are expressed by synonyms such as strength, courage, ardor, or my current favorite, enthusiasm. When we have enthusiasm for our practice, this is the kind of inward state of *viriya*.

The root of the term comes from the Pali word *vira*, which means hero, or in the feminine, heroine. It's actually the same root as the Latin for virile—the English word virile comes from basically the same root as *vira*. This is a particular kind of energy, though. It's not just random physical energy. It's energy that's directed toward the path, or you could say toward our meditation.

Again, this is from the Buddha: "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unskillful states and the development of skillful states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the responsibility of cultivating skillful states."

When we tune into *viriya*, there's the understanding that the journey we're on is a heroic kind of journey. The energy that we are putting into it is a heroic kind of energy. Having watched you all practice so sincerely for almost four weeks now, I'm really struck by this heroic quality and the courage and enthusiasm and ardor that you display in keeping to your practice even when things aren't easy. I really feel that in the interviews. It's moving and inspiring.

This ardor for practice comes out of our motivation and our aspiration, of course. You see it in worldly terms also, although it has a different feeling here. In worldly terms, there's a lot of effort going into worldly pursuits. I think about sports as one area where it's really easy to see this. I'm a fan of tennis, and I really loved the generation about ten years ago when Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras were leading the men's game. I liked both of them in different ways.

But Agassi was working with this very determined trainer from Las Vegas—you might have said he was a Sayadaw U Pandita of the tennis world. He would have Agassi run up the hills around Las Vegas until he became so exhausted that he threw up. He'd have to run every day until he got that tired, brought to that edge of what he could sustain.

And I think about professional bike riders also. I like to watch a little bit of the Tour de France in the summer, and it is amazing what those people do. They ride for basically a month full out every day. One of them said that every time they get on a bike to race, they understand that they're going to be going through eight hours of nonstop pain. They push their body through all these uphills and downhills and flat stretches absolutely as fast as they can go for about eight hours a day. At the end, they are close to passing out. Some of them pass out when they reach the finish line. So I think about that level of virya being put in just for fame and fortune.

And then I think, well, we're after something much more important, right? We're after the purification of heart and mind.

In one three-month course that I sat, virya was really being emphasized. The basic instructions were that one should sleep for four hours a night and do sitting and walking most of the rest of that time. When I went in for my interview every day, seeing Joseph and Sharon at that point, I would report every day how many hours I sat, how many hours I walked, and how many hours I slept. Again, with the accountability, I thought, I'd better work at this. I wasn't used to sleeping just four hours a night—I was used to more like six on retreat. I couldn't just do that overnight, but little by little, I worked my sleep down. I finally ended up going to bed at eleven, getting up at three every day, and finding out I had enough energy to get through the day. That's what I sustained for a long part of that retreat. If you're not getting involved in other activities, the rest of the day is mostly sitting and walking. It was difficult to get going, and then once I got it going, it was sustainable. That's one form of energy.

For me, that was really the courageous form, the most determined form of effort that I put in practice. It was very worthwhile. I'm very glad that I did that style of practice.

This quality of virya also expresses itself not always in straight courage and tremendous forms of effort, but it expresses itself as perseverance. There's this beautiful story from Tibet in the 11th century with one of the greatest yogis in all of Tibet, who was Milarepa. He's still revered as one of the greatest practitioners ever. You'll recognize him in thangka paintings because he's wearing just simple white cotton robes and usually has a little topknot coming out of his head.

Milarepa had several strong disciples, most famous being Rechungpa and Gampopa. There's this wonderful story about his connection with Gampopa, who became a very famous teacher in his own right and has left a number of wonderful texts.

Gampopa had been training with Milarepa for some time, but it was time for Milarepa to push Gampopa out of the nest. He said, "Now you've gotten all the teachings, you need to go off and practice." So Gampopa was very sadly saying goodbye because he had a great love for his teacher, but he was ready to follow the direction and go off and meditate on his own. Gampopa was starting to walk down the mountain trail, having taken leave of his teacher, and finally Milarepa called out, "Wait, wait, come back. There's one more important teaching."

So Gampopa comes back. Milarepa said, "There's one more instruction I need to give you, my son, before you leave. There is nothing more profound than meditating on this pith instruction." And he turned around, flipped up his white robe, and showed Gampopa his buttocks, on which were two very hard calluses.

Milarepa said, "The qualities in my mind stream have arisen through my having meditated so persistently that my buttocks have become as hard as a camel's hoof. You must also give rise to such heartfelt perseverance and meditate."

So, my noble sons and daughters, my calluses have worn down so much I can't give you this pith instruction myself, but I can relate it from Milarepa.

Sometimes this quality of heroic effort seems daunting, but if we just think about it as moment after moment after moment, then it seems more doable. I think we've already heard this quote from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, but I'd like to read it again in this context:

"Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be awake. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort which is simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

When we maintain this level of energy and effort, as the mind collects around our experience in the present moment, there's something new that starts to come in. And I know you all have experienced this at times.

As this quality of calm develops, we discover something quite remarkable. We start to find a deep sense of ease and tranquility that permeates both the mind and body. This isn't simply the absence of agitation—it's a positive quality of peacefulness that feels nourishing and restorative.

When we reach this level of calm, the body naturally begins to settle. You might notice that your breathing becomes softer and more refined. Tensions that you didn't even realize you were carrying start to release. There's a sense of the whole system coming into a state of natural ease.

This quality of passadhi is quite different from ordinary relaxation. It's not the kind of relaxation we might experience while watching television or taking a bath. This is a deeper settling that comes from the mind's contentment with present-moment experience. It's as if the whole being recognizes that it doesn't need to be anywhere else or do anything else—this moment is completely sufficient.

In this calm state, we often discover that we can be alert and peaceful at the same time. This might seem contradictory at first, because in our usual experience, when we're very relaxed, we tend to become dull or sleepy. But in meditation, we can cultivate a quality of relaxed alertness where the mind is both wakeful and at ease.

This tranquility also has the beautiful quality of being self-sustaining. The more calm we feel, the more the mind wants to rest in that calmness. It becomes a refuge from the usual turbulence of thoughts and emotions. We start to understand why the Buddha emphasized the importance of cultivating inner peace—it provides a sanctuary that we can access regardless of external circumstances.

As this factor of calm becomes established, it naturally leads us toward the next factor of awakening: concentration. But before we move there, it's worth noting how these factors we've explored so far—mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, and calm—all work together in a beautiful harmony. Each one supports and strengthens the others, creating a momentum toward deeper states of understanding and peace.

If there are lots of emotions, the body will be stirred with those emotions also. As the mind starts to calm, the body also starts to calm down. So we start to settle into the present moment more without so much desire or aversion. There's not so much agenda for something to happen because we're finding some contentment. There's not so much struggle with aversion because mind and body are calming more and thoughts aren't assaulting us as strongly as they did before.

Early days and weeks of the retreat, sometimes early years of meditation practice, are really dominated by the hindrances. When we first touch this period of calm, it's a little like, what is this? It's so unknown, so foreign to us at first. One meditator said that when they first experienced this, all they could do was say, "Calm?" with a big question mark—like what is this thing? But once we touch it and we realize this is really a possibility for me now, there's something really beautiful about it.

It's kind of like a sailor. You've been out there on your sailboat and you've crossed storming seas and big waves and a giant squid attack and boat almost being capsized on the rocks. And all of a sudden you come through all of that and you come into this port with a big wide harbor. And everything can just settle down. There's something so delicious about that.

Emily Dickinson pointed to this in a poem called "Wild Nights." She's describing the other side of this, and it has this sea-going metaphor in it. "Futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass. Done with the chart. Rowing in Eden." That just expresses this kind of peace where we've been battling for so long, and now all of a sudden we get to float for a while in this calm, safe, broad harbor place.

This is where the experience of meditation starts to reveal this natural peace and ease in the mind. We start to trust that this is something that we can come back to again and again. We start to understand that if we don't stir it up, that is where the mind settles. Of course, we'll keep stirring it up again and again with the hindrances, with thoughts, with emotions and so on. But we understand that there is this natural peace.

This is an instruction that Ajahn Amaro, a British monk and abbot of Amaravati, likes to give in retreats after a few days have gone by. He says, "Rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body, and then pay attention to whatever disturbs that." It's a beautiful instruction. Rest in the natural peace and ease, and then pay attention to whatever disturbs it.

So this natural peace is some of what we're looking for through dharma practice, through meditation practice. There's something very satisfying about it. It's a temporary state at this point, so we know that it's not going to last, but there's something satisfying that for me has always drawn me to go further. It's like, wow, this is possible? How much more peace is possible? That's been a pull for me all along the way in my meditation.

One of the things that can happen when we meet this calm is not knowing what to do with it. The main instruction is just to let yourself feel that the way you feel any state of mind. You can rest in feeling the calm and knowing it, understanding this is the mind affected by the factor of calm. We know it's temporary, and yet we can experience it.

Sometimes in this Western culture we are so used to intensity that we think if intensity isn't happening we're half dead or we're missing the boat or it shouldn't be like that. So calm isn't an intense experience and sometimes we think this is not enough, this is not sufficient. It reminds me of that cartoon by Gahan Wilson. He did a whole series on the Zen monastery cartoons.

So in this one, the cartoon shows two monks sitting side by side in the meditation hall—one older, one younger. The older monk leans over and whispers something to the younger monk. Though they're not supposed to be talking, he can't help but share this wisdom. The caption reads: "Nothing happens next. This is it."

This might capture exactly what we feel when we encounter a patch of calm. What's supposed to be happening now? Nothing happens. This is it.

Sometimes boredom can arise at this point because there's such a neutral experience. It can be helpful to note the neutral feeling tone of calm. It can be helpful to generate interest—interest is the antidote to boredom. This interest can emerge from investigation, the second awakening factor.

But soon we learn to appreciate, really appreciate, the presence of calm. It is one of the great blessings of the path and the foundation of contentment in our practice and in our life. One quotation I love from the Dhammapada has the Buddha saying that peace is the highest happiness. This is a literal translation. He didn't say "the unconditioned" or "enlightenment"—he said peace. The word used is *santi*, which in Sanskrit is *shanti*.

Peace is the highest happiness. This is a very interesting comment on human psychology, because our culture does not generally hold this as its highest value. It holds stimulation, entertainment, gratification, sense pleasure, enjoyment as its highest forms of happiness. But the Buddha said peace is the highest happiness.

It's fascinating when we start to understand the truth of this in our own experience. It really stops us from looking outside for external things and stops us from looking inside for special high experiences—states of bliss or ecstasy or rapture. All of those will pass and are not truly reliable.

Peace, although in the seven factors it comes and goes, in the deeper depths of understanding draws from the unconditioned nature of stillness. There is something more reliable in this quality of peace than simply a temporary passing state, though that's how we experience it for now.

This is a poem from Rumi called "Quietness":

Inside this new love, die.
Your way begins on the other side.
Become the sky.
Take a ride to the prison wall.
Escape.
Walk out like someone born into color.

Do it now.
You're covered with thick cloud.
Slide out the side.
Quietness is the surest sign.
Your old life was a frantic running from silence.
The speechless full moon comes out now.

This quietness and the trust we feel from it leads into the next factor: concentration. Concentration is the greater collectedness of that calming mood, where the mind can simply relax into itself. Relaxation is the key to the deepening of concentration. Concentration is not brought about through strong, forcing effort, but by trust and relaxing in a sense of ease and allowing.

Concentration is somewhat misleading as a term because in the West it has a particular meaning. When we say "concentrate," we mean to focus our attention narrowly on one part of what we're doing—like trying to focus on homework while asking someone not to distract us with the television.

It's not a translation I like very much, but we're somewhat stuck with it because it's so widely used. A better word would be *collectedness*. The Pali term being translated here is *samadhi,* and *samadhi* does not have this exclusive focus connotation. *Samadhi* is not about bringing the mind to only one point and ignoring everything else.

Samadhi is about the whole psyche that has become collected in the present moment.

Some of this confusion exists because bringing the attention down to one point can be a way of collecting the mind in Buddhist meditation. But it's not the only way, and that narrow focus is not intrinsic to the experience of samadhi. Samadhi refers to the mind that has become collected. It is not primarily about attention on a narrow focus.

I love this description from Ajahn Sumedho. One of the synonyms that's often used for concentration is ekaggata, which literally means one-pointed. Ajahn Sumedho defines one-pointed as "the one point that includes everything." That's a beautiful way of opening up the narrowness. The one point that includes everything.

So what's the one point that includes everything? How about here and now? The one point that includes everything is the present moment—one way of understanding it.

When the mind is collected like this, it has great power. You have felt it. A number of you have described this in interviews, and I know all of you have touched this at different points. When the mind comes together, it is steady. You know it because it stays in

the present moment for a while—not forever, but it stays for a while. As it abides in the present moment, it's not thrown off its present-moment awareness by a passing thought or an unpleasant sensation or a little stirring of one emotion or another. It keeps its collectedness, and that makes it strong.

This coming together of the mind's energy makes it strong, steady, stable, unified, whole. These are really beautiful qualities of the concentrated mind.

I'm sure you know how different teachers transmit different kinds of energy. One of the most dramatic examples I witnessed was Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese master, who came to Spirit Rock a few times before we had built our retreat center. We still had a big open hillside that was a natural amphitheater. We built a speaker's platform for Thay at the bottom of the amphitheater, with about two thousand people spread out on the hillside and a loudspeaker system so we could hear his teachings.

He has an amazing presence if you've ever met him and been around him. For me, he had a kind of stillness that I hadn't felt in any of the other teachers I'd been with—a stillness that radiated. His body language is very still. His mind is very still. His words come out very composed. As I sat there on the hillside listening to him speak, I felt like he was casting a samadhi spell on all two thousand people. You could just feel everybody settle into the stillness of his being.

This is the quality of concentration. It has a couple of benefits. First, it feels whole. It feels healing and it feels good. So it brings an immediate benefit of a sense of well-being and strength and confidence.

The Dalai Lama put it this way: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." This quality of samadhi is a big part of inner peace.

The second benefit is that it serves as the platform for insight to emerge. When we are living our usual life with the untrained mind, everything is going by so fast we can't see clearly. It's a little like we're on a merry-go-round, on one of those horses going around and around, and a friend comes to the side of the merry-go-round with a newspaper. They hold it up and say, "Read the news!" But we're spinning by so fast, we can't read the news.

With samadhi, the merry-go-round starts to calm down, to slow down, and eventually comes to a halt. We're in front of our friend with the newspaper, and then we can read the news. And the headlines say: Life is change. Don't hang on. If you hang on, you suffer. If you let go, you'll find happiness.

We can read the news. And when we read the news from that place of stillness, it really goes in. Insight penetrates deep when the mind is strong and unified and collected. So the message goes right into our heart. We can see things the way they are, and it changes us. Concentration brings the mind into this state of wholeness, peace, stillness, and receptivity.

And because of the strength of that kind of mind, it opens into the seventh factor of equanimity, *upekkhā*, which Bhante talked about a couple of weeks ago. So I don't need to say a lot more about equanimity. He spoke beautifully about it on that evening. Just to say that it is a state of real balance of mind that is not so moved by the alternating currents of pleasure and pain. It can stay steady in the face of the alternating experiences of the pleasant and the unpleasant.

Sometimes in Western language, equanimity has a little bit of a connotation of unfeeling. It's like looking at the statues of the Buddha. He looks so serene and untouched that you imagine he doesn't feel anything or care or have a heart. But equanimity is not like that.

It was interesting. At the end of a three-month course a few years ago, I asked people in our discussion group what were some of their most significant experiences on the retreat. People spoke about being in a state of such balance that the pain in the body didn't bother them. Their emotional flow didn't bother them. And thoughts didn't disturb them. I said, "Well, you know, that's the state that's talked about as equanimity." And most of them did know that. And I said, "OK, in that state of equanimity, was your heart closed down? Were you shut off from feeling? Did you not care?"

And everybody said, "Not at all. It was just the opposite. When I could be in that state of balance, my heart was much more open and connected. *Mettā* and compassion came far more easily in that place, and there was a lot more warmth." The state of equanimity is not a state of indifference at all, but with that strength and balance, we can really move into the world out of love and compassion.

So these are the three pacifying qualities—the tranquility, the concentration, the equanimity—which are needed to balance the three arousing factors of investigation, energy, and rapture. It's mindfulness that knows the presence of all the others and can keep them in balance.

As you go about your practice, you can start to look at this balance. And in shorthand, look at three qualities in particular: mindfulness, energy, and concentration. Mindfulness is the balance. Energy is shorthand for the arousing factors. Concentration is shorthand for the pacifying factors. When I practice on retreat, I try to always be in

touch with these three to the point that if my teacher came up and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Where are your mindfulness, energy, and concentration right now?" I could tell them. It's very helpful to know.

Then you start to realize: if your energy is too high for your concentration, you need to bring in more calm. And there are ways to do that. The *Ānāpānasati Sutta*: "I shall breathe in, tranquilizing the bodily formation. I shall breathe in, tranquilizing the mental formation." And so on. Open to expansiveness.

If, on the other hand, the arousing factors are too low and the calming factors are too high, it leads to the quality of dullness or sinking mind. Then bring up the energy factors with investigation or noting or some physical movement to arouse energy. We can start to see how these factors are developing in our practice, in our experience, moment by moment. Because when all the factors come together and are balanced, that's when the mind is primed for insight. And as they come into their maturity, their fulfillment, as the Buddha said, that's when the mind is primed for enlightenment, for the glimpse of the unconditioned that is the awakening process.

Sometimes today one wonders: does this awakening still go on for people to the depths that we read about in the texts? I want to close by reading you a little story from a Thai master named Luang Paw Liam, or Ajahn Liam. He is the successor to Ajahn Chah at his main monastery in Thailand, Wat Ba Pong. Ajahn Liam is a fairly old man now, but I just came upon his biography and autobiography that describes his practice in a special year of 1969. I'd just like to close by reading some of this to you.

Around the middle of the rainy season of 1969, Ajahn Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity. So Luang Por Liam increased his efforts, and as he did so, results became evident. First he described a real growth of happiness and brightness and joy. But he recognized that this was impermanent, so he just kept practicing.

Then he became very, very sleepy. For days, this great sleepiness overtook him, but he saw that this too was impermanent. "Keeping this in mind, I kept on meditating," he said.

"Normally, I would sit meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m., and then stop to have a rest. But on this day, I continued sitting without making the slightest change in posture. A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body, as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, an experience of becoming completely light and at ease. Cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness.

"It feels like there are no sankhāras or proliferations of the mind now. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before—the attraction to the other sex, or all kinds of ambitions that I had before—they all disappeared. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose. There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how any other things exist.

"As concerns dukkha, I don't know what that is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without change."

So this profound awakening is still possible. When we cultivate the seven factors of enlightenment with patience and dedication, when we allow them to mature and come into balance, the mind naturally opens to these deeper truths. The path that the Buddha laid out twenty-five hundred years ago remains as vibrant and transformative today as it ever was.

Let's just sit for a minute together in appreciation of this possibility that lives within each of us.

CHAPTER 129

Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

Guy Armstrong examines the profound freedom available through what Thai teacher Upāsikā Kī called "unentangled knowing" - a quality of mindfulness that remains fully present to all phenomena without getting caught in clinging or reactivity. Drawing extensively on the twelve links of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), Armstrong shows how the chain of suffering unfolds from contact through vedanā (feeling tone) to taṇhā (craving) and upādāna (clinging), creating endless cycles of birth and death of various selves. The key insight is finding freedom in the gap between feeling and craving - not a temporal gap, but a spacious awareness that doesn't react with greed, aversion, or delusion. This momentary nibbāna (tadaṅga-nibbuto) offers a foretaste of the unconditioned, allowing practitioners to touch the deathless quality of mind that's always available when we don't disturb it with reactive formations. Armstrong offers practical approaches including Sayādaw U Tejaniya's "checking the attitude" method and techniques for resting attention in consciousness itself rather than sense objects. Through teachings from Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and other Thai forest masters, he demonstrates how this unentangled awareness becomes both path and goal, revealing the unity of inner spiritual work with outer expressions of freedom and justice.

We've talked quite a bit so far in this retreat about how the sense of self gets constructed and the ways that this binds us, limits us, and ties us into suffering. We've also started to talk a little bit about the way out of that. Bhante's talk the other night on the Third Noble Truth was a very clear and complete description of that possibility as described by the Buddha.

So in the talk this evening, I want to focus on both these aspects. Andrea described the construction of the self in some detail with dependent origination. Bhante described the undoing of that with his talk on the Third Noble Truth. I want to draw on both those themes this evening, really to point us even further in the direction of discovering freedom.

I think this word freedom is a very powerful concept for us. Across the world, it evokes a very deep yearning in the human heart. We see it applied inwardly through spiritual life and the teachings of the Buddha. We see it applied outwardly through so many movements for justice and equality and an end to oppression.

Looking at the inner and outer expressions of this search for freedom, a couple of things strike me. One, they both tend to be struggles. As you're discovering here, the inner journey is not always easy because we're coming up against these inner forces. As anyone finds who carries on this work outwardly, there are forces there that oppose us also. When we look closely, they're basically the same forces. So whether we're working outwardly or we're working inwardly, we're confronted by the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. That's the work that we're trying to undo in the world and in ourselves.

One thing I find really interesting is that those people who try to change the world and are most effective seem to do it by recognizing the unity of the outer work and the inner work. I'm thinking of people like Dr. King and his work in the civil rights movement, of Aung San Suu Kyi, who's a very strong meditator in her work inside Burma. I think of Nelson Mandela, whose spirituality was forged through those many years of prison. And I think about Cesar Chavez, who formed the United Farm Workers Union in California in the 1960s and worked really very successfully to bring some basic rights to seasonal workers on the farms through strikes and the unity among his community.

Chavez was also very deeply rooted in spirituality. He was a devout Catholic, and he often used masses and prayer meetings to build a sense of community and really solidarity among his workers. I think his commitment to nonviolence also came from his deep faith in the teachings of Jesus.

These are some of the most effective leaders in the outer world that we've seen in our lifetimes, and I think that it's very significant—that marriage of the inner and outer in all those cases.

Here we're primarily involved in the inner work, and I think this question of freedom is equally important to us as an inward journey as it is in an outer form. One of the things I want to ask about this quality of inner freedom is: where is it, and will you know it when you find it? I think we may not, which is why I raised the question. I think sometimes it's staring us in the face and we may be overlooking it.

So I want to tease out a little bit of that in the talk tonight. How can we recognize it when it comes? Because if we think that freedom is only found in the complete ending of greed, aversion, delusion, that might not happen tonight. That part is a long piece of work, a long struggle. But perhaps there's a way that we can experience freedom in our practice here and now, and in doing that, come to taste some of the fruit in an immediate sense. If we can, I think that can build a lot of confidence that we're gaining the fruit of the practice, which the Buddha pointed to, as we go, as we journey.

The subject of the talk tonight is unentangled knowing. This is a term from a Thai teacher named Upasika Kee. She was a laywoman who taught from the 1950s up until her death in 1978. She used this term, unentangled knowing, which I think is a great pointing.

This word is a little tricky, perhaps, if you're not a native English speaker. Tangle refers to the twisting of balls of yarn when cats play with them or someone's long hair when they go for a ride in a convertible—the knots and snarls that happen when different strands come together. Entangle is the verb meaning to make that happen. And the "un" in front of it means we're not allowing that to happen. So we're not allowing the tangle to form.

This image of the tangle occurs in the Buddhist teachings a lot. I'll just mention a couple from the suttas. Here's one from the Anguttara Nikaya: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." I like this quote because it points to the way that different desires conflict with each other. When we try to follow them both, we get tangled up. A simple example: we want to be liked and we want to do our own thing.

What do we do when those conflict? Ah, we're caught. We're in a conflict.

This is a lovely quote. It comes from the Samyutta Nikaya and was used as the beginning of the Visuddhimagga, that sixth-century commentary on meditation practices. It's a quote of a questioner coming to the Buddha in his lifetime, addressing him by his family name, which many people did if they weren't disciples—Gotama.

"A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gotama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

It's a great question, isn't it? Today as much as back then.

The Buddha's answer was basically: who succeeds in disentangling the tangle is one who follows virtue, meditation, and wisdom. That is developing the Eightfold Path, which is what we're doing here.

This is how Upasika Kee used it. She was pointing to, in this quote, "an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside." An inward staying, unentangled knowing. And we'll talk more about what that means.

But first a word about Upasika Kee. Women teachers in our tradition in Asia are somewhat rare, so she stands out as being, I think, an exceptional woman teacher in our lifetime. She was also a laywoman, so she wasn't even an ordained nun but taught as a laywoman. The term upasika means a woman lay supporter.

Her talks were recorded sometime during her teaching career, and a number of the best ones were assembled into a book by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. I highly recommend the book. It's called Pure and Simple. I'll write that and her name up on the board after the talk. I find her teachings very accessible and also very deep. She does not pull her punches and gives the straight Dhamma in a very clear and, for me, impactful way. Thanissaro Bhikkhu considers her the greatest woman teacher in Thailand in the 20th century.

So this phrase, "unentangled knowing," is pointing to a kind of mindfulness that is aware of all the phenomena of the momentary experience but is not caught up in holding on, in clinging, in being enmeshed or attached with any of them. There's this sense of full presence, full mindfulness, lots of things happening, all six senses open, but not the tangle of craving and reactivity going on.

I want to suggest that this is actually happening for you at many moments throughout the day. But those moments may be quiet and a little bit subtle and go by often unseen. So in outlining this approach, I want to encourage us all to start to notice those moments, because as we notice them, they will grow and become an important part of our path.

In looking at how we become unentangled, we're first going to take a little review look at how we become entangled. Again, I want to use the model of dependent origination and refer to Andrea's talk from the other night. She explained how the Buddha's teaching is described in these twelve links, which begin with ignorance, go through momentary sense experience, and come around again to suffering, which tends to strengthen the ignorance and sets us on the cycle again.

In terms of our experience as meditators, I think the most important four links are the ones that happen toward the center of the chain. Andrea described these in detail, and I just want to review them briefly: contact, feeling, craving, and clinging.

We're going to leave out the first five links, which tend to get a little philosophical. We're going to leave out the last three links, which also get a little philosophical and get us into those nasty rebirth questions. We're just going to focus on the moment-to-moment experience of these four central links in the chain.

As you know, our basic experience as human beings is that we're constantly subject to sense experience at the six sense doors. This is what's known as contact. This is the impinging, which we feel every waking moment, of sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, thoughts, and emotions. These are happening all the time, whether we want them or not.

Have you ever found a way to turn these off? When you want to go to bed at night and you want things to be peaceful, can you turn off this flow of contact? When you're sitting in the meditation hall and you're searching for some calm, can you turn off contact? Generally not.

As long as we're awake, the six senses are active, functioning, and we're getting stimulated by this flow, which, as we've said many times, is difficult because it's a mix of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither. And it's this mix that can keep us off balance.

From this contact through the six sense doors, feeling arises—feeling tone arises. This is the quality of vedana, which may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Feeling tone is conditioned and therefore somewhat malleable, but we can't exactly choose it either.

Based on our conditioning, we tend to interpret contact in certain prescribed ways. This provides that mix of pleasant and unpleasant in our moment-to-moment experience. These sense contacts and feelings then tend to condition the next step in the chain, which is craving. Remember, these are not strictly causal, but they are conditioning factors.

So craving is the unexamined response to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. We respond to the pleasant in a conditioned way with wanting. We respond to the unpleasant with disliking or aversion. We respond to the neutral with delusion. The neutral is not very interesting because we're focusing on what we can get or push away. So the neutral doesn't really register on our scale, and that's the activity of delusion. And delusion also reinforces greed and aversion because if we could see what we were doing, we could see it doesn't really work. But delusion covers up the activity of wanting and disliking so we don't tend to see the effect until we start to pay attention.

So craving starts to incline the attention toward an object that's experienced as pleasant. Let's take pleasant or unpleasant because they're easier. It starts to incline the mind toward that. There's a seductive quality to both the pleasant and the unpleasant. One we want to grab, the other we want to push away. And then as the mind continues to incline toward that arising, it more or less matures in one more step, which is clinging, and that is to say that we take a hold of that object.

So the Pali word is upādāna. Sometimes we translate it as grasping, sometimes as clinging. It's the same meaning. We often will use grasping for the act of taking hold, and we'll use clinging when it continues over some time, but it's the same word in Pali. Another way to think of it is we fixate on that with our attention. We do it with both greed and aversion. Obviously we do it with greed in order to draw the object closer, but before we can push an object away, we also have to take a hold of it. So if aversion is the driving force, grasping also takes place.

Simple example: pain arises in the knee. It's felt as unpleasant. The mind inclines, perhaps out of some fear or disliking. And in order to do something with it, we have to fasten the attention there. Driven by aversion, it is a form of grasping.

Then, once we have grasped, we tend to build a self around that thing. Why? Because the mind is fascinated with it, and it means something to me, either gratification or threat. So once we've grasped, thoughts tend to proliferate around our relationship to the thing. So a lot of I-thoughts come in around the things that we've taken a hold of. So this arising of all the I-thoughts born of clinging is what we might refer to as becoming or birth, but it's kind of inevitable once we've gone into clinging.

So this is a brief recap of these four links of contact, feeling, craving, and clinging that we tend to go through until we start paying attention and seeing them. These links happen very, very fast, as I think Andrea mentioned the other night. It's not like we have a contact and then we have a few seconds to contemplate it. The contact comes, the feeling comes almost immediately with it, and then the craving will happen very fast on the basis of the feeling, and then the clinging happens almost necessarily out of the craving. There will be some taking a hold. And all these things happen in less than a second, most likely. If mindfulness is not strong, these things just tend to happen.

So you can see that over the course of a whole life, we've gone through this cycle so many times with so many objects because life is basically about forming relationships to the things that come into our field. So as an infant, one begins to relate to mother, breast, food, father, and growing up, friends, school, homework, high school, attractive people, college, sex, job, career, salary, money, Lady Gaga, Facebook, Twitter, Barack Obama, the global economic crisis. It all lands. It all lands, and we've got to relate to all of it with its mix of pleasure and displeasure.

So anytime we take hold in that mix, suffering is inevitable. Again, just a couple of quick examples. Andrea went through one, and I'll go through another. First, an example based on not liking. Let's say you're on eight precepts. Actually, it is based on liking.

Let's say you're on eight precepts. You come down at five o'clock, planning to have your nice glass of juice and a little hard candy. So you walk by that table and get the glass of juice. But as you're standing there, you notice these wonderful aromas wafting up from the other table, where people who haven't taken the eight precepts are gathering. There's a warm pot of soup and some freshly baked bread.

As you're getting your little glass of juice, you're smelling these things. You happen to be quite hungry because you didn't quite take enough at lunch to carry you through until the next morning. And you start thinking, "I would really like some of that bread and soup. Could I come back later and get some? Oh no, everybody's seen me with my glass of juice. They know I'm an eight precept yogi. I can't do that. Maybe I can sneak in after they've all gone. No, no, the food people take that away too quickly. What can I do? Did I save anything in the fridge from yesterday? Maybe I can go get that, but people will see me eating that too. Oh, and I'm so hungry. I'm not going to get anything until tomorrow morning. I shouldn't have gone on eight precepts in the first place."

As you know, we can spin out about food and eating for quite a while. So, having taken hold of this situation, we might be born into this new birth as the hungry yogi. The hungry yogi can wander off after that little glass of juice and think and think and feel and feel about this for quite a while—could be half an hour, could be an hour. We're sort of caught in this not knowing what to do, not really liking what we've chosen, wishing that we could find a way out. And the hungry yogi has that lifespan. It's not a pleasant birth.

But eventually, let's say you come in for the 6:15 sitting. You settle in, you let go of that. And at some point you will let go of that engagement, that entanglement, and you return to mindfulness in the present moment. At that point we can say the hungry yogi has passed away. That birth has come to an end. The hungry yogi has died.

So here we had a birth that was not too happy. The hungry yogi was not a happy rebirth. But then the death was quite pleasant—happy to let that existence go and move back into good yogi here and now.

So then the good yogi keeps meditating. Mindfulness strengthens, attention settles, concentration develops. Maybe it's the next morning and we've actually had something to eat. But we're sitting, we're feeling quite present, quite steady in our mindfulness, and we like it.

So we realize, "Oh, this is that factor of concentration they were talking about. This is the quality of calm and equanimity. I can sit here. I can be effortlessly with the present moment. Thoughts are going by, but they just don't disturb me. I can be in the middle of my life. I can even think about my relationship and my work, and they just go by."

"Wow, wait till I take this back into the world. I am going to be such a cooled-out person now that I've finally found how to meditate. I'm going to be able to go back into my office and operate from this place of wisdom and compassion with everybody I meet. I know I'm going to get promoted because there are very few people who can do this. And then I'm going to have a much better salary and I'll be able to actually buy a house in this area, which I could never dream about before. And I'll be so warm and loving in a relationship. I know I'm going to find a great partner because I can hold this meditation space."

Now, I know this sounds really naive to those of you who've been sitting all this time, but when I first came upon this space in practice, I really thought it was going to last. I thought I'd discovered what all the books were pointing to, and now I was just going to live in it. So I took hold of it and really thought about it a lot for about an hour. Then I went out and walked, and then I had to come back in and sit again. After all that thinking, I was totally worn out, and the next sitting was a wreck.

So in my case, I'd taken birth as the good yogi, the concentrated yogi, and it was a really delightful birth, imagining all the things that were going to come into my life based on my great spiritual advanced development. It was like a heaven realm birth, really. For that period of time, it was like I was floating. I was imagining my life unfolding in all these great ways, being born in a heaven realm.

But then when I came in and sat again and it all went away, oh, the death was so painful. Letting go of that was really awful. I'd worked so hard to get it. I tried really hard to get it back and couldn't. Very painful.

So if we take hold of something where there's suffering, we have an unhappy birth, but a pleasant death. If we take hold of something that's pleasant, we have a pleasant birth, but because it will change, we have a painful death. Either way, in grasping, we're going to end up in suffering, which is what the chain of dependent origination points to.

This is how we take birth. We take birth by grasping. There's really nothing more to it than that. That's what creates the sense of self over and over and over again. There's no self who does the grasping, but grasping is a function of the mind, and when we do it, we take a new birth. Some of them are brief, some of them are longer, but they're all formed from grasping.

Andrew Olendzki, who's the scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, put it very nicely in this way: "What becomes clear through this analysis of moment-to-moment experience is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something created by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds onto or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

So grasping gives rise to a new self, or we could call it a new birth. This is the way that our untrained mind works most of the time if we're not paying attention.

I don't know if you ever watched a monkey go through the forest overhead. When I lived in Thailand, my hut was out in the middle of a rainforest and monkeys were often passing overhead. They can travel on the canopy of trees, of course, but if they're lower down, the way they travel is by holding onto a vine and swinging until they can find another vine. Only when they see another vine coming into view will they release the first one and grab the next. Then they'll swing on that vine until they see another vine, release the first one and grab the next one.

This is the way the untrained mind usually works. It goes from one form of grasping and won't let go until it finds another. So this is what's referred to as the monkey mind—grasping more or less continuously, moment after moment.

But as meditators, we have another choice. The chain of dependent origination is not deterministic. There is freedom to be found within it. So where for us can that freedom be found? Where can this connected chain be broken so that it doesn't lead to suffering?

I would say that the classical answer is between feeling and craving. When a feeling arises that is pleasant and we don't respond with greed, when a feeling arises that is unpleasant and we don't respond with aversion, when a feeling arises that is neutral and we don't respond with delusion, we have essentially cut that chain right there. Having cut the chain, the other links do not unfold into clinging, becoming, birth, and so forth.

Now of course it takes mindfulness to be able to do this, but I know you all are doing this because we hear it in interviews. This is one of the purposes of strengthening mindfulness—to be able to stop this chain from happening again.

This is a quote from one Buddhist teacher: "The whole of the Buddhist path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving."

Now, I just want to clarify—this is a very profound and significant pointing, but don't think of this as a time gap, as though contact arises and you've got a couple of seconds to figure that one out, and then feeling arises and you've got a couple of seconds to

figure that one out. Because contact, feeling, craving, clinging can happen in the blink of an eye. So there's not a time gap between feeling and craving. Don't go looking for one—you'll become very frustrated.

But what the teacher is pointing to is a state of mindfulness where one is aware of the feeling and not falling into the reactive formation of craving. That creates a space in the mind, and that's the kind of gap that is being pointed to here.

This becomes very interesting to investigate—what is that like when a feeling, let's say pleasant or unpleasant because they're easier to see, is there but there's no reactive formation?

What's that like? Look in your own experience and see what language works for you.

I would describe it in a few different ways. There's ease, it's spacious, it's restful, it's peaceful. It's not conflicted, not characterized by struggle, and there's some feeling of lightness. Those are some of the words that come to me. And particularly the word that I want to emphasize this evening is that there's freedom in that moment—because the mind is not being caught in greed, in aversion, or in delusion. That is a kind of freedom.

So essentially what's happening is there's a gap in the causal chain. In that gap, there's a sense that one touches something else—peace, ease, calm, whatever you want to call it. One of the things I want to ask is: let's call it peace. Did you construct that peace? By refraining from greed, aversion, delusion, did you construct or fabricate that peace? Or is that peace a natural part of the mind that's always available if we don't disturb it with greed, aversion, delusion?

I want to suggest that that peace is a natural part of the mind—or our experience, or whatever you want to call it—and that it's not something that we've put together by a lot of hard effort at that point. So what that can give us is a sense of trust that if we don't get involved in these reactive formations, that peace is always available. And that peace being always available points to something that is not so conditioned—not so subject to causes and conditions. Because it's always there as a potential for us to relax into.

So we are starting to intuit, or one could say touch, the realm of the unconditioned, which is what Bhante was pointing to in his talk the other night.

I want to read this quote from Ajahn Chah. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate around these things, dividing them into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself.

The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are—as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

So when we rest in that gap, we are stepping out of the cycle of birth and death. We are not moving forward into grasping and taking a new birth. And because we're not taking a new birth, we're not subject to the death of that self. So not being involved in the cycle of birth and death means that we're opening to something that has the flavor of the deathless, or the unborn, or the unconditioned.

In the time of the Buddha, the dominant religion in the society was Brahmanism, and it was led by the caste of Brahmins who controlled access to the teachings and the rites and the rituals that characterized those teachings. The Buddha was an outsider to that system. He didn't come from the Brahmin caste, and what he was teaching was not derived from Brahmin doctrines. So he was always regarded with a little bit of suspicion by the religious orthodoxy of the day. He was a little bit of an outsider.

Nonetheless, when he would come and teach in villages because his reputation had spread, very often the Brahmins would come down and listen to him, which was a gesture of some humility on their part. And so there are a few suttas in a book called the Sutta Nipata, where these young Brahmins come and question the Buddha. And you can feel the sincerity and open-mindedness of these young men who are not entirely caught in the orthodoxy of their doctrine.

So this one Brahmin youth, whose name is Todeia, comes to the Buddha and asks this question: "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you like to ask the Buddha that? What's liberation like? Tell me.

And so the Buddha replies, "That sage is without desire. They have nothing. They are unentangled in becoming." Resting in the gap between feeling and craving means that one does not get entangled in becoming. One does not take a new identity, a new birth.

Here's Ajahn Chah again. Imagine that this is being given by Ajahn Chah in an open air hall in Thailand.

Imagine that you're sitting in one of these open-air halls where the warm evening air flows freely through the space. Ajahn Chah looks around and says, "The roof is a becoming. The floor is a becoming, but in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness."

Where there's no becoming, Ajahn Chah is pointing out, is like nibbana—this empty space where we haven't taken birth, where we're resting in this natural peace that wasn't constructed and has the flavor of the unconditioned. This is a deathless place because no self is being born and no self is dying away from it. And it's always available.

In fact, I think we all touch it many times during the day. Ajahn Buddhadasa, another great Thai teacher, said that if you didn't touch that many times in a day, you'd go kind of mad, because the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are so upsetting.

This kind of non-becoming that Ajahn Chah referred to as nibbana is not the final nibbana—the state of being of one who is fully enlightened and has completely exhausted greed, aversion, and delusion. It's not that fullness of nibbana, but it's like a foretaste.

I was very happy the other night when Bhante used a quotation from the suttas, which he referred to as a momentary nibbana. I was familiar with this term from the Thai tradition, but I had not known where it was found in the suttas. He kindly provided me the reference. In the suttas, it's described as tadanga nibbuto, which means basically this approximation of nibbana—this quenching or blowing out of the fire to the extent possible.

This is what's happening in our practice when we come upon these periods of calm between feeling and craving. We are touching into the semblance of nibbana to the extent possible for us here and now. This is the extent to which we can realize that ultimate peace in this moment, and we can start to recognize this.

That recognition is important for a couple of reasons. One is that it's very satisfying when we learn to discover it and rest in it for longer periods. It brings some sense of the fruit of the path. When we can start to recognize that this sense of peace is in some way linked to, related to the unconditioned—which is the final fruit of the Eightfold Path—we start to realize that we are getting there. So we gain confidence.

The other reason it's important is that it becomes something of a path in and of itself. This resting in that gap, that open space, can be seen as the path. This ability to rest there in that peace is onward leading. Not only does it have the quality of the goal, it also has the quality of the path. So in discovering it, we find that the path and the goal are coming together—that where we want to go is to some extent revealed here and now, and by touching it again and again and again, that becomes the momentum of the path.

We are still aware. We are resting, but we've not closed off our senses. The six senses are alive and functioning. We're in touch with phenomena. We have not withdrawn from the world, but there is this sense of peace in which we learn to have more and more trust.

This is from Ajahn Joon, another teacher in the Thai tradition: "The best way to develop a great awareness"—the term being translated as "great awareness" is maha sati—"is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in that pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their nature of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

One of my teachers in Thailand was Ajahn Buddhadasa. I practiced with him when I was a monk—a young monk and a fairly young practitioner. He was very accessible at that time. He was one of the great teachers in Thailand, a great meditator and also a scholar. He gave addresses on radio and television. But to some extent, he was an iconoclast, a little outside the Theravadan orthodoxy. I think because of that, his monastery had not quite been discovered yet. So when I was there, he was very accessible.

He'd have his breakfast in the morning and then often come out to sit outside his cottage on a stone bench, on bare earth with forest chickens running around and picking at scraps in the dirt, temple dogs either lying at his feet or prowling nearby. I swear they had an appetite for Westerners—Thai monks would pass by without the dogs responding much, but when a Western monk walked past, they would tend to rise up and start barking.

I would sometimes go visit with Ajahn Buddhadasa at the front of the monastery in this very informal setting. You'd simply sit on the ground before him, and he was just there, available to answer questions. But I found him intimidating at first. You know how when you meet with a Vipassana teacher, they'll pull out a chair, offer you tissues, ask if you need tea—we try to be friendly in our interviews. Ajahn Buddhadasa dwelt in this place of unentangled knowing. I can see now that he was simply resting in that space of great peaceful mind, and I was just another object arising in his visual field. That's how he related to me—he would just sit back and meditate me.

At first I thought he didn't want me there. If he wanted me here, wouldn't he be more friendly? But as I reflected later, I came to realize that he didn't mind if I sat there asking questions. He was just as content with that as hanging out with the chickens and dogs—I had at least that status. But his apparent lack of communication unnerved me, so I didn't visit as often as I could have. Later, after leaving the monastery, I deeply regretted not taking greater advantage of that opportunity.

This is that space of unentangled knowing—where we are fully present, open, balanced, aware of everything happening, but not clinging to any of it.

One approach I found helpful for entering this space was shifting emphasis slightly from the objects of the senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions—to the knowing quality of mind itself. As we've discussed, there's consciousness or knowing accompanying every sense object that arises. When a sound occurs, there's not only the sound itself, which we've become quite familiar with, but also your consciousness receiving and holding that sound. This is what it means to be sentient. If a corpse lay here beside this bell, the sound would not arise for it, but it arises for us because we have consciousness.

In our experience, we can emphasize either the object or the knowing—the consciousness that knows the object. At a certain point in meditation, when I had thoroughly investigated the objects of my six senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and all the emotions I could find—I became interested in this quality of knowing itself.

What I discovered was that moving attention from objects to knowing created a profound sense of spaciousness. It led directly into this quality of unentangling from objects. By taking that step into consciousness, I was releasing the tendency to fixate on arising phenomena.

It's not possible to create a very clear, simple meditation instruction from this. If this description doesn't resonate with you, don't worry—mindfulness practice based on knowing sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and emotions is liberating in itself. It takes one all the way. This shift isn't necessary, but I share it because some practitioners like myself have found it helpful for moving beyond clinging.

I invite you to explore it through a couple of simple approaches. One is a teaching we've received from Sayadaw U Tejaniya called "Checking the Attitude." His instruction is to examine how you're relating to objects in your meditation experience—the phenomena that arise, your sense experiences—and discover whether you're reacting with greed, aversion, or delusion.

He suggests three simple questions. To check for greed, ask: "Am I wanting something else to happen?" Sometimes this is immediately clear—you can see you're wanting something different to occur, indicating greed at work. To check for aversion, ask: "Am I wanting something to stop happening?" Again, this is often quite apparent. To check for delusion, ask: "Am I not aware of what's happening?" Usually by the time you pose this third question, you're back in touch with present moment awareness.

And so if delusion was there a moment before, it's not now. But often you can identify greed and aversion by asking these questions. Then if you see that there's greed or aversion or delusion in the mind, just become aware of that. Become mindful of that.

You don't need to judge it. You don't need to judge yourself for having it. You don't need to try to push it away because that would just be an additional reaction of aversion. You just become simply mindful and allow that formation of mind.

In the beginning, if you're interested in this practice, you could do this checking like three, four, five times during every sitting or every walking. As you get more familiar with it, you can check more often. Eventually, I developed the ability to just turn and say, "What's the attitude?" And I wouldn't have to ask the questions. I could just see if there was greed, aversion, or delusion. So it made it very easy to check. I could check more often.

Then, if you like, when you're very comfortable with this checking, this can become your primary meditation focus. This can become your primary practice. You just keep your mind on: Are there reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion coming? If there are, you're mindful of it. If there are not, you just rest.

This ties in really nicely with another teaching of Ajahn Chah, which I'd like to read: "If you want to see a train, just go to the central station. You don't have to go traveling all the way up the northern line, the southern line, the eastern line, and the western

line to see all the trains. If you want to see trains—every single one of them—you'd be better off waiting at Grand Central Station. That's where they all terminate. Just look right here." He points to his heart. "Just look right here at Central Station. Greed arises here. Anger arises here. Delusion arises here. Just sit here and you can watch as all these things arise. Practice right here because right here is where you're stuck. Right here is where the conditioned arises, where conventions arise, and right here is where the Dhamma will arise."

So this is a very interesting and wonderful way to practice, which is that when the mind is stable, we just take the movements of the heart—greed, aversion, delusion—as what we're paying attention to. And if you want, you can rest your attention in the heart center and just notice those movements of reactivity.

This is Upasaka Ki again: "So your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's so worth checking on."

And by the way, when she says "going out," it also includes events in the body, like going out to body sensations or to pleasant sensations. That's moving away from the central awareness of the mind.

So this is one way of getting in touch with the quality of unentangled knowing. We're just paying attention to the movements of the heart toward greed, aversion, or delusion, and resting when they're not active.

Another way is to directly turn the attention toward consciousness itself. Again, learning to look at this knowing side of experience can be a way of unhooking from the fixation on objects, on sense contact.

I was standing at the pond the other day—the large pond down the road—and it was raining. I was watching the raindrops just land on the surface of the pond. You know how it happens: each one makes a little splash and makes a few ripples. If they're coming often, the ripples start to intersect with each other, but they're all just arising and passing, arising and passing. They make that little impact on the surface of the lake.

For me, what that was like was that consciousness was like the surface of the lake, and all the sense objects make this momentary ripple. But I can turn my noticing to the field of knowing and then feel the ripples, but I don't get so involved in each ripple. I get more involved in knowing that field in which the consciousness is taking place of the changing phenomena. You can practice with this.

How do we become aware of awareness itself, or how do we become conscious of consciousness itself?

One way—this doesn't work for everybody—involves working with the sense of sight. Usually, the eyes are looking outward, focusing on objects that are out there. What happens if the vision were to turn back and look at the source of seeing? Would that put you in touch with this quality of consciousness itself?

Another thing that's helpful for people sometimes is just the phrase, "aware of awareness," or "turn the attention to the knowing." If any of these resonate, you can play with that.

This is again from Upasika Kee: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing. All outward going knowing cast aside. An inward staying, unentangled knowing.

We're with the awareness or we're with the consciousness itself, and we don't latch on to the sense experiences that are arising at the six sense doors. When you practice in this way, the field of consciousness gives a great sense of space in which everything is just allowed to arise and pass.

You may know that when the Buddha left his home, he had a wife and a son. He left to go on his spiritual journey for six years, and his family—his father and mother and relatives—took care of his wife and son. When he returned, his son was seven years old. His son ordained as a novice and received teachings from his father, and at the age of seven became fully enlightened. That's a helpful parent.

This is one of the meditation instructions that the Buddha gave to his son, whose name was Rahula. He said, "Rahula, develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like space."

I'll close tonight with another exchange between one of the Brahmin youths and the Buddha, drawn from that same section of the Sutta Nipata. This Brahmin youth's name was Kappa, and he asked the Buddha this question: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replied, "Having nothing, clinging to nothing, that is the island. There is no other. That is nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Having nothing, clinging to nothing. That is the island. There is no other. That is nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death.

CHAPTER 130

Joy and Happiness

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of joy and happiness as fundamental aspects of Buddhist practice, countering the common misconception that the path focuses solely on dukkha. Drawing extensively from the Upanisa Sutta (sometimes called the Sutta on Transcendent Dependent Origination), Armstrong shows how the path unfolds as "a progressive refinement of joy," beginning with suffering and faith, then moving through gladness, rapture (pīti), calm, and happiness (sukha). He examines various Pali terms for positive mental states including muditā (empathetic joy), sukha (happiness), ānanda (bliss), pīti (rapture), pamojja (joy), somanassa (gladness of mind), and santuṭṭhi (contentment). Armstrong shares personal stories from his monastic practice in Thailand and Burma, illustrating how joy can serve as a crucial ally during difficult periods. He discusses practical approaches to cultivating happiness through muditā practice, appreciation of nature and sense pleasures appropriate for lay practitioners, the joy found in virtue (the "bliss of blamelessness"), generosity, gratitude, and finding truth even in difficult experiences. The talk emphasizes that contentment represents "the greatest wealth" and that happiness provides the stable foundation necessary for deeper spiritual development, ultimately supporting the path toward the "unshakable deliverance of mind."

The subject of this evening's talk is joy and happiness. This is not science fiction.

The vocabulary of the Buddha's teachings, as you know, revolves largely around the word *dukkha*. This is the pleasure of being in a Theravadan center. But the Four Noble Truths could just as well have been expressed in terms of happiness. The Buddha could have said: there is unhappiness, the cause of unhappiness is wanting, real happiness is possible, and the way to real happiness is the Eightfold Path.

I want to suggest that joy and happiness are essential parts of our path. Despite the talk of *dukkha*, these elements are truly essential as we progress and develop. Don't worry if you're not completely there today in your practice. These are elements that take a while to mature.

It was a little like Bhante's talk on Nirvana, the Third Noble Truth. We may not have full realization today, but it's helpful to know that's where this is all headed. That's where we're going. Because as Yogi Berra said, if you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere else. So we want to be sure where we wind up.

It's very helpful to start noticing these qualities when they arise and then cultivate them as a conscious part of our practice path. In the overall scheme of the Buddha's teachings, the cultivation of joy and happiness certainly falls into the four right efforts that Winnie discussed early in the retreat. In two of the right efforts, the instructions are to maintain and increase wholesome states of mind, and joy and happiness are certainly in that territory.

I think there is a deep longing for these states among meditators and the world in general. One of our friends and colleagues in California is James Baraz, who many of you know wrote a book called *Awakening Joy*. The book received promotion from Oprah Winfrey's magazine, *O*, and in the six months after it was mentioned, attendance at James's class, both in person and online, reached 2,900 people around the world who were interested in developing joy as part of their meditation practice.

We want to develop the ability to see joy when it arises just as easily as we can see difficulties, the hindrances, and afflictive emotions. Sometimes when we're early in our practice phase or struggling with the hindrances in particular, the mind is almost looking out for them and more apt to notice them. These quiet moments of happiness, joy, or peace can slide by unnoticed.

We want to develop a kind of mindfulness that isn't biased either toward the afflictive or toward the uplifting, but that can really see exactly what's happening in either direction. As the mind comes to completeness, it needs to see joy as easily as it sees difficulty.

When we start to open up to this, this attention on the positive begins to redress an imbalance in the mind, because so often the mind inclines toward what's wrong or what's lacking. The bent of the mind shaped by craving inclines to see what's lacking or what's off, and it doesn't often take into account the positive states that are present. So we need to give equal weight to seeing the wholesome. As the Buddha said, what one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind.

There are many words in Pali, in the Buddha's teachings, that point to this whole range of beautiful qualities of mind. I'll mention some of the ones I'm familiar with.

There's the term *mudita*, empathetic joy, which Winnie devoted a whole talk to a couple of weeks ago. The term *sukha*, which I would translate as happiness. It sounds a little bit like sugar, and *sukha* has this sweet quality in the mind, just like sugar does.

Ananda means bliss. It was frequently used in Buddhist names. Of course, you know the Buddha's attendant was Ananda. My first preceptor in Thailand was called Panyananda, which means the bliss of wisdom. When I took a monk's name the next time I ordained, I asked to call myself Sunyatananda, and my preceptor agreed, which means the bliss of emptiness. You see this in many Buddhist names—it's very common.

Piti, which we discussed in the seven factors, is usually translated as rapture. *Pamoja* could well be translated as joy—it might be the best word to translate as joy. I think Bhante mentioned this in one of his talks.

Somanasa, which I would translate as gladness of mind. And *santuti*—I like that word, *santuti*. It sounds like it comes from an Italian gelato factory, and it means contentment.

All these words are part of the Buddha's teachings, part of the development of the path. They're particularly emphasized in one sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Upanissa Sutta, sometimes called the Sutta on Transcendent Dependent Origination.

This sutta describes the unfolding of the path as an unfolding of joy, beginning with suffering, leading to faith, and then joy, and then the joy leading on to states of concentration, insight, and liberation. It's a beautifully positive description of the path to awakening.

Venerable Analayo, who will be coming here in March to teach with Joseph, is one of the foremost Buddhist scholars writing in the English language. He's a German monk who ordained in Sri Lanka. He has a wonderful book called *Satipatthana*, which is a long commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta. He's very familiar with the whole range of the Pali suttas. He's also learned Chinese in order to study their counterparts in ancient Chinese texts—a wonderful monk and a scholar of great renown.

He put it this way: "The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." The entire scheme of our training is a progressive refinement of joy. That's what we're doing here, culminating, of course, in liberation, which the Buddha described by saying, "Nibbana is the highest happiness"—from the Dhammapada.

It's very helpful to be able to not only recognize the quality of joy when we find it, but also to bring it in at times, to have practices that develop this quality and bring it in during times of difficulty. Because if we know how to do that, this quality of joy can be a tremendous ally on the path. Let's face it, we all hit times that are difficult, and we can use some uplift.

This came really clear to me when I was practicing in Burma several years ago. I'd been a monk in Thailand in the eighties, and then I went back and ordained again in Burma around 2005 because I wanted to practice with Paok Sayadaw, this concentration master I've mentioned a few times. He has a monastery in Burma about two hundred miles southeast of Rangoon.

I arrived there at the start of the rains retreat, which should have been a clue, but I didn't quite get it. I got there one afternoon, met with Sayadaw about five p.m., and said I'd like to practice for six weeks, and if he was willing, I'd really like to ordain. I told him I'd been a monk before, and he said okay.

So the next morning I was driven into town, bought my robes and bowl and belt—the whole gear. That afternoon, about one o'clock, my head was shaved. I went through the ordination ceremony, took the precepts, and I was a monk again. It was very quick.

The rains retreat opened that day. This is a period when for three months the monks settle in one place because it's the rainy season. In the olden days, they weren't supposed to walk through the fields and disturb the crops that were growing, especially the rice.

I started to practice, and Paok Sayadaw's practice was quite demanding. I wanted to study concentration with him, so I had one object and one object only—the small area underneath my nose where I could feel the breath. That was the only object I was allowed for the six weeks. It wasn't time to investigate interesting sights or sounds, much less the nature of awareness. I had to come back to this point in every sit, in every walk, at every meal for six weeks. It was a very narrow focus, which itself is a challenge.

They weren't kidding about the rains. The rain started pretty much the next day and went on uninterrupted for about the next three weeks, during which time it rained three inches a day and I didn't see the sun.

I was eating one meal a day at the monastery. Breakfast didn't quite work for my timing because the schedule was pretty full. So I was eating one meal a day. The monastery is vegetarian, which I appreciated because I'm vegetarian. But there wasn't a lot of protein. So it was basically stir-fried vegetables and white rice. On that diet, I was losing about half a pound a day of weight. And you can tell I don't have a lot to give up in the first place.

The practice was demanding and the schedule was demanding. The shortest sitting during the day was an hour and a half.

I settled into that schedule, practicing hour after hour, not seeing the sun, losing weight steadily, surviving on minimal food. The bugs in my kuti were amazing—I saw the biggest spider I'd ever encountered right outside my window.

After about three weeks of this demanding routine, I wasn't making tremendous progress in the practice. I grew quite discouraged, and my spirits began sinking really low. It's funny now, but at the time it wasn't amusing at all.

Fortunately, I had brought a small piece of art that I kept on my altar—a photograph of the Dalai Lama with quotes from Shantideva about the bodhisattva's way of life. Facing this beautiful image of His Holiness, I decided to ask for guidance.

"Your Holiness," I said to the photograph, "I'm having a really difficult time. I need some counsel. What advice can you offer me?" I genuinely supplicated to his image.

Quite immediately, a transmission came. It arrived in his voice—that distinctive Indian-accented English—and the message was crystal clear: "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then the transmission ended.

I figured I'd better follow this guidance from such a revered figure. Whenever I could remember, I would call to mind that advice: stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. Sometimes it worked beautifully. When I could recall what cheerful actually felt like, it truly uplifted my spirits and allowed me to continue with my retreat.

I've continued remembering and practicing this wisdom during difficult periods. After all, what's the point of being anything other than cheerful, optimistic, and confident? There really is no point.

The Dalai Lama himself embodies this beautiful standard for happiness. He carries on his shoulders the weight of the entire Tibetan nation—a people who lost a million of their seven million during the Cultural Revolution, whose monks and nuns still cannot freely practice dharma as they wish, who face ongoing arrests and persecution. Nonetheless, he radiates this amazing joy and happiness.

At a gathering of scientists in Dharamsala, where he loves bridging the scientific and Buddhist worlds, one scientist asked him over tea in a casual setting: "What was the happiest time of your life?" I thought he might say it was in the Potala Palace as a young monk, studying and practicing freely before the occupation. Instead, he simply said, "I think right now."

What a beautiful response—the happiest time of his life is right now.

I want to explore some of the different ways we can cultivate this sense of joy and happiness in our practice. One of the most powerful is mudita, which Winnie discussed—sympathetic joy or appreciative joy. This is the practice of taking happiness in another's happiness.

Among all the formal Buddhist practices I know, mudita is the most joyful and upbeat. It's a wonderful ally. If you develop a good relationship with what we call "the happy person"—the one with the smile on their face—bringing them in as an ally can be genuinely uplifting.

Sometimes you can feel that spontaneous spark of delight in someone else's happiness. One morning the phone rang at my house. It was a friend I hadn't heard from in a while. When I asked how she was, she responded with tremendous enthusiasm: "I'm wonderful!" Without thinking, I immediately replied, "I'm wonderful too!" That was pure mudita—her happiness simply touched something in me.

There's a beautiful standard phrase in this practice: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." It's a lovely way to tune into another's joy.

We can appreciate this profound line from Shantideva, the great Indian philosopher: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy."

Whatever suffering there is in this world comes from wanting only myself to be happy. This practice of mudita serves as a reliable guide to discovering more happiness in ourselves.

This truth became vivid to me several years ago when Carol and I taught a weekend retreat on mudita. We teach many metta retreats here, but I'd never taught or participated in a mudita retreat before. We offered a weekend to explore this practice together.

I didn't have high expectations. Weekend retreats are perhaps the most challenging of all retreats—you begin with the opening day, and the next day is already the closing. There's no time to settle into that spacious in-between place. Yet I was genuinely surprised by how much participants received from the practice. I remember someone approaching us at the end, saying with wonder, "I haven't felt this happy in years." This from just two days of mudita practice.

I've since worked with practitioners who have engaged in intensive mudita practice for ten days at a stretch, and I've done this myself. It proves to be a profoundly uplifting practice.

There are other forms of joy available to us as well. Most of us here live as laypeople in the world, with access to various sense pleasures. In daily life, we watch movies, enjoy foods of our choosing, listen to music, share intimate relations, appreciate art, painting, and sculpture. This represents a natural part of lay life, and these activities do generate a certain kind of joy in the moment. We cannot avoid this fact if we observe our experience closely.

Of course, as sophisticated meditators, we understand that such pleasures are temporary and dependent on conditions. Yet they do uplift us. Consider how your lay life would feel without any sense pleasures—it might resemble the opening day of a retreat here, which offers a crash course in renunciation and often proves somewhat difficult.

It's worth noting that we laypeople structure our lives to include a certain amount of joy from sense pleasures. This doesn't contradict the Buddha's teachings. In fact, one of the terms for householders in the Buddha's language was "one who enjoys sense pleasures." This describes who we are as laypeople. If you wish to eliminate all sense pleasures from your life, ordination might be more appropriate, as monastic life provides much greater support for the practice of renunciation.

Here on retreat, our access to sense pleasures is naturally limited, yet simple pleasures throughout the day still offer brief moments of delight. I think of rising and enjoying a hot shower—when sitting retreat, I love feeling that warmth on my body. After walking on a chilly autumn afternoon, you come inside for a warm cup of tea or hot bowl of soup, feeling the warmth pervade your being with such delight.

You step outside and witness the beauty of autumn leaves, still present after several weeks, or notice how the sky opens into brilliant blue on a morning like today after days of clouds. Perhaps the most precious moment comes at day's end—after the final sitting and chanting, you lie down in bed. Isn't that delicious? That feeling of settling completely. The problem, of course, is that it doesn't last long. You fall asleep and then wake up again. But it remains pleasant while present.

In the retreat environment, our heightened sensitivity makes all these pleasures more vivid than even fine food and experiences typically strike us in daily life. As the Buddha expressed it: "Robes, alms food, a hut, and a straw seat will seem rich and luxurious to one who has renounced." This describes what we enjoy here—the heightening of our senses toward appreciation through simplicity of being.

Another great pleasure available to all of us is the joy of nature. This became particularly clear during my first monastic period in Thailand. After ordaining and spending time in Bangkok securing my long-term visa and learning the fundamentals of bhikkhu life, I traveled north, just outside Chiang Mai, to practice in a fairly remote monastery built at the bottom of a river gorge. It was quite beautiful.

I appreciated that the practice conditions were roughly equal for men and women—monks lived on one side of the river, nuns on the other, with individual huts lining both banks. High cliffs rose on either side, lined with trees, truly out in the countryside.

I had a sweet little hut called a kuti situated on the riverbank. Each morning, the sun would finally crest the cliff and shine down, illuminating beautiful scenery. My hut sat quite alone, creating ideal conditions for meditation in the profound quiet.

Yet difficulties existed there as well. I spoke no Thai, and the teacher spoke no English. During my three months there, I didn't have a single interview or hear one dharma talk. This was before MP3 players, so I couldn't even smuggle in Dharma Seed contraband. I was truly on my own.

The teacher would occasionally come up to my kuti. I don't know if he was checking to make sure I was okay or what, but he'd look in the window, and I'd either be sitting or walking. Honestly, there wasn't much else to do. So he'd look in my window, see me sitting, and he'd just say "Dii, dii," which means "good, good" in Thai. That was the transmission, the seal of approval.

Or he'd come up and I'd be walking. For some reason, I was walking on the bare ground wearing sandals. I can't imagine why. And he would point to my feet and tell me to take off the sandals so I'd walk barefoot, get more sensation, more contact with the ground. So that was about the extent of my instruction for those three months.

There wasn't another Western monk there that I could talk with, so I really didn't have any conversation for those three months. That was challenging. I was really on my own in that setting.

One of the things that sustained me, that kept my spirits up, was the beauty of that nature—the sunshine, the river, the cliffs, the trees. The most striking thing was on my path, the path I would walk from my kuti to the front of the monastery for my morning meal every day. I would pass this huge old mango tree, and it was mango season in the spring. The mangoes were ripening on the tree and falling on the ground, and there would be this delicious, fresh fragrance of ripe mangoes when I walked by that tree.

The only thing that was a little frustrating is I couldn't eat them. As a monk, you can't eat anything that hasn't been put in your hands by someone else. So these mangoes would fall on the ground because they were ripe, and then they would rot, and I would just have to smell them and watch them. But even the smell was a delight, I must say.

So taking time to appreciate the beauty—as I know you all are doing, I hear it from you in interviews—taking the time to appreciate it. This is from Ajahn Sumedho: "Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism, one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower, you should contemplate its decay. Or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse. That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty."

This is the joy of appreciative joy, being able to appreciate the beauty in the things around us. So this appreciation of nature, appreciation of the beauty of natural things—one source that we have a lot of access to here for joy.

There's also a real joy in virtue, in maintaining our conduct well. When we're careful with our sila in life, we live through a few years of maintaining good sila, and as we look back, we find we don't have to have regrets about the actions we've done. Because we don't have regret or remorse or guilt, the mind can really settle in meditation in a lovely way. We feel one level of an inner kind of purity from that care with our conduct.

The Buddha had a special word for this. He called it enjoying the bliss of blamelessness. He said that of the other kinds of pleasures that one can have in lay life—enjoying a degree of self-sufficiency, a livelihood, and freedom from debt—these are not one-sixteenth the value of the bliss of blamelessness. He spoke of this very highly.

So one may wonder, to what extent can this be developed? Again, this was an interview with the Dalai Lama. He was being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, and I just want to say how much I appreciate Oprah's work at bringing real spirituality to a very broad audience. I don't know of anyone else in this country who does it the way that she does it.

So she was interviewing the Dalai Lama personally for an article in O Magazine. She started by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

No major mistakes, Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

I have to believe that part of the reason for the Dalai Lama's success in meditation is his carefulness with his conduct—that bliss of blamelessness.

There's the joy in generosity. Carol talked about this the other night, and I could feel that joy as she described the work that she does in Burma every winter, being able to support nunneries, monasteries, schools for orphans, and so on. I also feel this joy in generosity when you all are serving Bhante his lunch every day. It's just a delight to watch the people line up and he goes through with great stillness, and you all take such care in offering the food that he needs, the portions that he would enjoy. I really appreciate the presence on both sides of that moment. I don't think I'm the only one who has shed a tear in watching that transaction happen. It's very touching for me sometimes.

You do get to see this a lot in Asia, particularly around monastics. When I was going to practice in Burma that time I told you about with Pauk Sayadaw, one of my students wanted to support my trip and support the monastery, and she gave me a few hundred dollars to give away while I was there in the best way that I could see fit.

So I got to the monastery—I was still a layperson—and one morning before I ordained as a monk, I went to see the steward, the lay steward of the monastery who handles the money. I said, "I have some money I'd like to offer to the monastery on behalf of this student. What I'd like to do is pay for a lunch to sponsor for the entire monastery."

At this time in the monastery, there were 750 people practicing. There were 450 monks, about 150 nuns, and 100 laypeople practicing there at the time. I said, "I have a few hundred dollars. Would that cover a lunch for everyone?"

The steward said, "Well, I'm really sorry to tell you this, but all the lunches are spoken for for the next three months."

I was amazed because this is one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth. And yet, every main meal for three months had already been donated by some Burmese people.

So we decided that her money would sponsor special breakfasts, breakfasts that would have especially good food for everyone in the monastery. Then every day I would come down to lunch and they would have a big white board, which is a lot like our meal dana board, and the white board would say who was sponsoring the lunch that day. It would say it in Burmese and it would say it in English. So as I walked by, I could read where my meal was coming from that day.

Generally it was more than one person. Often it would be a family or it looked like quite a lot of a village who would sponsor the lunch because it was a lot of people. So they would often be sitting off to one side. They would come to the monastery wearing their nicest clothes. The whole family or clan or maybe village would all sit together and watch the monks and the nuns and the laypeople file through and be served from these huge pots until all the people had gotten their lunch.

What was so beautiful were the big smiles on the faces of the donors that day. They would sit off to one side and they would watch Pauk Sayadaw being fed from their offering. They would watch the other senior monks and nuns be fed from their generosity. And it brought them so much joy. It was so clear on their faces. It was really a delight to see.

In our own meditation practice, there's a joy of being with the truth, even if it's difficult. I hear this in interviews from people that even when practice is working in a difficult place, there's a joy of learning how to be with it, of learning how to open to this new place in ourselves, this new place in our practice. Even if it's a little bit difficult, there's, I would say, a joy of understanding what these states mean, how mindfulness helps to liberate them, and how the whole path unfolds, even based on the difficulties.

When my mind touches into some of these core issues of personality, of character—and these may be things like, in my case, fear, or for other people, vigilance or rage—as the retreat goes on, we find that we can touch these places, and the mind has the steadiness to be there with them. It may be for the first time in our life we can touch these

deep feelings and the mind can stay steady in the middle of that and not need to escape either through fleeing the room or going off into fantasy or flights of papañca. But the mind can really stay and hold it.

That's the key to freeing ourselves. This contact with steadiness with these difficult areas in our mind.

And if you look closely, I'll bet you'll find a joy in that experience where we wouldn't expect to find it at all.

This is from a poet named Michael Lunig:

"When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it. Let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it. Let a bird lean in the hole and sing a simple song like a tiny bell and let it ring."

So as we stay steady with these difficult facets of heart and mind, the studying continues to deepen and we find that the experience starts to open into places of real peace and stillness. And this is the factor of concentration that's developing.

One of the things that kept me coming back on meditation retreats is I would keep touching these levels of peace at what felt like more and more profound places in me. And I thought, wow, if this much peace is possible, if this much stillness is possible, what else might there be in this mind? And I wanted to come back and explore that because being there was so satisfying. Having a period when the dukkha did not arise was so satisfying that I wanted to sort of plumb that depth. Finding that I could live without being assaulted by the hindrances of liking and disliking, of wanting and pushing away was so freeing, so delicious.

There's also a lot of joy in the practice of gratitude. I know Winnie mentioned this also, and I wanted to talk a little more about this quality of gratitude. Sometimes I think that there should be a fifth Brahmavihara and that it should be gratitude, but I'm going to try and convince you that it actually belongs under one of the ones we already know.

So gratitude, as I understand it, is about appreciating what's already in our own life —appreciating the blessings that are in our life. And I connect this with doing mudita practice for oneself.

Some strains of Buddhist teaching say that we're not allowed to do mudita practice for ourself, that that gets too self-centered, and that mudita is only valid for another person. But I don't see it that way, and I don't understand it that way, and I think there's a textual reference for seeing it the other way as well.

For those of you who were here for the practice of loving kindness for all beings that I led about a week ago, we did a little chant about abiding, pervading the quarters with a mind imbued with the Brahma Viharas. So I'd like to read this chant a little bit on the subject of mudita, which is being translated by gladness.

"I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with gladness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above and below, around and everywhere, and to all as to myself, I will abide, pervading the all-encompassing world, with a mind imbued with gladness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will."

This passage comes from a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, so it is the words of the Buddha. And as you can tell, we are pervading the world with mudita "to all as to oneself." So very clearly in this sutta passage, the Buddha is encouraging us to direct mudita to ourself as well as to all other sentient beings.

So I encourage you to play with this. You can use the same phrase, "may my happiness and good fortune continue," or if that seems a little striving, you could use another phrase, something like, "may I appreciate the blessings in my life."

So gratitude is such a beautiful state of mind. Because we're appreciating what we have, we don't slip into desiring something else. And because we're appreciating what we have, we don't slide into aversion to what's here now. So it's a state that avoids both desire and aversion.

And this came through really nicely in a story of one of our friends, a wise practitioner, who was talking to her granddaughter on Christmas Day. Her granddaughter was like five or six years old at this time and was living in a different city. So our friend called her granddaughter, and the granddaughter had gotten presents that day. And so our friend said, "Well, when you get presents, do you feel thankful for what you have, or does it make you want more?"

And feel the wisdom starting to slip in?

And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, I want more."

And our friend said, "That's too bad."

And the little girl picked up on it and said, "What do you mean?"

And our friend said, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, you feel good. And when you're wanting more, it doesn't feel as good."

And little girl said, "Oh Nana, you're right."

So this is kind of the magic of gratitude. All of us here have many things to be grateful for.

I'm going to come back to this in a minute, but I want to tell a story about another friend of ours who was working in a refugee camp in Thailand. I guess this was in the 1990s. And refugees were coming into Thailand from Laos and Cambodia because those countries were still in a lot of turmoil and they could find some safety in Thailand. So he was working near the Thai border with these refugees, and they had often come from very poor parts of the country, often living up in the hills without modern conveniences.

And many of them had been given visas to move to the West. In fact, a lot of these people settled in California. I think Fresno has a lot of Lao and Cambodian refugees. So they were in the refugee camps to prepare them for this transition to the West.

So they were learning about things like dollar bills and quarters and washing machines and toasters and bus timetables—all of these things that they didn't have in their lives in those countries. And so as a way of getting to know people and getting them to talk about their lives, one of the questions our friend would ask them in classrooms was, "What are the most important things in life?"

So he told me there was this one teenage girl, a refugee, and when he asked her, "What are the most important things in life?" she answered, "The most important things are fire, rice, and water." I think that gives a flavor of what her life was like.

In this country, we more or less take those things for granted or their equivalents. In our situations, I think most of us take those things for granted. Of course, many people in this country don't have ample supplies of heat or food or shelter either. But most of us have the opportunity when we go home to stay sheltered, to stay warm, to stay dry, and we can be really grateful for that. Many people in the world don't have that opportunity.

We have ample food most of the time. I appreciate being here on retreat. We have really good food, really good ample food a lot of the time. I was just reflecting on the range of foods that we've eaten in this retreat—how many came from the Native Amer-

icans. Europeans may not be aware of this, but Native Americans provided through their agriculture many of the food staples that we eat in this country and now, of course, that are in Europe also.

So some of them that we owe to the native people are corn, maple syrup, squash, potatoes, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, beans, tomatoes, strawberries, peanuts, avocados, and sunflowers—all brought to us from Native Americans. So we generally have access to these choices of foods, but many people don't. Many people around the world and people in this country don't. So we can feel grateful for this.

All of us, in fact, are enjoying what the Tibetans call a precious human birth. And the precious human birth means that we have been born as a human being and have the chance to make our life meaningful. And in fact, all of you are making your lives meaningful. We're born as human beings. Our mind and bodies are in reasonably good shape. We're at a time when a Buddha has appeared in this world. We're at a place and a time when the Dharma is flourishing, when there are practitioners who are following the teachings, when we have heard and understood the teachings, and we have the interest and the time to follow and practice the teachings.

This set of circumstances doesn't occur for a whole lot of people on this planet. And yet all of us have this opportunity, and it's a huge thing to be grateful for. Bottom line, when we think of things to be grateful for, we can always remember the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. And I've heard this in interviews a lot as we come to this part of the retreat when some people are leaving and reflecting back on their experience—a lot of gratitude for the triple gem: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

It's wonderful to practice and cultivate this state of gratitude. The Buddha said, "Three persons are rare in this world. One is a Buddha, and another is a person who is grateful." It's good company to be in.

One retreat I was sitting here, it was in the colder part of the three-month course. And I had arrived from California where the weather was sunny and relatively warm. And I came in—I think it was November—and the rain started and it started to get cold, you know, some frosty mornings. And I was developing some aversion to the weather. I went in for an interview with Joseph and he said, "Don't waste your time on that. That leads nowhere."

So I thought, I better work with this. And so I started a gratitude list. And I just decided to write down every single thing I could think of in my life that I was grateful for. And then every morning when I got up, I would read through that list as a way to

kind of set my tone for the day. It was very helpful because it just kept reminding me how many things I had to be thankful for. And it's a wonderful antidote to any kind of aversion—to remind myself of that.

One other kind of nice gratitude practice: I was teaching a group of senior students a few years ago in California, and two of them decided to start this practice where every night, just before they went to bed, they would send an email to the other telling them one thing they'd been grateful for that day. And so we called them gratitude buddies and they had the commitment—just one thing, but every day. And so they just did that steadily.

And they said it really changed their outlook on their life to realize they had something to appreciate every single day. Keeping that up as a practice and appreciating the other person's gratefulness really made a difference. When we talked about it in the senior students group, a bunch more people started doing it. The gratitude buddies practice actually spread for a while.

One of the things I often reflect on with gratitude is the presence in my life of the path of the Dharma. Have you reflected ever, or recently, on what your life was like before you found a path, before you found this path? I know what my life was like. I felt kind of lost. I felt like I was just bouncing around life, going up, going down, not understanding why, feeling at the mercy of the winds—I don't know what winds, but some winds. I didn't have any ideas where happiness came from or why I was suffering. I felt lost and adrift.

Then finding that there is a reliable path to happiness, to a stable kind of happiness, was like an amazing revelation to me. I just knew I was willing to do anything it took to walk that path and find a stable kind of happiness in my life. When I reflect back on how I got connected to this practice and to IMS, it seems like kind of a fluke. I was in a spiritual bookstore in California one day. I'd been doing a little meditation, but I saw a poster for a retreat with Joseph and Sharon and Jack that was happening in New Mexico. I said, "I want to go to that." This was 1976.

That was my connection to them as teachers. I went to the retreat and learned about IMS. About six months later, I came here and did a long period of retreat, then came on staff. That poster totally turned my life around. I made a connection that I don't know how I would have made otherwise to what is, to me, the best force in life that I've ever found.

So it seems kind of mysterious at times. How did I happen upon that poster that day? But then I also feel like there was almost a sense of destiny about it. I don't know if you felt that about your path, but I just feel something was leading me to this place. I felt so ready. I know I've heard many of you say when you first heard the teachings, you felt like you were coming home. There's just some force that has guided us here.

I think about another Native American saying, this one from the Chippewa Nation: "Sometimes I go around pitying myself while all the time I'm being carried across the vast sky by great winds." There are these great winds carrying all of us. As we keep adding our good intentions, moment after moment, these winds pick up force and they keep carrying us down this path, which is so wholesome, so completely wholesome.

This sutta, the Upanisa Sutta that describes the unfolding of the path to liberation in terms of joy, goes a little like this: It starts with suffering, which is where the first chain of dependent origination ended. But then it goes on to a different track, and from suffering it moves into faith. This is a little jarring at first, but it's true, isn't it? Didn't you develop your faith by learning to work with your suffering? Understanding suffering is the avenue to faith, to believing in the practice.

Faith brings about a kind of gladness. Carol talked about this as the gladness or brightness in the mind when this quality of faith or *saddhā* develops. This quality of joy leads into rapture, which is *pīti*, this energizing, alert enjoyment of being in the moment. *Pīti* leads into, as it does in the seven factors, calm or tranquility. The delight expresses itself in this settledness that we feel as calm.

In the Upanisa Sutta, the next step is happiness, *sukha*. Following the experience of calm is this quality of happiness or *sukha*. The factors then get more tranquilizing—concentration, insight, liberation, and so forth. What's interesting to me about this is that *sukha*, which I'll call happiness, is a deeper development than joy. Joy is more momentary, uplifting, beautiful, essential. We have so many avenues to get to it. But as joy rises, it needs to pass through tranquility to settle and steady itself before it lands into happiness.

Happiness or *sukha* is this quality of joy that's been matured or ripened or mellowed with calm. Because of that calm, it can settle in a more stable way into our being, into our hearts and minds. It brings with it a real quality of contentment as the mind finds it can settle into itself without having to look outside for anything else. This is that word *santuṭṭhi*, contentment. Of it, the Buddha said—this is also from the Dhammapada—"Contentment is the greatest wealth."

The greatest wealth.

So this kind of happiness, which has some stability to it, brings a real sense of satisfaction. And as it settles, we get the feeling that, yes, it's impermanent to some extent. It does come and go. But we start to trust that life can throw us curves and we'll still go up and down, but we can settle back into this kind of contented happiness. It forms more or less a reliable baseline for us, even though we're bounced around by the comings and goings of life.

If we have that, we have some basic confidence in being able to work with life, in being able to work with our heart and mind, being able to work with others, being able to work with the world at large.

I love this poem from Rumi. When Rumi says "you," he usually means the divine, the way he understands that. But this captures the spirit for me of when this deep happiness is present:

Come to the orchard in spring.
There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers.
If you do not come, these do not matter.
If you do come, these do not matter.

This is also a poem to this happiness. If happiness doesn't come, these other things don't matter. And if happiness does come, these other things don't matter either. This is that stable foundation.

Of course the path doesn't stop at this happiness, but it continues to evolve. One of the teachers whom I respect deeply put it this way: "The main cause of freedom is happiness." So it is this great supportive condition for the final fruition of the path.

And as the Buddha said in the simile of the Heartwood, the goal of our practice is not just *sila*. It's not just gain or a good reputation. It's not just concentration or the well-being that brings about, happiness being a part of that. And it's not just insight. But he said, "It is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end." The unshakable deliverance of mind.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Come to the orchard in spring.
There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers.
If you do not come, these do not matter.
If you do come, these do not matter.

CHAPTER 131

The First Noble Truth

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

In this dharma talk from a February 2014 retreat, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of the First Noble Truth as taught in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). Drawing from the Buddha's first discourse after enlightenment, he examines the Pali term dukkha and its various English translations—suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness—explaining why no single word captures its full meaning.

Armstrong details the three types of dukkha: dukkha-dukkha (the pain of suffering), viparinṇāma-dukkha (suffering due to change and impermanence), and saṅkhāra-dukkha (the subtle unsatisfactoriness of all conditioned formations). He emphasizes that the First Noble Truth is not meant to be a depressing philosophical view but a liberating insight to be fully understood through direct experience.

The talk addresses common misconceptions about Buddhist teachings on suffering, showing how proper understanding of dukkha leads to wisdom and compassion rather than despair. Armstrong concludes with an inspiring account from Ajahn Liem about the complete transcendence of suffering through dedicated practice, demonstrating that the end of dukkha remains achievable in our time.

The subject of tonight's talk is the First Noble Truth. You probably remember from hearing Greg and Andrea discuss this that the First Noble Truth is the first of four: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to the end of suffering. Tonight I'll be exploring the first noble truth, which is the truth of suffering.

Sometimes people hear this and feel discouraged, thinking, "Oh my God, we just had the hindrances last night. Do we have more on dukkha tonight?" I want to share this statement from the Buddha, where he said that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So may you experience great happiness and joy in tonight's talk.

To set the stage for this exploration, I want to base our discussion on the first discourse that the Buddha gave. You probably know the story. The Buddha had been practicing for six years very intensively—probably more intensively than we can imagine. He wouldn't have skipped the late night sitting with chanting, for example. In that, he's a very good role model for us.

After six years of very intense seeking, you know of that night when he sat under the Bodhi tree and toward dawn had the realization that brought him to full enlightenment—the release from all kinds of suffering. It's said that he didn't teach right away, but spent the next forty-nine days in the area of the Bodhi tree, sitting and walking, enjoying what he called the bliss of deliverance.

Can you imagine? After six years of striving to have arrived at his goal and then just to be able to rest in that peace and liberation, the feeling of that liberation. He was enjoying the bliss of deliverance and reflecting on his understanding. He must have been thinking about how he would possibly convey this to someone else.

It's said that he was inclined not to teach because he thought that what he had discovered was so subtle that no one would understand. Then the legend goes that a heavenly being came down and said, "Awakened one, please consider—there are beings in the world with little dust in their eyes. If you teach, they will understand. Please share what you have gathered out of compassion for the world."

The Buddha took that advice, looked around and remembered that there were beings who perhaps could understand. He thought of the first two teachers he'd had in his journey. As he used his psychic powers, he realized they had died. Both of them had died recently. He wasn't able to share it with them.

Then he reflected on his five most recent friends in the course of his meditation practice—a group of five ascetics who had been doing these very austere practices of self-mortification along with the bodhisattva. But when he decided to take food as he was near the town of Bodhgaya, they gave up on him and said, "Gautama is resorting to luxury. He's falling away from the path. We won't have anything more to do with him." They left him, and of course he came to enlightenment.

Again with his psychic powers, he realized that they were now living near the city of Varanasi, and he resolved to travel there. He walked from Bodh Gaya to Varanasi, which is a couple of hundred miles. It would have taken him probably a couple of weeks or longer to get there.

When he found his group of five ascetic friends and they saw him coming, they thought, "Oh, this is the luxurious indulger Gotama. We won't have anything to do with him." But as he approached them, something in his being intrigued them—maybe his dignity, maybe his radiance, maybe his confidence. They decided that they would lend an ear.

Having persuaded them to listen, the Buddha delivered this discourse. After six years of practice, after enlightenment, after forty-nine days of enjoyment and reflection, these were the first words of teaching that came from him. These words are recorded in a discourse in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Dhammacakapavatana Sutta, which in English means "the discourse on setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma." This took place in the deer park at Varanasi.

The Blessed One addressed the practitioners of the group of five thus: "Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness and sensual pleasures, which is low, the way of worldlings, ignoble and not beneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana.

"And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata? It is this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata."

The Buddha sets aside two courses of action which he had seen in the world. One is the pursuit of sense pleasures. I want to frame this carefully because as lay people, we are all involved in sense pleasures in different ways. As I understand this teaching, the Buddha is really saying: don't follow a path that seeks its happiness through the incessant pursuit of sense pleasures. This is not the path that all of you are on.

Someone who has embarked on that path wouldn't come to a twenty-eight-day or a two-month retreat. So I regard this as like the people that are shown in the film *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Do you know that one where Leonardo DiCaprio plays this Wall Street scam artist and spends his accumulated millions on drugs and all the other sense pleasures?

But neither is it beneficial to try to torture the flesh in an effort to liberate the soul, which was the view of the ascetic practitioners of the time. So finding a middle way that isn't seeking to find our total happiness through sense pleasures, but also isn't seeking to mortify the body in order to release some kind of spirit.

So this middle way goes between two extremes. There are many other extremes that it goes between. You could say between greed and aversion. You could say between nihilism and substantial creationism.

So having introduced this, the Buddha is basically proclaiming his own awakening and his own enlightenment. Then he announced that the middle way was this Eightfold Path, which we are cultivating here, which we're developing on this retreat. So having introduced the Eightfold Path, then the Buddha started to enunciate the Four Noble Truths.

And you could say that after that enunciation of the Four Noble Truths, the whole rest of his teaching career, all forty-five years, was really just a commentary on this discourse. It was just filling in the details of what he had already transmitted to people. At the end of this discourse, one of the group of five, his old friends, became enlightened to the first stage of awakening called stream entry. So the discourse itself had a powerful effect.

So in introducing the first noble truth, he said, "This is the noble truth of suffering." And then he enunciated what makes up suffering. And he said it like this: Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Illness is suffering. Death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

This is the definition of the first noble truth. Sometimes it's stated as "all of life is suffering." But that's a misstatement. Did you hear that within this enunciation? It doesn't say it like that.

And in order to really get the meaning of what the Buddha is pointing to, we want to draw out the Pali word that is being pointed to by suffering, which you probably know as *dukkha*. It's not possible to translate the term *dukkha* with one word in English because it really has a range of meanings. So you'll see translators using different words for it.

Bhikkhu Bodhi uses the word suffering. Most translators do. It's the word I'll use most of the time. Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses the word stress. Stephen Batchelor likes the word anguish. Other words that other translators have used have been unsatisfactoriness, unreliability, dissatisfaction, or my current favorite—and I don't understand why more people don't use this—unhappiness.

It seems to me that really what the Buddha is pointing to is this thread of unhappiness that runs through human life. But the sense of unsatisfactoriness is probably the most comprehensive and the one that we can continue to focus on if we have questions

about it. And it suggests that in some way the basic circumstances of human life aren't capable of giving us in and of themselves a lasting kind of satisfaction. And the Buddha has pointed to all the various reasons why.

And what I like about his formulation is how universal it is. There's nothing in this formulation that is particularly Indian or particularly ancient. But the way that he described it applies to humans today just as much as it did to people back in his day in Northern India about twenty-six hundred years ago. He's talking about universals like birth and aging, illness and death, sorrow and grief, association with what we don't like, separation from what we like, not getting what we want, clinging that runs through the heart and mind.

So in another way, even though he doesn't say "life is suffering," there is in his description of it the sense that this thread is pervasive and by the reference to clinging is tied to our very own inclinations of heart and mind. As Greg's talk pointed to a couple of nights ago, this tendency to clinging is responsible for the arising of this mass of difficulty.

So Ajahn Sucitto, I thought, had a nice comment on this point that this goes very deep in us. He said, "We may feel that somehow we have to get ourselves out of this predicament. But when we *are* the predicament, how do we get out?"

So this is kind of the situation that we're in. We *are* the predicament. This fact of clinging runs very deeply in us. So we recognize the universal nature. But the other thing I appreciate about the Buddha's description is that it's not personalized. He doesn't say, "I am suffering" or "you are suffering." Feel into that when we say something like "I am suffering" and we take that on as a kind of burden. How does that feel? It feels like a weight. It feels like a personal failure, perhaps a personal source of guilt or embarrassment or shame.

He simply says there is this element of dukkha. It's universal, and in that universal way, it's not terribly personal. It's part of the human package when it hasn't been examined. So in this universal nature, in this impersonal nature, this understanding of the difficulty in human life really becomes a source of connection for us. As we investigate this shared vulnerability to suffering, we see that we're all in the same boat.

I love this poem from Naomi Shihab Nye. She's a Palestinian American poet. This is called "Kindness." I'm just going to read a short part:

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
You must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

This is our human condition. We could all be lying dead by the side of the road somewhere and the simple breath had run out for us. This is the condition of all seven billion of us on this planet.

The Buddha went into a more detailed description of the kinds of dukkha that exist for us. He said that there are basically three kinds. The first is called dukkha dukkha. You can get the flavor of that one—the dukkha of pain, the pain of dukkha, whichever way you like to express it. This is the direct experience of the painful nature of life that comes sometimes. The painful states of body, painful states of mind and heart that we sometimes come in contact with that are very oppressive, the source of our most intense kinds of suffering.

We can look around the world and see this, the magnitude of this kind of pain every night on the evening news. The wars that are taking place—the civil war in Iraq or Syria, the continuing strife in Afghanistan, all of our soldiers who've come home wounded, traumatized, lives shattered by their contact with war. We can look at the spread of illness. About a million children a year die of malaria, mostly in Africa—totally innocent victims of a disease that could be controlled if the resources were there for it.

Even around us in one of the richest countries of the world, we hear every day stories of murder, of rape, of sexual assault, of the abuse of children. And one of the hidden stories today for many people is the existence of racism in our culture, really quite prevalent in the culture. As a white person, I had grown up very ignorant about it until I sat down and was educated by films, by conversations with people of color, and got a sense of the magnitude of the impact of this kind of discrimination that afflicts many, many millions of people of color growing up in this culture—something to which I think many white people are completely blind and unaware, yet it's a deeply affecting and troubling condition in our society.

A few years ago I was teaching a group of senior students, and I just wanted to find out in their own lives what was most difficult for them. So we were talking about the Four Noble Truths, and I asked, "What are the real difficult areas of suffering in your life?" These were people who'd been practicing the Dharma in most cases for ten years, fifteen years, had done a lot of retreat practice, a lot of home practice over that time. These were some of the things that they mentioned as being sources of suffering for them:

A sense of isolation and a lack of community and connection with others. The presence of afflictive emotions in their lives—depression, sadness, anger, fear. The pressures of work—the time pressure, the workload, the fear of inadequacy, of not being able to meet the demands. The fact of aging and illness in themselves and their partners and their friends, meeting that day by day. Caring for aging parents who are losing their capabilities, either their mental capacity or their physical capacities as they get into their sixties, seventies, and eighties and near death. And an underlying sense of anxiety about the future, not knowing what was going to come for them economically, physically, emotionally—changes in their life.

These are the different forms of dukkha dukkha, the pain of suffering that we're vulnerable to, that everybody around the world is vulnerable to and has to deal with.

The second kind of dukkha that the Buddha pointed to is called in Pali viparinama dukkha. In English, this means the dukkha of alternation. What it points to is that with the truth of change, even pleasant circumstances don't stay that way, don't stay pleasant. We may be going along in a very pleasant circumstance for some time, but because of the truth of impermanence, at some point it's going to change. It will either disappear—that pleasant circumstance may disappear, such as the physical health we have at present that at some point will not be there—or it will turn into its opposite.

It will turn into directly unpleasant circumstances.

This truth applies to all conditions in the world, including what the Buddha called the eight worldly vicissitudes—the inevitable changes that affect all conditioned existence. We witness this pattern clearly in our meditation practice. One sitting may be deeply calm, collected, delightful, and peaceful. The very next sitting can be agitated, with the body uncomfortable and the mind restless. We encounter these shifting conditions hour by hour as we move through our retreat days.

This alternation is not a mistake on our part. It's not because we haven't been good yogis or because we've somehow ruined our meditation. This is simply what the conditions of mind and body do at this stage in our development—they continually alternate. When we cling to the pleasant experiences, their inevitable departure brings pain, loss, and unhappiness.

Ajahn Chah offered a vivid metaphor for this dynamic. He said that grasping worldly conditions is like grabbing hold of a poisonous snake. If you take the head—the obviously painful end—it bites you directly. If you grab the tail, which appears to be the neutral, safe end, and hold on, the head will eventually swing around and bite you any-

way. Either way you grasp that poisonous snake, you're going to get bitten. This is precisely what happens when we grasp worldly conditions—the law of alternation will inevitably bring difficulty.

The third kind of suffering the Buddha identified is called sankhāra dukkha. Sankhāra means formations, and the Buddha used this term in several ways throughout his teaching. In this context, we can understand it as referring to all conditioned things—all formations that arise through causes and conditions. This could be translated as "the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned formations."

This third form of dukkha points to a profound truth: everything that arises has such a momentary nature that it never quite exists as a solid thing in the first place. This characteristic is not easy to perceive until you develop a meditative eye. One of the first places practitioners begin to discover this truth is in the body.

Most people sitting down to meditate for the first time feel that the body is quite solid. They sense the substantial earth element that Andrea spoke about this morning. The body feels definite, really there—after all, we've seen anatomy textbooks showing solid flesh and bones. But when you begin investigating with the eye of mindfulness that has been cultivated through close contact with the present moment, can you actually find anything solid within your direct experience of the body?

Can you locate any sensation that isn't characterized by impermanence on a momentary level? When you observe closely, even a strong sense of pressure—which normally gives us the impression of hardness and earth element—reveals fluctuations in intensity. You begin to feel it as waves of pressure, waves of intensity. This is even more apparent with the pulsing, vibrating, changing nature of what we typically consider neutral sensations in the body.

As you examine closely, you discover that the body has no solidity whatsoever. It's simply arising, changing, and passing away moment after moment after moment. This momentary, arising-and-passing nature characterizes everything that comes into existence. Everything we experience through the senses is continuously arising, changing, and passing moment by moment. This is what gives the world its fundamentally unsatisfactory nature—we cannot find anywhere solid to land because things don't exist in a solid, substantial way.

This is the essential message of emptiness: things do not exist in the solid and substantial manner we imagine them to. A few years ago, the Dalai Lama was giving teachings at Shoreline Theater in Mountain View, and several of us attended. It was a beautiful day in May—sunny, with lovely weather.

He was on this outdoor stage, if you know the Shoreline setup. A bunch of people were sitting in the seats, and then many of us were on the grassy field behind them. On the stage was His Holiness in a big, tall throne so that everybody could see him. He explained that the tall throne was not about making a big deal out of the individual or promoting the person—it was giving respect to the teachings. I thought that was interesting. It's not an egotistical thing.

He was on this big tall throne, and the stage was filled with nuns and monks from many different Buddhist traditions. There were the Tibetans with their bright red robes, Theravadans in their ochre to orange to yellow robes, Koreans in their gray, and Japanese Zen practitioners in their black. The stage was simply filled with all of them. Behind the Dalai Lama was a huge mural of the Potala, the palace where he used to live in Lhasa, kind of illuminated by the setting sun. It was nostalgic because you could just imagine the years when he was actually able to live there and teach from there and be considered the head of Tibet.

There was this splendid assembly, and we were all enjoying the weather and the teachings and, of course, his presence. It was kind of like a Buddhist Woodstock—no drugs going around, but otherwise it felt a lot like that vibe.

He was teaching on the Heart Sutra, which is one of the clear expressions of emptiness. When he got to this point, he took some time to go over it carefully. He said, "If you really want to help others come out of suffering, you have to understand all the reasons that they're suffering. It's pretty easy to see the pain of pain, the dukkha dukkha. It's pretty easy to see conceptually the pain of alternation, how things change. We can all get that. But it's not so easy to see this form of sankara dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of conditions. If you really want to help other people, you need to understand this also."

It's the most subtle of the three to see, and you need to understand it so that you can really know why people cannot find a solid happiness in this life. There is no solidity there. He said, "If you think that things are stable for a while and then change, that's not the right understanding. The right understanding is that things are falling apart moment after moment after moment. There is no ground in phenomenal existence."

This was expressed in a beautiful quote in the Discourses. This is actually a Brahma, a heavenly being who comes down and makes this comment. I love the way it is put: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." Form is a technical term—the Pali word is rupa. It's one of the five aggregates and it means the whole physical world. So when the word form is used here, it means physical matter or the physical world.

This is what we learn when we investigate the nature of the body with our meditative insight: it is chronically trembling. It is always shifting. It is never continuous.

This is one of the understandings of impermanence that comes through the practice in a retreat. The way these things fall apart was nicely summed up by Joseph Goldstein when he said, "If it's not one thing, it's another." Daily life is kind of like that, isn't it? You just get your relationship in place and then work falls apart. Or you just get work in place and then your kids do something. You know, you just get your kids together and your parents get ill. If it's not one thing, it's another.

This doesn't mean that it's not possible to be basically happy in the world. We all have this vulnerability, but there are a lot of basically happy people in the world. Some of them are Buddhists, some of them are not. Some of them are spiritual people and some of them are not. I find it so delightful and inspiring when I meet happy people, whether it's come out of a path of practice or some people just have it as a native temperament from birth. It's really delightful.

But I will say, looking at these happy people with my Buddhist glasses on, I see three qualities that they share. I want to suggest that these three qualities are kind of like a recipe for worldly happiness. If you want to pursue a path of normal worldly happiness, you can do it by developing these three qualities. And they are generosity, ethical conduct, and loving-kindness.

In Buddhism, these are considered the basis of wholesome worldly action. I think they provide a really good recipe for how to be happy in the world. And don't take my word for it, but check it out. When you meet people who have this native quality of happiness, see if they don't manifest these three areas: generosity, ethical conduct, and loving-kindness.

So this kind of happiness is available to us. It is changeable. And the Eightfold Path is designed to lead to a happiness that is not changeable. So it is a higher aspiration. And many beings have discovered it. Many beings have realized that happiness which is beyond change. I'll talk about one of those beings later in this talk.

So the Noble Truths, all of them, are not just nice philosophical propositions. They're all calls to action. Each of them has something for us to do about it. And the call to action for the First Noble Truth is it's to be understood. That is, the Noble Truth of suffering is to be, and the Buddha's words were, fully understood.

So if we're not fully enlightened, that means we haven't yet carried out that instruction to fully understand the First Noble Truth. It sounds kind of easy, doesn't it? I mean, we can look through this definition. Yeah, I get it. Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Illness is suffering. I get that. I understand it. No. We haven't got it yet.

Because if we fully understood the truth of suffering, we wouldn't hang on. We wouldn't cling. That's the power in understanding fully the Noble Truth of suffering. We would understand that there is in all the conditioned world nothing suitable for hanging on to. That's the quote from the Buddha that Greg mentioned the other night. Nothing whatsoever should be clung to, is suitable to be clung to.

But we haven't got that yet. So things come along and they're attractive and so we go, it won't hurt to just go after that one. And so we go after that one, maybe we get it, and then it provides some happiness for a while and then you know what? It always goes poof. It always dissolves, whether it's the new car that loses its smell after a year or so or gets a few dings when you take it in the parking lot. Or it's a new relationship where after six months you realize the partner actually does have a flaw or two. Whatever it is, it doesn't keep that ability to satisfy.

So we cling to the next thing and then it satisfies for a little while and then it kind of goes poof. And you can see this in meditation. Oh, let me just arrange the body in a vertical way and the breath just at that point and a little bit of peace comes along and then it gets disturbed. Let me try again. I'll get it back again.

Or something that we're trying to avoid, some unpleasant thing comes on the horizon. Oh, no, I don't want to experience that. I've got to resist that. Meanwhile, it's still there, association with what is displeasing. It's still there, but we're resisting opening to it. But it's with us. We're feeling it. We're not liking it. We're resisting it to the very last moment, and then it goes. Oh, what was that all about? I didn't have to resist that so hard. It was going to go anyway. And yet we keep doing it, don't we?

Trying to maintain the association with what is pleasing, trying to push away any contact with what is displeasing. This is the struggle we're involved in. This is the round of birth and death that constitutes samsara on a moment-to-moment basis in our practice.

The Buddha put it this way: there is one thing, the not seeing of which keeps you bound, and that is dukkha. Because we keep clinging, we don't see how we keep clinging to what is eventually going to go. The going is its unsatisfactoriness, our clinging and its change is the dukkha.

So how can we open to this truth? How can we work with it? How can we understand it better? How can we relate? This is a very delicate point in practice, I think. Because if we don't open to this truth, we're really going to keep deluding ourselves.

We are a step ahead of the curve because we've seen it doesn't work in outside life, or we wouldn't be here. If we thought we could fix the problem in outside life, it's much more fun out there—we'd be there. But we've seen that, and so we're here.

But sometimes we might think we can solve the problem through generating different states in meditation. So we think, "Okay, if I develop mindfulness strongly enough and infuse it with some loving kindness and then really work on the concentration, I'm going to get to a steady state in my meditation and I'm just going to cruise for the rest of the month." Maybe not. But it's as though we bring that habit of acquisition into meditation and we imagine that we're going to, as we develop our skill, create kind of a cozy little plateau where we can wrap ourselves up with our meditative skills and our concentration and then that will last.

This is a little bit a continuation of what I call a Winnie the Pooh view of the world. You know how Christopher Robin went through his days. He could go out and have these kind of scary adventures in the woods with his friends—Winnie and Piglet and Eeyore and all of that. And then he'd come home at night and his mother would tuck him in and give him some hot chocolate, and then he'd go to bed like a good British lad would. It was all very safe.

But our world isn't quite like that. Our world isn't safe and cozy and predictable like that. Our world is kind of intense. It gets raw at times. It gets very vivid. And sometimes it is just really intense with issues of birth and death and aging and loss and everything else.

So the question really is, how do we stay in touch with that truth—this truth of the pervasive nature of dukkha—but not get it, not fix on it as a view? Because when we fix on it as a view, life is... it turns out something like "life is dukkha." And then we pick that up and we attach to that view and we carry it around like a burden. And if we have that view—life is dukkha—it will be felt as a burden and will develop a resistance and actually an aversion and a fear of life.

You can see this in some practitioners. They've taken the First Noble Truth and they've turned it into a view. The First Noble Truth is not meant to be a view or a belief. It's meant to be an insight. And insight is a living experience of the truth in this moment.

When we have a living insight into the nature of dukkha, it's liberating. Try it sometime. You're in some state of conflict. Things are painful. There's struggle. There's discord. Just name it: "Oh, this is dukkha." And see if that doesn't create some spaciousness, some impersonalizing, depersonalizing of the experience. And then drop it. When the dukkha goes, you drop it.

But if we carry around this view—"Oh, life is all suffering, it's all gloom, nobody's exempt, there's no way out, it's all meaningless, and then we die"—you'll get depressed. I would get depressed if I thought that.

So these are meant to be fresh insights that we discover through our investigation, not meant to become the way we take life to be.

We'll develop a sense of aversion and fear. So that's not skillful. But we want to keep touching into it, keep reminding ourselves. The Buddha put it this way: A bhikku is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure.

There's a great deal of pleasure available through our meditation practice—these states of calm, harmony, acceptance, loving-kindness, peace, relaxation, ease. They're all available moment by moment, and many of you are touching into them already. I know because I hear it in the interviews. There's a delight in our meditation practice that is actually much greater and more reliable than the delight of sense pleasures.

The Buddha didn't object to sense pleasures because they were morally repugnant. He pointed to their limitations because they're not capable of lasting satisfaction. And there's a higher kind of pleasure available through the Dhamma. So the pleasures of meditation are very sustaining, supporting, encouraging. They generate faith and point in the right direction. They're onward leading. They lead us to deeper wisdom, deeper freedom, and deeper happiness.

At the stage we're at, they're not totally consistent yet either, or totally reliable. But they lead in the direction of total reliability and freedom. So we appreciate the pleasure that comes from our Dhamma practice. We learn to cultivate it, grow it, and enjoy it.

And we don't shy away from the experience of suffering. I think the world is mad in a way because it has shied away from the experience of suffering. Freud said something really insightful about this. He said neurosis is basically the refusal to suffer. We're unwilling to open to suffering and so we choose neurotic pathways. We choose neurotic adjustments to keep from feeling this essential part of being alive.

But as a practitioner, suffering can be a great ally. I know it's not something that we welcome easily. It's not probably what you came to the retreat for, but I just ask each of you to reflect on your own practice. Has suffering ever been useful for you in your course of Dhamma? Has it ever brought you greater understanding? Has it made you look more deeply? Has it made you reflect on your actions, your choices, your motivations, your intentions? Has it taught you anything about what leads to happiness and what leads away from happiness? Have you developed courage in relation to difficulty? Have you developed compassion out of meeting your own pain? And has that compassion then translated to being touched by other people's pain?

Suffering has the power to do all these things. It leads most of us to the path in the first place. Some of us come to the path out of intellectual curiosity about a foreign religion, but that's usually not enough to sustain us through a month-long retreat or a two-month retreat. What sustains us is our faith that this practice can really help us come out of our own pain and sorrow. So it's our own suffering that has led to that understanding. It leads us into wisdom. It leads us into compassion. It leads us to that quality of faith because we've verified that the practice has the power to bring us out of suffering.

Otherwise, why could this be called a noble truth? So much of the world is in a state of suffering, and it's not very noble. Mostly in the world, suffering leads to more suffering. It does not lead to beauty. It does not lead to maturity. And it doesn't lead to dignity and nobility. In some cases it does. It's quite amazing—the spiritual nature, I would say, of human beings, that for some people it does.

I'm thinking about Morgan Freeman. Morgan Freeman was born in 1937 and grew up in the state of Mississippi.

Imagine what it was like to be a black man in Mississippi in 1937. Do you think that was an easy path? Do you think that was a path of privilege? I don't think so. I'm sure he experienced many painful episodes of discrimination, abuse, prejudice, racism—maybe in some of its most violent forms. I don't know the details, but I'm sure he felt it.

He didn't become famous until he was fifty-two. It was that movie, *Driving Miss Daisy*, that really put him on the map. Since then, who has played God in more movies than any other actor? Morgan Freeman. Who has narrated more great nature documentaries? Morgan Freeman.

I really love his presence. Actually, Sally and I were at a play one evening on Broadway in New York City, and we're walking down the street after the play when who should come walking up the sidewalk toward us but Morgan Freeman. He was dressed

in this very handsome black wool overcoat and had such dignity and such presence that I wouldn't have known anything else to do except to stand slightly aside and let him pass as a way of honoring him.

So out of that childhood, as difficult as it may have been, came a man with some of the greatest dignity and nobility that I've been around, that I've felt up close. Sometimes it happens, but for us it can happen because of our practice. We learn how to transmute this suffering into nobility.

After Ajahn Chah died in Thailand, the person who became the abbot of Wat Ba Pong—the monastery where he had been abbot for many years, where Jack Kornfield practiced with him and Ajahn Sumedho first practiced with him—was a teacher named Ajahn Liem, who is still alive and still the abbot of Wat Ba Pong.

Ajahn Liem was visiting this country a while ago, and some of the monks at Abhayagiri took him to visit the monastery of Ten Thousand Buddhas, which is also up there in Ukiah. The two abbots got to meet—the abbot of Ten Thousand Buddhas, who I think is Chinese, because it's a Chinese Mahayana lineage, and Ajahn Liem got to have a dialogue.

So the abbot of the Chinese monastery asked Ajahn Liem, "What was the hardest thing in your practice?"

Isn't that a great question? Only one practitioner would think to ask that question of another practitioner. What was the hardest thing in your practice?

Ajahn Liem thought for a moment. He said, "I think the hardest thing in my practice was fear." And then he paused. "But just to say it was the hardest thing isn't quite right. It doesn't really tell the story. It was my worthy opponent. Because without it, there wouldn't have been the growth in wisdom that I came to."

For all of us, whatever form our suffering takes, that's our worthy opponent. That is exactly where we grow.

If we're overwhelmed by the suffering, we need to find a way to change that around. We need to find lots of skillful means—whether it's loving-kindness practice or patience or a cup of tea in the dining hall or a walk in the hills and a gazing at the sky for a while. We need to find lots of skillful means to help us bear that suffering.

But then, when we have the strength, we really need to meet it. We need to touch it directly. And I would say we can even welcome it because it is the messenger of our own growth and therefore of our own movement to greater wisdom and toward freedom.

So suffering is an invaluable companion on this journey. And our attitude can become one of real welcoming of it. Let me learn. Our attitude is: let me learn from this.

Ajahn Chah put it this way: there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and there's suffering that leads to the end of suffering. What makes the difference is this willingness to learn—the willingness to open and the willingness to learn.

So this is our call. We can't understand suffering at arm's length. We can't understand it from a book. We've got to understand it from direct, immediate contact and, to some degree, resolution. We have to understand what led us into it. We have to understand how we're hooked into it.

And we have to understand in our direct experience how to release it. We can't do that except by meeting it head on.

So meditation practice will lead us in one of two directions at different moments. It will lead us into great states of peace and ease and relaxation and insight and warmth and loving kindness. That will come. Those moments are very helpful for giving us the confidence and strength that we're looking for.

Or it will lead us into moments of struggle, of difficulty, of some kind of pain, of conflict, difficult emotions relating with body pain. Then we have the opportunity to develop our insight further, to expand our field of compassion and understanding, to learn how to relate to that suffering and how to release it.

So whichever is showing up for you on any particular day, in any particular sitting or walking, in any particular moment, whether it's ease or difficulty, both are really helpful on this path. Both are great sources of learning. They're sources of strength and sources of wisdom.

You know where the Four Noble Truths goes from here. As we fully understand the way dukkha works, we learn to let go, and that means we are letting go of craving. What I think Greg talked about is the abandoning of craving. And then as we abandon craving, we find that the mind moves into the reduction or the end of suffering, which is pointed to by the Third Noble Truth. And it's by following the Eightfold Path, the Fourth Noble Truth, that all of that takes place.

But this question about the end of suffering—it's a really interesting question today. I hear it from people. Is there anybody today who's fully awakened and has really brought suffering to a complete end? Does that still happen in this world? And I think it does.

So I want to close by reading you an excerpt from the biography of Ajahn Liem, who is now the abbot of Wat Ba Pong. In it he describes in his own words his meditation experience during a rains retreat when Ajahn Chah was his teacher. This is from 1969.

Around the middle of the rainy season of 1969, Ajahn Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity. So Ajahn Liem increased his efforts and as he did so, the results became evident. And the rest of this is a direct quote from Ajahn Liem:

"Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and then stop to have a rest. But on this day I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture. A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body as if something was taking hold over it. The body felt cool, a coolness effusing the whole body, an experience of the whole body becoming completely light and at ease, cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. The body felt tranquil, cool, and light.

"This experience continued on throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years, all from that one time. It feels like there are no sankhāras, no proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before, the kilesas concerning sexual desire, or all kinds of ambitions that I had before, I don't know where they all disappeared to. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose. There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without changes."

So let's just sit together for a few minutes and let the words settle. "All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before, I don't know where they all disappeared to. There isn't anything to be concerned about. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like."

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 132

Morning Instructions Day 5

Guy Armstrong · 17 min

> *In this fifth day of morning instructions from a February 2014 month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong builds upon the foundational meditation guidance by integrating previously introduced elements into a cohesive practice approach. He reviews the three recommended anchor points for attention: body posture, sounds, and breath sensations, emphasizing how these serve to stabilize and collect the mind.*
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> *Armstrong introduces the concept of fluid attention - the ability to rest with an anchor when nothing particularly draws the mind, while remaining open to other arising experiences such as body sensations, emotional states, and the five hindrances (kāmacchanda, vyāpāda, thīna-middha, uddhacca-kukkucca, and vicikicchā). He emphasizes investigating these hindrances through their bodily manifestations, teaching practitioners to locate where emotions like anger, restlessness, or dullness express themselves physically.*
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> *The instruction emphasizes bare attention without judgment, encouraging practitioners to meet each arising experience with mindfulness rather than trying to manipulate or eliminate it. Armstrong guides students toward understanding that the continuity of mindful awareness is more important than the specific object of attention, laying groundwork for the comprehensive noting practice that characterizes insight meditation.*

You may have gathered that our basic instruction for the whole of the month is going to be: sit down and notice what's happening in your experience. But if we said that at the very beginning, it would be hard to do that without a little bit more foundation. And so what we tend to do is break the instruction up into smaller pieces and deliver them a little bit at a time over the first ten days to two weeks of the course.

Typically we begin by encouraging you to pick a home base or an anchor in your practice that you can come back to again and again to help stabilize the attention. As you return to a similar focus, it will help the attention collect. And when you notice you're not with that focus, you're reminded to come back and steady the attention. So we've recommended breath, we've recommended body posture, we've recommended sounds as those kinds of anchor possibilities. I leave it up to you to choose.

Yesterday Andrea opened us up to the whole field of body sensations. We can look at those through the four elements as she introduced. We can look at them just in their bare physical nature. And then Andrea also introduced the hindrances in the Dharma talk as things to pay attention to.

What I'd like to do today is sum all that up in the instructions where we've gotten to today. And then as the retreat goes on, more instructions will clarify other pieces, other sense doors to pay attention to.

Please begin by sitting comfortably, so you can put the relax in "relax, observe, allow." As you bring your awareness into your body as you're sitting, have a sense that the awareness can pervade the whole body, is pervading the whole body. As you notice the experience of the body as you sit, just take a moment to let go of any unnecessary tension or holding.

Let the eyes be soft, relaxed, a little bit downcast. Allow the jaw to drop. Let the shoulders relax. Let the hands not be clenched. Let the belly be soft. There may be other areas of tension that you're not able to release—that's fine. The muscles need to have some tautness just to hold the body up in sitting. We don't relax completely, but we relax what we can.

Again, feel that unification of the awareness with the body posture, recognizing that the posture itself can become our anchor focus. In using the body posture as a focus, what you want to do is take in the whole body with one glance, as much as possible. Sometimes you can't quite get to every joint of every toe, but with one look, feel the whole length of the body as you sit.

We don't want to construct a sense of an observer that's standing behind the experience, watching it. You want to feel yourself in sitting. Feel the body sitting. It's just one experience. There's no observer outside it. We're just it.

Then you might open your attention in a wide way to take in all the sounds that are coming and going: the sound of my voice, sounds of the building, the systems, the sounds of one another. Let your awareness become wide, limitless, just allowing all the sounds to appear and disappear in the big empty space of awareness. If at times you're not noticing any sounds, then just be aware of the extent of the silence, the vastness of the silence.

Notice how with hearing you don't have to make any special effort to hear. You just sit in a relaxed way with a receptive attitude, letting sounds come, and they're all known spontaneously.

Then bring the attention back into the body and see if you can have that same kind of receptive quality in receiving the experience of the body. Sitting quietly, doing nothing, the body is felt. Again, have the sense of the awareness being able to reach every corner of the body from the top of the head to the tips of the fingers and toes. Everywhere the attention looks, awareness is there with the body, in the body.

As the awareness rests within the body, you'll start to notice the changes in the feeling of the body due to breathing. You'll notice how when an in-breath comes, the energy of the body shifts, feels different. How far throughout the body do you feel the impact of an in-breath? When an out-breath happens, the feeling in the body shifts. There's an impact. How far throughout the body do you feel the impact of breathing out?

Just allow yourself to rest the awareness within the whole body and feel what it feels like to breathe in and breathe out moment by moment, sitting quietly, doing nothing. The receptive attention reveals the sensations of breath.

These are our three recommendations for anchors: the whole body posture, sounds, or breath. If breath is your comfortable focus, you can feel it either in the whole body or in a smaller part—at the belly, the chest, or the nose. All of those are fine.

While you're attending to your anchor, other experiences will come from time to time and naturally draw your attention. We're not fixed on the anchor. Our mind stays open to any other experience that comes.

So other sensations arise in the body: a pressure in the knee, a warmth in the chest, a tingling on the top of the head. When you notice one of these arisings, let that become the new focus for your mindfulness. Easily let go of your anchor. Let the attention go to the new sensation. Connect with it directly and feel it just in its bare physical nature.

If you like, you can notice it as one of the four elements. Or you can just feel it, just being in touch with its physical characteristic—pressure, ache, tingling or pulsing, vibration, warmth, coolness.

If that sensation fades and the attention is no longer drawn, you can return the attention to your anchor. Or perhaps another sensation will call the attention. That's fine.

From time to time you'll notice the arising of different states of mind, different emotions, different moods. At this point, pay particular attention to the arising of any of the hindrances that Andrea discussed the other night—the movements of sense desire, ill will, sleepiness, restlessness or doubt.

Bring mindfulness to the direct experience of the hindrance energy, not judging it, not trying to make it go away, just paying attention so we become familiar with it, open to it, allowing it. "Oh, anger is like this. Restlessness feels like this."

If that energy is strong, it will express itself through the body. So find and investigate: Where am I feeling wanting in the body? Where do I feel impatience in the body? Where is this dullness to be found in the body?

If you can locate it, let your attention go to that part of the body. Feel the sensations connected with the hindrance energy. By staying in touch with that part of the body, you'll also be in touch with the hindrance—using the body to ground the attention in order to stay in touch with the emotional realm. Again, not judging the emotion, not judging yourself. Mindfulness simply observes and allows. Knowing what's there with clear seeing—that's the basis for wisdom.

Begin to get this fluidity of attention that can be with your anchor if nothing special is going on, but can easily move to one of these experiences—other body sensations, sounds or breath, moods and emotions—when they arise and you notice them. Make each new arising the direct focus for your mindfulness in this new moment.

Everything that arises is a proper focus for mindfulness because it's the mindfulness that's the key and not the object. So sustain the continuity of your careful attention, moment by moment by moment.

CHAPTER 133

Morning Instructions: Day 9 - Mindfulness of Thinking

Guy Armstrong · 17 min

> *In this ninth day of retreat instructions, Guy Armstrong addresses one of the more advanced aspects of mindfulness practice: developing a meditative relationship with thinking. Drawing on the wisdom of Korean Zen master Chinul, Armstrong guides practitioners to move beyond seeing thoughts as obstacles to recognizing them as present-moment arisings worthy of mindful attention.*
>
> *The teaching explores the paradoxical nature of thoughts - how they create our entire constructed world yet dissolve under direct observation. Armstrong emphasizes that the goal isn't to eliminate thinking but to develop the capacity to observe thoughts without being seduced by their content. He offers practical techniques for working with repetitive thought patterns, suggesting we label recurring themes and investigate the underlying emotions that fuel persistent mental activity.*
>
> *Through guided meditation, practitioners learn to maintain present-moment awareness while observing the arising, persisting, and passing away of thoughts. This approach aligns with core vipassanā principles of seeing the impermanent nature of all mental formations. Armstrong's instructions help meditators discover that even our sense of past and future are simply present-moment thought constructions, pointing toward the liberating recognition that there is only this moment of direct sensory experience.*

This morning in the instructions we're going to take one of the more advanced topics for mindfulness, which is the whole realm of thinking.

So far in the instructions you could almost imagine that thought is our adversary because thought has been the activity that tends to take us away from the present moment and take our attention away from breath or sounds or body or emotions. But this has been a temporary settling in direction.

In the long run you don't want to see thoughts as an adversary because you'll always feel like you're doing something wrong. It's not that thoughts shouldn't be arising. So I hope this exercise this morning will help us all get rid of the idea that it's a mistake if you think—that would be really self-defeating. It's not a mistake if you think.

The Korean master Chanul put it like this: "Don't be concerned that thoughts are arising. Only be concerned if you're slow in recognizing them." So this is the point. We want to bring mindfulness to this area of our experience as with all the other areas.

But as you know, thoughts are a slippery slope. Because when we start to pay attention to a thought, it's very easy to get seduced into the content. Thoughts have this extraordinarily seductive quality of leading us into the alternate realm that they construct. And our practice is to keep coming back to the simple reality of the six senses in this moment. This is the whole key to vipassana.

Connecting with the simplicity of our sense experience is what leads us out of the fabrications that thought creates, which include the whole sense of self. So moving away from an immersion in the thought world is the direct route to becoming free of the sense of self.

So it's also an investigation. As we meditate with the arising of thought, it's an opportunity to find out what is this thing that we call a thought. It's extraordinary when you think about it. Everything in this room has been created by thought, including us. Somehow our parents had some kind of thought connection with each other and we came out of that. The clothes that we wear, the wood that's in the floor, the shawls, the cushions, the chairs—were all fabricated by thinking. The world is ruled by thought. Things that go on in the world all start with a thought. Your job, your house, who you're with—all come out of thought.

And yet, when you look at a thought, what in the world is it? It's just this little tissue of words. And often when you have enough mindfulness and you turn and look at a thought, it will just go poof and fall away right on the spot. It doesn't always do that, but sometimes it will do that.

So as we start to really bring a meditative attention to the activity of thinking, we start to see the lightness, the ethereal, transparent nature of any given thought. And yet if we take a hold of a thought and invest in it, then it can structure our whole world. So we want to find another place to come from in living our life.

Most of the world lives in the realm of thought, guided by the realm of thought, doesn't see beyond the realm of thought. Thought constructs our view of the world and of ourselves. As meditators, we can come from a different place. And the place that we're moving to is this silent, non-conceptual awareness. Once we land firmly in that place, we can see thoughts as a present moment arising and not be dragged out of the silent non-conceptual awareness. So mindfulness can encompass thinking without being seduced by it. And this is the kind of steadiness of attention that we want to find.

One of the difficulties with thought is that we tend to take it so personally. "This is my thought. What does it say about me?" But again, when you start to look at the way thoughts come, some of them are so random. Who knows what made that thought appear? So Joseph Goldstein has a nice instruction: imagine that your thoughts are coming from the person sitting behind you. And then you don't have to take any ownership. So play with that.

Some people tend to think in pictures more than in words. I tend to think more in words, so I'll probably use language that refers more to words. But you can think of handling images, relating to images in the same way if you're more of a visual person.

And then there's one kind of thought that I want to single out, and that is repetitive thought patterns that go again and again. And these tend to be about things that you care about a lot. So it could be repetitive thoughts about your work or an argument you had with somebody or a personal relationship or how your finances are, what's going to happen with your new job prospect and things like that.

These are things that we tend to run over and over and over. This kind of thinking will often show up in the middle of a silent meditation retreat quite strongly.

So with repetitive thoughts, what's helpful—you might notice that there's like a top ten list on your jukebox. Develop a label for each of those. You might say "relationship thought," "planning thought," "work thought," "argument thought," "rehearsing thought for an interview." Once you start to see a repetitive pattern, give it a label, and that will help mindfulness make a clearer relationship with it.

Secondly, those repetitive thoughts don't tend to resolve themselves through more thinking. It's just not going to happen. So we want to move with these repetitive thoughts out of the enmeshment with the thought process and into the senses again. A very skillful thing to do is ask: what's the emotion that's driving the thought? If a thought's coming again and again with a lot of energy, there's some emotion that's fueling it. That's the motive force. What's the emotion with it? And then drop out of the thought realm and just feel the emotion. If you can find it in the body, that's very helpful.

Now I'm going to do a little guided meditation to lead us into the mindfulness of thinking, and then we'll leave you to work with thoughts through the remainder of the period.

Please sit comfortably, relaxed in your body, alert. Let's begin this period by just connecting with the anchor—whatever you've been using for that: breath or body or sounds. Just to bring a little bit of stability into the attention at first. You can start to

notice if thoughts are present or not, but have the sense that you can keep your attention with the anchor even as thoughts are drifting through. So not yet turning the attention directly to the thought, but just making space for thoughts to be present as you attend to the anchor.

Opening up the attention a little wider, just resting in a receptive way, noticing whatever is arising in the moment—in body, in hearing, in breathing, in mood or emotion. Now we'll play a little bit with thought as an object for mindfulness.

In this kind of open space of attention, imagine that there's just a blank screen in front of you visually. You're in touch with the moment. Now you want to notice the arising, lasting, and passing away of the first thought that comes into this blank space after I finish this sentence.

Having noticed that thought, then return the attention to be with this open awareness or your anchor, staying closely in touch with the present. Steadying the attention again in the present moment. Once again, imagining a blank screen and being mindful of the arising, persisting, and passing of the next thought. Then returning the attention to your anchor or a simple awareness of the present moment.

Notice if in relating to thought in this way, you can still stay with that present moment mindfulness while you're aware of thinking. This is the key. A thought is just a present moment arising. Can your mindfulness stay with it and see its nature of arising, lasting for a while, and passing?

Once again, imagining the blank screen and being aware of the thoughts that arise and pass for a few moments. Make thought the primary object for mindfulness for this short period. I'll say when it will end. Mindful of each thought as it arises and passes.

Now returning to simple awareness of the present moment, reconnecting with your breath, body, sounds, emotion.

Notice in that last exercise if the mindfulness had the power to keep the present moment connection, or if in giving attention to the thoughts it slid away into the content and lost the present moment awareness. This is what we're trying to arrive at—this meditative relationship to thinking that sees it but isn't seduced totally into the content. The more we can find this, the more we can abide in the present even when thoughts are happening. Then thought is not an adversary and does not steal our mindfulness—it's just another object.

We start to see that even the sense of time is just being created by thoughts of the past, which are just present moment arisings, and thoughts of the future, which are just present moment arisings. There is no past and there is no future—just thoughts arising and passing here and now.

If you like, play with this attention to thoughts by making thoughts the primary object for short periods of time in this meditation. You might see how long the mindfulness can hold to this present moment awareness while being aware of thoughts. And then when you feel the seductive power of thoughts taking over, come back to a simple object—anchor, body, sounds, breath.

Reconnect with the present and then when you feel ready, open again.

Just this observation of thought is itself a present moment experience—an interested attention that really wants to understand: what is this thing called a thought? It rules the world, but what is it actually?

Through this practice of watching thoughts arise and pass, we begin to see their ephemeral nature. They come into being, exist for a moment, and then dissolve back into awareness. We start to recognize that thoughts have no more substantial reality than clouds passing through the sky. They appear vivid and compelling, but they are simply temporary formations in the vast space of consciousness.

This understanding is profoundly liberating. When we see thoughts as just another phenomenon arising in awareness—no different from sounds, sensations, or any other object of consciousness—we are no longer enslaved by them. We can observe them with the same interested curiosity we might bring to watching leaves fall from a tree or waves rolling onto shore.

The mind that was once caught in endless loops of planning, worrying, remembering, and fantasizing begins to rest in a more natural state of open awareness. We discover that beneath the constant chatter of thinking lies a profound peace—not the peace that comes from getting what we want or solving all our problems, but the peace of simply being present with what is.

This is the gift of mindfulness practice: to see clearly, to understand deeply, and to rest in the natural awareness that is always here, always now, always free.

CHAPTER 134

Morning Instructions: Day 14

Guy Armstrong · 13 min

> *In this day 14 morning instruction from a February month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong provides detailed guidance on transitioning from anchored attention to choiceless awareness practice. He explains how this open awareness meditation relates to the concentrated attention practices introduced earlier in the retreat, offering practitioners a skillful means to work with the natural movement of attention (manasikāra) rather than forcing it to remain fixed.*
>
> *Armstrong distinguishes between exclusive focus meditation and the insight practice approach used throughout the retreat, where attention moves fluidly between an anchor (breath, body, or sounds) and whatever naturally arises in awareness. He describes two complementary ways to understand choiceless attention: simply noticing "what's happening now" moment by moment, and deliberately unhooking attention from its anchor while maintaining alert awareness of where it lands. This practice develops both samādhi (concentration) and the flexibility needed for deep vipassanā insight.*
>
> *The instruction emphasizes the importance of training attention as a faculty while allowing its natural changeability, using noting practice as optional support. Armstrong provides practical guidance on when to return to an anchor for stability versus when to open into choiceless awareness, helping practitioners navigate between concentration and insight practices skillfully throughout their meditation sessions.*

Carol did a review of the instructions yesterday, and there's really not much more that we need to say. But I wanted to go over, once again from a slightly different angle, this practice that we sometimes refer to as open awareness or choiceless attention, and give a little more detail on how to practice it.

We often present it as the open alternative to focused attention on the breath. I'd like to explain a little about how these relate.

There are a few styles of meditation that one can practice, all of which are helpful, and it's important to know how to move between them. In the beginning of the retreat, we encourage everyone to find an anchor—a focus that you come back to again and again. Having that provides a way for the mind to settle. You always know that if anything is confusing, if you feel a little lost or not sure where to go, you have a place like a

home base that you can come back to and land on. The returning again and again to that anchor helps to steady the attention, developing this quality of samadhi, concentration.

We offered three specific anchors: breath, body posture, or sounds as suggested ones to work with.

In the beginning, you could take the instruction, "I'm going to be with that anchor no matter what happens. If anything else comes in—a different sound, a different sensation, a thought or an emotion—I'm just going to notice it but not pay any attention to it and come right back to the anchor." This is what I'd call the intention of having an exclusive focus just on the anchor.

We did not give that instruction. I hope everybody is aware that was not the instruction at the beginning of the retreat. That would be a good instruction if you were doing a strict concentration practice, but we've been doing insight practice all along.

Instead, the instruction that we gave was something like: be with your anchor, and then when something else arises, let your attention go there and notice it. If it's strong, naturally drawing the attention, let that new arising be the focus for your meditation, the focus for mindfulness. Then if nothing else is up, come back to your anchor and let the attention connect there.

In this formulation, there's a preference for the anchor, but it's not exclusive. We're being with the anchor while also being open to anything else that naturally draws the attention, letting the attention connect and know all the different experiences that arise at the sense doors. This is a very good way to practice. It includes the steadying, calming, concentrating focus that the anchor offers, but it's not exclusive. There's a sense that we're always open to whatever is there.

As the days went on and we covered the instructions for body sensations and sounds and emotions and thoughts and vedana and intention, we could then move into this practice that we call choiceless attention, where we don't even have a preference for the anchor. Instead, we just notice what's happening now, what's happening now, what's happening now.

This is the technique I want to describe in a little more detail. This technique of choiceless attention is basically noticing what's happening now. There are two ways that it can be explained. These two ways are the same technique; they're just described differently.

The first explanation is simply: notice what's happening now. Whether that's an in-breath, a sound, an out-breath, an emotion, a thought, a pressure sensation—just notice what's happening now. That's where mindfulness locates itself.

The other way to describe choiceless attention starts to highlight a factor of mind that's a really important factor in Dharma practice, but one we haven't talked about a great deal: the quality of attention. The Pali word is *manasikaro*. Attention is the faculty in the mind that singles out from our broad range of sense experience and different contacts at the six sense doors, that singles out one of those events to focus on at any given moment.

What we find when we start to meditate is that attention is a very volatile factor. It's drawn now here, now there, now there, now there. When we try to bring the attention in a sustained way to an anchor like breath or body or sounds, we might be—especially in the beginning of the retreat—with two breaths and then the attention is somewhere else.

A big part of the discipline of the practice is training this factor of attention so it can be at our disposal. If we want it to stay in the present moment, that becomes more our choice. If we want it to stay with one object, that becomes more our choice. We're training this factor of attention, and finding an anchor and returning to it is one way that we do that.

When we move to the practice of choiceless attention, though, what we do is deliberately unhook the attention from the anchor. We basically say, "No preference for the anchor. Take it off of that where it may be attached by habit. Unhook it from there. Let it go wherever it wants, but notice clearly where it lands."

That's what's so interesting about this practice of choiceless attention. We're not directing the attention, but we have to stay very awake and alert to its movements, and it will continue to move. It's a very changeable factor. In each new moment, the attention could land somewhere else. Our job as meditators is to be really mindful of where attention is landing and to know that experience in each new object that it lands on.

So this is why the noting practice can be such a strong support as we track the free movement of attention. We may notice: in-breath, sound, pressure, thinking, calm, pleasant, out-breath—like that.

It's a beautiful meditation practice because there's no forcing behind it, but it requires a real alertness. You know, with the breath, you can kind of get in a groove. With sounds, you can space out in a really lovely way. But this requires the attention to be

very fluid, very flexible, and yet really alert, because the picture is changing all the time. So you can relax with this kind of practice because you're not trying to make the attention go anywhere, but you have to be very awake with it.

What I just described as an example of the noting is optional. But in doing choiceless attention, you should be noticing with that kind of crispness. You should be alert to where the attention is landing and making that connection to that experience, even if it's just for a moment. That's fine, and then the attention may go off somewhere else.

That it moves is not a problem. Where it lands is not your problem. Our only job is to notice where it lands and make that connection of mindfulness for that moment. Sometimes it will land somewhere and stay a while—like a pain in the body may linger for some time. Sometimes it might come back to an anchor, staying there for a while. That's fine as long as there's no forcing with it. But you want to learn this faculty of letting the attention move freely and still being very alert and aware in each moment of what it's doing.

So then the skill becomes: when do you come to the anchor and when do you open up with choiceless attention? Or when do you spend some time with an emotion like fear?

If there's not much happening that's particularly strong in terms of physical pain or emotional difficulty, the general advice is to go to your anchor if the mind feels kind of distractible or a little unsettled, and collect the attention. When the attention is collected, open up in this choiceless way and see if the stability is there to really be with the parade of changing objects that the attention illuminates.

Please begin in a relaxed and comfortable way, perhaps just beginning the meditation period by coming to your anchor—breath or body or sounds—so that you feel you've made a connection to the present moment. Allow yourself to land for a bit in the present.

And then deliberately let the attention go free from its focus on the anchor. Open up to the expanse of phenomena that are our present moment experience. Then just notice where the attention lands in each new moment, making a direct mindful connection with that new appearance.

You might try in the beginning using notes—simple notes to describe the object: sound, a sensation, a thought, a mood, a breath. Or if that seems like too much activity, just be with the clear noticing of each new object that's being highlighted by the attention in this moment.

CHAPTER 135

Morning Instruction - Expansive Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 43 min

> *In this guided morning meditation from a February 2014 month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong leads practitioners through an exploration of expansive awareness. Drawing on teachings about shifting attention from the content of experience to the knowing consciousness itself, this practice invites meditators to recognize awareness as vast, open space - like a clear sky in which all phenomena arise and pass away.*
>
> *The meditation systematically guides attention through sounds, bodily sensations, and mental formations (thoughts and images), teaching practitioners to experience each as temporary appearances within boundless awareness. Rather than focusing on the sense objects themselves, the practice emphasizes the field of consciousness in which knowing takes place. Armstrong uses skillful analogies - awareness as sky, sensations as glimmering stars, thoughts as rootless clouds - to help practitioners recognize the spacious, unbound nature of mind itself.*
>
> *This approach reflects classical vipassanā teachings on the investigation of consciousness (viññāṇa) and the development of wisdom (paññā) through direct observation of experience. The practice supports both samatha (calm) and vipassanā (insight) by establishing stability in open awareness while investigating the empty, unsubstantial nature of all phenomena. Particularly valuable for practitioners working with the cultivation of mindfulness and the development of non-dual awareness in meditation.*

This morning there will be a guided meditation through the sitting period on the theme of expansive awareness, along the lines of the talk last night about this shift that can be helpful for some people—placing the attention less on the sense objects of experience and more on the knowing or the consciousness of them.

In this meditation, the term awareness will be used to refer to the field in which the consciousness or knowing is taking place. Please have a comfortable posture and one that you can be relatively still in for the period of the meditation. In this meditation especially, the stillness of the body will really help support the stillness of the mind.

Begin by bringing your attention to sounds. Any sounds from inside the room, sounds of one another, sounds of the building, the systems, the sound of my voice, and any sounds from outside. When no sounds are arising, just become aware of the vastness of the silence.

In opening your attention to sounds now, let the awareness become expansive and wide, able to take in all the sounds that come and go. The awareness is like a big clear sky or like empty space. All the sounds just appear and disappear in this vast empty space of mind. Awareness is like the sky—it's clear and empty. All the sounds simply come and go within this big empty space.

Not holding on to any sound and not resisting any sound. Just allowing all sounds to appear and disappear in this openness of awareness. This awareness is like the sky—it's clear and limitless. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness.

Now become aware of sensations throughout the body. Sensations are just points of feeling, points of sensing. They arise and change, glimmering like the stars in the sky at night, all in this open space of awareness.

In the direct fact of our experience, there's no head, no shoulders, no back, no chest, no arms, no legs. Just points of sensation arising and changing, all in this open space of awareness. In this awareness, there's no inside and no outside. There are no boundaries, no separations—just sounds and sensations arising, passing, all in this open vastness of awareness.

Let the mind be soft, open, and still, not moving toward or away from any appearance. There's no inside and no outside. Just sounds and sensations arising, changing, passing in this vast open space of awareness. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness.

Now become aware of thoughts and images. Thoughts and images are just like clouds passing through the sky. They don't have any roots, they don't have any home. They just arise and drift and pass in this vast open sky of awareness.

Look at the nature of this mind. It's clear and invisible like vast space without any form or boundary. It exists, but it doesn't quite exist. It contains all things, but it's not composed of them. This mind is empty without any foundation. It's insubstantial like the sky. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own mind.

For the last few minutes of the sitting, put it all together. Sounds appear and disappear. Sensations arise as just points of feeling, points of sensing arising and glimmering like stars in the night sky. Thoughts and images drift like clouds, rootless and homeless, all within the vast empty space of awareness. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness.

CHAPTER 136

Connection to Life

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

In this retreat talk, Guy Armstrong examines how our sense of self narrows consciousness through grasping and the construction of sakāya-diṭṭhi (personality view), creating separation and suffering. He explores how vipassanā and mettā practices naturally restore our connection to the broader web of life, drawing on the Huayan Buddhist image of Indra's jewel net and Suzuki Roshi's "big mind" teachings. Armstrong shares moving stories of interspecies compassion and human courage, including whale rescuers and civil rights pioneers like Thurgood Marshall, illustrating how genuine care transcends artificial boundaries. The talk culminates in an exploration of bodhicitta - the awakened heart that aspires to liberation for all beings' benefit. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's instruction to observe both internally and externally, and referencing the classical Theravāda teacher Dhammapāla's writings on the bodhisattva path, Armstrong shows how meditation reveals our fundamental interconnectedness and shared humanity, transforming isolation into universal compassion.

The topic for this evening's talk is the connection to life.

We've talked a number of times about how we construct this sense of self through the process of grasping and how that process of grasping, done over and over again, restricts our consciousness, restricts our heart and mind. It narrows and limits our relationship to life, our view of life. And it makes it, in that narrowness, feel contracted and painful. Of course, this is also reflected in the way we understand ourselves, in the way we view ourselves. From the child's very open, wide consciousness, it becomes more and more narrow, and our sense of ourselves gets more and more limiting.

This is based on how we construct a view of ourselves, which the Buddha called *sakāya-diṭṭhi*, the view about our personality or our being. We've talked about different ways that we do this, and I want to emphasize one other tonight, which is how we consider ourselves to be different.

When we are defining ourselves and our characteristics, we will often say things like, "I'm too tall" or "I'm too short," or "I'm not intelligent enough" or else "I'm smarter than everybody else," or "I'm really not good looking enough," or else "I'm better looking than everybody else," and then we get inflated. Or we make discriminations based

on our skin color, or our sexual orientation, or things like that. In all these discriminations, we are, in a way, stepping ourselves into a corner by defining ourselves in these more narrow terms.

I think in a way, this is the project of ego: to make ourselves special with these self-definitions. In doing that, what we end up doing is separating ourselves out a little bit from the whole family of humanity. So it's no wonder that we start feeling alone, isolated, cut off, or disconnected from the world, from life, from the human family, because our thoughts are running over and over about what's different about us.

When was the last time you thought, "Wow, just like everybody else, I've got two eyes and a nose. That's fantastic"? This sounds trivial, but we don't reflect along those lines. We seldom reflect on what we share. We reflect on how we're different. This carries over into many walks of life—politics and couple relationships and work relationships and so on. We so often focus on what's different, and that's what divides us and brings us apart.

But we can correct that imbalance, and meditation opens us to that very naturally by reminding ourselves of the breadth of life and what we share with that breadth of life. This project of ego, which is about making ourselves special, comes with a price tag, which is an increasing sense of loneliness or disconnection. This is especially prevalent in the West today because the extended family has kind of broken down and communities have kind of broken down. So those normal ways of finding connection are not so available for us. In the West, I think we're more isolated than most other cultures.

Researchers in the West are finding that this sense of isolation that we live with is one of the deepest sources of our suffering. Scientific researchers have discovered this, and consequently, healing this kind of disconnection can bring a much more fulfilling sense of human life.

Part of the work of our meditation is to allow the heart to relax its grasping and relax that really narrow focus and open back up to this wider sense that we came in with, and how that wider sense unveils the sense of interconnectedness to life. So that's the theme I want to explore tonight.

In this opening and widening, there's a lot of potential for greater ease, greater peace, greater harmony with life because we're part of the whole flow. We're not stuck out on some isolated margin, but we really see how we're part of the whole flow.

This undoing is accomplished through both vipassana and *mettā*. Both of them have important roles to play, so I want to talk about how they both do that.

Through vipassana practice, when the emphasis is taken off the contraction, the mind naturally opens, the heart kind of expands, and we sort of have room to look around. A lot of people talk about the openings of vipassana as creating more space. So it creates more space, the pressure is off the heart, and in that we kind of relax and breathe and we look around and what do we see? Oh, there are a lot of other people here. So it opens us up to that.

In fact, the foundations of mindfulness point to this directly. One is encouraged to be mindful internally and externally. So we become aware of our own body and feelings. We're also instructed: pay attention to the bodies and feelings of those around us. So this happens naturally as part of vipassana practice.

Through *mettā*, we start to tune into other beings' states of happiness and unhappiness, and that becomes of concern to us. We start caring through *mettā*, compassion, *muditā*, about how other people are doing and feeling. In that, our hearts get connected. We get put together with others. And we also see some other similarities that are beautiful.

This kind of interconnectedness that exists, but that we often overlook, is summarized in an image from an ancient school of Buddhism called Huayan Buddhism that was popular in China from early years, like the sixth to eighth centuries, somewhat up until the present time.

And the image that they spoke of is called the Jewel Net of Indra. In this teaching, Indra is a great god from the Hindu pantheon, and the image describes how Indra has created this universe as a vast net of rope—strands extending horizontally and vertically throughout all three dimensions of existence. At every intersection where two ropes meet, there hangs a gem: transparent jewels of different sizes, colors, and shapes—some clear, some red, some green, some blue.

The beautiful quality of each gem lies in its clarity and transparency, which reflects all the other gems throughout the net. When you look into any single gem, you see the whole universe reflected within it. This is the profound image of the Jewel Net of Indra—each gem holds and reflects all the other gems because of its transparency, which is another way of speaking about its emptiness.

This serves as a model for us as sentient beings. Every human being, every conscious creature, reflects all the other beings in the world, in the universe. This reflection is possible because of our own intrinsic emptiness.

Our situation begins to become apparent as we deepen our meditation practice and open to this wide, choiceless awareness in which all experiences of the senses simply come and go—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions—all arising within this vast awareness. Among those sights are all the other sentient beings.

In this way, each of us holds a universe. Each of us is a universe because of this transparent consciousness that we embody. This is how we function—our consciousness, our awareness, is like a sky that is essentially empty yet can hold everything that arises, the way vast space embraces all phenomena.

This understanding points toward what we explore in Big Mind meditation. As far as I know, the term "big mind" was coined by Suzuki Roshi and appears in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, where he writes: "Big mind experiences everything within itself. That everything is included within your mind is the essence of mind. To experience this is to have religious feeling."

I cherish this statement—when we realize that everything exists within our own mind, we have a religious feeling. This realization emerges from our vipassana meditation and provides that profound sense of connection.

You can experience this immediacy anytime you choose to tune into it. You are part of my experience right now, and I am part of your experience. Or we could say that you are in me right now, and I am in you right now. This is how we interpenetrate each other, and this is what the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh means by "interbeing"—we inter-are with each other.

We don't need to reach out to connect with one another; we simply need to recognize how we're already part of each other. Vipassana helps us see this through the open awareness that includes everything. Metta helps us recognize this because our hearts naturally begin to connect—we start caring about each other's wellbeing.

One discovery we make through exploring metta practice is that all beings share the same fundamental wish: to be happy and free from suffering. We are all alike in this essential desire. The many discriminations we make based on body shape, skin color, gender, or even species—while these may be valid distinctions—often obscure this profound similarity, this aspiration we all share.

Sometimes this truth breaks through to us powerfully, even across species. I treasure this story reported several years ago in the San Francisco Chronicle about a humpback whale. You may know that off the California coast, there's a sizable population of hump-

back whales that migrate seasonally—traveling south to Mexico for winter calving and mating, then north to California waters for summer and fall feeding. They grace our waters during both legs of their journey.

This particular humpback whale was migrating south in early December. She was magnificent—perhaps fifty feet long, weighing something like forty-five tons. Swimming about ten miles offshore, directly west of here near the Farallon Islands, a protected conservation area that also hosts crab fishermen who set their pots—heavy clay vessels suspended by floats on nylon ropes, dangling in the water.

As she swam through these waters, she became entangled in multiple crab pot lines—about twelve lines total, some wrapped around her body four times over.

They went around her back, they went around her tail, they went around her flipper, and one of them went right through her mouth, looped through her mouth. So the problem is that the clay pots are quite heavy, something like 90 pounds each, and she was carrying a lot of them—something like 12 or so pots were weighing her down. So not only was she tangled up, but the weight of them was carrying her down and she was really struggling to keep her blowhole above water so that she could breathe.

A fisherman went by and discovered her. But he didn't know what to do. He was in a small fishing boat. He didn't know what to do. So he contacted the Marine Mammal Center on the California coast and told them what was going on, and they said, "Wow, we've got to take care of this whale." So they sent a boat out with some divers, and they reached her. It was a few hours later, so she'd already been struggling and getting tired and probably exhausted when the divers showed up.

Then they looked at the situation and thought, "Wow, this is kind of a mess. How are we going to free her? This is not easy." The lines were cutting into her skin. So they were embedded in her flesh. And the divers said, "You know, if we go in the water, one flip of her tail could drown us. What should we do? Should we protect ourselves and just let her find her own way?" But they decided to go in.

So four of them dove in and they had these special knives, curved knives, and they worked very carefully around her, sawing, sawing, sawing through each place where the ropes were hanging off her—the body, the tail, the flipper. And one of the divers was working right around the mouth.

This diver who was working around the mouth said, "When I was cutting the line going through her mouth, her eye was there winking at me, watching me. It was an epic moment of my life." Can you sort of imagine that communication and that connection?

All the divers said that as they were working, the whale was just floating very passively—no longer struggling, but just kind of surrendered to what they were going to do with her. They kept cutting, cutting, cutting. It took a couple hours, but they finally cut all the ropes and pulled them away, and she was free.

Then the divers reported: when the whale realized she was free, she began swimming around in circles in apparent joy. She then swam up to each diver, nuzzled him, and then swam to the next one. "It felt to me like she was thanking me, knowing that she was free and that we had helped her," one of the rescue divers said. "She stopped about a foot away from me, pushed me around a little bit and had some fun. She seemed kind of affectionate, like a dog that's happy to see you. I never felt threatened. It was an amazing, unbelievable experience."

I think it's really beautiful, this kind of connection. All of us can feel that. You feel that when you see the deer around here? Someone mentioned running into a group of five deer on a trail the other day and just looking into that glistening eye and the deer not being afraid. The beautiful moment of being touched by that contact, by that connection. We feel their vulnerability because we know our vulnerability. So it kind of opens up into this universal quality of loving-kindness, this universal nature that all of us share.

I want to read a little more from a poem I mentioned earlier called "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye. She says:

"Only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend."

So metta is likened in the text to a gentle rain that falls everywhere without discrimination. And someone else mentioned in an interview that they felt the metta bringing this moisture to the heart, bringing a dampness. And that moisture is the opposite of dry—a juiciness to the heart. This image of the rain is beautiful because it has this universal quality.

The Buddha offered another reflection about this universal quality. He taught often on the theme of birth, death, and rebirth. And he said that all of us have gone through countless lives, being born, dying, passing away, and reappearing in another body, living that life, dying, passing away, reappearing in another body. And he said, because of

all the different lives that we have lived in proximity to other beings, "it is not easy to find a being who in some previous life has not been your mother or your father or your sister or your brother or your son or your daughter."

Now I don't know how you feel about your family of origin, or this theory, but what if we all were connected like this? What if we all had been so intimate with each other in lifetimes before? What if I had been your mother? Would you want to care for me? Look after me? I think we might.

This is a line from the sutta that we've been chanting most evenings: "Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies and downward to the depths."

There's another story that comes to mind about this that I really like. Jack Kornfield was the founding teacher here. He has a daughter who recently completed law school at UC Berkeley and decided to become a human rights lawyer. That's what she's doing now, really great service work.

While she was still in law school, she would travel back and forth between Berkeley and Woodacre. On one of her drives back to Woodacre with a friend, they were driving past Larkspur Landing, where the ferry comes in—a big six-lane road. The traffic was backed up unusually, with honking and everything moving really slowly.

As she got closer, she could see that the cars were stopped because there was a mother duck and five babies trying to get from the shoreline side of the six-lane road over to where the ferry was located so they could jump back in the water. They were trying to cross these six lanes of traffic, and cars were stopping and braking while people grew impatient and honked horns. But they kept trying to drive around the ducks.

So Caroline and her friend pulled up, stopped the car, got out, and blocked the other two lanes of traffic. They just told people to stop. The mother duck and the little ones crossed over to the center divide. Caroline thought, "Cool, all okay." But then they couldn't quite get up on the center divide—the mother could, but the little ducks couldn't quite make it up. So Caroline and her friend went and pushed them up onto the divide.

Then they hopped down on the other side, and the same thing started happening in the other direction. The other three lanes started braking, swerving around, honking, people getting upset. So Caroline and her friend went over to that side, still leaving their car totally stopped in one lane, and stopped the traffic so this family of ducks could cross the other three lanes and head toward the water.

"Just as a mother would protect with her life her child, her only child." I thought that was a beautiful, spontaneous act of metta toward these creatures.

The practice of the brahmaviharas—loving-kindness, compassion, and joy—really opens this channel of connection for us. This is from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche:

"It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to put too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for compassion. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate.

A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief."

So this tenderness that's there for us, that opens through compassion and metta, is felt as a sensitivity, as a little vulnerability. It's not always so easy. But this tenderness and connection opens up so many wholesome qualities for us.

Even our practice of sila, of taking care with our conduct, is really an expression of this metta and compassion. We care for others through our conduct. We practice the precepts out of this sense of connection.

There was this beautiful story of the Dalai Lama being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey. I have tremendous appreciation for what Oprah has brought to our world because she takes these beautiful teachings—many dharma teachings—and spreads them to a wider audience than anybody else I know. She has featured, for example, our own James. Her endorsement of his book and his class brought many people to benefit from his teachings. She recently did a TV series with Jack, and she's featured Joseph Goldstein in a discussion on wise relationships—how to be in relationship without too much attachment.

After that encounter, we could affectionately call Joseph "Dr. Love." In this particular case, Oprah was interviewing His Holiness the Dalai Lama for an article that would appear in her magazine, O.

She began by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied simply, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said with surprise.

"An insect, hmm, okay," she continued, trying to process this response.

The Dalai Lama went on, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life—to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

That's a beautiful mind. That's a beautiful heart. I really feel that this purity of sila he's describing—this non-harming—is part of what allows his mind to settle in such a deep way and permits that compassion to flow through him so clearly.

As we develop these qualities of metta and compassion in our own practice, we really feel that heartfelt wish for ourselves to come out of our own suffering, and we start to genuinely wish that others come out of their suffering. This is part of the opening of the eye to the rest of the world, to the situation that other human beings are in, that other creatures and animals are in. We open our hearts to the suffering of others and feel we would really like, if we can, to help them come out of their suffering.

When we feel metta and compassion in this kind of boundless way, we can enter a reflection that asks: What would be the best way I could help others truly come out of their suffering? There are many routes to help people come out of their suffering. There are so many needs in the world, so many ways to help people.

One path to help people is to help them awaken. If you really want people to go beyond all forms of suffering and reach the highest happiness—the most stable happiness—the aspiration might come: "I'd like to help other people to awaken."

When that aspiration arises, you can use it as part of your own motivation. Because how can you best do that? It's to awaken yourself. So we can take this aspiration to help others and bring it back as motivation: "I want to become free so I can help others move beyond the bounds of suffering."

This particular wish and motivation has a special name in the tradition. It's called bodhicitta. It's something we can practice, something we can develop. Bodhicitta literally means—bodhi means enlightenment or awakening, and citta means heart or mind. So you could call it the awakened mind, or what I prefer: the heart of awakening. We develop this quality, which is the heart of awakening, to awaken for the benefit of other beings. This can become part of our practice.

Sometimes when you're having trouble finding your own personal motivation, you can reflect: "It's difficult for me right now, but I really want to wake up to be in a position to help others wake up." That can help beautify and dignify the work we're doing.

This aspiration is not necessarily a huge flame in the beginning. It can be just like a little candle flame compared to our motivation to come out of our own suffering. But there's something quite beautiful about it. Even the Dalai Lama expresses it this way: "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is. That is all."

So this is an aspiration that we can develop. Carol spoke about it when she discussed the three excellences.

At the beginning of every sitting or walking or day of practice or retreat, we can make this aspiration: "Through the benefit of my practice, may I awaken for the welfare of all sentient beings," or something like that. You can say this at the start of every sit to remind yourself, if it's true for you, that part of the reason we practice is to benefit other beings.

Trungpa Rinpoche put it this way, continuing from the earlier quote: "There's also an inner wound called Tathagatagarbha, or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and to communicate, then we begin to realize our

whole being is made up of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever." That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore.

So this is the development of bodhicitta, the sense of a compassion and care that can encompass all beings everywhere. And it really starts to matter to us. This is from the hermit monk Ryokan, who was a Japanese Zen teacher: "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this fleeting world" – that wish that we could gather up all the suffering in this fleeting world.

So our practice takes on a flavor – it may not be the central element, but it takes on a flavor of motivation that we're really involved in this work for all beings, for the welfare of all beings. And it moves from being a nice phrase to being something that we feel in us.

I was sitting a long retreat at IMS one year in Massachusetts, and it was getting into wintertime. It was a November-December time period, and I liked to walk outdoors. The cold was coming in, the nightfall was coming early, the rain and occasional snow flurries were coming. It was late November, and I was feeling a little lonely. You know how autumn comes in and you start to feel, wow, it's really dark and the leaves are falling. I was starting to feel a little lonely.

But there was this stone wall that I was walking along, right beside my walking path. Very often this little chipmunk would poke up on this stone wall. He'd sort of pop up and look around a little bit. If I was still, he'd hang out there a little bit. If I moved too quickly, he'd just run away. And chipmunks are incredibly cute, you know – they sit up like this and they've got that little stripe, black stripe running down their back. They look around and then just dash into a hole to stay safe. So occasionally I would violate all wildlife warnings and bring him down some peanuts from tea and leave them out for his winter stash.

Then one day, a friend came to visit the center. He knew some of us who were on the retreat, and he'd brought us a little gift. So there's a note on the board: check the box where the managers leave things, there's something for you. I go to the box, and there's this piece of chocolate cake, which he had brought as a gift for a few of us who were on the retreat. That was very heartwarming. And delicious.

But something that was equally heartwarming was the note he wrote, just sending his love and expressing his wishes that I have a good retreat. His love for the Dharma really came through in the note. And then the last line really hit me. It said, "All beings are cheering you on."

And I really thought about that. All beings are cheering you on. And of course, some of them aren't. But if they knew what we were up to, they would be. It's just that they don't understand. But if they understood, all beings would be cheering us on. So I had this image then of the chipmunk sort of standing up and going, "Go, guy, go!" as I was walking. Very moving.

Sometimes this compassion really comes across from a very tender and soft and vulnerable place. And sometimes it comes out really strong. Sometimes it has to be very, very firm. So I'm thinking about the people who were in the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties and actually before that. We know a lot of these names – Dr. King and John Lewis and Ralph Abernathy. They've become somewhat famous.

And somebody that I didn't know a lot about until recently, but who I really think is a great hero of that movement, is Thurgood Marshall. So Thurgood Marshall was a lawyer who started working for the NAACP at their headquarters in New York in 1936. And he was very thoughtful about the way he approached his work. He wanted the NAACP to limit their legal cases to issues that he thought would really transform the welfare of especially African Americans in this country. And so he said, we want to focus particularly on education issues, on voting rights, and on capital punishment cases, because that's where he saw clear discrimination going on in the society and in the court systems.

So he went on to be the lead counsel for the NAACP, and he was the lead attorney who won the decision of Brown versus Board of Education, which overturned segregated schooling in this country—that 1954 Supreme Court decision that opened the way for school integration. And then in 1967, he was nominated by Lyndon Johnson to be on the Supreme Court. So he became the first African-American member of the Supreme Court.

When he was a rising star on the NAACP legal team, he would go down south, because that's where the most egregious violations of rights were going on, and he would go to trials to defend black people in the midst of these white communities that would have a white judge, white prosecutor, white police, and often all white juries. And he said of many of his cases, he never expected to win them. But he went down hoping to find some mistake on the part of the courts that could later be overturned on appeal. And he did that often. He would maneuver the prosecutor into making some overstep that could later be grounds for a retrial. So he was very successful on getting cases appealed.

But every time he went, he began to realize his life was in danger. There's this one case in 1946. He was defending 25 black men who had been accused of rioting and attempted murder in a small town in Columbia, Tennessee. And in fact, they had been provoked and they weren't really attempting to murder anyone, but they were on trial again with white judge and all-white jury.

So Marshall was a very skilled lawyer. And one by one, he managed to win the release, the acquittal of every one of the 25 defendants. So he was down there with other members of his team, and at the end of the case, they freed the last defendant. And they said, wow, now we can celebrate. Let's go back to Nashville where we have supporters. Let's go back to Nashville and we'll really celebrate.

And they were leaving town at night to drive to Nashville. As they were driving down the road, they were pulled over by the local police, who of course were white. And the police chief said to Marshall, you're drunk. I'm going to arrest you. Get in this police car. Marshall hadn't had a drop to drink. But they pulled him into a police car and they told the other two lawyers, you go on your way. Keep going wherever you're going. You're going to Nashville. Keep going. Get out of town. We don't want you around here.

And they took Marshall in the police car. And where they drove him was down to this river where a bunch of other white people had assembled. And they were probably carrying Ku Klux Klan symbols and so on. And Marshall had happened to know that that site was the site of a number of killings of black men and lynchings. So there he was, all on his own, surrounded by this angry white mob who hated the fact that he had come into their town and gotten 25 men freed. And he was quite sure that he was going to be killed. In 1946, it would have been the end of his career.

And as he's standing by the river and getting intimidated by the police, another car starts coming down the lane. And it's his two lawyer friends who had not gone on to Nashville but had turned around and followed the police car and showed up on the scene. And where that mob felt they could get away with killing one person, they didn't feel they could do it in the face of two witnesses. And so they let him go.

So Marshall lived to fight another two decades of court cases for the NAACP, knowing every time he went to the South that his life was in danger, that he could face hostility, assault, murder. And yet, he cared so deeply about the suffering that was going on, he never hesitated. Never hesitated to show up and do what he thought was important to be done.

So this is a kind of compassion that's so strong that one is willing to put one's life on the line for what one believes, as difficult as it is to do that.

There's one other story I'll tell along these lines. I'll try to make this one brief.

Mahagosananda was a Cambodian monk. He died a number of years ago. When the Khmer Rouge took power in the 1970s, you probably know they killed most of the educated class in Cambodia, and they killed off most of the monks and nuns. They killed about two million people while they were in power under Pol Pot in the 1970s.

Maha Gosananda was not killed because he was practicing in Thailand. He was living in Thai monasteries doing Buddhist practice and was out of the country. But something like sixteen or seventeen members of his family were killed in that genocide while he was away.

The Khmer Rouge were pushed out in 1979, and refugee camps had been established along the Cambodian border with Thailand. A lot of Cambodians had fled there to seek safety from the genocide. Gosananda then went to the refugee camps and started living there, ministering to the people who had fled, who were all Buddhists by upbringing, by culture. He was one of the few senior Buddhist teachers left because most of them had stayed in country and had been killed in the genocide.

Gosananda started teaching and people started coming in large numbers to hear him. What he started teaching was having them chant the stanzas from the Dhammapada. He passed out leaflets that had a chant in Pali and a Cambodian translation. He got all these huge numbers of people chanting. And the chant that he had them do was: "Hatred never ceases by hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law."

These were people who had lost their families, their property, to the Khmer Rouge. And he's teaching them to chant, "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love."

The Khmer Rouge had infiltrated the camp as well. They were still active, even though they weren't the head of government. And he began to receive death threats. So his supporters said, "We want you to seek asylum in France. We're going to take up a collection. We want you to take a train to Bangkok and then a flight to Paris. Otherwise, we think you're going to get killed."

They gave him the money, put him on a train, sent him up to Bangkok and thought, "Great, now he's safe." About five days later, he shows up back in the camp. He'd taken the money they'd given him and bought ten thousand more leaflets that said, "Hatred never ceases through hatred." He got more and more people chanting at the risk of his own life.

This is the kind of compassion that's really dedicated, that is really strong.

Other ways that we separate ourselves out: body image is one. We often think about our body with quite a lot of different feelings. We might be proud of the way it looks. We might be more likely a little embarrassed about the way it looks—it didn't come out quite right. And we often take it very personally. We can take our body really personally.

But when you think about it, did you have anything to do with the basic way your body turned out? Whether you're tall or short, your shoulders are broad or narrow, the color of your eyes, your hair, your skin—did you choose any of that? We kind of forget that, don't we?

The body's just part of physical nature. Think about it: your mother's egg met with your father's sperm, and it gestated for a while, and then it popped out, and it got food and water and sunshine and air. Then all by itself, it just grew up to be whatever it's going to be—a little influenced by diet and exercise and things like that, but basically, it's just a physical process.

And yet we take it very personally. We can. And on the basis of that, we separate ourselves out: "I'm not good enough. It's not good enough. It should have come out different." Not ours.

Not our problem.

So that's why Ajahn Buddhadasa said, and I think Greg mentioned this quote earlier, this body came out of nature. It's part of nature and it belongs to nature. So give it back to nature. That'll be a great relief for you.

And similarly, really, with our thoughts and emotions. We can take some of our emotions very personally, thinking we're the only one in the world who knows this kind of embarrassment or shame or fear or grief or loss or sadness. And yet, again, if we look around, we see every human being has this same range of emotions—all the beautiful ones of love and joy and happiness and contentment and all the difficult ones. They're in this whole package. They're all there together.

Can we open and just allow them to be part of our mind's nature? There's a mental nature just as much as there's a physical nature. And for human beings, mind's nature includes this whole range of emotions. So can we just let them be there? Some of them are beautiful, some of them are painful. Whatever they are, can we let them be as part of what nature has offered? We didn't create them. We didn't ask for them. Nature delivered them.

So if we can hold this physical body, hold these emotions in that space of metta, letting them assume their own nature, then they open up and transform.

This is from an Australian poet named Michael Leunig: "When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it. Let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it. Let a bird lean in the hole and sing a simple song like a tiny bell and let it ring."

So we open our heart to the forces of nature and that heals us. Loving kindness heals us. Compassion heals us.

We can turn our attention to this underlying unity that's below all the differences. Are we really fundamentally more different or more alike? Which is bigger? We all have basically the same body—they're just these small variations. We all have basically the same emotional package. It's just different combinations.

So the way it feels to me is we're all one organism that just takes different forms. Or you could say it's like one heart that's been poured into different vessels and then put through different life experiences. But that quality of heart, I think we all share. We all have that vulnerability. We have some fear. We have some tenderness. We have some love. The heart is very, very similar.

I'm sure you know Rumi very well, and his teacher was said to be a man named Shams who came from the town of Tabriz. Not much is known about Shams, but one poem supposedly has been preserved, and I'd like to read that:

"I, you, he, she, we—
In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

I'll read it again: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

In the garden of metta and vipassana, these are not true distinctions either. The true distinctions are qualities of heart and mind and body that we all share.

So we can remind ourselves of this. We can remind ourselves of this deep unity that is always there underneath all the perceived distinctions. And in fact, we can start to choose whether we want to perceive distinction or unity, which is probably more healing. Perceiving the unity is probably more healing, and that's one of the reasons that the Brahma Viharas are such beautiful practices, because we come back to these simple wishes we all share for safety, for happiness, for health, and for ease.

And then as our hearts and awareness open up, we see we're all in the same situation. And to the extent that we can help one another, we want to help one another.

If it really is the same heart, but just in different packages, don't we want to free it everywhere? We don't have to stop with one package, because it's the same problem everywhere. Don't we want to free it everywhere?

This can become part of our motivation—the aspiration to free the heart wherever it appears. This is the journey of bodhicitta. One who is carrying out this journey is said to be a bodhisattva—one who aspires to awaken for the benefit of all other beings.

I want to close with this quotation from a Theravadan teacher, Acharya Dhammapala, from somewhere around the sixth century. He's not very well known, but he was a Sri Lankan teacher whose work appears in a beautiful book called "Treatise on the Paramis." Sometimes people say the bodhisattva ideal is not found in Theravada, but here is a Theravadan teacher from 1,500 years ago where the bodhisattva ideal is clearly articulated.

Dhammapala writes: "Through wisdom, the bodhisattva brings himself across the stream of becoming. Through compassion, he leads others across. Through wisdom, the bodhisattva understands the suffering of others. Through compassion, she strives to alleviate their suffering. Through wisdom, he aspires for nibbana. Through compassion, he remains in samsara. Through compassion, the bodhisattva trembles with sympathy for all. But because compassion is accompanied by wisdom, her heart is unattached."

Let's just sit for a minute together with this beautiful teaching: Through compassion, the bodhisattva trembles with sympathy for all. But through wisdom, her mind is unattached.

CHAPTER 137

Delighting in the Wholesome

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

In this dharma talk from a February month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses the unique challenges of extended practice and introduces 'delighting in the wholesome' as the essential energy (vīrya) needed to sustain deep spiritual work. He outlines three fundamental aims of practice: brightening the mind, finding inner peace, and developing understanding. Armstrong explores the Buddha's three bases for meritorious action - dāna (generosity), sīla (ethical conduct), and mettā (loving-kindness) - as practices that naturally uplift the heart and create sustainable happiness. He then examines the path to liberation through samatha (tranquility) and vipassana (insight), focusing on sammā-samādhi (Right Concentration) and sammā-diṭṭhi (Right View) as doorways to freedom. Drawing from personal experiences in Burmese monasteries and teachings on the Four Noble Truths, Armstrong demonstrates how understanding dukkha (suffering) and its cessation forms the foundation of the Noble Eightfold Path. The talk concludes with an inspiring account of Ajahn Liem's awakening, illustrating the genuine possibility of complete liberation from suffering in this very life.

The subject of tonight's talk is delighting in the wholesome.

At the end of the second day, as Sally pointed to last night, it's quite easy to remember that what you are undertaking is not an easy thing to do. With a week-long retreat, you can kind of blast through because the end is in sight. But when you start a month-long retreat, the end is too far out there. You lose track of it. You get into a month-long retreat and you can't see the end. It's sort of like you're here forever, for a while. It's going to feel like this retreat goes on forever, and that presents its own challenges and difficulties on top of the normal retreat experience.

I remember coming to the end of my first month-long retreat. There was one fellow who was finishing at the same time, and he'd gotten to the center a couple of months before me. I thought, "Wow, he's been practicing for months longer than I have. He must be really far along by now." So at the end of the retreat, I went up and asked him the only thing I really wanted to know: "Does it get any easier?" He said, "Not as far as I can tell."

But that was just after a few months. After a number of years, I can tell you it gets a lot easier, and retreats become a lot more delightful than painful. But it takes a while. You just have to trust in the evolution of the practice.

Even for veteran meditators, when we go into retreat, at some point we usually get challenged to the limit of what we can do or hold or bear. It challenges our patience, our courage, our determination, and our ability to tolerate what's going on. Because of that, often in retreats during the first days, I would find myself thinking, "What would I rather be doing?" The list got fairly long—there are many things I would really rather have fun doing than this.

But the good news is we're here because we want to come out of suffering. If you're able to bear the difficulties and pain of the retreat experience, this experience does lead us out of suffering. It's just a question of whether we can stand it while it's going on, and whether we can find the inner resources to bear it. If we can—and I'm confident all of you will for the time you're here—you're going to feel at the end what it has brought you. It brings such great gifts that don't come any other way that I know of.

In tonight's talk, as in Sally's talk last night on mindfulness, I want to remind us why we're doing this and what we're up to in being here, because it does take a lot of work. Classically, this is a factor of the path. Effort is one of the path factors in the meditation section of the Eightfold Path, and it means, in classical terms, letting go of what we can that's unwholesome and developing what we can that's wholesome in the mind. It's those wholesome factors that lead us into happiness and eventually into freedom.

At several times in my practice lifetime, I've spent time with Tibetan teachers whom I really appreciate for the breadth of their vision and the openness of their hearts. I had the opportunity to practice with Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, who was one of the great Dzogchen masters of the past century, while he was still alive, and took refuge with him in that lineage.

When you take refuge with a Tibetan teacher, you get a Tibetan name. My name was Urgyen Sandrul—Urgyen after him and his lineage, and Sandrul as the second word. Sandrul is the Tibetan word that corresponds to our word virya, which means energy for the practice. It's one of the factors of enlightenment, so it's a really important factor—energetic effort, something like that. But the way they understand it in Tibetan, it means delighting in what is wholesome.

So the energy that we apply to the practice is to delight in what is wholesome. That's all of what we're doing here, and that's what I want to talk about tonight: What are we doing here?

And I think we can all agree, whatever your aspiration, whatever your view of your Dharma practice, what we all share—demonstrated by our commitment to being here—is a deep love for what is wholesome. Without that deep love, you could not sustain yourself for a month's retreat or for a journey of a lifetime on the path. So let us all together delight in what is wholesome that we're doing here together.

While I was on retreat recently, I stepped back and took a high-level view of what practice is about for me and therefore what I understand teaching to be for. And things got really simple in a way that I wondered if I'm deluding myself. So I'm just going to tell you what I think. This is not from the Pali Canon. It's just from my own thoughts. See what you think of it.

It occurred to me that everything that we do in our practice and everything that we as teachers say to you is for one or more of three aims. There are really just three things I think that we're doing here.

The first is to brighten the mind. Brightening the mind means bringing about clearly wholesome qualities that bring joy, that bring energy, that uplift our spirits, that give us confidence and the energy to carry out this path. So that's the first part. Some instructions are to brighten the mind.

Another set of instructions has to do with finding inner peace. This is one of the greatest immediate benefits of our meditation practice. We find access to levels of peace that most people only touch for moments in a busy daily life. But we find a way to access them regularly and more and more to rest there, to abide with that peace. And that peace brings a great quality of contentment into our life.

And the third thing is that we are trying to understand more deeply the nature of things. We want to understand the nature of our human experience in a deeper way because ultimately it's the wisdom of seeing the way things are that frees our hearts and minds.

So I'm going to suggest that you think about your practice in these terms: brightening the mind, finding greater inner peace, and developing understanding. And you might keep these in mind over the whole month and see if they resonate for you. See if these are in fact where your practice is heading. All of these three are very wholesome factors. And they are factors that grow directly out of our meditation practice.

I also think that the first level of brightening the mind might be sufficient for finding what I'd call normal human happiness. There is a way of being happy and content in the world that's available to anyone who develops these factors of brightening the mind. And I'll talk more about the details when we get into that topic.

And then the qualities of peace and insight are really on another track, which is more than normal human happiness. It's the path to liberation. It's the path to really freeing the mind from the deepest roots of human suffering or the suffering of sentient beings.

So as I think of it, there are these two directions that one can take meditation practice and Dharma practice. One is toward normal human happiness and there are specific practices for that. And the other is to liberation and as much freedom as you care to reach and there are practices for that. And so one can orient one's path in one direction or both directions.

In fact, if you orient your path to liberation, to freeing the heart and mind, you will cultivate the qualities for normal human happiness as you go. So you might almost say that normal human happiness is a side benefit of the path to liberation. But if your approach is more about just finding a happy life in the world, then there is a way for that as well.

Both paths are respected in the Buddhist tradition. It's not that you have to sign up for the PhD course in our practice. Both paths are respected and wonderful things to do because bringing a life into the world that is a genuinely happy life is a great contribution to the world. The world needs your happiness. It needs your care and positive energy. It seems like especially now, but I don't know that the world has ever been any different. But certainly it needs it now. It feels to me like we're going through a dark era right now. But maybe it's always felt like that. I'm not sure.

All right, so I want to talk a little more about both of these directions. First, the path of brightening the mind.

The Buddha said that there are three activities that are what he called the bases for meritorious action. That means action that's really, really wholesome to do. So one of these is giving. One of these is virtue or sila or ethical conduct, whatever you'd like to call it.

And the person I was talking to about organizing this said, "Oh yes, that's wonderful. A lunch for the whole monastery would cost about $35."

$35 to feed 750 people lunch! I was just astonished. I said, "Well, my donor gave me several hundred dollars. What else could we offer?" And he said, "Well, we could sponsor lunch for a week, or we could sponsor breakfast and lunch for several days."

So we ended up sponsoring meals for quite a while with this donation. But what really struck me was the simplicity of their needs and how little it took to make such a meaningful offering.

And then I got to witness something extraordinary during my time there. Every single day, laypeople would come to the monastery to offer food. Not just once in a while - every single day. There would be families, individuals, sometimes groups of people who would arrive with enormous pots of rice, curries, vegetables, fruit. They would come at dawn to prepare the meal, and they would serve it to all 750 people with such joy and devotion.

I watched grandmothers bent over from age still insisting on serving the monks their food personally. I watched families who clearly didn't have very much materially speaking offer what they could with such genuine happiness. Children would come with their parents, learning this practice of generosity from the earliest age.

And what was so moving was to see how much joy it brought them. They weren't giving reluctantly or out of obligation. They were radiant. There was this quality of delight in their giving that was unmistakable.

This is what the Buddha was pointing to when he talked about dana as a basis for meritorious action. Generosity naturally brightens the mind. When we give - whether it's our time, our resources, our attention - something in us opens up. The tight, grasping quality of the mind relaxes. We feel connected to something larger than our small self and its endless wanting.

And it doesn't have to be dramatic gestures. It can be as simple as offering your seat on the bus, bringing flowers from your garden to a friend, volunteering an hour at a food bank, or listening deeply when someone needs to be heard. The scale matters much less than the spirit behind it.

Seven hundred and fifty people—about four hundred monks, one hundred and fifty nuns, and the rest a mix of laywomen and laymen. So we thought it would be nice to offer a lunch.

As you know, Burma is one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth. Because of the corrupt military dictatorship that has taken all the funds, they're rich in natural resources, but these have been controlled by the dictators and their cronies. So the people are very poor, generally very poor. And this monastery was out in the country.

I spoke with the clerk of the monastery, wanting to offer a lunch for dana, and he said, "I'm sorry, all lunches have already been sponsored for the next three months." The poorest country—one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth—and people had already pledged to provide lunches for seven hundred and fifty practitioners because they so valued what those people were doing.

Every day, I would come down for the meal, and there was a big whiteboard with the name of the family or village—sometimes it would be a whole clan that had offered the lunch for that day, because it was not cheap feeding seven hundred and fifty people. The donors would be sitting off to the side, watching the monks and nuns go through the line and fill their bowls with the food they had provided. Many of them were rural villagers who came dressed in their best clothes, and they would be so happy to witness this. They'd see Pauk Sayadaw, the head of the line—a monk with basically sixty years in robes, an acknowledged master all over the country—as the first to take his meal from their offering. And they would look so happy.

So this is the joy and the brightening that generosity gives. Where Buddhism has been implanted in the culture for a long time, you really feel this very strongly. The reason it's such an important part of dharma practice is that we might represent clinging or attachment like this with a closed fist, and generosity is the open fist that offers what we have to share with others. So it actually is a practice that undoes grasping and clinging and attachment. It also generates empathy because it makes us tune into other people's situations. We have to think about the needs of the people that we're offering to. And that brings happiness in itself.

I don't know if you see it this way, but one of the reasons I love the holiday season—whether it's Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa, they all are connected with giving gifts—is that it's a time of year when a lot of us are thinking about what we can get to give somebody that they will really enjoy having. And I find there's just this uplift of spirit around those times because of the practice of generosity. Of course, as a kid, I felt an uplift of spirit from a different motive, but the adults seemed happier then too, so that was nice.

If you think about giving to someone or think about a gift that you've given that was appreciated, how does it make you feel? You feel bright, don't you? Feel happy, a little bit uplifted. That's the beauty of generosity.

The second part of the brightening practice is about ethical conduct, or sila, sometimes called virtue. I don't think there's a great word in English to translate this quality, so I'm going to use the word sila a lot. That's the Pali term for it. Virtue sounds a little Victorian, and ethical conduct sounds a little too much like it came out of a philosophy class, so I just kind of like sila.

We took the five precepts together when we arrived, and this is the basis for sila for us as laypeople. Monks and nuns take many more precepts than this, but for us this is a good start. It involves, as you know, the commitment to not killing, not taking what isn't given, not using our sexuality in ways that will harm others, not speaking falsely, and not using drugs and intoxicants that cause heedlessness for us.

These are called and understood in our tradition not as commandments but as training precepts. In other words, we undertake these as part of dharma training to learn the habit of being considerate in our conduct. Sometimes it's not our natural inclination. There are many times when the forces in our own heart of greed, aversion, and delusion would lead us to break these precepts. But because we've taken the precepts as commitments, we restrain the acting out of greed, aversion, and delusion, which can cause suffering to us and suffering to others. So we hold back or restrain these forces from the mind that can cause harm so they don't come out in actions.

But we know we're not going to do it perfectly because these forces are strong in us. So we don't take the precepts thinking that we're going to keep them perfectly. We take them knowing we're going to break them. But that's okay because then we learn, "Oh, this is what happens if I don't follow the precept." So they're kind of like our educators. They're our guidelines to learn from. We just do the best we can. It protects others and in that it protects us also.

We were at a Christmas gathering with some friends and the invitation was just tossed out: "Do you have an aspiration for the new year?" This could be like a resolution, but being Buddhists, we tend not to take resolutions. So our aspiration—we were just asked to state our aspirations. Just on the spur of the moment, I said, "I'd like to go through the year without getting verbally angry at anybody." And so that's my intention or aspiration for the year. So far, so good, but we're only a month in. And United Airlines came really close to testing me on that one.

But so far, so good.

So we take the precepts to avoid causing suffering to others, and it benefits us as well. This is from the Buddha again: "The purpose of sila is for freedom from remorse." That means we don't reflect on our actions and feel bad about what we've done. And

freedom from remorse is for gladness. So when we can look back at our actions and feel we haven't done things in violation of the precepts, that also brightens the mind. That brings a quality of joy to the mind.

And then the sequence goes on. The purpose of gladness is to let us settle into the present moment, and settling into the present moment is to see things as they are, and seeing things as they are is to awaken. So sila ties directly into the path of awakening.

Here's another thing the Buddha said about this. He said there are four kinds of bliss available to lay people. I think there are more, but here are his four: having enough money to get by, enjoying the money that we have, not being in debt, and being free of blame in our conduct. And he said of these, the greatest is the bliss of blamelessness—the bliss of reviewing our conduct and feeling it was not blameworthy.

The third of the brightening factors is loving-kindness. You could say generally it's about developing a really good heart. And loving-kindness is a good place to start. Loving-kindness leads naturally into other qualities like compassion and joy. So we see it as a beginning, and then it develops further.

All the brahmaviharas, which I think Bonnie introduced this afternoon, are states that uplift the heart and mind and bring gladness and brightness to us. So it's interesting, isn't it? Because metta is the quality of caring about ourselves, yes, but also others. It's interesting that caring about others brightens our own mind. This is an interesting thing to learn about—that caring about others brings satisfaction, fulfillment, gladness to ourselves. That's a beautiful discovery.

Once we have developed these qualities like love, compassion, and joy, if we practice them a lot, they get stronger, and then they become allies in times of difficulty. There are going to be times that we need the support of love, compassion, and joy. And if we've developed them well, that brightness of mind will be a really good ally for us.

To continue the Burma monastery story: I ordained at the start of the rains retreat. I was right back in robes, very quickly. I didn't have much time to adjust to the environment. And in the years since I had not been a monk, I'd sort of forgotten how to tie my robes. You may know that if you're wearing Theravadan robes, it's basically just a big sheet that you've learned to wrap around yourself and tie with a kind of sleeve. Part of it gets formed into a sleeve, but that's a roll that can easily roll off your left shoulder. So that was happening to me.

It's called the Rains Retreat for a reason. So the first two weeks that I was there, I hardly saw the sun. I think it was raining on average three inches a day. The meditation hall was about a fifteen-minute walk uphill from my cottage, so I had to do that something like six times a day for the scheduled sittings.

The practice was difficult. We were doing meditation on the breath just at the upper lip. This was the only place one was allowed to go twenty-four hours a day if you were awake that much. In sitting, in walking, and in anything else, we were just following the breath here. There was no other instruction. I came to Sayadaw and I said, "Well, what about when hindrances come up?" He said, "Oh, if you're sleepy, pull your earlobe. And if you're having aversion, do some metta. Otherwise, just stay here." So it was a very narrow focus. You couldn't really go to explore emotions, much less do loving-kindness or beam out energy at the trees. So that was very narrow.

The schedule was difficult. We were sitting eight hours a day. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half. The longest sitting was two hours. The biggest spider I'd ever seen in my life was building a huge web right on the porch of my cottage, which I'd see every time I went out.

In those moments of struggle, walking back from the dining hall in the rain, juggling my bowl and umbrella while Burmese devotees bowed by the muddy path, everything felt overwhelming. The meditation practice wasn't progressing as I had hoped—it was adequate, but far from inspiring. When I asked the Sayadaw about working with hindrances, his only advice was to "pull your earlobes," which felt insufficient for the depth of discouragement I was experiencing.

I had brought with me a photograph of the Dalai Lama, who represents for me one of the most inspiring human beings I have ever encountered. This image sat on a small altar I had created in my cottage. In my moment of greatest need, I turned to him with genuine supplication. "Your Holiness," I said, "I'm really struggling now. Do you have any advice for me?"

What happened next was extraordinary. An answer came, crystal clear and unmistakably in his voice—that distinctive, high-pitched, Indian-accented English that is so characteristic of his speech. I could hear him perfectly: "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the transmission ended.

The wisdom of these words struck me immediately. When would staying cheerful, optimistic, and confident not be helpful? This became my refuge during the remaining difficult moments. When discouragement arose, I would remind myself: stay cheerful, stay optimistic, stay confident. It will work out. While I couldn't always remember what cheerfulness actually felt like, this guidance provided an anchor.

What made this practice accessible was my previous cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, and joy. Because I had spent time developing these wholesome mental factors, I retained some memory of their texture and quality. Even in my depleted state, I could sometimes call these bright states back into awareness.

This points to something profound about the practices of dana, sila, and metta—generosity, ethics, and loving-kindness. These practices genuinely bring brightness to the mind. When sustained over time, they create an ever-increasing sense of happiness and well-being. But what's most significant is that all three are fundamentally relational practices.

These are not solitary exercises conducted in isolation. They are practices that unfold in relationship—with other beings, with people, with animals, with life itself. They connect us to the web of existence, and it is precisely through these connections that brightness emerges. This is not merely coincidental; it reveals something essential about the nature of happiness and spiritual development. The sources of true brightness are found not in withdrawal from the world, but in our compassionate engagement with it.

And because they're relational practices, they're available to anybody. You don't have to be Buddhist to do these. You can find these same expressions, the importance of these, in all major religions that carry these as important values. This is also why some of these practices are getting so widespread in the world. Mindfulness is becoming—it's the new yoga. Just as yoga was in the nineties, mindfulness is now. It's in hospitals, it's in schools, it's in prisons, it's in sports.

This is a quote from Steve Kerr, the coach of the Golden State Warriors: "There are four values I try to instill in my team. They are joy, mindfulness, compassion, and competition." When I read that, I thought he was channeling James. I thought he'd taken James' Awakening Joy course when he said that. Of course, we don't have to do competition, but if you want to get into it... no, we won't go there.

Those are the qualities that brighten the mind. If you think about people you know who are truly happy, see if they don't embody generosity, conduct, and loving-kindness. In my experience, they do. These are the sources of human happiness.

Then we have this whole other track that's about freeing the mind. Of course, all of you are here for a long retreat, a month or two months. We're going to talk a lot about freeing the mind. We're going to assume that this is a track that you're interested in and a track that we will be encouraging you to be interested in for the time that you're here.

To the extent that we walk it, we free the mind to that extent. It can be walked to such an extent that the mind becomes fully liberated. In our tradition, that means from the forces—the internal forces of greed, of hatred, and of delusion. This is possible for a human being: to liberate the mind to that extent that those forces no longer operate within us.

The first of these I mentioned was the deep sense of peace. Traditionally, this is called the development of samatha. I think Sally mentioned that this morning. Samatha is usually translated as tranquility or serenity. The development of insight, which is the complementary half of that, is called vipassana. That's the name given to our meditation practice generally and is translated as insight meditation—the understanding that seeing things as they are is what frees the mind.

The Buddha said that this freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion is the highest form of happiness. This is what he called nibbana. This is where the path of mindfulness and the Eightfold Path is leading. It's heading in that direction. We can choose to walk it as far as we want, but for all of us, that's the direction that it's going in when we apply the factors of the Eightfold Path.

Let me talk briefly about the quality of peace and the quality of insight by focusing on two factors in the path. With peace, I want to talk about the path factor called Right Concentration, samma samadhi. This refers to a mind that has become composed, collected and stable in the present moment.

You've all experienced this to greater or lesser degrees. When you feel yourself really arrive in the present moment and you can connect with two or three breaths in a row and thoughts aren't shoving you away out of the moment for a while, that is the first indicator of this quality of samadhi or collectedness. I invite you to examine that experience because I think what you'll find is there's a strength and a stability in that way of being that is very satisfying, because it is starting to touch into this quality of inner peace. It gives the mind a great source of strength and that is satisfying.

Concentration develops just from frequent moments of mindfulness. The more continuous the moments of mindfulness are, the sooner the quality of steadiness will develop. You don't have to press for concentration. You don't have to think, "Oh, I'm going to try for concentration now." All you have to do is be mindful in each moment when you have a choice. The moments of mindfulness do the work of concentration.

Concentration can't be willed, can't be forced, can't be brought about by active volition. But by volition, you can pay attention. And moments of paying attention lead to this quality of being present.

This is just like a law of gravity—this is the way it happens. So don't think, "I can't do this. I'll never know concentration; it's beyond me." All you have to do is be mindful as much as you can, and this will develop.

I love this quote from Joseph's first teacher, Munindraji: "If you sit and know that you're sitting, the whole of the Dharma will unfold for you." This is the trust in mindfulness, just simple mindfulness. So this will bring about that sense of stillness and peace that then becomes the foundation for understanding. When the mind is still, it can see more clearly.

The insight piece is about understanding the nature of things. In the Eightfold Path, it's represented by the first two path factors, which are right view and right intention. Of these, I want to talk specifically about right view. It's the first step in the Eightfold Path, and it's the most important. All the eightfold path is there to generate the factor of right view. But we have to start with it so that we get on the right track from the beginning. Then everything else feeds into it. Concentration feeds into seeing things the way they are.

Classically, right view is defined as understanding the Four Noble Truths. Sometimes it's a little tricky—what does right view mean? Think of it as understanding the Four Noble Truths. We'll talk a lot more about these as we go, but the Four Noble Truths are suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to the end of suffering. Obviously, suffering and its end are the aim of the Eightfold Path. That's what the path is all about. That's what the Buddha's liberation teachings are all about.

Of course, this is a big field. The field of suffering is huge in our world, and it's always been huge. I want to read this from a research project: "According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data ac-

cumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be, given everything it must put up with. Nine out of ten of the respondents identified by just their initials for the purpose of the survey stated that they would give up completely if they knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail. In a personal note in the afterward, researchers stated that statistically speaking, life is, quote, 'just too much,' and as yet they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through it at all."

So, science confirming what we already know. You may feel like this sometimes—life is just too hard, or practice is just too hard. Unfortunately, your chance of getting something in the mail has gone away. Too bad.

The Four Noble Truths are all about understanding suffering and coming to its end. But the noble truths are not just things that we believe in. These aren't just concepts that we're supposed to adopt. The Four Noble Truths are calls to action, and every truth has its own call and its own action.

The first noble truth, the truth of suffering—the Buddha said it's to be understood. That's our call: to understand what creates suffering. Of course we want to understand it for ourselves. Where does our own personal suffering originate from? How is it created and maintained? This is a key focus for our practice during this period, during this month or two months. How does suffering arise in our direct experience, moment by moment? This is our call, especially on retreat. You all have generated the time and space in your life to devote to the examination of this question: How can I understand suffering and therefore hopefully release it?

In the world, and to some extent here too, we want to understand this on a broader level, not just our personal suffering. We also want to understand the social suffering and the suffering in the world that is avoidable if we understand correctly. I think some of the really important issues of our time involve understanding how our attitudes, which we haven't examined closely, may be helping to perpetuate racial injustice in the world.

For all of us to understand how our actions and our use of resources are contributing to the climate crisis that could overwhelm many human beings, many creatures, and change the environment for a long time to come. For us all to understand how our habits of eating are landing on the animals who have some role in the production of that food. What is the suffering like in their realm as they are slaughtered or as they are used for milk or eggs? These too are the direct result of our own actions.

So we want to understand these issues socially and in the world, and in retreat we especially want to look at our own suffering.

The second part, the second noble truth, tells us that the cause of suffering is to be abandoned, and that is identified as craving. So we are encouraged to abandon craving, which is a synonym for greed, hatred, and delusion. They cover the same ground. We're asked: how can we give up greed? How can we give up hatred? How can we give up confusion? First comes the acknowledgment that these are forces in our own hearts and minds. We are being asked to give up deep forces that are part of us.

There's this very moving scene in the movie *Kundun*, Scorsese's film about the life of the Dalai Lama. In it, he shows the young Dalai Lama being tutored when he still lived in the Potala Palace before the invasion of his country. His tutors were grilling him on the meaning of the second noble truth.

"The second noble truth is the cause of suffering is craving," he said.

"No, no, no, make it more personal. What does it mean to you?"

"The second noble truth—that's because I have craving."

"No, no, no, that's too general. What does it mean to you?"

Finally he said, "The cause of most of my suffering are the habits of my own mind."

"Oh, very good. Very good."

This is the pointer of the second noble truth. The cause of most of our suffering comes from the habits of our own mind. In this retreat we'll be led to see this again and again.

Now our own mind may have been shaped by forces way beyond our control or wish. It may have been shaped by childhood abuse or mistreatment, by prejudice and discrimination and the oppression of racism, by gender discrimination, homophobia—all sorts of forces in the world have shaped our minds. The world is generally not going to fix that. To fix that, we are going to have to look at what we have been left with. This is the area of the second noble truth.

The third noble truth is that the end of suffering is to be realized. This applies both long term—we are to realize the complete end of suffering in our path—but in the short term, any time we're suffering, that end of suffering is to be realized, is to be reached. How does that happen? By abandoning craving.

So in any moment in which craving has gripped us—which is the second noble truth, causing suffering—can we learn to release that and move temporarily into the third noble truth, the opening to freedom from that particular instance of craving? In this way, the third noble truth, the truth of the freedom from suffering, gets realized again and again and again in our practice. That's what we're here for: to learn how to move from the second noble truth to the third noble truth, from being caught to being free.

The way to the end of this suffering is the Eightfold Path, which we've talked about some and will continue to talk about. Specifically here, the development of the meditation portion supported by sila, leading to wisdom.

So, Right View. Sariputta, one of the Buddha's two great disciples, said that there are two conditions for the arising of Right View. The first is hearing the voice of another. That's all he said, but I find this really interesting. What I understand it to mean is we hear the voice of a spiritual friend or a teacher who comes from Right View. We hear someone like the Buddha or disciples speaking the correct understanding.

What this means to me is that Right View is contagious. We get it from other people. We get it from people who have walked the path before us and who have gone further on the path than we have. By listening to them and their understanding of the world, themselves, us, the path, and practice, that draws us into alignment with Right View—which is, as I understand it, the way the Buddha saw the world and saw our situation, centered around the Four Noble Truths. How do we orient our lives around suffering and its end as calls to action?

This is what Right View is about—orienting our lives around these truths. And this is the best environment I know of to do that. So, continuing to really listen as we attempt to talk about these truths as best as we understand them and can communicate them. Not that you have to agree with us on everything, but just to understand that part of what we're trying to do is share right view and align us all in that direction.

The second part is wise attention. Wise attention means: is your attention going into something that's going to be helpful for you? Because where we give our attention, there we give our energy. There we invest our care and the resources of our heart and mind. So a simple question is, where was your attention today? Was it on the Four Noble Truths? Could you see the suffering of the moment as a noble truth? Or was it going into a lot of thinking about personal problems?

Personal problems naturally arise—they have kind of the pull of gravity when we get into silence. If you've chipped a part of your tooth off, your tongue goes looking for it all the time, just keeps wanting to feel that chip that's absent. Personal problems are

like that. When there's a personal problem in our mind, thoughts want to go there and try to figure it out. But thinking seldom gets us through personal problems. What tends to get us through personal problems is dropping to a deeper level of silence and having a new understanding.

So I want to recommend that as thoughts come up centering around personal problems, see if you can say, "Not now." Return the attention to the present moment. Giving attention to the present moment is wise attention, even if the attention is on a hindrance. In this moment, I'm feeling confused. Good. Mindfulness knows confusion. In this moment, I'm feeling worry. Good. Mindfulness knows worry. This is wise attention. But dwelling with thoughts isn't so helpful. We want to learn not to give all our attention in that direction.

So this is the unfolding of Right View and the Eightfold Path. And this is the way to free the mind, either a little bit or all the way. One of the things people ask, in retreat and in daily life, is: is that really possible, to free the mind all the way? Which is asking, is full enlightenment a real possibility today?

I want to close with this reading from the autobiography of a teacher named Ajahn Liem. Ajahn Liem is the current abbot of Wat Ba Pong in Thailand, which is the monastery founded by Ajahn Chah, who was Jack Kornfield's teacher and Ajahn Sumedho's teacher. This is a story of his practice when he was a monk under Ajahn Chah, going back to the year 1969. Ajahn Liem is older now, but this is from his practice when he was a younger monk, still practicing under the direction of Ajahn Chah.

"Around the middle of the rainy season, Luang Por Chah—Luang Por just means spiritual father, another word for Ajahn—encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity, so Ajahn Liem increased his efforts, and results became evident. Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit in meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and then stop to have a rest, but on this day I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture.

"A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body, as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, an experience of the whole body becoming completely light and at ease—cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. This experience continued on throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years, all from that one time.

"All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before—I don't know where they all disappeared to. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose. There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. The experience of this feeling has lasted continuously all the time since then."

There has been no change all the way up to the present day."

Let us sit together for a moment and allow these words to settle deeply within us. "Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any." This same state continues to last—stable, continuous, and without change.

What we have witnessed in Luang Por Chah's account is nothing less than the complete transformation that comes with the ending of suffering. This is not a temporary peak experience or a fleeting glimpse of peace, but the permanent establishment of the unconditioned. The kilesas that had tormented him simply vanished, leaving behind a peace that knows no disturbance.

When he says "questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any," we hear the voice of one who has crossed to the far shore. This is not the absence of pain or discomfort in the body, but the complete extinction of the mental suffering that comes from our resistance to life as it is. The heart that was once agitated by the endless arising and passing of phenomena now rests in unshakeable equanimity.

This teaching reminds us of what is truly possible through the path of Dhamma. It points beyond the gradual reduction of suffering to its complete cessation. Luang Por Chah's experience stands as a beacon, showing us that the Buddha's promise of liberation is not metaphorical but utterly real and achievable.

As we reflect on these words, let them inspire our own practice. The same potential for complete freedom lies within each of us, waiting to be uncovered through patient cultivation of mindfulness, wisdom, and letting go. The peace that Luang Por Chah found—stable, continuous, and unchanging—is the birthright of every sincere practitioner who follows the path to its ultimate completion.

May his example encourage us to practice with unwavering dedication, knowing that the goal is not merely the management of suffering, but its total transcendence.

CHAPTER 138

Day 3 Morning Instructional Sit

Guy Armstrong · 43 min

> *In this third day morning instruction from a February month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong provides comprehensive guidance for establishing mindfulness meditation practice. He begins by emphasizing panoramic awareness - recognizing that being present involves all six sense doors functioning together: bodily sensations, sounds, thoughts, emotions, and visual awareness. This broad field of experience becomes the foundation for developing sati (mindfulness) as an awake, alert intelligence.*
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> *Armstrong introduces the concept of yoniso manasikāra (wise attention), explaining how choosing what to pay attention to skillfully shapes our understanding and insight. He guides practitioners through establishing different possible meditation anchors: whole-body breathing awareness, localized breath sensations at the nostrils or abdomen, sounds as objects of awareness, or body posture itself. The instruction emphasizes receptive attention rather than forced concentration, allowing natural stability to develop.*
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> *Practical guidance addresses common meditation challenges including working with thinking mind and physical pain. When pain arises strongly, Armstrong suggests investigating it directly as a mindfulness object, observing its bare physical qualities while noticing any mental reactions like aversion or fear. He emphasizes how mental contraction around pain often intensifies suffering, while relaxed awareness can help soften both physical discomfort and emotional reactivity. This approach reflects the Buddha's teaching in the Sallatha Sutta about the difference between unavoidable physical pain and optional mental suffering.*

Beginning as you sit here, just notice in a panoramic way everything that's in your experience. Notice that being in the moment is a situation where all the senses are alive and functioning.

As you sit, you can feel sensations through the body. You can hear sounds in the room or from outside. Thoughts are coming and going. There's a certain mood in the heart or mind. If your eyes are gently closed, there's maybe a grayish screen in the visual field, perhaps a few flecks of light or changes in color. This is the basic field for our meditation.

The key element at this moment is that you are alive and awake to all of it or any of it. That awake quality is the heart of mindfulness. Although we'll give different instructions about what to pay attention to within this broad field of awareness, never forget that the awakeness within the field is the main thing that we're emphasizing and developing.

As I talked about last night, wise attention means choosing intelligently what to pay attention to. What we pay attention to shapes our experience and will shape our understanding and insight. We'll give more specific instructions, but remember that they're all in the context of this awake, aware intelligence that takes place within the broad field of our whole sense experience. Body, mind, heart, and environment—it's all here in every moment.

As you sit within this broad field with your awake alertness, let that attention first fill the whole body. Have a sense that the awareness is pervading the whole body. The body is immersed in this awake awareness. Just connect with what it feels like to be sitting. If there are any obvious areas of holding, you can relax them. Let the eyes be soft, the jaw dropped, the shoulders not held, and let the belly be soft.

We want to have a mental attitude of relaxation in the experience of the moment, because we're not trying to make anything else happen. We're not trying to force any particular experience. We just want to be alive and awake to the experience as it's happening in this moment. So we can relax and trust that. You can trust your body to sit. You can trust your mind to do what minds do. And you can trust that awareness to know it. We're just sitting with this openness to the body, aware and in touch, letting the body be just as it is.

Now reconnect with that broader space of knowing by attending for a while to sounds. Let the awareness open in a 360-degree way, aware of any sounds that are coming and going. Sounds near you. Sounds throughout the hall. The sound of my voice. Sounds from outside. When things are very quiet, you can pay attention to the extent of the silence, the breadth of silence.

When sounds come, notice that you don't have to make any effort for them to be heard. You're just sitting in this relaxed way with an attention in the present, and every sound is known effortlessly, spontaneously.

Now reconnect with the sense of the body and the sitting posture. As you sit feeling the body, start to notice the impact of breathing. The body's experience changes every time you breathe in, every time you breathe out. We're just present with this same relaxed attention—not so much watching the body as feeling the body as it breathes.

There's not a separate watcher or observer, but we're feeling the body from within because the awareness is right with the breath. Just one experience of breathing and we're there to feel it.

If you like, you can continue to feel the breath through the whole body. If this is a comfortable anchor for you, it can be a very integrated way to develop this stability of attention. Or if you're comfortable experiencing the breath and it's clearer in a small area like the nose, the belly, or the chest, that's fine too. You can let the attention settle in one of those areas.

In this sense, the attention can just rest there. Again, in a very receptive way, just feeling the experience of breathing in and breathing out. Sometimes it can be helpful to add a soft mental note of "in" and "out" at the nose, or "rising" and "falling" at the belly or chest. But let the experience be 90% with the physical sensations of breathing. Just keep a fraction of the attention—10%—on the soft mental note.

If the breath serves as a good home base for you, a good anchor, then keep returning to it. Keep it in the forefront of awareness. Keep your attention there as much as possible. This will help stabilize the ability to be present.

If you find yourself getting tight around the breath, you can open up to feel the whole body again. Make the body posture your anchor. Or some people find that attending to sounds is a good anchor for them. The spaciousness and receptivity of hearing really helps the mind to relax and soften.

Hopefully over these days, you'll have found the best anchor for you in the sitting meditation—something that you can come back to again and again. It becomes your home.

Of course, as you're attending to the moment, thoughts will come that are seductive enough to carry us away with their content. We'll follow a train of thoughts for a few seconds, a few minutes, or twenty minutes. This is natural. This happens as the meditation develops.

So when you notice that you have been thinking, appreciate the return to the present moment. Acknowledge that the thoughts are there, and then choose to reconnect with what's happening—breath, body, or sounds. Reconnect with your anchor.

Other times you might find it hard to stay with the anchor because of some pain in the body. When pain becomes strong, it has a powerful call on the attention, and you might feel that you'd have to struggle to keep attention with the anchor. If that's the case, don't struggle with it. Let the attention go to the physical sensation of the pain. Let your awareness go right into the experience of pain.

The pain isn't actually a threat, but it can feel unsettling. So take the pain as the focus for mindfulness. Let yourself open to feeling it in its bare physical nature—pressure or aching or stabbing, tightness, contraction.

When you've been with the pain enough that there feels to be some space around it, some ability to accommodate it, you can return the attention to the anchor and settle again. Or if the pain continues to be strong and naturally calls the attention, let it be your object for however long that is. That's fine.

As you're attending to the pain, see if you notice any emotional or mental reaction to it. Is there aggravation or irritation? A judgment that it shouldn't be there? Disliking? Fear of the pain? If there is, also notice the mental reaction and see how a reaction of disliking or fear will cause a contraction in the body. The contraction doesn't help to soften the pain.

So if you can, stay open to the pain in a soft, relaxed way. The mental relaxation, if anything, will help the pain to soften as well.

What's happening now? As you connect again with the present moment—thought, body posture, in-breath, sounds, discomfort in the body—again refine that alert, awake intelligence that knows what your experience is. That is mindfulness.

CHAPTER 139

Day 6 Brahmavihāra Instructions: Mettā for Self, Benefactor and Dear Friend

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

In this sixth day of brahmavihāra instructions, Guy Armstrong introduces the practice of mettā (loving-kindness) for a dear friend, building upon the foundation established with self and benefactor. Using the traditional metaphor of cascading pools flowing down a mountainside, he explains how mettā naturally develops from where it's easiest—beginning with ourselves—and then overflows to benefit others. The teaching emphasizes that unlike vipassanā practice which often directs us toward difficulty, mettā cultivation starts where caring feels most natural and accessible.

Armstrong offers practical guidance for selecting an appropriate friend—someone with whom there's genuine warmth and connection but minimal complication. He introduces a four-step technique: visualizing the person, feeling the heart connection, sending the phrase with genuine intention, and returning awareness to the heart center to feel the resonance. The instruction stresses that sincere caring, rather than mere repetition of phrases, is what transforms the heart and develops our capacity for genuine concern for others' welfare.

The talk addresses common challenges in mettā practice, including the impermanent nature of loving feelings and the importance of not forcing emotions. Armstrong explains how this practice ultimately cultivates an intention of caring that infuses all our interactions, changing not just our emotional responses but our fundamental orientation toward others in daily life.

Meditation on loving kindness, we're going to introduce a new individual, new category called the friend or the dear friend.

So you'll notice that we're expanding the categories as we go, starting with self, moving to benefactor, and today moving to friend. And we'll move on from there as the next week unfolds. The reason that it unfolds like this is that we start with all the brahmavihāras—mettā and compassion and joy, equanimity, when we get there—where it's easiest. Isn't that nice? Vipassana always seems like we have to go where it's hardest, you know, we go for the hindrance, we go for the pain, we go for the burn, but in mettā we go where it's easiest.

So we start with the person that's considered easiest to care about and that's ourselves. Now it doesn't always mean that the mettā flows the biggest or the warmest or the juiciest for ourself. Sometimes it's a little dry doing mettā for ourself. But we care more about ourself than we care about anybody else. That's just the truth of things generally.

The image that's used in the text is that there's a mountain that has a stream of water coming down, a little stream that collects the rain when it falls. So at the top it starts to run down and then it fills up a little pool on the way down. And that pool takes a while to fill because the rain has to accumulate. When that pool fills, then it runs over, and then the water continues down the stream, down the hillside to the next pool. When that one fills up, then it runs over and runs down the hill to the next pool, and so on, until each pool down the way gets filled up.

So this first pool represents ourself. The idea is that we do mettā for self until it gets full enough that it runs over and we can extend it to somebody else. And that person, the next nearest person, is our benefactor. Somebody who's been kind to us, somebody who's been good, taken us under their wing, showed us help, and so on. When the benefactor fills up and it naturally runs over, then it goes to the third pool, which is the dear friend. So that's where we are today. We're going to be in the third pool of the dear friend. And as the week goes by, we'll fill up the other pools as it goes downhill.

One thing to say about this is that the pool for ourselves needs to fill up before we can really extend the mettā in a sincere way to someone else, to anyone else. Sometimes people come into the loving kindness practice and it's as though there's been a lack of love for self. It's been difficult to care for ourself. And sometimes that pool takes a long time to fill up. So people have come into the mettā practice and all they've wanted to do is mettā for self for like a couple of years or three years. And after that much time of mettā for self, that pool starts to fill up and then they're happy to extend to others.

So if it feels like that for you, if it feels like mettā for self is really the right place to be, then spend most of your time there. Let that pool fill up until it can naturally overflow to somebody else. For the purposes of learning, I'd suggest you try each of the categories anyway. Try the benefactor, try the friend. But in your own mettā as you do more during these days, let that pool fill up if that's where it feels the need is.

Today we're going to move on from the benefactor, and I hope people have said that if you don't have a personal benefactor that's a living human being, you can use somebody like a child, you can use a pet, you can use a friend in the benefactor category, somebody that's really easy to feel a lot of warmth for.

So that's the benefactor and today we're going to open it up to the dear friend. I'll invite you to pick a friend, somebody that you know well enough to have a real bond of connection and affection, but somebody with whom hopefully there's not too much complication. You know, when friendships go on for a while there tend to be little problems that come up sometimes, big problems that come up, and those can color our ability to just open our heart to the friend. That's just the reality of close friendships. So try to pick someone in the friend category where when you think of them you really feel this warmth and affection. And the first thing that comes isn't, "Oh, I wish they hadn't said that last week."

Some of that will be there with a friend. And because it tends to come, these old hurts—oh, they hurt me or I hurt them—these tend to come with friends. Tomorrow in this Brahmavihāra period, we're going to offer instructions in forgiveness meditation. So the friend often leads into the need to ask for forgiveness or offer forgiveness or forgive ourselves. So that's what we'll do tomorrow. But today is just for the friend. Hopefully it will be a positive experience.

So you can start to think about who you would like to bring in as your friend. You may have a number of friends that you could choose from. We recommend for these afternoon sessions, choose one, stay with that person, develop the meditation with that person. You see that it will go through ups and downs.

You know, you start, and there's a lot of warm feeling for the friend and it's really juicy. And then after a while, you just can't feel anything. You think, "Oh, I should switch my friend." Not necessarily. Allow the friend to stay and you'll see that the metta feeling is impermanent too. It will go through ups and downs. And it's kind of natural, isn't it? The heart has a rhythm. Sometimes it's open, sometimes it's closed. Sometimes open, sometimes closed.

What we're doing here, part of what we're doing here, is learning about the heart. Metta is a way of educating ourselves about how the heart works. It's got its own laws, its own principles. Sometimes it's a little bit like a shy child—doesn't want to be leaned on too much. Sometimes it's a little bit like a wild animal. If you try to force it, it'll run away.

So with the heart, we have to listen. We're really in the position of listening and not dictating to the heart. We just want to offer it this opportunity to care and then listen to how it responds. Sometimes it will care, sometimes it may not. That's okay. We're just here to listen, not to force, not to put pressure.

So you may think about some friends that you might like to bring in. In fact, in the first minutes of the meditation, you can audition a few people. You can bring them on the stage, let them dance, see how they step. "No, off stage. You're not the right one for this role." Bring on somebody else. That's fine.

The phrases, intention, and everything will be just like with yourself and benefactor.

I just want to make one more comment. The most important thing in the metta meditation is the moment where you send the phrase to the person and try to give it as much sincerity as you can. In other words, to mean the phrase as much as you can. It's the sincere, genuine caring that makes the practice come alive, that makes it work.

If you just repeat the metta phrases like a mantra, it won't really do anything except quiet your mind down. You have to imbue the phrase with meaning. Meaning, "I really do care about your welfare. I really do care about your happiness." And to the extent you can feel that in a genuine way, that's what will open the heart and change the heart.

And most deeply what it changes—sometimes it'll be warm, sometimes it'll be cool, that's okay—but most deeply what it changes is our intention. That when we look at somebody, when we're in contact with somebody, we care about what their experience is like. That's what this practice is really meant to do: to bring that caring attitude into every interaction.

So we practice it by caring. If you want to change the mind, you manifest that quality. So we're manifesting this caring.

I want to say one more thing about the practice. I'm going to offer this as a technique as we're doing the friend, and I'll introduce it now. Sometimes people say, "Oh, metta practice, too many words. Mine gets too busy. I just want to feel the metta. I want to feel what's there."

So I'm going to suggest a way to do the loving kindness practice that's more about feeling and space than about words. And that is to break it into four parts. Each phrase, you're going to break into four steps.

So, first step: call up an image. You've been told about working with image, right? That's a good thing to do, if you can. It's good to bring up an image of the person.

So the meditation begins by connecting with yourself through the heart center, that tender space in the center of your chest where emotions naturally arise and settle. Place your hand there if it helps create that connection. Remember what you genuinely appreciate about yourself—perhaps your humor, your capacity for empathy, your dedication to service, or simply your wisdom in choosing to be here on retreat.

These good qualities you recognize are not manufactured or forced; they are expressions of an innate goodness that has been with you since childhood. If you can touch that innocent, open period of your early life, you'll find that same fundamental goodness, that natural capacity for love that remains unchanged at your core.

There's a mysterious relationship between goodness and happiness—they seem to follow each other naturally. So connecting with this sense of your own inherent goodness becomes both the foundation for genuine caring and the wellspring of authentic happiness.

From this place of self-recognition, you can offer the metta phrases to yourself with sincerity:

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy and live in the world with joy.
May I be healthy and my body support me with strength.
May I live with the ease of well-being.

Stay rooted in that felt sense of yourself as you send these intentions inward.

When you feel ready, bring your benefactor to mind. Connect with them however feels natural—through an image, speaking their name silently, or remembering a meaningful moment together. Let yourself really appreciate their good qualities, the specific ways they have helped and supported you. Feel the genuine gratitude and affection you hold for this person.

From this clear recognition of your benefactor's goodness, begin offering the same phrases:

As I wish to be safe, may you be safe from harm.
May you be happy.
May you be healthy.
May you live with ease.

As you offer these phrases to your benefactor, release any expectation about what you should feel. Don't try to manufacture warmth or recreate some previous experience of metta. Simply speak the phrases authentically, allowing whatever natural feeling might arise to be present—whether that's obvious love, subtle appreciation, or no particular emotion at all.

What matters is the genuine moment of caring about their welfare, that simple wish for their wellbeing that arises from recognizing their goodness and remembering their kindness to you.

And then if you're ready, bring in a good friend. You might need to try one or two or three different people to see who's a good fit, but you can bring them to mind. See what feeling comes. Try to find a friend who, when you bring them to mind, there's a sense of liking, loving, warm, friendly feeling.

A friend is like the benefactor in being somebody that we already care about, but usually more of a peer relationship. And generally it's not so helpful to bring in a friend if there's a strong physical attraction, because then the metta gets mixed up with some other emotions.

So as you connect with your friend, try to visualize them or say their name. Get a feeling for their being, almost like they were in the room with you, sitting in front of you. And think about the qualities that you really appreciate in your good friend. You've shared so much with them. What can you see of their character? What are all the different facets you really like?

So in touch with your friend's goodness—all their beautiful qualities. Because it's said that seeing someone's goodness is the proximate cause of feeling metta for them.

So as you see your friend's goodness, let that feeling of caring come, and then start to express it through your phrases toward your friend:

May you be safe, happy, healthy, at ease.

And if you'd like to try this four-part metta, I'll just review the instructions briefly. You can play with it if you'd like.

So try bringing up an image of your friend. And then notice how you feel on seeing the image. Don't have to put it in words. Just notice the feeling that's there. And then let your phrase go out from your heart center toward the image. I like to do this on an out breath, but that's up to you.

And having said the phrase, return the attention to the heart center and just feel the resonance of that, the echo. What was it like to have wished your friend well?

And if you like, one more time: Image. Feeling. Phrase. Heart center. So you come back, rest in the body. And then carry on in whatever style you like.

It can help to have an image of your friend as smiling so that you feel their potential for happiness. But if they're in a hard situation right now, maybe what comes through is their sadness. That's okay. You can stay with the same phrases. The metta takes on a little of the flavor of compassion. You see some difficulty—it's okay, keep sending the same phrase. Notice if the metta feeling is a little bit different, that's okay.

Sometimes some memory might come up of something that happened between you and your friend—might bring some regret, some fear, some hurt, or some resentment. So that's fine. You can let that other emotion, which is not exactly metta, be there as well. Let it just be in the space. And just keep directing your attention to the phrase and the real wish for their happiness. And then the other emotion can be there. It's not a problem, but you keep turning your intention to their welfare.

If the connection with a friend starts to feel weak, then you can renew it by calling them to mind again, bringing up an image, remembering their good qualities, remembering times you spent together so that they stay alive in the moment to receive your metta.

If metta for the friend ever feels difficult or too complicated, you can just go back to doing metta for yourself or metta for your benefactor for a while. Go where it's easier. And then if you feel reestablished in that metta, you can come back and take up the friend again.

And for the last minutes of the sitting, just opening the attention in a wide way, aware of all the beings on the planet, living a human life, living an animal life, and all of them just wanting to be happy and not to suffer. So we have a wish that it's like that for all of them.

We're just closing and sending your metta phrases to all the beings on the planet:

May they all be safe and protected from harm.
May they be happy and live with joy.
May they be healthy and their bodies support them with strength.

May all beings live with the ease of well-being.

You can certainly incorporate metta into your other sittings—as much as you like. It's nothing but beneficial for all of us. As you bring loving-kindness into other practice sessions, you can continue working with yourself, your benefactor, and your friend. These are the three categories I work with most in my own practice. While we'll eventually move on to different categories, these three can serve as reliable allies in developing your loving-kindness practice. Cultivate metta with all of them and use them as they prove helpful.

Questions? Phoenix, then Joe.

Phoenix raises an important point about the traditional approach of starting with a benefactor, developing that loving feeling, and then directing it toward yourself—which differs from what I've described. She's absolutely right. While I've spoken about the image of cascading pools beginning with yourself and flowing to benefactor and friend, you can indeed start with whomever feels easier and then bring that metta back to yourself. This is an excellent technique.

The cascading pools isn't a rigid structure. As I mentioned, sometimes the metta feeling for ourselves isn't as strong as what we can generate for others. If you find that loving-kindness toward yourself feels thin or difficult to access, you can warm up the metta with someone else first. Then borrow that feeling and bring it back to yourself. This is a very skillful approach.

Joe asks about working with the four steps in relation to yourself and how to know when that pool has been filled sufficiently. Let me address some additional techniques for self-directed metta first, then return to that question.

You can absolutely use the four steps with yourself. When I'm practicing metta extensively, I'll hold a different image of myself for each phrase. When contemplating safety, I might imagine myself at home, engaged in something I enjoy, feeling completely secure. For happiness, I'll envision myself in an activity that makes me light up with joy. Try this approach—different images for each phrase. This keeps the mind bright, active, and engaged. While it might feel slightly busy initially, it's worth experimenting with, as each phrase can evoke its particular feeling.

Another beautiful way to work with self-directed metta involves emphasizing the receiving rather than just the sending. Usually when practicing with ourselves, we focus on sending metta but don't take time to receive it. We excel at giving—"I want you to be happy, I want you to be happy"—but when it comes to ourselves, we often think, "Well, I don't need it."

Here's a powerful technique for emphasizing reception: imagine all the people you care most about in your life seated in a semicircle before you. They're offering the metta phrases to you, so your only task is to receive their love. Because these are your closest people, you know they genuinely mean it as they speak to you. You might have six or eight people sitting there, and while you say the phrases—"May you be safe," and so forth—it's all flowing toward you. You simply rest in the position of receiving.

That's a beautiful practice. Another approach that people find nourishing is walking with your benefactor or friend—imagining, particularly during walking meditation, that you're walking together to the end of the path, arm in arm, sharing the phrase "may we be happy." Or you might visualize sitting peacefully with a benefactor or friend, offering the same shared intention: "may we be happy." In this way, you're truly sharing the metta between the two of you.

All of these approaches are skillful ways to work with loving-kindness toward yourself, and they all tend to generate more genuine feeling.

As for how you might know whether that inner pool of self-love needs more filling, I think it really comes down to a phrase that Sally likes to use: "May I love and accept myself just as I am." When you say these words, is there a sense that you already do love and accept yourself just as you are—more or less, or at least during your better moments? Or does something in you respond, "No, I really don't. I don't have that self-love, that self-acceptance."

If the answer that arises is "I really don't have that self-acceptance yet," then it can be tremendously helpful to spend more time filling that pool. Because when genuine self-acceptance is present, loving-kindness flows much more naturally toward everyone else.

This self-acceptance isn't an easy thing to cultivate. Many of us enter practice without a real love or affection for ourselves. But this can genuinely transform—sometimes completely—through the practice of metta and vipassana. It truly is possible, even if self-love feels entirely absent at the beginning, to develop this capacity in an authentic and lasting way.

In fact, I was speaking with someone in an interview recently who shared that lately in her practice, a big chunk of anxiety had simply dissolved. She said it had also helped her learn to relax for the first time in her life. Then she mentioned that her self-loathing had gone away—she had worked clear of it entirely.

I told her I thought the anxiety and the self-doubt were intimately connected. For many of us, when anxiety becomes a persistent pattern, what we're really anxious about is that we're not good enough. It expresses itself as this constant underlying unease. But when we genuinely feel our own goodness and trust in our fundamental okayness, much of that pervasive anxiety can simply fall away.

So this metta toward oneself isn't a small matter. It can profoundly transform our entire relationship to life.

A practitioner offered this observation: "When I'm on retreat and my body feels light and empty, I naturally feel love. When I feel stuck, I don't. It seems to flow from that relaxed state rather than the other way around."

That's absolutely true as well. When we come into retreat and the body can truly relax, some of that habitual anxiety releases, and then love becomes accessible. And conversely, when we feel love as a reliable presence in our lives, it naturally enhances our sense of self-worth. We look inside and recognize that this goodness is there, and that recognition of our own goodness becomes the proximate cause for metta toward ourselves to arise spontaneously.

Another question arose about the visualization practice: "In your third step, you emphasize extending the heart toward another. Could you also bring the other into the heart, thereby expanding that inner space?"

You absolutely can. While I suggested letting the phrase flow from the heart center toward the image of your benefactor, you could certainly experiment with visualizing your benefactor or friend directly within your heart center. We typically visualize people as separate from us because that's our ordinary experience of relationship. But what if you were to hold the image of your benefactor right in your heart space? This can create a beautifully intimate quality in the practice, so it's certainly worth exploring.

So the comment was, if you're sending to a benefactor or a friend and there's someone who has difficulty receiving the metta, you might imagine a few people sending to them at the same time as we did on the receiving circle for ourselves—people who are close to your benefactor or friend. Sure, you could do that. Yes, that's fine.

As I mentioned, you might be directing metta to someone and what's really apparent as you call them up is a difficulty they're going through. Then the feeling that comes through may be compassion. And that's okay. You can say the metta phrases and just notice, oh, this feeling has the flavor of compassion—and that's okay.

Okay, so we'll end there. We have half an hour for walking. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 140

Day 7 Morning Instructional Sit

Guy Armstrong · 44 min

> *In this seventh day of month-long retreat instruction, Guy Armstrong provides a comprehensive review of the foundational mindfulness practices introduced thus far. He offers a clear and accessible definition of mindfulness as "knowing what your experience is in the present moment" and guides practitioners through the primary meditation anchors: body posture, sounds, and breath awareness (ānāpānasati).*
>
> *Armstrong emphasizes the receptive quality of attention, teaching how to rest awareness effortlessly while remaining open to whatever arises naturally in experience. He systematically covers mindfulness of body sensations, emotions (including the five hindrances: kāmacchanda, byāpāda, thīna-middha, uddhacca-kukkucca, and vicikicchā), and thoughts. For emotional awareness, he presents a practical three-part framework: noticing bodily sensations, recognizing the mental tone or flavor, and observing accompanying thought patterns.*
>
> *This instruction exemplifies the comprehensive approach to satipaṭṭhāna (four foundations of mindfulness) practice, showing how to establish a stable meditation anchor while maintaining openness to the full range of present-moment experience. The teaching is particularly valuable for understanding how different meditation objects work together as a unified system rather than separate techniques.*

We've given a lot of instructions already, starting with the body, breath, sounds, emotions, thoughts, and attitudes. It may all have gone by in a bit of a blur. So this morning, before we add anything else—and we do have a few more things to add—I just want to review where we've been so far so that it starts to feel like it might be a coherent set of guidance.

Please sit comfortably. Find in your posture that expression of upright firmness and alertness, and also relaxed softness and receptivity. The mind and the body both are balanced between these two qualities.

Bring attention first into the body, just feeling yourself sitting here and now. Have a sense that your full awareness in the present can fill your whole body. There's no corner in the body that isn't pervaded by this conscious knowing. Remember that this alert knowing is the key thing we're cultivating in mindfulness practice. Whatever it's directed to, of the many aspects of our experience, what we're most interested in is this alert, aware attention.

I want to offer a really simple definition of mindfulness that you can take with you and keep checking as you go through the retreat. All the miracle and power of this practice comes from this simple activity, and it is knowing what your experience is in the present moment. That's all we're asking you to do. What's happening now?

We offer these different objects so that everything that comes in the range of your experience can be a comfortable object for you to know thoroughly. We break it up in the instructions, but really the experience is unified and you might be noticing any of these at any time.

We begin just being comfortable in the body. The body as it sits, the body posture, can be an excellent anchor in meditation. This can be the one thing that you come back to again and again to stabilize your attention. It can be your home base.

In practicing with the body posture as the main focus, what you do is take the whole thing in at a glance, as far as you can. Obviously there are different parts, different sensations—you might not quite get it all. But see about seeing the whole body sitting in one glance. That can be where you rest your attention.

Then if you like, you can let your attention open in a panoramic way, just aware of all the sounds that are coming and going. It could be sounds in the room of each other, sound of your own breathing, sounds from outside or the sound of my voice. Use sounds to give a breadth of attention that can give a sense of ease and relaxation.

Also notice as you pay attention to sounds, you don't have to do anything to hear. If your attention is open, the sound will be heard. It's like sitting in a concert hall, listening to a symphony. You just rest in the middle of all the sounds and they're known effortlessly and spontaneously. You don't have to send the attention out. The sound comes to you. Sounds are the second possible anchor for your practice.

Then return the attention to the body and just again let it rest within the whole body. As it rests there, you'll feel the impact of breathing. The body will change as you breathe in. It will change as you breathe out. What does that feel like breathing in? What does it feel like breathing out?

Again, let the attention be really receptive. You're not trying to control the breath and not doing pranayama breathing. We're letting it come and go on its own and we're just there to feel it. You might like to keep feeling it throughout the whole body, or there might be one area where it's clearer for you. It might be clear in the belly or at the nose or in the chest. If it is, it's fine to let the attention settle in that part of the body.

Have the attention just rest there. As it rests, let it effortlessly receive the sensations of breathing, just as you received sounds. There's no struggle, just resting and feeling. Breathing in, breathing out. This is the third possible anchor for practice.

So make your home in one of these anchors, but then be open to anything that comes and naturally draws the attention away from the anchor.

As you sit in touch with body posture, sounds, or breath, notice when something else arises that naturally calls the attention. It could be a sensation in the body. Let the attention move to that new sensation. Make a connection to it with your attention and feel its bare physical nature. Is it tingling or pulsing, vibrating, twitching? Is there pressure or heaviness? Lightness? Is it warm or cool? Is it aching or stabbing? Just know clearly what the sensation is as you feel it directly. This is mindfulness of sensations.

If the sensation is painful, notice if there's a mental reaction—fear or anger, judgment, frustration. Be mindful of the mental reaction. Just allow it to be there. As far as possible, soften the mind to allow the discomfort in the body.

The attention may be drawn to a mood or emotion. You might notice one of the hindrances: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt. You might notice other emotions: joy, loneliness, embarrassment, contentment, anger, happiness.

When you notice a mood or emotion, let that become the new focus for mindfulness. This means just letting yourself feel it without judging it, without trying to hold on or push it away. All the emotions are part of our human nature. They come and go like clouds. Like the weather, they're impermanent and changing. We don't have to make a big fuss when a cloud covers the sun. We don't have to make a big fuss when an emotion comes and displays for a while. It's just what it is. We know it. We feel it. We recognize it. We allow it.

Let the attention become close to really feel the experience of the emotion. You might notice three aspects of it.

How does it feel in the body? Where do you feel it? With happiness there might be a bubbly, uplifting sensation in the chest. With fear there might be a contraction in the belly. With anger, there might be a burning around the neck and throat. Just feel the sensations and allow them as part of the emotion.

Second, notice the mood or mental tone, the flavor of that emotion. Sadness has a different tone than anger, than joy, than compassion. Notice and allow the mental tone.

And third, what kind of thoughts accompany the emotion? Fearful thoughts tend to accompany fear. Happy thoughts tend to accompany contentment. When you notice any thought, when attention is drawn to a thought, just notice its presence as thinking. Find that meditative relationship that can see the thought arise, persist, and pass away. We don't have to get so involved with its content. Let it come, let it go, be mindful of it.

So anything that's arising now in our experience can be food for mindfulness to grow from: body, sounds, breath, sensation, emotions, and thoughts. Resting the attention in the anchor is our home, but being open to being mindful with any of the other arisings that we find, knowing them clearly in their nature. And when they subside and pass away, just return the attention to be with the anchor, resting again in our meditative home.

One of the things you'll discover about our instructions is that they're wonderfully varied. This presents a challenge not only for you as practitioners, but for us as teachers, because there's a vast territory of practice to explore together.

It would certainly be simpler if we offered only one technique—like meditation on breathing, anapanasati. Some teachers make this their entire focus, and they teach it beautifully. But for us, breath awareness is just one object among many in the rich landscape of mindfulness practice. And we haven't even completed the full range of objects we're presenting to you.

This variety reflects the Buddha's skillful means—offering different doors into the same essential understanding. Some of you will find your home in breath awareness, others in body sensations, still others in the spacious awareness that holds all arising phenomena. The invitation is to explore with curiosity and patience, discovering which practices most naturally support your awakening.

Remember that this multiplicity of approaches isn't meant to overwhelm, but to honor the unique ways each of us connects with the dharma. Trust the process of exploration, and know that whatever arises in your practice—confusion, clarity, resistance, or ease—is exactly what you need to work with right now.

CHAPTER 141

The Power of Loving-kindness

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

In this comprehensive exploration of mettā (loving-kindness) practice, Guy Armstrong presents five key powers that emerge from cultivating this brahmavihāra. Drawing from his decades of practice and teaching, he shows how loving-kindness makes the heart tender and responsive, purifies consciousness by working with hindrances and self-hatred, develops samādhi (concentration), creates deep connection with all beings, and generates reliable happiness. Armstrong addresses common philosophical concerns Vipassanā practitioners have about mettā practice, explaining how it supports rather than conflicts with "taking refuge in reality." He shares inspiring stories from the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Nelson Mandela to illustrate how mettā practice transforms both personal suffering and relationships with difficult people. The talk includes practical guidance on working with the "near and far enemies" of loving-kindness, the purification process that can arise during practice, and how mettā develops from patience through allowance to genuine love. Armstrong emphasizes that love is our innate nature—not something generated by Buddhist practice—and that mettā simply helps us incline the mind toward this natural capacity for caring and connection.

The talk this evening is on the power of loving-kindness.

There's a quote from Rumi that I like here. Rumi, you know, is the poet laureate of Spirit Rock, so we quote him whenever possible: "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives."

This is part of our path, the allure of love. And I am so grateful that we have the practice of loving-kindness within our tradition—well-established, clear instructions, easy to follow, reliable, and trustworthy.

When I was a young man in my early twenties, I had a lot of access to love. But it came and went like nobody's business. My emotions were in a lot of flux at that time, and so I could make strong connections with people, nature, music, and art, but I couldn't stabilize in it. I didn't know how it came about or how it went away. So actually finding the access to love became a really important motivation in my dharma practice.

And what I discovered, of course, is probably what you all know too. It needs the wisdom from vipassana in order to make it more stable. It needs the wisdom of non-clinging to have regular access to love. And then it's possible.

So we have a practice within our tradition that gives us an avenue to developing this quality of love in our hearts. And I'm very grateful that I found it. I've done a lot of metta practice over the years, and it has changed my life and my practice tremendously.

I want to talk tonight about some of the great things that come out of metta practice. There's probably a really long list, but I'm going to talk about five tonight. These are the powers of metta.

It makes the heart responsive, or you might say tender. It purifies the heart—that is, it cleans it up, it scrubs it. This leads to concentration. It connects us to all of life, meaning that we develop an inclusive sense of what being alive means. We allow all beings into our hearts. And it brings happiness in a very reliable way.

When we say it makes the heart tender, what we mean is that it lets us feel the joys and sorrows of life—our lives and others'—more readily. Things land on us with more impact because the heart is being trained to be responsive. And you can see this in the practice itself. What we're doing is going to different individuals and offering: "I hope you're happy. I hope you're well. I hope you're peaceful. I hope you're healthy."

So it trains us to keep looking into the inner experience and inner welfare and inner well-being of everyone we come in contact with. The emotions of metta will go through lots of ups and downs, but this movement of caring and interest—you could say the empathy of metta—is what continues. This is how we're shaping the mind, and this is what we learn as a practice and as a habit from doing loving-kindness.

Now, not everybody who does vipassana does metta. Nor do you have to do metta. Nor should you feel guilty if you're not doing metta. If you don't want to run to the allure of love, that's your business.

Some personalities, I feel, open up to metta in a big way just through vipassana. I think about Dipa Ma, a wonderful Indian teacher, whom somebody mentioned—I think John mentioned in his talk. She was a very deep vipassana practitioner. I don't know that she ever did much formal loving-kindness practice, but she just had the heart qualities that when her suffering went away through vipassana, her big heart was right there. And metta was one of the things that people felt in her most strongly. She just had a very loving attitude to everyone she met. Joseph and Sharon used to say that when they visited her in Calcutta, they would just walk into her little house—part of an apartment—and just feel the space filled with love, which was simply her way of being.

But for other teachers who don't have a natural heart quality in personality, they can come out of vipassana practice, and I'll put it this way—their metta feels a little distant. So personally, I really gravitate to the teachers who have developed both wisdom and loving-kindness. Those teachers have shown me the possibility of development that is there for us as human beings.

So take a look at your personality. If loving-kindness is a natural flowering through vipassana, that might be plenty. On the other hand, if you feel a little dryness of heart, a little cerebral inclination, loving-kindness is a really wonderful supplement to vipassana to draw out those heart qualities.

One of my teachers was a Tibetan teacher who was giving heart advice at the end of a retreat. Tibetans have a way of doing this—they kind of sum up pith instructions they want you to take with you.

And he said, "I want you to carry three things out into the world. The first," he said, "is be natural. Just be yourself. Don't be pretentious. Don't put on big spiritual airs. Just be a nice person. Be natural.

"The second thing," he said, "is be wise. Go out, conduct yourself well. Don't make big fusses for people. Don't make mistakes in your conduct and your speech. They want to understand that good qualities come out of Buddhism. Good actions come out of Buddhism.

"And the third thing," he said, "is be juicy."

Because that's what will communicate to other people and let them know about your inner development. Now, juice is a technical term in Buddhism. It covers a wide range of qualities: love, reverence, joy, compassion, faith, kindness, humor, humility, devotion, awe. All those things are under this technical heading of juice. And it's lovely to take those qualities back and share them in the world because our world needs more juice.

So these are the things that come out of our practice of metta. And I like the perspective that Alice Walker enunciated when she said, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good heartedness." If we come out of Buddhist practice with good heartedness, that is going to communicate to the people we're in contact with. It will be meaningful to them and it will be our contribution to the welfare of the world.

So loving-kindness is the first of the four Brahma Viharas. In our tradition, it's the foundation for the other three. So the other three are compassion, joy, and equanimity. Loving-kindness is learning to care for the welfare of the beings that we bring to mind or come in contact with.

Compassion is not so far removed. It's what loving-kindness moves into when it looks on suffering. So if you're caring for someone and you notice suffering in them, the quality that comes out naturally is compassion. So compassion is connected with the suffering in the world.

The third quality of appreciative joy or sympathetic joy—mudita—is like the mirror image of compassion. It's beautiful how the Brahma Viharas are balanced in this way. And that is when the open heart looks upon someone who's happy, the response becomes a resonance with that happiness which makes us happy and joyful. So this is the movement of the heart in response to seeing happiness. It makes us happy to see others happy.

Then equanimity is the state that's a balance of mind that supports the other three. If equanimity isn't present, the other three aren't stable, and they also move into qualities that are not as wholesome. We'll talk about that later. So equanimity supports the other three.

If you go to teachings from Tibetan teachers or Zen teachers, they might have this same arrangement of the Brahma Viharas, but for them, compassion may be primary. And I think the Mahayana schools tended to adopt this because compassion really ties into the Four Noble Truths. Four Noble Truths are all about suffering. Buddha's teaching is all about suffering in the end. So compassion ties nicely into that.

Don't think of them as so different. Don't get into a war with a Tibetan student saying, "No, metta's the foundation," and they say, "No, compassion's the foundation." Need more equanimity. They're very, very similar. The Dalai Lama expressed this well. He said, "Compassion is basic human warmth." That's what loving-kindness is also—basic human warmth.

Sometimes Vipassana students have a little bit of a philosophical problem with metta. It seems a little bit phony, like we're trying to contrive something or forcing ourselves to feel something that's not there. And you know, philosophically, Vipassana is very elegant. Just be with what is. It's kind of like: take refuge in reality.

You don't need to change it. Isn't that beautiful? It's very elegant, and metta seems a little bit like we're trying to get in there and interfere with reality. We're trying to put something in or push something out with this quality of loving kindness.

Vipassana is really our foundation. Taking refuge in reality, aligning our understanding and our mindfulness with exactly what is—this is the foundation of practice. And loving-kindness can really help us open to that in a very easeful and relaxed way.

So we say that we do loving-kindness in support of our Vipassana practice. We think they go together well because it's bringing in right effort, it's bringing in a wholesome state. And when loving kindness grows up, the mindfulness quality that we meet our experience with becomes very warm. So that's where we're aiming—to bring the warmth of metta with the clarity of mindfulness so we have this warm, loving attention that we bring to everything we meet.

And when you can bring a warm, loving attention to every part of your experience, conflict kind of goes out of life. So we're expanding the field where we can bring this warm, caring attention.

And then sometimes philosophically people complain, "Oh, but metta is diluted. May I be happy? But there is no I," they'll say. "Or may you be happy? But I know happiness is impermanent. What do you mean?"

So we have a solution for that. Here's a phrase for you all who have this doubt. I'm going to use it in an example: In this ever-changing stream of mental and physical phenomena, conventionally designated as Sally, may the mind state of happiness arrive ever more frequently.

So if you'd like, you can use that phrase in metta practice. Or you could just say, "May Sally be happy." That might be simpler. But actually, the way I understand "may Sally be happy" is the long phrase that I just said. So from a Vipassana point of view, we understand not-self, we understand impermanence, and still we want Sally to be happy as much as possible. And she does too.

Because when you meet somebody who has really developed this kind of loving heart, it's kind of amazing, isn't it? And I think about the Dalai Lama a lot in this regard because he has such a good heart in the face of all the difficulties that he carries in life. He has more or less sole responsibility for the welfare of the six million remaining Tibetans. There used to be seven million, but a lot died since the occupation. So the fate of his people rests on his shoulders. And that's a huge weight to carry. And yet he still has this joyful temperament that you see when you meet him.

And you've probably heard that he'll say something like, "You know, my true religion is not Buddhism. My true religion is kindness." And you feel that around him. That's what he cares about—making this kind human connection.

So he was being interviewed by Oprah one time for the magazine. And I really appreciate what Oprah has done to bring spirituality into the mainstream. I don't know of anyone else who has brought good Dharma to so many people. Oprah has a great reach through her TV shows and through her magazine.

So she was interviewing the Dalai Lama and started the interview by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

And he said, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said.

"Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued, "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about."

That's a great life to have no regrets.

Regarding service to Tibet, the Dalai Lama said, service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind.

That's a beautiful mind. And what people like the Dalai Lama are doing is reminding us of our true nature and our true capacity. Love is not something that gets generated by Buddhist practice. It's not something that's only found when we start metta meditation. It's in all of us.

One of the most loving people I ever knew was my grandmother, who was born in 1890 and had no Buddhist training at all. And yet when we were kids and came to her house for a visit, she gave us the most warm and loving embraces. So mostly it's a matter of inclining our mind in that direction and letting this innate quality come out. We're encouraging it, we're inviting it, but it's already there in all of us.

So this is the aspect of responsiveness. We train the heart to be responsive in this direction of caring.

Another big way that loving-kindness meditation works is in the area of purification of heart. And this starts with this simple intention. We connect with someone and we wish them well. That's a very pure intention. So we're developing over and over again this intention that is wholesome and caring. As we talked about—I think Aaron talked about the other day—intention is the seed for karma. This is the most transformative mental factor in all our practice: intention. The Tibetans say everything rests on the tip of motivation. So we take care to set our motivation in a wholesome direction. And the intention of metta is a very wholesome direction. We're training ourselves to care. That's an intention that comes up again and again.

It's kind of like by turning to caring over and over, we're planting little seeds. These are karmic seeds from intention. And we continue to water them. And then eventually they sprout. They grow big and sprout.

Those of you who are gardeners know if you plant seeds, you can't tell the seed when to come up. You plant a tomato seed in early summer and you water it and you put it in a sunny place. Maybe you put some plastic over it to heat it up a bit. You can't tell the tomato, now it's time for you to come out of the ground. And if I don't see you popping up, I'm going to reach down in the dirt and pull you up. That's how I'll get my tomato plant.

But you just trust that the seed is right, the elements you add are right, and nature will take care of the rest. And that's the way it is when we plant the seeds of intention. We can't say when it's going to flower as a strong feeling of love or connection or caring, but we know that if we keep planting the seed and giving it the right conditions, it will—because this is a natural law. Metta will flower based on that intention.

The Buddha put it like this: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." This is metta. We're just dripping it moment after moment, and we let that jar fill up.

We begin with loving-kindness for ourselves because classically it's said to be the easiest, but as you may have found, it's not always the easiest. Sometimes metta for ourselves is the most difficult because it brings up feelings that we're not so comfortable with.

Some of the things that can happen are bringing up old memories of past events in our life. Every time we bring a new person into loving-kindness, we might review what's happened in that relationship. And there can be beautiful moments of friendship and caring, and there can be painful moments where we've been hurt or we may

have hurt someone else. So those memories can come up. We may get in touch with feelings of not liking ourselves very much, of self-hatred, of judgment, of doubt about ourselves.

This doesn't mean we're doing the metta wrong. Rather, it indicates the purification is happening. Because the metta is a strong force, we're aiming this strong, beautiful force right at the heart. And as we do that, it's going to draw out everything that's its opposite.

That's how we get purified. If those feelings are in us but we can't feel them, we can't ever understand them and release them. As they emerge, we have the chance to hold them within this whole framework of loving kindness. The metta can then work on them, and hopefully they get released. That karmic knot unwinds and dissolves in time.

So when you find yourself doing loving kindness practice and some of these other qualities are arising—we'll call them hindrances for now—don't worry that your practice is going off track. This is part of the natural process.

How do we work with them? It depends somewhat on the strength of the hindrance. If you can leave the hindrance in the background, recognizing that it's there while still connecting with the intention to care, do that. Just keep the metta phrase going, connect with as much sincerity of loving kindness as you can, leave the hindrance back there, and the metta will start to work on it. It will be held in the metta field and will start to partake of the metta.

We often speak about how when a hindrance is present, we move through recognition into allowing as parts of the steps of RAIN. It's important to understand that metta has a range of expressions, and allowing is part of it.

The first inkling of metta might be the quality of patience. Perhaps before we started metta practice, when something arose—whether a hindrance or something external—our first reaction was irritation. We would move to annoyance or judgment, resistance, condemning, and so forth. When metta is present, that same stimulus can be met with a quality we call patience. The Pali is *khanti*.

Patience here doesn't mean "I'm just going to wait. If I wait a couple hours, that will go away." That's not what patience is about. Patience is bearing what's not pleasant while keeping our mind in a wholesome place—an okay place, let's put it that way.

So the first sign that metta is happening is that we become more patient. Things that ordinarily irritate us, we meet with "okay, it's not pleasant, but now I can bear it."

The second step in the growth of metta is that we have a real allowing of it. More than "I can bear it"—it really becomes okay. As it warms up, it moves from patience into allowance and acceptance. Then it moves from there into affection. And then it moves from there into love. And then it moves from love into what you might say is passion and devotion in a really selfless way.

So metta has this whole range of flavors and intensity, and it starts with patience. The affliction comes, the hindrance comes, and there can be patience with it.

All the standard hindrances can arise, and then there are special hindrances that come with metta called the near and far enemies. You'll find that each of the *brahmaviharas*—and somebody in the afternoon probably mentioned this—each of the *brahmaviharas* has a near enemy and a far enemy. The near enemy is a state that looks like the *brahmavihara*, but it's not wholesome. It's an imposter masquerading as the real thing.

With the *brahmavihara* of loving kindness, the imposter is affection with attachment. So you like somebody, but it's very conditional. It's only if they act a certain way. Sometimes it's conditional affection or friendship: "I'll befriend you if you'll befriend me. And if you go back on your part of the bargain, I'm going to take away my part of the bargain." So it's looking for a deal.

There's another way this comes out. Let me give an example. I was teaching a metta weekend one time. I didn't think people would get much in a metta weekend, but actually they did. It was amazing to see the opening. We used the phrases we're using now, including "may you live with ease."

I took questions, and a woman said, "Well, I was using my son as my benefactor because I really love him a lot. And I came to the phrase 'may you live with ease.' And you see, he's in college and he's living with way too much ease. He sleeps late in the morning. I do all his laundry for him. I go in and clean up his room."

And you know, he's not even doing that well in his studies. And so what I wanted to say is, "May you acquire some backbone and do your work better."

This is not entirely metta. This has a little bit of fixing in it. And so when we say metta for someone, we want to really accept them as they are, not conditionally based on their changing or living up to our ideas. We're not trying to use it to fix people.

And in fact, we're not even waiting for an outcome. We say to someone, "I hope you may be happy," but our hope, our care for them is not dependent on that outcome, on that result. Maybe they're not happy. We can still wish that for them. So we don't attach to the result of our wishes. And it's equanimity that gives that support to not attach to the result.

So how to work with the hindrance? The first is if it's weak enough, leave it in the background, continue with the intention of loving kindness, and it will be affected by the field of metta that you're in. If it gets stronger, it can feel like it really blocks or prevents the shift of caring. When you're really burdened with a strong hindrance—you know, could be desire, could be fear, could be worry—you're not going to be able to move into caring for someone.

So when it's like that, it's more helpful to shift away from metta and you have two options. The first that I would recommend is you go to compassion. Because in compassion, you're staying within the Brahmavihara family. So you're not moving very far away. And you have a phrase either, "May I be free from this pain and sorrow," or "May I hold this pain with compassion." Either of those is a good phrase for compassion. So you recognize the hindrance that's there and you say something like, "May I hold it with compassion." Continue with that until it subsides and return to metta.

Or, and this may be if the compassion doesn't feel right or it doesn't seem to engage properly, then move to vipassana. Open to the hindrance with mindfulness. Let yourself feel it. Do the exercise of RAIN. Feel it in your body. Allow it to be there. And sometimes that will just give it enough space that it can kind of, if it's fairly new, not too rooted, can kind of wash through. And then you can go back to the loving kindness.

This quality of meeting our own self-hatred or self-doubt is really common in doing metta practice. It's a deep conditioning often in us that goes way back to childhood, and it's something that can take years to become free of. But the combination of vipassana and metta really can let us become free and transformed from that.

So I want to read this poem. It's a well-known poem, but I hadn't heard it for a while, and maybe you haven't heard it for a while, so I'm going to read it. It's called "St. Francis and the Sow" by Galway Kinnell.

"The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within of self-blessing, though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness. To put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing. As St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow and told her in words and in touch, bless-

ings of earth on the sow. And the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout all the way through the fodder and slops, to the spiritual curl of the tail, from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine, down through the giant broken heart, to the sheer blue milk and dreaminess spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths, sucking and blowing beneath them. The long, perfect loveliness of sow."

So sometimes it's necessary to reteach ourselves our loveliness. And that's what the practice of loving kindness is doing. It's showing us that possibility.

Now, of course, one of the challenges in purification comes when we pick up the difficult person. And this is going to be your treat tomorrow in loving kindness. It's probably the most challenging part of the practice, but then there's also good learning.

So I was doing an intensive metta retreat one time. I was practicing it for six weeks in a container a lot like this, and I was quite settled when it seemed to happen that I started running into one other person on the retreat a lot, and that person was my difficult person. It's someone that I'd known before the retreat, and they were also on the retreat, and it just seemed at this point we crossed paths a lot.

So my practice would be going really well, and I'd had a lot of love and energy and brightness. And then I'd meet this person passing in the hall. And I'd go, "I can't believe what they did. What they said and how they treated me."

I can't believe they did that. And I'd start winding myself up thinking about all the things that had happened. I'd get really growly about it.

I'd go back to my cushion and try to practice: "May my friend be safe, may my friend be happy"—but I can't believe what that person did. I would spin out for half an hour and be really worked up about it.

Then I'd sort of remember: oh, you know, they talk about loving-kindness for the difficult person. Maybe I should try it. But I said, "No, no, no, I don't want to love the difficult person. That's not part of the program that I came for."

But the anger was so annoying and unpleasant, I thought I'd better try it. So I did. And surprise of surprises, it worked.

Something really interesting came out of that. When I could generate a real wish for their welfare, the anger went away. That's all it took. I didn't have to like them. I didn't have to love them. I didn't have to approve of what they'd done. I didn't have to condone their conduct or think they were a great person. All I had to do was wish them well. And if I could sincerely wish them well, the anger went away.

As I looked into why that was, I saw that a piece of anger, for me anyway, is usually something called ill will. In ill will, it's the opposite of goodwill—we actually want the other person to suffer. I started to see that within my anger was a wish that my difficult person suffer. That is really close to cruelty. Cruelty is enjoying somebody else's suffering, but ill will is wanting somebody else to suffer. They're not that far apart.

Although I could think, "Oh, it's okay for me to be angry," I couldn't think it was okay for me to be cruel. That didn't feel acceptable. I saw how close I was getting, and I didn't want to be in ill will toward them. I realized that I now have a way to come out of ill will, and that is to replace it with goodwill.

That was a real opening for me. I recommend it as a skillful means with anger. If you can just wish well for the person, the anger can really lift.

I want to read something from one of the discourses of the Buddha. This is a text called "The Simile of the Saw." The Buddha talks about how to deal with difficult people. Difficult people have by and large said something unkind to us. The Buddha said this might happen in five ways:

They might say it at the wrong time. Have you ever been with somebody you really like and hope will respect you, and a friend comes up and gives you some feedback or says something disrespectful? It feels awful to be hurt at the wrong time.

Or somebody says something about you that's just not true, but other people hear it and believe it. That's hurtful.

Or they come and speak to you harshly. It's really clear they're angry and they blast you with that harsh energy. That hurts.

Or you know that their speaking is coming out of ill will—a wish to cause you harm—and that doesn't feel good.

Or you know that the mind they're speaking from is one of anger or hatred, and that doesn't feel good.

So the Buddha said if any of these five things happen—somebody speaks to you at the wrong time, they speak something that's not true, they speak harshly to you, they speak in a way that harms you, or they speak from hatred—you should still maintain loving-kindness for them.

This is what he actually says: "Herein, bhikkhus"—and bhikkhu means practitioners, means us—"you should train thus: Our minds will remain unaffected and we shall utter no evil words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving-kindness without inner hate. This is how you should train, bhikkhus."

This is a challenging directive. Reflect on it with people who have hurt you with their speech.

This is not easy to do—to maintain loving kindness toward those who have wounded us with their words. Yet this is precisely what the Buddha calls us to practice.

This teaching offers us a good reminder when we encounter difficult people: see if it's possible to open with some care.

I want to share the story of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was placed under house arrest for close to seventeen years by the military dictatorship in Burma. As you know, she is now free and serves as an elected member of parliament—quite remarkable.

During her house arrest—and I say "house arrest" though she lived it partly as a meditation retreat—she received visits from very well-known and respected Burmese Sayadaws. We know some of the teachers who visited her and the instructions they offered during her confinement. One of the central practices they taught her was loving kindness.

When she emerged, you could observe how she remained balanced in relationship to the military dictators, able to work with them politically. She had been cultivating metta throughout her long years under house arrest. Upon her release, she reflected: "When I compared notes with my colleagues in the democracy movement who have suffered long terms of imprisonment, we found that an enhanced appreciation of metta was a common experience. We had known and felt both the effects of loving-kindness and the unwholesomeness of attitudes lacking in loving-kindness."

She had witnessed this contrast clearly, and her determination was to approach all circumstances with love.

Nelson Mandela expressed something remarkably similar. When the white government of South Africa was considering his release from prison, their primary concern was whether he would encourage the black population to rise up against whites in retribution for years of oppression, cruelty, and false imprisonment.

They arranged a meeting to assess this risk, essentially asking whether he would incite people to turn against the white population. Mandela's response was clear: "No. I am not going to do that, and my government will not do that. Why? Because we have seen in you what brutality and fear look like. And we don't want to live like that. We are not going to repeat that."

I believe this reflects Aung San Suu Kyi's intention as well—not to repeat the mistakes of the dictators. This is the realm of purification of heart.

The third power of loving-kindness is the power of concentration. Concentration concerns the unification of mind, and we typically approach it by choosing an object around which the mind can center. In Vipassana practice, that object is often the breath. In loving-kindness practice, the primary object is the phrases themselves.

You return again and again to the phrases of loving kindness, and the mind collects around them. As the mind gathers in this way, stray thoughts, wishes, desires, and fears arise less frequently—a genuinely wholesome development. As Bonnie mentioned last night, this represents one of the seven factors of enlightenment: the factor of concentration.

As you develop greater sophistication in your metta practice, you'll begin to notice that the mind collects not only around the phrases, but around other objects as well. There's the image of the person you're sending metta to, if you use visualization, or the felt sense of their presence if you work without images. There's the feeling of metta itself—as it grows, you can attune to it and allow yourself to be aware of it. And there's something I often recommend: returning to the heart center and feeling the body's response to the metta.

You might say there are really four objects you can be aware of during loving kindness practice, and each serves as a focus for concentration. Concentration builds with each of these elements. In fact, the more aspects you hold simultaneously, the stronger your concentration must become. It's rather like juggling—to keep all those elements moving in the right sequence, you must be genuinely present. These four aspects stretch you, and in stretching you, they build this power of concentration.

Metta is a beautiful concentration practice. We use it on long retreats to teach concentration to the depth of jhana—this is one of our approaches during extended practice periods.

Concentration unifies the mind. As you probably know, love itself unifies the mind.

Love is a really powerful unifying force. It brings families together, friends together, countries together. There's a beautiful quote from Martin Luther King where he says, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." So we hope that it will bring the nation together eventually.

Love is unifying, concentration is unifying. In the metta practice, we're using both love and concentration to build that force of unity. This is a double power of unification.

I want to read this passage from a Russian Orthodox saint from the 19th century whose name was Theophan the Recluse. I very much doubt that he had Buddhist training, but here you'll hear it coming from a Christian perspective, something that I think will be familiar:

"For as long as the mind remains in the head where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there. This concentration is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of warmth. The sensation grows gradually stronger, firmer, deeper. And so it comes about that whereas in the initial stages the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will"—have you noticed that with metta? It takes an effort of will to stay in the heart—"in due course, this attention by its own strength gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting one another and must remain inseparable because dispersion of intention cools the warmth and diminishing warmth weakens attention."

This is exactly describing the way metta and concentration support each other in this bringing about of warmth in the heart.

And another Dipa Ma story. She was teaching a three-month course at IMS on the East Coast. People were struck by her character and her being and her presence. One time, somebody had the idea to ask her what I think is a great question. They said, "What's in your mind?" I'm really glad somebody asked that.

And she said, "I have only three things in my mind: concentration, peace, and loving-kindness. That's all that's there."

That's a beautiful mind.

The fourth aspect, the fourth fruit of loving-kindness is this quality of connection. It really opens us out into a connection with other beings, beginning with a circle of friends and close people we already have, extending outward to people we don't know, extending outward to people we have difficulty with, eventually extending to all beings everywhere—human beings, animals. We care for their suffering. This is where the practice is opening up to, and there's a joy in that. There's a joy in this connection.

This is from Shantideva, who was a great sage in India and author of *Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life*:

"Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

So this is the beauty of the path of metta. As we connect with others, that connection is really satisfying. It satisfies something deep within us because it offsets our sense of isolation. I read somewhere—so many of these things go by and I didn't note it, I can't give you the reference—that neuroscience researchers have found that one of the deepest sources of suffering for humans is feeling isolated, disconnected, lonely, not part of a community and not belonging.

Metta overcomes that sense of isolation. It puts us in touch with all sentient beings. Why? Because we find out all beings have the same basic wish we do. Every being that takes life experiences pleasure and experiences pain. Every being that takes life only wants to experience pleasure and doesn't want to experience pain. This is our common predicament. So we're all alike in this.

Any being you bring to mind, you'll find that common thread of humanity or even cross-species connection. Animals are the same—all want to be happy and don't want to suffer. When we start to see it like this, we find that that unifying force of connection is bigger than the distinctions we've made.

What thought does is it makes lots of distinctions. It makes distinctions among us of age and race and ethnicity and class and education and sexual orientation and gender identification and ability or different ability and so on. These distinctions are real.

We are not trying to deny them. We acknowledge them. We can celebrate them as our diversity. But we don't have to obsess about them to the exclusion of seeing what we have in common. And what we have in common is more fundamental and unites us rather than providing a possible ground for separation.

What unites us is this fundamental humanity. We all have access to the brahmaviharas. We all have access to the difficult emotions. They're part of our human package. The way I feel it is we all have the same heart. It responds in the same way to pleasure. It responds in the same way to pain.

It's kind of like that one human heart has just been poured into all our different packages. And then it's been subject to really different life experiences. It's been shaped by those life experiences. So our hearts have been conditioned by the different circumstances we've been in. But underneath, that same heart is there in all of us. We're the same organism, basically. We've just been conditioned and shaped differently.

There's Rumi, and then you may know his teacher was from the area of Tabriz whose name was Shams. He's known as Shams of Tabriz. Not much is known about Shams, but he left at least one poem. Here's a poem from Shams of Tabriz: "I, you, he, she, we, in the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." These are not true distinctions. In the garden of loving kindness, these are not true distinctions. There's one heart. It's just beating in different chests. Same heart.

So this is the force of connectedness that undoes our isolation, undoes our loneliness, and opens us up to a really deep inclusivity with life.

And the last beautiful quality of loving kindness is this force of happiness. When this caring is there, when this sense of connection is there, when the mind has become unified through love and concentration, there is a sublime quality to our experience. That's why the brahmavihara is called a divine abiding. It's sort of like the Buddha was saying, if you're going to hang out in a state, this is like the highest state to hang out in. You can hang out in Nibbana, and that has no flavor, essentially. And that's really free. But if you're going to be in the world, and you're relating, these are the states, heavenly states, that you can learn to relate from.

So metta opens this up really directly. And one of the places that you might feel that the strongest is when you're really connecting with a dear friend or a benefactor. When the quality of real care and deep affection is there in that moment and it comes to life, see what that feels like. It's kind of like there's such a richness and enjoyment to that. It's satisfying on so many levels that there's just the sense that we can drop into and rest in the contentment of that place. We can abide in that quality of loving kindness. And it's kind of like it's a place we can feel we're home in.

So one of the reasons metta is such a good counterpart to vipassana is vipassana kind of takes us apart. I don't know if you felt this in this retreat, but vipassana kind of breaks us down into the six senses or the five aggregates, which John will talk about soon. Our experience, when we look at it closely, is just these momentary arisings of in-breath, sound, emotion, thought, sensation, out-breath, sight. There's nothing else there.

So this can make us feel like we're in pieces. Vipassana reveals this great space where these little bits of action are happening. Metta fills that space with warmth and puts us back together. We hold all those bits in the embrace of loving kindness, of acceptance, of warmth, of love. And when we're held there, we feel that goodness. We feel that goodness within us, and that becomes the source for loving ourselves, really caring about ourselves deeply. And that's something that, as practice evolves, we want to share with others.

This is another quote from Shantideva: "For as long as space endures and as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world." We find this source of reliable happiness and sublime abiding, and we want to share that with others. And that is deeply satisfying.

So this is sort of the close of this interview between Oprah and the Dalai Lama.

And I just want to mention that compassion and metta can be used interchangeably in discussions like this. They're not very far apart. Compassion is primary in Tibetan Buddhism, while metta is primary for us in the Theravada tradition—the same basic principle expressed through different cultural lenses.

As this interview between Oprah and the Dalai Lama drew to a close, Oprah asked him a final question: "In my magazine I do a column called 'What I Know For Sure.' What do you know for sure? The one thing on which you have no doubt."

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate. His answer came immediately, with complete certainty: "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For happy life and happy world, there is no doubt."

Metta is too.

So let's just sit for a minute and let the metta fill the space. Let this truth settle into our hearts: Compassion is the best source of happiness for a happy life and a happy world. There is no doubt.

CHAPTER 142

Day 11: Morning Instructional Sit - Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · 43 min

> *In this instructional talk from a month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong explores three distinct approaches to working with meditation anchors, culminating in an introduction to choiceless attention practice. He distinguishes between concentration-based samatha practice that maintains unwavering focus on a single object, the balanced vipassanā approach that uses the breath as a home base while remaining open to whatever calls attention, and finally choiceless attention where no preference is given to any particular object.*
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> *Drawing from the Mahāsi Sayādaw tradition, Armstrong explains how choiceless attention involves completely unhooking from the anchor and simply noticing where attention naturally lands moment by moment. Whether attention rests on breath, body sensations, sounds, thoughts, or emotions, each becomes an equally valid object for mindfulness. He frames this as asking "What's happening now?" and attending to whatever is predominant in awareness.*
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> *The guided meditation demonstrates this uncontrived approach, encouraging practitioners to let attention roam freely while maintaining mindful awareness of each new experience. Armstrong suggests soft mental noting as a support for staying connected to the constantly changing field of experience. This practice cultivates alertness, freshness, and receptivity while building on all the foundational instructions previously taught in the retreat sequence.*

In our meditation practice here, there are three ways to relate to the anchor.

One way—and I'll use breath as an example, but understand it could also be body posture or sounds—is to use the anchor as a focus for developing primarily concentration. In this approach, you fix the attention on the anchor, let's say the breath, and you do not take notice of anything else that comes. So a sound comes, you don't move your attention voluntarily. A different body sensation arises, you don't move your attention. A hindrance arises, a storm of thinking and feeling, you don't move your attention. This is the instruction from U Ba Khin Sayadaw: just keep the attention right here on the upper lip. This is a concentration style of practice specifically designed to develop samatha, tranquility. A few people are doing this practice now in this retreat.

Most of you are not. Most of you are doing a vipassana practice. In vipassana practice, the way we've been unfolding the instructions, we've had a preferential attitude toward the anchor, toward the breath. That is, if nothing special is going on, come back to your home base and allow the attention to rest there, experience the breath, and that will help develop the concentration. But when something naturally calls the attention, you go there. Connect with sounds, with sensations, with thoughts, with emotions, intention, feeling, and so forth. Then when nothing is drawing the attention, come back to the breath. This is a great way to practice, could be for the duration of your retreat. It's a wonderful style that balances concentration and openness. But there's still in that approach a preference for the breath. We make a choice. We're choosing the focus.

We're going to open up today to a kind of meditation called choiceless attention, where there's no preference for the anchor. There's no preference for the breath. Instead, you unhook from your anchor and you just notice where the attention goes. Everywhere it lands, that becomes the focus for mindfulness. If it lands on the anchor, that's fine, but we're not choosing it. If it lands somewhere else, that's fine. If it stays with a body sensation for sixty minutes, that's fine. We let the attention go loose.

Notice what happens when you let the attention go loose. It wanders. It'll go first here, then there, then thought, then a mood, then a sight, then a sound, then a breath, then a sensation. That's what attention does when we're not trying to control it. So that's fine. That is not a problem. The challenge in choiceless attention is being with each new thing it lands on.

This is really the practice that we'll be introducing today. Let the attention go and notice where it's landing in each new moment because it will tend to move. This is a beautiful way to practice because it's so uncontrived and uncontrolled. You just let the attention do what it's going to do. Your job is just to notice: Where is it landing now and what is that thing? Connect with that new experience.

This is the foundation of Mahasi Sayadaw's meditation instructions. He was probably the best known and most influential vipassana teacher of the twentieth century, and our instructions basically derive from him. You can see how we've been building up from body posture, breath, sounds, emotions, thoughts, feeling, and intention, to come to the point where everything that happens in your sitting, you now know how to relate to mindfully. So in a way, the instructions today are putting that all together in this choiceless approach.

There are two ways you can think of it. One is you notice where the attention lands in each new moment. The mind, you'll see, has to be very fresh and alert to do that. In some ways, it's simpler to just say, "Okay, I'm just going to notice the breath. I'm there, I

know the object, in, out, in, out." Fairly simple. When the attention is moving around quite freely and somewhat randomly, you really have to be alert to stay with it. Every moment is something different.

You don't know what to expect. But it brings an alertness and a freshness and a real receptivity to the meditation.

So that's one way to describe it. Where does the attention land? The other way to describe it is something that we've said a number of times. You just ask the question, "What's happening now?" And the answer to that question is whatever's predominant. That's what we call it. Whatever's standing out from the whole field of experience as the single thing that's drawing your attention, that's what's happening now, and you go there. Lots of other things, of course, are happening, but the attention can only land on one thing at a time. So that's what's happening now in terms of what we notice.

So you can think of it either of these two ways. They come to the same thing, and this is the technique of choiceless attention. This is the technique we're going to introduce this morning, and it can be a wonderful practice for you to start to work with.

So we'll now go into meditation, and I'll give the instruction as we go. First settling into an awareness of the body, relaxing the mind, relaxing the body, just resting easily. That move to relaxation reminds us we're not trying to produce anything. We're not trying to get anywhere else. We're just trying to get here. We don't have to change here. We don't have to fix here. We just have to arrive here. So we do that by relaxing.

And as we land with the attention, with the awareness in the body, we also notice the mood. How are you feeling right now? Making space and allowing that. And then is there any train of thought that you're bringing in from the period before? Just making space for the thoughts to come, not needing to pick them up, and then they'll go.

So as you land in the present moment with your body, your mood, and your thoughts, connecting first to your anchor, feeling the breath in the body, aware of the wide space for sounds, or simply feeling the body posture as you sit. Let the attention settle into your familiar anchor.

And now consciously let go of your anchor and let the attention just take in the breadth of your moment's experience. The body is there manifesting its life. Sounds come and go in the big space all around you. Thoughts and moods come. Not so locatable, but they're there. And in that big space of awareness encompassing all the senses, what are you noticing right now? And now.

And now, notice how in this broad space, the attention, if left to itself, roams around, picking up different experiences moment after moment, allowing the attention to wander as it will. It tends to settle momentarily on something that seems predominant, a stronger experience that draws it. But it may not stay long and then gets drawn somewhere else. So each time the attention notices something new, you're there with that noticing. You're mindful of the new experience.

Sometimes it can be helpful in this style of practice, especially to use the soft mental noting can help keep us directly connected to our experience in the moment. So you might every two seconds, three seconds, make a soft mental note that labels where the attention has gone. And as you do, feel that thing. So your noticing might be something like: in-breath, sensation, out-breath, sound, sensation, aversion, contraction, unpleasant, relaxing, ease, in-breath. Just in a very relaxed way, knowing in each moment what your experience is. Naming it if you find that helpful to stay connected to the moment. Be very open, very relaxed, and quite choiceless as to where the attention goes. The mindfulness will develop moment after moment in this approach.

If in this choiceless open space you ever feel lost or confused by there being too many places to pay attention, just come back to your anchor. Drop the open choiceless approach. Refocus the attention where you're comfortable. And then when you feel stable again, try letting go of the anchor and again opening up to the wide space of appearances.

Noticing in each moment what attention is highlighting.

This practice of choiceless awareness invites us into a profound intimacy with the present moment. Rather than directing our attention with willful effort, we learn to receive whatever arises in the field of consciousness with gentle recognition. Each moment becomes a teacher, each sensation a doorway into deeper understanding.

The beauty of this approach lies in its simplicity and naturalness. We are not forcing the mind into any particular state, but rather creating the conditions for awareness to reveal its own inherent clarity. Like a clear mountain lake that reflects whatever passes overhead—clouds, birds, the changing sky—our awareness can learn to mirror the flow of experience without disturbance.

As you continue this practice, remember that there is no perfect way to do it. Some moments the attention will feel scattered, other times deeply focused. Some sessions will feel spacious and easeful, others restless or unclear. All of this is the natural rhythm of practice. What matters is the gentle returning, the patient cultivation of this open, receptive awareness.

Trust in the process. Trust in your own innate capacity for wisdom and clarity. Each time you settle into this choiceless awareness, you are strengthening the very foundation of mindfulness itself—the ability to be present with what is, exactly as it is, without the need to change or fix or improve anything at all.

May this practice serve you well on your path of awakening.

CHAPTER 143

Day 14 Brahmavihāra Instructions: Mettā - All Beings-Pervading Mettā in All Directions

Guy Armstrong · 46 min

In this final guided mettā meditation of the retreat series, Guy Armstrong leads practitioners through the traditional Buddhist practice of pervading all quarters with loving-kindness. Drawing from classical sutta instructions, the meditation begins with cultivating mettā for oneself and loved ones before systematically extending compassion through the four directions—north, south, east, and west.

The teaching emphasizes the boundless nature of the brahmavihāras, explaining how mettā can extend infinitely to include all beings everywhere. Armstrong uses the beautiful metaphor of a lantern with four doors, allowing practitioners to visualize their loving-kindness as light radiating outward. The guided meditation includes practical techniques such as imagining specific beings in each direction, from local wildlife to people across continents, making the abstract concept of 'all beings' tangible and heartfelt.

This practice represents the culmination of mettā cultivation, where practitioners learn to extend genuine care beyond personal preferences to embrace all sentient life. The session includes traditional Pali phrases and chanting, connecting modern practitioners with the ancient wisdom of boundless loving-kindness as taught in the early Buddhist texts.

This afternoon will be the last of our guided meditations on loving-kindness, so we'll do another variation on metta for all beings. It might overlap a little bit with what Aaron and Bonnie have done, covering the same terrain but maybe a little differently. Did either of them talk about pervading in the four directions? That's what we're going to do today.

But first we want to warm up to the metta for all beings. It's a very inspiring concept that it's possible to have this attitude toward all beings. We verified this with the neutral person—that we really can care for those we don't know very well. They're good objects in a way because we don't have a reason to dislike them yet. That always helps. There are a lot of beings we don't have any reason to dislike, and we can really wish for their welfare.

But before we go from the neutral person to all beings, as you know, before getting out to that unbounded space, we have to go through the asteroid belt, as Sylvia Boorstein calls it, which is the difficult person. We can't conceptually go to all beings without going through the difficult people, and then the spaceship might get beat up a little. That's okay because then we go through it and we're out in this vastness of all beings.

This is the stage at which we realize the boundless nature of the Brahmavihāras. Each of them is said to be boundless in the extent to which they can be extended. The number of beings is boundless and we can extend to all those beings.

I want to give you a little chant. It's a quotation from the suttas, the words of the Buddha, but it's been made into a chant by the monastics at Amaravati. I don't remember it entirely or exactly, but I hope this will give you the flavor.

We are going to practice in such a way that we pervade each quarter of the world by directions. So we'll do north, south, east, and west one quarter at a time. And this is the way in which it is to be approached. I'll chant a little bit:

"I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving kindness. So above and below, around and everywhere, and to all as to myself, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will."

This is the nature of it. This is the instruction to pervade the four quarters of the universe with a heart of loving kindness, extending to all the beings there just the way we would extend to ourselves.

The risk in extending loving-kindness to all beings is that it can become a little abstract. We're just saying words, and it helps if you can have a sense of actual beings that are included. This is the beauty of extending in the four directions.

Just so you know the orientation of the hall: That wall to your left is north. The wall behind me is east. That wall to your right is south, and the wall at the very back of the hall is west. When we turn to those directions, one thing that's lovely to do is to imagine all the beings who are to the north of us. If you know people in Novato or Seattle, or you can imagine people in the Yukon and the polar bears and the seals and the Inuit and the caribou who roam up to the north, it's beautiful to send loving kindness to beings that you can imagine. And similarly to the other four quarters.

Because there's a little risk in loving kindness for all beings being a little abstract, we like to warm up the space first with individuals. We'll do that by going through first ourself, and then a benefactor or friend, wherever you feel the warmer connection, and then we'll extend to all beings in this pervading way. So we'll go through a little bit of guiding.

Since I mentioned last time this metaphor where one surrounds oneself with one's dearest people and imagines them sending love so that you can just purely receive it, we'll do that as a little guided meditation on the way to all beings.

So let's begin.

Sit comfortably. Be relaxed. Let your attention come into your heart center so that you have a place to feel the metta in a grounded way in the body. You can put a hand on your chest if that is helpful to connect.

As you connect with your heart center and any warmth that you find there, bring to mind your sense of yourself. This could be through just feeling yourself sitting here and now. It could be remembering a photograph of yourself that you like. It could be imagining yourself in some place you feel happy, content, or safe.

As you connect with yourself, turn your attention to your good qualities. Remember the things that you appreciate about yourself. Seeing your good qualities is the key to evoking the loving kindness. At this point in the retreat, if nothing else comes to mind, just think of all the hours of good intention you've put forth here when it wasn't easy. You didn't want to sit or didn't want to walk or didn't even want to pay attention.

But you kept coming into the present moment because of your commitment to this journey—purifying your heart, and bringing forth wisdom and love. This is very noble and very rare in the world.

And so with that sense of your own goodness, your unquestioned goodness, begin saying the phrases of loving kindness to yourself:

May I be safe from harm.
May I be happy.
May I be healthy.
May I live with ease.

Now I'd like to invite you to bring into the room with you the people that you love the best in the world. Have them sit in a half circle in front of you. You can invite them in maybe one by one so that as each person enters, you make that connection with

them. It could be your benefactor and your dear friend. It could be your children. It could be your parents, other close friends, partners, family members. Let them come in one by one and take a seat in front of you. Let them be smiling at you, happy to be with you today, happy to join you in the loving kindness. Take a minute to bring your people in.

As you look out on your little circle of loved ones, remember that they've come here to be with you. You're at the center and they're here for you. Each of them is looking at you with a lot of love, a lot of appreciation, because they all know what a great person you are—even if there are just two or three people. They know you and love you.

Now imagine that your phrases for loving kindness, the ones you've been using for yourself, are being spoken by them, being sent as their wishes to you. You might want to hear them in the voices that are there. You might want to just imagine the chorus. But of course, change the words from "may I be happy" to "may you be happy" because they're wishing you this well-being.

Start repeating the phrases that you've been using, imagining them coming from this circle of dear people. Their metta wishes are entirely sincere and they're just streaming from their hearts into yours. It may be hard to take in all their loving wishes, and just continue to open one by one to each wish from each person. You might even feel you're not worthy of their love, but they keep sending it. They're not asking for anything back. They're just offering and ours is just to receive.

When you feel ready, you can thank your circle of friends for their visit and all their kindnesses. Or if you'd like to invite them to stay a little longer, that's fine too. You can allow them to go, or if you want to continue with this, you can allow them to stay a bit more.

If you feel ready to move on, you can bring in a benefactor or two or a friend or two and send your loving kindness to them, feeling the warmth of the connection you have and seeing their goodness.

As I wish to be safe, may you too be safe and protected from harm.
May you be happy and live with joy.
May your body support you with strength.
May you live with the ease of well-being.

Continue to connect with your benefactor or friend or a few, sending out wishes for their loving kindness, for their welfare.

Now we'll open up the field a bit and become familiar with the four directions by first noticing the feeling of metta directed just within the hall—everyone who's within the hall right now, but we'll do it by one quarter at a time.

First, the people who are in front of you. You might remember from when you came in the room, who's there? Remember familiar faces, the backs of their sitting posture, back of their heads. Have a sense that your loving kindness can reach out and touch all the people in front of you and send your metta phrases to them.

May you all be safe and protected from harm.
May you be happy.
May you be healthy.
May you live with ease.

As you do this, let the images of certain people come into your mind and stay there for a while so that the metta becomes personal for them. You can remember times you've seen them here, in the dining hall, around, seen them sitting, walking, practicing. Times they may have looked happy, times they may have looked sad.

All the people in Central and South America. Penguins and whales in Antarctica. Let particular beings come to mind so your loving kindness has a place to rest. Maybe someone you know who lives in that direction. Hold them in the light for a few moments, wishing them well.

If you have dear friends or family members to the south, let them receive this radiance of care. Let them feel held by your good intentions. The light of metta knows no boundaries - it can reach across any distance to touch hearts that need it.

And now close the southern door and open the western side of your lantern. Let the light shine to the west, behind you. Beings in the Pacific Ocean - the great whales, the sea otters, the vast schools of fish. Islands in the Pacific. People in Japan, China, Southeast Asia, India. All the practitioners around the world who sit in meditation at this very moment.

Think of particular people if they come to mind. Maybe someone you've never met but heard about, someone whose story touched you. Let your metta reach them. Let it span the oceans and continents to find them where they are.

The light doesn't diminish as it travels far. If anything, it seems to grow brighter as it meets other hearts, other beings who also wish for happiness and freedom from suffering.

Now close the western door and open the northern side. Let your loving kindness shine north. Beings in Oregon, Washington, Canada, Alaska. The great forests, the mountains, the arctic regions. Polar bears and caribou. Indigenous communities. Cities filled with people going about their daily lives, each carrying their own hopes and struggles.

If there's someone special to the north that you care about, let them rest in this light for a while. Send them your wishes for safety, for happiness, for ease in their lives.

And now, slowly, open all four doors of the lantern at once. Let the light shine in every direction simultaneously - east, south, west, and north. Feel how your heart's capacity for loving kindness can radiate boundlessly, touching beings in all quarters of the earth.

There's no limit to this care. It doesn't get used up or depleted. The more we offer it, the more abundant it becomes. Feel this infinite quality of metta as it streams from your heart center to encompass all life everywhere.

Continue sitting with this sense of boundless loving kindness filling all directions, touching all beings, near and far, known and unknown.

Central America. South America. Penguins in Antarctica—all wishing for safety, happiness, health, ease.

And now all beings to the west, behind you. Close the door on the south, open the door on the west side of the lantern. The light is pervading that quarter, however far it goes. All the beings to the west—Point Reyes, all the seals and sea lions, to Hawaii, Japan, Korea, China, Southeast Asia. On to Burma, Thailand, India. All the humans, all the creatures wanting to be happy, not to suffer.

Close the door to the west, checking that the lantern is still lit. If the lantern becomes dim, you can do some loving kindness for people that are close to you—friend or benefactor—just to strengthen the light a little.

And then open the lantern door to the north, to your left. Let the brightness of your loving kindness shine north, however far it goes. All the beings in Northern California, Shasta, the coast, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, into Canada, Vancouver, Alberta, all the First Nations people of Canada. All the wildlife—the eagles, bears, deer and elk.

And then finally, take the doors away from all four sides of the lantern and let the light pervade the space in all directions so that the loving kindness can reach as far as it will. For all beings everywhere. Beings in states of suffering, beings in states of glad-

ness. Beings in states of good health, beings in states of ill health. Human beings, creatures of the land, the sea and the air, rivers and lakes. All beings everywhere wanting to be happy and not to suffer.

Let the loving kindness be abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.

May all beings be safe and protected from harm.
May all beings be happy and peaceful.
May all beings be healthy and strong.
May all beings live with ease.

CHAPTER 144

The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

> *Guy Armstrong offers a profound exploration of one of Buddhism's most challenging teachings: anattā or not-self. Drawing from the Anattalakkhana Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's second discourse where all five ascetics achieved enlightenment, he examines how our conventional sense of 'I' is constructed through identification with the five khandhas (aggregates): rūpa (form), vedanā (feeling), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness).*
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> *Armstrong illuminates how we mistakenly equate ourselves with these aggregates in various ways - sometimes identifying as the body, sometimes as the owner of the body, sometimes as emotions, sometimes as their observer. Using accessible examples and personal stories, including his sister's death, he demonstrates how these aggregates are merely conditioned phenomena that arise and pass away, lacking the permanence and unity we attribute to 'self.'*
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> *The talk reveals how the sense of self emerges through upādāna (clinging) to any of the aggregates, creating dukkha through separation and fear. When we see these processes clearly without grasping, we experience the freedom and spaciousness that comes with wisdom - what one teacher called 'no self, no problem.' This exploration offers both intellectual understanding and practical guidance for recognizing selfing in meditation and daily life.*

The subject of the talk this evening is the five aggregates are not self. As you might deduce from the title, this is going to be a talk about one of Buddhism's central teachings—the teachings on not-self.

The teaching on not-self is one of the most powerful teachings that the Buddha gave, and it's a teaching that's unique, I believe, to Buddhism. It is often paired with two other pointings: impermanence and unsatisfactoriness. Together these three—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—are considered the three characteristics of things that exist. Tonight we're just going to look at the last of these, the teaching on not-self. Impermanence you're probably fairly familiar with. Bonnie is going to talk about unsatisfactoriness or dukkha in a couple of nights, so this will round out the three characteristics.

The teaching on not-self is a powerful teaching, a profound teaching, but it's also one of the hardest to understand in all of Buddhism. So welcome to the evening. In that it is not easy to understand, I just want to offer this as an exploration of the theme. It's not that you are supposed to get it all tonight. Some of you may already have a very good understanding of this topic, and hopefully this will be a refresher and maybe a little deepening. If this is somewhat new to you, then don't strain too much conceptually. Just kind of take in the drift of it and don't bother thinking too much about it. Don't worry if it doesn't all make sense. It's not supposed to on first hearing. And also notice if there's any resistance to hearing it. We are a little bit attached to the self, so there might not be an interest in hearing about not being there. Just notice that.

What the Buddha said is that the sense of self is not really intrinsic to our experience of being a human being, but it's something that arises based on our concepts and our beliefs. So in meditation, we want to look at what that means. Is it possible for us to have experiences where the sense of self isn't present or isn't really intrusive? How does that feel? And how would it feel when the self comes in again?

This belief in self, the Buddha more or less equated with this fundamental factor of ignorance. One of the fundamental ways that ignorance manifests is that we don't understand the truth about the sense of self. And this is a cause for a lot of self-concern. The more we dwell on self-concern, the more we isolate ourselves from the wider field of humanity, creatures, and nature. That isolation, which is engendered by our thinking, leads to a sense of separation. The separation leads to a sense of fear. We create this strong duality between the self and the other, between self and the world. And then we live in that tension. Once we've created the duality and firmly established it and believe in it, there's a tension that we live within that creates a fundamental anxiety in us.

There's this wonderful teacher from India, who passed away twenty or more years ago, named Nisargadatta Maharaj. He was a Vedanta teacher who lived and taught in Bombay. He wrote a powerful book called *I Am That*—highly recommended if you haven't encountered it. And this is one of his comments: "All yogas"—and yoga is a word that just means joining or union, so he would see our way of practice as another yoga in his system—"All yogas, all real spiritual practices, have only one aim: to save you from the calamity of separate existence."

So right now, we are kind of in that calamity. Most of us are living from that sense of separation. And the teaching on not-self is to bring us out of that, to see clearly the way things are and bring us out of that. Because when we release the self-concern, we can

open in a much broader way to life. We have a much more inclusive vision of life. The boundlessness of the brahmaviharas are one expression of that. And the expression of wisdom leads to spaciousness, openness, lightness, and ease.

So in the talk this evening, we want to look at how the self gets formed and how it might be to see things without it. This notion of "I"—basically self—appears whenever we say the words "I," "me," "my," "mine," and really believe in them. I mean, it's possible—the Buddha talked about "I." He used it, but he wasn't caught in it. But for the most part, when we use it, we believe in it.

And that's a problem.

So this sense of I appears frequently in our thoughts. It's the center of our life. It's kind of our North Star. Everything revolves around the I—our thoughts, our views, our actions, our speech, our decisions, our values, our life's direction. And so we want to understand what it really means.

This I seems so self-evident, but have you ever found it? Have you ever come across it in meditation? You've been exploring mind and body in a very dedicated way for these two weeks and a long time before. Have you ever found this I?

So William James, the philosopher, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." And the Dalai Lama said, "When you think something is real, but you can't find it, that's a sign of delusion." It may not be as real as you think.

So the classical analogy is you're walking in the forest and you come upon this thing on the ground that is colored—it's white, red, and green, and it's about this long and it's in a coil on the ground. And as you're walking along, you're convinced that's a snake. And so you jump back in fear. And as you get a little closer, you look at it more precisely. Oh, it's a piece of rope. I thought it was a snake, but it's actually a piece of rope. Your perception has become clarified. Now you're no longer afraid. The rope's not going to bite you.

So it's just this way. We think that this human body and mind and heart contain a self. And that's scary. That's separating. It leads to isolation. We're afraid of dying. When we understand it the way it is, it takes that fear away. So it's a matter of correcting our perception.

This use of the word I comes with some what I would call faulty logic. We use it all the time. We've used it since we learned to speak. It's been a very common word for us. And we've just kind of built our views around the conventions of language. But we've never really stopped to think about it.

So let's look at some of these ways language is just kind of funny. So let me ask a simple question: How tall are you? And you can answer that pretty easily. I would say I'm five feet, ten inches tall. So what I really mean is the body is five feet, ten inches tall, right? My thoughts aren't five foot ten, my mood isn't five foot ten, but the body is five foot ten. So here we're using I to mean the body. "I am five foot ten" means the body is five foot ten. We're equating I with the body.

Okay, now let me ask: What color are your eyes? Again, easy question. I'd say—this is not a trick—so I'd say, my eyes are brown. So now I'm not the body. That would be the eyes. You know, if I were to say, "I'm brown," that would mean I'm the eyes. But I'm saying my eyes are brown. That means now I'm the owner of the body. And that means something separate from it that possesses it.

So which are you? Are you the body or are you the owner of it? And can you be both? Does that really make sense?

That you're both the body and the owner of it?

Let's examine the mind. We might speak of our emotions and say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." Here we're equating the "I" with the emotion of happiness or sadness—so here I am the emotion. But we can also speak of "my joys" and "my sorrows." Now we are the owner of the emotion. So which are you? Are you the emotion or the owner of it? Can you be both?

Another way we commonly think of ourselves—at least I do, and you can tell me if you do—is that we feel the "I" is really a small being located in the head, behind the eyes and between the ears, kind of in the center here, looking out at the world and having all kinds of experiences. This "I" is doing the seeing, the hearing, the observing. It's somehow separate from what is being seen and heard and observed. There's a separate little being that's like the essence—the little guy right in the center of things who's observing, watching, hearing, experiencing it all. This is the sense of "I" as observer.

There's also the sense that this "I" should be able to control things. We should be able to make our body feel better when we sit. We should have a better mood when we wake up in the morning. It's this kind of experiencer and controller that has that responsibility.

So these are five ways we use the word "I"—as the body, as the owner of the body, as the emotions, as the owner of the emotions, and as a separate observer somewhere inside the head. Can all those be true? Or have we created a really confused concept that meditation might help us straighten out? Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

Here's a quote from the Buddha: "In whatever way they conceive of the self, the truth is ever other than that." We may be conceiving it a little bit wrong.

I had a teacher who put it even more bluntly. He said, "Everything you think is wrong." That's a good wake-up call. It reminds me of something someone said on a talk radio show. Talk radio shows are not generally the font of wisdom in this country, but one incisive comment was about the mind: "The mind—often wrong, seldom in doubt."

This is how it is about the self. We really believe it's like this, and we seldom doubt it. But it may be helpful to question this belief, because as long as we believe in the self in this way, we're bound up with separation, we're bound with fear.

So how did the Buddha see—how did an awakened being see—our process, our existence? When you and I look at one another, typically we see a person. Certainly before we get engaged in meditative insight, we look at each other and we see a person.

There's a sixth-century commentary from Sri Lanka called the Visuddhimagga. It was a compilation of meditation techniques and insight practices from that time. It's still used today as a manual in Buddhist countries. In the Visuddhimagga, the text says that imagining you're looking at someone and seeing a person is not the way a trained meditator would see it.

The analogy it uses is with a butcher. Now, personally, I've been a vegetarian for many years. I'm committed to animal welfare, and I don't like to talk about the suffering and slaughter of animals. Nonetheless, this text uses the analogy of a butcher. So please excuse that, but this is the classical reference.

When a butcher carves up the carcass of a cow that he's going to sell for meat, he doesn't think to himself, "cow, cow, cow." He thinks, "rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs." Because he's so familiar with the cow, he knows what those parts are. He doesn't just see cow—he sees the details of cow.

So the Visuddhimagga said that one who has looked deeply into the mind-body process doesn't just say "person." They see the particular parts that make up a person, both in the mental sphere and in the physical sphere.

When the Buddha talked about what a person is, he used two different models. You could say he saw in two ways. One of them is six types of sense organs and six objects.

So this is from a discourse called the Sutta on Totality from the Samyutta Nikaya. Let me read a section of it:

"Bhikkhus"—and this applies to you all because you're practitioners—"what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully and I will teach you the totality of life. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality would not be speaking of something they knew about."

This is pretty exhaustive, isn't it? It describes our experience as human beings—the six senses, including the mind as the sixth, and their corresponding objects. That's what our experience is made up of. It's beautiful because this is so simple. At any time there are only six things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects with their organs.

This maps really nicely to our meditation practice. You may have noticed that many of our instructions follow this schema. The Buddha mostly used the map of the six sense bases to cut through craving by highlighting where we get desirous of pleasant experience at these sense doors.

But there's another model that he used just as often—the model that John talked about a couple of nights ago called the five aggregates. The five aggregates also describe this totality of experience, but they divide it up differently. This device the Buddha used to cut through wrong view—wrong view meaning the sense of belief in a self.

So we're going to examine this a little tonight by looking through the false way that we create a sense of self. And I want to say that this can sound abstract. Perhaps in listening to the talk the other night and perhaps in listening to this talk, you'll think, "Oh, this is just intellectual theory. This is Buddhist jargon. It doesn't have anything to do with me and my real experience of life."

But I want to share that the five aggregates really became alive for me and meaningful when one of my older sisters died. She was five years older than me and she died when she was fifty-one, quite unexpectedly. She had an illness for a long time, but it wasn't life-threatening. And then all of a sudden one evening, she had an attack of some kind. She went into cardiac arrest and the medical technicians were not able to bring her back.

I had talked with her on the phone just a few days before, and she was bright and vital and energetic. She was a big personality. I had a close connection with her—she had a lot of humor and a lot of heart. And to hear that she had passed away so suddenly was really a shock to me.

I'm sure you have probably all come into contact with this around death—that somebody can seem so alive, so real, so solid, such a strong person, and then at some point they're just gone. And I couldn't make sense of it. She had been there, and then she was just gone.

The thing that helped me understand it was looking at her experience through the five aggregates and understanding the different elements that make up a human being. And by understanding her, I came to understand myself a lot more deeply. It brought me a great deal more peace and ease with the process of dying.

So the five aggregates can be very meaningful in our exploration of them. They are really a description of life and, by extension, a description of the ending of life.

The Pali word is *khanda*. It covers five elements: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. The first aggregate is physical—it means all physical matter in the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. The other four are mental.

I don't want to go through those in detail because I think John probably covered them quite well. I do want to highlight a little bit this factor of perception, because perception is something we don't spend a lot of time talking about, but it's a really powerful quality.

I may have mentioned in a morning discussion that what we see in the visual field is just patches of form and color. It's quite interesting, especially if you take out the added dimension of depth. If you cover an eye and just look with one eye, you take away the depth perception. And what we really see are patches of form and color.

When artists come to learn to paint accurately, they have to learn to see this two-dimensional view of things—this play of light and shape—in order to represent it correctly. So in this model of form and color, we have learned over time to draw elements out and assign names to them: cushion, floor, person, chair, lamp, door, ceiling.

Well, we had to learn that perception. We might think it happens automatically, but it's not like that. This is a description from Oliver Sacks, the neurologist who had been involved in treating a man who had been blind from the time he was very young—blind almost from infancy—and then found out that he could have an operation to restore his sight.

The man's name was Virgil. He was lying in the hospital bed, his sight having been restored. Sacks was there and the surgeon was there, and they were peeling off the bandages from his eyes. Everyone thought he would exclaim, "Wow, this is fantastic, I can see again! Here you all are and it's just wonderful!" It didn't happen like that.

This is Sacks' description of Virgil's first moments after the surgery: "He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing, at the surgeon who stood before him still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke—saying, 'Well?'—did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face." Virgil told Sacks later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, meaningless—a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, "Well?" And only then did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face, and indeed the face of his surgeon.

Virgil had gone through the years when the perceptual wiring gets developed in the brain, and he hadn't learned how to do that. So as a grown man, he couldn't recognize things. With a lot of training, some of that perception started to occur for him naturally, but it never came back fully the way it is for us. He went through the rest of his adult life struggling to perceive objects out of the blur of form and color.

For us, we do this perception almost automatically. I'm going to add a little postscript here because it ties into what for me is an interesting question. There was a question this morning about whether mindfulness is a conceptual activity. The Abhidhamma says that the proximate cause for mindfulness to arise is strong perception. Can you get that? When you perceive clearly what your experience is—in the nature of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, in-breath, out-breath, mood, feeling tone, et cetera—mindfulness happens. Mindfulness happens with the recognition of what we're experiencing, and that is perception. So when there's strong perception, mindfulness follows.

Now, is perception a conceptual activity? When you walk into the room and you see Sally and you recognize her as Sally, does it require words to do that? Or when you look up at this altar and you see the statue of the Buddha, you recognize that's what the statue is of. Do you say words every time you see that? It doesn't require words, does it? If you see a good friend, do you say to yourself, "Good friend is coming"? No, you just recognize that's a good friend.

So perception is built on names. We recognize it's in the category: mat, chair, statue, painting, door, et cetera. But the recognition, when it happens, doesn't require the concepts to come up again. In this way, perception doesn't have to be a conceptual activity, and mindfulness doesn't need to be a conceptual activity, though it is built on our prior familiarity with those categories. I hope that's clear.

Perception is very powerful because once we perceive something in the world, we form a view about it and then we act in the world based on that view. If we perceive someone as friendly to us, we act toward them based on that view and we tend to respond with friendliness. If we perceive someone as hostile or critical to us, we form a

view about that person and then we tend to respond to them out of that view. So the moment of perception is a very powerful moment in forming our mental structures and then conditioning our actions.

One of the kickers about perception is it's not always reliable. I was practicing on a meditation retreat on the East Coast. It was a fall morning, and I was doing my walking meditation outdoors when all of a sudden I heard a brass band coming up the street. I distinctly heard horns and trumpets, and they were coming closer and closer as I was walking. This is a little bit unusual in a small town in the middle of Massachusetts—to have a marching band come up the street on a fall morning. So I stopped my walking and just listened.

Gradually the marching band transformed into the bumps and rattles and squeaks of a garden cart that was being pushed down a gravel track on two bicycle tires. I thought I had heard a brass band. I was convinced I heard drums and trumpets, horns. And I hadn't. I'd heard a garden cart on bicycle tires. So perception is not always reliable.

But I might have reacted out of thinking there was a brass band coming.

So one of the ways the Buddha said we don't perceive things correctly is that we think things are permanent when they're not. We think things are going to be satisfying when they're not. We think things have a self when they don't. And we think things are really beautiful when they may actually be a little dangerous. So these are our misperceptions that go on a lot. And part of the difficulty I'd had with my sister's death was some assumption of her permanence, of her continuity, that hadn't taken into account the way she actually was.

So perception is also interesting because sometimes when we put a label on things, we stop seeing it correctly. Notice this if you label something as pain in the body—sometimes that word forms a block and makes it difficult to feel exactly what's there. Or there may be a strong emotion like hurt or regret, and you think, oh, that's either hurt or that's guilt. Maybe the word "guilt" colors it so much you can't get in and actually feel it. So perception can cloud our ability to be with a direct experience. Just to be aware of that.

For example, this big metal thing in front of me—I assume most of you perceive it as a bell because we strike it at the end of sittings and it makes a sound and it's very useful. So you look at it normally, you perceive it as a bell. Could it be a begging bowl? Could there be a big monk or nun who would like to carry it around and have you fill it up with rice and curry? Sure. If you had a big statue, could you turn it upside down on

the statue and it'd be a really nice little chapeau? Sure, it could be. If we get attached to the word "bell," we don't see all those possibilities. We don't see the thing just in its bare suchness because the word has conditioned us.

So a Zen koan—they might hold this out, a Zen master might hold it out and say, "What is this? If you say it is a striker, I will hit you. But if you say it is not a striker, I will hit you too." I heard a lot of stories like that, and that's why I ended up in Vipassana instead of Zen. I had a feeling I would get hit a lot.

There was this nice dialogue kind of along these lines. In the late seventies, these two really respected Buddhist teachers came together. They were both in Cambridge, Massachusetts at the same time. One was Kalu Rinpoche, who was a great master in the Tibetan Kagyu lineage. The other was Seungsahn Sunim, who was a Zen master from Korea. Some friends were in touch with them both and thought, wow, it'd be really great to bring these two enlightened beings together. You know those stories about how enlightened beings totally recognize each other's enlightenment—they're just like two mirrors meeting each other, they're both so empty, and there are these tremendous heart openings of recognition for kindred spirits. They thought it would be something like that.

It wasn't.

So they sat them down, they served them tea and put out some fruit for them. And as they were still just settling in and chatting a little bit, Seungsahn Sunim, the Zen master, picked up one of the oranges and held it out to Kalu Rinpoche and said, "What is this?" Because that's the way he was used to checking someone's enlightenment from the Zen tradition. "What is this?"

Kalu just kind of looked at it, smiled a little bit, kept doing his beads—he was doing some mantra on his mala. Seungsahn Sunim didn't get an answer, so he held out the orange again. He said, "What is this?" And Kalu just turned to his translator and said something, and the translator said, "Oh, Rinpoche asked, don't they have oranges in Korea?"

So it's all about perception, right? It's an interesting story because sometimes cross-culturally, dharma doesn't exactly translate that easily. Even expressions of dharma are culturally conditioned. Helpful to remember.

So this is the area of perception and how it can be sometimes accurate, sometimes not so accurate. The fourth aggregate is volitional formations—mostly thoughts and emotions, movements of mind. And then consciousness, the knowing quality that receives all the different sense objects, that holds them and knows them in that very basic way.

So our human experience is made up of form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

That's it.

Why is that freeing? Why is that significant? Because there's one element there that we think about a lot that's not in that list. There's no "I" in that list. There's nothing in the center that they all belong to. There's nothing in the center that controls them. There's nothing in the center that is the essence of those aggregates. Our experience is just form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.

If you want to condense it a little bit and make it more approachable, think of it as three aggregates. Collapse feeling, perception, and formations all together. Call those formations. This makes it more immediate for me. So our experience is: we have a body, we have consciousness that reveals sense objects, and then we have thoughts and emotions, feelings, perceptions, meditative states like calm, concentration, equanimity. These are all the mental formations that happen inside us. This is what a human being is—these three things. There's not a separate self in the middle of all that.

It's kind of like—can anybody see what this is? This is a pen, right? Everybody would agree this is a pen. We have no trouble identifying it and naming it. But suppose I start to take it apart. Suppose I deconstruct the pen for us to look at. Now I've got a cap, I've got a barrel, I've got an end, I've got a cartridge, and I've got a tip. Is this still a pen? Would you call this a pen? It's not really, is it? It's just pieces. When they're put together in a certain way—we put it all back together—then we call it a pen. But when the pieces disassemble, it's no longer a pen.

This is the way it is with a human being. We're so accustomed to seeing these pieces joined that all we can think of is "human being" or "pen." But when we apply meditative insight to our experience, we see that we are only made up of these different pieces. They are not intrinsically bound together.

This is what my sister's death revealed. Her formations and her consciousness were not intrinsically bound to her form. At death, they separated. That's what I hadn't understood before. I thought they were intrinsically bound as one thing. But in death, the pieces come apart. And then we understand the human being is made up of different pieces. It's not just one thing.

So we still use the pen. It's still quite useful. I can describe it to you. It's a ballpoint pen. It's gray and black in its barrel, and it writes with black ink. It's a medium tip. That's a useful designation. It's useful to know that. But we don't deceive ourselves that the pen is one substantial entity. We see how it's just been put together. It's a collection of pieces that we conventionally designate as pen.

So this is what we want to see about ourselves. We're a collection of pieces—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. That's all.

But when you really look at it honestly, we feel ourselves to be relatively permanent and substantial. We expect to continue in some recognizable form. We expect to be happy if we arrange things properly. We think of ourselves as unified and coherent. And we feel ourselves to be fundamentally separate from the rest of the universe—that I am here and you are there, and there's some basic separation between us.

These are the assumptions we operate from, but they're all contrary to what investigation reveals. When we look closely, we see that everything is impermanent. We see that trying to make impermanent things give us lasting satisfaction is a recipe for suffering. We see that what we call "self" is actually multiple processes happening simultaneously. And we see that these processes are deeply interconnected with everything else.

So the spiritual path is really about coming to see clearly what's actually happening, rather than operating from our unconscious assumptions about what's happening. It's about waking up to reality as it actually is, rather than continuing to live in the story we tell ourselves about reality.

The Buddha's insight was that when we see clearly—when we see the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and empty nature of all phenomena—we naturally stop grasping at them so tightly. We stop trying to extract permanent satisfaction from impermanent things. And in that letting go, there's tremendous freedom and peace.

This doesn't mean we become nihilistic or that nothing matters. Remember, conventional designation is still useful. We still say "pen" and we still say "Sally." We still take care of our health and pay our bills and love our friends. But we hold it all more lightly. We're not desperately trying to solidify and protect something that was never solid to begin with.

You know, I'm a male, I'm a certain age, I'm a certain height, I have this background and these characteristics and this conditioning. It kind of makes up this person. We think that.

But we attribute some things to the self that are over and above that. The central one is we attribute continuity. We think that there's some permanence or ongoing nature to this thing we call I. A simple question: don't you feel like the same person now who went to third grade? If you link up all your memories, doesn't it feel like you've been there for all those years? Or just over the course of this retreat, don't you feel like the same person who walked in the door a couple of weeks ago? Well, of course you feel different in many ways, but there's this continuity we attribute to self.

If we didn't have this assumption of continuity, you wouldn't be afraid of dying. We're afraid of dying because we see the continuity coming to an end. What's going to die? Me. Me is going to continue up to the point of death, but then there's this cliff that ends it. And that's scary to me, because the assumption is the me no longer continues then.

The second thing is that we feel ourselves at the center of experience, and in a way, separate from the experience. When we say something like "I have joys," we feel ourselves separate from the experience of the joy. "I have sorrows"—we feel ourselves separate from the experience of the sorrows. So there's this assumption of a self in the middle of everything. That's actually, if you look at it closely, an identification with the fifth aggregate of consciousness. It's consciousness that receives joys. It's consciousness that receives sorrows. And when we identify with consciousness, then we say, "I am receiving joy. I am receiving sorrow."

We think that we should be unitary, right? The self should be unitary. Otherwise, how many selves do you think you are? Usually people who think they're more than one self—somebody calls the paramedics for them. This is not generally considered a sign of mental health. So we think we're one, not many. So are you both your liver and your compassion? How many selves are we? Liver, compassion, toenail, perception, pleasant feeling tone, joy, eyeballs.

And we think we should be unique, right? My self is different from your self. Some of the aggregates fail on this count. We'll get to that in a minute.

So just think about this body. If we claim it as I or mine, we can either have a lot of pride about that or we can have a certain amount of embarrassment, even shame. We maybe don't really want the body that we've got. But did you have anything to do with how it came out? Did you choose it? Did you shape it? You know, by diet, by exercise, by healthcare, we have a little bit of influence, but did you choose how tall you are? How broad your shoulders are? Whether you're dark or fair? We didn't choose any of that.

What did? Well, our father's sperm met our mother's egg. They connected. They lived in the womb for nine months. The cells multiplied and specialized. Something popped out into the world. It was nourished by milk and water and food and air and sunlight. And it grew, grew, grew.

Here it stands today, totally beyond our control. This body is simply a physical process that initiated at the moment of conception and has unfolded into what we see now. Can you really take responsibility for how it has turned out? Yet we do this constantly, don't we? We assign "I" to the body and feel either proud or embarrassed about its appearance or condition.

Actually, this form is completely beyond our control because the body is simply part of physical nature. It's nature itself that has done this work—not our will, not our choice. This body is the result of processes within physical nature.

One of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, expressed this beautifully. He said, "This body came out of nature. It's part of nature. It never departed from nature and it belongs to nature. Give it back to nature. That will be a big relief for you."

You can understand emotions in the same way. Emotions are simply part of mental nature. Every human being has the same range of emotions—we all experience fear and joy, anger and happiness, sadness and contentment. We all have access to this complete spectrum. This emotional range is simply part of the mental nature that accompanies being human, so we don't need to claim these feelings as "I" or "mine."

Consciousness itself is a particularly interesting faculty because it too is just nature—part of mental nature. What makes it especially intriguing is why it doesn't make sense to identify with consciousness either. One common approach is to say, "I am just the observer," or in more sophisticated meditation terms, "I am vast awareness. Everything comes and goes within me. I am not the comings and goings—I am the vast awareness that holds it all."

This could become a philosophical view, but that awareness isn't actually different between you and me and everyone else. That awareness is fundamentally the same. Since there's nothing unique in it, there's nothing that can be called a separate self, a distinct "I."

So the sense of "I" is not intrinsic. How then is it generated?

Shortly after Ananda ordained—he was the Buddha's cousin and attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life, very close to him—another monk was giving Ananda instruction. This monk told him, "It is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness."

This is a profound observation. The "I" isn't present until we cling to one of the aggregates. It's this grasping hold of a part of our experience that constructs the "I" and gives us that sense of self.

The Buddha expressed this in similar terms. When asked how the belief in a self comes to be, he said, "An untaught ordinary person"—this is a key phrase from his teaching, referring to someone who hasn't heard the Dharma, hasn't understood its pointing—"regards form as self." This would be like saying, "I am the body."

Or self as possessing form—"I am the owner of the body."

Or form in self—"The body is part of me." You might think this makes sense if you believe you're the vast awareness and the body is part of that vast awareness, so the body becomes part of you.

Or self is in form—"I'm really inside the body, inside the head, looking out at everything that's happening."

These represent four ways of identifying with form alone. You can multiply this by five for all five aggregates, giving us twenty different ways we construct a sense of self. I'll let you work through the other sixteen on your own.

You have another two weeks or a month to explore this, so continue your investigation.

But more simply, the "I" gets built when we grasp at any phenomenon at a sense door. A simple example: let's say there's a pain in the knee while you're sitting. If you're just very clear and mindful, you'll simply note "unpleasant sensation." But if grasping

comes upon it—maybe there's some fear, some worry, some frustration—you go, "My knee hurts." The "my" is extra. Even the "knee" is extra, truth to tell. All you really know is unpleasant sensation.

But when we turn to it and go, "Oh, that's my knee and that's my pain," we create a sense of self that wasn't there before. So that's the turning toward and taking hold of something out of some kind of fear or desire, generally.

You can take a look at this with any experience at the sense doors where you start hearing the word "I" or "my." For instance, some fear arises and the thought is, "Oh, that's my old pattern." That's a form of grasping and a form of identifying—it links through time, creating a belief about the self: "I'm the owner of that old pattern."

So what if the fear just arose and all you knew was fear, and there was no "I" or "my" connected? Then the sense of self isn't arising.

This momentary grasping and creating a sense of "I" or "my" is the activity that we call *selfing*. We construct a self moment by moment when we take hold of something and claim it. That's all. If you don't do that, sense of self never has to arise.

So this is the Buddha continuing: "Therefore, all form should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

When there's no grasping and self is not created, how does that feel? If you've had that insight or that understanding, it feels good, doesn't it? It feels open, spacious, peaceful, free, easy.

This is a very interesting place to examine and pay attention to in meditation practice. When is the mind simply open, receiving sense impressions at the six sense doors, and when does grasping take place that claims one of those—driven by greed or aversion typically? Then contraction comes in. Then struggle comes in. Conflict comes in. The self comes in—sense of self.

Notice for yourself: when are things free of that sense of self? How does that feel? And then when does a grasping moment take place that gives birth to a sense of self? It's very helpful to notice.

This opening of the door to seeing not-self is not a cold intellectual experience. When we are able to see without the contraction of self, the world is more open, the heart is more open, and we feel less burdened. We feel lighter, easier, without that pressure.

Jack Kornfield tells this story of visiting an old monk in Sri Lanka when he was still a monk. He was a young guy and a Westerner, and the monk thought, "Well, I'll check this young monk out." The monk said, "Oh, what do you understand as the central teaching of the Buddha?" And Jack said, "Well, my understanding of the central teaching is that there really is no self within the field of our experience—no separate self." And the monk said, "Oh, very good!" He said, "No self, no problem! No problem!" And he just started laughing.

So this is the experience of no-self. Check it out. Take a look in your own practice and see what it feels like when this grasping insistence isn't happening.

This kind of makes sense of this famous saying of Nisargadatta Maharaj, whom I quoted earlier. You may have heard it before. He said, "Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows."

So please let the metta carry you to this connected feeling with everything.

Please let vipassana carry you to this wisdom of not being anything particular.

Let's just sit for a minute.

In this gentle space between everything and nothing, we find the true flow of our lives. When metta opens us to the boundless connection with all that is, and vipassana reveals the transparent nature of what we think we are, we discover a profound freedom. This is not the freedom to be something special, but the freedom from needing to be anything at all.

The practice invites us into this delicate dance—embracing our interconnectedness while simultaneously releasing our grip on any fixed sense of self. In this release, we don't become diminished or lost. Rather, we become available to the natural unfolding of each moment, no longer trapped by the exhausting project of maintaining and defending a particular identity.

This is where wisdom and love meet—not in grand philosophical understanding, but in the lived experience of letting go while remaining fully present. Between the poles of everything and nothing, life simply flows, and we flow with it, no longer swimming against the current of reality.

The invitation is simple: let your practice carry you to these discoveries again and again. Allow metta to dissolve the barriers between self and other, and let vipassana reveal the spacious awareness that remains when all our constructions fall away. In

this place, the heart naturally opens, and wisdom naturally arises—not as something we achieve, but as what we already are when we stop trying so hard to be something else.

CHAPTER 145

Day 16: Brahmavihāra Instructions: Compassion: Suffering person, benefactor and dear friend

Guy Armstrong · 47 min

In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong offers profound instructions on karuṇā (compassion), the second of the four brahmavihāras. He explains compassion as the natural movement of loving-kindness when it encounters suffering, emphasizing that the brahmavihāras function both as concentration and insight practices that teach us to relate skillfully to the First Noble Truth.

Armstrong addresses the common difficulties practitioners face when opening to suffering - both their own and others' - exploring various defense mechanisms like avoidance, denial, rationalization, and the urge to immediately fix problems. He discusses the near and far enemies of compassion: pity (condescending attitude) and overwhelm (tipping into grief), explaining how equanimity serves as the essential balancing force that prevents compassion from becoming destructive.

The guided meditation systematically works with four categories of beings: a suffering person, oneself, a benefactor, and a dear friend, using phrases like "May you be free from your pain and sorrow." Armstrong emphasizes the crucial importance of maintaining inner balance throughout practice, advising practitioners to narrow their focus or return to mettā when feeling overwhelmed. He concludes by describing authentic compassion as having a sober, slightly sad quality - like watching a beautiful sunset - that contains both the pain of suffering and the beauty of caring, referencing the bodhisattva Kuan Yin as an embodiment of balanced compassion.

This afternoon we will have the second in the guided meditations on the theme of compassion, *karunā*. Sally probably explained what we mean by this yesterday, but I want to mention that it's the natural movement of the heart of loving-kindness when it looks upon suffering. So it's not very different—I don't think of it as very different from *mettā*—but it's *mettā* when it looks on a difficult situation.

One year I was doing a six-week retreat and decided to do ten days of intensive practice on each of the four *brahmavihāras*. So I did ten days of *mettā*, ten on compassion, ten on joy, and ten on equanimity. I found them all really illuminating. As you probably know, the *brahmavihāras* are not just concentration practices, they're also insight practices, so we learn a lot from doing them.

One of the things I learned from doing compassion is how hard it was for me. The reason the compassion practice was difficult—it wasn't difficult to feel it—it was difficult to be in touch with suffering eighteen hours a day. Because in the compassion practice, we bring people to mind and look on the difficulty in their life, the suffering in that being's life. And that connection to suffering is not an easy thing, I think, for us as people.

There are so many ways in daily life that we don't open to suffering. Freud said that neurosis is the refusal to suffer. We can sort of see that, right? When we can't open to our own suffering, we find ways to compensate through neurotic behavior. But the difficulty we have opening to our own suffering is the same difficulty we have opening to others' suffering because it reminds us of our own.

When we meet suffering in the world or in ourselves, we have a lot of different defenses against it. We avoid touching it. We deny that it's taking place. We rationalize it and explain to ourselves all the reasons why it's happening. We find ways to defend with escapes, whether it's television, alcohol, drugs, sex, whatever. We blame the person for their own suffering. We justify it to ourselves why they might be suffering or we might be suffering, or we try to fix it. I don't know if you've ever found a friend who, every time you try to just unburden your heart a little bit and talk about your problems, what they really want to do is make it go away by fixing you. So this is another way of avoiding just feeling the impact of suffering.

The beautiful thing about the compassion practice is that it lets us make a direct relationship with suffering and not be unnerved by it. We come to be comfortable in being with the truth of suffering in our own life or someone else's. And this is the first noble truth: there is suffering in life. This is the way that we learn how to relate to it skillfully.

There are unskillful ways of relating to suffering, generally expressed as the near and far enemies, which I think Sally talked about yesterday. Sometimes the near enemy is described as pity—this is not *pīti*, the Pali word for rapture, but pity, looking down. It's kind of like looking down on someone. Pity is not quite compassion because it comes from a superior attitude. It's like, "Oh, I'm so sorry you have this problem, but I don't have this problem." And that's a way of taking ourselves out of the equation. There's a condescending attitude in pity, whereas compassion says we're all in the same boat. This could be happening to me also.

The other form the near enemy takes is overwhelm by suffering. And this is possible for all of us at any time. We may be overwhelmed by our own suffering. We may be overwhelmed by the suffering in the world. There is enough suffering in the world that it can overwhelm any of us if we want it to. If we open and bring to mind the extent of

suffering in this world, any of us could be overwhelmed in a minute. We can't hold, I don't believe, the full extent of the suffering of the world. And so we learn through the compassion practice just to open to it a little bit at a time, say in one individual at a time, and then it becomes more manageable, more bearable.

This tendency to be overwhelmed, or sometimes we call it tipping into grief for the world or for ourselves, is the far enemy. And the only thing that can support us in staying with compassion is equanimity. Equanimity is the fourth of the *brahmavihāras*, and if it doesn't grow up alongside *mettā* and compassion, then *mettā* tips over into attachment, affection with attachment, and compassion tips over into grief.

Sometimes people may feel, "Oh, you should be opening to all the suffering in the world or you're not a caring person." But I don't think that's quite a good instruction.

I think we should open to the suffering in the world to the extent that we can keep some inner balance. Because if we're crushed by the suffering of the world, we can't be helpful. We can't be helpful to others. If we don't open to the suffering of the world, then we're acting out all those defense mechanisms and we're closing ourselves off and we're being indifferent. But if we open too much and we get crushed by the suffering, we can't be useful for people. We can't be useful for ourselves. So we have to open just the right amount.

The compassion practice stretches our ability to open. The Vipassana practice also stretches our ability to open. Do you find yourself being accepting of things that you couldn't at the beginning of the retreat? Pain in the back, shoulder pain, knee pain, a hindrance. Do you find you're able to be okay with it now that you couldn't two weeks ago? This is also the opening moment of equanimity to unpleasant, painful experience.

So both Vipassana and the Brahmaviharas play a role in giving us the strength to open to what is difficult. Little by little, we expand our ability to be with what is suffering in the world. So we want to keep doing that and we also want to recognize, especially in the retreat, where our limit is. If some aspect of suffering feels too much, we want to find a way to make our focus smaller and open to the extent we can stay in balance.

This word balance is a really important word in our meditation practice. It is in life and we learn about it here. And I would say maybe the most important instruction as you go through the days of this long retreat is to keep yourself in balance. If you find yourself getting discouraged or overwhelmed by your own hindrances, find a way to

open up and take a break. Do what you need to do to come back into a balance where you can relate, where you feel some courage, where you feel some possibility, where you feel, again, some inspiration and willingness.

Because if we lose that inner balance, our practice can go adrift for a while. So stay in touch with this. We're here because we're willing to open. All of you have done incredible work so far in this willingness to open. So keep your heart tender and engaged.

Maybe you need to take a cup of tea. It may be you need to take a walk. Maybe you need to rest and miss a sitting or a walking to come back into balance so that you can face again the work with balance. Compassion practice is the same way. If you feel overwhelmed, make the focus a little more narrow so that you can hold the suffering or go back to metta. I'll mention this again as we're doing the compassion. Go back to the easiest place you know of in the Brahmaviharas. Go to loving-kindness for yourself, a benefactor or a friend. Do what is necessary to stay in balance. This will help you open and it will help the world when you return to it.

So today we're going to take up two new individuals. Well, they're familiar individuals, but we'll work with them with compassion. I think Sally yesterday did the suffering person and yourself. So today we'll bring in our good old benefactor and our good friend and invite them into the compassion practice as well. We'll move through all four of these individuals today.

Please sit comfortably. Get in touch with yourself through your sitting posture, relaxed attitude, coming into your heart center, having a sense of warmth and brightness around the heart center.

First, bring to mind the person that you chose yesterday to be the suffering person—someone in your circle of acquaintances who may be going through some difficulties. Hopefully not such strong difficulties that you feel overwhelmed by looking at the person, but bring the person to mind. Remember your connection to them, your friendly relationship to them and your care. You've seen them in times of happiness and enjoyment. You've seen them in times of struggle and challenges.

Let yourself focus on the difficult aspects of their life that you know of right now. It could be a few areas of difficulty.

You can let each one come to mind. You might look over their areas of mental and physical wellbeing, their work and family and friends life, to see where the challenges might be.

So as you hold them and let yourself feel their difficulties, notice if there's any resistance to feeling that. Notice if there's an attempt to avoid or defend, letting that suffering touch you. Rather than thinking too much about how to fix it or how to assign responsibility, just feeling the suffering.

And then sending toward this person your phrase for compassion. Something like, "May you be free from your pain and sorrow," or "I care about your pain and sorrow," or "May you hold your suffering with compassion." If there's a particular difficulty, you can replace pain or sorrow with that difficulty. It could be their illness or their loss, their unhappiness, their grief. You can use one of those words if it makes it more specific for you.

When you're ready, move on to yourself. Let go of the suffering individual and connect again with yourself as you sit here. Perhaps connecting with an image of yourself. As you connect, let your reflection bring to light the areas that are difficult for you now. It might be things that are presenting themselves here in the retreat. It might be situations in daily life, in relationships, in your work. Could be health concerns, aging concerns.

Reflecting as you connect with the areas of difficulty, remember that suffering is an integral part of life. It's not that suffering is a mistake. Suffering is to be understood. This is how we learn to be free. And so in touch with the suffering, allow yourself just to feel it, to feel the pain of it. Not to blame yourself, not to judge yourself, but feel it.

Then repeat your compassion phrase toward yourself: "May I hold this pain with compassion," "May I be free from this pain and sorrow," "I care about my suffering." Continue to repeat the compassion phrase for yourself, staying in touch with what's difficult for you.

If it feels like the contact with the pain is too much, turn to loving kindness. Focus on your good qualities, bring metta to yourself, or bring in someone who uplifts you—a benefactor or friend. When you feel balanced again, you can return to compassion for yourself. If any blaming comes in, include that with the compassion. Hold that with compassion.

When you're ready, let go of the connection to self and bring in your benefactor. Bring an image of your benefactor or say their name, getting in touch with their character, their being. Remember your connection to them, your care for them, their goodness.

Then bring to mind what you know of the difficulties in their life. Every human being has some difficulties. Sometimes benefactors are happy people and it's hard to find the suffering, but there is always some—either in health, work, family, and friends. So connect with the suffering of your benefactor, whether it's large or small, and send your compassion phrase to them: "May you be free from your suffering."

If it feels like the connection to your benefactor is weak, then call them up again. Feel their presence more strongly. Remind yourself of the difficulties, the suffering they're experiencing.

When you're ready, let go of the benefactor and bring in your good friend. Invite your friend in. Get a good sense of them. Imagine them where they are right now. Remember times you've been together. Let yourself get touched by the feeling you have for them—friendship and care, appreciation for their good qualities.

Because you probably know your friend fairly well, you can look into their life with some knowledge, some detail. You can look at their physical health, their emotional wellbeing, the tug of partners, children, parents and friends, and their work life.

the satisfaction and also the challenges in their work.

So as you connect with the pain in your friend's life, just let your heart feel that and send your compassion phrase to them. If it appeals to you, you could try this four-part phrasing that I mentioned earlier: calling up the image, noticing what you feel, saying the phrase, and coming into the heart center to feel the response, where you might know the compassion in the body.

If at any time your friend's pain seems a little too hard to bear, just return to metta for yourself or a benefactor. Let the mind come back into balance.

And for the last minutes of the sitting, just let the compassion extend to all beings, recognizing that every being that takes birth is going to face struggle, difficulty, and pain. It's part of life, part of existence. And so recognizing our unity with all living beings that we share in this vulnerability to suffering and wish for happiness. Extending the compassion in an unbounded way: may all beings everywhere be free from suffering. May all beings hold their pain and sorrow with a compassionate heart. May all beings find peace and ease and acceptance.

I want to say a couple more things about the quality of compassion. It's not a state of suffering. When it tips into the near enemy of grief, it becomes a state of suffering, but it's not itself a state of suffering. If you look at the beautiful statue of Kuan Yin on the back altar—Kuan Yin is the bodhisattva of compassion—take a look at her face as you go out.

Kuan Yin is said to hear the ten thousand cries of joy and the ten thousand cries of sorrow in the world. She's listening all the time and hears that. But she has a deep inner balance that lets her hold it with compassion. So if you find compassion becoming a place of suffering, maybe adjust—go back to metta for a little bit. See how much you can hold with balance.

But compassion is a sober kind of state. Like metta can get really happy, right? Sometimes you can get almost exuberant practicing metta because you're focusing on well-being and the potential for welfare. With compassion, because we're looking at suffering, it's a sober kind of experience and there can be a tinge of sadness in it. That's okay. It's okay if compassion has a little bit of sadness.

One of my teachers said it's like being up on a hill and watching the sunset. You know, the day is coming to a close. It's been a beautiful day. The sun is setting. You know that day is ending. A little tinge of sadness in that. But there's also beauty.

So look in compassion for the quality of beauty. It's the care that you have that makes the beauty. And the suffering adds this tone of sadness. But it's okay, because when we're able to be with suffering in the world without needing to move away from it or to try to fix it or make it go away, it's a gift that not everyone gets to enjoy. So if you can take that back into the world, it's a real gift for your own friends, family, people you come in contact with, students, and so on.

CHAPTER 146

Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddhist understanding of how suffering arises through our tendency to grasp at experience. Drawing on the central links of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), he traces how sense contact leads to vedanā (feeling tone), then to taṇhā (craving), and finally to upādāna (clinging/grasping). This process creates momentary selves that are born, live briefly, and pass away - always involving some degree of dukkha.

The talk introduces the concept of "unentangled knowing" taught by the renowned Thai laywoman teacher Upāsikā Kee, describing a form of awareness that remains present with experience without getting caught in reactive formations of greed, aversion, or delusion. Armstrong suggests that moments of this unentangled awareness already occur naturally but often go unrecognized. He offers two practical approaches: checking our attitude for the presence of the three unwholesome roots, and shifting attention from sense objects to the knowing awareness itself.

Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Jemnian, and other Thai forest masters, Armstrong points to the gap between feeling and craving as the crucial place where freedom can be found. This space of non-reactive awareness offers a taste of the peace of nibbāna - not the final liberation, but an approximation that serves as both path and goal. The talk concludes with the Buddha's teaching that the island of safety in the flood of existence is "having nothing, clinging to nothing."

We talked a few nights ago about how the sense of self gets created over and over again, moment by moment, through the act of identifying with one of the aggregates, taking hold of one of the aggregates and claiming it as "I" or "mine."

In the talk tonight, I want to look at this process in a little more detail and also to look at where within it we can find a sense of freedom. This concept of freedom exerts a very strong pull in the human heart. Spiritual paths are directed to it, and outer work is directed to it. In the spiritual path, we come to find that it means freeing the heart from the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. And in the outer work, we find actually it's the same forces that need to be transformed in order to find great freedom in our societies, in our world.

I find it interesting that some of the most effective leaders in creating outer change have been those who've been able to combine the spiritual inner work with the political outer work of moving to freedom. We think a lot about leaders like Martin Luther King and Aung San Suu Kyi. Someone we don't mention as often or maybe think of as often is Cesar Chavez, who was the leader of migrant farm workers in the 1960s who formed the United Farm Workers Union and brought decent basic rights to farm workers throughout the state of California and the West Coast. Something interesting about him that I didn't know at the time is that his activism was grounded in his devout Catholicism. He used prayer meetings with the workers to build a sense of community and solidarity. That's how he joined people together. And his commitment—a deep commitment to nonviolence in protests which could have turned quite violent—came out of his deep faith in the teachings of Jesus.

So it's very interesting that the same forces need to be conquered inside as well as outside to bring this sense of freedom. And in both cases, there's a struggle, because these forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are very deeply conditioned in us who are on the path and in the humans who make up the society that we find ourselves in.

Coming back to the spiritual journey and the inner freedom that we're discovering here, I want to ask a couple of questions. Where is freedom to be found on our journey? Is it only at the end of the path when the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion have been totally uprooted from the heart? Is that the first time we're going to have a sense of freedom? Or is it possible to have a sense of freedom along the way before that? And if it is, will you know it when it comes? Do we know enough to recognize the freedom that we might touch before we get to that final freedom?

The subject of the talk this evening is unentangled knowing. This term "unentangled" may be a little difficult if you're not a native English speaker. Tangle refers to the way that lines of things get twisted, like if a kitten is playing with a ball of yarn, the yarn gets all knotted up and snarled, or the way that if you have long hair and you go for a ride in a convertible, it's hard to comb out afterwards because it's gone into all kinds of tangles. So "entangle" is the verb that describes forming a tangle, and "unentangled" means that we're going to prevent the tangling from happening. This is a kind of knowing that prevents tangling from happening—that's unentangled knowing.

This was a term used by a great teacher in Thailand in the last century named Upasika Ki, one of the foremost women teachers. I'll say a little about her in a few minutes.

The Buddha referred often to this concept of tangle as part of our life, as part of spiritual practice. Here's one quotation from the Anguttara Nikaya: "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." I like this reference to how craving or desire puts us in all sorts of tangles within ourselves. You can see how this happens because our desires sometimes run counter to each other. Just a simple example: we may want to be liked—that's one desire. We want other people to like us. But we also want to do exactly what we want to do, and nothing else. Sometimes those two don't go together so well, and that creates conflicting desires or a tangle.

Here's another great quotation, this one from the Samyutta Nikaya. This is a questioner who's coming up to the Buddha and addressing him by his family name. The name of his family was Gotama—he was Siddhartha Gotama. So people often referred to him by the family name Gotama: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gotama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?" It's a great question, acknowledging the inner conflict, the outer conflict. Who succeeds in disentangling?

The Buddha said it's one who develops the Eightfold Path—one who cultivates virtue, concentration, and wisdom—who disentangles this tangle. This quotation, by the way, is so central in the history of Buddhism that it forms the introduction to the Visuddhimagga, the sixth-century manual from Sri Lanka that compiles the meditation techniques of that time.

Upasīkā Kee was a noted teacher in Thailand, remarkable first because she was a woman. This was quite radical, since most teachers in Thailand had been men, and mostly monks. Not only was she a woman, she was also a laywoman who remained in lay clothes throughout her life and never took formal ordination.

She started very simply with a piece of family land in the Thai countryside. There she had some meditation huts constructed, went into retreat, and when others joined her, they all practiced together while she taught. Her teachings span from about the 1950s to her death in 1978. Fortunately, some of her talks were recorded, transcribed, and then translated. The best of these have been compiled into a beautiful book translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu called *Pure and Simple*—highly recommended.

This is a quotation from her book:

An inward staying, unentangled knowing.
All outward turning, cast aside.

This points to a form of mindfulness that doesn't get caught up with the objects of our experience through the force of craving or through greed, hatred, and delusion. It's an awareness of our experience that remains free from reactive formations.

What I want to suggest is that moments of this unentangled knowing are happening for you many times during the day, but you may not recognize them yet. In this evening's talk, I want to show you how to begin recognizing when those moments are happening, to feel what that feels like, and to appreciate the freedom—the degree of freedom that may already be here. Then I want to discuss a couple of approaches to meditation that make this more accessible.

But before we get into that, I want to understand in more detail how we become entangled. How do we get caught in the factors of our sense experience?

The Buddha described this generation of suffering in detail in a teaching called Dependent Origination, which traces twelve links—causal links within our experience that start with ignorance, progress through ten other links, and culminate in suffering. It's considered perhaps his most profound teaching, his deepest insight.

I'm not going to discuss the entire teaching tonight since we have a different focus, but because it explains entanglement in such clear detail, I'll examine the central four links of that sequence. The first five links venture into somewhat philosophical territory we don't need to explore. The last three links also get philosophical and lead into that challenging question of rebirth—which we'll stir up in a few more sessions, but not tonight.

So, returning to our basic experience as human beings: What is it to be human? Remember that discourse on totality where the Buddha explained that there are only ever six things happening—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mind objects. That's all that's ever going on, experienced through their corresponding sense organs. These are the facts of our experience as people.

This impingement from the sense doors on our experience is known as contact—sense contact. There are six types. This is the first of the Dependent Origination links I want to examine.

Contact includes our becoming conscious of the sense experience that has occurred. It's the meeting of the sense door, sense consciousness, and sense object. When you hear a sound, that's contact. The sound is present, your ear is functioning, and hearing arises as a result. That's a moment of contact at the ear door, happening constantly.

Each contact, as you know, carries an associated feeling tone—the vedanā quality—which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. These contacts, with their varying feeling tones, arrive in our consciousness moment after moment after moment, and we have no control over the pleasantness of the experience.

We want it all to be pleasant all the time, don't we? Who has ever wanted an unpleasant sense contact? Yet we have no control. The body gives us pain, thoughts bring worry, emotions cause us to suffer and contract, and sense input varies dramatically. This is our basic situation, and this is precisely why being a sentient being is problematic.

We want things to be pleasant, but we can't control that. So contact gives rise to feeling, and this is the second link in dependent origination that we're investigating tonight.

I think we've talked quite a bit about how when there's pleasant feeling, there's a habit, a conditioned habit for us to react with desire or greed. When there's an unpleasant feeling, there's a conditioned habit for us to react with aversion. And when there's a neutral feeling, there's a conditioned habit for us to overlook it with delusion.

These reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion are collectively known as craving. You probably know this is the origin of suffering in the Four Noble Truths—it's the second noble truth. The craving is the source of suffering. So this is a powerful force to become aware of.

Now the word craving indicates a desire force. But aversion also comes under craving. Why is that? Because craving is basically wanting things to be different than they are. This is how we get into conflict with the present moment. The present moment arrives with its varying sense contacts, but we don't always like it just that way. We want more of this and less of that.

So wanting it to be different—if there's craving, we want more of the pleasant. If there's aversion, we want to push away the unpleasant. Both of these are part of the force of craving.

Now, how does delusion get wrapped into craving? That seems odd because delusion is kind of neutral. It's just a spacing out quality. The way I understand it is twofold.

One is when we're preoccupied with gaining the pleasant and pushing away the unpleasant, anything neutral doesn't excite us. And you can feel this as you're sitting. The antennae are up in a vigilant way: what's going to threaten me? And I'm going to push that away as quickly as I can. What's going to gratify me? And I'm going to pull that to

me as quickly as I can. Sometimes the more intense, the better, right? Because we find a strong identity in relating to what's intense. Anything better than that neutral, boring blandness of neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling tone.

So delusion is born out of a mind that is craving the pleasant and wanting to push away the unpleasant because the neutral doesn't hold stimulation. So we just ignore it. We overlook it. Whereas in fact, the neutral is as much a part of our experience as pleasant or unpleasant. So we should be as much in touch with it. But if craving is operating, we're not. It looks uninteresting.

So craving includes greed, aversion, and delusion. The other reason it includes delusion is that we don't see clearly the activity of greed and aversion. Because if we did, we would see they weren't satisfying. So when delusion starts to tune in to the activities of greed and aversion, we tend to give them up. For greed and aversion to be operative, we have to keep ignoring the suffering of those activities. So delusion is always paired with greed and aversion.

This is the third link in the chain. Contact leads to feeling. Feeling often leads to craving—the reactive formations of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The last of the four links we're exploring is clinging or grasping. Very quickly, I would say pretty automatically, craving goes into grasping. The way I understand it is like this: We're meditating, we're paying attention to the details of our experience. We see something that has the opportunity either to draw us or repulse us. And the attention inclines that way because we're picking up on its pleasant or unpleasant vibe. It's like that pleasant or unpleasant stimulus draws the attention there.

And if it's at all strong, the next thing that happens is we glom onto it. In order to pull toward us the pleasant, we have to first take hold of it. In order to push away the unpleasant, we first have to take hold of it.

You can feel this in your practice. If there's a pleasant sensation in the body, notice how the attention is drawn there and it fixates on it. Fixation is the sign of grasping, the sign of taking hold. If there's an unpleasant sensation, the attention fixates on that in order to solve it. I can either push it away, or I can manipulate the energy with mindful attention, or I can do something to try to break it up and make the unpleasantness go away.

So very quickly from craving, the mind moves into grasping. The Pali word for this is upadana. Sometimes we translate it as grasping, sometimes as clinging. It's the same word in Pali. The way I think of it is that grasping is the first act of reaching out and taking hold. As we continue to hold on to it—because we usually do—then it becomes clinging. So first we grasp and then we cling, but in Pali, it's the same word.

Because there's no self in this whole process, no real self in this process, the question "who grasps?" isn't answerable. Grasping happens. It's a faculty of the mind to fixate and take hold. So there's no one doing the grasping, but grasping happens. Then we develop an "I" and "my" around it because we get fascinated with it.

You can notice this. With anything you take hold of, the self is going to build around that with words of "I" and "my." We'll dwell on it with our thoughts and think about it with "I" and "my." Check it out and see if this is not true.

All this happens really quickly. These four links—contact, feeling, craving, clinging—can happen within a second. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And we're there. So it's a very quick process and it's not so easy to see the individual pieces, but by paying attention again and again, you'll pick up different ones at different points and you can see how they fit together.

So in life, how does this work? Life is basically about making relationships. That's what human experience is about. We come out of the womb, we pop into the world. There's mother, breast, food, father, school, sports, high school, sex, college, job, money, taxes, Lady Gaga, Instagram, Twitter, Barack Obama, global economic crisis—it's all flying by. Some of it's pleasant, some of it's not. But who's going to resist taking hold of that juicy mix of stuff? Right? We do. We take hold of it all as it flies by.

If we take hold, suffering is inevitable. Greater or lesser, suffering follows from taking hold. Because when we grasp, we form an "I"—we in a way give birth to a self. And then that self lives a life, maybe brief, maybe longer, and then it passes away. So in that process of being born as a new self and then living and then passing away, there's some suffering, maybe small, maybe big.

Let's look at some examples. You know, this is such a simple environment, and yet there are so many things that can frustrate us on retreat. How many things in a day can you get irritated about? That's a lot, isn't it? There's nobody cutting you off on the freeway. There's nobody pulling into a parking place ahead of you. But so many things can come up. There's noise in the dorms. There's noise in the halls. Teacher says something that you just don't agree with. The interviews are running late and you're having to wait outside.

The food is not what we want this particular day. The team we're doing work meditation with is moving too fast or too slow or they're not doing their jobs. The mind is restless. We want to take a walk, but it's raining outside. Somebody has gone through the line and taken too much food and there's not going to be enough for us. All these things we can find ourselves getting irritated about.

And sometimes that irritation can last a while. We find ourselves still going an hour later about something that happened earlier in the day, here in such a simple life. It can happen like that. So something comes along, we take hold of the situation, we think it shouldn't have been like that, and we get annoyed. This irritation can go on for a while. We're taking birth as the irritated yogi.

Then we'll dwell on that thing. How could they do that? I can't believe—the rules are posted. People have said it so many times. They're not supposed to be doing that. Should be more considerate of others. On and on for quite a while. So we've taken birth as the irritated yogi. And this is not a pleasant birth, because irritation is not that much fun. I mean, we enjoy parts of it, or we wouldn't do it. But when you look at the direct experience, it's really not that pleasant.

Eventually, we let go of that flare-up, and we come back into some kind of balance. This balance, Upasaka Ki calls the natural mind. We return to our natural mind. And then that birth is over.

That's one kind of birth. Here's another kind of birth.

We come into the hall. We've been practicing quite steadily. Things have been up and down. We come into the hall. We sit. All of a sudden, we're really present. We're connecting well, one moment after another without much forcing. The object is clear. The mind is steady. Our confidence is high. Thoughts go through, but they don't grab us. Some emotions may come, but they're seen and pass out again. As we continue to practice, we start feeling concentrated. The mind feels stable and strong and really centered. We're able to pay attention moment after moment for a while.

When I first hit this point in meditation, I thought, "Wow, I've solved it." I started thinking, "I'm going to go back after the retreat to my life and it's always going to be like this now." I thought it was linear like that. "I'll go to work and I'm going to be able to deal with people from this place of centeredness and strength and steadiness. I'm going to get promoted because of that, because not many people can do that. Then I'll get more money and I can buy a house." And relationships—I thought, "Wow, people are going to want to be in relationship with me because I'm going to be so cooled out. Nothing can bother me."

I actually thought like that for a while. So I got up from the sitting and went out to walk. I thought, "I'm going to take this thing for a walk." I just kept thinking about how much fun it was going to be for the rest of my life because I was going to be living like this. I got spun out in all these pleasant fantasies.

I can't wait to get back in the hall and sit again. I came back in the hall and sat. Oh, I was totally stirred up. That thought stream had just become a whirlwind that took me over. The concentration was gone, my energy was all over the place, my body was in contraction, and I was miserable.

So I had taken birth by grabbing onto the concentration and claiming it as mine, building up a lot of fantasy about it. It seems really naive now. This was my first experience and I was very naive. I'd taken birth as the concentrated yogi, the good yogi—claimed it, fantasized about it, and then it crumbled. It went away, as all those states do. It died.

So eventually, I let go of that stirred-upness. I let go of being the good yogi, and my mind returned to balance again. Natural mind returned. The good yogi had to die, and he did die. So we've had two births and two deaths.

In the first case, the irritated yogi—the birth was unpleasant. That's a suffering state to be angry. But the death was a happy one because that being passed away. Unhappy birth, happy death.

But in the second one, the birth at first was happy. Good yogi. That's like living in a heaven realm—to think we're always going to live like this. A little deluded, but kind of heaven realm place. And then the death was really painful when that good yogi went away. First one, painful birth, happy death. Second one, happy birth, painful death.

It's always like that. If we grab hold of the pleasant, it's pleasant at first, but we suffer when it goes. If we grab hold of the painful, it's painful immediately, and then there's some release when it goes. So either way we grasp it, pleasant or unpleasant, there's going to be suffering. Taking birth involves suffering, one way or another, due to the fact of change.

This taking hold of is the act of grasping. It's just a faculty of mind. There's no one who does it. But once the grasping happens, self builds on top of that. It builds on top of what has been fixated on by claiming it in some way as I or mine.

This is expressed beautifully by Andrew Olenski, a Pali scholar: "What becomes clear through this analysis of moment-to-moment experience is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something created by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds on to or pushes away what is unfolding in experience."

So this grasping is the source of selfing. And it comes out of a sequence—it always comes out of a sequence. Contact, feeling, craving, clinging or grasping, whichever you like. This is the heart of dependent origination. And this sequence always leads to suffering.

If you look at our typical conditioned approach to life, whether it's in retreat or outside, it reminds me of the monkeys I used to see in the forest. When I lived in Thailand, I had a hut out in the rainforest, out in the middle of this large forest. A lot of monkeys would go by overhead in the trees. Often they would travel through the canopy at the very top, but sometimes they would come lower down and swing from one tree to another using vines that hung down.

What the monkey would do is grab hold of a vine and swing until they got close enough to grab another vine. Only then would they let go of the first and jump over to get the second. Then they'd swing from that vine over to another, and they'd only let go of it when they saw a third vine that they could grab hold of.

This is why we refer to these restless movements of clinging as monkey mind. Because a monkey won't let go of one thing until there's another one to take hold of. And that's the way so often we're conditioned to live in the world—we don't let go until there's something else to grasp.

But as meditators, you have another choice. You have the choice of letting go and not picking up anything new. And maybe this is where freedom lies—in letting go and not picking up.

So let's explore this. We've traced the chain: contact, feeling, craving, clinging. Is this inevitable? Because clinging always leads to suffering. If this is inevitable, we're doomed, aren't we? As long as there's contact, it's going to lead to suffering. Could this be accurate? Or is it possible to interrupt this chain at some point, and if so, where?

Let me ask: have you ever been with an unpleasant feeling and not moved into aversion? Have you ever been with a pleasant feeling and not moved into greed? Have you ever been with a neutral feeling and not moved into delusion?

That's the power of mindfulness. Mindfulness gives us the ability to feel the pleasant, the unpleasant, and the neutral and not move into a reactive formation. That's a great skill, and that is where the chain can be broken.

Classically, this is the understanding with dependent origination. The chain is broken between feeling and craving. What it means is that a feeling comes, but we don't react with greed, aversion, or delusion. If we don't do that, then there's basically an approach of acceptance. We've allowed, accepted, opened to—whatever you want to call it—relaxed into that feeling, and no self is being born and no suffering has to take place from it.

This is what gets us off the wheel of dependent origination where ignorance usually leads to suffering. This is how it gets interrupted, and this is the opening to freedom. One teacher put it like this: "The whole of the Buddhist path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving."

This is significant. The whole of the path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving.

When we talk about a gap here, please don't get the idea that there's a big time gap. Feeling can move into craving just like that. So it's not like contact comes along and you have a couple of seconds to contemplate that, and then feeling pops out and you have a couple of seconds to contemplate that and decide whether you really want to go into craving or not. And then craving arises and you have a couple of seconds to figure out if you want to go into clinging or not. No—it's like boom, boom, boom, boom.

So there's no time gap really between feeling and craving. The reaction or lack of reaction is pretty instantaneous. If mindfulness is there, there doesn't have to be a reaction. And then that space can go on for a while. That's what feels like a gap. The feeling is there, but there's no reaction. Then there's this space that opens up in the mind.

So this is what's so interesting to explore: when it's like that, when there's not the reaction of greed, aversion, and delusion, what does that feel like? Explore this in moment-to-moment experience. What does that feel like?

When I look at my own experience, the way it comes across to me is spacious, ease, peace, non-conflicted, no struggle, and a feeling of lightness in the experience. Not heavy. It's not weighed down. It's not burdened. So the main word I want to put in here is: it feels free.

When we're in the gap between feeling and craving, there's a real sense of freedom at that moment. That freedom that opens up—another way to describe it is peace. There's peace of mind at that point.

Did you construct that peace?

Did you construct that freedom? Or was it just there when you didn't grab? When you didn't grab, was that just what was already there? Perhaps that peace is a natural part of the mind that's there all the time, that's always available as long as we're not grasping. And that we always have the choice to rest in it by not reacting with greed, aversion, and delusion.

If that's always available, it points to something that is maybe a little less impermanent or a little less fragile or a little less conditioned than these momentary sense contacts. It's as if there's always that potential, and then there are these conditioned things coming and going.

I want to read something from Ajahn Chah. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, likes and dislikes. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that these things are oneself or belong to oneself. The tendency to conceive things as oneself is the source of suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind.

"The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are, as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

When we rest in this gap, we're not taking birth. And we are said to be abiding in something that has a flavor of the deathless. It's not subject to being born and dying. It's something that's always available if we don't disturb it.

At the time of the Buddha, the predominant religion in India was Brahmanism. The Brahmins were a high social caste who more or less represented the religious orthodoxy of the day. It was founded on ancient texts and a lot of rites and rituals. The Buddha was not part of that group, of that caste in India. And once he became a wanderer, he was definitely outside the religious orthodoxy.

Yet, after he became enlightened and wandered around and showed up in various places to teach, some of the Brahmins were interested enough to come and hear him. Even though he wasn't part of their gang and he wasn't part of the orthodoxy, he had a good reputation. So they would come and lend an ear.

There are many suttas in the collection called the Sutta Nipāta where these young Brahmins are coming to ask questions of the Buddha. I find it a very beautiful part of the suttas because they have to be quite humble to leave their own orthodoxy and caste to come and ask questions of this poor mendicant wanderer. So there are some very nice dialogues between them.

In one such dialogue, a Brahmin youth named Todeyya has come to ask a question. Todeyya says, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you like to ask the Buddha that? What's it like in there? What is the liberated mind?

This is the Buddha's response: "That sage is without desire. They have nothing. They are unentangled in becoming." Unentangled in becoming means they're not taking part in this momentary birth and death anymore.

This is again from Ajahn Chah. You can just imagine Ajahn Chah giving this teaching in a hall in Thailand that's basically outdoors. There are so many halls in Thailand where the weather is quite warm, which have a floor—usually a concrete floor—and a roof that's supported by pillars that go around the outside with no walls. So it's completely open air. It's a place, a sala, where many Dhamma talks are given in Thailand.

Ajahn Chah, you could imagine, was giving a talk in a setting like this. And this is what he said: "The roof is a becoming. The floor is a becoming. But in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. Where there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbāna is this emptiness."

So nibbana, the freedom that the Buddha was pointing to, is in this place where there is no becoming, where there is no birth or death.

When we rest in that gap, we are in that state temporarily. It's not the final nibbana. It's not the final liberation. But you could say it's like a little foretaste of it, of the peace of nibbana. An approximation of nibbana, as it's called in one sutta.

Explore this and see what it feels like. It's not overwhelming. It's not overwhelmingly pleasant. But there is a peace in it that's very satisfying. And the more you rest in that peace and allow it to deepen, the more satisfying it becomes.

So that satisfaction brings a sense of the fruit of the path. You're finding the fruit of the path, the sense of freedom as you go. We might say that the goal of the path is felt here before we reach the final end. We're feeling the goal as we go.

But also resting in this place is the path. As that teacher said, the path is resting in this gap. That means it's onward leading. So in this approach, we're resting and we're allowing ourselves to settle, and that continues to deepen and incline toward the final liberation. The path and the goal have become basically the same. Where do we want to go? Peace. How do we get there? Peace. We rest in this peace, allow it to deepen, and it leads in only one direction. And that is that final or ultimate peace of nibbana.

We're still aware. When you rest in that gap, it's not like you close off the sense doors. Not at all. Quite alert. Present. Sense contact is still happening at all the doors. So you're in touch with the world. You're not withdrawn. But you're meeting it all from a different place.

This is from Ajahn Jemnian, who's another master in the Thai forest tradition. "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and the words he used for this were maha sati. Maha means big, sati is mindfulness. And by the way, he gave this little talk here at Spirit Rock to a group of Spirit Rock teachers, 1997. "The best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have their nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their nature of impermanence, and this other is the Dharma of the deathless."

So you'll find this way of looking a lot in the Thai forest tradition.

One of my teachers in Thailand was Ajahn Buddhadasa, great teacher in the last half of the 20th century, one of the greatest Thai monks. He was both a deep practitioner and a scholar of the texts. He combined them to teach and comment on ways of prac-

tice. When I was with him, he was very well known in the country. He gave radio addresses throughout the nation on Sunday mornings. But his monastery was not a big scene at that time, and it meant that he was very accessible.

In later years, he became more famous, and big tour buses would pull up to the monastery, and hundreds of tourists would come out and visit, and it kind of got overrun. But when I was there, it was still pretty low-key.

So every morning after his morning meal, he would go out and sit on a bench in front of his cottage, his kuti. It was at the front of the monastery. It was a stone bench just set on a big patch of earth, of dirt. And around him, forest chickens would be walking by and just pecking at things that were on the ground. The temple dogs would be lying around. And generally, if Thai people went by, the temple dogs wouldn't move. But somehow, if a Western monk went by, they'd sit up and bark at us.

Always seemed to happen. But nonetheless, he was completely accessible—just sitting there on his bench. You could approach him at any time. I would go up, make my bows before him, sit on the ground, and ask him any dharma questions I wanted. He would simply sit and answer.

But I have to say, at the time I found him rather intimidating because he was such a great teacher. Even then, he was well-known, and his demeanor was not overtly warm and welcoming. When you visit a vipassana teacher, they typically say, "Oh, pull up a chair! Do you need tissues? Can I get you some water? Come on in and sit down"—trying to be friendly and accommodating.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was not quite like that. He simply was himself, just sitting there. I felt put off because I thought perhaps he didn't want me there, which was a little unnerving. I held back from visiting him more than I wish I had in retrospect.

Because as I reflect on it now, what I realize is that he was simply abiding in unentangled knowing. I was just another object arising and passing at his sense door within his meditation. He didn't care whether I was there or not. He would have been equally content for me to sit down and ask questions for a while—it didn't disturb him at all. He would have been equally content if I had gotten up and returned to my kuti. He was simply resting in this balanced knowing, meditating me as I appeared in his awareness.

But I didn't feel that welcoming energy, so I remained somewhat hesitant to approach him.

What we want to discover is a way to move into this space of unentangled knowing, where we can open to all the arisings at the sense doors without getting caught in them, without grasping.

In our meditation instructions here, we've progressed from focusing on objects one by one—body, breath, sounds—to this choiceless attention that opens to all of them. Now we want to take one more shift within this open attention, moving into unentangled knowing.

This is not a technique per se. Unentangled knowing is a frame of mind, a state of mind free from grasping. But I want to discuss a couple of approaches that can help us move in that direction together. It involves taking a step back from objects into other facets of mind.

Let me mention two approaches tonight. The first is a practice from Sayadaw U Tejaniya that we've discussed several times, which we call "checking the attitude." As you relate to the events in your experience, you periodically check to see whether greed, aversion, or delusion is involved in your relationship—how you're relating to them. You'll notice this is the same point of examining the presence or absence of craving that we explored in dependent origination. It's the same central juncture.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya recommends checking for greed by asking, "Am I wanting something to happen?" Take a look and see what emerges. To check for aversion, ask, "Am I wanting something to stop happening?" To examine delusion, ask, "Am I not in touch with what's happening?"

If you find any of these three present, you don't judge it or try to push it away—that would be another form of grasping. You simply become mindful of it. "Okay, greed is here now. Greed feels like this." Just become aware of it. "Aversion feels like this. I'm knowing aversion."

I think you'll find that when you ask these questions, it creates space around the direct experience of whatever sense contact is occurring. It's almost as if you step back and observe in a witnessing way: "How am I relating?" This creates spaciousness in the mind that can open up the gap between feeling and reactivity. You begin to look at the reactive formations of mind as a central focus of meditation.

As you develop this practice, you might check your attitude two, three, or four times during a sitting or walking period. As you become more familiar with it, you won't need to ask the three separate questions. You can simply inquire, "What's the attitude?" and it will become clear because you've practiced with it sufficiently.

Once it becomes clear that you can just look and see if there's greed, aversion, or delusion, you can make this more of a primary practice, meaning you can rest your attention and just notice any disturbance of greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is another quote from Ajahn Chah. "If you want to see a train, just go to the central station." So here a train is a symbol for a movement of mind. Just go to the Central Station. You don't have to go traveling all the way up the Northern Line, the Southern Line, Eastern Line, Western Line. If you want to see trains, every single one of them, you'd be better off waiting at Grand Central Station. That's where they all terminate.

"Just look right here," and he pointed to his heart, "at Central Station. Greed arises here, anger arises here, delusion arises here. Just sit here and you can watch as all these things arise. Practice right here, because right here is where you're stuck. Right here is where the conditioned arises, where conventions arise, and right here is where the Dhamma will arise."

So we simply settle into the heart and we feel any reactive formation of greed, aversion, or delusion. All the trains leave central station right there, and we can become mindful of that. This stops us from getting on board the train and riding it all the way out one line.

This is from Upasaka Ki: "So your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's so worth checking on. Is the mind being affected by the objects of sensory contact? Are we getting entangled with greed, aversion, and delusion? Or are we not? Keep checking on that. Don't send the mind out latching onto things."

This is the same message. So this is the first approach: checking the attitude, resting in the heart center, looking for the movement of greed, aversion, delusion.

The second approach is to turn to the dimension of consciousness or awareness rather than the experience of the sense object. You know how every moment of sense contact has both the object and the knowing of it? Object and knowing together. Turn to the knowing instead of focusing on the object.

So we're going to do a guided meditation tomorrow morning—I'll warn you now in case you want to skip it—that will give clear instruction for how to move to being in touch with this knowing. But for tonight, I'll just give some suggestions.

I was outside not long ago and I was standing by a pond, and it was raining. So I was looking at the surface of the pond as the raindrops were falling. It wasn't a heavy rain. It was kind of a light rain. And if you've ever done that, you know that you can see the impact of each raindrop on the surface of the pond. It goes "blip," and it makes a few ripples. And then another goes "blip," and it makes a few ripples. And then the ripples run into each other, and the drops are falling close to each other. And you get this beautiful moving pattern of water and wave and raindrops coming in.

And it struck me that that surface of the pond was kind of like a sensitive membrane, a sensitive plane that's like our consciousness, right? And the raindrops are like sense contact. So we're sitting here and moment after moment, there's just this little bit, bit, bit from sense contact. But the surface of the lake is like our consciousness. These contacts are landing in, let's say, the field of awareness moment after moment after moment. And if we're sensitive, we can feel each little blip.

Can we keep our attention on the big open plane—say, of the surface of the pond—the big open plane of our awareness, where we'll feel the little blips of the drops, but we don't get obsessed with each drop or any drop? We let the sense contact come and go. We don't fixate on any of the individual drops that are landing in the consciousness.

So what happens when you do this—you'll practice with it tomorrow—is it's as though we find a dimension within ourselves that's a step less entangled or less enmeshed with the objects of the senses. And this is a beautiful place to meditate from. We're clearly in touch with what's happening. We know the impermanent nature of the sense objects as they're landing moment by moment, but we don't fixate on the raindrops.

We keep our attention in this broad plane of knowing.

This is again from Upasika Kee: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward-going knowing cast aside. This is the meditation that we want to develop.

We can stabilize our attention on this plane of awareness. We stay in touch with the phenomena that are coming and going, but we don't get enmeshed with grasping at them.

So I'll close with a quote, again from the Sutta Nipāta, one of these other Brahmin youths who has come to talk to the Buddha and ask questions. This is the youth named Kappa: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

The flood is a very frequent reference in the old texts to the storms of birth and death that we are all vulnerable to. And the island is—where do I step out of the floods to find safety? "Tell me the island, dear sir."

And this is the Buddha's reply: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is nibbāna, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

So let's just sit together for a moment, please.

[Period of silence]

In the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir. Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is Nirvana.

CHAPTER 147

Big Mind Meditation

Guy Armstrong · 42 min

> *In this guided meditation, Guy Armstrong introduces the practice of "Big Mind," directing attention toward the conscious quality itself rather than specific objects of consciousness. Drawing on teachings from various Buddhist traditions, Armstrong uses the term "awareness" to refer to the entire field in which all six types of sense consciousness operate, rather than focusing on individual sense doors.*
>
> *The meditation systematically guides practitioners through expanding awareness to encompass sounds, bodily sensations, and mental formations (thoughts and images), all experienced as arising and passing within vast, open space. Armstrong draws on metaphors of sky, stars, and clouds to illustrate how phenomena appear and disappear within the boundless field of awareness. The practice emphasizes non-resistance and non-grasping, allowing all experiences to come and go naturally.*
>
> *The session concludes with wisdom teachings from notable masters: Ajahn Jumnian's instruction to "rest the attention in the pure knowing space of consciousness" as "the dharma of the deathless," Suzuki Roshi's guidance to "live in the utter darkness of the night sky," and Upasaka Ki's teaching on "inward staying, unentangled knowing." This meditation offers both beginning and experienced practitioners a way to directly investigate the nature of consciousness itself, supporting both samatha (calm abiding) and vipassanā (insight) development.*

So we're going to do a meditation this morning, a guided meditation called Big Mind that directs the attention toward this conscious quality, encouraging us to notice the faculty of consciousness as it happens.

In this meditation, rather than talk about the six types of sense consciousness, I'm going to use the term awareness to refer to the whole field in which consciousness is happening. Awareness is more or less a synonym for consciousness, but not the specific knowing of one object, but rather the whole field in which consciousness of all the appearances is taking place.

As you begin the meditation, please take a comfortable posture. In this meditation especially, the stiller your body can be, it will help the mind to also become still. Be comfortable not in a stiff way, but just as a way to encourage a posture that you can sustain for some time in the meditation.

Please begin by bringing the attention to sounds. Let your awareness become expansive and wide to take in the sounds all around you—in front, behind, to the right or left, above or below—so that the awareness is felt like a big clear sky or like empty space. All the sounds are just appearing and disappearing in this vast and open space of awareness.

Because the hall is very quiet this morning, I'll introduce a sound from time to time just to let the attention know that. And sometimes I'll hit the big bell, sometimes other bells. But you'll know the sitting ends when there are three strikes of the big bell.

Not resisting any sounds and not holding on to any sounds. Just letting all the sounds come and go in the open space of awareness. Awareness is like the sky. It's clear and limitless. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness.

Now becoming aware of sensations throughout the body. Sensations are just points of feeling, points of sensing. They arise and glimmer like stars in the sky at night, all in the big empty space of awareness. In the actual fact of our experience, there's no head or shoulders or back. There's no chest or arms or legs. Just sensations arising and changing, all in the big open space of awareness.

Awareness has no inside or outside. There are no boundaries or separations. Just sounds and sensations arising, changing and passing in this one empty space of awareness. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness.

Let the mind be soft and open and still, not moving toward or away from any appearance. There's no inside and no outside. Just sounds and sensations arising and passing in this one open space. Not resisting, not holding on. Allowing them all to come and go in the open space of awareness.

Now becoming aware of thoughts and images. Thoughts and images are just like clouds passing through the sky. They have no roots and no home. They just arise and drift and pass away in this vast and empty space of awareness.

Look at the nature of your mind. It's clear and invisible, like vast space. It doesn't have any form. It doesn't have any boundary. This mind is, but it doesn't quite exist. It contains all things, but it's not composed of them. This mind is empty and without any foundation. It's insubstantial like the sky. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own mind.

Now to put it all together. Sounds are simply appearing and disappearing. Sensations in the body arise and change, glimmering like stars in the night sky. Thoughts and images drift like clouds, rootless and homeless—all within the vast and empty space of awareness. To see if it's like that, look directly at the nature of your own awareness.

Ajahn Jumnian: Rest the attention in the pure knowing space of consciousness. That is the dharma of the deathless.

Suzuki Roshi: Always live in the utter darkness of the night sky.

Upasaka Ki offers this teaching: an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning cast aside.

In this practice, we discover that awareness itself is our true refuge—not the objects that appear within it, but the pristine space of knowing in which all experiences arise and dissolve. Whether sounds, sensations, thoughts, or images, all phenomena are like visitors in the infinite guest house of consciousness, appearing momentarily before returning to the vast silence from which they emerged.

This is the invitation: to rest in that which never comes or goes, that which remains untouched by the constant flux of experience. In the words of these great teachers, we find the same pointing—toward the deathless nature of pure awareness, toward the profound darkness that is simultaneously luminous knowing, toward the unentangled presence that recognizes all yet clings to nothing.

May this practice support you in discovering the peace that is already here, the awareness that is your deepest nature, and the freedom that comes from recognizing what you truly are.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 148

Day 20: Brahmavihāra Practice: Muditā for the neutral person and the difficult person

Guy Armstrong · 44 min

> *In this guided meditation from a month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong leads practitioners through muditā (sympathetic joy) practice, focusing on extending appreciative joy to the neutral person and difficult person. Armstrong describes muditā as "the happiest practice within our tradition" and explores how it serves as a powerful ally for the challenges of vipassanā practice.*
>
> *The talk provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the four brahmavihāras through their divine states, near enemies, and far enemies - creating what Armstrong calls "a roadmap of the heart's responses to the world." For muditā specifically, he examines how envy (the far enemy) and over-exuberance (the near enemy) can obstruct genuine sympathetic joy. The teaching emphasizes that everyone, even those in difficult circumstances, has access to some form of happiness.*
>
> *Armstrong introduces the concept of "precious human birth" - the rare confluence of being born human, encountering authentic dharma teachings, having the capacity to understand them, and possessing the resources to practice intensively. The guided meditation moves systematically from self-muditā (which naturally connects to gratitude) through beloved persons to the more challenging neutral and difficult people, offering practical guidance for working with resistance and cultivating genuine appreciation for others' wellbeing.*

Continue the practice of muditā or sympathetic joy in this afternoon meditation. I want to offer a few words of introduction.

Today we're going to work with the two people you've already encountered—the neutral person and the difficult person—but we'll warm up with other individuals you've touched on with muditā so far.

Let me offer a few additional comments. I know Bonnie and Sally have both spoken about this practice, but I'd like to add some further reflections.

I think muditā is the happiest practice within our tradition. As you know, we don't do a lot of ecstatic chanting and body dancing. Given that, this is the practice that really directly uplifts the heart. I think we often overlook it in our instructions, but to compensate, a few years ago I taught a weekend retreat on muditā at IMS on the East Coast.

I thought people would just get a little instruction on how to practice it, but I didn't realize how deep it would go for people. Someone at the end of the retreat—two days of muditā practice—said, "This is the happiest I've felt in years and years of my life."

So if you feel drawn to this practice, I really encourage you to do more of it. It has a great capacity to uplift us, and because of that, it's a really good ally for all the ups and downs that vipassanā practice will take us through. It's a great friend to discover on the path.

Some classical texts say that muditā is the most difficult of the four brahmavihāras to practice because of the tendency to go to the far enemy. I assume someone has talked about the far enemy of muditā—envy—because it's hard to allow other people to have their happiness as though it takes away some of ours. It sets up comparing mind: "Well, if they have that much happiness, how come I don't have that much happiness? Are they a better person than I am?" This is the danger in muditā practice. But if you account for it and just allow it to be there, returning the attention to appreciating, then you can deal with it.

I'm not sure if I'll lead another guided brahmavihāra this retreat, so I want to say something about the brahmavihāras and the near and far enemies. There are four brahmavihāras. Each one has the state itself—which is a heavenly state, a divine abiding—the near enemy, which masquerades as it, and the far enemy, which is an unwholesome state that's the opposite.

Taking these three states across four brahmavihāras, you have twelve different states contained within this teaching. I personally have found that those twelve states make a really good roadmap of the heart's responses to the world. As we encounter different situations, we're going to respond mostly from one of these twelve states. It's pretty well an overall map, and it's brilliant the way it's structured because the brahmavihāra is the way the awakened heart responds, or the selfless heart responds—perhaps the most profound response that we're capable of.

The near enemy is the normal ego, egoic response—when we're just based in self, this is the neurotic way the self responds to the world. It's not far off the mark, but it's very much identified with selfhood. And the far enemy is the unwholesome response—you could say the dark side of the heart.

I invite you to explore that roadmap as a way to respond, and all the different moods and attitudes that it reveals.

With muditā, a beautiful response to someone else's happiness is to just appreciate it for their benefit. The response of what I would call over-exuberance is like, "Oh, how's that going to help me? My friend just inherited a lot of money—they can take me on a trip to Mexico." That's just the normal ego-based response. The far enemy is envy: "Oh, I wish they hadn't gotten that money. I don't have that kind of funds or resource. How come they got it? Are they a better person than me?" So it sets up suffering for ourselves, and then we can't appreciate their good fortune.

You can look through all the other brahmavihāras as you reflect on this and see how the beautiful state, the egoic response, and the unwholesome response play out.

We'll do some muditā for self as we lead into this meditation. Some classical texts say you can't do muditā for self—it's only supposed to be for other people. But the Buddha never said that. The sutta that we've referred to says something like, "Let the muditā be abundant, exalted, immeasurable, to all as to myself, pervading the all-encompassing world." So in the Buddha's instructions, we are not left out of the feeling of muditā.

When we practice mudita for self, what comes through, in my experience, is gratitude—or even if it's not exactly gratitude, it's very close to it, because we're feeling the blessings of our life and letting ourselves appreciate that. So it's very close to a gratitude practice, which, as Aaron talked about, is a really beautiful state of mind that fits within the Brahma Viharas.

One of the things that we sometimes don't think about to be grateful for is what in one tradition is called the precious human birth. All of us are enjoying right now this precious human birth. And it doesn't just mean being born a human being, which itself is very fortunate—more fortunate, say, than being born in the animal realm. Although animals have many beautiful and noble qualities, they're not considered to have the capability for mindfulness, which is the basis for awakening. We all have that capability, being born in the human form.

Not only that, but we've been born at a time when the teachings have been declared and the teachings are being followed. So that's a rare opportunity. How many people in history have had this opportunity to liberate the mind through following an authentic path? Not so many.

Then not only have we heard the teachings, we've understood them enough to make a commitment to them. Not only have we understood them, but we have a mind and body that are in reasonably good shape to practice them. Everyone here has these fortunate conditions.

And not only do we have a mind and body that are in reasonable shape to practice them, but we have the opportunity—we have the time, the interest, and the resources to be able to devote a whole month or two months of our life to practicing the Dharma. This constitutes precious human birth. Everyone here is enjoying those conditions, and those conditions very rarely come together for a human being on this planet. You look over the whole planet and you see very few people who have all those conditions together. So we're all really, really fortunate, and it's something really helpful to consider in the gratitude reflection.

There may be other things in your life that are difficult—there usually are. And as we turn to our situation, sometimes we focus on those and we forget all the blessings that we do have. And practicing the Dharma is a big one for all of us.

Then we will move into the neutral person. You may not know the neutral person so well. You may have to do a little imagination to reflect what might be their sources of happiness. Maybe you can know them a little bit to be able to feel some of that and let your imagination fill in the rest. But it's important to know everybody has some access to happiness.

This is hard to believe when we get to all beings. You might reflect on it again: all beings have some access to happiness. At least that's my experience. Even for someone who's suffering physical pain, there are generally times of the day when it lifts somewhat and the mind can brighten with an appreciation of that.

I was teaching a metta retreat one time. We got to mudita in the afternoon practice period, and there was a woman on the retreat who was a social worker in Manchester, England. Her job was tending to refugee women who had come to Manchester because of fear of persecution, imprisonment, torture—whatever—in their home country. And this was the place that they had landed in their asylum seeking. Most of these women were from Third World countries, from the Middle East or Africa, from climates that were much warmer than Manchester, England.

I don't know if you've ever been to Manchester, but it's one of those northern industrial cities that used to be a mill town and is still full of old red brick buildings crowded together. It has a kind of Dickens-era vibe and is not a beautiful, uplifting spot for the human spirit.

So here are these women coming from their homes and communities and transplanted into Northern England, having to create a new life from a very difficult situation. I asked the social worker, "Do you detect happiness in these women?" And her

face lit up. She said, "Absolutely. The resilience of their spirit is just amazing. They are so determined to make a life for themselves here and they have so much courage and strength and joy in what they're doing."

So that told me that if someone from a warm country can come to Manchester and find happiness, everybody can find some happiness. This is helpful when we reflect on the neutral person.

When we come to the difficult person, then you might run up against a similar vibe as in metta, which is finding it really difficult to appreciate their happiness. In metta, sometimes in the beginning, it can be difficult to wish for their happiness. Now we're being invited to reflect on their happiness—to call to mind the happiness of your difficult person and celebrate it. The heart may go through a little roadblock there.

Notice if that happens. This is, again, a little bit of a function of ill will at work. It's not exactly—it may be called envy here. It's a little bit of a far enemy feeling, maybe envy, but there's a little bit of ill will in it.

So if that arises, just notice it. As with the metta, you allow that feeling to be there—the resistance to their being happy because they're such a terrible person, they don't deserve it. Just notice if that thought is there, if the roadblock is there. Let that be in the background. Continue with the intention to appreciate their happiness.

I think that's enough for an introduction. We'll move into the neutral and difficult person, but we'll warm it up first.

So please sit comfortably. First, just bring your attention into the heart center, the center of the chest. Let this be the avenue that you can connect to yourself through. Feel your own being through sitting here or through an image. Connect with your own goodness, remembering qualities in your character, good things you've done. Think of all the moments on this retreat when you've committed to being present, to making right effort, to showing up, to allowing what's difficult, to developing love and compassion—strong, wholesome intentions.

And then reflect on your life, your general situation, both here and at home, and reflect on what's going well for you. What are the things in your life you feel good about? And as you connect with those, say your mudita phrase to yourself. I'll just mention a few possibilities: "May my happiness and good fortune continue," or "I appreciate the blessings in my life," or "I'm grateful for my happiness and good fortune." Continue to stay in touch with those blessings and repeat your mudita phrase for yourself, remembering that we all share in the rare good fortune of this precious human birth.

And then if you're ready, bring in either your happy person or benefactor or dear friend—wherever you feel the most uplifting connection. As you connect with this person, make them alive in the room with you right now. Feel their presence, feel their character. Remember their good qualities. What do you like about them? What's noble in them?

And then connect with the things that you know are going well in this person's life—whether it's their mental state, work, family, friendships, hobbies, practice. Take in all the blessings in their life. As you connect with them, some of the difficulties may come through too. Pass over those and return to connecting with the things that are going well.

And then send your mudita phrase to this person: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." If you like, you can add this subclause: "may they increase, may they never end." Or "I appreciate the blessings in your life." Or most simply, "I'm happy that you're happy."

As with the metta practice, from time to time just stop and feel in your body whatever you feel there, perhaps in the heart center, noticing whether there is a feeling of resonant joy for their happiness, or any other emotions that can come. Make space for any feeling that's there and return to the intention to appreciate their happiness.

And then bring to mind now your neutral person—perhaps the same person you've been using through metta and compassion as well, so that you're familiar with them. Connect with them as best you can, remembering what they look like, remembering places and times you've seen them, and getting as much of a feeling for their character as you can.

You don't know them well, but you can intuit some things. Feel into what you've intuited about their personality or character. If you've ever seen them looking happy, remember them with a smile on their face and fill in a bit about what they might have been happy about. It's okay to imagine a little bit with the neutral person.

Whatever sense you can get about what might be going well in this person's life—any things you know they might enjoy, anything you've seen them appreciate, expressions of friendliness, cheerfulness. Remember that every human life has some happiness in it.

And so send your mudita phrase to your neutral person: "May your happiness and good fortune continue."

May they increase. May they never end.

Remember that you can try the four-step process with mudita as well as with metta: recalling the image, checking the feeling, sending the phrase, and resting in the heart center. If the connection with the neutral person feels too thin or too dry, return to one of your other people—the happy person, benefactor, or friend. Connect again with the warm feelings for them, and come back to your neutral person when you feel ready.

When you're prepared, you can bring in your difficult person. Bring this person to mind—say their name or see them, feel their personality. If it's more comfortable to have them at a little distance, perhaps across the room, that's perfectly fine.

As you connect, notice any feelings that arise at their coming into your space. If there's unease, anxiety, or resentment, simply notice that these feelings are present. Allow them to be there in the space without resistance.

Connect with your difficult person and see if you can call to mind any of their good qualities. Sometimes this is not easy, but you may know, or you might imagine, how their mother would see them. Someone could probably find good qualities in them.

As you connect with their good qualities, also bring to mind all the things that may be going well in this person's life—whatever sources there are for happiness, enjoyment, and contentment that are wholesome. If this is someone who enjoys being unkind, that's not a true source of happiness, so don't bring those to mind. Focus instead on any wholesome sources of enjoyment: friendships they cherish, family, work.

Notice as you focus on the things going well for them, what mood comes with that. Is there a sense of sharing in their happiness? Is there some contraction around their joy, some wishing that they would limit their happiness, that circumstances weren't quite so good for them? Notice the presence of those feelings without judgment, without trying to push them away. Simply make space for them to be there.

Now begin to say your phrase for sympathetic joy to the difficult person: "May your happiness and good fortune continue. I appreciate the blessings in your life." Continue to say it as you've said it for the other people and yourself, then see what comes. Check on the feeling, connect with the heart center, notice what you feel regarding their happiness. See if there's any judgment—thoughts that they're not deserving of it. Let that pass through.

In the last minutes of the sitting, extend this sense of resonant joy to all beings everywhere. Feel it going out from your heart center to all four quarters of the world, touching the beings in this hall, the beings on this land, beings on the earth and beyond. All beings near and far, seen and unseen. All beings having a mix of pleasure and pain in life. All beings wanting only to be happy and not to suffer.

For all beings: May your happiness and good fortune continue. May you appreciate the blessings in your life. May you grow in happiness, peace, and freedom.

CHAPTER 149

Muditā for the Neutral Person and the Difficult Person

Guy Armstrong · 31 min

> *In this guided meditation from a February month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong leads practitioners through muditā (sympathetic joy) practice, one of the four brahmavihāras or divine abodes. The session systematically works through different categories of people - beginning with oneself and a beloved person before moving to the more challenging territories of neutral and difficult individuals.*
>
> *Armstrong provides practical guidance for cultivating genuine appreciation for others' good fortune, even when it feels emotionally challenging. He offers various muditā phrases such as "May your happiness and good fortune continue" and "I appreciate the blessings in your life," while acknowledging the natural resistance that can arise when extending sympathetic joy to difficult people. The teacher emphasizes the importance of recognizing wholesome sources of happiness and making space for whatever emotions arise without judgment.*
>
> *The practice concludes with extending muditā to all beings everywhere, touching on the universal desire for happiness that connects all life. This meditation offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a structured approach to developing one of Buddhism's most transformative heart practices, fostering genuine joy in others' wellbeing as a path to greater compassion and inner freedom.*

Please sit comfortably.

First, bring your attention into the heart center, the center of the chest. Let this be the avenue through which you can connect to yourself.

Feel your own being through sitting here or through an image. Connect with your own goodness, remembering qualities in your character, good things you've done. Think of all the moments on this retreat when you've committed to being present, to making right effort, to showing up, to allowing what's difficult, to developing love and compassion—strong, wholesome intentions.

Then reflect on your life, your general situation, both here and at home, and reflect on what's going well for you. What are the things in your life you feel good about? As you connect with those, say your muditā phrase to yourself. I'll mention a few possibilities: "May my happiness and good fortune continue," or "I appreciate the blessings in my life," or "I'm grateful for my happiness and good fortune."

Continue staying in touch with those blessings and repeating your muditā phrase for yourself, remembering that we all share in the rare good fortune of this precious human birth.

When you're ready, bring in either your happy person or benefactor or dear friend—wherever you feel the most uplifting connection. As you connect with this person, make them alive in the room with you right now. Feel their presence, feel their character. Remember their good qualities. What do you like about them? What's noble in them?

Then connect with the things that you know are going well in this person's life—whether it's their mental state, work, family, friendships, hobbies, practice. Take in all the blessings in their life. As you connect with them, some of the difficulties may come through too. Pass over those and return to connecting with the things that are going well.

Send your muditā phrase to this person: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." If you like, you can add this subclause: "May they increase, may they never end." Or "I appreciate the blessings in your life," or most simply, "I'm happy that you're happy."

As with the mettā practice, from time to time just stop and feel in your body whatever you feel there, perhaps in the heart center. Notice whether there is a feeling of resonant joy for their happiness, or any other emotions that can come, and make space for any feeling that's there. Return to the intention to appreciate their happiness.

Now bring to mind your neutral person—perhaps the same person you've been using through mettā and compassion as well, so that you're familiar with them. Connect with them as best you can, remembering what they look like, remembering places and times you've seen them, and getting as much of a feeling for their character as you can.

You don't know them well, but you can intuit some things. Feel into what you've intuited about their personality or character. If you've ever seen them looking happy, remember them with a smile on their face and fill in a bit about what they might have been happy about. It's okay to imagine a little bit with the neutral person. Whatever

sense you can get about what might be going well in this person's life—any things you know they might enjoy, anything you've seen them appreciate, expressions of friendliness, cheerfulness.

Remember that every human life has some happiness in it. Send your muditā phrase to your neutral person: "May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase. May they never end."

Remember that you can try the four-step process with muditā as well as with mettā: recalling the image, checking the feeling, sending the phrase, resting in the heart center.

If the connection with the neutral person just feels too thin or too dry, go back to one of your other people—the happy person, benefactor, or friend. Connect again with the warm feelings for them. Come back to your neutral person when you like.

When you're ready now, you can bring in your difficult person. Bring this person to mind. Say their name or see them.

Feel their personality. If it's more comfortable for you to have them at a little bit of distance, that's fine—across the room, that's fine.

As you connect, simply notice any feelings that arise at their coming into your space. If there's unease, anxiety, resentment, just notice those feelings are there, allowing them to be there in the space.

Connect with your difficult person and see if you can call to mind any of their good qualities. Sometimes this is not easy, but you may know, or you might imagine how their mother would see them. Someone could probably find good qualities.

As you connect with their good qualities, bring to mind also all the things that may be going well in this person's life—whatever sources there are for happiness, enjoyment, contentment that are still wholesome. If this is someone who enjoys being unkind, that's not a true source of happiness, so don't bring those to mind. Any wholesome sources of enjoyment—friendships that they enjoy, family, work.

Notice as you're focusing on the things going well for them, any mood that comes with that. Is there a sense of sharing in the happiness? Is there some contraction around their happiness, some wishing that they would limit their happiness, wishing that circumstances weren't quite so good? Notice the presence of those feelings without judgment, without trying to push them away, just making space for them to be there.

Then begin to say your phrase for sympathetic joy to the difficult person: "May your happiness and good fortune continue. I appreciate the blessings in your life." Continue to say it as you've said it for the other people and yourself, and then see what comes. Check on the feeling, connect with the heart center, and see what you feel for their happiness. See if there's any judgment that they're not deserving it, and let that pass through.

In the last minutes of the sitting, extend this sense of resonant joy to all beings everywhere. The sense that it can go out from your heart center to all four quarters of the world, touching the beings in the hall, the beings on this land, beings on the earth and beyond. All beings near and far, seen and unseen. All beings having a mix of pleasure and pain in life. All beings wanting only to be happy and not to suffer.

For all beings: "May your happiness and good fortune continue. May you appreciate the blessings in your life. May you grow in happiness, peace, and freedom."

CHAPTER 150

Four Noble Truths: An Overview

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Guy Armstrong offers a detailed exploration of the Four Noble Truths (Cattāri Ariyasaccāni) based on the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), the Buddha's first teaching after his awakening. Armstrong contextualizes this pivotal discourse within the historical setting of the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodh Gaya and his journey to teach the five ascetics at Sarnath's Deer Park.*
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> *The talk systematically examines each truth: dukkha (suffering/unsatisfactoriness) as the universal human condition; taṇhā (craving) as the root cause; nirodha (cessation) as the possibility of freedom; and the Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya Aṭṭhaṅgika Magga) as the Middle Way leading to liberation. Armstrong emphasizes the practical dimension of each truth's three aspects - recognition, action, and completion - forming the twelve-fold framework that constitutes setting the Dhamma wheel in motion.*
>
> *Drawing from personal experience and contemporary examples, Armstrong demonstrates how these ancient teachings remain vitally relevant for modern practitioners. He concludes with an inspiring account from Ajahn Liem, a contemporary Thai master who reportedly achieved full awakening, illustrating that complete liberation remains possible today. This talk serves as both intellectual foundation and practical guide for deepening one's understanding of Buddhism's core insights.*

In this evening's talk, I want to give an overview of the Four Noble Truths and base it in the discourse, the sutta. Sutta means discourse in Pali. This was the Buddha's first teaching after his awakening.

I'm truly happy that we can explore this topic with a group of experienced students. Sometimes when we introduce this in a regular retreat, people respond with, "Four Noble Truths? Oh no, I don't want to hear any more about dukkha." But the Buddha said—and I think you all know—that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So we hope this will be the message of tonight's talk: the happiness and joy of the possibility of freedom.

This discourse was given by the Buddha over 2,500 years ago in northern India and was truly the beginning of the movement that has come to be known as Buddhism, the major world religion. It was a comprehensive teaching, and you could say that all the

rest of his forty-five years of discourses were footnotes or amplifications to this discourse, making it absolutely central. It's called the Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma.

The idea is that this wheel of the Dhamma was set in motion 2,500 years ago and has rolled across many countries and continents, and has now come to the West, where it is beginning to roll and pick up considerable momentum. We want to look at the discourse tonight, passage by passage, and talk about the themes within it. Then in the rest of the retreat, we will develop each of the Four Noble Truths in more detail. We'll have one talk on dukkha, one talk on craving, two talks on nibbana, and a talk on aspects of the Eightfold Path.

But I want to provide the setting for this discourse before we begin, because I think it's remarkable. The Buddha left home when he was twenty-nine years old. He was living near where he had been born. His birthplace is one of the first pilgrimage sites—Sally mentioned going on pilgrimage to India. His birthplace is actually in Nepal, but it's very close to the village where he grew up, which is another of the pilgrimage sites. That's usually one of the first areas people visit on pilgrimage: the Buddha's birthplace and his childhood home.

When he was twenty-nine, he became dissatisfied with his worldly life and wanted to seek what he called "an unailing, unaging, deathless and sorrowless security from bondage," which he called nibbana. This was a concept that was in vogue at that time in India. There were many philosophical schools, and many of them were trying to find this release, this security, this peace of nibbana, but no one had charted a clear course to it. The Buddha said he wanted to set out to find this for himself.

He left a very luxurious life at his home and went off into the forests of northern India, where he met with many teachers, listened to their advice, and practiced with great diligence and austerity for six years. Take the schedule you're doing here, multiply it by two, then extend it for six years, and you'll get a sense of what the Buddha did during that time of his own pilgrimage.

He described his effort in these terms: "Let only my skin, sinews, and bones remain, and let the flesh and blood dry up in my body, but I will not relax my energy as long as I have not attained what can be attained by human strength, energy, and exertion." He had tremendous determination.

In the course of this, one of the prevailing philosophies was that if you torment the body, the soul will become freed and will be able to find the path. So he engaged in great austerities where he ate very little. He said that at one point his skin was almost falling off, and when he touched his stomach, he could feel his backbone. He came very near to dying and decided that this wasn't going to be the way.

Near the town of Bodh Gaya, a young woman named Sujata offered him a meal of rice gruel. He took it, ate, felt stronger, and said, "This is what's needed in order to find the release that I'm looking for."

He traveled a little further from the site of the meal and sat down under a Bodhi tree in an area now known as Bodh Gaya. Bodhi means awakening or enlightenment—it was near the town of Gaya. He sat under the tree, a Bodhi tree, which is just a form of ficus called a peepal tree. He made the resolve at that time: "I'm not going to get up until I attain this release of awakening."

He entered the evening with very strong determination: "I'm either going to die on this spot or I'm going to find what I'm looking for." It's a good thing to keep in mind the next time forty-five minutes of sitting seems a little too long. This kind of determination is possible.

He began his meditation. There are a couple of discourses in the middle length discourses of the Buddha that describe his practice that night—number four and number twenty-six in the middle length discourses are very inspiring descriptions of that practice. As he practiced all night long, toward morning, just as the sun was rising, he had the insight that freed his heart and mind from all forms of suffering. He came to complete awakening and liberation called enlightenment. Only at that time did he become the Buddha, which simply means "the awakened one."

It was such a revelation to him that it brought on a great quality of bliss. The bliss of release was immense. Rather than go out and do anything, he stayed around the Bodhi tree for the next seven weeks, doing various reflections and mainly just abiding in the bliss that he had discovered of liberation.

At that point, he thought about teaching, but he was inclined not to. He said, "The world is so caught up in confusion and wanting, there won't be people who will understand." Then it's said that a heavenly being came down to him and said, "Venerable one, enlightened one, there are those who will understand. There are those with little dust in their eyes."

Please teach what you have discovered for the benefit of beings.

So the Buddha looked around with his awakened vision and saw there were indeed those with little dust in their eyes. The first people he thought of teaching were his two former teachers, who had instructed him in states of meditative concentration. But when he looked with his psychic vision, he saw they had passed away. Too bad for them.

Then he thought of a group of five renunciates, ascetics with whom he had practiced. "They have little dust in their eyes. Let me teach to them." But where were they? Again using his psychic vision, he saw they were living near the town of Benares—actually quite a major city in northern India—staying in a park called the Deer Park outside what is now Sarnath.

That was about two hundred miles away, and there were no Tesla motor vehicles back then. The only way he could reach his friends was to walk that distance. So he set out, traveling by stages from Bodh Gaya to Sarnath.

There he found his five old friends, who had continued practicing. When they saw him approaching, they said, "Oh, here comes Gautama. But he looks fat. He's been living a luxurious life. He's been eating food. We know that's the wrong way to go. You can't eat food—that's going to trap the spirit in the body. So we're not going to listen to him."

But as he approached, something in his bearing and his face was dignified and radiant. They couldn't help themselves; they were drawn to listen to him. So they finally did. He sat down with them, and here we pick up the discourse you have a copy of.

Let me read it section by section so that the words enter into our talk as well. Beginning where it says on the upper left, "11, Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma," please follow along if you can:

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Baranasi in the deer park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus: "Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata? It is this noble eightfold path: that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action,

right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

The Buddha's teaching is often called the Middle Way. He was pointing out to them that freedom is not reached by looking for one's happiness in sense pleasures, nor is it reached by torturing the body in the belief that this will free the soul. But there is a middle way between indulgence in sense pleasures and mortification of the body, which is the Noble Eightfold Path he outlined to them.

So the Middle Way is this Eightfold Path, and it leads to vision—another word for insight—knowledge, peace, direct knowledge, enlightenment, and nibbana. This is his enunciation of the path and the core of his teachings, stating from his direct experience that it leads to enlightenment and nibbana.

Then he begins to explain the Four Noble Truths, which are at the heart of his insight:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering."

In brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

The word being translated as suffering is dukkha, the Pali word. The meaning of dukkha is wider than simply suffering. It refers to the whole range of inconvenient experiences in this life, from intense pain—emotional or mental—to mild inconvenience. The fact of the shuttle breaking down on the way to the retreat yesterday was one form of dukkha, not necessarily the greatest anguish. When things don't go according to plan, that also is dukkha.

We may often use this word untranslated because there's no one English word that really renders it. We may well just say dukkha when we talk about the First Noble Truth, but you understand it includes a wide range of experiences.

Notice that the Buddha is not saying that life is suffering. Sometimes that's a gloss of the first noble truth—oh, it means life is suffering, it's so pessimistic. It's not saying that. But it describes these really universal experiences. Birth is suffering, isn't it? Aging has suffering in it. Illness has suffering and death has suffering. This is something that we all share. In it, we're all alike. We're united in this kind of suffering.

Association with what is displeasing—finding body pain as you sit during the day is dukkha. Separation from what is pleasing—not being in a comfortable home, not being with companions that one might like to visit with—is unsatisfactory sometimes. Not getting what one wants is dukkha. One wants a concentrated sit. It doesn't happen. There's some frustration.

So there are these many forms of unsatisfactoriness, but I think the beautiful thing is how universal this statement of it is. These are things that everyone on the planet can relate to. Often when we are in suffering or unhappiness, we feel isolated because of it. We think no one else is having this kind of experience. But if we look at this definition, everybody has these kinds of experiences. So suffering shouldn't isolate. It can join us to one another. And it comes in so many forms from big to small.

Joseph Goldstein was teaching here one year, and it provided the inspiration for one of his little mottos. He has a lot of little meditation mantras, so I'll share this one. He was going for a walk, probably just down the walk that goes south of here, down the river. On the way, I think he sprained his knee and had a hard time hobbling back up to the meditation hall. When he got here, he couldn't sit cross-legged anymore. It was difficult to sit, but he could not fold his legs up to sit cross-legged.

He went into a lot of personal grief about it. Talking about association with what is displeasing—he had it in spades. And it was painful. So he had to sit in a chair. He hobbled around to complete the retreat. And he was thinking, why me? Poor me. How can this happen to me? I'm a healthy person. I shouldn't be having these kinds of physical problems.

Then this phrase came to him spontaneously: "Oh, if it's not one thing, it's another." And that's the message of dukkha. If it's not one thing, it's another. That's a really useful phrase to drop in when you find yourself frustrated with any given situation. These little inconveniences in life pop up.

So on the first day of retreat, we often encounter many of these little inconvenient experiences of dukkha. The body isn't comfortable. The mind is wandering. We can't sleep well at night. Someone is in the shower when we want to use it. The food is not exactly to our liking. These are all part of settling in. But rather than simply turning to them as sources of complaint, we can see them as expressions of the universal nature of dukkha.

One of the ways that dukkha manifests is when we're separated from what is pleasing, or when what is pleasing changes. Things we've grown accustomed to don't stay the same. And when they change, that's often disappointing or frustrating or difficult for us.

Organizations manifest this dynamic quite often. Spirit Rock is a very complex organization, always going through countless decisions and turning this way or that. Some recent decisions haven't made me very happy—I've been frustrated by them. I would sit in meditation, stirring around in my mind the things different people had said that I didn't agree with, some of the decisions that had been taken that I didn't support. If you know organizations, you know this happens all the time.

Sally and I recently taught a retreat in Durango. It's lovely to see some of you from that retreat joining us here as well. After the retreat—some of you might remember—a few members of the local sangha took Sally and me on a river trip, a canoe excursion down the Green River in Utah, which was a total delight. I'd never done a canoe trip down a river before.

We were in three canoes, six people total, and Sally and I, being the least experienced, sat up front and let the person behind us do the steering. We paddled, but they did the steering. The current was quite good, so we could cover—one day I think we traveled eighteen miles without working all that hard.

What was beautiful about the river is that it was broad and flowing. It was set at the base of Labyrinth Canyon, which has walls of sheer rock that rise five hundred to a thousand feet. It really is a wonderful experience if you ever have the chance to make that trip. Not only were we unplugged from cell phones and email and internet, which was a great blessing, and there were just the six of us sangha members, but we were in a different timeframe altogether.

We were floating down one sunny morning, and I turned around and asked my friend who knew the area well, "How old are these rocks that we're looking at?" And he said, "Well, the oldest ones we can see are two hundred to three hundred million years old."

I just let my mind expand into that geologic time. It put everything I'd been dealing with into great perspective. Two hundred to three hundred million years. And I'm worrying about changes that have unfolded over six months. Come on, Armstrong. This whole meditation center isn't going to be here in another million years, most likely. And that's just a fraction of these rocks' age.

Going back into geologic time was fantastic for putting perspective on our human experience. You get a taste of that here at Vallecitos as well. Sally and I took a walk this afternoon, went up the ridge to a spot where you get a 360-degree view, and it's very expansive. The river trip expanded time, and some of the views and walks around here really expand the sense of space. This gives great perspective on our moment-to-moment struggles and reactions—dropping into that wider view of things.

Because these difficulties of being human exist within a big field. Being human is not an easy thing to carry out. Everyone struggles in different ways with human life. This is from the New Yorker:

"According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be, given everything it must put up with. Nine out of ten respondents stated that they would give up completely if they only knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail."

This is kind of our human life, and you may feel like this at times here. Unfortunately, you've given up the chance of getting something in the mail.

We simply notice that being human involves us with dukkha in many different ways. We can feel it in subtle form, in moment-to-moment experience. Sometimes life presents us with big examples of it.

We can use that dukkha in our practice. We can use it to make us more compassionate. We recognize it in ourselves and open to it with some tenderness. Knowing that other people are experiencing the same, we open to them with tenderness as well.

This is from Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet: "Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive."

Meeting our own dukkha can make us more compassionate. It can also make us stronger. We learn so much from meeting, understanding, and working with our difficulties. This is the first noble truth.

The second noble truth is phrased this way in the sutta: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination."

This last is more often translated as craving for non-existence. This is where one simply doesn't want the experience to go on any longer. This is the movement that results in suicide, and in lesser ways, it's a movement to reject.

Craving is the source of dukkha. This was really revelatory for me. When I first started hearing this, it was very liberating. I came into the practice at a time in my life—in my twenties—when I had a lot of confusion, unhappiness, uncertainty about direction. I wasn't sure what was up. I went through a lot of highs and a lot of lows. Many of us do that in our twenties.

What was alarming, looking back, is that I didn't know what led to happiness and what led to unhappiness. I didn't know the cause of my unhappiness. Here the Buddha spells it out so clearly—both the truth of unhappiness and the truth of its cause. If there's a cause, there's a way out. That's what was so amazing to me.

Craving is the translation of the Pali word *taṇhā*. Its original meaning was simply thirst. I like that because you can feel that—you can quench a thirst, but it keeps coming back. You can't ultimately quench a thirst. You can't ultimately satisfy craving by continuing to feed it. You can get temporary release, but it cannot be satisfied permanently in that way.

Craving is this deep-rooted tendency of mind, a very deep movement of mind that wants things to be a certain way. Generally, the way the moment is isn't that way. So craving is looking at the moment, looking for it to be one way and complaining because it's not, or wanting something different. It expresses itself both as pulling toward us with wanting, as Sally mentioned this morning, or pushing away with aversion, which she also mentioned.

Normally in life, we think that the problem is outside of ourselves. The reason we're unhappy is due to causes and conditions outside of us and beyond our control. The second noble truth says something different.

I don't know if you saw the movie *Kundun*. Martin Scorsese made a film about the life of the Dalai Lama. It must have come out fifteen years ago or so—a really beautiful movie. If you haven't seen it, it's worth a look. It traced the Dalai Lama's life growing up as a young monk with his tutors in the Potala Palace. He was recognized at an early age and trained from about age four.

In this particular scene, he's probably around ten years old, and his tutors are teaching him the Four Noble Truths. They say to him, "Now, explain in your own words the meaning of the Second Noble Truth."

He said, "The second noble truth is that the cause of suffering is craving."

They said, "No, no, no, that's too formulaic. Express it in your own words."

And so he thought for a moment and said, "I suffer because I want things."

They said, "Oh, that's still a little too traditional. Put it really in your own words."

And so the young Dalai Lama sat there, reflecting for a few more moments. Then he said, "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind."

And the tutors said, "Very good."

Most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. And that's what meditation is for—to release us from these habits of mind. We have to trust in that. Otherwise, we keep complaining about the external conditions. But the source and the release is within us.

So then we come to the Third Noble Truth as described in the sutta: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

So the Buddha is talking here of the ending of suffering, the ending of dukkha. And this is generally understood in a permanent way—the remainderless fading away of that craving, meaning it doesn't arise again. This is what he discovered under the Bodhi tree. It's a possibility that the source of dukkha can be uprooted and not arise again. That is the essence of full awakening or full enlightenment. That is a human possibility. And this is the direction that our Dharma practice leads in.

So this was a radical discovery. According to the recorded literature, no one else had proclaimed it in this way before—that it was possible to find an end of suffering through the ending of this psychological habit of craving.

We can explore this in two different senses. There's the permanent end that the Buddha pointed to that is reached with full awakening. This is the state of what is called in our tradition an Arahant. One who is fully awakened is called an Arahant—reached the very end of craving, and it's said never to arise again for that person. That person's life will still continue, but there won't be psychological suffering in it.

But the other way that we can understand this is that there can be a temporary end of suffering when there's a temporary end of craving. This brings it much more home to us in our moment-to-moment practice, and it makes freedom available here and now. A degree of freedom is available here and now by the relinquishment, the letting go, the abandoning of this movement of craving.

So in practical terms, this is what's very helpful to explore, to recognize, and to learn how to move into. We'll be spending a lot of time talking about this—both the permanent state and as a practical, immediate experience for all of us to discover.

And then the discourse continues: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. It is this Noble Eightfold Path, that is right view to right concentration."

So this is the statement again of the same path that he described as the Middle Way. These eight components—right view and right intention constitute the wisdom portion in Pali called paññā. Right speech, right action, right livelihood constitute the portion of conduct called sīla. Right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration constitute the meditation portion called samādhi.

To have a path that gives us step-by-step instructions to come out of dukkha and move into any degree of freedom that we might aspire to is such a gift to the world. This is the Buddhist gift to the world. There is not only the possibility of happiness or freedom—there is a clear, concrete path to reach it.

And that's what we're doing here. We are walking the path that leads in that direction. Whether we finish it in this week or not, I don't know. But this is one more movement of momentum that heads just in that direction.

Just to talk a little bit about the meditation portions of this: right effort basically means keep the mind in a wholesome place. That's all that right effort is about. So you can watch right effort going into annoyance or going into hindrances or going into craving. And when you see that, as far as possible, you want to interrupt it and bring back wholesome factors of mind.

So the most immediate wholesome factor that we're going to keep bringing back again and again is mindfulness. Mindfulness is one of the most wholesome factors of the whole path, and it's something that we can bring about in a moment of intending it. That's why mindfulness is the next step.

Effort is meant to remind us: okay, move back into wholesome. How do I do that? I become mindful. I start paying attention.

I want to give a really simple definition of mindfulness. You can read long, complicated definitions on the web. MBSR has its own definition and different teachers have their own definition. I want to offer a really simple, practical definition: mindfulness is knowing what your experience is in this moment.

All you have to do to become mindful is to answer the question: what's happening to me right now? Oh, there's an in-breath. Oh, there's a sound. Oh, there's a mood of irritation. Oh, there's an unpleasant sensation in the lower back. Knowing that is your experience—that's mindfulness.

Now it can grow up and become more mature and refined and stronger and unshakable. But this is enough to activate the path. So this will be the essence of our meditation instruction: what's happening right now? And all you have to do is notice it. It's really simple. Connect to the direct experience of the way things are. This is what's happening.

Out of right mindfulness, when we string enough moments together with enough frequency—or you could say continuity—the mind starts to collect in the present moment. Because what we're doing in mindfulness is taking it out of the spin of conceptual proliferations. All the things we think about—work and home and past and future—we're taking it out of that spin and we're just coming in and saying: what's happening now is there's a pain in the knee. What's happening now is there's an in-breath.

As we accumulate these moments of present moment orientation, it builds to collect the mind in the moment, and that's a source of strength. When the mind becomes collected, that's concentration. And concentration brings a steadiness, a strength and a stability to the mind. So all of a sudden we can observe the way things are going—even thoughts, even hindrances, even movements of wanting or hating. We can observe those without being so shaken by them.

And having found that stability, we can start to see clearly. The purpose and benefit of concentration is to see things as they are. That's the ground for insight. So you can think of it like this: what's this awake awareness that we've been talking about? What's the purpose of it? It's to see things the way they are. That's what frees us.

And when we can abide in that awake awareness, we discover that it itself has a quality of freedom. So it leads in the direction of freedom and it embodies, it carries with it the quality of freedom. And then this seeing things the way they are comes back around to the start of the path, which is right view.

So the sutta continues. And this is where it gets kind of interesting in a way that isn't talked about so often. The Buddha is going to break down each of the noble truths into three phases that he wants us to understand and focus on. So he's going to express it differently now.

He takes the first one: "This is the noble truth of suffering. Thus, Bhikkhus, in regards to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light." In other words, he's saying this was an original insight. I didn't get this from somebody else. I saw this for myself. This is the noble truth of suffering.

And then it continues: "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood, thus because in regard to things unheard before there arose in me vision, knowledge," etc.

This is a really important line in the whole sutta: "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood." The noble truths aren't just philosophical concepts that we're supposed to believe in. If that's all it was, everyone could pick up a book on Buddhism in Religion 101 and reach the Four Noble Truths.

Each of the Noble Truths is a call for us to take action. The action in regards to suffering is we are to fully understand it, fully understand it. When we fully understand suffering, that is what brings release.

The Buddha said on another occasion, "There's one thing the not seeing of which keeps you bound. What is that one thing? Dukkha." It's because we haven't fully understood dukkha that we continue to be bound.

And then he continues, "This noble truth of suffering has been fully understood." So now he's speaking as the fully awakened Buddha, saying that he has fully understood the first noble truth of suffering. And this is what has released him.

There are these three aspects with each of the noble truths. There's the statement of the truth, there's the call to action, and then there's the expression of its completion—the action having been completed. And when all three of those are brought to fullness of development, that is the ground for awakening.

And then he continues, "This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned." So the meditation instruction is craving is to be abandoned. Now we may have abandoned craving on many, many occasions, and that's fully in line with the Buddha's instruction.

But then he continues, "This noble truth of the origin of suffering has been abandoned. Thus there arose in me vision, knowledge, etc." So his statement is craving has been completely abandoned, relinquished, let go of, not to arise again. And that's again a statement of his full awakening.

So we understand dukkha. We release or abandon or let go of the craving. And in truth, sometimes we can let go of the craving. And sometimes we can't. Ajahn Chah has this great line. He said, "Seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing that you're holding on and not being able to let go."

So we will see that a lot. We know we should let go. And we just can't. But eventually we do. And this is so helpful to notice the moment when the craving has been held and is then released. Really helpful to see directly.

Then the third noble truth. "This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized." This is our task. And then for the Buddha, "This noble truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized."

So we are to know in our direct experience, the cessation of dukkha. We can know it on a momentary basis, the temporary release, the temporary freedom, the temporary liberation. And at some point, hopefully we will recognize it in the complete release.

And then in the fourth noble truth, "This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. This noble truth is to be developed." And then his statement, "This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering has been developed."

So dukkha is to be understood. Do we always understand our dukkha? No. Often we won't even acknowledge it. There's so many ways we are so defended against letting ourselves even feel the dukkha directly. We deny it's happening. We blame it on someone else. We blame ourselves for it as a way of distancing. We want it to go away. We try to push it away. All these are complications of mind that mindfulness helps us to undo.

Freud said that neurosis is the refusal to suffer. And he's just pointing to all the defense mechanisms that we create against feeling it and understanding it. So we open to our suffering through this practice of mindfulness. And through that, we can understand it.

So we have the Four Noble Truths, each with its call to action: to understand dukkha, to abandon its cause, to realize the cessation of dukkha, and to develop the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. Each of these Four Noble Truths has three aspects—this is

the truth, this is the action, and this is the statement that we have done the action, at least partially. We have three aspects times the four noble truths, which generates the number twelve.

This is where the Buddha continues: "So long as my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects was not thoroughly purified in this way, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world. But when my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths, as they really are, in their three phases and twelve aspects, was thoroughly purified, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world. The knowledge and vision arose in me. Unshakable is the liberation of my mind. This is my last birth. Now there is no more renewed existence."

This is his proclamation of his own liberation and deliverance from the realm of birth, death and rebirth known as samsara. He ties it to these twelve aspects. This setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma is described in detail as these twelve aspects.

This has been represented in the art of our tradition for a very long time—the symbol of the Dhamma wheel that the Buddha started rolling. When you see it with twelve spokes, those represent these twelve aspects: the noble truths times their three phases. Often the Dhamma wheel is represented with eight spokes, symbolizing the Eightfold Path. This is perhaps more commonly the way we think of it. But in Asia, more often we see the Dhamma wheel with these twelve spokes symbolizing the Four Noble Truths in all their three aspects. You might see the Dhamma wheel in either of these forms, but in either case, it symbolizes the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the path. The implication is that this wheel was set in motion and cannot be stopped—has not been stopped and cannot be stopped.

"This is what the Blessed One said." Kondañña was one of the five ascetics, and in this moment, he had a direct realization of the Four Noble Truths. This is a stock phrase that occurs throughout the suttas to indicate this moment of glimpse into the truth of what the Buddha was pointing to: "All that is subject to origination is subject to cessation." He had apparently seen at least the cessation of craving and suffering fully in that moment.

This is what's referred to as stream entry. This first glimpse of the depth of the Four Noble Truths is a moment where the mind has been temporarily completely liberated, and one knows without a doubt that liberation is possible through this teaching and through this path. Kondañña received this from one short discourse that the Buddha

taught. Things like this still happen today. People still get awakened on hearing the Dhamma being spoken. It is a powerful means of communication, listening to the Dhamma.

The next section describes how "the earth-dwelling devas raised a cry. At Baranasi in the deer park at Isipitana, this unsurpassed wheel of the Dhamma has been set in motion by the Blessed One, which cannot be stopped." This goes through many layers of Buddhist cosmology where all the high heavens proclaim their joy at this setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma. I'll leave you to read that at your own pace and make of it what you will. It's not essential to believe in this cosmology, but it is a way of saying, as Asian religious texts often do, this was a big deal. And it's still a big deal today.

These Four Noble Truths are something that all the meditative schools of Buddhism agree on as their foundation. If you go into Zen, Chan, or Tibetan Buddhism of any school, you'll find the Four Noble Truths underlie the teachings as they underlie ours. It's what joins all these schools together.

The sutta concludes with this lovely paragraph: "Then the Blessed One uttered this inspired utterance: 'Kondañña has indeed understood! Kondañña has indeed understood!' In this way, the Venerable Kondañña acquired the name Añña-Kondañña, Kondañña who has understood."

Not only did the Venerable Kondañña get it—the Buddha saw that he got it. He saw that Kondañña had momentarily awakened and received in the deepest possible way this teaching. But Kondañña wasn't fully awakened. The Buddha had this insight seven or eight weeks earlier and had fully awakened from it. Kondañña's mind wasn't that strong or that clear.

He didn't fully awaken, but he knew the path. He had complete faith in the possibility of full awakening. Then the Buddha continued to instruct the group of five over the next two weeks. During that time, Kandanya and the other four all reached full awakening. So at that time, there were six Arahants in the world, six fully awakened beings, two weeks after the Buddha began teaching.

We might ask ourselves this question about full awakening: Is that just a 2,500-year-old Asian fairy tale? Or is that still possible today?

I want to close by reading a short passage from a biography of a teacher named Ajahn Liem. Ajahn Chah was a great Thai master of the last century. He was Jack Kornfield's first teacher and Ajahn Sumedho's main teacher. He passed away in the mid to

late 1990s. But before he did, he gave transmission and anointed as his successor Ajahn Liem, another Thai monk who lived in the northeast of Thailand. This is from Ajahn Liem's biography, which you can find on the web.

Around the middle of the rainy season of the year 2512—that's 1969 to us—Ajahn Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity. So Ajahn Liem increased his efforts, and as he did so, results became evident.

"Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and then stop to have a rest, but on this day I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture. A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body, as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, an experience of the body becoming completely light and at ease. Cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness.

"This experience continued on throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years, all from that one sitting. It feels like there are no more proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with defilements that had bothered me before—the thoughts concerning the other sex or all kinds of ambitions that I had before—I don't know where they all disappeared to. There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And this experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change all the way up to the present day. The same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without change."

This is very rare in Theravadan circles—that a senior monk, a senior practitioner, basically declares his ending of all suffering. But he is considered in Thailand to have genuinely reached this state of full awakening. He sometimes comes to teach in the West. He still teaches in Thailand and sometimes also comes to the West.

So this is a possibility of the Four Noble Truths manifested in the current day and age, where the cessation of suffering has been fully realized by someone.

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose. There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 151

Third Noble Truth & Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

Guy Armstrong presents a comprehensive overview of the Third Noble Truth and its relationship to Nibbāna, drawing from classical Buddhist texts and the Four Noble Truths framework. This dharma talk examines Nibbāna as both the cessation of suffering described in the Third Noble Truth and as an unconditioned element already present within us, referencing key passages from the Udāna and various suttas.

Armstrong explores the literal meaning of Nibbāna as "extinguishing" the fires of craving, greed, hatred, and delusion, while discussing the four stages of awakening from stream entry to arahantship. He shares inspiring stories from the Therīgāthā and accounts of contemporary masters like Ajahn Chah and Dīpamā, illustrating how different personalities can manifest full liberation.

The talk concludes with practical meditation guidance, emphasizing "liberation through non-clinging" and directing attention toward the deathless element through the stilling of formations, relinquishment of attachments, and cessation of craving. This foundational teaching prepares practitioners for deeper engagement with the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.

Tonight I'd like to talk about the Third Noble Truth and conjoin it with the topic of Nibbāna. We're going to have two talks on this topic, and tonight what I want to do is present an overview of the classical meaning of Nibbāna as it's found in the discourses of the Buddha. At times this may seem a little theoretical to you or a little remote, but then Carol tomorrow night is going to talk about how we can make it approachable and relevant in our own practice and find elements of this quality in our direct experience here and now. So we'll have both a theoretical background, an overview, and then tomorrow night a more practical approach to the Third Noble Truth.

You remember we talked last time about the Buddha leaving home at age twenty-nine, embarking on this quest for what he called "the unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless security from bondage"—Nibbāna. He found what he was looking for on the night of his awakening under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya.

There was a poem that he spontaneously uttered right after his awakening. It goes like this:

"Through many a birth I wandered in saṃsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. O house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken. Your ridge pole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving."

His comment is "painful is birth again and again." He's reflecting on the thousands and thousands of lives that he saw that he had lived in this cycle, and the attendant dukkha in each one. In this evening's insight, he had found a way to be free of all that. The house that he was talking about—the builder of this house—the house is the body that takes birth again and again. The house builder is craving. The ridge pole that gets shattered is ignorance. Then as he says, "my mind has attained the unconditioned." Unconditioned is a synonym for Nibbāna and "reached the very end of craving."

This brings us back to the statement of the Third Noble Truth that we talked about on the first full day of the retreat: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

Through the poem and the Third Noble Truth, we are getting this equation, this correspondence between the Third Noble Truth, the end of suffering, the end of craving, Nibbāna, and the unconditioned. What we want to do in this talk is explore all these different ways of talking about the Third Noble Truth and how they relate.

This brings us immediately to the question: what is Nibbāna? I'd say that this is the hardest topic to talk about in all of Buddhism. Yet fools will rush in where angels fear to tread, and so I'm going to talk about it tonight.

It's hard because, one, the Buddha was deliberately vague on the details here. He didn't want to paint detailed pictures of it, because people could get a misleading impression from words. He just wanted to show people the way, and then when people followed the way, they would find it and know for themselves what it is.

A second thing is that the ultimate kind of experience that one can have in religious terms is beyond words. All the great religious traditions say this, and this is true in Buddhism also. Different people will put words to the insight into Nibbāna, but the descriptions may sound different. It's very interesting to listen to two different teachers describe it, and you'll hear entirely different descriptions, and yet both may have undergone similar degrees of liberation. The descriptions and the views on what constitute it will differ, but the liberations can be the same.

It is indescribable. The ultimate cannot be put into words because words discriminate, and the ultimate is beyond discrimination. The Buddha said this about it: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand. It's subtle, to be experienced by the wise."

The talk tonight may not be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So don't try too hard to figure it out. This is not really a conceptual thing. Get the feeling of it. Let the feeling come through. Even though some of the descriptions may seem a little remote right now, let the principle of it guide your practice. I'll explain some practice directions tonight. Carol will talk about more tomorrow.

The literal meaning of the term Nibbāna is extinguishing or blowing out or quenching. It's a fire that has been put out. Now, when a fire is put out, where is it to be found? It's nowhere, is it? It ceased to be. So the fire in this case is the fire of clinging or of craving.

And when it is extinguished, it's gone. The mind experiences a great coolness that is the relief from the burning energy of craving or clinging. So nibbana is often described in terms of coolness and peace—this is the experience of it.

Sariputta gave perhaps the most concise description of it in all of the suttas when he said, "The destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion—this is called nibbana." We realize that craving encompasses greed, aversion, and delusion. When craving is destroyed, these tendencies of mind, these deep-rooted unconscious tendencies are also ended.

So the one who has released greed, aversion, and delusion has come into a state of great freedom. These forces no longer afflict one. Craving no longer afflicts one. Suffering no longer afflicts one. And the experience is one of a great freedom—unshakable freedom.

Nirvana is pointing to a state of mind of an enlightened being, a liberated being. But it's also usually understood as a deathless element that's already present in each of us. This becomes very interesting—an unconditioned element that's already here and now within our being. That makes it not so remote. That means some aspect or flavor of this unconditioned element may be felt in this very moment.

But why is it hard to see? Why is it hard for us to discover and touch? The reason is that its vibration is very subtle, and the vibrations of greed, aversion, and delusion are very gross and they mask it or obscure it. When the mind is active with greed, aversion, delusion, it's too busy, too active for this very subtle vibration of nirvana to come into the foreground.

That's why the path of meditation is to calm down the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion, so that the very nature of the mind becomes closer to that of nibbana. When it becomes very close, then there's the possibility of opening to it and seeing it directly.

The most reliable guidelines I know for a meditative approach to nibbana are the seven factors of enlightenment. I understand their purpose as shaping the mind so that it is as close as possible to the vibration of nirvana. With that convergence, there's a possibility that it can be revealed, that we can know it directly.

This unconditioned element is already present. The aim of practice, according to the Third Noble Truth, is for us to realize it. This expression of the unconditioned element as something present in us was most clearly stated in this passage from a text called the Udana. These are the words of the Buddha:

"There is, bhikkhus, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded. But since there is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded."

What the Buddha is pointing to here is a contrast between all the conditioned elements of our experience—which include all the mental states, all the sense contact, all the impermanent things that come and go and catch us in craving—and this latent element, which is unborn, meaning it hasn't come into creation in the same way as sense objects. It's uncompounded in that it doesn't arise from prior conditions. It's said that it is not subject to arising and passing. That's why it's available at any time.

These are some synonyms that the Buddha gave for this element—also called the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the harbor, the refuge, the beyond.

This is considered nibbana—the highest kind of happiness available to us. It's above sense pleasures. It's even above yam burgers with chipotle sauce, which is a very high form of sense pleasure. I thought that was like the best retreat dinner I've maybe ever had tonight, so many thanks to our cooks. It's even above the blissful states of meditation, jhana states, which can be very blissful and pleasant, because it's so happy because it's a place of safety. We're no longer subject to the torments of mind—of greed, aversion, and delusion. We are sheltered from all that, and that peace comes as a huge relief.

It's said also in the Dhammapada that peace is the highest happiness. Whether you consider it the ultimate peace of nirvana or relative peace, I think this is a really interesting comment on our psychology. Do we believe it? Because peace is available in any moment when we let go of our activities. There is a relief in that kind of peace. If we believe that's the highest happiness, wouldn't that incline us to stop pursuing all the worldly, impermanent things that we pursue? Because they all stir us up. But we can contact this peace that we can rest in, in any moment in which we give up all those pursuits, all that activity of striving and pushing and pulling.

So this is really, I think, a very profound psychological insight that is not well understood in the West. Peace is the highest form of happiness. It's not a bubbly kind of happiness, peace. It's not like always coming out as this great bubbly joy. But the very peaceful nature of it is satisfying in a way that sense pleasures aren't.

So how do we get in that direction to the unconditioned, to liberation, to freedom? Again, from the Buddha: "Just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines toward the ocean, so too a practitioner who develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path slants, slopes, and inclines towards nibbana."

You're only going in one direction. I hope you want to go there because that's where this is heading. And as Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you're going, you might end up somewhere else."

So this is where we're all going. Some people are surprised by this when they, just somewhere down the way, they thought, "Oh, I thought I was going for this bliss and uplifting joy. No, you're going to peace. Oh, I'm not sure I want to go there."

Trust us. This is the place to go. This is the highest happiness. This is where the Buddha was pointing us to.

This path is outlined in many discourses. There's one where it's described very beautifully in kind of two stages. There's one stage that goes from suffering to contentment, or you could say to normal happiness. And then there's another part of the path that goes from happiness to liberation.

So Munindra-ji, Joseph's first teacher, likes to say, "If you aim for the highest happiness, all the others will follow in the wake." So normal human happiness, worldly happiness, joy and delight all come in the wake of aiming for the highest happiness of peace.

Now, there are two ways that the path can be understood within all the Buddhist traditions. You'll hear these different flavors. Our approach is very much along the lines of strengthening the positive qualities of mind, developing them to such a degree, especially the seven factors of enlightenment, that they converge on awakening. They converge on nirvana. So this is a path of effort where factors are cultivated deliberately and brought into maturity and strength so that the mind is poised for awakening to take place.

There's another view of the path which says that the natural purity of our being is already here. And you can think of the unconditioned element in this way—that natural purity within us is already here. And all that has to happen is that we thin out the clouds or the clouds thin out through awareness. And then this natural purity comes through.

I think this is interesting because one way stresses effort. The other way stresses trust. And things unfold best, I think, when you put both together. You make the effort to cultivation and you trust that that purity of nature is there as well.

Effort can take us very close, but effort can't do the work to take us to the fullness of the third noble truth. Why? Because nibbana is desireless. Nibbana is aimless. And any kind of effort directed toward a goal is not of the nature of nibbana. So effort can build the mind to this beautiful balance of conditioned peacefulness, but it can't open the door to the unconditioned element. That only comes from grace, some uncontrollable, unpredictable element.

So in our meditation, what we want to do is to develop all the factors to get us as close as possible and then trust. Because at some point we have to stop trying because trying does not align with the energy of the desirelessness of the unconditioned.

So there's this nice story about Ananda. You all probably know Ananda is like the sweetest guy in the whole of the Pali Canon. He was a cousin of the Buddha's who was his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. Very loyal, devoted, and friendly. It's said that Ananda had a big part in the establishment of the bhikkhuni order, the nuns' order, which the Buddha initially refused because it was just not done at the time to have women practicing seriously in India of that age. But Ananda pleaded their case to the Buddha, who eventually agreed. So Ananda is like everybody's best friend.

But he devoted all his time to serving the Buddha, and he hadn't had a lot of time for his own practice. So after the Buddha's death, there was a gathering. It was said of five hundred fully awakened beings, and their purpose was to collect the teachings so that they could be passed on to other generations. But the gathering was only for fully awakened beings and Ananda was not one.

However, Ananda possessed an extraordinary memory and had spent twenty-five years at the Buddha's side, hearing all the teachings and developing the ability to recite them perfectly. So the assembly found themselves in a dilemma: they desperately needed Ananda's presence, but he had not yet awakened.

Ananda felt this conflict deeply. He understood that he needed to attain awakening to join his fellow practitioners. So he resolved to practice with utmost dedication until the council began. This gathering became known as the First Council.

Through the night before the meeting, Ananda sat and walked in meditation, practicing with tremendous fervor and staying awake in his determined effort to reach enlightenment. Yet despite all his striving and intense effort, awakening eluded him. As morning approached, he realized he wasn't going to succeed.

"I guess it's not going to happen for me this time," he thought to himself. "Well, I might as well take some rest and perhaps I can be helpful in some other way tomorrow."

In that moment, Ananda simply relaxed his effort. He sat on his bed and prepared to lie down for rest. But just as he was about to place his head on the pillow, the final moment of enlightenment dawned for him. He went to sleep as an ordinary practitioner and awakened the next morning as an Arhat, fully liberated, ready to join the council.

All the suttas you encounter that begin with the phrase "Thus have I heard" were recited by Ananda from his perfect recollection. It was his extraordinary memory of the Buddha's teachings that preserved these texts for us. This story beautifully illustrates how effort carries us to a certain point, but then relaxation and grace bring the final opening.

It's important to understand that Ananda was not a beginner. In our tradition, there are considered to be four distinct stages of awakening, and each stage releases some of the fetters that bind us. These fetters—ten in total—keep us bound to continued existence, to spiritual blindness, to fundamental misunderstanding.

The first stage is called stream entry, characterized by the same experience we encountered with Añña Kondañña in our opening sutta. When the Buddha delivered his first teaching, Kondañña immediately understood. The phrase describing his realization has become standard in the suttas for this preliminary enlightenment: "While this discourse was being spoken, there arose in the Venerable Kondañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma: whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation."

Stream entry means the practitioner—whether woman or man, as both are described in the suttas—has experienced their first direct realization of the deathless element, the unconditioned, nirvana itself. This opening of mind to the ultimate reality is profoundly transformative, constituting what we call an enlightenment moment. It transforms us because it permanently uproots some of the fetters that blind us.

Stream entry eliminates three specific fetters. The first is personality view—essentially the belief that there truly exists a self within this mind-body process. This first contact with the unconditioned removes the fundamental belief in selfhood. While the sense of self will continue to arise for a stream enterer, they can examine it closely and see through its illusory nature. The belief itself has been extracted.

The second fetter eliminated is doubt—specifically doubt about the path and whether the Buddha's teachings actually lead to ultimate freedom. This doubt dissolves because one has directly experienced the truth of the unconditioned, that momentary but unshakable peace. Having tasted this reality personally, one knows with absolute certainty that complete liberation is possible through developing the factors of the path.

The third fetter is attachment to rules and observances, sometimes called rites and rituals. While this may seem less relevant to Western practitioners today, it was tremendously significant in the Buddha's time. The Brahmin caste maintained elaborate ritual systems—sacred bathing, priestly chants, animal sacrifices, and countless ceremonial practices—all believed to purify the mind. The Buddha declared these ineffective. Similarly, while sila or ethical conduct serves as valuable support for the path, moral behavior alone cannot liberate the heart and mind.

The tradition teaches that a stream enterer is destined to reach full enlightenment within at most seven more births. This represents a kind of spiritual guarantee—having reached this milestone, one's eventual liberation becomes assured. Before this point, one might wander from birth to birth for countless lifetimes. Such is the profound power of this particular insight.

This is not merely an ancient Indian legend. Practitioners today, both in the West and perhaps even more commonly in Asia, do reach this stage of understanding. These openings happen primarily during extended retreats—the two-month programs at Spirit Rock and the three-month course at IMS. Dedicated practitioners who have been cultivating their practice over time do experience these realizations in our current era. Those who do feel deeply inspired and gain tremendous confidence in their spiritual journey.

It's sometimes not possible to know whether an experience is a valid enlightenment experience. You're a practitioner who has heard many stories and words, but when the actual thing comes, is it that or something else?

Ajahn Sumedho had a question like this. He was practicing under Ajahn Chah, having been ordained with him in Thailand in the late sixties—I believe the first Western monk to ordain with Ajahn Chah. After practicing very diligently for several years, he had an experience that he thought might be stream entry. So he went to ask Ajahn Chah about it, wanting confirmation. He described what had happened and asked, "Was that stream entry?"

Ajahn Chah replied, "How should I know? I wasn't there."

This is a great reflection. Western Vipassana teachers tend to have this same humble attitude about students' enlightenment experiences. We don't confirm or deny because we can't really tell. Only the person who has had the experience can truly know, and sometimes only after time passes can they determine whether it has actually purified the heart and uprooted some of the fetters of the mind. According to the suttas, the Buddha could tell, but we cannot. So we don't tend to make those kinds of evaluations.

The next stage of enlightenment is called a once-returner, meaning one will return to the human realm only one more time before full enlightenment is assured. In a once-returner, no fetters are completely uprooted, but the primary defilements of lust, hatred, and delusion are greatly weakened. The characteristic of a once-returner is greatly reduced lust and aversion. I believe some Westerners we know have probably reached this stage, though I don't query my colleagues about it. Even if I did, I'm not sure I would always trust their evaluation. This is not easy to achieve and remains an uncommon occurrence, at least in the West.

The third stage is called a non-returner. Here, significant fetters are uprooted—sense desire and ill will are ended. The possibility for anger is gone. Lust is gone. Dipa Ma was said to have reached this stage of awakening. She was a Bengali woman who also practiced under Munindra, developing a very strong meditation practice and high levels of attainment.

One of Dipa Ma's comments about the third stage was that family life is no longer possible after reaching it. Family life, I believe, is the Indian euphemism for sex. After the third stage, because sexual desire and sensual desire are no longer present, there's no purpose to intimate physical relationship.

But she said the reason it's so hard to reach the third stage—why so few people do—is because it requires opening to the truth of dukkha on such a deep level. We spoke today about how opening to the First Noble Truth is an important ingredient in activating the path, meaning we really need to feel the suffering. Someone called it penetrating the suffering, which is a fine way to express it. We really have to feel it, feel the hurt of the suffering. Dipa Ma's comment was that to reach the third stage, one has to feel the unsatisfactoriness of our existential condition in a very, very deep way.

Yet the degree of freedom at this stage is immense. Carol and I both had the chance to spend about a month with Dipa Ma when she first came to the States. We were looking after her, cooking for her, taking her shopping. I never saw a flicker of any reactivity in her during that entire month. She was always peaceful, equanimous, untroubled—a very impressive being.

If you haven't read her biography, simply called *Dipa Ma*, it's a wonderful read. It's especially inspiring for women because there are a limited number of strong women teachers in our lineage. Dipa Ma is someone in our lifetimes who truly manifested great awakened spirit—a very inspiring person.

The fourth stage is what's called the fully awakened or fully enlightened one, known as an Arahant.

So in this final stage, all the earlier fetters have already been removed, leaving only the five remaining fetters to go. Some of these are quite subtle and refined. There is attachment to fine sense realms and attachment to immaterial realms—these are more purified ways of being that are cultivated through states of concentration and jhana than the ordinary human realm, which is a mixture of pleasure and pain. These are very refined states developed on the basis of strong concentration that can be quite sat-

isfying and blissful, but not ultimately so. At a certain point in meditative development, these refined states can themselves become attachments. The Arhat has let go of even these most refined states as objects of clinging.

But here are the three most significant fetters that fall away. The Arhat has completely ended conceit, which means any sense of self at all—not just the belief in a self, but any residual sense of selfhood whatsoever. There's a story about an Arhat who was captured by bandits who were planning to kill him. I'm not sure why—that's just what bandits did in India in those days. If they caught you, they killed you. The bandits were shocked that he wasn't afraid when they told him of their intention. He said, "What should I be afraid of? There's no owner of this body and mind. What should I fear?" The bandits were so impressed with his character that they let him go, as these stories always end happily.

Here's another fascinating fetter that only disappears at this final stage: restlessness. You might think that when you're sitting quietly in meditation, your mind shouldn't be restless. But only in the Arhat's mind is there true freedom from restlessness. We can concentrate our mind and restlessness can be temporarily absent, but the underlying tendency toward restlessness continues to exist within us. What this restlessness really represents, I believe, is the persistent sense that there must be something better somewhere else—the constant searching, the inability to be completely at peace with what is. Let me see if I can find it, or think about it, or move toward it. In the Arhat, this is completely gone. There is no longer any looking for anything else.

Finally, ignorance is gone. Any confusion about the way things are, about the nature of impermanent conditioned formations, the nature of craving and clinging, the mechanisms by which we enter into suffering—all of this is seen clearly. There is complete clarity and wisdom about the fundamental nature of existence. This wisdom is what prevents one from ever again falling into those states of suffering.

It's said that the fully enlightened one will no longer be born in any realm, will no longer take birth again. There's this beautiful quote from the canon: "The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. He or she is not shaken and they are not agitated, for there is nothing present in them by which they might be born." The urges that would lead to rebirth are extinguished. This is the meaning of extinguishing—those fundamental urges are gone.

This is what the Buddha referred to as "an unshakable deliverance of mind." Because the fetters that cause restlessness or craving are completely gone, the mind can't be shaken by anything. This is what he declared to be the goal of his teaching—this unshakable deliverance of mind.

He said: "This holy life, friends, does not have gain, honor and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration, or knowledge and insight. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end."

Even in the modern age, some of our masters continue to experience this degree of liberation. I read recently Luang Por Liam's remarkably candid account of his own awakening, where he describes how dukkha was no longer present. There's another Thai forest master, Ajahn Maha Bua, who has also recounted his awakening. He had been a monk for ten years when he decided to make an extraordinarily strong effort during one rains retreat—the traditional three-month practice period in late summer. What he committed to do was sit up all night, every night, without moving.

He developed this profound fearlessness, this complete loss of fear of death. The pain from death couldn't possibly be worse than the pain he had experienced sitting through those nights without moving. From that point forward, he said, he kept making progress until his mind was like rock—skilled enough in concentration's stability that it became like a slab of stone, unable to be easily affected by anything at all.

Can you imagine having a mind that stable and firm? No restlessness, no craving. But he wasn't yet awakened. He said he remained stuck in that concentration for five years. It was so satisfying, so peaceful, that he didn't look for anything else. But then he realized he was trapped.

So he turned to wisdom and began investigating—craving and the absence of craving, suffering and the absence of suffering. But he saw that all of these were changing. He came back to basic mindfulness and wisdom, paying simple attention. He watched as these faculties became steady, impartial, and impassive. The mind was not tending toward anything.

At that moment, he said, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked. Ignorance was thrown down from its throne in the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared at the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

This eradication of ignorance was his declaration of liberation—a very beautiful account.

One never knows in practice when a moment of opening might come. There's a collection called the Therigatha, verses of the elder nuns collected around the time of the Buddha and shortly after. Reading these accounts of women practicing in that era is remarkable. There's a wonderful book called *First Buddhist Women* that weaves together these stories, combining the verses with their biographies.

One nun was called Siha, and this is her practice story: "Obsessed by sensuality, I never got to the origin, but was agitated, my mind beyond control. I dreamed of great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace. Pale and thin, I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night."

Imagine—seven years as a nun, wandering through the forest seeking peace. "Pale and thin, I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night. Then I took a rope into the forest and thought, 'I'd rather hang than go back to that narrow life.' I tied a strong noose to the branch of a tree and put it around my neck. Just then my heart was set free."

Amazing. Someone brought right to the edge, and there must have been some profound letting go, and then liberation.

One fascinating aspect of this awakening process is that enlightened beings can have remarkably different personalities. You might think that once the self goes, once greed, hatred, and delusion disappear, everyone becomes identical. It's not like that at all. These people can be real characters, and they often manifest much the same personality they had for years, though in a purified form.

For instance, Mahasi Sayadaw, one of the greatest meditation masters of the past century—Carol and I had the chance to meet him and practice with him at IMS in the late seventies. He embodied tremendous equanimity. You could feel the unshakability of his mind, but there wasn't a huge amount of metta radiating from him. You didn't feel like you wanted to crawl up and cuddle with him like a grandfather. He was quite remote, but profoundly cooled out.

Dipa Ma, on the other hand, you would have loved to have as your grandmother.

When she came to the States, she brought her grandson, whose name was Rishi, and she was so warm and kind and loving with him. She was loving with everyone that she met. She just always had a smile for people.

Ajahn Chah had the most amazing sense of humor of any monk I've ever encountered. He was very playful and could use his humor to poke at people, but what he would be pointing to were the character traits that needed development. So he was a

real person-oriented Dharma teacher with tremendous wisdom that he shared about managing families and businesses, training children, and all kinds of practical matters. Very practical and very funny.

But his teacher, Ajahn Mun, was very fierce. If you see photographs of him—and you can look him up online where there are just a handful of photos—he always looks very serious and stern. It's said that he would make his students sit through the whole meditation schedule even if they had malaria. If you've ever had malaria, that is not a pleasant disease—high fever, your body feels awful—and he would make practitioners continue sitting so they would lose concern for pleasure or pain.

And then you have someone like the Dalai Lama, who I don't know what level of awakening he's at, but I think it's really high. He has this amazing manifestation of joy and compassion. To me, he's the most inspiring person on the planet, even though he's not Theravadan. He's still pretty remarkable—a very free, very free heart.

So this fourth stage material can seem really far off, but even in the suttas describing arahants, we can find excellent pointers for our practice. Carol will give more tomorrow night that will be relevant for us, but I want to highlight a few things to head us in a certain direction.

One phrase that appears frequently in the suttas is "liberation through non-clinging." This is mentioned repeatedly, and when you think about it, it's actually a practice instruction. When we practice non-clinging and not holding onto things, that becomes a path. Where non-clinging leads is to this experience of liberation.

Ajahn Chah said it quite succinctly: "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace."

So play with this as a meditation instruction. What does it feel like if you let go? You're just sitting there. Maybe there's a little holding, maybe there's not. But simply bring to mind non-clinging—letting go, abandoning, releasing, however you want to think of it. Just see what happens in that moment. It's an instruction you can give yourself. See what the effect is. See what your experience becomes.

I find that it opens the mind and brings back some kind of expansiveness that has an element of greater freedom and ease in it. This can obviously be carried to quite some depth.

Here's a dialogue between two of the Buddha's greatest disciples, Anuruddha and Sariputta. Sariputta had already become an arahant and was helping Anuruddha, who had not yet become fully enlightened but was a great practitioner, as you'll see. Anuruddha was asking Sariputta for meditation advice.

He said, "Friend Sariputta, here's what's going on for me. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I survey a thousand-fold world system." That's his first point. I'm still waiting for a yogi to come and report that in an interview—hasn't happened yet.

"Second report: energy is aroused in me."

My mindfulness is established without confusion. My body is tranquil without disturbance. My mind is concentrated and one-pointed.

Third report: yet my mind is still not liberated from the taints through non-clinging. This is why he's looking for advice.

This is Sariputta's reply: "Friend Anuruddha, when you say that the divine eye surveys a thousandfold world system, that is your conceit. When you say that energy is aroused and mindfulness is established and your mind is concentrated, that is your restlessness. And when you say your mind is still not liberated from the taints, that is your remorse. It would be good for you if you would abandon these three qualities and stop attending to them. Instead, direct your attention to the deathless element."

That's a sort of wisdom. Sariputta was basically saying, "Don't wander off into these thoughts and evaluations about what's going on in your practice. Quiet your mind. Direct your attention to the deathless element," which is a synonym for the unconditioned or nibbana.

It's likely Anuruddha knew the deathless element from prior experience. He may have been a stream-enterer, although it doesn't record that for sure, but it's quite likely. Once one has reached stream-entry, one knows the flavor of the unconditioned, one knows the flavor of the deathless element, and one can incline the mind toward that. So Sariputta is saying that would be the best meditation instruction for you: direct your mind to the deathless element.

So Anuruddha went off and practiced, and it said a short while later he realized for himself the liberation for which he was practicing, and Anuruddha became one of the arahants.

Now that's great if one is a stream-enterer and already knows from direct experience what the deathless element feels like, you might say. But suppose one doesn't know what the deathless element feels like?

Then there's another sutta that gives some more direction toward this end. The Buddha was talking to a group of monks, including one called Malunkyaputta, and so this sutta is named after Malunkyaputta. This is one of the more beautiful and concise pointings in the canon. It's in the Majjhima Nikaya.

The Buddha says: "Whatever exists of sense objects and states of mind, one sees those states as impermanent, as suffering, as void, as not-self." In other words, one sees the three characteristics of all conditioned phenomena. "One turns the mind away from those states and directs it toward the deathless element thus."

So again, the instruction is: move away from conditioned things because they're impermanent and unsatisfactory. Turn toward the deathless element. Direct your attention there.

"Direct it toward the deathless element thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all attachments, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

The way I read this, it's like the Buddha's up in the air traffic control tower and you're flying in for a landing. You're not quite sure where the landing strip is—your instruments aren't quite tuned—and he's telling you how to land in nibbana.

So you discover what's peaceful. You find what's sublime. And that is the stilling of all formations. That means the mind stops moving toward the sense objects. How does one get there? Through the relinquishment of attaching, through letting go.

And then two other qualities come in. The first is dispassion. That means one is no longer caught up in lust for any of the sense experiences. And why would one be? Because one has seen them all as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and void. Any ones that we run after are just going to crumple. So this is the quality of dispassion. You might call it also equanimity. The literal meaning of the word is "without lust"—viraga, without lust. One ceases to lust after the sense experiences.

And that leads into the state the Buddha calls cessation.

Now, cessation has many applications in the Buddha's teachings. We see it in the Third Noble Truth: the cessation of craving is the cessation of suffering. So here we can take it as the cessation of craving and the cessation of suffering. The formations have

stilled. Lust has gone away. All attachments have been let go. And one practices the cessation of craving. One does not give rise to greed, aversion, or delusion in any direction. And that is what opens the door to the deathless element of nibbana.

So these are instructions that we can reflect on: the stilling of formations and the relinquishment of attachments, the peaceful, sublime quality of that, not lusting after anything and discovering the cessation of craving. That's what can open us to that unconditioned deathless element.

I want to close with just one more quotation. This is from the Udana, also about nibbana. This is from the Buddha: "One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering."

Here, dependent means dependent on something in the present moment. When we're leaning on something or attached to something, pushing or pulling, we are dependent on it. One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

So let's just sit for a minute and let the words settle. "She turns her mind away from conditioned states and directs it toward the deathless element thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all attachments, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

CHAPTER 152

Entering the retreat: refuges and precepts

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

In this dharma talk marking the formal beginning of a long retreat, Guy Armstrong explores the profound meaning of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, along with undertaking the five precepts. Drawing from the Pali Canon, he presents both the outer historical understanding of the refuges and their inner spiritual significance for practitioners.

Armstrong offers an inspiring portrait of the historical Buddha as embodying purity, transcendental wisdom, and compassion—qualities available to all practitioners through awakening. He describes refuge in the Dhamma as both the recorded teachings and the inner truth of present-moment experience, while Saṅgha represents both the monastic community and the fellowship of all sincere practitioners supporting each other on the path.

The talk concludes with taking the five precepts (pañca-sīla) as training rules that create the foundation for clear conduct, freedom from remorse, and the conditions necessary for deepening meditation practice. Armstrong emphasizes how these ethical guidelines, including noble silence, create simplicity that allows practitioners to clearly see the workings of their own hearts and minds during retreat.

This evening we're going to make the formal entry into the retreat space, and the full noble silence will start tonight. We normally make this entry with a short ritual—one of the few rituals we do here—called Taking of the Refuges and Precepts. We'll do that tonight as our way of entering the space.

I want to recognize and remember the events of September 11th, 2001. This is the 15th anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center. There's much observance in New York City today, of course, and I imagine many of us have felt the memories of that day and its impact on our lives and in the world. So much sympathy for the people who were killed, much sympathy for the lives that were touched, and for all of us who were affected by that event.

The Buddha was asked many questions after his awakening. One time a being approached him and asked, "Venerable sir, how did you cross the flood?" And that means the flood of existence with all the stormy waves that life brings. The Buddha replied, "I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away."

I think this is really good advice for starting on a long retreat. This is a good attitude to set. You don't have to hurry in this practice, but you also don't want to tarry. Take it at a steady, continuous pace, and that is the way that the floods of existence will be crossed—one step at a time, one breath at a time.

Tonight we'll make the first entry by taking together the three refuges and the five precepts. In this evening's talk, I want to discuss what those are for us. I'm sure you've all taken these a number of times. For many of you, you've taken them countless times and are very familiar with these reflections. I just want to amplify things we often say at the beginning of a retreat.

So I'll start with the question: what does refuge mean? When we say "I take refuge," what does that word refuge mean? What comes to my mind is that it's a place where we feel safe—a place of safety for beings.

One of the nice things in the walks around here is that you'll see much land that's been designated as wildlife refuge. That means that hopefully all the animals who enter those terrains will feel safe, because there's no hunting and no fishing allowed in the areas of wildlife refuge—a place where the deer can relax, where the turkeys can make all the noise they want, even around Thanksgiving, and no one will shoot them.

In old Hawaii, there were places of refuge. The Hawaiian name was *Pu'uhonua*. There's still a quite famous one on the Big Island, which is also a great snorkeling spot if you get down that way. The place of refuge was a place where, if a person was considered to have committed a crime—and a crime could be something rather small, like for a common person to let their shadow fall on a member of the nobility—then that crime was often met with the penalty of death. Once a person was considered to have committed a crime, their death was fairly assured, but they had one out. If they could get to a place of refuge, then they couldn't be captured or killed from that spot.

In addition, it was considered sacred space. The places of refuge were sacred space, and there were priests there who could hear the person's confession, absolve them of the crime, and consider them purified. Then they could be released back into society.

For us, IMS works a little bit like a place of refuge. We come here, we remember some things we wish we hadn't done. We get a little scrubbed clean with mindfulness and then we get sent back into the world. All is forgiven. So the center is a place of refuge for many. I hope it will feel that way for you.

One of the other implications of refuge is that the world in general is an uncertain and sometimes dangerous place. We need places of safety because not every place is safe. Sometimes our health is at risk. Sometimes our body is at risk. Sometimes our emotions are at risk. Sometimes our very life is at risk because the world is uncertain. Of course, this is a key teaching of the Buddha's.

We all need places of refuge at times. And retreats often remind us how uncertain the world of body and mind is.

We can't control what happens in the body. We can't control what happens in the mind. And on retreat, this becomes very clear—sometimes it's delightful, sometimes it's difficult. A long retreat especially has a way of taking us somewhat near the limits of what we are comfortable with. It could be with physical comfort. It could be the comfort of emotions that arise—sometimes loneliness or hopelessness during long retreats, or fear. It can be where our thoughts lead us, into memories we'd rather not revisit or projections about the future.

This uncontrollability of events, the uncertainty of our experience, often comes through clearly in a long retreat. And in times like this, when we're getting close to the edge of what's comfortable or what we think we can bear, we all need to recall what is our refuge. We all need to find refuges in times like that.

Of course, traditionally in the Buddhist teachings and all the Buddhist traditions, there are considered to be three genuine refuges. Among them are not a lot of money, or a comfortable home, or a position of power or status in the world. But the three true refuges are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These are what we want to talk about tonight.

In our lineage, we often talk about "taking refuge"—we take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. But the literal translation of the Pali is "I go for refuge." I go to the Buddha for refuge. I go to the Dharma for refuge. I go to the Sangha for refuge. That's the meaning of this word *gacchami* in our chant—"go to."

This ties back into ancient Indian culture, where the uncertainties of life—which poor people were exposed to a lot back then—could be defended against if one came under the protection of either a powerful political figure or a very wealthy landowner. People talked about "going for refuge" to those persons. If one came under their wing, so to speak, one had a better chance of dealing with everything that life brought. It's a little bit like taking refuge in Barack Obama, for instance, who I think actually is a great refuge for many, many reasons.

So we understand that we can find some real sense of safety in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. And as we start to turn to these refuges more and more often, we find they provide another element, which is giving direction to our lives. We don't just turn to them in times of need or uncertainty, but we start to recognize these are the reliable avenues for a human life. We start to orient our life choices and our life direction around the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, because these represent three really important values for us as practitioners. They tell us how we should orient our life—our thoughts, our speech, our actions, our choices, our values, our direction.

So I want to talk about all three tonight, and then we'll take the refuges together. Then I want to talk about the five precepts, the five lay precepts, and we'll take those together. That will be our content for this evening.

First, the refuge in the Buddha. We often say that the refuges have two meanings—one is outer and one is inner. With the Buddha, for instance, the outer form of the refuge is taking refuge in the historical person: the historical Buddha who lived 2,500 years ago in northern India, whose given name was Siddhartha Gautama. The clan that he was in was the Sakya clan, living near the border of India and Nepal, near a town called Kapilavatthu.

You know his life story. He grew up in a life of luxury, sometimes said to have been a prince, but I think that's an overstatement. There was a king in the area, but that was not his father—his father was wealthy. So he grew up in a life of luxury, at age 29 left home as the Bodhisattva to discover the path to freedom, discovered what he was looking for at age 35, and then taught for 45 years until he died at 80.

I was brought up in the Christian tradition. Actually, I was brought up Presbyterian, which is kind of to say with as little religion as possible, but a touch of religion. I studied the Bible a bit when I was growing up. As I recall, in my edition of the Bible, all the teachings of Jesus occupied maybe 30 or 40 pages in my King James Bible. So when I started looking into Buddhism, it was really interesting to find that the words of the Buddha occupy about 20 volumes in the Pali Canon. Even though it happened 500 years before Jesus, there was much better recording apparatus—which was memory at that time. And because he lived such a long life and had so many teachings, they were remembered and later written down. So there are 20 volumes about the historical Buddha and his teaching. We're able to get a much fuller portrait of him that I believe is reasonably accurate.

It's not a hundred percent accurate, but I believe it's reasonably accurate. Based on the stories I know from those readings about the historical Buddha, I consider him the most amazing person who's ever walked on the face of the earth. And what I want to do this evening in talking about the historical Buddha is to talk about some of his qualities that made him so amazing.

In the West, we have tended to present the Vipassana teachings without a lot of historical overlay or cultural overlay. But in fact, there is a lot there if one becomes interested. So the way I see it is that for a lot of Vipassana practitioners, we grow up without a strong sense of connection to the person of the historical Buddha. My connection to that figure became much deeper after reading many volumes of the recorded teachings. He has become a very inspiring and important figure for me in a very personal way, and I want to talk some about that tonight—what I appreciate about him.

It's fine if you don't have a connection with the historical figure because there's also an inner refuge that is equally important. But if you get connected to the outer figure, it can be a great source of inspiration and faith and confidence.

The Buddha taught and died somewhere around 500 BCE, 500 years before the Christian era or the common era. The teachings spread from northern India really throughout Asia, so that at one time or another virtually all of Asia was entirely or mostly Buddhist. It's very interesting if you look at the history—from Afghanistan, do you remember when the Taliban blew up those two big standing statues? That was the extent to which Buddhism had traveled west, and it happened a long time ago. It was very influential in Afghanistan, and then moving eastward through Pakistan, northern India, quite a bit in Nepal, spread of course to Tibet through the Silk Route, Southeast Asia—Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia—and even Indonesia ages ago was largely Buddhist, and then up into Korea, Japan and China and Taiwan. Mongolia too. That whole reach of Asia was mostly Buddhist at one time or another. Now it's shrinking a bit. But that shows the effect of one person's impact in this world.

For those of you who've traveled to Asia, I'd ask you to reflect on the quality of the cultures you've been in that were under that Buddhist umbrella. The places I've been that have a big Buddhist imprint, I find myself really enjoying the culture. I find a lot of kindness and compassion—places like Thailand and Burma, for example.

After his awakening, the Buddha totally devoted his life to teaching others. He didn't have any other interests or activity. Forty-five years was just service and giving and teaching.

So what was he like as a person? This really interests me. One of the traditional meditations in Asia is to reflect on the wholesome qualities of the Buddha. It's a good meditation because we realize that all those qualities are within ourselves also—they just need to be developed or grown up. So reflecting on those qualities can be a reflection that really brightens the mind. Oh, this is really possible for a human being because it's really clear the Buddha was simply a human being like you and me. He made it very clear he was not considered to be a god or an angel or anything like that—simply another human being who developed beautiful qualities that are there within all of us.

One Pali chant expresses these qualities in a very short form. It says, "The Buddha endowed with such excellent qualities whose being is composed of purity, transcendental wisdom, and compassion." So if you're looking for a short form to understand who the Buddha was, I like this expression: purity, wisdom, and compassion.

The purity part meant that his whole mindset was just wholesome. He had ended greed, he'd ended hatred, and he'd ended confusion in his own mind stream. So that just allowed all the beautiful qualities to come through. That's the purity.

Through that opening of his awakening, he opened the door for what's called transcendental wisdom. This can be understood in two ways. One, he understood the wisdom that transcends suffering. He understood the cause of suffering and he understood how to abandon the cause of suffering and come to the end of it. So he had transcended suffering.

The other way to understand transcendental is that he had touched this unconditioned element called nibbana, in which the direct realization uproots unwholesome qualities. It's a quality that transcends the sphere of the six senses. So that is the wisdom piece.

And then compassion. Once he had awakened, he never stopped working for the welfare of other people. He just continued teaching really until the day he died. Even on his deathbed, he continued to teach and give advice. His life wasn't about anything else.

Some of the great qualities that he manifested when he was alive out of this mind of purity—one was great determination. You really see this in his practice life as the Bodhisattva. He spent six years doing nothing but intensive meditation practice. For us, six weeks is a long time, and it is a long time.

His time scale was a little bit bigger—six years until his awakening. And he tried everything that he could think of and that others recommended. So you probably know that at that time, the ascetic practices were very strong in Northern India. And people thought, oh, if you starve the body, you'll release the soul. So he tried really starving the

body. He said that he took to eating just once every two weeks, and he became so thin that his hair was falling out. And when he touched his belly, he felt his backbone. There was nothing between his skin and his backbone left. But then he saw that that wasn't leading anywhere. Finally, he took food and that was what helped him awaken. Great determination.

Even after his awakening, he lived with complete simplicity. After his awakening, he had many wealthy supporters and donors. The two biggest kings in the north of India, King Bimbisara and King Pasenadi, were both students of his. They offered him gifts. They offered him tracts of land for the community. They supported him in many, many ways. If he had wanted, he could have retired to a palace, been given great food and lived very comfortably for the rest of his life. But he chose not to do that. He continued living in the forest, which is not an easy life through the seasons of Northern India. There's winter, there's rain, sometimes it's very cold, close to snow.

So they asked him, why are you living in the forest still? He said, for two benefits. I see a pleasant abiding for myself here and now, and I have compassion for future generations. He wanted to set an example for future practitioners because he considered the simple lifestyle to be the most conducive for waking up.

So 2,500 years later, we have our version of living in the forest. It's much more comfortable than his. We actually have mattresses, we have roofs, we have heat in the winter. But our life is really simple here. So the way the Buddha lived, even after his awakening, is still a model for us, is still an inspiration for us in our practice. And that was his compassion.

There's one story that really touches me. It's just a small story. It's not like a huge teaching story. But, you know, he used to walk around northern India. He made many trips all by foot, sometimes going hundreds of miles to give teachings in one spot or another. So on one of these trips, it was close to wintertime, and someone who was living locally was walking out in the morning and found the Buddha sitting on a pile of leaves —it was not very thick—on the ground, which was covered with frost.

And this person approached, the Buddha recognized him and said, "Bhante, did you sleep well?" And the Buddha replied, "Yes, I slept well. I am one of those in the world who sleep well."

And then this lay person said, "But Bhante, the winter nights are cold. It is the time when snow falls. The ground trampled by the hooves of cattle is rough. The spread of leaves is thin. The leaves on the trees are sparse. Your ochre robes could leave one cold and the gale wind blows cold. Yet the Blessed One says, yes, I slept well."

So he says, "Well, then let me ask you a question. Suppose a lay person has a house with a peaked roof plastered inside and out, free of drafts, with shutters closed, a couch spread with robes, blankets and covers, and an excellent cover of hides with a canopy above and red bolsters at both ends. Would he sleep well?" And the lay person says, "Yes, of course."

And the Buddha said, "Oh really? What if he was tormented by wanting? What if he was tormented by hatred? What if he was tormented by confusion? Would he sleep well?" And the lay person had to say, "No, he wouldn't." All those luxuries would be no guarantee that he could sleep well.

And the Buddha said, "Well, for me, the fires of lust, hate, and delusion have gone out."

Therefore, I sleep well. Even on frosty ground, even just covered with his three robes, he sleeps well.

The Buddha, as you can imagine from some of the stories, had a very strong presence. And I think it came from the combination of stillness and complete attention in the present moment. If you've met people who have this combination, they radiate something very powerful.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to come to Spirit Rock once every couple of years before we built our retreat center. The retreat center is on a hill that provided a kind of natural amphitheater, and now that amphitheater is filled with buildings and walkways, and he didn't come anymore. But before that time, he would come and we'd build a platform for him and a loudspeaker system. And he would talk to about 2,000 people filling the hillside and the land around there.

I don't know if you've ever seen him speak, but he has one of these kinds of presence. He's very still. When he speaks, there's almost no movement of his body. And his words are coming from a place of deep wisdom, reflection, and stillness—concentration. When he spoke, it was as though he could cast a spell of stillness over those 2,000 people just by his presence, his stillness, and the Dharma that he talked. It was really something amazing to see. So I think that was a small indication of the power that the Buddha had.

One of the things that was clearly communicated in the Buddha's presence was his loving kindness. There was a physician to one of the northern kings. The physician's name was Jivaka. The king asked him to attend to the Buddha when the Buddha had a health problem. Jivaka was very strongly drawn to the Buddha's presence, to his per-

sonality. What he said about the Buddha was: "Just like there are some said to be in the Brahma realms who abide in loving kindness, so the Blessed One abides in loving kindness."

This was the physician's main read on the Buddha's character, on his personality—that he abided in loving kindness and greeted the people who came to him with that kind of friendly attitude.

In his teaching, he obviously had a very strong transmission power. Again, I don't know if you've met teachers like this, but their words and their presence can spark insight really directly. In the first discourse that he ever gave, called "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma," he gave it to five old friends who he had been practicing with. One of them was partially enlightened from that discourse. Then he had them all practice for another couple of weeks. He gave another discourse. All five of them were fully enlightened by that discourse.

A while later, he was in the company of a group of yogic practitioners. Today we would call them Hindu practitioners, but that word wasn't really applicable back then. They were yogic practitioners who followed a path of fire sacrifice. If you're going to talk to yogic practitioners of the fire sacrifice, what topic should you talk about? Well, fire might be a good idea.

So the Buddha invented a Dharma talk on the spot, which has come to be known as the Fire Sermon. The gist of the Fire Sermon is that the world is on fire. The senses are on fire. The heart is on fire. The mind is on fire with greed, hatred, and delusion. At the end of that discourse, it said that there were a thousand practitioners in front of him and all thousand became awakened from that discourse. So he clearly had this amazing transmission quality that I think was based on his wisdom, his stillness, and his way with words.

Another ability he had that was quite amazing is he could be in a group and just by tuning into people's vibes, he could tell who was close to awakening. He would then direct his teaching to that person and lead them step by step. He would sort of understand where they were and lead them step by step with just the questions and instructions that they needed to bring them to the point of waking up. Then he would give that pointing and the person would awaken. So he seemed to know the right teaching to give for each person whom he met, which is an incredible quality that I wish we had—but not yet.

He never seemed to be afraid. He was about to walk someplace on a mountain path near where the killer Angulimala was known to be hanging out. Angulimala had killed 999 people and was going to kill one more. The Buddha was about to walk that way. All his friends and all his advisors said, "Don't go there. The bandit's going to come out of that mountain refuge and he's going to come and kill you." And the Buddha said, "Don't worry about that. I'm going to walk there."

He walked there. Angulimala tried to kill him, couldn't do it, instead asked the Buddha what he taught, was converted on the spot, later became a member of the Sangha, practiced, and of course awakened.

So this is just a bit of the historical Buddha and the qualities of his heart and mind. What I think is important to understand, and this is what leads into the inner teaching, is that all of us have this potential. We have this potential for awakening and freedom, just as the Buddha had it. I think these qualities that came through the Buddha are not particularly personal to Siddhattha Gotama.

They are aspects of the human mind that get unlocked by the depth of our own understanding and freedom. So the wisdom, the purity, the compassion are waiting there for the veils to drop away, for those deep treasures of the heart and mind to flow out. And you will feel this day by day and moment by moment on this retreat. As the clouds lift, more of those beautiful qualities start to come through.

So this is not a personal unfolding. It's a universal human unfolding that the Buddha happened to develop to a really high and beautiful degree.

For me, one pointing to what the inner meaning of the refuge is about is this awake quality. The word Buddha means awakened one. So this awake quality that we can bring in any moment—when you bring this attention in a fresh way into the present moment, that is activating that refuge, the refuge in the Buddha. This is the direction. Anytime you feel close to discomfort in body and heart and mind, remember that awake quality is always available. When that awake quality meets the present moment, something special happens. This is how, step by step, awakening takes place. So our practice is just to return to that refuge of this awake attention moment after moment. This is the refuge in the inner Buddha.

The refuge in the Dharma in the outer sense means the teachings of the Buddha. They're often called the Dharma. So one of the beauties of the long retreat is that we are really steeped in the teachings of the Buddha day by day through the instructions, the discussions, the meetings with teachers, the evening talks. The Dharma is really all

we're hearing, so it just starts to permeate. These teachings start to permeate as they go in really deeply below the surface, so that they become more and more available and more and more of a refuge.

When I turn to the outer meaning of refuge in the Dharma, I like to reflect on—well, if you had to sum up the teachings of the Buddha in a really short and simple way, it might be the teaching on impermanence. This is always helpful to reflect on in times of discomfort. Everything changes, nothing stays the same. So whatever difficulty you're in, it's going to pass. When we're in the middle, the hindrance tells us it won't. The hindrance says it's going to be permanent, but it isn't. So this reflection on impermanence is a short way to recollect the outer refuge in the Dharma.

In the inner refuge, Dharma means truth, or nature, or law—or I like "the way things are." The Dharma is the way things are. So when we talk about practicing the Dharma, we mean practicing with the truth of things. When you combine the Dharma as truth with the inner Buddha as awareness, attention, then when the inner refuge in awareness meets the inner refuge of the truth of one's experience, that's where freedom comes from. That's the key that unlocks things.

Ajahn Sumedho has a nice way of phrasing this. He says, "The Buddha knows the Dhamma." I used to think, of course the Buddha knows the Dhamma, he made it up. But really what it's pointing to is that inner Buddha of awareness meets the inner Dhamma of our direct experience, the truth of our experience. That's where freedom comes from because we see the way things are, and it's seeing how things are that liberates the heart and mind. And that alignment can happen in every moment. Refuge in the Buddha meeting refuge in the Dharma can happen at any time.

The Sangha. I want to talk about two meanings of Sangha. Traditionally, the word Sangha has two significances. One is the monastic Sangha—those women and men who have committed their whole lives to the path of awakening through taking on the robes and renouncing all the aspects of lay life, considered a refuge for us due to the strength of their commitment and the development of their practice through that form. The second meaning in the traditional sense is the community of awakened beings, those who have partially or fully awakened, sometimes called the Noble Sangha or Ariya Sangha. And they are appropriate grounds for refuge because of the depth of their understanding and degree of freedom.

In the modern sense, Sangha has come to mean the community of all of us together who are practicing and committed to the path of awakening, journeying together with commitment on this path to waking up. So we'll use Sangha in all three ways here.

We especially appreciate as we're practicing together in this community aspect how much support we draw from one another. If you thought about doing these six weeks or three months on your own, it would be really daunting. But because you're doing it with ninety other people, that support is always there as a felt thing, and you support them as well as you practice. So we support each other through this outer representation of Sangha.

In the inner Sangha, what I like to think about are the qualities that we manifest as practitioners.

What are the qualities that you draw from to inspire you when you see one another? What are the qualities that you manifest that can inspire others as we practice together?

A few qualities that come to mind are determination—understanding that this is the path to freedom and manifesting that through our actions. Courage to keep sitting when you may not want to sit, to keep walking when you may not want to walk. The compassion for one another becomes very sweet at times, in the way you look upon each other. You don't have to do big things—it's probably best not to—but you'll feel that kind of intimate connection to each other. The compassion and loving-kindness are present abundantly as the community grows together.

These are all facets of the awakened mind that emerge from the falling away of veils and the arising of wisdom and compassion.

Having gone through the refuges, let's chant those together to begin. I hope you picked up a sheet from the front. We'll chant the refuges first. Later I'll talk about the precepts and then we'll chant those as well. With the homage and the three refuges, I think we'll chant them in unison since quite a few of you know these. When we get to the precepts, we'll do call and response.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

Buddham saranam gacchami
Dhammam saranam gacchami
Sangham saranam gacchami

Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami

Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami

Now I'd like to say just a few words to introduce the five precepts. We'll take just the first five tonight. We'll talk about and offer the eight precepts in a few days, but for this evening we'll start with the five.

Of course you understand the five precepts are really about non-harming. They're an outward expression of what the compassionate or loving heart would do in its actions in the world. They're not moral commandments—they're considered training rules. The way they work is they train us to keep our conduct fairly straight so that we don't have cause for regret.

The Buddha said that when our conduct is proper, we enjoy freedom from remorse. The benefit of that is gladness. The benefit of gladness is joy. The benefit of joy is happiness. The benefit of happiness is concentration. The benefit of concentration is knowing and seeing things the way they are. And the benefit of knowing and seeing things the way they are is liberation.

This is the foundation: keeping the heart and mind clear from regret, confusion, conflict, and disturbance, so that the deepening of meditation can take place, leading to happiness, insight, and freedom.

You're probably quite familiar with these five precepts. I'll mention them briefly.

The first is to refrain from taking life. Anything that lives—we respect that it wishes to live just as deeply as we wish to live. For all beings, their life is their most precious possession. When you look upon beings with a heart of kindness, you recognize their attachment to their life and do everything you can to honor that, not taking the life of any living being.

The second precept is framed as not taking what isn't freely given or freely offered. For you as yogis here, that probably mostly comes down to things like food. We take food when it's put out and offered from the kitchen, and we don't take it when it's not put out and offered.

This sounds simple, but it hasn't always been observed that clearly here. One evening about midnight—this was when I was on staff—one staff member walked into the kitchen and noticed that the door to the walk-in fridge was slightly ajar. They went and opened the door and found one of the three-month yogis in the walk-in fridge with

their hand in a box of figs. The staff person, being compassionate and thoughtful, said, "Can I help you?" The yogi looked up and said, "Oh, I was looking for the maintenance office."

To avoid that kind of embarrassment, simply don't take what isn't freely offered. In terms of yogi needs, if you take things from the closet, pay for them. Don't borrow other people's cushions, blankets, and so forth. Really stick to what is yours.

The third precept in the context of retreat is not engaging in sexual activity. This is not so much a non-harming precept, although it has that implication too—not to disturb another yogi's meditation—but also not to become distracted through activities that don't support the basic move toward present-moment self-sufficiency. It's contentment with what already is here. This is the direction of the practice: not looking for more than that.

The fourth precept in lay life is not saying what isn't true. Here we observe that and extend it to include noble silence.

Noble silence, as I think Sally and Bonnie talked about this afternoon, is not meant to be a cold or distancing or isolating thing. It's meant to be actually the creation of a warm and safe container that allows each of us to go through our own journey without interference. So being able to settle into one's own process and realize, I don't have to communicate to anyone else. I don't have to try to be pleasant or say something funny or endearing. I can simply let my process be the way it is. It really simplifies things and that's what's ennobling about it. It lets us get deeper into our own journey.

So I think of noble silence as we give up unnecessary talking. If you need to talk to Roberta about anything logistical, if you need to call on Jared or John, feel free to do so. Of course, you'll talk to your teachers in the practice meetings. That's all completely appropriate. But please don't talk to one another. Please don't make contact with one another through notes or conversation. I think Sally and Bonnie mentioned that this afternoon also. Please don't write notes to one another. It can be very disturbing in the sensitivity of a long retreat.

And then it extends, of course, to telephone, emails, text, internet. If you need to use the internet for a plane reservation or a medical situation, please talk to Roberta, who might ask you to check it out with your teacher. And we can work out if there is an actual need. But otherwise, we ask you to renounce those activities. Just on a recent retreat I taught, someone had really intended to renounce communication, happened to turn on

their smartphone, got one text from a partner that was very upsetting, and it blew their meditation out of the water for several days. So please keep that container really clear and firm for yourself. It will really protect your practice.

Sometimes people come on retreats with a partner or a really good friend. And sometimes couples like to support each other during the retreat by hanging out together. It might be sitting together at meals. It might be walking side by side in the walking meditation. And I really recommend, if you're here with your partner as part of a couple, that you really try not to have contact like that. Because what usually happens, because I've talked to a lot of couples on retreat, is that one partner starts to want less contact than the other. Ever seen this dynamic in daily life? It happens on retreat also. And if you're not speaking, it's very hard to work that out. So one partner starts withdrawing, the other partner starts feeling very insecure or rejected, and then things become tense, and it's difficult for both.

So the simplest thing, if you're here with a partner, act like you don't know them. Sally and I have sat a lot of retreats together, and if you came in and were sitting with us, you'd never know that we were a couple. So pretend you're not while you're here, and that will be simplest for you. And it will also keep from stirring things up in other yogis, like, oh, I wish my partner was here. I wish I had a partner who was connected with the dharma. I'd like a little company from time to time. So let it be the individual experience for each one of us here.

Now, in terms of the renunciation of devices, we're going to have one more meaningful ritual in a couple of days, and that's what we call the cell phone renunciation ceremony. That will be on Tuesday morning. You will be invited to actually turn in to the manager your cell phone or tablet or laptop so that it will be removed from temptation's reach for the duration of the retreat. And we'll put more details out tomorrow about how to do that. And Tuesday morning, we will actually have a little ritual in here to celebrate the renunciation from those who wish. It's not obligatory, but it is a great support. And it's a really happy thing to do. It lifts a lot of worry to do that.

The fifth precept is not to use recreational drugs or intoxicants while you're here. The meditation process does enough mind shifting that we don't need to cloud it with other intoxicants. So please refrain from the use of alcohol and other drugs. If you're on prescription medications that your doctor has recommended, please do continue with those. We're not asking for you to give up drugs that you need for your health and well-being, only recreational drugs. So please continue with the medications that you've been advised to take.

These precepts create a condition for a lot of simplicity in our life together as a community. And what that simplicity allows is the revealing of what's underneath. So it's a little bit like when autumn comes, which it's already starting, and the leaves start coming off the trees, you can really see the structure of the limbs and branches.

The leaves fall away and everything else is exposed and becomes really clear. So when these external activities fall away, what we're left with is the workings of our own hearts and minds. That's what we see. The external situation is fairly simple, but what gets added to it—or layered on top of it, you might say—are our own emotional and mental reactions. And that's what we're here to learn about.

We don't need to learn about how other yogis are doing. We're here to learn about how our own hearts and minds relate to the situations of life. So when things become really simple, that's exactly what gets exposed, just like the bare branches of the trees. And that's what we want to learn from.

So that is the short explanation of the five precepts, and now let's take these together. Because these are a little longer, let's do these in call and response. I'll say a phrase and then ask you to repeat it back to me.

Panatipata veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Panatipata veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Adinnadana veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Adinnadana veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Abrahmachariya veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Abrahmachariya veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Musavada veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Musavada veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Sura-meraya-majjapamadatthana veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

Sura-meraya-majjapamadatthana veramani sikapadam samadhyami.

And then the dedication, call and response:

Idam me silam magga-phala-nana-ssaha.

Idam me silam magga-phala-nana-ssaha.

Thank you all for your attention and participation. With that, the retreat is formally underway, and we've entered into the period of noble silence, which will continue for the remainder of the retreat until integration time, either at six weeks or three months.

Just one announcement this evening: At the nine o'clock sit, which will happen every night, we'll begin the chanting tomorrow night. So tonight there will be the nine o'clock sit, which will be led, but there won't be chanting tonight. The formal instruction will start tomorrow night as well.

Time for walking, then nine o'clock for the next sitting.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 153

Morning Instructions—Mindfulness of Moods and Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 46 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong expands on the previous day's teaching about the five hindrances to explore the broader territory of the third foundation of mindfulness—cittānupassanā (mindfulness of mind). He provides clear definitions distinguishing between moods (light, background emotional tones), emotions (stronger feelings like joy, fear, or compassion), and mind states (including subtle meditative qualities like samādhi, upekkhā, and passaddhi).*
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> *Armstrong offers a systematic approach to meditation practice, suggesting practitioners establish an "anchor" (body posture, sounds, or breath) while remaining open to whatever becomes predominant in awareness. When moods or emotions arise, he teaches how to investigate them using the RAIN technique (Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Non-identification) discussed previously. He emphasizes that strong emotions manifest both as mental qualities and bodily sensations, encouraging practitioners to explore both dimensions.*
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> *This teaching addresses common concerns about emotional meditation practice, clarifying that both highly emotional and calm practices are equally valid paths. Armstrong highlights how developing skill with difficult mind states offers profound opportunities for freedom from suffering, since our emotional reactions—rather than external circumstances themselves—are the primary source of dukkha. The instructions provide practical guidance for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of the mind-heart (citta) and cultivate greater ease in daily life.*

Yesterday in the meditation instructions and in the dharma talk, Bonnie talked about how to work with these five hindering energies that the Buddha said can obstruct our meditation and weaken wisdom if we don't know how to relate to them skillfully.

In the instructions today we're going to extend that field of mindfulness to take in, in addition to the five hindrances, the whole area of moods, emotions, and states of mind.

I want to talk a little bit about the vocabulary I'm using here. All these terms—mood, emotion, state of mind—are all pointing to experiences that happen on the mental level, but they have slightly different significance.

A mood is an emotion that's kind of light and a little bit in the background. I don't know if you've ever noticed sometimes you wake up from a dream and even though the images of the dream may not be clear, there's some kind of lingering feeling from the dream. It's like a pervasive or ongoing mood. Sometimes we'll pick up one of those from different places. It could be a mood of being a little nostalgic. You could be feeling just a little blue. There could be a mood of being pleased, waking up and seeing a sunny day. There could be a sense of a little bit of apprehension, just not sure how the day is going to unfold—which of course we never know. But moods tend to be light, kind of cloudy and in the background, not as strong as a clear emotion.

One level up from that, what we call emotions—the whole field of affect—would include things like feelings of happiness, feelings of sadness, feeling of joy or love, a feeling of fear or anger, feeling of loneliness, feeling of compassion. These are stronger expressions that come into the heart and mind. You notice how Bonnie used those terms together a lot last night—heart-mind or mind-heart. The word in Pali is citta, and this is the third foundation of mindfulness. To me, I think the best translation in one word might be psyche. The psyche contains both thoughts, emotions, moods—a whole range of experiences. So this is the area we're moving into today, the whole range of the third foundation: moods and emotions.

This third term that I'll use, states of mind or mind states, is the broadest. It encompasses moods and emotions, but it also extends to what I'd call subtle meditative states that aren't so familiar to Western culture necessarily—states like mindfulness, concentration, calm, equanimity. These states that are developed out of our deepening mindfulness we also want to take in in this third foundation, and we'll include those in states of mind or mind states. They're usually quite subtle and it takes some learning to tune in and to recognize them. Some of them are similar. I know the difference between calm, concentration, and equanimity may not be clear until you've practiced with them all for a while.

In the instructions this morning, I want to go through a review of what we've covered so far in a way that I hope will make it clear how you can be practicing. Sometimes when we offer many different instructions over several days, people say, "What am I supposed to do? Just tell me what I'm supposed to do and I'll do it."

So this morning, I'm going to tell you what I think you could do. It's not what you have to do, because many of you have come in with a practice you're familiar with, or you may be doing a specific practice that you've talked about with your teacher, and that's fine. But I'm going to suggest one path that I hope will be a clear set of instructions for you to follow if you'd like.

Please begin by sitting comfortably and also at the same time upright, finding this balance that we've talked about. If you can, begin with a mental attitude of relaxation as though your work is already done right now. You just have to be here and feel what's here. No real task to accomplish. You're not trying to get from here to there; you're just trying to get more here. However here is, is fine.

We may notice a certain mood, may notice the body being a certain way, may notice certain thoughts that have come along from just before. That's all fine. Just relax into the experience of being here now.

Let the body relax as much as possible. Let the forehead be smoothed. Let the eyes be soft. The jaw can be dropped. The shoulders can be let go. The belly can be soft. The hands don't need to be tight.

First, just settle your awareness into this experience of the body and sitting. The mind is relaxed. The body is relaxed as possible. Then let the attention open in a wide way to take in all the sounds that are coming and going.

Sounds all around you, front and back, left and right. Notice that hearing doesn't require any special effort, but if you just rest in the present moment, all the sounds are known spontaneously. All you have to do is be present and receive.

Now bring the attention back into the body, letting the attention still stay very receptive. Receive all the sensations connected with breathing. Each in-breath feels a certain way in the body. What does that feel like? The out-breath feels different. How does that feel?

We don't need to control the breath. We don't need to make it long or short, shallow or deep. Just let the breath come and go as it will, and we're just there to feel it, to know it. Some people like to feel the breath at the tip of the nose, others at the belly or the chest. Sometimes you like to feel the breath through the whole body, staying in touch with the whole body and feeling the impact throughout. All these are fine.

Generally what we've been recommending is that one of these three styles—body posture, sounds, or breath—become an anchor for your sitting practice. What that means is if there's nothing else special going on, you have a comfortable place for your attention to come back to, to rest in. Or if the mindfulness has been interrupted by a stretch of thinking, a comfortable place to reconnect to.

Let's say that you're practicing in this way. If nothing special is going on, you're with your anchor—body, sounds, breath. As you're doing that, other things will naturally take your attention. That's what it means when an experience is predominant. Something arises that naturally draws your attention. Could be a sound, could be another body sensation, an ache in the knee, a pleasant feeling in the chest.

When you become aware of that new object, that new sensation, let that become your meditation focus. Easily let go of your anchor and let the attention begin to relate to this new experience. For a sensation in the body, connect with its bare physical nature. You don't need to make a concept, but just feel its elemental quality.

Is it pulsing or vibrating or tingling or itching? Is it warm or cool? Is it pressing or stabbing? Is it heavy or light? Is it aching or throbbing? Let the attention stay with that object, letting the mindfulness be established there for as long as that sensation seems strong, seems to naturally draw the attention.

At some point it may fade or the attention will be drawn to some new arising, a new sensation. If a sensation is strong, you could be with it for most of a meditation period. If it's somewhat fleeting, you might only be with it for five or ten seconds. Either way is fine.

When the attention lets go of that sensation, you could return to your anchor, or there could be a new sensation that draws the attention and becomes predominant. Then easily move to that, letting the mindfulness be established there.

From time to time, the attention will be drawn to the mood or emotion or mind state that's present. There's always some state of mind that's present. A lot of times we don't pay attention to it, but there's always something there. You might just check right in this moment: What is the mood, emotion, or state of mind? Could be a light emotional flavor, could be a strong emotion, could be one of the meditative states like calm or equanimity. Just notice there is always some state of mind going on.

From time to time that arena will come into the foreground. You'll notice, "Oh, this is what's happening now—a mood, emotion, or mind state." When that happens, make that new experience the focus for mindfulness.

It could be one of the five hindrance energies: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, or doubt. Could be a subtle mood—nostalgia, apprehension. Could be a strong emotion—joy, love, anxiety. Could be recognizing the meditative state of interest.

These states of mind are not always easy to attend to because they can feel so light and insubstantial. When you check in with the mood in the mind, it can feel very cloud-like, almost ethereal. If you connect with it and find it difficult to sustain attention, that's perfectly fine. You can return to the anchor and notice what's predominant.

When emotions are strong, however, they will have a clear impact in the body. With emotions like fear or anger, or strong happiness and joy, feel where they're expressing themselves physically. Let your attention go to the bodily sensations and allow that to be the place where you feel both the sensations and the mood or emotion together.

What you'll discover is that strong emotions have two distinct aspects. There's a physical expression through the body, which manifests as certain sensations. And there's the coloring or mood or flavor that exists in the mind—the pure mental quality of the mood or emotion.

With difficult emotions, it's particularly helpful to use the RAIN practice that Bonnie described earlier: Recognize or name the emotion, Allow or accept it, become Interested and investigate, and see it as Nature with non-identification. As we become familiar with difficult emotions, we discover we don't need to fear feeling them. We can completely allow ourselves to let them in, touch them with mindfulness, envelop them with mindfulness, penetrate them with awareness. They cannot harm us as long as we remain conscious and present.

We begin to notice that all emotions have the natural quality of impermanence—they arise and pass away. We don't need to force them to leave because their very nature is to change and dissolve. We simply open to them, feel them fully, recognize and allow them, then let them go when they're ready to go. From there, we either return to the anchor or turn attention to whatever is next most predominant—breath, sound, sensation, emotion, or mood.

In this way, meditation becomes quite natural and organic. You simply allow the attention to go where it's drawn and notice where it's going. You establish mindfulness there. If nothing particularly compelling is happening, there's always your anchor to return to for restabilization.

What's happening in this moment? Where is the attention naturally drawn? Can mindfulness be established in relation to that natural part of our experience? This approach allows the practice to unfold with ease and authenticity.

This meditation on emotions and mind states is tremendously important for several reasons. First, we come to know our inner terrain intimately. We learn how to direct the mind, to skillfully shape consciousness and cultivate wholesome mind states while abandoning those that are unwholesome.

Additionally, difficult mind states are responsible for much of our suffering in life. You might say that all of our suffering actually emerges from these challenging mental formations. Even our relationship with illness, physical pain, aging, and death—the real difficulty lies in the emotions that these experiences evoke rather than the experiences themselves.

Learning to bring mindfulness to these states offers us profound opportunities for freedom. It's one of the most significant pathways to greater happiness and ease in living. I encourage you to work with these states directly, to explore this terrain and discover what's contained in this aspect of human nature that we all share.

Sometimes when people are introduced to this practice, they worry that if they're not experiencing strong emotions, the meditation isn't working properly. This isn't true at all. Meditation paths unfold in remarkably different ways. Some practitioners have very emotional practices, while others experience very little emotional intensity. Both approaches are perfectly valid—it's deeply individual.

If you're not having strong emotional experiences, it doesn't mean the practice isn't effective. It may be working beautifully. Take time to appreciate what is actually present. Perhaps you're experiencing a state of calm or equanimity. According to the Buddha, calm was indeed a very positive quality worthy of cultivation and appreciation.

We have time for a few questions this morning. I'm going to try something different with our question period. I've noticed over the last few days that I've had difficulty hearing some questions, especially those from the back of the room or when voices are particularly soft. So I'm going to ask that if you'd like to pose a question, please use the microphone. Jared has kindly offered to serve as our mic runner today.

CHAPTER 154

Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses one of meditation's most immediate benefits: learning to work skillfully with difficult emotions. Drawing on the third foundation of mindfulness (cittānupassanā) from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Armstrong explores how afflictive emotions—whether called hindrances (nīvaraṇa), kilesas, or disturbing emotions—cause suffering when we don't understand how to relate to them wisely.

Armstrong presents a framework for understanding five primary difficult emotions: desire (wanting pleasant future experiences), fear (aversion to unpleasant future experiences), sadness (grief over pleasant past experiences), anger (resentment about unpleasant past experiences), and self-judgment (anger turned inward). He emphasizes investigating these emotions through three aspects: their mental quality, their bodily manifestations, and the thoughts and storylines that sustain them.

The talk offers practical guidance on shifting from rejecting difficult emotions to accepting them as temporary visitors that can be met with mindfulness. Armstrong shares personal retreat experiences and teaching stories to illustrate how mindfulness creates space around emotions, providing choice in how we respond. He discusses loving-kindness (mettā) as the long-term antidote to aversion and emphasizes that these challenging states, when met with wisdom, become our greatest teachers in developing patience, strength, and freedom.

The subject of tonight's talk is working with difficult emotions. This array of states goes by different names in the Buddhist lists—sometimes called the hindrances, or the kilesas, or afflictive emotions, or disturbing emotions, or the taints. By whatever name, they cause a lot of suffering. It doesn't matter what you call them, but they are responsible for the primary sufferings in our life. When we don't understand how to work with them or to relate with them skillfully, we feel we are the victim of their onslaught. Coming to learn some skills in relating to these emotions is one of the avenues to open up a huge amount of new feelings of freedom in our life through the direct application of our vipassana practice. This is one of the biggest, most immediate benefits I think people can see from mindfulness practice.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every dark hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing." There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method.

It's interesting when we look at children—they are not worried about their emotions. Whatever comes up, they're just right there with it and they don't hold back. It's not necessarily mindfulness, but there's a fearless quality with children that's really beautiful. By the time we've grown up, we may have been harmed in different ways by the world, by society, or by our own emotions, and we become more tentative in relating to these emotions. But before children are harmed, they're very open to experiencing their emotional life. So as meditators, we can regain some of that kind of openness and fearlessness in the emotional field.

As Joseph talked about this morning, if you can simply let emotions arise, pass through, and fade away, that's great. There's no problem. However, at this point as adults, we've generally become tangled up in certain emotions. We resist them, we're afraid of them, they make us uncomfortable, and we really struggle with them. So learning how to find the right relationship to these emotions is a really important part of our dharma path. You might say that becoming free in relation to disturbing emotions is the central journey of the path that we're on.

At first, as we get to know the terrain, we want to make these things go away. But we soon learn that's not possible in the short term. There is the possibility of that with true liberation. It's said that all these afflictive emotions go away—the Buddha said, "cut off like a palm stump, never to arise again." This is the possibility of the path, but for most of us that's still some way off. But we can find much greater freedom in relation to them even when they arise by learning some pretty basic skills.

Again from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run 100 miles an hour to the other side of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

So this area of work is very central. The Buddha talked about this in terms of meditation as the third foundation of mindfulness. The third foundation is known as the foundation of citta, which is often translated as mind, but as Bonnie has been translating it in her talks and instructions, she's been calling it heart-mind, or sometimes mind-

heart. What that points to is that in the Pali word citta, both affective or emotional elements and cognitive or thought-rational processes are both involved in the field of citta.

In the West, if you ask somebody where their mind is—an ordinary person in the street—where do you think they'll point? Up here, right? In the West, we tend to take the mind to be equivalent with the brain. In Thailand, if you ask somebody where the citta is—the Thai word for citta is jit—they'll point here, to the center of the chest, what we call the heart center. So they'll point to what's known as the heart area, emphasizing the heart aspect of citta, heart-mind. So it really is both of these.

Just a little postscript for those of you who are interested in this: The Western concept of the brain as the ruler of everything is quite deep for us. I was sitting with a Tibetan teacher, a bright young Rinpoche, and he was describing a human being with an analogy to an airplane. He said the stomach is kind of the engine and the legs are like the jets and the wings. He said the fuel is the food that we eat. And he said the brain is just the computer—the brain is the airplane's computer. The pilot is awareness. And awareness is often equated to citta at the heart center.

So I thought that was interesting. His view: the brain is just a computer. Nothing special.

So citta encompasses moods, emotions, and states of mind. I mentioned this the other day in the instructions, so I'll just repeat it briefly.

Emotions are the kinds of feelings that we often talk about—feelings we can experience strongly. Things like love and jealousy, loneliness, despair, joy, and so forth.

Moods are similar to emotions, but they're more toned down. They're more subtle, maybe more cloud-like in the background. So we might say that we're feeling a little melancholy, we're feeling a little nostalgic, or we're feeling tender right now. It's not quite strong enough to be called an emotion, but it's definitely in the affective realm and we feel it through our heart-mind.

And then states of mind include moods and emotions and also all the more subtle meditative qualities: mindfulness, concentration, interest, equanimity, peace, and so forth. So citta includes all of these. In fact, when I say states of mind, it includes everything you can notice as a quality of mind or heart—this entire mental range.

In Buddhism, as most of you are familiar, the states of mind fall into two basic categories: wholesome and unwholesome. Now this might sound moralistic or judgmental, but it's not meant that way. It requires discernment, for sure, but discernment is not the

same as judgment in my vocabulary. For me, judgment implies a sense of condemnation, a strong moralistic outlook that says it's bad. So discerning wholesome and unwholesome is not necessarily to be taken as bad, but it's more understood as not skillful. These are not helpful states.

The unwholesome states lead into suffering for ourselves and others. The wholesome states lead toward happiness for ourselves and for others. So of course it's skillful to cultivate the wholesome states and to decrease the unwholesome states. This is essentially the heart of our Dharma practice: grow what is wholesome and leads to happiness, decrease what is unwholesome that leads to suffering. This is in fact the definition of right effort. If you look at right effort as part of the Eightfold Path, this is basically what it says: grow the wholesome, decrease the unwholesome. And there are many meditative tools in order to do that.

In fact, one of the things I think is so beautiful about the Dharma—I had no idea of this before I encountered Buddhadharma—these tools give us the ability to shape our heart-mind in any direction we choose and to shape it to any depth that we want. We have tools and practices within our tradition to do that.

Do you want to become more loving? There's a practice for that. Do you want to develop compassion? There's a practice for that. Do you want to develop liberating insight and become as free as the Buddha? There's a path for that. Do you want to develop psychic powers through concentration? There's a path for that.

So in whatever direction we would like to shape this heart-mind, we can do that. The tools are there. We just have to pick the path and do the work.

I find this amazing and part of the genius of the Buddha—that he could see the mind so clearly that he could separate out these wholesome and unwholesome qualities and direct us to the cultivation of any one of them or all of them.

This process of cultivation is what's known in the tradition as bhavana. Bhavana is often translated as mental development, sometimes cultivation. It literally means bringing into being. So we can bring these wholesome qualities into being. That's the purpose of our effort.

We'll talk more about wholesome states as we go. In the beginning, we tend to lay the foundation with working with what is difficult. But just briefly about wholesome states for now, two things.

One: notice them when they come. Sometimes we take them for granted, like, "Oh, this is what's supposed to be happening." When things quiet inside, how often do you note clearly, "Oh, the calm, peace, tranquility, serenity"?

Not so much. We tend to take that for granted—"Oh, this is what should be happening. Now I'm peaceful. This is what it's supposed to be." We should notice that because peace is also conditioned, the outcome of prior causes and conditions. And as we notice it more, we appreciate it. Then we learn how to steer there. That's one thing: notice the wholesome states.

Second, of course it's obvious—don't cling. Or be mindful when you do cling, because we will tend to. But clinging to the wholesome leads to suffering as well.

With the difficult states, we also need two things. The first is a shift in attitude. When I was first practicing in long retreat, some difficult emotion would come up—for me a lot it was fear and anger. I side on the aversive personality type, so it was a lot of fear and anger. Desire wasn't so strong for me. And when one of those emotions would come, I'd think, "This shouldn't be happening. This is wrong. This is a mistake. Meditation's not going right. This thing should go away." That only led to more conflict because it was there and it was real.

So the first thing to notice is we need not to have a judgmental attitude toward these difficult emotions. They're part of the human package. They come about because of causes and conditions. They don't come because you're a bad person. They come because of their own conditioned life. And when they come, it's not a mistake. As Pema Chödrön said, they will come until we've learned from them what we need to know, which is how to be free in relation to them.

The attitude often to these states is very rejecting: Don't want it. It's not what should be happening. I'm bad if I have it. They're bad for coming. And we try to push them away. So we really need to work toward an attitude of acceptance. This is an important thing to check: What's your attitude when these states arise? Work with acceptance, which is the A in RAIN.

The second thing we need is a greater understanding of their nature. Once we can just start to observe these things pass through—like Joseph said, like clouds, they don't have roots, they don't have homes—we can start to see that their nature is to come, to persist for a while, and then to pass away. When we trust in that, we see they're not problematic. They may not be pleasant, but they're not problematic. We don't have to try to make them go away because their nature is to go away.

This is seeing the emptiness aspect of the emotion. Empty here doesn't mean that the emotion is meaningless. Emotions are a rich source in our life, but it means they're ephemeral. They're as light as clouds. They come, they persist, they pass away. This is their essentially empty nature. They're not fixed in us and they're not who we are. They're temporary visitors.

So the first step in working with these emotions is to know what they are. It's like there's this terrain in here that if we haven't been trained, we have to learn about. And I wasn't trained when I came into meditation. My upbringing hadn't taught me to know and understand these states.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if children learned these skills from the start? There's a beautiful movement spreading across this country through organizations like Mindful Schools and others, bringing mindfulness teachers into elementary and middle schools to teach children how to recognize their emotions and observe their effects.

One of our sangha members in California, who ran a preschool for many years, discovered she could teach these fundamental principles to three- to five-year-olds. Of course, they wouldn't sit down for traditional meditation instruction using terms like mindfulness, stillness, and concentration. Instead, she would begin with yoga sessions—children naturally love moving their bodies, stretching, and feeling into their physical experience.

After yoga, she would have them lie on the floor with their heads pointing toward the center, creating a sense of community. Then she would offer meditation instructions that went something like this: "Your awareness is like a big pond of water. Within that pond, all kinds of fish are swimming through. Start noticing what fish are swimming through your pond. There are happy fish, sad fish, angry fish, loving fish, friendly fish. Just open up. You be the water and let all the fish swim through. No problem."

The children could relate to this imagery beautifully. After one session, she asked them to share their experience. A five-year-old said, "I could let all the fish swim through, but I couldn't let the mad fish swim through." When she asked why not, he replied, "When you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt people."

Five years old.

This understanding can indeed emerge when children are young, and there's a growing movement in this direction. But if we didn't attend that preschool, we can learn these skills now. It's essential we do, because the mad fish can make us act unskillfully too.

Understanding our emotions begins with recognizing what we're feeling as we're feeling it. Without this awareness, our emotions act unconsciously through us. This practice sounds simple, but it's more challenging than it appears.

Let me share an example from my early years of practice. I was sitting a three-month retreat here, about two weeks in, and had developed reasonable concentration. My mindfulness felt fairly strong. When the 9:15 morning sitting bell rang, I walked out the back door for walking meditation. In those days, I practiced on the lawn below what's now Bodhi House.

I had walked in the same spot every period for two weeks, so I was very mindful—noting lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing as I walked slowly outside. But when I looked down at my walking path, someone else was there.

"What are they doing in my walking path?" I thought. "They must have seen me walking here every period for two weeks. Did I cut in front of them in line this morning? Are they trying to play games with my head?" All the while continuing: lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing.

I walked down there anyway, internally steaming. I found another patch of grass which, to my great surprise, worked just as well as my original spot.

And I continued with my walking practice, but internally, I was still stewing about why that person had stolen my walking path. Honestly, I thought I was being mindful, but it was thirty minutes into the period before I realized, "Oh, I'm angry."

I thought I was mindful, but these thoughts had come in. The hindrances sneak in like under our mindfulness radar. We've got our mindfulness radar up. We think we're really present, and these things slip under and take us over.

So once I saw that I was angry, then I could start to relate with it. "Oh, I know how to work with this. This is anger. I'll feel it in my body. I'll make space. I'll look at the thoughts. I'll open to it with allowance." And then it just sort of passed through. But until I could identify it, I couldn't relate with it. I had no way to work with it, and subconsciously it was just pushing me. I had no freedom. I was compelled by the force of it.

So we see that when we don't know what we're feeling, we tend to just react blindly out of it. And this is what the Buddha called unwise attention, misdirected attention. I was putting all my attention on the other person and the story that I'd created about them. The story was they shouldn't have been there. They were in my path and they were wrong and I was right. And when I believed that story, I got all worked up.

But as soon as I turned the attention back inward to the experience of anger, then I could relate to it with mindfulness and it could be released.

So when the hindrance comes, when an afflictive emotion comes, the most important thing is to notice that the story is taking your attention somewhere else and direct the attention back to the direct experience of the emotion that's there. Because when we're with the emotion, with mindfulness, there's not just the emotion. There's the emotion plus mindfulness, which carries a bit of wisdom. When mindfulness even recognizes, "Oh, this is anger," there's a bit of wisdom or intelligence coming in. So now you're not just caught with the afflictive emotion. There's the afflictive emotion plus your own wisdom. And that shifts everything.

The first thing it does is it lets you feel more space around the emotion that you're feeling. And discovering space around these emotions gives us choice. We can choose how to act in the world. We can choose how to respond through our meditation tools. So as soon as we can name it with mindfulness, we create some space and that makes it workable.

It's a very interesting fact. There are so many research studies now on mindfulness and the tools of mindfulness. One study took a group of people who were working with anger management techniques—and there are a lot of them out there in the psychological world. But this one took a group of people and what they had them do was very simple. They just instructed them that every time they were angry, just note by using the word "anger." It's all they were instructed to do. And they found that that simple technique of noting the emotion they were feeling was as effective as any other technique and more effective than most. Just naming the emotion they were feeling really helped the people to restrain actions based on that anger.

So there are these different lists of the difficult emotions. Bonnie talked about the hindrances. Of course that's a central one in the Buddha's teaching. When I look at my experience and the experience of meditators that I talk to, I come up with a little bit different list of what I'd call maybe the top five difficult emotions. And four of them I want you to tell me about. I'm going to ask you some questions and I want you to tell me.

One of the curious things about difficult emotions is that they rely on grasping. Beautiful emotions don't rely on grasping. You can see someone in the moment, have an outburst of loving kindness or compassion that's not tied with grasping at all. But grasping means we've taken a hold of something in the past and we're still hanging on to it. So that implies continuity over time. So the afflictive emotions are bound up with time in a way that beautiful emotions are not.

We're going to take a look at time as one axis.

We're going to do an x-y graph. Do you love algebra? You've come to the right place.

We're going to do a chart with the horizontal axis, the x-axis, being time. And of course time is usually seen as moving from your left to your right, so that'll be the movement of time. The past is this way, the future is that way, the present is right in the middle.

The vertical axis is going to be from pleasure to pain, because a lot of our emotions revolve around what we like and what we don't like, what's pleasant and what's painful. So the vertical axis is from pain at the bottom to pleasure at the top.

We've now created four quadrants. Let's look at each of those four quadrants.

Let's start with the future—sometimes future is more fun, it's more open. So there's something pleasant that may be happening in the future. What emotion would come up around that? Excitement. Anticipation. Joy. What would you feel towards something that's out there that's not quite there yet? Craving. It's wanting, isn't it?

Pleasant things in the future evoke wanting—some form of desire. "Oh, we're going to have cookies for lunch tomorrow." I don't know that, by the way. Probably we're not, but that's just an example. So this quadrant, pleasant in the future, evokes desire, and this is one of the primal forces in our minds, in our lives.

What if there's something that's unpleasant that's coming in the future? Fear. After you get home, you're going to talk to your boss and you're going to have to do a big presentation. Fear, anxiety, nervousness about unpleasant in the future. So fear is another very fundamental force.

Pleasant in the past. Something that was there in the past, very lovely, satisfying, agreeable, dear, not there anymore. What's the feeling? Regret. Sadness. It's gone. That beautiful thing we had isn't there anymore. Sadness, grief. You really feel this with the loss of a relationship, loss of a job, loss of a person in your life. There's sadness or grief—another very primary emotion.

And then what about something painful in the past? And let's say, to zero in a bit, connected with another human being. Resentment, anger. It's in that field, isn't it, when someone has done something unpleasant to you?

So these are, I think, as I see it, the big four that move us: wanting, fear, sadness, and anger. I see these come up a lot in myself. They're very powerful, and I think they're very primary for us as humans.

And then one wrinkle around the anger piece—if it gets directed at ourselves, it comes across as self-judgment. So we judge ourselves, we're angry at ourselves for something that we did that was not skillful in the past.

So these are the big five that I want to talk about a little bit more tonight.

So the first thing is to say, as we meditate with these, when these states come up, start to investigate them in three aspects.

All these difficult emotions will impact us in three ways. The first is that each of these is just a mental quality on its own. Desire feels a certain way, fear feels a certain way, sadness feels a certain way. Each of these has a distinctive quality, which is a quality of the mind.

Then second, when they're felt strongly, they'll impact the body. Body and mind are very closely intertwined—they feel as though they're merged in us. But with training we can start to separate out what's mental and what's physical.

So when we feel a strong emotion—I'll take fear as an example—when it's there and strong, it often feels like a clenching somewhere. Could be in the belly, could be in the chest, could be a contraction through the whole body. So we feel the impact of fear in the body somewhere.

The meditation instruction is this: in order to remain mindful of fear, go to the point in the body where you feel it and pay attention there. And you might just alternate between feeling the physical sensation of contraction and tuning into the mental flavoring or color that is fear.

Now sometimes people say, "I don't see the mental side of what you're talking about. I go in the body and there's this contraction and I feel the mood there also. I don't see two things. I just see one thing."

But let me ask this: Have you ever had fear in a dream? When you didn't necessarily feel the body at all? And yet you knew, oh, this is fear. So when we feel these emotions in dreams, we're not necessarily connected with the body. But we feel the emotion clearly and we know it. That's the mental component.

Another way to think about it is that the fear and the contraction are there together. It's a little bit like mixing cream in your coffee. If you can feel contraction from another source—maybe anger has a contraction that feels like that too, maybe you're doing an isometric exercise at the gym and you feel that contraction—then you notice what the

contraction feels like on its own. That's the coffee. Then you pour a little bit of fear in there, they get stirred together, and that's fear plus contraction. And that's what you come to know as the emotion of fear.

So take some time and explore. See if you can find the flavor or the mood or the coloring in the mind of each of the emotions. Happiness has a flavor. Joy has a color. Fear has a flavor. And they're all different. You'll feel these in dreams. You know them just as they are. And then you notice how it mixes with the body. So go back and forth. Feel the body. Feel the mental mood or color.

And then the third aspect to pay attention to are the thoughts. When you're in a happy state, you tend to think happy thoughts. When you're in an angry state, you tend to think angry thoughts. So watch the thoughts that come that are connected to the emotion.

There's one kind of thought that's especially important. Sometimes it's not even conscious, but it's like a subconscious belief. So like with my walking meditation, when somebody was in my path, I hooked onto the anger because I had a belief. And the belief was, "They're wrong and I'm right." When I let go of that view, the anger couldn't stand.

So also, the afflictive emotions all have storylines or unconscious beliefs that we hold. So we'll look at those for each of these.

Okay, so let's talk about desire. This is a movement of mind that wants to have a pleasant experience. It can happen really frequently in a retreat.

For things outside—people, places, your home, food, drink—this can happen inside the retreat as well. You want to repeat a concentrated sit, you want calm, you want an insight to come again. It can happen in both ways, but it comes up a lot in retreat.

I was teaching a retreat in Italy some years ago, which was a blast. I loved teaching Italians because I found they seemed really fluent with their emotions. They knew what they were feeling when they were feeling it.

I was having an interview with a young Italian man on about the fourth day of the retreat. I asked him how the retreat was for him, and he said, "It's not going well. I don't want to be here."

"Oh, okay. Well, why are you here?" I asked.

"This is August. This is my holiday time. I could have taken a vacation—this is my vacation. Some friends of mine were going to the Caribbean and they asked me if I wanted to go with them. Or I could have come to the meditation retreat."

"So why did you come to the meditation retreat?"

"Well, I thought about the Caribbean, you know—beautiful beaches and warm water and great food. I really wanted to go there, but all the tickets were sold out. I couldn't get there, so I came to this retreat."

"Okay, have you been thinking about the Caribbean?"

"Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, a lot. I keep thinking about all my friends on the beach having a good time, and I'm here."

"Okay, now I understand why you're having a hard time at the retreat. What if you stopped thinking about the Caribbean? Then what would it be like being here?"

"I don't know, but I can try that."

So he went back into the retreat, and I saw him again a few days later. "How are you doing?" I asked.

"Fine. I let go of the Caribbean. I arrived here. And since then, everything's been going fine. I've been very happy to be here."

This is the way desire works. When we want to be somewhere else, we can't be happy here, because we're wanting something that we don't have. Do you ever find yourself wanting something you do have? "Oh, I want a hand at the end of my arm"—not usually the way it works. We want things we don't have, and that very wanting of what isn't there sets up dissatisfaction.

This is the problem with craving, with desire, with wanting. The unhappiness isn't from the absence of the object. The unhappiness is from the wanting. Let go of the wanting, and the moment is usually fine. Most moments in this retreat will be fine. There may be some physical discomfort. There may be an unpleasant mood. But overall, if you take a big view, the moment is not necessarily problematic. And yet we struggle because we want something different.

The storyline for the young Italian man was: if he'd been in the Caribbean, he would have been happy. That was the underlying assumption—he couldn't be happy because he wasn't in the Caribbean. So with desire, the storyline is something like that, and you can feel into it for yourself.

With anger, the challenging aspect is that our thoughts may indeed be accurate. The other person might genuinely be wrong, and we might genuinely be right. But here's the crucial insight: even when we're right, the anger still burns us. Even when our assessment is correct, the aversion still creates suffering within us.

This is where we need to distinguish between being right and being at peace. We can acknowledge that someone has acted inappropriately or that a situation is genuinely problematic without carrying the burning quality of anger in our hearts. The wisdom lies in recognizing that our rightness doesn't justify our suffering.

When we hold onto anger, even justified anger, we become like that person who grasps a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else—we're the ones who get burned. The other person may not even know we're angry, while we sit stewing in our own painful emotions.

This doesn't mean we become passive or fail to respond appropriately to situations. We can take skillful action, set boundaries, or address problems without the internal fire of anger consuming us. In fact, we often respond more effectively when we're not clouded by the reactive energy of aversion.

The practice is learning to see anger clearly—feeling it in the body, noticing the thoughts that feed it, understanding its nature—without either suppressing it or acting it out unconsciously. We can say, "Anger is here. There's burning in the chest. There's tension in the jaw. There are thoughts about how wrong they were." We acknowledge it all without necessarily believing that our anger is telling us the whole truth about what we need to do.

Sometimes the most radical thing we can do is simply not pick up the hot coal at all. Even when we're absolutely certain we're right.

Somebody may have done something to us that's really inappropriate, awful, rude, or cruel. That may well be true. When you look at the impact of individual actions, when you look at the impact of systemic racism on people of color, you see that people have been harmed many, many times from childhood on by these factors that are widespread in the society, in the culture. So that harm has been real, and there are real grounds for saying, "Wrong was done to me. I was harmed by individuals, by the system. I've been harmed." So that is true. And so especially the work with anger is important for all of us.

There's a story from the Dalai Lama. He had known a monk back in Tibet in 1959, before he fled the country. He'd left and gone to India, but this monk had been captured by the Chinese and put into prison for the crime of being a monk. Especially when the Cultural Revolution was happening in Tibet, a lot of monks and nuns were put in prison for being monks and nuns.

The man was eventually released from prison and escaped from Tibet and made his way to India. The Dalai Lama likes to meet people who have come from Tibet and made it to India. So he had a meeting with this monk, whom the Dalai Lama had previously thought was a pretty ordinary guy, an ordinary monk.

In talking to him, the Dalai Lama asked how his time had been since he'd last seen him. And the monk said, "I really felt myself to be in danger." So the Dalai Lama said, "Oh, do you mean you were in danger of being tortured?" And the monk said, "Oh no, that's not what I meant. I was tortured many times. I was in danger of becoming angry about it. But I didn't. I worked with loving-kindness and compassion and I didn't."

The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk's practice. He was much more developed than he had thought.

As we investigate the phenomenon of anger, especially if we're thinking of acting out the anger towards someone who has hurt us, the texts say that it's helpful to investigate how the process goes. They say that becoming angry with somebody is like picking up a hot coal to throw at them. But when we pick up the coal, we burn ourselves first. It's also described as drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick.

It's really important not to suppress anger, whatever its source or cause. It's really important to let ourselves feel it and to work with it as skillfully as we can with mindfulness, to go through the steps of RAIN: to recognize, to allow it to be there, to become interested and investigate, and not to identify with it. Because this form of anger is very universal.

Sometimes we have to practice strongly with metta and compassion in the face of anger. I was doing a long metta retreat here one time and my difficult person—you know that's one of the categories in the metta practice—was also on the retreat. So I'd be going through my day: "May all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful." And my difficult person would walk in front of me and I'd start growling about what they did during that last year. "That was really not right." And I'd start winding myself up with being angry at them.

About thirty minutes later, I'd be spinning, spinning, spinning, and finally it would pass away. I'd go back: "May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be happy." And then later in the day, I'd see my difficult person again. I'd get all angry again. And I thought, "There must be a way to work with this."

I thought, "Somebody's told me I should do metta for my difficult person." And I thought, "I don't want to do that. That would mean I'd have to like them. I don't like them. I don't want to do that." But I was desperate. So I thought, "Okay, I'll give it a try."

So I started doing metta for them. And very interestingly, the anger did go away. And I found out I didn't have to like the person. All I had to do was wish that they could be happy. And if I could wish that they could be happy, the ill will went out and the goodwill replaced it.

So it was very interesting for me. And I really recommend it with difficult people and difficult situations. Try the practice of loving kindness or compassion. If you can just see a glimmer of possibility that maybe they could be happy and it would be okay, that can take the anger out of the moment.

When anger gets turned against ourselves, it manifests as self-judgment. We feel we're not good because we've done things we regret, or we don't measure up in some way to standards that have been put in us by parents, teachers, siblings, or society. Self-judgment often starts with rational thoughts.

I was having an interview one time with a student who was a psychotherapist. The therapist had just been dropped by a client—this happens all the time—but it was becoming very personal for the therapist. They traced the thoughts they had after being dropped by the client. They said, "Okay, the patient dropped me and I thought, I guess I just wasn't the right fit for that person. I thought that for a while. Then it moved to, 'Oh, I really didn't have enough compassion or warmth.' Then it moved to, 'I'm really not a very loving person.' And then it moved to, 'Well, actually, I've never loved anyone and no one loves me.'"

It started out rational and specific, then became more and more general and judgmental. That's when it felt really heavy. So one thing—if you notice judging thoughts, try to make the thoughts become specific. You might have to ask the judge, "Tell me something specific about myself." Then it comes out: "Oh, well, I was unkind to someone last week in a group meeting that we had." Oh, okay. Well, everybody does that. We're not perfect. Everybody does that. So come back to what's true.

The storyline underneath self-judgment—the reason it's so oppressive—is that it feels like we're not good enough or we're not lovable. We question our very worthwhileness. Can we have the space to exist as a human being and take up space on the planet? Are we worthy enough to do that? We all are.

There's a lot of self-judgment in Western culture today. I'm not so familiar with other cultures, but in Western culture there's almost an epidemic of self-judgment. A group of about twenty Western teachers were meeting some years ago with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India. They were having a meeting just to talk about how things were going—"How's the Buddhism going where you are?" "Yeah, pretty good. How's it going where you are?"—and learning from His Holiness.

Someone brought up this quality of self-judgment, or even in some cases self-hatred. The Dalai Lama had this mystified expression on his face. He couldn't understand what people were talking about. He had no personal experience or cultural reference point for it, because in Tibet, children are brought up with so much love from the extended family that they feel really valued and cared for and lovable from early on.

So he couldn't understand what it meant, but he went around to the Western teachers and asked, "Do you know what this is?" "Yes." "Do you know what this is?" "Yeah." He went around to all twenty Western teachers—they all knew what it was because it's so widespread in the West. I think it's because our community systems and our family systems are breaking down, and we don't have that coherent upbringing to hold us so that we know we're valued and really loved.

We may hear ourselves judging ourselves, putting ourselves down. Sometimes it comes out toward others, but it's more destructive toward ourselves. Joseph has this very nice practice when judging is happening. He hears a statement like "You're never going to be good enough," and he adds the phrase, "and the sky is blue." "You really messed up in that meeting last week, and the sky is blue." "That person at lunch took too much food, and the sky is blue." That just puts a different container around it.

With self-judgment, I've found that especially the long-term practice of loving kindness is the best way to undo it. It doesn't even have to be loving kindness toward oneself, although that comes out of this. But when there is real goodwill and affection for others—and friend and benefactor are very good people to work with—then we look inside and we see, "Oh, there's something beautiful here."

There's this friendly spirit toward others. I can feel good about myself because metta is alive for me. So in the long term, the practice of metta really, really undoes the tendency to self-judgment.

Briefly, with sadness, often we're afraid to open to feelings of deep loss, disappointment, and grief because we fear that they'll be overwhelming. Sometimes we feel, if I open to this sadness, I'll never come out of it. I'll never move through the grief and so we hold it at a distance. But that's just a belief - just a belief. We've got to have faith in the practice, faith in ourselves to open to that loss, to that missing, and we'll find out it does have an end.

One of the really moving things that's been happening at Spirit Rock is that a few parents have come on long retreats who have lost children in their teens, generally lost their children to drugs or to suicide. And that's, I think, one of the worst losses that a human being can suffer - to lose a child when they're still young and promising. And what's been amazing is to watch the parents go through the retreat cycle over a number of years and watch the grief slowly fade and be replaced by real acceptance, real warmth, real love. And then those parents are able to share that experience with other parents who have more recently lost children in the same way. So they become models and teachers for others who have gone through that kind of grief and that kind of loss. So grief is limited in time if we can let it come and be felt.

And then fear. With fear, usually when it arises, the first thing we feel is more fear. Oh, I'm afraid of the fear. So the first thing we have to do is come into the present and start to feel the fear directly and see, can we bear it? Because with fear, the storyline is something like, this moment is bearable, but the next moment is going to be unbearable. So we have to come into this moment, feel it, let go of that projection about the future. That's just the storyline. The next moment isn't going to be unbearable. And see, is this moment bearable?

I worked with this a lot. I came in first to the body sensations. Body sensations with fear are not pleasant, but I had to ask myself, can I bear them? Moving to allowing, moving to accepting, can I just bear them? And I found after touching them many times, I could. You know, contraction in the chest, fluttery feeling throughout the body, light, ungrounded feelings. I found I could bear those.

Then I had to open to the mood in the mind. It's hard to get in touch with the mood of fear because fear is to escape. So the mood of fear is moving away from, escaping. It was hard to touch that. But then I could. It was the fleeing impulse that is the heart of that mood. Then I could bear that and I could let go of the thoughts.

Slowly, slowly, I began to open to the whole experience, this kaleidoscope of fear. And it got to the point that I could totally accept it. I reached a point in my meditation where I didn't care one bit whether fear arose or not. I was completely equanimous

with it. And when I reached that point of acceptance with fear, it lost some grip over me that it had had before out of my fear of fear. I got over my fear of fear. And when it came, it was okay.

Now, since then, I've had to meet it a number of times, but I now know that I can come to terms with it. I know how to meditate, allow it, be with it so that it's not overpowering and it's not fundamentally threatening to me. And that came out of the fullness of the movement to acceptance.

So whatever difficult emotion might be the strongest for you, this is really an encouragement to allow it in and even welcome it. Because what you'll find is you'll learn so much by working with it. You'll find levels of wisdom you didn't know you had. You'll find degrees of patience that you didn't imagine were possible. And you'll find you have a core strength that had never been brought to light before.

One Arhat in Thailand, a fully enlightened person, was asked late in his life what had been his biggest difficulty in practicing. And he said, "I'd have to say that it was fear for me personally. But to say it was a difficulty doesn't say it rightly."

It was my greatest adversary, but it brought out my greatest strengths. And I learned the most from being with it. So it was my greatest teacher as well.

This is the promise of these difficult emotions. We learn so much in coming to freedom in relation to them. We transform our ability to be with what's difficult. So in that meeting of mindfulness—greeting desire, sadness, anger, fear, judgment with kindness, with compassion, with courage, with interest—we're transforming a moment of suffering into a moment of clarity. We transform the unwholesome into the wholesome through this meeting. And there's a great liberation that comes out of this work.

I want to close with one prayer from the Tibetan tradition. This is called the supplication of Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa, one of the great Tibetan yogis. He put this supplication to the Dharma—not to any one person, but to the Dharma itself. These are the four blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's sit together for a moment with these words: Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion. Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 155

Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · 46 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong introduces the practice of choiceless attention, a central technique in the Mahāsi Sāyadaw method of Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā. Drawing from classical instructions outlined in 'Practical Insight Meditation,' Armstrong explains how this approach differs from using an anchor as either an exclusive concentration object (samatha practice) or as a home base for attention.*
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> *The teaching explores three ways of working with meditation anchors, culminating in choiceless attention where practitioners completely unhook from their chosen object and allow mindfulness to follow wherever attention naturally lands moment by moment. Armstrong explains the Pāli term manasikāra (attention) as the pivotal factor being released from our control. This practice transforms everything in experience—sensations, sounds, thoughts, emotions, feeling tones—into potential objects for mindfulness rather than distractions.*
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> *The talk includes practical guidance on implementing this technique, including how to use noting practice to maintain moment-to-moment awareness and when to return to an anchor if spacing out occurs. Armstrong emphasizes that this approach embodies the genius of Mahāsi Sāyadaw's method by making clear that nothing in our experience can be an obstruction to mindfulness—everything becomes workable material for awakening.*

This morning we're going to extend the meditation instructions a little more to take in the practice or technique that I would call choiceless attention. Some people commonly refer to this as choiceless awareness. I prefer the term choiceless attention, because Krishnamurti coined the term choiceless awareness and used it to refer to quite a refined state of mind in which greed and aversion were not operating. Choiceless attention highlights the fact that it's the attention that is the pivotal factor we're letting go of control of.

Our meditation instructions have been adapted from the classical instructions that were given by Mahasi Sayadaw. They're clearly outlined in a little book, which I think is available online, called Practical Insight Meditation. He called his method Satipatthana Vipassana. When you would come into a retreat in his style, he would give all the instructions on the first day. What we have done is take his basic set of instructions and

expand them over thirteen days of instruction. We've taken out the pieces that he had assembled and we're giving them out in a longer time sequence with a little more detail on each one.

But the main practice that he was pointing to is this choiceless attention that I'm going to describe this morning. It's made up of all the parts that we've talked about: body sensations, breath, sounds, sights, tastes and smells, moods, emotions, intentions, and feeling tones. You now have all the foundational instructions to practice this style of choiceless attention.

When we take an anchor—and I'll use the breath as an example, but remember we've talked about anchor as body posture, as sounds, or as breath—we can approach it in one of three ways.

The first is we can use it as the exclusive focus in a concentration practice, often called a samatha practice, which is designed to strengthen the factor of tranquility and the accompanying concentration. When you make a commitment to an anchor for a samatha practice, you don't take any other objects. If you wanted to take the breath as a concentration or samatha practice, you basically don't attend to anything else. There are a few people here who are doing the practice in this way. So sound comes up, you do not become mindful of it. Another sensation comes in the body, you do not consciously pay attention to it. The style of practice taught by Paok Sayadaw, for instance, which begins with anapanasati at the upper lip, emphasizes this technique of not taking any other object. This is one approach to your anchor.

The second approach, and this is what I think a lot of you have been doing, is to use the anchor as a kind of home in meditation that you stay with if nothing else particular is drawing your attention. If nothing else strong is happening, you have a place to rest the attention. You become more and more familiar with it, you establish a good connection with it, and it's an easy place to come back to in meditation. This is the use of the anchor as a chosen object, such as the breath. When nothing else particular is drawing the attention, you have a place to rest.

But it's not exclusive. If another phenomenon arises that draws the attention—strong sound, strong sensation, an emotion—you easily let go of the anchor. The attention moves to the new phenomenon, you connect the attention there, you sustain it long enough to get a feel for its nature. It's sometimes called rubbing—you sustain the attention long enough. Then you can either let go of that and return to the anchor, you can stay with that new phenomenon for longer, or you can let go of that new phenomenon

and go to where the attention is drawn to another new phenomenon. This is the predominant experience, but with the anchor as a home that you come back to. That's the second way to relate to the anchor.

But the third way is what we're going to explore today. You have no preference at all for your anchor. This is when the attention becomes truly choiceless. Notice that the key factor that we're talking about here is attention. What phenomenon are you singling out from the overall field in which things are arising and passing? What phenomenon are you singling out to focus on and give attention to? In Pali, the term for this is manasikara. It's an important factor to know in meditation because most meditation techniques are about where the attention is going.

In choiceless attention, we unhook the attention from our anchor and we let it go wherever it will. This is something interesting to notice as you just sit here. Where is your attention landing moment after moment? It's probably not fixed in just one place. You might notice the sound of my voice. You might pay attention to the meaning of the words. You might feel the pressure of your seat on the cushion. You might notice the air temperature. There might be a mood of interest. There might be a mood of confusion. You come back to the sound of my voice.

Left on its own devices, attention moves around. A lot. In choiceless attention, we don't try to interrupt or control this moving around. We let the attention go where it will, and we make that new landing spot the focus for mindfulness.

However long the attention stays there, that remains the focus for mindfulness. As soon as it moves away to some new phenomenon, we make that the new focus for mindfulness in this new moment.

The quality of concentration is still developing in what we call a moment-to-moment way in choiceless attention. It's not developing off a single chosen object, but it's developing off the mindfulness that grows moment after moment with changing objects. So it's important to understand that concentration still develops from changing objects. It's not a problem.

So this is the basic approach to choiceless attention. Unfix the attention from your anchor. Sometimes it's not so comfortable to unfix that attention because you become very habituated in the relationship to the anchor. Sometimes unhooking it brings some uneasiness, a little nervousness. How am I going to be steady in my attention if it's not locked on to my chosen object? So this is an experiment. This is an interesting learning.

But the beauty is that the meditation takes on an unforced quality. You're not trying to steer the attention anywhere at all. You're just remaining alert to where it lands and then becoming mindful there. So there's no resistance, for instance, to a thought arising. Thoughts aren't seen as a distraction because the thought can be a focus for mindfulness. There's no resistance to a sensation, whether pleasant or unpleasant, because it can be the focus for mindfulness.

This is the practice of choiceless attention.

There's one other way I want to describe it which is equivalent. This is kind of the technical explanation based on this factor of manasikāra, or attention. But there's another way you can approach this. Choiceless attention simply answers the question, "What's happening now?"

If you ask yourself in any moment the question, "What's happening now?" normally what you'll notice is what we call the predominant sense experience in that moment. There are a lot of sense experiences going on in every moment at the six sense doors. But generally in a moment, one of them will stand out and become, let's say, foreground.

So anytime you ask yourself the question, "What's happening now?" the answer to that becomes the new focus for mindfulness. This is just another way to describe choiceless attention.

So in whichever of those descriptions appeals to you, this kind of practice is a very natural way to be mindful. We're not trying to direct the practice in a particular direction, except to be mindful.

So I'll encourage you to, in the instructions in a minute, I'll encourage you to begin with the relationship with your anchor and then at a certain point to unhook the attention and just let it go where it will. You'll see that there's a kind of ease that comes when you let go of this choice. You're not trying to steer the factor of attention, but you have to be careful to maintain the moment-to-moment mindfulness. It's not forcing to do that, but you have to be mindful.

The risk in letting go of a chosen object like an anchor is that it's a little easier to space out sometimes. So notice if that begins to happen.

Okay, so please sit comfortably, finding in your posture that ease and alertness. And please connect first with your chosen anchor. Could be body posture, could be sounds, could be breath. I'm just settling in this comfortable relationship to stabilize the attention.

And now letting go, deliberately letting go of your connection to the anchor. And just looking with a kind of fresh and interested curiosity, where is the attention going to land next? Noticing where it lands in terms of the categories we've been working with: sensation, sound, mood, emotion, thought, feeling tone, intention. And then the next new moment, where is the attention landing? Being mindful of that.

You're not forcing anything or any direction in the meditation, but just a sense of resting with an openness to all the sense appearances. You've learned to work with each type over the sequence of instructions over days. And this is in a way putting them all together in this open, choiceless way of being mindful.

You might find it helpful to sustain the moment-to-moment noticing by using the noting technique. Just using a short word to identify where the attention is landing in each new moment. Might sound something like: "In. Hearing. Thinking. Sitting. Touching. Out. Hearing." Maybe make a note every two to three seconds just to remind yourself what the experience is.

Remember that from time to time what may be apparent is the mood or state of mind.

So noting that as well. Wanting. Calm. Sadness.

If you ever start to feel lost or confused about what to pay attention to, then just return the attention to the anchor for a while. Let it stabilize again with that familiar experience. And when you feel steady again, let go of the anchor and open again to choiceless attention. What's happening now? Keeping the attention open with interest to the whole range of experience.

I think this particular approach to meditation, this choiceless approach, is kind of the genius of Mahasi Sayadaw because it makes so clear that everything in our experience can be the subject for mindfulness. Nothing can be an obstruction because everything that happens we can relate to as a new focus for our attention and for mindfulness.

Just one word about continuing this practice. If you find it helpful, no one is obliged to practice in this way. Some people have a good relationship with an anchor and want to keep that as a preference or focus. But if you'd like to practice in this open way, what I'd recommend is recognizing that part of the art is learning when to open up and be in this easy, unforced way with everything. The lack of single focus sometimes leads more easily to spacing out, however. If you notice you're spacing out, then it's a good time to come back to the anchor, recollect the attention, and when you feel you've stabilized again, then open up once more.

So the art is moving between when it's skillful to have a more settled focus and when to open to the choiceless field. This fluid movement becomes part of the practice itself—developing the wisdom to know when to gather and when to release, when to focus and when to open.

CHAPTER 156

The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) and their relationship to the doctrine of not-self (anattā). He introduces the five components that make up human experience: material form (rūpa), feeling tone (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa), explaining how each can be observed in direct meditation experience.

Drawing from the Anattalakkhana Sutta and other early teachings, Armstrong demonstrates how our sense of self emerges not from any inherent essence, but from clinging to these aggregates. He explores the "faulty logic of I" - how language creates confusion about selfhood - and shows how investigation of the aggregates reveals their impermanent, conditioned nature. Through personal reflection on his sister's death, he illustrates how understanding the aggregates brings freedom from the fear and separation that arise from belief in a solid self.

The talk emphasizes that realizing anattā is not merely intellectual but requires meditative insight developed through sustained practice. Armstrong concludes by connecting the wisdom of not-self with the natural arising of love and compassion, showing how these two aspects of awakening support each other in the path toward liberation.

The Five Aggregates Are Not Self

The subject of tonight's talk is the five aggregates are not self. I'll be exploring two aspects: first, the formula or model of the five aggregates used to describe our human experience, which I'll introduce and explain; and second, how this relates to the teaching on not-self, one of the central and most powerful teachings that the Buddha offered, unique in his time.

This teaching on not-self—*anatta* in Pali—is often paired with impermanence and unsatisfactoriness as the three characteristics of all existent things, summed up as *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. This is one of the central pointings in the Buddha's teachings, and a place where, as we come to understand it, we can experience a great degree of freedom even short of enlightenment. I believe this is one of the most liberating insights available to us before full awakening.

But it's also one of the hardest to understand. So don't worry if it doesn't all make sense tonight. I simply want to introduce some of the concepts. This is a theme that we need to live with over years of dharma practice and meditation. It cannot be understood purely on a conceptual or intellectual level. The understanding of it relies on meditative insight, which in turn relies on the stilling of the mind and a strong degree of presence and concentration—qualities you are all developing in this long retreat.

This understanding needs a combination of inquiry and reflection, which are rational activities, and the meditative balance and stability that can begin to see the truth of what the Buddha was pointing toward. This is something we investigate over time, and it deepens in understanding gradually. If these concepts are new to you, don't try to think them through too hard tonight. Rather, let the general approach sink in, as it will take time to integrate.

Also notice if there's any resistance to hearing this, because you may have a little attachment to the self—we all might. This teaching undermines one of the central building blocks of our psychology, so notice if there's a little unease with that. That's perfectly natural.

Very interestingly, the Buddha said that the sense of self we carry, which reveals itself constantly through words like "I," "me," and "mine," is not intrinsic to the experience of being human. Rather, it is something generated out of our beliefs and views. An interesting question to explore through this talk is: What is our experience when the sense of self is being generated? What does that feel like? And what is the experience we have when the sense of self isn't being generated? The Buddha said these are very different human experiences.

Child psychologists tell us that when an infant comes into the world, it has a very expansive sense of the world, or you could say self. The division between self and world is not so strong; the infant experiences things through an oceanic sense of connectedness. Then as we grow up—even in childhood years and certainly by teens and early adulthood—that oceanic sense has dwindled down and the sense of self has become quite narrow.

This restriction in our sense of what's happening brings suffering with it—inevitable suffering. As we crystallize out of this whole field of experience, we crystallize a sense of what we are and what we're not. That leads to a duality with the world. Creating self also creates other. Once we create a self and differentiate it from what we call "other," then we become separated and isolated. That separation is one of the deep sources of our unhappiness when we believe it thoroughly.

This crystallization into self also leads to a deep-seated anxiety, sometimes a strong fear, because of the imminence of death. We see this self that we have cherished and been concerned about, protected and fed and defended, coming to an end at some future date. As long as we believe in the reality of that self, death is going to be a fearful experience in one way or another. So one possible development and freedom in understanding not-self is becoming much more comfortable with the possibility of death and removing some of the fear that we normally carry.

The self tends to have many concerns. When we dwell on those concerns, we become more separated, more isolated, and in general, more fretful and worried. This strong belief in the self leads us into different kinds of suffering and provides, I would say, the root of our basic fearfulness in approaching life.

There's a wonderful Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj whose teachings were collected in a book called *I Am That*, which I highly recommend. He was a Vedanta teacher who died in the 1990s and taught in Bombay. He made this comment (and in this context, "yoga" is simply a generic term for spiritual discipline—he taught in the Vedanta tradition, but in his view, Buddhism would be considered one of the yogas): "All yogas have only one aim, that is to save you from the calamity of separate existence."

This is where we find ourselves now. We are all embroiled in the calamity of separate existence. The teachings of the Buddha and the possibility of liberation show us the way out of that calamity of belief in separate existence.

When we open to what is beyond self, we find ourselves opening to a way of being that's much wider, broader, more inclusive, open, kind, generous, thoughtful, and loving. This is the promise of opening up the restricted sense of self that we have built ourselves into—something not intrinsic to our human nature.

For most of us, this sense of self is the center that everything revolves around. You can simply notice how often the terms "I," "me," "my," and "mine" come into your thinking. Even on retreat when we're not relating much to others, these make up the content of our drifting thoughts much of the time.

So the self becomes the focus of our thoughts, our speech, our actions, our decisions, our emotions, values, directions, purpose. It's like the North Star that everything else revolves around in our world when we're not seeing through it. It seems, to use a phrase, self-evident.

But have you ever found it? This is quite curious, isn't it? It seems like the most obvious fact of our existence. Have you ever located it? William James, the philosopher, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." That was good. That's a good start. Most of us can't locate it anywhere.

The Dalai Lama said that when you think something is real but you can't find it, that's a sign of delusion. So this belief in self is one of the most fundamental delusions that we have. In the texts it's compared to walking down a path in the woods and seeing something brown coiled up and believing it's a snake. One jumps back in alarm in the belief that it's a snake. But as you get closer and look at it more precisely, you see it's just a coil of rope.

So the understanding about self is like that. When we're burdened with the belief that the self is something real, we live with fear and anxiety, separation and isolation. When we examine it more closely and those beliefs dissolve, we can relax much more into the flow of life as a process of nature. When our perception is refined and corrected, we see that there's just the process of nature going on.

We can look at our language to see some of the confusion we have around this sense of "I." We've grown up as children in this culture, and the words get tossed around a lot—I, me, mine—but without real clarity about what they're pointing to. So as children, we absorb the language of the culture, and it's led us to believe that there's something real and precise being pointed to with these words. This isn't necessarily the case, and I would call this confusion the faulty logic of "I." Things aren't necessarily the way they seem.

Let me ask some questions that might draw some of this out. Suppose I were to ask how old you are. This is a really simple one to answer. So I'd say I'm 68. In saying "I'm 68," which doesn't strike an odd note for any of us, the question is: what is 68? Are my thoughts 68? Is my mood 68? Is my hair 68? No, generally the body is 68, right? It came out of the womb 68 years ago. So here we're equating "I" with the body. We're basically saying "I'm 68," meaning the body's 68, so we're saying I am the body.

Now let me ask you: what color are your eyes? So I'd say my eyes are brown. Now the "I" is not being equated with the eyes, but the "I" is being equated with the owner of the eyes. They're my eyes. That implies that the "I" is something that stands apart from the body and possesses it. So which are you really? Are you the body or are you the owner of the body? Can you be both? Does that really make sense? How many selves are you?

We can do the same thing with emotion. Sometimes we say, "I'm happy, I'm sad." Here we're equating the "I" with the emotion. I am happy. At other times we talk about my joys and sorrows. There we become the owner of the emotion. So are you the emotion? Are you the owner of it? Again, can you be both?

Or here's another one. This is what I felt for years to be most essentially who I am. I felt there was a little observer inside the head.

Behind my eyes and between my ears, there was a witnessing presence looking out at everything unfolding—seeing sights, hearing sounds, thinking thoughts, making choices. This felt like the real me. Let's call this the observer—the one at the center of everything, experiencing it all. Have you found that one?

How many of you have practiced Goenka-style body scanning? Quite a few. Have you spent considerable time investigating sensations and experiences in the head? Ever find a little person in there? That's what it feels like—as though the essence of who I am is this little being inside, looking out and experiencing everything. I never found one.

So that's the fifth way we conceive of "I," and there's another I'll mention later. Can all of these be true? Can all of these point to something that actually exists? The Buddha would say no, and he said this quite explicitly: "In whatever way one conceives of self, the truth is ever other than that."

This is worth remembering. However we conceive of self, the truth is always different from our conception. It's interesting that this verb "conceive" is closely related in Pali to the quality of conceit—*māna*—that Bonnie discussed the other night. So conceiving of self and the conceit she described are intimately connected. One way to understand *māna* is as the way we conceive that we are a self, that we are something particular.

One of my teachers put it even more bluntly: "Everything you think is wrong." That's quite a wake-up call—everything you think is wrong, especially regarding self-view and self-image. It reminds me of something I heard on talk radio. I don't listen to much talk radio—I think it's rather chaotic in this country—but here's an incisive observation: "The mind, often wrong, seldom in doubt."

We need to question these assumptions, particularly around this concept of self. Something deluded is happening here, and undoing this deception is one of the primary aspects of Buddhist meditation practice.

So how did the Buddha see? If we attune ourselves to his way of seeing and describing us, we can approach a more awakened understanding of what's actually occurring.

When you and I look around this hall, I'm guessing we mostly see persons—a person here, a person there. Around the hall we see persons. When the Buddha looked at someone, I don't think he primarily saw a person. I think he saw more precisely than that.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, a fifth-century text that compiled many of the meditation techniques and understandings current in Sri Lankan monasteries, the commentator monk Buddhaghosa offers an analogy. Though I'm uncomfortable with it as a longtime vegetarian who deeply cares about animals, it comes from the old text, so I'll share it. He said that when a butcher carves up a cow's carcass for meat, the butcher isn't thinking "cow, cow, cow." Being intimately familiar with anatomy, he thinks "rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs"—his understanding is more refined.

Similarly, when the Buddha saw us, I don't think he primarily saw a person. I think he perceived something more fundamental, more detailed. In the teachings, he described a person in one of two ways. The first is what Joseph mentioned a few mornings ago: the six sense bases. Remember Joseph saying something like "there are only ever six things happening"?

This comes from a discourse in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* called the "Discourse on Totality." It asks: "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of things?" This is quite a bold statement. I don't know many Western philosophers who have made such a claim—certainly not Freud.

I don't think Marx said this. I don't think Einstein said this. But here's the Buddha: "Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of things. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of things would not be speaking of something they knew about."

I love this because it's really simple, and it's really true, isn't it? When we look at our experience, that's all that's there—the sense base and the sense object. This also maps beautifully onto our meditation practice. Vipassana practice is concerned with mindfulness of these six objects as they arise and pass at the sense doors. So this is a good field map for meditators. The Buddha used this formula frequently when he talked about cutting through craving, because we generate desire for pleasant experience in each of these six modes of the senses.

But there's another format that the Buddha used just as often in his teachings, and that is the model of the five aggregates. It's another way to describe the totality of things, but it divides them up differently. And he used this teaching device to cut through wrong view, particularly the wrong view that concerns the belief in self. So that's why we're going to talk about this tonight—the five aggregates as a way of seeing through the self.

When we start to see through the model of the five aggregates, we see people the way the Buddha saw them. And that means we see them without the false overlay of self. And first, of course, we start to see ourself without that false overlay.

This sounds quite technical. You know, "aggregate" is a technical term, and as we get into the five, they may seem unfamiliar. But to me, this is not just an idle philosophical conversation. I got very interested in this scheme when one of my older sisters died. She was 51 at the time—I'm five years younger than she was. She'd been ill for a while, but she was very functional in her life, still raising children, and she was not anywhere near a life-threatening disease.

But one night at home, she came down with something very quickly. Consciousness was fading, she suffered cardiac arrest, and the medical technicians could not pull her through. So she basically died that night quite unexpectedly, with one of her sons in the house with her at the time.

I heard the news the next day, and it hit me very strongly because I'd been talking to her on the phone just a few days before. She was someone I was close with—we had a very good relationship. And she was somebody I enjoyed a lot. She had a big personality, a great sense of humor, a big laugh. She liked to have fun. She was passionate in both directions—she could also get upset about things. But when she was in the room, you knew it. So much vitality.

For that to have gone on for the 46 years that I'd known her and then come to such an abrupt stop was something I couldn't comprehend. She had been so full and so alive a few days earlier, and then she was just gone.

I'm sure most of you have had this experience with the puzzle, the real mystery of death. How can someone who is so alive all of a sudden just be gone? What has happened?

So I began investigating this as I lived with the grief that touched me for a while. There were a couple of months where I would go into grieving spaces and come out a little bit, then go back into darkness and come out a little bit, reflecting on the Dharma implications of this. The model I used to understand what had happened to her was the

five aggregates. It helped me a great deal to understand as much as I could of the mystery of her death. And in doing that, it helped me come to much greater peace around her dying, but also around my own dying, because I came to understand how this being has been put together. I'll say more about that later in the talk.

The Pali word for the aggregates is *khanda*—a simple word.

that just means heap or bundle. You could talk about a khandha of twigs or branches or something like that. We translate it with the word aggregate because that's the way it's been used for a long time, but that sounds too technical to me. Aggregate sounds like road paving material, like what they're going to be doing out on Pleasant Street in hopefully a few days. Another way you could say it is components. There are five components that make us up. But even that sounds a little technical, so what I like is "kinds of stuff." There are these five kinds of stuff that make us up. And that's really how I take it. But I'll use the word aggregate because in Buddhism it's become very common.

So the five aggregates are material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. This is what makes up a being. I want to go through each one and talk about how we can find them and feel them in our direct experience.

Form—the Pali term is rupa—means all material form. All the matter that you see in the universe goes into this one aggregate. Our bodies, other bodies, the floor, the trees, the forest, the earth—this is all part of the material form aggregate. Not only that, but the sense objects that come from physical interactions are also part of material form. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and sensations are all part of that material form aggregate. You could say this is the physical world, including the physical sense objects in our experience. For example, that sound is in the realm of rupa, one of the physical sense objects that's part of rupa.

The second aggregate is feeling tone. You know this is vedanā. We covered it—I think Carol covered it in the meditation instructions a few days ago. This is the quality that every sense contact has of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. You'll remember that the feeling tone, as Carol described it, is a mental component because the same physical experience doesn't translate for everybody with the same degree of pleasantness or unpleasantness.

For example, beets. We had beets, I think it was yesterday at lunch. I saw a lot of people helping themselves very happily to the serving of beets. I didn't take any because I don't like beets. And now that my mother isn't around anymore, I don't have to eat them. Some people really love the flavor of beets. To me, they taste like dirt and it's not very pleasant. And I don't have to eat them anymore.

The feeling tone is a mental quality that gets projected onto the physical experience. In that way, as one teacher described, it's kind of like we feel our way into our experience of the thing. The feeling tone is mental, even though the object is physical. For instance, with the sound of the bell—generally, most people here would experience that as a pleasant tone, just in and of itself. But because it marks the end of the sitting, it's really a pleasant tone. That is generally felt as pleasant, but not everybody might.

The third aggregate is perception. Again, all the rest are going to be in the mental field because rupa has taken in the whole physical world. Perception is another feature of mind, and it refers to our ability to recognize objects and place them in a category that we've known previously. As you look around the room, quite automatically, the mind is putting things into categories of recognition. You will see woman, man, zafu, mat, floor, tree, statue, light, chair, and so on. This happens pretty automatically. You don't have to think about it a lot. But you recognize the things that are here because you've seen them before and you've put them in a category and then you remember that.

Perception is based on memory, on prior cognition. It's a re-cognition of something you've known before. We think it just happens automatically, but in fact we've learned to perceive. It happens without our thinking about it now, but it might not have happened that way. The neurologist Oliver Sacks tells a story of a patient that he was working with. The man's name was Virgil.

Virgil had lost his sight when he was very young, perhaps as a child. But as he grew up, surgical techniques were developed that could restore vision. So in early middle age, Virgil underwent surgery to regain his sight. Sacks was consulting with the surgeon, and the momentous occasion arrived when Virgil lay in his hospital bed, about to have the bandages removed from his eyes so he could see again.

Everyone expected this to be a moment of pure joy. They imagined Virgil would exclaim with delight at being able to see once more. But when the surgeon peeled back the bandages, something quite different happened. Let me read from Sacks' account of what occurred:

"No cry, 'I can see!' burst from Virgil's lips. He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing at the surgeon who stood before him still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke, saying, 'Well?' did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face. Virgil told me later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, all meaning-

less, a blur. Then out of the blue came a voice that said, 'Well?' Then and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face, and indeed the face of his surgeon."

Because Virgil had lost his sight so young, he had never been able to wire his brain to process visual information and perceive the objects of sight. As Joseph mentioned, what's really happening in sight are just patches of form and color. You can see this more clearly if you close one eye—if you reduce the visual field to two dimensions, it becomes much clearer that patches of form and color are all that's actually there. But we've learned to recognize those patches as different objects. Virgil never had that learning.

By the time he was older, those neural circuits were much harder to establish. Virgil did learn, with considerable training, to recognize and perceive a number of things in his world, but there were many things he never learned to perceive fluently. He lived the rest of his life at a perceptual disadvantage.

This illustrates the nature of perception, and one of the things that's particularly challenging about it is that we don't always perceive accurately. The Buddha described these inaccuracies of seeing as distortions, both in perception and in view, calling them *vipallāsas*. Someone may give a talk on this later, but he taught that we tend to see things as permanent when they're not, to see things as offering lasting happiness when they can't, to see things as being a self when they're not, and to see things as beautiful when they're actually somewhat dangerous. These are distortions of perception that we gradually unlearn through meditation.

As an example of perception's limitations, consider when you have a sensation in your leg. If you immediately label it with the word "pain," that perception can hold you back from meeting that sensation freshly and exploring it without fear. If you explore it without fear, you might discover it's perfectly okay to experience. But as soon as we call something pain, we might hold back. Or we might not see things quite as they are if we perceive something and think we've understood it completely.

For instance, we see this bell, and because we're familiar with it, we normally think, "Oh, it's a bell"—and that's the end of it. But could this be a begging bowl for a well-appointed monk or nun? Certainly, that would work quite well. Could you see this turned upside down as a charming little hat on a statue of appropriate size? Yes, that might be rather nice. Could it be a flower pot? It would be expensive for a flower pot, but it would make a beautiful one.

We want to be able to look at things as they are without necessarily burdening them with conceptual overlays. Zen makes quite a lot of this point. You may know about the koans in Zen tradition. The Zen master will say, "What is this?" If you say it is a stick, I will hit you. If you say it is not a stick, I will hit you.

That's actually why I ended up in Vipassana—I figured if I went to Zen, I'd get hit a lot.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 7/12). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

So I came to the softer school.

There's a delightful story about this. In the late seventies, two really venerable masters were both in Cambridge at the same time, giving teachings. Some of their students knew one another, and when they discovered the other teacher was in town, they thought, "Let's bring these two enlightened masters together. We'll have this wonderful encounter where enlightened mind meets enlightened mind and recognizes itself—like an empty mirror looking into an empty mirror. And we'll all get enlightened too!"

So they brought together the Tibetan master Kalu Rinpoche and the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn. They invited them into a friend's home, offered them tea, and set out a platter of fruit. Both masters were sipping tea and conversing through translators.

Seung Sahn thought, "Okay, I'm going to check this fellow out." He picked up an orange from the fruit plate, held it toward Kalu Rinpoche, and asked in his good Zen master voice, "What is this?"

Kalu just sat there doing his beads, saying his mantra and moving through the mala, smiling a little, very peaceful. He didn't reply.

Seung Sahn wanted an answer, so he held it out again. "What is this?"

Kalu quietly turned to his translator, who then said to the group, "Rinpoche asks, 'Don't they have oranges in Korea?'"

Apparently nobody got enlightened that night.

It's a wonderful story about perception—you never quite know how it's going to turn out.

When you hear the sound of the bell, you normally recognize it as the bell ending a sitting, so you know it's time to get up. This perception happens automatically. That's recognition at work.

The fourth aggregate is called mental formations, sometimes called volitional formations to emphasize that intention is involved. I don't want to go into great detail tonight, but you'll recognize that intention is central to the Buddha's teaching. Based on Winnie's instruction and Sally's dharma talk from a couple nights ago, intentions are key to the formation of karma. The intentional aspect is important in the fourth aggregate, though we won't spend much time on that tonight.

Mental formations encompass thoughts, moods, emotions, and meditative states of mind. We've been discussing these extensively in the meditation instructions, so you're familiar with how to know them and practice with them.

When you hear the bell at the end of a sit, you may think, "Oh, the sitting's over." A feeling of ease may arise, followed by the thought, "Now I could sit forever"—you know, like a moment before the bell rings when you can't wait for it to end, and as soon as it rings, you think you could sit forever. These emotional or volitional formations that arise upon hearing the bell are mental formations. In Pali, the term is *sankhara*.

The fifth aggregate is fascinating. It's called consciousness—*vijnana* in Pali. We haven't explored it much during this retreat, but it's very interesting to investigate in your direct experience.

Consciousness means many different things in Western philosophy and psychology, but in Buddhism, the meaning is fairly simple. Consciousness is the faculty of mind that reveals, holds, receives—or best put, *knows*—sense objects. When you hear a sound, you're a conscious being, so the hearing takes place for you as sentient experience.

If the bell rang in the forest and nobody was around, would it make a sound? Depends how you define sound, right? The sound wave would be created, but if no being were there to receive it, there would be no conscious experience of hearing.

What we all have when the bell rings is a conscious experience of hearing. The sound is being known by our consciousness. Each of us receives it in consciousness.

Consciousness reveals the bare data of that *mmm*—before it knows it's a bell, before it knows it's A-sharp, before it even recognizes it as a sound. Consciousness knows that *mmm* and reveals it to us.

Consciousness is present in each moment. It has revealed the sound, revealed the feeling tone, revealed the perception that it's a bell, revealed the feeling of ease at the end of sitting, revealed the thought "Now I could sit forever." Consciousness is there with each of the other aggregates too.

Consciousness is this basic cognition happening all the time while we're awake. It's what marks a sentient being. Birds have consciousness.

Dogs have consciousness. Insects have consciousness. And humans have this kind of consciousness.

So these are the five aggregates that describe our human experience: form, feeling tone, perception, formations, and consciousness.

Something to explore—we won't do it right now, but for you to explore—is there anything in your experience that's outside this list of five kinds of stuff? Is there anything else going on? It's kind of important that you do that review to convince yourself that everything that's happening is in one of these five categories. But I'll leave you to do that.

And I'm just going to say, I think you'll find that it's complete. The Buddha thought it was complete. I think you'll find it's complete.

But why is this important? Because in our whole experience, there's only form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. There's nothing else. In particular, there's a kind of important noun that isn't on this list, and that is self. There's no I on this list. There's no me, there's no self. There's only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. That describes the whole thing.

So there is no one at the center to whom these are all happening. There's no owner of these kinds of stuff. There's no controller of these kinds of stuff. There are only these kinds of stuff.

And in fact, one of those versions of the self that we talked about—remember that the one who's sitting at the center in the head, looking out, seeing sights, hearing sounds, thinking thoughts—that is only an identification with consciousness. That's basically saying, I am the experiencer. I am the knower of all these things. Consciousness is doing the knowing. But we identify with that and say, oh, I'm the knower. I'm the observer. But it's just an identification with consciousness.

So there are only these five things. And what's the relationship to the human being?

Probably most of you can see the item I'm holding up is just a common pen. It's a ballpoint pen. Everybody can recognize that. It's a physical object. It's in the area of rupa. And your knowing it as a pen is simply a perception—it's a commonly agreed thing.

But I can take this pen apart. So as I take it apart, there's a tip, there's a cartridge, there's a spring, and there's a cap. Now I'm holding up these four parts. Is this a pen? It's not a pen anymore, is it?

To make a pen, I have to take these four parts and fit them together in a way that it can be used for writing something. Now that I put it back together, everybody says, oh yeah, now it's a pen.

Pen doesn't point to any one thing. The word pen is just a conventional designation that points to an assembly of certain parts put together in a certain way.

The word human being doesn't point to any one thing. It only points to a collection of aggregates that have been put together and assembled in a certain way that works.

Another way to say it is in the center of all the components of pen, there is no one thing that is a little pen. In the center of the collection of all the parts that is each of you, there is no one thing that is the essence of you. It's just an assemblage of parts that put together in this way work in the way that they work.

So to say human being is just a conventional designation. To say Guy or Sally or Winnie is just a conventional designation. When you look closely to what is being pointed at, it's just a collection of parts.

This was the part that was so freeing in investigating my sister's death. I had assumed that her personality, which is mostly these mental formations—you know, her sense of humor, her kindness, her irritability, her love for her family—I had assumed her personality and her form were one.

That was a mistaken perception. It was almost accidental that that personality and that body had come together. When I saw that, when I could separate them, I could see how when life ended, the body remained. Whatever the personality was, that had gone on. That was not there any longer. But the separation of those two components wasn't so startling anymore.

This let me see how my death was going to happen. What I took as my personality was going to get separated from this body. All these components that we have assembled here are conditioned, and we need to look in and see that conditioned nature and its limitations.

The Buddha addressed this directly in one of his discourses. You probably know his first discourse was the Four Noble Truths. One of the people he delivered it to—a group of five old friends who had practiced with him—got partially enlightened from that first

discourse. Then a couple of weeks later, they all practiced together. The Buddha gave his second discourse, called "The Characteristic of Not-Self." When he delivered this second discourse, all five of them became fully enlightened.

This characteristic of not-self is significant. The first five arahants in the world after the Buddha were created from a discourse like this one—probably a little better than this one.

The Buddha was asking about the five aggregates. He said, "This body, is it permanent or impermanent?" Of course they knew. They said, "It's impermanent, venerable sir." So the Buddha said, "What is impermanent—is it going to give you lasting happiness, or at some point is it going to become unsatisfying?" They said, "At some point it becomes unsatisfying because it changes, venerable sir."

So the Buddha said, "Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine. This I am. This is myself'?" You might remember this line from Bonnie's talk the other night, because "This I am" is the pointer to māna—conceiving oneself. In other words, why would you put yourself onto something that is going to change and is not going to give lasting happiness? That's not a good bet.

Then the Buddha went through the same series of questions with feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. At the end, the practitioners had all been led to investigate their body, their feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness, and realized that none of them were fit to be regarded as "This is mine. This I am. This is myself."

In that recognition, there was a great letting go. In that great letting go, their minds opened to the unconditioned and they were enlightened on the spot.

This is an important investigation because self is not just a neutral concept without associations. Self has assumptions embedded in it that constrict us. There are three or four really important assumptions we carry about the self that we haven't investigated.

One is that it has continuity. That's why in some way we feel like the same person now as the one who went through high school or the one who entered the door two weeks ago to join this retreat. We feel in some way it's the same me through all those different experiences of life. If we didn't feel that sense of continuity, we wouldn't worry about death, because death would be happening to somebody else. It wouldn't be happening to me. That would be a different person then. Oh, that person can deal with it—I don't have to worry about it. But we do worry about death because we assume this continuity of the self over time.

A second thing is we think there's just one self. When you ask about where your self is, how many different ones do you expect to come up with? It's really just one, isn't it? People who really think there are two or three or four—usually we call the medics for them, because that's considered not very healthy mentally.

Then also we feel our self should be unique. I'm unique in this whole created universe. There's only one like me.

You have your own unique self and I have my own unique self. But each of us is very different in that self piece. Yet when we examine this more closely, we begin to see the contradictions.

Seeing that the aggregates are all impermanent destroys the illusion of continuity—there is no real continuity to a human being. And as we investigate the aggregates, we'll see that clearly. Nagarjuna, who's the preeminent Buddhist philosopher of emptiness, said: "If mind and matter were me, I would come and go like them." So if you really think you are these aggregates, then you need to feel yourself arising and passing moment after moment. But we don't, because we assume that the I is ongoing.

You have to think that the self is unitary. So how can you be both the liver and compassion? How can you be the toenail and loving-kindness? Those are really different pieces. How can that be one self? It doesn't make sense.

And you have to assume that you're unique. Is your love really different from my love? Is your anger really different from your friend's anger? And what about consciousness? But we'll get to that in a moment.

So first of all, let's think about this body. We want to explore the aggregates and their conditioned nature.

First we'll think about this body and how it came to be this way. As Bonnie said in her talk the other night, we can have definite mana about our appearance. We can have pride about our appearance or we can be embarrassed about our appearance. But when you think of it, did you have anything to do with your appearance?

Overall—okay, diet, exercise, health care, how you cut your hair—that makes a little bit of impact. But did you have anything to do with your overall appearance? How tall you are or how short, whether you're dark or fair, whether your shoulders are broad or narrow? Did you have a say in any of that? Did you choose by volition any of that?

Well, let's review how this thing got here. Your father's sperm met your mother's egg. They joined. The cells multiplied and specialized within the womb. Nine months later, something popped out into the world. It got milk and water and food and air. It grew, grew, grew, grew, grew. And then it's here today.

Did you have a choice in any of that? So why do we take so much responsibility for it? It's just a physical process. The whole thing was a physical process from the moment of conception until now. Our choice had nothing to do with the overall way we came out. And yet we take a lot of pride or embarrassment around it. It's just part of physical nature. The body is part of physical nature and it will follow the laws of physical nature.

One of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, said it like this: "This body came out of nature. It's part of nature. It never departed from nature and it belongs to nature. Give it back to nature. That will be a great relief for you."

You can also reflect on that with emotions. We've talked about how our emotions are part of the whole human package. For everyone who's not highly enlightened, we have the same range of emotions. We all feel at times the same happiness or sadness or joy or loneliness or anger, whatever. We all have that because it's all part of human nature.

And then consciousness, the fifth aggregate—that's just nature also. We all have this ability to know sense objects, and that's really all it is. All humans have this same type of knowing of the objects of the senses.

Sometimes we can identify with consciousness as the observer. But we can reflect on that and realize there's not really a little person behind that observing function.

Yet there's another way in dharma language we might identify with consciousness. We might say something like, "Okay, I get it. I'm not the body. I'm not the emotions. I'm not the thoughts. What I really am, my fundamental identity, is this vast awareness that it's all happening in." This vast awareness just always seems to be here. It includes all the comings and goings, but that's really me. The vast awareness—oh, that's what I am.

What's wrong with this view? First, the "I" is unnecessary. The vast awareness may be there, but there's no need to claim it. It's just part of nature. And the vast awareness is no different between me and you. So there's nothing unique or self-like about it. This identification doesn't stand up either.

So there's no place within the aggregates that the sense of self really stands up under investigation. We examine each one, and it's not found anywhere. So how does it come about? Because we keep having this sense.

Ananda was a cousin of the Buddha who became the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. He's one of the most sympathetic characters in the Pali Canon—a lovable, humble, devoted practitioner. When he was newly ordained, he relates this story. He had just ordained and a monk came up to him offering advice. This is the wisdom that this monk transmitted to Ananda: "Ananda, it is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness."

You can check this out in your meditation. Ask yourself: does the "I" ever arise on its own? Does it ever just go, "I"? Or does the "I" only arise in relation to other sense experience?

There's a pain in the knee. All of a sudden we think, "I have a pain in my knee." We could just say "unpleasant sensation." But if we get a little worried, and out of that worry we grasp the pain, look how soon the phrase will come: "I have a pain in my knee." The "I" and "my" are unnecessary, but the worry gives them potency. It gives them a charge.

Take a look when the sense of "I" arises and see if it hasn't come out of clinging to some kind of sense experience. This is what the Buddha referred to as I-making and mine-making. The Pali words are *ahankara* and *mamankara*. We construct the sense of "I" over and over by grabbing hold of experience at one of the five aggregates, or you could say one of the six senses. If we don't grab hold, no "I" arises. No sense of self arises.

Start to pay attention to this in your meditation. When is there the fixation and grabbing hold of a sense experience with the attendant feeling of "I" and "my"? And when is it that in your meditation you're not grabbing hold of anything? What's that like?

What is it like when you're grabbing hold and self is being born? And what's it like when there's just a spacious, open, non-grasping attention and the self isn't being formed? What do those two feel like?

Explore that, investigate, and tell me where you'd rather meditate from. I think you'll find the experience without "I" to be much more easeful, peaceful, open, spacious, balanced, equanimous. Start to investigate and see what it feels like.

The seeing into not-self is not a cold, intellectual, academic exercise. It is to remove the excessive self-concern that we generate when we feel the tight constriction of self.

When we remove that excessive self-concern, the heart can open easily into love and compassion. This is why we investigate self—to discover that open space where love and compassion can flow very easily.

These two experiences, the absence of self—sometimes described as the emptiness of self—and the movement into love and compassion, support one another. They need one another. One naturally flows into the other.

This understanding brings us to a beautiful quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj that captures this perfectly: "Love tells me I am everything. Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows."

Let loving kindness carry you into a deep connection with all of life, and let Vipassana carry you into the wisdom of not being anything particular at all.

So let's just sit for a minute.

Love tells me I'm everything. Wisdom tells me I'm nothing.

CHAPTER 157

The Power of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the transformative power of mettā (loving-kindness) practice within the Vipassana tradition. Drawing on the Dhammapada and teachings on the brahmavihāras, he outlines five essential developments that arise from mettā practice: cultivating a responsive heart that learns to care, purifying the mind by bringing hindrances to awareness, developing samādhi through unified attention, connecting us to all sentient beings through recognition of our shared wish for happiness, and generating profound contentment. Armstrong skillfully addresses common obstacles in mettā practice, explaining how apparent hindrances like self-judgment or anger are actually part of the purification process. He demonstrates how mettā serves as the foundation for all four brahmavihāras - with compassion arising when the open heart meets suffering, sympathetic joy when it meets happiness, and upekkhā providing balance for all three. The talk weaves together inspiring examples from figures like the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, and Dīpā Mā, showing how this 'basic human warmth' can transform both individual practice and our relationships with others. Armstrong emphasizes that while Vipassana reveals the emptiness of phenomena, mettā fills that space with warmth, creating what one teacher called 'empty, empty, happy, happy' - the perfect fusion of wisdom and love.*

The talk tonight is on the power of loving kindness.

I'll start with a quote by Rumi, who is kind of the poet laureate of the Vipassana lineage, so a suitable opening. He said, "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." This spoke to me deeply.

When I was in my twenties, I had many openings and considerable access to love. It came through connections to people, to nature, to music, and to art. Those experiences were very meaningful and satisfying for me, but what they weren't was stable. They seemed to come and go with no logic that I could see. I didn't know what the conditions were that led to that availability, or what conditions made them unavailable. That was a significant part of my motivation for entering Dharma practice—I wanted to understand how to have love be a more frequent part of my life.

Of course, I found out what probably many of you realize already: the key to any kind of stability in loving kindness or mettā is the wisdom of non-clinging. The process of clinging or selfing blocks the opening to love, while letting go into non-clinging opens the channels to love. In addition, our lineage has a very powerful practice that inclines the mind in this direction—the practice of loving kindness itself.

I'm very grateful that this exists within our tradition. One of the beautiful things about the tools that the Buddha offered is that we have the power to shape our heart and mind in almost any wholesome direction that we choose. We can direct it toward wisdom, toward equanimity, toward joy, toward compassion. We can direct it to love using specific practices and specific tools that the Buddha offered.

Within our tradition, the practice of loving kindness is the primary way to develop this openness to love in all its wholesome forms. There's much that goes on with the practice of loving kindness in addition to just the appearance of the quality of mettā, and that's what I want to explore tonight—the benefits and powers that are implicit within the practice of loving kindness.

There are five particular developments I want to discuss this evening. First, the practice of mettā makes the heart more responsive. It trains us to care, and in doing that, makes us respond to and feel, with an empathetic attitude, the happiness or suffering or welfare of the beings that we come into contact with.

Second, it purifies the heart. That is, it cleans it up, scrubs it—sometimes with quite a stiff brush—but it's a very powerful agent for the purification process.

Third, mettā practice is an excellent avenue to concentration. It's described in the Visuddhimagga, that fifth-century text compiling many techniques of the time, primarily for its benefits in developing concentration or samādhi.

Fourth, it connects us to life. It connects us to the whole breadth of what lives, and so in that way makes our practice more inclusive. It teaches us our relatedness to all sentient beings and gives us a way to bring all sentient beings really alive in our meditation.

Finally, the practice of mettā brings a lot of happiness. It's one of the most direct routes to happiness that I know of.

Let me talk about each of these five developments in detail, beginning with how the practice makes the heart more responsive. This is perhaps the most obvious thing that happens as a result. What we're really doing in our formal mettā practice is training

ourselves in how to care. We learn how to care about our own well-being and we learn how to care about the well-being of any other being that we direct the loving kindness to. This is a training in heart connection.

The very phrases of mettā point us to caring about people's safety, happiness, health, and ease in life. It's easy to go through our days meeting people as they come and go without having to look very deeply into their experience. But using the phrases of loving kindness, we start inquiring: How are you? How are you doing? These are the areas that make up happiness—how are you doing in those areas? This becomes an important training in taking beings in.

In our lineage, Vipassana is the primary practice. We often say that we do the loving kindness in the context of the Vipassana practice and as a support for it. The wisdom practice is to see things as they are, and out of that seeing comes an unburdening of the heart with greater freedom.

And out of that unburdened heart, love and compassion flow more easily, flow more naturally.

In my observation, some people have a temperament such that just from Vipassana practice, a big heart opening takes place. As their personality inclines to the emotional side or to the loving side, just the freedom that opens through Vipassana allows that loving kindness to come through.

But with some other personalities, the Vipassana practice removes a lot of obstacles, but it doesn't so strongly accelerate the opening of the heart. For myself, my upbringing and temperament were such that I was probably on the cerebral end of the spectrum. I was not terribly emotional as a young person growing up. And so for me, the introduction of the Brahmavihara practices created a wonderful avenue to really bring the development of the heart to the forefront.

There was a period of time in my practice when I did a lot of Brahma Vihara practice. I would come here to the three-month course every year. I would sit for six weeks, and I would do Brahma Viharas—metta, or compassion, or sometimes all four Brahma Viharas. That brought beautiful qualities to be more accessible in my life, in my practice, and in my relationships.

It's not necessary that everyone do metta practice. It's not necessary that all Vipassana practitioners do metta practice. Usually within a group of 100 yogis, there's a very solid club called the I Hate Metta Club. So if you're part of that, that's okay too. You don't have to run toward the allure of love. But if you want to, here's the path. And it really works.

I was sitting in a retreat with a Tibetan teacher, and you may know that often at the end of retreats, they give heart advice to their students as parting instructions. So this teacher said, "As you're going back into the world, I suggest that as you take the teachings back into the world, let people know how the teachings are manifesting in your life. You're a representative of the Dharma as you go back into your life. The way you carry yourself and conduct yourself will express to people what's going on with your Buddhist practice."

He said, "I have three pieces of advice. When you go back, be natural. Just be a natural, easy person. Don't put on spiritual airs and try to be precious about the fact that you're a meditator. Just be a natural down-to-earth person. The second is, be wise. When you go back into the world, be careful with your choices. Be careful with your conduct. Don't do things that are going to be really upsetting to other people. Don't harm people. Take care with your interactions and your relationships. And the third thing: be juicy."

Juice—this is a technical Buddhist term. And it includes qualities like love, reverence, joy, compassion, faith, humility, devotion, humor, awe, wonder. "Go back and manifest this juicy heart quality, and that will be an immediate way of transmitting to people the benefits of your practice." So be natural, wise, and juicy. That was the instruction.

These qualities not only communicate to other people, they make our life so much sweeter. As these qualities come alive in us, they bring forth the beautiful emotional side that is in our human potential. Life becomes so much richer on account of them. And they also touch others.

I appreciated this comment from Alice Walker, the author, who said, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." So as we go back into the world, let's manifest that good-heartedness to the people that we come in contact with.

We have four specific ways of development through the Brahma Viharas. In our lineage, metta is the foundation for the other three. There's loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Metta is the foundation because with metta, what we do is develop the heart that is open and caring. That's the foundation for everything in the Brahmavihara realm.

When that open heart looks on someone who's suffering, the natural movement is to compassion. That's naturally what comes through when the open heart looks on suffering. When that open heart looks on someone who's happy, what naturally comes through is sympathetic joy—a happiness in the other's happiness.

And when that open heart can just rest in the center of things, the way it expresses itself is through the balance of equanimity.

So all four of these states are intimately related. And I love the symmetry here. With metta as the foundation, suffering gives rise to compassion, happiness gives rise to sympathetic joy. There's a beautiful symmetry in that. And then equanimity, you could say, is the support for all three. Because if equanimity is not present, the mind tips out of the balance of the brahmavihara into an unwholesome state—either the near enemy or far enemy.

If you read dharma that comes out of a Mahayana lineage, Zen or Tibetan, they will usually talk about compassion as being primary among the brahmaviharas. Tibetan Buddhism definitely has the same four brahmaviharas as our lineage, but they tend to emphasize compassion as the foundation. And this is beautiful in a way, because compassion really relates to the heart of the dharma as expressed in the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are all about suffering and its end. And so the brahmaviharas can be focused on suffering and, through practice, its end.

But you don't need to argue with the Tibetans about this. It's not that metta and compassion are so very different. We see metta as a foundation; compassion is just what comes through when it sees suffering. So they're very closely allied. And whichever one you regard as primary works just fine.

The Dalai Lama defined compassion as "basic human warmth." And that's what our definition of metta could be also—basic human warmth. This is the stance of the caring heart.

Now sometimes from a vipassana perspective, people have a philosophical doubt about metta practice. Some people don't want to get too close because they don't quite trust it. Vipassana is so elegant—just be with what is. It's kind of impeccable, right? Who could argue with just being with what is? And in a deep way, we're taking our refuge in reality. The dharma means the truth. Our refuge is in the truth of things the way they are. That's very beautiful.

And so from this point of view, metta can seem a little suspicious. It can look contrived, sound too much like a Hallmark card, be a little sentimental, or have a feeling that it's somehow fake.

But even the faking has a good quality to it. As Carol Wilson likes to say, "Fake metta is a lot better than real aversion."

With the brahmavihara practices, we incline the mind in a certain direction, and then slowly the natural quality is evoked by that inclining. It becomes very unfabricated, very natural, very unforced.

And then other people complain that metta is deluded. You know, you say, "May I be happy," but there is no I—we know this from vipassana practice. There's no I. Or you say, "May you be happy," but happiness is impermanent. Why should I wish for something that's impermanent?

So for all you vipassana practitioners who have this view, I want to offer a different meta-phrase for you. The phrase goes something like this: "In this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena, conventionally designated as Sally, may the mind state of happiness arise ever more frequently."

I think this would satisfy even the Abhidhamma purists in the group. So you could say that phrase in your metta if you like, or you could simply say, "May Sally be happy." You can choose.

But truth to tell, when I say, "May Sally be happy," I understand that other phrase. My understanding is that she's empty of a self and happiness will always come and go. But we understand that, and we can still say, "May Sally be happy."

And it's so moving, I find, when I meet somebody who's developed the heart to a strong degree. I often think about the Dalai Lama in this regard. He will say to large groups, "My religion is kindness." And I think he means this in a very profound way: My religion is kindness.

In that famous interview, the Dalai Lama's responses revealed something profound about a mind cultivated in loving-kindness. When Oprah asked if he'd ever had to forgive himself for anything, he replied simply: "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah pressed, clearly incredulous.

"My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable," he admitted. "Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

The awe in Oprah's voice was palpable as she reflected: "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet, service to Buddhism, service to humanity," he replied, "I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators—even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind—I don't lag too far behind."

What a beautiful mind and heart. And it only took him seventeen lifetimes to get there, so we still have a way to go. We might catch up.

Someone like the Dalai Lama reminds us of our nature and our potential. This quality of love is not something fabricated through practice—it's something natural in us. We draw it out and strengthen it over time.

I think about one of the most loving people I've known: my grandmother. She was born in the countryside of North Carolina in 1890, and she had one of the most loving hearts I've ever encountered, with no formal Buddhist training whatsoever. She was just a naturally warm, kind, loving being. When we touch someone like that, we realize: oh, that's my possibility too. That's my potential.

The next of the powers of loving-kindness is purification. This purification begins from the intention that we put into our metta practice. When you express a phrase like "may you be safe" or "may you be happy," you're expressing an intention. Intention is at the heart of karma and has powerful impact in our hearts, minds, and eventually our lives. So we're working directly with a very wholesome intention as the seed of metta practice.

We reiterate this wish again and again—in different forms, the basic message of "I hope you're well and I hope you're happy." This creates an interesting situation because we're wishing someone else happiness, but we can't control whether they experience it or not. And for our metta practice, whether they do or not isn't really the point.

We're not wishing this to make that outcome happen, because we can't. If we could, we would, but that's beyond our power. We're wishing it as a way of strengthening this wholesome seed—the intention of caring. It's the repetition of that moment after moment that grows the feeling of metta in us.

Just as in vipassana practice we have the moment-by-moment intention to pay attention to the present moment, in metta our intention is to express that wish of caring. That's what we're doing time after time.

The metta practice doesn't work like a mantra practice. It's not enough to just say the phrase mechanically.

The more meaning you put into saying the phrase, that's what will give it the power. So we want to mean the phrase as we say it. That's where the sincere caring comes in.

And then you don't have to worry if it doesn't feel like anything's happening yet in metta. Sometimes people get impatient. "I've been saying the metta for five minutes and I'm not overcome by unconditional love." Be patient with it.

What the intention is doing—the intention is a karmic seed. We're planting the seed, but we can't make the plant grow. Just like if you're a gardener, you can plant a tomato seed, but you can't tell the plant when to push up out of the soil and start bearing fruit. All you can do is put it in the ground, water it, give it sunshine, give it fertilizer, and trust nature to do the rest.

So that's what's happening with our metta practice. Each of these intentions is a little seed. We water them with our care and our sincerity, but we trust nature, we trust the Dharma to grow it up in its own time. So sometimes as you're planting the seeds, it might feel mechanical, it might feel repetitive, the feeling may be dry. Don't worry about that. You're just planting seeds and the fruit will come in its own time.

The Buddha said it this way in the Dhammapada: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." Just one drop at a time, and those seeds will grow.

With the Brahmavihara practices, we're instructed to start where it's easy. And in loving kindness, this is considered to be oneself. But as you may have found out, metta for oneself is not always the easiest to do. Sometimes the feelings are just not as strong toward oneself as toward a benefactor or friend. That's quite natural.

And then also as we do the metta for ourself, we may come up against obstacles that tell us, "Oh, you're not really worthy of being loved. You're not really worthy of being cared for." And sometimes memories will come up of things that we've done that were unskillful or ways that we've been hurt or harmed. And it's almost like the metta intention starts to show us ways that we can't really be loved or loving.

Sometimes when that happens, we might think, "Oh, I'm doing it wrong," or "I can't do it, I'm not a good metta practitioner," but that's not the right understanding. These feelings that come up—whether they're guilt or remorse or self-judgment or blame or even self-hatred—may be in there already and the metta is bringing them to the surface. That's part of the power of it.

It's as though the metta intention is this very strong positive pole that we run up near our heart. And what it does, it's kind of like a magnet. It brings to the surface everything that has the opposite charge. So it can bring up anger, guilt, blame, resentment, and so forth, but that's part of its power. Because when those things come into awareness, then we can work with them. If they're just hidden and we don't feel them directly, we can't work with them. They can't be seen, they can't be understood, we can't become free from them. But when they're brought into the light of awareness, then they can be worked with and to some extent release our fixation on them.

So how to work when these qualities come up, as they are likely to in doing extended periods of loving kindness? The first thing is to recognize the hindrance that has appeared. This is a little bit like the practice of RAIN. We want to recognize what's present. So anger, resentment, hurt, blame, self-judgment—just know what's there.

If it's fairly light, keep repeating the metta phrases and keep saying the metta intention. Keep connecting with that intention of caring, maybe for yourself at that point. And let the hindrance be kind of in the background. And what's interesting about that is that the hindrance sort of gets enfolded into the metta energy. As you continue to incline the mind to caring, the hindrance—even if it's self-related, even if it's self-judgment—starts to be touched by the intention of caring. And that makes it much more bearable.

So we start to see that metta actually has different levels of intensity. The first level of intensity, I would say, is the quality of patience. And here, the Pali word is kanti. It's one of the paramis. And it doesn't quite mean what patience means in English, which is just waiting until the bad stuff's over.

You're waiting in line at a supermarket—when will it be my turn? Patience, as khanti, has more the sense of how can we stay in a balanced and open frame of mind when circumstances aren't really to our liking? Or even more, as it develops, how do you maintain a sweetness of mind in the face of unfavorable circumstances? This is really what the term khanti means and why it's one of the paramis.

So when a hindrance comes, the first sign of the metta being active is that we can simply be patient and endure the hindrance without being too upset by its presence. The metta is active if there's an attitude of patience with the hindrance.

The next level of development in the metta is a real spirit of acceptance. This is the A that we've talked about in RAIN—true acceptance and allowing of the presence of that difficulty. So it might be self-judgment, it might be guilt, it might be remorse, but we

simply allow it to be there in all its fullness. We don't fight it. We don't resist it, we don't judge it, we don't say it ought to go away. When we can bring that spirit, the metta has grown up yet another level.

As we've talked about with difficult emotions, this movement into a real allowing—meaning non-resisting of the difficult emotion or the hindrance—is a really important step in finding freedom with it. It's the full acceptance of these difficult states that undercuts their conditioned power. So the move to acceptance is part of loving kindness.

Then the next level, and this is where people usually start looking for metta, there's a feeling of affection. You'll feel this most readily with people you're close to—friend, benefactor, and so forth. Or if you pick a neutral person, you can really fall in love with your neutral person. It's quite a delight. We haven't gotten to the neutral person yet in the instructions, but see what happens if you pick a neutral person who's on the retreat and practice for them steadily.

So this feeling of affection—that's the first sign that most people would recognize: oh, this is loving kindness. This is visible. This is felt here and now. And then the feeling of affection can become stronger. It can grow into a deep sense of love for the person or for yourself. And then even stronger into a quality of devotion that's almost like a passion as love is magnified—such a strong connection.

So these can all come out of allowing the hindrance to be in the background, and qualities of affection can develop even toward the hindrance. They become like an old friend.

If you can leave the hindrance in the background and still connect with the caring intention, that's the first suggestion. But sometimes the hindrance becomes so strong we can't really connect with that caring. If that happens, then you have two choices.

One is—and this is probably recommended because it stays within the Brahmavihara family—switch to compassion. And you say something like, "May I hold this difficulty with compassion?" So you drop the metta phrase and move to a compassion phrase. The classical compassion phrase is, "May I be free from this suffering?" You could try that one, that's fine. The one I use these days is, "May I hold this pain with compassion?" And try just saying it repetitively, just like you were doing a metta practice—fifteen minutes, twenty minutes—and see if it doesn't shift your relationship to that hindrance. Compassion is a very powerful way to hold a difficulty.

If it feels like compassion isn't quite fitting for you, doesn't feel quite appropriate, then switch to vipassana. And as you switch to vipassana, just let yourself open to the hindrance with mindfulness. Think about the sequence of RAIN—recognition, allowing, investigation, non-identification. And often just that gesture of openness, willingness to meet, application of mindfulness will let the hindrance just open a little bit and sometimes wash through. In which case, if it gets weaker, kind of passes through, you can just return to the metta phrases again.

So these are the three levels: hindrance in the background, continue with metta; switch to compassion; or move to vipassana and just relate mindfully with the hindrance that's there. One of these will usually bring some degree of greater ease with the hindrance that has appeared.

One other thing you can do is move to a person who's easier for you. If you've been doing metta for yourself, move to a benefactor or friend—take an easier person.

And then what this does, when we can even surround our hindrances with this loving-kindness energy, is it puts us together. You may have noticed that vipassana in looking at the six sense objects and the five aggregates is kind of taking us apart. We might say that it deconstructs the idea we have of what a self is. And in doing that, it takes us apart into these momentary arisings and passings that make up our sense-based experience.

What metta does is it introduces this unifying energy. Love unites.

And so metta introduces this unifying energy that holds all the different pieces together and sees them all as part of ourselves—acceptable parts of ourselves. It tends to end the psychological fragmentation and brings the being back together.

Another aspect of purification can come up when we work with the difficult person, which we'll get to in another week. I was doing one long period of metta practice here—a six-week metta retreat. Interestingly, my difficult person from the year before was also on that retreat.

So I was settled in and the metta was going well. I was feeling a lot of openness and joy and connection. Then I'd cross paths in the dining room with my difficult person. All of a sudden, all that love and connection would just be out the window. I'd start thinking about the way they treated me during this past year. How could they have done that? How could they have said that? And I'd start getting into angry complaining about the difficult person. I could spin out on that for like half an hour, thinking about the past and what had been difficult in this past year.

I thought, "How am I going to work with this?" I tried a lot of different things. Finally, somebody suggested I should send metta to the difficult person, but I didn't want to do it. I thought, "If I send metta to the difficult person, that's going to mean I have to like them. I don't really want to like them. I certainly don't want to love them." But I was desperate, so I tried it.

I would run into the difficult person, start complaining, the anger would start growing, and I would immediately turn to start doing the loving-kindness phrases for my difficult person. What was interesting is that when I did that, the anger went away. Then the thoughts calmed down and I could just get back into the rhythm of my loving-kindness practice. So basically it worked—much to my chagrin.

But what was most interesting was what I learned from that. I saw that the way my anger was forming—and I think this happens a lot with anger—there was an element in it of ill will. Ill will means we want the other person to suffer. Metta, which is goodwill, means we want the other person to be happy. So I saw that in my anger there was an element of wanting the other person to suffer.

When I could replace the ill will with goodwill, there was no grounds for the anger. All I had to do—I didn't have to like the person, I didn't have to love them, I didn't have to excuse their actions—all I had to do was wish that they'd be happy. If I could sincerely wish for their happiness, the ill will couldn't coexist with that. So it was a really interesting learning.

As I started to examine this ill will, something struck me about it. I acknowledged that I was wanting the other person to suffer, and that came as kind of a shock to me—to see that this was an integral piece of my anger. Wanting somebody else to suffer. Because that is very close to cruelty. Cruelty is enjoying someone else's suffering. Ill will is wanting someone else to suffer. And they're very close.

I could sort of be okay being angry at somebody, but when I looked closer, I could not accept that I could enjoy being cruel or accept being cruel to someone. And because ill will and cruelty are actually so closely related, I didn't feel good about generating ill will anymore.

So this was a real wake-up call for me to look more closely at my anger to see if there was within it the seed of wanting someone else to suffer.

The Buddha talked a lot about how to relate with people who have harmed us and for whom we might get angry quite easily or quite naturally. And he gave this piece of advice: "When someone speaks harshly to you, train like this. Train in this way. Our minds will remain unaffected and we will utter no evil words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving kindness without inner hate."

This is not so easy. But I think about some beautiful examples in the larger world who have struggled with big burdens. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for twenty-seven years by various white regimes in South Africa. Finally, in 1990, the government began to realize that they might have a real problem on their hands if they continued to keep him in jail. So de Klerk, the president at that time, brought Mandela out of prison to meet with him and a few senior cabinet ministers to explore the possibility of releasing him.

But the main fear of the white government was that if they released Mandela and he became a popular leader in the country, he could incite so much anger in the black population—who had been oppressed and violated and harmed for so many years—that the whites were really afraid of the retribution.

So de Klerk and the ministers sat down with Mandela and basically put it to him: "If we let you out of prison, would you want to incite the population to violence against whites?"

Mandela was very clear in his answer. He said no. He said, "I would not at all try to do that. We have been observing you and we have seen in you what brutality and fear look like and what it does to you as people. And we do not want to live like that. So we are not going to engender that in the population if you release us."

And he didn't. It was one of the most beautiful demonstrations of the capacity for forgiveness that we've seen in our lifetimes. And that came out of a deep spiritual place. That was not just a political move.

Aung San Suu Kyi said something similar. She was released from house arrest after about seventeen years. It's interesting—she was under house arrest and she used the time to do a lot of meditation practice. We've heard stories because we had connections to some of the noted Burmese Sayadaws who went in to visit her and taught her while she was under house arrest for those seventeen years. She was doing serious practice during that time. And one important component was this practice of loving kindness.

So at the end of her years of imprisonment, she said, "When I compared notes with my colleagues in the democracy movement in Burma who have suffered long terms of imprisonment, we found that an enhanced appreciation of metta was a common exper-

ience. We had known and felt both the effects of loving kindness and the unwholesomeness of natures lacking in loving kindness." And she too has emerged from those years of imprisonment and mistreatment with a very generous attitude of healing the divisions within the country.

The third area of power of loving kindness is the realm of concentration. Bonnie talked about this factor the other night when she talked about the seven factors of awakening. It's a really important part of the Eightfold Path built on developments of mindfulness.

One way to understand concentration is that it's about the unification of mind. One of the synonyms for it, ekaggata, really means unification of mind. So in concentration, the mind comes together into the present moment. And when the mind becomes unified in the present moment, it acquires a strength and stability that it doesn't have when it's chasing after past and future. This unification of mind is a very powerful factor.

So we will use the loving-kindness practice as one way of teaching concentration. Often in a retreat like this, there will be several people who are doing exclusively loving kindness practice, partly as a way to develop the heart and partly as a way to develop concentration. We will teach it in long retreats as a way to develop concentration to the level of jhana. So loving kindness has that potential.

And when you think about it, it makes sense because there's a clear object that we keep coming back to, which is the phrase or phrases. We keep repeating them, and in that repetition the attention has a very clear point to collect around.

So in the beginning we see that the phrases are the primary object and the mind collects around that. As the mind gets more settled and the loving-kindness develops, we start to see there are actually up to three other objects that are going on in the metta practice.

One of them is the connection to the other person or yourself—the connection piece. And often we suggest that people bring up an image of the person you're directing the metta to, and the image becomes another focus for concentration.

We also want to tune into what's the mood or emotion that's coming as a result of the metta practice. And it can be a form of metta—patience, acceptance, affection, love, etc.—or it can be one of the hindrances that the metta practice is drawing out in its work of purification. So we look at the feeling that comes through as well.

And then I like to encourage people to have the metta be a really embodied experience. So to come back into the heart center regularly and feel whatever sensations are there at the center of the chest.

As the metta develops, we can have these four separate objects of concentration. And if you say a phrase and go through contact with all four of these objects, it gives a very clear path for concentration to develop.

What's so interesting about this is that love unifies the mind and concentration unifies the mind. So when we bring them both together, we get very strong forces of unity.

This was described in a really interesting way by a Russian Orthodox Saint who lived in the 19th century. His name was Theophan the Recluse. As far as I know, he didn't have contact with Buddhism or the practice of metta. He was a Christian contemplative. And yet, listen to how similar this is:

"For so long as the mind remains in the head, where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there. The concentration is reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of warmth. This sensation grows gradually stronger, firmer, and deeper.

"And so it comes about that whereas in the initial stages, the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will, in due course, this attention by its own strength gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth then holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting one another and must remain inseparable because dispersion of attention cools the warmth and diminishing warmth weakens attention."

Isn't that beautiful? The way the love and the concentration support one another in this meditation.

Sometimes you meet meditators, masters, who have an incredible power of manifesting this loving kindness. Dipa Ma is one of the most inspiring women teachers in our lineage. She had this capability. She had this kind of force of transmission. If you haven't read her biography, which I think is just titled "Dipa Ma," I really recommend it to you, especially to women practitioners, because I think for the women in our lineage, she is one of the strongest figures that you can relate to.

She came here in the late seventies, early eighties and taught some different courses. She was someone whom everyone felt when they were in her presence they had a very strong feeling of her love. Joseph and Sharon used to visit her at her small apartment in Calcutta and they would describe walking in there and just feeling that the whole space of her home was filled with the energy of love.

One time—I love this question—one time she was teaching at IMS and one of the meditators asked her, because she was an amazing being, the meditator asked her, "What's in your mind?"

And she said, "I only have three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and metta."

That's a beautiful mind.

Then connection. The practice of loving kindness opens our connection out to embrace all living beings, everything that lives. When we get to the loving kindness for all beings, this comes through really strongly because we find that whomever we direct the loving kindness toward, we discover they're a lot like us.

Every being that we bring to mind wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer. You see this so clearly in all of us. You see it in the chipmunks who are running across the road and don't want to be struck by you or a car or anything. You see it in the birds who look for food as the days grow shorter. Every living being has the same most fundamental wish as we do: a wish to be happy and not to suffer.

And as you tune into beings, you can feel their vulnerability. You can feel how all of us are exposed to this changing set of circumstances that can be helpful or dangerous for us. So we start to feel like every being has got some piece of our heart alive in them. This heart that is looking for happiness, this heart that shrinks from pain and suffering—it's our connection to every being that lives.

What thought does is thought and concepts grow on distinctions. So we make a lot of distinctions, and they're valid ones, but we make a lot of distinctions based on gender, gender identification, age, race, ethnicity, class, ability or lack of ability, culture, sexual orientation. These are real distinctions. And each one of them shapes our life in a certain way. And people with one set of these qualities will go through life with one set of experiences and people with another will go through life with a different set of experiences.

But sometimes because these distinctions come so easily to the conceptual mind, we lose sight of the fact that there's an underlying unity that is just as important. We're so used to dividing that we sometimes forget how strongly we're united underneath all that. And when we start to look at this human heart that we all share, we all have the same package of emotions and we're all vulnerable in very much the same ways.

And I start to feel that it's really—there's only one human heart. And it's been poured into all our different bodies and then goes through life subject to different conditions and experiences and gets shaped in different ways. But it's still the one human heart that is there in all of us. Metta brings this out as we hold people with this sense of care.

We see this deep sense of connection to everything that lives. Rumi had a teacher whose name was Shams, and he came from a town called Tabriz in that part of the world. Rumi wrote a lot of poetry. Shams did not leave much behind. But of the one poem that I've heard from Shams, it's quite beautiful, and I wanted to share it. This is from Shams of Tabriz:

"I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

There is a way of seeing that is deeper than all the distinctions that we can draw with our concepts. But it needs the spiritual eye to be open to see that underlying unity. And this is one of the things that metta reveals to us.

And finally, happiness. Metta leads to a lot of happiness. One of the things it does is overcome our sense of separation and isolation through this connection. Separation and isolation are very difficult for us to bear. They're a source of some deep unhappiness.

When I was doing a long period of meditation on my benefactor, and I'd picked someone who was wise and happy, I really felt that in that meditation, I was just soaking up their energy, their mind, their heart, day after day, hour after hour, by holding them in my loving kindness. So I really recommend picking a benefactor who has these qualities. It could be someone you've met, it could be a teacher you've known from a distance, like the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh or Deepa Ma, someone you really feel inspired by. But the joy can really come as a transmission through them.

One teacher who came to Spirit Rock over a number of years was a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian had done a lot of loving-kindness practice and also a lot of vipassana practice. So what we say is vipassana reveals emptiness and loving-kindness fills it with warmth. You can feel this in your practice. The space grows

from the vipassana and the metta can fill that space with warmth so that we bring this warm attention into our mindfulness with every object or person that we meet. This is the merging of mindfulness and loving-kindness.

Ajahn Jumnian didn't know a lot of words of English. He spoke Thai through a translator. But he knew a couple. And when people would ask him to sum up some of his teaching, he would go, "Empty, empty, happy, happy." That's the fusion of vipassana and metta. The emptiness of vipassana, the warmth of metta.

As those two start to come together and we feel it pervading our meditation, we feel it pervading our heart and mind, it provides a home that we can start to trust in and rest in. This gives the sense of relaxation and ease that we're looking for. We don't have to strain for something other because the peace and the warmth are right there together. And there's just a sense that if we just let go and feel what's in the heart, we're already home. We're already home and it will grow from there. So this is a way into our own trust in our own basic goodness. And it brings a lot of satisfaction, a lot of happiness.

Oprah had one more question for the Dalai Lama. And in his reply, I just want to remind us again that compassion and metta are more or less the same. It's different flavors, same thing. Her last question for the Dalai Lama was, "In my magazine, I do a column called What I Know for Sure. What do you know for sure, the one thing on which you have no doubt?"

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate. "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For happy life and happy world, there is no doubt."

Metta also.

Let's just sit for a minute. Compassion is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world.

CHAPTER 158

The Five Aggregates Are Empty

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this profound Dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddhist teaching on suññatā (emptiness) as it relates to the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā). Building on previous teachings about anattā (not-self), he illuminates two essential aspects of emptiness: the absence of an abiding self within the aggregates, and the fundamental insubstantiality of all phenomena.*
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> *Drawing from key suttas including the Suñña Sutta and the Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta (SN 22.95) from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, Armstrong presents the Buddha's powerful similes—form is like a lump of foam, feeling like a water bubble, perception like a mirage, formations like a plantain trunk, and consciousness like a magician's illusion. He shares the moving story of Bāhiya, who attained full awakening through the Buddha's brief instruction: "In the seen, let there be just the seen." Personal experiences, including witnessing autopsies as a monk in Thailand, illustrate how direct investigation reveals the dreamlike, insubstantial nature of all experience.*
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> *The talk demonstrates how understanding emptiness naturally gives rise to compassion rather than nihilism. When we see that nothing is solid enough to grasp, clinging loses its foothold and suffering cannot take root. Armstrong quotes the Visuddhimagga: "There is suffering, but no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on." This wisdom, embodied by the bodhisattva Kuan Yin, allows us to hold life's joys and sorrows with both tenderness and equanimity.*

The subject of the talk tonight is the five aggregates are empty.

Two weeks ago I talked about the five aggregates being the components of experience that make us up: material form, feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. In that talk we went into how none of these can be a ground for confirming a true self within the mind-body process. All there is is these five aggregates. There is no one to whom they belong. There is no one at the center that constitutes an essence of the aggregates. This was the teaching on not-self. The Pali word for that is anatta.

Tonight I want to look at the five aggregates in terms of their quality of being empty. Emptiness in the Buddhist tradition is known as sunyata. It's a very important term and has been for the 2500 years that Buddhism has been around. It has become central in every lineage of the Dharma, every practice lineage since the time of the Buddha.

In the talk tonight, I want to look at two aspects of the meaning of emptiness in relation to the aggregates. The first aspect is this absence of self—that within the five aggregates there is no abiding or continuing entity that can be called a center or self. This is put very succinctly in the Buddha's answer to a question from Ananda. Ananda, you remember, was his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life, a very devoted, loyal, and kind person.

Ananda asked the Buddha, "The world is empty. The world is empty. In what way is the world empty?" And the Buddha said, "The world is empty because it is empty of a self and of what belongs to a self." In other words, the world is empty of "I" and it is empty of "mine." In this sense, anatta or not-self and sunyata or emptiness mean the same thing in this context of the world being empty of self.

I want to talk about this a little bit more. These words "I" and "mine" don't have an ultimate reference. They're conventionally useful, but they don't point to any single thing that endures. And yet we can see that, but the sense of "I" keeps coming back. It's very curious. We can see many times this absence of self, and yet we continue to be fooled by the sense when it comes, and we think, "Oh, it feels like it's there." So how does that happen?

This is a quote I mentioned last week, another from Ananda. Another monk told me when we were newly ordained, "It is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging." And by clinging to what does "I am" arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. In other words, the sense of "I am" arises when we hold on to one of the aggregates or to a sense object.

The Buddha put this another way, saying the same thing: "When there is form, by clinging to form, by adhering to form, one regards things thus: 'This is mine, this I am, this is myself.'" And then he repeats that for the other four aggregates. Basically, by grasping something, we give rise to the sense of self, either as "I" or as "mine."

But when this doesn't take place, this seeing of the absence of self can be completely liberating. There's a very nice story of a visitor named Bahiya. Bahiya was a sincere spiritual practitioner who lived in the south of India. He lived very simply. He had

strong renunciation. He had many followers. And yet he was unsure whether he was fully enlightened or not. That might have been a clue, but he held it as a question: maybe I'm fully enlightened.

It so happened that one of these celestial beings, a deva, came down and told him, "Sorry, Bahiya, you are not fully enlightened, nor are you on the path to enlightenment." What a message. And so Bahiya said, "Well, do you know of anyone who is an Arahant?" The celestial being said, "Yes, there is one named Siddhartha Gautama, and he lives in the north of India, and he is teaching now, and he is a fully awakened Buddha."

Bahiya immediately resolved to go there and receive teaching. He traveled from the south to the north, a long distance, hundreds of miles, and caught up with the Buddha. He immediately went to seek him out.

And he found him when the Buddha was on alms round. The Buddha was walking slowly, mindfully through the city, and Bahiya came up to him and said, "Are you the one I have heard of called the Blessed One, Gautama Buddha?"

The Buddha acknowledged that he was, and Bahiya said, "Please, Venerable Sir, I've traveled a long distance to see you. Can you give me the teaching, your Dharma, in brief?"

The Buddha said, "No, Bahiya, this is not the right time. I'm on alms round and this is not a convenient time for me. Please come later."

But Bahiya wouldn't accept that. He said, "Venerable Sir, I so want to hear the teaching. Life is short. Who knows what might happen? You might die or I might die. Please give me the teaching in brief."

Again the Buddha declined: "No, Bahiya, this is not the right time. I am on alms round now."

Bahiya was persistent. He asked a third time: "Please, Venerable Sir, this is urgent. Who knows how long each of us might live?"

As often happens when the Buddha is requested a third time, he acceded. He said that he would teach Bahiya in brief. And this is the message that he gave him:

"Therefore, Bahiya, this is how you should train: In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

In other words, when we stop making "I" and "mine" through the medium of sense contact, suffering stops.

When he said this, Bahiya fully awakened. Bahiya was well prepared, and his mind just opened on that brief instruction. He fully realized what the Buddha was pointing to. Later, the Buddha referred to him as his disciple foremost in quickness of learning, quickness of understanding.

Bahiya withdrew, and the Buddha continued on his alms round. Later that afternoon, walking through a field, Bahiya came close to a cow who probably had a calf nearby. The cow attacked him and gored him, and he died on the spot. But the Buddha confirmed for all his disciples that Bahiya had fully awakened before he died, and therefore his journey was complete. That message of "who knows how long you may live or I may live" turned out to be very prophetic. But Bahiya realized.

This was the insight into not-self that completely freed Bahiya's mind. When there is no grasping after the objects of the senses, there is no creation of "I." And in that no creation of "I," suffering has no grounds to arise.

So this is the first meaning of emptiness within our tradition: the clear seeing that this mind-body process, as described by the aggregates, is empty of a self or what belongs to a self.

The second meaning of emptiness is around the notion of insubstantiality—that the aspects of our experience, our sense experience, described as the six kinds of sense objects or as the five aggregates, are not solid, not substantial.

I'll read a passage from one of the key discourses in the Pali Canon. This is from a volume called *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*—in Pali, it's the Samyutta Nikaya. Bonnie thought I should ask: have you all read this book? At least to suggest that it's a good idea. But we'll read a little tonight.

There are not a huge number of suttas that point to this insubstantial nature, but it is clearly there in the Pali Canon. There is more emphasis on the aspect of not-self, but the teachings on the emptiness of phenomena are clearly present from the early days of the Buddhist teachings.

This is a sutta called "A Lump of Foam":

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: "Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam."

You have to imagine that this is a frothy mixture of water and air that has been stirred up by the river. Sometimes we might think a lump of foam would be a block of styrofoam, but 2,500 years ago, that was not the case. This is a bunch of frothy bubbles carried along on the river.

"A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?"

This is the first aggregate that he is talking about—material form. And he is saying, what substance could there be in form? It is like a mass of foam.

This is radical. Because we normally take the body and this physical world to be very solid. In granting them reality, we have also attributed solidity to them. And so the Buddha is saying that this very body and all the world that we see is just like a lump of foam. Could that be accurate? Could he really mean it? He is meaning it. And this is a very clear pointing to this nature of insubstantiality or emptiness of matter.

We know from twentieth-century quantum science that matter mostly consists of space. The amount of substance in the form simply of protons, neutrons, and electrons occupies a very small volume of all the matter that we see in the universe. It is overwhelmingly empty space. And yet the Buddha had this intuition, had this insight from his direct experience 2,500 years earlier.

How else can we see form as being like a mass of foam? A few years ago, I was teaching at Spirit Rock on our month-long retreat in February. In the middle of the dharma talk one evening, as I was talking, there came this loud cry from outside the meditation hall. It sounded like a baby wailing really loudly. Of course it was a little disturbing to hear that, so a couple of the staff members who were in the hall went out to see what was happening. Otherwise I continued with the talk and people continued listening.

When the talk ended we all went outside to see what had happened, and we found the staff members standing over the dead body of an adult deer, which was just laid out on the ground near one of the residence halls. One of the staff members reported that

they had seen a couple of large dogs running away when they came out to check on what the sound was. It is not uncommon in the countryside where Spirit Rock is located that packs of dogs will attack a deer and kill it, but it had never happened on the Spirit Rock land before.

So there we were, a number of us—staff and teachers and some of the yogis—standing around this dead body of the deer. Of course it was very powerful and shocking. In the middle of a retreat, we did not really know what to do, but we knew to stand around and send metta to the deer, wherever its being might be at that point. So we did that for a while, formed a circle, sent metta to the deer.

After doing that, we went about our business, continuing with the retreat. The caretakers called the Marin Humane Society, who said, "Yes, we understand this happens in Woodacre from time to time. We'll come out tomorrow and pick the deer up. Please take it down near the entrance to the property, and we'll come by and pick it up." So the caretakers bundled up the deer and put it into a pickup and drove it down near the entrance and left the body there.

The Humane Society never came. They probably had more pressing things to do. So every day, as we continued to go and come from the retreat, we could observe the body. Interestingly, every day there was a bit less of the deer there to observe because overnight the different animals would come and start to pick it clean. Within about ten days, all that was left of the deer were the bones, the fur, the hooves. All the flesh had been picked completely clean by vultures, by raccoons, by insects—all kinds of scavengers that came.

It was just so shocking. Here was a body that had been complete ten days ago, and now it had completely disappeared.

Form was like a mass of foam. There and then gone. Gone into energy. Gone into food. Disappeared. So that was one way it was demonstrated—this body is like a mass of foam.

Another way comes out of dharma teaching. Some years ago, the Dalai Lama was giving teachings on the Heart Sutra at an outdoor amphitheater in Mountain View in the Bay Area, and a lot of us went. It was a beautiful May season. The teachings were over a few days, and we were spread out in this kind of natural amphitheater, Shoreline Amphitheater. The Dalai Lama was up on a stage up front with what must have been about a hundred monks and nuns from different Buddhist lineages. The Tibetans were on one side with their red robes, and the Theravadans were on another side with their

brown and ochre robes. And then the Zen monks from Japan and Korea were there in their black and gray robes. So the whole stage was filled with this very respected monastic presence.

The Dalai Lama was perched on a throne so that everyone could see him better. And the backdrop was a big canvas painting—where the Grateful Dead would have had an array of hundreds of speakers, instead the Dalai Lama had a big painting of the Potala Palace in Lhasa in the days when he would have been living there, before the occupation. It was this very beautiful setting, and on the hillside were thousands of people, some in seats and others spread out on the grass. It felt actually like a Buddhist Woodstock—a kind of gathering of the tribes, with great energy.

So he gave these teachings on the Heart Sutra, which is all about emptiness, as you probably know. And he came to a section where he was explaining dukkha, unsatisfactoriness. He talked about the third type of dukkha, which I think Winnie probably talked about a little while ago. The third type is called sankhara dukkha, which is the unsatisfactoriness of formations.

The way he explained it was like this. He said, you know, we think impermanence means that something goes along for a while and exists as a kind of solid thing, and then it disappears—sort of the gross view you might have of a creature going along living, then dying, disappearing. But he said that's not the meaning of this third type of dukkha. The dukkha of formations is that things are always dissolving. Nothing exists as a solid thing from one moment to the next. When you look closely with the eyes of meditation, everything is dissolving in the area of the senses moment after moment after moment.

This is something that we can understand through our meditation practice—this unsatisfactoriness of formations, of all conditioned objects, all the sense objects. You can take a look at material form in your direct experience and see this unstable nature.

One of the places we might look first is in the body directly. I know a lot of you have seen this, sometimes many times. When you look closely at a body sensation, is it characterized by solidity or is it characterized by change? If you haven't explored, take these next days and explore. When you look closely at a body sensation, even if it's one of pressure or heaviness, you can see moment-to-moment variation in it—changes in intensity, changes of pulsation, changes of vibration. You'll feel that as you look closely at things. As we start to investigate this material form, the body from inside, there's nothing really solid that we can find and hold on to. It's all in a process of flux.

Then we look at the other aspects of material form—sounds, smells, tastes—even less substantial. Can you grasp a sound? When you're listening to music, can you stop it and grab a note? As soon as you perceive a note, it's already passed and the next note is there. Sound is also characterized by variation, by change in volume, in pitch. Sound is ungraspable. Smells and tastes around the meal table—can you lock onto that lasagna from a couple of days ago? Tastes are very ephemeral. Smells are hard to even catch in the first moment.

That's why this quote, again in the Samyutta: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise one takes no delight in form."

Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling—we see it in the body, in sound, smell, and taste. The last of the senses that make up material form is sight, but it's the hardest to penetrate, to see the changing nature, so we'll come back to that one.

This discourse goes on. Form is like a mass of foam. And then the Buddha goes on to say that feeling tone is like an airy bubble—just a bubble in a stream, like when a raindrop falls in it. Plop, gone. Perception is like a mirage, just a vision in a desert somewhere. Formations are like the trunk of a plantain tree. Plantain is a variety of banana, and if you've ever watched a banana tree growing in the tropics, what you'll find is it only flowers or fruits once, and then it dies because the trunk is not solid. The trunk of a banana tree is just coils of green vegetation. There's no heartwood, there's nothing solid there. You uncoil it, and the tree is just soft. So formations are as empty, as insubstantial as the trunk of a banana tree.

These are the comparisons for the other aggregates. And as you explore, you can ask: Is feeling tone solid, something you can take hold of? Can you grab a perception and hang on to it? And what about thoughts in the area of mental formations? It's just a poof of energy, isn't it? Just a blip. Emotions are so cloud-like that sometimes we can hardly tell they're there. These are the signs of the emptiness of all the other aggregates—insubstantial, ungraspable. I encourage you to continue to look in your actual meditation experience and check this out. Investigate and see if any of the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations—are graspable. See if you can find anything solid to hold onto in them.

This brings us to the last aggregate, which is consciousness. Here's the analogy for consciousness: "Suppose, bhikkhus, that a magician should hold a magic show at a crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it. It would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could

there be in a magic show? Even so, monks, whatever consciousness there is, a person inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it. It would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could there be in consciousness?"

So consciousness is being compared to a magic show—basically an illusion, a magician's illusion. Consciousness, this knowing quality that reveals, that illuminates all the sense impressions: a magician's illusion.

Why would this be of interest? If you think about magic tricks, they're really cool when you first see them, aren't they? Kind of unbelievable. How did they do that? A hundred years ago, the best-known magician in the world, as far as I know, was Houdini. He would draw many people to watch his performances. Here's one of the typical things he would do. He would have people tie up his hands with ropes and chains. Then they would wrap more ropes and chains around his whole body. Then they would place him in a wooden box, someone would hammer down the lid to the box, and then they would toss him in a deep river. That would be fun, huh? People would wait and think, "There's no way he's going to get out of this. He's dead. He's never going to come up from this water." And then a few minutes later, Houdini would swim to the surface, break the water with a big smile, and people on the shore would be wild with disbelief.

Magic tricks are really impressive—until we know that it's a trick. And then what happens? Well, I'll tell you the story of how Houdini did it, because this is a dharma talk and not a magic show.

When they tied his hands up, they tied them really loosely. It looked like they were tight, but they weren't, so he could wriggle his hands out of those bonds. He had tucked into his cheeks several little wrenches, like little Allen wrenches, and he pulled them out. He was an expert lock picker, so using the Allen wrenches, he would pick the locks that were on the rest of the chains that tied his whole body up.

Once he got those done, there's one more trick coming, but there's a big piece of skill in the middle: he had trained to hold his breath for up to three minutes underwater. This is not easy to do. Usually after about a minute we start panicking, and there's this strong desire to swallow, which is not a good idea. So he trained himself to hold his breath for three minutes.

He was doing all this while holding his breath. He'd gotten rid of the ropes around his wrist. He'd gotten rid of the chains around his body. He was still in a wooden box. But the trick was that one side of the box was very lightly tacked on. So he just kicked that side of the box, he was out in the water, swam to the surface, took a deep breath of air. Everybody was amazed. That was magic.

So once you know the trick, it's not as impressive, is it? It brings in this element that we call disenchantment. Disenchantment is a factor—in Pali, the word is *nibbidā*. It's a wholesome factor of mind that is an important part of the journey to liberation when it's described as the building up of wholesome factors, because what it leads to is dispassion. When we see how the trick is performed, we're not enchanted by it any longer. And then we're not as stuck to the belief in the reality of it.

Consciousness is a magic show, but we don't know that. We don't know that it's a trick of sorts, that it has embedded within it, in the way we hold it, a kind of illusion.

So then the Buddha went through all of these. He said, "Form is like a mass of foam and feeling but an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations a plantain tree. Consciousness is a magic show. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun"—which is another word for the Buddha.

So the magic is that through consciousness, we think the world is solid. Consciousness reveals a world and we think it's a solid reality. And then by taking it so seriously, we think we can hold on to it. This is the sad part. Because it's not solid, we can't hold on to it. Seeing that is the same message as seeing impermanence—everything goes, and we can't really grasp. But emptiness takes it a step further, which we'll get to.

We live in a culture where this is not well understood, the lack of solidity in the world. We live in a culture that takes this material world as the ultimate reality. This worldview, which has been around in philosophy for thousands of years, is called materialism. It says that this is the true reality. Everything else comes out of this matter, including us. Somehow evolution made it possible for bodies to grow and then bodies generated consciousness. But everything fundamentally depends on matter. So our fundamental view is that this world is the ultimate reality. We came into this world at birth. We're trapped in it for however many years. And when we die, it continues, but we don't. This is one view, and it seems to be the dominant view in Western culture right now, the dominant view of materialism.

But if you look at ancient Indian philosophies, for example, some of them took consciousness as primary and said basically the physical world was an invention from consciousness. Everything that's physical just appears as a blip in consciousness. And consciousness will endure even if the physical world doesn't.

So this is interesting to consider, isn't it? What's the reality? In the Buddha's teachings, it's interesting—he sort of follows a middle way.

Consciousness and form lean against each other. He said like two sheaves of reeds. If you take one away, the other collapses. Take away consciousness and form will collapse. Take away form and consciousness will collapse. So this is interesting.

But in any case, what we do have is a situation where everything in our experience arises in consciousness, and this has implications. Let's apply this to the world of sight, because this is the hardest to penetrate, isn't it? You look at a wall, it seems very real and solid. You tap on it, it feels very solid. So we might think, well, the other senses might be flimsy, but sight is really giving us solid and real impressions. Let's see if that's true.

We can call on a little bit of the science we know to understand how the sight of wall occurs for us. We know, and this is not too sophisticated, that for us to see a wall, light has to fall on it. The light has to be reflected from the wall to land on our eye. The light that falls on our eye triggers a signal to the brain. That signal gets interpreted in some way that no one understands—scientists aren't even close to figuring this out. And then, boom, the sight of wall appears. Take away the light, take away the eye, take away the nerve, take away the brain—no sight appears.

In order for that sight to keep appearing, if you see the front wall right now, in order for that sight to keep appearing to you, light has to continue to land on it and reflect to your eyes. So that sight is not ongoing. You know that. If you think about the seventh-grade physics of it, you know that millions of photons are hitting that wall and therefore hitting your eye every second, and that impingement of photons is what's recreating the image of the wall over and over and over. There's no solid image anywhere in your visual experience. The image is only being recreated over and over and over, many times a second.

Could that kind of image be said to be solid? No. It's only being recreated by our sense organ, our brain, and our human consciousness, which are all conditioned and go into fabricating this image of wall that we see and believe is solid, but really isn't. The image is not solid.

So when we look closely at the mechanism of sight, we can see the insubstantial nature there too. Everything is changing moment by moment. The problem is we think we're seeing a world, but we're only seeing a representation of it constructed by our sense organs, brain, and consciousness. We don't live in a real world. We live in a fabricated representation of something. Who knows what's actually out there? I don't. But we think we do. We think it's real and solid, and it's only a representation through the senses.

Here's another thing that intrigued me. I used to reflect on this. If I ask you what color this book is, it's pretty clear, right? You would say that it's blue. So let's think about that with the question: where is blue? Is blue really in this book?

Again, if you know science, you know that what's happening is white light falls on this, absorbs the other colors, and reflects blue back to your eye. So that's why you're seeing blue—because you're seeing the reflected blue light. But the other colors, the other end of the spectrum—red, orange, yellow—are being absorbed. So if the book is anything, it's red, orange, yellow, not blue. In fact, you could say this book is really not blue. What it's reflecting back is blue.

So where is blue? It's only in your experience, isn't it? It's just an arising in consciousness. That's the only place blue exists.

It doesn't exist in the book. It only exists in your consciousness.

So we live in a representation of the world that's created by our senses, brain, and consciousness, but we mistakenly give it a solidity that it has never had. And we think we live in the real world.

One way to undo this a little bit is that instead of talking about objects—sense objects—we should talk about appearances. Sometimes I'll use that language, sometimes I'll use "objects," but you have to do the translation internally. We're just talking about things that appear.

One of my teachers said, "Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever"—meaning substantial existence. They are only appearances. That's why consciousness is like a magic show. In Tibetan Buddhism, they call this the magical display of the world through consciousness. Sometimes you get that feeling, don't you, with the autumn leaves? That is really a magical display going on out there. Who knows how it happens? But it's incredible.

So everything in our experience is just an arising in consciousness. There's no solidity there.

This is from the Diamond Sutra, a key text in the Mahayana:

Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world: like a star at dawn, a flickering lamp, a bubble in a stream, an echo, a mirage, and a dream.

This reality is like a dream. When you think about that, is there any real difference between a moment of experience here and a moment of experience in a dream? Is there any real difference? How can you tell the difference? It's truly as insubstantial as a dream. It does seem to have more continuity, but that relies on memory. But in a moment of experience, can you tell the difference?

The nice thing about comparing it to a dream is that it really brings out the fundamental message of seeing emptiness. If you were in a dream, would you cling? If you were in a dream and knew you were in a dream, would you cling to the things of the dream? Not if you were smart.

One time I was about ten years old and it was the night before Christmas. I went to sleep and had a dream that my basement was full of these racks from floor to ceiling, and the racks were full of presents for me. I was very disappointed when I woke up because I had clung to those things in the dream. But if we know it's a dream, we don't cling. And this is like a dream.

So this is the sense of the emptiness of appearances, or the emptiness of sense phenomena. Emptiness doesn't mean a place of nothingness. It doesn't mean a vacancy. It doesn't mean a meditative state where there's no contact happening. It means understanding the insubstantial nature of everything that arises.

When we start to see this insubstantiality through and through and through every sense experience, we start to see that nothing actually lasts long enough to be called a thing. These appearances, as you really look closely, they're really fleeting. Nothing is actually there enough to be a solid thing. And that's why Nagarjuna, the great philosopher of emptiness, said, "That to which language refers is denied." I think that's brilliant. What language refers to is denied. The nouns that language refers to—there aren't any nouns. There's only process.

This is from the Heart Sutra:

While practicing deeply the perfection of wisdom, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress.

There's a key text of the Mahayana. The perception of the emptiness of the five aggregates removes all suffering and distress. Why? Because it undoes grasping.

Impermanence shows us that if we hold on to something, eventually it's going to pass, and that holding will have been futile. But emptiness shows us, if we understand it deeply enough, there's nothing there to hold on to in the first place. There's no solid thing, even temporarily, to hold to. So when one sees that, there is no inclination to grasp.

At this point we see that we're actually empty in two ways.

They're related and they build on each other. They're powerful in building on each other.

The first way is that this mind-body process is empty of a central essence or self that's ongoing. This is anattā. The second way is that every component that is real in this process—the five aggregates or the six types of sense objects—are all insubstantial and therefore empty. So there's no center, therefore empty of self, and there's no solidity anywhere in the components, therefore insubstantial and empty. We're empty in both those ways.

One of the things that really brought this home to me happened when I was a monk in Thailand. One of the great things about being a monk—there were a lot of great things—but one of them was that we got to be very close to dead bodies on a number of occasions. I was thirty-two years old, I think, and I'd never stood next to a dead body before. People in my life had died, but it seemed as soon as they died, either medicine or law just took them away. So I'd never been next to a dead body.

In Thailand, we had the opportunity to do this in different ways. One was outdoor funerals. Sometimes villagers would bring a body into a monastery, build a big pile of wood as a pyre, set the body on top of it, and we could visit the body before the fire was lit. Then the fire would be lit and we could observe the cremation. But in the urban setting, we had another alternative, which was the morgue. Monks and nuns were allowed to visit the morgue at a downtown hospital in Bangkok and observe autopsies being performed. So I did that.

The first thing when I walked into the morgue, I stood next to a dead body that was laid out on a steel table. I had never been so close to a dead body before. Then the body was wheeled into the coroner's theater, basically. We took seats in the elevated rows around the theater—a few monastics and then medical students—and watched the coroner perform an autopsy on this body that I had just been standing next to.

I don't know if you've ever seen an autopsy. If you're queasy, you might not want to listen to this. But the first step was that the coroner made a deep incision from one ear going across the top of the skull through the skin to the other ear, right down to the

bone. Having made that incision, with his two hands he took hold of those two flaps of skin and peeled them in opposite directions. So the face of the person came off and the back of the skull was exposed as the skin was peeled in the other direction. What that did was cleanly expose the skull itself. Then he took a saw and started cutting through the skull all around the outside until he could take off the top half and expose the brain. Once the brain was exposed, he took it out, examined it to see if there were any diseases, to see if it might be related to the cause of death, and he weighed it and recorded the weight.

Then he made a deep incision down the person's front from about the neck down to the navel and started opening up first the skin and then cutting through the ribs and opening the rib cage so that he could take out those organs—the heart, the lungs, the liver, spleen, and so on. He took out each of those organs, examined them for any disease, weighed them, recorded it. When he was done, he put everything back in its right place, including the brain and scalp, and he sewed it all up again so that the body looked, more or less from the outside, like it had when he brought it in. That was the completion of that autopsy. It took about thirty minutes. I sat there and then he did two more autopsies just in the same way—brought out two additional corpses and went through the same procedure.

I'd been sitting in my monastery for several weeks at that point in retreat. I was pretty still, very present, and really open. So this kind of blew my mind. I'd never really stood next to a dead body before, and the way they were cut up and opened and kind of invaded was shocking to my sensibilities. It really stunned me, but it was too interesting to turn away from.

I exited the coroner's office, left the morgue, and went back into central Bangkok to catch a bus back to my monastery. I was just in this very altered place from what I'd been observing. It was near the parade ground, Sanam Luang, if you know Bangkok. So there were a lot of people going by—old women walking by with their groceries, young couples walking by hand in hand, children kicking a ball around a big grassy field. And I would look at them all, and they seemed just like the bodies I'd just seen under the autopsy. The word that came to my mind as I hung out with this, because they just didn't seem very far apart, was "walking corpses." We're all just walking corpses.

Then I started to reflect on what that meant, because it doesn't make a lot of sense—corpses don't walk. But I started to reflect on what that meant to me, and I saw that we're very similar to those bodies I had just seen. The difference was there was like this light shining out of people's eyes who were still moving around, something that was somehow related to consciousness. There was still that spark of consciousness in the

ones who were living and walking and moving. It just struck me that what most fundamentally they were, what we were, was a body plus this consciousness. That's what I was seeing: body plus consciousness.

Of course there were mental states present too, but they seemed less fundamental than body and consciousness. So I started looking at people as being mostly body plus consciousness. And that became very interesting because the body is totally of the moment. Of course it's had a history, but right now the body is totally of the moment. Consciousness is totally of the moment, with no tie to the past.

But we have this peculiar faculty of memory that lets us store up conscious experiences and hold them, then call them up and project them into the future in some way or another. This very peculiar thing called memory—it has a lot to do with constructing the belief in a self. But if you simply see a person as body plus consciousness, you don't have that history.

Try it as you look around the room if your eyes are open right now during the talk. When your eyes land on somebody, see them as just body plus consciousness, totally in this moment. Or if you're doing reflection on a friend, see them as just body plus consciousness.

Then try seeing them with all the personal history you know of them. There's a body plus consciousness, plus they have a long past. They have successes and failures, things in their life that they've loved, times they've had conflict, whole family relationships, parents, possibly children, livelihood, careers, fortunes won, fortunes lost. See how it feels to bring in all of that. Which is lighter? Which is freer?

When you just see the present moment—body plus consciousness, and maybe there's a little mood there, a mind state—it's so light. This is the liberation of the five aggregates. We can learn to see others and we can learn to see ourselves just in the present moment. We don't need the history, we don't need the projection into the future. And when we see in that way, it's really freeing.

This is an exercise you can do with yourself and with other people. Learn to see as body plus consciousness. It's very light and it's very free. This is what opens up through the seeing of emptiness, through the seeing of insubstantiality of all the aggregates—the magic show of consciousness, the lightness of being that we all carry when we don't attribute solidity to ourselves and the world.

This is from the Visuddhimagga: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers." I wonder if you can get the sense of this. There is no one at the center who is doing the suffering. There is suffering, but no one it's happened to. One meditator put it really

beautifully when they said, "Suffering is rope burn. It comes from trying to hold on to something that's passing through." It's the holding on that causes the suffering when we cling to what's passing.

Empty phenomena roll on—also from the Visuddhimagga. The aggregates are doing their thing. They're all aspects of nature, physical nature, mental nature. Empty phenomena rolling on. This way of seeing is very freeing, but it's not a cold way of seeing. It actually evokes a lot of compassion.

In the Tibetan realm, they say emptiness is the womb of compassion. Why? Because it shows our vulnerability. There isn't anything solid to hang on to. Therefore, we're all subject to change on every level at any time, all subject to change.

We were talking about this in a senior students group at Spirit Rock some years ago, and one of the students wrote this afterwards. She said, "It's spooky. I would look at everything like this Japanese lamp that I love and I'd see it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When I went from an object and said it's an appearance to a person and said they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile."

In Mahayana Buddhism, in Chinese Buddhism, Kuan Yin is the embodiment of the quality of compassion, the bodhisattva of compassion. There's a beautiful representation of her at the back of this hall and another beautiful representation in the walking room next door. It's said that Kuan Yin hears all the cries of beings in the world—the ten thousand cries of joy and the ten thousand cries of sorrow. But Kuan Yin is a bodhisattva, and that means she's not a beginning meditator. She understands that there's suffering, but she also understands there's no one who suffers.

And that's the wisdom that lets her hold the suffering of this world with equanimity as well as compassion. It's what lets her hold it in the balance that gives rise to the equanimity on the face of the statue of the Buddha.

Through seeing emptiness, the heart becomes less burdened. We release a lot of self-concern, and compassion and loving-kindness open up toward the whole of existence. Out of this freedom, we also see the causes of suffering and that it's not necessary. The suffering, to a large degree, comes out of an illusory understanding of the world and its components as abiding in self and solidity.

So Kuan Yin understands that there is not a true source for suffering within the conditioned world. There is not an inevitable source of suffering. And so this is a quotation that's been attributed to Kuan Yin:

The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?

Let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 159

Transcendent Paticcasamuppāda

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong presents the lesser-known sequence of transcendent paticcasamuppāda (dependent origination), drawn from the Upanisā Sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. Unlike the traditional twelve-link chain that describes how suffering arises from ignorance, this transcendent sequence traces the positive path from suffering to complete liberation. Armstrong guides listeners through each of the twelve links: suffering, saddhā (faith), pāmojja (gladness), pīti (rapture), passaddhi (tranquility), sukha (happiness), samādhi (concentration), yathābhūta-ñāṇadassana (knowing and seeing things as they are), nibbidā (disenchantment), virāga (dispassion), vimutti (liberation), and the knowledge of the destruction of the āsavas (taints). Through personal stories from teaching meditation in juvenile detention, monastic experiences in Burma, and encounters with Ajahn Chah's teachings, Armstrong illustrates how each factor naturally gives rise to the next. He emphasizes that this sequence offers a comprehensive overview of the spiritual journey in positive terms, showing how suffering itself can become the foundation for faith and eventual awakening. The talk provides both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for recognizing and cultivating these wholesome mental factors along the path to nibbāna.

The subject of tonight's talk is transcendent dependent origination. This may sound like a mouthful, but breaking it down, it's actually not that complicated. Transcendent simply means "goes beyond." Dependent means one thing arises based on another, and origination refers to how things come to be.

The Buddha spoke extensively about dependent origination, and I want to begin with the general principle he stated many times: "When this exists, that comes to be. With the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the ceasing of this, that ceases."

This is a principle of mutual dependency, and you can see its application in the Four Noble Truths, which concern suffering and its cause, the end of suffering and its cause. This principle has very broad applicability. At one point, the Buddha is said to have declared that one who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma, and one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination. That's how fundamental it is to his teaching—everything arises based on something else.

You probably also know that this general formulation is used in a specific case to indicate a chain of twelve links which begin with ignorance and proceed through related links to craving and clinging, ending in suffering. This is essentially a very detailed description of how suffering comes to be. The undoing of suffering, the Buddha said, comes with the undoing of ignorance. When ignorance ceases, all the other links collapse and no suffering arises. This is the second most famous expression of dependent origination.

But the chain we're exploring tonight consists of twelve other links. This is called the transcendent chain because it transcends suffering, but in a different way. In the original dependent origination, suffering is removed by removing ignorance. But this chain traces the development of the path to the end of suffering in positive terms, which I find quite remarkable.

This teaching is taken from a discourse in the Samyutta Nikāya called the "Discourse on Proximate Cause." In it, the Buddha states the typical chain leading from ignorance to suffering, and then presents this other chain which starts from suffering and proceeds through liberation. This chain picks up where the more common traditional chain leaves off, tracing the journey as a comprehensive overview of the spiritual path in positive terms. I find it deeply inspiring to examine these steps, beginning with suffering and leading to liberation.

Let me state this chain of transcendent dependent origination in its twelve links: suffering, faith, gladness, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowing and seeing things as they are, disenchantment, dispassion, liberation, and knowledge of the extinction of the taints. That final link—knowing the taints have been extinguished—represents the end of the path.

Let's trace how this unfolds. The first connected links show that suffering can give rise to faith. This is a truly interesting connection, where the chain departs from the original sequence and begins moving in a genuinely positive direction. Suffering, it is said, leads to faith.

This is rather a surprising connection because there's abundant suffering in the world, yet not necessarily abundant faith. So how is it that for each of you, suffering transformed into faith? This requires a very unusual turning.

I invite you to examine your own journey and see if there isn't some truth to the fact that you embarked on the path out of suffering and a desire to find resolution to that suffering. Some people may take up meditation out of intellectual curiosity, but intellectual curiosity doesn't usually sustain someone through a three-month retreat. I believe

that for all of you here, there was a deeper realization of unsatisfactoriness in life—in your own personal experience—and that this unsatisfactoriness led you to seek something more. The Buddha taught that there are two kinds of search...

There's a search with wisdom and there's a search without wisdom. We see the world embarking on the search to find happiness through external means, and that doesn't lead to real happiness. But the search with wisdom leads us to examine the causes of suffering and can lead to great happiness—the Buddha said to the highest happiness.

There are two conditions for someone to turn that corner. One is the awareness of suffering in their life, the clear recognition of the difficulty and pain in their own existence. And the second is to hear the teachings, to hear teachings that can lead one out of suffering.

At some point, each of us in this room has had to become open to looking at our lives and investigating them in a new way to resolve this basic existential question of pain and sorrow. It's not always clear what will lead one person to this investigation while another remains untouched. There's something—I hesitate to say destiny—but there is something that seems fated about our journey.

A number of years ago, a friend and I were invited to teach meditation in a juvenile hall in California. For those unfamiliar with this system, juvenile hall is where young people are placed when they've been arrested and accused of a crime if they're under eighteen. These are people who are not yet adults but have been picked up for some suspicion of a serious crime.

We were brought into the maximum security part of this juvenile prison in the Bay Area, invited by people who worked there to lead a class on meditation. We were meeting with young men—it was a segregated dorm with just males in that wing—aged fifteen to seventeen who had been arrested for things like assault, assault with a deadly weapon, grand theft, murder, attempted murder, and similar charges. These were suspected crimes that, if they ended up being convicted, could put them in jail for a very long time.

When we went in, we wanted to give them instructions first on how to calm their minds and second on how to open to the difficult emotions they were facing. You can imagine a group of young men tossed into this holding facility, awaiting trial, not knowing what direction their lives would take, dealing with huge amounts of fear and anxiety, cut off from contact with their parents, cut off from their community, their whole futures uncertain.

It was very interesting to see how much they took to the instruction. We couldn't call it Buddhist meditation—we thought that wouldn't fly. So we called it "mind power," and that they could more readily relate to. We gave them the same kinds of instructions that we've given here. We started them with the breath, and then we took them into the area of difficult emotions.

The meditation instructions on working with fear were really helpful for people. One positive aspect was that they had a lot of unscheduled time during the day, time on their own that they could use for practice. Some of them found a truly transformative relationship to the fear they were experiencing. This gave them a new way to find—I won't say ease—but some relief from the direct experience of fear.

In the end, we also decided to teach them about karma, putting it in the context of karma as the science of happiness. We taught the five precepts, and toward the end, we taught loving-kindness to them. It was reported later, after the class when other teachers took over, that some of the people had been members of gangs and they had started to send loving-kindness to people in rival gangs because they said, "Oh look, they have mothers and sisters also. We should hope for their welfare."

It was very moving that they also discovered a certain amount of faith. I can't say they kept up the practice afterwards—I don't know what happened in their future lives. But in this setting, they were highly motivated, a very highly motivated group of young men, and really found out that it could work.

At the end, we gave them a certificate for completing the course in mind power, and we signed our names to it. One of the young men asked, "Can I take this to the judge when I go up for trial?"

Something like this happens to some of us. The suffering in our life puts us into some kind of extreme situation where we feel we need to find a way through. In a way, the extremity of our suffering sometimes forces us to dig so deeply that we find this way through.

Ajahn Chah, who was one of the modern founders of a school in the Thai forest tradition, talked about his own practice as a younger monk. One of the traditional practices they were encouraged to do in the Thai forest was to go meditate at night in a charnel ground.

So you can imagine this is something that will bring up a certain amount of fear and anxiety—to sit at night in a place where dead bodies have been brought.

So Ajahn Chah was sitting there and what he didn't realize is that a corpse from a nearby village was being brought that very day and a pyre had been built and the corpse was going to be burned. And it was right next to where he had taken his seat to go into the evening meditation.

So he didn't move. The body was placed on the pyre. It was set alight. The body was cremated and then the villagers left. So he was there all on his own at night next to the body that had just been burned. And he was sitting with his back to the fire and his eyes were closed. This was spooky. You can imagine the feeling. He was scared. He was not an enlightened master at that point. He was a young monk.

And he recounts it this way. He said, "I forgot about sleep. My eyes were rigid with fear. Then about 10 p.m., there came a sound of shuffling from the fire behind me. It walked up behind me. The leaves crunched under the footsteps as it made its way round to the front. It got closer and closer until it stopped right in front of me and just stood still."

This was really it. I forgot all about Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. There was only fear welling up inside my chest until it completely filled me.

So there he was, totally immersed and filled in this panic of fear. And then he said, "After some time, the fear reached its peak and began to overflow. A voice inside me asked, 'What am I so afraid of?' And then another voice answered, 'I'm afraid of death.' And then the first voice said, 'Where can you run to escape death? Whether you are afraid or not, there's nowhere to escape death.'"

And Ajahn Chah recounts, "As soon as I thought this, all the fear completely disappeared. It was amazing, so much fear, and it could disappear just like that. Non-fear arose in its place. Now my mind was lighter and lighter until I felt as if I was in the clouds."

This is very interesting. Sometimes the practice will take us to the edge of what we can bear. And then sometimes there's this amazing opening from, you could say, the wisdom—our inherent wisdom in our minds.

This is a story from the nuns at the time of the Buddha, a nun called Siha. And this is from a volume in the Pali Canon called the Therigatha, the verses of the elder nuns. She recounts her story in verse form:

"Obsessed by sensuality, I never got to the origin, but was agitated, my mind beyond control. I dreamed of a great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace. Pale and thin I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night. Then I took a rope into the forest and thought, 'I'd rather hang than go back to that narrow life.' I tied a strong noose to the branch of a tree and put it round my neck. Just then my heart was set free."

So this is Siha's account of her own full awakening. She fully awakened at the point at which she was going to hang herself. That extremity and the proximity to death brought something else forward for her.

So you all have had your own versions of these insights, maybe not quite as dramatic. But we've all had something like this, where in a time of extremity, something else came through. And that degree of suffering and then openness becomes the basis for our faith.

So this is what convinces us that the practice actually can work, that the teachings are true. The word for faith in Pali is saddhā. And the literal meaning is to place one's heart upon. So faith in this sense is not a series of beliefs or doctrines. It's what can you put your real being and trust in? What can you place your heart upon?

And when you find that you can place your heart into these teachings, as all of you have found at many different points, that becomes verified faith. You know for yourself that the teachings work and that you have the ability to carry them out.

So this brings in aspects of faith or saddha which have to do with confidence. It's another meaning of saddha. We begin to develop the confidence that we can walk this path ourselves and we can come out of our own suffering because we've seen it happen. We also then trust—we trust in two things: we trust in our own innate wisdom to find the way, and we start to trust in the path as the way that will lead us beyond suffering. Traditionally, this is summed up as saying that one has faith—one discovers faith—in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

When one finds that faith is a part of one's life, it brings a certain gladness into the mind. When we don't know that this is possible, there's an element of anxiety in life. I look back to my early life before I found this path, and one of the things that's most alarming is the mixture of happiness and suffering and not knowing what way to go. There was a basic kind of confusion, and finding the path was a great relief to that confusion.

So the discovery of faith really leads us into a determined effort, a persevering effort on the path. In terms of the five spiritual faculties, which I think Winnie talked about earlier, faith is the first of the five. When faith grows, it leads to effort. And effort is what then carries us along the path.

In this particular sequence, faith is said to lead to the next factor, which is gladness. Sometimes translated as joy, but I'm going to use the word gladness because it's a little different than the other joy we've talked about. The Pali word is pamoja.

One of the things this highlights is there are a lot of words for joy and happiness in the Buddha's teachings. We've got a few words for dukkha—we've got dukkha, we've got the hindrances, we've got craving, we've got the kilesas, we've got the taints. But there are also a lot of words and a lot of lists for happy qualities. There's pamoja, there are other words we'll reach tonight, there are the brahmaviharas, there are the factors of enlightenment, there are the spiritual faculties. The wholesome lists are bigger than the unwholesome lists.

So we want to get really tuned into these wholesome qualities because they are really what propel us along the path. I think it was Sally who mentioned this quote from Analayo: the entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy, or you could say gladness.

So this is an important and essential part of our journey along the path. If you can find areas of joy and gladness in your practice, they become a tremendous ally. It's necessary. We all need to find these.

One example is loving-kindness for the benefactor. When you hang out with someone that you love, that becomes a source of uplift. Another is the practice of sympathetic joy, or mudita, where we focus on the happiness of various beings that we bring to mind, and their happiness lifts our heart.

This need for an ally of joy came clear to me when I was practicing in Burma a few years ago. I was originally a monk in Thailand for a year. I really enjoyed that time. Due to circumstances, I left a little too early. I hadn't really lived out my monastic inclinations. There was always that little bit of leftover desire to be back in robes again.

Some years ago, I had a chance to do that. I went to Burma. I wanted to practice with Pauk Sayadaw, who's a great master of both concentration and vipassana. I wanted to learn his concentration practice.

So I went and he allowed me to ordain. I arrived at the monastery about 5 p.m. one day in my lay clothes and my suitcase. I asked him if I could ordain, and he said, "Yes, you'll ordain tomorrow after lunch."

I said, "Whoa, that's kind of quick. I just landed here. I don't know where anything is. I don't know how to do anything."

So in the morning I went into town and got my robes and bowl. I came back and right after lunch someone shaved my head. I went through an ordination ceremony and put on the orange robes again. It felt great to be in the orange robes, but in the meantime I'd forgotten how to tie them. As I was walking around, they kept falling off my shoulder.

I should have known what was coming, but I ordained at the beginning of the rains retreat.

You know, there's this period of three months every year in Asia where the monks and nuns go into seclusion in the monasteries because the rains are happening and you don't want to be trampling through the fields. So I should have known by its being called the rains retreat that something was about to happen.

And it did. It rained steadily for about the next three weeks. I hardly saw the sun and I think it was raining about three inches a day because it was a tropical monsoon that just kept coming down. The meditation hall was a fifteen-minute walk uphill from my kuti, and that was through the rain. There were six sittings a day up there, the shortest of which was an hour and a half, the longest of which was two hours. And the practice was very simple—just staying with the experience of the breath on the upper lip all day long, sitting, walking, nothing else. There was no choiceless attention. There was no opening to sounds to get a sense of relaxation. It was on the breath all the time, every day.

The practice was challenging. The weather was really challenging. The biggest spider I'd ever seen was building a huge web right on my porch. And the food was very simple—just one meal a day, mostly steamed vegetables and white rice. At the end of the retreat, I found out I was losing about half a pound a day during that time.

All of this came to a head one day when I was down at the dining hall. I'd gotten my bowl filled with rice and curry, and I even had a little dessert, which I put in the bowl lid turned upside down on the top. I was holding that in one hand, and it was raining like crazy, so I had my umbrella in the other. I was walking back to my kuti, and my robe started falling off my shoulder. I was walking up this muddy path when there were

a few Burmese lay people who knelt in the dirt by the side of the road to bow as I went by—that's what they do to honor monastics there. And I was trying just to keep my clothes on at that point.

I made it back to my kuti and had my meal, but these were the most challenging conditions I'd ever practiced in. The meditation was difficult. It was going okay, but it wasn't going great. So I reached a real low point in the middle of that period due to all those different conditions, and I felt I needed some support. The teacher was not psychologically trained, so I had to look for my own inner resources.

I had brought along a picture of the Dalai Lama, who's a great inspiration to me, and I turned to the picture with a real spirit of supplication. I was feeling very humble at that point. I turned to the picture and said, "Your Holiness, what advice do you have for me? I need some help right now."

It was very interesting because as soon as I said it, the voice of the Dalai Lama popped into my head with his Indian-accented English. There was a very clear transmission. The Dalai Lama said, "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." And then the transmission just ended. It came on—boom—and it was gone. That was all I was getting from His Holiness on that day.

But I thought, what a beautiful message. Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support. When would that not be helpful? I took the message in, and I really brought it to mind many times in the rest of that retreat. When I could remember what cheerful felt like, it really picked me up.

So I recommend this to you—find sources of gladness, whether they're internal or external. Another great source, of course, is nature. We're so fortunate here to have access to nature because very often we can go out, especially on a day like today, and let this incredible autumn beauty in the woods, on the trails, on the roads, around the grounds, just lift our hearts. I know a lot of you take advantage of that, and it's a wonderful resource that we have. Don't look down on beauty.

It is very, very helpful. This is from Ajahn Sumedho: "Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism, one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower, you should contemplate its decay. Or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse." That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty. This is the joy of mudita, appreciative joy—being able to appreciate the beauty in the things around us.

So don't forget opening yourself to the beauty of what's around us. Sometimes I tune into light and radiance as just a reminder of that beauty. There's something really special about the quality of radiance in this world. And when the mind relaxes and opens to that joy, just an ordinary moment can have a tremendous amount of uplift.

This is from Thomas Merton: "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and of joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being." All created being is speaking of this beauty and the gladness that it brings.

So then gladness leads to the next factor, which I'll translate here just for lack of confusion as rapture. It's the Pali word pīti, which when Bonnie talked about in the seven factors, she called joy. That's also a great translation. Just to differentiate it, I'll use the word rapture this evening.

Rapture is kind of an intensification of the gladness of pamojja. And particularly, it brings that sense of delight into the meditation itself. So the gladness may be triggered by an external reflection or contact with nature, inspiration of a person, but we bring it into our meditation and we start to find a delight in the meditation object. One teacher in Australia talks about finding a relationship to the beautiful breath. So to discover that the breath can be beautiful is a sign of that delight in the meditation itself. That's a sign of pīti.

Another synonym for pīti is rapt attention—R-A-P-T—rapt attention, because we're so enjoying what we're seeing. So this is one of the seven factors of awakening that Bonnie talked about. It's one of the five jhanic factors that Sally talked about. I won't talk a lot more about it because they covered it really beautifully. But we'll just note that it's a mental factor that is accompanied often by physical energy. So the energy connected with pīti can be felt as swelling, as trembling, as uplifting, as pervasive throughout the body. And this is generally experienced as pleasant. The quality of rapture generally has a pleasant tone, although sometimes it can be a little too strong.

But the pleasant nature of it leads into the next factor of this chain, which is tranquility. I think we may have talked about this as one of the seven factors of enlightenment, as calm. It's the same Pali word, passaddhi. So tranquility calms the energy of rapture. Sometimes rapture is felt as a little too strong, a little too turbulent, but as this moves into—mellows into—tranquility, the turbulence of the rapture settles down. Sometimes this is translated as tranquility, could be translated as calm, sometimes it's been translated as relaxation, and it's felt both in the body and in the mind. So in this

the body is settling as well as the mind, and that lets us settle into the moment without either wanting something different or resisting what's there. But the tranquility is very inviting. It lets the mind really settle.

So this discovery of calm is sometimes new territory. It's something we often don't find in daily life. And so one meditator who first felt this in their practice noted it tentatively and said, "Calm? Like, unbelievable, right? Calm? Is this what they're talking about?" And so you may have that feeling. It's a little unfamiliar. But as you recognize it and trust in it, it's a beautiful quality to settle into.

It's kind of like we've crossed the stormy ocean with all the hindrances—you know, rocks and waves and giant squids coming up—and we found a quiet harbor in the middle of this stormy ocean. And that quiet harbor is tranquility or calm.

And I love, in connection with this, this poem from Emily Dickinson. It's just an excerpt from a part of one of her poems called "Wild Nights." For those of you who don't know Emily Dickinson, she lived just about a half hour away from here in the town of Amherst, and her house is still available there to tour. From "Wild Nights":

Futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden.

Let me read that again. Futile—that means useless—futile the winds to a heart in port. Done with the compass, done with the chart, rowing in Eden.

It has this feeling of just being beautifully settled in this kind of primeval terrain, peaceful and restful.

So in the factor of tranquility, the mind discovers its own natural peace and ease. There is a natural peace and ease to the mind when we don't disturb it. When the mind isn't being stirred up by random *papañca* and emotions, there is a natural peace that is there.

Ajahn Amaro, abbot of Amaravati, has this really nice meditation instruction. When you've discovered this quality, he says, rest in the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body, and then pay attention to whatever disturbs that.

I like this: rest in the natural peace and ease. This is the territory of tranquility, of calm. And as we settle into it, it opens the doorway to a new kind of contentment because the mind has found its own peacefulness and satisfaction.

This leads to the next of the factors, which is happiness. The Pali word here is *sukha*. In this sequence of transcendent arising, this is not a terribly bubbly or exuberant kind of happiness. It's a very settled happiness. The kind of thrill of rapture has been mellowed out through the peace of tranquility and settles into this calm kind of happiness that might be better described as contentment.

As contentment starts to be felt, it really tends to do away with the longing for anything else. *Sukha* has this quality. Actually, I like the term because it sounds a lot like sugar. I've been curious if there's an etymological connection between the two. But I think of *sukha* as very much like sugar for the mind, but healthy. Maybe it's agave nectar. It brings this sweetness into the mind that also really helps to settle the body. The sweetness combined with the calm gives a very warm and stable kind of settledness.

Whereas the gladness we talked about is evoked by certain conditions—by nature, by a benefactor, by an inspiration—at this point, the *sukha* of happiness doesn't depend on conditions. It has flowered of its own. It doesn't depend on external conditions to be continued. The mind has found its own way in.

There's a sense of coming home at this point in the presence of the *sukha* and the tranquility together. It's like we found a big piece of what we've been looking for. I think people come into meditation practice looking for peace of mind. When we find this combination of tranquility and contentment, we feel like we've discovered that.

We can't secure it as a permanent resting place. We recognize that it's still impermanent and subject to arising and passing, but at least we have opened to that possibility. We've seen that possibility as one of the outcomes of our meditation practice. We know that practice leads in this direction. We trust in this.

This kind of peace of mind is a friend and an ally that makes a lot of life much more acceptable. When we can rest in this place, it feels like we have the inner quality to deal with the ups and downs that life brings. It's almost like if that's there, everything else is workable. If that's not there, sometimes it feels like nothing else is satisfactory.

This reminds me of a poem of Rumi's. When Rumi says "you," he usually means the divine, the presence of the divine. But I think of it in terms of this beautiful kind of contentment.

Rumi said: "Come to the orchard in spring. There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers. If you do not come, these do not matter. If you do come, these do not matter."

When we have this stable contentment, the external conditions don't matter so much. We're not drawn to need things in the outside world because there's a self-sufficiency that is inward.

This stage of happiness is very pleasant in itself, but as you know, the path doesn't stop there. I think Carol mentioned this quote from the Buddha: "Two things I never lost track of in my own practice—not to be lazy in my efforts and not to settle just for wholesome states of mind."

So even this level of deep, peaceful contentment is not the end of the path. It leads on to the next link, which is concentration or *samādhi*.

Concentration is that unification of mind that Bonnie talked about, Sally talked about, the jhanic factors that make it up. And that unification of mind, bringing together all the mental energy that is in us, brings a sense of steadiness, of stability, of firmness, and of strength.

When we give away our energy to thoughts of past and future and all the emotions that come with that, we're giving away that inner strength. But when the mind collects through this contentment and relaxation, that strength is recollected. So the concentrated mind is a mind that's come together and that strength gives us more and more ability to accept all the ups and downs of life.

So this is still a deeper settling, a deeper collection than even the happiness brings. The mind just continues to collect because it's simply settling within itself, not being pulled by desires outwardly. But this is also just onward leading. As the Buddha said, the purpose and benefit of concentration is to know and see things as they really are. So concentration has its value in opening the door to insight, seeing things as they really are.

So this is the next link in transcendent dependent origination. The Pali is yathabhuta-jnana-dassana, knowing and seeing things as they truly are. Jnana means knowing in the sense of wisdom. It's the same root word as the Greek gnosis. Dassana means seeing, and it's the same root as the Pali vipassana. So those are based on seeing. Yathabhuta means things the way they are, or as Carol sometimes likes to say, things the way they have come to be. Both point to seeing reality in its characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

So seeing the three characteristics is an important piece of yathabhuta-jnana-dassana. Or we could say seeing the emptiness of things. What we get from this insight —the three characteristics are emptiness—is that the things of the world don't have the power to offer lasting satisfaction. Sense objects can't give ongoing satisfaction because

none of them last. None of them in truth are solid enough to hang on to from the beginning. As we talked about in the emptiness of the aggregates, this insight leads to the next step, which is that we see the display of the world as a kind of magic show.

In that Sutta on the lump of foam, the Buddha talked about how consciousness reveals the world as a magic show or as a magical illusion. And when we see that way, the insubstantiality, we can't believe in it so thoroughly as capable of satisfying. This is the sense of disenchantment. Disenchantment doesn't mean depression, it doesn't mean cynicism, it doesn't mean negativity. It just means we recognize the sense objects have enchanted us for a long time. We've been drawn out of ourselves toward them thinking that they were the source of happiness. Now that enchantment, the spell that they have cast, is broken. The illusion is broken. And we see these things can't give lasting satisfaction. So we're just not that thrilled anymore.

As one teacher says, this is the stage of the withdrawal of the projected promise of pleasant sense experiences. They offer one thing, but you can't cash it in. It doesn't work that way. So with disenchantment, there is a step back from the objects of the senses. When we realize they don't have the ability to satisfy, there's a deeper letting go that starts to happen.

There was a particular period in my practice as a monk where this was the most alive thing for me. I'd been in retreat for some months at that point, fairly calm. And I just started seeing how every experience that came through didn't last very long. And a number of you have reported this in our meetings here. Pleasant things happen, unpleasant things happen, and they just all cycle through. None of them last very long. And so there's no real gratification from the pleasant and there's no real obstruction from the unpleasant.

And yet, how much do we continue to focus on the pleasant and unpleasant nature of those transitory experiences? They still have the power to captivate us, don't they? To fascinate us. We really want the pleasant and we really don't want the unpleasant. But as we see the kind of rapid cycling that is their nature, we sort of go, why am I bothering holding on or pushing away? They're going to go of their own nature anyway. Why am I bothering?

And so this leads into the next of the factors which is called dispassion. The Pali is viraga.

So I want to explain dispassion a little bit. It basically means equanimity. We're not strongly drawn to sense experiences and we're not strongly turned off. We're not much pulled one way or another.

So this is the balance that we see in the statues of the Buddha and Quan Yin, this equanimous mind state that still cares and is still compassionate. So dispassion doesn't mean that we become cold or uncaring. It doesn't mean that on the path we give up all our fire. That's not what's being pointed to here.

In classical Buddhist language, from all the traditions, this word passion has a certain meaning. It's a synonym for lust, for greed, and for craving. And so when passion is used in the Buddhist context, it's always an unwholesome state. But in the West, we use passion in a way that's often very wholesome. And we can continue to use it in that way as long as we're clear with the meaning.

In Buddhism, we have different words that refer to this kind of strong feeling. And these words are such as ardor, which is atapi, zeal, which is chanda, or enthusiasm, which is virya. And in the Satipatthana Sutta, it's said very clearly that one abides ardent and resolute, dwelling on each of the foundations of mindfulness. And in another discourse, Sariputta says, one cannot attain enlightenment without ardor.

So this is what we might call passion, this quality of ardor or atapi. Actually, the root of it was a practice of fire, fire worshiping or fire devotion in ancient Indian culture. So this is a fiery quality, this quality of ardor.

Zeal is a translation of chanda, is one of what's called the iddhipadas or a basis of power when combined with concentration. We have to have a zeal, an energy for what we're doing or it won't move forward. And virya, of course, is what we've been talking about as energy or effort, one of the seven factors and one of the ten paramis.

So these are all wholesome qualities that we could call in our Western language different forms of passion—our caring and love for and devotion to the practice. But dispassion in this sense is something different. And in its fullness, dispassion literally means the absence of lust.

And if you remember when Carol talked about Nibbana last night, she talked about it—I can't remember if this is the exact same quote, but here's a very similar quote: "Insofar as the practitioner has abandoned greed, aversion, and delusion, insofar is nibbana realizable, immediate, inviting, and attractive." In other words, when the mind is released from lust, from hatred, from confusion, it is immediately next door to nibbana, to the immediate discovery of this unconditioned element. This is the pointing of dispassion at this point. When lust has been temporarily ended, the mind is very close to the opening to nibbana. This is the precondition for the direct realization or what we call enlightenment.

So there's another discourse where the Buddha says—and as I hear it, it almost is giving meditation instructions to lead us into this realization. This comes from a discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya: "This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

This is like a temporal sequence of how one gets there. So peaceful and sublime—we've kind of encountered this through the maturing of sukha. The stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, and the destruction of craving—this is the deep letting go. We are not pursuing any of the objects that come to us through the contact through our senses. Craving being destroyed means greed, aversion, delusion are being destroyed. Then dispassion is the natural outcome of that movement.

So it's kind of like the Buddha is directing us how to land. He's in the air traffic controller booth and we're coming in on the runway. Still the formations. Relinquish the attachments. Destruction of craving. Now we're landing. Dispassion is what the runway looks like.

And then this final word, before nibbana: cessation. It's a really interesting word in the Buddha's vocabulary, and it's used in a number of different contexts. One of the contexts is in the Four Noble Truths. The cessation of suffering results from the cessation of craving. The word for cessation is nirodha. So tanha nirodha is the cessation of craving, and that leads directly to dukkha nirodha, the cessation of suffering. So that is being pointed to here—the end of craving, the end of suffering.

But there's another context in which nirodha is used that I find really interesting, which is the cessation of consciousness, vijnana nirodha. And specifically what's pointed to here is the cessation of the six bases of sense consciousness, the six types of sense consciousness. So the Buddha said in one discourse, that sphere should be realized where the eye ceases and the perception of forms ceases, and so on through the other six senses. That sphere should be realized where the six classes of sense contact cease.

Wow, what's that about?

So this is a very interesting investigation. What I found when I was in that period in the monastery and I was starting to lose interest in sense objects, that means I was losing interest in contact. And contact is the meeting of the object with the organ and the consciousness. I was starting to lose interest in that because it was not satisfying and it wasn't threatening. When I started to lose interest in that, I could feel the very factor of consciousness slipping away due to the lack of interest.

Why should we be so fascinated by these temporary blips that can't satisfy and can't harm us? And yet we're totally tied to them most of the time, moment after moment. Let go, let go, let go, relinquishing all attachments, even to contact. And what is discovered as one releases the attachment to even contact itself is that consciousness fades as well. And in that cessation of the sense consciousness, the door is truly opened to the realization of what transcends them—nibbana.

So this contact with nibbana is the next step in the sequence described by the term liberation. The Pali word is vimuti. So this contact with the unconditioned, if it's at a certain depth, a certain depth of realization of nibbana, is what liberates the heart and mind. And this is when the practitioner will say something like: "Birth is destroyed. The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more coming to any state of being." This is the fullness of liberation. The work is completed. The mind has been released from all the unwholesome factors.

What partakes of nibbana, what gets us close to this territory? There are a number of ways that we talk about it and have talked about it in this retreat that give the closest mundane descriptions of what is beyond the mundane, what is beyond worldly conditions that transcends suffering that is beyond the world. And these are concepts like acceptance, deep acceptance, full acceptance, full awareness in the present moment, steadiness of mind, stilling of all formations, equanimity, and deep trust. When these come together, we are in the mundane territory leading to that realization.

And then after liberation, it is said there's the knowledge of the destruction of the taints. One realizes that the most fundamental impurities of the heart and mind have been eliminated, have been eradicated, never to arise again. And these are the asavas, what's often translated as the taints: the taint of sense desire, the taint of becoming, and the taint of ignorance. So when these are gone, the work is done, it is said.

So when I first heard about this possibility, I got really impatient. And I went to my teacher in the next interview and I said, "But how long will it take?" Because I really wanted to get there quickly. But we don't know how long it will take. What we do know is that this practice is leading that way. The Buddha said the practice of mindfulness in the four foundations—that is right mindfulness—only leads in one direction, and that is to this full liberation. And he said we don't know how much of our fetters wear away each day, but we do know that they're wearing away.

And he compared it to an ocean-going ship that's been brought up on the land after a season out on the seas. And the sun and the wind and the climate factors just slowly erode the riggings and the ropes and the sails that are just left out in the open air. So all those things are rotting away under the influence of mindfulness. We don't know how fast, but we know that they're rotting away.

This is how Ajahn Chah put it: "The practice has to develop naturally according to conditions. You allow things to develop according to your accumulated wholesome karma and paramis. This doesn't mean you stop putting effort into the practice, but you continue with the understanding that whether you progress swiftly or slowly, it's not something you can force. It's like planting a tree—it knows by itself the appropriate pace to grow at. If you crave to get quick results, see that as delusion. Even if you want it to grow slowly, see that as delusion."

And so this also reminds us of another quotation from the Buddha, which I think somebody may have mentioned earlier, but I'll read it again.

When a deva came to the Buddha and asked, "How did you cross the flood of existence?" - meaning, how did you find security and release and safety, how did you become liberated? - the Buddha answered with profound simplicity: "I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away."

Let's just sit for a minute with this teaching.

I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away.

This is the middle way of practice - neither forcing nor being lazy, neither grasping for quick results nor becoming complacent. Like the tree that knows its own natural pace of growth, our practice unfolds according to its own wisdom when we maintain this delicate balance of effort and patience, of engagement and letting go.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 160

First and Second Noble Truths (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat at Spirit Rock, Guy Armstrong offers an in-depth exploration of the First and Second Noble Truths as presented in the Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). Drawing from the Buddha's first teaching to the group of five bhikkhus at Sarnath, Armstrong contextualizes these foundational teachings within the framework of the Noble Eightfold Path as the Middle Way between sensual indulgence and self-mortification.*
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> *The talk examines the First Noble Truth of dukkha, exploring its three dimensions: dukkha-dukkha (the suffering of pain), viparināma-dukkha (the suffering of change), and saṅkhāra-dukkha (the suffering inherent in conditioned existence). Armstrong emphasizes that dukkha encompasses a spectrum from subtle dissatisfaction to intense anguish, connecting all beings in shared vulnerability while opening pathways to compassion rather than isolation.*
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> *Addressing the Second Noble Truth, Armstrong explores taṇhā (craving) as the root cause of suffering, encompassing craving for sensual pleasures (kāma-taṇhā), existence (bhava-taṇhā), and non-existence (vibhava-taṇhā). He demonstrates how craving includes both greed and aversion, showing how the constant mental corrections we make to improve our experience actually disturb our natural peace. The teaching concludes with the practical application: the First Noble Truth is to be fully understood, while the Second is to be abandoned through insight rather than willpower.*

I'd like to talk this evening about some of the most classic teachings from the Buddha, which is part of the Four Noble Truths. Because it's a longer retreat, we want to go into a little more detail, so I'm just going to talk about the First and Second Noble Truths.

Sometimes when people hear this topic, some resistance comes up. "Oh, I don't want to know anymore about suffering." But what the Buddha said about it is that the understanding of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So I hope this will be your experience in the talk this evening.

I will base this talk in part on the discourse in the suttas that relates this teaching. It's part of the Connected Discourses of the Buddha from the Samyutta Nikaya.

You may know the background to it. The Buddha had spent six years in very intensive meditation practice, seeking the liberation of heart and mind. When he finally came to that realization that freed him underneath the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya in Northern India, he didn't do anything for forty-nine days. He just sat under the Bodhi tree and in the area and delighted in the bliss of deliverance. He soaked in the joy of liberation.

He thought that he probably wouldn't teach. He said, "People won't understand. What I've seen is subtle and hard to get. I don't want to bother trying to put this out." Then it is said that a heavenly being came down and said, "Venerable sir, there are those with little dust in their eyes. Please make the effort to teach for the benefit of beings." So he said, "Okay."

He looked around to see what beings might have little dust in their eyes. He came upon this group of five people that he had been practicing with earlier. He had been on a very ascetic path, and these five other men were his companions in that journey. With his psychic vision, he saw that they were now residing near Benares in Sarnath, in the deer park. So he decided to walk there. It was 150 miles, and it was apparently in the springtime. He just set out walking, collecting alms along the way.

Days and days later, he reached there and found this group of five. They saw him coming and thought, "Gautama looks too fat. He's eaten. That's no good. So he's fallen off the path. We don't want to listen to him." But he approached them. He said, "You should listen to me." And they said, "No, no, no, you're too fat now. We don't want to hear you."

But they were struck by his bearing and his dignity and his radiance. They said, "Well, maybe he's got something to say, so we'll give him a chance."

So after six years of practice, full liberation, forty-nine days of reflection, and a 150-mile hike, this is what he said:

"There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus..." In this context, bhikkhus refers to—serious commentators say—any serious practitioners. Normally it means a monk, a mendicant. But in this context, it means a sincere and dedicated practitioner of either or any gender. So you are all bhikkhus by this term as we're practicing here together.

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness and sensual pleasures, which is low, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial.

"Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way." Tathagata is the term that the Buddha most often used to refer to himself, so it's synonymous with Buddha. "The Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

He is staking out a new spiritual vision in this teaching, which avoids the extreme of indulgence in sense pleasures or making sense pleasures the central focus of one's life. He's not saying that lay people shouldn't enjoy sense pleasures—we enjoy a lot of sense pleasures.

We experience music and food, relationships and entertainment, clothing and art, travel and countless other pleasures. The Buddha is not saying we should reject these entirely. Rather, he is cautioning against making the pursuit of such pleasures the central organizing principle of our lives.

When we look around the world today, we can observe countless people whose existence revolves entirely around chasing these kinds of sensory experiences. We see individuals addicted to substances, to entertainment, to food, to endless acquisition. This represents one extreme that the Buddha advised we avoid.

The other extreme to be avoided is self-mortification—those ascetic practices the Buddha himself had pursued during the earlier years of his spiritual quest. He discovered that inflicting pain upon the body does not lead to genuine health, happiness, or freedom. We encourage this same understanding here in our practice: do not punish your body through excessive sitting, walking, sleep deprivation, or over-effort. Do not become rigid or tense in your practice. The middle way embodies harmony and ease.

The Buddha continued: "And what, bhikkhus, is the middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision and leads to nibbana? It is this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

This marks the Buddha's first declaration of his path. He presents it as the middle way and delineates the eight components we are practicing and developing together during this retreat. We are cultivating all eight aspects of this path in our time here.

Carol spoke extensively about right view recently, and it bears noting that the classical definition of right view encompasses the Four Noble Truths. To truly align ourselves with the Buddha's understanding—which is the essence of right view—we must orient ourselves toward these Four Truths. This is why they hold such central importance in the entire framework of dharma teachings.

Tonight we will explore the first two truths, with the others to follow as our retreat unfolds. I wanted to offer this teaching now to establish a common vocabulary we can carry forward together. The Four Noble Truths form the foundational framework of all the Buddha's teachings, and this language will resurface throughout our time together.

Let me briefly outline these truths: The first truth acknowledges suffering. The second identifies craving as suffering's cause. The third proclaims that suffering's end lies in the cessation of craving. The fourth reveals that the path to suffering's end is the Noble Eightfold Path itself.

This structure possesses an elegant symmetry. The first pair addresses suffering and its origin, while the second pair presents suffering's cessation and the means to achieve it. We can imagine the Buddha, with his profound wisdom, compassion, and clarity, contemplating how best to share his discovery and creating this beautiful framework.

What strikes me as particularly significant is how causality rests at the very heart of this teaching. When you examine the Buddha's core teachings closely, you discover that cause and effect permeates everything—the Four Noble Truths, the law of karma, and dependent origination all rely on this principle.

Why does causation hold such central importance in Buddhist understanding? We will return to this question, but I suggest it is because when we remove the notion of a controlling self as the agent behind all events, we must explain reality's unfolding through selfless processes. This happens through the interaction of causes and conditions operating according to natural laws. In Buddhism, these causes and conditions replace both the concept of a controlling self and the idea of a creator deity orchestrating every detail of existence.

This provides our overall framework, which will likely resurface many times throughout our retreat.

Now let us hear what the discourse reveals about the first Noble Truth. The Buddha continues directly: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering."

I find this formulation deeply moving because of its universal applicability. Is there anyone who has not encountered these experiences? While you may not remember your birth...

Well, I can't remember that actually, but I bet my mother did. So there is definitely suffering in birth. Aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. I can attest to aging and illness. I can't yet attest to death, but I suspect. Union with what is displeasing—has that occurred since you've been here? Probably. Separation from what is pleasing—we experience that a lot. Not to get what one wants—it happens all the time, doesn't it?

So these are very universal statements. We can see how true they are for us. And then he sums it up by saying, continuing in brief, "the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering." The five aggregates are a description of the mind-body process of a human being. And when there is clinging involved with the five aggregates, they're suffering in that experience of living. So that's a very broad and universal definition of suffering.

But actually, there's a Pali word that's being translated as suffering, which most of you probably know—the Pali word *dukkha*. It's a word that is not really translatable into English. So most translators use this word suffering, but it's not quite the right fit because other translators have used for it anguish, stress, unsatisfactoriness, unreliability, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction. Because in fact, *dukkha* points to a range of the unsatisfactory aspects of life that go from very subtle friction to the most intense physical and mental pain imaginable. So *dukkha* encompasses that whole spectrum.

And it also has an underlying quality—you might say that it's impossible to put it all right, that this unsatisfactoriness is an integral part of our experience of living, and it's impossible to fix that part.

Now, sometimes people say that the first noble truth says life is suffering, but it doesn't say that. That would be a very gloomy statement for a religion, and Buddhism does not say that. But it does say that unsatisfactoriness is an integral part of life and will continue in all these different ways.

But it is kind of interesting that for a religion that has suffering as the first truth, there are a lot of happy people in the Dharma. And there are a lot of happy people in life generally, but Dharma practice leads to a lot of happiness. This is kind of interesting. So it's almost pointing that the more we open to suffering and accept it, the happier we become. And even though *dukkha* is unavoidable in different ways, it is true that one can live life as a basically happy person and that the outcome of our dharma practice leads in that direction.

So don't be misled by the emphasis here on *dukkha*—that a huge amount of suffering is always intrinsic to every human life. It's not like that. As we understand more and more with wisdom, the baseline of life becomes happiness and contentment. And the obstacles that come along can be accommodated more and more easily.

But it does point to something about human life that has a quality, when unexamined, of a lack of fulfillment, a lack of satisfaction. And of course, this is very widespread. We may see it, but the whole world feels it. This is a wide, wide truth.

This is from an article in the New Yorker: According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be given everything it must put up with.

Nine out of ten respondents—identified by just their initials for the purpose of the survey—stated that they would give up completely if they knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail. In a personal note in the afterward, researchers stated that, statistically speaking, life is, quote, "just too much," and as yet they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through it at all. From Duke University.

So you may feel like that here sometimes—life is so hard, I don't know how I'll get through it. Unfortunately, your chance of getting something in the mail has now gone away. You're stuck.

This can be a little bit of a daunting picture when we start to take in the width of unsatisfactoriness. And yet it is an integral part of our practice to open to this and unfold in it with wisdom.

This is a comment from Ajahn Suchitto that stresses the difficulty of the work. Ajahn Suchitto says, "We may feel that somehow we have to get ourselves out of this predicament, but then we realize we are the predicament. So how do we get out of that?"

So it's a very interesting process, coming to terms with this first noble truth and the truth of suffering. Often before we meet the Dharma—and even after—we may think "I am suffering," and that suffering tends to isolate us. But if we can see it in the context of the first noble truth, we realize that suffering is everywhere. Rather than separating or isolating us, if we understand it rightly, it connects us, because every human being, as we understand this truth, is dealing with the same realities that we are.

This both opens a doorway to compassion and overcomes feelings of isolation or loneliness. This is from a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian American poet. The poem is called "Kindness": "Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive."

All of us are in this situation together. We all share this vulnerability of human life.

The Buddha talked about three particular kinds of dukkha that we should investigate. The first he called dukkha-dukkha. This is like when you go get a double shot of espresso—this is the double shot of dukkha, which means it's the pain of pain. The pain of pain we see all around us on the evening news at night. We read or hear reports of the wars in Syria. It got to the point where I couldn't turn on the evening news because I couldn't stand to see another hospital full of bleeding children in Syria. It was too much for me. The war in Iraq continues. Flare-ups in combat in Afghanistan are still ongoing. On those massive scales, people are undergoing horrendous suffering in that part of the world.

Illness is rampant. Malarial deaths in Africa are about half a million a year now—something that should be easy to fix with mosquito nets, but still 500,000 people a year are dying from that disease. Closer to home, we read frequent accounts of murder, domestic violence, and child abuse. As we start to wake up to the social aspects of this country, of the United States, we start to understand how racism has oppressed and harmed people of color, how homophobia has oppressed and harmed the LGBTQI community. Often from very young—as soon as people are able to perceive themselves as different from the dominant cultural norm—there is often an overlay of not being quite good enough. That message, communicated again and again, is its own kind of trauma for people who grow up marginalized and excluded from what looks like the mainstream.

Even in a sangha like ours, we talked a few years ago in a group of senior students about the most common forms of suffering, the most difficult forms that people were experiencing. These were people who had good jobs and health care and reasonable health. They cited things like loneliness and lack of connection with others, the frequency of difficult emotions like depression, sadness, or anger, pressures at work, fear of inadequacy, fear of not being able to perform to standards, their own aging and illness, looking after aging parents, looking after children who were having a hard time

coming out of their teens and into young adulthood, and anxiety about the future. All these forms of difficulty are part of the pain of pain, the suffering of painful experiences in life, and they meet all of us. None of us are free yet from these.

The second kind of suffering that the Buddha talked about is called the unsatisfactoriness of alternation—in Pali, viparinama dukkha. This just means that even when conditions are good, they will eventually change. When they change, if we're clinging to them, we'll suffer with their change. This really highlights the problem in clinging. If conditions are difficult and we hold on to that, we suffer right away. If conditions are good but we cling to that, they're subject to change and then we'll suffer when they change.

Ajahn Chah said it's like grabbing a poisonous snake. If you grab it by the head, you get bitten right away—and that's taking hold of the painful parts of life. But if you grab it by the tail, the head will swing around and bite you—and that's taking hold of the enjoyable aspects of life because they will change. So this is the suffering of alternation or change.

The third kind is the most subtle, and it's called the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena—in Pali, sankhara dukkha. This is a very interesting one to explore. What is being pointed to here is that all conditioned phenomena are unstable. We were at a set of teachings from the Dalai Lama some years ago down in Mountain View.

We were outside at the Shoreline Amphitheater. It was a beautiful spring day, and Shoreline is set up to have a number of seats toward the front of the amphitheater and a big grassy area at the back. They had the stage arranged to accommodate the Dalai Lama on a high throne, which he emphasized was not because he's vain or egotistical, but because these are high teachings, and he wanted the respect for the teachings. Actually, what he was teaching on was the Heart Sutra, a central discourse about emptiness.

The stage backdrop, where all the speakers for the Grateful Dead would have been, was filled with this huge canvas painting of the Potala Palace back in the days when that was the Dalai Lama's home before the invasion and occupation. Seated on the floor of the stage were monks and nuns of every different Buddhist background. There were the black robes of the Japanese Zen monks and the brown robes of the Koreans and the ochre robes of the Theravadans, and there were monks and nuns and then of course many of the red robes of the Tibetan monks, all seated side by side on the stage.

Honestly, it felt like a Dharma Woodstock. I was just delighted to be sitting on the grass and feeling the vibes of all these beautiful people and hearing these teachings. But our minds stayed clear. So that was cool. Unlike Woodstock.

The Dalai Lama was talking about emptiness and he got to this part of talking about the three kinds of dukkha. He talked about sankara dukkha, and he said, "You have to understand this teaching on impermanence deeply. It's not that things go along solid for a while and then change and that that's impermanence." He said, "Things aren't solid for even a moment. Everything in our sense sphere is dissolving moment by moment as we experience it."

So the connection to emptiness is that not only should we not cling because eventually something will change into its opposite, there is in truth no thing there to cling to in the first place. There is nothing solid in our field of sense experiences that is hard enough to be taken hold of. Everything in the sense sphere—and you can look at this directly in your own experience in meditation—is dissolving moment after moment after moment.

The first two kinds of dukkha, the dukkha of pain and the dukkha of alternation, we can kind of see conceptually and we can understand by just reflecting on our experience over a long period of time. This third kind, the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena, we can only penetrate through meditative insight. And yet this is ultimately the most fundamental and the most freeing of the understandings of dukkha. So this is what we develop our meditative stability and investigation to learn about—this constantly dissolving nature of things.

There's one line in the discourses where a heavenly being comes down and is talking about their understanding of the Dharma. The heavenly being, talking about bodies, says, "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." So this could include actually all matter. Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form.

Of course it's not just form that is dissolving, but our mental states are as well. So the hindrances arise and pass quickly. Beautiful states arise and pass quickly. Even meditative states—mindfulness and concentration arising, passing, arising, passing.

So this is what we need to understand: these three levels of dukkha. And the Dalai Lama said that if we truly want to help others, we need to understand all three ways in which people are affected by the truth of dukkha.

This sometimes seems like unhappy news, right? Because we think we'd like something to be steady and stable, something that we could hold on to that would be permanent and lasting. But it's not just bad news. This is from the Buddha: "If there was

one speck of permanent form, the holy life for liberation would not be possible." So if permanence was an aspect of this universe, real permanence, we couldn't transform our hearts and minds and come to liberation. So it's not all bad news.

Now the Noble Truths, as it continues in this discourse, are not just philosophy. This is not something that we're supposed to believe in. Each one has a call to action. And this is a really important piece to understand.

So Right View is not just, "Oh, I believe that there is dukkha in life." There is a call to action. And what the call to action is for the First Noble Truth—this Noble Truth of suffering—is to be fully understood. This is our job, this is our work: to be fully understood.

The implication is we don't understand it fully yet. We may conceptually, but we're not living out that realization. Because if we saw clearly the insubstantial nature, the dissolving nature of things the way they are, we wouldn't try to hold on. But we do.

The Buddha put it this way: there is one thing because of the not seeing of which keeps you bound, and that is dukkha. In other words, we keep holding on because we don't fully understand the unsatisfactoriness of things. So we need to reflect on this truth again and again in our direct experience. We need to understand how dukkha is showing up in our immediate experience and recognize it as an aspect of the First Noble Truth.

Here's a question: When difficulty comes along, do we see it as an aspect of the First Noble Truth? When you're in struggle, when you're in suffering, do you note, "Oh, First Noble Truth"? I would say seldom. Because we do a lot of other things with that difficulty. We have a lot of stories about our suffering, about our pain.

Sometimes we deny it. Sometimes we blame ourselves for it. I remember doing this a lot before I met the Dharma. I thought, "Oh, there's something wrong with me." I took the pain really personally. I invalidated myself. I judged myself for the suffering that I was having. Or we might blame our parents or our teachers or society or our partner for it. Or we distract ourselves—we watch TV or have a drink. If we're in meditation, we turn to a pleasant fantasy.

But there's always the opportunity to just come and feel the pain and say, "This is the First Noble Truth. This is what the Buddha was pointing to." When we can do that, we put it in the context of practice, the context of understanding, and it also connects us to every being that lives today.

It's a delicate point because we want to open to and recognize the direct immediate experience of dukkha as the First Noble Truth. This is a practice point—an important one. Essentially, this is freeing. It's meant to be freeing to see this in its universal aspect and in its connecting aspect.

But if we make up a view or a belief about our life or about life in general, that it's all dukkha, that just gets depressing. That's taking it out of direct experience and making a belief about it. I hope you can feel the difference. This is not something to be believed in as a solid thing that is applied to all of life. "Oh, all of life is suffering." If we hold on to that view, that's depressing. We're going to get averse to life. We're going to get afraid of life. We're going to get negative. But that's not the way it's meant. If we can see the truth of it in the moment, that's what is freeing.

So we want to not deny this truth, and we also don't want to cling to it as a view. Clearly this was not the Buddha's intention in teaching—for us to cling and become depressed. The Buddha said, "A bhikkhu is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm herself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure."

So we have to open to the suffering and even, I would say, embrace it. Let me ask: Has suffering ever been useful in your practice? Have you learned from it? Would you be the person you are today if you hadn't had that suffering? Has it developed strengths in you? When we bring wisdom to our difficulties, it's a tremendous source of learning and growth.

I was practicing at IMS one year, working with Joseph Goldstein as my teacher, and I was about five weeks into a long retreat when I hit a really difficult patch. I was becoming very agitated. Some fear was coming up. A lot of physical energy was arising. A lot of thoughts and emotions were just racing through. I couldn't stabilize my mind on the present moment, on the breath or the body or anything. I was getting very discouraged. I went into Joseph and explained what was going on.

And he said, "Well, are you upset about this?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm upset about this." And he said, "Why?" I said, "Because I feel like my practice was deepening and now that stopped. I've lost the deepening of my practice. I've lost the thread."

And Joseph just sat back and smiled and said, "Guy, this is the deepening of your practice."

And then I got it. That's what I had to work with next. So I learned a lot from working with that. It opened a lot for me.

You all probably know who Ajahn Chah is. He was Jack Kornfield's first teacher and Ajahn Sumedho's teacher, a very revered monk in Thailand and great teacher. When he died, he passed the leadership of his monastery, which was Wat Ba Pong in the north-east of Thailand, to a senior monk at that time named Ajahn Liam or Lungpao Liam. Lungpao means spiritual father.

Lungpao Liam had been practicing with Ajahn Chah for a long time, and now he is still the abbot at Wat Ba Pong. He occasionally travels to the US and does a little bit of teaching. Well, Lungpao Liam was asked by another abbot of a monastery, "What was the hardest thing in your practice?" And he replied, "I would have to say that fear was the hardest thing for me." But then he paused. He said, "But just to say that it was hard isn't quite right. I would have to say that it was a worthy opponent. Working with fear brought about the growth of a lot of wisdom."

So this is part of the deal for all of us. These hindrances that come and the different forms of pain that arise really are our worthy opponents. And in this setting, we have the environment and we have the tools to learn to work with them. And I'm going to make a bold statement here: to master them, to find ways to overcome the suffering that these things could catch us in.

So these are challenges to our practice, but they are also the sources of a lot of wisdom. And we find through working with them strengths that we didn't know we had. So this is really what grows us up as human beings and opens us to a lot of understanding and a lot of compassion, lets us be able to help others going through the same thing.

The second noble truth. Don't worry, I'm not going another forty-five minutes. Just briefly, we'll go into the second noble truth. I'll read what the discourse says about that:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence."

I was so relieved when I heard this second noble truth because it said the suffering you're experiencing has a cause. At that time, I thought my suffering was just a solid block that I couldn't understand. And this said, no, there's a cause to it. Because where there's a cause, there's a possibility of taking out that cause. So this statement really shows a way to freedom, a way to release.

Craving is the translation of the Pali word taṇhā. And in the Buddha's time, that was just an ordinary word that meant thirst. So you could say the cause of suffering is thirst. I like this expression because it suggests something about the craving. It suggests that it's a kind of natural thing that comes up, that it can be satisfied, but only temporarily.

Right? You're thirsty, you drink some water, thirst is gone. How long before it comes back? It comes back.

So that's the way it is with craving. We crave something, we give ourselves that thing, it ends the craving, we feel satisfied, but in not too much longer, craving comes back. So what is being pointed to here is that craving is a very deep-rooted tendency in the mind and will fasten on different objects, seeking delight now here, now there. But the fact is that it will keep coming again and again and again.

When thirst arises, do you tend to feel satisfied or unsatisfied? You tend to feel unsatisfied, don't you? When craving arises, do you tend to feel satisfied?

No.

So craving itself and its frequent reoccurrence engenders this frequent feeling of discontent. There may be nothing wrong in the situation as such, but when craving comes again and again, it feels like there's something missing. I need something more or I need something to go away. That's the meaning that comes when craving arises.

So one thing I just want to point out here is that craving, although it's a desire word, is not just about desire. Craving is essentially wanting things to be different than they are. Sometimes that means I want something pleasant to come in. Sometimes that means I want something unpleasant to go away. So craving, the word tanha, although it's a desire word in English, actually encompasses both wanting and aversion. Greed and aversion are both included in craving.

And delusion is also included in craving. This may not be clear why delusion is included, but I want to explain it in two ways.

One is we don't pay attention to the forces of wanting and pushing away. Because if we did, if we saw them with wisdom, we would see they don't work. These things keep us stirred up all the time. Take a look when you're sitting and some craving is there. You want the experience to be different. You want a little less body pain or you want a bit fewer thoughts or you want a little more concentration or you want back the bliss of the sitting that you had two days ago. We do things to make that happen. You've prob-

ably seen this. That's why our sittings are not peaceful—because we're fidgeting mentally and sometimes we're fidgeting physically due to the force, this frequent force of craving, wanting things to be a little bit different, more positive, less discomfort.

But we don't see that clearly and so we keep doing it. Are all those little adjustments that craving wants you to keep making ever really successful? Check it out. They keep us off balance, but rarely do they satisfy. So we don't see that. And so we keep doing that. We keep trying to make it a little bit better, a little bit better, a little bit better. But the very activity of that is what disturbs our natural peace.

The Tibetans have a saying: the essence of samsara is correcting. Samsara is the wheel of continued existence—birth, death, next birth, next death, and so on. It can be understood over many lifetimes, but it can also be understood moment to moment: forming a new sense of self, dissolving, forming a new sense of self, dissolving. That's what keeps us on the wheel. We want to make the moment just a little better. The moment's not right the way life has given it to us. We've got to correct the moment. That's what greed and aversion keep trying to do. But we don't see that we're doing it and we don't see how that disturbs our basic peace. So that's how delusion is wrapped up in craving.

The other way delusion is wrapped up in craving is this: when our vision is set on bringing in pleasure and pushing away pain, that's all we're interested in. The pleasurable things stand out strong in our field of experience. The painful things stand out strong in our field of experience. What about the neutral things? We blow those off. They don't register.

The Buddha has this nice statement: "Lust is a maker of measurement. Hatred is a maker of measurement." So we measure things by their ability to bring us pleasure or bring us pain. We're constantly measuring our sense experiences through that filter.

That's delusion because clarity is to see pleasant experiences, unpleasant experiences, and neutral experiences all with equanimity, with the same amount of clarity and emphasis. But when we're so focused on pleasure and pain, an element of delusion comes in and we don't see the neutral clearly. It doesn't have a charge for us, so we write it off.

This sutta talks about three different kinds of craving: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

Craving for sense pleasures means pleasant experiences in the five physical senses. This is obviously a huge area of pursuit for human beings. I was curious about the statistics, so I looked on the web this afternoon. The restaurant industry in the United

States generated $783 billion in 2016. Now, of course, people have to eat, but it's a lot cheaper to eat at home. $783 billion in the restaurant industry. Movies—the sense pleasure of seeing—$11 billion in the US in 2016. Recorded music, $15 billion in 2015. These are dipping, by the way. You probably know the music industry is in trouble. That's pleasant sounds, dipping.

But this one got me: the perfume industry. Pleasant scents. And this is just one kind of pleasant scents. This doesn't include deodorant and moisturizer and such. The perfume industry alone, worldwide, $29 billion a year on pleasant scents. Unfortunately, they're not wanted here because we are scent-free. But that's a lot of money for pleasant scents.

This is clearly a big pursuit for human beings. Why? Well, sense pleasures do bring some happiness. I love eating a warm chocolate chip cookie. It brings a real hit of happiness for me. But it doesn't last. They're temporary. It's not like a good meditation—it doesn't always last either, but it lasts longer. So there's craving for sense pleasures. They provide a temporary hit, but they don't bring lasting satisfaction. If we orient our lives around trying to get more and more of them, we're caught up in some level of frustration.

Craving for existence basically means wanting to be alive. According to the Buddhist teachings, we are all here because we wanted to take birth again. There was some unfinished urge from a past life that led us to want to be experiencing things again, and that's why we're here.

You notice how this plays out for us today—we don't want to die, by and large. Every being that lives does not want to die, and that's because of this deeply rooted craving for existence. In some ways, it's not all that rational. What if you went to bed tonight and just didn't wake up in the morning? Would that be a problem? It might be a problem for other people, but would it be a problem for you? If this train of consciousness just finished, there'd be no one to feel the problem. Yet we'd be terrified if we thought that was going to happen. This is just a very deeply rooted wish to be in this form, to have the sense experiences that we're having—one of the most deeply rooted wishes in our being.

Bhavatanha, the Pali term, also means craving for becoming. It means the wish to be something, to have an identity that we can coagulate around and identify ourselves as being something. We may want to have a particular career. We may want to be in a relationship. We may want to be a parent.

rich. We may want to be famous or athletic or something like that. Those are wishes for a particular form of existence that we call becoming. I like this quote from Lily Tomlin: "I always knew I wanted to be someone, but I guess I should have been more specific." So this is *bhava taṇhā* also.

And then *vibhava taṇhā*, craving for non-existence—this is basically the wish to turn it all off. When life becomes too much, when it's painful, this is the impulse to non-existence that is the motive for suicide. Don't want to experience anymore what's happening in the body, what's happening in the mind, what's happening in the senses. So this is based on a deep aversion to life.

So these are the forms of craving. And the second noble truth also comes with a call to action. And that call is this: the noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned. Abandoned.

So suffering was to be understood, and the cause of suffering, craving, is to be abandoned. This is our work. When we meet craving and its forms of greed, aversion, and delusion, we are to learn how to let go of those.

So you can talk about it in terms of the three *kilesas*, greed, aversion, delusion. You can talk about it in terms of the five hindrances that Bonnie talked about. You can talk about it in terms of the taints or *āsavas*. They're all pointing to the same letting go of these impurities that are deeply rooted in our mental habits.

Because they are so deeply rooted, we can't get rid of them through an act of will. We can't just decide, "Oh, I'm not going to have any more aversion today." It doesn't work that way. The abandoning of these forces comes only through deep insight. And in the Buddhist tradition, the understanding is that it comes through the direct realization of the unconditioned element or *nibbāna*. And that is what constitutes enlightenment.

So it is the direct realization of the unconditioned that has the potential for uprooting these forces in the mind.

So just really briefly, the second noble truth of craving is to be abandoned. The third noble truth, as I mentioned in the beginning, is that the end of craving is the end of suffering. The call to action there is that the third noble truth is to be realized. And the fourth noble truth of the Eightfold Path as the way to the end of suffering—the fourth noble truth is to be developed. So that is what we're doing here. But we will spend a lot of time looking at especially the second and third noble truths.

Some form of craving expressed as greed, aversion, or delusion. The abandoning of that means that in the moment that craving goes out of the mind—it disappears—in that moment, we move into a momentary experience of the third noble truth of the immediate end of that particular suffering.

So we could say that the heart of our dharma practice is to move from the second noble truth of craving momentarily into the third noble truth of the end of craving. This is the heart of the dharma. This is the heart of our practice. And as one teacher put it, our practice is to change the habits of mind that lead to suffering. There is no other practice.

Second noble truth moving into third noble truth. This is what we want to find again and again and again. And the more often we're able to find it on a moment-to-moment basis, the more often that quality of peace becomes established as the baseline of our meditation and of our life.

Okay, let's sit together for just a minute, please.

This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood. This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned. This noble truth of the end of suffering is to be realized. This noble truth of the way leading to the end of suffering is to be developed.

So we have about thirty minutes for walking and then we'll come back.

CHAPTER 161

Kamma and the End of Kamma (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this retreat talk, Guy Armstrong presents kamma as "the science of happiness," offering practical guidance for understanding how our actions shape our lives and spiritual development. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings, he explains that kamma is action with volition (cetanā), where the underlying intention determines whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome. Wholesome actions arise from generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom, while unwholesome actions stem from greed, hatred, and delusion.*
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> *Armstrong discusses the ten unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind, and addresses common Western resistance to karmic teachings. He emphasizes that kamma operates as a universal law while acknowledging other causes of suffering such as illness, accident, and social conditions. The talk explores how karmic results manifest in six ways, from immediate feelings to habitual mind states and mysterious future consequences.*
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> *The discussion integrates the teaching of anattā (not-self) with kamma, explaining how our personality is simply the flow of karmic patterns that can be transformed through practice. Armstrong concludes with the profound teaching that the Noble Eightfold Path leads to the end of kamma itself, where even wholesome actions cease in the stillness of nibbāna. This teaching connects directly to the retreat's equanimity practice and the classical phrase: "All beings are heirs to their kamma."*

The talk tonight is on karma and the end of karma.

As you probably know, one of the central philosophical concepts in Buddhism is the concept of emptiness. A number of years ago, some Western teachers were meeting with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, discussing dharma matters. They asked him what he thought they should really be teaching Westerners about. He said it's more important that you teach Westerners about karma than to teach them about emptiness. Why? Because it's so practical. Karma is so practical for our understanding of how to live and conduct ourselves in the world. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

This word has entered our Western vocabulary, but it's not very well understood in the West. James and I, some years ago, were teaching a meditation group at a juvenile hall in the Bay Area. We went in with some trepidation because we weren't sure if they

would be interested in listening to two middle-aged white guys. But we were there for six weeks, one class a week, and it was very rewarding for us and for some of the people there too.

If you're not from this country, you may not know Juvenile Hall is a jail for people who are under the age of eighteen who have been charged with fairly serious crimes. People were accused of things like assault with a deadly weapon, grand theft, murder, and attempted murder, and they were awaiting trial. There was a huge amount of anxiety and worry on their part while they were in this facility. So we shared meditation techniques, much as we've shared with you, to give them some tools to meet the fear and anxiety and come to some calmness. Many of them really appreciated it. That work has since continued in a couple of other projects, both in the Bay Area and on the East Coast. It's good work.

When we were nearing the end of our class series, we said, should we talk about the precepts? We decided yes. And then, should we talk about karma? Yes, we thought we might as well talk about karma too. So on our last class, that's what we talked about—the precepts and karma.

We presented karma in the way that I'd like to present it this evening as the science of happiness. Whatever level of happiness you want to aim for—the three kinds: human, heavenly, and nirvanic—the teachings on karma give you instructions for how to get there. So karma as practitioners becomes our best friend, our most sincere and trustworthy friend on the path.

The teachings on karma get into mysterious areas, as you've probably been feeling as you've been doing the practice with the equanimity phrase these last few days. Some of these areas are not things that I can verify from my present experience. They are things that the Buddha said he could verify from his experience and his insight. I'm going to share some of that with you tonight. I don't think it's my job to tell you what you should believe, though I think it would be to your benefit to believe it. But I think it is really my job to tell you what the Buddha said on this topic. Then, as adults, you can form your own views and take it where you will, but it won't be because you haven't heard it.

We're going to look at this topic from a few angles. We're going to look at karma itself. We're going to look at the results of karma. We're going to look at the relationship between karma and the understanding of not-self. And we're going to look at the end of karma. So we'll come at it from a few directions, so please be patient as this unfolds.

First, what is karma? Karma is a Sanskrit word that originally simply meant action. That's all it meant at the time of the Buddha—action. The Pali term for it is kamma, with a double m, k-a-m-m-a. This evening I'll use the terms karma, kamma and action interchangeably.

In the time of the Buddha, there was a lot of debate from all these different philosophical schools about what action meant, what constituted significant action. Some teachers said that actions didn't mean anything. You could do anything and there were no results. Some said that results of actions were very important and had theories about what constituted them. Some philosophers said that actions were predetermined. There was no free will. Everything you were going to do in this life was already laid down by existing laws. Others said, no, there's free will and what you choose does make a difference. All these different theories were going around.

The Buddha said they're all speculative. He said that what he saw with his own direct insight from an extremely concentrated mind led him to a new formulation of the meaning of karma.

And this is how he described it. He said karma means action with volition. The Pali term for volition is *cetanā,* and we've been using it in our instructions with the translation "intention" — looking at the intention before we adjust a posture, before we walk through a door. This can be extended before we speak or act.

This is a direct quote: "Volition, O bhikkhus, is what I call action, for through volition one performs the action."

We could think of a few different synonyms for this word volition. Sometimes you could call it intention, motivation, urge, impulse, or will. I hope you can see that it's the underlying energy that makes an action happen, that pushes it forward.

In the Buddha's understanding, an action becomes wholesome or unwholesome depending on what this underlying motivation is. If the underlying motivation is wholesome, the action is wholesome. If the underlying motivation is unwholesome, the action is considered unwholesome.

Unwholesome volition, the Buddha said, is that which is influenced by greed, hatred, and delusion. We can see this in our personal lives, we can see it in the lives of individuals around us. These three motivating forces lead to the suffering of the world. That's why they're called, in the Buddha's language, roots of the unwholesome — these three factors.

We also see it in society and the institutions in society. Consumerism promotes greed. Racism promotes hatred. Biased media promote delusion. These forces are rampant in our world today, and they're all extremely destructive.

Wholesome volition comes out of the opposite of these unwholesome roots. So the opposite of greed is letting go, or the generic term the Buddha used is renunciation, sometimes relinquishment, and it's more often seen actively as generosity. Renunciation or generosity is the undoing of greed. Aversion or hatred is undone by loving-kindness, by *mettā*, and delusion is undone by wisdom.

So these are the wholesome roots: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. When actions come out of these motives, the act is considered wholesome.

Now, you can describe an action — someone takes a sharp knife and slashes open another person's stomach. Unwholesome? It depends on the volition. What if it's a surgeon removing a burst appendix? Then it could be a very wholesome action. If it's a robber trying to steal someone's money, it would be a very unwholesome action. So the volition is what we judge the action by.

Another example: if a baby is asleep, rolls over in their sleep, knocks over a candle, and the candle burns the house down — but somebody rescues the baby — that act has no karmic weight at all because there was no intention behind it. It was purely accidental rolling over, so there's no karmic result from an action like that.

And then there are actions that have mixed motives. We give something to someone, which is generosity, but we do it because we want something back, which is desire. So that has mixed wholesome and unwholesome motives, and many actions in the world have that mix, so they have mixed results as well.

The important thing here is that actions coming out of our volition have moral force based on the value of the volition. There are wholesome volitions and there are unwholesome volitions.

These actions in the Buddha's view happen in three areas: body, speech, and mind. Body and speech I think we can clearly see as actions. We may not have stopped to consider that our thoughts and emotions also are active and so carry karmic weight. However, the karmic weight of a thought or a feeling, if not acted upon outwardly, is much less than if that same thought or feeling is acted upon outwardly. So don't get too worried about the bad karma of seeing unwholesome thoughts because mindfulness is there to see them — they may actually be reducing. Don't get too concerned about the weight of that karma, although we'll talk about it more later.

Fortunately, the Buddha was very clear with us about what constitute wholesome and unwholesome actions. In specific, he listed ten types of unwholesome action — three of body, four of speech, and three of mind — that give us really clear guidelines on what not to do in the world.

The three unwholesome actions of body are killing living beings, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct.

And you'll recognize these as the first three of the five precepts that we chant regularly.

The four unwholesome actions of speech are first, saying what is not true. And this is the fourth precept of the five that we regularly take. The other three are using angry or harsh speech, speaking maliciously of others, or entertaining ourselves with idle chatter and gossip.

There are three unwholesome actions of mind: covetousness, which means wanting what belongs to someone else; ill will or hostility; and wrong view. This is very interesting. If we misunderstand the nature of the way things are, this leads us to act unwisely in the world. So having the wrong understanding about the way things are is actually considered an unwholesome action. It's one reason that understanding right view is so powerful.

So the ten wholesome actions are to refrain from these ten unwholesome. And of course there are other wholesome actions that you can extrapolate, such as generosity, loving-kindness, and so forth.

A number of you will be heading back into daily life soon, and then the relational field becomes very, very important. So it's very helpful to reflect on these wholesome actions as you head back into daily conduct. We have a lot of choice in our actions in the world. And sometimes people ask, well, if everything is conditioned, that means my motivations are conditioned, how can I change?

Just because motivations are conditioned doesn't mean that they're determined. And they're not. Because as influence comes to bear in the moment, wisdom starts to change the habit of our intentions. So the wise approach is to act as though you have a choice. Act as though you have free will and bring as much wisdom as possible and kindness into that moment.

So then this leads—the actions then lead to future results. The result of karma is called vipāka, vipākakamma. And the basic teaching is that wholesome actions lead to wholesome results, or put briefly, happiness. And unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results, or unhappiness.

When James and I were teaching at Juvenile Hall and we started to explain this concept of karma, we asked them, "Do you get this? Does it make any sense to you?" And one of the young guys raised his hand and says, "Oh, you mean what goes around comes around?" And we said, "Yeah, yeah. That's pretty much it."

Put simply, here's the way the Buddha put it at the start of the Dhammapada: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind and sorrow will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

You may know that in Tibetan Buddhism, they also have the brahmavihāras, but they call them a different name. They call them the four immeasurables. And I want to read you the phrases that the Tibetans use for mettā and compassion and see if this sounds a little familiar.

Here's the phrase for loving-kindness: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." And this is the phrase for compassion: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue." This is their meditation on love and compassion.

Here's another way the Buddha expressed it, and you'll see how this ties into our equanimity meditation: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, for good or for ill, of that they will be the heirs."

So this is stated as a universal law. One of the things the Buddha stated that applies to all beings. So it doesn't matter if you know this law or not. It doesn't matter if you believe this law or not. It doesn't matter if your religion believes this law or not. It doesn't matter if your culture believes this law or not. This law applies. It's a universal law that operates for all beings. And the fact is that your growth in the path depends on this law, which we'll explain in more detail as we go.

So this reflection becomes the basis for our equanimity meditation.

All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own past actions more than on my wishes for them. The phrase "more than on my wishes" is somewhat optional, but I like including it.

This is obviously something that takes time to understand deeply, so I want to explain it carefully. There's often resistance to such a blanket statement, especially in the West, and I want to qualify it in ways that may make it more comprehensible.

I mentioned earlier the beautiful scene in the movie Kundun, the biography of the Dalai Lama, where the nine or ten-year-old Dalai Lama receives teachings from his tutors about the Four Noble Truths. They ask him to restate the Second Noble Truth in his own words. After a few formulaic attempts, he arrives at: "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind." The tutors respond, "Very good."

Most of our suffering does come from our own habits of mind. So another way to frame this equanimity wish is: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own habits of mind"—because our habits of mind are also karmic actions. They influence not only our thoughts and feelings, but our speech and actions as well. If this formulation makes it more reasonable for you, this is also an excellent equanimity phrase.

The Visuddhimagga, the Path of Purification, offers another perspective on this phrase, describing the four brahmaviharas in detail. Here's their explanation: "Beings are owners of their deeds. Whose, if not theirs, is the choice by which they will become happy or will get free from sufferings? Whose is the choice if not ours by which we will become happy or get free from suffering?"

This suggests a more forward-facing formulation: "All beings are the heirs to their karma. Their happiness and unhappiness will depend on their own actions." This orientation helps because the backward-facing interpretation becomes problematic.

Consider the children in the Holocaust who died in the camps or watched their parents, sisters, or brothers die. Do we imagine that those four, five, or six-year-old children had created such negative actions in their short lives that they were destined for such suffering? Personally, that's difficult for me to accept.

We must question whether all visible suffering can be traced to individuals' past actions. Even in our society today, some people are born into favorable conditions that give them advantages throughout life, while others are born into circumstances that create obstacles and social headwinds in their development.

I'll share an example from a training on undoing racism by the People's Institute—highly recommended if you're interested in understanding the roots of racism in this country more deeply. One presenter was Diana Dunn, a white woman who had been with the organization for years. Diana had two children from two marriages. Her first marriage was to a white man, and their child was obviously white—perceived and recognized as white by society. Diana described how this child moved through the world with tailwinds at their back. All kinds of opportunities opened up in terms of schools, relationships, jobs, and so forth.

After her first husband died, Diana married Jim Dunn, the founder of the People's Institute, who was a black man. She had a child with Jim—as she put it, "went in the same way, came out the same way." But this child was perceived as black by society. This mixed-race child, raised with the same care, love, and wholesomeness of heart, faced headwinds as they moved through the world. The same doors did not open for them in school, relationships, work, and other areas.

Personally, I have no inclination to call such a situation karmic. It might be—I don't know. It might not be. We'll explore other causes in a moment. We simply cannot perceive such things clearly. To judge a situation we don't fully understand as purely karmic is a misunderstanding and misconstruing of reality.

The Buddha identified the workings of karma as one of four "imponderables"—things we simply cannot understand through reasoning. The others are the range of a Buddha's mind, the beginning of the universe, and the power of concentrated mind. The Buddha warned that whoever speculates about these four would go mad and experience vexation. Not recommended.

Yet speculation about karma continues extensively, doesn't it?

Have you ever gotten sick and had a friend say, "Oh, that must be your karma"? I don't know how you feel when you're told that, but I don't feel very happy when I hear this because it's simply a speculative view and it doesn't really help. Someone like a Buddha may be able to see the effects of karma, but generally we are not. So it's not helpful to speculate.

The Buddha never said that everything that happens is the result of past actions. He was once asked to endorse this view, and he would not. He said that philosophers who make such claims are overshooting themselves—meaning, it's a polite way of saying they're talking about what they don't know. He explained there are many other causes for painful and unhappy conditions we see in the world, mentioning illness, diet, climate, accident, and assault.

As I understand it, there are many causes for the way our lives unfold—physical causes, biological causes, chemical causes, as well as karmic causes. All these different kinds of causes flow together and create the life we live. But the Buddha never said that everything about our life is due to past karma.

The way I read this teaching on karma is in a very broad view: wholesome acts lead to wholesome results, unwholesome acts lead to unwholesome results. It's much more helpful to think about it going forward. We don't have the vision to see karma as a rear-view mirror. We can't tell what acts got us here, and to speculate about them would be futile.

So let go of any judgment about the situation you find yourself in—thinking, "Wow, I must have done something really awful to get here." Over time, we've probably all done everything. We have all done everything. Trying to figure out what particular actions led to one particular result is not possible to do. I would let go of using karma as a rear view mirror and try to use it going forward. Let it guide your path and your life looking ahead.

Westerners often feel resistance to the teaching of karma. Perhaps it's because we have very strong democratic ideals of equality in the West, and it seems as though saying people are to some extent responsible for their own welfare is being cold or cruel or heartless or uncaring. But one thing not implied here is that beings deserve to suffer or deserve punishment for their actions. That sense of deserving and punishing is not at all in the flavor of the teaching on karma.

I believe if the Buddha had had the ability to reach into other human hearts and pluck out the cause of suffering, he would have done that for everyone who came to him, even the most hardened criminals. There's this beautiful story of Angulimala, who had killed 999 people—what's sometimes not mentioned is that this was under directive from his former spiritual teacher, a misguided teacher. He had killed 999 people and needed to kill a thousand. The Buddha was going to be his last victim.

So he stalked the Buddha and met him in the woods, intending to kill him. But the Buddha turned away from him, and Angulimala could not catch him. Finally Angulimala was so taken by the Buddha's presence that he asked why he had not run away out of fear. The Buddha said, "It's because I have stopped, Angulimala. But you have not stopped. You are still running."

At that, Angulimala asked to be taken as his student, and the Buddha assented. He gave Angulimala the teachings, the Four Noble Truths, led him to practice. And as these stories go, in a very short period of time, he was liberated. This was someone who had

done many unwholesome actions out of deep wrong view, and yet the Buddha's relationship to him was entirely compassionate, leading him completely out of his suffering.

So the teaching on karma doesn't have any aspect of punishment, but it is a law. Expecting to do an unwholesome deed and not have any karmic result would be like expecting an apple to come off a branch and not fall to the ground. You can't interrupt the law of gravity and you can't interrupt the law of karma, according to the Buddha's teaching.

Another reason people sometimes resist is they think that karma, putting some responsibility on the individual, gives us an excuse for not caring—as though we would say, "Oh, that problem is their fault. They created that, so I don't have to worry about it."

That's not equanimity—that's indifference. Indifference is the near enemy of equanimity. It closes our heart off to others' suffering. True equanimity has to go along with metta and compassion.

So when we see suffering, we don't really care where it came from. If beings are suffering, compassion wants to alleviate it. We recognize the source could have been societal, internal, parental, or physical. We don't really care. If beings are suffering, then love and compassion want to alleviate that. And equanimity needs that infusion to be complete.

If equanimity leads to coldness of heart and not caring, it needs to be balanced with more metta and compassion. The four Brahmaviharas really need to work together.

When we look at the results of actions, we can see at least six ways that they happen. Let me name these and give examples.

First, there are results before we act. When you're thinking about doing something generous, how does it feel? It feels good, doesn't it? It feels uplifting. If you're thinking of doing something unkind, how does that feel?

I was on a conference call with a committee of a retreat center not long ago, and I had a conflict of opinion with someone else on the call. After the call, this person sent me an email and was still kind of taking on the argument in a tone that I felt was really disrespectful, not acknowledging any validity in my position.

My first impulse was to forward this email to the other committee members so they could stay current on our discussion. Something just didn't quite feel right. Although normally that's a reasonable thing to do, I saw that my motivation was actually to ex-

pose their disrespect to the other members and therefore undermine their status a little bit. Once I saw that, I couldn't send it. So I just picked up the phone and called the person and talked it through. That was a much happier solution.

When we're thinking of doing something unkind, if we look into the feeling as we're planning, it doesn't feel so good. We can pick up on that.

Second, in the moment that we do the action, we get a certain feeling from it. Doing something kind feels good in the moment. Doing something that hurts another, if we're sensitive, we feel the hurt ourselves. Sylvia Boorstein has this very nice saying: "Someone causing great pain is themselves in great pain"—even though they may not know it. As we tune into that, we feel how it is to be kind, feel how it is to be unkind.

Third is when we remember our past actions. In metta practice, we're encouraged to start metta for ourselves by remembering things we've done that have been kind or generous. As we do that, we really rejoice in those memories. We appreciate having done those things and it aids the metta.

The other side is that in long retreat, often there will come to mind ways that we've hurt other people. We sometimes go through this process of a life review. When I first sat a long retreat, many memories came up of unskillful things I'd done—some when I was very young, some when I was in my teens. Each one landed with a strong hurt as I reviewed them from this place of caring about people.

This life review is important, and it's important to feel that we're open enough to feel that remorse for the things we've done that were unskillful. Gradually, by allowing the remorse to be felt, we still regret the actions, but the intensity dies down. It's as though we've taken that into account and we strengthen the resolve not to act that way again.

Fourth, our actions come back to us in the way people relate to us. If we're warm, generous, caring, and loving, people will respond with warmth and generosity and care and love. If we're often angry, critical, and judgmental, people will shy away and not want contact with us. Our relationships are often mirrors of our own moods and mind states.

Fifth, we see actions come to fruition in habitual states of mind. Where does your mind go when it's left alone? Often we have deeply ingrained habits and tendencies that vary from person to person. Some will be in the loving direction, some may be in an angry direction, some may be in a generous direction, some may be in a desirous direction. In many ways, what we're seeing when we sit and these moods and thoughts come, we're seeing the effect of past investments of energy and volition.

These habits have gotten created in our minds like grooves—well-worn grooves that very easily, left to their own devices, allow thoughts and emotions to fall back into familiar patterns out of habit.

The Buddha taught: "Bhikkhus, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, or cruelty, their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

This was 2,500 years ago—the Buddha describing the neural wiring and patterning of our reactions. There's a lovely quotation sometimes attributed to him, though I don't believe he actually said it. Still, it captures something very accurate: "The thought becomes an intention. The intention manifests as an action. The action develops into habit, and habit hardens into character. Therefore watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings."

The sixth way that results come, according to the Buddha's teaching, is through the mysterious workings of karma—events that happen to us in the future springing from past actions where we cannot see the connection, but which the Buddha says are happening nonetheless. We may not see the immediate result of our generosity, love, or compassion, but the Buddha says: be assured that those actions will bear wholesome results. Don't doubt that this is the case.

I find this deeply interesting because it suggests that morality is woven into the very fabric of the universe. If this is a universal law applying to all sentient beings wherever life exists, then morality is fundamental to how the universe is designed. It cannot be avoided.

For me, this view brings heart, warmth, and care. I don't want to live in an immoral or amoral world. I want to live in a moral universe. Karma as a teaching points to the essential nature of morality as being woven into the way existence itself is structured. It's more than just an evolutionary adaptation—it's in the heart of sentient life itself.

I don't know how that happens. I think it's a huge mystery. But I think it's a beautiful mystery, and for me, it's a heartwarming one. It tells us we don't live in a cold universe.

When someone says, "I don't believe in karma," they usually mean this sixth kind—mysterious things happening based on our present actions. The first five kinds of results are quite verifiable. You can observe all of these from your own experience over time. The sixth one isn't really verifiable unless you're very developed, as the Buddha was.

So I would simply say: keep an open mind and consider that it might be true. If you take a stance today saying it's not true, you don't know that for a fact. You're closing off a possibility based on something you don't really know one way or another. If you keep an open mind, you can investigate and observe over time—yourself and your friends—and see if long-term results of people's actions begin to make sense through this lens.

And if you're willing to keep an open mind about this, then you can keep an open mind about the next topic: rebirth.

When I came into dharma practice, I was skeptical about rebirth. I had a scientific background in college, and it didn't land naturally for me. But I kept an open mind and remained open to the possibility.

There are discourses where the Buddha speaks very specifically about actions and how they influence future life. He says that generosity leads at some point in the future—perhaps in some future life—to abundance in material things. Non-killing leads to having a long life. Non-injuring of living beings leads to health of body. Inquiry, asking questions of wise people, leads to growth in wisdom.

These are instructions for how to act now with the possibility that future wholesome results will come into our lives either now or in a future birth.

Here's another quotation from the Buddha—you'll recognize that he comes from an agricultural culture: "Grain, possessions, money, all the things you love, servants, workers, and dependents—none of these can you take with you. You must cast them all aside when you die. But whatever karma is made by you, whether by body, speech, or mind, that is your real possession, and you must fare according to that karma. That karma will follow you just as the shadow follows its owner. Therefore, do good actions."

Therefore, do good actions. Gather benefit for the future. Goodness is the mainstay of beings after death.

I'm not saying you have to believe this, but you might want to consider what the Buddha said. If it's true, you'd really want to live carefully, right? And if that turns out not to be true, you wouldn't have wasted your life either. So it's a good wager.

The next teaching is not-self. How can karma and not-self go together? This was pointed up by a question that someone asked the Buddha in his time: "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" If there's no self, where do these actions come back and land? There's no self in the action, so where do they land?

The Buddha basically said, "You haven't been listening to me," and he didn't explain it any further. As fools rush in where angels fear to tread, I'm going to explain it a little further.

Here's how I understand it. The teaching on not-self simply means that there's no fixed entity within this mind-body process. But it doesn't deny individuality. This mind-body process is labeled Guy. That mind-body process is labeled Guru. They are different. The Buddha's enlightenment solved his problem, but it didn't solve mine. So we each have our own individuality that we live with and work through.

The metaphor that's often used for this is of a stream. A stream is a flowing body of water. If you step out here, the stream is flowing really strongly with all the winter rains. If you look down in that water, is there anything fixed in it? No. That water is changing every moment. There's new water, new pebbles, new twigs flowing past in every moment. It doesn't stay the same for one second.

Similarly, with what our experience is, does anything stay the same in the objects of the senses moment after moment after moment? It's all changing, isn't it? So this is called a mind stream. And we have in this room roughly a hundred different mind streams this evening, all carrying their own karmic patterns or whatever we want to call them.

There's a flow of experience that constitutes every sentient being. But just as we can call this the Spirit Rock stream, and it's different from the Mississippi River, so the mind stream we call Carol is different from the mind stream we call Sally. Those are useful designations.

So what's personality? Often what defines our core idea of self-image—who we take ourselves to be—is our personality. We think, "I'm a happy person" or "a caring person" or "a sad person" or "a fearful person." But what is personality really? Is there anything fixed in personality? Isn't it just the changing stream of thoughts and feelings and speech and action? Isn't that how you know someone? How they act, how they speak, how they feel and how they think? Isn't that roughly what describes someone's personality?

This is all karma—actions of body, speech and mind. That's our personality. That's all it is. And it's always changing. Our personality isn't fixed. Just as you've seen, your thoughts and feelings aren't fixed. They can change in a finger snap. So they're always changing, but they do have a patterning. Each of us has a sort of recognizable personality, which is the kind of patterning that we've developed in actions of body, speech and mind.

And as you know, it's not so easy to change one's personality. This is what Dharma practice is about—changing our being, transforming our being. But it's not so easy.

This is the profound meaning of this quote from the Buddha: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin." We're bound to our karma by the way it shapes us. We're conditioned by these patterns that we've invested in over and over again by reinforcing the volitions that are playing out in us.

These patterns are strong, but the beautiful thing is they're not fixed. Nothing in our being is fixed—not the patterns, not craving, not even ignorance. These are all still just arising and changing moment after moment after moment. And anything that has arisen can also pass away. Any patterning that has been established can be undone. This is the karmic principle that makes Dharma practice transformative.

The path itself is a karmic unfolding. We start with the conditioned habits of mind that we bring into practice from perhaps lifetimes of not understanding, craving, ignorance, and so forth. But as we encounter the Dharma, we start to bring in wholesome mind states: mindfulness, loving kindness, renunciation, tranquility, concentration, equanimity. And all these start to change us little by little by little.

It's as though we've got one big mind stream—let's call it our karmic river—that currently is flowing into Lake Samsara. Samsara is a very curious lake where what flows out just feeds right back into the source again. Lake Samsara is just this endless cycling of currents, and that's where we are when we come into Dharma practice.

But now some other streams start to come in from the side: mindfulness, compassion, factors of enlightenment, brahmaviharas, paramis. All these new karmic effects start to steer the stream in a different direction. They start to move it away from Lake Samsara directly toward the nirvanic ocean. That's the only place this leads. And it's important to know this because, as Yogi Berra said, if you don't know where you're going, you could end up somewhere else. We want to know where we're going, and we want to end up in Nibbana.

If there was anything fixed in us, the streams of Dharma practice could not change us. They couldn't turn us in that other direction. That's why the teaching on not-self—meaning there is nothing fixed at the center—is the avenue by which karma can unfold in us and we can change the patterning of our actions. They can liberate us because craving is not fixed and ignorance is not fixed. And that's the truth of not-self.

If you don't believe in karma, how could you explain the development of the path? We really can't.

Our situation is this: all of us are afloat on a sea of changing conditions. Most of them are outside our control—external things like the weather, to some extent our body, the interactions we have with people, the successes or disappointments we have in life. A lot of these are really beyond our control. But we have one really important thing: we have a rudder. We know how to steer.

The rudder for our journey on this unpredictable, uncontrollable ocean is karma. We steer through the force of our wholesome intentions. And the Buddha said that intention repeated over and over and over again is what takes us to a safe harbor—the safe harbor of peace, of safety, of security, of release, and of liberation. It's the only reliable rudder: loving kindness, mindfulness, wisdom, compassion, equanimity, concentration.

There's a quotation from a teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj, a great Vedanta teacher in India in the last century. He mostly taught through dialogue. In one conversation, Maharaj says, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." The questioner responds, "Well surely karma interfered." And Maharaj replies, "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life. The attitudes are your own. Ultimately your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character."

Your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character. These are the wholesome intentions of Dharma practice.

This brings us to the end of karma. In this very mysterious statement, on a number of occasions, the Buddha said for the arhat, there is no more karma. For one who is fully liberated, that person has come to the end of karma. It's not that the enlightened person doesn't act anymore, but somehow that person has stepped out of the cycle of karma.

How does this come about?

There are a few quotations in the Anguttara Nikaya that point to this. The Buddha asks: what karma is neither painful nor bright, with neither painful nor bright results, which leads to the destruction of karma?

He's outlining that there are painful actions that lead to unwholesome results. There are bright actions—positive actions like generosity, acts of loving kindness, acts of compassion, positive outgoing expressions of wholesome intention. But he's saying there's another type which is neither painful nor bright, and it leads to the destruction of karma.

What is that kind of action? It is this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This Noble Eightfold Path is the action that leads to the destruction of karma.

Because even positive actions like generosity or loving kindness can be done from a base of self: "Oh, look how good I am. Oh, they'll really like me for this. Oh, I'm really a good person if I do this kind of action." They can sustain a self-image. But the Buddha isn't after a beautiful self-image.

And so here's what he says about peace: "This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

The stilling of all formations. So at a certain point in practice, we're not even attempting to do loving kindness. We're not even attempting to do generosity. All formations are coming to stillness. And this means that at a certain point in practice, meditation moves into more an arena of non-doing, of stillness and of rest.

This is the gateway at a certain point. We abandon any kind of self-oriented activity because at some point we see that all the urges are not helping at that point. And we trust more in the rest and the peace and the stilling and the non-doing. We trust in a deep stillness from which the mind may lean into the realization of the unconditioned, which is the root of liberation.

And as the Buddha said, it is this Noble Eightfold Path that is the way leading to the cessation of karma—the peaceful, the sublime, the stilling of all formations, the end of karma.

So let's just sit together for a moment. "This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

CHAPTER 162

Brahmavihāra Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 46 min

In this dharma talk from a month-long retreat, Guy Armstrong offers comprehensive instructions for mettā bhāvanā (loving-kindness cultivation), one of the four brahmavihāras. The teaching begins with appreciating one's own spiritual progress and beautiful qualities developed through dedicated practice, before moving through the traditional sequence of sending loving-kindness to oneself, benefactor, good friend, neutral person, difficult person, and all beings.

Armstrong introduces a refined four-step technique for deepening mettā practice: visualizing the recipient, noticing the heart's response, directing the phrase toward them, and resting in the heart center to feel the resonance. He emphasizes the importance of sincere intention behind the traditional phrases "May you be safe from harm, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you live with ease," explaining that the power comes not from mere repetition but from genuine well-wishing.

The instructions conclude with extending mettā to the retreat community, staff, and all beings everywhere, emphasizing our shared human desire for happiness and freedom from suffering. This practical guidance offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners clear methods for cultivating one of Buddhism's most fundamental heart practices.

So we'll simply review the instructions and some of the refinements that we've introduced.

Please begin by connecting to yourself once again. Just as you're sitting here, know yourself through this familiar experience. Bring to mind some things that you appreciate about yourself. In addition to all the qualities that you show in the world, remember all the ways that you've manifested beautiful qualities here during these past four weeks: your perseverance and courage, your dedicated effort, your willingness to look at whatever's in the mind and body, your care for the other yogis and empathy for them, times of spontaneous presence and being fully here, times of stillness and insight.

Even amidst the difficulty, so many beautiful qualities have been developed over these four weeks. Appreciate that it was your own wise efforts that brought those about. With deep appreciation for your dedicated work, wish yourself all the flavors of loving kindness: May I be safe from harm. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease.

From time to time, come into the heart center, letting the practice be embodied, and just notice whatever feelings are there—a flavor of metta, patience, acceptance, friendliness, warmth, or anything else.

Now move into this practice that really emphasizes the receiving of the loving kindness thoughts. Imagine that all your closest friends and family, the people you feel most affection and trust for, are sitting in front of you in a half circle. Bring them into the room one by one or as a group. Look into their faces. Notice that each one of them is smiling at you with tremendous love and care. Then they repeat as a group your metta phrases to you, sending them as expressions of their sincere and deep caring about your well-being. If there's one person you're particularly connecting with, let them come into the center focus as they say the phrases for you.

Now thank your circle of friends, let them go, and bring in your benefactor. Remember how you've looked at them through the eyes of metta, compassion, joy, and impartiality. Come back to this wish for their welfare. Stop to appreciate all the things that you really like about this person—their good qualities, the ways they've reached out and supported you. With that sense of the great goodness of their heart, send your wishes of loving kindness to them.

I'm going to suggest a slight refinement of technique in sending metta to a benefactor or anyone. You can try it out if it suits you, or simply continue as before if it doesn't feel helpful. We'll break each phrase down into four parts.

First, call up an image of your benefactor. Second, notice what you feel when you see them. What's the immediate response of the heart? Third, have a sense that your phrase goes out directed toward the image. The image is a little in front, and the phrase travels from your heart center toward the image to reach them. Fourth, come back and rest for a moment in the heart center, the center of the chest, and see what's there. What did it feel like to offer that phrase to your benefactor? There might be a little resonance, a little echo of the metta offering.

Then again for the next phrase: image, feeling, phrase sending toward the image, feeling the echo in the heart center. Try this for a few minutes and see if it is helpful—image, feeling, phrase, heart center.

If there is some metta feeling toward your benefactor, you might play with a sense of radiating. Have a sense that the benefactor is in front of you. Rest your attention in the heart center and simply let the metta flow out toward the benefactor, quietly radiating that caring.

And then if you're ready, bringing in your good friend. Having a clear sense of their presence, perhaps seeing them or saying their name. And as you connect with them, remembering their good qualities—what is it that you like about them so much?

With that sense of your friend's goodness, then directing the phrases of loving kindness to the good friend. May you be safe from harm. May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease. Keep a clear sense of your friend's presence, and feel the meaning of the words as you say them. It's not just a mantra. The power of the practice comes from the sincere intention of wishing well.

If you like, you can also try with a good friend this four-step process for each phrase: bringing up the image, feeling what you feel for them, sending the phrase toward the image, resting in the heart center to feel that echo. You might see if it helps to synchronize these four steps with the breath, so that a phrase takes one or two breaths to complete the four steps. What I find helpful is to have the phrase go toward the person on the out breath—so you're breathing the phrase toward them. You don't need to rush this process or rush the steps. Let it be a slow, gentle offering. Find your own rhythm.

If there is metta present for your friend, again play with the radiating—just resting the attention in the heart center. Then it's like opening a door so the metta can just radiate out to touch your friend, just like there's a little lantern and you open the door and the light bathes your friend.

And then bringing in your neutral person. Feel their presence, see them—maybe you know their name, maybe you don't. If it's someone on the retreat, perhaps thinking back to when you first set eyes on them, had no special feeling for them, and then having meditated on them for some time, how that shifted. Remember whatever you have intuited about the neutral person's personality, joys and sorrows, their humanness, whatever you've seen of it.

Reflect that like all beings, they just want to be happy and don't want to suffer. This is our common thread—this unites us. So appreciating their humanity and sending your phrases of well-wishing to them.

Then bringing in your difficult person, if you feel ready. If there's an openness. Feel their character. Keep them at some distance if that's more helpful—that's fine. Notice what emotions come when you bring them in: any fear, resentment, hurt, drawing back. Allow all those feelings to be there in the space of caring.

See if you can find one or two good qualities in your difficult person. How would their friends see them? Send to the difficult person the same phrases you've used for the others, knowing they too are just trying to be happy, trying not to suffer—not needing to like them or want to be with them, just seeing if there can be a real wish that they be happy, that they be peaceful. If not, just repeating the metta phrases is enough.

If the difficult person stirs up too much fear, resentment, or hurt, then just go back to someone easier—yourself, benefactor, or friend. Settle with them, renew the metta.

And then letting go of the difficult person and opening up to all the people who are in the hall right now. You probably noticed some of the faces as they came in, some of the people sitting around you. Have a sense that you can open your awareness and let it encompass all the people who are in the hall—in the front and behind, to right and to left.

As you open your attention, let some of the faces and images of those people come into your mind. This has been part of our community for the past month. We've spent time in the hall, in the dining room, walking. All of us here for the same reason: finding happiness and seeking not to suffer.

With a lot of appreciation for what everyone has done this month, extend to them your same genuine wishes for their welfare. Feel their goodness, let your care pervade the space, and also send your wishes to them: May you all be safe and protected from harm. May you all be happy and live with joy in the world.

May you be healthy and strong. And if that's not possible, may you accept your limitations with grace. In your outer life, may you live with the ease of wellbeing. And may the force of loving kindness unite us through this retreat and the next. May we always look on each other with kindly eyes, appreciating our shared love for this dharma.

And then also extending the loving kindness to those who are down the hill right now, our other dharma brothers and sisters, still following the dharma path, doing a little speaking, a little listening, thinking of all their sincere intentions and efforts over these weeks. May those efforts lead them to the deepest fruits, the deepest happiness. May they all be safe and protected from harm. May they be happy and peaceful. May they be healthy and strong. May they live with the ease of wellbeing.

And then thinking of our managers who have looked after us—Anna, Diane, Carrie, Ramona, and Beth—here because they love the dharma also. May they be safe and happy, healthy, at ease. And all the other staff who came, who you met on that morning

early on, must have been about thirty of them in here. And there are some forty to fifty total, making it possible for us to be here, and the cooks who have fed us so lovingly, so carefully. May they all be safe from harm, happy, healthy, and at ease.

And then letting the sense of loving kindness radiate in all directions—around us, above and below, all the human beings across the earth in states of happiness and states of suffering. And all the creatures of the land, of the air, of the lakes and rivers and oceans. May all beings everywhere be safe and protected from harm. May they be happy and peaceful. May their bodies support them with strength. May they live with the ease of wellbeing.

And may all beings be liberated.

CHAPTER 163

Suññatā: A Practical Introduction for Meditators

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this introductory talk on emptiness (suññatā), Guy Armstrong explores one of Buddhism's most central yet misunderstood concepts. Drawing from the Suññatā Sutta and the famous teaching given to Bāhiya, Armstrong explains that emptiness doesn't mean nothingness or nihilism, but rather points to the insubstantial nature of both self and phenomena. He examines how our conventional sense of 'I' is created through identification with body, emotions, thoughts, and the observer, showing how this creates suffering through attachment and clinging.*
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> *The talk covers four main areas: emptiness of self (anattā), emptiness of phenomena, the spacious quality of awareness, and how understanding emptiness naturally leads to compassion (karuṇā). Armstrong illustrates these teachings through personal stories, including observations from his time as a monk in Thailand, and references the Buddha's radical definition of totality as simply "the eye and sights, ear and sounds..." He explains how seeing through the illusion of solidity—both in ourselves and the world—allows us to let go of the 'rope burn' of trying to grasp the ungraspable, leading to greater peace, freedom, and awakening.*

The theme of this evening is the concept of emptiness—suññatā—which is the subject of my book whose official publication date is tomorrow. This is actually the first public talk I've given on this theme, as I usually teach it in the context of week-long retreats. There's a great deal to say about it, and we'll only hit the highlights this evening.

Emptiness is a central topic throughout all of Buddhism, from the very early days of the Buddha himself 2,500 years ago, through the evolution into later Indian Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Zen. If you search for it on Amazon, you'll find hundreds of titles on the topic in a Buddhist context. Why does it occupy such an important position in the history of this major world religion?

First, it's not a very appealing word, is it? Hinduism has bliss and devotion, Christians have love and charity, and Buddhists have emptiness. Why would anybody pay attention to this? Yet these understandings throughout the centuries have brought practitioners and meditators to the greatest depths of freedom, peace, and happiness. Emptiness is the common doorway among all traditions that leads into this deepest kind of

understanding. It's a very important and revered concept in the tradition, though not widely understood, especially in the West where we're still learning about it. And it's not a simple topic.

I was visiting with the esteemed Tibetan Lama Mingyur Rinpoche, a young lama who recently returned from a four-year retreat wandering through the wilds of the Himalayas, far from any buildings or people, meditating in caves in solitude. He's a devoted follower of meditation, just like the ancient Tibetan practitioners and lamas. He's a very impressive being.

I had the chance to meet with him on his first trip to California in 1997 or 1998. My wife Sally and I drove him up to the top of Mount Tamalpais, thinking he'd enjoy the view and nature. As we drove up, I tried to make conversation. "How do you find the West?" I asked. "Square and clean," he replied. End of conversation. I tried another angle: "Do you think Tibetans are happier than Westerners?" "Yes." End of conversation.

At the top of Mount Tam, there's a path around the summit that takes about twenty-five minutes to walk and is only about six feet wide. I thought I'd better try a different approach, so I asked about the difference between two schools of Tibetan Buddhism—Dzogchen and Madhyamaka. Then his eyes lit up. "Ah," he said, "the first thing you have to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness." He sat right down on the path and launched into a discourse on the eighteen different kinds of emptiness.

I won't discuss the eighteen different kinds of emptiness tonight—that would take far too long. But this was a pointer to the fact that this is a broad topic, and we'll only touch on some basics this evening. I hope it might interest and inspire you to learn more.

What is meant by this term? The basic meaning of emptiness in the Buddhist context is that the world—which includes us—is not as solid or substantial as we normally take it to be. The understanding of that, when properly integrated into our life, our hearts, and our minds, leads to great spaciousness and freedom.

A couple of things to note: First, there's a way in which we haven't yet quite understood the world or ourselves.

So this pointing to emptiness, even with this jarring and provocative title, is meant to be a wake-up call. It's meant to provoke us to wonder, well, what's going on here? What is it we're not quite seeing? And what is it we could understand differently about ourselves and about the world?

The second thing is that our tradition that we teach at Spirit Rock is a tradition called insight meditation. The Indian term for it is vipassana. And what vipassana means is to see things as they are. So the idea is that we haven't quite fully seen things the way they are. And because of that, we're caught up in unhappiness and suffering.

So this is not just a philosophical exercise or an intellectual exercise. The purpose of looking into emptiness, the purpose of talking about it and reading about it is to free our hearts and minds so that we are on a path moving away from suffering and into greater happiness. So please remember that as the foundation of everything we're talking about tonight. It's a way to happiness.

Because it's a way to happiness, the sort of common way that we hold emptiness in the West—which might be of vacancy or total absence or nothingness or nihilism or despair—are not what the Buddha meant by the term emptiness. So I want to clear that at the very beginning. It's not about nothingness, it's not about going into a meditation where nothing happens as though that's the final result. Because any meditation you go into that's special in that way, you have to come out of and live your life again. But it's to change our understanding so that we relate to life in a freer way.

Now, a lot of you probably know that the Buddha talked a lot about impermanence. Everything changes. And the reason he talked a lot about impermanence is so that we wouldn't hold on so tightly to things. When we know things are changing, we tend to not clutch so tightly. We tend to relax, let go a little bit.

So emptiness builds on impermanence but takes it a little further. And I'll talk about that a little later. With impermanence, we see everything's changing. But when we see emptiness, we see it's changing so fast, there's nothing there to hold on to in the first place.

So emptiness doesn't mean that we're not supposed to have experiences. And it doesn't mean that the things of the world don't exist in some way. Suzuki Roshi said, the bird we see and hear exists. We're not denying that. But what I mean by exists may not be the same as what you mean by exists. And so this is what we want to look into. How do things exist? How do we exist? What is it about our life that we haven't quite seen yet?

So there are four main areas that I'll just touch on tonight. The book goes into more detail. One is emptiness of self. The other is emptiness of phenomena in the world. The next is this empty quality of awareness, which we pointed to in the meditation this

evening. Could some of you connect with that? Could you feel that spacious quality through the meditation? Getting in touch with that emptiness is a way to hold things. And the fourth is compassion, because emptiness and compassion are closely related.

So I'll talk a little bit about emptiness of self first. Again, emptiness of self doesn't mean that we don't exist. But this is a quote from an Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj. And when he uses the word yoga, he means any spiritual teaching that leads to freedom. He said, "The aim of all the yogas is the same, and it's to free you from the calamity of separate existence."

This is something to reflect on. When we feel separated from the rest of the universe, we feel vulnerable. We feel at risk, we feel exposed, we feel distant, and we can feel afraid due to that. Seeing through this duality where we separate ourselves from the world lets us feel connected and not afraid any longer. So this is a big part of the motivation to understand the emptiness of self.

Now the Buddha pointed to this really directly. He had an attendant named Ananda, who was his cousin, and looked after him for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. He was a very sweet man. He's kind of the sweetest man in the old Buddhist texts.

Ananda was always a little behind some of the other monks, so he frequently came to the Buddha with questions. One day he approached the Buddha and said, "Venerable one, you speak of the world being empty. What do you mean when you say that?"

The Buddha replied, "The world is empty because it's empty of a self or what belongs to a self."

This is quite a strong statement. Does it feel like your life is empty of a self? Probably not. So this is, again, a provocative teaching that points to some fundamental misunderstanding in the way we hold the self.

Let me ask you some simple questions to see if some of this misunderstanding might reveal itself. First, how old are you? That's straightforward enough, as long as you haven't forgotten. So you say, "I'm thirty-nine," or whatever your age might be.

But when you say "I'm thirty-nine," what's really being pointed to here? Is your mood thirty-nine years old? Are your thoughts thirty-nine years old? Is your hair thirty-nine years old? Your hair keeps growing, doesn't it? It keeps changing. Your thoughts simply come and go in this moment. What exactly is thirty-nine years old? It's the body, isn't it? So when we say "I'm thirty-nine," we really mean "I am the body and it's thirty-nine years old." Here we are the body—I am the body.

Now let me ask you a different question. What color are your eyes? That's pretty simple. I'd say my eyes are brown. But notice—now I'm not the body. I'm the owner of the body. It's not "I am the eyes"—I own the eyes. They're my eyes.

So which are you really? Are you the body? Or are you something separate from it that owns it? Can you be both? How many selves are you in any given moment? Usually people who think they're more than one self in a moment get medicated. We generally think we're just one self, but look: are you the body or are you the owner of it?

Let's examine emotion. Sometimes we say "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." Here we take the "I" to be the emotion itself—happy or sad. But then we can turn around and speak of "my joys" and "my sorrows." So again, are you the emotion, or are you something separate that owns it?

This isn't mere wordplay. We genuinely feel both these ways inside. Sometimes when observing the body, you'll say "my knee hurts," and there's a real sense of ownership in that statement. At other times you'll say "I'm sick," and there's a suffering in that "I" that is sick. These are authentic feelings we experience, but they're sometimes confused. Are you the body or the owner of it? Are you the emotion or the owner of it?

Here's another perspective: Don't you often feel like who you most truly are is an observer located inside the head, looking out at the world? This observer seems to be seeing everything, hearing everything, feeling everything, positioned perhaps two inches behind the eyes and between the ears.

So this is a fifth way that we create the sense of I. All these ways are what in Buddhism is called identification. We're creating an I by identifying it with some aspect of experience—the body or the owner, the emotion or the owner, or the sense of the observer.

Can you be all those things? Can one entity be all those things? If you are your body, that means you're your liver and your toenail. If you are your emotions, that means your compassion and your anger. Is your liver the same thing as your compassion? Is there one self there?

I toss all these out just to encourage you that the way we use I doesn't quite make sense. We've used language like this since we were able to speak. And by using it that way and not examining it, we've come to believe that the word I points to something that actually exists, but it doesn't. There's only this collection of parts—body parts, thoughts, emotions, feelings, consciousness. There's no entity.

I invite you to look. See if you can put your finger on what feels like the real you in this field of experience. I just want to raise a question in your minds so that you might be encouraged to look. And these kind of confusing ways we hold I can do that.

William James, the philosopher, said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." It can be like that. We've used I in a lot of different ways in our language. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the philosopher, said that the I is just a shadow cast by grammar. There's nothing really there—just a collection of body, emotions, feelings, thoughts.

It's not a problem to use this language as long as we understand what we mean. There's a way in which each of us is a different being. We have qualities, characteristics of age and height and ethnicity and sexual orientation—all those things that are accurate. We can describe ourselves in those ways, and that's all fine. That's what we call the conventional sense of I, but it doesn't point to something inside here that exists as a single entity.

That's where we get misled. We think that there's a core in here, an unchanging kind of core. Because of that, we think it goes on over time. When we believe that, we're afraid of that continuity ending. It's the I that we worry about ending. When we really believe there is an I, we get scared. We're scared of death. When we take the I out of the picture to a greater or lesser or total degree, the fear of death goes away. You'll find this in spiritual writings all over.

So if the self isn't real, what is? There's this quite wonderful discourse that the Buddha gave about what really is here. I want to read it. It's very brief:

"Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of things." First of all, this is a bold statement, isn't it? Somebody's going to teach us the totality of things. Did Einstein ever say that? Marx ever say that? Did Freud ever say that? But here's the Buddha 2,500 years ago saying, "I'm going to teach you the totality of things."

"What is the totality? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. If anyone were to proclaim a totality beyond this, that person would be speaking of something outside their knowledge."

This is a very interesting and radical kind of statement. If Einstein was going to talk about totality, would he use this description?

I don't think so. He would talk about space and time and the objects of mass like the sun and how they warp space and time. If Marx was going to talk about totality, would he talk about it like this? I don't think so. He would talk about socioeconomic systems and classes and the struggle over wealth.

So the Buddha is doing something really interesting when this is his definition of totality. What he's pointing to is our immediate experience: the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and taste, the body and sensations, the mind and objects of mind. Objects of mind are basically thoughts and emotions.

If you look at your direct experience, is there anything in your experience that the Buddha doesn't cover in this statement? Direct experience of a present moment: sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, thoughts, and feelings. That's pretty much it, isn't it?

This is a map of our inner experience. And the reason the Buddha is pointing it out is that this is where our suffering comes from. Most deeply, our suffering comes out of our own inner experiences. And therefore, this is where our freedom has to come from—our own inner experience. So he's not approaching the world like an external, independent thing. He's inviting us to look at what's here, what's now.

So how does the sense of self get created out of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and feelings?

Let me ask you this. The word "I" comes up in our conversation a lot, right? We're talking with friends, we're thinking about our life, we notice the words I, me, my, and mine a lot. Do they ever come up on their own? Do you ever just sit there quietly in meditation and the thought comes up, "I"? Or the thought comes up, "me"?

It doesn't usually happen like that, does it? Doesn't the word usually arise in relation to something else? "I want to go to the movies." "I'd like a piece of chocolate." "My back hurts." "I need to see a doctor." So the "I" doesn't arise just by itself, but it arises based on these objects of the senses. I want, I need, my knee, my body.

This is significant, because what it means is that sense of "I" isn't always there. But it comes up again and again in relation to experience. And we claim experience: I see, I hear, I want, I'm afraid, I'm going.

So if the "I" isn't intrinsic—it's not there all the time—are there times when it's not there? When you're sitting really quietly in meditation and there are not demands from inside, is there a strong sense of "I"? Take a look and see. It's pretty light at those times, isn't it?

Other times, if you get upset, somebody says something discourteous or a driver cuts you off on the freeway, the "I" comes up really strong. "They shouldn't have done that to me." "I'm really angry." "I'm going to fight back." "I'm going to report them." Then the "I" springs up with a lot of life and energy.

And is that a happy state? Not usually. When we get caught in a lot of resistance, anger, fear, hatred, or a lot of wanting—"I've got to have that new car"—

I need to have that raise. I need more money. That's also a struggle.

When the "I" comes up strongly, take a look and see if there isn't some friction, some turmoil, some upset, and some suffering with that. It may be subtle: "I'd like some ice cream. I can't have it right now. I'll have to wait until I get back to Fairfax and see if the scoop is still open." That's subtle suffering.

Or it might be more obvious: "Oh, my son is really going through a hard period. He lost his work. He may lose his house. I don't know if his job will be there to provide income to support his family." Then that becomes a burden. That's difficult. That's suffering.

So take a look. Sometimes the "I" is really not making itself felt, and this is a doorway to freedom.

I want to tell you a story. At the time of the Buddha, there was a practitioner in the south of India. The Buddha had lived and taught in the north of India, sort of east of Delhi, between Delhi and Calcutta. That's where he wandered for the forty-five years that he was teaching. But his fame spread.

There was this practitioner in the south of India. He was a really good meditator, a spiritual teacher with many students. He lived very simply and had a certain purity—a purity of heart and mind that many people were drawn to. His name was Bahiya.

He knew that he was developed, but he didn't quite know how far. So he was sitting one day, meditating, and he wondered, "Am I fully enlightened?" Well, that should have been a clue, because if you're fully enlightened, you tend to know it.

The story goes that one of these heavenly beings called devas in the old texts read Bahiya's mind, heard that question—"Am I enlightened or not?"—and came down and spoke to him. The deva said, "Bahiya, you're not enlightened. Sorry. Not only that, you're not even on the path to enlightenment."

That was an honest response. Bahiya said, "Do you know anyone who is enlightened?" The deva said, "Yes, up in the north of India, in the town of Savatthi right now, there is an enlightened being and he's teaching. He's offering the dharma. He's alive and he's fully enlightened."

Bahiya immediately resolved to go there. There weren't airplanes back then—there wasn't even United Airlines! He just set out on the road, walking from the south of India to the north. It would have taken him weeks to get there. But his motivation was so strong, and he had faith that the account was true.

He came upon the Buddha one morning while the Buddha was walking into town with his alms bowl. Monks are mendicants and have to make themselves available for food to be offered to them. So the Buddha was walking through town with his alms bowl, and Bahiya found him.

"Are you the Buddha, the one that I have heard about?" And the Buddha said, "Yes."

Bahiya said, "Please, venerable sir, teach me the Dharma. Teach me in brief because life is short. Who knows what will happen to you or who knows what will happen to me? Please teach me."

And the Buddha said, "This is not the time, Bahiya. I'm walking the streets for my morning round for collecting breakfast."

But Bahiya entreated him again. He said, "Oh, please, sir, please give me the teachings in brief because life is short. Who knows what will happen to you or happen to me?"

The Buddha again declined. Bahiya asked a third time, and that's the way it goes in the suttas. You ask three times, the Buddha said, "Okay."

And this is the teaching that he gave him: "Okay, Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here, nor there, nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Bahiya's mind was very ripe. He heard that teaching, that direct pointing, and he immediately awakened. Full enlightenment. On the spot. The Buddha later described him as the person who was foremost in quickness of learning of all the people he taught. Bahiya got it. Like that.

And then he expressed his gratitude for the teaching, wandered off, and that very day, that same afternoon, was walking through a meadow. There was a mother cow guarding her calf. The cow felt threatened, gored Bahiya, and he died.

So all the monks were concerned. This beautiful spiritual seeker had come, died that very day. But the Buddha said, "Don't worry, he understood before he died. He fully awakened and was released just on the basis of that short hearing."

So this is a good teaching to contemplate. You never know when it might happen again. Basically what the Buddha said: if you don't make I and mine, there's no suffering. There's no suffering.

This is an instruction that we can take in practice. When we look in our experience and we see what's happening, maybe fear is arising. We could say, "That's my fear" or "I'm afraid." Or we could just say, "Fear is arising."

We could say, "I'm sitting in meditation. There's a pain in this part of the body. My knee is killing me." Or we could just say, "Strong pain is arising."

Play with it and see how it feels to say what's happening without the I and my. It can make it more spacious, more equanimous. Through the process of meditation and examining this formation of I and kind of letting it come and go, we don't take it quite so seriously. We don't believe in it so strongly.

And as the sense of self thins, more of that spacious relationship to life opens up. We don't hang on so tightly. And we have more of that open awareness that perhaps we touched in the meditation earlier.

And then it leads onward. That peace and the ease of that continue to deepen.

So that's just a brief look at the emptiness of self. Then the next thing the Buddha pointed at was the things of the world. He said they're not as solid as you think they are. It feels like it, doesn't it? This table, these chairs, the floor—they all feel really solid today. But knowing twentieth-century science and quantum physics, are they? What are they mostly made of? Space, right? The neutrons and protons in the center of an atom are just at the center. The electrons whiz around the outside, and most of that atom is space. So most of the matter that we see is actually space.

Scientists only discovered this in the last hundred years, but the Buddha discovered this twenty-five hundred years ago.

I want to read from a discourse called "A Discourse on a Lump of Foam." On one occasion, the Buddha was dwelling on the bank of the river Ganges, and he addressed a group of monks in this way: "Monks, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, monks, whatever matter there is, a person inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could there be in matter?"

So here the Buddha is reporting, twenty-five hundred years ago, the lack of solidity in all matter—every form of matter on the face of the earth—which he realized from his direct meditation experience. It was not through scientific instruments; it was from his firsthand experience. And this kind of exploration is available to us also. Matter is like a lump of foam. How can that be?

One year I was teaching a retreat up the hill at the retreat center, giving a talk in the evening in the hall up there. Sometime in the middle of the talk, there was this loud scream from outside. It sounded like a baby crying really loudly. It was a little unsettling for everybody to hear, but it passed. Some of the staff went out to see what had happened, and I kept giving the talk.

After the talk, I went outside to see what had happened. The staff were gathered around the body of a deer. The deer was lying on the ground with its neck at an unnatural angle. The staff had checked and found the deer was dead. They said that when they first went out, they saw a couple of large dogs running away from the deer.

This happens in Woodacre. There are lots of deer in the hills, and sometimes there are loose dogs who will attack and kill the deer. But I hadn't seen that happen at Spirit Rock before, so it was kind of a shock.

We stood around, made a circle around the deer, and sent it thoughts of loving-kindness for whatever its journey was going to be. We did that for a while and then went on with the rest of the evening's program.

One of the staff members called the Humane Society and said, "We have the body of a deer. We don't want to just leave it out here. Could you come pick it up?" The Humane Society said, "Sure. Take it down near the entrance and we'll come by tomorrow and pick it up."

So the deer was brought down near the parking lot, just by this meditation hall. The Humane Society never came.

Over the next two weeks as I was teaching the retreat, I would stop by and look to see what was happening to the deer. You probably know that on this land, we have raccoons, vultures, crows, ants, badgers—all kinds of scavengers. Every day there was just a little bit less of the deer there, until at the end of about ten days, all that was left were the hoofs, the bones, and the fur. Everything else had just been picked clean.

So that solid deer that was there ten days ago, just like a lump of foam, was gone. This is one way we can see this matter—our body is just like a lump of foam.

The Dalai Lama was giving teachings some years ago down at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View on the Heart Sutra. It was over a three-day period, so I went down with a number of friends. It was a beautiful few days in May. If you've ever been to Shoreline, you know there are a lot of seats arranged in an arc, and then there's a big grassy hill behind the seats. So you could sit on this big grassy hill and watch the Dalai Lama.

He was surrounded by monks and nuns from all the major traditions. There were many other Tibetan monks and nuns there in their bright red and yellow robes, Theravadan monks and nuns with the dark brown of the forest tradition, Korean Zen monks in gray, Japanese Zen monks and nuns in black. The whole stage was filled with all the colors of the monastic worlds of Buddhism. It was like being at a Buddhist Woodstock—a really beautiful feeling.

The Dalai Lama was sitting up on a big, tall throne so that everybody could see him. He was teaching from the Heart Sutra, and the Heart Sutra says that there are three ways that we suffer, three reasons that we suffer.

One is we suffer the pain of disagreeable or unpleasant experiences. Sometimes the body is directly painful. Sometimes the emotions are directly painful—anger, wanting, fear, anxiety, worry. This is called *dukkha dukkha*. Dukkha means suffering. This is like a double shot, like a double espresso—a double dukkha.

The next way we suffer is that even when something pleasant comes along, it's going to change. The bowl of ice cream runs out. The love phase of the relationship changes—it's no longer a honeymoon. The new car gets a dent when you leave it in the parking lot. So even the very pleasant things of life change at some point, and that's painful to us. This is called the pain of alternation.

But he said the underlying root cause—and he said you need to understand this if you really want to help people—the underlying root cause is something called unsatisfactory formations. What he said is that all the formations of the world are not really

stable. It's not that things go along solidly for a while and then flip. He said they're not solid even for a moment. Whatever is arising is also changing moment by moment by moment. There's no stability in our direct experience.

You can get a sense of this if you look at your body sensations in a sitting and see if there's anything solid and unchanging anywhere throughout the body, or if the sensations you experience are actually characterized by vibration, pulsation, flow of energy, alternation, change. Take a look and see. This is something you can experience directly. This is the unsatisfactoriness of changing formations. And the Dalai Lama said it happens moment after moment after moment. This is also why matter is like a lump of foam—there's nothing solid that we can rest on there.

So why do we reflect so much on impermanence? It's so that we don't hang on. One meditator said it really crisply: "Suffering is rope burn." It means we're trying to hang on to something that's flowing through our hands, something that's changing. It could be our youth, it could be our health, it could be our relationship, it could be our job, it could be our money, it could be our children, it could be our parents. We try to hang on for some kind of security or happiness, but everything we're holding on to keeps changing. And as we hold on, it burns.

The reason we look at impermanence is so that we'll let go, because we know it's going to change. But emptiness takes us one step further. When we start to see clearly the way things really are in our experience, we see things aren't solid even for a moment. It's not that there's something solid that we can hang on to, but then it goes. There's nothing really there to grasp in the first place.

So it's seeing this that lets us let go. And it's the letting go that steps us out of that rope burn of suffering. And even more deeply, it's the letting go that opens our heart and mind to this spacious awareness that we touched in the meditation that can lead to enlightenment. I'm sometimes reluctant to use that word, but it is the point of the Buddha's teachings. It is possible through this deep letting go for the heart to be liberated, for the heart to be awakened and for suffering to come to an end. And that only happens through a deep letting go.

So this is why we look at the emptiness of self. It's why we look at the emptiness of phenomena. So we start to see we're empty in two ways. There's no fixed core at the center that we can really call an I. That's one way we're empty. The other way we're empty is that all the elements of our experience, all these phenomena, are arising, passing, arising, passing, and insubstantial.

When we really deeply understand both of those, what we see is this world is a complex play of causes and conditions. Everything in this moment is going to condition the next. And that's going to condition the next. And that's going to condition the next. There's no controller in here who's making all this happen. And as we start to see this, we settle back and relax into the flow of the Dharma. Nature, you could call it. Nature is taking care of us. We don't have to control it.

We learn a deep trust in the processes of nature, which means all the causes and conditions that unfold in their own way: biological causes, physical causes, chemical causes, mental causes, emotional causes, karmic causes, social causes. They're all playing out in this complex interplay of life. And we don't have to fix an I in the center that tries to control it all. So this deep letting go brings a lot greater peace and ease in life. And it also opens the door to liberation, to awakening.

I was a monk in Thailand for about a year. And one of the privileges of being in robes in Thailand is that you get to go to the morgue and watch autopsies. So this was fascinating to me. I was in my early thirties. I had never even stood next to a dead body. In the West, we tend to put death somewhere over there. So I had never even stood next to a dead body.

But in Thailand, I got to go to a morgue down in the center of Bangkok, and I was led into a room where there was the body of a young woman laid out on a metal table who had drowned in one of the canals a day or two earlier. So that was shocking enough for me. But then we got to go into the autopsy theater, which is a lot like an operating room. So there were seats in tiers around the main center of the room. And the young woman was wheeled in on that metal table. And then the coroner started to perform the autopsy.

And we got to sit and watch along with a bunch of medical students. There were maybe half a dozen monks and nuns there and maybe twenty-five or so medical students who were watching the autopsy. And if you've ever seen an autopsy or heard one described, what's happening is that the coroner takes out all the major organs and weighs them and inspects them to see what the cause of death was. So I had only just seen my first dead body, and then I watched it being taken apart, organ by organ by organ. And I'd been sitting in retreat for about three weeks at that point. I was very quiet, I was very present, and I was very open. So this was a powerful experience for me.

So after the coroner finished and wheeled the woman away, I went out to catch a bus back to my monastery. I was waiting on the edge of the parade ground in downtown Bangkok, waiting for the bus, and I was just watching all the life go by: an old woman

wheeling a cart full of groceries, a young couple walking across holding hands, a mother wheeling her baby in a stroller, the baby crying, young kids playing and kicking a ball around on the grass.

And I was watching them all in the light of death. And it seemed to me that there wasn't much difference between the young woman I had just been standing next to and all the people I was watching in their lives on the parade ground. The difference was just a little bit.

And it seemed to me that what the difference was was that in the people, I could see this brightness shining out through their eyes, which was related to their aliveness. With the woman who was dead, that brightness wasn't there anymore.

As I was riding back on the bus to my monastery, the phrase that came to my mind was: walking corpses. We're all just walking corpses. It doesn't matter whether you're young or old. I had the same perception of everyone.

What I meant by that is this: the difference between the woman who was dead and all those people who were alive was that the living people had this bright awareness that was still going, and her body didn't. So it seemed to me that what we are most fundamentally is this body and this bright awareness—both existing just in the present moment.

But we have this capacity for memory. What memory does is store up a bunch of the past and plant it in the brain as though it's real. But the past isn't there anymore. And then we project those memories into the future as though that's real out there somewhere. But that's just imagination. What's real is the consciousness in the present and the body in the present. All the rest is concept.

So what is it like if you feel yourself just to be this consciousness that's right here and now, and this body that's right here and now, and you let go of the past and you let go of the future? Does that feel light? That's the lightness of awakeness and freedom and emptiness. It's not believing that we are our past or we are our future. We're just right here, right now, and it's really simple. Isn't the moment really simple? You're comfortable, you're safe, you're in good company. This is the doorway to freedom. This is emptiness.

When we see in this way, emptiness is not something cold at all. It's not cold, distant, and remote. We realize that we all have this present moment awakeness, but we get caught believing in past and future, believing we're somebody, worrying about health,

worrying about aging, worrying about money, worrying about death. And so this opens up this feeling of sympathy and compassion, because we're all in this same boat. Everybody's facing these same life situations. No one is exempt from them.

We realize there's nothing fixed in here, nothing solid in our experience. But we still have to deal with life. So as the space opens up in our own heart, we feel for the situation that we're all in. We feel compassion for ourselves. We feel compassion for others. Emptiness is not a cold thing that cuts us off from the world or from ourselves. It opens up the natural warmth of the heart because we're not so burdened. It's light living in this way.

Then we understand this quotation that is attributed to Kuan Yin. I think we have a Kuan Yin on the altar—the female representation of the embodiment of compassion. There's a quotation attributed to Kuan Yin. She's the bodhisattva of compassion because she listens to the cries of joy and the cries of sorrow that are in the world. At the same time, she really understands emptiness. She understands the simplicity of this moment-to-moment experience.

The quotation says: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

Our experience is always empty, always open, always basically free. There's a safety and a refuge, a freedom and an ease in that. This is the possibility of emptiness.

That's really all I wanted to share this evening. We have a few minutes for a couple of questions or comments, if there are any.

These words—I, my, you, we—do have clear meanings in a social setting, so we use them as we always have. It's really good that I know where my car is and you know where your car is, that you know which house is yours and I know which is mine. But these are social conventions. There's not an absolute ownership. This book doesn't know that it's mine; the car doesn't know either. But it's a social convention we've agreed upon, and it creates ease in living together in community.

Similarly, if I say, "I'm feeling really happy today," it simply identifies where the experience is taking place, as opposed to saying, "She's feeling really happy today." We're designating locations with these words, and they're necessary for easy communication. But when I'm in my own experience and have stepped outside the social realm, I don't need to use the words "I" and "my." I just say, "Fear is arising," or note, "Car."

When communicating with each other, we really need to use these conventional terms, and we use them in the conventional way. But we're not tricked by them anymore. We don't believe the words are pointing to something unchanging that's in here. They're still really useful, though. Because of that, we can talk about ourselves as having an identity using conventional terms. We're old or young, tall or short, gay or straight, black or white—whatever. Those still make sense, referring to this whole package. But we realize the whole package of mind and body is always changing, even though there's a kind of consistency to it.

Another questioner shared their difficulty understanding the absence of "I," thinking of it pseudo-scientifically as the point of origin of all sensation—something that could never disappear, regardless of feeling connected to surrounding energies or atmosphere. They reasoned that this sense of "I-ness" as the origin point of all touch, hearing, taste, smell, and thought seemed impossible to transcend.

There is indeed a kind of geographic or spatial centralness to experience, and I don't think that goes away. But we don't have to claim anything about it. It's taking away the claiming—"this is me," "this is mine"—that creates all the space. You also realize that within this spacious awareness, things are always changing. They're always changing within this mind-body stream and within that mind-body stream. We're located in different places, so there's geographical separation. We acknowledge that reality. But there's nothing fixed within either of those streams.

So rather than "I am where sensation is occurring and sensation is occurring to me," it becomes "sensations are occurring here"—wherever here is. And "here" isn't a very precise term. When we say here, do we mean Spirit Rock? Do we mean Woodacre? Do we mean the USA?

Finally, someone asked about suffering being part of the "rope burn"—referring to the earlier metaphor. In the Buddha's teaching, we suffer because we want things to be a certain way. Usually that wanting stems from having known pleasant experience in the past and wanting it to always be like that.

Or we've known unpleasant experience in the past, and we don't want it to be like that. So there's a holding on to an idea of the way things ought to be happening in our life.

A simple example: I'm sitting in meditation, and there's a pain in my knee. Well, I remember that there was a time when I sat comfortably, and I want it to be like that. So I'm holding on to that as a reference point. And because of that, this experience of pain in my knee is undesirable, unwanted, and I suffer from it. It may just be a little suffering, but it's suffering nonetheless.

Or consider a bigger suffering: we've been happily married for ten years, and we find out our partner has been unfaithful. It's very painful to realize that the relationship of trust and honesty that we thought we had is not there anymore. That really feels like the center of our life is being ripped away from our heart. That's a more extreme example.

But it's when we lose something really precious that we feel that suffering. Or when something really unpleasant comes upon us and we lose the ease or the health or the youth that we had before. And it's not easy to let go of that.

We are just at 9:15 now, and I want to be sure everybody can get back to their other commitments, so we will end here.

Just a couple of words before everybody leaves. Thank you all for coming. If this is of interest and you'd like to explore further, I'm doing a day-long on Saturday in this same hall on this topic, and it would be a pleasure to see you all. Otherwise, I thank you for coming tonight. Thanks for visiting Spirit Rock, and I hope we meet again.

CHAPTER 164

Emptiness is Everything

Guy Armstrong · 1h06

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong explores one of Buddhism's most central yet challenging concepts: śūnyatā or emptiness. Drawing from his book on the subject, Armstrong clarifies that emptiness doesn't mean nihilistic vacancy, but rather points to the insubstantial nature of both self and phenomena. He examines two key aspects: anattā (not-self) - showing how our sense of 'I' is constructed through identification with body, emotions, or an imagined observer - and the emptiness of phenomena, where even solid-seeming objects are revealed as dynamic, ever-changing processes. Through practical examples and meditation guidance, Armstrong demonstrates how the Heart Sutra's teaching that 'form is emptiness' can be directly experienced. He references the Buddha's Discourse on Totality, showing how our six sense doors (eye-sight, ear-sound, etc.) constitute the totality of experience available for investigation. The talk culminates with the story of Bāhiya, who achieved awakening through understanding that 'in the seen, let there be just the seen' - without the overlay of self-identification. Armstrong emphasizes that realizing emptiness isn't merely philosophical but leads to practical freedom from anxiety, self-obsession, and suffering, while opening space for compassion and wisdom to arise naturally.*

Okay, so as I said earlier, it's a real treat to share with you tonight my good friend and respected colleague, Guy Armstrong. I probably teach with Guy and his wife Sally Armstrong and Carol Wilson more than anyone over the last 20 years. We always teach the February retreat together and we've gone through so many things together.

Guy and Sally are probably as important players, besides Jack Kornfield, of Spirit Rock being what Spirit Rock is—especially the construction of both the meditation hall and the new meditation community hall. This is just what he does on the side besides all the teaching, going to countless meetings and having a brilliant flair for creating beautiful things. But he's just a very special combination of clarity, depth of dharma, and good heart. When we teach on the February retreat, I teach about love and compassion. He teaches about dependent origination and karma and rebirth and those things. Thank you, Guy. So it's a real treat to have him here with us to share about this work that he's put the last two years or more into—a beautiful book called *Emptiness*, which I highly recommend. I'm enjoying it very, very much. So take it away.

Thank you, James. And it's a pleasure, it is a pleasure to be here. James and I have spent so much time together over the last 20 years in teaching and in meetings. I was sort of estimating the other day—I think all told we've probably spent about two years of our life working together. So he is a real dharma brother and a great friend. And coming into his community just feels like coming into family. So I'm happy to be with you all tonight.

I would like to talk about this topic of emptiness, which is not the simplest topic in the world to talk about. I usually teach this theme in a seven-day retreat. There are a lot of pieces to it. So this evening, I just want to hit a few of the highlights and leave you with maybe a little bit to reflect on, a little bit of food for thought. I hope that will interest you.

One thing to say about this word is it's not the most appealing for the central concept of a world religion. You know, the Hindus have bliss and devotion, the Christians have love and charity, and the Buddhists have emptiness. It's not much of a hook. But it has been really central to all the schools of Buddhism for the last 2,500 years—starting with the original teachings of the Buddha and the centuries of early Buddhism, the early Mahayana which expressed itself through the Prajnaparamita Sutras and the teachings of Nagarjuna, the later evolution in East Asia. As we sit in this temple, I feel like the emptiness vibe is just kind of permeating from the devotion and the philosophies that informed Chinese Buddhism, and then it translated to Japan as well. So this has been a theme, and I would say the central thread that links all the different traditions of Buddhism, the major schools over the last 2,500 years. But there are a lot of pieces to it, so we'll just touch on a few tonight.

Just to kind of illustrate the range of it, there's a young Tibetan lama named Mingyur Rinpoche. He's a wonderful teacher and a terrific practitioner. He visited Marin for the first time about 20 years ago—I've forgotten whether it was 97 or 98. And I had a little bit of connection to him through knowing his brother, Tsoknyi Rinpoche. So I got to meet him on his visit to California.

Living in Marin, I thought, well, let's take him for a little bit of a sightseeing tour. Maybe he'd like to see the top of Mount Tam. So we drove up to the top of Mount Tam. And on the way, I was trying to make conversation. I said, "Rinpoche, how do you find the West?" He said, "Square and clean." End of conversation.

Okay. I better try again. "Rinpoche, do you think Tibetans are happier than Westerners?" "Yes." End of dialogue.

So we got up to the top of Mount Tam, and if you've ever been up there, you know that there's an asphalt path that goes around the peak. Beautiful 360-degree views of the whole Bay Area and the ocean. So we were walking around on that path, and I just thought, I better try one more time.

So we got up to the top of Mount Tam, and if you've ever been up there, you know that there's an asphalt path that goes around the peak. Beautiful 360-degree views of the whole Bay Area and the ocean. So we were walking around on that path, and I thought I better try one more time to talk to this esteemed Lama.

So I said, "What's the difference between the views of the Dzogchen school and the Madhyamaka school of Tibetan Buddhism?" Two central schools within that lineage. Then he got interested. "Ah," he said, perking up as his eyes lit up. He said, "The first thing you have to understand is there are 18 different kinds of emptiness."

And then he sat right down on the path. It was only six feet wide. He sat down, so we all had to sit down. We totally blocked the path going around. And he talked for about ten minutes about the 18 kinds of emptiness in these two schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

So this is a subject for tremendous reflection. If you look on Amazon, you can probably find hundreds of books on this topic—well thought of in the Buddhist world, reflected on extensively, written about prolifically. I'd like to share just some key points this evening.

The main pointing behind this concept is that the world is not as solid or as substantial as we take it to be. That's a summary of the message of emptiness. And there are two key points I'd like to pull out of this.

One is that there's something we haven't quite understood about the way the world is. There's a very famous text among the Prajnaparamita body of texts called the Heart Sutra. You've probably heard of it. Many of you may have recited it. And it begins describing the practice of a bodhisattva named Avalokiteshvara. Avalokiteshvara is an Indian being who is the embodiment of compassion. And when this image of Avalokiteshvara migrated to China, it transformed into Kuan Yin, the female principle of compassion. And I'm sure there's one at the back, for sure, who's facing the front. The white statue at the back is of Kuan Yin—a beautiful devotional figure. Avalokiteshvara is the male representation from India.

And the very start of the Heart Sutra says, "The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, when practicing deeply the quality of wisdom, perceived that mind and body are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress."

So within the tradition, that's the liberating power of this kind of insight. It is meant to save us from suffering and distress.

The kind of meditation that James and I teach is called insight meditation. The Pali word for it, the old Indian word, is vipassana. And the purpose of it is so that we gain more understanding, more insight into the way things are. Vipassana literally means to see clearly—to see clearly how things are.

So our development of insight meditation is meant to bring us to the same understanding that Avalokiteshvara had. And the purpose of that is to liberate us. This is not just a philosophical exercise or an intellectual exercise, but it's meant to free our hearts and minds. It's meant to lead us away from unhappiness, from stress, from worry, from anxiety, and into a great degree of freedom and happiness.

So that's the purpose behind all these teachings, and I hope we keep that view on it as I talk this evening.

One thing to clear up in the beginning: emptiness does not mean in the Buddhist lineage what it sometimes might mean in the West. It doesn't mean a vacancy, a total absence, nothingness, despair, cynicism, hopelessness. That's not the intention. It is rather to open up this spaciousness where we feel the fullness of life coming into the empty space. So we'll talk about that more as we go.

Now you probably know that in Buddhism there's tremendous emphasis given to the understanding of impermanence. We look into the fact that everything is always changing on every level—the personal momentary level, the level of one lifetime, the level of the cosmos and the planets and the sun. Everything eventually comes and goes.

And there's a reason that we look into that so deeply in Buddhism. It's so that we don't hang on so tightly to things that are bound to change. Because if we're hanging on to something and it changes, we're going to suffer from that.

So emptiness takes this principle one step further. And the seeing of emptiness is that there was nothing there to hang on to in the first place. We'll talk about this more. But we see the insubstantial nature of the way the world actually is. We see there's not a thing there that we can ever hang on to.

This also helps us to let go and keeps us from suffering. When we understand the insubstantial nature of all phenomena, we're less likely to grasp onto things that will inevitably slip through our fingers.

We're going to explore two or three ways that emptiness reveals itself in our meditation and investigation. The first is emptiness of self—the recognition that there's no solid core at the center of this mind-body process. This is the teaching known in our lineage as anatta or not-self, a central teaching of the Buddha.

The second is the emptiness of phenomena, which doesn't mean that the things we perceive don't exist, but rather that they're not solid in the way we typically imagine them to be. Suzuki Roshi captures this beautifully when he says, "Of course the bird we see and hear exists, but what I mean by that may not be quite what you mean by that." We want to learn to see the bird the way Suzuki Roshi sees it, because that understanding will keep us from suffering.

Let's begin with the teaching on the emptiness of self. The Indian teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj, who taught in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, said, "The aim of all the yogas"—and here yoga means any path that leads to liberation—"is to free you from the calamity of separate existence." This is meant to be a provocative statement. Why would separate existence be a calamity?

Because once we feel separate from everything else that is, it creates in our minds a sense of duality—self and other. And once we have a self, there's something that must be defended, protected, nourished, something constantly under threat from what is perceived as other. This idea that we are completely separate leads to a sense of isolation, of not belonging, of insecurity and underlying anxiety.

I think this is one of the most challenging aspects of contemporary Western life, as the sense of community continues to break down in so many societies. People are losing connections to family, neighbors, and close friends whom they might see daily. This leaves individuals feeling alone, isolated, and somewhat fearful.

As we investigate the emptiness of self, some of those boundaries we've created can start to weaken and eventually fade away, at least temporarily. In the Buddha's lifetime, he had a cousin and attendant named Ananda—the name means bliss. Ananda appears as one of the sweetest figures in the early teachings, a very kind and caring person. But he was younger and often found himself a step behind the other practitioners in understanding.

There's a text where Ananda approaches the Buddha and says, "Sir, you're always saying that the world is empty, but what do you mean by that?" The Buddha responds, "The world is empty because it's empty of a self or what belongs to a self."

This is both interesting and counterintuitive. Does it feel like your world is empty of a self right now? Probably not. Most of us experience the self as present most of the time. But the Buddha is suggesting that perhaps there's something here worth investigating more deeply. Maybe we don't fully understand what we carry as our idea of a self.

Let me ask you a couple of simple questions. First: How old are you? You don't need to answer aloud—that might be embarrassing for many of us. But it's a straightforward question, right? If you say, "I'm 39 years old," what do you really mean by that? Are your thoughts 39 years old? Is your mood 39 years old? What exactly is 39 years old? The body, right? So we're really saying the body is 39 years old. Here we're equating "I" with the body—they're the same thing.

But what if I ask, "What color are your eyes?" Again, an easy question. You might say, "My eyes are brown." But here, you're not saying "I am brown." You're not identifying yourself as the eyes that are brown, but rather presenting yourself as someone who has eyes. Now you're the owner of the body. They're your eyes; you might speak of your body.

So which is it—are you the body, or do you have a body?

Or are you something separate from it that owns it? And can you be both? How many selves are you in any given moment?

Then we can do the same question with emotions. We might say, "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." So here we're equating ourselves with the emotion, with happiness or sadness. But we could also talk about "my joys" and "my sorrows." So we could be the body, we could be the owner of the body, we could be the emotion, or we could be the owner of the emotion.

Can you be all of them in one moment? It doesn't quite make sense, does it? Usually people who feel they're more than one self are offered medication. So you might not want to go around telling people you feel you're four selves at once.

And then there's one other way that we really create this sense of self quite often. And that is maybe the deepest sense—we feel like we're an observer that's located between the ears and behind the eyes, sort of two inches into the center of the head. And it's kind of looking out, seeing the world, hearing sounds, feeling feelings. And that's really who we most deeply are, this observer.

So this is five ways we've seen that we create a sense of I. And this creating a sense of I by connecting it to part of our experience is called identification. We identify the I as being just one part of experience.

Do any of these really stand up to logic? And moreover, have you ever found any of these as an individual being? Have you ever found that observer? Have you ever found the one who owns the body or who owns the emotion?

William James tried and he said, "When I search for myself, all I can find is a tickle at the back of my throat." It's a bit like that. It's quite subtle, this sense.

So we've used these words since we were old enough to understand. Before we were two years old, we were hearing and using these words. And just by the force of habit, we've come to believe that they actually point to something that exists. We believe that there is an I somewhere here that these words point to. That something exists that we can put our finger on if we're clever enough and say, "That's the self. That's what I really is."

You can search and search. You won't find it. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said the self is just a shadow cast by grammar. We've used the language so much, we've come to believe in it, but it doesn't point to anything real.

Now there is a being here. There's no doubt about that. And there's a being there and there's a being there, but within this being is only an impermanent flow of body stuff and mind stuff. Always changing. Nothing is fixed within it. There's no core at the center that owns it, to whom it's happening, or who controls the whole thing. This is the understanding that the Buddha wanted to communicate.

This takes some reflection, because this sense is so conditioned. But through reflection and through meditation, we can explore it. For example, I'll bet that when you were meditating tonight, there were times when the I didn't seem that strong. When you're in a place that's calm and settled, it can feel peaceful, it can feel spacious and open, and it doesn't feel like there's such a strong center.

But at other times, the I can get really stirred up. Somebody says something rude to you. Driver cuts you off on the freeway. And all of a sudden this I springs up with some force. "How could they do that to me? I have to say something to them. I have to confront them about this." So then the I becomes very strong.

But at other times it can feel quite weak. So it's an easy way to investigate. Notice times when the sense of I is quite weak and other times when it feels really strong. So it's not just a steady ongoing thing, but it kind of grows and diminishes with time and circumstances.

So if the I in the Buddha's view isn't quite real, what is? There's this very interesting teaching that he gave that points to the basis for how Buddhists see what is real, what could be looked at, what should be investigated. This is a little text called the Discourse on Totality.

In this teaching, the Buddha said, "Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of things." First of all, that's a very bold thing to say, isn't it? Just tune in—I'm going to teach you the totality in about two minutes. In the West, Einstein never said that. Marx never said that. Freud never said that. Here's the Buddha 2,500 years ago saying, "I'm going to teach you the totality."

And so he said, "What is the totality of things? It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and objects of mind"—which means basically thoughts and emotions.

Is there anything else in your experience that falls outside of these six categories? Basically it's sight, sound, smell, taste, touches, thoughts, and feelings. Is there anything else? Is this a fair description of our reality? It's pretty good, isn't it?

The reason this is so interesting is if you look at many philosophers, they talk about quite different things—how many angels dance on the head of a pin or is there a God? The Buddha was interested in pointing directly at our own experience. That's what's so radical about this formulation. He's saying if you want to understand what matters, look at your own direct experience.

This becomes the basis for our meditation practice. We feel sensations of body and breath. We pay attention to sounds, when our eyes are open to sights, when we're walking, the sense of movement. And then we know our own thoughts and feelings. This becomes a map of where our meditation practice can focus.

The reason that's so helpful is it's in these areas that we get caught and we become unhappy. It's in relation to these six kinds of things that we suffer, and it's in relation to them that we can get free. This is quite interesting—there are only ever six things happening.

Normally, lay life seems really complicated, doesn't it? There are income taxes and jobs to carry out and children to look after and all the myriad problems of them coming into adulthood, or parents to care for with their aging process and loss of faculties. But in the pointings of the Buddha, there are only ever these six things to look at that make up our suffering or our liberation. It's a really interesting pointer to what really matters in life, a pointer of where to look.

What is interesting about this for our particular investigation this evening is how does the self, the sense of self, get created? Because we all have a sense of self, but the Buddha said the self isn't intrinsic. So how does it get created?

Again, I'll just ask you to look at your experience. You're sitting quietly. The sense of self—you'll notice it when the words are I, me, my, and mine. The language is the clue.

When you're sitting there, does it ever pop up and just go, "I"? Does it ever pop up and just go, "me"? Not really, does it? When you look at the way we form the concept of I or my, it's in relation to something else. There's a pain in this area, so I say, "my knee hurts." There's a memory about a friend, so I say, "I'm thinking about my friend."

The I and my are extras there. We could just say pain. We could just say memory. We could just say image. But we connect the I to it.

That means we identify and we add something there that doesn't have to be there.

Now the words are useful when we talk to each other. If I say to you, "I'm happy," what that identifies for you is where the emotion is taking place. That's different than if I say "James is happy." But that's just an indication of location. It doesn't mean we have to own it.

So the words are useful when we communicate, but when you describe your own experience to yourself, see what happens if you don't use these words. An emotion comes up and you could say, "I'm feeling really anxious today." Or you could just say, "Anxiety is arising and being known." See how it feels to make that just little change in language.

Notice that the sense of I isn't always there, but it gets created again and again and again when we lay claim to something. Also notice that when it's weak, there's generally a sense of peace. And when the I comes up strongly, there's usually some kind of turmoil going on. I want, I don't want, I like, I don't like, I need, I must—this strong attachment to I is integrally connected to our suffering. At times when it's weak, there's less suffering. There's a sense of deep peace.

So this is the sense of I, and the creation of self, that as we open it up, leads to one kind of emptiness, leads to more spaciousness, less anxiety, less self-concern and self-obsession.

The second sense in which emptiness is used classically is to explore the emptiness of phenomena. What that means is the things that we see in the world are not solid in the way that we think they are.

We're all good students of twentieth-century science, and we know quantum physics pointed this out like a hundred years ago. You know that the rug there is not mostly matter. What is it mostly? It's space, isn't it? Everything that you can see and touch, however solid it feels, is made up of atoms. Atoms are protons and neutrons orbited by electrons, and they are mostly space. So we know that this whole physical world truly is mostly space.

Has that made any of us a lot happier? It doesn't seem to have. I was a physics major in college. My professors did not seem a lot happier, and yet they really knew this. So what's happened? We haven't quite integrated it. We haven't taken in this knowledge and we haven't seen it directly for ourselves. So the aim of meditation is that we start to see some of this stuff for ourselves more directly.

I'll just read a passage from another of the Buddha's discourses. Again, it's a kind of wake-up call. He was giving a teaching. He was sitting on the banks of the River Ganges and giving a teaching to a group of students. And he addressed the students thus: "Monks, suppose that this River Ganges was carrying along a big lump of foam."

So I ask you to imagine that. If there's a big lump of foam, it really looks like there's something there, doesn't it? Big, with a certain color, a certain change of color, a certain texture. And yet what would happen if you went up to grab it? It would just go poof, wouldn't it? Because there's nothing really there.

"Suppose this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of matter there is, a practitioner inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in matter?"

This is basically the same insight that quantum physicists came to 2,400 years later, but the Buddha had realized it directly from his own meditation practice. And he's inviting us to learn it from our own meditation practice.

Just a simple way in: take the body as a place to check out. This is as close as we can get to knowing matter from the inside because our own awareness runs throughout the body. So what happens if you direct your awareness inside the body—you can do it right now—and ask, is there anything solid in your experience?

So we're talking about the field of sensations that we feel throughout the body. Is there any sensation in your body that is solid, fixed, and unchanging? Or when you look into the body, is it more like a dynamic field of energy that's characterized by pulsation,

vibration, flickering, change, and variation? I encourage you to investigate now and at home in your meditation and see: is the body really solid, felt from within, or is it more characterized by change, by flickering, by pulsing? Take a look and see. If we can find that there's no solid matter felt from the inside, that gives us a certain amount of confidence. Maybe all matter is just like this body.

Another way that form is like a mass of foam. James and I were teaching at Spirit Rock one February retreat, and I was giving the Dharma talk that evening. So it was about eight o'clock at night, and outside the hall there was this loud scream—like a baby crying in some kind of pain, so it was unsettling. A couple of staff people left the room and went out to look to see what had happened, so I kept giving the talk.

The talk finished about eight-thirty, and then a number of us went out and looked to see what it was that had happened. Staff people had gathered around in a small circle around the body of a deer. The deer was lying on the ground near one of the residence halls with its neck at a really odd angle. The staff people had checked and found the deer was dead. They reported that as they came up to the deer, they saw a couple of large dogs running away from the site. That happens in Woodacre—there are dogs that roam the hills. There are a lot of deer, and occasionally dogs will kill a deer. But I'd never seen it happen at Spirit Rock.

So we knew the deer was dead, but we stood in a circle and said some phrases of loving kindness for the deer, hoping that it might help it on its journey. Then the staff people went in to call the Humane Society. "We've got a dead deer here. Could you come and pick it up?" The Humane Society said yes, they would. "We'll come tomorrow. Please take the body down near the entrance, and we'll come and get it." So the staff did that. They drove the deer down and laid it to rest by the parking lot right on the edge of the driveway.

But the Humane Society never came. Our retreat was going on for another couple of weeks, so I would pass the body every day and keep checking on it. So what do you imagine happened? Little by little, most of the body of the deer disappeared, because we have scavengers on the land. There are raccoons, there are turkey vultures, there are crows, there are mice, there are rats, there are insects. So every day that I went by, there was a little less of the deer there until after about ten days, there were only the hoofs, the fur, and the bones that were left. So the rest of that deer had just gone. Like a mass of foam. Poof. Nothing more left.

Another way to look at this: the Dalai Lama was giving a series of teachings a few years ago. I bet some of you were there. He was down at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View, teaching on the Heart Sutra, that central text to all the traditions. A number of us went down to hear the three days of teachings.

It was a beautiful setup. It was early May, about this time of year. At Shoreline, there's a big stage, there are a bunch of chairs in a semicircle, and then there's a very broad hillside, which at that time was still green because of the winter rains. You could sit out on the hill, look up to the Dalai Lama on his big throne on the stage, and he was surrounded by monastics from all the different traditions. There were Tibetan monks and nuns in their bright red and orange robes, Theravadan monks and nuns in the dark brown of the forest tradition, Korean monastics in their gray robes, Japanese Zen monks in their black robes. The whole stage was just a colorful show of Buddhist monastics.

Actually, it was like a Buddhist Woodstock. I kind of felt like we were at a festival, except where the speakers should have been for the Grateful Dead, there was a big painting of the Potala Palace as the backdrop.

The Dalai Lama was saying that the teachings in the Heart Sutra point to this understanding that there are three forms of suffering we encounter in life. One of them is what's called dukkha dukkha. Dukkha is the Pali word for suffering—it means the pain of life. Dukkha dukkha is the direct experience of what's painful or unpleasant. It's like a double shot of espresso—a double shot of dukkha, the pain of pain.

There's another way that suffering comes to us, which is when something has been pleasant for a while, but then it changes. If we're expecting it to continue, we suffer from the change. The bowl of ice cream finishes. The falling-in-love part of the relationship is over and we get down to working on living together. Pleasant things change and turn into difficulty—this is called the suffering of alternation.

Then the third kind is called the suffering of unstable formations. The Dalai Lama said it's really important to understand this if you really want to help people. It's not that things go along for a while in a solid way and then change to something else. Things are changing moment by moment in every moment of our experience. Nothing is solid even for a few moments. Another way to say it is that if you look closely at experience—and this is what the Buddha did with the body and with the senses—things are dissolving moment by moment. This is the instability of formations. There's nothing to rely on.

This is the seeing into emptiness. The emptiness of phenomena is directly understood when we see this moment-to-moment dissolving nature within our experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts and feelings. Then we know we shouldn't hold on to things that are going to change. But we really see we can't hold on to anything that's dissolving. It's not possible. There's nothing solid enough to hold on to.

Both of these teachings—on impermanence and on the emptiness of phenomena—teach us not to grasp. Because we are conditioned to look for the next hit of something pleasing and to hold on to it for as long as we can. But that strategy doesn't ultimately work. It keeps us busy trying to find the next source of pleasure, but eventually it leaves us. And then we strive to find the next.

There's another way to live. The other way is we let go. In that letting go, we let go of some of the knot of selfing that we create moment after moment, trying to bring in the pleasure and keep away the pain. We start to see we're empty in two ways. There's no fixed core at the center of this mind-body process that we have to keep protecting and defending. And the elements of our actual experience are all just coming and going, pulsing on and off, moment after moment. Both these insights teach us not to struggle and hold on, but to let go.

The way this letting go feels—and you can check this out in your meditation—is that it leads to a settling back into an observing of the present moment that doesn't have such a strong agenda, but is a relaxation and an ease and kind of letting life flow. It's like we relax into the Dharma that's unfolding, which is really just nature. And we trust in that. Nature can hold us. When we release the self-centered grasping, nature holds us. This is what brings in a much deeper sense of peace and ease in our day-to-day living.

Not only that, but this opening up to the unfolding of nature also prepares the mind for an even deeper letting go, which is an opening that leads to enlightenment. I don't use that word a lot in Dharma talks, but I wanted to mention it tonight because it is the purpose of the Buddha's teaching. It is to find the possibility of a peace that truly can liberate us from all forms of suffering. This is why the Buddha taught, and it is the kind of peace that people are still discovering today.

Both the spaciousness and ease that we can experience in meditation and in life come from letting go. And also letting go leads to this deeper opening to a truly liberating understanding.

What happens when we let go and relax into nature is that we see life is proceeding from many causes and conditions. It's led up to this moment. This moment couldn't be any different than it is because of all the causes and conditions that have led up to it. Then this moment conditions the next moment, which conditions the next moment with its causes and so forth. We start to see this unfolding is taking care of itself if we don't struggle.

Now sometimes, of course, we need to intervene in the world when things are going off track.

And we need to adjust the conditions that are happening in our personal life, in our family, in the greater society, in the environment, and in the world. But we can find through meditation the way to engage with that intervention in a way that comes from peace and ease rather than just more angst.

So the meditative opening is to allow all the causes and conditions to be seen and to unfold. And there are so many of these—physical causes, biological causes, chemical causes, emotional, psychological, social, karmic. All these causes and conditions are weaving through to make this very complex play of life. But we find a way to be in it from a place of relaxation and ease. And this is what happens when the tightness of the self starts to get unwound, and this knot that we might feel in the center of things starts to open up and relax.

I want to close with a story of one meditator at the time of the Buddha. He was a spiritual teacher already, named Bahiya. Bahiya was living in the south of India. The Buddha was teaching in the north. And Bahiya was quite developed—he had many students, he lived very simply, he had a very pure mind. But one day he asked himself the question: Am I enlightened?

Well, the asking of that question is kind of a clue, because if you're enlightened, you know it. So it said a heavenly being came down and addressed Bahiya and said, "Bahiya, I'm sorry to tell you, but you're not enlightened. That's the bad news. The other bad news is you're not even on a path to enlightenment, because you're not doing the right practice."

So Bahiya was a little disappointed. But he said, "Well, do you know of anyone who is?" And this heavenly being said, "Yes, there's a teacher who goes by the name of the Buddha who's teaching currently in northern India. He's right now in the town of Savatthi, and you can go and visit him."

Bahiya would do anything for his spiritual practice, so he immediately left his home and started walking to the north to find the Buddha in the town of Savatthi. So he got to the town, and as he's walking around, he sees a person walking in a monk's robe who sort of matches the description he's heard. This being has a lot of dignity and a lot of radiance, a lot of beauty of spirit. So Bahiya walks up to him and says, "Are you the one they call the Buddha?"

The Buddha said, "Yes, I am."

"Please, sir, can you teach me your teaching briefly? I've come all the way across half of India. I really want to understand."

Well, at that time, the Buddha was walking with his alms bowl in search of his daily meal. So he said, "No, Bahiya, I'm sorry, I can't teach. This is not the right time. I'm walking for my morning meal."

But Bahiya was persistent. He said, "Please, sir, life is short. Who knows how long you may live or I may live? Please share your teaching briefly."

And again, the Buddha said, "This is not a convenient time. I'm walking for my midday meal."

But Bahiya didn't give up. He asked a third time, and as often happens, the third time the Buddha says, "Okay." And then he said, "This is how you should train, Bahiya. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized."

Do you notice what's missing? It's not being claimed as "I" or "mine." "Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

On hearing that profound instruction, Bahiya's mind woke up. He was so ripe, so ready. Because of his own spiritual practice, he was prepared to hear it. And he became awakened just upon hearing that brief teaching.

He thanked the Buddha and wandered off, probably looking for his midday meal. He happened to travel through a pasture where a mother cow was guarding her calf. The cow felt threatened, attacked Bahiya, and gored him. He died on the spot.

So his urgent request to the Buddha—"Who knows how long either of us will be here?"—was very timely indeed.

The monks were deeply concerned. They said, "Oh, Bhante, this person has come such a long way to see you, and then he died."

The Buddha reassured them: "Don't worry. He was awakened before he died. So his visit was fruitful, came to full maturation."

This is the potential power of seeing through the limitation of self. The letting go of self has been for 2,500 years a doorway to awakening and continues to be today. That's the power of emptiness. That's the power of this central teaching.

Thank you all very much for your attention. We have time for a couple of questions.

"Hello, Guy. Over the years in practice, I've had a very few, very brief experiences of walking around the world and not being Ernie. Nevertheless, there's still a location of perceptions. There's still a here and there's still something—some entity or being or gadget or whatever—that's walking around the world from that point of view. So who or what is that?"

I expect a number of you have had these moments of glimpsing the absence of self. The first thing I'll ask you to check in your experience is: How does that feel when the self temporarily is absent?

"It's very ordinary—just being in the world, except that I'm missing."

Is there peace and ease, or is there suffering?

"Peace and ease, yes. There's just a sense of being, basically."

When this happens, notice the emotional tone of that experience. See if it isn't one of peace and ease and absence of suffering. Many of us have had that kind of opening, and yet the self tends to come back. The sense of self tends to return.

"Very quickly, usually."

What I've observed is that the more I let myself open to these moments, and the more I understand the truth of it, the more my mind finds its way back to that way of being more and more often. Over time, one comes to stabilize in that kind of peace and ease and openness.

But the sense of self doesn't go away completely, according to the texts, until full enlightenment. So we continue to observe its appearance, but as time goes by, we're not so taken in by it. We know—we have seen the truth many times. The self isn't always there, and it's not intrinsic.

As it fades away, the more the experience of life becomes one of non-separation and openness, receptivity, and ease. The self is a burden. The belief in the self is a burden that weighs us down with fear, anxiety, and desire. As that lifts, there's a greater sense of openness, and out of that openness comes easy access to qualities like love, compassion, and joy.

So as the self thins, it's not just a metaphysical event. There's an openness of heart that springs from that which makes life really rich and beautiful.

Any other questions? Yeah.

Isn't there a self that lets go of the self? Isn't there an entity—and I'm not being flippant about it—isn't there an entity that observes and that is actually making decisions that affect beyond the conditions? Something that observes all the experiences, all the objects of mind, reflects on them and says, "Oh, okay, now I understand," and adjusts what I would call the lower level self accordingly?

No, it's a really good question, and it's one that I do answer at greater length in the book. But to say really briefly, there is a sense of agency within us. And when I talked about how causes and conditions lead to the next moment, lead to the next moment, it shouldn't be taken as being deterministic. Because the spiritual path unfolds if you act as though there is free will—it's best to act that way. In fact, our will is somewhat conditioned.

You were pointing to the issue of deciding, and there's a sense of agency that makes decisions. That deciding is conditioned by many different factors, the most relevant of which are the states of mind that are present right then. For instance, decisions that come out of fear, anxiety, and upset are different than the kind of decisions that come out of love, compassion, and generosity.

So there is not one entity that makes a decision, but there is a factor of mind called volition that operates in any given moment, influenced by the other qualities of mind that are present there. An impulse, an urge, a motive, a direction, a movement comes out of this factor of volition influenced by the other mind states that are present right there. There's not an entity that's doing that decision, but there is an agency that acts.

Similarly, there's not an observer, but there's a faculty of observing. This is interesting. So mindfulness is one faculty of observing. There's not an entity who is being mindful, but mindfulness is a factor that comes into our experience and carries out that observing function. So these are great questions. They can all be explored and resolved within your meditation.

Thank you. And there was one more question up front, if we could hit that one.

Now I've kind of forgotten what I was going to say exactly, but something around compassion and empathy—the fine line between detachment and having empathy and compassion and then doing something about it. Maybe having to take a few steps to help someone, rather than saying, "Oh, that's just the way it happens, like, let it be or whatever." Does that make sense?

No, it's a really good question because if one only dwells on the emptiness side of things... you could start seeing everybody as just collections of atoms and molecules, right? The scientific worldview—and I was kind of into this in my teens because I was studying physics—was just seeing people as collections of atoms and molecules. And it doesn't really matter what happens to atoms and molecules, right?

When you start seeing the emptiness of things, you could take it in a direction that says it doesn't matter what happens because it's all empty. That's a real misreading of the Buddha's teachings.

So the way I like to say it is that the insight into emptiness needs to grow up in parallel with the unfolding of love and compassion in our meditation practice and in our direct experience. Then when we look on others who are going through difficulty, the lack of our own self-obsession actually opens the door for more empathy to come through. And because the boundaries have melted somewhat, we don't feel so separate from the people who are going through difficulty.

So we say in our tradition, compassion comes out of emptiness. When there's emptiness of self, then the heart flowers. One of the things that we encourage is to let compassion flower and it will direct you what needs to be done.

Compassion isn't just a sweet feeling. It's an active wish to relieve the suffering of others. So it carries a little bit of that volition that we were just talking about a minute ago. And if there's real emptiness, then that volition can move forward without fear to act in the world. We need this compassionate response in the world—on the relationship level, on the family level, on the social level, on the global level.

I feel like if something is making you anxious or upset or suffer because you see something happening, then that's a good thing that it incites you to do something. But I guess it's kind of hard to... well, I don't know.

Yeah, sometimes suffering can be a spur to action. But I'll just say that you look at a lot of great spiritual teachers like the Dalai Lama in this day, the Buddha in his day, Dipa Ma, if you know of her—the teacher James and I met—they are coming from a

place of being basically at peace, and yet they have tremendous energy to help others and be very active in the world in caring ways. So suffering doesn't have to be the only spur to taking compassionate action. And the more selfless we become, the less it acts in that way.

How would you say to keep yourself detached from that, but still be motivated?

So in the Buddhist language, the word we use so much is not detachment but equanimity, or rather I would say balance. Balance is the state where we feel a kind of inner equilibrium or equipoise. We're kind of at rest and things are okay. But if we see suffering outside, there's a movement to alleviate.

And that's the natural movement of compassion. So we let that flow in its natural way when we're already in a balanced place.

I think that's all I want to say tonight, and James is going to wrap up the evening for us with some metta meditation. So thank you all for coming. If anybody wants a book signed, I'd be happy to sign books afterward.

James offered a beautiful reflection: "First, thanks so much for the talk—as usual, clear on a very deep topic. One thing about how I approach this subject is that one way of looking at reality does not negate the other. So it's not like, 'Oh, you don't really exist. Who do you think you are anyway? You're empty.' Rather, when you see this other perspective, it brings a whole other way of holding this pattern of life called James or Guy or whoever.

There's this pattern that is uniquely yours, but it's not fixed and static. It's an ongoing transformative flux of life with its own history and all that—something you want to both respect and take care of, to discover its gifts and share them with the world. It just brings a whole other way to be light about your life. You know that you stop on the red light and go on the green, following all the rules of relative reality, but you're coming from a much freer place. So don't give up on who you are—just know the freedom that comes with seeing a wider perspective. May this support you in having the courage and interest to keep looking inside."

We closed with a brief loving-kindness meditation. James guided us: "Just going inside, appreciating that we're all here sharing the Dharma together and recognizing what extraordinarily good karma we have to be here in Berkeley, hearing a lovely Dharma talk and coming together with like-minded friends. May we share all of our good fortune and merit and good karma that we brought to this evening and that we

created here together. Coming here this evening, may it be shared and be for the benefit of all beings everywhere and this beautiful planet Earth. May all know the highest happiness and peace."

As we concluded, there was a heartfelt wish: "May the earth heal soon. May that be so."

CHAPTER 165

Chanting And Morning Instructions: Mindfulness of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · 45 min

> *Guy Armstrong begins this dharma talk with the traditional chanting of the Three Refuges (Tisaraṇa) and Five Precepts (Pañcasīla), offering detailed guidance on proper Pali pronunciation and intonation variations between East and West Coast traditions. He emphasizes the importance of maintaining authentic pronunciation while creating a harmonious group practice.*
>
> *Following the chanting, Armstrong provides essential instructions for ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing) meditation. He guides practitioners through establishing a relaxed body posture, cultivating acceptance of present-moment experience, and connecting with the natural rhythm of the breath. The talk emphasizes the middle way approach to thoughts - neither resisting nor pursuing them - and offers various skillful means including noting, counting, body scanning, and the four-point breathing technique.*
>
> *Armstrong addresses common misconceptions about meditation techniques, clarifying that tools like noting and counting are not 'beginner' methods to be outgrown, but valuable supports that can benefit practitioners at any stage. Drawing from his extensive experience, including intensive retreats with Paok Sayadaw, he emphasizes finding what works best for each individual while maintaining relaxation in body and presence in attention. This foundational teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners practical wisdom for developing stable mindfulness of breathing practice.*

We want to chant the Refuges and Precepts somewhat regularly, so let's begin with that this morning. If you have your hymnals...

I want to make a couple of comments about intonations and the melody before we start. There's kind of a West Coast accent and an East Coast accent on some of these. Because we're on the East Coast, I feel a little obligation to follow the East Coast accent.

This pops up in the refuges section when it comes to Budaṃ Saraṇaṃ Gacchāmi—all the Gacchāmis. On the West Coast, we do it like this: Budaṃ Saraṇaṃ Gacchāmi. But on the East Coast, we do it: Budaṃ Saraṇaṃ Gacchāmi. Dhammaṃ Saraṇaṃ Gacchāmi. So I think we should honor the East Coast pronunciation here, even though many of you are from the West Coast and incline that way. We'll do the flat on the Gacchāmi today.

Then in the fifth precept, there are different ways of intonation on the second phrase, which is Majjapamādatthānā. The way that Sally and I say it is Majjapamādatthānā. Normally in Pali, if there's a long A or a long accent over a vowel, that's the syllable that gets the emphasis. But it's also the case that when there's a double consonant, like the D-A-T-T, that's also an inclination to emphasis. So some people go da-ta-na, but Sally and I are used to da-ta-na, accenting the last one.

And then on the Magaphalajñānasā, I've heard different melodies for this. We do it sing-song: Magaphalajñānasā. So it's low, high, low, high.

Maybe just for today, we'll do those bits call and response, just so we kind of get the same melody. Because this is the Forest Refuge Tabernacle Choir, and we want it to really sound good.

Let's begin. I think we can do it all in unison until we come to the fifth precept.

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa
Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa
Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa

Budaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Budaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Tatiyampi Budaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Call and response: Surāmeraya majjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Uccāsayana mahāsayana veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Visukadasana mālāgandha vilepana dhāraṇa maṇḍana vibhūsanaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Call and response: Idaṃ me sīlaṃ magaphalajñānasā paccayo hotu

We've really given the core instructions for mindfulness of breathing that we wanted to share.

Continuing with this gentle exploration of mindfulness of breathing, let me offer a brief review of the fundamental principles we've been cultivating together.

Begin by finding a comfortable seated position, allowing your body to settle into a natural state of ease. Feel into any areas where you might be holding unnecessary tension—perhaps in the forehead, around the eyes, or through the shoulders—and simply let these places soften. There's something particularly supportive about allowing the eyes to rest in a gentle downward gaze, as if you're looking toward the floor a few feet ahead. This subtle adjustment often deepens the sense of inward settling.

Let your jaw unclench, your shoulders drop away from your ears, and your belly remain soft and natural. Allow your hands to rest wherever feels comfortable, free from any grasping or holding. This is about settling into your body's natural posture with a quality of relaxed alertness.

As you establish this physical foundation, extend the same quality of relaxation to your mind. There's no need to strive toward any particular destination or outcome. One of the profound truths of meditation practice is that all wholesome development emerges from a place of acceptance—simply being present with whatever is arising right now, exactly as it is.

Open your awareness to include the soundscape around you. Sometimes this receptivity to sound creates that spacious quality we've been exploring, where everything can be held within a larger field of awareness. Within this openness, allow thoughts to arise and pass away naturally. When we resist the emergence of thoughts, we strengthen aversion. When we chase after them and elaborate on their content, we strengthen attachment. The middle way is found in allowing thoughts to come and allowing them to go, without resistance or pursuit.

Similarly, let whatever mood is present be accommodated within this open space of awareness, without judgment or the need to change anything.

Now, reconnect with the felt sense of your body in sitting. Imagine your awareness filling your entire body, present wherever you choose to place your attention. If at any point the focus on breath begins to create striving or tension, you can always return to this simple foundation—resting your awareness within the body as the body rests in stillness.

From this grounded place, begin to notice the natural impact of breathing. What do you feel on an inhalation? What shifts with each exhalation? You might choose to feel the breath moving through your entire body, or you might prefer to focus on a smaller area—perhaps the nostrils, the upper lip, the chest, or the belly. All of these approaches are skillful; choose whatever helps you remain most present.

As you attend to this natural rhythm of inhalation and exhalation, notice how the breath itself can become a gateway to calm. You might orient gently in this direction, letting yourself attend to the breathing rhythm specifically to cultivate tranquility in both body and mind.

Feel free to employ any of the supportive techniques we've explored together—noting, counting, the body scan, attending to the beginning, middle, and end of each breath, or the four-point breathing method that includes the eyes, chest, belly, and sitting bones. Through all of these approaches, the central thread remains simple: the breath coming in, the breath going out, with as much continuity of mindfulness as possible.

I notice how beautifully quiet you all are, and I almost hesitate to interrupt this natural settling with words. But there's an important point worth addressing briefly.

As you work with these breathing practices, you might find yourself viewing certain techniques—like noting or counting—as somehow elementary, thinking you should have progressed beyond the need for such supports. This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how these tools function in our practice.

I spent years in my early practice using noting, carefully attending to "rising, falling" at the abdomen. Later, during an intensive two-and-half-month retreat with Pawk Sayadaw, I found myself counting in virtually every sitting period, not because I was struggling, but because I discovered that this support actually enhanced my ability to remain present.

These techniques aren't stepping stones to be abandoned; they're skillful means that can serve us throughout the entire journey of practice. Find your own authentic relationship with these tools, but please don't dismiss them as remedial. They represent profound wisdom about how attention can be cultivated and sustained, and they remain valuable allies at every stage of our development.

But the main thing is what works best for you, what keeps the body relaxed and the attention present.

So we have a few minutes this morning if there are any questions.

CHAPTER 166

The Power of Loving-kindness

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive teaching on mettā (loving-kindness), Guy Armstrong explores the transformative power of the brahmavihāras, beginning with a personal reflection on how love requires the wisdom of non-clinging to become stable. Drawing from his own journey of nearly 20 years of vipassanā practice before discovering intensive mettā cultivation, he outlines five major benefits of loving-kindness meditation.*
>
> *Armstrong examines how mettā develops tenderness and responsiveness of heart, purifies the mind through the karmic power of wholesome intention (cetanā), and serves as a powerful concentration practice that unifies mind and heart. He addresses common obstacles like the "near enemies" (attachment) and "far enemies" (ill-will) of mettā, offering practical guidance for working with hindrances that arise during practice. The teaching emphasizes how mettā connects us beyond individual liberation to care for all beings, referencing examples from the Dalai Lama and other realized teachers.*
>
> *Throughout, Armstrong weaves together classical Buddhist understanding with accessible modern examples, showing how loving-kindness transforms both meditation practice and daily life. He concludes with the profound happiness that emerges from mettā practice, describing it as filling the emptiness revealed by vipassanā with warmth, creating a liberation by loving-kindness that feels like coming home.*

The subject of the talk this evening is the power of loving-kindness. We shifted this morning into instructions for the metta meditation, meditation on loving-kindness. So in the next few evening talks we want to touch on the themes of metta and the other Brahma Viharas. Tonight I'd like to talk specifically about loving-kindness or metta.

Rumi said, "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." This really connected with me because in my early twenties, I was opening to love in many different ways—with people, with nature, with music, with art. The experiences were very strong and very fulfilling and quite inspiring for me at the time, but they were very unsteady. They came and went seemingly beyond my control or influence. And yet they became somewhat of an inspiration for my Dharma practice because I wanted to live there more of the time in my life.

Over the years I came to realize that they could not be steady unless they were joined by the wisdom of non-clinging, or you could say the wisdom of emptiness. And that's what makes these experiences more stable. Since that time, since my entry into Vipassana practice, I got very interested in the heart practices of the Brahmaviharas and really very moved by their power to bring in qualities that Vipassana alone was not bringing in for me.

Tonight I want to talk about what I see as five major benefits of the practice of loving-kindness. First, it makes the heart more responsive, or you could say tender. Second, it purifies the heart—it cleans it up. Third, it develops the factor of concentration strongly. Fourth, it connects us to all of life, meaning an inclusive openness to life. And fifth, it brings a lot of happiness. These are the five areas that I want to explore this evening.

This quality of tenderness—you could say that loving-kindness and the Brahma Viharas sort of wake the heart up. It makes us more in tune with the heart qualities of what is going on around us. That means what's going on in other people, in the creatures, and in ourselves. We let that land in our own hearts more clearly and more deeply.

The phrases lead us in this direction. All four phrases for metta that we introduced this morning are leading in the direction of "I'm checking in on you and I hope you're doing well." That's the flavor of the metta phrases—"I hope you're doing well." And that means that we care. We care about how we're doing ourselves. We care about how others are doing. And we're checking in to feel how that's going for you.

We say that Vipassana is our wisdom practice, and it is to see things the way they are. Not everyone who does Vipassana will choose to incorporate metta into their practice, and that's okay. You don't have to. If you don't want to run to the allure of love, that's your business. But Vipassana is really our foundation. We say we do metta in the context of Vipassana. That is, in liberating the mind and bringing these beautiful qualities into our life, metta and the Brahmaviharas are some of the most important ones that we want to bring along and to develop.

My observation is that for some personalities, the quality of metta unfolds naturally from Vipassana. As we see more clearly and the hindrances lift, wholesome qualities come in, and for some personalities, those qualities will include metta. Deepamma was like this. She did Vipassana, and in the beginning, a lot of her beautiful heart qualities just naturally shone through. She had that kind of temperament.

But I've known other people who develop quite a lot of Vipassana insight where the heart qualities were not so apparent. And so it's kind of based on what temperament one comes into practice with. In general, I'd say the more emotional temperaments tend to develop the more emotional qualities of the Brahmaviharas. And the less emotional temperaments tend not to develop them so readily, and so they are helped by being supported by specific practices.

For me personally, I had done close to twenty years of Vipassana practice when I happened upon the intensive practice of loving-kindness. And it became very important to me. I did a six-week retreat at the retreat center one year. For the next year, I didn't do any Vipassana practice. Everything I did in my daily sitting—

I came back the next year and did another Brahmavihara retreat. So for almost a year and a half, I put Vipassana aside and did nothing but Brahmavihara practice, and I have kept it up to some extent ever since. It has been a wonderful addition to my meditation and to my life. I really feel it has had a big impact on the way I see the world and the way I feel about the world today.

One of my teachers was a young Lama named Sogyal Rinpoche—well, at the time he was young; he's gotten a little older now, as all of us have. At the end of Tibetan retreats, they tend to give heart advice to their students. The retreat has ended and they're sending people out into the world. They want to offer some parting words of wisdom, pith instructions for the journey ahead.

Rinpoche's pith instructions at this retreat were simple but profound. First, he said, "When you go back into the world, be natural." Don't puff yourself up as some kind of great spiritual person. Just be natural and easy, simple. The second thing he said was, "Be wise. Go home and take care of your life, take care of your family, take care of your friends. Don't mess up." And the third thing he said was, "When you go back, be juicy."

Now, "juice" is a technical Buddhist term that stands for qualities like love and joy and compassion and reverence and devotion and wonder and awe and humility. All these things are what emerge as our hearts grow and grow. These are the qualities, I think, that get communicated to the people in our lives.

You know, you go home, and the people in your life are not going to be interested in hearing about your anatta insight—you probably already know that. But they are really going to respond to these qualities of juiciness that you bring home. And then they're going to think, "Maybe there's something to that meditation you've been doing." These qualities make our experience of life much sweeter and much richer.

Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, was quoted by Sharon Salzberg in one of her books as saying, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." This is what communicates when we go back. Our good-heartedness is what touches people.

The beautiful thing is the Buddha didn't just say this is a good idea. He told us how to develop good-heartedness and gave very clear instructions on this. Within our tradition, loving-kindness is our primary practice to develop these qualities of heart—the primary one in the tradition of early Buddhism. Essentially what we learn, through what the phrases are pointing to, is that we care for the well-being of others and we care for the well-being of ourselves through this wish which we generate again and again and again.

Once we have established this basic relationship of care for ourselves and for others, the other three Brahmaviharas follow along naturally based on that. When this open heart connects with someone who's suffering, what comes through naturally is the quality of compassion. Compassion is the response to suffering. When this open heart connects with someone who is in a state of well-being and happiness, then what comes through is what's called sympathetic joy. Our heart resonates with the joy that they're experiencing. This is not something we have to force—it happens naturally.

And when we're not particularly confronted with anyone's situation, the open heart can rest in a way that holds all the joys and all the sorrows of life, and this is the quality of equanimity, the Brahmavihara of equanimity.

If you look at teachings from Tibetan Buddhism or Zen Buddhism, you'll probably find that their primary heart quality is compassion. I think this comes out of their emphasis on the bodhisattva path, working to end the suffering of all beings. So compassion as a response to suffering gets elevated in those traditions to the primary place.

But don't imagine that it's that different from metta. The Dalai Lama said that compassion is basic human warmth, and that's what metta is too. It's just a slight shift in flavor—whether it's looking on suffering or more general in the case of metta. The other traditions also have the other Brahmaviharas, so it's not that compassion stands alone as a Brahmavihara in the Mahayana; it's joined with the other three Brahmaviharas as well.

Sometimes as people get into metta practice, they have a kind of philosophical doubt about it. It seems a little phony or seems like a Hallmark greeting card, or something that's too idealistic. Or they feel like, "I don't want to fake it if I'm not feeling it." This is where our good friend Carol Wilson has a nice piece of advice. She says, "Fake metta is better than real aversion."

So we trust in that. Because really the generation of these beautiful states is all part of the Buddha's teaching on right effort. Right effort is to maintain and develop wholesome states of mind, and the brahmaviharas are some of the most wholesome states that we can develop.

As Sally has been saying, don't hold metta so differently from, say, the steadiness of the breath. What we want to do is combine mindfulness and metta together in a moment of experience that you could think of as a warm attention. We want to meet our experience with a quality of warmth or friendliness. So if we can befriend all our experiences with this warm kind of mindfulness, that's actually the way the practice will deepen the best.

And then other people say that metta is really deluded. It says "may I be happy," but there is no I. It says "may you be happy," but happiness is impermanent. You know, "I'm too wise to practice metta. It's not really aligned with the Buddhist teachings."

So we have a phrase for you, if you are that kind of skeptic. If you like, you can say the metta phrase like this: "In this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena, conventionally designated as Sally, may the mental state of happiness arise ever more frequently."

So if you like, you can say that. Or you can just say, "May Sally be happy." The choice is yours. The truth is, I just say "may Sally be happy," but I understand it in the longer form. So as old vipassana practitioners, you may also come to understand it that way and you just say it really simply: "May Sally be happy."

It is extraordinary when we meet someone who has developed the heart so strongly. And one of the people I think of in this regard is the Dalai Lama—such an amazing individual. I think we're so fortunate to be alive in a time when someone like him is still living on this earth.

When I want to think about, sort of realistically, how might a really awakened human being respond to a life situation, I don't imagine it in my mind or go back to stories of the Buddha. I think about the Dalai Lama. How does the Dalai Lama respond to life situations? He laughs a lot, and he also cries. He meets the refugees who are coming out

of Tibet who may have been in prison for years. He hears their stories, and he'll cry at those stories. So we don't imagine that someone who's awakened has a cold or unfeeling heart or approach to life.

He has said very publicly, when people would ask him in these interfaith conferences, "What's your religion?"—like, they hadn't been reading?—"What's your religion?" And he would answer, "My religion is kindness." And I think he really means that. Most fundamentally, that's what he is about.

One time a few years ago, he was interviewed by Oprah Winfrey for her magazine. I really appreciate that Oprah is someone who gets these wonderful spiritual teachings and puts them out to a really wide audience. There aren't many people in the world today who do that, and Oprah is very good at that.

Oprah started interviewing the Dalai Lama and began by asking, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama said, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect," Oprah said.

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued, "You have nothing in your life that you have regrets about."

That's a good life. That's a great life, to have no regrets.

Regarding service to Tibet, the Dalai Lama said, "Service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

That's a wonderful mind. I'd suggest that his meditation skills are tied to his kindness—that his heart qualities support that deepening of his meditation practice.

So people like the Dalai Lama and Dipa Ma remind us of things that are part of our own nature, that are intrinsic to us also. My grandmother was born around 1890 in North Carolina, never had any formal Buddhist training. But she was one of the most loving people that I've ever met. It just came naturally to her.

So in our practice, we develop this quality of responsiveness, tenderness, awakefulness of the heart by inclining our mind in that direction moment after moment, much the way we develop in vipassana meditation by developing mindfulness moment after moment after moment.

The second powerful effect of the loving-kindness meditation is that it purifies our heart very strongly. This is from that very simple intention of connecting with someone in our meditation and wishing them well, connecting with oneself and wishing ourselves well, that we repeat again and again and again.

Now whether they get happy or not is not up to you, right? The outcome or the result isn't in our control. So we don't base the meditation, the worth of the meditation, on whether it works to make them happy or not. We base it on whether it purifies our own heart, our own mind. We can't control what happens in their life. But as we incline our mind to wish for their welfare, this wish can be connected with again and again and again. And it's that which purifies our own heart.

When we wish something, there's a kind of intention behind it. Our intention is for the person's well-being. This factor of intention is pointed to in a quotation on page four under the brahmaviharas, under the name of volition. The Pali word is cetana. Sometimes we'll translate it as intention, sometimes we'll translate it as volition. But there's a will in it.

In quotation fifteen, the Buddha says, "It is volition or intention that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, and mind."

So what we're doing as we generate this intention or volition toward others' welfare is we're making a karmic imprint in our own heart and mind through this mental action of intent, and that's what transforms us. Moment by moment, these intentions cause our own mind-stream to go in a slightly different direction. And that's a direction of care and of loving-kindness.

This is really the engine of the metta practice—connecting with this wish. That's what does the work. So when you say the phrases, it's not enough just to repeat them like a mantra. The power of the practice really comes from the intention that you give to the wish you're making. Simpler way to say it is: say the phrase as though you actually mean it. Try to put as much real meaning as you can into the phrase.

Sometimes it will be hard to summon that up and you'll just say the phrase and you'll stay in the present moment, and then a little later the meaning will come back to you and you'll be able to give it that sense. But it's really your heart's meaning of the caring that is the power of the metta practice.

You might say that what we're doing with each repetition of a phrase is we're just planting a seed. We're planting a seed of that intent. And as you know with mindfulness, meditative seeds can take a long time to bear fruit. Mindfulness was probably not an explosive experience for you when you started. Little by little you feel the momentum, tremendous momentum that it has. And so these metta intentions are the same way.

So say it with some degree of meaning and trust in the fact you're planting that seed. Don't worry if it feels like nothing's happening. This is something that every metta meditator has to deal with: "I'm saying the phrase, I'm being diligent. My heart still feels dry. What am I doing wrong?" Nothing. It's just sometimes one has to be patient. It takes time for the change to develop.

But a week of metta practice will do something for you. I don't have any doubt about that. It will do its work over the course of a week. So just be willing to plant the seeds, water them.

It's not our job to tell it when it's going to flower or when it's going to bear fruit. That's nature's job. If you went out and planted a tomato plant in the soil out here, your job is to plant it and get the soil right and water it. But it's not your job to say when the tomato should come up. If every day you want to go dig it a little bit and pull a little harder, it's going to stifle it. But you plant the seeds, you water them, and then you trust the Dharma. You just surrender.

This is from the Dhammapada: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, 'this will come to nothing.' By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." Little by little. The jar fills up one drop after another of this intent, this karmic action of intention.

So we begin with loving kindness for ourselves. As Sally mentioned, sometimes this can seem difficult. It's presented as the easiest person, but it's not necessarily. However, it is the person we care the most about. So in that sense, it's easy. We do care for ourselves more than for anyone else, and that's the starting point.

But as we turn metta to ourselves, often it brings up the ways that we don't feel so great about ourselves. We may find that it brings up feelings of self-judgment or "I'm not worthy of love," or it brings up some self-hatred or feelings of guilt. We remember all the times we didn't act with loving kindness and then we feel really bad about that.

This doesn't mean that we're doing it wrong. Actually, that can be a sign that it's working—that we're doing it right. Because metta purifies. As we incline the mind to loving kindness, anything that's not aligned with that is going to come to the surface. It's kind of like metta is this powerful magnet with a positive pole, and we run it up the center of our being, and it attracts all the things that are negatively charged to it. It draws them out of the mind, it draws them out of the body.

Then, when they're drawn up into awareness, we have the possibility of knowing them, understanding them, and releasing them through caring attention, through a combination of mindfulness and loving kindness. So hindrances—the activation of hindrances—are part of the process of the loving kindness practice. It's not all light and flowers in our metta practice. So just be prepared for that. It doesn't mean it's going wrong; it means that it's actually doing the work of purification.

People who have done quite a lot of metta practice find they become really sensitive to anything that's arising in their thoughts or emotions that's not aligned with metta. And it starts to feel really uncomfortable to have those kinds of thoughts and feelings. And then, therefore, we want to let them move through us as soon as possible, without judgment, but with clear seeing: "Oh, this is not aligned with metta. Let's let this move through."

So as the hindrances come up through the metta practice, how do we work with them? The first suggestion—much as Sally discussed with the hindrances in concentration practice—is to leave the hindrance in the background. So it could be anger, could be fear, could be anxiety, could be desire. Any of the normal hindrances, just let it go on kind of in the background and keep turning the attention to the wish for caring.

If the hindrance is weak enough that you can still develop the intention of caring, continue to do that. Then eventually the caring and the metta will sort of embrace the hindrance. It's like wrapping an arm around it and saying, "Come on in, you don't have to be so upset." It'll take care of the hindrance by itself and then you don't have to do very much.

If the hindrance is stronger and it blocks the intention to caring, then try moving from metta to compassion. You're in a position of some suffering—the hindrance is strong enough that you're not able to develop the genuine wish for caring anymore.

That's kind of painful. So we turn to compassion and I'd suggest doing a formal compassion practice at that point. Also on page four of the study guide are some possible phrases for compassion, and you can use any of these that you like. The classic one would be to turn your attention to yourself and say, "May I be free from this suffering."

So you recognize the suffering is here through the hindrance, but you care about it. You care about your experience of suffering. You say, "May I be free from this suffering?" This is the most classical way.

Another approach—I find that "may I be free from" has a little bit of an aversive, pushing-away tone. So the phrase I use personally is "May I hold this pain with compassion." This kind of wraps the arms around the whole experience. "May I hold this with compassion." Or you can say something like "I care about this pain" or "I care about this sorrow." It creates a new relationship with the hindrance that shines the caring on the hindrance itself.

If that doesn't feel fitting, then you can switch to vipassana. Just move into your normal mindfulness practice. Feel the hindrance as its emotion manifests. Feel it in the body. Listen to its thoughts. Stay with it with mindfulness until it passes through. So mindfulness is still useful even in the metta practice. Once the hindrance has washed through, you can go back to the formal practice of metta.

One thing you'll notice in being with a hindrance with metta is that it may not be a very joyful kind of metta. You start to learn that the presence of loving-kindness has a range of flavors. It goes from subtle to strong.

Here are some of the manifestations of the quality of metta. The first is patience. Something unpleasant is going on—like a hindrance—but you're basically okay with being with it. You're kind of okay that it's there. You're not thrilled, but you're not really struggling or getting judgmental about it. So there's this element of patience, which is allowing without pressure to get rid of it. There's still a kind of "don't like it," but you're bearing with it, you're forbearing.

One step up from there, you move to the hindrance with real acceptance—a real quality of "It's totally fine with me that this fear is here, or this desire is here, or this anxiety, or whatever it is." It's really totally fine. I don't care if it goes or stays. I accept it as part of my experience. No resistance.

Then, as metta continues to warm up—maybe with or without a hindrance—it moves into a quality of real friendliness, an affection for your experience. There's a kind of warmth that comes, radiating and directed to anything that comes within your field of experience.

One step up from that is love. You might feel this when you're walking out in nature here, walking in the forest on a beautiful sunny day when the flowers are out—it's rhododendron season—and your heart just goes, "Wow, this is love." This is the quality of deep, deep affection for things.

Then it can grow to devotion. Devotion can be directed toward a person, a spiritual teacher, or toward the dharma itself. You just feel that this is the greatest gift in life—the dharma, the teachings, the beings who manifest the dharma. This is what I want to lay my heart upon. So this devotional quality comes through as the metta practice develops.

As we're directing metta to ourselves, we can feel at times there's an inward friendliness developing that lets us open up to more and more of ourselves. This is pointed to in this poem by Galway Kinnell called "St. Francis and the Sow." I'm just going to read a little bit of the poem.

He starts off talking about a flower bud, which is nice at this time of year. A lot of the rhododendrons are still in the budding stage—some plants. Some of them are already really flowering. You'll see other flower buds around here.

"The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers from within, of self-blessing; though sometimes it is necessary to re-teach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on its brow and retell it in words and in touch..."

It is lovely until it flowers again from within of self blessing.

This is part of what metaphor offers us. It lets us discover our beauty, the treasures of our heart and mind.

Now, the metta practice in its purification work brings up any hindrance, but specifically there are two kinds of hindrances that we discuss in relation to the Brahmaviharas. One is called the near enemy and one is called the far enemy. Each of the Brahmaviharas has one of each. You can see a list of those on page 4, quotation 13.

So for each divine abode, it lists its near enemy and its far enemy. The near enemy—somebody called it the near miss, which I thought was rather cute—because it's close to the Brahmavihara, but it's not quite on target, and it misses in a way that's somewhat unwholesome. The far enemy is the opposite, so it's definitely not a wholesome state of mind.

With loving kindness, the near enemy is said to be affection with attachment. That is, you have a feeling of friendliness towards someone, but you want something back from them or you want them to be a certain way. The metta only continues if you get what you want or they manifest the way you want them to manifest.

So in relationships, for example, there's often a kind of contract: I'll be friendly to you if you're nice to me or if you give me what I want. Or sometimes there's the expectation, I'll be nice to you if you act the way I want. This can lead into a kind of conditional acceptance of someone, and that can lead to fixing.

I was teaching a metta weekend once in Canada—a whole weekend just on metta practice—and I'd used the phrase "may you live with the ease of well-being" as the fourth phrase. I encouraged people to find someone really close to them in the friend category and practice: "May you live with the ease of well-being."

Partway through that session, someone raised their hand and said, "Well, I have a son in college, and I say this phrase to him: 'May you live with the ease of well-being.' But I think to myself, no, he's living with way too much well-being and ease. I'm taking care of him, I'm cooking his meals, I'm doing his laundry, and he's not even doing that well in his classes. May you start doing well in your classes!"

That was mother's metta. And I said, "No, no, no, no, no. That's fixing. You really want to feel the friendship and acceptance for the way your son is." So allowing each person to be the way they are and still having that care for them.

The far enemy is the opposite of metta. So instead of caring about somebody's happiness, we are happy when they're not doing so well. This is called ill will—the opposite of goodwill.

At my first metta retreat at the retreat center, my difficult person happened to be on the retreat with me. I would be doing my metta, getting into it: "May all beings be happy. May they be safe. May they be at ease." And my difficult person would walk by. I'd start remembering all the things that had happened in the past year: "Oh, no. I can't believe she did that. When I said that and she did... I can't believe it was like that." So I'd start spinning on all the events of the past.

This would go on for a while. It was very painful—not only the upset, but the loss of the metta was really painful when being around this difficult person.

I hadn't done a lot of metta practice at that time. I'd heard that you could do metta for your difficult person, but I thought, "I don't want to do that. They're going to make me pretend I like them. I don't want to do that." So I resisted for a while, but then I got desperate. I said, "Okay, I'll start doing metta for this person."

I just went through the phrases—five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes—and all of a sudden I found I wasn't angry at them.

I could actually start to wish for their welfare. And what I realized was that within my anger—and I think within a lot of our anger—there's an element that's actually ill will. This person has hurt me, and I want them to suffer. That's what ill will is: I want them to suffer.

When I realized I was wanting somebody else to suffer, that was very close to cruelty. Cruelty is when we enjoy somebody else's suffering—it's the opposite of compassion. So here I was wanting someone else to suffer. It was so close to cruelty I couldn't accept it. When I saw what it was, I couldn't accept it. I thought, I don't want to live like that.

And so I discovered that this conscientious application of metta, even for my difficult person, would undermine the ill will. As long as I could generate a thought of good will for them and really hope that they become happy, the ill will couldn't coexist. Ill will can't coexist with good will. As soon as I could find the good will, the ill will wasn't there anymore and the anger wasn't there anymore. I found this really does work, even for the difficult person. That was one of my most difficult people in my life, and it really made a difference.

Some people who have been in prison—Buddhist practitioners in Burma who have been imprisoned—have commented that when they came out of prison, they really appreciated the value of loving kindness so much more because they saw what it was like to live with people who were influenced by the opposite of loving kindness: their prison guards and captors. They came out of prison and appreciated even more the value of loving kindness.

Nelson Mandela said something similar. This is from that movie based on his life called Long Walk to Freedom, which is based on his autobiography. There was this amazing episode where he was negotiating his release from prison with de Klerk and members of the white government. The main reason they didn't want to release Mandela, according to the movie, is that they were afraid that he would incite the black people of South Africa to violent revenge upon the whites who had mistreated them so badly for so many years.

In this face-to-face meeting with Mandela, they asked him that directly: Are you going to go out and incite the black population to take revenge? And he said, "No, we will not do that. I've seen what fear has done to your people. You have always been afraid of us, and it has made you an unjust and brutal people. We do not want to live like that."

He did this amazing thing of coming out and developing the truth and reconciliation movement that tried to unify all South Africans. It was an amazingly spiritual step to take.

So this is the element of purification. The hindrances come. We hold them with metta. They have the possibility of moving through us. And some of them are purified—I'm reluctant to say it, but it's true—forever. As some of these old habits of mind are seen and moved through us, that particular pattern may truly be gone forever. Forever.

The third of the great benefits of loving kindness is that it is a concentration practice and brings about this quality that we've been talking about so much on this retreat: the unification of mind. We've talked about mindfulness as bringing the mind together in the present moment in a unified way, but we also know that love unifies the mind. Love is a tremendously unifying force. It brings people together—couples together, friends together, families, communities, nations, eventually, maybe, someday, the globe. It has that potential.

So we join the unification of love with the unification of concentration. In loving kindness, the concentration is primarily, as Sally mentioned this morning, the phrases. By continuing to say the phrases, the mind is collecting around that meditation focus. But there are three other focuses that we've mentioned or will draw out more clearly: the image of the person that you may want to work with, the metta feeling that may come, and feeling the effects of the metta in the body.

And here we incline you to look at the heart center. We actually have four objects for concentration: the phrase, the image, the metta feeling, and the heart center. We'll explain how to work together with these as we go. Therefore, having even more objects can make the concentration stronger. A juggler who's got four balls up in the air has to be pretty with it to keep those four balls going. This is our concentration practice with metta. So love brings the mind together, concentration brings the mind together, and the two together are really powerful.

I want to read this paragraph from a Christian saint—his name is Theophan the Recluse, and he lived in Russia in the 19th century. He was a Russian Orthodox saint. It sounds like it could have been written by a Buddhist practitioner. I don't know if he had the influence or what, but it's so like our practice:

"So long as the mind remains in the head, where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there. The concentration on life is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of warmth. This sensation grows gradually stronger, firmer, deeper. So it comes about that whereas in the initial stages the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will, in due course, this attention by its own strength gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth then holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting one another and remain inseparable, because dispersion of attention cools the warmth and diminishing warmth weakens attention."

Isn't that lovely? The warmth and the attention coming together in the heart, concentrating and reinforcing one another. That's also this practice.

The fourth great benefit is that it really opens our practice out to all of life. Vipassana practice can become quite individualistic sometimes, can become self-centered and in a way sort of narrow—about my happiness, my suffering, my release. But metta practice eventually opens out beyond our limited experience. It opens out to other individuals from the beginning, eventually opens to all beings.

This is from Shantideva, an 8th century practitioner and writer from India who practiced and taught at Nalanda University, a great center of Buddhism in medieval India. His most famous work is *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, a foundational text in the Mahayana. This is from Shantideva:

"Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

With metta, we really awaken this wish for everyone in the world—all beings, all humans, all creatures—to be happy. And that connects us. I think one of the deepest sadnesses in the West in the last century has been the growing sense of isolation. As communities have been undermined, as children have moved away from parents and their homes, the risk is of individuals getting very alone and disconnected, even from other friends, in a very solitary kind of lifestyle. Researchers who have investigated say that this is a source of deep unhappiness for our world today.

Metta undoes that. Metta connects us. As we tune into the welfare of other beings, we find out we all have the same wishes. Everybody wants to be safe and happy and healthy and live at ease. And so do all the creatures. We all want the same basic things.

In our social discourse these days, we make all kinds of distinctions. There's a lot of thought and writing about distinctions of race and ethnicity and class and age and sexual orientation and gender identification, language, culture, political views. All those things—they're real. Those are real distinctions. We don't want to write them off. But sometimes we forget that they're not the whole story. Those distinctions don't tell the whole story about us. And what the distinctions don't tell is our sameness. We all share the same humanness.

And we know that, but in the realm of social discourse, it doesn't get pointed to very often. It's like, oh, that's a spiritual thing. That's not the place for newspapers to talk about. But it's a place for us to talk about.

We have basically the same body with minor variations. We have the same heart because we share all the emotions together. We have the same mind. We can think the same thoughts and have the same human consciousness at work. And we realize basically we're one organism. All of it. One species. One organism.

The same human heart has been poured into all these different vessels. And then it undergoes different conditions and different experiences. And therefore it gets shaped. But the heart is the same. Everywhere. And we forget that. We forget how deeply alike we are. And that's ultimately what connects us. We're the same being.

So metta really reminds us of that. Across all the distinctions that we can make, which are valid distinctions and important distinctions on the social level, on a deeper level, it's different.

You know, Rumi left a lot of poems, and he credited one person with being his teacher, who was Shams of Tabriz. Shams of Tabriz left very little in the way of poetry, but here's the one poem that we know that he did leave: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

You could also say in the clear seeing of Vipassana, these are not true distinctions. And metta sees through them to this connectedness. It does not ignore the distinctions, but it sees that they are not the final or only word about our truth.

And finally, the fifth benefit that comes from the practice of metta: it brings a lot of happiness. And I really hope you all get to experience this during this week to come. Metta brings a tremendous amount of delight and happiness.

One of the people I think of in this regard is the Thai teacher I talked about the other day, Ajahn Jumdean. He was one of the most accomplished practitioners that I've met. He was proficient in Vipassana practice, and he'd done a lot of loving-kindness practice,

and he radiated that as well. And every time I saw him, he seemed happy. He had a smile on his face. He was laughing. He was playful. He was joyful. I never saw him in any other mood than that.

At one point, we were talking to him about his practice and his development. He said, "I haven't had anger in 25 years." That's a happy mind.

So we'd bring him to Spirit Rock and offer that people could come if they wanted and hear teachings, but he was there to hang out. And some days people would ask him, or Jack would ask him, "What would you like to do today, Ajahn? We could drive you around Marin and take you up to the top of Mount Tam and you could have a view, or we could go out for lunch at a restaurant."

And he'd say, "Oh, I'm happy with anything, I don't mind, but are there people who want to hear the Dharma? If there are people who want to hear the Dharma, then I'll talk to them about the Dharma. But if nobody comes and nobody wants to hear the Dharma, then I can just sit here and I'll be happy."

But he really seemed happiest when people wanted to hear the Dharma. And he was one of those teachers, sort of the river-of-Dharma teacher, where you turn the switch and it just goes on and on and on until lunchtime, maybe. He had a lot of Dharma energy to transmit.

And one of his key teachings that I still remember—he didn't speak much English, but he learned at least two words. And he was transmitting the essence of what he understood from Vipassana and metta. And he would touch the space and he would say, "Empty, empty." And then with his other hand he would go, "Happy, happy."

And that's what he was like. He was so empty and he was so happy.

So when we discover this happiness of the Brahma Viharas and happiness of metta, it's a little bit like the sukha that we were talking about the other day. It is so satisfying. It is so much what we are looking for that we feel we can just settle into it, just rest and experience that quality of happy comfort and the joy of loving kindness. It feels like we're home. It feels like a deliverance.

And in fact, the Buddha talked about the liberation by loving kindness as one particular form of liberation. So we say that in our practice of Vipassana, it reveals this inner emptiness or this openness or this spaciousness, but then metta fills it with warmth. And that's what's so lovely. So when we come to rest, this is not like a cold, empty void that we find ourselves in because the metta is pervading it with warmth. And so it's rich, it's touching, it's moving, it's satisfying.

And out of this we find—and it's not just metta, but so many treasures of the heart and mind come from that place when we can rest, when we're supported by the Brahma Viharas, by emptiness and by wisdom. The treasures of the mind really come out. So we can trust in that. We can surrender to it. We can stop doing. We can stop running. We don't need anything else. And we feel as we rest, oh, our basic nature is good. Self-doubts really dissolve in that kind of experience. Our basic nature is good. And there's a really okay feeling about who we are and what we are.

And then when we can trust in our own goodness, we find it's a pleasure to share that with others, as many of you are already doing in your lives, sharing this blessing of the Dharma with others.

This is also from Shantideva. This is a particular passage that the Dalai Lama has a very strong resonance with, and I think encapsulates his attitude:

"For as long as space endures and as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world."

This is really the Bodhisattva's aspiration. For as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world.

And then I want to close with another quotation with Oprah and the Dalai Lama. And in this quotation, I want to again remind us that metta and compassion are not very different. They're different flavors of the same ice cream, you could say.

So Oprah finished the interview and said to the Dalai Lama, "In my magazine, I do a column called 'What I Know For Sure.' What do you know for sure? The one thing on which you have no doubt."

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate: "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For happy life and happy world, there is no doubt."

And so is metta.

Let's just sit for a minute and let the words settle. What do you know for sure? Metta is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world. There is no doubt.

CHAPTER 167

Morning Instructions: On Mettā Practice

Guy Armstrong · 40 min

> *In this morning dharma talk from the June 2019 retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Guy Armstrong provides detailed instructions for mettā (loving-kindness) meditation practice. He guides practitioners through the foundational stages of mettā bhāvanā, emphasizing the importance of beginning with self-compassion before extending loving-kindness to benefactors and friends. Armstrong addresses common challenges in mettā practice, particularly the arising of memories and thoughts when focusing on relationships, explaining this as a natural "relationship review" process that helps align past experiences with present dharmic understanding.*
>
> *The teacher offers practical advice for selecting appropriate recipients of mettā, suggesting that in Western contexts where traditional benefactor relationships may be less common, practitioners can include children, pets, or mentors who evoke uncomplicated affection. He emphasizes the embodied nature of mettā practice, encouraging practitioners to connect with the heart center and maintain awareness of physical sensations and emotions that arise during meditation. The talk includes a guided meditation session using traditional mettā phrases: "May I/you be safe and protected from harm, may I/you be happy, may I/you be healthy, may I/you live with ease."*
>
> *Armstrong concludes by connecting individual mettā practice to the universal wish for happiness shared by all beings, encouraging practitioners to recognize that the basic desires for safety, happiness, health, and ease are common to all sentient life. This teaching offers both beginning and experienced practitioners accessible entry points into one of Buddhism's most transformative practices for developing compassion and emotional healing.*

In the loving kindness instructions for today, we'll continue to work with the two or three people that Sally started us with yesterday, which includes beginning with self. So I recommend in every sitting, in every walking, you include some time on mettā for self.

This may not be the most warm, alive, juicy part of your meditation. But it's really important to keep bringing those attentions back to self. It's what starts to change our relationship to our self.

Then we'll work with someone who will be in the category for you of either benefactor or friend. So after a third to a half of a session of sitting or walking, begin with self and at some point you can switch to benefactor or friend if that seems skillful for you, if that seems appealing and helpful.

If you start with mettā for self and you find this is really connecting, this is really where I want to be, you can just stay with mettā for self. People have discovered in the mettā practice, mettā for self is really filling up a thirsty hole they didn't know existed. And they have stayed with mettā for self for years before moving on to another person. And it's fine to do that if that's what feels appropriate for you, if it feels really a strong draw.

But if it feels easy, be with mettā for self for fifteen or twenty minutes or so, and then move toward the second person—let's say a benefactor or a friend—wherever the relationship feels warm and pretty easy, pretty uncomplicated.

If you're looking for someone in a benefactor category, in the West sometimes we don't have so many benefactors growing up. Family members are at a distance. Maybe we haven't connected with a mentor or a teacher in a really personal way. So there may not be anyone that stands out for us as a benefactor in that classical sense.

Then you can also think about using a child or a pet in this category. The benefactor should be a being who evokes a lot of affection and where there's not much ambivalence when you turn to them. So children can really open the heart really well. It could be your own child. If they're adult and the relationships become a little more fraught, you could think of them as a youngster. Or it could be a niece or a nephew or a godchild or it could be one of your grandchildren if you happen to have grandkids.

And then if you'd like to bring in a friend as well in that category, you can do that too. You can have both a benefactor and a friend, and bring them in as they seem to fit.

So in these first days of the mettā practice, we'll be focusing mainly on people in these three categories: self, benefactor, and friend.

One of the things you may find as you do mettā practice toward, especially someone who's an adult whom you've known for a lot of years, is you bring them in and a lot of memories about them will come up, and memories about yourself in relation to them. This is natural. You might think, "Oh, I've really backslid because when I was with the breath I wasn't having so many thoughts, I wasn't having so many memories and now all these are coming up. Am I losing it?" No, this is natural with mettā practice. It's a relational practice. And so it tends toward this kind of relationship review, let's call it.

As memories of the person come up, you may remember things that were beautiful, warm, loving, happy. You may remember areas where there was friction, where there was some conflict or disagreement and things may not have turned out so well.

So in practicing with mettā, if memories come up, don't fight with that. Don't try to push them back down. Don't try to suppress the thoughts. Let them be there but in the background. So it's best if the memories can kind of come just as images without a lot of words. And you can let the images be in the background while you continue to say the mettā phrases for that person or for yourself.

And essentially what's happening as we bring someone into a field of unconditional acceptance, which is mettā, we start to see the ways that our relationship didn't line up with that in the past. And so essentially what the memories are saying is, help me get aligned with mettā in my relationship with this person. So we're kind of updating them from our old ways of living into our new ways of Dharma understanding. And this is a healing process. This is helpful.

So not to fight the memories, but also try not to go on long thought excursions around them. Let the thoughts come, let them go. Images can stay in the background and keep returning to the mettā phrases.

Beginning the meditation. Sitting easily, comfortably. It's really hard to generate a lot of mettā if your body's in pain, so be easy and relaxed in your sitting.

Begin by connecting into your body. Just feeling yourself in sitting. We want the mettā practice not just to be a mental line of words, but we want it to be an embodied experience of whatever it is that comes.

Feeling your presence in the body, and perhaps within that, bringing your attention into the heart center—this area in the center of the chest, where so many emotions are rooted and felt.

As you connect with the heart center, get in touch with this wish which is behind all metta practice: the wish for the welfare of all beings everywhere. This is what we're aiming toward, and we're building toward it through various individuals. But in its basic form, the wish of metta is for all beings to be well and to be happy.

So have that sense of an expansive awareness that's very wide and open, inclusive—standing in a kind of boundless way all around you. Just realize that whatever beings there are in this wide awareness, our intention toward them all is for their welfare. You might verbalize that with a few repetitions of this phrase: "May all beings be well, happy and peaceful."

And recognize that included in all beings is you.

Now bring the attention to yourself. You can still rest the attention in the heart center and connect with your sense of yourself. As you do, remember some of your good qualities. This might be your taste in art, your sense of humor, your caring for friends, or being there for your children or parents, caring about the earth and environment and showing that. What would one of your friends say they liked about you if you asked them?

Then bring to mind a few things you've done—a few actions you've undertaken that have shown your care for others. Calling someone who's ill to check in. Sending a card to someone who might need support. Looking after your pets and seeing they're well-fed and healthy. Just little things.

As you remember some of these kind actions, get in touch with the intention behind each one. Notice how you are responding to someone's need or wish through a motivation of caring for their welfare. As it's said, the proximate cause for metta to arise is to see the good in someone. So it's helpful to remind ourselves of the good in ourselves.

And especially for all of you, think about your commitment to the Dharma. How you've dedicated so many hours to growing in understanding, growing in love, growing in compassion for the benefit of yourself and the benefit of the world. This is a rare and beautiful motivation.

So in touch with your own goodness, begin directing the phrases for loving-kindness to yourself, using the phrases that you've found feel suitable for you:

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy.
May I be healthy—and this always carries a sub-clause: *And if that's not possible, may I hold my limitations with grace.*
May I live with ease.

This phrase especially refers to taking care of ourselves in the world—the phrase about our relationships and livelihood. When those are in order, we can feel we're living with ease.

Stay in touch with yourself—this could be the felt sense of your body and mood as you sit. It could be through an image of yourself somewhere that you're comfortable or happy. Stay in touch with yourself and repeat these phrases of loving-kindness. There's no need to rush with your phrases. It's not a speed affair. See if you can take the time to feel the sincere meaning in the wish as you say it.

Now, if you feel ready, you can move on and bring in your benefactor or friend. Connect with them by remembering them, perhaps calling to mind an image of them someplace where they feel comfortable. Or it might help to say their name.

As you get in touch with them, remember something of their good qualities. What has made you like them so much? It might be their wisdom, their integrity, their compassion, their ethical lifestyle...

their humor, or simply the warmth of their presence. Then you might reflect on a few kind actions you've seen them take. It could be kind things they've done for you, kind things they've done for others, or acts of care for the earth itself.

With a sense of the goodness of your benefactor, begin to repeat the phrases for them that are more or less the same as the ones you use for yourself—the same basic wishes. As I want to be safe, may you too be safe and protected from harm. May you too be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.

Continue to stay connected with the benefactor, either through an image or a felt sense of them, occasionally saying their name, and extending your wishes in the form of the phrases. A nice rhythm might be that you call up an image, say your phrases for them, and at the end of a set of phrases, bring your attention back into the heart center. Feel what it feels like in the body and see if any emotion or mood is present. Could be strong, could be subtle. Could be the flavor of metta, could be a little bit of compassion. Could be one of the hindrances, or could just be calm. All of those are fine. Notice the mood as you connect back into the body. Allow it to be just the way it is, and connect with the next set: image, phrases, heart center, and feeling.

As you're connecting with your benefactor, you may notice different feelings come up in relation to them. Could be gratitude or appreciation or friendliness. Could be one of the hindrances—some memory of a conflict or disturbance comes in. All of those are fine, a natural part of the meditation. So if possible, allow that emotion to be there, to be felt, and continue connecting with your wish for the benefactor's welfare and expressing that through the phrases.

For the last minutes or so of the sitting, reconnect with that wide sense, with an expansive awareness of all beings everywhere. Human beings, creatures, beings seen and unseen. All beings everywhere have the same basic wish that we do for happiness. Just reconnecting with that wish for all beings again with a simple phrase: May all beings be well, happy and peaceful. May all beings be well, happy and peaceful.

So as you go through the day today with the sittings and the walkings, continue with the metta practice. Remember to always spend some time with yourself and then, if you feel ready and inclined, move on to a benefactor or friend as well. It's helpful to use the same phrases for all the beings you work with—first, because it strengthens concentration, and second, because it really brings out the fact that all beings want the same basic things in life: safety, happiness, health and ease.

We have a few minutes for questions, if there are any. And just to remember, I don't know if we've mentioned this, but sometimes staff will come in to sit and staff are welcome to leave after the sitting. They're not required to stay for the questions. You, on the other hand, once you come, we'd appreciate if you'd stay so there's not too much turnover.

So are there any questions this morning?

CHAPTER 168

Morning Instructions: The Practice of Compassion

Guy Armstrong · 47 min

> *In this morning instruction from a June 2019 retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Guy Armstrong introduces the practice of karuṇā (compassion) as an essential component of the brahmavihāra meditation. He addresses how practitioners can wisely meet the reality of suffering—both in themselves and in the world—without becoming overwhelmed by grief or despair.*
>
> *Armstrong explains that compassion is the appropriate response when encountering dukkha during mettā practice, whether reflecting on one's own difficulties or witnessing the struggles of loved ones. He provides detailed instructions for compassion meditation, beginning with a 'suffering person' whose difficulties feel manageable, then extending the practice to oneself, benefactors, and friends. The talk emphasizes that compassion is not itself a state of suffering but rather a beautiful, balanced response that can hold pain with wisdom and care.*
>
> *The instruction includes practical guidance for daily life application, referencing the mindful self-compassion approach developed by Kristin Neff and Chris Germer. Armstrong offers specific phrases and techniques for practitioners to use when encountering physical pain, difficult emotions, or challenging life circumstances, making this an invaluable resource for both retreat and home practice.*

For today and tomorrow as you continue your meditation throughout the day, we suggest that you keep working with the three categories of individuals you've been working with so far: self, benefactor, and a good friend. We want to take advantage of the instruction times today and tomorrow to introduce two practices that are part of the brahma viharas and serve as helpful tools during any period of brahma vihara practice. These are the practices for compassion, which we'll introduce today, and for sympathetic joy, which we'll introduce tomorrow.

We're not suggesting that you move your entire practice to compassion or sympathetic joy. Rather, we want to give instruction on how to do these practices so that you can bring them in when they really fit. Sometimes they're very helpful. In a normal metta retreat of a week, we would introduce these in the afternoons. Since we're not having afternoon instruction sessions, we're introducing them today and tomorrow.

This morning we'll be introducing the practice of compassion. This is obviously so relevant to our meditation practice and our life in the world, because once we start to wake up to the way things are, what we see around us and what we see inside us is suffering. It's everywhere. It's part of the human condition and the foundation for the Four Noble Truths. We start to see the truth of suffering everywhere we look. We begin to understand more deeply the root cause of suffering—craving. We understand there is the potential for the end of suffering and the end of craving, and we walk the path toward that.

Nonetheless, many people in the world are not walking the path to the end of suffering. The suffering is visible, and in some cases not easy to remedy. So how does our heart meet that truth? How do we relate to all the unfixable suffering that we encounter in our life in the world?

As you go through the meditations on your benefactor and friend and also yourself, you'll come across areas of suffering. There will be ways that you review your own life where you realize you didn't act so skillfully, and you may have regret, remorse, or judgment. You'll come upon situations in your current life that are difficult and don't admit of easy resolution. You'll find conditions here as you're meditating on retreat—difficult emotions or bodily pain that are an immediate part of your experience and not easy to alleviate. Then metta can seem like a wishful fantasy when the truth is the immediacy of suffering in this moment.

In all these situations—the width of suffering in the world, the experience of suffering directly in our own life—how can we meet that wisely with the brahma viharas? This is the role of the brahma vihara of compassion. Compassion is the wise response to the encounter with suffering, and it's not itself a state of suffering. Compassion is a beautiful state.

If you look at the statues of the Buddha, or even more to the point, Kuan Yin, who is the bodhisattva of compassion, she's not depressed. There's this beautiful balance of equanimity in the face of all the cries of sorrow and joy that she's witnessing. The response of compassion to suffering is a wise response that is not itself suffering. It finds a way to hold the suffering, whether of oneself or of the world, in balance.

In fact, in order to develop compassion, we need to meet an instance of suffering. Compassion is not some ideal state that we manufacture out of thin air. The proximate cause for the arising of compassion is the encounter with suffering. It may be our own; it may be another's. But we need to touch the suffering directly for compassion to be able to arise.

In the meditation on compassion, we always say that we start where it's easy. We're going to start with someone in your field of acquaintance who's undergoing some suffering. This is a person we'll call, for the purposes of this meditation, the suffering person.

As you think about selecting a suffering person for this meditation, don't pick someone with the most suffering you can imagine. Pick someone with a suffering that feels manageable for you. It may not feel manageable for them, but it should feel manageable for you. This means either it's someone for whom the suffering is manageable for themselves, or it's someone who's at a little more distance so that their suffering doesn't overwhelm you.

You'll start to see that the potential miss—the near enemy—with compassion is being overwhelmed with the grief of another, the grief of the world, the grief of ourselves. As we're learning a compassionate response, we don't want to call up a person that puts us immediately into more burden than we can carry. So pick someone whose suffering feels manageable for you but is apparent. This is the person we'll begin the meditation with.

As you come into this period of meditation, first sit comfortably, finding your own balance of body and mind. Remember that the wide intention of the brahma viharas is for all beings to be well, happy, and peaceful. May all beings be well, happy, and peaceful. Establish that wide view first with a short reflection on metta meditation for yourself.

Included in all beings is yourself. We begin with the simple wishes for our own welfare.

May I be safe and protected from harm. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease.

And now taking a few moments to select and call to mind someone in your circle of acquaintances who's going through a difficult time. It could be someone you're close to, a loved one, someone a little more distant, a colleague at work, someone in the sangha whom you know.

And as you choose this person and bring them into the moment with you, feel their presence as clearly as you can. It may help to see an image of them. Or you might like to say their name. And as you connect with them, remember if you can what you've liked about them. Any of their good qualities, pleasant interactions that you've had, ways you may have seen their kindness. So that you approach this person from a foundation of goodwill and appreciation.

And as you connect with them, now bring to mind the ways in which they're experiencing some present difficulties. It could be in the area of their health, their close relationships, partners, parents, with children. It could be in their life circumstances. Difficulties in housing or finances or livelihood. Could be conflicts with family or friends. And as you touch into the difficulties that your person is experiencing, tune in also to how it's affecting their heart, how the difficulties are landing for them emotionally.

And as you connect with them from a place of appreciation, of goodwill, know that you really want for them not to have to go through the suffering they're going through. You really wish for them relief from this suffering. This wish that they be relieved of their suffering is the essence of compassion.

So we express this wish to the person with a phrase something like this. Classically, the phrase is, "May you be free from your suffering." In the formal compassion practice, we usually just take one phrase instead of the four of metta. See if there's one phrase that expresses what you want for this person. It might be, "May you be free from your suffering." It could be, "I care about your suffering." It could be, "I'm with you in your suffering." Or something like, "May you hold your pain or sorrow with compassion."

Try out a few of these phrases and see the one that resonates for you. May you be free from your suffering. I care about your suffering. I'm with you in your suffering. May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion.

And so staying connected with this person and repeating for them your compassion phrase. Every so often putting the attention in the heart center, making it embodied and feeling whatever you feel there. Notice any emotion that comes as you connect with your suffering person. If you like, you can refer directly to the kind of difficulty they're experiencing instead of using the word suffering or pain or sorrow. You could say something like, "May you be free from this illness. May you be free from your fear. May you hold your grieving with compassion." If there's a word that speaks more directly to what they're feeling, you can make that part of the phrase.

If you feel yourself becoming too weighed down by this person's difficulty, then you can let them go for a few moments, return to loving-kindness for yourself or a benefactor. And then when you feel a little refreshed, you can come back in again in relation with the suffering person and try again the phrase for compassion.

Now letting go of this person you've brought in and their difficulties. Come back into the moment in an open and spacious way. Notice any feeling that's there after this meditation. See if it has that quality of caring in response to the difficulty. See if that has any

sense of the difficulty being too much for you to open to, tipping into some form of too much grief. Notice any other emotions that may have come with the meditation. Just making space for those.

Now we'll turn the practice of compassion toward ourselves.

So once again, connecting with yourself. This could be as you sit here and now—familiar body experience, familiar mood. Remember to look on yourself with friendly eyes, with appreciation, with goodwill.

As you connect with yourself, bring to mind any areas of your own life that are currently difficult. These might be in the inner world—emotions, balance. They could be connected with your health, welfare on the physical level. They could be in relationships with partners, family, parents, children, friends. They could be outward circumstances of safety, finance, home.

As you connect with the things that are difficult for you presently, take a moment to feel the impact of those things. They land as heart experiences. So become aware of the hurt, the hardship, the pain of these difficulties as they impact you, as you feel them.

In touch with that level of pain, begin to direct the phrase for compassion to yourself: "May I be free from my suffering," or "I care about my pain and sorrow," or "May I hold this pain with compassion." Just repeat the phrase for yourself, staying in touch with what's difficult for you.

Feel that you can kind of wrap your compassion around the experience of the difficulty, embracing it with comforting care, holding it gently. If it's helpful, use a word in the phrase that points directly to what you're feeling. It could be grief, worry, injury, fear, loss: "I hold this [grief, worry, fear] with compassion."

If it seems too much, take a break from the compassion, returning to metta for a bit. Perhaps bring in a benefactor or friend who you feel comfortable with, who you feel might even uplift you, reconnecting to them with metta.

Then, letting go of the focus on yourself, let the mind come back into balance and bring in either your benefactor or good friend. Connect with them, feeling the appreciation and goodwill you have for them. Then notice any areas that may be difficult in their life. If not too much suffering is apparent, just remember the small ups and downs that everyone experiences day by day—changing circumstances, pleasure and pain. Direct your thoughts of compassion to your benefactor or friend with this same phrase: "May you be free from your suffering. May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion."

This can be a very useful form of brahmaviharas practice combined with the practice of loving-kindness. You may find as you're directing thoughts of metta to yourself or to one of your people, or especially when we get to all beings, that your metta is touching on areas of real difficulty in their life. Your recollections of them are touching on areas of real difficulty. As you're saying the metta phrases, what may be coming through for you is not so much safety, happiness, health, and well-being, but their opposites. You may feel the person's lack of happiness or lack of safety or lack of health. Then the flavor that comes through may be more of compassion than of pure well-wishing.

If that happens, it's very helpful to turn directly to the compassion phrase. Make a direct perception of their difficulty, of their suffering. Within the brahmaviharas, you respond to it directly: "Oh, may you be free from that difficulty. May you be free from that pain and sorrow."

This is very helpful to do for others. It's especially helpful when you find yourself in a position of suffering in meditation. Whether it's here on retreat or in daily life, suffering will come. To be able to recognize it, turn our attention to it with compassion, say this phrase for ourselves—this can really shift the relationship to it. Even taking it as a practice for fifteen or twenty minutes, you can start to feel a shift. Maybe there's physical pain, there may be a strong hindrance that's up. Try it if that arises for you over these days and see where the potential is for this compassion practice for you.

There are a couple of teachers who are part of our sangha who have made a full offering out of this approach. Based on the Buddhist practice of compassion, they've expanded a little bit into what they call mindful self-compassion. Both Kristin Neff and Chris Germer, who have been students here, have done a lot of work in this area and led workshops and trained people to lead this work.

I want to offer one form of it that you may find on Kristin Neff's website. They call it mindful self-compassion. Anytime you run into a difficulty in life or in meditation, you can do this compassion practice for yourself. I've posted a brief outline on the bulletin board, but I'll go through it here.

The first step, which is a little bit optional but is nice, is to put a hand on your heart or make some physical gesture of comfort for yourself so that you feel, even physically, that you're being held in the moment. Touch does release some chemical transmitters in the body that bring comfort.

Then you simply comment. The second step is you comment: "This is a moment of suffering," or in whatever form that feels right for you.

It might be, "This hurts." Or "This is painful." Or "This ache is painful. This longing is painful." Whatever words fit to acknowledge the difficulty, acknowledge the immediate impact—"This is a moment of suffering."

The third step is to reflect on the universality, which is in one form: "Suffering is an integral part of life." It's the First Noble Truth. Or you might say, "Everyone has this," or "I'm not alone with this." One of the classical techniques in working with pain is to imagine all the people in the world who have the same difficulty that you're having, but much, much worse. This connects you to the human ability to bear what is a common experience of difficulty or pain. So that's the third step: "Pain is an integral part of life," or "I'm not alone in this."

The fourth step is your compassion phrase. It might be, "May I hold this pain and sorrow with compassion." It might be, "I care about this suffering." It might be, "May I be free from this suffering." Whatever compassion phrase works well for you.

So play with this also. I find that sometimes going through the four steps of mindful self-compassion a few times draws out our whole relationship to the experience of difficulty. Then we can just go back to the one phrase of the classical compassion practice. So this can be kind of a warm-up to doing compassion for self.

Instructions for Today

Continue with the metta practice for self, benefactor, and friend. Bring in compassion as it seems appropriate, as it seems suitable to any of the individuals.

And then, as Sally was pointing to in the talk last night, if you're interested, spend some time doing metta for a neutral person and perhaps a difficult person. You might choose to do a neutral person today, just from time to time. Just occasionally bring in someone in this category. And tomorrow you might want to spend a little bit of time doing some loving-kindness for a difficult person. Not as a central practice, but maybe from time to time during the day.

Any questions this morning?

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 169

Morning Instructions: Practice of Muditā

Guy Armstrong · 43 min

> *Guy Armstrong offers morning instructions on muditā, the third of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes). Building on the foundation of mettā (loving-kindness) and karuṇā (compassion), muditā is the heart's natural response to encountering joy and happiness—whether in ourselves or others. Armstrong explains how this practice of sympathetic joy serves as a powerful antidote to our mind's tendency to focus on difficulties while overlooking the happiness that is equally present in life.*
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> *The talk provides practical guidance for cultivating muditā through specific phrases like "May your happiness and good fortune continue" and "I'm happy that you're happy." Armstrong addresses common misconceptions from ancient commentaries about practicing muditā for oneself, clarifying that the Buddha's instruction was "to all as to myself." He also discusses the near enemy of muditā (elation or over-exuberance) and its far enemy (envy), offering skillful ways to work with these hindrances.*
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> *This teaching emphasizes muditā's role in creating balance in our perception, helping us recognize that all beings experience both suffering and happiness. As Armstrong notes, "apart from enlightenment, this is the happiest practice I know of in Buddhism," making it particularly valuable for uplifting the heart during difficult times.*

Today is a lucky day for us because we start the practice of muditā. As I mentioned early on, the Brahmaviharas allow the heart to respond to all the different circumstances and conditions in life, our own and those of others. Mettā lays the general foundation as an attitude of caring and goodwill, a wish for all beings to be happy. When that open heart touches suffering, it naturally evokes compassion, described as the trembling of the heart in response to suffering. But when that open heart encounters joy or happiness in ourselves or another, it responds with this quality that is muditā—sometimes translated as sympathetic joy, sometimes altruistic joy, sometimes simply joy. This is a wonderful companion to have with us on the journey.

Today we get to enjoy the joy of others. We get to enjoy the joy of ourselves. It's interesting that yesterday was compassion day and it was gray and rainy. Today is muditā day and nature is cooperating—it's bright and partly sunny. We let that sunshine come in and resonate with us this morning.

In the practice of muditā, we are encouraged to look at the things that are going really well in our life and in the lives of others that we bring to mind. In doing so, we're reminded that happiness is as much an integral part of life as suffering is, as difficulty is. We start to understand that all beings have a mix of difficulty and enjoyment in life.

It's often said that positive things in our life slide away from us like Teflon, while the difficult things stick in our mind like Velcro. There's some truth to this. Out of a wish for protection, we tend to focus our perception on the difficulties, the threats, the challenges, the things that might go wrong. But in doing that, our thought mechanism becomes biased. It inclines to see the problems.

The practice of muditā helps put the needle back in the center. The Buddha came from the center. He wasn't inclined to see the world predominantly one way or the other. He talked about suffering. He talked about the end of suffering. Both are possibilities. In our lives, in our perceptions, we should have our minds in the middle where we're open to seeing suffering and we also see the happiness, the joy, the possibility of ending suffering in our experience and in the experience of those around us.

This practice of muditā is wonderful because it connects us to this thread of joy that runs through all the lives of sentient beings. When we start to look, we can find happiness in all sentient beings' experiences. I remember one of my early teachers went into a hospital where a student was in a hospital bed inside a breathing machine, without even real contact with fresh air. He asked her how she was doing and she said, "I'm fine. I love it when the sunlight comes in through the window and falls on my face."

Even in the midst of what looked like really difficult circumstances, there are moments where the pain lifts or where joy comes in. We can tune into those experiences for any being that we turn our attention to. When we open to that, we find that muditā has a beautifully uplifting quality for our hearts.

As compassion is a really useful practice when pain is present, muditā is a really helpful practice when you want to pick your mood up a little bit. When you're going along and things seem down or a little flat, and you feel it would be helpful to have a little uplift of energy, a little positive outlook on things, the practice of muditā is our way into that. Apart from enlightenment, this is the happiest practice I know of in Buddhism. I hope you'll enjoy this foray today.

There are a few different phrases you can use for sympathetic joy. They're in your study guide if you want to review them. I'll suggest some during the meditation. The phrase that I've used for many years is: "May your happiness and good fortune contin-

ue. May they increase. May they never end." I like this because it points to the happiness, but it also points to the possibility of its growing. As practitioners, we know that's possible.

Another phrase is: "I appreciate your happiness and good fortune." We just tune in to what's going well for the person, and we notice, "I appreciate that. It's great that that's happening for you." Another way to say this is: "I appreciate the blessings in your life."

The simplest one is: "I'm happy that you're happy." It's a nice sentiment to have, and we can feel that a lot. When we're with somebody who is in a happy place, it's contagious. We resonate.

That's why it's called sympathetic. We resonate with each other's happiness.

Now, if you read some of the ancient commentaries, they'll say things like, "Oh, but you can do mudita for other people, but you can't do it for yourself. That would be too selfish." So some of the ancient commentaries say, "Oh, don't do mudita for yourself." That's incorrect understanding. The Buddha never said that. When he talked about practicing mudita, he said, "to all as to myself." So mudita is for all beings.

When we get to ourselves, you might want to find a phrase that resonates. It could be something like, "I appreciate the blessings in my life." That's kind of unimpeachable. Sometimes, depending on our current situation, if we say, "May my happiness and good fortune continue," that might sound like we're cultivating greed. So if it rubs you the wrong way, "I appreciate the blessings of my life" is fine. But see what works for you. I'll repeat these phrases again as we start the meditation.

We always start the brahmaviharas where it's easy. In mudita practice, the easy person is someone you know who's happy or going through a particular space of happiness in their life—someone whose good fortune is really apparent when you bring them in. So you can start to think about that now, and we'll settle into the meditation.

Beginning again, just bring your attention into the present moment. Coming into your experience of the body with its alertness and relaxation. Bringing your attention into the heart center, the center of the chest, the seat of a lot of our emotional life.

As you connect with your heart center, just feeling the broadness of awareness. It includes everyone in the room. It expands to outside and nature. All those beings. It doesn't have a clear ending. So we feel that all sentient beings can be included in our awareness.

We remember the foundation of our brahmavihara practice as wishing that all beings be well and free from suffering. Expressing that with just the reminder: May all beings be well, happy, and peaceful.

Now bringing in someone who for you represents a happy person—someone in your circle of acquaintances whom you know well enough to know that things are going well in their life. As you bring them in, you might see them with a smile on their face. Remember a time that you've been together. As you connect with them, remember all the things you like about them. That foundation of goodwill and appreciation.

As you connect with your happy person, bring to mind all the things in their life that are going well or that they enjoy. Could be big things—home, relationship, family, livelihood. Could be small things. Hummingbirds are coming back and they like to put out food. They're going to see a play they've wanted to see. They bought a dress they really like. All the things that make this person happy.

As you connect with all the sources of happiness in this person's life, beginning to express your connection to them with a phrase of mudita. "May your happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase. May they never end." Or, "I appreciate your happiness and good fortune." Or, "I appreciate the blessings in your life." Or, "I'm happy that you're happy."

You can play with these phrases, find your own. Again in this practice we just use one phrase, though there may be multiple clauses. So repeating to your happy person the phrase that expresses your gladness at their happiness.

From time to time coming back with your attention into the heart center. Feeling in the body the effect of the meditation.

And noticing whatever emotion is there in response to the mudita wish. Again, we don't try to force any particular feeling in relation to the happy person. We're simply inclined toward seeing the happiness in their life. Repeat the phrase, staying open to whatever emotion might arise from that.

Now let go of the connection to the happy person and bring in the connection to yourself. Feel your body and mood in sitting here. Bring up an image of yourself somewhere you've been content, happy, enjoying things. As you connect with yourself, bring to mind all the things that are going well in your life now—all the different sources of happiness that are in your life. Big things, little things, silly things you might not even tell anybody else, like you enjoyed lunch yesterday.

All of us here have so much to be thankful for, including our refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Warm, dry, and fed. Express this appreciation for the happiness in your life by directing the mudita phrase to yourself: "May my happiness and good fortune continue. May they increase. May they never end." Or "I appreciate the blessings in my life," or "I appreciate my happiness and good fortune." Continue to connect with the sources of happiness and send the mudita phrase to yourself.

Now let go of the focus on yourself and bring to mind either your benefactor or good friend—whichever you feel inclined to, the person you've been using for these few days. Feel their presence with you. You might see an image of them, you might say their name. Remember what you like about them. Hold them with friendly eyes. Then bring to mind all the things you know of that are going well in their life currently—all their sources of happiness, big ones and little ones. As they come to mind, repeat your phrase of mudita for this person, your friend or benefactor: "May your happiness and good fortune continue," or "I'm happy that you're happy."

As you go through the day today, make your practice primarily rooted in the practice of metta and loving-kindness for self, benefactor, and friend as we've been doing. This will lay the stable foundation for the opening of the heart. But throughout the day, as you come upon instances of joy in yourself or in these other people, you might turn to the mudita reflection for a short period of time and see how that feels. It's a good practice to make friends with. It's really a wonderful ally on the journey of bringing about the uplifting of the heart.

Tomorrow we will move into loving-kindness for all beings. So we'll begin to move in a spacious direction beginning tomorrow.

It might be worth saying just a little bit about the near and far enemies with mudita. The near enemy—and this is in the study guide—is elation, something like elation or over-exuberance. What I think of it as is when you start to feel joy and there's an element of grasping that comes in, and you start to spin out with thoughts about it. "Oh, now that I'm this happy, I'll be able to do this in my life," things like that. So I think of elation as getting a little attached and whipping up the positive feelings through thinking about them.

The far enemy is envy. This especially comes up with friends. We bring in a friend, we're looking at what's going well in their life, and we think, "Hmm, might be going a little too well for them. Why is my life not going quite that well? If they have that much happiness, they must be stealing some of mine." Whatever. The comparing mind comes in. Conceit can come in.

But we just notice that. Let the envy or elation be. Try to come back into balance. If the envy feels quite strong, we might go back to someone we don't have that kind of comparing mind toward. Return to metta or return to mudita for someone else. So just be on the lookout for those particular hindrances with the mudita practice.

And again, if you have a moment during the day to do a little metta practice for a neutral person and a difficult person, then that kind of paves the way conceptually for all beings.

Once you've found that you can extend loving-kindness to neutral and difficult people, then you understand it's possible to extend it to all beings. That's the logic in the progression. But you don't need to spend a lot of time with those two categories initially.

When choosing a difficult person for practice, I'd recommend picking someone where there's some irritation or mild conflict, rather than the most difficult person in your life. Start with manageable challenges and gradually work your way deeper as your practice stabilizes.

The beauty of mudita practice is that it opens our hearts to genuine celebration of others' happiness and success. When we can truly rejoice in another's joy without the interference of comparison or envy, we discover a wellspring of happiness that doesn't depend on our own circumstances. This sympathetic joy becomes a gift we can offer freely, enriching both our own lives and our relationships with others.

As you continue developing these heart practices, remember that they work together synergistically. Metta provides the foundation of unconditional friendliness, while mudita adds the sparkle of shared celebration. Together, they help us move through the world with greater openness, warmth, and genuine connection to the happiness that surrounds us.

May your practice of mudita bring you great joy, and may you find countless opportunities to celebrate the good fortune and happiness of all beings.

CHAPTER 170

An Appropriate Response: The Brahmaviharas as a Roadmap of the Heart

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong presents the brahmaviharas (divine abodes) as a comprehensive roadmap for how the awakened heart responds to life's ever-changing conditions. Drawing on the teachings from the Metta Sutta and various stories including King Asoka's transformation, Armstrong explores how metta (loving kindness) naturally develops into karuna (compassion) when it meets suffering, mudita (appreciative joy) when it encounters happiness, and upekkha (equanimity) as the balanced foundation that holds all experiences. He discusses the near and far enemies of each brahmavihara, showing how these twelve possible responses map our relationship to the world. The talk includes practical guidance on working with the neutral person in metta practice, using compassion phrases during difficult emotions, cultivating gratitude as a form of mudita, and developing bodhicitta - the awakening heart that wishes for liberation for all beings. Armstrong emphasizes that these are elevated states representing the awakened response to circumstances, not our ordinary self-centered reactions, offering practitioners a clear framework for training the heart toward appropriate response in any situation.*

The subject of the talk tonight is the Brahmaviharas.

A Zen master was asked one time, "What's the value of a lifetime of practice?" I was really curious what the Zen master was going to say because I expected something like: "Well, after a lifetime of practice, just before you die, you sit up in perfect zazen posture and you utter a spontaneous poem expressing your deepest realization, and then you go." He didn't say anything quite that idealistic. The Zen master said the value of a lifetime of practice is an appropriate response.

I thought this was beautiful because it points to the fact that after we've practiced, the way it shows up is how we respond in the moment over and over and over. The fruit of our practice is responding appropriately in each new moment. That's enough. As practitioners we recognize that anything can happen at any time.

One day a friend of ours had visited the Ramana Ashram in southern India and afterwards went for a vacation on a beach nearby. It happened to be December 26, 2004. If you remember, that was a catastrophic date in that part of the world. He was standing on the beach in front of his cottage, a beachfront cottage, practicing qigong. A big

wave came up and knocked him over. But then it went back out and he was able to stand up. As he stood up, he saw this wave receding in a really unusual way. It was leaving a huge depression as it went back out—very abnormal wave formation. He said, "This doesn't look so good." So he hopped up onto a concrete wall and grabbed hold of a palm tree and then the second wave came in. That was the really devastating one that hit Thailand and India and Burma. But because he had grabbed hold of the palm tree and stood on the concrete wall, he was high enough and had enough of a grip that it washed in, washed out, and he was okay. This is one time when the practice of non-clinging was not advised. Clinging was very helpful to him.

Of course, lots of people didn't have a palm tree to cling to, and there were many lives lost in that tsunami. But you just never know. Fortunately, he had the mindfulness to look at what was happening and listen to his instincts. "Uh-oh." And he found a safe place, found a safe haven.

Life is going to keep presenting us with these situations, sometimes mild, sometimes intense. I was just talking with a friend today who had a very intense situation arise in her life and a friendship, someone she's very connected to, completely out of the blue, completely unexpected, and obviously somewhat shaken by it. But as these episodes of life affect us, it's easy to become despairing, hopeless, feel defeated, or think "what's the point?" But if we move in that direction, that doesn't help the world. It doesn't help others and it doesn't help ourselves.

The Brahmaviharas show us that there's another way of responding to any situation on the scale from painful to very pleasurable. There's an awakened response that's possible. As we cultivate the Brahmaviharas, they become our allies in training the heart to an appropriate response in whatever situation comes up.

As we've said, loving kindness is the foundation, this basic sense of goodwill and care. When that tender heart meets the truth of suffering, the response naturally is compassion. When it meets a situation of happiness, the response is sympathetic joy or mudita. If no particular stimulus is coming in, the open heart can rest in equanimity, where it's balanced among the joys and sorrows that life can present.

I mentioned the other morning this question about: If we are trained to accept the moment as it is in our meditation practice, how can we have a wish for the suffering of the world to go away? It's through this quality of equanimity that we combine those two. When the Buddha looked out on the world, he saw a vast range of suffering. He also knew he had the key to unlock it for people, but it depended on their effort. So through his compassion, he wished to alleviate their pain. Through his equanimity, he

understood they needed to do the work, and he couldn't do it for them. This is how we balance—the compassion and the loving kindness and the sympathetic joy are all held in this deep rest that equanimity brings to us.

We begin with loving kindness and on the easy end of the spectrum: self, benefactor, and friend as we've been practicing for these last few days. Sally talked a little this morning about the neutral person, bringing that person in for loving kindness. A neutral person is really a turning point in our practice of loving kindness because we find as we start to wish them well that we can care a lot about somebody that we don't really know.

I was teaching a daylong on metta once at a gathering in Marin County. A guy had come down from Sonoma and took the day and received instructions for all these categories including the neutral person. He went home and took as his neutral person a cashier in a supermarket near him. I saw him about a year later and he told me the story. He said, "I practiced metta for my neutral person every time I went into that supermarket. I got so fond of that person, I started to get nervous when I was checking out."

And he never really knew that person well, and yet he had this big reservoir of care about her and connection to her.

So the neutral person opens us up to the possibility that we can care for the seven billion people on the planet whom we haven't yet met and therefore have no reason to dislike. That's kind of a nice situation, right? So it's said that metta becomes, as it extends to all beings, like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without exception. That's what gives it this universal or boundless quality.

The Buddha made a reflection about this that I find really interesting—sort of why we might choose to care about the people that we run into. He said, given all the many lives that we have all spent in this realm of samsara, it's not easy to find a being who at some point has not been your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, your son, or your daughter.

Now you may or may not hold this view of rebirth that the Buddha taught often and referred to many times in his discourses. But what if it was true? What if we all have been, especially those of us in this room who seem to be connected in a way that a lot of people in the world may not be—what if we have been that close to one another in the past? Could be many times in the past. It would make us feel differently about each other, wouldn't it? We would start to care more. Of course, that might depend on how you

feel about your family of origin, so I don't know. But it makes us closer than we would have thought we were, and it really can open up our metta practice to all of life, all human beings.

So just as we've been reading in the Metta Sutta, "Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings." This is our instruction. And as Sally said, it doesn't mean we have to like people, but we can care about them. We can wish them happiness. We can wish them well. And as we meditate with these reflections of loving-kindness, we understand every being that lives wants the same things we want. Every being wants safety, happiness, health, and ease. So in that, we're all alike.

So as we open up to the welfare of beings in the world, we also discover there's a lot of suffering around us, some suffering inside us. How do we relate to that? Sometimes not easy.

Classically, it's said that the hardest of the Brahmaviharas to practice is mudita, because the factor of envy comes up so easily and so readily. It's hard for us to be joyful about someone else's happiness because the envy is so nearby.

But that's not what I found. In one six-week period of retreat, I spent ten days doing intensive practice of each of the four Brahmaviharas. It was a wonderful experience to really get into the depth of each one. And each of them can be practiced for concentration as well as for the heart quality that it brings.

So for me the hardest to practice was not mudita. Mudita was actually the most joyful. I just found it really uplifting to be with happiness all day. The hardest for me was practicing compassion because it was about staying with suffering all day long—eighteen hours a day in me and all the other people that I brought to mind.

I find it difficult—I think most of us find it difficult—to be right up against suffering. So we've found ways to avoid doing that. We have lots of different defenses to keep from having that experience. Carl Jung, the psychologist, said that neurosis is basically a refusal to confront suffering. Well, that's a strong statement. Because we don't want to face suffering directly, we find these suspect ways to avoid it that are our neuroses.

So take a look at the relationship of the world to suffering. We avoid it, we turn away, we deny it. Often we try to fix it. If we find a friend is suffering, we really go quickly—at least, I think it's a male pattern—we go quickly to fixing. I think women are a little better at just being with a friend in suffering. We might tend to blame it on someone else. If it's our suffering, they made me suffer. It was my mother, it was the society, or it was capitalism. We judge it as wrong. This suffering shouldn't be happening.

We judge ourselves as wrong. If I was an okay person, this suffering wouldn't be happening. Or we turn to something pleasurable. The Buddha pointed to this really directly in one sutta. He said, for the ordinary untrained person, the only escape from painful sensation is to turn to a source of pleasure.

So this is the beginning of addiction. We look at all the pleasurable outlets that the world offers, and there are many, and we become addicted as a way of avoiding the pain. Or if it's suffering with other people, we tell ourselves stories about it. We rationalize it. It's not my problem. It's their karma. It's those kinds of people.

But suffering is the proximate cause for compassion to arise. If we want this quality of compassion to develop, we need to touch the suffering in ourselves and in others really directly. So in our meditation, can we touch it, be close to it, and just feel it without having to make it go away or fix it or avoid it? Can we just feel the suffering in ourselves and in another?

If we open to that, then we find the compassion can come through. And the more we can expand the compassion for our own suffering, the more we'll be able to be with the suffering of the world. The less we're able to be with our own, the less we can be with others. It's really the same dynamic.

So it's wonderful to be in a sangha because you see these amazing examples of compassion. I was teaching a retreat, a month-long retreat one year at Spirit Rock. And there was a meditator who worked in the kitchen who had an illness that had attacked his kidneys. Both his kidneys were failing. So if he went back from the retreat, he was going to need to be on dialysis perhaps for a long, perhaps for the rest of his life, because waiting for a kidney transplant can be a long process. It depends on the need, the availability, and lots of different factors.

One of the other meditators happened to overhear a conversation in the kitchen about this. This other meditator had no relationship to the yogi who was ill, and she formed the intent during that retreat to offer the meditator a kidney if they were a match. And she held to it. Going through the retreat, obviously she probably went through a lot of ups and downs and questions, but she came out of the retreat, she held to it, she approached the person, offered the kidney. The person accepted the offer, they went into testing, it took some time, but ended up that she donated a kidney to this other yogi whom she had never met before. It's a beautiful act of compassion and wanting to help someone else in a situation of suffering.

Suffering can really affect us, can change us. There's a quite interesting story, a moving story about King Ashoka. He lived in the third century BCE in India, and he was probably the first emperor of India to unify almost all of that subcontinent. How does a king unify a subcontinent? It's not by loving-kindness. He doesn't just say, come on, give up your own ruler and come under my government. It's by wars. He battled fiercely many other rulers on that subcontinent, battle after battle, war after war. In one of the last ones, it's said that 100,000 people died in the war with this one ruler.

It culminated in one particular battle. Afterwards, the king was surveying the battlefield and the carnage that was just laid out in front of him—thousands and thousands of corpses from both sides, dead on the battlefield. And as he watched, he saw a Buddhist monk walking across the battlefield in a state of great serenity and peace and calm. And he was looking at the ruins and thinking, what have I done? Is this worth it? I'm responsible for all these people dying. And he watched the Buddhist monk walking across in a state of complete calm and peace. And he thought, this person has nothing. I have all the wealth of what he knew as his world. I could do anything. He's at peace and I'm tormented.

What is his secret?

At this time, Buddhism was not anything like a hugely widespread religion in India. But Ashoka became so interested that he pursued the teachings and changed his rule completely. He followed the Buddha's teachings. He gave up war. He assured all the rulers around him that he'd given up his aims of expansion and conquering more territory. He encouraged everyone in his kingdom to respect all religions, not to fight over religion any longer. He distributed food widely so that poverty essentially became a non-issue in the kingdom. He outlawed animal sacrifices, having compassion for all creatures. And then he put up edicts throughout the country proclaiming Dharma principles—the principles he wanted people to abide by.

So it was a huge transformation that came out of a moment of compassion—an hour or a day of seeing the effects of war, the devastation of war. And he changed the history of India from that point forward.

Here we have a formal practice to develop compassion that can transform our relationship to suffering. I remember some time ago I was at home when a student I'd been working with for a couple of years called me in a great state of fear. The student said, "I'm going through this intense fear and I've tried working with vipassana and it's just not letting up. I'm really in the grip of it and it's really painful."

I could hear the panic in her voice because it was an overwhelmed situation. I said, "Okay, you've already tried vipassana, let's try something different." So I gave her the instruction for the compassion phrase, which she hadn't worked with before. I said, "Just hold yourself, feel the fear and repeat this to yourself over and over—at least twenty minutes, at least thirty minutes, longer if you can. And then let me know what happens."

About an hour later, she called back and said, "That completely changed. The compassion phrase just let me be with the experience. And then the panic went out because I knew I could be with the experience. As the panic went out, the fear went way down and became really manageable."

So compassion has this kind of ability. I remember in my own experience when I started working with the compassion practice and applying it during retreat when I was in some state of pain and suffering. I can't remember what it was, but I felt this different voice coming alive inside me. It was like I was channeling Kuan Yin. The pain was still there, but this other voice was coming in that was very mature, adult, balanced, confident. And with that, I knew I could be with whatever experience was going on. It completely changed it for me.

Essentially what compassion does as we grow it is let us hold the experience in a bigger frame—what I would say is a bigger heart. It's a little bit like the title of Sharon Salzberg's book, *A Heart as Wide as the World*. We find we can accommodate the pain of the world as we grow that heart. We can still be overwhelmed, but we can come back to that as a baseline, as a foundation.

Because compassion is in touch with suffering, it's not an exuberant state. You feel the suffering that you're in touch with. One of my teachers said that it's like the mood at sunset. There's a beauty and there's also this kind of wistful poignancy that's there—a touch of sadness because of the suffering that's present. But there's also a sublime feeling that's a kind of beauty as the compassion is pure.

Now we've talked about the fact that compassion can easily tip over into a near enemy. One of them is overwhelming grief. We feel the suffering is too much to bear, whether it's ours or another's, and we feel too burdened down. We can't find the strength, we can't find the equanimity to hold it with balance. That's one possibility, that's a near enemy. In a situation like that, it's maybe more helpful to turn to some subject that will bring uplift—turn to someone like a benefactor or friend, a child or a pet, or turn to *mudita*, focus on the wholesome, the positive, and let the heart be picked up from this place of overwhelm.

The other near enemy is an element of pity—not *piti*, but the old English pity—where we feel sorry for the person, but it involves a looking down on them. It's, "Oh, too bad about your suffering, but I'm not feeling that."

So I'm in an okay place, so it doesn't really touch me. What's going on with pity is that we're kind of looking down on someone from above, and there's an element of conceit in that. We're in a superior position because we're not suffering currently. But of course, if we reflect, it could be the other way around at any time.

Compassion shows us that we're really all in the same boat in terms of our vulnerability. We may be temporarily away from suffering, but things could change and we could be feeling that. It's something that connects us to everyone. It's universal.

This is from a poem called "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian American poet: "Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Feel the future dissolve in a moment, like salt in a weakened broth. Before you know the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans, and the simple breath that kept him alive. Before you know kindness is the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing."

So compassion opens us up to this universality of sorrow, our own vulnerability to suffering, and connects us to all things that live.

The far enemy of compassion is cruelty, which is enjoying someone else's suffering. We talked about this a little bit the other night. Most of us don't think of ourselves as cruel people. But if you look closely at anger, you might find within it an element of ill will—which is wanting someone else to hurt, to suffer. And that's just a step away from cruelty. So it may not be that far away for us.

Sometimes we're in the midst of very complicated situations where there could be blame on many sides—a family situation, a situation at work with lots of colleagues—and you can see everybody's piece of contributing to it. You may not be able to see a clear way to resolve the situation, but one thing you can always take as a refuge is compassion for everyone involved, without needing to judge right and wrong. Just to see the shared suffering in the situation.

Compassion also lends itself to seeing the potential for suffering for all beings and therefore the wish for all beings to be free from suffering. So both loving kindness and compassion can grow into this feeling for all beings everywhere—that's when they become boundless.

And then there's something else interesting that happens when metta and compassion grow up to become boundless. I want to pose this to you as practitioners: If you feel metta for all beings, you want all beings to be happy. What's the most complete way for all beings to be happy? It's for them to awaken, isn't it? The most complete form of happiness is their own awakening, their own liberation. So that wish starts to come in.

And as compassion grows up, you really want all beings to be free from suffering. What's the most complete way for a being to be free from suffering? It's also to awaken, isn't it?

So when metta and compassion grow up in this really boundless way as a Dharma practitioner, you want all beings to find happiness and to be free from suffering through awakening. What's the best way for you to help toward this goal? It's to awaken yourself, isn't it? Can you help bring beings out of suffering altogether if you haven't awakened yourself? Not so likely. But once we have awakened, then we have the possibility of bringing others out of suffering completely.

So this can become a real wish for us: "May I awaken myself in order to help bring others out of their suffering and into real happiness." This wish is called bodhicitta, sometimes translated as the awakening heart. And this wish can be fed back as a motivation in our practice. We can form the wish to practice, the wish to become awakened as the way that we can help others to achieve real happiness and a true end of suffering.

So this is the source—the quality of bodhicitta really grows out of the maturing of boundless metta and boundless compassion. This is expressed in a really nice way in one of the quotes in the study guide. It's short—you don't need to look it up now. A quote on the back page, number 80. "Crossing" is a word used in the Buddha's teachings for crossing the flood of the kilesas, the taints, whatever.

It means crossing over to the other shore, becoming awakened. "Crossed, I would cross others. Freed, I would free others. Tamed, I would tame. Calmed, I would calm. Comforted, I would comfort. Attained to nibbana, I would lead to nibbana."

This is the expression of that quality of bodhicitta—what I deeply wish for myself and the world: to come to awakening and help bring others to awakening. This was written by a fifth-century teacher from Sri Lanka named Dhammapala.

If you resonate with this sense of bodhicitta, you might like to bring it in at the start of sittings. I do this when I sit both in daily life and on retreat. I just say a few lines to myself: "By the merit of generosity and other virtuous actions, may I come to awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings." It renews my motivation at the beginning of each sitting period.

This is the quality of bodhicitta. The Dalai Lama is a great advocate of this practice—one we have to remind ourselves of because it's very easy for it to get lost in the wake of our self-centeredness. Even the Dalai Lama, who's one of the great practitioners of our day, says, "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is. That is all."

We don't have to imagine that we're going to become great bodhisattvas or saviors of the world. But we can plant this motivation and it can inspire us. It can help broaden our vision and keep connecting us to all of life.

As we're connecting to the world, we also notice how much joy there is. This leads us into the practice of mudita—the response of the heart to happiness, taking joy in another's happiness. I remember once calling a friend on the other side of the country. I needed to talk about some business, and I started by asking, "How are you doing?" She said enthusiastically, "I'm wonderful!" Her answer just picked me up. I said, "I'm wonderful too." That was the contagious nature of happiness—such a delight to hear from her.

Mudita gives us a double dose of happiness. It doesn't have to come from big things. Think about your lives as yogis here on this retreat. There are so many moments in the day that have little bits of happiness with them: getting out of bed when it's a little cool in your room, but you get to have a hot shower; after a day of rain, walking outside to find the sky is blue; catching sight of a deer in a meadow or off the road as you're walking; a cardinal flying by on the driveway; when the sky is clear, watching the moon rise a little later at night; or one of my favorite times of the day—lying down to go to bed. Such relief after practicing and working hard all day. It feels so good for the head to hit the pillow. Unfortunately for me, that never lasts very long because I go to sleep, wake up, and start practicing again. But it's a few nice moments.

We are so fortunate here to have the beautiful nature surrounding us. Nature is so sustaining and uplifting. One of the hardest retreats I ever did was as a fairly new monk in Thailand. I practiced in a forest monastery up north, outside of Chiang Mai, where the teacher didn't speak English and there were no other English-speaking

monks I could talk to. I went for three months in real silence, apart from the chants around meal time. I didn't hear any dharma talks—we didn't have MP3 players back then—and I didn't have any interviews with the teacher.

I was just practicing completely on my own for three months in a new country, new culture. And it was difficult. It was very difficult at times. But what sustained me was the beauty of nature. The monastery was out in the forest. There was a creek that ran through the center of it. My little cottage was right next to the creek, so I could see that and hear the running water. The sun would come up most days. It was very beautiful. Trees all around. So I felt the beauty of nature really sustained me through that time because there wasn't a lot else. The nature was always there.

And practicing in Asia, there are always these opportunities for joy. Practicing in cultures where the Dharma has been embedded for so long. I went to Burma to be ordained for a second time some years ago. A student knew that I was going and wanted to offer some support, so she gave me some money to take to offer to the monastery. She said, "Take this gift and offer it. Use it in the way that it would seem most beneficial." It was a few hundred dollars, which in Asia can go quite a way.

So I got to the monastery, way out in the country in southeast Burma, far from the capital. At that time, there were 750 people practicing in the monastery—something like 450 monks, 150 nuns, and the rest were laypeople. I thought, "Maybe I could take this money and on behalf of the student, sponsor a lunch for everybody in the monastery. Offer a dana on her behalf to everyone who was practicing there."

I was still a layperson—I hadn't yet ordained—so I could still handle cash. I went to the clerk of the monastery and said, "I have this gift from a friend overseas. Could I sponsor a lunch for everyone?" Burma is a poor country, and what wealth they have has been siphoned off by the leaders. I thought there would be a real welcoming of this gift.

The clerk told me, "Oh, all the lunches for the next three months have already been offered." And I thought that was so beautiful. In one of the poorer countries on the face of the earth, people had already come along to offer meals to feed all 750 people who were sitting. This kind of practice is what gives rise to our meal dana, which we see the notices of every day at lunch.

So we arranged to provide two special breakfasts—really tasty, extra food for everyone. On the day of the meal, you'd go down and the name of the person or family or village who donated the funds for that meal would be put up on a big whiteboard, both in Burmese, which I couldn't read, and in English. You'd walk in and see whose generosity had made possible the meal for that day. So for the breakfast, her name was up there.

But for the lunch, the people who had offered the meal would usually come to the monastery. They would watch the monks go through the line and fill their bowls from the funds that they had donated. They would be sitting off to the side, typically villagers from nearby. Usually it might take a whole family or several families to make the money to offer lunch to everyone who was there. They would be sitting off to the side, watching people go through the meal line, dressed in their best clothes. This was a very special day for them, a very special outing.

You could just see the happiness in their faces. The first monk to go through was Paok Sayadaw—he had something like fifty-some years as a monk. He was the most senior monk, a teacher, so he went through first. And they were just beaming with being able to offer to Paok Sayadaw, all the other accomplished practitioners, the monks, the nuns, and then the laypeople.

So it was a very joyful thing for them to be able to do that, to offer that. So this is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy because our hearts would really resonate with theirs. We'd pick up on their joy and it was just delightful.

And sometimes it's translated as appreciative joy. This is from Ajahn Sumedho, the American monk who was a student of Ajahn Chah. Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism, one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower, you should contemplate its decay. Or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse. That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty. This is the joy of mudita, being able to appreciate the beauty in the things around us. So we encourage this joy with beauty, this appreciation of what is around us.

As we direct the meditation on appreciative joy to self, it often comes through as gratitude. And gratitude is a really beautiful state of mind because it undercuts both greed and aversion. When there's gratitude, we appreciate what we have so we don't crave for more. And when we feel gratitude, we appreciate what we have so we don't dislike our situation. We don't give in to discontent. We're happy where we are.

We have a friend who has kids and grandkids who's also a wise practitioner and teacher and takes the opportunity to teach when possible. She was talking to one of her granddaughters on Christmas Day, talking on the phone because they were a long way away. And the granddaughter had just gone through the list of presents she'd gotten for Christmas, which of course made her very happy.

So our friend said, "When you get lots of presents, do you feel thankful for what you have? Or does it make you want more?" And the little girl, who was about eight at this time, said, "Oh Nana, I want more." And so our friend said, "Oh, that's too bad." And the little girl was listening and said, "What do you mean?" And our friend said, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, you feel good? And when you're wanting more, it doesn't feel as good?" And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, you're right." That was a teaching on gratitude.

At one retreat, I went into the retreat at the start of November. It was here. And you probably know the start of November in New England is not a particularly uplifting time for weather. So it was rainy, it was gray, it was already cold, it was windy. And as I was getting into the retreat, the weather was kind of weighing on me. I thought, oh gosh, am I going to get really gloomy with this weather? So I decided to do some gratitude reflection and I wrote down on a piece of paper all the things in my life that I was grateful for. Just wrote down as many as I could think, the big things and the little things. It ended up filling a whole page.

And then every morning in the retreat, I would read through that list and remember how lucky I was. To be practicing was one thing I was grateful for, but there were lots of others. So it really served to dispel this sense of gloominess or sadness about my situation.

Sally and I, some years ago, were teaching a group of senior students, and we were talking about gratitude. And one member in the group said to another, "Hey, let's email each other every night before we go to bed one thing we were grateful for that day." And so two of them started doing it, and then other people in our group started doing it. And as far as I know, that's where the daily email gratitude practice came from, was that group of senior students. It's a good practice if you have a dharma buddy to do it with.

So it's very helpful to have things in your mind, things in your life that you can call to mind to bring up this sense of uplift. Later in that retreat, when I'd ordained and I was sitting in Burma with Paok Sayadaw, I hit some difficult patches. So I was in robes. I hadn't been in robes for years. The practice was very narrow because it was just keeping the attention at the upper lip, basically eighteen hours a day, no other focus. The

schedule was demanding. The shortest sit was an hour and a half. Longest sit was two hours. And I happened to join and get ordained right at the start of the rains retreat. And I should have known the rains retreat was so called for a reason. It started raining and I didn't see the sun for about three weeks.

I read the rainfall figures later—it was raining about three inches a day. It was a real tropical experience for those three weeks. I was eating one meal a day, and as I looked back at the end of the retreat, I had lost close to half a pound a day on that diet of one meal, which had very little protein.

I remember it all came together one lunchtime as I was walking back to my kuti, my little hut. It was raining, of course. I had a bowl, which was hot, with the hot food. I had a little bit of dessert in the bowl lid, which was upturned on top. I was cradling it in my left arm, holding an umbrella in my right, and my robes, which I had not quite learned to tie well again, were sliding off my left shoulder.

As I was walking along in this precarious situation in the rain, a group of Burmese laypeople on the muddy path, running with water, moved off to the side, knelt down, and bowed to me. I was just hoping I wouldn't come completely unclothed in front of them. I managed to get back to my kuti and enjoy my lunch, put my umbrella away, and get dry. But it marked a low point in my whole journey.

I was feeling at the end of my rope, very challenged and down in spirits. All these things were coming together, and I really didn't know what to do because I didn't have a good friend there. I didn't know who to talk to about this. Sayadaw was not exactly on the emotional end of the spectrum.

I had brought along a photograph of the Dalai Lama with a very inspirational quote from Shantideva—a bodhisattva kind of quote. So I turned to the Dalai Lama in a great mood of sincere supplication and humility. I said, "Your Holiness, do you have any advice for me?"

Immediately there was this very clear response in his voice, his Indian-accented English voice: "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then the transmission ended. That was it.

Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support. I thought that was brilliant advice. Because if I could remember what cheerful felt like, I could sort of put myself there, and it really helped. When would we not want to be cheerful, optimistic, and confident? This is one of the things that mudita opens up to us—an ally to bring in cheer and confidence. That's a teaching I've relied on many, many times. Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. Remember what that feels like.

The Dalai Lama himself manifests this in a beautiful way. He has probably seen as much suffering as anyone I can think of, because he kept hearing reports of genocide after he fled Tibet in 1959. Something like a million people were killed in the decade following, and most of the monasteries and nunneries were wiped out. And yet he has this huge pool of happiness.

A few years ago there was a gathering in Dharamsala, where he lives—a gathering of scientists, because he's really into science and lining Buddhism up with science and doing research to prove meditation. One of the scientists, over an informal gathering, asked him, "What was the happiest time of your life?"

I thought it would be when he was living back in the Potala and Tibetan culture was all intact, when he was under the supervision of his tutors and many, many monks and nuns were practicing all over the country. I thought it would be that kind of time he would point to.

They asked, "What was the happiest time of your life?" And he said, "I think right now." I thought that was so great—the best possible answer.

With mudita, the near enemy is, as we've talked about, elation or over-exuberance, when there's an attachment to the happiness and we overthink it and claim it as our own and project it into the future. Of course that will undermine it and eventually chase it away. And the far enemy is envy—as though if somebody else has happiness, it's going to take away from ours.

After I graduated from college, I went into the Peace Corps. In going into the Peace Corps, I left a relationship...

I left a girlfriend at that time to go off. I taught school in Malaysia for two years, which is where I first had contact with Thailand and fell in love with the culture. So I'd left my girlfriend—I still had feelings for her, but I wanted to do this teaching in Asia. Not long after I got settled at my school in Malaysia, I got a letter from my best friend who told me that he'd just gotten together with my girlfriend in a relationship.

Mudita was not the first response that came to mind at that point. So I had to work with that envy and jealousy. But we have a tool, and one of the beauties of mudita is that it's said to dispel envy. We become very skillful in situations like that.

The last of the Brahmaviharas is this quality of equanimity, and I think I'll save this for another night. The Pali word is *upekkha*. It is this fundamental balance of mind that's not thrown off by the alternating pleasure and pain of life, both internally and externally. Within the Brahmaviharas, it's the balance that holds all the joys and all the sorrows of the world and ourselves without getting disturbed about it.

Equanimity is an extremely high value in the Buddhist teachings. It's the last of the Brahmaviharas. It's the last of the factors of enlightenment. In the meditation system of Mahasi Sayadaw, it is the last development before awakening happens. So it's a very powerful and desirable state, and we'll talk about it more another time.

I want to close with some reflection on how the Brahmaviharas in their totality make a kind of road map of the heart and its relationship to the world. The Brahmaviharas themselves shouldn't be taken for granted. You shouldn't just assume, "Oh, I ought to be having metta. I ought to be having pure compassion. I ought to be having mudita. I ought to be having equanimity." These are high states. They are what I would call the awakened response to the circumstances of life. So we're imitating the awakened ones when we find ourselves in these states.

You shouldn't expect this to be your normal way of operating. These are elevated states of being. Our normal, self-centered way of operating is described by the near enemies. That's essentially where the near enemy comes from—normal self-centered mind states. Affection with attachment, pity and looking down, envy and looking up, or agitation instead of equanimity—this is the way the untrained mind tends to respond to changing circumstances.

The far enemies are essentially the really unwholesome responses to life circumstances, and we definitely want to avoid those—the responses of ill will, cruelty, envy, or agitation.

Taken together, we have four Brahmaviharas by three qualities: the Brahmavihara, the near enemy, the far enemy. This gives us a map of twelve responses to the world. As you start to practice with these, you really see how they describe or outline most of the range of possible responses that we will make to life situations. Using the Brahmaviharas as tools, we learn more and more how to move ourselves from the suffering places into the really wholesome and awakened places.

This whole system of the Brahmaviharas with their near and far enemies provides a wonderful roadmap to the responses to life's conditions. We can look at ourselves through this map almost any time.

Let me close with one other version of the Brahmavihara phrases. This is the standard Tibetan expression of the four Brahmaviharas. They have them also—I haven't heard of the practices being quite like ours, but they have the concept of the Brahmaviharas.

So I'll close with reading these qualities from the Tibetan point of view:

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.

May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

So let's just sit together for a minute.

Crossed, I would cross others. Freed, I would free. Tamed, I would tame. Calmed, I would calm. Comforted, I would comfort. Attained to nibbana, I would lead to nibbana.

So thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking meditation, and then we will return to practice a new chant—the last of the four pages of chanting on pervading loving-kindness.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 171

Morning Instructions: Pervading Mettā for All Beings

Guy Armstrong · 45 min

> *In this morning meditation instruction from the June 2019 retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Guy Armstrong offers guidance on practicing mettā (loving-kindness) for all beings through the traditional method of pervading the four directions. Drawing from classical Buddhist meditation instructions, Armstrong teaches two approaches: first using phrases while directing loving-kindness to beings in each cardinal direction (north, south, east, west), and second using a visualization of a four-sided lantern in the heart center to pervade each quarter wordlessly.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes the creative and imaginative aspects of mettā practice, encouraging practitioners to visualize specific beings—from loved ones and neighbors to wildlife and creatures in each direction. Armstrong guides students through the complete sequence: beginning with self, benefactor, and good friend to warm the heart, then extending systematically through the four quarters, and finally pervading all directions simultaneously. He offers practical advice for maintaining concentration and connection with specific beings to prevent the practice from becoming too abstract.*
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> *This instruction is particularly valuable for practitioners looking to expand their mettā practice beyond individual recipients to the vast field of all sentient beings, incorporating both the structured approach of directional pervading found in classical texts and the creative visualization that keeps the practice alive and engaging.*

Let's begin this morning again chanting the refuges and precepts to start our sit. And let's do this in unison this time. See how we go.

In the meditation this morning we'll again focus the instructions on loving-kindness for all beings. Just to orient you to directions, because we'll be pervading the four directions with loving-kindness, you are roughly facing north. This building is not quite aligned north-south, but more or less you're facing north. So East is to your right, West is to your left and South is behind you.

One of the instructions that I'll give is as you're directing loving kindness to beings in the North, you can think of all the beings to the North who will be receiving your loving kindness. You can think of our lovely neighbors from Canada whom we wish were closer to our country. You can think of all the native people, indigenous people up in the

north of Canada and of course throughout. You can think of all the creatures to the north, creatures in the Great Lakes and the Bay and the Arctic, whales and fishes, seals and polar bears.

When we aim to the east, to the west, to the south, you can be really creative in your imagination about what beings are receiving your loving kindness in those directions. If there are people who you've wanted to bring in, who you haven't brought into the metta because we've been restricted, this is a great time to bring them in. Whenever we hit their direction, you can remember your loved ones who are in that direction and say the phrases specifically for them.

As we're extending to the various directions and you think of people in the hall who are in that direction from you, you can bring up their faces and say the loving kindness specifically for those people, or the birds you hear outside, or whatever sparks your imagination. Loving kindness for all beings is really a wonderful time to be creative. Bring in any beings that come to your imagination, think of the wide range of beings that your metta is directed to, and let that tickle your fancy. Metta for all beings can never become boring for me because there's always so much imagination we can bring to it, so many other people we can bring in.

Please begin by sitting comfortably. We'll begin again with loving kindness on a few individuals that you've worked with in order to warm up the field.

In sitting comfortably, coming into your body. Let the body be relaxed, the forehead and the eyes, the jaw and shoulders, the belly and hands. Not trying to get anywhere else, just resting, settling into the moment.

As you feel your body in sitting, coming into the heart center, bringing your attention to the center of the chest. Aware especially of any sensations, any mood that might be felt there.

Connecting with yourself, either through this felt sense, the body here and now, or an image of yourself somewhere you're contented and happy, maybe smiling. Remember your goodness. You've devoted so much of your life to the cultivation of wisdom and love. It's a really unusual thing in the human realm. A really beautiful expression of what you care about. I wish we could populate the world with you all.

With that sense of your own good nature, then directing the thoughts of loving kindness to yourself.

Then bringing in either your benefactor or good friend, wherever you feel the warmer connection. Bringing them alive with you in this moment so you feel their presence. Remember what you appreciate in them. Remember all their good qualities. There's some mysterious way that happiness follows goodness. In touch with your benefactor or friend's goodness and directing your thoughts of loving kindness to them.

Now letting go of your friend or benefactor. Just coming into the moment. Again, feeling your body, feeling the heart center, noticing any mood that's present.

As you rest in the moment, feel the wide field of your own awareness. How it stretches out to hold everyone in the room, the space in the room, the objects in the room. And beyond to the outdoors, to nature, to the trees and creatures and grass. And on in a fairly limitless way, to include all the beings everywhere.

We reconnect with that initial wish that's the impulse of loving kindness, that all beings everywhere be well, in a vast range of life. So we say that with our simple wish, may all beings be well, happy, and peaceful. May all beings be well, happy and peaceful.

Now we can take up the practice of the Four Quarters. We'll do this in two different ways. The first way that we'll do it, as you're sitting we'll begin with the quarter that's in front of you. So that is to the north. Just have the sense of taking in the vastness of what's in front of you. As you're sitting in the hall facing the front, you're roughly facing north. Remember, as you take in this quarter, that your gaze includes up into the sky as well as down into the earth.

And now, as you repeat the phrases for all beings to the north, let yourself feel the flame in the heart center. Imagine raising the metal pane on the side of the lantern that faces north, allowing the light of loving-kindness to shine out in that direction. You can visualize this warm, golden light streaming from your heart toward all the beings in the north.

May all beings to the north be safe, happy, healthy, and at ease.

The light doesn't need to be forced or pushed. It simply radiates naturally from your heart center, carrying your intentions of goodwill to all beings in that quarter.

And now turning your attention to the east, to your right. Imagine raising the metal pane on the eastern side of the lantern. Feel the warm light of metta flowing from your heart toward all beings to the east.

May all beings to the east be safe, happy, healthy, and at ease.

Now toward the south, behind you. Raising the southern pane of the lantern, allowing the light to flow from your heart center toward all beings in that direction.

May all beings to the south be safe, happy, healthy, and at ease.

And finally, to the west, to your left. Lifting the western pane and letting the light of loving-kindness stream from your heart toward all beings in that quarter.

May all beings to the west be safe, happy, healthy, and at ease.

And now imagine raising all four metal panes simultaneously, so that light is radiating from your heart center in all four directions at once. The lantern in your heart is shining its warm, golden light equally to the north, east, south, and west.

Feel this light representing your loving-kindness flowing out to encompass all beings everywhere. Not just those in the four horizontal directions, but also those above you—in the sky, in space—and those below you, within the earth itself.

May all beings in all directions, above and below, be safe, happy, healthy, and at ease.

Rest in this sense of universal loving-kindness, your heart radiating goodwill in all directions like a beacon of light. There's no effort required, no straining to make the light go further. Simply allow it to shine naturally from your heart center, touching all beings with its warmth.

Take a few more moments to rest in this all-encompassing metta, feeling connected to all life everywhere through the light of loving-kindness flowing from your heart.

So this will be a practice in pervading the four quarters one at a time without using words.

First, you lift the cover over the glass that's to the north, that's in front of you. The light of your loving kindness can shine in that direction in front of you. You let your metta pervade the quarter that's in front of you without any words. You simply have the sense that that quarter of your heart is open and the metta can stream out and radiate however it likes.

You don't have to try to make it fill that quarter. You don't have to try to make it go any further than it's inclined to. You open that door on the lantern and you let the light of metta shine in front of you, touching all beings in that direction who can feel it. I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness.

Now you let the door go down over that pane that's to the north, and you open the door that's over the pane of glass to the east. You let your loving-kindness pervade the quarter to your right, letting the light simply go free and extend as far as it likes to go. Loving kindness extended to all the beings in the quarter to your right.

If different beings come to your mind as you're pervading, that's fine. You can let them stay there and be touched by the light.

Then closing the door on the pane facing right, and opening the door on the pane that faces to your rear, behind you, roughly south. Simply let the light of your loving kindness shine in that direction, pervading the quarter to your back.

Then close the door facing south and open the door that faces west. Your metta extends to the west as far as it naturally does.

Now open all the doors over all four panes of the lantern and have a sense that the light of your loving kindness can shine in all directions equally. I will abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a heart imbued with loving kindness.

May all beings everywhere be safe and protected from harm.
May all beings be happy and peaceful.
May all beings be healthy and strong.
May all beings live with the ease of well being.

You can bring in this meditation on all beings as you like, as it seems appropriate to you. As you may have found yesterday, it's a really lovely meditation to do when walking, when walking outdoors. You can really feel that space and the pervading nature. And any being that comes in your orbit, make it specific to them—people, birds, chipmunks, squirrels. It's directed to individuals.

In practicing with this last form where it's wordless and you're just pervading a quarter or the whole world with this light, because there's not a clear form to focus on, sometimes it may be easier for the mind to drift. If you're practicing that way and you find a lot more thoughts coming in, come back to the phrases for a while. It can be phrases for individuals, phrases for the four quarters, all beings, however you like. But see that the concentration doesn't get too frayed around the edges as you practice with this formless, pervading kind of metta.

Work in your own self, benefactor and friend when they feel helpful. One of the risks in "all beings" practice is if it's not connecting with specific beings, it can get too abstract—"Oh yeah, may all beings be happy, right"—but we're not really feeling the happiness and welfare of individuals. It can just become conceptual.

If that happens, bring in specific beings to the north, south, east, west, whatever, or go back to your three easy folks—self, benefactor and friend—to make the metta warm again and real, so that it lands somewhere.

CHAPTER 172

Morning Instructions: Objects, Space, and Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 42 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk from a June 2019 retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Guy Armstrong introduces practitioners to awareness-based vipassanā meditation. He begins by clarifying that 'awareness' in this context refers to consciousness (viññāṇa), the fifth khandha - our most basic capacity for knowing that makes us sentient beings. This bare faculty of knowing operates through the six sense doors (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects) without requiring conceptual thinking, distinguishing it from higher-level functions like perception, mindfulness, and insight wisdom.*
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> *The guided meditation systematically explores three interconnected elements: sense objects arising at the six doors, the spatial dimension of experience both within the body and extending outward, and the quality of awareness or knowing itself. Armstrong guides practitioners to notice how objects arise within space, investigate whether inner and outer space are truly separate, and tune into the knowing quality that recognizes both objects and space. The practice cultivates what he calls 'choiceless attention' - a receptive alertness that allows phenomena to reveal themselves naturally.*
>
> *This teaching offers practical entry into consciousness-based meditation, emphasizing direct investigation of our immediate sensory experience while developing familiarity with the subtle, formless quality of awareness itself. The approach provides a foundation for deeper vipassanā practice by establishing clear recognition of the basic structures of conscious experience.*

So this morning we're going to take the leap into the awareness practices. You ready? Lift off.

I want to say a few words before we go into any formal instructions. We'll be giving different instructions through the days of awareness practice, and we're just beginning today with an introduction. But I want to explain what I mean by the word awareness, or how we're going to be using it, because it means different things to different people.

In this retreat, we're going to use it synonymously with consciousness—the fifth aggregate, more or less. We'll clarify the finer distinctions as we go, but mostly we mean it's synonymous with consciousness.

I need to explain the meaning of this term consciousness. It's the fifth aggregate, vijñāna in Pali. It is the most basic capacity of knowing that we have. It is what makes us a sentient being.

As you are awake in this moment, you are having conscious experience through the sense doors of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects—mostly thoughts and emotions. That conscious experience is ongoing. It happens naturally in any moment that you're awake because we have sense organs, we have sense doors that bring the world into our conscious experience, our human experience. This is what it means to be a sentient being.

Can you turn that faculty off? If I say, "Don't hear this sound," can you stop hearing? If your eyes are open, can you stop seeing? If your body's sitting, can you stop feeling sensations? No.

This is the nature of consciousness: just to reveal, or you could say display, or illuminate, or put forward these bare sense experiences for us to know. Consciousness doesn't take any smarts. You can be on the verge of sleep and you'll still be knowing objects. Dogs have consciousness. Ants have consciousness. Every sentient being has this knowing of their immediate environment.

It's just the bare revealing of—for us—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. That's what consciousness is. It's this faculty of knowing in a very simple and primitive way.

Now on top of consciousness we can layer other kinds of knowing that get more intelligent and more sophisticated. This is referred to in the study guide as the five kinds of knowing. We can know through perception, we can know through conceptual thought, we can know through mindfulness, we can know through insight. These are all higher level functionings that require concepts. Consciousness doesn't require concepts.

I don't think ants have too much verbal facility, but they have consciousness. They experience the world.

This is what we're going to use as the meaning of awareness for now. We'll refine it later, but for now, we're investigating consciousness. That's mostly what these days of practice will be about—investigating consciousness. With that as our prelude, awareness will be used synonymously with consciousness.

With that, we can go into the meditation. Please come into the present moment. Feel your body in sitting. Let your attention rest in the heart center.

First let us carry forward this idea of metta in its boundless form, extending to all beings everywhere and pervading the space around us. As you sit, let yourself become aware of the space in front of you, to your right, behind you, to your left. We can include above and below. Have a sense that your care for all beings can extend outward in all six directions from your heart center. Wish for all beings to be well, happy and peaceful.

With that sense of the vastness of metta, extending to all beings in a wordless way, let go of any phrases that you may have been using in the practice of metta or the other brahmaviharas. Just sit quietly with this awareness of space.

Sometimes it might feel a little awkward in turning the corner from metta to what we will now undertake as vipassana. In metta we've been concerned with the phrases, the image, the metta feeling, the heart center. Now we're changing our field of focus.

So as you relax into this open space, grounded in the body, just notice what's here. What's showing up in this openness? What sense objects are making an appearance for you right now?

You'll notice sensations in the body. You'll notice the impact of breathing. There will be sounds from time to time. Thoughts will come and go. And there's some mood or emotion that's present—could be a strongly felt emotion like joy or impatience, wanting or compassion. Could be a subtler mood, a bit of longing, a touch of aversion.

And then notice also the visual field. With eyes closed, there's probably not much going on, but there's the sense of grayness or darkness of the visual field, or perhaps some flickering pixels, or perhaps some light. So we notice that these are the phenomena that constitute our experience through the six sense doors, and they will continue to arise as long as we're awake.

So the objects of the senses are the first things that we want to notice in the meditation this morning. Sally talked last night about the six-limbed equanimity, and these are the six limbs of experience that we can notice in our meditation.

If you're feeling somewhat calm and settled, coming out of the concentration practice of metta, then you don't need to go searching for these objects, but you can have the sense of resting—just resting in the center of everything and letting the phenomena reveal themselves to you. Now a sensation, now a sound, now a thought, now an in-breath. Receptive attention, but alert, awake, ready for the next contact.

And now we want to move a little further into the exploration of the second territory, which is that of space. Bringing your attention into the body, noticing that you may feel sensations from the head through the shoulders and back, down the arms, chest and belly, and the hips and legs and feet.

As you connect with the head, the middle of the body, and the feet, you'll notice that the sensations spread out in this way create a sense of distance. Sense of distance is an immediate part of our experience of the body. So there's a separation or a space between the head and the feet, which we can directly experience.

As you feel the sensations that take place between the head and the feet, ask and investigate: Is this whole space full with sensations? Or are there some parts of the body as experienced from within that don't particularly have sensations? In other words, is there some space between some of the sensations in the body? Or is every cubic inch dense with sensation?

Once we connect with the distance in the body, we can also find space—space within, between, among all the various sensations. So tuning in now to the quality of space within the body.

And as you sit in the hall, can you also get a sense of the space around you? The space that you're sitting in. It extends to the front and behind, to your right and left. And can you feel it extending beyond the walls and windows to outdoors?

Sometimes sound is a way to evoke space. A bird sound. A bell sound. We can feel the distance between us and the sound that arises. So we can be in touch with the space outside. We can be in touch with the space inside the body. Are these two different things? Or is there just one space? It's both inside and outside.

So connecting with this sense of space inside and outside, you might investigate: how far does it extend? Or can you find an edge to it? If you hear the bird outside, do you get a sense the space extends that far?

When you hear my voice, do you get a sense the space extends that far? This is the second element that we'll look at in the meditation this morning—the sense of space.

The third element that we'll bring in is the quality of awareness. As you're in touch with appearances, sensations, sounds, breath, thoughts, mood, those are all being known because they're part of your direct experience. There's a knowing of these arisings that is your human consciousness. Sounds are known. Sensations are known. Thoughts are known.

Is space also known? When you're in touch with a sense of space, is there knowing of space? Is there some consciousness of the space around you and inside you? As far as the sense of space extends, does your knowing go with it? However wide space is, is awareness also that wide?

Now asking, can I be in touch with the sense of knowing? When the bird calls, can I sense the knowing of that sound? When a sensation arises, can I sense the knowing of that sensation? That sense consciousness is taking place—can I feel that happening? When there's the perception of space, and I feel the knowing of that, the awareness of space—is the knowing as wide as the space is? Is there any boundary or edge to awareness?

Sometimes the quality of awareness can seem really elusive. It's very subtle. It's formless. It can't be grasped. It can be intuited. It can be sensed. But sometimes it's so subtle, it's hard to sense it. So if that happens, you might just ask this simple question: am I aware? And if the answer is yes, just stay with that sense—awareness.

So there are the elements of the objects, of space, and of awareness or consciousness. Let's put these together with specific experiences at the sense doors. As you're sitting, simply resting in the middle of space, some object will arise that you'll notice—a sensation, a breath, a sound, a thought. As you connect with that object, ask if you can also notice the space around it. First we notice the object, and then we see if we can notice the space that it's happening in, the space surrounding it. It can be a big sense of space, it can be just a small sense of space, but notice that it is happening within space.

So we notice the object, then we notice the space. Is there any shift in inner feeling, any shift in mood when you go from noticing the object to noticing the space around it? And then after you've noticed the object and the space, notice the quality of awareness or knowing. There's knowing of the object, there's knowing of the space. Can you feel that activity of knowing taking place?

So for this last section of the sitting, practicing in this way, connecting with an object as it arises, noticing it, and noticing the space around it, and then noticing the knowing of the object and of the space. This can become a kind of choiceless attention, knowing objects arising at the six sense doors, contemplating in your direct experience the object, the space, and the awareness.

If the element of awareness is not so apparent, don't worry about it. It's kind of elusive, may come and go. Just be with the knowing of the object and the space.

For the last minute of the sitting, returning to our old friend, the breath. Bringing the attention into the body, feeling the breath wherever it's been comfortable for you. Connecting with the in-breath and the out-breath. Recognizing it in the field of sensations. As you connect with the breath wherever you're feeling it, notice the space around it. How does it feel to move from knowing the sensations of breath to notice the space? And then, can you feel the awareness of the breath, the awareness of the space? Knowing both the arising object and the space it's arising in.

So was that space or was that spaced out? Any comments, questions on the meditation?

When Jane asks about which sense door we use when connecting with space, I regard it as manifesting on the physical level - through the physical sense door connected with sensation and the body.

Don raises an interesting point about interoception, which refers to our ability to sense internal bodily signals. This eighth sense, as some researchers call it, encompasses our awareness of heartbeat, breathing, hunger, thirst, and other internal states. It's distinct from the traditional five senses and even from proprioception, which tracks our body's position in space.

Interoception could indeed be relevant here. When we're sensing space around the breath, we might be tapping into this capacity for internal bodily awareness. It's that subtle sensing that doesn't quite fit into the neat categories of sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, yet is undeniably a form of knowing.

This highlights something important about meditation practice - we're often working with forms of awareness that don't map perfectly onto conventional categories. The space around the breath, the felt sense of openness, the quality of awareness itself - these experiences invite us to expand our understanding of how we know what we know.

Whether we call it the body sense door, interoception, or simply awareness itself, what matters is that we're cultivating a more refined and subtle capacity for knowing. We're learning to recognize not just the obvious objects of experience, but also the context in which they arise - the space, the awareness, the knowing quality itself.

This kind of practice gradually develops what we might call "meta-awareness" - awareness of awareness itself. We begin to recognize not just what we're experiencing, but the very capacity for experience. This is where meditation starts to reveal the deeper structures of consciousness, the very ground of our being.

CHAPTER 173

The Nature of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong explores the nature of awareness and consciousness (viññāṇa), the fifth of the five aggregates. Drawing from the Honeyball Sutta and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains how consciousness arises through contact—the meeting of sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness. Armstrong distinguishes between consciousness (knowing individual sense objects) and awareness (the broad field encompassing all six sense doors), using the metaphor of firelight illuminating objects while we rarely examine the light itself.*
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> *The talk addresses why practitioners turn from object-based meditation to awareness itself: consciousness is free from the kilesas (greed, hatred, delusion), impartial like a mirror, and offers refuge from the pleasant-unpleasant dance that leads to suffering. Armstrong explores five levels of knowing—from basic viññāṇa through perception (saññā), conceptual thought (vitakka), mindfulness understanding (pajānāti), to liberating wisdom (ñāṇa/paññā).*
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> *Drawing from teachers like Upasika Kee Nanayon and Ajahn Buddhadasa, Armstrong reveals awareness as the union of emptiness and knowing—'cognizing emptiness' that is naturally pure, unestablished anywhere, yet ceaselessly responsive. This recognition opens the heart's treasures: mettā, compassion, equanimity, and wisdom, pointing toward the mind's Buddha-nature.*

The talk tonight is on the nature of awareness. I will be referring to the study guide if you have one handy and want to take a look at the quotes, as we will be using it a few times.

You probably know that after the Buddha's enlightenment, he debated whether or not to teach. He was inclined not to teach, saying, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and hard to understand." He didn't think people would get it. So the talk tonight may not be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. If that's the case, just let the energy wash over you. Take it energetically. Don't worry too much about the concepts.

As you all know, generally in Vipassana practice, we go through this systematic series of instructions that direct our attention toward what are called the objects of our sense experience. We typically start with sensations, breath, sounds, emotions, thoughts, feeling tone, intention, until we're quite comfortable relating with mindfulness to all of those different arisings. Usually then the retreat's over, right?

In this retreat, we are turning to this faculty called consciousness, or sometimes we call it awareness, which is what's responsible for knowing the sensations, breath, sounds, emotions, thoughts, et cetera. But in most Vipassana retreats, we don't get instructions on how to relate to this. So it's often new territory for us when we come into a retreat that is exploring consciousness, this fifth aggregate, vijñāna.

D.H. Lawrence commented that not looking at this property of awareness is like somebody who's sitting outside at night by a fire. They get fascinated by all the objects that the firelight is illuminating—the trees and the grasses and the logs and the limbs and the insects and the shadows, everything that goes on in the dance of the firelight. They're so entranced by the objects, they never think to turn and look at the light itself. It's the light that's making all this available, that's revealing it, that's illuminating it. And yet we can get so entranced by the different things that are showing up, we don't look back at the light.

So in this retreat, we're looking at this light that illuminates or knows all the objects of our experience. And that's really where the mystery lies. Fire is kind of a mystery and consciousness is definitely a mystery. Scientists don't have a clue how this happens. I don't think they even have the beginning of a clue about how it happens. But we know it. It's very close to us. It's always active and we can explore it in our direct experience even if we don't have a rational understanding.

As we talk about this factor of consciousness and awareness and the knowing, hold it, please, in the context that it's a great mystery for all of us. We almost can't get too specific in our descriptions of it, in our vocabulary around it, in our terminology, and any definition of it, because it's a vast, mysterious thing. So we'll try to be somewhat precise, as precise as we can be, but just be aware that words can't nail down this factor because it is fundamentally a deep and beautiful mystery.

We may talk about it as consciousness, we may talk about it as awareness. Now I've mentioned before this word "awareness" is used in different meanings by different teachers. Some teachers, like Sayadaw U Tejaniya, will use it more to mean mindfulness. We use it, in this retreat, more to mean consciousness, so vijñāna as opposed to sati. But it's a slippery word, and the reason it's a slippery word is that there's no word in Pali that needs to be translated by "awareness."

The Buddha's language was pretty precise. If we can take a Pali word and bring it into English, we know pretty much what the Buddha was intending by it, because he used it so many times in so many ways and we get the sense of it. But this word "awareness"—it's a beautiful old English word. And because of its old English nature, it has a deep resonance for us. But it doesn't have a Pali equivalent. Therefore, we don't know what the Buddha would have made of it. And it's hard for us to be precise about it for that reason. That's why it can mean whatever a teacher wants it to mean. So Sayadaw U Tejaniya likes to use it to mean mindfulness. Guy and Sally like to use it to mean consciousness, more or less. We'll get a little more specific about that.

So in this retreat, we're mostly using awareness to point to consciousness, this bare knowing of sense objects. But I want to make this little distinction between consciousness and awareness the way I use it. I usually use consciousness to refer to the knowing of an individual sense object, a specific arising at one of the six senses. We'll even talk about eye consciousness, ear consciousness, smell consciousness, taste consciousness, body consciousness, mind consciousness. So there are these six classes of consciousness for the six kinds of sense objects.

When I use the term awareness, I usually mean the broad field of consciousness that includes all six kinds of sense objects. This is often pointed to when we say, open your attention in a wide way and notice any of the objects that are arising. With awareness we can include all the different kinds of sense objects and still call it one big field of awareness. There can be sights and sounds and emotions and thoughts and sensations and smells and tastes, all of that within one field of awareness.

You get this sense when we were doing the pervading metta that there's a big space that we know and that things are happening within. So that's the way I want to use awareness—the broad field in which objects are known, consciousness is revealing objects.

Let's look for a minute at how objects come to arise within our experience. This means we're awake, we're having conscious experience, and all different kinds of objects are coming and going. This is the first quote from the study guide on page 6, quote number 25. This is from a famous discourse called the Honeyball Sutta, which we may take a closer look at later, but I just want to start with the first couple of sentences.

"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact."

This is the fundamental definition of contact in the Buddha's discourses. It's the coming together of—in this case—eye, forms, and eye consciousness. This is repeated in the full discourse for all the other five senses. The coming together of the sense organ, the sense object, and the sense consciousness—that's called contact.

Then it goes on: "With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives." This is also one of the discourses where it's clearest where the Buddha is using the concept of perception. The Pali term is saññā. So there's contact. From contact, there's feeling. Based on that feeling, we perceive what's happening. We perceive the sense experience.

What I want to come back to is this definition of contact: the meeting of the sense organ, the sense object, and the sense consciousness. Basically, if your eye is working and open and something is in front of you, the eye consciousness will reveal it. Similarly with a sound—if the ear is working and a sound arises, hearing consciousness will reveal it.

So if we have a sound that arises in your experience, you don't have any way to turn it off. It just arises spontaneously. What you're meeting there is the working ear, the sound, and hearing consciousness. In our direct experience, we kind of take the sense organ for granted, so we can set that aside for now. Ears and eyes are mostly working for us.

So there's the hearing consciousness and the sound coming up together. Don't think of this as two separate experiences, like the sound is over here and the hearing consciousness is over here. When the sound arises in your experience, both of those things are together. That's the meaning of the word contact—it's the meeting of the sound and ear consciousness. These two things are together.

But the nice thing is, it's one experience for us, but we can look at either the sound or the consciousness of the sound. One experience, but it's got two aspects, and we can choose which to look at. How does that work? One thing, two experiences.

If you look at this bowl, is it round or is it white? It's both, right? It's one thing.

It's a bowl. Is it round or is it white? It's both. So we could focus on the shape, which is the roundness, or we could focus on the color, which is the whiteness. They're both here together.

So when we hear the sound, two things are going on. The first is the bare sound, just that hmmm. The second is the consciousness of it, the knowing of it. It's in your experience. You're having a direct experience. You're knowing that sound. It's arising in consciousness.

So we can look either at the sound, which is what our traditional Vipassana instructions have told us to do for many years, or we can look at the knowing of it. It's a part of our experience. We can pay attention to that. And in this part of the retreat, that's what we're asking you to do. Pay attention to the knowing of it.

Now, if you pay attention to the knowing, does that mean you don't hear the sound? No. It's still there too. They're together. But you could look at the sound or you could look at the knowing. Choice is yours.

So we're being instructed to pay attention to consciousness itself. Now, is this within the realm of Buddhist practice? Did the Buddha teach this? And if he taught it, why haven't we heard of it before?

It is in the instructions, in the Satipatthana Sutta. The Fourth Foundation lists a few areas that there are instructions to become mindful of, and in that list of topics are the five aggregates. They're the six sense bases and also the five aggregates. So in the five aggregates, the fifth one is vijnana.

So essentially, there is the instruction in the Fourth Foundation to become mindful of each aggregate, therefore to become mindful of vijnana. That's really what we're practicing. We're practicing mindfulness of consciousness.

One of the beautiful things about mindfulness is anything that can be noticed in our whole field of experience, we can become mindful of. We can become mindful of any emotion. We can become mindful of any mood. We can become mindful of any flicker of feeling in the body. We can become mindful of the most subtle thought. We can be mindful of an intention that's just subtly forming. And we can be mindful of this quality of consciousness, although it is one of the most subtle things to pay attention to.

So if you've been having trouble as we've turned the corner into awareness, don't worry. A lot of people have trouble with this. And it can take days to land on finding this quality of consciousness. That's fine. Don't worry about that.

We could describe this kind of practice as mindfulness of consciousness. Some teachers talk about knowing your knowing. But that gets into the complexity of the word knowing, which I'll come back to in a minute. So we could talk about mindfulness of consciousness, but somehow I prefer the term aware of awareness. It kind of evokes

that old English familiarity. So I like to talk about this practice as becoming aware of awareness. But if you ask me to be specific and put it in the Buddha's language, what we're practicing is being mindful of consciousness.

Why do we want to explore consciousness? Why is this interesting or valuable? It seems subtle, maybe confusing, maybe hard to get. What's the point? The objects were working pretty well for us. We learned how to liberate emotions and be with the unpleasant and develop a lot of equanimity and insight. Why would we turn to this elusive factor of consciousness?

Well, I'm going to suggest there's a little bit of a problem in attending to objects. The problem is that objects are sometimes pleasant and sometimes unpleasant. As we attend to them and focus on them and build our meditation practice around them, we are building on a foundation of shifting pleasant-unpleasant, pain and pleasure.

This poses certain challenges because unmindful attention easily leads into greed and holding on, on the one hand, or aversion and pushing away on the other. Now, of course, we're meant with mindfulness to develop equanimity in regard to the pleasant and painful aspects, but that's a training. It's not always that easy.

So being involved with objects leads us into this dance with the pleasant and the unpleasant, which can easily lead to reactive formations of desiring or pushing away. And of course that leads into grasping, clinging, and therefore suffering.

Taking a look at consciousness or awareness really helps us not to get entangled with the objects. Why? Well, for one thing, when you connect with awareness, it's like connecting with space. It relieves some of the pressure and kind of takes a step back. As you connect with awareness of an object, you can feel yourself with a little bit more space around it. So that helps develop equanimity. But you're not cut off from the world—you're still knowing sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind objects, but you've got more space around them.

The second thing is, as you start to explore this quality of consciousness or awareness, it itself is free from the kilesas. Consciousness does not have qualities of like and dislike. Consciousness reveals everything equally. We could have a beautiful flute concerto in here, and you would hear that clearly. We could have a jackhammer ripping up the floor out in the lobby, and you'd hear that clearly. Consciousness doesn't care. So as we tune into consciousness, we are stepping into a sphere where the kilesas are absent. They don't rule. They don't play. So that's enormously helpful—to have a refuge where the kilesas are not active.

So consciousness and awareness are impartial. They're just like a mirror. They'll reflect anything that comes before them, and they're not harmed by it. This is tremendous.

And then as you tune into the nature of awareness, you'll also find it's not moving. As you connect with objects—any object in the senses—you'll find movement. You'll find change. You'll find variation. You'll find a dance. And that's fine. We can learn to work with that. We get insight about impermanence and unsatisfactoriness and uncontrollability. But in awareness there's an aspect that's not moving, that's still. And as we tune into that, we partake of that stillness. We feel that stillness, and that supports us.

So overall, this practice is meant to free us from the tendency to get entangled with objects through clinging, grasping, fixation, obsession, and suffering. It gives us another place to be that's not entangled but is still in touch. So we aren't disconnected from the world, but we're just not as caught up.

Here's another nice quote. This is on page seven, quote number thirty-nine. The speaker is a woman teacher from Thailand named Upasaka Ki Nanayan. She's passed away now, but she wrote a book—or her talks were collected into a book—called Pure and Simple, which is a very beautiful expression of deep dharma.

So quote thirty-nine: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way. In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside."

So when we're aware of awareness, we're not sending the mind out after sense objects and we're not getting entangled in them. So this is a place of freedom. This is a place of unentanglement, a place where we can rest. It's a place of peace.

Now, she uses this word knowing—unentangled knowing. And so I want to take a little detour for a few minutes to talk about this word knowing. And I'm going to summarize it.

In the Buddha's vocabulary, the fourth kind of knowing is wisdom, which in Pali is *paññā*. This is the intelligence that develops through training the mind. It's not IQ; it's not intellectual understanding. It's the kind of understanding that comes through our meditation practice, through our training in concentration, in mindfulness, in investigation. This wisdom sees things more clearly. It sees things as they actually are, rather than as we think they should be or as we wish they were.

Wisdom recognizes impermanence in our direct experience. It recognizes the unsatisfactory nature of clinging to things that are impermanent. It recognizes that there's no solid, unchanging self to be found anywhere in our experience. These are profound insights that come through the development of wisdom.

And then the fifth kind of knowing is what's called omniscience, or *sabbaññā* in Pali—literally "all-knowing." This is the knowing of a fully awakened being, a Buddha. This is the complete understanding that comes with complete liberation. It's the knowing that sees everything exactly as it is, without any distortion whatsoever.

So when we talk about knowing in meditation, it's helpful to be precise about which kind of knowing we're referring to. When Ayya Khema speaks of "unentangled knowing," she's pointing to a quality of awareness that doesn't get caught up in the content of what it's knowing. It's the knowing itself—clear, present, spacious—without being pulled into the drama of thoughts, emotions, or sense experiences.

This unentangled knowing is what allows us to rest in awareness itself rather than in what awareness is aware of. It's what gives us that place of freedom, that place of peace where we can simply be present without needing to fix anything, change anything, or go anywhere else.

The thought might be true or it might be false, but still we can make up these thoughts.

Then a step up from there is the knowing of mindfulness. We went through this in mindfulness of breathing. The Satipatthana Sutta says: "Breathing in long, one knows, I breathe in long. Breathing out long, one knows, I breathe out long." Here the term being translated as "know" is *pajanati*. One other translator translates it as "understands." So we start to see that within mindfulness there is an understanding of our experience. We understand our experience in a certain way, and this being with that is even more sophisticated than conceptual thought. It's a superior kind of intelligence to conceptual thought.

This understanding piece, *pajanati*, has the opening into wisdom—liberating wisdom. *Pajanati* is closely related to *sampajañña*. *Sampajañña*, clear comprehension, again gets the *ñña* on the end, which is another way of saying knowing. It's a kind of knowing.

The final category I'm aware of is what I would call insight knowledge or wisdom. Insight knowledge is referred to as *jñana*. Wisdom is referred to as *paññā*. So again, you get the *ñña* root in both those words. This is the whole purpose of insight meditation.

The purpose of insight meditation is to generate these insights and knowledges. Classically, they're around the three characteristics or the realization of nibbana. These are considered the range of insight.

In the West, we extend it and include things like psychological insight: "Oh, I see, I reacted that way at that time because of an old karmic pattern which led me to reactiveness in that situation." We call that insight. Formally in the Buddhist tradition, insights are really around the three characteristics or the realization of nibbana. So in Buddhist terms, this is the highest kind of knowing because this kind of knowing leads to the end of suffering—insight, knowledge, and wisdom.

So there are these five different levels of knowing. When Upasika Kee says "unentangled knowing," I take it to mean consciousness or what we're calling awareness. She talks about "aware of awareness"—just this bare knowing. This is what we'll be cultivating in this part of the retreat.

Let's look into this quality of awareness a little more. It's not so easy to locate sometimes. And yet, it's always present, isn't it? Anytime you ask yourself, "Am I aware?" does the answer ever come back no? I don't think so. Yes, when we check, we are always aware. Awareness is always there with us. But it's hard to locate, it's hard to find.

The reason is, awareness is what's holding objects. So awareness can hold an object like a sound, but can a hand hold itself? Not really. So awareness is always holding objects, but it's hard to hold. You can't get a hold of awareness itself. You can't grasp awareness, but we know it because it's working. It's functioning. It's revealing things. It's happening all the time. We're always aware—if we're awake.

So awareness isn't a thing. Consciousness is not a thing you can pick up and hold. Consciousness is the holder. But it's there. So we have to intuit it. We have to feel into its activity. We have to feel into its presence, its action. This is what Ajahn Chah said about not grasping awareness.

He said, you're riding on a horse and you're asking, where's the horse? We're riding awareness all the time.

This insight comes from Ajahn Sumedho. It's just like the question, can you see your own eyes? Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes, but I can't see my eyes. I'm sitting right here. I've got two eyes and I can't see them. But you can see my eyes. Looking in a mirror, I can see a reflection, but that's not my eyes. It's a reflection of my eyes. But there's no need for me to see my eyes because I can see.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? If I started saying, why can't I see my own eyes? You'd think, Ajahn Sumedho is really weird, isn't he?

So we can't grab hold of it, and yet it's so near. It's so close. It's so fundamental to our every moment of waking experience. If it ever seems like you can't quite connect, just ask, am I aware? And just stay with that. Yeah, I feel it. I know it. I'm not in any doubt about that. So just stay with that sense.

There's another quote from the study guide on page 10 that I really like. It's quote 62. This is by a man who took the pseudonym Wei Wu Wei. He was an Englishman living in Hong Kong. His real name was something like Terence Gray—I can't quite remember. He got into Zen and must have had some realization because he wrote all these pithy Zen-like sayings, but he made them up himself. He had some real insight. And this is one of his pithy sayings. He's not alive anymore, but he wrote several interesting books.

He says, "What we are looking for is what is looking."

That's why we can't grab hold of it. What we're looking for is what is looking. That's consciousness. That's awareness.

So we say that consciousness or awareness is the knowing—knowing of sense objects, knowing of phenomena, in this most basic sense of registering, revealing the sense object. Don't think of it as an object in itself. It's more like an activity. Knowing is a verb. And I think it's best to think of consciousness or awareness as an activity. It is doing knowing. That's its function. It's revealing, it's illuminating, it's showing the experiences of our senses.

Now, Joseph Goldstein gives a nice instruction related to this. He says, try putting it in the passive voice. Normally we might say, "I'm knowing sensations." But what if you just say, "Sensations are being known?" He said, try that. He came upon this, I think, when he was doing walking meditation. In walking meditation, there's often this tendency to think that there's an observer in the head who's looking down on the legs and feet and the sensations as you're going along. You sort of locate the eye up here, but the object is down there.

So when you rephrase it as "sensations are being known," you can take out that sense of the separate observer. You're just with the sensations in the legs and feet and the knowing of them. There's no distance. So it can be skillful. Try it in walking meditation sometime: "Sensations are being known."

Think about this passive voice construction. We could say, for instance, "The bell is being hit." And then we could ask, "Hit by what?" We would say, "Hit by the striker." We could say, "The cheek is being stroked." Stroked by what? By the hand. We could say, "The paper is being cut." Cut by what? By the scissors.

And then when we say "sensations are being known," look in your experience—known by what? What is doing the knowing of the sensations? Do you find that actor performing that action? You might say consciousness, but we just went through consciousness as a verb—it's the knowing. What's doing consciousness?

What happens in your mind when you ask that question? Does it kind of bring it to a stop? It does, doesn't it? And in that stopping, that's a nice meditative place to be, because you're not conceptualizing. You're not scrambling for an answer. You're just open, receptive, interested, present. That's not a bad place to meditate from.

There was a Zen teacher who established a big center in Providence, Rhode Island, named Seung Sahn. He was Korean. He came to the three-month course one year toward the end and gave a dharma talk. It was the funniest evening I've ever spent in that meditation hall—he was a very engaging speaker. Seung Sahn had a saying that he liked to mention to people, a core teaching: "Only keep don't-know mind. Only keep don't-know mind."

When you pose a question like this—"sensations are known by what?"—it puts us in a place of "I don't know." That's a good place to meditate from, and it's a good place to investigate from.

One answer, one possible answer, is that this is an invalid question. There's nothing behind the knowing. You're just mixing up the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha spelled it all out clearly—there are the five aggregates, consciousness is the last one, and there's nothing else there. So that's one school of thought on this question.

But another school of thought says that there may be an agent behind consciousness that we might call mind—something more ongoing that's doing the knowing. The knowing of objects is very fleeting, comes and goes, arises and passes with the object. So the knowing, the consciousness, is clearly impermanent. When the object goes, the consciousness goes. But maybe there's some agent behind there doing the knowing. Let's call it mind, for want of a better word.

This has been a question in Buddhism for a long time. There's a very nice story from the Chinese Chan tradition. Bodhidharma is the teacher who, as legend has it, went from India and carried the Buddha's teachings up into China a long, long time ago.

When we look carefully at awareness itself, we discover something quite profound. The story about Bodhidharma illustrates this beautifully. He was a very hermit-like teacher who, according to legend, went into a cave and stayed there for nine years, facing a wall in meditation, refusing to give any teachings. People would come pleading for instruction, but Bodhidharma just kept facing the wall, offering nothing.

Finally, one person became so determined and desperate for teachings—a man named Huike—that he cut off his arm, tossed it into the cave, and asked for instruction. Please don't do that here—if you want teachings, just write us a note and we'll find a time!

He threw his arm into the cave and shouted to Bodhidharma: "Your disciple's mind is not purified. I beg you, master, pacify it."

Bodhidharma calmly responded, "Show me your mind and I will pacify it."

Huike replied, "I have searched long for this mind, but I have never been able to find it."

And Bodhidharma said, "There—I have pacified your mind."

It's just like the question "known by what?"—it stills the mind. Huike was looking for his mind, couldn't find it, and that brought him stillness. He could simply rest there. Actually, according to the story, he was awakened at that point—that's how these tales always go.

We have a quote in the study guide from a nineteenth-century Tibetan lama named Shabkar, a wonderful writer and practitioner. He says: "When you look carefully, you won't find the merest speck of real mind you can put your finger on and say, 'this is it.' And not finding anything is an incredible find. Friends, to start with, mind doesn't emerge from anything. It isn't anywhere. It has no shape or color. And in the end, nowhere to go."

When we turn to awareness and look for this factor called mind, the not finding anything is significant. What this not finding means is that mind is empty—it's not a thing, not substantial. But you also couldn't say there's nothing there, because it keeps functioning. It keeps revealing the phenomena of the world. So you can't say it doesn't exist, but you also can't find it as something substantial, as a thing.

Its basic ability is knowing—we could also say cognizing. But it's also empty. You can look at this in your own experience. When we went into the Pervading Metta meditation, if you felt that boundless quality of space, you could sense that most of it is just

open. When you look around this room tonight, there are people and things, but much of the room is open space. As you let your awareness fill the room, you realize that much of your awareness is open space—nothing in it, not full. There are some things in it, but it's not full.

This opening to the vast emptiness of awareness points out a fundamental feature of it. In this expansive view, this is sometimes called big mind. As Suzuki Roshi says in quote 61: "Big mind experiences everything within itself. That everything is included within your mind is the essence of mind."

To experience this is to have religious feeling.

Based on this term "big mind," the meditation practice called Big Mind was developed by Joseph, and we'll introduce that in a couple more days—the Big Mind meditation. The feeling that everything is happening within your own mind is to have a big mind.

This vastness reveals an emptiness that is like space. We say the space in a room contains all the physical elements that are in the room. And the space of awareness includes all the arisings that come moment after moment at the six sense doors. They don't fill it up. There's always room for a new arising. If the mind were full, I'd hit that bell and it wouldn't arise because the mind was jammed up with too much other stuff. But there's always room for one more. That's the basic emptiness of awareness.

Another way to think of this emptiness is that nothing is stuck in the mind that's been there from the very beginning. It's like all the furniture in this room. Once this room was built and they took the construction equipment out and people walked in, it was empty. There were no chairs, there were no cushions, there were no people, there was no Buddha statue. But little by little, they brought all of those things in and the space of the room started to get filled up. But in this room, because of the original emptiness, everything could be taken out again, right? All the furniture could be taken out of this room and then it would be back to its original emptiness.

The mind is the same way. Nothing is stuck there. Nothing is there from the beginning. So anything that has taken up a home within the mind can be taken out again. This is tremendously freeing. Any concepts you have about yourself, any judgments about yourself, any old karmic patterns, any afflictive emotions that have taken root, any kind of suffering at all wasn't there from the beginning. And because of that, it can be moved out like furniture. That's the liberating potential of our dharma practice. That's the liberating potential of understanding the emptiness of awareness. Nothing in the mind is fixed or stuck there.

All different forms of suffering have come about because of particular causes and conditions. And because they've arisen due to causes and conditions, they can cease when the causes and conditions change. That's what dependent arising says: when this arises, that arises; when this ceases, that ceases. Anything that's arisen can also cease. And that's why we can move from the truth of suffering to the end of suffering. That can cease.

When we discover this empty nature, that in itself is freeing. And it produces a lot of faith. We can see the original emptiness of mind. We know nothing is fixed. And then we just have to do the work, which is not easy. But we recognize that emptiness. We recognize it can be done.

There's one important difference between the space of awareness and the space in the room. The space in the room doesn't know the chair, doesn't know the bell, doesn't know the person. It's not conscious space. The space of awareness knows bell, chair, person. Awareness has a greater property than physical space. Awareness has emptiness and it has knowing.

As you feel into it—somebody mentioned this in an interview—the empty space and the knowing are not separate with awareness. They can't be separate. They can't be separated. In the empty space, there is knowing. Joseph sums this up nicely. He talks about the cognizing power of emptiness. As you get in touch with the empty space that you feel internally, it already knows. It knows whatever appears. It's the cognizing power of emptiness.

So there are basically these two qualities that are together in the mind.

There's emptiness on the one hand and there's awareness or knowing on the other. These two are joined. They're not separate and they can't be separated. They're united. They are a union. This is the description of the mind. The mind is a union of emptiness and awareness.

This is not just your mind or my mind. It's every mind. It's the human mind. It's the turkey mind. It's the duck mind. It's the mosquito mind. Every sentient being has this empty knowing combination. And this is to be developed.

Another quotation from the study guide appears on page ten. The Buddha is giving meditation advice to his son, whose name is Rahula. I'm not sure what age—I think Rahula was quite young when he was getting this advice. The Buddha said, "Rahula, develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space,

arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like space."

Space is not established anywhere, awareness is not established anywhere. That means it's not solid. It's not graspable. It's not a thing. It's not established. This is unentangled knowing. Arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts do not invade the mind and remain. This is what awareness opens the door to for us. That's why it's such a refuge.

On another couple of pages, Ajahn Buddhadasa has a very nice way of saying it. On page twelve, quote number seventy-four, he says, "We should call the mind emptiness, but because of its awareness we call it mind." This cognizing quality is what makes mind.

In our meditation, we want to move in the direction of recognizing this union. We want to find awareness, which takes practice, but you can do it. Asking the question, are you aware? The awareness will be there, will be felt. Can you turn to it and see that it's empty?

This will take some investigation. When I first started doing this, I had to ask a lot of questions, which don't help the meditation, but I had to go through it. I turned to awareness—yes, I got awareness. I'm aware, I'm knowing things. I definitely know I'm aware. Is it empty? I'd say, okay, it's wide. There's a lot of space in between the arisings. I guess it feels spacious and that space is kind of empty. Is there a self congealing there? Oh, I don't know. It's not too much of a self there. It's kind of empty in that way.

So I would ask those questions and investigate and find that it was actually empty the way it was supposed to be. But it took me a while to have confidence in that. After investigating it again and again and again, I could turn my mind and recognize awareness and it was really clear it was also empty. I could turn to awareness and also see its emptiness and I could see those together.

Once I could do that, then I developed more and more ability just to rest in that. That knowing of the union of awareness and emptiness. Awareness and space, if you like.

Now, there's one other thing that happens when you can recognize the union of emptiness and awareness.

And this is explained by Shabkar on page 11. This is the quote we mentioned at the very beginning of the retreat—one of my favorite quotes in the study guide. It's quote 67. I'll read the whole thing, but there's one sentence I especially like.

"Not being fixed is something. Mind is beyond presence and absence. It neither comes nor goes, gets born nor dies, is illuminated nor obscured."

Does your study guide read differently? Does it say "neither illuminates nor obscures"? Yes, I think that's a mistranslation. I checked another source that I regard as more reliable, and they put it differently—"is neither illuminated nor obscured." So I'm going with that version.

And then this is the key phrase: "Mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive. Stripped bare of samsaric error, mind itself is surely and always Buddha."

This points to that unstained purity of awareness that's not touched by the kilesas. The basic nature of mind is not contaminated. It's not touched by greed, aversion, and delusion. Its nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal—intrinsically empty, that's the emptiness piece—naturally radiant. So "radiant" is the aware piece, as though the light of the mind is illuminating the phenomena, lighting up and radiating all the phenomena that arise.

Sometimes this is called radiant, sometimes luminosity, sometimes clarity, sometimes cognizance, sometimes awareness. These are all synonyms for the lighting up of phenomena.

When you have these two together—the emptiness and the cognizance—you open into the third quality, which is "ceaselessly responsive." What this means is that when you can touch that empty awareness, all the treasures of the heart start to come through. The treasures of the heart are the beautiful qualities we've been exploring, that you've known from your meditation: loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, wisdom, patience. You can go through the whole list of paramis. They start to come out of this empty awareness because part of emptiness is non-contraction, non-self, non-clinging, non-grasping.

When the heart is contracted with kilesas, you won't be able to clearly see the empty awareness. It's not empty—it's full of self at that point. When that clinging, grasping fixation is released, you can see the emptiness, you can see the awareness, and that's when the heart qualities come through.

So when the heart is not constricted by grasping, then it opens up and responds with all the treasures, all the beautiful qualities that are potential within us. As we connect with the empty awareness, the doors are open for these beautiful qualities: peace, contentment, joy, love, compassion.

This is where the practice of awareness leads us—into this state of freedom.

So we want to develop first the recognition of emptiness joined with awareness, and then start to notice how the unburdened heart responds in that situation.

I'm just going to close with this quote from Rumi. It's called "Tending Two Shops."

Rumi says: "Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller. Checkmate this way, checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free swimming fish."

Let's just sit for a minute.

Mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive. Stripped bare of samsaric error, mind itself is surely and always Buddha.

So we have about thirty minutes for walking meditation, then the final sit with chanting at nine. Tomorrow in the instructions, we'll look at some specific ways to get in touch with this empty awareness as a unity. We'll look at that in terms of meditation.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 174

Nature of Awareness, Part 2

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this second talk on awareness, Guy Armstrong weaves together classical Buddhist teachings with contemporary practice insights, beginning with an inspiring account of Ajahn Sumedho's visit and early ascetic training. Armstrong explores the nature of mind through three aspects found in later Buddhist schools: emptiness, cognizance, and responsiveness - collectively known as Buddha nature or Tathāgatagarbha (womb of the Buddhas). While acknowledging this formulation post-dates the Buddha, he finds hints in the Pali Canon, particularly in passages describing the mind's radiant nature and consciousness as "signless, boundless, luminous all around." Drawing from Thai Forest teachers like Ajahn Jumnian and Ajahn Mahābua, Armstrong addresses the controversial question of whether awareness partakes of the unconditioned, offering a skillful means approach that avoids rigid metaphysical positions. He provides detailed practical instructions for recognizing empty awareness, distinguishing it from choiceless attention practice, and integrating formless awareness practice with object-oriented meditation. The talk emphasizes trusting one's experience of growing freedom while learning to rest in the nature of mind without grasping.*

This evening I want to continue the talk on the nature of awareness that we started last night.

But before I get into the content, I just want to mention something about today. You may have noticed some orange-robed gentlemen wandering around the place this afternoon. We had a visit from three monks. We were visiting with them over at Joseph's house for a little bit, and then they took a tour of the Forest Refuge. The senior monk was Ajahn Sumedho. He's been staying at a branch monastery in New Hampshire that's a little over an hour away, and he thought that as long as he's in the neighborhood, he'd like to come by and visit with Joseph. So Joseph invited Sally and me to join them.

Sally and I have had a relationship with Ajahn Sumedho for a long time. I first met him when he came to IMS in around 1978 or 1979. Then when we were living in England, we had the chance to meet with him and we practiced with him on different retreats. He's been an important teacher for both of us. So it was just lovely today to be able to visit and then show him a little bit of this facility. Sorry if any of the talking and visiting disturbed your silence, but he's a very venerable and esteemed teacher. He's one of the few people that I regard as a Western master. I definitely put him in that cat-

egory. His teachings are highly recommended—books and many talks on the website that are wonderful to listen to. He talks a lot about the quality of awareness. I think his most recent book was called Intuitive Awareness.

It was interesting chatting and getting him to talk about some of his early years of practice. It was not this nice in the early years. He was the first Western disciple of Ajahn Chah, practicing at Wat Ba Pong before Ajahn Chah became famous and before it was very well known or well supported. The food was very simple, the accommodations were rough. He talked about Ajahn Chah giving five-hour dharma talks in the evening, and he would have to sit quietly, basically on a concrete floor covered by a thin mat, through the five hours of the dharma talk.

Then he decided to take a more ascetic route for a while. That was not quite challenge enough. So he asked Ajahn Chah if he could go practice at this remote mountain facility. It was a beautiful spot, but it was way off the beaten track—way out in the country on top of a mountain. There was a little hut, and you had to walk a couple of miles off the road and then ascend on ladders at times up to the top of the mountain. It was beautiful, natural, unspoiled.

He stayed there for about six months practicing. Of course, there was not a teacher there who spoke any English, so he was really on his own. The food, he described using the word "coarse"—I would take that as an understatement. Insects were a staple part of the diet in that part of rural Thailand at the time. There probably wasn't a lot besides rice that was offered to him.

While he was there, he got very ill. He came down with malaria. Malaria, if you haven't heard it described, is a really awful disease with fever and shaking—you feel really terrible. So he got malaria, and of course, way out in the rural mountains, there was no doctor around. He was just struggling through this malaria with coarse food and, he said, swarming flies that would fly into his nose and ears all day long. He was almost too tired and weak to bat them away.

Finally, he was taken down the mountain. He couldn't get down the mountain on his own. He was carried by two men, probably from the village nearby, and they were going to arrange for him to get to a doctor. But meanwhile, while he was waiting, this voice came to him and it said, "Practice anapanasati." So even in his weak condition, he sat up and began paying attention to the breath at the nose, focused all the energy he could, all the attention he could, on that experience. He said in a week he was cured.

He then lived with Ajahn Chah for another few years in Thailand before coming to the West to establish Amaravati Monastery and now many branch monasteries here. So it was wonderful to see him.

He was reflecting that even though the early years of his practice were very difficult, he doesn't remember the pain of it now. But what he's really grateful for is how he's transformed his heart and mind. And now he lives with this great cheerfulness, happiness, contentment from his deep dharma insight. So I find that a really inspiring reminder.

Your time here will go through ups and downs and it will be challenging and it will be difficult at times emotionally and physically. And years later you won't remember that part. You'll be so grateful for all the openness that you've brought into your mind as a result of your dedication to practice. So it was wonderful to see him, a real uplift for our day.

The Nature of Awareness

So, the nature of awareness. We had gotten to the point in the talk last night where we were talking about the mind's nature as having these three aspects: The essence is emptiness. The function is awareness or cognizance. And its capacity, its potential, is responsiveness. That is, when it rests, it has the potential to bring out these beautiful qualities—love, wisdom, patience, equanimity, compassion, and so forth.

In the whole tradition of Buddhism, and this came several hundred years after the death of the Buddha, these combinations were first outlined by a later Buddhist school in India known as the Yogacara school. And this combination of the three qualities—emptiness, cognizance, and responsiveness—as defining or describing the nature of mind came to be known as Buddha nature.

So you may have heard this term, Buddha nature. This is what it means. It means the nature of our mind is composed of emptiness, cognizance, and responsiveness.

Now, I think Buddha nature is not the best translation of the earlier Sanskrit term. The earlier term is *Tathagatagarbha*. *Tathagata*, you may know, is one of the names—it's the name the Buddha usually used to refer to himself. It's a Pali word also. And *garbha* means womb in Sanskrit. So *Tathagatagarbha* literally means the womb of the Buddhas.

So this nature that we all have is the womb from which awakening comes. And that is to say that each of us has this nature as the seed of awakening within us. Every human being has this as our potential—this nature. So I like thinking of it as a womb because that shows it as a potential, whereas when you call it Buddha nature, it sounds like it's an existent thing within us. It's our potential in this nature of mind.

So the question is, did the Buddha talk about this in the Pali discourses? In his time, did he talk about these qualities? And I have to say, not exactly. But there are some hints that kind of lean in this direction.

Let's take a look at a couple. "This mind, O bhikkhus, is radiant, but it is obscured by visiting defilements. The untaught ordinary person does not understand this as it really is, so for them there is no development of mind. This mind, oh bhikkhus, is radiant and it is freed from visiting defilements. The instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is, so for them there is development of mind."

So the Buddha is pointing to the radiance of the mind, which is a synonym for the luminosity, clarity, cognizance that we talked about last night. So here's a pointing to the luminosity of mind, similar to this later description.

And then one that I find even more suggestive is where someone has come to the Buddha who's not a follower, but he's asking what to him is an important question. He says, "Where are the four elements destroyed?" meaning the physical world, the physical world composed of the four elements, where are they destroyed?

And the Buddha says, that's not the right question, because that implies kind of getting rid of existence. The Buddha says the right question is, where do they find no footing? Which is a way of saying, where are they not made solid and substantial? Where can they not land?

So he rephrases the question and then he answers it. He rephrases it: Where do earth, water, fire, and air, the four elements, find no footing? Where are name and form completely destroyed?

So this question has been debated in Buddhist circles for about fifteen hundred years. We're probably not going to resolve it tonight. But I think it's interesting to consider the possibility of something about this field being ongoing.

This is where we get into different ways of interpreting the Buddha's teaching. In the Pali tradition, everything conditioned is impermanent - that's absolutely clear. But this field of awareness we're pointing to might not be conditioned in the same way that objects of awareness are conditioned.

When you rest in this open awareness, does it feel like it's being manufactured moment by moment? Or does it feel more like you're discovering something that's already here, that's been here all along? Like when clouds part and reveal the sky - the sky wasn't created by the parting of the clouds. The sky was already there.

This is one way to think about this question. Some schools of Buddhism would say this awareness-nature is indeed permanent, not in the sense of being a thing that lasts forever, but in the sense of being the unchanging ground in which all changing appears. Other schools would say no, everything without exception is impermanent, including this field of awareness.

What's beautiful is that for our practice, this philosophical question doesn't need to be resolved. Whether this awareness is permanent or impermanent, what matters is learning to rest in it, to recognize it, to let it be our home base. What matters is discovering that in this field, the grasping mind relaxes. In this field, objects arise and pass away without getting a foothold.

The practical instruction remains the same: get familiar with this dimension of your experience that is like space - open, cognizant, responsive. Learn to trust it. Learn to rest in it. Let it teach you what it wants to teach you about the nature of mind, the nature of suffering, the nature of freedom.

I don't know if you remember from last night's talk, when I asked: sensations are being known—but known by what? In other words, is there something behind consciousness that's doing the knowing? We decided to explore that and call it mind.

What we're suggesting here—what the later tradition suggests, not the Pali discourses—is that this thing called mind, which is Buddha nature, is not subject to arising and passing, but is in some way always there.

So the question becomes: is awareness part of the unconditioned? Is it related to Nibbana? Is this thing called mind synonymous with Nibbana? Or another way to ask it: does Nibbana have an aspect of knowing as part of it?

There are different views on this question. Some schools say yes. Other schools say no, that's delusion—that's fake news. And because the Buddha never said it explicitly, there are grounds for saying no, it's not like that. But if you look at your own experience, you might feel there's something ongoing that you could say is the source of this awareness.

Different schools have different views on this, and we don't have to settle it tonight. But I want to suggest a way we could see it that reconciles these two perspectives.

Many of you are familiar with this. We're going to do a little thought experiment where we go out to the edge of our solar system. So we're out in space. We have a space suit, we can breathe. Our back is to the sun, but we're on the edge, so we're not seeing other planets. We're looking just out into space. And let's say, for the sake of argument—we can make this up—we're looking into a part of the sky where there aren't any stars. The sun is behind us, we're looking out into space. No stars.

What do you see? It's dark, isn't it? It's just blackness out there.

So is it the black that comes from a black crayon or black spray paint? Or is it the black that's the absence of light? Just the absence of light, isn't it? No light coming to our eyes because we're looking at a part of the sky, of space, that doesn't have any stars. So we don't see any light.

But is there light there? Your back's to the sun. You're on the edge of the solar system. Is there light in front of you? Yes. The sun's light is pervading. Your shadow is negligible. The sun's light is pervading that space, but we don't see it.

Now, imagine that a meteor shoots by in front of you, comes up from below, whizzes by. Do you see it? You do, don't you? Because the sunlight reflects off it back to your eyes. But then it's gone.

So this is an analogy for what may be happening with something that's ongoing and something that's impermanent. The analogy is this: the sunlight pervading empty space is the radiance of Buddha nature, of the nature of mind. It's always there. It's not really subject to arising and passing. Sunlight is always there.

When the meteor flashes by and there's light reflected to our eyes just for a moment, that's the illumination of a sense object that is impermanent. So that's the analogy for consciousness. Sunlight pervading empty space.

Buddha nature, ongoing, not subject to impermanence. The flash of light that comes off the meteor, comes and goes—that is consciousness that knows that particular object so briefly.

One of the things I find interesting about this analogy is that it can reconcile the two views: something ongoing in the nature of mind, and something impermanent in the flash of consciousness. The other thing I find interesting is that it's the same light in both cases. One is reflected and momentary, the other is pervading and ongoing. It's the same luminosity, or you could say cognizance. So in a way, it's saying that we're holding that light all the time, but the only way we see it is when it reflects off a sense object. The knowing of a sense object is what brings it home to us.

So this analogy suggests that the cognizance and the emptiness and the responsiveness that are part of the nature of mind are ongoing. And you could almost say that the light pervading empty space is the unborn, because it doesn't have any shape. It doesn't have any color. We don't notice it. But as soon as it illuminates something, it then shows up—shape and color.

Suzuki Roshi in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* has this very nice line. He says, "It is necessary for us to believe in something that has no form or color, but is always ready to take on form and color. This is Buddha nature." It itself, we can't find form and color, but it's always ready to take on form and color.

And this connection with the unborn is very interesting. There's a beautiful quotation in the Udana about the unborn that goes like this: "There is this unborn, unbecome, unproduced, unconditioned. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unproduced, unconditioned, there would be no escape from what is born, become, produced, conditioned. But because there is this unborn, unbecome, unproduced, unconditioned, an escape can be seen from what is born, become, produced, and conditioned."

So the unborn is pointing to the deathless. What isn't born doesn't die. This is a synonym for nibbana. That which is unborn and unconditioned provides the escape from what is born and conditioned, the relief from the field of suffering.

Not only is this found in the later Buddhist schools from India, but it's also found within the Thai forest tradition. We can look at a quotation from Ajahn Jumnian, a Thai forest teacher who's still alive. He says, "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and the actual term he used was *mahasati*, great mindfulness—"is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

I like that he says the pure space of knowing, because that's one of the things we talked about regarding awareness—its purity. It's not affected by the kilesas. It doesn't mind the kilesas. It doesn't acquire them. They don't stain it. Consciousness has a purity when we can tune into it and recognize it. And then it's not giving rise to birth and death. That's why it's a place of the deathless. Phenomena come and go. This other is the dharma of the deathless.

Even more explicitly, there's this quotation from Ajahn Mahabua, another great Thai forest master who died a few years ago. In his book *Straight from the Heart*, he gives an account of his meditation experience leading up to basically a declaration of his arahantship. This is very interesting and very rare because mostly monks don't describe their arahantship. And he doesn't call it that, but if you read the account of his meditations, you know that's what's going on in his estimation.

He says: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws."

The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration. This is very interesting. Personally, I find this inspiring because it suggests that as we connect with consciousness, as we connect with awareness, we're linking back to this thing that is undying—that is the deathless, that is the avenue to liberation. So you might start to get a sense for that as you practice.

I don't know if you have read Joseph's book called One Dharma, but he became very intensely occupied with this question of which view is right when he first started being exposed to the view that the nature of mind may be undying. Because all his training in the Burmese tradition was there's nothing beyond consciousness—it's all impermanent and that's it. And so he was really wrestling with this dilemma for a while in his practice and it became, it had him in its grip. And he explains how he sort of resolved it in his own understanding as understanding that both of these views were skillful means. And he could use the view without coming to a solid belief about which one was right. And that was his way through.

And we can do the same. We can use the meditation practice of awareness with the sense of its inclining to the deathless, without having to take a position, a final position, on the metaphysics of it. So I was sitting in a retreat one time with Ajahn Sumedho, and he talks a lot about awareness and its connection to the deathless. He's kind of in that Thai forest camp. And so I went in for an interview with him, and I've gone through the same questioning, and I said, "Ajahn, there's this one view that awareness really partakes of the deathless, which you find in the Thai forest. And there's this other view that it's all impermanent. There's nothing else besides the impermanence of the five aggregates. How did you reconcile those two in your own practice?"

And he said, "Oh, I never worried about that." He said, "This practice worked for me." So we can do that too. We can not worry about it. Use the practices, see what suits you, and you don't have to take a metaphysical stand. I don't think metaphysics liberates anyone. But your own practice from a place of trust.

Another thing that Ajahn Sumedho said, which I thought was interesting, he said, "Western yogis don't trust themselves enough. They need to trust their own experience." This is really true in the practice of awareness because sometimes there are not such clear signposts along the way. You have to trust what's evolving for you, especially in this area.

One of the things you can really trust in is the sense of freedom that comes when you open to this empty awareness. As you connect with it, as you recognize it, as you learn to rest within it, there is a growing sense of freedom that comes. That is really trustworthy. Whether you think it's connected to nibbana or not is up to you. I find it inspiring, but you don't have to feel that. But the freedom is the key point. The way it releases us from entanglement with objects and takes us out of some suffering—that is real.

And it's a little bit like, I don't know if you've ever been in a neighborhood that had a bread factory, but it smells great. You know, you get near the bread factory and you get that fresh bread baking aroma, and you just kind of want to follow the smell to see where the factory is because it gets stronger and stronger. This sense of freedom that comes from empty awareness is like the aroma from a bread factory. Just follow that scent and the freedom continues to grow. That is really trustworthy.

So we talked this morning about specific ways to access this freedom—empty knowing. And I just wanted to talk about a couple of other practice specifics tonight. One is this practice can look a lot like the choiceless attention that we practiced in the instructions from Mahasi Sayadaw. In choiceless attention, we open the mind in a wide way and we notice each arising at different sense doors. We can notice an in-breath and we note it. We can notice a sensation and we note it. We can notice a sound and we note that. We can notice a mood, we note that.

We can notice a thought and we note that.

So the mind is very open and it's connecting at all six sense doors, one after another. Similarly, when we're practicing awareness, we're very open and we notice things. Is this the same practice as choiceless attention? No.

In choiceless attention, we are still mostly interested in the objects. So when an object arises—let's say a sound—we connect the attention there, and that's the quality of vitaka. We connect the attention there and we sustain it. We rub it long enough to really know the nature of that sound. And then we'll recognize it as a bird or a door or a footstep or whatever. But rubbing the sound is what that practice is about.

As we rub it, we know its individual characteristics. We also know its universal characteristics, which are that it's impermanent, it's unsatisfactory, and it's not self. That's why we rub it. We want to get to know the object clearly and closely. So there's vitaka, connecting, and then there's vicara, sustaining or rubbing, just long enough to know each object when it arises. This is the practice of choiceless attention.

In the practice of awareness of awareness, we will still notice objects arising. We don't take the step of connecting and sustaining. We let them arise and then just let them go. We don't direct the attention there to land, connect and rub. We keep the attention on the broad field of awareness. And that's when it feels like things are just kind of coming up, touching a wall, and falling down. Coming up, touching a wall, and falling down. And that's one way that we keep from getting entangled with those objects, with those sense phenomena.

Another question that came up in the hall about awareness practice is basically, how do you know if you're doing it right? And this is kind of the nub of the matter. It's hard to know in the beginning because it's not so clear. And this is where it's really helpful to take one of those techniques for connecting with awareness: turning the mind back, asking who is looking, making the statement "aware of awareness," or simply the question, "Am I aware?"

Take what you get and then trust in that. We have to trust in something here. Trust in that and see where it goes.

Now as you start to rest in that, one of the ways to check if it's authentic is: are you still aware of impermanence? In other words, with the open awareness, are you still knowing objects arising and passing? You don't connect and sustain to them, but is that within your field of experience? Because you could get in this open space and kind of go into trance, where the senses are shut down and you're sort of wrapped up and cut off.

But in the openness, you should still be knowing things coming and going. So if that's true—feels wide, expansive, somewhat settled, but you know things are coming and going—that's a good sign.

So we talked this morning about adding emptiness to the seeing. You want to see awareness, and you also want to see emptiness. And then to see that they're joined—they're not two things, but they're one thing merged or indivisible.

So at first, I think I mentioned, I had to reflect a lot on the emptiness piece. The awareness piece was pretty clear. I was knowing things. I was aware. The emptiness piece was a little harder to find. But it's worth investigating so that you can get some confidence. Because eventually you want to look and see emptiness and awareness with one glance.

So at first you put these techniques in and it takes a few seconds. You say, "Am I aware?" or "aware of awareness" or turning back to awareness—it takes a few seconds. But as you get more skilled in it, it's very immediate. You just have the intention to see it.

And it comes, the emptiness and awareness together. So that's where you want to be aiming your practice—to see the emptiness and the awareness with a glance.

If the emptiness is ripe, mature, and full, there won't be a self in it. That means there won't be grasping—there won't be big grasping in it. This openness reveals the absence of a center that's pulled together by contraction. So when there's opening to emptiness and awareness, it should feel spacious and not contracted. This means there's no self-ing, no grasping. It means the kilesas aren't there—greed, aversion, and delusion are absent. Therefore, the mind is getting purified. As you rest in that place, it's getting purified.

When you can rest in empty awareness, the beautiful qualities of the heart come forth as responsiveness.

This brings up a question: Do all beings have empty awareness? This Buddha nature exists in all beings—the emptiness, the cognizance, the capacity for responsiveness. Are all beings manifesting beautiful qualities of heart and mind all the time? No. But as practitioners, you are developing this skill.

In this approach, what makes the difference? All beings have empty awareness. What creates the distinction? Yogis recognize it, and uninstructed worldlings don't. You recognize it as the nature of your own mind. Those who haven't been instructed don't. That's what makes the difference. That's what opens the door to responsiveness.

It's said that there is one nature for beings but two paths. One path simply acts out one's habits of mind and karmic patterns because there is not clear seeing. The other path recognizes the nature of mind and unlocks the door to all the beautiful qualities of heart and mind. This is what leads us out of suffering and into freedom.

So it's all about this recognition—recognizing awareness first, and then the union of emptiness and awareness. That's what unlocks the door.

When we went through the techniques this morning, we talked about turning to awareness and recognizing it. Start to add in there: recognize the empty awareness. See emptiness and awareness together, and then rest.

The fourth step is release. As you're resting, you don't need to try to make it stay longer. You don't need to try to prolong it. If you did, that would be a form of desire. What we're trusting in this practice approach is the purification of heart and mind that comes from resting in the nature of mind. We're trusting the nature of mind to do the work.

Our only work is to turn and recognize it. We can't even say that we do the recognizing—we turn, and recognition either happens or it doesn't. All we can do is turn. But as we become more familiar with it, recognition happens more and more often.

Once you've recognized, just rest. You let go of effort, let go of trying, let go of doing. Just rest. In that, you're trusting this pure nature to do the work of the path for you, on you.

It used to be, when I was starting out, I would say to myself, "Okay, I'll rest and I'll stay there as long as I can." But then I realized that wasn't the right way to say it. I changed it to "I will stay as long as it stays"—because it's up to the thing and not up to me.

So don't make this attempt to escape from phenomena, but rather recognize that awareness is the space in which phenomena appear. The sounds, the sensations, the thoughts—they're all arising within awareness itself. You're not trying to get away from them; you're recognizing the open space that holds them all.

Another near relative that can arise is making awareness into an object of concentration. This happens when you focus on awareness as if it were a thing you could grasp or hold onto. But awareness isn't an object—it's the knowing itself. It's not something you concentrate on; it's what you rest as. This is a subtle but important distinction.

Sometimes you might find yourself in a very peaceful state, and you think, "Ah, this must be it." But if you're holding onto that peaceful state, trying to maintain it or make it last, then you've moved away from the effortless resting we're pointing to. The peace is lovely, but don't make it into another project for the mind.

Another thing that can happen is what I call "awareness as a mood." You create a particular feeling or atmosphere and think that's the recognition. But the nature of awareness isn't a mood or a feeling—it's what's aware of all moods and feelings. It's more fundamental than any particular state.

And sometimes there can be a subtle sense of "I am aware" or "I am the awareness." But even that "I am" is still a thought arising in awareness. The recognition we're pointing to is prior to any sense of self, even a spiritual sense of self. It's the pure knowing before the "I" claims it.

So as you continue to practice, keep refining. Keep letting go of anything that feels like effort or doing. Keep returning to that simple recognition and rest. Trust that this pure nature of mind knows how to reveal itself when you get out of the way.

The beauty of this practice is its simplicity. We're not trying to create anything or achieve anything. We're simply recognizing what's already here, what's always been here. And in that recognition, we rest. That's the whole practice.

And that's really awareness. That's a kind of attempt to dissociate, to disconnect from phenomena.

So that's why it's important to see that when you're resting in awareness, you're still noticing objects. You notice them coming and going. So you're not separate. Awareness and objects are always there together. Consciousness comes with objects. Awareness is the field of consciousness. So they come together.

But then the question comes up: okay, I feel my awareness out here. What object am I aware of? Space. Sometimes we're aware of physical space. That's the object that's being met with awareness. So awareness always comes with objects until some altered state happens. There are altered states where that changes, but ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, awareness comes with objects.

Another way that sometimes people misunderstand the practice is they say, "Oh yeah, I'm doing that practice that you talk about, but I'm just being. I'm doing the practice of just being. That's what you're talking about, right?" No. Dogs and cats and babies

are really good at just being. But in dogs and cats and babies, the recognition of empty awareness is not happening. The light of mindfulness is not turned on. The light of wisdom is not turned on.

So there's more going on here than just being. The key is the awareness. The awareness is smart. The wisdom comes in through the cognizance, through the awareness. And that's really what we're growing. So just being doesn't really do it either in mindfulness practice or in awareness practice.

And then one other thing that comes in is exactly what was mentioned in a question this morning about feeling that there's a center to the awareness which is in the head. This is a really common experience that probably all of us have or have had. And it's just our conditioning coming through that we identify with—basically we identify with consciousness and construct a sense of "I am the observer." And that "I" tends to get located in the center of the head.

So it's very deeply conditioned. It's a rare moment, I think, when that isn't present to some extent. But as meditation deepens, as wisdom deepens, as we explore that sense, as we look at locating the center in other places, we realize that it's just a construction. And there can be moments when we're free of it.

One thing that can be interesting to try in playing with this—don't get the sense that you're wrong if you have a sense of an observer. It's just part of the karmic conditioning playing out the same way we still have greed, aversion, delusion, the same way we still have hope and fear. It's not a huge deal. As meditation deepens, it can change.

But if you want to play with it, one of the things you can do is take the awareness, wherever it's being directed, and turn it toward the observer. And just ask, "Oh, who's looking?" And then you'll see if there's anything there or not. Perhaps.

In the last minutes I want to talk a little bit about integrating the practice we're doing now—the awareness practice—with our earlier practices of breath and metta, or any other practices you're doing: choiceless attention, or body sweeping, or compassion practice. And we'll put these all in the category of object-oriented practices. These are practices where we're bringing our attention to objects, whether it be the breath or sensations or metta phrases.

But we're moving now into a phase where we're putting our attention into formless practices. The awareness practice is a formless practice. You will find it really helpful in this last part of the retreat to work with integrating these two types of practice. They're both really valuable practices.

So what is the value of an object-oriented practice? It gives a really good place to collect the mind around, to collect the attention. An object gives something for concentration to develop around. And the purpose of concentration is stability, and the purpose of stability is insight.

So when you're with the formless practice, what's the risk? Moving into space can lead to spacing out.

There's not a clear enough focus sometimes and the mind goes off thinking, thinking, thinking, drifting, drifting, drifting. And as we said early on, distracting thoughts are not just a distraction. They are the feeding ground for the *kilesas*. When we go into distracting thoughts, we go into past and future. We go into hope and regret. We go into fear and worry. So these excursions come with a price. The price is they stir us up.

When you are with the awareness practice and you find your mind getting distracted and lost in thought, that's a good time to come back and collect with an object-oriented practice. It could be any—breath, body, choiceless attention, body scan, *mettā*, compassion, any of those. Once the attention has gotten stabilized again and you feel you're pretty present, open up again to empty awareness.

So in these remaining days of the retreat, have as part of your intention: I'm going to learn how to integrate these two. I'm going to know when I need to be with objects and when I can really go formless and still stay present. The staying present is the key thing.

Just one other point about this formless practice. When you open up to true emptiness and awareness, it happens in a place without grasping. That's part of the emptiness. The self is not being constructed out of grasping at that point. And then from time to time, of course, grasping will come back again. That's just what we do—so deeply conditioned.

So you can make, in a way, a focus of your practice: Are you in a place of openness, emptiness, and awareness? You'll feel this as a free, relatively free place—ease, peace, settledness. And then notice when the grasping happens. You'll feel it as a physical contraction, taking hold, fixating, obsessing, clinging. And so your practice can be a noticing of: is there openness or is there contraction? Freedom or clinging? Clinging always leads to suffering, gross or subtle. So that can become an interesting exploration. You just watch. The mind's going to go back and forth so many times. Openness, grasping. Openness, grasping. We can learn from that.

I want to close with a quote from Patrul Rinpoche, who was a Tibetan yogi and teacher from the 19th century. He summed up the practice very nicely:

"Don't dwell on the past. Don't invite the future. Don't alter the innate wakefulness. Don't fear phenomena. Apart from that, there's not a damn thing."

Let's just sit for a minute.

"There is this unborn, unbecome, unproduced, unconditioned. If there were not, there would be no escape from what is born, become, produced, conditioned. But because there is, there is an escape from what is born, become, produced, conditioned."

So we have about thirty minutes for walking practice and then the last sitting of the day with the chanting. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 175

Morning Instructions: Natural State

Guy Armstrong · 41 min

> *In this gentle morning instruction from the Forest Refuge, Guy Armstrong shifts from detailed explanations to the profound simplicity of meditation practice. Drawing on the wisdom of Ajahn Chah, he explores the concept of the mind's 'original nature' - a state of intrinsic purity and peace that exists when not stirred by lobha (greed), dosa (aversion), and moha (delusion). Armstrong introduces the key teaching that this natural state of empty awareness is not something we construct, but rather our fundamental condition that emerges when we 'stop messing' with conceptual elaboration.*
>
> *The instruction focuses on recognizing the fundamental choice present in every moment: resting in openness and freedom, or engaging in grasping and clinging (upādāna). This teaching reflects the Buddha's understanding of the mind's natural luminosity mentioned in the Anguttara Nikāya, where consciousness is described as naturally radiant but temporarily obscured by visiting defilements. Armstrong emphasizes that once practitioners can experientially recognize this state, the practice becomes remarkably simple - just seeing it and resting there.*
>
> *This approach offers profound practical guidance for both formal meditation and daily life awareness, helping practitioners distinguish between states of mental freedom and fixation, ultimately pointing toward the effortless abiding in our true nature.*

We have almost exhausted the words of instructions. This morning is going to be very sparse on instructions. In coming days we still have a couple of different meditations we'll want to open to, but for today it's going to turn the corner from explanation to simplicity. You'll find that once you learn to understand and recognize this empty awareness, it doesn't take much. Just see it and rest. This morning, we're going to be emphasizing the simplicity of that.

I want to begin by rereading something that Sally read last night in this quote from Ajahn Chah about this mind: "In truth, there is nothing really wrong with it. It is intrinsically pure. Within itself, it's already peaceful. Our practice is simply to see the original mind."

Another word that's sometimes used for this original mind is the natural state. When the mind isn't stirred up with greed, aversion, confusion, it settles down and relaxes into its natural state, our natural state, which is this empty awareness. We've put a lot of words into the understanding of what this state is, but now that you can find it experientially, you can just go there and rest. Incline toward it, recognize it and rest.

The one thing I'll suggest that you notice today, some in the formal sitting, some throughout the day, is that when you're able to rest in this natural state, grasping is not taking place. And when grasping is taking place, you won't be able to rest and relax in this natural state. The meditation becomes one of moving between the openness of the natural state and the fixation of grasping. That's what I would encourage you to notice today.

Is the mind in a state of openness and freedom? Or is it in a state of clinging, selfing, and grasping? These are always our two options. See which form the mind is in as we go throughout the day. Again, you don't need to investigate a lot when you're resting. It's better to keep free from even investigation in the time of resting. But you'll notice when grasping comes in again, the contrast. Just reflect on it from time to time through the day today.

The instruction for this morning: Rest in the essence of meditation, the natural freedom without fixation.

In your meditations today, try and get a sense for the naturalness of this state of meditation. When it's not being stirred up with our thoughts and grasping, it settles into itself—peace, calm, empty, aware. It's not that we have to go out and construct this empty awareness and the peace; it's already there. We just have to stop messing.

CHAPTER 176

The Aggregates Are Empty

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines how the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) reveal the profound teaching of emptiness. Drawing from the Samyutta Nikāya's famous "lump of foam" discourse and the Buddha's instructions to Bāhiya, he explores two fundamental aspects of śūnyatā: first, that there is no permanent self (attā) at the center of experience, and second, that all conditioned phenomena lack substantial existence. Armstrong skillfully unpacks each aggregate—rūpa (material form), vedanā (feeling tone), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (volitional formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness)—demonstrating how they operate through causes and conditions without an independent controller. He addresses the practical implications for vipassanā meditation, showing how recognition of anattā leads to profound letting go and how understanding the momentary, dreamlike nature of all appearances can transform our relationship to experience. The talk includes guided reflections on releasing identification with body and mind, and concludes with the famous verse from the Diamond Sutra on the fleeting nature of conditioned existence.

The subject of tonight's talk is the aggregates are empty. We've been discussing emptiness in connection with awareness for about a week now, but we really haven't explored it in any detail. So tonight I want to go into the topic of emptiness in a little more depth, speaking about it in terms of the five aggregates.

As many of you know, the aggregates are a framework for describing our whole human experience. Everything that we know as human beings falls under one of the categories of the five aggregates. These aggregates are empty in two ways, which we'll explore. The first is there's no self in the center of them, no one who owns them or to whom they're happening. The second way they're empty is that all the phenomena of the aggregates are insubstantial. These two approaches are called the emptiness of self and the emptiness of phenomena. We want to look at both of these tonight in terms of the aggregates.

We can turn to the study guide if you're interested on page five. Ananda was obviously puzzled by this word too, because he approached the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir, it is said 'empty is the world, empty is the world.' In what way is it said 'empty is the world'?" And the Buddha replied, "It is, Ananda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, 'empty is the world.'"

So the world is empty of self, and yet our personal experience doesn't seem so empty of self. Our personal experience seems to be dominated by the sense of I and mine. It's something that we have to look into. We look at ourselves and we definitely see a self there. We look at another person and we assume there's a self there.

The Visuddhimagga said that this is like someone who's a butcher—excuse the analogy, I'm a longtime vegetarian and I support animal rights, but this analogy is in the text. It's like a butcher who's carving up a cow into pieces of meat for sale. As the butcher cuts it up, he's not saying "cow, cow, cow." In fact, the butcher doesn't do that because he's so familiar with the anatomy that he's going "ribs, tenderloin, sirloin, rump." So the analogy is that if we are really familiar with this mind-body process, we don't say "person." We see what's actually here. We want to look to see the way the Buddha looked, and he didn't look in terms of self.

Because as it says in quote twenty, "In whatever way they conceive of self, the fact is ever other than that." One of my teachers put it a little more directly. He said, "Everything you think is wrong. Everything you think about self, if you believe in one, is wrong. The fact is ever other than that."

When the Buddha looked at a human being, I think he saw in one of two ways. One is the six types of sense organs and their objects. This is described really nicely in quote twenty-two. The Buddha says, "Bhikkhus, what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality. What is the totality? It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. If anyone were to proclaim a totality beyond this, that person would be speaking of something outside their knowledge."

This is really a pretty radical statement. Here we have the founder of one of the world's great religions, one of the most influential humans who's ever lived on the face of the earth, and he's saying the totality on which I am basing my view of things is the six sense organs and their objects. That is your direct human experience of things. We're not talking about some transcendent God figure or Brahman or monotheistic God. The foundation of Buddhism is your direct experience. This is pretty radical.

It's what opens the door for our meditation practice to look at these six classes of objects. This is what Vipassana meditation does. It looks at the sense experience and investigates it because that's what makes us up. So I said the Buddha saw in one of two ways. This is the first way. Bhikkhu Bodhi said that he tended to use this analysis to cut through craving—the analysis through the sense doors. The other way of looking is through the five aggregates. It's describing the same realm of human experience.

The aggregates form a complete map of human experience, with each category representing a different kind of process. When we recognize how these five collections function together, we begin to see the mechanisms that create our sense of being a solid, permanent self.

Let me walk through each aggregate in more detail. The first, material form or rupa, encompasses everything physical. This includes not just our body and all external objects, but also the sense impressions themselves - the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and physical sensations we encounter. Even the interactions between physical forms belong to this category. When I strike this bell, both the bell and the sound it produces are forms of rupa.

The second aggregate, feeling tone or vedana, describes the immediate quality that colors every moment of sense contact. Each experience carries with it a flavor of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant - what we often call neutral. This feeling tone appears instantaneously with any sense contact, before we even recognize what we're experiencing.

Feeling tone holds tremendous significance in the Buddha's teaching. It occupies its own position among the aggregates, forms the second foundation of mindfulness, and serves as a crucial link in dependent origination. Why such importance? Because feeling tone triggers our reactivity. Pleasant experiences generate craving and attachment. Unpleasant ones provoke aversion and resistance. Neutral experiences often get ignored entirely, leading to delusion or ignorance. We can think of feeling tone as the spark that ignites the three poisons.

When I ring this bell, most of you probably experience the sound as pleasant - particularly because it signals the end of sitting! But feeling tone remains subjective. What one person finds delightful, another might find irritating. Consider how differently people respond to the taste of beets or the sound of jazz music. This subjectivity reveals that feeling tone, while seeming automatic, actually involves mental activity. As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, we feel into each experience to discern its pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality.

The third aggregate, perception or saññā, involves recognition based on memory and learned associations. When consciousness encounters a form, perception immediately categorizes it: chair, person, tree, microphone. This process happens so quickly we rarely notice it, yet it fundamentally shapes our experience.

If you examine your visual field carefully - perhaps by closing one eye to flatten the three-dimensional effect - you'll notice it consists simply of shapes and colors. Yet perception instantly organizes these raw sense impressions into meaningful categories drawn from past experience and language. This recognition process proves enormously influential because we respond to the world based on our perceptions, not the raw sense data itself.

A powerful example in the world today is this factor of implicit bias. When we are out and about in the world and we perceive someone of a different race or class or ethnicity, we often form a quick assumption about them based on that perception. And the perception is biased if we don't know them or know people like them. Generally, implicit bias acts to harm the people who are not in the dominant group of a culture based on that particular attribute.

So in terms of race, the dominant group being white tends to have some implicit bias toward people of color. The dominant group being heterosexual tends to have some implicit bias or judgment against people who are not heterosexual. These are widely culturally held assumptions. It doesn't mean that every one of us sees in this way, but this is what forms a culture—the dominant group having some implicit bias toward a non-dominant group. And it's very harmful. So we need to examine our perceptions, purify our perceptions, clarify our perception so that we see things the way they are.

Sometimes a perception can just keep us from going right to the root and seeing exactly what something is. For instance, sensation in the body, which we label as pain—often we just stop at that and draw back or push it away. But with our mindfulness training, we can penetrate to the actual experience. We can look beyond the label and say, oh, what's actually there? And sometimes when we do that, it's not quite as bad as we had thought. Sometimes the concept is scarier than the actuality of the thing.

Or we label things in the world and we don't look at them closely. Like this white thing that's in front of me right now—we might just think of it as a bell and then we stop looking. But if we look more closely, we might not know what that is. If we haven't been in this hall before, we might not know. And we'd say, is that supposed to be a planter? Is that supposed to be a bowl that a monk or a nun would eat out of? Wow, that would be a big meal.

So, looking past the perception and the label to see what's actually there, we get closer to the reality of the thing. They play with this a lot in Zen koans. You've probably heard this—a Zen master will go, "What is this? If you call it a stick, I will hit you. If you say it is not a stick, I will hit you." All I got from that is if I went to Zen, I'd get hit a lot. That's partly why I ended up in Vipassana.

So perception, we can investigate and clarify and observe. And when we hear this, generally we know that's a bell, that's a meditation bell, that sound. So we recognize it.

The fourth aggregate is called volitional formation, sometimes just mental formations, but I like "volitional formations" as a translation of the Pali word saṅkhāra. So this category includes mostly states of mind, moods, emotions, thoughts, meditative states of mind like mindfulness, concentration, tranquility—all included within this aggregate of volitional formations.

These are the things that form in the mind. One moment they may not be there, the next moment they may form. Mood, emotion, thought, mind state, come and go. But they are mind objects. So, hearing the bell coming at the end of a sitting, we might feel a sense of ease—it's over. And then we might think, oh, now I could sit forever. Somehow that bell just takes away the pressure. I could sit forever. So that feeling of ease and the thought, "I could sit forever"—those are volitional formations.

And the fifth aggregate is consciousness, vijñāna, which we've been exploring a lot, talking about a lot for the last week. It's that knowing quality of mind that reveals sense objects, knows sense objects, illuminates sense objects. It holds our experience, reveals our experience.

So as soon as one hears the bell, there's hearing consciousness with that sound. The two come up together. But we've been training—we can either look at the sound or we can look at the knowing of it. Both are there and we can look at that one experience from either aspect. So the interesting thing about consciousness is it's present with all the other aggregates. It knows the sound.

It knows the feeling tone. It knows the mental formation around the feeling. It knows the perception as well. So consciousness is with all the other aggregates.

Now, I'm not going to open this up tonight for discussion because it would be a long conversation, perhaps. But for you to check: is there anything in your experience that doesn't fit in one of these aggregates? This is a useful investigation. Is every part of your experience able to be slotted into one of the aggregates? I'll leave you to investigate and check that out.

If it's true—which I think it is, having been tested for about 2,500 years now—then this is a complete description of our human experience. Just like the discourse on totality, anybody who tried to talk of something outside this would be speaking of something they didn't know. So we'll take the Buddha's word for it.

Why is this model of the aggregates important? If it describes the whole of our human experience, there's one element it does not include, and that is I, me, my. This list is telling us there is only form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. There's nothing else. There's no "I" that's at the center of it, who's experiencing it all, to whom the aggregates happen, who owns them, or who controls them.

These are hidden assumptions when we think of a self. We're at the center. We're independent of things. We experience hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, and so forth. Or, "I am the thinker. The thoughts come from me. I'm making them happen. I'm in control of my emotions." The self is woven into all these false assumptions, but there is only form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness.

We start to see that all of these aggregates have their own causes and conditions. They're all unfolding on their own, and they're out of our control. There's a limited amount we can do to influence them—some, but it's limited. When we start to see this, we realize that we don't have to try to control our experience the way we habitually do, and then we can surrender into it.

There's a great letting go that happens when we realize we don't have to protect a self, we don't have to maintain a self, we don't have to feed a self. We let things be the way they are.

There is something here that looks like a being, right? It looks like there's some kind of being here, but can you find a being? It's a little bit like Bodhidharma talking to Huike about "show me your mind." Show me your being. Well, you might point here, but that's just a body. So a being—there's no being. There's only a conventional designation of a bunch of pieces that have been put together in a certain way, which are the aggregates.

It's just like—if I hold this up, can everybody see? Is there any uncertainty about what this is? It's a pen, right? But if I take it apart into all its little pieces, I've got five little pieces now. I've got a tip, a cap, a cartridge, a barrel, and another cap. Five little pieces. Is this a pen? Nobody would call this a pen. These are the parts of a pen, but it's not a pen until you put it back together. Just five independent parts assembled in a certain order, and then we call it a pen, and we don't really think about it.

That's what the Buddha said we have to see about this mind-body process. We have to see the five different parts of the aggregates just as clearly as you see the five different parts of the pen to understand what a "being" is. There's no being apart from this assemblage of separate parts.

We can even go farther. We can say, this pen is gray and black and it's a ballpoint pen with a certain kind of gel ink in the cartridge. We can say all that about it and that's good in terms of conventional designation. So when we talk about a conventionally designated human being, we can say, "I'm white, I'm male, I was born middle class, I'm cisgender." All different kinds of things we can say about the beings that we see or the beings that we are.

Those descriptions are accurate. But there's no *I* in the middle of them all. Yes, there are characteristics to things that are put together, but there's no one thing called pen apart from this assemblage. There's no one thing called being apart from this assemblage of parts.

When we say there's no self here, we don't deny individual characteristics—that we're different, that we're all unique in the way we're put together. We can examine many different descriptions of people and those are all valid. But there's no *I* in the middle of them all. There's no self at the center.

We begin to see all the different pieces that make us up, and they're all conditioned. The Buddha had a dialogue with the bhikkhus about this in quote 24 on page 5. It begins with someone asking him, "How does personality view come to be?"—this belief that there really is a self here.

The Buddha replies, "An untaught ordinary person regards material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form," and then repeats this for the other aggregates. "This is how personality view comes to be."

I don't want to unpack this tonight, as it would make a good theme for a three-month reflection—a little long for this evening. So I'll continue with the passage.

"Bhikkhus, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?"

Well, they're smart: "Impermanent, venerable sir."

"Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?"

"Suffering, venerable sir."

Let's pause with this language. What the Pali says is "dukkha or sukha?" Is material form *dukkha* or *sukha*? And they reply, it's *dukkha*. I like to think of it in the broadest sense of being unsatisfactory. Can any material form give you lasting satisfaction and happiness, or does it eventually turn out to be unsatisfying because it changes?

So the bhikkhus, no dummies, say "unsatisfactory, *dukkha*." Here it's translated as suffering, but it's not all unpleasant. Material form isn't all unpleasant, but it's ultimately unsatisfying.

"Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: 'This is mine. This I am. This is myself'?"

In other words, would you bet your life on what's going to change? Would you put your identity on what's changing and unreliable? Not a good idea.

This is the thrust of the Buddha's teaching: all these conditions of the five aggregates are subject to change, to passing away, and unreliability—*dukkha*. They all have their own nature, but they all share these characteristics.

We have a different assumption about the self. We think the *I* is ongoing. There's this assumption that I'm the same observer now who was there in grade school. I've been observing all these things happening over all these years and will keep observing until the day I die. That's the stable, ongoing self that the Buddha denies, saying it doesn't exist that way.

All we are is an assemblage of parts that are all subject to arising and passing moment by moment. You could call them *I* if you felt yourself arising and passing every moment. But we don't. We feel like the self is going on and we're having different experiences. But in fact, our whole being is arising and passing moment by moment.

So the Buddha continues, and this goes on to page 6: "Therefore, any kind of material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself." And then that's repeated for the other of the five aggregates.

So this line—"not me, not mine, not who I am"—is a short way to say it. It's a kind of interesting line to play with. If you're in vipassana mode and you're investigating your experience, so not resting in awareness but investigating your experience, try adding these words to any experience you have. A sensation in the body: not me, not mine, not who I am. A thought: not me, not mine, not who I am. An emotion that's arising: not me, not mine, not who I am. A sight that you see outside, the suitcase you brought into your room: not me, not mine, not who I am.

So cutting through, using investigation to cut through this sense of "I" where it forms. And of course one of the places that it forms in a big way is around the body. We have a lot of identification with the body. If someone tells us that they think our body is not very attractive, we feel, "Oh, I'm not very attractive in that person's eyes." It's really close together.

But when you think about it, did you have anything to do with how this body came out? Okay, we can affect it a little bit with diet and healthcare and exercise and all of that. But did you have anything to determine whether you were tall or short? Whether your hair was straight or curly? Whether you were thin or broad-shouldered? Nothing. We didn't get to choose. Father's sperm met mother's egg. They merged, cells grew in the womb, popped out of the womb one day, nourished on milk, air, sun, and water, grew and grew, became grown up, aging, continuing. We didn't have any choice about that. That's just nature. It's the physical nature of the body. It wasn't our will, wasn't ours to choose. The body just happened and we've come along for the ride. Consciousness is just kind of along for the ride in this form.

And yet we take a lot of pride or embarrassment about how our body is. My teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, put it this way. He said, "This body came out of nature. It's part of nature. It never departed from nature and it belongs to nature. Give it back to nature. That will be a big relief for you."

So we can look at the other aggregates in this way too. Let's for the moment lump feeling and perception into volitional formations. They could go there—they got pulled out, singled out for some reason. Let's lump them back into volitional formations. So then we could talk about three aggregates: the body, volitional formations, and consciousness.

Take a look at volitional formations. Look at your thoughts and your emotions. Are these unique to you? Are you the only one who has self-judgment? Are you the only one who has joy? Who has mindfulness? Who has fear? Who has anger? Our emotions aren't even unique. They're nature too. They're all part of human nature.

And what about this consciousness?

Is your consciousness unique? Are you the only one who has that consciousness? We imagine the knowing faculty is privately ours, yet this is the most universal thing in the world. I think ants have it, to tell you the truth.

So the body's physical nature, emotions are human nature, consciousness is sentient nature. It's all just the play of nature. There's no I in control. There's no I to own it.

And yet, why does it seem like there's an I? This is so curious—such a curious thing. It's not the same all the time. People have told me in interviews during this month, "Oh, there was a period of real openness, didn't feel an I present." And yet other times the I can be really strong.

This brings us to quotation 27. Ananda said, "Another monk told me when I was newly ordained: It is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness."

That is, the sense of self arises when we cling to one of the aggregates. And if clinging isn't happening, the I sense isn't arising. So the sense of I is something that's not stable or ongoing. It comes into being when we take a hold. It comes into being when we cling.

How does it feel when you cling? What's the feeling in the body? There's a contraction, isn't there? There's a tightness. So the I is felt as a contraction. It narrows our world. It narrows our experience.

This is why opening to empty awareness is so powerful. It undoes the contraction. It releases the contraction of self and opens up to the vast awareness of the original mind. And that opening allows all the contractions that have happened over years, decades, maybe lifetimes—it allows them to unravel.

So this is a big part of the purification. All those karmic patterns can start to open up, move through in the empty space of awareness.

Notice—start to notice in your vipassana times, and you'll notice at other times too—when the I word arises, I or my, does it ever arise by itself? Does it ever just pop out of nowhere and go, "me"? Or does it always arise in relation to something else? Like "my knee is hurting," "I'm hungry for lunch," "I hear a sound." Take a close look. I think you'll see the I only arises in relation to something else, when we've focused on it and taken a hold of it.

And the more we fixate on something, the more I thoughts proliferate. Grasping and I thoughts always go together. If you're hanging on to anything for any length of time, the I thoughts will proliferate around it. So this grasping is more or less synonymous with creating the sense of self. And so we can also call it selfing.

Here's a quotation that's not in the study guide. I love it because it's one of these poignant moments in the discourses. The Buddha's talking to Sariputta, one of his chief disciples, and he says, "Whether I teach the Dhamma in brief or in detail, those who understand it are hard to find."

You get the poignancy of that from a teacher as great as the Buddha—those who understand my teachings are hard to find. And Sariputta, who's always encouraging, says, "Now, blessed one, is the time to teach the Dhamma."

There will be those who will understand.

And the Buddha, drawn out, says, "Well then, Sariputta, this is how one should train. In regard to this body and its consciousness, and in regard to all external signs, let there be no eye-making and no mind-making and no underlying tendency to conceit."

So conceit is this word *mana*, establishing a sense of self. But I like these instructions: let there be no I-making and no mind-making. The Pali words are *ahankara* and *mamankara*—I-making and mind-making. And it makes clear the I is not some ongoing thing. We make it in some moments. We make the sense of I or the sense of my in a moment. We create it. And the Buddha says, don't do that. Stop making I and my. That's how you should be training.

Well, that's kind of a high bar, because it's an old habit. But that's what he's telling us. The I is extra. When there's pain in the knee, we can just note pain. We don't have to say "my pain." When there's a strong emotion, like anger, we can just say "anger," not "I'm angry."

So notice when the sense of I is there and when it's not. And aim toward experiences where the sense of I is not arising. Empty awareness is a good place to begin to discover this.

So here's the famous instruction, which I'm sure you all have heard, from Buddha to Bahiya. Bahiya had come across half or more of the country of India to receive this teaching. He came upon the Buddha when he was on alms round, and the Buddha originally didn't want to give him a teaching because he was on alms round. But Bahiya asked three times. So the Buddha gave him the teaching very briefly.

And this is the teaching: "Then, Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

So this is pointing to the extraordinary freedom that's available seeing the emptiness of self. When we perceive the world as empty of self, there is this great freedom that's the end of suffering—at least temporarily, the end of suffering. So this is the promise of the emptiness of self.

Then the other half is the emptiness of phenomena. So we want to look into that a little bit. And I'm going to start with a discourse from the *Samyutta Nikaya*. The main gist of which is on page 8 in your study guide, quote number 46. But I just want to give the introduction.

This is from the *Samyutta Nikaya*. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: "Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it.

It would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of material form there is, a practitioner inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it. It would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in material form?

Well, if material form doesn't have substance, what does? Material form is the hardest thing we know. It seems really solid. And the Buddha is saying material form, all of it, is just like a lump of foam. You put your hands around it and it just goes pop. There's really nothing there. How are we supposed to understand this?

There are several ways we can understand this. One is that quantum physics has been telling us this for about a hundred years now. My professors in college, my physics professors, were all very clear on this point. Matter is mostly empty space, with the occasional stray electron or clump in the nucleus. Mostly empty space. I didn't notice that my physics professors were any happier than my other professors, however—except they were happier than those in the psychology department.

We know intellectually that matter is insubstantial, but how do we bring that into our direct experience?

One fall I was teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock. I was in the middle of a dharma talk in the evening when there was this loud cry outside the meditation hall—a loud cry like a baby in pain. A couple of staff members went out to see what was going on and I just continued with the talk.

When the talk finished, I went out and saw a group of staff standing in a small circle. I walked over and they were standing around the body of a deer lying on the ground with its head twisted back at a disturbing angle. The staff said the deer was dead. One of them explained that they had gone out and seen a couple of large dogs running away from where the deer lay. So probably what had happened was that a couple of dogs had

attacked the deer. There are many deer around Spirit Rock, and occasionally these dog packs roam around Woodacre. I'd never seen that on Spirit Rock land before, but that's probably what happened. A couple of dogs attacked the deer and perhaps broke its neck.

We all stood around, did some metta for the deer for a while, and then dispersed. One of the staff called the Humane Society, who said, "Sure, take the body down to the driveway at the bottom of the hill, and we'll come by and pick it up." So the next morning they put it into a golf cart and drove the deer's body down to the entrance. The Humane Society never came.

The retreat continued. Over the next ten days I would walk by the deer and observe its state of decay. Every day there was a little bit less of the deer there. We have coyotes, vultures, crows, ants, and insects all around Spirit Rock. All these beings were feeding on the mass of the deer. Until after about ten days, the only things that remained were the hide and fur, the hooves and the bones. That was about it. The rest had just been eaten. Form just went poof, like a lump of foam—gone, as though it had never been there before.

Another time, Sally and I went to hear some teachings from the Dalai Lama. He was teaching on the Heart Sutra, which relates closely to emptiness. In the midst of the discussion, he said that there are three kinds of dukkha. This is straight out of the Pali Canon, so he was very much in line with our teachings as well.

He said there's the dukkha of pain, which is called dukkha-dukkha. There's the dukkha of alternation, where something pleasant continues but then changes into something neutral or unpleasant. And he said the third kind of dukkha is called sankhara dukkha, the dukkha of formations. It means the dukkha of all conditioned arisings.

He said the dukkha of formations is that nothing is stable—everything is dissolving. And he said if you understand that things continue along for quite a while in a certain way and then they turn into something else, that's the wrong understanding. Sankhara dukkha shows that things are arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing, moment after moment after moment. Nothing is stable in our experience for longer than moments when you look at your experience closely.

This is the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned things. Nothing is lasting. This momentary dissolving nature can be found in meditation experience.

One of the purposes of concentration—remember we talked about the purpose and benefit of concentration is to see things the way they really are—is to see this dissolving nature moment after moment after moment in our direct experience. The body is a good place to see it. S. N. Goenka's whole meditation technique is directed towards seeing the dissolving nature of body sensations in a state of good meditation, moment after moment after moment.

We can start to see this in our direct experience of the body. Then we start to notice sounds also come and go really quickly. Smells and tastes are very fleeting, insubstantial. Thoughts come and go rapidly. Emotions may linger a while, but even when an emotion's there, it's hard to really get a firm grip on it. You can feel it in the body, but try getting a hold of a mind state all on its own without going through the body.

There's this other beautiful quote, number 47. This is a deva who's come to talk to the Buddha: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise one takes no delight in form. The wise one takes no delight in form."

Further in this discourse on the lump of foam, on the top of the next page, the Buddha offers other analogies. Form is like a lump of foam. Feeling is like a water bubble. Perception is like a mirage. And formations are like a banana tree. If you haven't looked at the trunk of a banana tree, there's nothing solid there. It's just rings of green vegetation wrapped around each other. There's no heartwood. And consciousness is like an illusion. So explained the kinsmen of the sun. Consciousness is like an illusion.

Another expression of this is consciousness is like a magic show. Very interesting. How is consciousness like a magic show?

To explore this, we can see that sounds, body sensations, smells, and tastes are very fleeting, insubstantial. But sight is a little harder to see that in. Sight really makes it look like there's a solid world out there. When you look at a wall, you look at a rock, it looks really solid. So let's investigate the sense of sight.

If you're looking at a wall right now, remember the way that the sight of wall arises for you. There's light that's coming off of the lights in this room and a little outside light that hits the wall, reflects and bounces to your eye, strikes the retina, and then that stimulates a signal up the optic nerve into the brain where it gets interpreted and then somehow, boom, image of wall comes up. Somehow, right? That's a huge mystery. Nobody knows how that happens. The retina gets stimulated and sight of wall comes up. The neuroscientists don't understand that. The physicists don't understand that. The biologists, nobody knows how that happens. That's the magic of consciousness and the senses.

So the sight of wall pops up. Is that the real wall that you're seeing? Is that the reality of that wall? Or is it just a representation of wall that's been constructed by your sense organ and your brain? It's arising in your consciousness. It's a picture of a wall. Is it the same as the real wall? How could we ever know, right? We can only know it through our senses.

So we're living in this representation of the world and we think it's the real world. Let's be honest. We go around thinking, "Yeah, that's the real wall. That's the real tree. That's exactly what that tree looks like." But we're living in a representation of the real world. We don't know what the real world is, but we live in a representation constructed by consciousness and only existing, in our experience, in consciousness.

So this wall seems very stable and ongoing, but what if the flood of photons to your eye stops? What if the light is all cut off? Does the image of the wall remain? No. The image of the wall is not solid. It's being recreated thousands of times a second by the impact of many, many photons and the transmittal of that nerve signal over and over again to the brain and the reinterpretation.

So this image is actually not stable. The image of the wall that looks so solid is being recreated hundreds of times a second by the activity of the photons landing on the retina and the nerve traveling up to the brain. It's just being regenerated again and again and again, and it's only in consciousness. There's nothing stable or solid in that at all. It could vanish in a moment. So the sight is also insubstantial. Even though it looks solid, the sight is not.

The wall is hard—that's for sure. That's the sensation of touch. And we know what that is: just electrons in one object meeting and being repelled by the electrons in another. That's why our hands can't go through each other. The electrons won't allow it. But that sense of hardness—that's just electrons, very fleeting.

Here's another one that I would have fun with. If I ask what color this book is, it's pretty clear, right? It's blue. Is it really? What's really happening from science is that light is reflecting off this book. It comes to your eye. It looks blue. But we know what's really happening. White light is hitting here. All the other colors are being absorbed and the blue is being reflected. White light has all the colors of the rainbow. The other colors are being absorbed. What's being reflected is the blue light.

So actually, if anything, this book is every color but blue, because it's pushing back the blue. And that's what you see. And you say, "Oh, that's blue." No. It's every color but blue.

So here's the other question. I used to ask this when I was first starting to investigate this: Where is blue? Is blue really an attribute of the book? Or is blue just in your mind? Blue's just in our mind. It doesn't exist anywhere but in our perceptions.

So all these aggregates are really insubstantial. You could almost say there's an unreal quality to them. There's a magical quality to them. This is how it's said in the Diamond Sutra:

Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world, like a star at dawn, a flickering lamp, a bubble in a stream, an echo, a mirage, and a dream.

A dream.

Is there any difference in your experience of a moment in a dream and a moment in waking life? In just a moment, could you tell with certainty, "Oh yes, this is a dream," or "Yes, this is waking life"? Is there any real difference? Take a look.

This dreamlike quality of experience, when you realize that it is only an appearance in consciousness, gives rise to understanding the insubstantiality of all sense phenomena. They're fleeting, they're conditional, they're not the solid world we imagine them to be.

One of my teachers put it this way: "Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever." Instead of calling them objects, we begin to call them appearances. They do appear, but the substantial reality is not as we think it is.

This is the way in which consciousness is like a magic show, or consciousness is like an illusion. The appearances have a reality in our sense world, but they don't have solidity. Though consciousness is revealing them, it's our understanding or misunderstanding that gives them a solidity they don't really have.

That's why the Buddha offered this wonderful teaching: "This world, Kaccana, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence. For one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world."

Existence is the attribute we normally give phenomena—we really think this stuff exists. Yet the Buddha is saying that to assume existence is wrong, and to assume non-existence is equally wrong. Everything is just arising and flickering, arising and flickering.

These are the two primary meanings of emptiness that have been discussed in the tradition for two and a half thousand years. The world is empty of self—there is no one at the center to whom it's happening or who owns it. There's no one at the center we need to protect and no one who can control it. This leads to a deep letting go, an understanding of all the causes and conditions that are at work.

The beautiful thing about our awareness practice is that as we let go from the control of self, we have somewhere to rest. We have something to surrender into, which is the quality of empty awareness. As we rest in empty awareness, we begin to see—we don't have to investigate, we'll simply see. All the sense appearances that are coming and going don't have solidity either. They arise and flicker and pass, arise and flicker and pass.

As the mind gets steadier and steadier, this becomes more and more apparent. It's a purpose and benefit of concentration to see things the way they really are.

Let me close with this quotation from Suzuki Roshi: "Everything is in flowing change. Nothing exists but momentarily in its present form and color. One thing flows into another and cannot be grasped. Before the rain stops, we hear a bird. Even under the heavy snow, we see snowdrops and some new growth."

Let's just sit for a moment together.

Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world, like a star at dawn, a flickering lamp, a bubble in a stream, an echo, a mirage, and a dream.

CHAPTER 177

Morning Instructions: Abiding in Emptiness

Guy Armstrong · 44 min

> *In this morning meditation instruction, Guy Armstrong offers a guided visualization practice based on the Cūḷasuññata Sutta (MN 121), the Shorter Discourse on Emptiness. The meditation begins with traditional refuge and precept chanting, then guides practitioners through a systematic simplification of perception—from visualizing the bustling town of Barre, Massachusetts, to the Forest Refuge retreat center, then progressively narrowing focus to the meditation hall's container, its empty space, and finally to boundless awareness itself.*
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> *Armstrong adapts the Buddha's teaching on the four formless attainments (āruppajjhāna)—infinite space (ākāsānañcāyatana), infinite consciousness (viññāṇañcāyatana), nothingness (ākiñcaññāyatana), and neither-perception-nor-non-perception (nevasaññānāsaññāyatana)—making them accessible through visualization rather than requiring deep absorption. The practice demonstrates how simplifying perception naturally quiets the mind, offering a practical tool for both formal meditation and daily life situations.*
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> *This instruction is particularly valuable for understanding how emptiness (suññatā) practice works through progressive letting go of mental fabrications, leading to the recognition of awareness's naturally spacious and unbounded quality. Armstrong emphasizes that we need only perceive these qualities, not achieve deep meditative absorption, making this ancient teaching accessible to contemporary practitioners.*

This morning's meditation will be a guided practice on the theme of abiding in emptiness. It's based on a discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 121, the shorter discourse on emptiness, which Sally mentioned in her talk the other night. This guided meditation relies somewhat on visualization, so it's not strictly a "recognize and rest" kind of practice. It will be a little more active than that, but it will lead in a similar direction. Please be patient with the process.

Before we begin, let me first guide you to establish your meditation posture by resting easily in the present moment. Bring your attention into the body, finding in your posture a balance of uprightness and relaxation.

Notice how you could describe your experience in two ways. You could say the awareness fills your body—feel that quality, with the emphasis on awareness in the body. Or you could say awareness holds the body, with a sense of the wider awareness that the body exists within. So awareness is in the body, or the body is in awareness. Simply rest as comfortably as possible in the present moment.

Now I'd like to invite you into a visualization, a fabrication, an imagination. Imagine that you're up in an airplane, cruising above the town of Barre, looking down at the forests, the roads, the houses, the traffic, the people, the town. You're reasonably high up, so you can see quite a distance.

First, notice the small town of Barre. If you haven't driven through it, it's a typical small New England town laid out around the square, with the post office, a bank, police station, food stores, gas station, and restaurants. You can imagine all the traffic passing through. At this time of day, people are going to work, commuting, heading off to schools and offices, stopping for food or gas, getting out of cars, walking around, greeting one another.

As you connect with these images, this visualization, let yourself make any associations that come around the activities of a town, around the people. Perhaps some pets are out—cats stealing around, dogs out for a walk. Get a sense of all the activities and the hustle and bustle of a town on a Monday morning.

Now the plane continues flying and heads a couple of miles north. You're over the area of the Forest Refuge and the retreat center, the IMS land, the study center, and all the woods and fields around them. Looking down, you see that the traffic is reduced but still present—cars driving by, staff arriving for work. Yogis may be sitting in the halls or out walking. There are retreats at all three centers. Cooks are busy, office people are booting up their computers.

Again, let your mind make any associations you have with any of the centers in this area—the Forest Refuge, the retreat center, the study center, any people you've known there, any experiences you've had, any staff you've known. Get a sense that even at a retreat center, a lot of human activity goes on. Bring in the creatures too—the birds, the squirrels, the chipmunks, the deer, porcupines. Notice that although it's not as busy as the town, there's still a considerable extent of activity and associations around this area for you.

Now direct the plane to hover just above the Forest Refuge.

Looking down on the buildings, staff and teacher housing, administration building, dining hall, council house, residence halls, meditation hall, and all the people in those buildings—housekeeping staff, facilities, kitchen, office, meditators.

As you look down, you can also see the trees, the lawn, the central courtyard, the fields, the lupine and other flowers, the roads and new paving. As you connect with all these areas of the forest refuge, let any associations or memories just come. Moments you've seen people, interacted with people, experiences you've had in meditating or in working or in dining.

Forest refuge is a lot more tranquil than the town of Barry. And yet still you can find the perception of activity of people, of creatures, associations.

So now coming just above the meditation hall, looking down on the square roof of the hall, and then coming inside. Imagine that you can be toward the ceiling of the interior of the hall and looking down.

So you see all the meditators, all of us here meditating, quite still, not much activity. See all the other things in the room—the chairs, zabutons, zafus, shawls, plants toward the front, meditation bell, the platform, the podiums.

Let any associations come to you. Connections with the people here, connections with experiences in the hall. Anything that comes to mind. Notice that the simplifying of the field, the simplifying of the activity might also feel more tranquil.

Now you're still within the hall, but you're more like at your own eye level. Direct your attention just to the container of this hall—your visual image of the hall. You can open your eyes if you'd like to refresh it, refresh that image.

But as you connect with the hall now in your visualization, just focus on the walls, the floor, and the ceiling. So there's the front wall behind the altar and Buddha statue. The side walls looking onto the forest. The rear wall, which has the shoji screen. So just perceiving in the hall the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, disregarding the rest.

Other images may come into your mind of people or other things. Just let them go. Return to the perception of floor, walls, and ceiling. Notice how it feels to simplify your perception in this way. Notice there are not as many associations or memories. So as the perceptions simplify, we say they are present with what we are perceiving, but they are absent of what we are not perceiving. Simply floor, walls, and ceiling.

We can simplify our perception still further. Within this container bounded by floor, walls, and ceiling, now bring your attention just to the space in the room, the empty space bounded by floor, walls, and ceiling. Just perceiving the empty space in the room, just free from the perceptions of objects.

If it would help you to connect with the space to open your eyes briefly, feel free to do that. Get a sense of the size, direction of the space that's in front of you, to the sides, behind you, above, perhaps below.

How does it feel to abide with the perception of space? Space is present, but this perception is empty of the earlier perceptions of people and things.

Although the physical space in the room is bounded by floor, wall, ceiling, can you get the sense that, in fact, there is also physical space on the other side, other side of the windows, other side of the roof, below the floor? You get the sense that the space inside connects to the space outside. And then that space stretches on and on. Doesn't have a boundary. Doesn't have an edge.

Letting the attention be wide and open, just in touch with space as far as it feels to you that it extends. Space without boundary. What's the feeling of the perception of that wide space, that unbounded space?

And then turning the attention toward awareness. Can awareness know this unbounded space? Wherever the space extends in front and behind, to right and left, above and below—is awareness there too? However far the space extends, does awareness extend that far also?

How can you feel that this awareness is as wide as the space that you can perceive? And because that space doesn't have an edge or boundary, awareness doesn't have an edge or boundary.

How does it feel to be with this perception of awareness in its unbounded nature?

So now simply resting in the spaciousness of this unbounded awareness.

If the attention becomes distracted from the perception of the awareness, don't worry about it—that will happen. And when the attention returns, then either connect again directly with this spacious awareness, or go through a few steps to find it: receiving floor, wall, ceiling, receiving space in the hall, extending it to wide space outdoors as well, and then to awareness. Its boundless spacious quality.

This meditation was adapted from a discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya. It's not a strict relating of it, but you might like to go to the original and read it. You'll find two other steps. And the terms the Buddha uses are a little different.

As we get into the space that goes beyond here, the Buddha calls it the perception of infinite space. I like to interpret that in my experience as boundless. I found boundless a little easier to come to grips with than infinite. And similarly with awareness, he uses the term infinite consciousness. Moving from infinite space and then what knows it? Infinite consciousness. Again, I think boundless awareness is more in line with our vocabulary.

And then he adds two more steps, which are the perception of nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception. And if you know the sequence of samatha instructions, these are the four formless attainments: the sphere of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception, which are states that are more developed than the four jhanas—the four form jhanas.

But it's important to understand that in this discourse the Buddha is not requiring us to be immersed or absorbed in those states. It's only the perception of those qualities that we're asked to undertake. So just being able to perceive boundless space is enough for this meditation. We don't have to be absorbed in it. Being able to perceive boundless awareness is enough. We don't have to be absorbed in infinite consciousness. And then I've omitted the last two steps because they're quite subtle.

If you'd like to read more, you can read the original sutta. And Bhikkhu Analayo has a chapter that includes this meditation in his book, Compassion and Emptiness. He gives more detail. And he came to the last APP retreat and taught on this discourse, so some of you are a little familiar with his approach from that.

So if you found this helpful as a way into boundless awareness, feel free to bring it in. If you can simply turn and recognize, no problem. Whatever's easy for you.

Could you feel as the focus narrowed from the big broad town of Barry down to the retreat center and then into the hall and then container and then space, could you feel how it tended to quiet the mind? As the perception simplified, the mind got quieter. That's the purpose of it. That's the function.

So this is a helpful thing to remember. Ajahn Sumedho used to give regular instructions on noticing space. So if you're in the middle of a meeting, let's say in daily life, and emotions are starting to get volatile in the meeting, try noticing the space in the room that everything's happening in. Again, space removes pressure. And so the perception of space opens up ease in the mind. This can be a useful instruction even in daily life.

CHAPTER 178

Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 42 min

> *In this intimate morning instruction from a June 2019 retreat at IMS Forest Refuge, Guy Armstrong offers beautifully simple yet profound guidance on the core practice of resting in empty awareness. Drawing from both Vipassana and Tibetan meditation traditions, he emphasizes that despite all the detailed explanations given throughout the retreat, the fundamental instruction remains elegantly simple: rest in empty awareness.*
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> *Armstrong addresses the common experience of doubt (vicikicchā) that arises when practitioners question whether they're 'doing it right' or truly accessing awareness. He encourages trusting whatever arises from the various methods of turning attention inward, whether through the 'big mind' approach of visualizing vast empty sky or simply asking 'am I aware?' He explains that different techniques may initially produce slightly different experiences, but as practice deepens, these approaches naturally converge.*
>
> *The talk includes practical guidance on integrating awareness practice with mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati) and the brahmavihāra practices, particularly mettā. Armstrong suggests using these more structured, object-oriented practices when the mind is distracted or caught in clinging, while accessing awareness practice when the mind is naturally open and uncluttered. He concludes with gentle advice about staying present during the final days of retreat, encouraging practitioners to fully commit to 'being here now' rather than mentally preparing for re-entry into daily life.*

As Sally mentioned yesterday, we have offered the essential instructions for this part of the retreat. The teaching is quite simple: rest in empty awareness. While we've explored many details about how to arrive there and what it all means, the basic meditation instruction remains elegantly simple—rest in empty awareness.

Sometimes the mind complicates this because, as one of the quotes in the study guide says, it's so close you can't see it, and so simple you can't believe it. But that's what this practice is about.

Twenty years ago, Sally and I, along with a few friends, went to visit a great Tibetan master in Kathmandu. We had arranged to see him for four days of teachings while we were there, which was very fortunate because his time was extraordinarily valuable. Toward the end of the four days, he said, "You'll notice I'm repeating myself a lot.

There's really only one thing to say. It's just like a field mouse—he runs across the field and the only thing he says is squeak. I'm just like the field mouse. I only have one thing to say to you."

So that's where we are in this retreat: rest in empty awareness.

The important thing is to trust that. This trust takes time to develop. Very often in this practice, especially in the beginning, people wonder, "Is this it? Is this what they're talking about? Is this the awareness? Am I seeing the emptiness? Have I really got it?" There's no way to figure that out conceptually.

You've surely tried many different ways of turning to recognize empty awareness. Some of them may even give you slightly different results. When I think about the instruction of big mind—the image of a vast empty sky—that leads to a different experience sometimes than asking the question, "Am I aware?" This is perfectly fine.

Whichever means you find that gets you in touch with something, trust what you get. Trust what comes from that pointing and put your chips on that. This means believe in it, trust yourself, follow it, develop it. What you'll find is that as you do, it deepens, it clarifies, and it becomes more apparent what's happening.

Even if the different ways of entering, the different methods of turning, get you slightly different experiences, over time those will converge. As they deepen and develop, they all move in the same direction.

Don't worry too much about whether you've got it. We have a word for this in the Vipassana world—it's called doubt, and it's not particularly helpful. Recognize when doubt is present and simply trust. Trust what you get when you turn and stay with that. Let it develop in its own time, in its own way, and you'll be doing just fine.

So that's the squeak for today: take what you get and trust in that.

Now, for this past week we've been talking almost entirely about the awareness practice, resting in empty awareness. But remember that as you move through these days, take time to integrate with your mindfulness of breathing and your practice of the Brahma Viharas. These practices are very supportive of resting in awareness.

As a reminder—and I've probably said this before, as has Sally—when the mind tends to be distracted or caught in the middle of some clinging, it might be simpler to turn to one of the object-oriented practices, breath or metta. When the mind is open and uncluttered, then awareness is usually more accessible.

One thing you'll notice is that it doesn't necessarily take very big clinging to make it difficult to access awareness. In the Tibetan system, they say that a thumb in the right place can block out the sun. So a very small obstacle can block this opening to awareness. When that's the case, either let go if possible, or return to a simpler practice—one that you know well.

I know that the end of retreat starts looming in people's minds at this point. You don't need to start preparing yourself yet. We will have a plan for that transition.

easing you out of the silence and back into activity. You don't need to do it yourself ahead of time. We'll tell you when it's right for it to start happening.

So really take these days to devote yourself as fully as you can to being here now. When thoughts about the future beyond these days come up, it's a good time to say, "not now." Not now to those thoughts. There will be plenty of time when the time comes.

Do you have any questions this morning?

CHAPTER 179

Emptiness and Kamma

Guy Armstrong · 1h06

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses an apparent paradox in Buddhist teaching: if there is no self (anattā), who performs actions and who experiences their results? Drawing from the Buddha's foundational definition of kamma as cetanā (volition or intention), Armstrong explains how actions of body, speech, and mind create consequences without requiring a permanent self. He explores the ten unwholesome actions (dasa akusalakamma) and their opposites, illustrating how wholesome intentions rooted in generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom lead to happiness, while unwholesome volitions based on greed, aversion, and delusion create suffering. Using practical examples and stories, including the transformation of Aṅgulimāla, Armstrong shows how personality is merely a stream of saṅkhāras (mental formations) - collective habits of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting that can be redirected through mindful practice. He emphasizes that while we cannot determine past causes of present circumstances, we can skillfully direct our future through wholesome intentions in each moment. The talk concludes with the profound teaching that the Noble Eightfold Path itself is the action that leads to the end of kamma, pointing toward the liberation where self-centered activity ceases.*

The talk tonight is on emptiness and karma. I hope you all came back in one piece from your little excursion into activity. Because we're going back into the world of activity and relationship, I thought this might be an appropriate time to talk about karma. Sally talked about it earlier in the retreat in regards to the practice of equanimity. Tonight I want to talk about it in regards to emptiness, because karma and emptiness might seem like they oppose each other. If there's no self, who do actions come back to? If there's no self, who does actions in the first place? These are the kinds of things we want to look at.

We've talked about how the self tends to get formed around taking ourselves to be the body—this is my body, or I am the body. We form it around emotions: I am happy, I am sad, my joys, my sorrows. We form it around thoughts: I'm the thinker. We form it around an identification with consciousness when we take ourselves to be the observer looking out from the eyes and experiencing sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—like there's an observer, a little being inside our head. You've had weeks to look at these questions, and hopefully these are not so firmly held anymore, this sense of self around these areas.

But there are two other ways that self sneaks in. One is we identify with making a decision. Who decides? When you decide to stand up after a sit, who decides? When you decide how much food to take at lunch, who decides that? Often in this moment of choice, it feels like there's an "I" there who's doing the choosing or the deciding. You may remember our former president famously said, "I'm the decider." That identification comes in easily.

The second place it comes in is around the area of personality. We take ourselves to be a certain way based on our personality, the way we show up in the world, the way we manifest. Maybe most deeply, that's who we take ourselves to be—this particular personality. And that's who we take others to be. We know somebody by their personality, and we think that's who they are.

Both these questions—the decider and the personality—are really questions about karma. We want to look at them in relationship to the concept of emptiness and see if there's a self lurking there that isn't actually a self.

So we're going to look at this field of karma, which means action. In the Indian languages that we work with, karma is a Sanskrit term. It just means action originally. The Pali term is kamma—same thing, just meant action. In the time of the Buddha, there were all kinds of theories in India about action. Some schools, philosophical schools, said action doesn't matter: I can kill someone, I can steal, it won't affect me. Actions have no consequences. Other schools said action is all predetermined, all set beforehand by prior causes and conditions. So it doesn't matter what you do or don't do, the same thing's going to happen. That was another school. And another school said it's all God's activity. There's no individual responsibility because God is directing everything.

The Buddha came along and said these are all speculative views—you people don't know what on earth you're talking about. This is when he defined kamma from his own direct insight and his own knowledge. This is in the study guide, quote 15 on page 4. This is the foundational teaching that he gave on the question of karma: "It is volition that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind."

Two important things here: Action is based in the volition.

In the sphere of speech, we find four unwholesome actions that the Buddha identified. These are lying speech, speech that divides people—sometimes called divisive or slanderous speech—harsh speech, and frivolous speech or idle chatter.

When we examine these carefully, we can see how each one creates suffering both for ourselves and others. Lying speech breaks down trust and connection. Divisive speech destroys relationships and communities. Harsh speech wounds hearts and creates enmity. And frivolous speech wastes precious time and energy, distracting us from what truly matters.

In the sphere of mind, there are three unwholesome actions: covetousness, ill-will, and wrong view. These mental actions might seem less tangible than bodily or verbal actions, but they're equally powerful in shaping our experience. Covetousness fills the mind with wanting and dissatisfaction. Ill-will poisons our hearts with resentment and hatred. Wrong view distorts our understanding of reality, leading us to make choices that bring suffering.

Now, the Buddha didn't just tell us what to avoid—he also gave us clear guidance on what to cultivate. For each of these ten unwholesome actions, there's a corresponding wholesome action. So instead of killing, we practice protecting life. Instead of taking what isn't given, we practice generosity. Instead of sexual misconduct, we practice wise and loving restraint.

For speech, instead of lying we practice truthful speech. Instead of divisive speech, we practice speech that brings people together. Instead of harsh speech, we practice gentle, kind words. And instead of frivolous chatter, we practice meaningful communication that serves wisdom and connection.

In the mental sphere, instead of covetousness we cultivate contentment and appreciation for what we have. Instead of ill-will, we develop loving-kindness and compassion. Instead of wrong view, we cultivate right understanding—seeing things as they truly are.

This framework gives us a very practical roadmap for living. Every day, in every moment, we're making choices in these three spheres. We're either moving in the direction of wholesome action, which leads to happiness, or unwholesome action, which leads to suffering. It's really that simple, and that profound.

The beauty of this teaching is its clarity. We don't have to guess what will bring us happiness. The Buddha has laid it out with perfect precision. When we align our actions of body, speech, and mind with these wholesome patterns, happiness naturally follows. When we don't, suffering inevitably arises.

This is why the Dalai Lama emphasized teaching karma to Westerners. It's not abstract philosophy—it's the most practical guidance we could ever receive for living a fulfilling life.

There are four unwholesome actions, and the first is also found in the precepts—false speech, telling lies, speaking what is untrue. The three other kinds of harmful speech are harsh speech or angry speech, divisive speech that sets one person against another, and meaningless speech—essentially gossip or idle chatter. These are not helpful.

And then we come to something very interesting: there are three unwholesome actions of mind. You rarely hear this list discussed. They're not included in the precepts because they don't rise to the level of bodily conduct, but the unwholesome actions of mind are covetousness—wanting what belongs to someone else—ill will, which means wishing harm to another, and wrong view.

This last one is particularly fascinating. Wrong view means not understanding the way the world actually works. You can see this, can't you? If someone believed, for instance, that action doesn't matter and that it's fine for them to kill people, that wrong view can lead to real injury for others and for oneself. The Buddha taught that wrong view is the foundation of all the other wrong actions.

The ten wholesome acts are simply to refrain from the ten unwholesome acts. If you don't commit any of the unwholesome actions, then your conduct is considered wholesome. This is not easy to do. Have you ever found yourself killing insects or telling little white lies or saying something to one person that you know would hurt another if they overheard it? These are profound areas for practice, and we can continue refining our conduct in all these dimensions.

Some years ago, James Baraz and I were teaching a class in the Bay Area at a juvenile hall. This was the first I know of Vipassana teachers going into juvenile facilities. It later became well established, with several different projects in the Bay Area offering such programs. James and I had been invited in by a nurse who was a Vipassana practitioner working in the juvenile hall.

If you're not from the U.S., you might not know that a juvenile hall is a holding facility—basically a jail for people under eighteen, below the adult age. These young people are awaiting trial. We were taken into the maximum security wing of this juvenile hall in San Mateo, where we worked with a group of young men accused of serious crimes: larceny, grand larceny, assault with a deadly weapon, murder, rape. They had not yet come to trial, so we didn't know if they were guilty or not, but they were in on serious charges. Generally they would be held for months before their trial date came up.

These young guys—sixteen, seventeen, maybe fifteen years old—had little self-knowledge at that age. None of us had much self-knowledge at that age. They were penned up for months with other young men in similar states of worry, anxiety, and fear about their futures because they didn't know what the judge would decide. They might be imprisoned for years if convicted. There was this atmosphere of intense anxiety and underlying aggression that they were living within and trying to cope with as best they could.

We went in and met with a group of about ten from this maximum security wing. Fortunately, one of their guards—or probation officers—was someone they respected. He was a big, strong guy, somebody they would listen to. He sat in on the sessions with us. We went in and taught meditation. I don't think he was there because he was interested in learning meditation, but he supported the program to make it work for us.

We had no idea what these young men would think about a couple of middle-aged white guys coming in and talking about Buddhist meditation. But we just taught them. We structured it over six weeks, with a different class each week covering breath, then body, then sounds, emotions, and thoughts.

When we reached the emotions, the liberating potential of the practice became clear to them. We gave them specific instructions for working with fear and anger. These young men took these instructions seriously, and because they had considerable time just being in their cells or lying on their beds, they could practice. They discovered that mindfulness could actually relieve the stress of the emotions they were experiencing.

By the end of about five weeks, we had gained a certain amount of credibility—just a little bit. As James and I approached the last class, we wondered: should we teach about karma? Or to phrase it another way, should we teach about sila? This was potentially fraught territory because these young men didn't want to be lectured to. They didn't want us to come across as moralistic.

And so we were curious whether we should do it or not. We said, "What the heck? It's our last meeting. Why not? We're going to be out of here."

So we went in and framed the teaching as the science of happiness. We basically said, "If you want to be happy, these are some things you might want to think about." And then I started to lay out the general principles of the way karma works, and I just asked the group, "Does this sound like something that might fit for you?"

One of the guys held up his hand and said, "You mean what goes around comes around?"

I said, "Yeah, absolutely, you got it."

So this concept was not all that far away.

One of the interesting things about the teaching on karma is that it operates whether you know it or not. It operates whether you believe in it or not. It operates whether your religion believes in it or not. It operates whether your culture believes in it or not. It's a universal law. It's one of those things about nature that the Buddha discovered. It works.

So as we go back into daily life, it's really helpful to start to look at this area of cause and effect in relation to our own conduct. And one of the things the Buddha said is that when we take real care with our conduct, we enjoy what he called the bliss of blamelessness, which is a really delightful thing to have.

Here's one quote from his discourses: "Restraint in conduct is for the sake of lack of remorse. Lack of remorse is for the sake of gladness. Gladness is for the sake of peace of mind."

So as we take more and more care with our conduct, our heart gladdens and the mind comes into peace. This is the beauty of taking care with conduct. And it's all based on our intentions. You start to see how important this factor of volition or intention is.

The Dalai Lama was at Spirit Rock some years ago. It was a really wonderful opportunity. He came to address a meeting of teachers at Spirit Rock. It was really terrific to have him there. Actually, Sally and I brought down a chair from our house because it was the biggest chair that we could find at the time, and he sat in it for two days. So we've never really cleaned that chair since. Still got the vibes going.

It was kind of interesting. It was fun to watch him with a group of Western teachers. I don't think we used the time so well, but people would give a presentation to him, like a five-minute presentation on how the Dharma was unfolding in the West, and then we'd ask him to respond. And sometimes he'd say a few things about what he thought. But another time, people made this presentation, and he said—oh, we asked what he thought—he said, "Oh, nothing left up here. A few minutes ago when you were speaking, I had some thoughts, but all gone now. But never mind." He just cracked up. He's very funny. He was just really honest and real with us.

So at one point, one of the teachers who had a lot more chutzpah than I would ever have had said, "You know, Your Holiness, as Buddhism is coming to the West, there's a lot of popularizing going on. And as it gets popularized, some of the deeper aspects of the teaching might be getting lost. And you, Your Holiness, are the biggest popularizer of all of us. What advice do you have for us?"

So the Dalai Lama just got quiet and reflected for a moment. And he said, "Some people, you see, call me living Buddha, or they call me the God King. No, I am not. I am just a simple Buddhist monk. Others call me counter-revolutionary, or they call me a wolf in monk's clothing."

But you see, I look back at my own intentions. If my intention is sincere, then that is what is important. How I'm perceived is up to others. I don't care." He said that really emphatically: "I don't care."

That was a remarkable thing to say for somebody who carries the entire weight of Tibetan culture on his shoulders, responsible for all the international relations between Tibet and China and the rest of the world. And he said, "How people perceive me, I don't care." He checks his intention. If the intention is sincere, that's what matters.

This is a powerful statement. If we are in touch with our actual motivation when we act and we come from a wholesome intention, then that's the place we can rest, even if we're criticized. Even if our words land in a way we hadn't understood or expected and the impact is different than our intention, if we're sincere about our intention, we can learn from that. We can acknowledge, "Oh, I didn't know that. Okay, I'll do better next time." But our intention was sincere.

This area of karma is hugely important, which is revealed in the next quote, number sixteen: "Beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they are born. Their actions are their friend, their refuge. Whatever acts they perform, good or bad, of those they will be the heirs."

The Buddha is basically saying we've inherited the actions of our earlier self, and whatever actions we do today, we will inherit later on. They're the womb from which we're born. So beings take their nature from the actions they have created earlier. Whatever acts they perform, of those we will be the heirs.

Notice in this passage the Buddha is talking about beings. He's not talking about the five aggregates. Beings, as we've said, is a conventional designation for the assembly of the five aggregates, but it's a conventional term. He's not doing an ultimate kind of pointing, not trying to see emptiness in this passage. He's trying to see the effect on beings.

Westerners often feel resistance to this idea. Perhaps it has to do with our democratic ideals of equality. Maybe we think it puts too much responsibility on individuals for creating some of their own suffering. And maybe this view seems cold, uncaring, or cruel.

But that's not the way the Buddha intended it to be understood. It doesn't mean that beings deserve to suffer. If the Buddha could have taken away the suffering from the most murderous criminal on the face of the earth, I'm convinced he would have done it. You can see that in the way he related to Angulimala.

You probably know the story of Angulimala. He was told by a spiritual teacher—a so-called spiritual teacher—that he could only advance in the teachings if he collected the fingers of one thousand hands from one thousand people whom he'd killed. He had to collect one thousand fingers and wear them in a necklace, a mala, around his neck. Angulimala means "finger necklace."

It's said that Angulimala had killed 999 people, collected a finger from each, and decided the Buddha would be his thousandth victim. The Buddha's friend said, "Don't walk that way, Venerable One. There's a killer out there who wants to take your life and finish his vow." And the Buddha said, "I'm going to walk that way."

So he walked on this mountain path near where Angulimala was hiding. As Angulimala saw the Buddha, he rushed out to kill him, but he couldn't catch him. The Buddha used special powers, and though Angulimala ran as fast as he could, he couldn't catch the Buddha. So Angulimala shouted out, "Stop! Stop!"

And the Buddha said, "I have stopped, Angulimala. Now you stop." Meaning, stop your mind. Angulimala was so impressed that this person wasn't afraid of him that he said, "What's up with you?"

And so the Buddha gave him teachings right there. Angulimala did come from a spiritual background, but he was seriously misguided. So the Buddha gave him teachings and invited him into the order, the monastic order. Angulimala practiced hard because he knew he didn't have a good outlook if he didn't—that was a good motivator. And as it says, in not too long a period of time, Angulimala became fully awakened.

So this is the Buddha's compassion. You can look at the horrors of those crimes. You can look at the terrible karma that Angulimala had created for himself. And yet the Buddha's compassion was: let me free this being. I think this being has potential to wake up. And he did.

Interestingly, as Angulimala continued in his life as a monastic, he would go out for alms and people would stone him because they knew of his prior actions. And Angulimala would come back and complain to the Buddha: "But people are stoning me." And the Buddha said, "You must bear it. This is just a small portion of the suffering that you would have endured if you hadn't become awakened."

So I believe the Buddha didn't want anyone to suffer, regardless of their background, regardless of their actions. But karma is a law. Expecting someone to commit unwholesome acts and not receive unwholesome fruits would be like expecting gravity not to operate. That would be like expecting an apple in late summer to come off a tree and not fall to the ground. If the apple comes off the tree, it's going to fall to the ground. If we do unwholesome actions, there is going to be some result of unhappiness in our lives.

Sometimes people think this is a really heartless view—that it condones heartlessness. Because we say, "Oh, if someone is suffering, well, that's their karmic result. So that's their problem. It's not my problem. I don't have to worry about that. They brought it on themselves."

Well, first of all, we don't know that everything someone experiences is the result of their action. We don't know that. But even if it is, to respond as "it's not my problem" is called indifference. This is the near enemy of equanimity. It's not equanimity—it's closing our heart to them. If our heart stays open, we see the suffering, and compassion wants to relieve the suffering, whatever the source. Just like the Buddha was able to relieve Angulimala's suffering, even though he could see all the unwholesome acts behind it.

So seeing karma does not bring indifference, if understood correctly. We want to alleviate suffering, whatever the source. And often we don't know the source of someone else's suffering.

You can see these fruits of action in at least six different ways. One is before we act, we become aware of the motivation in doing the action, and we can either feel great about it, or we feel a little off about it.

I was on a conference call once with an IMS committee and we were disagreeing a lot about what to do about some particular topic. I was particularly disagreeing with one other person on the conference call. Afterwards, this person sent me an email that I thought was very disrespectful. Other people on the committee had been listening on

the call too. My first thought was: I'm going to forward that email to the rest of the committee because it would show how unreasonable they were being and then would undermine their view. I was kind of enjoying the thought of doing that.

Then I realized, "Oh, something doesn't feel right." I thought, "I won't send that email." So I picked up the phone and called the person and we talked it through instead. But I knew that it didn't feel right.

On the other hand, when you're thinking about doing something wholesome, it feels good to think about it. So we feel the effect before we act.

We feel it in doing the action. When you do something kind for someone, who enjoys it more—you or them? When you give a present that really touches somebody, doesn't that feel great? When you do a favor for someone who needs some help, when you help an animal that's injured, it just feels great to do that. So we feel it in the immediate moment of doing the action.

And on the other hand, if someone is harming somebody else, there's harm to them in that very moment as they're committing the action. Sylvia Boorstein has this beautiful phrase: "Anyone causing great pain is themselves in great pain." This is a really good thing to remember. Harm comes out of inner pain, and so we can have compassion there too.

The third way we see the effects of karma is when we remember our past actions. One of the instructions in beginning the loving-kindness practice is to reflect on good actions we've undertaken—things that have helped people, actions that have come out of a spirit of caring. When we reflect on those wholesome deeds, we feel good about ourselves. That sense of well-being then becomes the proximate cause for loving-kindness to arise toward ourselves.

The other side of this in metta practice is that often, as a purification practice, we remember things we've done that haven't been so skillful. When those memories surface, we don't feel so good. We experience the pain of regret or remorse or shame.

The fourth way karma operates is that our actions come back to us in how people relate to us. If we're kind, thoughtful, and caring to others, people are happy to see us and we receive love and care in return. If we're consistently grouchy, critical, complaining, or judgmental, people don't really want to see us coming—they move away or close their hearts to us. Our actions return to us through our relationships quite quickly.

The fifth way is that our actions come back in habitual states of mind. I don't know if you've noticed this during this month of practice—when the mind moves, why does it move and how does it move? Does it seem like a habit? Basically, it moves where we have invested in the past. Where we've put our time and energy and attachment previously, that's where the mind goes when we get quiet and sit.

This insight comes directly from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty, then their mind inclines to thoughts of sense desire, ill will, and cruelty. If they frequently think and ponder upon thoughts of renunciation, of kindness, of compassion, then their mind inclines to thoughts of renunciation, kindness, and compassion."

These habits of mind reinforce themselves. They wear grooves in consciousness, and then those grooves play out again and again.

The sixth way the law of karma operates is that results show up in the future in mysterious ways that we can't fully understand or verify.

So what about the Buddha's statement that when you speak and act from a pure mind, happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable? One of the basic teachings of karma is that happiness follows goodness. Happiness follows goodness. This is mind-blowing to me—this is a law of the universe.

How does that work? I don't know, but I believe it. When you understand that this is an immutable law for all beings everywhere, it destroys the notion that karma is cold or uncaring or amoral. The connection between virtue and happiness is woven into the very fabric of the universe. It's not a cold, indifferent, amoral cosmos. The relationship between kindness and happiness is woven right into reality itself.

For me, this is what makes the world a warm, caring, and moral place to be—a trustworthy place to be. This law of karma creates that trust.

Now, the Buddha taught that we can't figure out the precise connections between actions and results. He said that anyone who tries to decipher these patterns is going to go mad and experience vexation. He identified this as one of the four imponderables—four topics that if you turn your mind to them, you're not going to figure them out, and the attempt will really stir you up and frustrate you.

The workings of karma—how results flow from actions—is one of these imponderables. The Buddha could see these connections through his powers of mind, but it's not something we can understand rationally. It's too intricate, too complex.

The other imponderables are the range of mind of a Buddha, the power of a concentrated mind, and the beginnings of the universe. Scientists are still working on that last one—they haven't figured it out yet.

We don't know how karmic results manifest, and we don't know what in our life or someone else's life represents a karmic consequence. I don't know if this has ever happened in your circle of friends, but sometimes when someone gets seriously ill, another friend comes along and says, "Oh, that must be your karma." This is a horrible thing to say, because we simply don't know that, and it can't possibly help the person who's suffering.

It's a very unkind and insulting thing to say. So when the Buddha was once asked whether all the pleasure and pain in our life comes from past action, he said we cannot make such a claim. He explained that there are many other causes for the pleasure and pain we experience. These could arise from illness, diet, climate, accidents, or assaults. He said that people who tell you everything comes from past action simply don't know what they're talking about.

So we don't say karma is responsible for everything. It's one of the laws that operates in the universe, but it's not the only law. There are physical laws, biological laws, chemical laws, and perhaps psychological laws also operating, and karma is one among these.

Sometimes we want to examine our present circumstances and wonder whether they came from our past actions. We usually ask this when we're suffering: "What did I do in the past to bring this on?" But we can never assume that our current situation is because of a past action, because we simply don't know.

This would be like using karma as a rearview mirror. Here I am in the present—what was there in the past? We can't see that. The Buddha could see that at times, he said, but we cannot. Whatever story we make up is just speculation. It has no real truth value. It would just be a story we were telling ourselves.

So it's not useful to try and figure out the past cause of our current situation. Where the law of karma becomes useful is in moving forward, because it shines a really bright light on our path ahead. We take it from here onward. Now that I understand, how can I make the best choices possible going forward to create the conditions for happiness in the future? So we use it as a headlight and not a rearview mirror.

Sometimes people will say, "You know, I don't really believe in karma. I know what people say, but I don't really believe in that." What they usually mean is they don't believe in this sixth kind of result—those consequences coming into the future that they

can't see or verify. But the first five kinds I talked about are verifiable. You can see those in your life. It's this mysterious one they question: "Oh, I'm not going to believe in that. That's just a theory."

So my suggestion is to hang out with the possibility that it might be true. Over time, you might come to have faith in it. I've come to have a lot of faith in the law of karma. I've observed many people's lives over the course of many years now, looking at them through this lens, and I have developed great faith in it. But we all have to do our own investigation. I'm not telling you what you should believe, but I am suggesting it's worth considering.

And also, don't form the opinion that it's not true, because you don't know that either. If you take up the opinion it's not true, that's part of what the Buddha would call wrong view. So be careful. Keep your mind open and keep looking.

Now let's explore karma and emptiness. When we consider the emptiness of self, at first they seem contradictory. If there's no self, who acts? Who's affected by the results of action? In the Buddha's time, one of the monks asked him this very question. The monk said, "What self then will actions performed by the not-self affect?" And the Buddha simply replied, "You haven't been listening to me." He didn't try to answer it directly. You haven't been listening to me.

But actually, karma and not-self need each other to make sense. They rely on each other.

The first thing we want to examine is whether there's a self in volition or intention. When you undertake an action, is there an "I" inside that's doing that?

So let's take an example of a simple volitional action and look.

I might be sitting in my room in the morning when it's chilly, and later say, "I was cold so I put on a shawl." That's a simple sentence we could say any day of the year and everybody would understand. But when we examine that action in more detail, there's far more happening than meets the eye.

Let's say you're sitting mindfully, present in the moment, and the first thing you notice is a sensation in the body that registers as cold. So it begins with mindfulness of sensation. The cold aspect is felt as unpleasant—there's a vedana to it that's unpleasant. Based on this unpleasant vedana, there's easily a reaction of aversion, not liking the cold.

Based on this aversion, there's some searching. Maybe you feel that the rest of the body is warm, or there's a memory of warmth—so there's a perception of warm. Then perhaps an image comes of the shawl that's right next to you, so a memory arises. Then there's a desire for that warmth, that remembered warmth. Another mental state has arisen. And out of that, the arm moves, picks up the shawl, and places it.

So it's not simply "I was cold, I pulled up the shawl." There was a cold sensation, there was a reaction of aversion, there was desire, there was perception of the shawl. All these things cascaded before that volition formed to make that action happen.

The volition is just one more link in the chain of all those physical and mental events flowing back and forth, eventually reaching a directive from the mind to the arm to pull the shawl up. Volition is simply another impersonal factor of mind, conditioned by all the other things happening at that time. It's born out of that process—conditioned by sense contact and by other mental factors: qualities of aversion, memory, perception, desire, before the volition comes to action, before it actually does something.

So then the question arises: given this mechanical nature of volition and action, is it all determined? It's so conditioned—is it determined? Or do I actually have any free will?

Maybe you never really generated out of your own free will the interest to meditate. It was just the piling up of many conditions in your life.

Here's what I would say in response: Is there free will? I would say that volition is conditioned, but it's not determined. If we said it was determined, we fall into the view of fatalism, which says there's really nothing to be done—it's all going to play out according to some predetermined scheme.

We see that volition arises based on other factors, especially of the mind. If we want wholesome volitions to come, the mind ought to be in a wholesome place. In other words, volition needs to come from a place where it's supported by factors like generosity, kindness, and wisdom. Because if the mind is in a state of greed, aversion, and delusion, the chance of wholesome action emerging from that is not as high.

This is why it's so important as we walk the path to keep the mind in a wholesome place, so that our actions will come from a wholesome place and the actions themselves will be wholesome, bringing wholesome results and happiness.

If there were truly free will, we could all declare, "All my actions will come out of generosity, kindness, and wisdom. All my actions will arise from wholesome motivation." Can you say that? No. Because we still fall into greed, aversion, and delusion, and sometimes we act from those states. Even though we don't want to, sometimes we do, because those are the accompanying mental factors from which volition arises.

This is why walking the path is so important for happiness. We want to make the mental factors more and more wholesome so that appropriate actions will naturally emerge from them.

So this is the first area where self could form around volition. But when we look into it, we really see it's just another impersonal factor of mind arising based on other mental factors present at the time.

What about personality? Sometimes that's really who we think we are. "I'm this kind of person. I'm not that kind of person." We have an image of ourselves.

We have an image of others and what we call their personality. Personality is fascinating because if I ask you to think of five of your friends, I could ask you to describe their personalities, and you could probably do it in a paragraph. You kind of know who people are, right? They show up with some consistency time and time again.

So we say personality has some consistency. Is there a self in there? That's really the question.

If you've been a parent, you really know personality shows up as soon as the child is born. Parents will have two children with very different personalities, and they recognize those personalities when the kids are really young. So there is some consistency to personality, but the way I like to think about it is like a stream.

In some Buddhist schools, there's this concept that beings have or are a mind stream. I think this is a great way to think about it. If you've walked during this retreat around Gaston Pond, you get to one side of the pond and there's a creek, a stream that flows out from the pond. The overflow crosses the road and goes down a little stream.

You could stand by that stream and ask, "What is a stream?" Well, it's not the banks. Really, it's the flowing water. You look at that stream closely—is there anything fixed in a stream? No. A bit of water's here and then it's there. It's always moving, always changing. The stream is never the same for two moments in a row. The water's flowing by and disappearing. So in the stream, is anything fixed? No. That water is constantly changing.

But different streams have different characteristics. The stream that flows out of Gaston Pond is fast, clear, clean. But if you drive an hour to the west from here, you'll cross the Connecticut River. The Connecticut River is very broad, it's brown, it's muddy, and it's slow moving. So there are two streams, but they're very different from one another.

Personality is like that. Personality is a mind stream, but one can be very different from another. In both the river stream and the mind stream, there's nothing fixed. It's always changing, always flowing. In our mindstream, different states circle past each other, one after another, sometimes really quickly, as you all have noticed this retreat. And yet, for each individual, there are similar patterns that come up again and again.

We know some people come across as warm and caring. Some people come across as cool or aloof. Some people are shy. Some are extroverted. Some are funny. Some are serious. We know people by these qualities, and there is some consistency in that.

If I were going to define personality—take it or leave it—I would define it as collective habits of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting. That's how you know someone. What are those habits for each person that you know among your friends? That constitutes their personality.

Does this remind you of any of the aggregates? Which one? Sankharas, isn't it? Formations. Volitional formations. There's that word volition again. The fourth aggregate is volitional formations. It's more or less the exact same description.

Volitional formations are habitual ways—so far we've mostly said—of thinking and feeling. The speaking and acting come out of ways of thinking and feeling. And in the full definition of sankharas, it includes actions of speech and actions of body. We didn't bring that in earlier because in silent meditation you're not doing much speaking and acting. But in the full definition of sankhara, it does include speech and bodily action. So it's more or less identical to the definition of personality.

There's consistency.

Is personality a fixed thing? If you look at that stream of sankharas, is there anything fixed in there? No. Just like a river stream, just running on, one after the other, after the other, after the other. Yet, in each of us, certain kinds of actions come up again and again and again through the force of habit. But it's not always like that. Even if you have a friend who you think is kind, sometimes they're probably mean. Even if you have a friend who you think of as generous, sometimes they're probably contracted and not so generous.

So the personality is a pattern, but it's not fixed. There's nothing fixed in it. But until we start waking up, the patterns have a certain circular quality. They just keep going around and reinforcing each other. So it's kind of like there's this lake that's been designed by M.C. Escher where the outflow circles around and feeds back into the inflow. And so the same patterns keep going around and around and around, repeating themselves. And that's called Lake Samsara.

So that's our mind stream when we come into the Dharma. When we first meet the Dharma, we've been circulating in Lake Samsara for a long time. And those grooves have gotten worn into our minds, even into our brains. As many people have said, it's not so easy to change one's personality, because of these strong forces of habit in our mental actions.

So we have this quote from the Buddha. And when he uses the word action in this, the word is karma: "Action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. Living beings are bound by action like the chariot wheel by the pin." Beings are bound by karma like the chariot wheel by the pin. That's a strong bond. And that's the Buddha speaking to the strength of these mental habits that we've been cultivating for years, if not lifetimes. We're bound to them. And that's why Dharma practice is so difficult. We're bound to our habits in this way.

It's strong, but it's not invincible. It's not unbreakable. And that's what practice is about. That's what the path is for.

This is a quote from one of my teachers: "The purpose of our Dharma practice is to transform the habits of mind that lead to suffering. There is no other purpose."

And interestingly, Dharma practice uses the law of karma for this transformation. So the path itself is a karmic unfolding. As we practice wholesome mind states, they arise more often. These qualities that you've been generating—of mindfulness, loving-kindness, energy, renunciation, patience, calm, non-identification, wisdom—each moment of one of these is like a new tributary flowing into our stream, flowing into our mind stream. And over time, they start to redirect the course of the stream away from Lake Samsara. And now it's flowing toward the nirvanic ocean.

That's why we practice. We're starting to turn the stream in a different direction. If there was anything fixed in personality, the stream couldn't be turned. But there isn't anything fixed in personality. There are patterns, but nothing is fixed. And so the new intentions start to move it in a completely different direction.

They move it in the direction of liberation. And they can do that because our ignorance is not fixed either. Ignorance is just another changing part of that karmic stream, that mind stream. And as we shift the intentions that are flowing in that mind stream, the mind starts to move in a new direction toward liberation.

So we start to see the mind still a little bit and we look at our situation. We're adrift on this changing sea of circumstances that is life—some pleasant, some unpleasant, some predictable, some completely unpredictable. Where are we going to go? How are we going to go? Where is safety? The only thing we have to steer by is intention. That's all we've got. And the intention is just in this moment.

So practice is always about what's the appropriate intention in this moment that will advance the mind to a wholesome state and move the path forward. That becomes our rudder. That's what we can count on. That's what we can rely on. That's how we steer in this chaotic seeming thing called life. We find that we have a reliable rudder, which is our own intention. And then our life moves in new directions based on our sustained intentions. Our life totally transforms. And I don't just mean our mind transforms—our whole external life transforms also based on our wholesome intentions.

This is another quote from the study guide. It's on page five. This is a wonderful Indian teacher named Srini Sargadatta Maharaj who worked with Westerners in the form of dialogue. He didn't give dharma talks, but people would come and talk with him. And one of his books is on the reading list called *I Am That*.

In this particular excerpt, a Westerner is in dialogue with Maharaj, who says to him, "Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny." And the questioner says, "Well, surely karma interfered." Maharaj replies, "Karma shapes the circumstances of your life. The attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character."

Your character shapes your life and you alone can shape your character. And the way we shape our character is the intention we bring moment after moment after moment in the direction of mindfulness, loving-kindness, wisdom, renunciation, patience, equanimity.

And then the Buddha said that for the Arahant, there is no more karma. This is very intriguing, mysterious. He didn't fully explain it. There is no more karma. It means the Arahant's not creating new karma. And the Buddha said that such a person has come to the end of karma.

And then the Buddha posed the question: what is the action that leads to the end of karma? And he answered his own question in quote seventeen—I'll let you read it another time—with the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is the action that leads to the end of karma.

So this is kind of poetical, and I don't have the first-hand experience to be able to tell you about, but the way it's suggested to me is that self-centered activity goes out. For one who has awakened, it has gone out. Self-centered activity has gone out. And for those of us who are awakening, it gets less and less. So our action comes from a wisdom that sees the good of ourselves and the good of others at the same time and leads in the direction of non-doing.

The end of karma has something to do with non-doing, at least from a place of center or self. So for me, it has these qualities of resting, not acting, stopping, not fabricating, surrender, allowing things to be as they are. Does it remind you of any meditation practices you've done recently?

So I think part of the beauty and the power of the awareness practices that we've been doing is that we are practicing the end of karma. We are practicing for the end of self-centeredness. We are practicing for the purpose of awakening.

Let's just sit for a minute together. Karma shapes the circumstances, the attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character.

So there are about twenty-five minutes for walking and then we'll have the last sit with chanting.

CHAPTER 180

Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 48 min

> *Guy Armstrong offers a profound guided meditation exploring the relationship between conventional and ultimate perspectives in Buddhist understanding. Drawing from his personal experience observing autopsies as a monk in Thailand, he guides practitioners through two distinct ways of viewing ourselves and others: seeing through the lens of personal history with all its conditioning and circumstances, versus seeing simply as body and consciousness existing completely in the present moment.*
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> *The reflection examines how the conventional view—considering someone's background, relationships, health, work, and life experiences—naturally evokes compassion (karuṇā) as we understand the struggles that have shaped them. In contrast, the ultimate view sees only the immediate reality of form (rūpa) and consciousness (viññāṇa), with mental formations (saṅkhāra) arising and passing like ripples on water. This present-moment perspective opens space for transformation and freedom, unconditioned by past patterns.*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes the practical wisdom of skillfully moving between these two ways of seeing. The conventional view supports compassion and understanding, while the ultimate view supports liberation from attachment to personal history. He guides practitioners to recognize that both perspectives have validity and specific applications in meditation practice and daily relationships. The teaching integrates elements of the five aggregates (khandha) and points toward the emptiness (suññatā) that underlies conventional designations, offering a bridge between formal meditation practice and engaged compassion in the world.*

This morning we're going to do a guided reflection along the theme of emptiness and compassion. I want to preface it by talking about how this came up for me. Those of you who have read my book know that at one point when I was a monk in Thailand, I got to observe autopsies. I stood next to dead bodies for the first time in my life and watched three different autopsies as the coroner determined what had caused the death of these people.

After sitting through that experience, in quite a sensitive and open place, I went out and caught a bus to return to my monastery. I was really in a different space. As I was watching people—this was in Bangkok in the center of town—I thought there wasn't

much difference between those people walking around and the people I had just seen who had died. There was a body, and in the people who were walking around, you could see their eyes were still bright, and there was still consciousness going on.

I thought, there's a body, there's consciousness, and of course there are all the movements of mind—the sankharas are going on. In terms of the three aggregates that we've talked about—body, consciousness, movements of mind—the first two, body and consciousness, seemed so strong and so fundamental that the movements of mind seemed like ripples on the surface of the water, just waves coming and going.

What really struck me was there was a body, which was totally in the present moment. There was consciousness, which was totally in the present moment, just this brightness of people being aware of things. But the mind's faculty of memory means we remember things that happened in the past and based on that we project things that are going to happen in the future. All those memories and projections are happening in the present too.

When I looked at people just walking around Bangkok, I was seeing totally their present moment reality. There's the body and there's consciousness. All the rest were just ripples on that reality.

That's what the reflection this morning is going to be about. It's about seeing people as body plus consciousness and seeing how that feels, then seeing people with a history and seeing how that feels. This will be our exploration this morning.

Please begin the meditation by sitting easily, relaxed and alert. Connect to the body and sitting, settling into an awareness of the body, feeling the heart center, connecting with a sense of goodwill for yourself, for all beings.

Now I'm going to invite you to bring to mind a friend. It could be the friend you used in the brahmaviharas practice. It doesn't necessarily have to be—any friend that you would like to connect with at this point. Let's take a moment and choose someone.

Once you've chosen them, bring them to mind, bring them present with you in this moment. Perhaps see them or say their name.

Because this person is a friend, you know something about their life. I'm going to invite you to reflect on the circumstances of their life and actually what you know of their personal history. As you connect with your friend, you might bring to mind where they were born, how they were raised, what their family of origin was like and how that affected them. Then anything you might know about their movement into adulthood—the period as a young adult is often turbulent. How that affected them.

As they've grown as an adult, any of the major things that come to mind that happened in their life? You might think about important relationships. Have they had a close personal relationship, an intimate relationship? How has that gone? Maybe there's been more than one. How have they gone? What's their current family situation? Are they in a close relationship? What do you know about their parents? Have they had children? How are those relationships for them?

Think about their current health situation. Do they have any health challenges at the moment, either physical or mental? Or are they in very good health? How has their state of health affected them?

Consider their livelihood, their support. What has their work life been like? How have they supported themselves? Has their work been easy and satisfying? Has it been difficult, challenging? How's their money situation? Is it comfortable or is it difficult?

And in all these ways that you've considered your friend's life from early on up until now, can you feel how all these factors have to some extent shaped them? And so considering your friend's overall balance of happiness and sorrows.

And now letting go of this reflection on your friend. Letting go of any thoughts about their past or history. Just returning to the present moment. Feeling yourself sitting easily. Aware of the body or aware of awareness, coming into the present moment.

And now I'd invite you to bring your friend in again. Connect with them, perhaps seeing their image. But this time only see them as a person totally in the present moment. Fundamentally, they are a body plus consciousness. Brightness of awareness, the body, all in the present.

Yes, there are mental states, there are moods and emotions and thoughts. Let's see those as passing ripples on a very large lake. The lake being the body plus consciousness all in the present.

How does it feel to see your friend this way? How does it feel compared to seeing them with all their personal history? Which way does it seem leaves your friend more open, more free, lighter? In which way of looking at your friend brings more compassion, more caring, more humanity?

And now letting go of your friend, thanking them for joining you in the reflection. Coming back into the present moment, just sitting quietly. Aware of the body, the sounds, space, awareness.

And now bringing to mind yourself, connecting with yourself here and now, aware of your heart center, with a sense of goodwill, wishing the best for yourself. And then taking a look back over your life and your situation—your childhood, the family you grew up in, and how that life affected you.

Young adulthood and all the things one goes through then. Relationships, close personal relationships, those with partner or partners, or the absence of them, family, relation to parents. Any children? Any grandchildren? The joys and sorrows with family.

Your own health. How is it now? How has it been over time? Have there been health challenges? How have they felt?

And your own livelihood and support. Any work or careers that you've done. The ups and downs of work life. And your current sense of support financially—how is that for you? Adequate? Comfortable? Or difficult?

And so with this sense of the course of your life, how it has affected you, how things are still affecting you, just a sense of what has made you who you are.

And then letting go of that recollection, letting go of that reflection. Just coming back into the present moment. Just a simple noticing of the body, mood, heart, space, awareness. Just resting in the present moment, letting go of any thoughts of memory or past.

And now again connecting with yourself and maybe seeing an image of yourself or a photograph of yourself somewhere you're comfortable. And this time as you look at yourself, just see body and consciousness. These are the two foundations for our human experience. We're in a body and we're conscious.

Thoughts and moods come and go like waves on a lake. But fundamentally we're body and consciousness totally in the present moment.

And when you see yourself in this way, how does that feel? No reference to the past. No reference to history. Just the present moment reality—body and consciousness.

Compared to seeing yourself with history, which way feels more open, freer, less confined, more available for transformation? And compared to seeing yourself with history, which evokes more compassion, more human understanding, more patience?

And now letting go of that reflection, that investigation, just returning to the present moment experience, sitting quietly, feeling the body, relaxing the body, relaxing the mind. Breathing in, breathing out. Letting the attention be wide and knowing all the sounds that are coming and going.

If the reflections earlier brought up any emotions that are difficult to be with, not so comfortable, just allowing them to be in the wide space of your attention. Not pushing them away or judging them. Just allowing them to be felt in this big space of awareness.

If the emotions are very strong, remember that you can always return to your Vipassana practice. We've trained a lot in working with difficult emotions. Remembering the steps of RAIN: to recognize, allow, investigate, not identify. Allowing the emotion to be there, to do whatever it will do, and knowing that it's held within the vast space of awareness.

And so for the last part of this sitting, just returning to your practice of awareness, or if it feels the mind could benefit from more stability, returning to mindfulness of breath, or one of the Brahma Viharas.

So this reflection, you might say, is the start of our integration practice. We are linking back up into relationships and the wider world and the activity of thought. So I'm curious, in these two approaches, both to your friend and to yourself—one with personal history and one just present moment—did one of them evoke for you a more sense of freedom and openness?

"The latter."

When you just see someone completely in the present moment, body plus consciousness, do you get more of a sense of their ability to move, to open, to change, to transform? Could you get that for yourself as well?

And what about between personal history and body plus consciousness—which evoked more compassion?

"The history."

The history. Is that generally true for people? When we think about people's circumstances and all the events in their life that have led up to their present circumstances, we often feel a lot of compassion for all the ups and downs in people's lives. Sometimes that sense of compassion can be overwhelming and it goes into the near enemy of compassion, a little bit of overwhelm. So we might experience this for our friend, we might experience it for ourselves. If that happens, that's kind of an indication—okay, might be the time to shift out of the personal history and into this other way of looking.

In the whole of the Buddha's teachings, these two ways of looking fall under what I would call conventional understanding and ultimate understanding. Conventional involves concepts. Even to designate someone as a person is a concept. To say there's a being is a concept. There's no being. There's only form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. When we say "being," we're already using conventional designation. And then when we review someone's history, that's the creation of memory. So it can really help us understand how someone has lived their life, what's happened to them, all the grounds for compassion.

Is personal history always reliable? The things we fabricate through memory are maybe sometimes true, sometimes really true, sometimes not so clear. So this personal history reflection is useful, but I would say don't believe in it ultimately. Don't believe that you've absolutely got it right. We remember things wrongly about our own past. We remember things wrongly about other people's past. So it's useful to evoke compassion, but hold it with a little bit of questioning.

And then coming back into the present moment and just seeing a body and consciousness, the doors are really open. Anything can happen in the next moment, not limited by personal history or what's gone before.

I actually use this reflection on body plus consciousness a lot. Sometimes for myself, if I feel like I'm getting entangled in something related to the past, I feel like I'm getting captivated by the past, I'll go to body plus consciousness and I'll see it's just an invention. That tie to the past is just an invention. And then I come into the present, everything's open again.

Or when you're with someone else, recognize that you have two ways of seeing them. For those of you who work with people, you can respond either from the point of view of personal history, or you can respond from the perspective that there's just the present.

That reminder—there's just the present—can sometimes really help people come back out of their involvement with their own past. But you have to be careful with it because you don't want to override compassion. Generally, the conventional view supports compassion. The ultimate view supports freedom. As you go back and forth, you realize you have the option every moment to see yourself and to see others in either one of these ways.

This becomes a really interesting exercise. You can view people from either point of view, and they both have their validity, their applicability, reasons to bring them in, reasons not to bring them in. Get skilled in looking both ways. Then you can resolve

your own attachment to the past, you can help resolve others' attachment to the past, or you can stay on that level of personal history if compassion is the most important response.

Obviously, the wisdom aspect here is the emptiness aspect. Body and consciousness—that's basically all that's going on. And of course, mind states are there and important, but they come and go so quickly, they're like waves.

Do you have any questions or comments?

CHAPTER 181

Taking the Practice Home

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses the essential question of how to sustain awareness practice after returning home from retreat. Drawing from his decades of experience as a former Thai forest monk and vipassana teacher, Guy explores how awareness practice reveals "a new room in an old house" - a dimension beyond the familiar territory of object-oriented meditation.*
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> *Guy examines how this practice shifts our understanding from the second Noble Truth (dukkha and clinging) to the third Noble Truth (temporary nibbāna and release), moment by moment. He discusses how awareness serves as an immediate refuge - something "steady, reliable and trustworthy" that feels beyond change. The talk covers practical integration with traditional samatha and vipassana methods, emphasizing the importance of maintaining formal practice while incorporating informal recognition throughout daily activities.*
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> *Offering concrete guidance for home practice, Guy suggests building on foundations of mindfulness of breathing and mettā before turning to awareness, and recommends maintaining two hours of daily formal practice when possible. He addresses common challenges like working with cognitive tasks and finding qualified teachers, while encouraging practitioners to trust their individual experience of this "timeless quality" of natural awareness.*

This afternoon I'd like to talk about taking this practice home. Before I get into details of what to do, I want to talk a little bit about this practice as an area for new understandings.

I came into these kinds of practices after I'd been doing Vipassana for about twenty years. I'd been a monk in Thailand and I'd done a number of three-month courses. When I happened upon the awareness practices, it felt like I was exploring a new room in an old house. I was familiar with all the other rooms, and yet there was this one off one of the main corridors I'd never been in before. As I started to know it and get familiar with it, I found that it changed my understandings of a lot of the ways that I'd held practice before.

Some of these we may have talked about in Dharma talks, some of them you may have touched on in interviews, but I wanted to bring out some of the ways that I felt practice changed as a result of learning about awareness and how my understanding of practice changed.

One of the key things for me was that I found a new and immediate refuge. I found something steady and reliable and trustworthy that was in my direct field of experience. The reason it was steady and reliable and trustworthy is that to some extent it was beyond change. It felt beyond change. Whether it is or not, the philosophers can debate, but it feels like that.

In that, there's a way that our center of gravity can shift from centering around objects and what's happening with objects, and even objects of mind. It can shift to this new place in our being that's another dimension. One of the great things about this other dimension is we don't have to produce it. You don't have to produce awareness. It's already here. It's always already here. You just have to tune into it.

We'd say that this dimension of our being, this empty awareness that we come to know as an intrinsic part of us, is an aspect of reality. It's a profound aspect of reality. Düdjom Lingpa, a Tibetan teacher, said that in taking up this practice, one is taking the fundamental nature of reality as the unsurpassable ultimate refuge. The nature of reality is our refuge, and we can touch it here and now.

The second thing that shifted for me is that I really saw the heart of dharma practice. As I talked about the other night, moving from the second to the third Noble Truth, this practice highlights that moment after moment. We're either in the second Noble Truth with craving, clinging and suffering, or we're in the third Noble Truth of temporary nibbana and release and ease.

My understanding of what I was doing in practice started to move to: am I in the second Noble Truth or am I in the third Noble Truth? Am I grasping or am I in empty awareness? If I'm not grasping, then I can be in empty awareness.

This is pointed to by a quotation from the Buddha when he says, "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to." That's the pith of that quotation. But he goes on to say, one who has heard this has heard all the teachings. One who has practiced this has practiced all the teachings.

This awareness practice highlights this central point again and again. Is there clinging or is there not? That's basically all we're concerned about.

The third thing that it pointed out to me is it showed another kind of path to awakening or liberation. The traditional path of early Buddhism relies upon these four stages of enlightenment, beginning with stream entry, moving through once returner, non-returner, and arhat, that are usually understood as four successive moments at deeper and deeper levels of connecting to the unconditioned element, direct realization of the unconditioned element, responsible for a moment of enlightenment.

This idea of awareness offers another way to freedom because in it there's the possibility of stabilizing. What is suggested here is that we have the potential to stabilize essentially in this area of non-grasping, the third Noble Truth. You may have felt that at different times in the retreat, that it was so clear and so steady that you felt stable in it for periods. There's no reason that with further meditation and further development, that stability can't go on and on.

Now after a couple of hours of talking yesterday, you may feel it's slightly more remote than it was two days ago. Nonetheless, this is a different description of a path to liberation. It may seem more possible for us because we've tasted that stability, and we know we just need to do it more.

Another way that it shows a little difference in the path is our normal understanding of the Eightfold Path is that we build up wholesome moments little by little, over and over, and they lead us closer and closer to the unconditioned, to the realization of the unconditioned. There's this lovely quotation from the Buddha: "Don't underestimate the value of wholesome moments. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." So accumulation of mindfulness moments starts to fill up the jar, and when it gets full enough, it tips into the unconditioned.

This awareness practice, in a way, reverses the process. It almost starts with the unconditioned. And it says, if you can get a little peek of this thing, trust that. Awareness is like the unconditioned.

When we glimpse it, we're almost looking from the other direction. And then we trust that expanding these glimpses wears away the kilesas. Awareness itself is free from kilesa. It's unstained. So when we can rest there, the mind is temporarily purified. That's the temporary nibbana that Ajahn Buddhadasa talked about. As we rest there more and more, the power of our natural state, the power of this free dimension within us, starts to wear down the kilesa, wears down the obscurations.

Another thing that becomes clear from practicing with this for a while is that now we know what to do in practice when the mind becomes calm. I don't know if you've ever experienced this, but this happened to me a lot. I'd be with a practice like the

breath or even body scanning, and I'd come into this state of calm where there wasn't much going on in the mind and there wasn't much going on in the body. Objects were really quiet. But then what was I supposed to attend to? I'd gotten there by attending to objects, and then what was I going to do next?

Sally talked about this possibility of samatha without support, which I've sometimes played with in my own mind—the way she described it as being with the stillness itself. So that's one approach. But I often felt I'd get to this open space of calm, and I didn't know what to do. I'd just kind of hang out there, but then my mind would drift because there wasn't really a clear place to land. The breath was really subtle, sensations were really subtle, there weren't many thoughts, and I'd just kind of float away into a little bit of distractedness.

Now when I hit that space of calm, I know what to do. I turn to awareness. It's always there. When the mind is calm, there's that foundation of samadhi that makes it easy to connect. A couple of people have mentioned, either in interviews or questions here in the hall, that when awareness is seen clearly, it becomes a very good focus for attention. It's a very clear part of our experience, and it's still and without kilesa. So it's a very good meditation focus when it's available. In times of calm, I find it's the clearest focus available to me. And because I have interest in it, that drift doesn't set in. It just feels wonderful to be in touch with that quality of awareness.

It's so interesting. Someone said in an interview the other day that they felt a timeless quality in this awareness. When they're with the awareness, it felt like it was out of time. And that's true for something that's not subject to coming and going. The perception of time is basically created by change. And when there is no change going on, time kind of falls away as a perception, as a felt sense. So that means we have discovered an element that is beyond coming and going, and it means it's always there—even in dreams.

I don't know if you've played with this at all, but there's this approach called lucid dreaming where you find your meditation subject in a dream. Awareness can be found in dreams also. It's there too. So wherever you are, awake or dreaming, you can find this focus.

Another thing I learned from being with awareness is I really learned the value of non-doing. In standard vipassana instructions, the direction to connect and sustain—vitaka and vicara—is so much at the heart of our meditation practice. Connecting and sustaining with the breath or sensations. Even in choiceless attention, we connect and

sustain with objects as they come up. It's a beautiful practice and an essential part of deepening concentration. But at a certain point, that repeated effort to connect and sustain moment after moment isn't needed.

In some meditation experiences, you'll find the effort will fall away. In vipassana practice as well as the awareness practice, you'll get to a point where effort's no longer needed to be with the present moment. But this practice of awareness really highlights that non-doing with the instruction of resting. Once we get the sense of resting and we have a clear focus—which is awareness—where the attention can go without movement, it really strengthens this feeling, the flavor of non-doing. And in non-doing, the self is really out of the picture. The self has stepped aside, and we're trusting we don't have to do the dharma.

The Dharma starts doing us. It becomes really clear that we don't have to do anything at that point. So there's this beautiful quality of effortlessness, this non-doing that emerges through this practice while still maintaining a clear focus for the attention.

This is the direction that surrender leads to—or that letting go leads to. Letting go guides us into this non-doing. We let go of control, we let things be where they are, as they are, and yet we can still connect to awareness.

This practice also highlights the importance of relaxation. If we're straining, we won't be connected to awareness. When we relax, it's already there.

There's a lovely poem by Angelus Silesius, a medieval Christian contemplative. Of course, he expressed it in theological terms, but listen to the way he describes the divine: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear."

A pure no-thing—does that sound like awareness? It does, doesn't it? Concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear.

As we settle into this level of relaxation and opening to what feels like it's beyond change, what seems to be always there, it opens an avenue to devotion. Devotion is sometimes not emphasized very much in Vipassana circles, but it has been a central part of every major religion throughout history.

The Buddha spoke of this after his awakening: "It is painful to dwell without reverence and deference. However, in this world, I do not see another ascetic or brahman more developed in virtue, concentration, wisdom, or liberation than myself, whom I could honor, respect, and dwell in dependence on. Let me then honor, respect, and dwell in dependence on this Dharma to which I have become awakened."

The Buddha is essentially saying that if there is someone more developed than we are in virtue, concentration, wisdom, and liberation, we can honor and revere that person. To "dwell in dependence" means to stay near them and continue learning from them. Fortunately today, there are many beings who are more developed in these ways than we ourselves are, so there are many examples for devotion in the community of senior practitioners.

But we don't have to neglect devotion to the Dharma itself. One thing I've felt, and that I've sensed from some of you in interviews, is a quality of awe and reverence for this awareness and what it opens us to. It's a mystery. How did this awareness arrive in this body? How is it that it can know the phenomena of the world? It can know our own mind. And yet there it is.

When I think about one single element of the Dharma that I can prostrate toward, I think about this awareness—the mystery of this empty awareness that's always available. I can feel that reverence and respect when I turn in that direction.

Sometimes when I chant the refuges and come to refuge in the Dharma, I think about this empty awareness. That's what comes to mind because of its immediate, felt presence and its liberating potential.

This also gives us a sense of where we might incline the mind toward nibbana. We've talked about how awareness, like the unconditioned, may offer a direct link into the unconditioned, into nibbana, through this notion of Buddha nature. As we direct our attention in that way and feel its quality as a refuge, like the unconditioned, it gives us a sense of what we can release into—that which is beyond change.

Finally, it gives us a sense of the primary importance of awareness. In doing object-oriented practices for a long time—breath meditation, choiceless attention, body scanning, emotional mindfulness—we can really think that Vipassana practice is all about the objects that come into our experience, both the physical objects and the objects of mind. But this dimension makes it clear that there's something holding all those appearances, both physical appearances and appearances of mind. That which is holding them—this consciousness or awareness, this empty awareness—is more fundamental and more of a refuge, more important than any of the individual objects. So it can take us away from entanglement with the object.

When we're paying attention to objects all day long, it's hard not to get entangled. But this gives us somewhere else to be that's not entangled. It offers us that kind of different dimension—a primary dimension.

We've talked about this as empty awareness, the union of emptiness and awareness, the natural state. Sometimes it's also called natural awareness. There's a very beautiful quote on the last page of the study guide about the four faults of natural awareness. I need to correct one mistyped word—when we get there, you'll know it.

The Four Faults of Natural Awareness:
So close you can't see it.
So deep you can't fathom it.
So simple you can't believe it.
So good you can't accept it.

The second "believe" should be "accept"—it's so good you can't accept it.

This is what we've been exploring. This is what we've been discovering. It's so close. That's why I want to emphasize again: it's so close. Whatever you've received as your experience through that movement of turning, trust in that. It manifests differently for different people and differently at different times for all of us.

Sometimes it's just very clear recognition of the factor of awareness. Sometimes it's a heightened vividness—you turn to awareness and everything kind of lights up. Sometimes there's a sense of letting go—you turn to awareness and there's a dropping that happens. Sometimes you turn to awareness and there's a stopping. The thoughts stop. The projections stop.

Whatever form it takes for you, trust that. Go with that. That's your individual glide path. It will deepen. In its deepening, it will clarify exactly what the nature of awareness is.

Going back into our daily life, how do we work with this new practice? Formal practice is still really important. Even though this gets into the effortless, formal practice remains crucial. This is from Shabkar, whom we've read a couple of times: "Butter is made from the essence of milk, but if the milk isn't churned, the butter won't form. Sentient beings have Buddha nature as their essence, but if they don't practice, they won't be enlightened."

So we need to keep practicing. In this arena, it means we need to keep turning to and recognizing awareness.

I think this practice is really well suited to informal practice times—off the cushion or off formal walking. It's a practice you can truly take with you out into the world because you don't have to locate your breath. You don't have to feel tingling sensations in the bottom of your feet, or anything like that. You just turn and notice awareness, and it's always there. It's always available.

At the end of one retreat, Mingyur Rinpoche gave direct instruction for maintaining this practice in informal times. He said to recognize it one hundred times a day in informal moments. One hundred times a day. I wanted to take that up as a practice some years ago, so Sally bought me one of those ticket counters—the ones where you check people going through a turnstile. I would try to hit one hundred with that every day. It's not easy, but it really helped keep track.

What I found the best avenue for that was boring meetings.

And being connected to Spirit Rock, I sat through many boring meetings. Every few seconds I could do a click on that counter, and within a few hours I'd reach my hundred. Driving might also provide this opportunity, or walking around shopping, or tending to daily tasks—anywhere you have a little free attention available. One hundred times a day really keeps you in touch with the practice.

When we sit down for formal practice, we often discuss this at retreat endings, and we usually recommend trying to sit two hours a day if you have the time. At this phase of your life, that may seem impossible. There were certainly times when I was working full-time that I didn't feel I had time for that. But as some of us in this room are moving toward retirement territory, this may be very possible. The only reason for not doing it might be lack of commitment, so really consider this deeply. If your schedule permits the possibility of sitting two hours a day, take it seriously.

My teachers told me this. Joseph told me this on my first retreat, and I've tried to maintain this for most of my practice career since then. It's fluctuated depending on my level of busyness, but I find that if I can sit two hours a day, it keeps me basically as balanced as when I emerge from retreat. That practice truly maintains my level of equanimity and equilibrium. Of course, do what you can in that regard. If it's twenty minutes, that's still beneficial and helpful.

Continue to go on retreats, naturally. From the stories of people like Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Mahabua, we know the great masters spent many years in retreat, doing nothing but sitting and walking meditation. That's how they became great masters—that's how the butter gets churned. So do what you can in that regard.

Many people here have done extensive long retreats, so I know I'm speaking to the choir to a certain extent. But I still want to encourage that continuation. I tell myself that every year: Guy, keep sitting long retreats. It remains tremendously valuable for me.

Some have asked where they can do more retreats in this style. It's not easy to find. There's usually at least one retreat a year at Spirit Rock that follows this approach. We advertise it as the Awareness Retreat. Philip Moffitt has been part of that retreat for years, and Sally and I have taught it many times. So there's typically at least one such retreat annually. Sometimes it's part of the Advanced Practitioners Program, and one might need to join that program to access the retreat. But many years, it stands on its own.

Another possibility is to attend one of the longer retreats at Spirit Rock or IMS. These are standard vipassana retreats, but if you want to practice awareness meditation, you can approach your teacher and say, "On this retreat, I want to do this awareness practice. Can you support me in that?" A number of teachers on those retreats could accommodate this. They wouldn't give instructions in the hall, but they could support you in interviews. You could bring recordings of talks from this retreat or other helpful talks and listen to them in the evenings, getting reminded of the instructions while practicing this style among others doing standard vipassana practice.

As many of you know, Sally and I will be offering this retreat again next September—basically the same curriculum, here at the Forest Refuge in September 2020. The application is already available on the website.

There will again be a lottery for that retreat. But we will be doing it again in the fall next year.

So a few words on how to integrate this practice with your existing practices. Sally's just encouraging me to say something about the Advanced Practitioners Program, which she started.

What Sally put together was a series of three retreats over the course of twelve months. One retreat focused on emptiness, one on awareness, and the third on liberation. They're designed for people who have already developed considerable meditation experience plus some study background.

In addition to the three retreats, the whole group—about a hundred people—signs up for the complete program. You form a dharma buddy relationship where you have regular conversations with one other person. There's an ongoing mentoring group where you meet monthly with people in your geographical area or online if you're in a

remote location. These groups are led by a teacher, you have a mentor in the program, and there's monthly homework and reading. So it's a very comprehensive package, and for people at your level of experience, it's an excellent program.

The Awareness Retreat got woven into that program, and details are available on the Spirit Rock website. You can search for Advanced Practitioner Program. There's one currently running, and there won't be another one for a year or two. There's still a description you can read that's quite interesting.

Now I want to talk about how to integrate this practice when you go home with your existing practices—vipassana and metta. The basic suggestion is the way we did it here: continue with your foundation practices.

Remember that we first turned to mindfulness of breathing to develop a foundation of samadhi or concentration. We turned to loving-kindness to further open the heart. And on those two foundations, we moved into awareness practice. So at home also, this is a good combination.

You'll see when you get home how this carries forward for you. Everybody's experience is different. One thing I've found is that when I leave an awareness retreat, it's really accessible for a while. Then, as the samadhi drops off when I move back into daily life, my avenue to awareness drops off as well. So I find it's not as accessible a week or two down the road after coming out of a retreat like this.

I find it helpful in my daily practice to support awareness with a samadhi-oriented practice. Breath and metta both qualify for that. As I start a daily sit, I might do a period of mindfulness of breathing, then check to see if awareness is available. If it is, great—I'll just stay with that. If it's not, then I might do some metta practice, because metta is also a foundation of concentration. Then I'll check again if awareness is available. If it is, I'll rest in that. If it's not, I'll stay with one of the foundation practices.

So really go home and see what your experience is. You don't have to be delicate about the awareness practice and say, "Oh, I better not try it now. I'm not samadhi-ed up enough." Try it whenever you have the inclination. But if it doesn't connect, don't take it personally. It could just be that the samadhi isn't there as the foundation.

I've come to appreciate a lot that if awareness isn't available, using the practices that lead to samadhi in daily life is valuable, because I find that's the element that's usually missing. In my daily life, I don't have the foundation of samadhi—settled in the present moment, the steadiness that Sally's talked about—that I do in retreat. So in daily life, I find a samatha practice like breath or metta very helpful. I do a lot of it. And then if I feel the settledness, I'll turn to awareness. If it connects, it's wonderful just to rest.

So I would integrate it remembering the practices you've done on this retreat and using them as you've played with them here, whatever has been helpful for you. And again, trust what you get when you turn to awareness.

It doesn't help to doubt what arises. If you have a sense of a shift as you turn to awareness, trust that. Stay with that. It may not be the perfect union of emptiness, awareness, and responsiveness. That's perfectly okay. Something happened. Some shift took place. Stay with that. Rest.

Especially if you have a sense of resting and being in touch with what's happening—the awareness is functioning to reveal objects, you have present moment awareness, and there's a sense of resting—that's a great beginning. Trust that and follow it.

When you go back into retreat practice, of course you might want to dive back into awareness straightaway. But again, I'd recommend taking a little time in your next retreat, even if it's just a week, to build in a little foundation of samadhi. Spend a few days with the breath, or spend a few days with metta, whichever one steadies you better. After that foundation is there, shift into this other gear and go back into the recognition of awareness.

I want to close with a quotation from the Tibetans. One we've heard before, but it's worth hearing again:

"Don't dwell on the past. Don't invite the future. Don't alter the innate wakefulness. Don't fear phenomena. Apart from that, there's not a damn thing." —Paltrul Rinpoche

Questions and Clarifications

A participant raised an interesting question about reconciling different approaches to practice. She had heard the earlier talk about Ajahn Maha Bua's extraordinary effort—sitting all night, every night, for months on end—and wondered how this aligned with the Buddha's memory under the rose apple tree, where he dropped into a very pleasant state of ease. Could this more relaxed approach also be a path to awakening?

The Buddha's recollection of that memory came after six years of the most intense practice anyone has ever described, including extreme ascetic practices. When his mind was finally turned to relaxation, that was the right balance. Then it could open beautifully to the unconditioned.

Our minds are not as prepared as Siddhartha Gautama's was. For us, effort is needed for most people. But it depends on your motivation and what you're aiming for in your meditation practice.

If you're aiming for full enlightenment, as Ajahn Maha Bua was, going full out is probably most likely to succeed. I think of teachers from the Tibetan tradition—Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche said he had spent more than half of his life in solitary retreat. Yet when I met him, he was very light and open and cheerful, not pressing anybody. But clearly he had been doing that intensive work for years and years.

If you want the highest result, you have to work really hard. But that's not the case for all of us. Many would be happy with a level of harmony, peace, good conduct, harmonious mind states, and good relationships in daily life. That's a noble goal in itself.

This path of achieving harmony through a more relaxed way, still combined with retreat practice and even long retreats, is more realistic for most people these days.

The number of people who are going to go the route of Ajahn Mahabua, even in Thai monasteries, is very small. He's an exception. That's partly why he's a great teacher.

For us as lay people in the West, my view is if you do one retreat a year and keep up your daily practice on a regular basis, you will be well on your way to having a harmonious life with good relationships and wholesome states of mind. That's kind of our recommendation.

But I know I'm also talking to a group where many of you have done long practice and found huge benefit from that. So where there's the inclination to longer retreats, go for it. They make a lot of difference.

Judy's Question: Self-Retreat Practice at Home

I've also done a lot of self-retreat in my home, and I found it a wonderful way to practice when I have the time. Two things about self-retreat that I've tended to adopt and shared with others who found them helpful:

First, make a schedule for yourself. Around a familiar environment, it's much easier to space out and get distracted by email or mail or cooking or anything else that's there in the home environment. So I would recommend making a schedule for yourself that's doable.

When I do a group retreat at Spirit Rock or IMS, all I do basically is sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, walk all day because that's what the group schedule says. I'm carried along by the energy of the rest of the yogis, and that's doable. If I tried to do that at home, I think I would frustrate myself because it's difficult to maintain such a totally intensive schedule on one's own.

So I make a schedule for myself that I feel is doable. For me that involves about six sittings a day, some walking, some yoga. And I tend to study on those retreats—that's when I do my dharma reading, the more challenging dharma reading where the mind has to be slowed down to get into it.

You have to figure out the schedule on your own. See what works for you. See what's doable. But those are the elements I'd recommend: make your schedule, include some walking periods, some yoga or movement, some time for study, and listen to dharma talks in the evening.

Roger's Question: Other Traditions Teaching Natural Awareness

Regarding attending retreats by teachers in other traditions whose teachings are along the lines of this natural awareness—I would recommend it.

The two that I've practiced with are Sotni Rinpoche, whom I've mentioned, and Mingyur Rinpoche. The difficulty is that with those teachers, they teach a lot of different styles of retreats. Mingyur Rinpoche has become so famous in the West that it's very hard to get any personal time with him. His retreats have a lot of people, and only a few retreats in a year will he teach that are open to people like us, where he'll give the depth of instructions in this technique.

So you want to look to see that if you're going to go to a retreat with Mingyur Rinpoche, it includes what's called "pointing out instructions." That means he's going to teach on the nature of mind. The same is true of Sotni Rinpoche, who I've sat with much more. I found him a very reliable teacher, but he teaches many retreats that are not nature of mind retreats. Again, you have to look at the course description and see if it says "nature of mind."

If you have an opportunity to sit with one of those teachers and they're teaching nature of mind and offering pointing out instructions, I think you could find it really helpful.

Michael's Question: Staying Connected During Cognitive Tasks

The question is how to stay connected with this practice while doing more cognitively demanding tasks.

And this is a challenge because if thinking is involved in what you're doing, it's hard to be mindful and think at the same time. The mindfulness of thoughts usually interrupts the flow of thoughts. So for instance, when I'm writing something like a talk or when I was writing the book, I didn't feel it was practical for me to be mindful and write at the same time.

So with that kind of cognitive activity, and this is probably true for a lot of desk jobs, I would just try to come back into my body periodically, regularly, and check that I still felt balanced. I think keeping an eye on when you're involved in work like that is sufficient—is the mind going out of balance? Am I getting involved with grasping, proliferation, unwholesome emotions coming up?

Now, listening to a podcast is in a different territory. It's like listening to a Dharma talk. And I find that in listening to a Dharma talk, I have fifty percent of my attention in the words of the talk and fifty percent on, say, my body. And there's enough processing power to hold them both. So I find that very doable, and this practice would be great for listening to a Dharma talk. Keep fifty percent in the awareness and fifty percent on the content. Not that much gets said in a Dharma talk, really. So I think you could do that.

But other things like writing, where you're really having to think, or an architect planning a building, I think it's much more difficult. And then the important thing is keeping an eye on whether your mind is staying in balance.

The question is how to do the two hours a day. Any way that works for you. For me, it's generally been one hour in the morning and one hour at night. But if you wanted to sit three forty-minute periods, that would also work great. So it's sort of what your time allows and just see how it adds up. And when you sit them just depends on your individual schedule and what works for you.

Actually, for a long time, before I hurt my back, I was sitting two hours before breakfast every day. I'd do an hour of sitting, half an hour of yoga, and another hour of sitting. Other times I'd sit for an hour in the morning and an hour when I finished work in the evening. It just depends. Whatever adds up.

Teachers in our Sangha who would be capable of instructing and guiding in this practice: Sally Armstrong, I think, is pretty good. Joseph Goldstein can. Philip Moffat has spent a lot time in this territory. Adrian Ross has taught these retreats quite a bit.

You know, as Michael was saying, it depends on the flavor, like Andrea Feller and the Utajaneya style. So Sally's bringing up what Michael referred to, the Sayadaw U Tejaniya style. I don't regard it as equivalent to this. All apology to Sayadaw U Tejaniya, whom I respect a lot. It's a different practice. So if the practice you want is knowing

awareness or mindfulness of consciousness, Sayadaw U Tejaniya's approach is different from that. So the teachers who teach roughly along the lines of mindfulness of consciousness, I think I've named the ones that come to my mind.

Oh, Suzy Harrington. Yeah, Brian Lesage. Yeah, Suzy Harrington and Brian Lesage are leading the current APP program along with Don Scott. You could get more information from Don about APP.

It's interesting. Robert Reyes' book wasn't on your list of...

So the comment was that Rob Burbea's book wasn't on my list of suggested readings on awareness. There are two reasons for this. One, I haven't read it yet. The second is that my understanding is he focuses more on emptiness than on awareness, so I don't know if he has the kind of awareness approach that we've been exploring this week.

Oh, and the suggested reading list is posted underneath the bulletin board—it's a little half-page list of books. If you haven't picked one up, there's a copy for everyone.

Well, this is about where we were planning to wrap up. So why don't we just have a couple of minutes of sitting together?

Actually, Sally had the brilliant idea to take a group photo. Are you all up for that? She's brought her camera, and we thought we would gather up here because there's a little more light.

I think we're going to need to arrange ourselves in a few tiers to get everyone in the frame—some people standing, some kneeling. For those who have their zabutons here, you can just bring them over and face this way.

So you are now released on your own recognizance. We'll come back here at 7:30 for our course closing together. And remember, silence returns at 5:30, please.

CHAPTER 182

Mindfulness of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

In this foundational dharma talk, Guy Armstrong explores ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing), drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN 118). He begins by defining mindfulness simply as "knowing our present moment experience," emphasizing how this direct knowing leads to purification and the realization of nibbāna. Armstrong explains why mindfulness of the body forms the first foundation of satipaṭṭhāna, providing stability and grounding for the restless mind.

The talk details the unique qualities that make breath practice so valuable: its autonomous nature allowing deep relaxation, its constant availability, its neutral yet potentially pleasurable character, and its natural rhythm that soothes the nervous system. Armstrong shows how ānāpānasati fulfills all four foundations of mindfulness, from bodily awareness through vedanā (feeling tone), citta (mind states), to dhammā (mental factors) including contemplation of anicca (impermanence).

Addressing common challenges, Armstrong discusses how to work with controlling tendencies, the arising of craving in meditation, and the trap of striving to recreate pleasant states. He offers practical guidance for practitioners who may find breath focus unsuitable due to trauma or breathing difficulties. The talk emphasizes that this ancient practice, used by the Buddha himself during three-month retreats, offers a reliable refuge in turbulent times while developing the stability and compassion needed to serve others.

So it's nice to see you all are still here. First days of retreat are often tough, and especially so when many of you have traveled from across the country. I can tell you from experience, the jet lag lasts a few days, in my case anyway. So it's not surprising if some of you are feeling tired today and took it a little easier on yourself. And of course, those of you who have been practicing, you'll just ramp up and show everybody what the real thing is, right? We're all easing into the retreat now.

Just one announcement before I start. If you haven't seen it yet, we will begin the one-to-one meetings tomorrow. I put a list on the board for the people whom I'll be meeting with tomorrow, so please check that out this evening if you haven't already. We've divided the group into three, so there will be ten people who we'll be meeting with on each of the interview days. It'll become clearer as we go along, but everyone should be seen in the next three days of meetings.

Tonight I'd like to talk about mindfulness of breathing. This is such an interesting topic because it is the one practice—the only practice I know of—that is offered in all the three main meditative schools in the Buddhist tradition. Obviously it's offered in Theravada, it's offered in Zen, both Rinzai and Soto, and it's offered in all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. I don't know of any other meditation practice that is common to all the major schools. So there's something quite special about mindfulness of breathing.

Within our tradition especially, it is the premier meditation practice over the last 2,500 years. With all the senior Vipassana teachers that I've practiced with and learned from, all of them emphasized mindfulness of breathing. They not only taught it, they made it somewhat central in the way that they taught meditation. So we are in the stream of a very strongly established lineage—many lineages—in practicing mindfulness of breathing.

One of the reasons is because it is such a refuge. When it is undertaken, cultivated, and developed, it is such a refuge. It's really a blessing.

I was just reflecting today that all of us have recently come from the wider world into this very special retreat environment. Coming from the wider world, you all know that a refuge is needed because the winds of samsara are blowing as strongly and with as much difficulty now as ever in my lifetime. I won't go into the details because some of you don't know them, but the level of violence in the country, racially tinged, has continued. The climate crisis that we're facing is not being solved on the level that it needs to be solved at. COVID cases are rising across the country. The war in Ukraine, which I think all of you probably by now know about, is not winding down. And the political world is ineffective and getting more so.

If we look on the societal level, from my perspective, there's not a lot of good news. But if I look on the individual level, I see a lot of good news. I see a lot of growth in the Dharma, both individually in people that I'm in contact with, and in society as a whole. I see it making inroads and becoming more popular. So on an individual basis, there's a lot of hope for us. I feel a lot of optimism about all of you and us finding refuge through these practices.

If we can find refuge and clarity and some stability in a time like this, then I think we're doing well. We're obviously not in the most difficult situation in the world—there are wars in Ukraine and beyond. But given the general lack of stability and the rising level of violence and racism in the country, if we can find some mental stability within that and offer that stability to others in our circles, I think that's a real contribution. So

that's something that I think is possible, and it's one of the reasons why I so much appreciate a place like this. Because we can find some peace of heart, peace of mind, and take that back into the world.

Just remember that we're not practicing only for ourselves, but to the extent that we can open and clear our own hearts and minds, that is a very big and perhaps rare gift to be able to take back and offer to the world. So our practice isn't just about getting quiet here, but it's about tapping deep reservoirs of understanding and compassion and then offering those back into the world. It's a refuge that we find and we ourselves can become a refuge to others.

Although as we enter more and more into the silent retreat space, we will probably talk less and less about the specific events of the world, please know that Sally and I are carrying those and care a lot about them. We're not forgetting the role of meditation within the broader social setting that we find ourselves in. The ripples from each of us will go out, have gone out before, will continue to go out, and we never know how far they'll reach. So I hope you'll remember that too—that your practice is to benefit others, and in the broadest sense, to benefit the whole world. May it be so.

In this section of the retreat especially, we are really dropping into a very powerful tradition that's 2,500 years old when we take up mindfulness of breathing. The development of this practice goes back not only to the Buddha's teachings, but to the Buddha's own practice, as I'll mention later. There are two main places that he talked about this in the Discourses.

One is in the cornerstone of the Vipassana world, which is the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Satipatthana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya No. 10. Mindfulness of the body is the first foundation, and mindfulness of breathing is the first part of the first foundation. That's how fundamental it was in the Buddha's teachings.

The second place that you probably know about is Majjhima Nikaya 118, which is the Anapanasati Sutta, the Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing, where the Buddha gives detailed instructions on how to practice with the breath for many, many benefits.

The Buddha wasn't keen on giving a huge number of explicit meditation instructions. Despite 45 years of teaching, despite basically 20 volumes of his translated words in English, specific meditation instructions don't occur all that often. And so for mindfulness of breathing to be so central in these two suttas is quite a strong statement. In

tonight's talk, I'd like to go into why that is. To get into it, I want to discuss mindfulness in general, then mindfulness of the body, and then some details on mindfulness of breathing and some suggestions.

So the first thing I want to highlight is the question: what do we mean by mindfulness? It's everywhere now in society. Mindfulness-based stress reduction has gone all over the country and in other countries as well, gone into hospitals and therapeutic settings and many treatment facilities. When I was beginning my practice here many years ago, I would never have imagined that there would be a magazine called Mindful. And yet there it is on newsstands. Mindfulness on newsstands. Wow.

And yet, if somebody asked you to define mindfulness, could you come up with something? Let's say your mother or father or one of your kids tapped you on the shoulder and said, "I hear you're doing this stuff called mindfulness. What is it?" I've heard a lot of different definitions of mindfulness, and most of them seem to me a little too complicated.

So I want to read a section from the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the Buddha's main discourse on mindfulness practice. It's in your study guide. If you are interested in following along, it's on page 3, "Excerpts from the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness." I want to read just a few lines from each foundation.

This is from the first foundation on the body: "Breathing in long, one knows I breathe in long. Breathing out long, one knows I breathe out long. When walking, one knows, I am walking. When standing, one knows, I am standing."

Second foundation, which is on vedana, feeling: "When feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows, I feel a pleasant feeling. When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows, I feel an unpleasant feeling."

Third foundation, which is on mind or mind states: "Here one knows a lustful mind to be lustful and a mind without lust to be without lust. One knows an angry mind to be angry and a mind without anger to be without anger."

Fourth foundation, which is Dhammas, or I like to translate it as dharmic principles: "If sensual desire is present in one, one knows there is sensual desire in me. If sensual desire is not present in one, one knows there is no sensual desire in me."

These are excerpts from all four foundations in the Satipatthana Sutta. Is there one word that stands out to you in this reading? Yes, "knows." One knows. That's the key, isn't it? To me, this is the operative definition of mindfulness: one knows.

When Bhikkhu Bodhi translated this passage, he used "one understands"—this is Venerable Analayo's translation here. Either way, one knows or one understands, it's a similar pointing. The Pali term that's being translated is pajanati. Pajanati is very closely related to the word sampajanya, which means clear comprehension. So you get that comprehension, knowing, understanding. Mindfulness is connected with knowing and understanding.

Put very simply, and I'd like to offer this as our working definition really throughout this whole retreat—because we'll come back to this a number of times—mindfulness is knowing our present moment experience. The parenthesis is that's in the Buddha's language, which is the six sense bases, the five aggregates. Knowing one's present experience in the Buddha's frame of reference, in the Buddha's foundations.

And I've heard countless lengthy definitions of mindfulness that use terms like non-judgmental and fully accepting and without greed, aversion, or delusion. I think that's gilding a lily. What we really need is this simple understanding: knowing our present moment experience. That's really simple, isn't it? And that's enough. The amazing thing is that it's so simple and it's enough.

For in the same discourse, Majjhima 10, if you want to look again at your study guide, quote number one: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbana—namely the four foundations of mindfulness." Knowing our experience in the present moment does all of that.

How does it do that? Well, one of the ways we can understand how it does that is to look at the alternatives. What's the alternative to knowing our present experience?

There's a cartoon from The New Yorker that I like. It's in three panels. The first panel shows someone working at their desk on a PC, typing away, reading the screen. And there's a thought bubble above their head that indicates their daydream. The daydream is they're out on a golf course about to drive a ball. The subtext is, "That's really where I'd rather be."

Then the next panel shows the same person out on the golf course about to drive a ball, and there's another thought bubble in their head. That thought bubble is they're at home making love to their partner in bed. Of course the subtext is, "Wow, that's really where I'd rather be."

And then there's a third panel. In this panel, the same person is at home, in bed, making love with their partner. And there's another thought bubble, which is of being in their office, working on their computer at their desk.

These are the alternatives to mindfulness. This cartoon quite succinctly sums up the force of the distracted mind—always somewhere else than where we are. It's not necessarily that where we are is somewhere that's not good to be, but there's this distracting movement of attention that thinks there's more somewhere else. This is the core of restlessness. Restlessness is really thinking there's something better somewhere else and leaning toward that.

So when we're not connected to the present moment, take a look at where the mind goes. The attention goes into these distracting thoughts of past and future and planning and remembering and analyzing and rehearsing conversations and so forth. What I think is sometimes not fully grokked by us in looking at this situation is the impact of those distracting thoughts. Because often in meditation we'll talk about returning from a distraction, bringing the attention back into the present moment. It's just a distraction. It sounds fairly neutral.

But take a close look in your meditation. When one of these distracting thoughts arises, is it emotionally neutral? It's not generally, is it? It wanders off into wanting or regret or blame or resentment or fear or insecurity. It wanders into places that have emotional charge. That's where our thinking is drawn. That's where our thoughts go.

When we come back from a distraction like that, are we generally calmer than when we took off? No. Generally these distracting thoughts stir us up. So it's not just a matter that we're missing the present moment experience. We're giving up a present moment experience, which is generally okay, to get involved in some kind of extended fantasy about past or future that's generally emotionally tiring and stirring.

One of the beauties of mindfulness is that it saves us from those kinds of disruptive and disturbing thoughts and emotions. The Buddha's term for getting lost in these unwholesome thought patterns is ayoniso manasikara—unwise attention. Unwise attention is that which leads into stirring up the unwholesome states of mind. Yoniso manasikara—wise attention—is that which wears down the disturbing states and leads to states that grow in the Dharma, that lead to our happiness and our wisdom. Attention to the present moment is one of those things that leads to our happiness and wisdom.

So mindfulness is making a clear choice moment after moment to be in the present for our own welfare and ultimately the welfare of others. And pursuing the distracting thought trains is a choice to stir the mind up and bring forth unwholesome emotions: shame, blame, regret, worry, anxiety, longing, fear, and so on.

So we are really, as meditators, learning how to choose the wholesome moment after moment after moment with this devotion to mindfulness and this renunciation of all the thought excursions.

Of course, we can't control this by an act of will. We may have tried for a long time. These thoughts will continue to arise, and sometimes we'll jump on the train. But we can tune into how it feels afterwards. When we've been on the train for a while and we come back to the present moment, how has it felt to be on the train? How does it feel to be back here? This is how we learn, moment by moment, what leads to our suffering and what leads to our happiness and contentment.

Within the overall field of mindfulness, the Buddha emphasized mindfulness of the body a great deal. It's the first foundation in the Satipatthana Sutta. In the Anguttara Nikaya, there's one point where there are fifty discourses in a row in praise of mindfulness of the body—fifty in a row! Here's just one:

"When one thing is developed and cultivated, the body becomes tranquil, the mind becomes tranquil, extraneous thoughts subside, and all wholesome qualities that pertain to true knowledge reach fulfillment. What is that one thing? Mindfulness directed to the body. Unwholesome qualities decline and the qualities that lead to true knowledge arise."

I find it really interesting that the Buddha puts so much emphasis on mindfulness of the body because, when you get down to it, our meditation is all about the mind. We're not freeing the body—it's going to do what it's going to do. Our goal is to free the mind. That's why so much emphasis is placed on states of mind: the hindrances, greed, aversion, delusion, craving, clinging, and then the wholesome mental states—the seven factors of awakening, the five spiritual faculties, the brahmaviharas. These are all qualities of mind. It's mental cultivation that we're about.

Why then is there so much emphasis on the body? Here are a few reasons.

Mindfulness of the body has been probably my central practice over all the years I've been involved in meditation, and here's why I've found it so helpful. It's always available. Like it or not, the body's always here, so it often gives a very clear experience that we can pay attention to, and it's very valuable in that way.

Also, the Buddha said if you're going to identify with something—if you're going to say "I am this"—it's much better to identify with the body than with the mind. Why? Because the mind changes so much more rapidly. In the course of a few breaths, you can

go from here to around the world, on a vacation, having your baggage lost, meeting your soulmate in a remote airport, and come back to here in a few seconds. But the body stayed right here.

Because of that relative stability—and it's only relative; the body's changing, cells are being born and dying, subject to illness, aging, and death—but relatively, compared to the mind, it's more stable. You feel this in meditation as you sit still, as we sit still in our meditation posture. That stability and stillness in the body transmits something to the mind. It transmits a sense of groundedness.

In a way, what we're doing is taking our seat, and the emotional waves come and go. Sometimes they crash like big breakers against a rocky cliff. Sometimes they're smooth, very pleasant. But we sit through all that wave activity because the body is still. And that says something. It says to the mind, "I can be with this." So the body ends up being, despite its vulnerability and being subject to pain, a grounding place and a source of stability and balance.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who I spent quite a bit of time with in Thailand, had a nice saying: "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body. Stay in touch with the body all the time."

Now, I want to acknowledge, because it's a reality, that the body may not be inviting at times. If you've had past trauma that's stored in the body, if you have a lot of physical pain, if you have an injury, if you have an illness, it's not so pleasant to bring the attention into the body again and again. Then you'll need to figure out, you'll need to find your way of how to connect with the body at times and how to open to something more neutral—perhaps to sound, perhaps to images, perhaps to space—at other times.

Work with your teacher to find a way to navigate that kind of situation.

But if the body is relatively okay, it serves as excellent grounding. Being in touch with the body also keeps us connected to our emotions. If there's a strong emotion arising, we'll feel it in the body. When the mind is agitated, the body is usually agitated. When the mind is calm, the body is usually calm.

Sometimes we may not be so attuned to the subtlety of emotional movement, but if we check in with the body, we can recognize agitation or calm. Trust that awareness. As the books say, the body doesn't lie. The body keeps the score. It's real.

So when there's agitation in the body, take a look. What's going on in the mind? Sometimes you'll find it's old karma playing out in the body and not actually agitation arising from present-moment mind activity. But sometimes it is present moment. Even if it's old karma, there's often mental agitation accompanying the physical agitation.

So, mindfulness in general, mindfulness of the body, and finally mindfulness of breathing—the primary practice in 2,500 years of Vipassana. "When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit." This is quote two from the Anapanasati Sutta in your study guide.

Even after the Buddha was enlightened, he kept going on retreat. I find this so interesting. All his afflictive emotions had been uprooted. He wasn't suffering. And yet he still went into retreat, sometimes for three months at a stretch. On one of these three-month retreats, he practiced mindfulness of breathing the whole time. He came out and told the monastics, "If anyone could say of anything that it is a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Tathagata's dwelling, it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one would rightly say this."

That's high praise. If it was good enough for the Buddha for three months, it's good enough for us for ten days.

So why is breath such a useful focus? I want to list several special qualities of this focus.

One reason is that breathing happens by itself. It's part of the semi-autonomous nervous system, so we don't have to do anything to make it happen. That means we can relax. And in the long run, we learn to have that relaxing turn into resting. We can rest in a very receptive frame of mind, let the breath come and go, and provide a clear focus for wise attention.

Breath is always there. You can always find it on a meditation cushion, when walking, when doing the dishes, when eating food at home, preparing a meal—it's always there. So it's a reliable companion.

Another great strength is that it's basically neutral. It's not going to be hugely provoking of desire or aversion. Basically neutral. So it's kind of easy to be with something that's neutral.

But it has the potential for a lot of pleasure. This takes some practice, but the potential is there. The first thing we notice with the breath is when we're in good relationship with it, there's an absence of disturbing thoughts. So there's a quality of peace that accompanies being with the breath.

As we get familiar with the relaxation that Sally was talking about this morning, and the sense of ease and comfort that can come with the breath, that creates a very pleasant feeling. So that's the opening to the pleasure of the breath—that sense of relaxation and ease.

Once we find that in our meditation, that becomes real motivation. We stop resisting the meditation. We know it's good for us, but we don't really want to do it. But when this pleasure element comes in, we kind of want to do it. And that will bring us back more and more to undertaking the practice.

This pleasure is not just a nice feeling—it's onward leading. The pleasure, the Pali term is sukha, which sounds like sugar and has the sweetness of sugar. It's said that this kind of pleasure, which includes relaxation and ease and contentment, is the proximate cause for concentration to arise. And I'm sure you all know how that works.

When you start feeling easy in the moment and can deeply relax into your body and into the present, you don't want to be anywhere else. This habitual restlessness of looking elsewhere for satisfaction or gratification, or to ward off the difficult, can rest, can relax. Just dropping into that ease brings contentment. And it's that contentment that allows the mind to collect and unify the way Sally was describing it this morning in the meditation instructions.

The other thing that is beautiful about the breath is its natural rhythm. When we're learning to let go of past and future and come into the present, letting the breath be natural, letting it come and go on its own, it finds a very easy rhythm. We're not controlling it. In that natural rhythm, we find there's a calm that comes from it. The rhythm itself is calming, is soothing.

I'm speculating a little bit, but I wonder if some of that soothing quality of the breath's rhythm takes us back to being on our mother's chest when we were babies and feeling that rise and fall, rise and fall in that position of absolute safety and nourishment. That's what it makes me think of anyway, back at my mother's breast.

So we want to open up and allow the breath to find its natural rhythm, but that's not so easy. As Sally mentioned this morning, it's always not so easy to relax in meditation or outside. When I first got into mindfulness of breathing, I would notice that I would be controlling the breath more or less all the time. There would be this little signal—it wasn't so much verbal, but it was: now breathe in, now breathe out, now breathe in, now breathe out. I would sort of be telling myself when to breathe in and breathe out, following some rhythm that was an idea in my head.

So it took a while to trust and relax enough to let go of that. In the beginning, as you're with the breath, if you find a little bit of control coming in, don't worry about it. It's something that will fade as the relaxation deepens. You don't have to fight it. Just saying "stop controlling" is just another form of controlling. It'll come with the relaxation.

The other wonderful thing about paying attention to the breath is that it has its own balance. The in-breath feels one way and the out-breath feels another way. So tune into this. This becomes interesting to investigate. How does it feel when you breathe in? How does it feel when you breathe out?

Take a look at this word: *ānāpāna*—in and out breathing. *Pāna* is the Pali term. You know what the Sanskrit is? *Prāṇa*. It's not just a clothing line. *Prāṇa* is an ancient yogic term that denotes the in-breath, but it has connotations of the life force and energy. What keeps us going is *prāṇa* or *pāna*.

You'll feel that as you get quiet. You can feel how each in-breath picks up the energy. You can feel it ripple throughout the body. It energizes. It wakes us up. It lifts us up. And then the out-breath lets it all go. On the out-breath, we empty. Going out into space, the mind settles. Let go. Relax. So the uplift and the out-go are both there in one breath—a beautiful balance of energy.

Another thing that's powerful about mindfulness of breathing is that once we make a commitment to this kind of focus, it very clearly shows us what's not with this focus. As you get connected to the breath and its rhythm, when you go away from it for any period of time and you come back, it's really obvious. It's really clear: I wasn't with the breath. It may be just two seconds or three seconds, but it's very obvious. We were somewhere else for those three seconds.

It's interesting because in doing an open practice like choiceless attention, which we'll touch on later in the retreat, a lot of people love choiceless attention because it's not hard work. Being with the breath is hard work. When we're with choiceless attention, thoughts will often drift through and we won't even notice them. There will often be a subconscious line of thinking that is actually stealing our present moment attention, and we hardly notice because we're just open.

So when we commit to a focus, then what's not of that focus stands out really clearly. We see the mind's movements and we see the mind's habitual tendencies very clearly.

There's something funny I want to share here. Committing to a focus takes some courage, takes some discipline, takes some energy, takes some ardor. Ajahn Suchito made an interesting and rather ironic comment about it. He said anytime you commit

to a focus, craving is going to come in. I find this really true, because we're going to find things we like and we're going to find things that are difficult in that focus. I'll touch on that again a little later.

Another beautiful aspect of the breath is that it's the wind element. It's an elemental kind of practice. The Buddha talked about four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. Here we're with the wind element, possibly all day long. We start to realize the body is made up of the natural elements—of solidity, of fluidity or cohesion, of warmth or coolness, and of movement or wind. We begin to understand the connection between the body and the whole material world. This body has the same elements as the entire material world, and this is our moment-by-moment experience of the wind element.

It becomes interesting to investigate self and not-self with the wind element. When air comes in, it comes from outside, so it's not me. Then it comes into the nose. Is it me yet? It goes into the lungs, and then the oxygen attaches to the blood particles. Now is it me? Okay, now it's in the blood, now it's me. Then it goes to the body, and the oxygen gets used, and then it comes to the lungs again, and then the wind gets filled with carbon dioxide. Is that me? And then it gets breathed out, and then is it not me?

We start to realize we're porous to the world. There's no firm barrier, even between the body and the world, much less between me and not me.

The other beautiful thing about mindfulness of the breath is that the Buddha said it fulfills all four foundations of mindfulness. This is quite remarkable, and I would encourage you to look at your study guide again if you have it, at quotation two on page two.

You know the second foundation is feeling tone. In the bracketed section that's indented in the middle, you'll see a line that says, "I shall breathe in or out experiencing pleasure." So here we have pleasant feeling tone, pleasant vedana, coming as a result of the breath. We're into the second foundation of mindfulness through the breath.

A little further on, you'll see the next stanza: "I shall breathe in or out gladdening the mind." Gladness of mind is in the third foundation. It's a state of mind. It's part of citta. Here, mindfulness of breathing is satisfying the third foundation of mindfulness. What is the mind state when breathing in? What is the mind state when breathing out?

Then in the final stanza: "I shall breathe in or out contemplating impermanence." Impermanence is part of the fourth foundation. It's ground for insight, wisdom. So here mindfulness of breathing is fulfilling the fourth foundation.

All four foundations are complete—can be complete—within mindfulness of breathing. That's a powerful statement.

These are some of the qualities that are so rich about mindfulness of the breath and why it's worth spending ten days or three months practicing, learning, and developing this. There are many ways to approach relating to the breath. Sally gave beginning instructions this morning. We will offer many other alternative approaches over the days to come: where to be with the breath in the body, whether to use noting or counting, whether to combine the breath with different parts of the body. There are many, many ways to approach it.

And all of them are fine in this context. In the context of these ten days of retreat, they're all fine. So we're not going to tell you that you have to practice being with the breath in this particular way, but we hope to offer some alternatives so that you find the way that works best for you.

I wanted to share one rather fun experience I had with mindfulness of breathing a couple of months ago. We were at a friend's house for dinner, and this friend was playing with one of those headbands that acts like an EEG. It monitors your brain waves and transmits the results to your phone. If you get into a certain groove, it can tell whether you're in a calm state, a neutral state, or an activated state. For meditation purposes, this is used to train yourself to be in a calm state.

I had never heard of anything like this—I didn't know there was such a thing. You can buy it on Amazon and pair it with an iPhone or Android phone. So my friend put it on me, turned on his phone, and the other three people sat around watching me meditate for five minutes to see whether I was going to be calm or active or what.

The cool thing about the app—what I thought was cool about it—is that if you get into a calm state, it plays bird songs. The bird songs are such positive reinforcement; you really want to make them happen. So I tried a few different kinds of meditation, and none of them were really producing many bird songs. Then I went to the nose and put all my attention on the sensations in my nostrils with in and out breathing, and the birds just went crazy.

I could sustain it for a while, and the app gave me a score of eighty percent at the end, which was rather gratifying. I could see how something like that could train someone through repetition to really get into a strong relationship—to get into a real groove—with mindfulness of breathing. At one point near the end, a distracting thought came up, and the birds went away. Oh, so disappointing! But I knew what I had to do to get them back.

These kinds of tools are out there, and they can be fun. I wasn't so interested in using it to train my mind because I've practiced this kind of breathing meditation extensively. But it was wonderful to remember what it feels like to really be on, to be in the breath and really give all one's attention to it in the present moment. It did accomplish that.

So those are the beautiful things about the breath. I also want to acknowledge that there are some real difficulties with the breath—some of which apply to all of us, some of which apply to specific situations. I want to mention these briefly and encourage you to talk with us, with Sally and me, if you run into them.

The breath may not be a good focus for everyone. What makes it not a good focus for some people is if there's a history of trauma, injury, or illness in the chest or around breathing. Then the repeated attention to that part of the body or to the breath can re-activate that trauma or past injury. For example, if someone has had asthma in the past and has felt themselves struggling to breathe, then being with the breath in that close way may remind them of the struggle to breathe. It may be counterproductive.

It may be something the person can work through, or it may be that another option would be better for them. This is why it's helpful to talk with your teacher about it. Whether it comes from an illness like asthma or from a past injury or trauma connected with the area of breathing, another focus might be more skillful. Talk with your teacher and see.

As Ajahn Sucitta said, if we commit to a certain practice, we're going to run into cravings. There's a particular name for the craving that comes from meditating: it's called striving. Striving means that you felt something nice in your meditation and you want it back.

Because all the nice things that happen in meditation do pass, right? You know that. No state of mind is lasting. The beautiful states of meditation also pass, but we want them back.

It's very common in doing some days of concentration practice with the breath that you will find yourself in very satisfying states of peace, calm, contentment, settledness, and ease—where the mindfulness is effortless for periods of time. It might be thirty seconds, it might be thirty minutes, but you may find yourself in these situations. And then it will change, as everything does.

The next time you come to sit, you might want it back—quite understandably, you might want it back. Then you might try really hard to make it happen again: "Oh, I can't let these thoughts come in."

I've really got to bear down and not miss a single breath. I'm going to rev up this state of concentration again! Of course, this completely forgets how we got there in the first place – which was by relaxing. We forget that relaxing and accepting was the way into that beautiful state, and instead we strive really hard to reproduce it by working harder and getting tenser.

When I was practicing in Burma with Palak Sayadaw, I fell into this trap over and over. I would go to see him every day in the afternoon for an interview. He knew I was a meditation teacher in the States, so I felt I had a little bit of an image to keep up. But I also had to just be honest with him.

I said, "Sayadaw, I've really found I'm striving in my practice. Do you have any advice for me?"

I thought that after all his years of helping beginning meditators through all the hurdles of concentration practice – deeply committed students from around the world – he would have just the wisest thing to say. So he replied, "Don't do that."

And that was it.

I had to go back to my kuti and find out for myself how not to do that. I got better at not doing it, but it was a lot of learning.

Another way we can get caught is judging ourselves when we're doing a concentration practice. We can get caught thinking we're not doing it well enough. "Oh, I'm not good enough. I was with the breath for a few breaths and then I was away for ten minutes on this chain of thoughts about something that happened last week before I came here. It was ten minutes before I could come out of it and come back to the breath. That's terrible. I'll never get anywhere with this meditation."

Not helpful.

This is a very common thing to have happen for all of us. I've been there many times myself. The first thing that's really out of joint with it is we think we have some idea of how long we should be away. "Oh, if I was a good meditator, I wouldn't be away ten minutes."

Well, how long would you be away? What's the right length of time for a good meditator to be away? Is it like never? No. Is it like one breath? No. I mean, get real.

We have this standard that we think we have to meet, but we have no idea what the standard is or where it came from. It's just replaying our habitual tendency to find fault with ourselves. So beware of that. If it happens to you, ask yourself: what's the right length of time to be away? There's no answer to that.

You are all experienced practitioners. Every one of you has lots of meditative background and experience and confidence. You wouldn't be here if the practice hadn't been of tremendous benefit to you. You wouldn't come for a month. It's been of tremendous benefit, therefore it has already worked, therefore you're already a good meditator.

So take yourself as the standard. "I'm a good meditator and I'm away for ten minutes." Well, that's what happens for good meditators. That's just fine. That's just fine.

The growing freedom is when we realize that we've been away and we make the choice to come back. We say, "That wasn't so helpful. Oh, let me connect again to the present. Let me connect again to feeling the breath." That's where the freedom starts to come.

There's another whole set of problems connected with our relationship with thoughts, but I don't want to get into it – it's a little long for our remaining time. So I'm going to end here for tonight.

And I'll just close with this quotation from the Samyutta Nikaya: "Mindfulness of breathing is peaceful and sublime. It is an abiding in happiness that breaks up and calms unwholesome mental states whenever they arise."

Well, that's our potential.

So let's just sit for a minute together. Let the words settle.

CHAPTER 183

Mindfulness of Breathing Combined with a Body Scan

Guy Armstrong · 49 min

> *In this dharma talk and guided meditation, Guy Armstrong introduces a practice that combines mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati) with directed breathing techniques and body scanning. Drawing from the Thai Forest tradition lineage of Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo through Ajahn Fuang to Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, Armstrong presents this approach as particularly suitable for developing samatha (concentration) practice.*
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> *The session begins with establishing basic mindfulness of body, sounds, and breath, then introduces the technique of consciously directing the breath to different parts of the body - from head to feet - while maintaining awareness of how the breath's energy affects each area. Armstrong emphasizes this as a preparatory practice, comparing it to an "aperitif" before the main course of natural breath awareness.*
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> *Referencing the Ānāpānasati Sutta and its instructions on long and short breathing, Armstrong discusses the balance between skillful intervention and natural letting go in meditation practice. He addresses practical questions about breath rhythm in daily life and how concentration can sometimes unearth streams of thought, offering Joseph Goldstein's teaching that "nothing is worth thinking about" during formal meditation practice.*

So today in the meditation, we're going to do something radical. We're going to control the breath. This is along the lines of Sally's response to the question yesterday morning about three different ways of relating to the breath. Sally emphasized that especially in doing concentration practice, where the qualities of piti and sukha are definitely to be cultivated front and center, we are going to use the breath in a way that may make the experience of sitting more comfortable.

This is just something for you, again like all our instructions so far, for you to try on and see if you like it. If it doesn't work for you, there's no need to continue it. If it does work for you, it's something you could do in every sitting. I do it quite often in my daily practice and in my retreat practice, because I've found it helpful.

This is not just some new age yoga innovation that we're bringing in and dumping on you to mix traditions. This was taught, I think I mentioned the other day, to Ajahn Thanissaro by his Thai teacher, Ajahn Phuong, who learned it from his teacher, Ajahn

Lee Damodaro. We'll put out a book list at the end of the retreat, and I'll highlight both the books by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and by Ajahn Lee that explain this in more detail and why it's helpful, why it has been passed down.

With that, we can go ahead and move into the meditation. We're going to do the preliminary entry into the meditation the way that we've been doing it, with body, sounds, simple attention to breath, because I think this is just such a useful way to go into any sitting. Then I'll add the instructions for some degree of directing the breath.

Please sit comfortably. Find that balance in your posture of being upright, energetic, alert, and at the same time relaxed, grounded, supported. Become aware of your whole body posture and sitting, as it were taking it in with a glance from the top of the head right through the feet. So you have the sense of the body as a unit, an organic unit. Not so much watching the body as feeling the body throughout. The attention is throughout the body. Sensations are being known.

Then open the attention wider in a 360-degree way to take in all the sounds that are coming and going. Sounds from inside, sounds from outside. If there aren't any sounds at any time, just be aware of the extent of the silence. When a sound does arise, notice that it's heard without any effort on your part. It just arises and hearing takes place. If we just rest with a receptive attitude, all the sounds are heard spontaneously.

Then bring that same receptive attitude back into the experience of the body, taking in the fullness of the sitting posture felt from inside. As you feel the body, start to notice the sensations that are connected with breathing. With an in-breath, certain sensations take place and the body feels a certain way. With an out-breath, different sensations arise and the body feels differently.

Notice that the impact of a breath can be felt beyond the simple areas where you know the air is entering or leaving—nose, throat, lungs. The influence of the in-breath in a way spreads the energy throughout the body. Remember that pana in Pali links to prana in Sanskrit, which is an ancient term for the life force or energy. We can feel that energetic upswelling with the in-breath. On the out-breath, feel some energetic calming or release.

Now let's play a little bit with these energetic qualities. The first thing that I'll suggest you do—you can just try it on—is to take several long and deep in-breaths and relax fully on the out-breath. Try a few deliberately long inhalations, fill the lungs with air. Then consciously let it all go and relax on the out-breath. Breathing in long and feeling the energy rise. Breathing out long, feeling the release and relax.

In your own meditations, if this is interesting, you can keep this deep breathing going for a while. I sometimes have done as much as five minutes at the start of a sit to help with settling. Here we'll make it shorter so that we can play with the other instructions. Take one last big inhale and full exhale.

Now in this next part of the guiding, we're going to take the breath into different parts of the body, covering the whole body in connection with breathing. This is a little bit of a combination of a body scan with breath. Again, this comes from Ajahn Lee.

I'm going to use a term like "breathe into" an area of the body. Of course, we don't breathe in through any other area but the nose or mouth.

But the sense is, as you take an in-breath, direct your attention into the part of the body that I'm going to name. And as you have the out-breath happen, also feel that part of the body. So I might talk about breathing into the head and breathing out from the head. Just take a nice breath in and feel how it's impacting in the head. You almost have a sense that the breath is traveling from the nose or the lungs up into the head during that instruction. And breathing out, it travels down from the head and out through the nose or feeling the lungs.

So we're just playing with this to see how it works, how it's felt, how it changes our energy, our presence, our ease. What will help the body feel more comfortable and more at ease as we begin a period of meditation?

So on the next breath, have the sense that you're breathing into the head. On the in-breath, let your attention cover the whole head area. How is that felt? As the breath comes in, how is that felt in the head? As the breath exits, how is that felt in the head? Breathing in and out through the head.

And then the neck. Breathing into the neck. How does that feel? Breathing out from the neck, how does that feel?

Breathing into the right shoulder and out. It's as though we're rubbing this part of the body with the energy of the breath. The right upper arm. The right lower arm and hand breathing in and breathing out. The left shoulder. The left upper arm. The left lower arm and hand.

The upper half of the back. Breathing into this area and breathing out. Lower half of the back. The hips and touch point of the sitting bones with a chair or cushion. Bathing this area with the energy of the breath. The chest and heart center. The heart center is

that area just below the breastbone in the center of the chest. The diaphragm. And the abdomen, breathing in to the belly, breathing out from the belly. In the lower abdomen, breathing in and out.

The right thigh. The knee, the right knee. The right calf and foot. The left thigh and knee, the left knee. The left calf and foot.

And now just a brief review, expanding the areas a bit. Breathing in with attention in the head. Breathing out with attention in the head. How is the head touched by the energy of the breath? Both shoulders and both arms. The whole back, breathing in, breathing out. The chest and belly. The hips and lower abdomen. Both legs and feet.

And now again, just taking up the whole body as your focus. Feel the whole body with the in-breath. Feel the whole body with the out-breath. Feeling the energy change. Uplift and release. Invigorate and relax.

And now allowing the breath to be natural and find its own rhythm. You can stay in touch with the whole body if you find that helpful.

Being the impact of breathing in and breathing out. Or if you're more comfortable being in a narrower focus with the breath, that's fine—nose, belly, chest, whatever is most suitable for you. Again, the experience is not so much of watching from above, but feeling from within, feeling the body in breathing.

At this point, feel free to add any of the other techniques we've talked about, such as noting, touch point, counting, or none of them. Just staying with a bare, direct experience of in and out breathing.

This kind of approach of directing the breath, of deliberately breathing in long, deliberately relaxing on the exhale is something that I think is especially suited to the development of samatha. Because when the body can relax more easily, the mind relaxes more easily. The instructions from Ajahn Lee are: do what makes the body feel good in this exercise of breathing.

Now you realize from the point of view of vipassana, this is a very slippery slope. We are not sitting on our cushion just to feel pleasant feelings all the time. That's not the point. We want to develop an equanimity of mind in regard to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. But especially in the preparation for a period of sitting meditation, it can be really helpful to start by being as comfortable as we can, because it really allows the mind to settle.

So I kind of regard this exercise as an aperitif. The main course is just paying attention to whatever arises. But of course, we're doing a period right now of specific concentration practice. So you may want to even expand the use of what I would call this preparatory or entry exercise into a period of sitting meditation, keeping an eye on what allows the body to feel comfortable. And if you can use the breath at times—and I would say in limited times—to support that, then that can be really helpful.

So play with it. In my own practice, I would tend to do something like this in the first five to ten minutes of a forty-five minute or hour-long period. So I would sort of keep it in that section. And then I would just settle into letting things be the way they are, letting the breath be natural.

The reason that part is important: first, to develop equanimity around pleasant and unpleasant. But second, you don't always want to have to be the meditator directing the experience. You want to get to a point where you let go of doing. We're going to see this even more when we get into the awareness practice. The letting go of any form of doing is really important for the self to step out of the way more and more completely.

So again, the reason preparatory is very helpful. Long-term, you want to diminish the doing. But we can learn, as senior practitioners, you can learn to balance these two halves of practice.

So I'll let it go there, and we have a few minutes for questions or comments, if there are any.

"I remember reading about slowing down the breath, like the length of breath, because in modern days we breathe very shallow and faster. And I practiced it. It was really interesting because when I slow down breath, I move slowly. So with my pace of my life, I cannot do that. I feel like I'm unbalanced constantly. So my conditioned way of breathing is breathing pretty shallow and fast. So what is your suggestion to slow down breath but move as fast as I can?"

The question is about the rapidity of the breath. She notices that when she slows down her breathing, it brings more calm. But in the midst of daily life, in the midst of moving faster in activity, it's hard to breathe more slowly.

I find the same. And so I often make a conscious effort in my daily life when I can to slow down the pace of my movement. I have to say that a lot of you did retreats at home during the COVID years—not that we're out of the COVID years, but we're back in person, which is great, a different phase. And one of the things that I really liked about practicing at home is I could go at my own pace a lot more of the time, because I wasn't engaged in so many outside activities.

So that became a lesson for me. It really is helpful to slow down the pace of my movement. It really supports the development of mental calm.

Now, can you slow down the pace of your breathing while maintaining rapid body movements? That's a good koan.

Well, I can't resist passing on a quotation from Joseph—one of my favorites—which is: nothing is worth thinking about.

Now I have to stress that's in the context of formal meditation practice. Obviously in our daily life, you need to make plane reservations or get somebody to water your plants. You have to think about that. But in the context of formal meditation practice, Joseph's bottom line is nothing is worth thinking about, even the most seemingly important things.

There's a quality about the concentrated mind where it can almost feel like it's unlocking chambers in our psyche. It's as if layers of the mind that were previously sealed become accessible, and all this material starts flowing. It can feel very compelling—like "This is the key to understanding my whole life!" But from a meditation perspective, this is actually just another form of mental activity that we can learn to let go of.

What I've found helpful is to recognize that these important-seeming thoughts aren't going anywhere. If they're truly significant, they'll still be available to you after your sit. The concentrated mind has this beautiful quality of clarity and spaciousness, and when you maintain that state rather than getting pulled into the content of thoughts, you actually develop a much more useful capacity—the ability to relate to your mental activity with some perspective.

So my suggestion would be to notice when you're getting caught in the stream, even when it feels very compelling, and gently redirect your attention back to your meditation object. You're not suppressing or pushing away—you're simply choosing where to place your attention. This actually strengthens your capacity to work skillfully with mental patterns both in meditation and in daily life.

The concentrated mind itself becomes a refuge. When you rest there, you're not missing anything important. You're actually developing the very stability and clarity that will allow you to see more clearly when you do need to engage with thinking outside of formal practice.

So I would encourage you, as far as possible, to let the thoughts go and come back to the simple experience of breathing. This will continue to deepen the concentration.

The fact is that as we get concentrated, we become more sensitive. When thoughts do arise, they can have more impact. This is something we'll also explore in tonight's talk. And there is a Dharma talk tonight, by the way. Since it's Sunday, we have our evening teaching. I'm going to speak more about working with thoughts in concentration practice. Thank you for providing such a perfect lead-in to tonight's topic.

Now for some quick announcements. There is indeed a talk this evening. Sally will be conducting the one-to-one interviews today, so those of you scheduled for today will meet with her in the Council House Library.

I don't know if we made this clear at the beginning, but each of us will meet with you once per week for these individual interviews. Today is Sally's day, and she'll meet with a third of you. I'll meet with those same people the next time their interviews come around. The way it works out, everyone will have four one-to-one meetings with each of us over the course of the month—four with me, four with Sally.

We have three Dharma talks per week. This may seem a little light if you're accustomed to normal group retreats, but you all clearly love the silence and know how to work with it skillfully.

CHAPTER 184

Mindfulness of Breathing: 3 Sensations in Inbreath & Outbreath

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this guided meditation and dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses one of the most common challenges in ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing): maintaining genuine interest in a practice object that can seem neutral and repetitive. He introduces a powerful technique from Sayadaw U Paṇḍita—investigating each inbreath and outbreath to identify three distinct physical sensations such as expansion, pulsing, pressure, or warmth. This investigation cultivates the curiosity and continuity that lead naturally to deeper settling of mind.*
>
> *Armstrong offers a nuanced teaching on boredom, defining it simply as "aversion to the neutral," and explains how active interest serves as its antidote. The session includes substantial discussion on the relationship between effort, surrender, and faith (saddhā) in meditation. He explores why the mind sometimes pulls back from deeper states of peace, connecting this hesitation to a fundamental lack of trust in the present moment—a trust that develops gradually through sustained practice as we learn we can meet whatever arises.*
>
> *The talk also addresses a subtle but important distinction between meditating on the "concept" of breath versus the direct physical sensations of the body breathing. Armstrong explains how Pa-Auk Sayadaw's approach emphasizes the stable concept or rhythm of breath for samatha development, while vipassanā practice naturally emphasizes changing sensations to reveal impermanence. Both approaches are valid, and practitioners can experiment to find what supports their practice. The session begins with the taking of the Five and Eight Precepts, grounding the meditation instructions in the foundation of sīla.*

In the meditation this morning, we'll continue to explore our relationship to breathing. As we've said a few times, one of the key things is finding interest. Because the breath is so neutral and so repetitive, it's very easy to lose interest in it. We have to take some active steps often to keep the interest up. Otherwise, we tip into apathy and boredom.

Let me say one brief thing about boredom. Boredom is merely the aversion to the neutral. That's all it is. Things aren't exciting enough to grab our attention either in attraction or repulsion, so we need to overcome it. The antidote really is interest.

Part of interest is motivation. If we find ourselves becoming a little apathetic, losing interest, then it's time to reflect on what drew us here and to refresh that motivation and keenness of learning to help spark the interest.

This morning I'm going to suggest one more way to encourage interest. This is an instruction Sayadaw U Pandita used to give to the yogis who were meditating with him: investigate the in-breath and investigate the out-breath to find three distinct sensations in each one.

Focus for a while on the in-breath. Just explore the in-breath and see if you can notice three distinct sensations that occur in the process of one in-breath. Make them physical, really bare physical experiences. It could be expansion or contraction or tension or touch or something like that. Don't just say, "Oh, I noticed it was hard." Those aren't physical sensations. Look for direct physical experience.

An in-breath goes on quite a while. An in-breath is not just one thing—it's lots of little sensations. Wherever you're feeling, even in the nose, there are lots of little sensations, definitely in the belly, chest, the whole breath. See if you can identify three on the in-breath. If you can notice those three with each in-breath, that will really help keep up the interest. And then on the out-breath, the same thing: notice three distinct sensations. If you can find them on each out-breath, that will also help with the interest.

This is not something that I'm suggesting you should do at every sitting, to find three or track the three. But honestly, when a yogi would come back to Sayadaw U Pandita and report their three sensations, he'd say, "Good, now go back and find one more. Report that next time." So this is something that can be ongoing, but that's going to be up to you. Play with it and see. I find it really brings my curiosity and the attention right into the direct physical experience.

Be relaxed and comfortable and also upright. When we find this balance in the body through the posture, we're also setting a balance in the mind between being too loose and being too tight—having a certain degree of firmness at the same time as we're feeling relaxation, both in mind and body.

Again, going through these short preliminaries: feeling the whole body posture in sitting, letting go of any obvious places of holding or tension, opening the attention in a wide way to sounds inside and outside to bring in a sense of pure receptivity. And from that place of receptivity, returning the attention to the body and feeling the sensations of breath—again, where it's most comfortable for you or where the experience is clearest. It may be a narrow focus: nose, belly, chest. Maybe a broad focus: the impact on the whole body.

As you start to connect with breathing in and breathing out, first bring attention to the experience of the in-breath. In the course of one in-breath, can you notice three distinct sensations that occur in the process of one in-breath? It can be helpful to name

them because it will help with memory—it will help you to remember what you've discovered. So it could be something like tingling or pulsing or pressure or warmth or coolness, expansion, something like that. But having named it once, you don't need to name it every time. It can be helpful in the beginning to name the sensations. Three sensations occurring in an in-breath.

And if you've noticed these three sensations, can you find them on each in-breath? Bring that same attention to detail every time there's a breathing in.

Now turning to explore the out-breath. In the same way, can you find three specific sensations that occur during the course of one out-breath? If you've recognized three sensations that occur in an out-breath in the area where you normally feel it, see if you can find those three sensations in every out-breath. It's a way of bringing interest, and interest brings continuity, and continuity brings settling.

Then finally you can try putting these two together. Recognize three separate sensations on an in-breath, three sensations on an out-breath, breath after breath. It takes quite a bit of attention and interest to sustain seeing that. See if it's possible. See if it helps you stay connected to the bare experience of breathing.

If you find it too complicated, if it makes you think too much or use too many words too quickly, just go back to the basic feeling the in-breath, feeling the out-breath. Then if the interest needs to be perked up, you can try this exercise again.

This kind of investigation, as I mentioned, is not something that you need to do in every sitting. But if you ever find your interest is low and you need to pick it up a little bit, this is one of the ways that we recommend—along with the one Sally introduced yesterday, which was beginning, middle, and end, a way to feel different parts of the breath and bring in continuity. It's helpful to have a few of these little tools because for all of us, the interest in the breath will come and go.

A student asked about the difference between effort, striving, and motivation. She described how in the day, sometimes she drops into a stream and there's a lot of peace—not rapture, but deep peace, and she'll take that. But then she bounces out, and there's more agitation, more easily distracted or looking for distraction. She was thinking about this and realized there's some way you need to surrender into the practice. So her inquiry became about resistance to the surrender—some fear, she thought, of really abandoning herself to the joy. She also noted that when it gets too complicated, it becomes joyless for her.

I had a little trouble hearing all of it, so let me repeat what I understood. She started off framing it as the relationship between effort and motivation and striving. Then she described how in staying with the breath—and it's helpful for her to keep it kind of simple—she's often able to come to a place of peace, and sometimes more joy comes in, but peace is kind of good enough. And yet, once that's there, there's an invitation to surrender and go deeper and really let go. But there's some pulling back from that.

And yet there's something in the makeup of the mind that doesn't quite trust it or isn't quite ready. Honestly, I find it a little bit similar to the quandary of falling asleep at night. You're lying in bed, you know you're ready to go to sleep, and the mind's just a little more active than one would like it to be. How does one move from that activeness to a place of deep rest and sleep? There's an invitation and there's a little bit of still holding back.

I haven't found any way by an act of will to make that transition. All I can really say about it is that the quality of relaxation is what really allows it to happen, and the relaxation is based on trust. This trust in the present moment is something that just has to grow by itself over time.

Trust is a really fundamental topic in Buddhism. We don't talk about it in these terms a lot, but it's one translation of the Pali word *saddha*, which is more often translated as faith. In a way, it's asking: do we have faith that if we let go completely, there will be a good outcome? That we will be taken care of? That it will be okay?

Honestly, I think all the mind's incessant activity—this restlessness which expresses itself through thoughts and emotional overtones—is really a manifestation of a lack of faith. It's kind of our project to keep the self as comfortable as possible. The mind's main activity with all these distracting thoughts is concerned with what's going to make it safe and what's going to keep the danger away. The only thing that really allows for the release of that is the deepening of faith.

In some ways, it's really learning to trust in the present moment, in our ability to relate to the present moment, no matter what's there. Sometimes there's this concern: if I let go, I don't know what's going to happen, I don't know what's going to come up. One of the virtues of our practice is that over time, we explore almost every corner of the mind. As we sit quietly through months and years of sustained meditation practice, almost every corner of the mind comes up to be looked at. We get more and more confident—oh, I can be with whatever comes. I've been with fear before, I've been with the void before, I've been with anger before, I've been with grief. I can be with it. That deepening trust in our capacity, I think, is ultimately what allows us to let go more and more.

There's one other thing that I think really supports it. In my experience, deepening concentration has really helped. The deepening concentration starts to quiet down the mind's thought excursions more and more. Sometimes they'll just stop for a while. And when the mind has settled to that degree, when the thoughts have settled to that degree, it becomes easier to drop and let go.

But I can't resist bringing in this quotation from Ajahn Chah, which is one of my favorites: If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot—I know you all know this—there's a lot of peace. If you let go completely, there's complete peace.

We approach that—a little, a lot, complete—over the course of our practice. It gets easier.

One other thing I'll say is that for me, the jhana practice really helped develop an openness to that kind of complete letting go. In entering into even the first jhana, one finds that that state sustains itself. That's why it's called an absorption. The effort can really go out at that point. So just another encouragement: if that's of interest, it's a useful avenue to pursue. And having explored that to some depth in the past, this reservation to let go still comes in. So there's no magic cure. But all these elements add up to support it.

Thank you for that question and observation. It's a deep one.

Another question came up about whether there's a difference between mindfulness of breath and mindfulness of the body breathing. For some practitioners, "breath" feels a little bit conceptual, but "the body breathing" is a direct physical experience.

This points to a really interesting question. My perspective is the latter. Feeling the body breathing is what I'm looking for. That's the way I practice and it's the way Sally and I tend to teach.

Pauk Sayadaw's approach is a little arcane, but it's at the center of the way he teaches mindfulness of breath. He says that if you go into the sensations of the breath, from his point of view, you're moving into four elements contemplation, which is his entry into Vipassana. And so what I was instructed was to stay with the breath in the area of the upper lip, but not to feel strongly or directly the sensations in the upper lip. That threw me for a while.

There's a couple who used to practice with Sayadaw—Tina Rasmussen and Stephen Snyder. Some of you may have read their book. Stephen said that the way he eventually came to understand Sayadaw's instruction was almost to visualize a little cylinder right under the nose and to almost visualize the breath coming in and out through that cylinder. Once he had the place, he didn't have to visualize anymore.

The way Sayadaw described it is that in the Samatha practice, one comes to meditate on the concept of the breath—which is exactly what you were saying. The concept of the breath. And so for Samatha, this is a really skillful move. Why? Because the concept is stable and the sensations are changing. This is a really interesting point, and you can play with it if you want.

Now, I found that "concept" wasn't a word that worked for me very well. The way I interpreted Sayadaw's instruction was as the rhythm of the breath. There's this image from the Visuddhimagga—it's from the commentaries, not from the suttas—of mindfulness of breathing as being at one point and having a saw go back and forth across a log. What you're interested in is that point of contact of the saw with the log. That suggested to me the rhythm of the breath. But Sayadaw used the word concept. Your interest is in the concept.

I would say from a Samatha point of view, concept can work really well because it's stable. I found the rhythm works the same way. Vipassana would emphasize the changing nature of the sensations in the body. I find that works well also. So maybe I'm being disloyal, but I tend to teach more on the experience in the body than on the concept, because I find the concept a little hard to grok and to explain. But you could use either one.

For Samatha, that quality will develop more strongly out of seeing sameness. The insights from Vipassana develop more strongly from seeing change—that's what leads into seeing impermanence. But in practicing Samatha, you're not so interested in seeing impermanence. If you can see something that's less changing, that's actually more onward leading for Samatha.

I will leave you all to play with that. If concept works for you, that can be a good way to practice. If the physical sensations speak to you more directly, that's also fine. In my experience, that works, regardless of Sayadaw's instructions.

A few announcements today. The first has to do with the different dialects of Pali that are going on in our group. When we get to the refuges, I don't know if you've noticed, there are different pronunciations happening. I see it as a West Coast versus East Coast thing. On the West Coast, the way we say it is "Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi" with the uplift. At IMS, the way it's said is "Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi."

I don't have a preference personally, but I tend to believe when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Because we're on the East Coast, I'm going to encourage the East Coast dialect. I know the West Coasters will miss the uplift—it's kind of soaring, a little bit like an Adele song. But we're going to go for the equanimity of the East Coast. Actually, I think it's a descendant from Thailand or from Burma that has brought this about. The East Coast is more Burmese, the West Coast is more Thai. So we're going to go with the Burmese pronunciation.

It may be a hard adjustment for the Californians, but I know you can do it.

Now, the good news and the bad news, as you've seen on the board: it's a beautiful day for practice, and it's going to be really noisy. There's a water tank in the garage.

Note: This appears to be the end of the transcript. The final portion contains primarily logistical announcements about noise during the retreat rather than dharma content.

CHAPTER 185

Awareness: Turn, Recognize, Rest

Guy Armstrong · 52 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Guy Armstrong unveils the central meditation instruction for awareness practice that parallels the systematic approach used in mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati). Drawing on the traditional factors of vitakka (initial application) and vicāra (sustained application), he presents the three-step method: turn your attention toward awareness, recognize its presence, and rest without effort.*
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> *Armstrong shares a powerful teaching story from Dzogchen master Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, recounted by his son Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche in 'Open Heart, Open Mind.' The simple hand gesture - palm out (looking at objects), palm in (looking at the mind that perceives), then dropping the hands - becomes a skillful means for connecting with inner space and the broad field of knowing.*
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> *This talk emphasizes the crucial difference between effortful concentration practices and the effortless resting in awareness. Once recognition occurs, all volitional activity ceases, removing the self from the equation and allowing natural stillness to emerge. Armstrong addresses practical questions about working with arising thoughts, emotions, and wholesome mental factors like joy and tranquility, providing guidance on when to stay with awareness versus when to attend directly to difficult experiences with mettā or vipassanā techniques.*

So good morning, everyone. Would you believe we're almost to summer? It's chilly. So I'm glad people have exercised wisdom and discretion in closing the windows on the side. Feel free to do that with temperatures like they are today.

This morning, I'm going to introduce two important things, so pay attention. First, I want to unveil the central meditation instruction that will accompany us for the rest of this retreat, this section on awareness. It's really the key pointing to how we suggest that you practice when you're doing the awareness practices from here on in. We've wanted to give a little bit of time for your intuition about awareness to build up and offering some various ways in. Today I want to put it into the context of a specific instruction for meditation.

The second thing is that I want to introduce the way of recognizing or finding awareness that has been most helpful for me in all the years that I've been practicing this. So these two things I'll cover this morning.

Let me do the meditation instruction first and then I'll get to the specific approach. I want to refer back to our practice of mindfulness of breathing, which we did for ten days together. The instruction was, once you got settled in your body, to direct the attention to the breath, connect there to see what your experience was, and to sustain the attention for at least half a breath, whatever was comfortable for you, without straining and striving.

So there were these three pieces. We intend to go to the breath, we would connect with vitaka, and then we would sustain with vichara. And vitaka and vichara specifically were the factors that developed the concentration in relation to our chosen focus of breath. Okay, we're all on the same page? Good.

Our chosen focus of attention in this section of the retreat is awareness. You could say consciousness, but whichever. And we talked very early on about how what we're really doing is practicing mindfulness of consciousness, mindfulness of awareness. That is our chosen focus. If it's an element in our experience, we can become mindful of it because we can notice it. So that's our intention, is to direct our knowing to awareness.

The second part is how to connect with it. And this we've given you a few ways already. Asking the question, "Am I aware?" is a way of connecting with the faculty of awareness and just see what comes. Sally led us in choiceless attention and then turning toward the knowing. That was the second way in. I did the meditation on body, space, boundless consciousness. That's the third avenue in. Sally led a meditation on loving kindness, moving to boundless or pervading loving kindness, and then turning toward awareness. And this morning I'm going to introduce one more. And then future days will give other ways that hopefully will lead you to the experience of awareness as a real thing, not just conceptual, but as a real thing in your meditation.

So this part of connecting, the vitaka part with awareness, is a lot trickier than connecting with the sensations of breath. Those things are really obvious and physical and tangible and solid and so forth. Connecting with awareness is a more subtle undertaking. And that's why we have to give a lot of different ways in. I can just tell you, "Feel the sensations of your breath" and you're there, right? But if I tell you, "Notice the broad space of awareness right now," you might connect or you might not. So we offer a bunch of different ways to do that connecting piece.

So this connecting piece is the most subtle, elusive, hard to gain confidence in, in the beginning. Once you've been working with it for a while, then the recognition comes really simply, really easily. But in the beginning, it can be hard to be sure: Is this what they're talking about? Am I really in touch with awareness in this way? So the connecting piece is subtle, sometimes elusive.

And then sustaining—what we've suggested is once you connect with awareness, just hang out there. So in the sustaining, there's not making an effort in any direction. Once you connect, just rest. Rest.

So I'm going to summarize these three steps, which are basically intention, intention toward mindfulness, vitaka and vichara in our normal terms. In relation to awareness, I'm going to sum them up by saying you turn your attention toward awareness using any of these cues that are helpful to you. You recognize it. And this is the moment that's a little tricky and sometimes elusive, but it will come with more and more confidence.

And the third step, in terms of sustaining, you don't do anything to sustain—you simply rest. These are the three words of the meditation instruction that we're going to use repeatedly: turn, recognize, and rest.

This approach is very analogous to what we've done in developing samatha with breathing. Turn is the intention to direct. Recognize is connect. Rest is sustain, but without effort. You sustain just as long as it naturally lasts. It's out of your control, and that's perfectly fine. However long it lasts, that's the right amount.

What did you do when you got distracted from the breathing? Eventually you'd wake up, have the intention of mindfulness, connect, and sustain again. That's exactly what we're going to do with awareness. When you get distracted and wander off into fantasy land, thinking land, planning land—whatever it may be—at some point you'll realize that. You'll come back into the present. At that point: intention for mindfulness, turn, recognize, rest.

In this way, meditation on awareness can become as systematic as mindfulness of breathing. The more we approach it with this pattern—turn, recognize, rest—the more we will stabilize attention in awareness, just as attention eventually stabilized in the breath. It wasn't stabilized all day. It may not even have been stabilized for an hour or ten minutes, but for periods, it became stable. The same thing can happen with attention on awareness.

As we practice this again and again—turn, recognize, rest—the resting will naturally get longer, but you cannot make it longer. If you try to make it longer, you're fussing with it.

There's an important piece here that's different from mindfulness of breathing. Once you have recognized, you stop doing. You stop all volitional activity. Why? Because that takes the self out of it. When we're engaged in deliberate volitional activity, we're introducing a motive. There's a wanting at work.

In mindfulness of breathing, you've all reached points where that volitional activity goes away and you can just rest in the stillness. It may not last very long—for some of you it does—but you've all reached those points where the stillness is self-sustaining and the effort can go out of mindfulness of breathing. There's a joy and delight in resting in that way.

This is a kind of surrendering—any attempt to control, any attempt to influence—and just letting things be as they are. There's immediate freedom in that. Whether you've reached it through concentration on the breath and that factor of stillness comes through, or in this case through the recognition of awareness and the ability to rest in that experience, there's a sense of freedom.

Learn to become familiar with that sense of freedom that is based on non-efforting, non-doing, resting. This becomes a great source of faith—the faith that you don't have to do anything to make things all right. Things are already all right, and you can trust in them the way they are. This is the beauty of resting. This is the beauty of stillness.

When do you need to do something again? Only when you've become distracted. Then attention needs to be recollected, intention toward mindfulness returns. Turn, recognize, rest. Connect with awareness again and sustain by resting, however long it lasts.

Not how long you make it last—however long it lasts.

This completes the first part I wanted to cover: the basic meditation instruction we'll work with for most of the remaining retreat. Turn, recognize, rest.

The second element I wanted to introduce concerns the means of turning and recognizing that has proven most effective in my practice. We've already explored several techniques—body space awareness, metta pervading awareness, the inquiry "am I aware?" These are all methods for turning. But I want to share with you the approach that has worked most powerfully for me.

One of my first teachers in this area was Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, a Tibetan Dzogchen master who had a small monastery outside Kathmandu, perched on a hilltop. His monastery was called Nagi Gompa. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche had four sons, all recognized as Rinpoches. One was Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, who teaches widely today through online and in-person programs. Another was Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who became our first teacher in this kind of practice—both Sally's and mine. He also had two older sons, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche and Chokling Rinpoche, who live in Nepal.

Though we initially met Tsoknyi Rinpoche, we eventually had the privilege of studying with his father, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, at Nagi Gompa.

What I want to share is an account from Tsoknyi Rinpoche describing a teaching he received from his father. This appears in his book *Open Heart, Open Mind*. Tsoknyi Rinpoche recounts:

"I was able to spend only a few weeks with my father at his hermitage in Nagi Gompa. Near the end of my stay, though, he gave me a lesson in experiencing inner space that I'll never forget.

I was sitting in my father's private room—a small, wood-paneled space with a bed, an altar, and enough room for a few people. The setting sun cast golden-red light through the windows. My father said, 'Look at the area around you with all your senses open, seeing all the objects, feeling all the sensations. Don't block anything. Can you sense that openness, that simple awareness of the things you see and hear and feel?'

I nodded. With the sun setting through windows overlooking a broad valley, the sheer physical warmth of my father's body, and his sweet but penetrating gaze, it would have been hard not to be aware of all the phenomena.

Then he said, 'Now slowly turn that same awareness to the mind that perceives these things openly. Instead of looking at outer space, look at inner space.'

He demonstrated with his hands, turning his palms outward to show how we ordinarily perceive by looking outward, then turning his palms inward to indicate the mind that perceives. Then he let his hands drop into his lap to demonstrate letting the whole effort drop, allowing whatever happened to happen.

In that moment, due largely to the certainty and understanding he had cultivated over years of practice, I caught a glimpse of inner space—wide open and clear, completely beyond concepts or judgments—in which the entire realm of phenomena appear and disappear."

I'd like everyone to open their eyes for a moment. You don't need to mirror this gesture, but you can if it feels natural. Tulku Urgyen turned his palms outward to indicate the mind looking at objects, then turned them toward his face to show looking inward at the mind that perceives. Finally, he dropped them.

This gesture became the primary method I've used throughout years of practice in this style to connect with awareness. I eventually simplified it to using just one hand: look out, look in, drop.

I offer this as another cue you can use if it proves helpful. For years, I hesitated to share this teaching because it came through a specific lineage, and I didn't feel authorized to transmit those instructions. But since Tsoknyi Rinpoche published it in his book, it has become publicly available, and I now feel comfortable sharing it based on his openness.

Let me demonstrate once more: out, in, drop.

Over time, this became increasingly subtle for me—eventually just the gentle turning of the palm would suffice. Later, simply seeing the back of my hand would open that space of awareness. Unlike some other techniques we've explored that involve multiple steps and take time to develop, this method is remarkably immediate.

With this understanding, let us now enter into meditation.

I'll repeat both the steps that we'll be using and suggest this hand gesture to see how it goes.

So again, please sit comfortably. Feel the uprightness and energy in your posture, as well as the groundedness and connection to the earth. Take a few moments to connect with the experience of breathing, feeling in the body the impact of breathing in and breathing out.

Now we can begin to practice with this instruction of turn—meaning turn the attention in the direction of awareness, recognize that awareness is present, and then rest with that experience of awareness.

Try this with the palm gesture that Swami Rinpoche described of his father. You can just visualize your palm facing away, representing our usual way of looking out toward the world. Then turn the hand back so the palm is facing you—the gesture of looking in—and then rest there.

Again: palm out, palm in, and rest.

Once you are in the phase of rest, you don't need to do anything else. Sense phenomena will still be happening. Sounds will come and go. Thoughts will come and go. The presence of a single thought does not have to disrupt the resting. It's only getting on the thought train and riding for a while that is a distraction.

You can notice that a thought can come and go and you can stay in touch with the broad field of knowing. Sensations come and go, sounds, there will be a mood, and thoughts will also be phenomena coming and going. None of that is an interruption to the resting.

Simply rest in a relaxed way, not trying to alter the experience, not trying to make it deeper or stiller or longer. Just open to this broad field of awareness, empty enough to hold all the arisings and their passing.

This field of awareness isn't constructed by us. It's already here. As we develop this practice of non-doing in the resting, we realize we're resting in what's already there—or we could say resting in reality itself. No effort is needed to improve it or change it.

As you rest in this field of awareness, you'll continue to perceive other sense phenomena. Sounds come and go, sensations arise and change, thoughts appear and disappear. You don't need to connect your attention deliberately to those phenomena.

In choiceless attention on changing objects, we would connect the attention to each new predominant experience. A sound would call the attention and we'd go there and stay there for a bit. A sensation would stand out, we'd connect, and the attention would linger.

While you're resting with awareness, all these phenomena will be known. They will appear. You don't need to send the attention there to connect or sustain with them. The attention really stays in the broad field, although other arisings will be known. They are, you might say, left in the background.

If you've become distracted, then you again go through the steps of turn, recognize, rest. Notice that in the turning, there is volition, there is intention, there is effort. This is appropriate, the same way we would bring the attention back to the breath in samatha breathing. We deliberately bring the attention back to awareness in this meditation.

So the turning is a volitional step, and you can use any of the techniques that you found helpful: "Am I aware?" Body space awareness. Meta-pervading awareness. Even if it takes some seconds, your turning step, that's fine. This is appropriate.

Or you can try the palm—palm out, palm in—to connect to awareness. And then once you've recognized, you can rest there, letting go of effort in the resting.

I suggest that you try this as your ongoing meditation practice through the day: this turn, recognize, rest. I want to say just a bit more about each of these steps.

In the turn, this is a technique. Whatever technique helps you get there - maybe it's just saying the word "aware," maybe it's asking "am I aware?" maybe it's the palm turning back, maybe it's going in through metta. Whatever has worked best for you, use that today.

I find in the long run it's helpful to have two or three of these techniques. Because I find I use one for a while, and it's magic. I just... wow, I'm right there. But then the magic wears off. I use it, use it, use it, and the magic of it kind of wears off. And then I need to bring in another one for a while.

So it's good to have two or three backups. And then I use the other ones for a while, and I've taken a break, and then I use my primary one again. Wow... right back there again. So play with this. It's not that one is always going to work super well.

When you get to recognize, here is where you have to really use your own discernment and take what you get. This is as close as I'm getting right now to the experience of awareness. However clear that is, even if it's a little bit vague, you're a little unsure, trust what you get. Use one of these techniques that has been most helpful for you and believe in that.

We each hit awareness with different degrees of clarity and fullness and perception of emptiness in it. So trust what you get when you do that turning with the tool that has seemed to work best for you. For each of us, that's our current vision of awareness, what it is.

And then when you get to rest, let it rest as long as it will. One of Tulku Urgyen's favorite sayings was, "short moments many times." If it doesn't last hugely long, that's okay. However long it lasts, that's fine.

A main factor that will let it last longer is samadhi. As concentration develops in the mind, that stability will carry over into the awareness practice. And that's really why we've done the concentration as a preparation for moving into awareness. The longer it lasts, the more you can feel the richness and the depth of the awareness that's there.

So that's why it's still helpful to do some concentration-style practices, say at the beginning of sits, even in this awareness phase. Or take a whole sitting and go back to breath or metta, really collect the mind, then open up again.

It doesn't really work to try to force the sustaining, to dictate how long it should last. It'll last as long as it does. And what makes it not last? Proliferation, or another term is grasping. Grasping, selfing, fixation, obsession, clinging. This will break up the access. This will block the access to awareness. It's no longer empty. There's a self. There's a strong self there.

So when that's come in, you need to find a way to let go of the holding and then connect again with awareness. So this is the outline of the practice.

Any questions this morning?

Ken and then Lisa.

"When you're explaining the turn, recognize, and rest, you talk about the volitional aspect of that."

"The turn."

"The turn. It seems to me in the turning of the palm..."

That is the turn. That's the technique of turning.

So let me just restate Ken's question if you didn't hear it. Where is the volition in this sequence: turn, recognize, rest? And I said, it's in the turn.

And he said, "But with the palm?" I said, "That's part of the turn." So that's volitional. The techniques for getting there are all volitional. Whether it's turning the palm or going through body space awareness or metta pervading awareness, these are the volitional steps. You call these to mind. You do that. And at the end of the turn, you get something. Whatever it is you get, stay there.

Lisa asked about when resting in awareness sustains for a while, there are arisings of qualities like joy and tranquility and happiness. Other people have reported love and compassion coming in. The question was whether those should stay in the background as well.

This is where the background-foreground distinction might get a little misleading. You will notice them. Anytime you've been developing mindfulness around factors of mind, when factors of mind start arising in awareness practice, you will notice them in the same way you'd notice a sound or sensation. I want to be clear: these are sense arisings. They're very wholesome sense arisings, but they're still sense arisings.

So we basically notice them. It's good to notice them, and it indicates the mind has been trained to be aware of mental factors, which is really good mindfulness training. And we don't mess with them. We let them come when they come. As they fade, we let them fade when they fade.

With the recognition of peace and joy and tranquility, we also know as practitioners that these are really wholesome. It is a wholesome development that these things are arising. This is that quality—the third aspect of the nature of mind that we talked about. There's the emptiness, there's the cognizing, and there's the responsiveness.

As you've entered this field with good concentration and a good degree of metta, that's starting to unlock the heart qualities to really shine out. This is a beautiful happening. So we appreciate that it's there. We understand this is growth—our growth in the Dharma. This is part of the ripening of the responsiveness of mind. But we don't fuss with them.

It's kind of like we've let the Dharma take the lead. It will show us what's there. And those beautiful qualities will just get more and more unlocked and flow as we learn to trust in the resting—natural qualities of mind just coming through. It's good to notice them, just the same way we notice sounds, but we don't have to dwell on them. Come back to awareness itself and rest there. Continue to come back to awareness as the place you rest. And then these beautiful qualities can continue to flower.

Jiyoung asked about holding other kinds of thoughts—maybe some difficult thought or hard feeling. "Should I go back to meditation or vipassana? Going back to awareness sometimes feels..." This is an important point. The question is: when a difficult thought or emotion comes up—one of the hindrances—should one just go back to awareness and sort of leave it in the background, or should one attend to it with metta or vipassana?

This is really a judgment call. Jiyoung's comment was that it feels like just ignoring it is not really taking care of herself, is not really attending to what needs to be attended to. If there's any feeling that what's arising is important enough that it needs to be attended to, then I would move from awareness and meet it with vipassana or metta and tend to it in that way. It is a judgment that each of us makes, and we need to make it out of a real sense of heartfulness: "Oh, this is really calling me."

I need to give attention to this. We work with it through metta or in vipassana with RAIN, the heart of which is this quality of real acceptance. I need to give my attention to it and accept that this emotion is there. It needs to be met, recognized, and honored.

Once we do that for a while, usually our relationship with it becomes clearer and calmer, and we can return to awareness. But if it feels like the hindrance is really strong and drawing us in, then it's good to attend to it. If we don't—and you all probably know this—we run the risk of bypassing. We're trying to use this lofty ideal of open awareness to avoid attending to emotional things that need attention.

When we don't attend to the emotional things that require our care, they end up causing suffering later, not only for ourselves, but usually for others. So it's beneficial to tend to these things when they arise. One of the metrics I always look at is the intensity of it, how strong the emotion is. If it's strong, I tend to think it needs to be taken care of. If it's weak, we can leave it in the background and stay with awareness.

Happy Juneteenth. Today is the day we celebrate the ending of slavery in this country. And happy Father's Day to all the dads out there. Let's include all other parents—happy Parents' Day. Just in recognition of how much each of our lives has depended on the care from others, and we continue, hopefully, to pass that care on. So, happy taking care of one another day.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 186

Tranquility and Insight

Guy Armstrong · 50 min

> *In this dharma talk from a concentration retreat, Guy Armstrong examines the two primary outcomes of meditation development: samatha (tranquility) and vipassanā (insight). He explores how unification of mind leads to happiness and contentment (sukha), which naturally reduces distractedness and supports present-moment awareness. Drawing from the Majjhima Nikāya, Armstrong discusses the Buddha's own awakening experience and how concentrated mind becomes the foundation for wisdom to arise. He distinguishes between ordinary concentration and sammā-samādhi (right concentration) as described in the Noble Eightfold Path, emphasizing that liberation requires concentration supported by all path factors. The talk includes practical guidance for maintaining samādhi while transitioning into awareness practice, covering techniques like returning to one's meditation anchor, continuity of mindfulness, and skillful attention to sense experience. Armstrong shares insights from his own practice with Burmese meditation master Pa-Auk Sayadaw, illustrating different approaches to using breath meditation for developing either tranquility or insight.*

The subject of the talk tonight is tranquility and insight.

I want to say first that I've really been touched coming into this retreat to feel the atmosphere that you all are holding. Normally when I come into a retreat, I feel like I'm more settled than the meditators are. Coming into this retreat, I get the feeling you all are more settled than I am. So I'm one of the people coming from outside who's probably going to stir you all up with my worldly energy. I've just really appreciated the people I see walking slowly and sitting quietly. The whole retreat feels very settled in to me at this point. So it's a lovely atmosphere to come into.

You all have been practicing unification of mind for ten days. As I'm sure you know, that's a synonym, probably the most frequently used synonym for the factor of concentration or samadhi. Often when I teach these retreats, I call them concentration retreats. But in some ways I think the language of unification might be more helpful for people. There's something about concentration that seems to evoke striving, as though we have to reach a certain level and qualify to get our gold badge for being a concentration yogi. But actually what we're doing in practicing for concentration is we are collecting the attention and unifying the mind, usually around a chosen focus.

In your case, for most of you, it's the breath. For some, it might be body or sounds. This concept of a primary anchor really supports the collecting because in every moment, we kind of know where we're meant to be. What that does is highlight the times when we're not there. When we don't have a chosen focus, we just assume meditation's going great, and we don't notice how many mind moments we're spending away from the present. So choosing this anchor is very helpful. It does collect and unify the mind.

When the Buddha talked about meditation, he talked about two primary outcomes that happen as meditation develops. One is tranquility, and the other is insight. In Pali, these two are called samatha and vipassana. Both are really important, and in fact, they really influence and strengthen one another. As tranquility develops, vipassana comes more alive. As vipassana deepens, it leads to a tranquilizing of the mind. So the two work well together.

Tranquility is closely related to concentration and unification. When the Buddha described meditation progress, he said that tranquility leads to happiness. Do you feel that? As you've gotten more tranquil, more settled, have you felt a growth in happiness? That's the first immediate benefit of a practice that aims for this factor of samatha.

As you've gotten happier, do you find that makes the mind less distracted? It can, because we're finding that there's fulfillment in the present moment. This term sukha, sometimes translated as happiness, can also be translated as contentment. It's one of the jhanic factors that I think Winnie probably talked about last night. This term for contentment really says, the mind says, "Oh, I'm quite happy where I am. I don't have to reach out to the past. I don't have to reach out to the future for something different." So it really calms those restless movements into past and future. That's what allows the energy to collect into the present moment, that lack of distractedness.

With that base, we can choose or not to direct the attention to wisdom. That's what's indicated by the term vipassana or insight. Insight is really for the purpose of developing greater understanding or wisdom and is primarily about what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering. That's what we want to learn. We're here not for meditative gymnastics. We're here to find out how to bring greater happiness and less suffering into our lives and the lives of those that we touch. It's really wisdom that leads to that understanding.

So tranquility by itself, concentration by itself is very good, but it's not the end of the road. You see this in the life story of the Buddha. You've probably heard that his first two teachers, when he left home and was wandering for six years, were concentration adepts. They trained him to two deep places in what are called the formless attainments.

These are states that are beyond the four jhanas, continuing to develop into areas called formless attainments, sometimes called formless jhanas. They're deep states of concentration. The Buddha's first two teachers taught him the attainment of nothingness and the attainment of neither perception nor non-perception.

Actually, I shouldn't call him the Buddha at this point. He was the Bodhisattva—he had not yet awakened. He was on the path to awakening, truly the Bodhisattva. And so the Bodhisattva was invited to teach with these two concentration masters, the most deeply experienced meditators he could find in India at that time. And he said no. He said, "I'm not really interested in that because it doesn't go all the way. It takes you to a place of great concentration and peace, but it's temporary—it fades."

This is really the limitation of concentration attainments. They're temporary because they're conditioned and they will always fade. I'm sure that's not disillusioning news for you at this point, but they will fade. However, they still have an important role to play in the overall development of the path.

It's interesting because I don't know exactly how the Buddha came to benefit from those practices, but I believe that he did. Later on when he was meditating, he recollected an experience of the first jhana, which is a lower attainment than either of these, and he was able to access that quite easily. So I suspect that the concentration states he'd reached early on in his wandering supported his ability to reach the first jhana and then to open beyond that.

So he reached deep states of concentration, but it wasn't yet what we would call right concentration or samma samadhi. And that's because it wasn't yet surrounded by the factors of the Eightfold Path. There's this beautiful description in one of the discourses where the Buddha says, "What is noble right concentration?" Notice there's a distinction from just concentration. "What is noble right concentration?" And he says, "Unification of mind, equipped with right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness." Do you recognize this list? It's the Eightfold Path.

So concentration becomes right concentration when it's supported by the other factors of the Eightfold Path. When it's not supported by the other factors, it may be concentration, but it's not the concentration that leads to liberation. You all, having practiced before, understand concentration as being supported by the other factors of the Eightfold Path, and that's what allows it to be liberating—right concentration.

But somehow the Buddha took this skill, which he had developed early, recollected through the first jhana, and then opened up into the greater possibilities of awakening.

I want to point out this book while I'm speaking. I suspect many of you know this—it's called the Middle Length Discourses. The Pali name is the Majjhima Nikaya. It's a collection of the Buddha's discourses that are middle length. There's another collection called the long discourses, and then other collections that are shorter discourses. This is middle length.

If you were going to take one book to a desert island, this would be a good one to take because it contains all the core teachings in depth of the Buddha, in one handy volume. It's really a great treasure for all of us. I sometimes do retreats at home, and when I do a retreat at home, I add in an element of study. Last winter, I reread this book. I'd read it twenty years ago and reread it while I was on retreat. It was very touching because I discovered a lot of things on the second reading that I hadn't discovered when I was younger.

One of the questions I was looking to understand is: in his discourses—and these are a very representative range of teachings that he gave—how often did he talk about liberation? What I found was that in almost every discourse in this collection, there are 152 of them, in almost every discourse he talked about liberation. So it's clear that this is really the heart of the message that he wanted to present. And in about half of those discourses, he talked about concentration because he considered it such a fundamental base for the development of wisdom, for wisdom to arise. He was talking about concentration all the way through these 152 discourses.

So I'll just read one passage which...

continues to strike me and move me. He's talking about the night of his awakening.

And he says, "When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, wieldy, and steady, I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints."

The taints is one of the terms that he uses to describe unwholesome states of mind, the states that cause us suffering and torment us. "I directed it to knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: this is suffering. I knew as it actually is: this is the origin of suffering. I knew as it actually is: this is the cessation of suffering. I knew as it actually is: this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. I knew as it actually is: these are the taints. I knew as it actually is: this is the origin of the taints. This is the cessation of the taints. This is the way leading to the cessation of the taints. When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taints. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: it is liberated. I directly knew the holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done."

The Buddha's account of his own awakening under the Bodhi tree, based on the concentrated mind being bright and purified.

And I like this term, "wieldy," because when the mind becomes concentrated, the wieldy part means we can direct it where we want it to go. In the Buddha's case, this was to the destruction of the taints, which was ultimately liberating. At other times, he directed it to the recollection of past lives. He directed it to seeing beings dying and being reborn according to their past conduct. So there are different ways that it can be directed. This is really the fruit of the cultivation of concentration, of samadhi.

So I started off talking about tranquility and insight. Tranquility is a different term. The Pali is samatha. The term for concentration is samadhi. It sounds like they should be related, but the words aren't really related. But they are similar in meaning. So people will sometimes talk about samatha practices. They'll sometimes talk about samadhi practices. And they tend to use those, a little colloquially, interchangeably, synonymously. The words are different, but people describe the practices somewhat the same.

So as the mind becomes tranquil, it does become concentrated—less distraction. And then when it becomes unified, that's when it's said to be concentrated.

So I've been looking for a long time for a good definition of concentration overall and came upon one that's from the Samyukta Agama. The agamas, you may know, are collections from early Buddhism from a slightly different tradition. They were passed on in Sanskrit and then translated into Chinese. So the agamas generally have roots in the Chinese translations, but they come from early Indian Buddhism, just a different school than the Pali school.

So I think this is a really nice definition: "What is right concentration? It is reckoned to be the establishing of the mind in the absence of distraction. It being firm, collected, tranquil, concentrated, and mentally unified."

I like this because it pulls together all the ways that we think about concentration and the ways that we talk about it. So look into your own experience with each of these. The absence of distraction. Was that in your experience when the mind was concentrated? Firmness. Did you feel there was a strength, stability when you were concentrated? Collected. Collected into the present moment. Tranquil. So the element of peace is there.

Concentrated and mentally unified—all these qualities are joined together in this definition. What I appreciate about this description is that these are all experiential terms. Concentration isn't just one thing; it has all these different aspects. As we become

more familiar with it, we can tune into all these aspects and start to recognize the concentrated mind by these different flavors. The more familiar we become with this state and feel all the different ways that it comes to us, the more our access to it will grow.

Some of this may have been explored in previous retreats, so please bear with me if there's some repetition.

I want to mention something important from my experience: there are times in practice when the mind is fairly concentrated, but it's not tranquil. Concentration and tranquility tend to go together, but sometimes you can be in a concentrated state and be impacted by a very strong experience, causing the mind to become stirred up.

This happens classically when the understanding of impermanence really ripens and comes front and center in meditation. Deep insights into the profound truth of impermanence are often unsettling. The mind can become anxious and stirred up, but this only happens from a place of concentration.

Another place this can be seen is when coming out of a period of stillness and returning to activity. Your friends who left the retreat today likely experienced some concentrated mind meeting the outside world, which probably led to some stirring up. Concentration meeting activity sometimes results in a loss of tranquility—not surprising.

I want to address something about tranquility in relation to healing. I've found, and many people I've spoken with have found, that the experience of retreat and the deepening of meditation can be profoundly healing for different psychological states we've grown up with in our conditioning.

People who have experienced trauma—whether from early childhood, accidents, injury, or abuse—carry that deep injury in their body and mind. It leaves a mark. Many come to meditation retreats like this as a way of healing from that injury, and we've found it very effective in doing so.

If you look into the Buddha's teachings, however, he doesn't explicitly address this kind of healing. He compares himself to a physician, saying the illness we all have is greed, aversion, and delusion, and the remedy is the Eightfold Path. He does see himself as a physician healing the suffering of the world, but these specific kinds of patterning or mental habits that we develop from injury aren't directly addressed in the teachings that I've found.

What does point to this, I believe, is the development of samatha. When the Buddha talks about developing tranquility, he speaks of it in both bodily and mental terms—and when I say mental, I include the heart. In the discourses, the word citta refers to both mind and heart.

What has been stored in the mind-heart and what has been stored in the body tends to be agitating when trauma is at the base. As tranquility develops, it can only develop if that agitation can come to the surface and be somewhat released. So I read in the development of tranquility a real pointing to the activity of healing in our meditation practice.

You can feel this. When the mind becomes collected and the body is settled, it feels like a whole, healthy, or healed place. You can check this out in your own experience.

This quality of samadhi is somewhat contagious. You're all picking it up from each other as these days go on. I'm coming in and picking it up from you, and the new yogis who will be joining us in a couple of days will come in and pick it up from you as well. It's a very shared, communal experience as we develop it.

This became really clear to me some years ago when we had a visit at Spirit Rock from Thich Nhat Hanh. Sally and I live near Spirit Rock, so we've spent a lot of time there teaching and serving on the board. When Thich Nhat Hanh came, it was quite popular—we had about a thousand people come onto the land for this day-long event. A thousand people don't even show up for Jack Kornfield, but they showed up for Thich Nhat Hanh.

It was an outdoor event, as we couldn't hold it inside. This was actually before the current meditation hall was built. The meditation hall, if you've seen Spirit Rock, sits at the top of a hillside, so the land slopes away.

below it.

There's a creek that runs down to one side of the meditation hall, and then the land slopes up above the creek. Both above the creek and on the other side are hills, and the creek runs down the middle.

So we set up a platform for Thich Nhat Hanh to speak on the far side of the creek, and then the meditators filled in the hillside that's now below the meditation hall. We were mostly sitting, some were standing, and a thousand people fit on the meadow.

He sat on the platform, his voice amplified. Maybe the Buddha could talk to 500 people, but I don't think Thich Nhat Hanh could without amplification. As he talked, I felt this spell of samadhi settling over everybody on the hillside. His body language and speech came from such a place of stillness that everybody felt it. A thousand people just settled as he was speaking.

Then, in the afternoon, he led a walking meditation. There's a path that goes from near the meditation hall to the end of the property, just a dirt trail. He took everybody who wanted to go—at least 500 people joined the walking meditation to the end. There was this very long line. There's still a photo of that somewhere at Spirit Rock. It was very beautiful. But you could just feel the impact of his samadhi in his speech and through his body. It was very tangible.

When we think about the development of samadhi, as you know, ten days here is a lot of work. I trust that at this point you feel it's all been worth it, because there's more work to come. But the work that's to come, I think, is easier than the work that you've done so far. You've done the hard work.

I want to talk about two benefits of the work that you've done. One is when that tranquility develops, when the concentration develops, it feels good, doesn't it? To me, this is one of the most striking and immediate benefits of Dharma practice.

I was at a board meeting yesterday, just down the hill. There were about fifteen of us in the room and another seven or eight online. We did one session in the afternoon that was more about personal sharing to get to know each other better. I was in a group with three other board members, and at some point I posed the question—I was just curious getting to know them—what really drew you into meditation? How did you get so committed to this practice and this center?

One of the other people in the group said the same thing that I said, which was that in our first retreats, we experienced a level of peace that we'd never known was possible. It was so satisfying and rewarding and fulfilling that it changed our lives. My friend said it transformed his life, that experience on the first retreat. A lot of it was because of that degree of peace.

When you feel something like that—maybe that resonates with your experience—it becomes a beacon. It says, this is what the path has to offer. For myself, I wanted to bring that more and more into my whole life. Not just a rare occasion on a cushion in the middle of a long retreat. But if the mind can go there, why not bring it more into life? So that became very motivating for me.

One of the things I noticed as the years went by: I came to greater and greater levels of that peace. The depth of peace available through our practice, I think, is truly unlimited. Unlimited. So that has always been an encouraging and motivating sign for me, the discovery of this incredible peace that I didn't know about before.

That's the first benefit. It feels good and it's inherently satisfying. But the second piece is, it doesn't stop there—it leads on to insight.

This degree of peace and concentration becomes the best foundation for the mind to wake up. And of course, this is where the wisdom comes in.

When the Buddha talked about these two factors of samatha and vipassana, he didn't ever say, "Now do this practice and you'll develop samatha," or "Do this practice and you'll develop vipassana." The way he presented it, in my understanding, is that mindfulness leads to both samatha and vipassana, which I think is true.

But over the centuries, different commentaries and traditions started talking about specific practices: if you want to develop concentration, do these practices; if you want to develop insight, do these practices. There's a fifth-century meditation manual from Sri Lanka called the Visuddhimagga, which has greatly influenced our tradition. So many meditation instructions and details are laid out there that are still carried out today. It's really been kind of a guiding light in some schools of our tradition.

In that section on developing concentration, the author, Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa, talked about forty different objects for developing concentration, of which the breath was one and the Brahmaviharas were another. The others included things like kasinas, which are colored discs that one then visualizes and focuses on; recollection of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; reflections on death; reflections on a corpse. There are many ways to unify and concentrate the mind.

But here at IMS, we tend to use two: the breath or loving-kindness practice of the Brahmaviharas. We regularly teach in the long retreats, both here and at Spirit Rock, for those who wish months or six-week stretches of concentration on those objects. Very, very fruitful for the people who engage.

So now having developed this base of concentration through this past week of retreat, we can use that to open up to vipassana. The awareness practice that we'll present is a form of vipassana practice. That means we want to be guided as we move into the second half of your retreat by wisdom. Insight and wisdom, of course, are almost synonymous. We want to let that take the lead.

But we want to continue to support the collectedness of mind. As we open up—I mentioned this afternoon that we'll be opening up to a wider field—we don't want to allow that opening to completely undermine our steadiness. That's why we will be opening up gradually and encouraging you to carry along some practice with your anchor, even as we move into the second part of your long retreat.

So we'll take, to some extent, as best we can, some of that concentration with us as we turn to vipassana and wisdom. Of course, we'll give more details as we go.

The breath is one meditation that can be clearly inclusive of both tranquility and insight. The Buddha gave one famous discourse on mindfulness of breathing, which is also included in this volume of the Middle Length Discourses, called the Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing, the Anapanasati Sutta. In one section of that, he talks about using the breath for tranquilizing the mind and for concentrating the mind. So the instructions are right there for breathing for both tranquility and concentration.

In another section of the same discourse, he talks about using the breath to contemplate impermanence. You can sort of see this because the breath is always changing, isn't it? Sensations are changing, it's coming and going. No two breaths are really the same when you look closely at them. So if you turn to an approach of investigation with the breath, it could lead into more insight, more wisdom.

When practicing—this is my experience—when I'm using the breath and practicing for samatha, I approach it one way. When I use the breath and I'm developing it for vipassana, I practice a little differently. I'm going to say a little bit about this because it might be relevant for you.

In practicing for samatha, I find it helpful to see the sameness in breath after breath, to see the commonality in breath after breath. One of the ways this may be expressed is that one keeps the attention steady just on one area of the body. In keeping it on one area of the body, there's a kind of ongoing focus that one can connect with and even emphasize. I'm just going to perceive that one area. Yeah, I could feel the breath up, I could feel the breath down. But as I'm practicing samatha, if I'm experiencing it mostly in the chest, I'm going to play with keeping my attention kind of in that area and see where that leads.

The image that's used—I think this is from the Visuddhimagga—is of a saw going across a log. The idea is the saw goes back and forth, but it's always contacting that one point where the wood is being worn away. That's kind of what the breath is like. It's

coming and going and coming and going. And yet if we leave our attention at that one area, that provides a sameness of focus that gets reinforced breath after breath after breath. That's what can help the mind to unify—that sameness.

If I'm using the focus on the breath for vipassana, it's more helpful if I notice the change.

Not the sameness, but the change. Within one breath, there are many different sensations. We often speak of feeling the breath in the abdomen as though it's one unified thing, but if you truly examine the experience of breathing in the belly, you discover countless little sensations flickering and shifting with each in-breath and out-breath.

When using the breath for vipassana, I want to observe all those changing sensations because the impermanence becomes so vivid and clear. I want to notice how one breath differs from the next, really increasing the degree of investigation that characterizes vipassana practice.

This distinction was brought home to me quite powerfully through direct experience. I've always enjoyed investigation—it's naturally appealing to me. But when I began using the breath for samatha, I had to shift that investigative tendency somewhat.

In the early 2000s, I traveled to Burma to practice with Pauk Sayadaw, a renowned meditation master skilled in both concentration and vipassana techniques. I sought him out specifically to learn his concentration methods, which people found remarkably helpful and powerful.

As I settled into practice, Sayadaw knew I was a teacher in the West. Whether he had particular expectations of me, I'm uncertain, but I definitely harbored expectations of myself—a desire to match whatever he might expect. These subconscious pressures can dominate our practice sometimes.

I found myself falling into striving. The way I understand striving is when we apply the force of craving to meditation states, trying to reach them through sheer force of will. That was certainly happening. I'd experienced some settling and desperately wanted to maintain and deepen it, so I was working very hard with a definite element of craving.

What does craving do? It creates tightness. I found myself getting tight, but what's the key to concentration? Relaxation. I wasn't being relaxed at all.

During my daily interview with Sayadaw—he kept close tabs on my experience—I reported, "Sayadaw, I find myself striving." As a very experienced and knowledgeable meditation master, I expected him to offer three or four skillful suggestions to help me move out of striving.

He simply looked at me and said, "Don't do that."

That was good advice, though I had to return to my little hut and figure it out myself. What I discovered was that I needed to readjust my understanding of right effort. I saw that right effort couldn't be focused on achieving a particular result—it had to be focused solely on the immediate experience.

This became my understanding: if I'm seeking an outcome, it becomes striving. If I'm simply interested in the present experience, it's not striving. Right effort means directing attention to the present moment with interest and curiosity.

Feeling quite proud of this insight, I reported to Sayadaw the following day: "Sayadaw, I took your advice. I went back, investigated deeply, and came to a new understanding of right effort in this practice. It really helped eliminate the striving."

He said, "Too much thinking. Just stay here."

He dismissed all my investigation and said, "Just focus on the breath at the upper lip. That's all you're supposed to be doing."

This gave me a completely different approach to meditation than I'd known was possible. I took the advice, and it worked.

One crucial lesson from that instruction and experience was learning I could simply stay here even when hindrances arose. As a trained vipassana meditator, it was almost a religious conviction that when a hindrance emerged, I had to approach it with mindfulness. The RAIN acronym was deeply ingrained in my meditation habits, and I believed that failing to approach hindrances with RAIN meant I was truly failing the practice.

But Sayadaw said, "Just stay here."

I began experimenting with that approach when hindrances appeared, and I found I could actually do it. I could maintain attention here while letting the hindrance run its full course in the background. Thoughts, emotions, and body sensations would continue, but I didn't need to engage them. I could keep attention anchored here, and while the concentration didn't necessarily strengthen during the hindrance, it didn't weaken significantly either.

And so it became a whole other option for me in meditation—I didn't have to go to the hindrance. But I should say, this was after I had been meditating for probably twenty years in the vipassana tradition, and I was very familiar with how to work with hindrances. If someone tried to apply this instruction as a new meditator, very likely there would be a kind of aversion to the hindrance, using the breath as a way to get away from it. That would be a form of bypass that wouldn't be so helpful.

But I was familiar with what the hindrances were. I knew how to work with each of them. From that place of some confidence, I could leave them in the background. This is something we may talk about more when we get into awareness practice. Because sometimes in awareness practice, the wise thing with hindrances is to let them stay back and keep the focus on the chosen area, which is the awareness itself. So we may bring that in later. I mention it now so that it may be helpful later on.

Another thing the Buddha said about these two—samatha and vipassana—that I found really helpful: I had thought only insight could liberate us to any significant degree. My practice was always devoted to the development of wisdom, with concentration as support. Then there's this very short statement that I found fascinating in the discourses where the Buddha says samatha is for the abandoning of lusts, and vipassana is for the abandoning of ignorance.

So we're not totally liberated until ignorance is abandoned. That's why wisdom is necessary, vipassana is necessary. But if we could abandon lust—and this doesn't just mean sexual desire; the Buddha uses lust, the term raga, in a broader sense to mean any form of desire, usually sense desire—but if we use the tranquility we develop through concentration to let go of wanting, that is a form of liberation in itself. It's not thorough, it's not complete, it's not final, but it's a form of liberation. I found that really interesting and encouraging.

I want to close with some really practical guidance. We're moving into a different form of retreat over the next two days and more in the days after that. But I really hope you will all keep an eye on this factor of samadhi as the retreat moves on and keep nurturing it. The instructions will provide some support for samadhi. We'll make it very explicit what the support for samadhi is in the awareness practice. But there are ways you can also benefit the maintenance of samadhi in other very practical ways. So I'm just going to name a few.

You may have been practicing with these already during this retreat, and I hope you'll continue. One is to return with some regularity to your anchor. As we move into a more open practice, we often say space leads to spacing out. So as you open up and let go of the primary anchor, it's easier to become distracted. Keep an eye on that. When

the distraction is getting bigger, don't hesitate to come back to your anchor and recollect. Continue your relationship with your anchor. Come back regularly and maintain that.

Using specific techniques with the breath can be really helpful. During this retreat, was there instruction in noting practice with the breath? No. Any instruction in counting? No. Both these little verbal additions can really help develop the quality of concentration. You may have used them in the past. Maybe something you want to refresh your connection with. They can be useful tools for strengthening the samadhi as we go forward with the breath.

The counting practice is not just for beginners. When I went to practice with Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma, he gave me the instruction to use counting. He told me to count breaths one to eight over and over and over. While I was with him, I did it in every sitting, and I found it was really helpful. It really did strengthen my continuity in the present moment. It let me know when I was drifting out. We're not going to teach that here, but if you've had prior experience and feel like picking it up, that's not bad.

The third principle, which I'm certain was discussed in the previous retreat, is the most important single element: maintaining continuity of mindfulness throughout the day. This means sustaining awareness through your sitting periods, walking meditation, meals, showers, service practice, and time in your room. The more you can strengthen this moment-to-moment presence, the more it will support the stability of tranquility.

I'm already witnessing this quality in our group through your natural inclination toward slowing down. When I arrived at the retreat, this was the first thing that struck me—how many people were moving slowly and mindfully. This quality truly communicates to others and preserves your stability of attention.

Another valuable practice is using the walking periods for formal walking meditation. This serves the cultivation of continuity. Often we discover that when the sitting ends, we suddenly remember we need to return to our room to wash socks. This takes us to the other side of the building, where we spend thirty minutes on this task. With only fifteen minutes remaining, we might think we don't need to walk and instead sit down to watch the sky.

If you haven't established the habit of maintaining continuity through formal walking, I encourage you to experiment with periods where you do a sitting, followed by a complete formal walking session, followed by another sit. Observe the impact this has on the continuity of your mindfulness through these three periods.

Guarding the sense doors provides another powerful support. Sometimes teachers interpret this as meaning "don't look"—approaching the dining hall while guarding the sense doors means avoiding looking around. However, this isn't what the Buddha intended. What he taught about guarding the sense doors is to remain careful of any reactive formations that arise when you're engaged with the senses.

For example, when you're looking, notice if wanting arises. Is there liking? Not wanting? Disliking? These reactive patterns are what we want to guard against. It's not about whether we look at one another, although we don't recommend making eye contact. Rather, as you're looking, observe what the mind is doing in response to what you see.

Another possibility you've likely been exploring already: as your practice becomes more energized and continuous, you may discover that physical energy increases, allowing you to extend your daily practice hours. This could mean rising a little earlier or staying up later. You might find you need less sleep than when you began the retreat. By extending the hours, mindfulness has greater opportunity to flourish.

These are all potential ways to continue strengthening the factor of concentration. I wouldn't mention these to beginning practitioners just arriving, as they can lead to striving. But since you've all already settled into the rhythm, these are subtle refinements. If something interests you, choose one element to explore. I wouldn't recommend implementing them all simultaneously, as that can become overwhelming. Select one, experiment with it, and see if it proves beneficial.

I believe this covers everything I wanted to share this evening. It's about 8:20, leaving forty minutes for walking meditation—the schedule you've maintained these past days. We'll offer longer Dharma talks once our retreat fully settles. For today, we'll conclude here.

There will be a sitting at nine o'clock with chanting. If you have the energy, please join us. We'll be chanting *Imaya Dhammanu* this evening. Feel free to join our choir.

Rest well, and we'll see you in the morning. Sign-ups for individual meetings with the teachers tomorrow will be posted after this sitting, so you can check the board if you're interested.

Have a blessed evening.

CHAPTER 187

Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this dharma talk from a retreat for experienced students, Guy Armstrong guides practitioners through the development of choiceless attention, a meditation technique refined by the great Burmese master Mahāsi Sayādaw. This approach represents a significant opening of the field of mindfulness, moving from focused breath awareness to whole-body breathing, then to sounds, and finally to complete openness where attention naturally moves from object to object without deliberate direction.*
>
> *Armstrong explains how this practice differs from more restrictive meditation techniques by allowing practitioners to be mindful of anything arising in experience - breath sensations, sounds, thoughts, emotions, or body sensations. The teacher emphasizes the particular value of this approach for laypeople, as nothing falls outside the scope of meditation practice, making it highly applicable to daily life. He introduces the distinction between attention (the spotlight quality that highlights objects) and awareness (the intelligent knowing quality), setting the foundation for deeper awareness practices to follow.*
>
> *The guided meditation progresses systematically from breath awareness to whole-body breathing, then incorporates sounds before opening to choiceless attention. Armstrong concludes by pointing toward awareness of awareness itself - noticing the wide extent of phenomena and the awareness that encompasses them. This session serves as preparation for the more advanced awareness practices that will unfold throughout the retreat.*

Good morning, everyone.

I hope things are going along relatively smoothly for you, and I hope you're enjoying the spaciousness of a half-empty center. There's something quite nice about it. Maybe we should keep the retreats this size—though then we'd have a big budget deficit, and people wouldn't benefit.

You probably know that today is the opening day of the second retreat, so things will get busier later on. I'll talk about that more in the announcements. But we still have almost a full day to continue developing the stability you've been cultivating.

This morning in the instructions, we're going to continue opening up the field of mindfulness. Yesterday, Jaya spoke about extending from a small area of the breath to feeling breath in the whole body, and then allowing the attention to open wide to sounds. Unfortunately, that's when the fire alarm went off, so we hope that's not a curse for today.

Now we're going to extend into the whole field of what we call choiceless attention—a meditation technique that really allows us to be mindful of anything in our experience. This approach was developed by Mahasi Sayadaw, a great Burmese master of the last century. I think it's an outstanding approach to meditation because of its inclusiveness. Many other meditation techniques are more restricted in what they eventually allow us to pay attention to. Mahasi Sayadaw's instructions allow us to pay attention to anything in our experience and use that as a base for mindfulness.

This is so helpful for us as laypeople in carrying the practice back into our daily lives because nothing is outside the scope of our meditation.

Let me say a couple of words about choiceless attention. Some teachers call this choiceless awareness, but I think the proper term is choiceless attention because what we are going to do is unhook the attention from our anchor—which for many of you is the breath, or maybe body or sounds. We're going to unhook from whatever anchor that is and just open up to see what's here, then notice where the attention is drawn. We let wherever the attention lands become the new focus for meditation, the new focus for mindfulness.

I'm going to invite you right now—eyes open or closed, it doesn't really matter—to tune into this quality of attention in your immediate experience. Notice: with all the things present in this moment, does attention tend to stay with one thing all the time? Or by its natural inclination, is it moving from one to another to another?

I'll pause the speaking and let you examine the movement of attention in your experience.

Did anybody have an attention that didn't move? Even when we're being very close with the breath—when I'm being very close with the breath—I still notice my attention will make little darts off to body sensations or sounds, even in the middle of following two breaths.

This attention is a very active element that moves on its own for reasons that are conditioned, but not purely volitional. We're not choosing where the attention is drawn—it just goes there. This is why we call this choiceless. We're not directing the attention to an anchor or any part of the body or anything in particular. We're allowing it to go where it will go, and then making the mindfulness established there.

This is a beautiful practice. It brings in this sense of real openness and naturalness. It's also challenging because without an anchor that we come to again and again, it's easy to let thoughts come in and take us away. As you're practicing with choiceless attention, which we'll introduce in a few minutes, notice if it's leading to more distracting thoughts. That can be a helpful time to come back to your anchor. Restabilize the attention, and when you feel present again, allow the attention to open wider in this choiceless way.

You can probably see how this style of practice would lend itself to noting. As I was sitting in the quiet a few minutes ago, I would notice where my attention was landing: it went to seeing, then to body sensation, then to in-breath, then to sound, then to noticing a mood. All these elements of our experience can get touched on.

In Mahasi Sayadaw's instruction style, he would suggest putting a soft mental label that names where the attention is landing. It can be really simple—we don't want to get into a lot of thinking. Just as I went through: you could notice a sensation, notice a sound, notice an in-breath, notice calm, notice agitation, notice a thought. Whatever the experience is in the moment, we connect with that, become mindful of it, and if you find it helpful, you can name it. This isn't a noting retreat, so we're not emphasizing this, but you're encouraged to play with it if it might be of use.

This is one step along the way to the awareness practice that will unfold a little later. This opening and allowing all the sensations and phenomena to come in is on the way to the complete opening we'll be doing.

Let's begin the meditation practice.

Please sit comfortably and find in your posture the combination of uprightness and alertness, and also ease and relaxation and the groundedness of connection to the earth. Have a sense that the body can rest on the foundation of the sitting base, and the spine can express that upward movement of alertness.

As you settle into the experience of the body sitting, begin noticing the movement of breathing. You may notice at first where you've been with it for the last ten days. If it's like that, then take the time to let the attention settle and stabilize in that area where the breath is felt most clearly as a way of collecting and unifying the mind.

Then, as one step in the direction of opening the attention, allow it to expand to include the whole body: taking in the head, the shoulders and arms, the back...

The chest and belly. The hips and legs.

And now see if it's possible to feel the whole body as a connected unit. This is what we sometimes call taking the body posture as an anchor—just sitting, being mindful of the whole body in this posture. See if it feels comfortable to have opened the attention that far. If not, you're always free to return to the breath in a smaller area. Feel free to return to the anchor.

Now with this attention on the whole body, notice where you feel the impact of breathing throughout the body. When there's an in-breath, how far throughout the body can you feel the effect of breathing in? When there's an out-breath, how far throughout the body do you feel the impact of the out-breath?

In this kind of exploration of whole body breathing, it's most helpful if you have the sense of feeling the body from within, from inside. Sometimes in giving instructions for mindfulness of breathing, we might have the sense that there's an observer in the head looking out or down at where the breath is being felt. But in this meditation, it's more supportive if you can feel the whole body as a unit and then just feel each in-breath and out-breath. Some people express this as letting the mind drop into the body.

We don't need to force the breathing. If we just relax into the body, the breaths will happen by themselves.

Now taking the openness a little further by bringing the attention to sounds. At this point, let the attention become very wide, open, spacious. Just notice all the sounds that come and go—the sound of my voice, sounds of one another, hum of the machinery, sound of traffic, nature. There's no need to send the mind out in search of sounds, but rather if we rest within the body in the center of all sounds, then they're heard without any effort. It's like we're sitting in a concert hall with a very open and receptive attitude.

If this degree of openness is uncomfortable in any way, if you feel you're losing your ability to be present, then just come back to your anchor—breath or body. Let the attention become simpler and resettle. But if it's comfortable being with sounds in this wide, open, relaxed way, then we'll take it one step further and just ask: What else is here? What else can you notice within your experience right now?

Are there sensations connected with breathing? Other sensations in the body? Probably some coming and going of thoughts, which we just allow to arise and pass away. And some emotion or mood is here—could be restlessness, could be wanting, could be contentment, could be ease, could be aversion. Just notice that a mood or emotion is always present in some way, sometimes subtle, sometimes bigger.

Now we'll move into the formal meditation with choiceless attention. Start to notice in each new moment: of all the focuses, of all the phenomena in your experience, where is attention landing right now? Can you be mindful of that? Can you relate to that as a focus for meditation? In this new moment, where is the attention landing now? And now?

Is it possible to notice for each new moment what is being focused on with this spotlight quality that attention gives? What phenomenon is being highlighted?

As you begin to settle into this practice, it would be fine if you notice something every few seconds—every three, four, five seconds, a noticing of the attention. Sometimes it may stay with the same object over that period; that's fine. But as we make this noticing a little more frequent, we find it helps to steady the mind in the present moment and continues to build up the quality of concentration even though the object is changing.

Play with this and see if it's something that might be helpful as a step toward openness. If it feels too spacey, too ungrounded, anytime just return to your anchor. Restabilize until you're ready and interested to open again. If you find the mindfulness is not really steady in following the attention, then it can be a good time to return to your anchor and re-stabilize in the present.

In this last part of the sitting, we want to explore this openness from a little different angle. So once again, connect with this sense that the attention can be very broad, wide, open—openness to sounds, to the breath, other sensations.

In this last part of the sitting, we want to explore this openness from a little different angle. So once again, connect with this sense that the attention can be very broad, wide, open—openness to sounds, to the breath, other sensations, thoughts and emotions.

Have a sense of the width of all the phenomena in your experience. Sounds can be very far away and still heard without effort. Sensations are more immediate. Do you have a sense of how wide your experience is? And can you place the attention on noticing that? You could say the extent of phenomena. Just rest the attention in noticing that wideness.

Sometimes when the hall is quiet, we talk about noticing the extent of the silence. Can you notice the wide extent of phenomena and have a sense that the attention can rest in that noticing?

As you're noticing that wideness, then ask the question: Is there awareness there? In noticing the extent of phenomena, is awareness present? If the answer to that is yes, let the attention rest in noticing that awareness.

If you can, you can notice that this awareness—this wide awareness—includes all the phenomena of the senses, but it's not limited by them. It's wider than any one phenomenon. This is a step in knowing the awareness of awareness itself, and this is the direction we'll be heading in the next few days.

So if you find this approach helpful—either the choiceless attention or the extension to the wideness and the awareness—feel free to start bringing it into your meditations. If you find that the sense of space leads to spacing out, come back and reestablish the connection to the present with your primary anchor. Just bring it in a little bit at a time as it feels of interest and attractive to you.

We have a little time for questions. This morning we're going to do questions through the microphone so everyone can hear.

"Hi, thank you for the practice today. I have a question regarding the difference between awareness and attention."

This is a question about the difference between awareness and attention. In the next few days we're going to be introducing a lot of vocabulary that may be new for you in terms of meditation instructions, and this is an important one.

Attention is the factor of mind that highlights one of the objects of our experience, one of the elements. So it moves around—everybody has attention all the time when we're awake. It's always moving to something or other. In every moment, it's that settling or highlighting of one aspect of experience.

Awareness is a quality of knowing what's happening. There's an intelligence in the awareness that isn't there in the attention. Attention can be quite mechanical. Turtles have attention—they may notice seaweed, they may notice humans floating in the water, they may notice their babies. But that attention is just happening on its own. The awareness has an aspect of intelligence similar to mindfulness. We'll draw that out more.

"In this context, when thought arises, if there's awareness of thought, is it appropriate to see that as an object or is it better to drop it?"

The question is: when a thought arises, is it useful to see that as an object or just to drop it? It depends what meditation style you're practicing at the moment. If you're practicing in a samatha style, where you're intending to develop concentration through single-pointed focus like the breath, it's more helpful to just leave the thought in the background. You recognize the attention has gone there, but we don't go so far as to pick it up as a meditation object. You just notice it coming and passing through, but you're not interested.

"In this case, it's choiceless, so I'm not picking it up and I'm not..."

In the state of choiceless awareness, you want to notice it as a meditation object. You let it continue its course.

You allow it to continue its course, and you're just aware of it, and that's okay. Yes, you allow it to continue its course, but often the influence of mindful attention on a thought will mean it has a shorter lifetime.

One of the powers of bringing mindfulness to the area of thinking is that when we notice a thought, it tends to get a little more shy and wants to run away because it's embarrassed at being seen. It's like when there are cockroaches in your kitchen and you turn on a light—they run for the corners. Thoughts are a little bit like that.

But yes, in choiceless attention, you want to notice the thought and make it a focus for mindfulness, which means, as Sally was using the word last night, we connect the attention to it with mindfulness. We sustain it for the duration of the thought. And when the thought passes, the attention is unhooked and free to move on to the next focus.

I think that's all we have time for in terms of questions because we have many announcements this morning.

Today will be an interesting day. We have about fifty people arriving this afternoon who will join you this evening. As Sally said, we are all going to regard them with great openness, metta, and affection. That's our practice for today. It may be a little bumpy at times.

The schedule is getting complicated today because of the two groups. Just as it was a little complicated on closing day, it's going to be a little complicated today. Let me walk through the morning and afternoon schedules.

This morning we're starting the practice meetings with you all. We're beginning with group practice meetings, and today we'll see about two-thirds of you. That list is on the board, so please check to see if you're being seen today. If we don't meet with you today, we will meet with you tomorrow. After that, the rotation will be that we'll meet with the new yogis on the next day, and then we begin individual practice meetings the day after that. So each of you in this period of time will have one group meeting and two individual practice meetings as this retreat unfolds. We're starting with the groups today and tomorrow for all of you, so please check the board.

This afternoon's schedule is where it gets a little complicated. There will be the usual sits at 2:00 and 3:30, and the practice leaders for those sits will be as normal. Then at 2:45, we have to do a sound check. The teachers have to do a sound check in here for the online version of the event. So at 2:45, it's going to get a little noisy in here. We'll be mumbling things into the microphone so the online people can check our sound. I would suggest walking at 2:45 today.

At 3:30, there will be a sitting—a silent sitting. We're asking the managers to communicate to the incoming yogis to bring their belongings into the hall during walking periods only. So during the 2:45 walking and the 4:15 walking, the new people may be coming in to put their things down on a spot. If you normally sit during those times, just know that it could be a little bit noisy. But there shouldn't be talking, though there may be a little traffic. During the sits at 2:00 and 3:30, those should be quiet.

Then dinner. The way the schedule is set up, you all will be having dinner from 5:00 to 5:30, and it will be in silence. Hopefully that will protect you over the mealtime. At 5:30, the arriving yogis are welcome to have their dinner, and that will be talking. So I would encourage you to eat quickly and get out, keeping things as silent as possible. The meditation hall will always be in silence, apart from the sound check, so this is always a good refuge.

At 6:30, there is a scheduled sitting, and there will be a practice leader in here, but the sitting will be short—only twenty minutes, so the bell should be rung at 6:50. Then you have a walking period because the course opening manager's talk is going to happen in here at 7:00.

One of the blessings of being a continuing yogi is that you don't have to attend the opening manager's talk. You already know the territory—you're already living it. But there is one piece I do want to mention: if you happen to have reclaimed your cell phone after renouncing it at the beginning of the last retreat, there will be another opportunity for renunciation tomorrow morning, Wednesday. I think you get double the merit for renouncing it twice, which has great appeal.

Tomorrow morning we'll have a cell phone renunciation ceremony during the morning sit. You're welcome to participate. There will be pouches again, and you're invited to label your device, place it in one of the pouches, and the managers will collect them for safekeeping.

There is an affinity sit this evening—please check the board to confirm which group. The affinity sit will happen with a flexible ending time, and everyone will reconvene here at 7:20 for the retreat opening, which is marked on the schedule.

So the flow will be: at 6:30 there's a sitting for those in the hall, followed by a walking period. Those attending the affinity sit can stagger your timing and return here at 7:20 when we'll all be together for the course opening. There will not be a late-night guided sit tonight since the opening may continue until close to 9:00. After sitting for an hour and forty minutes, we're not asking you to sit from 9:00 to 9:30—you're on your own after that. If you still have energy at 9:00, you could do walking practice or return for more sitting, but the formal schedule today ends at 9:00.

Any questions on logistics? It's a lot for me to keep in mind, so I can imagine it's challenging for you as well. Check the notice board—everything is posted on the schedule.

Finally, I want to offer a fuller introduction to Christina, whom we're very happy to have with us. This is Christina Barre. She lives in Canada but teaches often in the States. Sally and I have known her for years, both as a yogi and student, and she brings many wonderful qualities to the teaching role. She completed her four-year teacher training this year, guided by Marcia Rose, Sally, and myself. She is now a full teacher and works in that capacity at retreats at Spirit Rock and elsewhere.

We're delighted that she's agreed to join us as an assistant. It's somewhat of a drop in her pay grade, but she's interested in this material, so it's an opportunity for her to both learn and serve. Once the new retreat opens fully, she will sit in on our interviews from time to time and will offer sign-up interviews, generally in the afternoons, beginning tomorrow. Any of you are welcome to sign up. Christina will also be teaching, probably offering a couple of the Brahma Viharas later in the week, so you'll hear her expression and get to know her better that way.

Christina, thank you for joining us. We're truly happy to have you.

So we're at 9:30, time for walking. I hope you have a very rich day and can stay stabilized, finding your way amidst all the comings and goings. This is a good kind of day, especially in the afternoon, to practice in your room or outside—to remove yourself. You know the value of seclusion. The Buddha said there are these roots of trees, there are these empty huts. That's the kind of day this can be—a roots of trees kind of day.

So please practice well, and we'll all return to silence this evening at 7:00.

So be well, and we'll see some of you in interviews soon. Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 188

The Nature of Awareness, Part 1

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Guy Armstrong begins an exploration of awareness practice for experienced vipassanā meditators. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on totality—the six sense doors and their objects—he explains how consciousness (viññāṇa) functions as the knowing faculty that reveals all sense experience. Armstrong distinguishes between standard vipassanā practice focused on objects and awareness practice focused on consciousness itself, explaining how consciousness lacks vedanā (feeling tone) and thus freedom from the reactive patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion.*
>
> *The talk explores consciousness as the fifth aggregate and references the Suññatā Sutta (MN 121) where the Buddha gives direct instructions for mindfulness of consciousness. Armstrong draws on teachings from Ajahn Chah, Upāsikā Kee, and other masters to illustrate how awareness practice offers an "inward staying, unentangled knowing" that includes all phenomena without getting caught in their pleasant or unpleasant aspects. He addresses the subtlety of this practice, comparing consciousness to a mirror that reflects without preference, and explores the relationship between awareness and emptiness (suññatā), showing how this practice naturally leads to insight into anattā (not-self).*

Are you ready for a ride? I hope so, because tonight we are making the transition into the awareness part of the retreat. Often these are new kinds of instructions for Vipassana meditators, even seasoned Vipassana meditators. So it may be unfamiliar territory and a little bit of an adventure. But I hope you will take it in the spirit of exploration.

There's a new land that we can explore for some of you. Some of you are familiar, but it'll be a new land for some. And there aren't crocodiles, there aren't alligators or tigers, so it's a safe place. But the best way to approach it is with a spirit of some playfulness. One of the reasons is it's always good not to be too serious in a new style of meditation. The second is it's not possible to be super precise about awareness. It's a big field and it's largely an opening to a mystery. And we're not going to solve the mystery tonight or maybe thoroughly ever in our practice. So have a sense of just open inquiry and exploration, please. And if there are things that don't connect, try and let them just wash over.

We talked about this a little bit a few days ago in the middle of the transition into this retreat, but I'd like to review it right now with everyone. You're sitting here. Let's say your eyes are open. They don't have to be, but let's say your eyes are open. And I want to ask you to look at your experience just in this moment and see what's here. Sally pointed to this a bit this morning in the meditation on choiceless attention.

What's present in your experience right now in kind of general categories? If we want to look at a list of what we might pay attention to, what things should we put on that list? So if your eyes are open, there are sights. If your ears are working, there are sounds. You have a body, so I'm assuming there are sensations. If you're practicing eight precepts, there might not be much of a taste. If you weren't, there might be a little taste from dinner. There could be a smell. There's not much of a smell in this room, but there could be. There are thoughts and there's some mood, right? Might be background, might be a strong emotion. Some kind of emotional tone in the mind.

Is that pretty much it? That's pretty much what's here, right? Does it ever change very much from that? That's kind of it, isn't it? All this fuss about what we call life comes down to these six things. Sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, thoughts and emotions, which we'll pair them as mind objects. They're only ever these six things happening. And that's what all the fuss is about.

So the Buddha pointed to this really directly. There's this wonderful discourse he called the discourse on totality. And he said, what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality. That's a pretty strong statement. You know, Einstein never said that. Freud never claimed that. Marx never claimed that. And here's the Buddha 2600 years ago: get ready, here's the totality.

It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects—thoughts and feelings. If anyone were to proclaim a totality beyond this, that person would be speaking of something outside their knowledge. So this is kind of it.

But I want to point out a little wrinkle in the Buddha's statement, a little different from what we were talking about. We were identifying what's here as sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, thoughts, and emotions. But the Buddha put something else in this list. He put in the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind. You have a sense of why he might have done that?

How would this read differently? How would this feel differently if what he said is the totality is sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, and mind objects? Would there be something missing for you in that understanding?

Yes, because it requires sense bases to generate those things. If the Buddha had expressed it that way—as just these six things—we would think they're not dependently arisen. They're just kind of there all the time. But by including the sense organs, he's showing that all the phenomena of our experience depend on us having these six sense organs. And that depends on us being in a body.

So he's really showing the link between the body, the sense organs, and our experience. This is a really crucial part of the teachings. We wouldn't be having these experiences if we weren't in a body with functioning organs.

Let's look at a simple example included in this framework: the ear and sounds. There's a sound. I'm going to assume that you have a working ear, and so you could hear that sound. The ear and sound are a pair. And now I want to ask, does the mind play any role in that experience?

If your mind was turned off, would you be having that experience? No. So the mind is right there with it. This is the third piece. If the mind wasn't there, we wouldn't be hearing that sound. There is something in the mind-body relationship—the mind needs to be present for us to experience.

There's one particular aspect of mind that lets this happen. In the Buddha's language it's called vijñāna, and the translation we use is consciousness. So we are conscious beings, we are sentient beings, and that means we can have experiences based on our senses. As we explore awareness, we're really exploring consciousness.

The way that we use awareness in this retreat is more or less synonymous with consciousness. Now some teachers use awareness to be synonymous more with mindfulness. If you followed the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya from Burma, who has a book called "Awareness Alone is Not Enough," he uses awareness more to mean mindfulness, sati.

But in this retreat, we're going to use it more or less as a synonym for consciousness. So we're going to introduce new vocabulary over this week. But of all the terms we introduce, the most important one is consciousness, vijñāna, the way the Buddha understood it. If you can get a sense for what this consciousness is and what it does, that will really steer you in the right direction to awareness because they're almost synonyms.

A little bit more about this controversy: Should awareness mean mindfulness or should it mean consciousness? Different teachers have different opinions. We're going to use it as consciousness.

You can see how this separation comes about, because the English word "aware" is a very rich word. Like if I asked you, "Were you aware of the thunder last night?" And you'd heard it, you'd say yes. And I'm really just saying, "Did you hear it?" Were you conscious of the thunder? Yeah, I heard the thunder, I was conscious of it.

But if I ask you, "When you spoke to me this morning, were you aware of your motivation in speaking?" Then this becomes more like mindfulness. Are you tuned into the intention, the feeling, the emotion that was behind your speech? That's more like mindfulness.

So awareness in English can go in both directions. And the difficulty is there's no Pali word that needs to be translated as awareness.

And that's why we can make up whatever meaning we want. Some people make up the meaning of mindfulness, and we're going to make up the meaning of consciousness. So just so that part is clear, we're not using awareness to mean mindfulness.

Consciousness is the single most important term that we're going to introduce. It may be new vocabulary for some. This term vijñāna is pretty central in the Buddha's teachings. It's the fifth aggregate. The five aggregates are a way of describing the makeup of a human being. Basically, there's a body, there's feeling tone, there are perceptions, there are mental formations—again, thoughts and emotions—and there's consciousness. That's what makes up a human being. It's like the description from the totality of the six senses, but organized a little differently. It covers the same territory, organized a little differently.

The five aggregates are intended to describe what a human being is. If you thought you were actually a person, no. You're really five aggregates. And there are these beautiful stories about Mara—you know who Mara is? He's sort of the tempter who comes and tries to lead good meditators off the path in the Pali Canon. Mara is coming a lot to the bhikkhunīs at the time, the nuns, hardcore practitioners. And he's trying to get them to think of themselves as persons. And they go, "No, Mara, there's no person here. There's only the five aggregates." And Mara goes, "Oh, the bhikkhunī knows me." And Mara slinks away defeated by the bhikkhunī's wisdom.

So the fifth of the aggregates is consciousness. It's a really integral part of what makes a human being. In fact, if you think about the three most fundamental things in being a human being, there's a body, there's consciousness, and there are emotions. In the Abhidhamma, the classification is more threefold. Rather than five, they kind of combine feeling and perception into mental activity. But these are the three fundamental parts.

It's interesting—you can look at yourself and you can look at friends or fellow yogis and think, "I'm not seeing a person. I'm seeing a form. I'm getting a sense of their emotional activity. And I see their consciousness." That's what's real. This assumption of selfhood is like the assumption of personhood. When we want to see clearly, we see this makeup, and consciousness is a central ingredient. We're conscious.

The Buddha talked about this in many discourses, but here's a simple example. This is from a famous discourse in the middle-length sayings called the Honeyball: "Dependent on the eye and visible forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is called contact." This is what gives rise to a moment of experience. A visible form, the eye is working, and eye consciousness arises. In the Pali Canon, when the Buddha talked about vijñāna, he usually used it to mean one thing: sense object known through one sense organ. So the visible form known through the eye with eye consciousness. We'll talk about that and then we'll expand it.

Do you get a sense of what this consciousness thing does? One of the ways to think about it is the use of the term unconscious. And I don't mean in the Jungian collective sense, but I mean when we go through periods where we're not conscious, what's that like? I think about things like—reflect on your own experience—deep sleep, if you've ever fainted, if you've ever been in a coma, which hopefully you haven't, or if you've ever been under general anesthesia for a surgical procedure.

Do you have any clear memories of those times? Do you remember what it was like to be in deep sleep? Remember what it was like to be under general anesthesia? No, there's kind of nothing there, right? As far as we know, that unconsciousness means there was no activity. Or another way I would say it is there was nothing happening for us. I mean the body was still going, but the mind was not checked in as far as we know.

No trace of the mind being checked in. And that's the factor of unconsciousness.

So consciousness is when things are happening. Consciousness is the faculty we all have that allows stuff to happen. And that's all that it is. Consciousness allows stuff to happen in our experience. You might say it illuminates our experience, it brings it forth, it reveals it, it shows the world to us because we're conscious.

This is a very specific meaning of consciousness in the Buddha's language—*vijñāna*. It's not about consciousness raising. It's not about having a friend who has a really evolved consciousness. No. It's just that we're conscious of sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touch and mind objects. It's really simple. It's really basic. There's not even any particular intelligence in it.

Turtles are conscious. Flies are conscious. Mosquitoes are conscious. They have to be or they couldn't find their food. So it's really simple and it's not particularly intelligent.

This mental aspect of *vijñāna* is there with everything we experience. It's what brings our experience to light, what makes things happen in our world. Consciousness expresses as knowing stuff—not conceptual knowing, but knowing the elements of our sense experience. That's what it does. That's its activity. That's what we all have. And all sentient creatures have this.

In this retreat, the aim is to explore this element of consciousness. That's what we're after. We want to understand how it is in our experience. This is not an intellectual description from a neuroscience point of view of how it arises or anything like that. It's experiential—how does it feel? That's what we're going to explore through the awareness practice, using awareness more or less as a synonym for consciousness. And I'll get to the detail of that in a minute.

Consciousness is really subtle. I have a friend who practiced in Burma for years, intensive practice for a couple of years straight with Sayadaw U Pandita. At one point he'd been doing vipassana and then he'd done metta and concentration and all that. Then Sayadaw U Pandita gave him the instruction to practice with the blue kasina for concentration. It's one of the standard concentration objects.

The instruction was: first you get a blue disc to sit in front of, and the color blue kind of imprints on your mind. Then his meditation instruction all day long was visualize blue. That was it. Would you like to do that practice? That's a kind of bare practice. That was his instruction—visualize blue all day long. That's pretty subtle.

Consciousness is even more subtle than that. So as we get into it, it's so subtle that sometimes it's elusive as a meditation focus. It's always happening, but sometimes it's elusive to connect with.

You probably know the story that after the Buddha's enlightenment, he was debating whether to teach or not. And he was inclined not to teach. The reason was, he said, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and difficult to understand. So I don't think anybody will get it, so I'm not going to bother."

Thankfully, a deva came down and said, "Please, there will be people who understand." And so the Buddha said, "Okay, I'll teach." Thank goodness.

It was a close call, and we're still benefiting.

So this Dhamma that he discovered is profound, subtle, and difficult to understand. This talk tonight—I'm not going to claim it's profound or subtle, but it may be difficult to understand. So if it is, don't worry. We have a whole week for this exploration. You don't have to get it all tonight. And we're going to do meditations tomorrow morning that will give a way into the experience, hopefully a clearer way into the experience.

So tonight what I want to do is lay a conceptual foundation for what we're going to be exploring through the meditation.

Awareness, I said, is synonymous with consciousness, but consciousness is just the knowing of one sense object, like consciousness of a sound, or in this moment if your eyes are open, consciousness of the sight that you're seeing.

But I want you to open your attention up right now, in the way that Sally was instructing us this morning, in a wide way. Can you feel that as attention opens up, it can include sound, can include seeing, can include body sensations, can include thoughts, and can include your mood? Can you have a sense that all that can be in your broad—we'll call it awareness?

These things, in our experience, don't just show up one sense door at a time, right? As I'm speaking, can you feel your body? As I'm speaking, can you see the statue behind me? So our immediate experience is that these can all be present in a moment—sights and sounds and sensations, thoughts, emotions.

We're going to use the term awareness for the consciousness that opens to all these things in a broad space. So consciousness is just one sense object in one moment. Awareness is this broad field that everything can happen in. Can you get a sense of that? Good. And again, we'll bring it out more in the meditation tomorrow.

A sense consciousness, just connected to one thing, will arise when the sound arises, and when the sound passes, that sense consciousness will be gone. Clearly impermanent. But awareness has this quality—I think Sally may have pointed to this—always there. Somehow this big field in which things keep showing up, always there.

So it's not immediately obvious that this awareness field is subject to coming and going. That's part of the exploration that is interesting. Because in the Pali Canon, there's only one element that's not subject to coming and going: Nirvana, the unconditioned. It's the only thing the Buddha talked about that is beyond impermanence.

This makes an interesting possible connection. The awareness isn't coming and going. Nibbana isn't coming and going. Are they related? Not going there tonight, but it's part of the exploration. I hope you get interested in questions like this, because Nibbana

is a transformative element in a meditator's experience. It's the single most transformative element. This is what enlightenment is based on. And when there is the direct realization of Nibbana, the mind is purified in a way that doesn't happen through any other cause.

So this question of nibbana, the unconditioned element, is a really important one in the field of meditation in the teachings of the Buddha.

What we're going to practice is looking at consciousness itself, or awareness itself—more or less the same.

Can mindfulness relate to anything in our experience? If it's in your experience, is it possible to be mindful of it? When the Buddha laid out the four foundations of mindfulness, every part of our experience is included in that. So then the question is, can we be mindful of consciousness? Can consciousness come under the umbrella of mindfulness?

And did the Buddha tell us to do this? Or are we just importing some sort of fanciful ideas from Vedanta or Tibetan traditions? Are we just sneaking in stuff that really isn't part of the Buddha's lineage? We're not.

Because in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, in the fourth foundation—the dhammas—the Buddha gave us clear instructions to be mindful of all five aggregates. So there's the clear instruction to be mindful of consciousness within the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

And there are even clearer meditation instructions in one of the discourses in the Middle Length Sayings. It's Majjhima Nikaya 121, the lesser discourse on emptiness. In it, the Buddha gives very clear instructions on how to approach mindfulness of consciousness. It's clear that this is what the sutta is aiming at. We're going to do a simplified version of that tomorrow morning in the meditation.

So we have these two places in the Pali Canon where the instruction is definitely to pay attention with mindfulness to the experience of consciousness. The Buddha told us to do it. It may not be easy, but this is what we're going to embark on for this week.

Why? Why should we bother? I'm quite happy with the breath. If I get tired of the breath, I can go to choiceless attention, I can connect with everything in the universe. What's the problem? Why would I want to look at consciousness, or as we're calling it, awareness?

The question I would ask in response is: Is there any limitation in a meditation focused on objects? Is there anything that might be less than ideal when our meditation focus—the focus of mindfulness—is sense objects?

Basically, even in choiceless attention, we are coming quite close in contact with all the sense objects of our experience. Certainly in mindfulness of breathing, we're very intimate with the breath. And even as we expand that to the other senses through choiceless attention, we're coming very close, really connecting with each of the new arisings that is part of our experience. So we're close to objects.

Is there any downside to that? Are objects always pleasant? Are sensations always pleasant? Are thoughts always pleasant? Are emotions always pleasant? No. And yet our meditation is about getting very close to all those experiences. That's what standard vipassana does.

The standard vipassana instructions, as I feel them, always involve us with pleasant and unpleasant aspects of our experience. And if you know something about the Buddhist teachings, this element of pleasant-unpleasant is called the feeling tone, or vedana—the second foundation of mindfulness, and an important link in the chain of dependent origination.

If the experience is pleasant, the mind has a habitual reaction to it, which is to hold on. If the experience is unpleasant, the mind has a habitual reaction, which is to push away. If the experience is neither pleasant nor unpleasant—neutral, in shorthand—the mind has another tendency which is "who cares?" So it's delusion. It doesn't connect. It doesn't take the pain to connect with neutral experience, because it's not going to bring joy and it's not going to bring pain. I can overlook it. And we do that with people in our lives as well as sense phenomena. Somebody's not important to us? Why bother?

These are the reactive formations of the kilesas: greed, aversion, and delusion. As we get closely connected with sense objects, we are closely connected with feeling tone, which is the basis for the reactive formations.

The interesting thing about consciousness, if we take it as a meditation focus—I don't want to call it an object because it's not a thing, but it can be a focus—is that it doesn't have feeling tone. Consciousness does not have the quality of vedana. You can't even say that it has neutral vedana. It just doesn't have vedana. That's not part of its makeup.

Why is that? Because consciousness doesn't have a flavor of its own. It reveals the flavor of every element that it knows or presents, and it itself doesn't bring anything to it. It's like clear water.

You can put lime juice in clear water—it tastes like lime. You can put tomato juice in clear water—it tastes like tomato. You could put gasoline in clear water—it tastes like gasoline. Don't! Because clear water doesn't really have flavor. It'll take on any flavor, but it doesn't have its own flavor. Consciousness is the same. It doesn't have its own flavor, but it will pick up the flavor of whatever is in front of it.

The way consciousness works is like a mirror. It simply reflects what's there. If something beautiful comes in front of a mirror, it will reflect that. If something unattractive comes in front of a mirror, it will reflect that. The mirror doesn't care—it has no preference. The mirror itself doesn't have a feeling tone; it will just reflect whatever is brought to it. Consciousness is the same.

If we can establish a connection to consciousness, we have stepped out of the whole realm of feeling tone into something that's free of that. In being free of that, we are free of the reactive formations. That's the power of awareness practice. That's the potential freedom in finding the ability to connect to awareness in your direct experience. And again, this is not an intellectual exercise. This is something you can feel for yourself, and the freeing nature of it you can feel for yourself. This is what the exploration is intended to reveal.

We step out of the area of feeling tone and the grasping aversion that goes along with it, but we're not cut off because awareness includes all the arisings. We're not cutting them off. We're just putting our focus somewhere else—somewhere that's not caught up with greed, aversion, and delusion. And that's the freedom of it.

If we need to relate to something beautiful or something unattractive, we can do that. We can switch our focus from awareness to the object. We can relate to hindrances. We can relate to the beautiful sunset. We can relate to people. No problem. We just move out of that focus and back into the focus on our direct experience. We can go back and forth easily. So we're not cut off. This is not a way of withdrawing from the world. But it is a way of withdrawing from entanglement with the world. That's the promise of this practice.

I want to read a quote from one of my favorite Dhamma books of the last few years. It's called Pure and Simple from a Thai laywoman teacher named Upasaka Kee. She taught from the 1950s well into the second half of the last century, and her teachings have been collected into this book. They're really wonderful, straight and deep Dhamma teachings, so highly recommended.

This is a quote from Upasaka Kee. She's talking also about this tuning into awareness: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside."

I'm going to read that again because there's a lot in here. The mind that's aware of awareness—so you've taken awareness, taken consciousness as a focus, being mindful of consciousness, mindful of awareness—doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness.

In other words, you stay connected there. All the phenomena of the world are coming and going, but you don't get involved in them. You know them, you're not cut off, you can connect if you need to, but from a meditation point of view, you don't have to. You know they're there, and you can rest in this awareness.

Doesn't send its knowing outside, meaning it doesn't go to objects. In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing. When we stay with the awareness, we aren't getting entangled in the sense phenomena that through their pleasant and unpleasant aspects bring about greed, aversion, and delusion. So we found a place of relative freedom. An inward staying, unentangled knowing. All outward going knowing cast aside.

Here outward going also includes things like body and thoughts and emotions. Even though those seem very inner, the way that Upasaka Ki is using them, they're taking the attention out of awareness back into the realm of sense objects. You get a sense of this? An inward staying, unentangled knowing. This is the promise of the awareness practice. This is where it can take us.

Now I want to explore this consciousness a bit more. We want to get in touch with awareness, but it's a little tricky because it is very subtle. So right now I'd like to ask you, can you feel one in-breath? Just drop into your body wherever you've established a good relationship with the breath. Can you feel one in-breath? And one out-breath?

And now I'd like to ask the question, in this moment, are you aware? And this aware can be bigger than one in-breath. Can you connect with that sense of being aware right now? If you ask yourself that question in the middle of a meditation, sometimes it can make a little shift. Oh, I'm aware. It's kind of opening to the wideness of it. You can play with that.

Sometimes it's not so easy to connect with or find this awareness. And why is that? Because awareness is what's holding the objects. So just like the hand can hold this striker, this hand can hold this glass, this hand can hold the paper, but the hand can't hold itself. In the same way, consciousness can know all the different objects, but it can't

grasp itself. First, because consciousness is not an object like the other objects that we can simply pick up. And second, because it is very subtle. So it's a little hard to locate, but are you confident that you have consciousness? I hope so. So it is here, it's active, it's functioning, and we can't quite grasp it.

Ajahn Chah talked about awareness quite a bit. When I think back over the history of IMS and Spirit Rock and the lineages that are still active and embodied in our retreats here, there are two Asian masters who for me stand out above all the others. That's Mahasi Sayadaw from Burma, whom we talked about a little bit with Choiceless Attention—he developed that technique. And the other is Ajahn Chah from Thailand, great master of the last century. Both of them created, through their students and their followers, probably hundreds of monasteries and retreat centers. I would say this center would not be here if it weren't for Mahasi Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah, both.

Interestingly, both of them came and led retreats here in 1979. It was so extraordinary that we had both of them in the same year. Mahasi Sayadaw was first in the spring, and then Ajahn Chah came in the summer. They knew of each other, I doubt they ever met, and their approaches were quite different. So Mahasi Sayadaw was the one who developed choiceless attention and also the very slow walking style. I'm sure you all have either practiced it or seen it—the style of lifting, moving, placing in walking meditation. It's a real support for developing strong samadhi, which is why he taught it that way. But Ajahn Chah's approach was really different.

He encouraged people to live a simple life in the forest and let mindfulness grow gradually through lifestyle, connection with the Sangha, and simplicity. It was a very different approach.

When Ajahn Chah came here for his first and only visit, there were many students who had practiced in the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition. In the afternoons, they would be out on the front lawn practicing the slow walking meditation—lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. This was not a practice you would see in Ajahn Chah's monasteries, where the emphasis was on being natural, though being natural for a long time in the monastery setting.

Ajahn Chah would go out in the afternoon and walk around. He'd approach people doing this formal walking practice and say something to them in Thai. Then he'd walk on, and at another spot, he'd approach another meditator and say something in Thai. In the evening, people asked Jack Kornfield, who was translating for him, what Ajahn Chah was saying when he went up to the walking meditators. Jack said Ajahn Chah was telling them, "I hope you get well soon."

That's probably what this center looks like to people driving by from the town of Barre—what kind of asylum are these people running?

Ajahn Chah's practice was very deep. You may know he spent seven years wandering alone in the forests of northeast Thailand. That's where his teaching came from—that depth of practice and understanding. He came and shared that wisdom, spawning so many great disciples. The lineage continues today, including Jaya, who is a descendant of Ajahn Chah's teachings.

Regarding awareness and how difficult it is to find, Ajahn Chah said, "You're riding on a horse and asking, 'Where's the horse?'" Because it's right here. There's nothing more fundamental than awareness. It's right here.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, a chief Western disciple of Ajahn Chah: "It's just like the question, can you see your own eyes? Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes, but I can't see my eyes. I'm sitting right here with two eyes, and I can't see them. You can see my eyes, but I cannot. Looking in a mirror, I can see a reflection, but that's not my eyes—it's a reflection of my eyes. But there's no need for me to see my eyes because I can see. It's ridiculous, isn't it? If I started saying, 'Why can't I see my own eyes?' you'd think Ajahn Sumedho is really weird."

It's similar with awareness or consciousness. It can't grasp itself, but we know it through its functioning. It's always revealing things to us, so we know it's here. How do we find it? That becomes the puzzle, the exploration.

There's another quote I really appreciate along these lines. There was a writer who lived in Hong Kong, an Englishman named Terence Gray. He'd obviously been deeply influenced by Zen or Chan—probably Chan. He wrote several books consisting mostly of pithy aphorisms, very direct Zen-like pointers. It was clear he had some kind of insight, realization, understanding, which he expressed through these aphorisms.

Interestingly, he wrote under the pen name Wei Wu Wei, which in Chinese means "acting without acting" or "doing through non-doing"—a profound philosophical point in both Taoism and Zen.

Here's his instruction regarding our question: "What we are looking for is what is looking."

That's it. What we are looking for is what is looking.

At first, when I read that, it just sounded like a paradox. I thought, "Well, that's never going to work." But then I simplified it into a single meditation instruction or pointing. I would just drop the phrase into my meditation: "What is looking?"

And that became very powerful for me because it just put me immediately in touch with this quality of awareness. So we may drop this in to a sitting. You're also welcome to play with it. What is looking? Boom.

So this awareness or consciousness really is the knowing of the sense experience. That's what consciousness does. It knows sense objects in the simplest possible way. It's like, the consciousness is just awareness, and then thought comes in and says, "That's a bell," or "That's a C sharp," or "That's the bell to end the meditation"—but that's conceptual. The awareness is before any thoughts come in, before you've recognized it as a bell or anything. That's what consciousness is revealing: these bare, simple elements of our sense experience.

So Joseph Goldstein has played around with this stuff a lot. And you know how when you're doing walking meditation, it's probably happened to you—it's certainly happened to me—there's often a sense that there's an observer up in the head looking down at the sensations in the feet and legs. And that's kind of how we track the lifting, moving, placing. So there's a very dualistic setup: observer here, sensations down there.

That observer up there is totally unnecessary. And the thing is that it can create a kind of tension. The maintenance of the observer is extra. There's not really any observer there. There's observing, but there's no one there. And so Joseph found that he could short-circuit that kind of duality with the phrase, "Sensations are being known."

So you're just walking, feeling the sensations in the feet and legs, and you just drop in the phrase, "Sensations being known." And then they're just arising in space, not distant from the eyes. The eyes don't need to see it. Just sensations arising in space.

So "sensations being known" can be really helpful. The passive voice is kind of what does it. It takes the doer out of that situation. Try this in walking. Play with it: "Sensations being known." See if you like it.

This passive voice is kind of interesting in other settings too. We could take an action like this: "The bell is being struck." Then we could ask, "Struck by what?" Struck by the striker. We could say "The paper is being cut." Cut by what? Cut by the scissors. And then we could say "The face is being stroked." Stroked by what? Stroked by the hand.

Then we could try "Sensations are being known." Known by what? Could you feel a shift from asking that? What is doing the knowing? Investigate.

So the first answer that comes usually when I ask that question in a smaller group is consciousness: known by consciousness. But the way I understand it, consciousness is the knowing. Consciousness is the activity that reveals. If consciousness is doing the knowing in the simplest way, then you say "known by what," or you could say "conscious by what"—is there something more fundamental than consciousness that's underlying it, giving rise to consciousness?

That's a little bit of a stretch, right? But some Buddhist traditions have said yes, there's something more fundamental than consciousness that gives rise to this impermanent sense consciousness. Something more ongoing.

You know how awareness always seems to be there? Maybe there's something more ongoing, not subject to arising and passing, that is doing the knowing, that is giving rise to consciousness. We'll explore this a little bit in another talk. But I find this a fascinating question of metaphysics—what's really here? What's here in the depths? So we'll talk about that, just as another way to play.

I like this question for a couple of reasons. One, if you felt a little bit of a shift when you asked that question, what it indicates to me is the power of curiosity. It's just wonderful when we don't know something but we want to find out in our direct experience. It kind of brings all the mental energy and interest right together in the moment, and that's a powerful force in the mind. When you really want to know something with all your heart, I've seen that the mind has a way of finding out. If you keep watering that question, watering that inquiry...

And then the other thing is that asking a question like that puts the mind into a very right place for insight. The interest is there, the humility is there to say, "I don't know, but I'd like to know."

There was this wonderful Zen teacher from Korea named Seung Sahn Sunim who established a center in Providence, Rhode Island and developed a lot of disciples and teaching. I think Jon Kabat-Zinn from MBSR and Larry Rosenberg from CIMC both got their start with Seung Sahn Sunim—a powerful teacher. And one of his key meditation instructions was: "Only keep don't-know mind."

Isn't that a wonderful instruction? He wasn't telling you what you were supposed to believe or know. He said, "Just keep don't-know mind." And then when you look at things, it'll be fresh and new. And that's where insight comes from.

So we can look into a question like: Is there anything underneath consciousness? And if we look in a fresh and open way, we may find something, or we may find an absence of something. To me that's really interesting.

I want to go a little bit further. We talked about how this kind of awareness that can include all our sense experiences is broad, includes everything that arises. Is there anything stuck? When you tune into that wide awareness, is there anything stuck or fixed in it? Is everything coming and going? All the sense phenomena coming and going?

Then could there be a self in there? No. Not if there's nothing fixed.

So exploring this factor of awareness is a direct link to the insight into not-self, the insight into anatta, and that means it's empty. The way that Buddha used the term emptiness—its most fundamental meaning is absence of self. So opening up to awareness, the insight into not-self comes for free. It's kind of part of the whole experience.

And then there's another way that it's empty: Can you find a shape for awareness? Can you find a color? Not really. So it doesn't have a structure. It's not a thing. It's insubstantial, and that's another aspect of emptiness. There's nothing fixed in it, no particular shape. It's a lot like space.

Think about the space in this room. There's a lot of space in this room, right? There's a lot of stuff in this room, but there's also a lot of space. There's always room for one more person to come in, more room for one more zabuton, one more zafu, and so forth. But there's a lot of stuff in here.

It was originally empty. When we moved into IMS, this room was empty. There was actually a little different setup, but it was empty. And then over time, all this stuff was brought in: chairs, zafus, zabutons, statues, railings, platform, window shades, Kuan Yin statue—all of that came in later. But everything that was brought in could be taken out, right? Because the basic space was empty to start with and it could be empty again.

Within awareness—each of our personal awareness—there's a lot of stuff that's like the furniture in this room. The furniture in our awareness is stuff like habits of mind, karmic patterns, attachments, and forms of suffering. None of that stuff is intrinsic to awareness, but we've brought it all in through the habits of a lifetime and through the ways that life has shaped us. So it's kind of crowded. Our awareness has gotten kind of crowded.

But because its basic nature is empty, all that stuff can be taken out. And then the awareness returns to its original empty nature. And that's the project of our Dharma work: to take out all the karmic patterns, all the obsessive, compulsive nature of thoughts and emotions, all the unskillful habits of mind. It's all been brought in, can all be taken out.

So this is where we're headed. We see the possibility. With seeing the empty nature of awareness, now we just need to do the work.

I think I'll stop here for tonight. I'll just close with a very short quote from Huang Po, who was a great Zen teacher many centuries ago: "Buddhas and bodhisattvas together with all wriggling things possessed of life, share in this great nirvanic nature of awareness."

So let's just sit for a minute together.

And from the Thai Master, Ajahn Buddhadasa: "We should call the mind emptiness, but because of its awareness, we call it mind."

Thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking, and then we'll have, again, the close of the evening with chanting. And are people free to leave after the chanting? Free to leave after the chanting. Free, free, free at last.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 189

Instructions: Energetic Impact of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · 50 min

> *In this instructional dharma talk, Guy Armstrong provides detailed guidance on selecting and working with meditation anchors, particularly focusing on breath awareness as taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). He explains when the breath may not be suitable as an anchor—such as when it leads to excessive striving, triggers memories of breathing difficulties, or connects to past trauma—and offers alternatives like whole-body awareness and sound meditation.*
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> *Armstrong introduces a comprehensive approach to breath meditation that emphasizes feeling the energetic impact of breathing throughout the entire body rather than watching it from outside. He suggests using the Thai meditation syllables 'bud-dho' to maintain present-moment awareness and occupy the verbal mind. Drawing from traditional samatha practice, he explains how to cultivate a receptive attitude toward the breath while maintaining the relaxed alertness necessary for deepening concentration.*
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> *The talk includes practical guidance for walking meditation, emphasizing continuity of breath awareness throughout formal and informal practice periods. Armstrong concludes with instructions for individual practice meetings, encouraging students to share their leading-edge experiences and best sittings as indicators of developing mindfulness and presence.*

Good morning everyone.

Today we'll continue working with the anchor, and I wanted to say just a few words about choosing an anchor. For most of us the anchor is likely to be the breath, and it generally works well for most experienced meditators. But I wanted to mention a few situations where it might not be the right choice of anchor, and then it's helpful to find another anchor.

As Sally talked about yesterday, anchors are really helpful because they give us a place to come back to when the attention has drifted away from the present moment. When we return to the present, we know where the attention can land next. That steadiness and continued connection to that chosen focus will really help to collect the mind over time. So we really recommend at this point in the retreat choosing an anchor. For most, the breath will work well.

But there are a few situations where the breath may not work so well. One is if it leads to a lot of striving. Striving in this context is where we really crave for a particular meditation outcome and tie it to an idea of how we should be relating to the anchor, the breath, moment by moment. This can put too much intensity, too much force, too much willpower on the connection with the breath. For the mind to settle naturally, there has to be a relaxed relationship with the breath. If there's too much forcing or trying too hard, that will actually block the concentration from deepening. So for those for whom striving becomes a really big aspect of relating to the breath, it can be helpful to choose another focus.

Another area where the contact with the breath may be difficult is if there's been a history of difficulty in breathing. For people who had asthma as a child, connecting with the breathing process itself may feel like a struggle. Breath may still not come easily, and it can remind us of that prior difficulty and bring up a sense of conflict or lack of ease. Then breath may not be the best focus.

Another situation could be if there's been an injury or trauma to the chest or belly—part of the breathing route—earlier, and the connection with the breath brings up memories of the trauma. This came to light when I was interviewing someone on a retreat a couple of years ago. They mentioned that every time they finished an exhale, fear arose for them. So it was uncomfortable paying attention to the breath because at the end of the exhale, fear came up. I thought this was unusual because normally on the exhale, people connect with relaxing.

So I asked them, "Has there ever been an injury or trauma connected with breath?" They said yes, there had been. They were a trombone player, and at one point in their twenties, they were playing the trombone very enthusiastically, blew out too hard, and one of their lungs collapsed. When the lung collapsed, they couldn't get enough breath. You can imagine if you're in a situation where you can't get breath, there's a kind of panic that comes in. After breathing out, they couldn't get breath back in. So that pattern reestablished itself in attention to the breath. Every time they exhaled, there was a subconscious fear that arose, and they weren't aware of the source of it. They had never connected the difficulty in breathing with that experience when they were younger.

So I said, "Okay, when the fear comes, just be with the fear. It's natural, it will pass." They did that—mindfulness of fear—which eased the problem, and then they could be with the breath quite easily.

So in those instances—really strong striving, prior difficulty with breath, or trauma or injury to an area where the breath is being felt—you may need to look to another anchor.

Sally suggested two possibilities yesterday. One is the body posture. This is a very good anchor in meditation. The sense of ourself in sitting, letting the full attention fill the whole body and getting a sense of the body as a connected unit. There's a section in the Satipatthana where the Buddha says, "Or else one simply is mindful to the extent there is a body." So in that way, just sitting and knowing, "Oh, there is this body"—full awareness of the whole body.

Another good anchor is sounds. In a place like this meditation hall where it's very quiet, sometimes that can bring its own challenge, but then one can become aware of the extent of the silence. Sounds are a very useful anchor for some people because the spaciousness of the whole hearing environment gives a sense of ease and relaxation.

I'll give instructions this morning related to the breath and just mention the other possible anchors as we go.

So beginning in the meditation, please sit comfortably. Have a sense that the posture combines these qualities of uprightness. Feel how the spine can be lengthened.

Sometimes an image that's helpful is imagining a thread from the ceiling to the top of the head. The top of the head is being pulled upward, lengthening the spine. At the same time, there is the pull of gravity, the downward pull of gravity and a heaviness that lets us drop into the sitting base—the hips and legs. So we're moving up toward the sky and settling down to the earth.

Begin with the attention spread throughout the body, feeling that the body posture is pervaded with our attention. This particular form of paying attention could be one of our anchors—mindfulness of the whole body in sitting, mindfulness of the body posture.

As we sit with this sense of ease, allow the attention to open in a wide way, noticing all the sounds that come and go: the sound of my voice, sounds of one another, sounds of the building, any sounds from outside. In this meditation on hearing, let the attention be purely receptive. The attention is resting and then open to the appearance of any sound in any direction.

Notice we don't have to send the mind out toward a sound. As we simply rest in the center of all the sounds, each sound will be heard spontaneously without any effort, with this receptive attention.

Bring the attention back into the sitting posture, mindful of the whole body in sitting. Let go of any obvious areas of holding—relaxing the forehead, letting the eyes be soft, the jaw not clenched, the shoulders dropped, and the belly soft.

As we let the attention fill the whole body, notice the impact of breathing. Again, rest with the receptive mode of attention. Just feel what happens with an in-breath, wherever it's felt in the body. When breathing in, how does the body experience change? It's not so much that we're watching the breath from above, but rather we're feeling the breathing happen from within.

Let the in-breath feel full. Especially early in the retreat, it can be helpful to have this broad view and notice the energetic quality of breathing. How is an in-breath felt energetically throughout the body? Then bring similar attention to breathing out. What happens in the body when an out-breath takes place? How is that felt throughout the body? Let the out-breath be a full out-breath. What's the energetic quality of that out-breath felt from within the body?

Keep this receptive attitude and just be interested in the impact of each in-breath and each out-breath. Let the breath take a natural rhythm, letting the breaths be full. How does that feel?

Sometimes it can be helpful to associate a brief syllable with the in-breath and a brief syllable with the out-breath. This helps remind us to stay present and helps occupy the verbal part of the mind. In Thailand, the two syllables used for this purpose are "buddho." Budd on the in-breath, ho on the out-breath. Buddho is just another version of Buddha.

As we remind ourselves with these two syllables, we are also reminding ourselves of this refuge—of the knowing of mindfulness, the understanding of mindfulness, the wakeful quality of mindfulness. You might play with this in this sitting, feeling the breath throughout the whole body with the note of budd on the in-breath and ho on the out-breath. See if this is helpful for you. If not, feel free to drop it.

As you're connecting with the breath, you may find that your attention very naturally settles in a smaller area than the whole body. Many of us have spent years practicing with the breath in the belly, in the chest, at the tip of the nose or upper lip. If that's the case and your attention naturally wants to land there and settle there, that's fine.

This whole body breathing can be helpful to bring in a broader perspective. Sometimes it helps connect with a sense of ease, but it's also fine if the attention naturally lands in a smaller area and the breath is felt there with the same receptive attitude, allowing the rhythm to be natural and the breath to be full.

As you feel the breath within the body from inside, allow it to take its natural rhythm. Just start to tune in: is there any point at which this rhythmic breath has an effect of calming, of soothing, of softening the body and mind? If so, appreciate that and see if there are any factors that help that calming to take place. How is it that the breath in its natural rhythm might exert its calming influence on body and mind?

In your sitting practice today, please do experiment with the breath as an anchor. See if it's going to be suitable for you. The broad perspective of feeling the breath in the whole body that I introduced this morning is really helpful to guard against striving, because the bigger space just takes off some of the pressure and intensity and leads into that ability to relax. So you can play with this frame of the whole body.

Sometimes the degree of openness leads the mind to drift a little more easily. In that case, it could be helpful to use the syllables "bud-dho." Or if you like, let the breath rest in a smaller area if that's more comfortable for you. Either of those is fine. And again, feel free to explore the other anchors of the full body posture or sound if you find that more conducive.

In the walking practice today—I think Sally alluded to this yesterday—as you're walking back and forth on your chosen walking path, the main focus will be the experience of the body in walking. Again, you might experiment with feeling the whole body in walking, where the more intense sensations may be in the legs and feet but you can still keep that frame of the whole body. If the attention becomes more scattered, you might find it helpful to narrow the focus a bit.

Then see if in the walking you can start to bring in some connection with the breath. Because we are doing a practice focused on tranquility—*samatha*—in this first part of the retreat, the normal instructions for *samatha* practice with the breath are that you stay with the breath all day long as the primary object. That's really challenging, especially at the start of a retreat. But see if you can start to bring in, during the walking, a connection—an ongoing connection with the breath as an element in your experience.

It may be that at this point most of your attention is with the movement of the body, legs, and feet. But see if you can start to bring in a regular noticing of breathing while you're doing the walking meditation. As time goes by, that continuity with the breath that goes from sitting into the next walking will help retain that connection in the next sitting. So the connection with the breath will get stronger over the days the more that we're in contact with it. See if you can start to just bring that in during the walking as a regular element.

Any questions this morning?

A student asks about tension in the abdomen area. If it's just tension that might come and go, then it's nothing really to worry about. We just notice it as one of the elements of the experience. If it feels like it's connected with some old injury or trauma, then it might be helpful to place the attention somewhere else—specifically in the chest or perhaps the nose.

But if it's the kind of tension that comes and goes throughout the day or from day to day, then I wouldn't worry too much about it. Just meet it with a sense of acceptance. You might notice from time to time the feeling tone of it. Tension is usually a little bit unpleasant, so notice the unpleasant feeling tone. Notice if there's a mental reaction of aversion, of disliking. If so, just be with that with some degree of allowing—"Okay, don't like it, but here it is"—and allow it to be present with the overall experience. If the mind starts to become too fixated on it, then it might be helpful to place the attention in another part of the body deliberately. Otherwise, it's just an aspect of the experience.

We're going to begin the individual practice meetings this morning, so I wanted to say a little bit about that. It's really a chance for us to hear how the retreat is going for you, how the meditation practice is going for you. At this point in the retreat, there may not be very much dramatic going on because most of you have just arrived. Some of you have been here for a while, so there may be a little more that's up.

You might just give a little bit of thought before you come in to the meeting about what you'd like to share. It doesn't have to involve a lot of rehearsal. When we rehearse, it's along the lines of "I'm going to say this, and then they're going to say that in reply, and when they say that, I'm going to..." That doesn't really usually unfold that way. But just think a little about what you might like to share about your experience so far.

It could be fairly simple—just settling in. Some of you have been practicing for a while and there might be some detail in what's happening for you. So you could give us an account of your general experience of being in the retreat, especially if you're just settling. If more is happening in your practice, it's helpful for us to know what's happening at the leading edge.

What you're kind of up to, and gives us a sense of how you might develop from there. This is quite helpful to know in some detail as part of your report.

Generally, it's a description of the best sitting. Best meaning not necessarily most pleasant, but where you have been most present—where the mindfulness has been strongest. Whether the experience is pleasant or unpleasant isn't so important, but how have you been present for the experience?

And then tell us a little bit about your walking meditation: how that's going, how present you feel, what's helpful in walking, what's not.

So you might begin with a little bit of report on how things are going, and then any specific questions that you have about how to practice, how to meet a certain situation, how to practice with the conditions you find yourself in. Share anything that's been difficult, and also anything that's been going well. Meditation teachers like to hear what's going well for you, so don't scrimp on that part.

That's a general outline: overview of your experience, details of a good sitting in the last couple of days, any particular questions, any challenges that are up.

We have fifteen minutes per person, so if you'd help us keep an eye on that time. I haven't quite looked in the library yet—hopefully there will be a clock that can face you and a clock that can face me so that we can keep on track. We have a very full morning. Oftentimes we'll see ten people between now and lunch, so it's helpful for us to keep on track so we can all go to lunch—the most important part of the day, right?

I think that's all for now. One announcement: the affinity sits will begin today. The six-thirty sit in the Council House Library will be the BIPOC affinity sit. All the members who identify as BIPOC are welcome to attend, though not obligated. It's optional. Whichever group you're in, you're welcome to attend. It's nice to show support for the other members of your community, but don't feel obligated. If your own practice schedule inclines you to sit somewhere else, that's totally fine.

So we have another beautiful day of practice, although a little cooler than yesterday. I hope you'll enjoy it.

May will be sitting in on the individual meetings this morning, if that's comfortable for you. Again, it's a real contribution to her learning and her training, if that's okay with you. But if at any point you'd prefer to have just a one-to-one, let us know, and May is happy to step out.

A beautiful practice day. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 190

Facing Our Fears: Living With A Courageous Heart

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines our tendency to live in what he calls the 'body of fear' - a habitual state of contraction and resistance that separates us from direct experience. Drawing on Buddhist psychology and the Buddha's own journey of sitting under the Bodhi tree, Armstrong explores how courage emerges not from the absence of fear, but from our willingness to stop running and face what frightens us with presence and compassion.*
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> *The talk addresses how fear signals the boundaries of what we find acceptable, and how spiritual freedom comes from gradually relaxing these boundaries. Armstrong guides listeners through understanding that all beings are naturally wired for fight-or-flight responses, but suffering arises when we become identified with this protective stance. He emphasizes that true refuge lies not in avoiding fear, but in developing the capacity to belong fully to each moment.*
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> *The session concludes with a guided meditation practice for working with personal fears, using breath awareness to cultivate the 'courageous heart' - a quality of presence spacious enough to include fear without being overwhelmed by it. Armstrong draws on teachings about loving-kindness (mettā) and the fundamental interconnectedness that the Buddha taught as antidotes to the isolation that fear creates.*

So it's nice to see everyone tonight. The dharma talk is entitled "Living with a Courageous Heart," and I was just reflecting on why I chose to speak on this topic this week. I realized that both in my own life and in the lives of many people I know right now, there's scary stuff arising. I mentioned that my dad went through surgery recently, which was really quite frightening. I have a number of friends who are facing different challenges—whether it's somebody sick in their life, a divorce, or just different life circumstances—having to find a way to face these difficulties and let that too be the path. So it's in that spirit that I'll share some reflections.

Let me begin by having us reflect on something we're very habitual about. With the stresses of the day, if we check out what's going on in our bodies and minds at any juncture where stress seems to face us—whether it's a work demand, a deadline, being stuck in traffic—our bodies, before we even know it, tighten up. Our minds start speeding up and our hearts contract, or else they really numb out.

This has been called the body of fear, and my sense is that's a very apt description. This body of fear is sometimes very subtle, where our being, our awareness, rather than being open and inclusive, has tightened and tightened, and we're just busily planning how we're going to move through—how to get through the day, which is a sad comment.

If we honestly investigate the root of any difficult experience, we'll find fear. We'll find this sense that we're approaching life like it's an adversary, on some level like we're having to meet up with something difficult that's dangerous and at best unpredictable. So we resist.

I was watching how I was moving through the heat these last couple of days. I noticed at first, every time I felt the blanket of hot air, there was this place in me that was just grumbling, sweating, and really being dramatic about it. Then I realized that was happening, and I decided, "Okay, heat meditation"—just sitting, just feeling it. Hot, sweating, nauseous, whatever, but just being with moment-to-moment experience. It was revealing to see what a habitual reflex it was to have this kind of complaint in my system. I mean, it's just weather.

One teacher described this body of fear as if we're entering this earth wearing a space suit. I think this metaphor works well because this body of fear, this space suit, is meant to help us navigate through difficulties, to get more of what we want and to avoid what we don't want. It's fight or flight—that's what this space suit does. It's basically designed to avoid direct contact. It's a kind of covering, an armor, to avoid direct contact with the elements. The presumption is that life's too much.

Whether the stresses are huge ones—like someone we love could die—or little ones like being late for something, there's a sense that we need a buffer so we don't have to feel the enormity of what we're feeling inside. What ends up happening is that there are not so many moments that we put down this space suit, that we relax this body of fear and directly relate to the sensations, the sounds, to our breath, to each other.

The problem is not that a space suit or body of fear emerges. It's that we become identified with it. Our whole life becomes organized around those defensive patterns. So it's our habit to buffer ourselves.

I was talking about this with a friend a few days ago who called describing some things in the newspaper. Because it was all so overwhelming, it was so hard to really open and feel what it meant—the realness of the people suffering—she was describing how it's just impossible not to look at it like it was a story. So we were talking about that, and then she ended up emailing me these verified newspaper headlines of the year:

"Something went wrong in jet crash, experts say."
"Police begin campaign to run down jaywalkers."
"Prostitutes appeal to Pope."
"Plane too close to ground, crash probe told."
"Astronaut takes blame for gas in space."
"Man struck by lightning faces battery charge."
"Typhoon rips through cemetery. Hundreds dead."

Probably each one of us here knows what it's like to cognitively register huge, enormous suffering. We laugh about a jet crash headline, and yet we know that it's just really hard to get it, to really register what it means when people are suffering. So we feel we have to wear this space suit.

And then the question we're going to approach is: How much do we really have to?

And how do we learn to let go some and let this world in?

But first, let's acknowledge that all life forms, by the nature of being life forms, have this fight or flight response, have a body of fear. All life forms are wired to register where threats are and to contract and to defend.

It's really interesting that when sensory experience is registered in our body minds, it first is registered in the emotional centers of our brain, the amygdala, and then the cerebral cortex. In other words, we make meaning—cognitive meaning—after our body has already registered its fight or flight response. So it's our basic wiring to fear and to contract.

We sometimes think that there's something wrong with us when we feel fear. In fact, we almost always do. When fear arises in our body, we think there's something wrong with me. We think it's somehow something missing or defective. I like this quote from Scott Peck: "The absence of fear is not courage, but some kind of brain damage."

So fear is a basic survival system. It's a painful feeling in the body, and it becomes suffering if we get identified and organized around it. If rather than just recognizing, "Oh, fear," and feeling it and being with it, we do whatever we can to run away from it, to contract against it, to try to get rid of it, to numb, to control things, what happens? It turns from fear to suffering.

This is Kafka: "You can hold back from the suffering, from the pain and fear. You have free permission to do so, and it is in accordance with your nature. But perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided."

Now this is really the core message that the Buddha was teaching 2,500 years ago—that we have this conditioning to hold back from life. And it's not that we're bad, it's not that we're wrong, but it's our capacity to realize that and to cultivate a sense of presence. It's our capacity to realize we're holding back and let go of resistance and let life in.

And so that's what I'd like to explore more fully tonight: how, when we realize that this body of fear is doing its thing, we realize we're tight, we realize our thoughts are racing, we realize that we've defended against each other and the life around us—how do we recognize that and relax the grip a little and let life in?

Now here is a classic story. Once there was a man who got so upset by the sight of his own shadow and was so unhappy with his own footsteps that he tried to run from both. But each time his foot hit the ground, he realized he was still taking a step. Equally disturbing, he saw that his shadow never once fell behind. Not about to give up, he ran faster, faster, faster, until finally he dropped dead. What he never grasped was that by stepping into the shade, his shadow would vanish. By simply sitting down, there would be no more footsteps.

Like the man in the story, we're afraid of what lurks in the shadow. We're afraid of change. We're afraid of the unknown. We're afraid of our imperfections. We're afraid of our mortality. And so what we do from this fear is we try to get away from it. We keep running.

And we're aware that running hurts us. We're aware that when we get caught in our addictions and our avoidant behavior, when we armor our heart, when we get intellectual, we kind of know. We know that we're in our strategy for avoiding things. But we do it anyway. It's such a deeply grooved habit.

We run daily. Each of us is trapped in reactivity. I can, at the end of any day, just look back and see huge swaths of time where I was in some trance, where I thought I was there, but I was actually trying to be busy and feel good about myself—just lost, not really present.

Real safety, the real refuge, lies in our willingness to not run away from ourselves. That is the refuge. To not run away. To stay. To just show up for this moment. And there's a wonderful question that you can ask yourself that can bring you right back here: "How can I belong to this moment?" If you see you're running, "How can I belong to this moment?"

This is the essence of meditation. We're in training to realize how this body of fear is doing its thing, sense our muscles tightening, sense that we're pushing away life, that we're lost in these ideas and concepts. And then have that willingness to come back, to stop running.

to rest in what's true.

It's also the motif in the mythology of the Buddha that he too ran. I mean, it's a given we're all running, we're all trying to protect and defend and grasp and so on. And he spent a number of years practicing austerities, a kind of striving towards spiritual accomplishment. And then, this is the centerpiece of the Buddha story, he stopped running, he stopped doing. He sat down under the tree of enlightenment, the Bodhi tree.

So that's our practice. It's really a practice of just stopping the doings and being with what is.

There's an irony that frequently people will turn to meditation as a way to reduce tension and stress, and as a way to find peace, without realizing that in the long run, while it does do that, the training itself is one of touching whatever's there. So for many people, there's kind of a surprise of sitting down and expecting to find some calmness and really getting in touch with the agitation that they've been running from. And then the learning or awakening is that by relating wisely to that, there's a deeper peace than could have been imagined. But it's not by getting rid of it.

Any true journey of awakening, of opening, is going to take us to the boundaries of what are familiar. It's kind of like getting in this small boat and setting out to sea on this kind of exploration or adventure to realize who we really are, and having all the fears that we're going to fall off the end of the earth or the fears of what weather systems might stir up the seas or how we might get becalmed and lose all our steam and

everything possible that can arise that's in our psyche. All the fears and hopes and sadnesses and excitements and longings—that's what we are game to connect with, that we're willing to touch if we're sitting down and meditating.

So in a way, I look at it like it takes an enormous courage to even be willing to sit down a little and be with ourselves. Now there certainly are ways of what we call meditating where we're just trying to aim the mind elsewhere and go into a trance, but that's not the kind of meditation I'm talking about. I'm talking about a mindfulness practice whose commitment is presence with what's real. Any genuine commitment to that will lead us to the edges of what we've been accepting.

We all design our lives to be as comfortable as we can. I mean, it's part of our wiring. We try to make our worlds safe and predictable, and we try to avoid things from changing, because most of us don't want change. We hold on tight to how it is. We have a million arguments on why that's good. We try to keep certain people in our life and certain people out and certain feelings there in us and avoid other feelings. We try to keep the air conditioning on when it goes over a hundred. So we all are doing that to some degree, trying to make our lives comfortable.

And yet, because there are shadow parts of the psyche that have been pushed away, it's part of the exploration to go to that edge and begin to include what we've been excluding or keeping out.

Fear signals the boundary to what's acceptable. And as one teacher, I think it was Joseph Goldstein said in one of the first retreats I was at, that to the extent that there's a boundary of what's acceptable, we're not free. Do you understand that? If there's a boundary and outside that boundary is the realm of unacceptable, we're not free. Because we're always avoiding, contracting against, resisting a part of life. One way of understanding spiritual life is to relax that boundary, kind of play the edge and keep opening to the places that we have been habitually avoiding.

Jack Kornfield describes fear when we're hitting that edge like this little light bulb that goes off and says in our minds, "about to grow, about to grow."

It takes a lot of energy to keep pushing away the unacceptable, pushing away our feelings of vulnerability, our loneliness. Loneliness is a big one. We do a lot not to feel it, to push away intimacy, to push away change. Everything is changing and yet we try so hard to nail it all down.

So staying put, facing fear, is really the only chance we have to become intimate with this life and to really touch freedom. Yet it's really hard to do it. It's all our wiring not to.

So let me ask you to reflect on something, if you will. Just take a few deep breaths and close your eyes, if you will.

Our habit is to avoid what's dangerous or risky or scary, but each of us has had times where we haven't done that, where we've been courageous. So I'd like to ask you to reflect on something in your life that you consider courageous that you've done. It might be an internal way of facing things or a behavioral way, some experience of your life where you felt that you were courageous.

Including as you reflect what you were facing, what you had to face and deal with, and the fear or the insecurity that might have brought up. What made it possible for you to be courageous in this instance? What motivated you? What allowed you to face your life? To stop running.

You can keep considering this, but please open your eyes if you will. And just to invite anyone that might have connected with that, what you noticed, what let you be courageous? What was it?

These are remarkable insights. When someone shared that seeing "the larger picture" enabled their courage, and another spoke of an "overwhelming desire to heal," we glimpse the profound motivations that draw us toward presence. Sometimes courage emerges because we recognize that "there's no other choice"—we find ourselves at a threshold where the only path forward is to remain present with what is.

The awareness that avoiding presence creates more suffering becomes a powerful teacher. One person beautifully described recognizing their pattern of dissociation—how they would "separate and become a guru" to avoid vulnerability—yet found the courage to return to embodied presence. This recognition of our habitual escapes, without judgment, is itself a form of courage.

What's particularly moving is how many responses pointed toward connection as the source of courage: a sense of connection with the divine, the support of sangha, the feeling of being held by something larger than our individual struggles. These reflections reveal different dimensions of what allows us to meditate—what enables us to face life directly despite our deep conditioning to flee.

Notice how many pointed to a compelling quality, a genuine longing to be present fully. This isn't forcing ourselves into mindfulness, but rather responding to an authentic pull toward wholeness. There's often a readiness that emerges, a confidence that we can meet whatever arises.

It takes courage to meditate. Every moment we choose to stay present with our experience—whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—we're cultivating this courage. We're reinforcing our sense of the bigger picture, our connection with something sacred, our interconnectedness with all beings.

The word courage comes from roots meaning "greatness of heart"—*cor*, the heart. True courage isn't the absence of fear, but rather the willingness to keep our hearts open even in the presence of fear, uncertainty, or pain. This is the courage that allows us to stop running and face our lives with compassion.

That our longing, our heart's longing to be free, to know truth, to feel love more fully, will end up inspiring us to be courageous, will bring us to meditation, and will have us go beyond our habitual way.

Now, as we know, because our conditioning is strong, we need to intentionally cultivate those qualities of heart and cultivate this capacity to relax the body of fear. So let's explore how, when we're in the grip, when you're facing the big stressors, how do we begin to tap into the courage, tap into the understandings that were just brought up so beautifully here?

I find it instructive to sense, well, if I was relating to a frightened child—just consider this: if you're with a child that's very, very afraid, how would you relate to that child?

"Kindness." "Protectedness." "Patience." "Honoring." "Allowing." "Soothing." "Love."

It's a question to ask yourself. If you really imagine this vulnerability within you as deserving of these qualities of attention, how would you relate? Because when we're in the middle of fear, we usually lock into "something's wrong with me." And we get kind of hard-hearted towards ourselves.

The way that many of us were brought up was that when we got frightened, we were penalized for it. We were put down for it or punished for it. Or else, for some of us, our fears were fed. We were told what a dangerous world this is. "Be careful—something's gonna go wrong any moment. You'll get hurt if you try to do that. People get hurt. You can't trust anyone."

And then for many, our fears were negated. We were told, "Oh, there's nothing to be afraid of. You don't really feel that." If we were sad or grieving or whatever, they were disregarded. And then we grow up with this kind of sense of not really knowing what we feel, or sensing it but denying it.

Somebody sent me this story. This is a woman struggling with a fear of loss of mental capacity. For a lot of years she felt like it was happening, but she didn't want to admit it to anybody. But now she and a lot of her peer group are passing around stories about loss of mental capacity. And this is one of their stories:

Three older ladies were discussing the travails of getting older. One said, "Sometimes I catch myself with a jar of mayonnaise in my hand in front of the refrigerator and can't remember whether I need to put it away or start making a sandwich."

The second lady chimed in, "Yes, sometimes I find myself on the landing of the stairs and can't remember whether I was on my way up or on my way down."

The third one responded, "Well, I'm glad I don't have that problem—knock on wood." As she rapped her knuckles on the table, then she told them, "That must be the door. I'll go get it."

That was her example of denial.

So there are several messages we get around fear, and then what we end up doing is that's how we treat our own fearful inner self. We put ourselves down for feeling afraid, deny that there's a good reason—say, "No, there's no good reason, I shouldn't be feeling this"—or we feed it: "Yep, things are really all going to crash around me in a moment." Rather than what you just described—soothing, comforting, protective, present—we end up either feeding or denying fear.

So what is this most kind of enlightened response to fear? How do we discover that kind and wakeful presence when we're in the grip?

We start with recognizing that it's happening. Really developing this sensor where there's a place in us that recognizes the body of fear. The body of fear is almost always there unless we're quite free, but it tightens, it contracts, it gets more consolidated. Having this place in our awareness that starts recognizing when our heart's getting harder or number, our body's getting tighter, and our mind's getting busier.

It helps to name it. "Fear" is one of the good ones to name. "Fear, fear." The little ones, the big ones.

What we'll be doing as we close tonight is a meditation on fear. So I'd like to invite you to reflect for a moment. You might not be aware of the subtle times your body of fear comes together, but reflect on a place in your life where you'd like to have more courage, where you are aware of getting caught inside fear.

For some it's situations where you might be rejected or abandoned, seen as stupid. For some it's a situation where you're afraid of failing or making mistakes. For some the fears are around our bodies—getting sick or gaining weight. For some it's around money.

For some it's around senility. For some the suffering, fear of suffering of our children. Choose, if you will, a place in your life where you know the body of fear contracts and imprisons you. Your awareness becomes very caught or identified. A place you'd like to have more freedom, more courage.

As a way of establishing a relationship with this place of tightness, we begin by just acknowledging it, in some way just bowing to it, just respect, okay, this. And as we finish tonight and go through these different steps, you can keep coming back to this place and sensing how you can relate to it.

Because we're often taught that it's bad for us to be afraid or something's wrong with us if we're afraid, we don't often acknowledge just how real it feels. Now that doesn't mean the story about the fear is real. It doesn't mean that in fact we are going to fail, that our story is accurate. But the feelings—the fear of failure, the fear of being unworthy and rejected, the fear of loneliness, the fear of what will happen if people see who we are—that fear feels very real.

I had a client some years ago who had a very great fear of any attractive woman. He went through life and when he found a woman very attractive, he got very scared and couldn't act like who he was. He felt like he just contracted. It took him months to even say that out loud because he thought it was such a stupid and ungrounded kind of fear to have in this world. What was really amazing was that the most liberating part of therapy for him was simply coming to terms with the fact that this fear was a real and painful experience in his body-mind. The fear was real.

As he said, "Okay," and he kind of bowed to it, he said, "Okay, this is real, this fear is there," he was able to start working with it. The first step to letting these fears, this body of fear, unwind itself is to acknowledge its presence. There's a quality of respect and acceptance. It's not like accepting fear means that you're accepting that you're always going to be fearful. It's just that this moment there's the ache, squeeze, tightness of fear.

So we begin with that and again just notice where your body of fear gets tightened around a particular situation. Just let yourself acknowledge the realness in a respectful way. One Zen master, when asked how he related with fear, said, "I agree, I agree." It's like saying, "Okay, this is here."

Once we have acknowledged the realness of this moment's feeling of fear, we then, as the Buddha did, pause, stop running, and face the fullness of it. This is the meditation of sitting down in the shade, being receptive to the unknown, the discomfort.

This isn't easy. This is where we actually have to train ourselves because there are so many parts of our life where we've got such a studied way of acting quickly, reacting, judging, that for us to stop and really feel in that pause, really connect with our experience, is difficult.

This is Pema Chödrön: "When we protect ourselves so we won't feel pain, that protection becomes like armor, like armor that imprisons the softness of the heart. We do everything we can think of not to feel anything threatening. We try to prolong feeling good about ourselves. When we breathe in pain, when we breathe in fear, somehow it penetrates that armor. The way we guard ourselves is getting softened up. This heavy, rusty, creaking armor begins to seem not so monolithic after all. With the in-breath, the armor begins to fall apart, and we find we can breathe deeply and relax. A kindness and tenderness begin to emerge. We don't have to tense up as if our whole life were being spent in the dentist's chair. When we breathe out relief and spaciousness, we are also encouraging the armor to dissolve. The out-breath is a metaphor for opening our whole being."

So this natural breathing in life—feeling what's there, breathing out, making space—is our way of pausing and relating directly to what's here.

What this means for most of us is that we have to let go of the busyness of our mind. And that in itself is a training. It's our biggest form of armor. The more we stay lost in planning thoughts and worry thoughts, the less we are asked to actually feel what's happening. We use our thinking as a defense against the intensity, the vibrancy of the elements.

So usually to do this breathing in and feeling fully, breathing out, making room, we first have to realize all the stories that are going on and just relax the grip of them some. "Okay, thinking, thinking, stories, stories," and then just feel into our body.

You can do it again and again, even this moment. Just sense whatever ideas are in the mind. Just note, "thinking, ideas, stories," and then again sit down into the body, breathing in, receiving this life fully, whether it's pain or fear, our interest, our sleepiness, our numbness, just feeling exactly what's real.

This is sitting in the shade. This is how we stop running. And then we breathe out and sense the space it's all happening in, letting it float, letting it be there.

Let me share a story with you. This was a teacher from India who described his experiences with fear, and I thought it was a wonderful description.

He said he was determined to get rid of his negative emotions—this was in the 1960s that he started practicing. He struggled against anger and lust, he struggled against laziness and pride, but mostly he wanted to get rid of his fear. His meditation teacher kept telling him, "Stop struggling, stop struggling, just let it be." But he just took that as another way of explaining how to overcome his obstacles and kept on trying to get rid of fear.

Finally, his teacher sent him off to meditate in a tiny hut in the foothills of the mountains. He shut the door and settled down to practice. When it got dark, he lit three candles. Around midnight he heard a noise in the corner of the room, and in the darkness he saw a very large snake. It looked to him like a king cobra, and it was right in front of him, swaying.

All night he stayed totally alert, keeping his eyes on the snake. He was so afraid he couldn't move. There was just the snake and himself and the fear. And then there was just fear and fear and fear.

Just before dawn, the last candle went out, and then he began to cry. He cried not in despair but from tenderness. He felt the longing of all the animals and people in the world. He knew their alienation and their struggle and their fear. All his meditation thus far had been nothing but further separation and struggle, trying to get rid of parts of life.

Now he accepted—really accepted wholeheartedly—that he was angry and jealous, that he resisted and struggled, and that he was afraid. He accepted fear. He also accepted that he was precious beyond measure, wise and foolish, rich and poor, and totally unfathomable. He felt so much gratitude that in the total darkness he stood up, walked toward the snake, and bowed. Then he fell sound asleep on the floor.

When he awoke, the snake was gone. He never knew if it was his imagination or if it had really been there, and it didn't seem to matter. As he put it at the end of this talk describing his experience with fear, that much intimacy with the real experience of fear caused his dramas to collapse, his sense of separation from the world to collapse. Finally he was able to connect directly with life, to belong fully to his life.

I love that story because, as is so true in the Buddha's teachings, the very arising of what's difficult is also the ground of our freedom—that by facing fully the intensity of fear, by really allowing ourselves to belong to fear, we end up belonging fully to life. By facing death, we awaken to live our moments completely.

And this belonging is the antidote, in a sense. The deepest fear is one of severed belonging. The deepest fear is of disconnection. So whatever allows us to begin to establish a connection with life gives us room in our hearts for fear.

One way is, as I've been describing, to connect directly with the experience itself. There are other ways, though, of also cultivating the heart so we feel a sense of belonging and we have room for fear. In fact, the Buddha's first teaching in response to fear was a loving-kindness meditation. He told the monks that surrounded him at that time—this was his quote: "Our fear is great, but greater yet is the truth of our connectedness."

It's so beautiful. Our fear is great, but greater yet is the truth of our connectedness. This is one of the lines from the scriptures that many people know and that becomes more and more real as we live our moments—that we see these weather systems of fear, this body of fear contracting, but discover more and more that what's most true and real is a sense of belonging to the world that allows us to have room for fear.

So this is the refuge that the Buddha talked about. If we're lost in fear, to find what we belong to. We find it through mindfulness by relating directly to the experience of fear. We find it as we cultivate the heart with practices like loving-kindness.

Any moment that we extend care to another being or to a part of ourselves reestablishes a sense of connectedness—even if we're doing it mechanically. Even if it's mechanical, just the fact that we had an intention to try comes from a part of our heart that cares. Any extension of care reestablishes connectedness.

In a moment of fear, if we just bring to mind what we most deeply cherish, just bring that to mind and just feel even a little bit of the warmth of caring, we're on that pathway back into belonging, back into a sense of wholeness where we can include fear but not be driven by it. That is the meaning of courage, that greatness of heart.

Let's take a moment—what we'll do is work a little bit with the fears you've identified.

Bringing this meditation practice to hold that fear, we'll begin by simply establishing the presence that comes from feeling our bodies and feeling our breath.

Sense what area of fear is asking for attention in your life—what circumstances bring up fear. Pick one area. Some will be able to evoke the realness of the feeling of fear more than others. Not to worry, but just include awareness as well as possible of where you'd like to have more courage.

Let the situation be as real as you can. Visualize the circumstances if possible. If there are others involved, see who's there. Sense what's most difficult and feel what that's like in your heart. When you feel like you've connected with what brings up the body of fear, just let go of the story and simply feel what's there. Very present.

Feel where the fear lives so that as you breathe in, there's a willingness to feel what has been avoided. Agree to feel what's there. Regardless of what you're feeling right now—fear, numbness, tiredness, happiness, whatever it is—let the in-breath be one of touching what's real. We breathe in and touch what's real. We breathe out and offer it space—that bigger picture, that open awareness.

Breathe in and connect with what's there. Breathe out and offer space, kindness, care. If it feels like too much to breathe in and feel, sense that all of nature and all of the loving energies of the universe are there to help receive it. Breathing in, there's room for this. Breathing out, offering care.

The Dalai Lama told one very frightened man that if he couldn't hold his own fear, just sense he was held in the heart of the Buddha, the lap of the Buddha. Let this fear be held by the beloved—breathing in, feeling fully, knowing there's room. Breathing out, offering care, space, establishing an intimacy, a realness with what's true inside you. Rather than running, we sit in the shade of this tree of enlightenment, this wakeful, caring presence.

Now bring to mind someone in your life that you know struggles with something that scares them, that contracts them. Everyone that we know struggles with fear, but bring to mind one person who's dear to you, so that you can breathe in on their behalf. Breathe in and sense the fear, the struggle, the pain. Breathe out and offer them your prayer, your compassion.

Let others come to mind, continuing to breathe and feel that as you breathe in, you breathe in the fear, you breathe in what has been resisted, and you breathe out offering kindness for the benefit of others.

Include in your awareness now the sense of all those that have gathered here—that each one carries their share of fear, each one wants to be happy and free—so that you breathe in and sense that you're breathing in for each of us. As you do, bring to mind faces and a sense of some of the people here that can make it more genuine for you. Breathing in, feel that you're breathing in for all of us, including the parts of the shadow, the difficulties. Breathe out and offer that space and that care that is the freedom of our courageous heart.

The only thing great enough to awaken through fear is the power of the heart. Our fear is great, but greater yet is our connectedness.

So we close chanting Om again as we did when we opened. Feel free to let your voices mingle and harmonize as we chant six rounds.

[Chanting: Om, Om, Om, Om, Om, Om]

May our attention and our prayers be of benefit to all beings. May all beings awaken. May all beings be free.

CHAPTER 191

Refuge in Calmness

Guy Armstrong · 48 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines what it means to find genuine refuge in calmness amid life's inevitable uncertainties and challenges. Opening with a powerful teaching story from Zen master Eiken Roshi about difficulties that persist throughout life, Armstrong invites us to consider what inner shift would allow us to embrace each moment with balance and grace, regardless of its content.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "all things arise because of conditions," Armstrong explores how our attempts to control the uncontrollable create additional suffering. Through stories including the Chinese monk who responded "amazing" to both praise and blame, and Milarepa's practice of building and dismantling towers, he illustrates the art of non-dwelling and non-attachment. The talk emphasizes developing loving acceptance that embraces every moment without distinction, learning to touch all experiences with calmness rather than aversion.*
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> *Armstrong offers practical guidance on withdrawing the fuel of reactive thinking, cultivating patience ("the long enduring mind"), and discovering spaciousness that isn't dependent on particular mind states or experiences. This teaching reveals how authentic refuge isn't found by escaping difficulty, but through our willingness to be present with whatever arises, transforming our relationship to uncertainty itself into a source of peace and understanding.*

This evening I'd like to speak about finding a refuge in calmness.

Some years ago, Eiken Roshi, a very wise American Zen teacher, was leading a retreat. On the second evening, he came into the hall to give the evening talk and began by saying, "The difficulties you are experiencing now." And then he stopped.

There was a very pregnant pause. The students suddenly looked very hopeful and alert. You can appreciate, even on the first evening of a retreat—never mind the second evening—the kind of space you can be in as you begin a retreat, where it seems that every hindrance that's ever been written about is occurring in your experience. The kind of space when you've perhaps completely forgotten why you ever wanted to come on retreat. The kind of space you can be in where it feels like this retreat is going to last for the rest of your life, and your body and mind is shouting at you.

So this pause seemed very important. What was he going to say? Was he going to offer some kind of magical solution or a shortcut through all of the challenges? Was there going to be good news about the ways in which the obstacles were going to disappear? Or maybe he was just going to announce a side trip to the beach?

But he began again and said, "The difficulties you are experiencing now are going to be with you for the rest of your life."

It's a wonderful line—not a statement that's intended to depress you or lead you to a state of despair or feel that everything is hopeless. But it is a statement that invites us to reflect a little bit upon our relationship to this moment and to many moments in our life.

What if this were true? What if it was true that the difficulties you are experiencing now were going to be with you for the rest of your life? What would be asked of us? What kind of inner shift or change would need to take place in our heart and mind that would allow us to turn towards whatever is present in this moment, no matter how difficult or painful or challenging?

What kind of shift would have to happen that would enable us to embrace and to hold this moment as it is, with calmness and balance and grace? What qualities of heart and mind would we need that would allow us to befriend and to learn from and open to whatever is happening right now for us in our experience? What would be needed to allow us to be with what is without rejection or judgment or fear, and without the thoughts that are always relying upon the promise or guarantee that a better moment is on its way?

What kind of acceptance or compassion would we need to bring to this experience, to our lives, so that we would feel that we are no longer just swept away by the many challenges we meet?

Many times we find ourselves in the reality of situations that we don't know when or if they will ever end—illness, sometimes a breakdown of our bodies, sometimes difficulties in our relationships, sometimes conflicts that have seemed to go on in our lives for a very long time, sometimes feelings within ourselves that are hard to accept. Many of us have these corners, these places in our lives where the truth is that we don't know if or when they will ever end. They are not something that is unique to retreats.

There's a wonderful story about a monk who lived in China near a small village, living a very simple life, yet with a very close relationship to the people in the village. In times of prosperity and peace, the villagers would have great affection for this monk. They would visit him and express their gratitude and appreciation for his presence and

the sense they had of how he was protecting them and guiding them in their lives. In the midst of all this praise and affirmation, the monk would say to them, "That's amazing."

Then, of course, things changed and there was poverty and conflict in their land. The crops failed and the villagers went to the monk and said, "You're really a useless monk. You failed us. You betrayed us. Whatever happened to these powers you used to have? You may as well disappear. You're no use to us." And he answered them again, "That's amazing."

Then, of course, things changed again. There was once more peace in their land and harmony in their village and prosperity. They went to the monk to beg his forgiveness for the ways they'd abused him and reviled him, saying they hadn't really meant it, that it was all just due to the stress of the moment, and that they really did appreciate his presence. And he answered again, "That is amazing."

This story is about balance.

We live in a very agitated world, a very restless world, a world that sometimes seems exceedingly chaotic with extraordinary levels of disharmony. We live in a world that is constantly changing and unpredictable. It is hard to find anything that is guaranteed. At times, the agitation we see in the world around us feels like a mirror of the turmoil and turbulence we also experience in our inner world.

Consider the changes we go through in a single day. You've probably tracked that today. Our feelings can change so quickly. Times when our sense of excitement turns to total boredom. Where what we love in one moment we can hate in the next. We can be desperately waiting and wanting to go and sit in one moment, and in the next we can be thinking of the countless ways we may be able to avoid it. We see at times our happiness turns to sadness.

Even in our world of thoughts, you may have noticed today, thoughts that can seem so convincing and real in one moment—you may have had a little storm of obsession at some time today about some disaster or other—so convincing, and we've forgotten them by lunchtime. We see the changes, the unpredictability of the life of our bodies, the way in which our health can turn to illness, from strength to weakness so unpredictably.

Within this world of change and turbulence, it does often feel that there is nowhere to rest, nowhere that is truly a haven, a sanctuary, a refuge. At times, it feels that there may be so little that we can rely upon anywhere.

What we discover in our lives and in our meditation is that we are not in control. We discover this over and over. We seem to get somewhere in our practice, a moment of calmness, a moment when we have relief from the endless commentary. We feel that we're arriving, we're finally making some progress, and the next moment it disappears.

We tend to be rather slow learners around this issue of control. Slow to get the reality that this is an undeniable truth in our lives, that we are not in control. Sometimes we are slow in learning that our attempts to control the uncontrollable and to grasp the ungraspable actually creates for us yet more fear and turmoil and struggle.

What meditation does is teach us about our lives. It teaches us about the nature of uncertainty. Do you know what the next thought you will have will be? No. Do you know what the next feeling that will arise in you will be? Can you choose it? No. Can you say to yourself or give instructions to yourself, "Oh, yeah, it's time for a little bliss. I'll have that now"? Or can you say to yourself, if an angry feeling or a thought of anger comes, "No, not today. I'm not up for this today," and it's just going to disappear?

Do we know what the next moment will bring for us, whether it's going to be some delightful body sensation, an ecstatic mind state, or will it be a burning resentment and doubt? We don't know. This state or this experience you are in right now—do you know when it will end, if ever?

There are real limits to our willpower and control. Sometimes we come on retreats and we think this is the right time for resolving this particular issue in our life or making this decision, and it doesn't even arise. Sometimes we come on retreats thinking we've resolved all those issues and made all those decisions, and countless ones arise.

Not knowing, uncertainty—this is the truth of our lives. And what do we do with that space? How do we respond? It is certainly one of the most challenging spaces to be with.

This illusion of control or being in charge is one of our most highly prized treasures. And often we don't want to see what an illusion it is. Recently in Time Magazine, which tends to be one of my major sources of information, I read that we have a new word for delusion, and it's called being "reality challenged." But sometimes around this issue or question of control we are indeed reality challenged. We don't want to see it as an illusion.

That is actually the nature of delusion, that we don't want to see something as being an illusion. Because to see this whole notion or issue of control as being transparent would actually really challenge and threaten perhaps many of our positions and

strategies that we hold onto so desperately in our lives for safety and identity and security. We really hold at times very close to our hearts the desire to be able to say, "I know something," or "I am something," or "I have something."

I wonder if you've ever found yourself curious about the commentary that goes through your mind in a day. Have you noticed today as you walk around this place how many words we have, how many descriptions we create? Sometimes it feels almost automatic, even compulsive, to offer a little commentary about everything. The world is not inviting it, and yet we find a certain security in being able to say, "I know something." These are our attempts to make the unknown familiar to us.

Recently I watched a wonderful documentary about someone who wanted to explore what it felt like to spend time in solitude in the Arctic. He was taken by dog sled to a place far beyond any human habitation and left there with a tent and supplies—everything he needed to survive. The arrangement was that a helicopter would come every few days to bring him supplies, and he had his own video camera to film himself.

On the first day, he was speaking to the camera about how humbled he felt, how awed he was by the vastness of this space. He talked about looking out and seeing no fences, no boundaries, no marks of it belonging to anyone. He spoke about that sense of wonder, the universality of that space.

A few days later, when the helicopter crew came to deliver supplies, he started complaining about them walking on his snow. After they left and returned the next time, they were surprised to see that he'd erected a fence of tape around his tent and made himself a yard.

This seems ridiculous, but I hope we can smile at our own behavior when we come on retreats. Sometimes we arrive at this universal space—one of the blessings here is that it really doesn't belong to anybody and belongs to everybody. Yet it's not unusual that after a day or so, we start becoming territorial. "That's my walking space." "What is that person doing sitting in my favorite chair in the dining room?" "What happened to my mug—my favorite mug that should be waiting for me on the shelf?"

We begin to mark out our own little spaces. We want that sense of safety and control. Sometimes this includes wanting very definite ideas about who we are, even though the truth is that those very definite ideas become the very definite traps we fall into in our lives.

We have such a vast vocabulary about ourselves: "I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm a good yogi, I'm a terrible yogi, I'm old, I'm young, I'm loving, I'm aggressive." We also have all these appendages about what we have—our possessions, our experiences. They become like treasures that we hold very closely.

What is happening in that movement within us is often that we are looking for a refuge. We are looking to grasping, to holding, to be our refuge—to provide sanctuary for ourselves in a changing and uncertain world. We believe perhaps on some level that grasping and holding will protect us, will provide a safe haven, until we look more clearly and deeply and see that our grasping is also subject to change and offers no protection against uncertainty. Often we are looking to grasping and holding to provide something that is impossible for them to do.

Underneath those movements of grasping lies that longing in us to find a refuge—a very genuine, heartfelt longing to find a place of ease, a place where we can simply be. Yet we sometimes become confused about how that refuge will come to us. I think we become confused because of fear and anxiety.

When we feel disconnected, separate from the rhythms of life and from life's truth, when we feel out of touch with the nature of life and ourselves, we often feel anxious and fearful. So we see the refuge we're looking for—that refuge of calmness—as somehow a destination we'll arrive at when we've found something reliable, when we reach a place where we won't be disturbed or challenged anymore. We come to believe that our refuge relies upon getting rid of the difficult, the sorrowful, and the disturbing.

There are obvious problems with this belief. The most obvious is that our refuge becomes endlessly separate and apart from this moment, a destination we feel unlikely ever to reach.

This search for a sense of refuge is worth reflecting on. A true refuge, a refuge of calm abiding—if it is genuine, if it is authentic—cannot lie as some future destination. Instead, that refuge will be found in the way we are present in the midst of the challenging, in the midst of the uncertain, in the midst of the difficult. Our refuge will not be found when the difficult or uncertain ends, but through our willingness to open and learn to find balance in all the moments of our life.

The fear and anxiety evoked in us through encountering the uncertain and changing is not something to run from. Fear and anxiety can be friends and allies. They can teach us and inspire us to look more deeply, to discover and question what a true refuge is, what an authentic refuge is. They invite us to ask ourselves: Is there a way we can em-

brace all the rhythms of our lives—change and uncertainty, praise and blame, gain and loss, success and failure? Is there a way we can embrace all of this without ever losing our sense of balance?

It seems to me that this exploration is really at the heart of every spiritual journey. This path is not all that concerned with having profound states of concentration or dazzling experiences or arriving at some ideal destination. Rather, this path is actually concerned with turning towards ourselves and turning towards this moment. This is also the greatest challenge of this path.

Think about what is happening here for you. We have a body. Sometimes our bodies are complaining, sometimes they're distressed. This is happening to our bodies throughout our lives. We are faced with a mind that at times feels riotous and unsettled, which can feel full or feel very heavy—this mind is a companion all through our lives. We are faced with a whole range of feelings: joy and happiness and peace, but also feelings of sorrow, of rejection, of negativity. This is the whole range of feelings that we meet in our lives.

We are faced with moments where there feels to be little reliability—when calmness gets swallowed by agitation, when a moment of peace is followed by a moment when we feel that every single thing is wrong. These moments are not unique to retreats. They happen in our lives, they happen in our meditation, they happen to all of us. How do we respond? How do we respond to these moments?

Sometimes our response takes the form of trying to jump into the next moment. When we are faced with the disturbing or the difficult, we think, "How can I get away from this? When is it going to be over? How can I make it end?" Sometimes when we're faced with the difficult, our mind might take the twist of trying to figure out where it came from. Where did these feelings come from? Where did these thoughts come from? Why are they here? What have I done to deserve all this?

We see that many of our ways of responding to the difficult are ways that actually invite a storm of stories, a storm of thinking about what we are experiencing—a storm of thinking that involves strategies about how to fix it, how to move away from it. We tend to see moments of challenge or difficulty as obstacles, as bad signs that somehow reflect on us badly. In those moments of difficulty, we are inclined to think in terms of failure, of being a spiritual disaster. And so we look for refuge in their endings.

Sometimes we are successful in trying to turn away and divorce ourselves from what is happening in the moment. Sometimes we can go to sleep, eat something, invite some really intriguing fantasy in, or get involved in some juicy planning session. Tem-

porarily it seems to remove us or distance us from that which challenges us. But is it peaceful? Is it actually a refuge of calmness of being? Or is it simply a postponement and an acceleration or a reinforcing of fear? Will we say at the moment of our death, "I don't like this, I think I'll turn on the TV"?

In these moments of change and challenge, aversion and avoidance and numbness don't rescue us. Very often a very deep change, a very heartfelt change and transformation, a shift in attitude is called for if we are truly going to learn the skills and the art of being with, of turning towards what is actually happening in every moment of our lives. A very deep shift in our hearts is needed if we are really going to find a refuge within ourselves and in the midst of all that is occurring. And it is possible for us to do this.

One thing we can be sure of is that we are not going to find that sense of refuge, of calm abiding, within the contents of our minds, our feelings, or our bodies. We are not going to find a refuge within the variety of thoughts or images or memories or sensations or likes or dislikes.

What happens when we do that? What happens when we get so entangled in the contents of what we are experiencing? We very rarely find calmness. Instead, more often what we find is agitation and busyness. We find ourselves in that very familiar position of always trying to fix, trying to alter, trying to control, trying to make things different—always in the position of the doer, operating according to our likes and dislikes. We're looking for the perfect experience, and for us, that means the undisturbed experience. But sadly, it's like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

You know, I think it's so interesting to track this in our meditation. Sometimes we perhaps, on the first day, feel very dull or very agitated. And we really think, "Aha, this is no good. I've got to get somewhere else." So we struggle with it and work with it. And maybe we get rid of it. For a moment we're happy.

But then we think, "Well, is this peace? This is kind of boring. Something else should be happening. This is not quite satisfying enough. Surely I ought to be having a really profound experience here. And then I'll be content."

Sometimes in our practice we really need to find and nurture and develop the trust and patience to let go of the contents a little bit. It's okay if there's dullness. It's okay if there's agitation. It's okay if there's aversion. It's okay if there's resistance. It's okay if there's fantasy. This doesn't mean that we're necessarily reinforcing these states or buying into them or inviting them to linger forever. We're not making this into some sort of permanent home. But it is as it is.

There's another way of being where we're not quite so entangled with our judgments and evaluations around that content. We're perhaps looking to discover a little bit of a vaster, bigger, more heartfelt space to rest in that is actually so allowing of all that content—a way of being present where there is spaciousness, where there is clarity, that is not dependent on the what of what is happening.

There's a wonderful story of a Tibetan yogi called Milarepa who, as the story goes, trained initially to be a sorcerer and inflicted much harm through black magic. Beginning to feel tremendous remorse and suffering over his actions, he decided to travel a new path. He went to find a teacher and found the teacher Marpa, saying he wanted really to let go of the suffering of his life.

Well, Marpa didn't just instruct him to find his zafu and sit down and meditate. Instead, he got him building towers. Single-handedly, he would instruct Milarepa to build these huge towers out of stone. Imagine—it's not easy work. So Milarepa would do this and build these towers. And every time, just as the tower came near completion, Marpa would come along and say, "No, Mila, that's not quite what I had in mind. That's not quite where I meant you to build it." Then he would have to tear down the tower and go and start over again, building another tower. And again, just as it was nearing completion, Marpa would come along and say, "Too bad, Mila, really, again it's not quite what I wanted."

This was his practice: building towers, taking down towers, building towers, taking down towers. There's something that happens through that kind of practice. It's about patience. It's about being with just what is. It's really about not being so concerned with the towers or stories that we construct and build, but with that quality of being that is so unconditional.

This is a very profound breakthrough in meditation—learning what it means to be with what is. To have the patience and the openness and the balance where our sense of being is really not so dependent, not so reliant upon the what of what is happening.

Now, what are the qualities of heart and mind that really are a shift? What really allows us to find this quality of spaciousness and refuge within our own capacity to see? One of those qualities is a loving and compassionate acceptance that embraces every single moment without distinction.

As long as there is aversion, there is separation, distance. Think of that here. Perhaps you felt aversion today towards a sensation in your body, or towards a mind state that's arisen, or towards another person, maybe towards yourself just generally. What happens when there's that aversion? We feel very separate. We don't want to be with. We don't want to be close. We want to be distant.

And yet also, what is one of the ingredients, one of the primary characteristics of that feeling of separateness?

Wherever it occurs in our lives is fear. We fear that which we feel separated from. It feels like an enemy, like an opponent. And sometimes we very much preserve separation through resistance and through judgment. These are almost like the servants of separation, our resistance and judgment. They serve to keep us apart.

And there is a real art and a real skillfulness in actually learning to let our judgments and resistances be. You don't have to do anything with them. You don't have to make them into something different. You don't have to make them better. You don't have to make them more spiritual. You don't have to get rid of them. But to learn to let them be.

And how do we do that? By not fueling them. The primary fuel for judgment is thought. Thought that is charged with feelings of aversion. It is the fuel that makes them continue.

A lot of this practice is about learning to withdraw blame. To learn to allow all things to be as they are. Loving and compassionate acceptance does not mean a kind of blindness or condoning, but it does mean a willingness to allow and to listen. Sometimes that loving and compassionate acceptance means a simple willingness to stay present with whatever is happening just as it is.

Think of having a thought of anger, for example. Maybe someone's crossed your walking path today. And that thought comes up. Maybe they've done it before, which is even worse. That thought comes up, "Oh, they're like this. There's such an insensitive person, such an unmindful person." Now in this context, that thought is often followed by another thought, which says, "I am so judgmental. Why am I so judgmental?" The aversion keeps it going, doesn't it? It keeps the thinking going. It is the fuel.

Now what happens if we just, instead of fueling it, let it be. Just let it be. Stay simply present. There is no fuel. There is no foothold. We learn to be present in a loving and compassionate way, which actually liberates all things. It liberates all things to unfold. It liberates ourselves to unfold.

If you think of the seasons of nature—summer and winter and autumn and spring—we wouldn't think that it would be a path of wisdom to shout at winter and say it should be summer. We wouldn't think it would be a path of wisdom to go outside today and say, "Why are you cold? It's the middle of summer. You shouldn't be cold." It is as it is, isn't it? It is as it is.

It is somewhat similar within ourselves. The Buddha once said that all things arise because of conditions. All things arise because of conditions. This is a wonderful pathway for withdrawing blame. All things arise because of conditions.

Sometimes due to our own conditioning, our mind and heart has been shaped in particular ways. Sometimes through that shaping there are thoughts and feelings that arise that may be angry, that may be unkind, that may be reactive. It is no wisdom to shout at them and to say you should be different. There is a wisdom in appreciating the roots and the history of those thoughts and feelings. Appreciate that all things arise because of conditions.

But there is also tremendous wisdom in really appreciating the way that we cultivate the shape of our own heart and mind in this moment through how we are present.

Through how we are present, we are actually transforming the shape of our own heart and mind so that it owes itself not so much to history or conditioning, but rather finds its form rooted in attention—in a loving, caring attentiveness, in acceptance and in being present. A different climate of heart and mind emerges that frees our own inner seasons to unfold.

Discovering a refuge in our lives, a place of calm abiding, also asks us to cultivate the art of non-dwelling, of non-stickiness, of not taking hold of anything. We learn this art in our meditation by returning over and over to the simplicity of this moment, the simplicity of one breath. We are actually learning one of life's most important arts—the art of non-stickiness, the art of non-dwelling, the art of allowing all things to be.

We can see there actually are many options in our lives. Sometimes we sit and walk here in retreat, and especially in the beginning, it seems like there are so many thoughts—countless thoughts. Sometimes it seems there are so many places we could become entangled, and do get entangled. Sometimes we want to struggle with that mind. We don't need to struggle with it. We're not trying here to have a particular kind of mind or a perfect mind. What we are actually trying to develop is a more intuitive way of seeing and contacting and connecting and understanding through being simply present.

That connection with the more intuitive way of seeing is really nurtured through non-dwelling. But this takes a commitment on our part. There's a lot of juice in those stories and thoughts—a lot of juice. It takes a true commitment to say, "Let it be. In this moment, let it be." Come back to this simplicity of direct connectedness and trust that through that, the intuition and understanding we so much seek will be found.

Meditation is about learning to touch all things with calmness—learning to touch all things with calmness, our thoughts, our bodies, our feelings. As we learn to touch all things with calmness, everything begins to settle, begins to slow down a little, begins to become more visible to us. In grasping hold of nothing, we are also not grasped.

Patience is a big part of this. Sometimes in the Tibetan tradition they call it the long enduring mind, which sounds a little difficult or unpleasant, but it's about patience—about patience, acceptance, being with. It means not thinking about results or completions or arrivals, not thinking about how much nearer we're getting to our destination or how much we're progressing or how much we've gotten rid of or how far we have to go.

It means that there's really only one moment that we need to attend to and only one moment that asks for our care—and that's the moment that we are in. In actually providing and offering that care, we also find our refuge in that moment. A refuge of calmness, a refuge of balance, and a refuge of understanding.

Thank you.

If we have a couple of moments quietly together.

May our beings live with calmness.
May our beings live with balance.
May our beings live with understanding.

CHAPTER 192

Our Karma Is Our Dharma: Family Course 1997

Guy Armstrong · 47 min

In this dharma talk from 1997, Guy Armstrong presents the profound teaching that "Our karma is our dharma" - how our life circumstances, particularly family life, become our spiritual practice. Drawing from his own experience with a household ant invasion, Armstrong demonstrates how mindfulness (sati) transforms mundane moments into opportunities for insight and awakening.

The talk explores three key Buddhist teachings through the lens of householder practice. First, mindfulness as a "non-judging, non-manipulative, non-grasping" orientation to the present moment that creates space for wisdom to arise naturally. Second, impermanence (anicca) as taught through raising children, who constantly remind us to let go and accept change. Armstrong weaves in poetry from Kahlil Gibran and others to illustrate how children teach us the practice of letting go "in the midst of deep love." Third, interconnectedness (pratītyasamutpāda) revealed through observing our children's development, which mirrors the evolutionary stages of all life.

Armstrong emphasizes that householders during the Buddha's time achieved full enlightenment "right in the midst of it all," and encourages practitioners to see every moment - whether sitting in intensive retreat or dealing with household crises - as equally valid opportunities for awakening. The talk concludes with the vision of becoming a "wise baby" - maintaining the complete presence of children while developing the mature capacity for understanding that leads to liberation.

Our life is really our practice. It's truly nothing other than this. Whether we're sitting for days on end in an intensive meditation retreat, or we're practicing in the midst of our family life, in the midst of our work life, in the midst of our play life—practicing in the midst of all the many and varied aspects of our life as a householder, which may or may not include periods of formal sitting meditation practice as well.

It's said that during the time of the Buddha there were many householders who became fully enlightened right in the midst of it all. We might not hold out for this possibility, or we might not hold on to this possibility—at least not too tightly. But we certainly do wake up over and over again in hundreds of small and bigger ways as we deepen in our relationship to our life as our practice. It's an inevitable fruit of this intention of ours to make our life our practice. Our karma is our dharma, actually.

One of the primary means, the primary skills—a particular quality of mind and heart that provides the ground for awakening, provides the fertile ground for insight to blossom in moments of our life—is what's called mindfulness. It seems now that mindfulness has become quite a commonly used word. In an intensive retreat I sometimes refer to it as having become a household word. How fortunate for us that it's a household word.

What is it really? What is it? And what is it that makes mindfulness a spiritual practice—this very incredibly powerful, helpful, and protective skill?

Mindfulness is a non-judging, non-manipulative, non-grasping or non-clinging, non-rejecting orientation to the present moment—any present moment. It's also meeting the moment with interest, with energy, meeting the moment with an interested curiosity.

So what is it that makes this flavor of meeting the present moment a spiritual practice? When we're so present in this way, there's an openness. There's room. There's a great spaciousness of heart, great spaciousness of mind, even if just briefly. There's a calmness. There's a spaciousness. And in this, there's room for clarity to arise, for insight, for true understanding to arise, which in a truly mindful moment is actually inevitable. It will arise.

Wisdom quite spontaneously arises. We don't have to do anything to make it happen. Wisdom, true understanding, isn't very far away at all. In fact, it's right here. It's ever present. It's not something we have to go after. It's not something we have to attain. In a sense, all we have to do is create the right conditions for this very natural occurrence to just simply happen. One of the primary occurrences is the development of a mindful attention—a mindful attention to the moments in our life, any moment in our life.

It's not just in intensive retreat time that we develop mindful moments. Right in the midst of any occurrence, any situation, and sometimes in the most unlikely, seemingly mundane occurrences, with mindful attention, with a presence, a mindful presence, deep understanding can arise—or a strengthening, a broadening, an expanding of understandings that have already come to us.

I sometimes think of mindfulness as magic, actually, but not the kind of magic that the magician performs that takes us into the illusion and sweeps us into it and holds us in it. Rather, it's the magic of mindfulness that takes us out of the illusion, out of the delusion, right directly into the midst of reality. It sometimes feels like magic when this happens, when we see so clearly and when we're no longer caught in the veils of illusion.

Just recently, last week actually, I came home to my house up in the mountains in Taos about four o'clock in the afternoon after a busy day, ready to settle down and prepare a Dharma talk for our Thursday evening sitting group that night. I was in the house for a few moments and I heard what sounded like rain coming down the heat stove pipe. There weren't any clouds outside. I looked out—there wasn't even a cloud over my little house. But it sounded like rain coming down my heat stove pipe.

I busied myself with some things, and in a few moments I noticed that there were dozens of small flying red ants beginning to cover the carpet in my house and cover the floor. They were coming out of the heat stove—dozens of them, and then hundreds of them, and then it seemed like there were thousands of them. My carpet was a kind of pulsing...

aliveness of red ants. It was quite amazing. Thoughts, of course, started coming very quickly. What to do? I have a Dharma talk to write, and these ants are here, and I can't write my Dharma talk, and how am I going to get rid of them?

Maybe I'm going to be eaten alive in my own house. Anger arose at the ants for taking up the time and the space that I was supposed to be preparing this inspiring talk for students that night.

At some point I noticed that the ants were in this great vibrating swarm covering my carpet—literally thousands of them, I think. I didn't count. They were moving towards the light, moving in the direction of the windows and the doors. This was interesting to me because they couldn't see, but they had a sense.

At one point, I started feeling very much in the minority. There was just one little me, this little person, and thousands and thousands of these ants. Fear came up. I thought, I'll have to leave. That was the point where I thought, maybe I'll get eaten alive in my own house. The mind is pretty tricky, actually.

All of this was happening very quickly, and I thought, I can't kill these ants. I just can't do it. In fact, the thought of it and seeing the life force there on my carpet, the thought of killing them all made me nauseous. So I knew I couldn't do that, but what to do?

I called my landlord and reached her on the phone. She said that the same thing had happened to her last spring. The ants make a nest in the stovepipe, and on a nice warm summer day after a rain, they hatch. You know how anthills are—there are thousands of ants in an anthill. They come down the stovepipe and also go up the stovepipe, and they came into the house out of all the openings in my wood stove. The thing to do was to close up the stove with saran wrap and tape.

So I busily set myself to doing that. But I also needed to get rid of them. I didn't know what to do because I couldn't kill them. So I decided to vacuum them up. I vacuumed them all up. It took a couple of hours. The whole thing took about two and a half hours. I vacuumed them all up and then took the vacuum cleaner bag outside and opened it up and let them go into where they really wanted to be anyways, out into the open, natural world.

At the end of the two and a half hours, it was time for me to leave for my sitting group. And I hadn't written a Dharma talk. But it occurred to me somewhere along in that process that my karma was going to be my Dharma that night—that this whole experience would be the perfect thing to take to the students, which I did, and which I'm bringing here now.

There was an incredible amount of understanding and insight that came in the midst of all of this strange phenomena happening in my life—strange and seemingly quite mundane phenomena.

When the ants were moving towards the light, that very innate, very deep instinct towards staying alive, I could feel it. I could feel it in their movement and in their very intuitive sense of moving towards the light, towards the outside. And I could feel that in my heart, a kind of tug, a kind of quivering in my heart of knowing that too, knowing that same feeling, not different from what was happening with this pulsing life on my carpet.

I also felt, off and on through that couple of hours, the preciousness of human existence—kind of two aspects of that. One is that we really are a rare species. If you think of how many just ants there are in the world, let alone other insects and other creatures, there's not very many of us humans. We're a pretty rare species in this world. And I was really feeling it quite graphically in the midst of my living room as being a minority among thousands.

The other aspect of precious human existence that came up for me was a very ancient teaching that I remembered again about precious human existence, which I'd like to read to you. It said that

Those who have a precious human existence and have the opportunity to practice the Dharma in this precious human existence are as rare as daytime stars.

There's also an ancient teaching story that I remembered in the midst of this that speaks to me deeply. It says that if all the world were water and a golden ring were thrown upon the water to be blown about by the winds, a blind turtle, surfacing once every hundred years, would put its neck more easily into that ring than you would obtain a precious human existence.

And so now that we have obtained this precious human existence, to not set out on the path of practice that leads to freedom would be more wasteful than a poor man who finds a house filled with precious jewels and who didn't do anything meaningful with them but just frittered them away.

The first precept of not killing was very potent for me that afternoon during those hours with the ants. The Dharma talk that night was very lively and pertinent in many ways for the people attending. My karma became our Dharma that night, thanks to the ants, and thanks to the magic of mindfulness right in the midst of it all.

One of the most potent pieces of practice that we're given in our household life—and very powerfully through our children—is the teaching and practice of impermanence, which is really the bedrock of the Buddhist teachings. This was the initial insight that impelled the Buddha to leave the palace where he was born and raised, in search of a path to enlightenment.

In our formal meditation practice, we learn to see and surrender to the fleetingness of the moment—a breath, a thought, a sensation in the body, a feeling arising and changing and passing again and again. Our children are such wonderful teachers for us in this seeing and surrendering to change. We keep learning over and over through our children, with our children, to just let go, to let go so that their ever-changing nature may unfold.

Our children continuously remind us to loosen our mindset about who we think they are or who we think they should be or who we think they could be. They continually remind us to pay attention when we get stuck or when we forget, as they just continue becoming who they are.

My youngest son, who today is thirty years old, used to look me right in the face and say—nicely, or at least fairly often nicely—"Mom, you don't have to say that," or "Mom, you don't have to do that." He was my mindfulness bell many times as he was growing up. It surprised me, usually surprised me and woke me up. Occasionally he still does this to me in a very similar way—telling me to stop, pay attention, see who he is now, and then now, and then now, and to wake up to the present moment just as it is.

Kahlil Gibran said, "Your children are not your children. They are sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you, but not from you. And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies, but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward, nor tarries with yesterday."

This process of bringing children into the world and then raising them has seemed to me over the years basically a process of letting go—letting go in the midst of deep love, letting go in the midst of the heart of compassion, letting go with the very natural and growing wisdom that inevitably arises in and out of our intention to make our life our practice.

This is a poem by a man named Red Hawk. It's called "The Wheat Farmer Says Goodbye to His Only Daughter":

His heart cracks like parched earth to see her go, but he is not free enough to weep. So he walks with her this evening out in the summer wheat where the stalks beat softly. Suddenly in his fertile anguish, his heart blooms. And like the last mad king of wild wheat, he grabs his child and twirls her. Through the sea of grain, he whirls her. She holding tight, he boldly dancing in the moonlight. When at last they fall, he is winded and amazed. On his knees, he embraces her. And then she takes her leaving, like a wild wheat flower dancing, waving in the softly breathing wind. He watches her go, weaving, moving slowly through the moonlight. And he fingers ripened grain in calloused hand. There's just one thing to do now that his daughter is departed: to harvest cleanly and without regret. In this way he pays homage to the precious seeds he planted. One blooms by rooting and one by blowing away.

The potency of practicing impermanence is immediately accessible in our life as householders in an endless array of ways when we pay attention in any moment. All the changes in daily life—many of which we may have subtle or perhaps strong resistance to—reveal that much of the time we're actually practicing permanence, not impermanence. Much of the time we want everything to stay as it is, to continue as we know it, or to become the way we want it to be. So often we believe that we have control and that things will always remain the same or do what we want them to do.

But this belief is really only make-believe. As we begin to see more clearly, we discover that belief has little or nothing to do with reality. The tighter we grasp onto our beliefs, the more limited our life becomes. We often construct our lives on this flimsy, rickety foundation of make-believe—made-up beliefs built upon assumptions, sometimes misinformation, opinions, ideas about this and that—and we hold on quite tightly.

In reality, the very fabric, the very essence of life is change. So why do we fear and resist this perfectly natural phenomenon? Why do we struggle against change, the beginnings and endings, the births and deaths? Why can't we surrender to the truth of the moment? Why do we resist and fear so much of life?

Without impermanence, there would be no life. As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches: "If there is no impermanence, the grain of corn will remain a grain of corn forever, and you will never have an ear of corn to eat. Impermanence is crucial to the life of everything." So instead of complaining about impermanence, we might say, "Long live impermanence! Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible."

Can you imagine if nothing ever changed? It would be the most incredible nightmare. Looked at from this perspective, impermanence is actually an amazing natural marvel. All life on the planet is changing all the time. All life is dying in the same volume as new life is arising—the new life that brings such incredible joy and delight each spring, the new day that greets us each morning when we wake up.

William Blake wrote: "He who binds himself to a joy does the winged life destroy, but he who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise."

As we look more closely at our own process—particularly at a time like this when there is more time and support to do so—as we explore more deeply by simply being with things as they are, we might begin to see that we've been living under what one teacher called an "assumed identity." The assumed solidity of our body and thoughts, the grasping and trying to hold onto these ephemeral thoughts, feelings, emotions—all these habitual fixations that we live with and believe and call our own, call "me," call "mine"—that we think define who we are.

As we practice formal meditation and live with mindful attention, we begin to see and experience more directly that things aren't necessarily as they appear—or at least as they have appeared until now. We begin to experience the whole thing as process happening, as changing sensations, changing feelings, as various manifestations of energy with different qualities, flavors, textures.

Again, our children are among the very best teachers in this respect, as they quickly manifest changing emotional states within just a few moments—changing likes and dislikes in the space of a breath.

As we deepen in our acceptance and understanding of change, of impermanence, our relationship to all forms, both inner and outer, begins to change. What might be a compulsive, addictive grasping—trying to hold onto the passing show—begins to loosen its strong attraction. Trying to control what is actually uncontrollable, this ongoing miracle of constant change we call life, begins to soften. We open our hands, so to speak.

We begin to see how excruciating it is to grasp so tightly. The fear underneath the impulse to control—the fear of being in and with life—begins to relax and open. The fear begins to weaken and fade as we surrender, opening to and surrendering more deeply to the truth of the moment. Now we're practicing impermanence.

Many of us have at times had a very strong identification with our face and body, how they looked when we were younger. My mother, who is eighty-five years old, sometimes stands next to me looking in the mirror—not as a planned event, but it just happens. One time we were looking in the mirror together at ourselves and each other, and she said, "I see an old woman. It's so strange."

And she kept repeating over and over again, "It's so strange, I see an old woman." Then she said, "I've changed so much. It's so strange to see." And then, "I've changed more than anybody. It's so strange." She said, "It doesn't match how I feel inside. It's so strange. So strange."

But what is strange? Stranger than what? This is life—life being lifey, life doing what it does, life doing its thing.

Have you ever stood in front of a mirror and looked at your face quite intently for a long time, just focused your attention on your face? If you do, it keeps changing, just keeps changing. Whose face is this? Who is this face? Who sees? If you've never tried it or if you haven't done it for a long time, try it sometime.

In our life, our life is practice.

Another potent teacher—of course there are many—is the world of nature. A number of years ago I was here at the Meditation Center in the midst of a long retreat. This happens to be a story from a long retreat, but it could be at any moment in any of our lives, being outside and paying attention.

I was sitting out back watching the grasses. It was late fall and things were changing quite rapidly. I was watching the grasses, and over days particular blades of grass even—you know sometimes when you're on a long retreat you can get fixated on certain things. So I was watching these blades of grass changing. They were changing color, losing their color, changing shape, curling over, drying up. Just watching this happen in an intent way over the days.

Are we different than this? Really, are we different than this? No matter how much moisturizer we use, no matter how many vitamins we take or how much healthy good food we eat, no matter how much exercise we do, our skin dries out, our body changes shape, our hair loses its color. No matter how hard we try, we just don't stay young. This mass of skin and bones has its schedule to keep and there's absolutely nothing we can do about it.

This is from very wonderful Kalu Rinpoche, no longer alive—although he actually has been reborn: "We live in the illusion and appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see that we are nothing. And being nothing, we are everything. That is all."

In our commitment and intention to make our life our practice, as our karma becomes our dharma, and with a deepening acceptance of the natural wonder of change and impermanence, this quite naturally leads us to the reality of interbeing, as Thich Nhat Hanh calls it. The reality of interconnectedness. The reality that we truly are everything. That as José said the other night, "I am because you are, you are because I am."

Again our family practice. Our children are such strong teachers.

We know from photographs taken of the development of the fetus in the womb that a baby—that each of us in the womb—goes through the various stages of evolution as cells multiply and develop into the human form. When my children were born, after they were born, as they were going through their developmental stages out of the womb, I found myself quite fascinated, quite amazed actually, as they again reflected the evolutionary stages of life on the planet.

I found myself calling them little fishy as they were lying on their bellies making swimming movements. Then they became little lizards or little snakes as they were squirming along the floor. Then frogs when they first began sitting hunched over in their round baby bodies. Then they turned into four-leggeds—the slow moving kind at first, then into the speedy agile four-legged creatures.

And then finally they stood and moved into the upright, two-legged world of human beings. I actually hadn't paid very much attention at all to this process until I'd had my own children. I'd never really noticed it. This intimate observation and relationship, this connection to a process that is truly much, much bigger, much broader than what was taking place with my own children, was in moments an incredibly expansive, inclusive and awakening experience.

There's nothing left out, nothing left out in our family practice. Life is our practice, as long as we're willing to keep engaging and opening to the gifts.

Just a few weeks ago, I was teaching a retreat in New Mexico. A grandmother in her mid-sixties came in for an interview. In her work life, she's a high-powered politician in the Texas legislature. She told me that during this past year, a new grandchild was born into her family, and so she went to visit the family very soon after the birth took place. Her son and daughter-in-law let her hold the baby for almost the entire four days that she was visiting, and she cried actually for a good part of those four days with the baby in her arms. Her son thought something was wrong, but she assured him that, in fact, everything was quite, quite okay.

She told me that she had forgotten the incredible purity and the complete presence of the very young. She hadn't experienced this for a long, long time in her life in the political world. Her heart was simply opening again. She was crying tears of deep joy, touching this essentialness, this pure beingness, touching again what's sometimes called our original face. The baby was a reminder, a heart opening.

And along with this, there was an arising of the heart of compassion in her—compassion both for herself and for others. For how far away we can get from this, from this profound connection. How swept up in other important business we so often are.

This is from a Tibetan song of enlightenment called "The Flight of the Garuda":

"Knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that it is never impaired or improved in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is liberated by just resting at ease with whatever happens."

Our karma, our family practice, our commitment to relating to our life as our practice, and our children being maybe the strongest, most powerful teachers that we will encounter—this is our dharma.

I sometimes think of awakening as becoming a wise baby. The complete presence that babies, that very young children have in the midst of whatever is taking place inside them and around them. It's a pre-verbal, non-conceptual, total presence. Can we be so present, even for just a moment?

Granted, new beings don't have the capacity to understand conceptually. But we do. In our maturing selves, in any moment of pure presence, we have the capacity to understand, not out of our intellect, but the spontaneous intuitive wisdom that arises quite naturally if we're present in our lives with a mindful attention, present with a non-judging, non-manipulative, non-grasping or non-clinging, non-rejecting orientation to the present moment.

Maybe as we wake up, we become like a wise baby.

I'd like to close with a poem called "Hokusai Says." Hokusai maybe you know is the Japanese painter who painted that huge wave, great big wave that is pretty well known, pretty popular. This is a poem by Roger Keys:

"Hokusai says, look carefully. He says, pay attention, notice. He says, keep looking, stay curious. He says, there's no end to seeing. He says, look forward to getting old. He says, keep changing, you just get more who you really are. He says, get stuck, accept it, repeat yourself as long as it's interesting. He says, keep doing what you love. He says, keep praying. He says every one of us is a child."

Every one of us is ancient.
Every one of us has a body.
He says every one of us is frightened.
He says every one of us has to find a way to live with fear.
He says everything is alive.
Shells, buildings, people, fish, mountains, trees—wood is alive, water is alive.
Everything has its own life.
Everything lives inside us.
He says live with the world inside you.

He says it doesn't matter if you draw or write books.
It doesn't matter if you saw wood or catch fish.
It doesn't matter if you sit at home and stare at the ants on your veranda or in your living room, or watch the shadows of the trees and the grasses in your garden.
It matters that you care.

It matters that you feel.
It matters that you notice.
It matters that life lives through you.

Contentment is life living through you.
Joy is life living through you.
Satisfaction and strength is life living through you.
Peace is life living through you.

He says, don't be afraid.
Don't be afraid.
Look.
Feel.
Let life take you by the hand.
Let life live through you.

Let's sit together for just a moment.

CHAPTER 193

Seeing Deeply Into Experience

Guy Armstrong · 47 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines how to work skillfully with the varied experiences that arise in meditation and daily life. He addresses the tendency toward complacency during pleasant experiences and reactivity during difficult ones, offering practical guidance for breaking free from habitual patterns of response.*
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> *Drawing from the traditional teaching of the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅga) - mindfulness (sati), investigation (dhammavicaya), energy (vīriya), joy (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā) - Armstrong emphasizes the importance of cultivating all these qualities rather than focusing on just one or two. He illustrates his teaching with a story about responding to workplace anger with unexpected generosity, demonstrating how we might move beyond familiar reactive patterns.*
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> *The talk particularly emphasizes the value of 'not knowing' as a practice - learning to rest in uncertainty rather than immediately seeking solutions or explanations. Armstrong suggests that sometimes our greatest insights come from experiences we barely notice at the time, highlighting the importance of bringing full awareness to ordinary moments. He concludes by reflecting on joy and happiness as essential aspects of practice, cautioning against an overly serious approach that neglects the natural contentment and wonder that can arise from dedicated dharma practice.*

The theme for this evening's talk is working with experience. In the flow and course of our days, the range and type of experiences that arise can vary considerably from one person to the next. These experiences can be pleasant, unpleasant, or somewhere in between.

Sometimes in the areas of pleasant experience, there's a certain kind of comfort that accompanies it. One flows quietly and easily through the day, but we don't notice when this is occurring. There can be a certain complacency in being in that kind of relative comfort zone, not realizing that in moving from sitting to walking to standing, eating, and listening, there's a fairly uniform level taking place as we go from one posture to the next, one moment to the next. Consciousness becomes quieted by that condition.

The general perception and thought that may arise regarding oneself in those times is that it's okay, it's nice, but really nothing is happening. For others moving through that field of pleasantness, there can at any time be a severe disturbance to that experience. One's mind is shaken up and begins to latch upon something—which we have been talking about over these days together. In that latching upon something, tension emerges from mind and body, along with the relationship to what's occurring.

When our experience is flowing along and then breaks, some reactivity comes, some tension comes, and it generates agitation within ourselves. With this agitation, we want to follow as clearly as we can: What do we typically do when we feel agitated? There's the agitation and the outflows from it, and the thinking can be, as it has always been, the means for getting over it. This can be all too typical. Sometimes it runs into doubt, into forms of escape, trying to see someone to solve it for us, thinking that we should be able to handle this all by ourselves.

When something impactful is going on, it will enliven other typical patterns that we have. We want to be noticing and aware not only of the agitation but what typically goes along with it—what is typical. If we recognize what is typical as unsatisfactory, then change in other ways and expressions will be necessary, sometimes going against the whole uniform way of relating.

To give you a small example: Yesterday evening, as I do on my visits here, I went to the Cambridge Insight Meditation Centre to give the evening talk. After the talk, during the question and answer period, one person said that she had felt angry all day. When asked why, she explained that she had engaged in a task at work, expecting that her colleague would want her to continue, but he had changed his mind and said no. She couldn't think of a reason why he should refuse her assistance or cooperation. She felt disappointed, hurt, and ultimately very angry with him, considering all the time, energy, and attention she had given to their previous project together.

So there's memory arising—we had worked on this before. From the memory came satisfaction in what was done. From the satisfaction came an expectation of renewal and continuity. When renewal and continuity weren't forthcoming, this affected her feeling inside. She felt agitated about it, angry. The anger was being carried around and directed at him. There's an impact process: effect and end result is feeling angry.

We explored this for a few minutes, and I asked her what she was going to do about it. She gave the usual responses that people often make in these matters—accepting, not judging—the typical Buddhist solution to everything. Sometimes one has to look completely around the other way. So my suggestion, in looking completely around the other way, was: Why not give him a gift? This is totally opposite to what the mind is doing.

She said it could feel manipulative in the face of all this, and I said, "Well, we've got between now and tomorrow to see through the manipulation and then give him a gift." Of course, we want to know what gift you're going to give him.

There's movement going on, a sequence, a typical way of looking at a situation. Then there's actually looking and asking ourselves: Could I go completely in an unfamiliar way, looking at it in a way which I've never before considered in my life? In the wish to arrest the mind, to allow something quite unusual from within to flower, we may find ourselves in that tension, in that difficulty, in that lack of acceptance, in agitation, unable to come up with an awareness or flash of insight or inspiration that totally goes against the familiarity of the mind.

But maybe in the tension and agitation, with some willingness just to stop and say, "I don't know what to do with this, but this certainly isn't the answer. This certainly can't go anywhere. I've been along this road so many times before"—in the conviction and determination to say "don't know what to do with this," not looking for some smooth operators like ourselves to give out a few pacifying solutions like "watch your breath for a little bit longer" or "send a bit of metta," but actually firming the mind up and saying "I don't know what to do with this."

Repeating that to oneself and bringing some conviction to it may generate just a little bit of space. We only want just enough to see if something can come out of that not knowing we've made for ourselves.

In a way, we make a kind of error of judgment and perception in these things. When something is tense and agitated and reactionary inside, when we're feeling irritable and hostile and negative, we all too quickly want some information, something to do in order to diffuse what we are doing with our mind, to bring in something else to help diminish that which we don't like. Of course, that resource and tool can obviously be useful and beneficial, but sometimes we look at ourselves and say, "I keep on doing that. I'm constantly looking to the books, constantly looking to methods and techniques, looking to instructions or guidance or wise advice, looking for a solution in some way or other."

Maybe we have to say to ourselves much more often: Here it is. This is what's going on. Pleasant, unwelcome, unwanted as it is, I don't know what to do with it. All I can say of myself is simply that I just don't know. Keep that steadfast, keep that clear not knowing there, and just live with it. Live with it. Whatever that burning issue might be, whatever it is will change. Things will be different. Life will go on, or one's life won't go on, but change will change.

The fretting and all that goes along with it, the attempt in this problem-solving mind where we keep thinking problem solving, improvement, problem solving—the culture's obsessed with it. Turn the attention away. Don't look for problem-solving devices. Stay steady with full, clear, unashamedly not knowing.

In attending to meditation, attending to mind and body, and finding a space that is opening and insightful to circumstances, there are also the beneficial experiences that arise. In association and contact with beneficial experiences—and Sharda was touching on this yesterday evening—there are two or three factors that deserve noticing and attention.

In the tradition, the Buddha has wisely spoken of seven factors of enlightenment, a skillful means for us to check in with ourselves: How's our relationship with each and every one of these? The first one is awareness itself, mindfulness. Those periods where we're just going along through the day can well be a kind of general mindfulness, a general consciousness from one situation to the next. But with that, to safeguard against any complacency that can occur, it's bringing the fullness of attention—as much as one can muster and draw out of one's cellular life—to clearness, to feeling, to sensing, to knowing clearness, to being extremely clear.

That might just be for one or two moments or minutes in the course of a sitting or walking, as if it was the last minute, as if there was nowhere else to go, as if nothing whatsoever could come out of it. Therefore, the clearness itself would have to be fulfilling unto itself, without any promises or additions or extra benefit in some future time. It would be it, without anything else.

We may well need this so that we're not just going mindfully through the day, but generating those moments and times where that clearness and firmness exists, where not a single sinew or cell of one's body intentionally moves. As the old monks of the tradition have said many times for many generations: When the little finger just moves for a moment, it disturbs the world of ten thousand things. One little movement affects everything everywhere.

Sometimes in our utter stillness, in our presence and transparency of our whole being, there's a clear seeing. It would be a pity, in such a privileged opportunity as we have here, to go mindfully through the day and misunderstand going mindfully through the day for the great value of one single extremely clear moment in which there's not a thought taking place, not an involvement with anything of the self taking place, no looking for anything, no reaching out for anything, no expectation of anything. Our whole existence has come to one complete halt in the moment, and nothing is going to come out of it because this is it.

That can occur and happen for us in different times, in different moments during the day. One may say the thought arises during the time, immediately afterwards: "I can't see the point. I can't see why I should just have one single clear moment. What am I going to get out of it? What good is it going to do me or the world?" Sometimes the thought arises simply because it doesn't know how to relate to that kind of expansive and firm and decisive awareness—that it could make a difference to our life in ways that all our trying to organize it and have it straight and okay and orderly and as we would wish cannot. All the wishes that go along with that—the wishing may be no substitute for that kind of presence, making possible a glimpse of something that just being quietly mindful through the day may not give us.

In the flow and rhythm of the day, questions arise too, some from the small groups and one-to-ones, in terms of insight into all of these things. It can be that we don't always know in the moment, in the occurrence, what actually is insight, what insight is actually arising. In the seven factors of enlightenment, the second one is enquiry and investigation. If in the flow of our day, in our meditation—whether one's first time on a retreat or one is well seasoned and exposed to all these areas—if it's quietly going along and one says in that quietness, "Well, nothing much is happening, just going through the day," then it might well be quite necessary to generate some focus of interest, to draw out of oneself some exploration that really begins to sharpen one's attention up.

That can obviously take different expressions and different forms. When it's a matter of the heart in the sitting, what shows? The initial response of the mind might be, "God knows, I've no idea."

But one asks oneself again in the sitting, impeccably not doing anything for any one self or other: what shows the love?

This might manifest in taking the walking meditation and walking up and down. In this practice, outwardly one is going nowhere—just walking up and down. To anybody traveling from Petersham to Barry along that road, who have watched for the last twenty years, this appears a really bizarre group because they're walking up and down and going nowhere. The same disturbing thoughts can obviously arise in one's own mind.

But then the teachings speak to this. One of our dharma teachers in Germany titled her book from the text: "Being Nobody Going Nowhere." One might walk up and down and generate the enquiry: what is the significance of this? Not just taking it as some nice little phrase about non-self, but actually absorbing the significance of being nobody and going nowhere. Learning to live with it, walking up and down again and again until something starts moving inside, something begins to show and stand out.

If one does this, of course there's going to be risk. There's risk that you might get some insight. There's risk that you get agitated. There's risk that you might start thinking about all your roles in life and who you really are and what you really should be doing and where you're really going. That's the chance. If you invite one thing in any enquiry, one might end up faced with precisely the opposite of who am I and where am I going—forgetting that the original question was being nobody with nowhere to go.

In the movement of walking up and down, or in the sitting, for some the process of meditation without introducing any reflection or enquiry is sufficient unto itself because one senses it. One senses the importance of keeping faith with meditating, keeping faith with clear awareness, keeping faith with the practices in a focused and dedicated way. This includes acknowledging periods of just mindfulness and acknowledging periods when agitations come and what's typical in those agitations.

But as I said, if it feels like a little drift—comfortable, rather nice, not extending oneself too much, always faithfully going for a second and third bowl of food, always leaving it to the last possible minute to walk into the meditation hall and being the first through the exit when the bell goes—all of this can help preserve the status quo of the comfortable self.

Sometimes we need to say to hell with this comfortable self. It's sowing the seeds for its opposite, because only wisdom gives comfort, only wisdom generates contentment of being. Sometimes we must say: rather than just going nicely and sweetly, let me extend. I want to know the immeasurable and really taste the sweetness and loveliness of it. Then I may have to extend myself a little bit from the finite towards the immeasurable.

That might include extending the sitting time, shortening the sleeping time, eating less food, staying up later. I won't be the first in meditators' history to have done that. In that extension and expanding out, there could be risk—risk that you hate doing it, risk that you feel even more agitated than before, risk that tiredness brings boredom and apathy, risk that you feel you're not getting anywhere and all the doubts arise. That's the risk if you extend.

But equally important, there is also the possibility that in taking the step and the risk, one does start opening out. One does break through. One does have a different sense of things. It might be that the barrier to that is actually much thinner than what one thinks. Sometimes just one precious single consolidated moment helps to show a wider sense, helps reveal that mind is a lousy reference point for knowing the truth of things because the mind keeps measuring—and therefore not a very good vehicle for knowing that which can't be measured.

With the areas of insight and understanding, there can appear to be significant time lapses between one and the other. What I mean is that in the course of hours and days here, experiences are going on. Some of them, as we talked about earlier in the enquiry, seem to matter more than others. We think that in certain experiences there's conviction, and we can feel quite assured about it. Meanwhile, something which was hardly noticeable, which we barely picked up on if at all, seems totally irrelevant, utterly inconsequential. When we were there, we didn't give it a moment's thought.

Some things we gave a great deal of thought, feeling, and experience to—from situations with the body to states of mind and emotions. Something else was so far on the periphery of consciousness that we weren't turning attention to it, even to the point we didn't notice it at all.

But in the very nature of things, in the very unfoldment and scheme of things, what consciousness may determine and thought confirm may not be the truth—the actual reality of what proves to be significant. There can be, as I say, that passing moment hardly noticed if at all, and then days, weeks, months, years later it suddenly strikes one what that was, what had occurred, what the significance was, what the benefit was. That doesn't even have to come from any experience of oneself—it can be what somebody else said passing by in a small group meeting, or just something which one noticed for a moment outside.

So the function of awareness and enquiry, bringing the two together: if you and I are willing as much as we can to bring awareness to the ordinary and everyday, not only does it give us the chance to see and connect and be clear about now, but it's generating myriad conditions for a constant flowering of understanding—constantly being touched with existence. If you and I are as transparent as we can be—which means the diminishing of ego—if you and I are as transparent as we can be, we'll keep reflecting and mirroring life. We'll keep feeling the extraordinariness of it, the miracle of it, the expansiveness of it, the incomprehensibility of it.

That's why we keep bringing awareness, keep ensuring that there's the wish and determination to make genuinely clear moments for us. Then inner life becomes a mirror for it—a mirror for what keeps going on around. There's a transparency which is so transparent, it takes birth, death, ageing, sickness, death, and doesn't make such a thing about it.

All of this looking as we look into ourselves and deeper, the taking of risks in some of the ways I've just been speaking about—one important feature, certainly mirrored again in the seven factors of enlightenment, is the importance of happiness and joy, these qualities of the heart.

Quite often, and perhaps if there is any imbalance here it can be in an exaggerated way, we speak about the significance of equanimity—that steadfast present between the field of pleasure and pain, to be steadfast in the face of both. This means not constantly pulling oneself into the pursuit of pleasure and having and ownership which goes along with that, and not constantly living in aversion and fighting with pain. To find that steadiness between these two extremes, these two poles.

But it would be a pity and unfortunate, from our own capacity as human beings, to lose access to a great wellspring of joy and happiness. Sometimes criticism comes that there can be too serious a focus in these kinds of teachings. Sometimes when people are coming off the street, perhaps on their first retreat, arriving a day or two late, having never been inside this situation before—somebody else urged them to come and they think what was their motive in trying to get me here? Obviously their real motive was to get me out of the house for a week. The eyes look around and say, "Oh what a grim lot they all are. Obviously it's just a place for people who are utterly antisocial, a place suitable for misfits." One sometimes looks around and wonders.

All of this is the way the eyes interpret the perceptions. In that interpretation—both of oneself and others—generalisations can get made. But that interpretation may not reflect with accuracy the inner experience of people. A number of people in these situations do experience great love of the situation, and that brings great joy and happiness. There's not a single thought running in the mind from one day to the next wanting to be anywhere else, wanting to be doing anything else.

One knows the resource of the place, the sanctuary of the situation, the blessing of the occasion. Happiness flows in the heart with or without knee pains, with or without back pains. Therefore, a factor of an enlightened life is showing itself—happiness and joy just being in this world, going nowhere and being nobody, but opening to great love.

Others, equally dedicated to the Dharma and practice and teachings, will look at themselves and recognise the importance of equanimity, the importance of being clear, of generating time for some deeper enquiry inwardly and outwardly. But actually, the joy and happiness doesn't flow—it doesn't flow easily, doesn't flow freely in that respect. There is the contentment of being that can take place, and that's its own quiet and sublime joy, of course. But for some, we need to give the heart a little bit more opportunity to flow.

The traditional way this has been endorsed and encouraged is by reflections on the Triple Gem—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha: the three gems of existence—awakening, the teachings, and the sangha of men and women of practice, past, present, and future. There's something beneficial in those kinds of recollections of how much dedica-

tion and love and commitment the generations of people on this earth have shown, doing exactly as we are doing as the living generation. I want to feel happiness at just participating. Or the recollection of a joyful communication with another, or the lovely things of nature which are there—all of that can help nourish and bring joyfulness and happiness into the heart.

All of that belongs and is integral to this whole body of teachings. It would be a pity really if some of those factors of awakening and enlightenment were being nourished but others were being neglected. Some people are very strong on mindfulness, no question. Sometimes we hear emphasis on the first factor—being mindful, being aware, paying attention moment to moment—and sometimes strong recollection and enquiry, but they may be undernourished and neglecting the joy of the practice, the contentment of it, the energy of it. Or maybe neglecting the equanimity.

From the standpoint of practice and our commitment to it, we need to attend to ourselves in such a way that we ask: in those areas of the factors of enlightenment, am I neglecting some? Am I putting too much on one or two at the expense of the others? Because the teachings never encourage that. It's a very wide, broad body of teachings, and it would be a terrible pity when—as is the danger—it gets reduced down to being a mindful human being as some kind of demonstration of what the teachings are about.

The teachings are about liberation. They are about awakening every factor of the whole being for that liberation and enlightenment.

All of that is included and very much embraced in the processes of what we are doing here. In the climate of sitting and walking, we don't get complacent, we don't drift, we don't just feel agitated and complain to ourselves about what's around us. We see the agitation, we see the relationship to it, and we dig deep.

If that digging deep means saying "I don't know" and just staying with that—knowing that the mind doesn't have the answer and the relationship of reactivity is no answer—we don't know. Right, we don't know, and we'll stay with that and see what comes from it.

So if one just takes some of those threads and themes which I have spoken about this evening, practice never gets boring. Never. It doesn't get dull, doesn't generate apathy, doesn't generate drift. One sees, my goodness, so much challenge to existence, so much challenge to the whole being. Those factors of enlightenment, the self and the I and the my which we have spoken about—all of it, tremendous grist for the mill.

Surely the application and exploration of all of that—what greater respect can a human being pay to herself or himself than to explore the full awakening of one's whole being? What greater act could one do than that?

Even in the most difficult times, let's never forget that the greatest act of kindness for humanity and for existence is to be so utterly conscious of it. This is the most significant thing we can do as we live and breathe.

May all beings live with awareness. May all beings live with realisation. May all beings discover a fulfilled life.

Let's have a couple of quiet minutes together.

Thank you for listening.

Never gets dull, doesn't generate apathy, doesn't leave us adrift. And one sees—my goodness—so much challenge to existence, so much challenge to the whole being there. And those factors of enlightenment, those constructions of self and I and my which we have spoken about—all of it, tremendous grist for the mill.

And surely, the application and the exploration of all of that—what greater respect can a human being pay to herself or pay to himself than to explore the full awakening of one's whole being? What greater act could one do than that?

And even in the most difficult times, let's never forget that the greatest act of kindness for humanity and for existence is to be so utterly conscious of it—this is the most significant thing we can do as we live and breathe.

May all beings live with awareness. May all beings live with realization. May all beings discover a fulfilled life.

So let's have a couple of quiet minutes together, please.

CHAPTER 194

Dharma in the Workplace

Guy Armstrong · 2h03

> *In this pioneering dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines how to bring Buddhist practice into the workplace through the lens of the Noble Eightfold Path. Drawing from his experience as both a dharma teacher and former Microsoft employee, he explores three key areas: ethical conduct (sīla) including right speech and right livelihood; meditation practice incorporating formal mindfulness breaks and loving-kindness (mettā) during meetings and commutes; and wisdom (paññā) focusing on right intention and freedom from the eight worldly concerns of gain/loss, pleasure/pain, praise/blame, and fame/disgrace. Armstrong addresses practical challenges like difficult colleagues, workplace conflicts, money and ambition, and finding service within corporate environments. He emphasizes that the workplace offers a rich laboratory for dharma practice, testing our ability to embody compassion and wisdom with people we didn't choose to spend time with. The talk includes guided discussion on integrating formal sitting practice during workdays and cultivating the 'bodhisattva spirit' of listening and supporting colleagues while maintaining healthy boundaries.*

Good morning. I'd like to welcome you all to this day at Spirit Rock on Dharma in the Workplace. This is the first time we've offered a day on this theme, so from my point of view, the whole day is quite experimental, and we'll just have to see how it goes. But I'm really happy to see you all today.

I found myself filled with enthusiasm as I prepared for this day, because it's a topic I care deeply about, yet I've never really had the chance to explore it with others. I think this could be an interesting opening day for me and hopefully for you as well.

My name is Guy Armstrong, and I'm one of the teachers here at Spirit Rock. I also have a background in various kinds of work, some completely unconnected to Buddhism or dharma practice, which I'll get into shortly. One thing I particularly appreciate about today is that there aren't many opportunities when these two realms can come together—dharma and our relationships in work. Sometimes I wonder if they're meant to be together at all.

I was watching the televised proceedings on C-SPAN this week of the Senate Judiciary Committee conducting an investigation called "Competition in the Computer Industry." The proceedings were chaired by Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah.

Three prominent computer industry figures appeared on the panel: Bill Gates of Microsoft, Scott McNealy of Sun, and Jim Barksdale of Netscape—companies currently locked in bitter rivalries.

Basically, the entire hearing was designed to put increasing pressure on Microsoft, which was the real thrust of the proceedings. A federal antitrust investigation is running concurrently. You begin to wonder if concepts like right speech and truth-telling have any place at all in our public forums. The committee chairman, who is very anti-Microsoft, said with complete seriousness, "This proceeding today is not directed to be critical of any one company in particular." Yeah, right. Then Bill Gates, called upon to defend Microsoft's business practices, replied with equal seriousness, "No, Microsoft does not have a monopoly in PC operating systems." Yeah, right.

Often in the world of work, and certainly in public discourse, there's just a parrying of words where truthfulness—and what dharma really means is truth—doesn't seem to have a place to play. So it may be difficult for us to bring these two worlds together.

I also read a story recently in the Wall Street Journal about entrepreneurs who had made hundreds of millions of dollars in various startup ventures, again in the computer industry, claiming that their interest in work wasn't about money. Not about the money. But then they quoted a venture capitalist connected to one of these startup firms who said, "Oh, well, yeah, the idea is first we do an IPO"—an initial public offering—"so the stock options of all the employees become valuable and they get rich. Then the next step is we aim to get bought out by a larger company through merger and acquisition. They buy us and our stock goes up further, so we get a double pop." Yet the heads of these companies are saying this isn't about money. Excuse me.

In my work life, apart from the dharma teaching I began in 1984, I've also worked as a computer programmer. I worked as a teacher overseas in the Peace Corps for two years in Malaysia. I helped run a small alternative school in Palo Alto in the mid-seventies when such things were quite trendy. What worked best about our school, I'm somewhat sorry to say, was its name: the Renaissance School for Creative Unfoldment. We didn't quite live up to the potential, but it was a great name.

My most recent job outside the dharma world was five years with Microsoft, which I started in technical support because I enjoy introducing people to computers. I moved naturally into sales and then into sales management. That's my most recent experience, and it happens to be with the company currently under federal scrutiny.

I still carry this bag from my Microsoft days—it's my low-cost briefcase. I was reflecting that very much like the company, it's actually held up quite well. It's ten years old now, but it's starting to get a little soiled. That's happening to Microsoft as well, so it's very fitting.

What I'd like us to explore today—and there are many different ways we could approach this issue—is different from some possible structures. This is not a corporate workshop on how to practice mindfulness in the workplace, although we'll certainly touch on that important aspect. I'm not a management consultant, so I won't try to advise people on the best ways to deal with employees or how to establish enlightened HR policies. I don't have any David Whyte poems to read, so some of you may be very disappointed and want to leave right now.

But I am primarily a dharma teacher, and what I'd like to discuss today is the life of work viewed from the perspective of dharma practice, specifically for people committed to following the Buddha's teachings through the Eightfold Path. I think this is a very fertile field for inquiry and investigation. All of us, having been practitioners for some time, have much to share from our own struggles and efforts to bring these two worlds together.

The day will combine some teaching from up front—I do have several things I'd like to share—but I also want to allow plenty of time for discussion, both in our large group where we can all listen to each other, and in different small group formats where you can speak more personally with one another, hear each other's challenges, and express your own. Since all of you have made different tracks and developed various understandings and pathways in this field, we can learn from one another.

So this is a day where I intend to learn a great deal from you, as well as hopefully sharing some of my own thoughts.

I'd like to just get a feel for the group to begin with. I'm curious, because people can come into these questions from many different angles. How many of you are currently involved in the world of business? How many earn your livelihoods there? Great. So it looks like somewhere between a third and a half of the group.

How many of you are in some form of administration that involves service or nonprofit? Good. How many of you are doing direct service work, like teachers or therapists? And how many of you are people who, in your work, work with your hands? Good. I'm thinking of people like builders, carpenters, fine artists, craftspeople, cooks, gardeners, body workers. You are a lucky group because you actually get to use your work as mindfulness practice. That's a rare category.

The so-called information workers find it much harder to combine work directly with practice. If you're sitting in front of a computer screen all day or your main task is intense interactions with other people, it's challenging to make that strictly a mindfulness practice, although we'll talk about ways to bring the Dharma into that work as well. But for people who actually work with your hands, it lends itself very well to practice.

Developing Dharma in the workplace is no different than developing Dharma in all of our life. We shouldn't compartmentalize or separate these two realms, and we shouldn't imagine that there's a magic bullet for bringing Dharma alive in work any more than there's a magic bullet for bringing Dharma alive in all of our lives. The Dharma practice of our life is a lifelong project. If you believe the teachings of the Buddha on rebirth, it may be a project of many lifetimes. At any rate, it's not a small-scale endeavor. And bringing Dharma alive in the workplace is no different.

I actually believe that our aspirations and goals in the workplace should be no different than our goals in our whole life—which is that we would like to embody in our work our deepest human potential for awakening, for living with true wisdom and compassion. These are the standards and goals that I think we should be aiming to bring into our work as well. I really don't see any difference between the two. As the day goes on and we talk about these issues in more detail, hopefully we can get a flavor of why that is.

Just as practice transforms our daily life, our everyday life, so practice also ought to transform our work. And if it doesn't, then it may not be working—the practice may not be working.

In my own life, I've experienced a tremendous change in my relationship to work. The first job I had when I got out of college was in 1969. The Vietnam War was going on, and I took a job with Shell Oil in Houston, Texas, as a computer programmer. I was doing Fortran programming on a large mainframe. I absolutely hated it. I hated the work. I was stuck in a small office—a private office that didn't have any windows. Even the door didn't have a window. I was basically cooped up in that office for eight hours a day reading manuals and writing programs.

I didn't have a heart connection with anyone else who worked there. I was starting to get interested in Buddhism and the whole field of psychology, and at Shell Oil in 1969 in Texas, I couldn't find anybody else who shared these interests. I felt very isolated and was miserable. That was the beginning of my work career.

Later in my career, I was working at Hewlett Packard in California. There I felt much more connection with people and much more openness from the company.

During my hippie phase, I had very long hair and a beard, and I'd come to work at HP in jeans. That was perfectly fine with the company. One Halloween, when everyone dressed up in costumes, I wore a business suit—that was my costume that year. I felt like bridges were beginning to be built.

However, even at HP, I still felt overwhelmed and fearful in my work setting. The corporation seemed too large and impersonal, and I felt lost within it, very exposed and at risk. Looking back now, I see that this was mostly a function of my own psychology at the time.

In my latest position at Microsoft, I felt I had matured enough to play a constructive role in the office. I was able to help other people who felt threatened, vulnerable, or at risk by being a sympathetic ear, a supportive presence. In my personal trajectory, I can see my situation evolving from isolation and fear, from feeling overwhelmed, to feeling —not in charge, because it's too volatile a company—but comfortable. I could provide stability and lend an ear to others in the organization.

This illustrates how, as we mature as people, we have the opportunity to bring a different spirit to our work. Practice should aim at moving us along this kind of continuum.

I'd also suggest that the workplace may be the richest area in which we can test our dharma understanding and apply it. In our families and personal lives, we have considerable choice about who we're with and how we spend our time. While we don't choose our children, there's usually love there to begin with. With partners and friends, we can tailor situations to suit our preferences better.

In the workplace, those choices are taken away from us. We can end up spending quite a lot of time with people we might never have wanted to walk through the same door with, much less spend eight hours a day alongside. The workplace, for most of us today, is our primary community.

It's rather unsettling that our society, through the Industrial Revolution, has structured itself so that our community is not where we live. Throughout human history for the last million years, our community has been the people near whom we live, who work together with us to survive, who become part of our extended family, and with whom we share our whole lives from birth to death. The Industrial Revolution has changed all that. That kind of community has been largely destroyed for most of us.

For most of us now, the people we spend the most time with, whom we interact with most frequently, are often the people at work. The real test of our dharma practice becomes: Can we bring our understanding, kindness, and compassion into those relationships? It's challenging precisely because we don't have the element of choice.

The main thrust of dharma practice in our life and work is to take the self-centeredness out of our existence. In brief summary, that's what dharma practice is all about—removing this self-centered attitude that believes my needs and wants should be the center of my universe. As we release this self-centeredness throughout our lives, we open to greater compassion and kindness.

The work setting is no different. It is entirely possible to approach our work with less self-centered investment. When we do this, we become a much cleaner vehicle for the dharma. Those in direct service know this firsthand—when we aren't so present as a "self," something else can come through us that can genuinely help people. But for anyone in a life of relationship, the opportunity for service exists by being less self-oriented in our views.

Krishnamurti offers this comment about love, which I think applies equally well to work relationships: "Love in relationship is a purifying process as it reveals the ways of the self. Without this revelation, relationship has little significance." I feel this is very true of our work relationships. If we're not using our work situation to illuminate ourselves—to reveal our clinging, grasping, and identification—then work has little significance beyond survival.

It's essential to begin inquiring in the work setting: What is this revealing about the ways I'm holding on, the ways I'm bound?

The Buddha gave us three main areas of the Eightfold Path through which to examine this question, and this is how I'd like to structure our exploration today. The Buddha divided the Eightfold Path—this path to awakening—into ethical conduct (sometimes called virtue), meditation (which involves effort, concentration, and mindfulness), and wisdom or understanding.

I'd like to examine our relationship to work and our workplace environment through the lens of these three areas: ethical conduct, meditation practice, and wisdom. Any approach to work that doesn't involve all three areas will be incomplete. We need to look closely at how each impacts our work.

I've structured today around giving a short talk on each topic—virtue, meditation, and wisdom—as it applies to our working life. After each talk, we'll have time for large group discussion, followed by specific questions for small group investigation. We'll

break into groups of five to seven to share our understanding, then reconvene to hear what emerges. Throughout the day, we'll include sitting periods to allow us to come to greater stillness and depth, so these issues can resonate more deeply within us.

Are there any questions or comments about the day so far? We'll explore each area in much greater detail, so if you have specific questions about mindfulness, for example, I'd ask you to hold them for now.

But any questions about the basic themes?

"I have more of a comment. I haven't attended one of your sittings before, and I'm delighted to have an experience with someone that doesn't start from a psychology background and has come to the dharma, having started from the technical world."

"Okay. So it's very interesting."

"Okay, thanks. Yeah, I feel a deep relationship between my love of science and my love of the dharma, because I basically feel that what the Buddha put out was the science of happiness. He just laid out very clearly: if you want to be happy in a wise way, here are the steps to take to do it. It's empirically verifiable, and each of us is our own laboratory for doing that."

"Thanks."

"Any other comments, questions? Okay, then I'd like to begin the day actually with a period of sitting, hopefully to allow us all to settle in a bit. And this will be about a 30-minute period of sitting meditation. I'll give some brief instructions because the day is open to those who haven't had meditation background. Let me just ask, are there people here who haven't had meditation instruction at Spirit Rock before? Okay? That's great. So I will give meditation instruction through this period."

Another aspect of ethical conduct is right livelihood. This is another way that the Buddha framed it. Unfortunately, the teachings of the Buddha aren't a great amount of help in this area. The Buddha was largely teaching monks and nuns. They have a very different form of livelihood. It's called begging. Now, if any of you want to learn how to be good beggars, the Buddhist texts provide great instruction. But the Buddha didn't envisage job titles like multimedia graphics engineer or substance abuse counselor. So he didn't have many discourses on those kinds of livelihood.

Here's what he said about right livelihood, just to give you an idea: "And what, friends, is right livelihood? Here a disciple, having abandoned wrong livelihood, earns his living by right livelihood. This is called right livelihood."

Okay? Have you got that?

Now, there are certain things that the Buddha defined as wrong livelihood, specifically trading in weapons, trading in living beings, trading in meat or fish, slaughtered animals—because the spirit of that goes against the first precept, which is not killing—trading in drugs and intoxicants—not pharmaceutical drugs, not medically alleviating drugs, but intoxicating drugs—and trading in poisons. Those are considered to be wrong forms of livelihood, or any livelihood that transgresses the precepts.

So I think for ourselves in the modern world, there are other issues about right livelihood. I think one of the big ones is: is this the right work for me? Is this the job that lets me flower as a dharma practitioner and as a person? Is it a job that contributes to my unfolding? It's a big question. Does it contribute to the well-being of myself and others? Or is it taking away? Is it a job that's injuring my well-being and injuring the well-being of others?

A question that comes in often for practitioners who are committed to the path of dharma is: do I need to be involved in service work? Because a lot of jobs aren't directly in service work. When I was selling Microsoft software, I mean, for God's sake, what difference does it make if the customer ends up running Microsoft Word or WordPerfect, right? I'm not making anybody's life better. I'm carrying out the aims of a business whose aim is to make money.

So, is it important for a dharma practitioner to be involved in a job that's directly service-oriented? And I think that's a big question. I think it's a question each person has to answer personally. So I don't think there's a blanket answer.

For myself, I found a service component in my life through going through different jobs. At one part of my life, I was doing part-time work as a computer consultant and part-time work as a dharma teacher. Other times, I've been full-time in one or another, a service job or a computing job. And that was the way that I brought it into my life, and that was okay for me. But it's a question I think everybody needs to look at for themselves. And I would recommend that people find a way to serve, even if it's not through their livelihood.

But those are some of the things I thought we could discuss when we come back.

That's basically all I wanted to say about ethical conduct. Any questions or comments?

[A participant shares a story about witnessing unethical decisions at work]

Well, I actually didn't know about the sexual component until months later. Mostly what I saw was a bad decision taking place. I also realized that if I had tried to do anything about that bad decision, nothing would have come of it. I would have created tremendous trouble for myself, and the outside situation wouldn't have changed at all.

My manager actually did hurl himself at that wall and created many enemies among those supporting that decision. He ended up leaving the company under a cloud—and since I'm not mentioning names, I'll tell you he left behind 10,000 options in Microsoft stock that today would be worth $28 million. I calculated that yesterday out of curiosity. I'll tell him that next time I see him—Spirit Rock says don't worry about it.

[Another participant comments]

When you were talking about how sometimes we don't intervene out of our own timidity, what I've noticed is that we have that anxiety, we don't intervene, and later when things escalate or continue, we're so enraged when we do intervene that we do it with blame and charge. That's hard to remember when you're faced with the fear.

Yes, that's an excellent point. Often when the issue first arises, it may appear smaller, and we think we can let it pass. But we accumulate a charge around it, and when it becomes a bigger problem—which most problems do if they're not addressed—both our charge and the stakes are much higher. Thank you for that insight.

[A participant asks about engaged Buddhism vs. monastic practice]

You talk about service and making that choice. With respect to being engaged Buddhists, isn't that a choice? One option is sitting in a monastery meditating. The other is engaging, getting out in the streets, practicing business, participating, really showing that Buddhism and the Eightfold Path can be practiced in an environment of greed and everything else.

I definitely believe that. The business world particularly needs more examples of spiritual business. It can make a real difference, and finding that service component in a business job is important for practitioners.

But can't that happen through the person's individual integrity—just having that quality, with people looking up to them knowing they're practicing that way?

Yes, it definitely can. I also think that most businesses, certainly publicly owned ones, have a bottom-line commitment to making profit for shareholders. The overt, stated aim isn't necessarily aligned with service goals. As someone working within that

organization, one of our goals isn't explicitly service-oriented—it's to help the company make money. So I see a blend there. It's important to respect the company's orientation while also finding our own service meaning within that framework.

When I'm talking about the individual—the leader of the company being able to engage people in day-to-day business—doesn't that provide great service?

Yes, I think it does. An individual at any level, whether CEO or someone at the bottom of the hierarchy, can manifest that integrity and commitment to ethics in ways that make a very strong statement in the world—and that's an important statement.

[Another participant interjects]

I think one has to be careful when talking about profit for shareholders or stakeholders, because that becomes political economics rather than substance. There's nothing wrong with making profit for shareholders, especially if it provides hundreds and thousands of people with right livelihood.

I don't feel bad about that at all. I'm not opposed to the basic capitalistic direction of our society or companies making profit. As you say, it provides many benefits to workers, their families, and creates positive ripple effects. At one point, my division of Hewlett-Packard was moving to Oregon...

At Hewlett Packard, I was invited to relocate when my division moved to Oregon. One statistic they shared—though I can't verify its accuracy—was that every job they brought to Corvallis would create five additional jobs in the local economy. That's truly beneficial.

This raises an important question about service. We tend to view service as external—the forms our time takes or what we actually do. Through my years in business while attempting to maintain spiritual practice, I discovered that service actually emerges from an internal process: how we address conflicts and paradoxes, how we find peace within ourselves, then transform the patterns present in mass consciousness. This is where true service occurs, rather than appearing to do something serviceable while acting relatively unconsciously.

Certainly, many people in so-called service jobs may do more harm than good. I'm reminded of Angela's Ashes, a remarkable book I recently read. A poor child growing up in impoverished Ireland during the 1930s encountered teachers—who were supposed to educate and nurture young people—who were so harsh, abusive, and dismissive that it's surprising they didn't completely crush his spirit.

A participant shared: "Practicing these precepts, I find it very difficult to protect myself from the demands of people around me who just want me to 'get on with it.' When I need to sit with a decision or watch things evolve, there's a whole way of communicating required. The challenge is dealing with a world of people who want you to go, do, decide, be, get it over with, and move to the next thing. For me, one of the largest challenges is learning to say 'not yet.'"

This touches on how we influence those around us and what kind of influence we can realistically have. We must be realistic that we may not always change the outcome of decision-making processes, including their timeframes. We can certainly voice our call for deliberation and request more time for reflection—this is usually beneficial—while recognizing that sometimes compromise is necessary and we may not always succeed.

Don't think you're having no influence if decisions don't go your way. Simply requesting a more deliberate pace may influence the process in ways that don't appear as outright wins but may slow things down somewhat. It's still worth continuing. In this way, you're like a brake pad on a spinning wheel. You might get worn down through repetition, but the brake pad is an essential part of any organization.

Another participant observed: "When you mentioned timidity, I was struck by that. I work in a public library as a manager, and while this has nothing to do with libraries specifically, timidity is very powerful because risks are perceived as so great. The threat of risk becomes a significant problem, and timidity plays too large a role. Courage doesn't blossom as you wish it could."

There's tremendous inertia in the status quo. Anyone who begins bringing interpersonal relationships into the light of awareness in a workplace introduces a threat for many people, because there's often an unspoken agreement not to discuss interpersonal dynamics in business or work settings. It's inherently risky.

After our break, I'd like to explore the second part of the Eightfold Path: meditation. This consists of three components—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Rather than detailing each aspect extensively, I want to focus on formal and informal practice in the workplace, as both can be tremendously helpful.

How often have you heard meditation teachers offer instructions like this: "In the middle of your workday, take three minutes. Stop what you're doing, sit there, and breathe." Many have heard such guidance, and nearly as many have tried it. But how many make this a regular part of work life? Only a few hands.

I believe this can be genuinely important in work life. When examining work settings, we need to cultivate the quality of right effort more than we currently do. Consider the difference between forty-five minute meditation periods you've experienced, or day-long retreats, or intensive seven-day silent retreats. The unique element in formal practice is this continual return to the present moment.

That we have the intention and we remember to do that again and again and again. It's that coming back that does the work. That's what starts the process of change.

What happens when we get involved in a work day is we forget to do that. So our work day is not meditation because we're not bringing in that moment after moment effort of coming back into the present moment. The best way to make your work day more of a meditation day is to do that more often—just to remind yourself in more moments to come back to the present and feel what's happening.

A real support for that can be just taking a three-minute break in the middle of a busy day: putting the phone down, not looking at the computer screen, closing your eyes, and just being with your breath for three minutes.

Now why, among all these smart people who have heard this instruction so many times, are there only two people in this room who do that? I'd like to suggest it's because of two reasons. One, we forget. Number two, when we stop in the middle of a busy work day, the experience isn't always so pleasant. Because what we find when we stop is we run into that mind that has been cranked up. We feel the thoughts going through so rapidly. We feel the agitation in the body. It's not a place we're comfortable hanging out.

That's been my experience. We don't like to sit in that place of suffering, which is self-created. We have generated that suffering through our own rapid-fire thinking and acting and behavior.

So a couple of things to say. One is, how's that thinking ever going to unravel? How's that pressure ever going to release unless we stop and give it time to vent? If you take the time and actually sit through it, whether it's three minutes at your desk or half an hour when you come home from work—you may come home from work and that same thing's still going on and you think, "Geez, I've wasted this whole sitting period. I've done nothing but think for the whole thirty minutes."

It's not a waste. The nice thing is that's the mind releasing its pressure. That's what it needs to do sometimes—just release. So the beautiful thing about taking that time when you come home from work is then you can go into the evening and some of the steam has been let out. Similarly in the workplace. If you just take a few minutes and realize

you're just going to be letting some of the steam off, you're not going to have that profound samadhi experience that you had on the sixth day of your last ten-day retreat at Yucca Valley, where the body dissolved and there was just light throughout your field of vision. That's probably not going to happen. But in stopping, you let some of the steam out, and that's useful.

The other thing that's important about that stopping is we actually feel what we're doing to ourselves with the pace of our work. The Buddha said on a number of occasions, "There is one thing, my friends, that keeps you bound. That is the not seeing of suffering." When we don't see the extent to which we induce our own suffering in the workplace, we don't have any motivation to change it. If we're going to be serious about taking a more balanced approach, being kinder to ourselves, being a little bit slower in our pace, we have to see the suffering that comes from the push. And the best way to do that is to be right there in the middle of it.

So when you take that three-minute break—and now I know everybody's going to go incorporate it—when you take that three-minute break, don't have the idea that you're going to have three minutes of calm, but be willing to experience whatever is there. That's what's in the moment. If you have the idea you're going to go into three minutes of calm, forget it. You're just going to be really frustrated. But that's not what mindfulness is about. Mindfulness is not about having my three minutes of calm. Mindfulness is about feeling what's real.

And what's real in this moment is this agitation that's a leftover of the pace. That's what we want to connect with. That's what connects us to the present moment. That is the truth of that moment. So just go ahead and experience that. That's okay. It's going on subconsciously anyway. So I would encourage you to take those moments both as a break and as formal mindfulness practice.

The other thing you can do in the workplace is start to bring formal practice into periods that are not particularly productive. How much time do you spend in meetings just sort of wishing that that person would finish up their rambling harangue and get on with something needed? During that time, you could be doing something actually useful, which is you could be doing a metta practice. The practice of loving-kindness, of directing thoughts of well-wishing to yourself and those around you, is terrific meeting practice. And believe me, you can do plenty of it and still hear every word that's going by. We've got that much bandwidth. And it really can change the flavor of your participation in that meeting.

Otherwise, it might just be totally dead time. You can do a practice when you're waiting in a queue. You dash out at lunch to do errands and find yourself waiting at the ATM, at the dry cleaners, or in the supermarket. You can practice there—perhaps standing meditation where you feel your feet on the ground and connect with your breath, or metta in those spaces.

For a long time, I had a lengthy commute when I was working at Microsoft—about an hour and a quarter each way. When I was a sales rep, it wasn't such a bad deal because I'd be out with clients during the day. But as a manager who had to be in the office more, going to the same place every day, it was a long drive.

For a while, I tried doing mindfulness practice while driving. I wasn't very good at it. I couldn't really keep my attention on my arms or stay with my breath. But what I found I could do much better was metta practice—the loving-kindness practice of sending wishes to people around me. In the Bay Area, there were always people around me, no matter where I went.

Ordinarily I'd be bugged by the guy in front of me going too slow, or the guy behind me wanting to go too fast. One thing I noticed: in any driving situation, I was the only person who wanted to go the right speed. Everyone else was too fast or too slow. The right speed for me is about ten miles over the posted speed limit, and I was apparently the only person at that speed. So everyone else was basically an irritant—either in my way or trying to get me out of theirs.

Doing the metta practice really changed my attitude. I highly recommend that practice to you.

When you walk from your office to the photocopier, you could take that as your one time each day for walking meditation. Don't try to do walking meditation everywhere you go—you won't enjoy it enough to sustain it. But pick one path you traverse repeatedly and say to yourself: "When I walk this path, I'm going to do walking meditation." That means simply experiencing the feeling in your feet and legs as you walk. That becomes your project during that time.

Finding little ways to bring practice into the work situation brings more reminders of the life of Dharma and adds that much more calm and attention to our experience.

But I feel by far the vaster field of practice in work—and probably the more important area—is in the realm of relationships: relationships to others and relationships within ourselves.

What normally happens in the workplace is that some communication—whether a phone call, meeting with a colleague, something a client says, or whatever—triggers reactions in us. These reactions are often difficult to be with. It might be fear, feeling belittled or embarrassed, anger, or desire. You walk down the hallway and somebody says, "God, I can't wait to tell you! The boss just came in and gave me a ten percent pay raise." And you know your pay raise was six percent. You're supposed to be happy for them. So desire might arise—wanting a pay raise yourself.

These qualities are an equal part of the meditational work, and probably the more profound part of our meditational work in the work setting.

There are many teachings from all the different Vipassana teachers about how to relate with anger, desire, and fear. I'm not going to cover that basic ground today—it's very important, central ground, but you can get that from many other places. What I want to encourage you to do is take that as part of your meditation practice. Really learn how to work with the experiences of these difficult emotions, which in the classical tradition we call the hindrances—the forces that oppose clarity. These forces arise again and again in work settings and in our outside life.

The question is: do we have the courage to be with these states of mind? It's difficult to be with the agitation of the fast pace, perhaps the restlessness of that. It's also difficult to be with these emotional states. I want to encourage the development of what we might call courage—the willingness to feel them.

That's all it starts with, is just the willingness to feel them. Or what Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan teacher, called fearlessness.

So I'd like to read you a little bit from Trungpa. This is from a book called Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior, on relating with fear and fearlessness.

"Fear has to be acknowledged. We have to realize our fear and reconcile ourselves with fear. We should look at how we move, how we talk, how we conduct ourselves, how we chew our nails, how we sometimes put our hands in our pockets uselessly. Then we will find something out about how fear is expressed in the form of restlessness. We must face the fact that fear is lurking in our lives, always, in everything we do.

"On the other hand, acknowledging fear is not a cause for depression or discouragement. Because we possess such fear, we also are potentially entitled to experience fearlessness. True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear but going beyond fear. Unfortunately, in the English language, we don't have one word that means that. Fearlessness is the closest term, but by fearless we don't mean less fear, but beyond fear.

"Going beyond fear begins when we examine our fear, our anxiety, our nervousness, concern, and restlessness. We must look into our fear and look beneath its veneer. Meditation is the tool for doing that."

And the meditation that we learn on our cushion—that lets us contact those feelings as we're just sitting—is the same mind that we then want to take into the workplace. We want to feel the fear when it arises and to know it as fear, to feel the anger when it arises and know it as anger, and to let ourselves feel that as part of ourselves, not to disown it or say it shouldn't be happening.

Let me back up for a moment. When I first was working in the corporate world, I didn't have the support of meditation. I felt often overwhelmed. Of course, what I felt overwhelmed by were my own feelings. That's all that can really overwhelm us. It's not what the external situation is, but our response to it.

As I gained more stability of mind through meditation, I no longer felt overwhelmed in those settings. And it was because one of the primary things that meditation develops is the quality that we call samadhi. Samadhi is usually translated as concentration. This is a little bit misleading. In the West, when we say concentration, we mean, "I'm going to focus on this and I want to ignore everything else." There's an exclusive sense in the way we use the word concentration.

But samadhi doesn't have that exclusive sense. Samadhi, as the Buddha talked about it, means a mind that is whole. It means a mind that has become collected in its attention and in its energy. And when the mind becomes collected, then it has tremendous strength. It has firmness, it has steadiness, it has stability.

So when, for instance, you sit down and try to pay attention to your breath, sometimes you'll find you're able to connect with quite a few breaths in a row. Sometimes you'll find you're just with one breath and then the mind is away. With one breath and the mind is away. This quality of being able to keep the attention where you want it is a sign of increasing samadhi. That's how you can tell when it's there. But the felt experience of it is that the mind feels very strong and stable.

And it's that inner strength that lets us be in a difficult environment where our emotions are being stretched and not feel like we're victimized, not feel like we're being overwhelmed by it. So in these three areas of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom, if in the workplace the primary feeling is one of vulnerability and fear of being overwhelmed, then the element that needs development is samadhi. And that's through the formal practice of meditation. That's what can give that kind of strength.

One of the aspects of samadhi, when it's well established and the mind becomes strong, is that this factor actually prevents difficult states of mind from arising or arising with any real strength. It's said in the classical tradition that samadhi suppresses the hindrances. So when that stability of mind is there, the upsets can't enter. If they do arise even, they can't really grab hold and dominate.

So that's one aspect—the formal practice. And then there's the informal practice: through moments of mindfulness or metta, being with the hindrances, being with the difficult emotions in all their forms, the effort of coming back together.

The other thing I think it's important to talk about—and I heard this topic in a couple of the small groups—is the whole area of simplicity. What is the balance in our life between work and practice? How much time do we give to one? How much time do we give to the other? Do we have the idea that we can enter into an eighty-hour work week or a hundred-hour work week and come home and be well balanced? Because I question that.

I think that for many, many years these teachings were preserved by monastics, by nuns and monks who led very, very simple lives, and that was for a reason. I think there's a reason that perhaps the Dalai Lama doesn't have a wife, three kids, two cars, a big home in the suburbs, and act as the head of a large corporation.

That's not to say that as laypeople we can't work with these practices, but I think as laypeople it's really important that we take a look at the balance in our lives between work and practice.

In our terms, I would talk about this as simplicity, and it doesn't have anything to do with being poor. It has to do with having enough leisure time that your mind can actually settle. Whether it's settling through formal practice or whether it's settling through doing things that you enjoy, not so important. But finding some leisure time so the mind can settle a bit.

In the classical terms, this quality is talked about as renunciation. And the purpose of renunciation is not some moralistic ideal that being poor is better or having no relationships is better. It's a way of keeping the mind less cluttered. Because when the mind is less cluttered, it can penetrate more deeply into life, and it can grow wisdom more easily. So it's a question that every person needs to look at and discover for themselves. Different people have really different tolerances for complexity than other people.

This is some advice from the Dalai Lama. It's from a book called *Awakening the Mind, Enlightening the Heart*:

"Practicing the Dharma does not mean you have to give up your profession or do away with your possessions. There are various levels of practice according to individual ability and mental disposition. Everyone cannot renounce the world and meditate in the mountains. This is not practical. How long could we survive? We would soon starve. We need farmers to grow food, and we need as well the support of the business community. People in all trades and professions can work honestly and conscientiously without contradicting the Dharma. In this way, they serve the community and help the overall economy. I usually advise people to devote half their time to the affairs of life and half their time to the practice of the teachings. This, I think, is a balanced approach for most people."

Wow. I usually don't advise people like that because I'd probably be laughed off the podium, but this is advice from the Dalai Lama. It's not to say that each of us has to do that, but it just might be an encouragement to look at where we've drawn that balance line in our life and think about other ways to approach it. Fifty-fifty. What would that look like in your life? Could you even imagine that? That's a challenge.

So there's something of a question about how do you make the trade-offs in your life between practice, your spiritual life, and your work commitments. And then also, of course, in that same level of importance come the family commitments. How do you balance those three? It's a difficult question.

When I was working at Microsoft, I got two weeks of vacation a year. And the first time I got my first week of vacation, I went on an intensive retreat. I signed up for the old students' retreat at Santa Sabina. I was going to do a week and then come back all charged up. I got about three days into it, and I realized that after that pressured life I'd been living for about the past year, I didn't want a bunch of bells telling me what I had to do that day either. And just going through this very demanding schedule with all these people around and queuing up for food, that was not what I wanted.

I put my retreat practice aside for five years. And I'm a retreat junkie. I'm a big-time retreat junkie. I love life in retreat. I've spent probably three years of my life in retreat over different times. I put it aside for five years because it wasn't what I wanted in my two weeks of vacation a year.

So one of the ways we can make this balance is by doing work for a while really full on, and then doing Dharma for a while more full on, or moving into a less work, more Dharma kind of balance. So it's not that we have to establish this fifty-fifty balance today, but to give some thought to how in our life we can find ways to bring in the Dharma practice more, ways to bring that balance about.

I think that's all I want to say right now about meditation as it relates to the work environment. Again, the important pieces are balance between spiritual life and work life, formal practice in the work setting and finding ways to do that, and the informal practice of relating to our own inner life, our own emotional life.

Questions or comments?

"I have a question. When the Dalai Lama is saying fifty percent work and fifty percent practice, by practice does he mean formal meditation?"

Well, the way he understands it, I think he said practicing the teachings. So I think for him, study is also a way of practicing the teachings. Meditation practice is another way.

Hearing the teachings is another way to practice. So I think all of that would come into it for him.

"But not some kind of incorporation practices?" someone asked.

He doesn't mean that necessarily. No, I think it's fine to separate the work life over here and the practice life over here. It's a formal practice. Well, study comes under that also, or hearing the teachings.

"In the work life, is that where we include family?"

No. That's why—sometimes family is hard work, but that's why I added that on as a third category. When I talked about establishing balance, I think the balance really comes between family life, work life, and practice. So there's even more complexity. And that's why I say I don't think you should think of applying this as if 50% of every day has to be practice.

Nancy wanted to comment since the issue of daily stopping had been raised. "It turns out Mary and I both started doing it during a period of great difficulty," she said. "Actually, it was a dharma teacher who suggested I get a watch—you know, the sound on the hour. Which is usually the bane of my existence, people who don't turn off their beeper watches! But what surprised me was that you said you find you have to be with uncomfortable feelings. What I also found was often there weren't uncomfortable things. I had this idea that my life was very stressful, but when I actually stopped and checked..."

I think what we're going to do is skip the small discussion groups on formal meditation. I don't know how much there is to say about that anyway, and spend just a few more minutes on that topic in the large group.

One thing I wanted to mention is for people who work with your hands—you can actually use virtually all of your work time as formal meditation practice. The way to do that is just keep your attention in touch with the sensations in your body as you're working. Stay in touch with your arms and the sensations in your hands, and let that be your primary focus of attention.

So if you're doing bodywork on a client, if you're doing carpentry, if you're doing gardening, you need to give a little bit of attention, obviously, to the task, but there's quite a bit of free attention that you can put in a formal meditation direction. This is highly encouraged, and it's something you can also use in meetings—just keep the attention focused in the body.

What I thought might be interesting to talk about now is putting together the first two things we've covered—right speech and right action and ethics in general—with these difficult emotions that come up in the workplace, which is the field of meditation. Let's talk about a question that often comes up: How do we deal with a difficult person at work?

Almost everybody I talk to has one somewhere—one of these difficult people. For myself, I had a manager who I felt was being very restrictive. I had gotten an email from a friend at corporate asking about what kind of computers I thought the technical support people in the field sales offices needed. So I wrote back a long email saying, "Well, I don't think our current specs are entirely adequate, and this is what I think the spec should be for our computer systems." I sent that back to this person, and they sent it around to a few other people.

Somehow my manager got copied on that email. The decisions on computers were made at a district level, but based on corporate recommendations. My manager thought that I was being insulting to her specifications and support. So she called me into the office, read me the riot act, and said, "Don't you ever send email to that person again. I don't want your comments on this office going out across this whole corporation."

I tried to explain that I was simply answering a mail that someone had sent me, but she didn't see it that way at all. I got so angry. I held my temper and bit my tongue, but I said what I felt about it—that I thought it was unfair, that it was very important for us to communicate with our peers. She wouldn't have any of it.

So I left the meeting very angry. I went to the basement parking garage and just stormed around up and down the aisles for a while, really angry. When I calmed down enough to come back in, I just picked up working again. But I had a very rocky relationship with that person for quite a long time from my side, mainly around this incident.

Looking back now, I think there was a trust issue there that I just didn't see at the time. I didn't see, "Oh, she doesn't trust me." Looking back, I could see some earlier incidents and now I understand. But for a long time, I just did not have a good relationship with this person.

We all probably have stories like that.

So I'm wondering—I'd be interested in hearing from people who have had difficulties with coworkers, with managers, perhaps with customers, about how you found skillful ways to deal with those situations. Any stories to share?

A participant shared: "I was thinking about this earlier, so I might as well tell this story. I work for a woman who is verbally abusive. She never really took off after me, but she would target our secretary quite a bit—we share a secretary. She would be sarcastic, critical, just use that cutting tone of voice.

When I first started working there, I thought, 'Oh my gosh, what am I going to do about this? I can't just ignore this. I have to do something.' But I was also new in my job and wasn't sure how to go about giving that kind of feedback to my boss.

What I decided to do—and it took a long time for me to decide—was to support our secretary in strengthening her own response. When she would complain to me about the boss, I would say, 'Well, have you thought about just saying, "Don't speak to me that way"?' I also decided to be a model, so any time this woman would start that tone with me, I would stop it right there.

It's been five years now, and it almost never happens anymore. I don't know whether I had anything to do with that, but certainly I think everybody's a little happier in that situation."

That's beautiful. It makes such a difference. You can just imagine how the secretary would feel going home after a day like that—she could be devastated for days. That kind of intervention sounds really skillful and seems to have made a real difference in people's lives. Thank you.

Another participant offered: "I was just writing down descriptions of a man I worked for for a couple of years. He was restrictive, punitive, dismissive, unresponsive, uncooperative, and unsupportive, among other things. It was really, really difficult for me. I tried every skillful means I could think of, and nothing worked. I just wasn't at a level to deal with it at all, so I suffered.

During this period, I was doing a lot of driving and had some tapes from Carolyn Myss. She had this one tape where she discussed the function of Judas in Christianity. Her conclusion was that Judas was responsible in a way for the Savior, because he had to die to be resurrected. She said that if there's a really, really terrible person in your life, thank that person as your savior.

That was the only thing I could think of doing, so I did it. It was incredibly transformative—it just changed everything. Every time he did something horrible, I didn't say it out loud, but I thanked him internally. It was always an internal response that helped me, and eventually it helped me right out of there. When I got out of there, I was done. I had taken what I needed to take and gotten what I needed to get."

That's beautiful. These two different responses really show the two avenues we can take in working with difficult people. One is direct outer communication; the other is inner transformation. Sometimes it may be helpful to do both. Sometimes there may only be one avenue open to us. I think there are some difficult people in work situations you simply can't talk to.

That's been my experience. And to try to would only compound the problem. So then if that avenue is closed, then the inner transformation is the only one.

The kind of gratitude that you're feeling is exactly the way the Dalai Lama talked about feeling toward the Chinese who came in, killed hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns, tortured people, reduced the Tibetan population from about seven million to six million in the years of their occupation. And the Dalai Lama says something like, "We need to be grateful to our enemy." He used that word—it's a strong word—because they teach us patience. He said, "How else would I have learned patience if it hadn't been for the presence of my enemy?" That's a very difficult kind of appreciation to come to, but if you can find that or develop that as a way of practice, I think it can be really powerful.

Thank you.

There's another situation where you don't necessarily have to deal with it alone. I had a new manager at a time when I was very depleted, and she was the opposite of help because she didn't know anything. She was also extremely anxious, so instead of being supportive at least emotionally, she was adding to the burden by micromanaging and saying things that were so ignorant they felt insulting. Luckily I had one other person that I could go to.

I was in very bad shape emotionally—kind of a combination of my work situation and that person—and I had somebody that I could tell the truth to. I really felt psychologically that this was character stuff with this person, and I saw absolutely no chance for help. But the good news is we had a healthy person that I had talked to, and he did research among all the people that were working for this person and found that my feelings were universal.

What is amazing is that I was dead wrong about this person's ability to change. She was tasked with talking with all of us about what our needs were, and I was pleased that I could tell her the truth compassionately. And this woman meets all my needs now. It's like a miracle to me. That doesn't mean I think she's perfect—she's a human, and she could be better in some things. But as far as really being a support and being a strategic resource at times, she really is. It's amazing.

That's terrific. Well, it sounds like a healthy organization in some ways. So looking for allies, especially people with influence and willingness to use it. That's a beautiful story. Thank you.

Others? Yeah, Nancy?

I have worked with someone for years, and he and I have had a pattern of conflict for years. For a long time he could do nothing right in my mind, and probably I the same. At one point I was doing an explicit practice of generosity every day—doing something generous.

One of the things about him that bothered me is that he speaks at length. It takes him half an hour to say good morning. So he started this one day, and I said, as my practice of generosity—I kind of thought through my schedule, and I said, "I can stay here until he finishes." And I listened.

There had been a meeting that I had heard about, and I had already heard the other side of the story, and he had, in my mind, done his usual screw-up. He started telling me about the story, about the meeting. He told me about the meeting. He told me the background of the meeting. He told me the background of the background, and he finally got to how hurt he was at all of this. Suddenly he was a human being. All of these years I had kept him as a bad guy, and suddenly what I heard was different. So I couldn't hold him at a distance anymore.

Then he did something that I actually did appreciate. I ran into him in the stairwell and without even thinking of it I said, "I really appreciate what you did."

Well, we now talk. And he doesn't talk at great length. He was disrespectful of everyone, including me, or so I thought. He is now much more respectful. I think it was this mutual disrespect that was feeding one another.

One of the things that irritated me is that he would do things—I thought he had very bad judgment—and then I would have to kind of backpedal and resolve the problems he had created. The other day he called me and said, "I'm thinking about doing this. What do you think?" That's fantastic.

It brings up a few different thoughts. For me, there's this lovely saying by Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching where he says, "If you want to shrink something, you must first let it expand." That really seems true with people who have a compulsive need to talk. As you say, what I've noticed is a lot of those people feel very isolated. It's a way of making some kind of connection or putting their story out. If you do give it the space, it takes away some of the need for that to happen. That's beautiful.

The other thing that I really appreciate in your story is the connection to the humanity. A lot of you probably know that when we do the loving-kindness practice, we start with the people that we feel close to—ourselves, friends, loved ones—and then we move to people we don't know, and then we move to people that we have a difficult time with. We call them, classically, the enemy or the difficult person.

One of the things that the metta practice does as you develop it is help you see—you can't do the metta practice without seeing what's lovable in each person. That's basically the focus of the metta practice. You just find out what's lovable in the person and therefore why you can feel friendly toward them. So even in doing a difficult person, we're almost forced to see, oh, what's likable in that person in doing the metta practice? How would this person's mother see them, for instance? I think that's a very skillful thing to do with someone who's a difficult person at work. Just to keep in mind: where's their humanity? How would this person's mother see them? It can really change our relationship.

Thank you. Any other difficult person stories?

Those were all really terrific. They all illustrated something different, and the movement within each one was actually inspiring. Thank you.

"How long did this take? The conflict? Or the whole episode, the whole situation, until it started to change?"

"It was over a period of months from when that first conversation where I really listened."

That's wonderful.

So I thought I would talk now a bit about the third area of the Eightfold Path, which is wisdom in the work situation. Then we will move into some group discussion and small discussion groups.

There are two aspects of wisdom in the Buddha's teachings. The first is right view, or sometimes called right understanding. The second is right intention, or motivation, or aspiration. It's like the attitude underlying our actions. Why do we do the actions we do?

I think that first it would be appropriate to talk about right intention in relation to our work. It poses the basic question: why do we work? I think it's really important that that intention in us be understood clearly because it's really the background for everything we do at work.

In the teachings of the Buddha, this quality of intention or motivation is so important because it is the seed of karma. When the intention is wholesome, then it's said the action that comes from it is wholesome, and the results of a wholesome action are wholesome in our lives. If we can set our intention straight in the beginning with an action, then it unfolds in a wholesome way, and the fruits of that action come back to us in a wholesome way. So this really is the nub of it.

Tibetans have a saying that everything rests on the tip of motivation. This is true in work as well.

Before we answer that question, I just want to step back once more and examine why we practice—to find a fundamental direction for motivation in our lives.

There's a beautiful saying of the Buddha that you've probably all heard: "Not to harm others, to help others if you can, and to purify the mind—this is the teaching of all the Buddhas." These three aspects—not harming, helping when possible, and purifying our own minds—form what I consider the basic aspiration and direction of dharma practice.

When I think about right intention as it applies to work, I connect it to these three areas: not causing harm, helping when we can, and using work to purify our own hearts.

Some motivations that come to mind fitting this wise intention include providing the requisites for ourselves and our families. The requisites in the Buddhist sense are clearly defined as food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—the four things the monastic community was always meant to have access to. These are wholesome motivations.

Our motivation might simply be that we enjoy the work—it allows us to use our talents and brings us joy. That's wholesome. It might be directly because we believe we can benefit others or the world through our work, embodying this attitude of non-harming and helping.

This points to one of the real benefits I see in the work arena. I've known many people, including myself, who have tried to avoid work at various points in their lives. Sometimes people avoid the work arena for many years because the conflicts they feel around it are too intense. But what people miss when they do this is the opportunity to develop confidence and self-esteem. The workplace can actually be excellent ground for developing trust in ourselves.

Confidence is sometimes discussed in Buddhist terms as trust, sometimes as faith, and I believe all these qualities come into play when we develop ourselves through work. It can be an arena where we genuinely develop deeper faith in life and in ourselves. And faith is what truly allows for surrender.

These are healthy reasons for engaging in work. What are some unhealthy ones?

Basically, when the project of self or the project of ego becomes involved in our work situation, motivation can go astray. The reason becomes not the wholesome ones we've mentioned, but rather using work to aggrandize our sense of self or inflate the ego in some way. You've surely seen this in people who take jobs as a way of defining themselves—as they grow in status or power, their ego becomes grander and grander, and they become increasingly difficult for those around them.

This represents the kind of unhealthy work motivation. When we use status, power, or wealth to build up or inflate our sense of self, it only creates more separation. It prevents us from seeing interconnectedness and builds separateness instead.

Of course, dharma practice can be used in the same way. "I'm a practitioner" or "I'm a Buddhist, therefore I'm better than non-practitioners, or better than non-Buddhists." But hopefully, within our meditation practice are the tools to see through that kind of pride, to see through such comparisons. In the work world, however, those tools of questioning, investigation, and paring away the unwholesome aren't usually built in. We have to do that work ourselves.

The Buddha identified eight concerns that tend to move the mind in an unhealthy direction, which he called the eight worldly concerns. These are distinguished from right intention or right motivation—they're the ones that lead us astray. The eight worldly concerns come in four pairs: pleasure and pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, and fame and disrepute.

There's nothing inherently wrong with any of these experiences. We all experience the alternation of these qualities in our lives. It's not that we've gotten life wrong if there's blame, if someone criticizes us, if there's pain in our experience. These things naturally rise and fall for all of us. But when we become attached to these as the primary direction of our lives, our motivation veers off course.

These things come in the process of living, arising naturally through the development of our livelihood. Sometimes they manifest on a tremendous scale. Someone mentioned recently that Bill Gates is now worth $45 billion given Microsoft's current stock prices—$45 billion! Yet he maintains it's not about the money.

These material circumstances are not inherently wrong, but clinging to them, being driven by them, or becoming obsessed with these results brings suffering. When we become tied to these outcomes as proof of our life's worth or validation of ourselves, we suffer as a result.

I find it helpful to keep the eight worldly concerns in mind, regularly checking how much I'm being driven by praise or blame. Am I pursuing something because I want personal glory, or because I genuinely want the outcome itself? Am I investing in work that lacks inner meaning but promises wealth? Or am I following what I honestly love, remaining open to whatever material results may come?

In this way, if you set your direction in life as following the Buddha's teachings—not harming others, helping when possible, and purifying the mind—this orientation itself becomes a safeguard against being consumed by the eight worldly concerns. But frankly, without this kind of spiritual or at least humanistic foundation, it becomes very difficult not to be consumed by these concerns.

You can observe this dynamic in Silicon Valley. The enormous wealth generated by high-tech startups reveals an interesting pattern. One report I read noted that people who have become wealthy through entrepreneurship in our generation have contributed less to charity than most previous generations. Perhaps this is because they're still young and haven't reached that stage of giving yet. Still, there appears to be much wealth pursued for its own sake—for enormous houses, multiple cars, and private jets that go far beyond what is needed.

Having a Dharma orientation while living in the world means, though it's become a somewhat trite phrase, being in the world but not of it. The societal mainstream is essentially fabricated out of these worldly concerns. To work and play in the world without being dominated by these concerns requires a different strategy altogether.

Letting go of the eight worldly concerns is essentially releasing our clinging to ego. If our work truly involves reducing the element of self and self-concern in our lives and livelihood, then these eight concerns are precisely what draw us back into the constellation of self within the work environment. They serve as invaluable pointers for keeping our motivation pure and direct.

This is a lifetime practice, not something accomplished overnight. Our motivation purifies just as all other aspects of the Eightfold Path purify through practice. Just as mindfulness purifies, wisdom purifies, and ethics purify, so too our motivation and intention become refined as our Dharma practice develops.

There's another aspect of wisdom—right view—that I wanted to mention. I try to carry an attitude, one I've heard expressed often today, that in work settings, people are more important than organizational goals. While people serve as the means of an organization, I believe they are more valuable than the ends themselves.

When I worked at Microsoft, I wasn't particularly overt about being Buddhist. Instead, I tried to tune into everyone's well-being. I would go out of my way to visit people at their desks, checking in on how they were doing with their work, listening if they had complaints about their manager or difficulties in their home life. I knew something about the personal lives and relationships of those who worked for me, considering this an important part of being present there. I wanted everyone to feel there was a sympathetic ear somewhere in that office.

Interestingly, during my time there, virtually no one showed much interest in meditation. I developed good friendships at Microsoft, but at most, I managed to bring two people to hear Jack speak on a Monday evening, and that was about it. Yet I was deeply touched because after I left, once three different couples learned what I was doing five years later, they asked me to perform their weddings. This felt like a sweet acknowledgment of the connection we had formed.

Another wholesome intention you can bring to the workplace is what I call the bodhisattva spirit—being present to listen to people's difficulties, to discover where people are struggling. This can become a profound motivation and intention for being there.

Great teachers are described as wish-fulfilling gems who bring to each person exactly what they need. Imagine what a blessing it would be if such a wish-fulfilling presence existed in a workplace. When there's one person in an organization whom everyone genuinely appreciates, this creates a tremendous unifying force. This is one way to build authentic teams—the reason leaders can be so vital to organizations. When everyone loves one person, it draws the entire group together. Love possesses this naturally unifying influence.

What can we cultivate in our workplace relationships to bring forth this quality of love? When this presence exists, it can genuinely transform the workplace, even if we're not the designated leader or manager. Can we embody the bodhisattva spirit in our place of work? Can we be there to love other people and listen compassionately to their difficulties?

The only thing that limits our capacity to be bodhisattvas in the workplace is our own development. If we're unable to love our colleagues fully, it simply means we haven't yet learned to love enough ourselves. This becomes our practice then—to grow sufficiently so that we can genuinely love the people we work with.

Let me now address some specifics around the eight worldly concerns, beginning with money, which has surfaced several times this morning. Money is such a charged issue, perhaps even more so in our culture because we have such abundance.

First, I want to clarify the Buddhist attitude toward money. There's potential for confusion here because Buddhist monastics—nuns and monks who are often held up as ideals of practice—take vows of poverty and celibacy. This might lead people to think that being a poor Buddhist is somehow better, that having resources is spiritually suspect, and that having absolutely nothing would be ideal.

The Buddha established monastic life as a way to allow total focus on Dharma practice. For some, this is a beautiful lifestyle. But for most of us in the West, that path isn't unfolding naturally. Most teachers and practitioners today are laypeople.

The Buddha spoke very differently about money with laypeople. He taught that wealth is the result of generosity—there's a karmic connection between generous acts we've made in the past and the abundance we experience today. He said there is great value in having wealth if it's used to enrich the Dharma. When wealth serves positive ends, it becomes a very positive force, creating opportunities for generosity that benefit both giver and receiver.

The relationship between monastics and laypeople was deliberately structured so that monastics depend on lay support. In our Theravadan tradition in countries like Thailand, monastics cannot keep food overnight. When I was a monk, if I wanted to practice in remote places away from villages and working people, I couldn't do it because I would starve. The Buddha designed this system so that monks and nuns must live near villages to collect their morning meal through begging. Thus, monastic survival depends entirely on the wealth and generosity of surrounding communities.

Spirit Rock exists only through the generosity of many people—some without much money, some with moderate means, and some who are wealthy. This center stands here because we've been blessed with generous gifts from people across the economic spectrum.

The Buddha emphasized maintaining proper perspective on money. As he taught—and I'm paraphrasing since I don't have the exact source—"Of small concern for a practitioner is an increase in wealth. Of great concern is an increase in wisdom. Of small concern is a decrease in wealth. Of great concern is a decrease in wisdom." In the Buddhist tradition, wisdom is often called the true wealth of a practitioner.

Money raises countless questions in relation to work. How much is enough? How much do I need? Will I run out? Am I getting what I'm worth? Is someone else earning more than me? What should I do with the money I have? How much can I spend on personal pleasures? How much should go to other causes, to helping people, to charitable purposes? There are so many misconceptions and intense feelings around money that clarity becomes difficult. Yet as one of the eight worldly concerns, it requires careful monitoring.

Another particularly interesting concern involves responsibility and fear of failure or blame. This surfaces frequently in work because we're essentially paid to take responsibility. You don't hire someone unless you're giving them a chunk of work for which they become accountable.

How does that feel? When you're responsible for a major piece of work, what arises? It can feel like a real burden because if we fail, many people will know. Success or failure often becomes quite visible. Sometimes we avoid additional responsibility simply to avoid increased visibility.

I definitely felt this way at Microsoft. The path was open for me to advance higher on the corporate ladder, but I chose not to pursue it. The higher you climb, the more visible you become.

And the more visible you are, the more praise and blame you get. I was quite comfortable with my current level of praise and blame. I wasn't making a lifelong career out of it. To a certain extent, I actually hid in the organization for a while because I didn't want to deal with any more praise and blame.

This was probably a reflection of both my wisdom and my fear. Maybe I would have grown more if I'd been in a more visible position—I don't know. But I think it was both those qualities operating in me.

The bottom line, the way to be free in this area, is something that Krishna told his charioteer Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita: "The way to freedom in this world is to act without attachment to the fruits of your action." This is a deep spiritual teaching. The way to freedom is to act without attachment to the fruits of your actions. This is really difficult to carry out, but this is another way of saying that the eight worldly concerns shouldn't drive us.

This is, in many ways, the essence of right effort. In our work and in our dharma practice, in our meditation practice, we want to pay attention, but then we don't know what will result. We have to pay attention and just trust that mindfulness leads to wholesome states. But we can't force that. In our work also, we make our right effort, but we really can't control the results.

When I was a sales rep, I used to get nervous before some presentations because there was potentially a lot of money on the table. If the customer bought from us, it could mean millions of dollars of income, and a lot of it might be influenced by one or two presentations. If we lost it, it would be clear—I was the account rep, I lost the account. So I felt that responsibility.

But what I started to realize is I couldn't control the outcome of the customer's decision. All I could do was do the best presentation that I could. The way I really got that lesson was from sports. I play tennis, and it's really clear—some days I can go out and be playing really well and still get beaten because the other guy is just too good. So I go into a match realizing I can't control whether I win or lose. The only thing that's under my control is whether I play my best game.

This has been a really helpful reshaping of right effort for me—just to play my best game. If I win, that's great. If I lose, that's too bad. I can't control that. But what I can do is play my best game. And if I play it without fearing the result, it goes better. I play better. I present better.

I think about this a lot at Spirit Rock. Deborah Urban is with us today—she's just joined staff as our development director, and she has the lofty assignment of trying to fundraise the rest of the money we need to finish the meditation hall, which you probably saw up there on the hill at lunchtime. We've got about another $1.3 million to go, hopefully by the end of this year.

Organizationally, Deborah has some responsibility for that. But if Deborah felt that she had to control the outcome of making sure we got that money, she'd probably go crazy. So I want to say publicly, Deborah, you don't have that responsibility. Deborah's responsibility is just to identify the best means for us to try and raise the rest of that money and then to implement a plan. But we can't control what happens with that plan. Maybe we'll get the money, maybe we won't. If we don't, we'll borrow it. It's okay. It just means people will pay a little more for retreats than they would have. But it really is okay.

If we can just have that attitude that we do our best and we can't control the outcome, it's a way to be more comfortable with responsibility.

Another area where a lot of ego gets tied up is ambition in work, which is basically the ego investment in recognition and being rewarded with money and title and so forth.

When I went to work for Microsoft, I made a vow to myself that I wasn't going to get my ego involved in my work. I was just going to go in and do the job, and I wasn't going to get caught up in the office politics, or whether I got a promotion, or whether I was getting paid enough. I knew it was enough money to keep me alive. I wasn't going to get involved in praise, recognition, rewards, awards, and so forth.

I succeeded for about six months. And then my ego got totally involved. I could see myself really wanting to be recognized and wanting a good review. We had performance reviews every six months and they were numerical, so I knew exactly where I stood. I wanted the highest percentage increase that would be based on that numerical rating each time, and I wanted awards at sales meetings and things like that. So it snuck in even though I was trying to be aware of it and didn't want it to happen—that level of ambition.

All I could do then was watch it with perspective. And that's okay too. If we can watch that stuff with perspective, we don't have to be ashamed of having an ego. In case you haven't noticed, the whole world does, except for maybe the Dalai Lama and a few other people. So it's not shameful to have an ego.

How can you be in sales in that type of environment and not get caught up in that thing when they have the big board showing who sold what this month? That's a horrible job not to have that. I couldn't. That's the simple answer. I couldn't. I'm sure the Buddha could have, but he probably wouldn't have bothered.

The more we understand that those things don't ultimately matter, the more freely we can play in that world. I knew people who were freer than I was about that stuff, and they hadn't even done meditation practice or even psychotherapy. I respected that a lot.

This ambition is really always focused on my pursuits and interests and self-concern. And ultimately, that's suffering. That's why clinging is suffering. Shantideva, who was an eighth century Indian teacher, said, "All happiness in this world comes from desiring others to be happy. All unhappiness in this world comes from wanting only myself to be happy." So this ambition stuff is usually only about myself. But when our interest is in really the welfare of others too, that's when the potential for happiness really grows.

I mentioned the person that I knew, my friend and manager who left Microsoft basically out of ambition. He had had ambition for promotion to the next level, and when it was thwarted, he got so upset he left, and left behind what turns out to have been $28 million.

Someone I know was married to a short man. He actually was a very ambitious person. He graduated from the Naval Academy and became a commercial airline pilot, then went to work as an executive for GE and started up General Electric China back in the late seventies. They moved to Hong Kong for a few years while he was heading up that operation. His wife didn't like traveling. She didn't like being the corporate wife. She didn't like that he was away all the time. She didn't like having to move every few years so he could get another promotion.

At one time she said, "God, if he'd only been a couple inches taller, he wouldn't have had to go through all this." It was just a quick quip, but it's a pointer to the fact that this kind of ambition often comes from personal insecurity. It's often a lack of real fulfillment that makes us invest in things like title and status and power over other people, as though because we have the ability to tell other people what to do in the workspace or to allot them their percentage raise, it makes us a better or more important person. It's a fundamental illusion.

I think I'll stop there. I had a little topic on competitiveness, but we'll maybe let that come out in the discussion.

I'd just like to close by reading a quotation from Chuang Tzu, who was a Taoist master of 500 B.C. A lot of you have probably heard this before. It's called "The Empty Boat," and in many ways it's a beautiful model for living in the world.

"If a person is crossing a river and an empty boat collides with his boat, even though he is a bad-tempered man, he will not become very angry. But if he sees someone in the other boat, he will shout at him to steer clear. If the shout is not heard, he will shout again, and yet again, and begin cursing, and all because there is somebody in the boat."

Yet if the boat were empty, he would not be shouting, and he would not be angry. If you can empty your own boat crossing the river of this world, no one will oppose you and no one will seek to harm you.

So I thought what we could do is just open up to some discussion in the large group first. Then we'll probably take one more break and come back. And I think some small groups might be interesting to discuss some of the issues that we've touched on, like money, ambition, self-esteem, and so forth.

So comments, please.

"Your comment about not controlling the outcome, I find that a wonderful thought, but it seems like in the workplace it's really difficult, because basically all evaluations, and even if you're in charge and other people are looking at you to see what you're doing, it's pretty much based on action. And Spirit Rock sounds like a wonderful employer, but other places aren't. But I'm just wondering how you realize that, how you think one can realize that in the context of what the work world tends to be like."

I think that the outcome goes best when we're not attached to the result of it. It's the same in meditation practice. Meditation practice is such a deep teaching on this very topic, because if you approach your meditation practice with a specific goal in mind, you're going to be frustrated again and again, because meditation practice unfolds according to the ripening of the individual process.

So, for instance, people come on a meditation retreat, they think that they're supposed to come to greater peace, and after three days they find their mind is going crazy. And that's the good part. And then after four or five days it's dredging up the most terrible memories of anything we've ever done or said to someone in our life. And after six days it's unfolding this deeply held grief or some sadness that we've carried with us since we were ten years old that we didn't even know was hiding there. And it feels anything but peaceful.

So if we come into that meditation experience thinking that the outcome should be peace, we're going to be frustrated. If we surrender to the process and stay with it, with that good intention, then eventually there's this huge clearing out and there's a great deep level of peace that's accessed and that's touched and that becomes really available to us. But we have no control over when that happens.

In the workplace, obviously we have much closer control and more immediate results, but we really can't strictly determine what somebody around us is going to do in response to what we do. And so all we can do is do our best job. But if we do our best job and the goals have been set reasonably, then the best results will come. So I think that element of surrender is really important for anyone who's in a work setting as a way of doing their best job. And when you do your best job, you have the best chance of getting the best results.

We do take responsibility in our workplace for not having gotten the results, and I think that's entirely appropriate. But we also have to understand with wisdom the interdependence that means that we can't control it entirely. For example, Kofi Annan goes to negotiate a truce with Saddam Hussein, and he does his best effort, but he can't control the outcome of that. He has the whole responsibility for the peace of Iraq riding on his shoulders, but he can't control the outcome. But he just goes and does the best job he can. And in this case, fortunately, the outcome came.

So I don't know if that helps. There has to be the sense of responsibility, but underneath it, we have to know with wisdom that we're not totally in control of anything, not even our own health.

"I'm just curious, what happened to the manager that left Microsoft?"

Well, he actually, it was a sad story actually because he went to a few different companies that didn't seem quite the right fit and is still in the high tech industry and still in sales. He was a vice president at a fairly well known software company for a while, but that ended up in difficulty. And so he bounced around a bit. I think it was very unsettling to his confidence the way that that story happened.

"Could you comment briefly on the distinction between right effort and right action?"

Right effort and right action. In terms of the Eightfold Path, right effort is really defined in psychological terms. It's defined as what we do to bring about more wholesome states within our own hearts and minds and what we do to decrease the unwholesome states within our hearts and minds. Right Effort is directly connected with the meditation practice and the mindfulness practice and awareness.

I'd say the link is that when we have purified the heart more and we can see more clearly, then our intention becomes purified, and it's through the link of right intention that our actions become pure. So right action is kind of what we do in the world in relation to others, and it's purified by a clear seeing and then traveling through this vehicle of wise intention.

"How do you, or how does one come to terms with, say, the difference between how much money somebody makes and what they do in terms of its value to society? You've got that athlete who tries to kill his coach and he's worth millions, and then you've got Mother Teresa. And then the people that seem to be money magnets who really are mean or abusive people that really don't have a whole lot going on for them, yet they always seem to have plenty of money. And then you have bright, articulate, attractive people that have a lot of stuff seemingly going for them. They have trouble getting jobs or getting really well-paying jobs or seem to always be underpaid."

I mean, if money's energy, why is it not flowing toward what's righteous almost?

I wish I knew. I share your dilemma. There seems to be a lot of injustice in the world around this issue of money. I'll tell you basically the answer that one of my Tibetan teachers gave to me. When a similar question like that was asked, he basically said, "This is samsara, and we don't expect things to work right in samsara."

It's not a cynical answer, but in the teachings of the Buddha, the world is deeply troubled. The world is not in good shape in the eyes of the Buddha's teachings. There is a tremendous amount of blindness going on in the world. As you can tell from the wars and the corruption and the fighting and the greed and so forth, there's a tremendous amount of blindness going on. That blindness expresses itself in human suffering. So there's also blindness in the consumer society.

As long as the larger mainstream society is not driven by a deeper underlying motivation for the liberation of heart and mind and the welfare of all sentient beings, there are going to be huge injustices. I think that the road to smoothing them out is twofold. I think it's interaction through people who are interested in transforming their own consciousness, and I think it's through outer action of social activists pointing out the failings of the society at large to do what's needed in areas that need to be attended to. But there's clearly no quick solution, and I think there's a lot of injustice in the world today.

"Doesn't karma play a large role?"

Say some more.

"I believe that people come in with a particular dharma that's based on whatever karma they've had in previous lives. And some people are not here to make money right now. I mean, that's just not their dharma. They have other things they have to learn. Other people make enormous amounts of money, and they have things to learn from that. There's a balancing of the scales. I think we tend to look at things over such a short period of time. I mean, a lifetime is no time in the scheme of things."

This is definitely within the teachings of the Buddha. It's very clearly stated that people carry with them into each life the mental tendencies that have built up through their actions, based on their intention, in past lives. And so people come into this life with different propensities.

The Buddha said, I think I mentioned earlier, that one of the prerequisites for abundance was generosity. He said that people who are kind in their relationships to living beings are blessed with long life. And he made a number of comments around karma like that. So that's certainly one explanation. That's one possible explanation for all the discrepancies of talent, of welfare, of wealth, of health that you see around the world.

"And yet also we hear the stories so often of those good Samaritans who risk their life to help someone, and their life gets cut short. And we also hear the term, why did he or she have to go? He was such a good human being. It's a hard one to... We never know. People like Martin Luther King being killed so young, John Kennedy, Princess Diana. We never know why. And it's one of those mysteries that we know we're exposed to also."

Nancy?

"Could you say something about being the bodhisattva of the workplace and balance? When we're already trying to balance work and not work and various aspects of work, and then in most workplaces there is so much need and so few people filling that role that if you step in, then it becomes a bottomless pit."

Good question. I think you have to bring a sense of balance to that as well. And it's clear that if you want to devote some time in your workday to listening to other people, there's going to be a price to pay either in the quality of your own work or spending more time on your own work. So I think it's just another of the things you have to balance.

I think you have to learn in the work setting when to say no to people. If somebody drops by for a chat, being able to set time limits on it. Being able to tell people that you'd love to talk to them but you can't today. Getting sort of time management rules,

you might say, within your bodhisattva relationships. But I think you just have to manage that like all the other tasks. You know, I just kind of saw it as one other task on my to-do list and I had to prioritize it and give it time within my other tasks.

Yes?

"That makes me think about a workplace where there are a variety of competencies, a variety of energies, and a variety of willingnesses, so that some are there a whole lot more than others, and they're all expecting, or they're all perceived as the same or equal. And so that really does have a... I mean, something really does begin to erode..."

for those people who are contributing more while others contribute less. The confidence in the whole workplace begins to deteriorate.

Well, in the places I've worked—which have been both for-profit and non-profit operations—I actually found that the for-profit organizations had much better performance review systems than the non-profit places where I've worked. I strongly endorse performance review systems, and I think numerical ratings are excellent tools.

When we're clear about expectations and honest about performance, it serves everyone. It protects those who are giving their all from burnout and resentment, and it offers those who aren't fully engaged a chance to either step up or find a better fit elsewhere. This kind of clarity isn't harsh—it's actually compassionate, because it prevents the slow erosion of trust and effectiveness that happens when standards become unclear.

The bodhisattva path requires us to be skillful in how we work together. This means being both generous with our energy and wise about sustainability. It means creating systems that support genuine contribution rather than just good intentions. When we bring this level of discernment to our spiritual communities and workplaces, we create environments where the dharma can truly flourish—not despite our human limitations, but through our honest acknowledgment of them.

This is how we practice the middle way in our everyday working life: neither burning ourselves out in misguided service nor withdrawing from our responsibilities, but finding that skillful balance where our efforts can be both sustainable and genuinely beneficial.

CHAPTER 195

Trust & Courage

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *Guy Armstrong offers a heartfelt exploration of trust and courage as essential qualities for spiritual development, particularly during times of transition and uncertainty. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on the five spiritual powers (saddhā, vīriya, sati, samādhi, paññā), he focuses on confidence/faith and energy/courage as foundational elements of practice.*
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> *Armstrong weaves together diverse wisdom traditions, sharing Hawaiian kapuna teachings about respectfully entering sacred spaces, personal stories of spiritual awakening in the Philippines, and insights from monastic tudong (wandering) practices. He distinguishes between "bright faith" - the initial inspiration that draws us to practice - and "verified faith" - the deeper trust that emerges from direct experience of the Dhamma's fundamental truths.*
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> *The talk emphasizes practical approaches to cultivating trust: slowing down, embracing silence and solitude, letting go of comparing mind, and taking refuge in the present moment. Armstrong explores how understanding impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā) through direct experience develops the verified faith necessary for sustained practice. He encourages practitioners to trust their organic unfolding, like fruit ripening on a tree, rather than forcing spiritual development through willpower alone.*

I'm not sure how many of you are new today who have just come in to do the last six weeks, but whoever you are, I'd like to welcome you to this sacred space that you're entering into. It's very fortunate that you have come into this place, this sacred space, this exquisite silence that has been prepared for you. Those who are here have, in a way, worked very caringly to prepare this space, this place of practice. And so we welcome you with a lot of metta into this place, and acknowledge that it's a great time of transition for you and for those that are receiving you.

In the islands where I come from, in the Hawaiian islands, there is what we call a kupuna system. It's a system of respecting our elders, having elders in the community that continue to teach the younger ones. It's quite a beautiful way that they've preserved in all of the islands. The schools, the elementary schools, actually hire the older people in the community—the older Hawaiians and the Chinese and the Portuguese and the Japanese—and they have them come and speak to the children about the old ways, the way of respect for the land, the aina, for the elders, for a way of life that has held together a community.

One of the great kupunas of Hawaii, her name is Hana Viri. We called her Nana as an endearing way of addressing her. She was actually the godmother of my youngest daughter, Therese, who I speak of a lot. Therese couldn't be born until she had a Hawaiian name, and it's just kind of a little side story. I was carrying Therese for an awfully long time, past her due date, and Nana had not called yet to give the Hawaiian name. I called Nana and she said, "It hasn't come yet to me." So finally Nana called and told me what her name would be, which is Ihilani, Heavenly Splendor. And that night Therese was born. Nana told me that she would be born that day.

So they're quite powerful beings and they're simple. Many of them haven't even gone or finished elementary school. But they're simple in their ways and their understanding runs deep because of their simplicity.

What Therese learned, one of the lessons Therese learned from Nana and that I learned from Therese and from Nana, is this: when you are going to a new place, when you're going across a threshold into a new place—and mostly in Hawaii it's referred to when you go to the ocean or you go to walk in a bamboo forest or you go to swim in one of the waterfall pools or you hike in any one of the craters—before you enter the place you must stop and really be careful and be quiet and pause and really feel the new place, the new space. The Hawaiians have a way of saying that you ask permission if you can enter that place, that new space. And so then you say, "I enter this place with respect."

So I think this is what is important when we enter a new space, not only for the people who are new, who are coming in new, but for the people who are already here. We're entering new spaces. We're opening to new places in our hearts and in our minds. It's important to enter with respect, to really pay attention at those places, those thresholds that we cross over.

When I traveled quite some years ago, I traveled to China and went to a place called the Forbidden City. This is the old palace grounds of Beijing. Many of you might remember this if you saw the movie The Last Emperor. It was filmed in that place called the Forbidden City. I noticed that at every entry level, every entryway to a new place, a new hall or palace or pavilion, they had these foo dogs—these dogs that were kind of part dragon looking and part pit bull looking.

I asked once, "What's the significance of these dogs or these symbols?" To make a long story short and putting it in a way that I felt was appropriate for my own life and my own practice, they're a symbol of and a sign and a reminder of paying attention when you come to a place of transition, paying attention when you cross a threshold

and remembering that you're entering into new ground—to leave whatever is old behind and to enter with kind of empty hands and an open heart. The dogs, the foo dogs, are there to remind us of that, to wake up, to pay attention.

So tonight I wanted to choose a subject to speak about that could speak to everyone, whether you're just coming in or you are continuing on your journey here. So I chose the topic of trust and courage.

Usually when choosing a subject to speak about for a Dhamma talk, I try to see for myself what I need to learn, what I need to pay attention to, what I need to look into to remind myself of, and how can I bring these ancient teachings that I revere so much alive through my own experience. How can I share that with you? Because I know your time here is really precious. So how can those teachings have meaning for us in this day and age, in this 20th century?

Just reflecting again on the major transitions that we make while we're here in practice. Here it's the halfway mark and it's the beginning for many of you who have just come in. For myself and also for many of you, it's a time when our bodies are changing and aging. It's a time in my own life when this year I'll turn 50. It's when my relationship to career, to an old career is ending and more work in the community, offering of my services in the Dharma, is happening. It's a different relationship as mother, as the children leave. And so it's a time of major transition and a time when a lot of trust and courage is needed. There are so many beautiful openings that can come from this time.

I feel that I'm blossoming in a new way, in a way I've never felt before. And in that aspect, it's kind of exciting. But the difficult part is that sometimes I'm overwhelmed with a great deal of doubt about how I can make it through—about how I can make it through being away from home or being away from my children, or just getting through a sitting or getting through a dharma talk. Will I be able to open? Will I be able to give and to share?

So faith in myself, trust in myself and in my ability to open, can seem like it happens so slowly, almost imperceptibly. And having trust in that kind of imperceptible, slow opening is really important on the way, on our path.

I used to have a lot of brazen courage, a lot of bold courage to do the things I needed to do in life—to raise kids by myself, to send them to college, to continue on with the spiritual path while doing that. And a lot of times I felt like my boldness came from not knowing, or from a sense of innocence, or maybe even ignorance. I used to be told a lot that I was saved by my own innocence, by my own ignorance, by my own stupidity. It kind of helped me get through.

But now that I've lived a little bit of life and my eyes are more open, I'm not willing to go through my spiritual life with that kind of brazen boldness, with that kind of energy. It takes a gentleness now, a trust and courage that I never had before—a willingness to allow my heart to open slowly and to enjoy the path, the opening, to savor each moment along the way. Because there's so much learning that comes from each moment of opening.

So I began to wonder: how could I fit these two aspects or these two qualities that we need in our spiritual life into the teaching? In reviewing the five of this and the three of that and the seven of this, I saw that there are two powers that are pointed out in the teachings, and they're part of what the Buddha called the five spiritual powers. These five we are speaking of during this retreat.

The first one is confidence or faith. Another way of saying that might be trust. The second is energy, and that could be translated into courage—the courage to bring forth that trust and to use it in our life, in our spiritual awakening. The third is mindfulness, which we talk about every day in the instructions and which is interwoven within everything we speak about here. That's the core of our practice. The fourth is concentration, and the fifth is wisdom—all of which we're touching upon as we do the practice here.

We've all heard this term: leap of faith. In the past, this kind of faith seemed to me like something associated with leaping and not looking—just kind of taking off on a path or on a journey and not knowing where we're going with our eyes closed and kind of blind. But as we go along and we see more things along the way, as we get older, our energy and time are precious commodities and we can't do that anymore. We used to be able to make mistakes and to kind of backpedal a lot and then begin again. But now it's important to walk the path more carefully. It's not a time for wasting.

Recently I was inspired by a writing or an account of a five-day journey by a group of nuns. This is called a *tudong*—I'm not sure where the accent is. But it was written by Sister Jitindriya of England, and it really touched me, some of the things that she said. I'm pretty sure it would be okay with her if I read some of her writing to you, so I'm going to take the liberty of doing that.

It was a journey that she and some nuns took from the Amaravati Monastery in England to a place called Devon, and it took a long time. I'd like to tell a little bit of this story or weave it in because it relates in a way to our own inner journey, and also because we're just always trying to find ways of keeping you awake during a dharma talk.

Because it can get pretty boring to talk about the same old things all the time. I know sometimes stories are completely unrelated to what we're talking about, but it really helps.

This is part of what she says, and it talks about what this *tudong* journey is:

"The journey wasn't all inspirational by any means. In concept and theory and philosophical retrospect, yes, perhaps, but the nitty-gritty of it at times was quite challenging, physically, mentally, and emotionally. But then that is what this kind of walk, or *tudong*, is all about. It's a kind of stripping away of the usual comfort zones that one can retreat into so as to contemplate the sense of insecurity that is thus laid bare in the face of the unknown. This is much of what the monastic training is about—to train the mind to be more fully present with life as you experience it in the raw, creating the possibility for direct insight into the true nature of things. In doing so, one notices how habituated the mind is to control and manipulate circumstances in an attempt to not have to feel the natural pain and insecurity of life."

So she went on this journey, and she and the other nuns stayed in all kinds of places, all kinds of situations.

They never knew what they were coming up against or coming into. They let it be unknown, just as every moment is in our practice, if we allow it to be—not expecting or hoping, not carrying the past into the present or projecting the future into the present.

They stayed in barns and sheds and open fields, on beaches and back lawns, and even a cricket pavilion. They never knew where they were going to land. The food was quite unpredictable. They depended on the kindness of others for their sustenance, and sometimes they didn't have very much. A kind of trust had to develop in their own ability to keep their hearts open and to connect with the kindness of others as they went along on their journey.

Sometimes the landscape was beautiful and comforting. Sometimes it was difficult and challenging. Sometimes it was warm, sometimes bitterly cold.

Here also we have this opportunity to allow these comfort zones to be stripped away so we can open more and more into the unknown—those places where we have felt a lot of diversion in our life, places we went to for comfort, perhaps reading or writing or acting out in certain ways. We begin to see that we can let those go as we begin to trust our inner journey more. Attachments begin to get stripped away, or at least we see them more clearly. We may go through grief, fear, blame, shame in our practice—really

come up against them and let them go. Preferences—we begin to see how they run our lives and how we can let go of how we want it to be. We can let go of the projections of how we thought it would be.

She continues: "The idea of going on tudong conjures rather romantic and inspirational images and feelings, for me at least. But reality is never contained or represented fully in ideas and perceptions and remains always unexpected and unknown."

There's a place in the Sutta Nipata that offers this beautiful phrase: "Let there be nothing behind you. Leave the future to one side and grasp not at what remains in the middle."

Can we do this in our practice? Can we allow this leaving behind, this not projecting onto the present moment what we want it to be? When we're on this journey through this sacred terrain, what is tremendously helpful is to drop all of our expectations, to have this willingness to have empty hands and not bring into the moment what we think we need to bring in from the past.

There's a beautiful poem by David Whyte called "Tillico Lake":

"In this high place, it is as simple as this. Leave everything you know behind. Step forward to the cold surface. Say the old prayer of love and open both arms. Those who come with empty hands will stare into the lake astonished. There in the cold light, reflecting pure snow, the true shape of your own face."

How can we do this? One thing that we can let go of, whether we're coming into this retreat new or have been here for six weeks already, is to be careful about the comparing mind. This mind brings in the old, and this is Mara in the moment—the tempter that keeps us from being present. When we compare this moment to a previous practice or discipline or experience, we bring the past into the present moment. It's helpful to simply notice comparing mind, let it come and let it go, not getting lost in the content of it.

So how do we cultivate this trust, this confidence, this faith?

Slowing down helps—for those who are new and for those who have been here. Just slowing down from where you've been before really helps. Taking one breath, one moment, one step at a time.

Having a respect for the power of silence, for the power of inner solitude—this is an immeasurable benefit. Sages of old, women and men of all time, have used the power of silence and solitude to help them see more clearly, to come to this clear lake and be able to see their face clearly, their true nature clearly.

Wherever you are in the practice right now, see if you can take a next step towards even more solitude, even more silence—whatever that next step is for you. Perhaps it's bringing in your reins a little more, slowing down, not needing to write as many notes, not needing to connect with others in the various ways we find ourselves needing to connect because of loneliness or whatever our habit pattern is. Reading, writing—these may have helped us this far along the way.

But see if you can let it go for a while. See if it brings you a deeper sense of silence, inner silence, a deeper sense of inner solitude. Just see for yourself.

Often all of us want to connect with that place, and we don't know how to connect with that place of inner silence. We don't see that it's mostly some practical steps that we can take to do that.

I found in a new book of Mary Oliver that I just got, a poem that she wrote about stars, and it has to do with letting the words of our mind go:

Here in my head, language keeps making its tiny noises. How can I hope to be friends with the hard white stars whose flaring and hissing are not speech but a pure radiance? How can I hope to be friends with the yawning spaces between them where nothing ever is spoken? Tonight at the very edge of the field I stood very still and looked up and tried to be empty of words.

So can we bring ourselves to this new place, the place that Mary Oliver calls the edge of the field? Can we come to this new place and be very still and be empty of words? Can we take that next step in our practice, on our path? Can we trust ourselves enough to do that? Only you know the answer to that. Can you dig deep down to that place of deep trust in yourselves to find that you don't need those places where the words meant so much?

It's usually at this place, at the halfway mark, where there's a lot of papañca around the understanding of no-self—which is completely ironic, because it goes against the understanding. It's kind of funny that we want to understand it with words and we want to know the big picture of it in a macroscopic way. But really we can only understand it in a microscopic way. The true understanding of no-self comes from a moment-to-moment experience, and this is the only way it can be understood deeply.

So can we let go of the words, let go of the questions, and just be with the experience of it, whatever it is?

What can we do to allow a gradual unfolding of this Dharma in us, of this bud in us, of this potential for awakening in us?

There's a way in our practice where there's a ritual that we take sometimes, and it can have an ever-deepening meaning for each one of us—and that is the taking of refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma, and in the Sangha.

For me, taking refuge in the Buddha really means taking refuge in that potential of awakening that lies within this mind-body continuum, and really taking refuge in the pace at which that opening takes place. Taking refuge in the unhurriedness of it, the organic opening of it, being able to open in our own unique way.

Once when I was in a retreat with Munindra, it was, I think, one of my first ten-day retreats, if not my first ten-day retreat. And it was a retreat that was very, very challenging. All of a sudden new understandings came that were never there before, and many kind of psychedelic experiences came. It was like I was open to a whole new world, and it was kind of shocking in a way.

About the eighth day of the retreat, Munindra was kind of pushing me to keep going and inspiring me to stay up all night and keep practicing and keep practicing and keep practicing. So I just kind of followed his advice and did what I could. But I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere at all. I was kind of stuck in the same place over and over again in this sort of very psychedelic, blissful place.

So I went to him towards the end of the retreat, and he simply said, "When the fruit is ripe, it will let go of the tree." And it gave me this image for the rest of my practice—that it just takes place in its own time, the ripening of this fruit. You can't be in a hurry.

This is from The Findhorn Garden, a writing from a book about the Findhorn Garden:

Flowers unfold slowly and gently, bit by bit in the sunshine, and a heart too must never be pushed or driven, but unfold in its own perfect timing to reveal its true wonder and true beauty.

So can we have this kind of trust? Can we surrender to this? Can we take refuge in this trust to unfold in our own way, in our own organic way, ripen in this way?

It's said that trust or faith is like a seed. It establishes itself firmly in fertile soil, and it's up to us to make that soil fertile, to give it the watering, the sunshine it needs. But we can't push the growth of the bud from that seed.

Faith has a characteristic of venturing beyond, of aspiring beyond. And so if you look at a seed, if you reflect on a seed and how it comes, there's energy that kind of bursts forth and cracks open the shell and allows what's inside that seed to venture beyond into a whole new world. This is what faith is like.

There's what is called bright faith. In the beginning of our practice we have what's called bright faith. And I'd like to talk about my own development of faith, because it's not a very interesting story, but we just hear so many great stories about the Buddha and about the nuns and monks in the monastery and even mythological stories, and it's kind of hard to relate sometimes because we're just wiping runny noses or changing diapers or the oil filters on our cars. It's not very romantic, but yet we all have the same kind of homing instinct that the Buddha and all the nuns and monks of old had—this instinct to really feel connected with all of life, to know the truth deeply, to understand a peace and happiness that's beyond the peace and happiness that we know, to experience emptiness or nothingness in a courageous way.

So for each one of us, this opening to trust and courage may be different and yet the same.

My own journey on the spiritual path began about twenty-five years ago. When somebody today asked me, "Well, what brought you to the path?" it is easy for me to say that suffering brought me to the path. Dukkha brought me to the path.

And for all of us, this is what brings us here. Suffering is a heavenly messenger to many of us.

When I was young, eighteen years old, I was married into a wealthy family. To make a long story short, it was an arranged marriage where my mother betrothed me to a man I had known for only eight days. It was okay with me simply because I was ignorant at that time, and I wanted to get away from my family. So I said yes.

I went into this marriage, into this political wealthy family in Manila, and I came from a very poor family—lower middle class. When I entered this new family, I was surrounded by wealth, but all around me was poverty. It was an eye-opening time because I got to ride in a Mercedes Benz in the back seat with a driver who carried a .45 revolver because he was also my bodyguard.

My father-in-law was in the government realm, so I was appointed to a high-ranking position in the Central Bank of the Philippines. I would be driven to work every Friday just to collect my paycheck—I didn't have to actually work. I'm giving you this picture of how it was.

When I first entered this family, I would try to sit in the front seat, and my in-laws would say, "No, this is not proper." I would try to say thank you to the help—I had a driver, a gardener, and six maids—and they would say, "You can't say that. You only say 'well done.' You never say thank you." It was a very new world for me.

So I'd get in the back seat, and the maid would give me, on literally a silver platter, tea and food for the journey, because the traffic in Manila is outrageous and it could take a long time to get to work. Sometimes we'd get caught in traffic jams, and if there was no traffic jam and there was a policeman at the intersection, if he saw my car—because it had a license plate signifying I was from a certain political family—the policeman would stop all traffic so my car could go through.

Here I was, very young, not knowing what was going on, and I would see along the way beggars and desperate-looking old men and women, young boys and girls, very young prostitutes, and little children who I heard would rent babies to carry so they could show them at car windows and you would take pity on them and give money.

I struggled with whether to give or not to give. One time I put my hand out to give some money and they were so fast—they would rip your hand open, and by the time I could get my hand back in the car it would be full of scratches.

This situation really opened me to the dukkha of the world. There was such a disparity between where I sat and what I saw that it ripped my heart out. I tried everything I could to help. I worked in an orphanage, but it didn't assuage my heart.

I was a practicing Catholic at the time, and I would go to church to say novenas, repeating prayers over and over again. I felt like one of these impossible cases. In the Catholic tradition there's a saint you pray to for impossible cases—Saint Jude. I would literally sometimes crawl in the cathedral from the back to the front, because this was the way things were done. I would do anything to know the truth of life. I really wanted to understand.

There came a point when I started taking yoga classes. They were offered at an Eastern Indian home. When I went in and saw their altar, it had many different things—Hindu symbols, and also the Buddha sitting peacefully with a smile, and Christ on the cross. When I looked at those two, I knew what my choice had to be. I didn't want to crawl through the cathedral anymore.

And I wanted to know that place where that smile came from on the Buddha. I wanted to know that place in my heart, not in a church. And I wanted to find the trust to do that.

To make a long journey short, I ended up having this great experience. Near our home was the marketplace where the cooks went to market. They came home one day and told me of this great sight they had seen near the marketplace, and they asked me to go with them. So I went along with other members of the family.

We all went over there and came to the place where plenty of cars were parked. It was kind of like an old village town. We parked the car and went along the pathway that wound around to this place where we could see many people milling around from a distance. It was pointed out to me that in the area above some palm trees, there was this light up above. This light was there in broad daylight, so it couldn't have been a projection of anything because it wasn't projecting onto anything. It was in space.

We came around the corner and I looked up, and I saw an apparition of a woman—a very beautiful woman who looked quite angelic and translucent. She was wearing robes and kind of floating in the sky. I'd never seen anything like this before. Quite a few others were there, so it wasn't a hallucination. This was real. This woman had hands and face you could see through, and her gown was blue and white. They said it was the Blessed Virgin, Mary. She was looking around, turning her head. I think out of shock I fell to the ground and was on my knees looking up.

The words she spoke to me at that time—not out loud, but I felt them—were: "What are you doing here?" I took a long time to answer that question and eventually left the Philippines.

What that apparition was to me, what it instilled in me, was this tremendous bright faith—this faith to believe in the unknown, in something I had never experienced before. This kind of trust to open to what I could never have thought I would have opened to before. It touched in me a place of courage that I could open to, to take steps that I needed to take on my path.

Sometimes each of us on our journey gets this bright faith, or is encouraged by an experience, a book, a person, a place, a reading maybe, that helps us to keep our way, to shine a light on our path. But it's not enough. At some point that light isn't bright enough when we come to a place of real darkness. It's where we need to look to our own experience, where we need to go to a place where we can open to what is called verified faith—faith that comes from our own experience, faith that can depend on our own ability to maybe see the laws of impermanence, to experience the ever-changing

moment to moment, to open to that vulnerability that comes with opening to dukkha. A kind of faith and trust that comes from allowing ourselves to open to that deep vulnerability of our hearts that's called dukkha.

And aligning ourselves with those truths—with the truth of impermanence or anicca, the truth of vulnerability or dukkha, and the truth of insubstantiality, the conditioned nature of life that we often refer to as no-self or anatta. Allowing ourselves to align with those truths. This is the threshold that we come to in our practice. Can we let go of that faith that held on to a person, place or thing and align ourselves with the new truths that we are now experiencing—the truth of impermanence, of vulnerability, of no separate self?

So much faith and trust comes in our ability to let go. Not let go in a forceful way, but let go because it's going. We see it going. How can we hold on when we see it going? Suzuki Roshi says, "True renunciation is not giving up things of this world, but knowing that they go away." That's what true renunciation is.

Sometimes faith is not only surrendering or taking refuge in the Buddha, not just taking refuge in our potential to awaken, but it's taking refuge in the Dhamma, in the Dharma. And what does that mean? Not taking refuge in this big Dharma, this big law, this big understanding of what the Buddha taught. But if we can take a look at it as taking refuge in this moment, in this very moment, surrendering to how things are right now, right here and now. This moment is what is true, whatever is in this moment. It could be anger, it could be grief, it could be rage, it could be shame, it could be doubt. Can we take refuge in that, in that Dhamma, in that moment? It's from that kind of taking refuge in that moment, surrendering to that, that the courage comes to continue. When we can just allow ourselves to go one moment at a time.

There have been many times in my own practice, and that I hear from those I speak with, that our ability to keep going comes from taking one step at a time—literally. During walking meditation, I have found myself unable to look at the end of the path I was walking on. If I was taking fifty paces, I wouldn't even look that far ahead. I would focus only on the next leaf or the next rock, giving myself the intention to be as mindful as possible from here to there—just really short distances, taking refuge in small pieces at a time.

Sometimes when we practice this way, it unleashes tremendous energy that we can ride. We discover that by committing to take one mindful step at a time, we often go much further than expected. The very act of focusing on one step with complete awareness generates momentum that carries us forward.

True faith is verified faith. It unleashes incredible power, energy, and courage—bringing forth the strength to keep us moving, to keep us going. This requires a particular kind of quiet effort, the effort that emerges from courage itself.

I recall a beautiful teaching from the writings about Don Juan that spoke of effort and the energy we invest in our practice. It was one of those Zen-like teachings that cuts straight to the heart: "It's up to you. You can take the energy that you have and put it into complaining or blaming, or you can put it into your practice, into liberation. It's up to you."

When you notice yourself blaming or complaining, you can remind yourself: "Can I put this energy into liberation instead? Into taking the next step with mindfulness? Into taking the next breath with mindfulness? Into opening to this anger or blame with mindfulness?" The choice is always ours.

This choice, this humility that opens us to such possibility, is truly rare. Yet we all possess the ability to make it.

Sister Jetindriya's writing concludes with these words: "The journey is not really finished."

And indeed, it never is. Each moment offers us a fresh opportunity to take refuge, to surrender, to find the courage to continue—one breath, one step, one moment at a time.

CHAPTER 196

Karma, Forgiveness & Equanimity

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

> *On the final evening of a mettā retreat, Guy Armstrong explores forgiveness as essential to developing true equanimity—the foundation for authentic loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. Drawing on the Mettā Sutta and teachings on karma, he addresses both "great forgiveness" (accepting life's inherent suffering) and personal forgiveness of those who have harmed us.*
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> *Armstrong shares personal stories illustrating how understanding karma helps us see that everyone "couldn't be better" given their conditioning and circumstances, while still taking appropriate action to prevent harm. He explores how we stay imprisoned by our own grudges, and how moments of clarity can instantly transform our relationships. The talk culminates with a reading of the Mettā Sutta, demonstrating how deep equanimity naturally gives rise to boundless loving-kindness.*
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> *This dharma talk offers practical wisdom for practitioners working with resentment, anger, and the challenge of maintaining an open heart in the face of life's difficulties. It shows how true forgiveness emerges not from condoning harmful actions, but from clearly seeing the karmic conditions that shape all beings' behavior.*

Here we are tonight on the last night of Metta Retreat. Someone said in an interview this morning, "I'm really, really hoping that you're going to talk about forgiveness in your talk tonight." So I was really happy to be able to say, as a matter of fact, I am.

It's not only always appropriate to talk about forgiveness, but it's particularly appropriate because it's really a linchpin key to the very heart of what we are doing. We talk about metta—benevolence or friendliness practice—that comes from that great balance of mind that enables us to meet each moment and each person as a friend.

Carol spoke last night so eloquently of being able to respond with the greatest depth of compassion only when we have the balance to hold suffering in our view and in our hearts without flinching from it and without aversion. And we are able to respond most fully to other people's good fortune with absolute sympathetic joy only when our hearts are balanced in enough equanimity so that our joy for them is not tinged and tainted with envy or jealousy or grasping.

So we need to talk about that great equanimity which is really the foundation of friendliness and compassion and sympathetic joy, and the way in which forgiveness is a key piece of that great equanimity.

Think about Carol's example of her friend who wakes up every morning and says, "Wow, this is the best day yet." Imagine getting up in the morning and saying, "Wow, thanks—another day to see the goodness of life." To do that truly with an awakened mind, you really need to have such spaciousness of mind that could hold the difficulties and the pain of life in it and still be able to say this. You would need to have the heart to open to all that pain, not drown in it. You'd need to be able to see your own situation and the situation of other people with tremendous clarity—really to see clearly the ubiquitous nature of suffering, our own and other people's—and to be able to do it with enough balance to have the power to respond with bodhicitta, with really the impulse to be of service, to address the great suffering of the world. And begin to see the possibility of service as happiness and generosity as happiness.

The great forgiveness—we'll start with the great forgiveness and then work down to the little personal forgiveness—is to be able to forgive life for being just what it is, so painful for everyone, sooner or later, not in the same amounts. The truth is that some people, for reasons of karma—we all have different rows to hoe and different amounts of difficulty. But everybody has difficulty.

I heard a story about a woman whose death remark—as death remarks of Japanese Zen teachers often are their final teaching—was apparently said as her final last breath remark: "Thank you very much. I have no complaints." Imagine being able to do that.

I had a friend who died about twenty years ago now. He was in his forties when he died. He died of a cancer very rare in men. He had a wife, he had children, he had a very flourishing career. He did everything he could to treat his illness, every possible treatment that was available. And he died. He wrote a letter to be sent to all his friends after his death, and one of the things he said in the letter in describing his life is, "I would have wanted more, but I never wanted other." I thought that was marvelous.

Sometimes when you listen to that, you think, "Well, didn't Bill want other? Didn't he want to get well from his illness?" He certainly did. And he did everything that he could to get better from his illness. So not wanting other doesn't mean not having aspirations. Doesn't mean non-acting. Doesn't mean not being patient. It doesn't mean being passive in the face of whatever is happening. It means doing whatever you can do, seeing whatever you've got, and then not wanting other, because that's really the refuge of a balanced, equanimous heart.

It's really a place of great wisdom to be able to say: Things are what they are for reasons far beyond our ability to figure them out. Certainly life gets lived through us. We aren't helpless in our lives. We make decisions in every moment, hopefully in moments of clarity, in a skillful way, and we make decisions that influence our life and have tremendous influence on the lives of the people around us and ultimately, I believe, on all life. But we're not in charge. There's a way in which knowing that, there's a place that we can rest in the middle of a life of difficulty.

with a certain balance around the difficulty.

I was going to Spirit Rock to teach one day, somewhere in the last year or two, and I was arriving for class in the morning, hurrying because I was almost late. Down the path came another person who comes to class quite often, so I know her by name. I said, "Hi Rose, how are you?"

She said, "I'm fine."

Then as we were hurrying in together, she said, "Well actually, you know, I have this difficulty happening, and this other little problem in my life, and I have this other problem with my son. But actually," she said, "I'm fine."

After we had sat that morning—because I had a sense of what Rose meant—after we'd sat together, as is our habit every week, I talked about meeting Rose outside. I told exactly the same story I just told you now. We talked about that sense of being able to say: this is what's happening, this is what's true, this is painful, this is not so painful, this is more painful, this is pleasant, and I'm fine. I'm really fine.

I'm reminded of my grandmother who used to say, "My arthritis is giving me a lot of trouble, my knee hurts, I haven't had a letter from my cousin Sophie in a long time. And I myself am not too good." There's a sense that I myself could be good or not good, fine or not fine, and people understood what she meant.

When I told that story about Rose's remark, Gwen made a comment that has gone down in Spirit Rock history as Gwen's remark. I said, "You know, maybe we should have as a password here: I'm fine." Like clubs and secret societies have passwords they say to each other—the secret hand sign or handshake or secret word. We said, "How about we'll have a password here at Spirit Rock, and the password will be 'I'm fine.'"

We all thought about that. Then Gwen made her remark, which has gone down in history. Gwen said, "When people ask me, 'How are you, Gwen?' I say, 'I couldn't be better.'"

That is always true for all of us. Always. If we could, we would. Nobody purposely suffers. They don't get up and say, "I'm feeling great, but now I'm going to mess up the day." Nobody purposely does that. We couldn't be better, any of us.

It is really that awareness that everyone is always operating at whatever level of clarity they have—sometimes not much, sometimes unskillfully, sometimes unwholesomely, sometimes in a way that creates great deal of pain for other people. But they couldn't be better. That doesn't mean the behavior is okay. It just means they couldn't be better. It's really the clue to being able to forgive people.

This moment in which we couldn't be better, we can be different. The next moment can be different because if this moment is one of clarity, we can make a judgment that will make the next moment better. We can make a judgment in a moment of clarity that changes this moment completely and our reality completely from here on. In fact, that's what we're hoping to do here this week.

I really think of this practice as transformative in the deepest sense and in ways often that I feel are heroic and monumental, like changing the course of the Mississippi. But we can do it because we really have that possibility in moments of profound clarity to choose differently and live differently and have a different reality.

But this moment, as it arrives, is the child of everything that ever happened—always. We say, as part of the equanimity reflection, every individual is heir to their own karma. I think about that a lot, about what it means. Every individual is heir to their own karma.

In my mind, I don't hear it with a sense of "we deserve what we got." We got what we got in a lawful way because of everything that's gone before.

I was teaching in Grand Rapids, Michigan, sometime a year ago. At the end of the retreat workshop that I taught there, someone said, "You know, there's a person in our community that you haven't met yet. There's Arnold Boorstein. He's 86 years old. You should meet him. Maybe he's a relative of yours. It's not that common a name."

So I sought him out, and we talked a little bit.

We determined that we were not relatives—his family came from northern Germany, while my father-in-law's people were French. He was 86 years old, and when I asked if he had been born in Germany, he said no. His father had been born there and come to the United States, but Arnold Borstein himself had been born in Grand Rapids in 1906.

"That's really interesting," I said. "All the folks I know came to this country, got off the boat, and stayed in New York. Nobody moved. They maybe moved to New Jersey if they were adventurous, but nobody moved to Grand Rapids. How did your father get to be there?"

"Well," he said, "my father actually came to New York and stayed there a while. He and a cousin went into business, but the business failed. So they were thinking of something else to go into business doing together, and the cousin said, 'Let's go into the pickle business in Chicago.' So he said okay. The cousin went to Chicago first, and then my father got on the train to join him to open a pickle business. But he had to change trains in Detroit, and in Detroit, he got on the wrong train. He got on the train to Grand Rapids."

He arrived in Grand Rapids in mid-afternoon on a Friday, alone in a new city on a new street, not knowing anybody. He walked down the main street and saw a store that said "S. Cohen and Son, Men's Haberdashers." He went in and said, "Listen, I'm new in town. I just got here. I don't know anybody. Do you know any family that would invite a single Jewish man home for Shabbat dinner?"

So S. Cohen took him home for dinner. In the home of S. Cohen, having arrived there a week before, was S. Cohen's niece from Europe. Arnold Borstein's father married her and lived the rest of his life with her in Grand Rapids. And Arnold Borstein was born there.

If Arnold Borstein's father had gotten on the right train to Chicago, he would have had a whole different life—not his children, not his grandchildren, not his story.

When I think about this, I realize we are all, all of us, all the time getting on the train for Grand Rapids. Every single thing we do, every decision we make, is another train to Grand Rapids.

I told that story to my friend James, and he said, "I think it's wonderful that story happened in Grand Rapids, because that's like what life is—it's a river that's one long Grand Rapids."

When I see clearly, in the moments that I see clearly, I recognize that for me to be here in this moment, every single thing in history has had to happen. For me to have my children or my grandchildren, for you to be here, for anything to be what it is now, everything else has had to happen.

Sometimes people say, "Well, wait a minute, what does your life have to do with Marco Polo establishing a trade route to the Orient?" I don't know, but I think it has something to do with it. Who knows what those trade routes to the Orient did about commerce in Europe, about the business affairs of people in Europe, which caused different people to make different decisions about where to live, how to marry, when to emigrate, when to do what.

There are such things as proximal karma and distal karma. Marco Polo is probably very distal to my personal karma, but nevertheless, when I realize this, I really am awestruck. Had I gotten on one plane later, or turned the corner ten minutes before, or married Arnold Schwartz instead of Seymour Borstein—that's proximal karma—but everybody's life would be different.

We really get this on some level. So then it's hard to realize why we don't forgive people for being what they are. It makes so much sense to do it if we realize that people who do hurtful things are in pain. Everybody knows that people who do hurtful things are in pain. Happy people don't do hurtful things. It's so sensible to think that.

Why aren't we compassionate? Why don't we right away respond with great compassion? Why don't we forgive them? Sometimes I hear people say things like, "I'm never going to forgive so-and-so as long as I live."

I'm never going to give them the pleasure of the satisfaction of my forgiveness. As if the other person gets better from us forgiving! It is actually we who stay locked in a prison of discontent, in a prison of tight heart when we don't forgive. And yet we imagine that we somehow are causing... First of all, we imagine that we're causing pain to the other person by not forgiving them, and we imagine that the sense of pain we're causing them is making us happy, but it's not true. Vengeance is sweet? It's not true. Vengeance is terrible, and it's painful.

It takes some deeper understanding, though, because it makes sense to forgive, and yet we remember who offended us and who hurt us. We keep a little list, even though we know it's tedious.

When we listen to the Metta Sutta, it's so beautiful: "May all beings be happy, whatever their living nature." The Metta Sutta doesn't say how to love everybody. It says take care of everybody, love everybody, wish everybody well. It's very beautiful. And it's a little bit like the Nike ad—it says "just do it." It doesn't say how to do it.

So I think we need another sutta called the "no-grudge sutta" or something—how to do it. That might also shed some light on how we can work with those tightnesses in our own heart that have not yet relaxed.

I think that we don't forgive because we've been either frightened into a guardedness of the heart or saddened into a hardened heart. I think that's what happens.

Sometimes people will say, "I'm not frightened, I'm angry legitimately because I see injustice. And my anger causes me to address it." My father used to say, "I need my anger because it keeps me active for social justice." And I would agree with him. I would say, "I think you're half right. You need it as an alarm bell to tell you something's not right. And then you need to act. But when we act clouded with anger, we don't act well and we don't act wisely. We need it as mindfulness. Wake up. This isn't right. I have to fix it." And then we have to act out of clarity.

You know, the things that people worry about sometimes is that forgiveness might mean excusing or condoning or justifying or actually becoming friends with people who are hurtful or dangerous. And it doesn't mean any of that. It means seeing things clearly and responding to them wisely. That space of wise forgiveness comes out of clarity—seeing not through a veil of anger. Sometimes it means seeing our own shadow. Sometimes we're afraid of seeing our own shadow.

I had a ten-year grudge. It was the longest grudge I had, I think. I had a letter once from someone accusing me of something that so offended me. I remember telling people twice in my life I've had a rage. I'm not a very wrathful person—I come from mild-mannered people. I have other problems, but wrath is not my main problem. And I tell people I had two rages in my life, one other and then this one.

So I got a letter that accused me of something, and I just was filled with rage. I could not... it was terrible to me that this person had accused me of this, that, and the other thing, for which I felt wrongly accused.

By the way, Shantideva, in Chapter 6 of the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life—the chapter called Patience—teaches that when someone challenges your good name and you feel offended and anger rises, you should reflect in the following way: Is that person right? If they're right, you should be grateful to them because they're pointing out something about yourself that you could improve or fix. Since our intention in life is to be as good as we can be, we should be grateful and think of them as teachers. And if they're wrong, what's the problem? Forget about it.

I didn't do it that well. I had a grudge for ten years.

Now, it wasn't a terribly debilitating grudge because I didn't think about it every day or nurse it daily. I don't run into this person very often—I live in the same county, and sometimes our paths cross, but not much. But for ten years it was more a story of how I couldn't let go of that grudge. I would tell my friends, "I can't believe that so-and-so said this about me. Can you believe it?" Ten years.

Sometimes we'd be on the same program, even on a panel together, and I'd think, "Uh-oh, I'm going to meet so-and-so there tonight." We were certainly always civil to each other, but I always couldn't see this person without thinking of what they said about me and having my grudge come up.

Then one night, fully ten years later after the event, I was driving to a gathering where I knew this person would be. Who knows why—perhaps it was enough clarity of the moment, the position of the stars, enough reflection, a moment of grace—but I had a really clear moment while driving along. I thought, "Well, I'm going to see so-and-so here tonight." Instead of the story coming up about "How could he have said that about me?" I thought to myself, "He was right, what he said about me. He was right. It's a piece of my shadow that I didn't want to see."

So I came to that place and met him. I said, "I'm really glad to see you." I felt really glad to see him. He said, "I'm really glad to see you," and he looked like he was. We finished the evening and he said, "Can we have lunch?" We made a lunch date.

We have become good friends, good colleagues, really study partners, spiritual friends to each other. I love him. He had health problems last year. I worried so much for him. I prayed so much for him. We've become quite close.

In the course of our becoming close, there was a long time before we actually spoke about the event that had happened. We would speak about it in veiled ways when we left each other after lunch. He'd say to me or I'd say to him, "I'm so glad we're friends." He'd say, "Yeah, it's really wonderful. I'm really glad we're friends." It was a code.

Finally, after a long time, I said, "I want to tell you the story of the event, because we have to talk about it sometime." I said, "I just would like to tell you how I felt when I read that letter. I read the letter, and I felt the rage, and I felt so inflamed that you had said that about me. So offended. It hurt me so much. It was very hard for me to think about." I told him the whole story about all the times I'd met him over the years, how that story always came up.

I said, "On that night when I said to you, 'I'm really happy to see you,' I had been driving to the place, and on the way, in a moment of clarity, I realized that what you said about me—you were right."

He said, "No I wasn't. I wasn't seeing clearly."

I was not understanding where you were at that time. I should not have said what I said in the harsh way that I said it. It was inexcusable of me to have said it in that way. I was not seeing clearly. Please forgive me."

It's quite extraordinary, the amount of happiness that this one friendship has brought to my life. And it's one where we see each other every month or two for lunch—it's not a big piece of my life. But the healing that happened and the learning that I did from it is a very big piece of my life.

It's really important, that awareness of when we hurt people. It's the only thing that really can be happening there—it's the fruit of that moment, the accident of the karma of that moment.

There's a very important passage in the book of Deuteronomy that instructs the Israelites about building cities of refuge. It says there ought to be cities where people can go to be protected from the angry kin of those they may have hurt, perhaps even killed, accidentally. The example given is if you were chopping down a tree in a forest with another person and your axe handle flew off and struck this other person and killed them, it would certainly be an accident. But their family, in moments of great grief and confusion, might come after you and kill you in return. So cities of refuge are for people to go "until the heated hearts of the family, of the hurt person, can cool down."

When one first hears that story, you might say, "Well, that axe handle flying off was an accident." But I think about this: everything is an accident of karma—of when we were born and who brought us up, our circumstances, our nervous system, our systems of self-control, our ability to see clearly, our needs to take care of ourselves that have somehow emerged from our viscera.

If we go back to Gwen's great wisdom: I couldn't be better. No one can be better. That doesn't mean we don't have to be careful and take action to preserve and protect people who can't control themselves so they don't hurt others. It just means we can see it as the accident of the karma of their lives rather than something they meant maliciously.

Sometimes you say, "Well, people meant to do it. They purposely did it. They premeditated it." That was also an accident of their karma—also a sadness. It's still important not to let a person who does that sort of thing do it freely. It's important to figure out how to stop those people from doing harm. It's important to figure out how to do it without hatred, understanding that everything is an accident of karma.

The Dalai Lama says everybody wants to be happy. Sometimes it expresses itself in a tremendously tragic and unwholesome way. When the mind is clear, we see that everyone is who they are and everything is what it is because of everything that's happened in the whole of creation, forever and ever since the beginning. And then we can take every step we can to take care of everybody, but with forgiveness in our hearts and compassion in our hearts.

A year ago I had the great good fortune to be invited to Dharamsala to a conference with twenty-five other Western dharma teachers to meet with the Dalai Lama. It was a tremendous honor to be invited and a tremendous trip to take. Among other things, I learned something about moments of seeing clearly in which it becomes apparent that the balanced heart really recognizes that everybody is just who they are because of circumstances, and everyone is lovable.

The trip to Dharamsala—if you haven't done it—is very difficult. You can't fly directly from San Francisco to Delhi; you have to go San Francisco to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to Delhi. Then from Delhi, we took a night train, which is a whole other experience in India. Carol talked a little last night about the difficulty of conveying in words the enormity of the Indian experience. The night train from Delhi to Pathankot is twelve hours—an extraordinary journey in very close quarters. Many of us who could meet in Delhi traveled together to Pathankot.

Then there's another four hours in a taxi cab from Pathankot to Dharamsala. Those of you who have ridden in an Indian taxi will know that's an extraordinary experience—seriously, seriously life-threatening. Your attention becomes very, very high.

The entire trip was marked by this heightened state of awareness. The level of prayers happening was extraordinarily high throughout the journey.

So we arrived, and by the time you reach Dharamsala after such a pilgrimage, it's such an altered experience just to have made this trip. And then suddenly, here you are in Dharamsala, which really is, in certain ways, a very poor Indian village. It's not magical in the way you might imagine a Shangri-La sparkling kingdom. It's not that kind of beautiful—it's simply a poor Indian village.

On the other hand, it's situated high in the Himalayas, breathtakingly beautiful in the mountains. From our window in the hotel where we stayed, you could look down on the roofs of different monasteries and see monks walking back and forth in walking meditation. It was deeply inspiring to be there.

And so here you are, suddenly at the end of the world, in another world entirely. We had seven days to be there, with only the middle days designated for meetings with the Dalai Lama. We had three days where our group was going to meet—just the twenty-six teachers who had come together to develop our agenda for what we would discuss with the Dalai Lama when we met him.

Not all of us knew each other. Perhaps half of that group I had never met before. There were teachers from all three traditions of Buddhism. I knew some of the people there, but certainly not all of them.

On the very first morning of our meetings together in preparation, my friend Jack Kornfield, who was moderating our session, gathered us all in a great circle. He said, "Well, why don't we go around the room and introduce each other?"

You know how these introductions usually go: my name is so-and-so, I live in such-and-such place, and this is what I teach, or whom I teach. But Jack didn't ask for that. Instead, he said, "Why don't we go around the room and say our name, and then share what is the greatest spiritual challenge facing us now in our lives, in our work, and in our teaching? I'll go first."

That's about the most serious question a person could ever be asked, and deeply personal. There's no fooling around with that question. He said, "I'll go first," and there wasn't even a question of who would go second. He announced he would begin, then pass the microphone to the person at his left. You couldn't even decide when your turn would come—it was simply starting, and you were in line.

There's a kind of sharpness that comes in the mind, or perhaps a surrender, when you know there is absolutely no way out of this situation. However challenging it might be, I found myself thinking, "Uh-oh, I don't know these people. How do I know if my spiritual dilemma will measure up to theirs? Will they approve of me?" In a certain way, I was the new person, since some of them had been to Dharamsala before and I hadn't. What if this, what if that?

But there was no room for such thoughts. We were in Dharamsala. You couldn't easily escape from there. The chips were down—it was one of those situations where you couldn't decide when to speak. Ready, set, go.

There's a wonderful kind of surrender that happens because there's nothing else to do. Clearly you're going to tell the truth, because there's nothing else possible.

Now, I must tell you something about this circle of twenty-six people—Jack and Sharon and myself and twenty-three others, many of whom I didn't know. There were people I knew and liked tremendously, people I knew and liked somewhat, people I knew and felt neutral about, and there were two, possibly three—two and a half people—with whom I didn't feel exactly on the same wavelength. Over the course of our time together in the dharma world, they had offended me at some point, and I had them on my little grudge list in my little heart. We were all very cordial to each other, but they weren't the people I chose to spend time with.

So here I was, looking around the room: good, good, good, good, ugh, good, good, good. You see the different faces and feel the response of your heart—how it opens toward the people you love and closes toward those you don't love as much.

But here came Jack with his question: tell the biggest spiritual challenge of your life, ready, set, go. He began and told his truth. The next person spoke and told their truth. Then the next person told their truth.

Meanwhile, I realized that whenever it reached me, I was going to have to tell my truth without worrying about what anybody thought, because worrying was impossible. I couldn't tell anything but the truth—here I was.

A wonderful kind of expansive surrender happened, truly a place of equanimity—an unusual, wide-awake, alert, bright, relaxed equanimity.

This person spoke, this person spoke, this person spoke, and then came one of my people—someone I didn't have such good feelings about. As he told his story, I realized it was as if I had never met him before. I was not meeting his sharing with all my accumulated stories about the times he had said things I didn't like, or when I took offense, or what he had said about me.

I listened without a story. Because when the heart really rests and the mind is truly clear, you listen without a story.

So he was just a person telling a story of struggle, the same way as everybody else had struggle. Because everybody's story is one of struggle. The very question itself—the biggest spiritual challenge of your life—already indicates struggle. People are going to tell you what their difficulty is. This person says, "This is my difficulty," and that person says, "This is my difficulty," and another says, "This is my difficulty."

And there was this person with his difficulty, and I was hearing it the same way. He had become a new person. Then there was the other person with her difficulty, and I was hearing it plainly. I realized as it was happening that it was happening, and I was so thrilled because I knew that I was free. In that relationship, that peace had returned.

With both of those people, I hung around afterward. We actually spent a lot of friendly time together and turned out to be very nice people. Sorry I had missed them before. I can't even remember who the half a person was—it got better. The half must not have been so significant. I remember the two clearly, and I remember that we spent a lot of time together. One of them I don't see at all now, simply because of where we live, but the other one I see quite often. We've really become good friends.

This happened, I think, because of the absolute surrender of the mind into a space of balance, which was necessitated by the location and the circumstances, and by the clarity of mind brought on by both the pilgrimage and the importance of paying attention. Everything had moved in the direction of attention, and everything had moved in the direction of surrender. You can't be in India without surrendering to begin with, and to undertake this whole journey in that group—the combination allowed me to see clearly and to absolutely forget. I would actually have a hard time remembering the stories of the offenses if I had to think them up.

When the mind is clear, it becomes so expansive. Everyone is just who they are. As a matter of fact, we begin to appreciate everybody for being exactly who they are. It's amazing how everybody is so completely themselves. It's awesome that you're you, not me. I look at different people living different lives and think, "Look how life is moving through that person. That's so amazing." It's remarkable that life comes through each of us so differently.

So we have the possibility of really respecting those karmic differences in all of us that make us uniquely ourselves—with our own name and our own story and our own way of being. And at the same time, when the mind is clear, we see how pervasive suffering is. No matter how unique our story, suffering is truly pervasive. It's the story of experience.

When we see from a place of equanimity and clarity how pervasive suffering is, it calls forth from us a vow to impeccability. When we see the pervasiveness of suffering—in myself, in others, all around us—we must not add one more drop of pain to an already very painful experience for all of us. This makes me understand better the Bodhisattva vow: "Although suffering is endless, I vow to end it."

I have a friend who's a Dominican nun, a member of the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael. She's been my friend for twenty-five years, one of my spiritual companions. She taught me a prayer that speaks to me deeply about being able to use insight to balance the recognition of suffering with clarity about the extraordinary, incomprehensibly profound truth of our interconnectedness. The prayer is: "May I be filled with that sense of awe that opens my capacity for loving."

So tonight, since we are ending this metta retreat, I thought we would sit for a little while, and I would read you the Metta Sutta.

Let's sit.

"This is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness and who know the path of peace: Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways, peaceful and calm, wise and skillful, not proud and demanding in nature. Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove."

Wishing in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none—the great or the mighty, medium, short or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to be born—may all beings be at ease.

Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings.

Radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies and downward to the depths, outward and unbounded, free from hatred and ill will. Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, free from drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views, the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision, being freed from all sense desires, is not born again into this world.

As we conclude this metta retreat together, may the seeds of loving-kindness we have planted continue to grow and flourish. May the practice of metta become not just something we do in meditation, but a way of being in the world—radiating outward from our hearts to touch all life with boundless compassion.

Thank you for practicing together. May all beings be happy, may all beings be free from suffering, may all beings live with ease.

CHAPTER 197

The Spiritual Warrior

Guy Armstrong · 45 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong explores the timeless question of how to relate wisely to life's enormous energies while staying true to what we most cherish. Drawing on the archetype of the spiritual warrior found across wisdom traditions, he examines how we can cultivate the balance of qualities that allow for genuine freedom and awakening.*
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> *Armstrong describes the spiritual warrior as embodying three essential capacities from Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha: the ability to think clearly (seeing what is), to wait (the power of pausing rather than reacting), and to fast (letting go of what binds us). These qualities form the foundation of meditative awareness and allow us to transform our basic life energy from destructive patterns into wisdom and compassion.*
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> *Through storytelling and personal reflection, the talk addresses how fear often prevents us from opening to life's fullness, and how cultivating courage - not the absence of fear, but the willingness to face it with presence - becomes the path to fearlessness. Armstrong emphasizes that what makes us willing to meet our edges is ultimately love: our care for truth, for awakening, and for life itself. He concludes with the understanding that the mature spiritual warrior's aspiration is comprehensive - that all circumstances serve awakening and all beings be included in our hearts.*

One of the great and perennial questions on all paths is how do we relate wisely to the enormous life energies - the creative ones, the destructive ones, the confusing ones? How do we find some balance in the midst of it? And how in the midst of all of it do we stay true to what we most value? Rather than getting yanked around, do we have that quality of remembering so we really live what our hearts most genuinely cherish?

The word bodhisattva, as many of you know, means awakened being. And we are all bodhisattvas. We're all awakening. It's our nature to awaken. The bodhisattva embodies a balance of qualities. In the classic spiritual texts, they're called spiritual faculties. There's a number of them, and these qualities allow that expression of freedom which is our nature.

Last week, the talk was on the power of wakeful relaxation, which really is one of these faculties - the capacity to find tranquility, to relax into experience, so that rather than fighting what arises naturally in our awareness, there's a willingness to be with. There's a willingness to experience fully what's happening. So there's a real transformative power to that.

There's also a potential shadow side. Sometimes in service of relaxation, or we think we're relaxing, we're actually dulling out, trancing out, turning off the switch. We're not there experiencing in an alert way.

One of the balancing qualities that the Buddha talked about that is part of our development as awakening beings has been described archetypally as the spiritual warrior. This archetype exists in many spiritual traditions and describes that capacity to courageously face our lives and to be wholeheartedly committed to living our path, however we describe our path. It's that wholeheartedness of resolve and commitment that really lets us go for it in a sense. This is the energy of the bodhisattva. This is that energy that really allows for fully living.

The description that I can best put on this energy is that it's our life force. It's that basic will to live, that will to thrive or to be fully. It can be used to create and destroy civilizations. It can be used to heal, to repress, to work hard with, to strive, to awaken, to liberate. It can go in many different directions. It's the energy behind the flower that's blooming or the dog that's barking. It's basic life energy.

What determines which way this energy goes, what happens out of it, is really our intention. It's our aspiration. As you know, we have many layers to our intentionality. Some of them are that we want to be safe, so we have the intention towards safety, to defend ourselves, to have more pleasure in our lives, to be respected, to be recognized. We can put our energy behind any of those areas of motivation.

It's said that when the spiritual warrior is mature, their aspiration is that of the bodhisattva - that all circumstances may serve to awaken. The aspiration is for freedom of the heart and mind. What that means is that the entire energy of awakening is towards that. When the warrior is instead in the grip of greed or hatred or delusion, energy is quite destructive, as you know.

I'd like to read you a little story. Once upon a time, there was an elderly king, a kind and generous ruler of a peaceful and prosperous land. He was greatly loved by his people for his kindness and his wisdom. He was approaching his 80th year. His wife

had long since died and his only son had been killed in a recent accident. He had no heir, so he had to decide to whom to leave his kingdom, who would he pass on the wisdom of his long life and all his worldly wealth.

He decided to look for a suitable heir among his people, and although it was against all precedent, he was a very good-willed king and decided he'd invite all interested people from the lands to his castle to see who was to be the next heir. He looked forward to the day with happy anticipation.

In the early morning hours of New Year's Day, which was the day he chose, people started flooding in. They arrived from near and far - women, men, rich, poor, young, old, learned, illiterate - and all were warmly welcomed by the palace staff and invited to the royal bathhouse to rest, relax, and clean up in preparation for meeting the king.

They were invited to soak in perfumed baths and offered fragrant lotions and oils to smooth their skin. Masseuses came to ease stress and tension, hairdressers to provide new hairstyles and trim beards. Now groomed and washed, they went into a huge wardrobe room where each selected a new outfit in which to meet the king. In his great kindness, he wanted everyone to have an equal chance in terms of how they appeared.

Relaxed and happy after the luxuriant bath, the applicants were beside themselves with excitement when they saw the dazzling array of fashionable clothing offered to them. Each tried on many different outfits, like children trying on make-believe costumes, preening before mirrors and each other, asking and giving advice, especially with accessories and shoes. When each finally settled on the outfit of their choice, they were taken into the palace banquet room where a lavish feast awaited them—a smorgasbord with every food and delicacy imaginable. Everyone wanted to taste every dish, so there was much bustling back and forth. No one wanted to miss out on anything.

While feasting with gusto, they were serenaded by musicians. During dessert, there were games of chance and a tantalizing array of prizes. This was followed by a mesmerizing magic show featuring the king's finest wizards.

It was at this point, after bathing, dressing, feasting, and being entertained, that the applicants were to begin going upstairs, one by one, to the king's chambers for their interview with his majesty. But the magic show was so spellbinding that not one of them could pull themselves away. They remained glued to their seats, completely entranced.

Meanwhile, the king was upstairs happily anticipating the appearance of the applicants. The appointed time came and he heard no footsteps on the stairs. Still, he waited patiently. No one appeared. Finally, as the sun moved close to the horizon, the king summoned his chief minister. "Where are the applicants? I'm eager to find my heir."

The minister looked sheepishly down at his shoes, visibly distressed. Clearing his throat, he spoke haltingly: "I am sorry to have to tell you this, your majesty, but they've all gone home. They've taken their new clothes. They've stuffed their pockets with leftovers from the feast. They've taken the prizes. They even took the soaps and lotions from the bathhouse. They've all gone home."

The king's hopes were dashed. He had no heir. Turning, he gazed silently out the window at the rolling hills and valleys of his beloved kingdom. His eyes filled with tears.

Satiated with food and drink, excited by new clothes and amusing prizes, mesmerized by music and magic, the people had completely forgotten why they came to the king's palace in the first place.

This is really the story of us all. There's not one of us that does not get waylaid. We know that. Sometimes we stay on track, but so often we get carried off into the preoccupations that really hold sway over us. We all get carried off. We get involved with planning and controlling and defending and trying to get through the day and make this happen and that happen, and we do disconnect from what most matters to us. And then we remember with a bit of sadness or angst that we missed many moments.

As we mature and wake up more and more, as we practice remembering on the path, what we're remembering really is what matters. We're remembering how much preciousness there is to a moment of real presence, to connecting in a heartfelt way with someone else, to really being here to live this life. We remember more. And this is the main attribute of the spiritual warrior—this quality of remembering what matters, coming back home again and again, remembering more and more moments.

In Jungian archetypes, the king-queen represents the awareness of it all, the mindfulness, the holding of the realm, containing and holding the realm in heart and mind and awareness. I love this description written by Jack Kornfield: "To take the one seat, to become the king or queen, to reclaim our Buddha nature, is to sit in the midst of experience just as it is, and to have our eyes open and our heart open."

In any moment we do this, it opens a whole new possibility—the possibility that we bear witness to, that we experience the unspeakable sorrow and beauty that makes up life.

This is a description of our awakened awareness, the king-queen quality. The spiritual warrior is in service of this. This is who and what the allegiance is towards of our basic energy.

Now, there are several qualities of awareness that are cultivated to allow the spiritual warrior—this part of our being—to really align ourselves, to remember, to be here for our lives. And they're described beautifully by Herman Hesse in the book Siddhartha. Many of you have probably read it, so to remind you: at one point he writes, "Siddhartha had three powers. He could think, he could wait, and he could fast."

These three qualities are really the grounds of a meditative mind. So let's look at them one by one.

He says he could think—he could see clearly. See clearly, be here for what is. To live with a totality of attention. So there's an awareness of posture. There's an awareness of sound. There's an awareness of mood, there's awareness of what is going on in this world. To see clearly means we're aware of our habits, of where we get stuck. To see clearly means we're aware of our potential, our capacity to really live in an open-hearted way, to be wise. So this is one of the qualities of a meditative mind and of the spiritual warrior—this clarity of seeing, this awareness, this attention that's right here and now, awake and alert.

The second quality: Siddhartha could wait. Now waiting, what does that mean? To be able to pause. The power of not-doing. That takes the quality of wakefulness where we're not carried off in our reflex and reactivity, but rather letting go of that and just being patient, silent, non-reactive. Discovering in that place, in that space of silence and quietness, the wisdom and compassion that can really guide us. That's where it comes from—learning to pause. It's a real power, and it's one that takes training, as you know. We tend to lean forward into our life and just roll along. To stop, to pause, to wait.

So Siddhartha could think. Siddhartha could wait. The third: he could fast. Now this is the one that gets most misunderstood, so I'll take a little time with it. Fasting—and it's also described in the classical texts as renunciation—means letting go of what binds us, renouncing or letting go of what keeps us small. Letting go of our habits of overwork, our habits of passivity, of overeating, of exploiting others, of controlling, of judging. Whatever it is that we're doing that gets in the way of full open presence, we gradually, as we can, let go of.

When we begin to realize our capacity for full presence, it becomes clearer and clearer how our habits of holding on or resisting keep us distant from ourselves, from each other. We start seeing the limiting beliefs we have about ourselves: "I can't do this," "I'm not good enough"—the steep self-doubts. That's part of renunciation: to not be so invested in, to let go of these ideas we have that keep us small.

Chögyam Trungpa writes, "What the warrior renounces is anything in her experience that is a barrier between herself and others." What do we do to push off others, to keep others out of our heart? What we're letting go of is contraction, is the small identities that stop us from realizing our Buddha nature. And in the letting go, we're freed up to live in the creative current of life.

So actually, renunciation is the pathway to a real creative, active participation. Because we have let go of all the constraints. Fasting is a way of saying, giving up all that takes us away from life—non-clinging. The attitude, it's the willingness to be here. This is the attitude of the spiritual warrior, this real willingness to say yes, yes to this life, to become part of the stream of life.

Now, meditation practice is really training in these three qualities: in seeing clearly, in pausing, in this kind of letting go into the flow. As an example, the one we're most familiar with here in our practice is frequently that thoughts come up. And what happens? The first part: to begin to see clearly that it's happening, just to recognize, "Okay, thinking." In the moment of seeing clearly, we're not so identified.

And then what? We pause. We just rest in that space of awareness. Just let be. Get quiet for a moment. See what's there. There's then the third: this letting go back into the flow, letting go of the grip of the thought, back into the flow of the breath. Our sounds that come and go are if there's a strong mood that wants our attention. We come back to what is.

By letting go of this identification with the waves of thought over and over again, we begin to see that we've been living in wave ideas and we haven't been connected to this ocean, this boundlessness of being which is our nature. So we really are practicing letting go into the totality. As we practice this letting go, we have available the full expression of life energy. It's access to a real boundless kind of creativity and loving. So that's the resolve of the warrior, to keep seeing what's happening and loosening the grip and opening back into the flow.

Now what stops us from doing that? What stops us from this letting go into it all? What most people find when they begin to investigate, when they look closely, is that our tendency to keep holding tight, to keep leaving, to getting lost in the past and the future, is very driven by fear. There's a real fear of opening to the mysterious and enormous energies of life just as they are. We want to in some way control it, hold it at bay.

There's a fear to let go into life, to really just sit down in our bodies. I mean, just try it. Just really letting go and sit down in it all. And we begin to, but then we recontract very quickly. Unconsciously, there's a continuous effort to kind of keep our fingers on the knob and the dial to control pain and pleasure. Fear is what stops and freezes this energy towards awakening. It's said that in order to be with life, we have to be willing to face this fear. That the source of courage of the spiritual warrior is this willingness to open to fear. Are we willing?

So our practice starts with seeing where we are meeting our edge. And we each have those places in our life where we've gotten very habitual to avoid something. Places where we don't let ourselves really get close to other people, where we get very defended or armored, places where we are not willing to take a risk creatively or in work. We're not willing to show vulnerability. We're not able to really face the parts of ourselves or other people that frighten us. We all have those edges, every one of us.

And this willingness to face fear is really a willingness to stay there and to see what happens. Again, Chogyam Trungpa, who writes a lot about the spiritual warrior archetype: "Acknowledging fear is not a cause for depression or discouragement. Because we possess such fear, we also are potentially entitled to experience fearlessness. True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear, but facing, going through, and beyond."

Now, going beyond fear again, does not mean that the sensations of fear just disappear. Rather, going beyond fear means that we have shifted from feeling the victim of, the one who is afraid, the one who is a small, endangered self. We've shifted from that into the awareness that recognizes fear with compassion, with presence. Do you understand that shift? The fear can still be there, but our sense of who we are has expanded. There's room.

This happens more and more as we are willing to be with what we've habitually avoided, resisted. Gradually we soften, we open, we shift in our sense of who we are. But it takes a willingness.

So the question is, what makes us willing to face what's difficult? What makes us willing to be with pain, to open to shame, to touch into the ocean of grief, to be with other people's grief? What makes us willing?

"Our desire to awaken," one student responds. Beautiful. "Wanting a higher and better quality of life," offers another. "Compassion," says a third voice. Yes, compassion.

Compassion emerges as another gateway to willingness—having compassion for ourselves and others makes us willing to face what we might otherwise avoid. Someone noted that fighting against our experience simply doesn't work; resistance only creates

more suffering. The desire for freedom itself becomes a powerful motivator, as does simple curiosity—that natural interest in exploring what lies beneath the surface of our habitual patterns.

Each of us finds our own flavor of what makes us willing to practice. We're all on this path in our unique way, yet something is making us willing to face what our conditioning would normally have us turn away from. To practice mindfulness is to be willing to meet life in a more unconditional way, and there's enormous power in this willingness.

This willingness generally expresses itself in two fundamental ways. The first is care—we care about life itself, about waking up, about being real and honest with what is. We love life so deeply that we want to experience it fully, even in its painful moments. The second quality is interest, born from our love of truth. Part of our love for life is this insatiable desire to know, to understand what this mysterious existence is really about.

There's no way to truly understand, no way to really know what this is all about, no way to live fully or open our hearts completely except by facing each moment as it is. And so, gradually, we learn to put down our armor.

It's profoundly ironic that the spiritual warrior—this archetype we find so compelling—actually refers to one who has the courage to disarm, to become vulnerable. We see this pattern repeated throughout history in all the great stories of heroes and heroic acts. This willingness emerges from deep caring, from love for something or someone greater than our small concerns.

Consider the myth of Camelot, where knights undertook extraordinary quests inspired by love for the lady of the court. Think of mothers performing superhuman feats to protect their children, or the countless beings throughout history who have fought for freedom in various forms. What enables these transcendent acts? We move beyond our usual preoccupations with personal pain and pleasure because of this great love—for life, for truth, for something that matters deeply.

Take a moment to reflect on where this quality shows up in your own life. What are you truly dedicated to? Who are the people, what are the activities or causes that evoke your deepest commitment? Where have you felt that sense of the spiritual warrior's resolve—that willingness to put everything on the line for what you care about?

For some, this dedication flows toward the path of awakening, toward the Dharma itself. For others, it's devotion to a relationship, to parenting, to creative expression, to service in the world. Where have you experienced this quality of resolve? How has this kind of dedication energized you, allowed you to let go of smaller concerns and open to something larger?

It's valuable to recognize and affirm this beautiful part of ourselves. By sensing again and again what we truly care about, we activate and energize ourselves on the path. This caring isn't something we need to manufacture—it's already present, waiting to be acknowledged and honored.

Sometimes, as was mentioned, it's the great life events that crack us open—the traumas and dramas, the births and deaths that awaken our heart and deepen our resolve. Learning that someone has cancer, losing a job, the birth of a child, spiritual breakthroughs or sudden insights—these experiences can instantly awaken the caring that's already within us. They don't create something new; they simply remove the veil that was covering what was always there.

We get shocked into being more here.

I'd like to share a personal experience from the last few days that speaks directly to this. About three days ago, a friend of mine committed suicide. I'm very close with his wife and family. His son is one of my son's best friends. This has created ripples of suffering touching many lives.

Yet witnessing how people have responded, how they've risen to the occasion—probably everyone here has lost someone close or knows someone who has—reveals such depths of compassion. It's as if when people are finally compelled to feel grief fully, so much falls away. There emerges this profound potential to be utterly real, to give freely, to sacrifice willingly. And this truly arouses resolve.

For me, it's inevitable that seeing a precious life end, facing death directly, makes me more resolved to love well and to live my moments fully. This speaks to one of the great universal teachings found in almost every tradition: that death and impermanence can be our teacher, moment by moment, because everything is going, everything is dying. Today is almost gone, our bodies are aging, for many of us our children are growing up, the seasons are changing—it's all moving so very fast.

Our response can either be to put on blinders or to look directly into the face of this impermanence, this dying happening all around us, and really cherish our moments. To truly value this one and this one.

The shaman Don Juan writes: "Without the awareness of death, he would be an ordinary man involved in ordinary acts. He would lack the necessary potency, the necessary concentration that transforms one's ordinary time on earth into magical power."

This is the heart of the spiritual warrior—this cherishing of life and having the courage and resolve to really show up for it, to be here for it.

In the most mature awakened bodhisattva, the spiritual warrior, this loving becomes unconditional. This resolve becomes comprehensive. All situations, all circumstances serve to awaken—the driving back and forth to places, the petty tasks, the big obstacles, the people who annoy us. Everything serves awakening. Every being is included in our hearts.

I mentioned earlier that this will to live, this quality of intentionality, often gets wrapped around our fears and wanting, which is quite natural. This has been called the shadow warrior. It's really the same energy as the mature spiritual warrior—still that will to live, to thrive—but it becomes contracted around wanting and fearing.

What do we do with this? This shadow warrior has been the cause of wars throughout history, of violence. It's the cause of destruction and sickness, of disease inflicted upon the earth and environment. How can we work with this energy in a way that transforms it, so we can manifest as mature warriors?

To awaken and heal, we start right where we are. If we find ourselves in the grip of the shadow warrior—of anger, of wanting to hurt or destroy or accumulate—if our energy, our intentionality is locked in contraction, we start there. Our practice, as always, is to bring the same clear seeing to what is arising.

Anger. See it clearly. Pause. Have commitment enough to simply pause and let it be, and let go.

Letting go of anger doesn't mean pushing it away. It means seeing the stories we've wrapped around it and allowing the energy to be there without identifying ourselves as "the angry person." We are the awareness that includes it.

The more moments we bring these qualities of clear seeing, of pausing, of opening, the more moments we touch our true nature, our free nature. The shadow warrior transforms into the mature warrior through kind attention, through opening to the vulnerability that drives him or her, to the soft spot, to being tender with that soft spot—the fear, the wanting.

This is the training we're engaged in. We train in concentration, in mindfulness, so we develop that muscle, that capacity, that strength. Then when we get caught, we can notice it. There's no shame, no judgment—just "Okay, caught, caught in this energy"—and see it clearly.

I began tonight with the story of those people who went to the castle and forgot why they were there. It is our nature to forget. Each of us, every day, gets pulled off track. This always happens. We forget. It's also natural that as we practice mindfulness, we remember more and more.

As this basic quality of the spiritual warrior begins to flower, we find ourselves present and knowing what we love, living what we love, living our moments fully.

The Buddha, toward the end of his life, taught that fear and insecurity are great—these are the energies that drive the shadow warrior. Fear and insecurity are great, but greater yet is the truth of our connection. Greater yet is the power of love. This is our Buddha nature: each of us has this power of awareness and love that can transform and awaken our hearts.

When we get little glimmers—through sitting, we get glimmers in nature, with loved ones, we get glimmers through our losses—these moments can serve to deepen our commitment, our resolve, because we realize how much we cherish this life. Like the bodhisattvas of the ages, we remember that we're really here for only one purpose: to wake up, to live it fully, and to love fully.

I'd like to close with a short poem:

To be of the earth is to know the restlessness of being a seed, the darkness of being planted, the struggle toward the light, the pain of growth into the light, the joy of bursting and bearing fruit, the love of being food for someone, the scattering of your seeds, the decay of the seasons, the mystery of death, and the miracle of birth.

Let's take a few moments to sit in guided meditation. As a way of establishing presence, connect with the aspiration of your heart, what brings you here, what you most wish to guide your life. Let that be your prayer for yourself in this moment: "May I awaken, may these moments be wakeful." Whatever words, whatever flavor matches for you.

Now take a few moments to relax your body, your heart, your mind. Make room for whatever arises in awareness. Meet whatever arises with interest, with care. See clearly what's true. Pause. Let go into the stream of experience again and again.

As a way of anchoring, if your mind is busy, simply steady yourself with the breath, with sound. Then open to whatever calls your attention with this clear seeing.

Let's close with metta meditation. Sit comfortably, taking a few moments to feel your heart, feel the breath at your heart.

I'd like to ask that we bring our prayer and care to the family I described earlier. Hold in your hearts, in the space of heart, the sense of these beings who are going through so much loss and pain. Alden, Hedda, Jane, Will. May these beings and all their relations be held in the great compassionate heart of wisdom. May they be soothed. May they discover some peace, some understanding, some freedom.

Now take some moments in silence to bring into your heart whoever in your life needs some healing, needs some kindness. Sense their vulnerability. Sense where they're tender, and offer your care.

Finally, let us open our prayer to include all beings. May all beings be held in this great space of compassion. May all beings touch peace. May all beings awaken and be free.

CHAPTER 198

The Courage To Live Your Aspirations

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this inspiring dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the essential role of spiritual aspirations in our practice and daily lives. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings on the four conditions necessary for nurturing dharma aspirations - suitable environment, good companions, self-regulation, and wholesome karma - Armstrong explores how to maintain the transformative energy of retreat practice in ordinary life.*
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> *Armstrong distinguishes between ego-driven goals and authentic spiritual aspirations that arise from our deepest wisdom. He emphasizes that true aspirations are not about becoming something new, but uncovering and embodying what we already are beneath the layers of greed, hatred, and delusion. The talk weaves together practical guidance on establishing daily meditation practice, working with relationships as dharma practice, and maintaining the precepts as a foundation for ethical living.*
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> *With characteristic warmth and humor, Armstrong addresses the courage required to live authentically, sharing personal stories and teaching anecdotes that illuminate the path from aspiration to embodiment. He concludes with Śāntideva's Seven Branch Prayer, a profound expression of bodhisattva aspiration that extends our practice for the benefit of all beings.*

Over the last ten days or two weeks that we've been here, we have heard a lot about what the full potential of our lives is. During this time we have been making a conscious effort to awaken, to come out of the dream or the fog-like state that we often live in. And even though at times the steps may feel small, each step is a step towards freedom.

By doing this practice, we have been nurturing our commitment to awaken—a commitment to living our lives in alignment with our hearts' and minds' deepest wishes. Soon we'll be faced with leaving here, and it's important to look at how we can continue to nurture this commitment. How can we take this practice and what we've been doing here and first let it become a support in our daily lives, and then let it become the way in which we live our lives?

When I first began doing this practice, the main criterion for me was that it be a practice that assisted me in my daily life, that brought some clarity to the situations I encountered. Tonight I'd like to speak about extending this practice that we've been doing here sitting on the cushion and extending it into our daily lives.

I'd like to begin by speaking about the seed itself—the seed of aspiration or the knowing or sensing of the full potential of life. It's so vital to our practice and how we live our lives. It can at times be extremely energizing and helpful to our practice to reflect on why we practice and what it is that has so inspired us to come here. What are the deepest aspirations of our hearts and minds?

By doing this we allow these aspirations to become a strong motivating force in our practice and in our lives. In understanding what is motivating us, we can come to see how to nurture this. Then these aspirations become something that we can use daily in our life. When we're faced with making a decision, it can be a reference point. For myself, having the aspiration to awaken, I can look and see: in a moment where I need to make a choice, will this help me to awaken, or is it based upon greed, hatred, and delusion?

I'd like to say a little bit more about the word aspiration itself, because it sometimes has funny connotations in our society. We live in a culture that's very good at setting goals. We may have a lot of training in how to reach these goals, and oftentimes these goals are something that we've intellectually decided upon. They may come out of cultural norms in our society and our desires, and may be related to a career path. It could be as if we pick out something that we want to do in life and then decide, no matter what, that's what we're going to do.

So often this is based upon some external kind of fulfillment, and the mind becomes constricted around the goal—what we want to achieve. In a sense it's a closing down of the mind and losing any sense of what's skillful or unskillful.

I'd like to share a story about one aspiration that is based on external fulfillment. Apparently there is an award that is given out each year called the Darwin Award, and it's given to the person who did the gene pool the biggest service by killing or injuring themselves in the most extraordinarily stupid way. This is the story about the winner for 1997.

His name was Larry Waters of Los Angeles, and he's one of the few Darwin winners to survive his award-winning accomplishment. Larry's boyhood dream was to fly. When he graduated from high school, he joined the Air Force in hopes of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, poor eyesight disqualified him. When he was finally discharged, he had to satisfy himself with watching jets fly over his backyard.

One day Larry had a bright idea. He decided to fly. He went to the local Army-Navy surplus store and purchased forty-five weather balloons and several tanks of helium. The weather balloons, when fully inflated, would measure more than four feet across.

Back home, Larry securely strapped the balloons to his sturdy lawn chair. He anchored the chair to the bumper of his Jeep and inflated the balloons with the helium. He climbed on for a test while it was still only a few feet above the ground. Satisfied it would work, Larry packed several sandwiches and a six-pack of Miller Lite, loaded his pellet gun—figuring he could pop a few balloons when it was time to descend—and went back to the lawn chair. He tied himself in along with his pellet gun and provisions.

Larry's plan was to lazily float up to a height of about thirty feet above his backyard after severing the anchor and after a few hours come back down. Things didn't quite work out that way. When he cut the cord anchoring the lawn chair to his Jeep, he didn't float lazily up to thirty feet or so. Instead, he streaked into the LA sky as if shot from a cannon. He didn't level out at thirty feet, nor did he level off at one hundred feet. After climbing and climbing, he leveled off at eleven thousand feet.

At that height he couldn't risk shooting any of the balloons lest he unbalance the load and really find himself in trouble. So he stayed there, drifting, cold, and frightened for more than fourteen hours. Then he really got in trouble. He found himself drifting into the primary approach corridor of the Los Angeles International Airport.

A United pilot first spotted Larry. He radioed the tower and described passing a guy in a lawn chair with a gun. Radar confirmed the existence of an object floating eleven thousand feet above the airport. LAX emergency procedures swung into full alert and a helicopter was dispatched to investigate.

LAX is right on the ocean. Night was falling and the offshore breeze began to blow, carrying Larry out to sea with the helicopter in hot pursuit. Several miles out, the helicopter caught up with Larry. Once the crew determined that Larry was not dangerous, they attempted to close in for a rescue, but the draft from the blades would push Larry away whenever they neared. Finally, the helicopter ascended to a position several hun-

dred feet above Larry and lowered a rescue line. Larry snagged the line and was hauled back to shore. The difficult maneuver was flawlessly executed by the helicopter crew.

As soon as Larry was hauled to earth, he was arrested by waiting members of the Los Angeles Police Department for violating LAX airspace. As he was led away in handcuffs, a reporter dispatched to cover the daring rescue asked why he had done it. Larry stopped, turned, and replied nonchalantly, "A man just can't sit around."

This is not quite the kind of aspiration that I'm talking about.

When I'm using the word aspirations, I often think of the energy of rising up—rising up to inhabit our full potential, the qualities that we inhabit in doing so. It's not a state of becoming but an embodiment of that which we aspire to. We don't become more loving—it's not a creation—but through the purification of our aspirations we may embody love more deeply. It's not about reaching out to be something, but rather revealing that which is already there, which has only been obscured. In this way it is a realignment of our lives to be in accordance with the deepest level of our being.

Another way that helped me to understand aspirations is the way Hozan, the Zen master that I sit with, used to speak of them. He often talks about uncovering our deepest vows. This has seemed to me to be really true—that as I sit and meditate, there is a sense of uncovering that which has been covered. It's covered over by habits of mind, emotions that carry us away, or thoughts that we get lost in. Essentially they get covered over when we identify with something in a way that starts to create a small, separate self.

Through our practice we're able to see through the delusion of these states, to become less enchanted by our desires. In letting go or simply not being moved by them, our deepest vows become revealed.

It's crucial that we nurture these aspirations, or they become some ideological concept that can drive us crazy as we fail to live up to them. In this way they become just another way to beat ourselves up, to tell ourselves that we're not good enough. They become that brutal "should" in our mind that we have a way of torturing ourselves with.

At the beginning of this year I was in Northampton, and as I was walking down the street there was a street musician there. In his box he had a sign that said, "May your suffering last as long as your New Year's resolutions."

When our New Year's resolutions become that brutal "should," we lose our inspiration. Or else we may just leave these aspirations to wither and die, and we begin to listlessly move through life, shying away from anything that may awaken us.

Growing more and more numb to life itself, this disconnection from our deepest aspirations can lead to states of guilt and remorse—feelings we may not fully face until the time of death arrives. Then we might look upon our lives with profound sorrow and despair.

Just recently, a friend of mine who works in hospice care shared a particularly moving experience. A woman came into the hospice after sixty-five years of marriage, and as she was about to die, she told her husband that in all those decades together, he had never been able to show his affection to her. Now, facing her death, he was completely present for her and couldn't stop expressing the love he had carried all along. In some way, he was very fortunate to have this opportunity.

Many times death comes without our knowing it's about to arrive, and we don't have those final moments to express what lives in our hearts. But hopefully we can learn to be connected in such a way that we don't need to wait sixty-five years to offer our love.

Both Carol and Sharon have spoken about how important our intentions and actions are, about the law of karma, and how what we direct our minds toward is what we will bear the fruits of. If we keep looking toward unwholesome, habituated patterns of greed, hatred, and delusion, this is what we will come to bear the fruits of. But if we can realign our hearts and minds with that which brings us closer to freedom, understanding, peace, and harmony, that too is what we will bear the fruits of. This obviously makes it very important what we incline our minds toward.

We can look right now into our own hearts and minds to see what it is that we aspire to, what's meaningful to us. And we can be honest with ourselves. There's no right answer. Each person's expression is probably quite unique. And yet when we look into our spiritual journeys, there's probably something quite universal in our ultimate aspirations.

In our own language, we may find something like a desire for greater happiness, peacefulness, understanding, or the aspiration to be liberated—to be free. It's important that we let the voice be our own, not what we think we should aspire to. It needs to be something that speaks to us in our own language.

Recently someone expressed it to me as "getting out of their own way." It can be something very simple. As Sylvia mentioned the other night, the Dalai Lama says, "My religion is kindness." A simple statement, and yet when we look at what kindness truly

is, it's not simply being nice to someone. True kindness requires that we live deeply, that in a simple moment of kindness we bring to bear the qualities of wisdom, love, compassion, and equanimity. It requires a full presence of being.

It may be that our aspirations are not immediately apparent. It may take some time to understand what is fully motivating us. We can be so used to listening to the chitchat of our minds that we fail to give the heart space to listen from an intuitive level. Rather than forcing some outside concept, we can silently listen within. Through our practice, we begin to allow the spaciousness in which our hearts can be heard. We can then begin to live our lives from this place.

For years, I would usually begin my sittings by saying, "May I be liberated for the benefit of all beings." There were many times when this seemed very dry to me, and I would wonder, "What's my problem? Don't I want to be liberated?" Then one day I noticed that even though there was some dryness with these words, they directed my mind to this place of intuitive knowing. There was a felt sense there—maybe there were no words to express it, but it could be clearly attuned to.

There's a quality of courage that is needed in moving toward our aspirations. We need to move beyond the inertia that sometimes settles into our lives when we fall into sustaining the status quo. We need to move beyond our self-preserving tendencies and be willing to stand naked in the light.

I know there have been many times in my life when I came directly into contact with the feeling of smallness, when I was faced with a situation that challenged me deeply. One such time, I was involved in a meditation center and had only been there a very short period when I was asked to manage the center. It was a big job with a lot of responsibility, and I remember so clearly how I would have this feeling of just being a very tiny little person in a very big job. There were times when I wanted to crawl back into my hole, times when I didn't like what I had to do. In many ways it forced me to let go of my preferences. This was possible through remembering what it was I was doing and why I was doing it. By keeping in touch with what was motivating me, I had a bigger picture than just being involved in satisfying my preferences.

I suspect many of us have at various times in our lives been put in positions where we really felt challenged. There's no question that it's a challenge to wake up out of our habituated patterns—they've been around a very long time. Sometimes it's seemingly more comfortable not to try than to try and feel as if one has fallen short.

I know when I was a child, I would often begin things and then the fear of failure would stop me. It was as if I was afraid that if I tried, I might discover that I really was no good—or discover what my shortcomings were.

During my teenage years, there were two people who really inspired me to have courage in following the aspirations of my heart. I came into contact with these two people at a very difficult time in my life. I had become very disillusioned with the world and all its seeming injustices. I was quite angry and felt quite alienated. At that time I was having trouble going to school—I would walk up the steps to the school each day, and then a part of me just couldn't face it again.

And so I would go and I would sit by the river. And it was a very pretty river with lots of trees around it. And yet in the background was the city was right there and the hum of the city. As I sat there each day, just watching the river flowing and the comings and goings of the life there, there were these two people that were frequently there.

By the standards of society, these people would probably be termed failures. One of them was a bag lady, and the other was probably something we would call a bum. The bag lady would come every day and she would pick up treasures that she found that other people had discarded. The bum would come in his ragged clothes and he would just sit on this bench and he would bring with him a bag to feed the birds. He'd sit there and he'd feed the birds for hours, and sometimes people would come along and he'd just have a chat with them.

What I really started to sense from these people was that they had some kind of peace and tranquility. They had something which I didn't see in a lot of the other people around me. I just looked at them one day and I thought, "If this is the worst that can happen to me, what do I have to lose?" I felt in some way that they were my own heavenly messengers, that they brought to me a message of having courage to begin to understand life, to follow my heart.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese woman who's been the leader of the Democratic Party in Burma for a number of years, was once elected to rule her people, but she was never allowed to do so because of the military regime there. She spent many years in house arrest or having very limited visitors being able to come and see her. Around her, people were subject to immense suffering, torture, and death. And during this time, she's never stopped by her fear. She says about fear: "Fearlessness may be a gift, but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavor. Courage that comes from cultivating the habit of refusing to let one's own fear dictate one's actions. Courage that can only be described as grace under pressure." And for those of you who know her, you probably realize how much she really is a symbol of grace under pressure.

So often our deepest aspirations get covered over by our fears and beliefs about ourselves. If we're in any way harboring a belief that we're not good enough, each time that we acknowledge our aspiration, we're also facing this underlying belief. So working with our aspirations, we also have to work with the compassionate heart. It does no good to beat ourselves up over and over again for believing that we're unworthy. But through the understanding we gain in our practice, through seeing deeply into the way things are, we no longer have to believe our beliefs. They're simply a case of mistaken identity. In this way we can see that it needs to be a combination of recognizing and acknowledging our deepest aspirations and using the practice to realize them.

For example, if we have the aspiration to be loving and then a moment later someone makes us angry, we could start to believe that we're really an angry person. Yet if we continue to be with the anger and see through to its impermanence, we can see that it's just the passing state and not who we truly are.

We also need to learn to work with our aspirations with wisdom, or they become our bondage. If we're not careful, we can end up with a compulsive, striving energy. If our aspiration is to be free and we are grasping at this, then we have only cultivated the habit of attachment. We are moving into the world of becoming, leaning into our aspirations in a way that constricts the mind around a fixed idea. It can be a very noble aspiration, and yet if it strengthens the idea of self, it will only cause more suffering.

We can see this in "I want to awaken. I want enlightenment." Nobody becomes enlightened. Enlightenment is. Nobody becomes awakened. Awakening is.

When we end up tightening the mind around our fixed ideas, we actually end up causing harm to ourselves and others. I know there's been times in my own life when this aspiration hasn't been done so skillfully. Some years ago I was living in a spiritual community, and for the most part it was an extremely happy time in my life. I felt like I could really dedicate my life to that which I believed in. I worked wholeheartedly in this community, but then something got caught up in the wholeheartedness. There became identification with the work that I was doing, as if through doing this work I was proving myself, I was creating some sense of self-worth.

There was an endless stream of work, and I started to find it difficult to say no to it. I became known in the department that I was working as "deva slava," or divine slave. I really ended up pushing too hard, working too hard, and harming my body in doing so. This was just because there wasn't skillful means in the holding of my aspiration. I wasn't bringing in the wisdom.

But it's natural that through our practice our aspirations become purified. We may have very noble aspirations and our means are still clouded by delusion. We begin to see how not only do we have aspirations but we have ideas about how aspirations will play out—some sort of agenda. And this is suffering.

An example of this is that as we sit, we may have ideas about what good practice looks like. We may think that when we are clearly seeing the arising and passing away of our experiences, that this is good. As we sit longer, it may begin to happen that things begin to move faster, and we begin to only see the endings of things. It has that sense as if everything's slipping away, that there's nothing substantial to hold onto.

But the truth of it may be that our practice is going to a new level. Yet by wanting what we consider to be good experience, we start cutting ourselves off from the way things are unfolding.

One of our jobs in practice is to learn to hold both our deepest aspirations in a way that energizes our practice and still have acceptance and surrender to the unfolding of our paths or the unfolding of the Dharma. It is the holding of two sides of a coin. We point ourselves in the direction of our aspirations, and then with wholeheartedness and dedication we simply do the best we can, responding to life as it is through skillful means.

Nyanaponika Thera talks about crossing the ocean of life. He says, "To cross the ocean of life and reach the other shore safely, skill is needed in navigating its currents and cross currents. In adapting oneself to those inner and outer currents, however, one must always be watchful. The currents can be powerful at times, and one must know when it is necessary to resist them. Sometimes right effort has to be applied to avoid or overcome what is evil and to produce and preserve what is good. At other times it is wise to restrain excessive and impatient zeal and revert to a receptive attitude, allowing the process of inner growth to mature at their own rate. By wisely directed adaptation, we can learn to give full weight to both sides of every situation, to the duality in our own nature and in the objective circumstances we face. Only by confronting and understanding the two sides within one's own experience can one master and finally transcend them."

Learning to recognize when our zeal becomes unbalanced—we experience it in our practice when we are pushing too hard to get somewhere, perhaps wanting some painful state to be finished with, noting it so it will disappear. We need to open and accept that which is, and our aspirations give us the energizing quality to do this. In the heat of the pain or the difficulty, we can simply remember why it is that we are doing this.

The Buddha spoke very simply about how to nourish our Dharma aspirations. He said there are four qualities necessary to do so.

The first of these conditions is being in a suitable place to live—a place that allows us to step out of the busyness of life. It's a place of refuge, of seclusion, a place where we have a sense of safety. It needs to be a place able to support a wholesome lifestyle where we can live ethically. For many of us as householders, it may not be that our house is totally silent, but it can be a place where we can work and share intimately with others, where we can respect others and feel respected by them. It's a place where we can begin to engender the qualities of love and compassion.

The second condition is to associate with good people. I'm sure we all know the difference between being with people who are on a destructive path and being with people who have like-minded aspirations. When we're with people who live carelessly, it's easy to fall into step with them—we may not want to make waves, or we simply begin to have our mind clouded by what they're feeling or acting. But when we keep company with good friends, people who inspire us, it really helps to give us support. These people can help let us know when we're getting off track, when we're starting to do foolish things, and they often bring great inspiration into our lives.

When I was practicing in Burma, I was sharing a room with a Swiss woman who had ordained as a nun. She had such strength and commitment to her practice that each time I walked into the room where she was, I was reminded instantly to be more mindful, to be present, simply by her presence. I'm sure we've experienced this support as we sit here—in times of great difficulty it's been the people sitting around us that have really helped us hang in there with it.

Sometimes I think we tend to overlook that taking refuge in the Sangha is the third of the Triple Gems, so it was obvious that the Buddha placed great importance upon this. It's really helpful, just in the same way that we've come here together to do this retreat as a sangha, to have some form of sangha in our daily lives. Perhaps we are part of a sitting group, gathering together regularly with our peers. In this way we can get strength from them, and it can help to provide steadiness and inspiration.

Some of us may find we're living in an area where there aren't so many practitioners. It might be helpful to find people we can communicate with, even from a distance, where when we're in a time of struggle, we can simply call them up and get some form of reality check, some form of inspiration.

Oftentimes in coming together as a sangha, there can be difficulties. It's not always easy. But instead of waiting for the perfect Sangha, we can use the situation we're in to further our practice, to use it as practice. In the same way that we've been working with difficult states here, we can work with difficult people within our Sangha. Here we may have found that if it's not one thing, it's another, and at home we may find if it's not one person, it's another. We can simply learn to work with these situations.

The third condition the Buddha spoke about was being able to self-regulate and guide our lives. This involves living in alignment with the truth, the teachings, the Dharma, and using our practice to do so. This is about the energy and effort we put into our practice. It's about being able to accept whatever limitations we may have.

We so often want to be the invincible ones, but these bodies, minds, and energy all have their limitations. It's learning through skillful means the times to move like a warrior and the times to simply sit and breathe gently. It's about finding what supports the continuation of our practice and having the energy to do so.

This might mean making a commitment to sitting on a daily basis. It might require getting up a little earlier or going to bed a little later, or asking for support from family members to help care for our children to give us this time. The length of time can vary for each one of us according to the conditions in our life. It's far better to choose a time that is realistic than to day after day not be able to stick with your commitment.

A few years ago—quite a few years ago now—I made a commitment to sit for two hours a day: an hour in the morning, an hour in the evening. Then one day I had a very busy day, followed by a dinner party, lots of conversation, and a few drinks. When I got home, I hopped into bed. Just as I was about to doze off, I remembered I hadn't sat.

I dragged myself out of bed and went to my cushion. I sat there for that hour, bobbing and weaving, imagining how I could curl up on my cushion, totally fantasizing about being asleep. If we looked at this on the level of what constitutes good practice, we'd probably think, "Why bother?" And yet, here I am many years later, and out of all the sittings I did in that period, this is the one that really sticks out in my mind. It does so because it truly was honoring my commitment, hanging in there with that commitment even though it was difficult.

This also brings up the point of not judging our sittings. As we move back into daily life and it becomes more hectic, we might find—if we sit at the end of the day—that we're just replaying the day, that there are lots of thoughts, maybe obsessive planning for the future. At that time, this was what my sittings often looked like. Yet just by con-

tinuing, it wasn't long before I started to feel a little more spaciousness in my life during chaotic moments. I wasn't quite so quick to retaliate with anger when things happened that I didn't like.

Sitting is not the only way to continue our practice. We've worked extensively with walking during this retreat, and walking can continue to be a strong anchor in our lives. We do a lot of it, and we can simply let that be a time of practice. IMS is full of hallways, and through my daily life, I'm often moving through these corridors. So I started making it a practice to remember each time I hit a hallway to walk—to simply walk.

I've also found that when walking down a busy street with many things to do, if in a moment I can just remember that what I'm really doing is walking, I can feel this great weight of the world drop from my shoulders, and I'm simply walking. It's certainly easier said than done—the remembering is the difficult part. I used to judge myself fiercely for gaps in mindfulness, noticing each time how long it had been since I had forgotten. Then one day I shifted this to celebrating the remembering, and suddenly there was joy and delight, and once again the opportunity to be present.

Strong emotional states can also become a reminder or wake-up call. When anger arises, we can take a momentary look at what this feels like—not being swept away by the anger, but instead exploring the state both in mind and body. If you happen to be in a phase where you're experiencing many strong emotional states, you might pick one of them and work with that—maybe a state such as blame. Each time you hear in your mind that you're blaming someone or blaming yourself, just let this be a reminder to look within and see what's happening.

Relationship has also been a strong component of my own practice, serving both as a mirror to cultivate mindfulness and as a practice of loving-kindness. At times the mirror can be difficult to look at. People closest to us often trigger responses that normally don't get touched, and we can use these moments to understand what we hold onto and how we get hooked.

Having a partner inspires me to move toward living from a place of less grasping, clinging, and desire for control—moving toward a place where love is unconditional. This means letting go of the expectations I may have of wanting my partner to be a certain way, respecting him in his own process. Sometimes respecting someone we love's process can be quite difficult. When they're in pain and suffering, can we simply be there for them without trying to make things right? Sometimes I've found it easier to sit with my own pain than to feel it in others. It often brings up feelings of powerlessness, feelings of futility. So I'm learning to be with these feelings while still honoring my partner's space.

One of my favorite lines that I've ever heard Sharon say, which she writes in one of her books, is: "To love someone is to be totally present for them." Relationship has been for me one of letting go over and over again—beginning to see how attachment kills the potential for love, having the courage to love with nothing to hang onto, knowing these conditions are impermanent and loving anyway, using relationship both as purification and as offering.

Also in our daily lives, we can work with honoring the precepts, taking them to heart—not blindly following them, but letting them be an alive, vital element in our lives. We can learn to work with them in a way that brings reverence and sacredness to life, respecting and caring for ourselves and those around us. There may be one of the precepts in particular that we feel drawn to work with. I'm sure the precept around false speech could keep us busy for many lifetimes, and we'd still have more work to do.

We can discover where we draw our lines. We use the precepts to become more aware of our intentions and motivations, and to be honest and intimate with ourselves—using the precepts as our foundation for living and relating with the world, cultivating thoughts and actions that come from a place of non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.

The fourth condition that the Buddha spoke about was previous good work or actions. This returns us again to the law of cause and effect. It's said to be a rare and precious opportunity for one to be able to hear the Dharma. If we look around this world at the vast array of conditions that one can be born into, there are many different lives we could possibly have without having this possibility of hearing the Dharma.

And then it's considered even more rare and precious to be able to practice the Dharma, even just to be able to sit here right now. At this time there are still monks and nuns who live in Tibet in monasteries, and they don't have the same opportunity for practice due to the conditions that are present. So all of these conditions can help to remind us of the laws of cause and effect.

In order to grow a garden, certain conditions need to be present. In order to come to understand our own hearts and minds, certain conditions need to be present. When we look at these conditions that are necessary, it may come to mind that something in our lives might need to change in order to support our heart's deepest wish. This can be scary, and yet if we let the practice guide us, what we find is that we are simply letting go of that which is not serving us. In this way we begin to simplify our lives.

I know there was a time in my own life when the practice really began to affect the way that I lived, and I no longer had the same interests as many of my friends. Some of my friends found this quite difficult, and some of them started to fall away, while others became more interested in what I was doing. At this time my husband Edwin was not meditating, and he would watch me day after day as I would go and sit. Then one day he decided to go to a retreat with me, and since that time he's become very inspired in his own practice, even to the point of spending time ordained as a monk.

Yet there was a point when I was not really sure how this was going to affect our relationship. I would go away for months at a time to practice, and I would imagine that during that time he would fall in love with another woman. And yet in my heart I knew that I had no choice but to meditate. I could feel the effect that it was having on me. It took courage to do that, and it felt like a risk. And yet I found that there was the faith and the courage to do that, made possible through the practice itself. The practice itself had this sense of guiding me.

The interesting thing about the aspiration to awaken is that as it is combined with the growing wisdom from our practice, it keeps returning us to the moment, to the here and now. We realize the possibility of awakening is nowhere other than right here.

In the very first retreat that I did with Hogen-san, a Zen master, he introduced me to koan practice. He describes koan practice as being the ultimate question which in itself is an answer by which one can cut off one's own karmic ego head and be born anew. So the first day that he gave a koan, I was very excited, and I was sitting with my koan, and then bingo, there came an answer. So excitedly, I hurried off to his room to tell him. I gave him my answer, and he got this very puzzled expression on his face, and he says to me, "What was the koan that I gave?" As I repeated it to him, he gets another puzzled expression and he says, "No, I never gave that koan." So I sheepishly exited from the room.

The next day he gave another one, and I felt very determined once again. When he said it, it sounded so profound, and so I thought, "Yes, I'll sit with this question." I was sitting there, and after a period of time, I realized I'd forgotten all about the koan. Then I realized I'd forgotten even what the koan was. So I once again went sheepishly back to his room, and I told him what had happened.

He looks at me, and he ever so slightly rolls his eyeballs. Then he says, "Just go and sit perfectly." I listened to this. I took it in. Then I was a bit puzzled. I said to him, "You know, you've just given me a future." He gets a very puzzled expression. He says, "What? How did I do that?" I said, "Well, if I'm going to go and sit, it's going to take some time to sit perfectly."

Then all of a sudden in the room there were just these two blazing brown eyes penetrating into me. And he said, "Perfection now!" I bowed and left the room.

So this is a poem by the Buddhist nun Rangetsu:

First steps on the long path to truth.
Please do not dream your lives away.
Walk on to the end.

Having the courage, the patience, and the perseverance to continue on our way, moment by moment allowing the inspiration and the energy of our aspirations to guide us to freedom. It is our heart's involvement in our practice, letting ourselves be wholeheartedly engaged in waking up moment by moment.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in his teaching about aspiration, says: "We must have a pure, honest, and warm-hearted motivation. And on top of that, determination, optimism, hope, and the ability not to be discouraged. The whole of humanity depends upon this motivation."

Remembering that what we do in this life affects the world. What we hold as dear to our hearts has the potential to touch the hearts of others. We can let our aspirations be not just for the benefit of ourselves, but for the benefit of all beings.

Just in closing, I'd like to read an expression of the aspiration that has really touched me very deeply.

And this is from Shantideva. It's called the Seven Branch Prayer:

May I be a guard for those who are protectorless, a guide for those who journey on the road. For those who wish to go across the water, may I be a boat, a raft, a bridge. May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall, and a lamp for those who long for light. For those who need a resting place, a bed. For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of plenty, a word of power, and the supreme remedy. May I be the trees of miracles, and for every being the abundant cow. Like the great earth and the other elements, enduring as the sky itself endures, for the boundless multitude of living beings, may I be the ground and vessel of their life.

Thus, for every single thing that lives, in number like the boundless reaches of the sky, may I be their sustenance and nourishment until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering.

So let's sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 199

The Five Hindrances

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of the five hindrances (pañcanīvaraṇa) as taught by the Buddha - the mental forces that obstruct meditation and cause suffering in daily life. Drawing from the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN 10), he explains how these hindrances of sense desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (byāpāda), dullness and drowsiness (thīna-middha), restlessness and agitation (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā) operate as "imperfections of the mind that weaken wisdom."*
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> *Armstrong details three traditional approaches to working with hindrances: developing mindfulness to recognize them clearly, cultivating concentration strong enough to suppress them temporarily, and ultimately uprooting them through deep awakening. The talk focuses primarily on the mindfulness approach, offering practical guidance for meeting each hindrance with awareness rather than resistance.*
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> *A key teaching tool introduced is the RAIN technique (Recognition, Acceptance, Investigation, Non-identification) developed by Michelle McDonald. Through personal anecdotes and retreat stories, Armstrong demonstrates how mindfulness allows us to "develop wakefulness in the middle of confusion" rather than trying to eliminate difficult states. He emphasizes that these hindrances are workable through understanding their nature, examining the stories that sustain them, and learning to relate to them with wisdom rather than being overwhelmed by them. The teaching concludes with Rilke's poetic reminder: "Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final."*

The other day when I was at home, I had an experience that I wanted to share with you. It's a pretty ordinary experience, one that I imagine you have all had at different times.

I was working at my computer, typing up a proposal for a new program here at Spirit Rock. As I was working on it over a couple of hours, I found myself getting more involved in the subtleties of it. Without really noticing it, I was starting to get worried about how this person was going to feel about this, how that person was going to take it. Am I offending somebody if I say it this way? Am I not offending somebody if I don't say it this way? I was getting tied up in the details of the project I was writing about without really being aware of it.

Over time, my mind just got into that kind of tight, constricted, tense, narrow place that I often get into around computer work. Then I decided to step out and get a breath of fresh air, so I walked out my back door. I live in Woodacre, so I see some of the same things that you see here. Just stepping out into that scene, my mind changed totally.

There was the freshness of the air. The breeze was bringing all the grasses and the trees to life with their movement. In just a minute, my mind opened and filled with that beauty of nature, the majesty of the scene, and the great space of it. That change happened in probably less than a minute.

This is what I thought was significant: how quickly the mind was able to shift from that narrow, tense kind of small mind worrying about me and my relationships to this very big, spacious kind of nature mind that the physical openness touched off. What struck me was the contrast because those two came so close together.

I realized that this is really what we're learning to do in our meditation practice. We're learning to go from that small and narrow and self-centered point of view to a more spacious and open and allowing kind of mind that we all know and we all have access to, because it's an intrinsic part of who we are. It's not something special we have to fabricate through extraordinary techniques, but it's something that you know, something that I know.

What we do in meditation is start to learn better and better how we move from that narrow, constricted self place to a bigger, open, more spacious, natural place. There was a Tibetan teacher named Yeshe Khen Rinpoche who put it like this: "The purpose of dharma practice is to know the nature of the non-deluded mind and to understand the workings of the deluded mind."

The very purpose of what we're doing is to know the nature of the non-deluded mind—that is, this open mind of wisdom and peace that we all have access to, that we all know. And then also to understand how the deluded mind works.

This is a pointer to our meditation. We have two tracks that we're learning in this retreat, in every retreat. One is to learn about this natural, open and free way of being. There are many ways to describe it, but one nice way is the set of qualities that James talked about last night: the five spiritual faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. The Buddha said that when those come together in our mind, when they grow into ripeness and maturity, they end in nibbana. They lead to nibbana. They merge into nibbana, the unconditioned, the state of complete release and freedom. This is a beautiful way of thinking about the qualities of the awakened mind: the five spiritual faculties.

The Buddha also had many pointers to the nature of the deluded mind—the ways that we get caught, the ways that we fall into seeing wrongly, and therefore the ways we fall into suffering. Lists you may have heard of include the taints, the defilements, the fetters. But the one that I want to talk about tonight is the list that he most often used for meditators.

He said that when you take up the practice of meditation in an active way, there are five forces that come up that oppose the deepening of practice. These are the forces he called the five hindrances. He named them as sense desire, aversion, dullness, restlessness, and doubt.

I want to talk about all of these in detail tonight. I also want to talk about them in general first. As we talk about some of the various facets of desire and aversion, I think you'll see that these are the forces that cause most of the suffering in our lives. They are not just meditators' problems. They are everybody's problems. They don't just happen in retreat. They also happen in daily life. But in retreat, we have the chance to really learn about them closely, to see how they work quite intimately.

The Buddha said that these are the forces that are the imperfections of the mind that weaken wisdom. So not only do they cause us pain and suffering, they also obstruct the development of our practice and the unfolding of our wisdom. They block us from going deeper until we learn how to work with them and relate to them.

In this teaching of the five hindrances, there's a good news and bad news scenario. I'll give you the bad news first: these things are no fun.

They're not easy to work with. They do plague us quite often. When you start to look closely at these forces, you'll see they're coming in again and again and again, moment after moment after moment, basically any time that you don't feel settled and peaceful. Did you have any moments of that today? Maybe one or two. So in those one or two moments, you were making acquaintances with the hindrances. Anytime the mind is unsettled or not at peace, one of the hindrances is active and at work. So they are very frequent visitors.

The good news is that all these states are workable. And because they're causes of suffering, in coming to understand them, there's tremendous potential for liberation in our formal practice and in our daily life. Everywhere that we're caught by one of these forces of desire, aversion, confusion, we can learn how to free ourselves from it and extend that freedom anytime we meet that hindrance. This is one of the great strengths of our Vipassana practice.

In all the different kinds of spiritual work that I've looked at and all the different kinds of psychological work that I've explored, I don't know any practice that addresses this situation as effectively and as directly as our Vipassana practice. We can find the tools through mindfulness to get really pretty immediate results in learning to work with these troublesome states of mind, and then take those tools from our formal practice back into our daily life. This is really what I want to talk with you about tonight.

There are basically three main strategies in the world of Buddhist meditation for working with the hindrances. We're going to focus in this retreat primarily on the first one, but I just want to mention the other two.

The first is that we develop mindfulness in relation to these states of mind. As the Buddha said in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Sutta on Mindfulness: "A practitioner understands when there is sense desire in the mind—the practitioner knows there is sense desire in me. Or when there is no sense desire, she knows there is no sense desire in me." And so on for the other painful states of mind. The key is knowing when they're present and knowing when they're absent. We come to know them really well through meeting them again and again. And as we know them well, like knowing the personality of a neighbor next door who's a little hard to get along with, we find ways to relate that we don't get into so much conflict with them. And that's the growth of wisdom.

The second avenue through meditation is that we develop enough strength of concentration—this collectedness of mind around a subject like the breath, for instance—that we're so involved and connected with that experience, the mind is completely given over to that experience of relating with the breath. There's no room for the hindrances to arise. So in strong states of concentration, the hindrances simply do not come up moment to moment. This is a possibility. It's not that remote for you. Sally and I taught a concentration retreat here two weeks ago where we just did seven days of practice focused on the development of concentration alone, one of the five spiritual faculties. And it was pretty amazing how many people in those seven days were able to touch that kind of state where the concentration was strong enough that the hindrances simply weren't arising. So that is an avenue that's open. We're just not focusing on that this week, but it's another possibility.

The third avenue through Buddhist practice is that eventually, as we touch deeper and deeper states of awakening, the hindrances become uprooted through that awakening itself. Basically, through the realization—the direct realization of the unconditioned—those forces can be eliminated from the mind forever so that they don't arise again. It's unlikely that's going to happen this week. But if it does, please let us know. We will rejoice with you. But just to know, that is a long-term possibility. That is the

place the Buddha lived from. In the life of the Buddha, after his awakening, the hindrances were no more a factor. But that's a real human possibility through this practice. It takes a lot of dedication.

So the first step in working with the hindrances is mindfulness. That means basically to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. This is not as easy as it sounds. So I'll just tell you a story from an earlier retreat.

I was on a six-week retreat a few years ago. I was fairly settled in—a couple of weeks into the retreat. I'd established my rhythm: sitting and walking, sitting and walking. I was getting pretty settled. I thought I was pretty continuously mindful. Sitting ended, it was time for a walking period, so I got up quite mindfully, walked to the back of the meditation hall, lifting, moving, placing with every step, and went to my walking path. Lifting, moving, placing, very steady, and I noticed somebody's in my walking path.

A reaction started. "How could they do that? I've been walking there every day for the last two weeks. What are they thinking?" Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. "Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line this morning? Is this their revenge?" Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. "Maybe they just haven't been paying much attention over these two weeks and they're really spacey and not very developed in their practice." Lifting, moving, placing.

So I walked to another place fairly near my old one. I wanted to show up and make sure they knew I was there. I did my walking, and about halfway through the period—twenty or thirty minutes in—suddenly I noticed: I'm irritated.

I thought I had been so continuously mindful, and the irritation had just snuck in. I didn't even know I was irritated. I was with lifting, moving, placing, but I completely missed what was going on in my mind, which happened to be the predominant experience I was having at the time.

This is the way the hindrances work. We may have our mindfulness radar up, and they fly in underneath. They slip in and we're so involved with the situation that we forget to see: this is actually what I'm feeling. They're sustained because we believe in the situation and our story about it.

My story was: I'm right, this is my walking path, they're wrong, they shouldn't be walking there. Because I never questioned that, I was just glued to the hindrance of irritation.

When I finally saw—oh, I'm irritated—then I could step back a little bit. I could see: oh, this is irritation. Now I can start to relate to it. As soon as I could relate to it, there was a little bit of space in the mind. In that little bit of space, I wasn't completely attached. I wasn't enmeshed. I could question the story and say: that walking path does not have my name on it. I did not buy that piece of land. It really is whoever gets there first. I could let go of the story and let go of the irritation.

One of the things I want to mention about the hindrances is that each one comes with a story. If we believe in it, it sustains the hindrance. When we take away that story, the hindrance basically can't support itself for very long. These hindrances are really a combination of an emotion and a belief about a situation.

The key point is: rather than turn my attention to that other walking person, I needed to turn the attention back on my own emotion. Then mindfulness could become established. We name it, we know it's there, and then we go to feel it directly in the body and in the mind. This is the activity of mindfulness.

The first of the five hindrances the Buddha talked about is sense desire—the tendency of mind that wants a pleasant experience. It's natural enough throughout the day. If we're sitting, walking, eating, or lying down, we want the experience in our senses to be pleasant.

It shows up a lot on retreats, especially in the early days. We may miss our friends or partners or family, and when we think about them, there's a kind of longing that comes up. Or maybe in the middle of a very long sitting—somebody said they had a forty-five-minute sitting the other day that felt like an hour and a half—we might be fantasizing about a vacation we'd like to take or did take. Something pleasant comes in that offers relief from the uncomfortableness or boredom that's crept in.

Or there could be an attraction to someone on the retreat. You start to feel: there's somebody special here of the gender I'm attracted to. Every time they walk close, it's like confirmation that you're soulmates. This is a past life connection coming to fruition in this sacred spiritual setting. "I know it's meant to be." The attraction just gets stronger and stronger.

We have a name for that: the Vipassana Romance, or the VR. It can take up a lot of mindfulness cycles, believe me.

When we look at all these different kinds of desire and start to feel into how desire feels, there's always a kind of bittersweet quality to it. There's an element of comfort because the object is a desired one.

It's something beautiful. And bringing in that something beautiful, there's some kind of solace that the heart takes from that. But if we look a little closer, a little deeper, we also see that along with it, there's this element of not being fulfilled. Always with desire, there's a piece of frustration because we don't have the thing. If we had the thing, we wouldn't be wanting it. Do you ever find yourself wanting a hand at the end of your arm? Probably not, because we already have it. What we want are the things that we don't have. And so desire always comes with unfulfillment, a kind of frustration.

This came up really strongly on a retreat a few years ago. Sally and Franz and I and another friend were leading a retreat in Italy. We had a lot of fun because the Italian people, at least I found on that retreat—very much like the image we have of Italians—are very open about their emotions and quite fluent with their emotions. They're not afraid of emotions, really. So they would come into interviews and talk very openly about what they were feeling.

This one very nice looking young man came into an interview on about the third day of the retreat and said, "I'm just not settling down into the retreat. Just not connecting. I've had other retreats. They've gone better. This one, I'm just really not getting into it." This was all through a translator, but the message was clear.

I said, "Well, tell me a little about what's going on. Why are you here?" He said, "Well, this is our vacation time. This is August. In Europe, everybody tends to go on vacation in August. Some friends asked me if I'd like to go to the Caribbean with them for a beach holiday. So I had to decide between that and this meditation retreat. Well, I actually wanted to go to the Caribbean, but all the flights were sold out. So I couldn't go to the Caribbean and I came on this meditation retreat instead."

He continued, "But now that I'm here, I'm wishing I were in the Caribbean. My friends told me there are so many beautiful girls in the Caribbean. I wish I were there."

So we talked about desire and how when desire is present, we can't really connect with what is present. It really blocks us from the moment. The interest in the breath is pretty low when the mind is on the beautiful women of the Caribbean.

I said, "I don't really think that the retreat is the problem, but maybe the problem is you're just thinking all the time about the Caribbean. What would it be like if you just dropped those thoughts for a little bit and just came into this present moment?"

He said, "I don't know, but I'll try."

A few days later, he came back for another interview and he'd completely turned that corner. In letting go of the thoughts of being somewhere else, he was able to just settle into the moment, which was not a problem. The present moment is usually not a problem, but desire makes something else look more attractive.

A friend of mine who is of a greedy temperament, a desirous temperament, says that he has this question that he asks himself often when he's feeling this kind of desire, longing to be out of the moment. He asks, "Is there anything truly lacking in this present moment? Is there anything truly lacking?" And when we come into this present moment, we usually see it's fine. It's complete. We can be happy here. We can be accepting here.

Sometimes as the retreat goes on, the force of desire starts to turn itself to the retreat experience because this becomes our life. We sort of move out of our outer life, and to some extent, we forget about it during these days. Our being, our life, our daily routine really becomes focused here, and then what becomes important are things like what's going to happen for lunch, what's my next sitting going to be like, is somebody going to close the door really loudly in the middle of the night tonight or flush the toilet by my bed—things like that.

So desire often builds around the circumstances of the retreat. In particular, desire can attach really strongly to a good sitting—what we call a good sitting.

We have a sitting where we're present, we feel at peace, connected, alive, awake, and calm. And that is such a pleasure, such a joy. That becomes the thing we most want to have. So we get very enthused. We go out for our walk and can't wait to come back in for the next sitting because we're going to have that experience again. Can't wait to get back to it.

Of course, what happens when we want it? Poof. Goes away. Maybe the next sitting is full of tension or wandering mind. And we're caught trying to get back. So start to notice if that kind of desire is coming in to repeat a meditation experience. Sometimes that's the only kind of desire that's really between us and the present moment. And if we can see that as a fairly subtle kind of desire and let go, we can be right back here again, right back in the calm and centeredness.

So I start to notice in myself if there's a kind of strain in my body, that's trying to lean forward to some kind of concentrated state or some kind of peaceful state. And I detect it in my body first, some kind of tension or strain that's like leaning forward, trying to make it happen, trying to make the meditation come back. And that becomes my cue. Oh, that's desire, that's wanting. Then if I can see it, it's a little easier to let go.

This is the force of wanting or desire.

The second of the hindrances is the force of aversion, sometimes called ill will, generally a state of negativity or of disliking. But there are many, many forms of aversion. We can discriminate between lots of different shades of this hindrance. There are states of anger, hatred, impatience, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, guilt, blame, resentment, depression, despair, resistance, and conflict that are all just forms of aversion. There's more, but I didn't want to bore you. It's a big one, isn't it? Occupies a significant portion of mental terrain, this force of aversion.

And we might say that the basic sense of it, when we're in this mind state of aversion, there's a kind of friction with everything that happens. And nothing is quite satisfying because it's not quite good enough. It's not quite right.

There's a story from the time of the Buddha. He was standing with a group of monks in a clearing in the forest. And he asked the monks, "Did you see that jackal? It ran out of the forest and it stood in the clearing for a minute. And then it ran out of the clearing and went into the underbrush. And it lay down in the underbrush, but it didn't stay long and it came out of the underbrush and walked into the hollow of a tree. And it stood in the hollow of a tree for a while, but it didn't stay long and it took off and it went into a cave. It lay down in the cave, but it didn't stay long and it ran off into the forest again. Wherever it went, the jackal wasn't comfortable and it blamed its discomfort on the forest, blamed it on the clearing, on the underbrush, on the tree hollow, on the cave. It blamed it on its sitting. It blamed it on its standing. It blamed it on its walking. It blamed it on lying down."

He said, "But monks, the problem was with none of these. The problem was that jackal has mange. The mange is the problem. And that's why the jackal was not comfortable anywhere."

The mind of aversion is like that. When we are caught in this sense of negativity and it's just a state of mind, nothing satisfies us. The meditation hall doesn't satisfy us, the walking path doesn't satisfy us, the lunch doesn't satisfy us, our fellow meditators don't, our teachers don't, everything doesn't work. But the real source is that mind state of aversion.

One of the ways that this often gets expressed in meditation retreat is with the sense of physical pain. We're sitting and a strong sensation develops in the knee or the back or the ankles or the shoulders. And in reaction to that pain, the mind becomes very averse. There can be different states of aversion and reaction. Sometimes we just get annoyed.

Sometimes we get fearful. Sometimes we simply dislike it. Sometimes we can become resentful. But in the instructions as James gave them today, we're guided that if there's discomfort, we should make that the object of meditation. We let mindfulness settle there and feel into that area of physical pain.

I'd also like to suggest that we examine how the mind is relating to that physical pain. Say there's simply physical sensation present. Can we be equanimous with that? Can there just be the experience of physical pain, or do we have to spiral into a reaction of aversion?

Take a look. If we go into the reaction of aversion—which is a kind of tightening of the mind—what happens in the body? When the mind gets tight, the body tends to get tight as well. And as the body tightens because of the aversion in the mind, what happens to the pain? It increases. As the pain grows stronger, what happens to our level of aversion? It cranks up another notch.

We find ourselves caught in this feedback loop. The physical pain intensifies, then aversion arises. That makes the physical pain more intense, which makes the aversion more intense. How do we escape? How do we find freedom in relation to that?

It's not so easy to change the physical experience. You've probably tried. I certainly did for a long time. But can we start to influence our mental reaction? Suppose instead of tightening with aversion, we were able to soften the mind. We were able to simply accept, stay calm, and recognize that physical pain is present without getting freaked out about it.

In the softening of the mind, that can lead to a softening of the body. This doesn't necessarily mean the pain will disappear, but if anything will help the pain to ease, that softening attitude will. So we work with seeing the reaction of the mind in relation to the pain as much as with the pain itself.

Here's where the meditation can establish itself. Can we be with the pain from a place of softness, acceptance, and allowing? This is tremendously helpful with unpleasant circumstances—to work directly with softening and allowing.

A classical antidote for the mind state of aversion is loving-kindness. As Sally led the meditation today, developing that heart of friendliness—even when you generate it with yourself or a benefactor—when the heart is in that place of friendliness, everything looks a little softer. Everything appears a little rosier. That friendliness spills over to the knee pain or the difficult person in our life, creating a softness of mind that can hold difficult experience with greater ease.

Within the retreat setting, another way that aversion manifests is through our tendency to judge. We may notice that we judge other people when we walk into the dining hall, or we observe how somebody's sitting or walking and find ourselves judging them. But often one of the most painful forms of judgment is the one we direct against ourselves.

I think we're especially vulnerable to this as retreatants. We've let go of our friendships. We've let go of our family. There's nobody around to tell us every day, "I love you. I care about you. You're important to me." We've entered into a solitude that is important and significant. But in doing that, we become vulnerable through this loss of affirmation—this loss of love, really. Then it becomes much easier to be hard on ourselves or to feel isolated, as though people don't care for us.

This hit me very strongly during one of my early retreats. I was practicing in England on a month-long retreat, and I was starting to have all these doubts about myself and harsh judgments about my personality. I went to see my teacher for an interview that day, feeling quite embarrassed about this. When he asked how I was doing, I said, "Oh, I'm just having some difficult thoughts," hoping we could let it go at that.

Okay, that was pretty honest—I'm having difficult thoughts—but he didn't let it go. He said, "What kinds of thoughts?"

Oh, I said, well, kind of aversive thoughts. And I thought I'd get out of it that way. He said, "What kinds of aversive thoughts?"

So I had to be honest. I said, "Well, I'm feeling like I don't like myself very much and like nobody else likes me either." I felt very vulnerable in saying that.

And he just stood up very straight and he looked at me and he said, "You're not seeing things the way they are. Your problem is you don't accept yourself. You need to work on self-acceptance."

That became my theme then for a few years in practice—this seeing of the self-judgment and the pain it was causing me made me want to find a way to work with it. And I took the direction, a more positive direction, of working to accept myself. It became an important practice for a few years.

After I had ordained in Thailand—I ordained as a monk—and I was going from the city monastery where I ordained out into the country to a forest monastery to do a three-month retreat period, I stopped over in another city in a monastery where there

was a Western monk who'd been in robes for quite a while. I kind of appreciated his having been down the road before me. He was a great guy. I really came to admire him a lot. I thought his lifestyle was very sane.

He'd take his mornings for his own practice and he had a really nice hut in this monastery. He looked out on a little pond. It was very peaceful. He'd been in robes for ten or eleven or twelve years at that point. His meditation was well developed and he had a lot of peace, also a lot of loving-kindness. People just liked hanging out with him.

So in the afternoon, he would be open to visitors. And people would come and talk with him. Thai people would come and talk to him about their family situation, difficulties with their sons and daughters, questions about their meditation practice, and he spoke fluent Thai. Westerners would come who were passing through Chiang Mai—was the city where he lived—and he'd give them instructions and get them started on the path of meditation practice. And everybody just liked hanging out with him.

The next morning we got to go out on alms round together. You know probably that the way Buddhist monks collect their food is by going with a bowl and basically begging. They show up and in cultures where it's understood, people come out onto the streets and put food in their bowls.

So I got to go out with this monk on his usual alms round. The first thing I noticed was how big his bowl was. I mean, I had a modest little bowl that my preceptor had given me, and it held what I needed to eat. His bowl was not much smaller than our meditation bell, and he had a girth to match. He was what we call a well-supported monk.

So we head off down the tracks near the monastery. And as soon as we get near some shops, a lot of people are out on the streets. And I found out it's because they know he's coming. He has very close connections with the people around, and they support him really well. So they were out there putting a lot of food in his bowl. And because I was behind, they put a lot of food in my bowl.

And then we also—it was his custom—there were two novice monks, younger men who had not yet reached the age where they could ordain fully, who were traveling along behind us. And I was going, what are they here for? Because the novice monks don't go on the alms round. They're fed by the monastery.

So we'd walked down this block and up the next block. My bowl was overflowing. His bowl even was full. And then we duck into an alley. He calls the novice monks over. They open their robe, and each of them has a big plastic bag hanging off their shoulder. So we take our packets of food, put them in the plastic bags.

They fold up their robes, and we go on another block of alms round. We fill the bowls again. So we had way more than we could eat. We took it back to the monastery and shared it with the other monks, nuns, novice monks, and lay people who were there to eat. Everybody had a great feast that basically came about because this monk was so well-loved. He had so much metta and connection to the people that everybody just wanted to give to him.

When we were back at his hut just chatting and getting to know each other a little bit, he told me something that really surprised me. He said, "You know, it wasn't always so easy for me, my meditation practice. I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working on my self-hatred. Nine years."

But out of that, he had developed this huge loving heart that touched everybody he came in contact with—a great spirit of generosity, giving, kindness, and availability for people. All of this emerged out of nine years of practice working with his own self-hatred. So he had a strong case of it, but what I really want to emphasize is that it's workable. It's possible to transform these very deep personality patterns through the openness of the practice, through the skillful use of meditation.

In working with self-judging, don't feel like you have to get rid of the judging thoughts. The big part of it is seeing them clearly and not having to believe in them. Most of them are rubbish, frankly. Most of those judging thoughts, if you look at them closely, are rubbish. They'll say things like, "Nobody loves me, nobody's ever loved me." The basic storyline is "I'm not a lovable person. No one could ever love me." It's just not true. You can look in your life and see people who have cared for you. That story is simply not true. But we can just let the thought be there and take it more lightly.

Joseph Goldstein, one of our teachers, says that what he does when he hears a judging thought is add the phrase "and the sky is blue." So it becomes: "Nobody will ever love me, and the sky is blue." That just lightens it up so he doesn't have to take it so seriously. That's a nice way to work.

Over time, what offsets this sense of self-judgment is feeling our own goodness and trusting in our own goodness. In loving kindness practice, the proximate cause for metta to arise is seeing what's good in someone. When you can tune in to the good in somebody, that feeling of metta comes spontaneously, comes naturally. When you can see the good in yourself, that feeling of loving kindness for yourself comes naturally.

The more we gain that conviction that James was talking about in our own essential goodness—which is no different from the goodness of one another, no different from the goodness of nature, no different from the goodness of the Dharma—then we know we can trust. Then we know the judgments aren't really true. This conviction grows more and more with the practice of loving kindness.

The other three hindrances I'll be briefer with. The third is one we've referred to a few times already: dullness and drowsiness. The old Victorian phrase that was first used to translate it was sloth and torpor. I like it. It kind of conveys the massiveness of it, the weight of it. I also like that phrase because it reminds me of the first meditation center I lived at, IMS on the East Coast. In the early days, we had a maintenance crew who were not exactly known for their work ethic, and we gave them the names Mc-Sloth and McTorpor. It reminds me of the innocent days of retreat centers.

So this is the third day of the retreat. I'm pretty confident you all have had a good, healthy exposure to sloth and torpor at this point. Often in the first few days of retreat, there's a lot of sleepiness, a lot of drowsiness, a lot of dullness. You can't really connect with the object, can't connect with the breath. There's a fog surrounding you. The storyline in sloth and torpor is not so critical, but if there is one, it's something like, "Nothing's worth doing. I can't be bothered to do anything." We just kind of get bowed under the weight of the heaviness of mind and body.

So the antidote is energy. Whatever will pick up your energy at that time—that's what will break through the drowsiness.

So we often recommend the usual things: sit up a bit straighter, open your eyes, take a few deep breaths. All those things will bring in more energy. If you're still feeling sleepy, stand up right where you are. Do the meditation in the standing posture. It's harder to fall asleep standing up—still may be possible, but usually the good news is that after about the third day, that fog starts to lift a little bit. We get a new source of energy, and usually it's not nearly as much of a problem.

If sloth and torpor continue to be a real problem after three days, then I start to get curious. Is something being covered over with that dullness? Because sometimes dullness can come down like a curtain because there's something we don't quite want to see. So then I get interested: what was there before the dullness came? But it may not be so heavy from tomorrow onward. That's my wish.

The fourth hindrance is called restlessness and agitation. Often it feels like the first days of the retreat just alternate—sloth and torpor one sitting, restlessness and agitation the next. So here the mind is too stirred up. There's an abundance of energy. We

can't focus because there are too many thoughts, too many bodily sensations, too many feelings. Everything's all stirred up. The breath gets lost. It's kind of like trying to pick a straw out of a hurricane—you can't find it.

In restlessness and agitation, again, we want to simply open to feel what that feels like. It's not a pleasant experience. And sometimes the storyline is maybe something like, "I can't stand this. I can't stand it. I have to get up and run away." But in fact, you can stand it. And we do stand it, if you notice. We'll be sitting there thinking, "I can't stand this. I can't stand it another minute." But we keep sitting and we do stand it. So that's helpful, just to know that we can endure this restlessness and agitation. Just feel it. The body feels stirred up, the mind feels stirred up, the emotions feel stirred up, but we can know that for an experience. It's okay.

We might think that the way back to calm is through getting really narrow with the breath again. "When I was narrow with the breath, I was calm. Let me get narrow with the breath again." But sometimes that's just too tight. It's like trying to take this hurricane and put it into a really small box—the box gets really rattled.

So maybe what's more skillful at that point is to let the mind get really, really wide and have the sense that you just want to enfold all this energy in a very broad attention. So sounds can be a really good object here. The sense that you want to let the mind get really wide and let the wideness bring in the calm so that the hurricane is held within a really big space. So try working with that really wide mind, working with sounds as an object when you feel really stirred up. When you go out to a walking period, you may want to take a little bit brisker walk and kind of use up some of that energy. Paradoxically, that may calm some of the energy down in the next sitting.

And the last of the hindrances is the hindrance of doubt. James talked about this quite a lot last night, about how we doubt our ability to do the practice, we doubt if it's the right practice, we doubt the teachings, and how faith is really the antidote to doubt. In the long term, that's really true. The storyline in doubt is maybe something like, "I can't do it. I can't do it." There's actually a really deep spiritual truth in this particular storyline.

The acronym RAIN offers us a profound shift in how we relate to difficult states. Rather than the futile attempt to banish our hindrances, RAIN invites us to meet them with the very awareness we seek to cultivate.

The A in RAIN stands for acceptance. This doesn't mean that we like what's happening or that we think it's good. It means that we allow it to be present without adding the extra layer of resistance. We don't fight with what's already here. There's a quality of non-violence in this acceptance, a recognition that what's arising has already arisen, and our resistance to it only creates more suffering.

This acceptance requires tremendous courage. It asks us to stay present with discomfort, to not immediately reach for our habitual strategies of escape or control. In this allowing, something remarkable begins to happen. The grip of the hindrance starts to loosen naturally, not because we've forced it away, but because we've stopped feeding it with our resistance.

The I stands for investigation. Having recognized and accepted what's present, we now turn toward it with curiosity. What does this anger actually feel like in the body? Where do I sense this anxiety most clearly? What thoughts arise with this doubt? We investigate not to analyze or figure out why we're experiencing this, but to know it more intimately, to understand its texture and quality.

This investigation is infused with kindness. We're not interrogating ourselves harshly, but approaching our experience the way a loving friend might—with genuine interest and care. We might notice the temperature, the density, the movement or stillness of the emotion. We might observe how it changes as we pay attention to it.

The N represents non-identification. This is perhaps the most liberating aspect of the practice. We learn to see that we are not our anger, we are not our doubt, we are not our restlessness. These are temporary visitors in the vast space of awareness. They arise, they're known, and they pass away. We are the knowing awareness in which they appear and disappear.

This non-identification doesn't happen overnight. It's a gradual recognition that what we are is much larger and more stable than any temporary state of mind or emotion. We begin to taste the freedom that comes from not taking everything so personally, from not believing that every thought and feeling defines who we are.

When we practice RAIN, something beautiful occurs. We discover that the very qualities we're seeking—awareness, compassion, equanimity—can be present even in the midst of difficulty. We don't have to wait for the perfect conditions to be awake. We can be awake right here, right now, with whatever is present.

This is the true transformation that meditation offers us. Not the ability to live a life free from challenges, but the capacity to meet whatever arises with the full presence of our awakened heart and mind.

So as we practice this, we're practicing wisdom, which is the fifth spiritual faculty that James talked about last night. We're bringing that awake quality into the moment.

The A stands for acceptance. We want to drop any idea that this shouldn't be happening—"I'm going to resist this. I don't want to feel it. It freaks me out. I shouldn't be feeling it." And we shift instead to an attitude of allowing and acceptance. It's okay. It's happening. It's part of our human nature. We move into a model of allowing it to be.

This is hard to do. It's a real challenge within the practice. Fear comes, our first reaction is more fear: "I can't handle this. I don't know what will happen to me if I open to it." But we just find more and more trust to allow it. And this is developing the first factor of the spiritual faculties, the quality of faith or trust or confidence.

And then we stay in contact with that allowing attitude. We keep feeling it. We feel it in the body, we feel it in the mind, and it takes a steadiness of attention to stay in contact. This is the quality of concentration, the fourth of the spiritual faculties that we're strengthening and developing.

The I stands for interest or investigation. It's a factor of curiosity that I think Sally talked about and James also mentioned. What is this thing called fear? Have we ever really gone into it? What is this phenomenon? It's so powerful, but have we ever taken time to really observe it? What does it feel like in the body? What does it feel like in the mind? What kind of thoughts come along with it? How does it make us act? How does it make us speak when we're in an afraid space?

We can learn about all of that. It's really the learning of these states that takes the mystery out of them. When we take the mystery out, they don't have the power over us. We establish the power of understanding. They no longer have that kind of power. So this is the quality of mindfulness, this going into and experiencing, and also of energetic effort. This is a very good use of effort. So these are the third and second spiritual factors. How do I investigate? How can I turn my attention to get curious about it?

The last part of the acronym, the N in RAIN, is non-identification. We don't claim this as I or mine. So think about it. When you're feeling angry, normally we'll talk about it as "I am angry." What would happen if you turned that around and just said, "Anger is arising, anger is present now"? There's a lighter kind of quality to that because the I and all that story doesn't get so hooked in.

This is an interesting one to practice with. If we can leave out the words I and my, then we see it's just an emotion arising. It'll last a while and it'll pass away. This is an emotion that is shared by everyone in this room. Everybody knows fear. Everybody knows longing. Everybody knows self-judgment or blame. So it's not a personal thing. It's not my fear or your fear.

It's just fear. We all share it, so we don't have to claim it. And then it can just do its own thing. It arises, persists, and it passes away. It's part of the whole human package, which we all have.

Then we start to see that we're waking up in the middle of these most difficult parts of our life. The most difficult areas of our hearts and minds, we don't have to close down around. We can have the strength, we can have the courage to open up and feel them and just let them be the way they are. And in that, we find there's a tremendous new freedom that comes.

We don't have to stay away from any corner of our mind, but we find we can go into every part of the mind and understand it. And then wisdom becomes, you could say, the master of the situation, the mistress of the situation. Not that we're the victim so much anymore, but wisdom becomes the master or the mistress of the house.

And we see that these are just forms of energy arising, persisting and passing. And if we don't invest in them, if we don't resist, if we don't cling, if we don't fight, they have their own lifespan.

Look at children. Kids can be playing happily away, laughing and delighting and totally into a game and the companionship. Then they'll squabble about who got the prize or who didn't get their turn on the board. And they'll get really angry and fight. And then the anger will just take them over. But they're not afraid of it. They'll just kind of go into it and act it out. And then, boom, it's over. And then they're back and laughing and playing and having fun again.

Kids have this openness to their emotional life, a trust in it, no reason to be afraid that we can also refine. So we just let these emotions come. We learn to feel them. We learn we don't have to act on them. So this gives us the confidence to let anything happen in our meditation. We don't have to hold back from any corner of our minds, of our hearts, of our practice.

I just want to close with a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. This is from a book called The Book of Hours. The image in this poem is before each of us comes into the world, the Creator takes us by the hand and says a few words to us before launching us on the journey of life.

"God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: Go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand."

Let's just sit for a minute. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

CHAPTER 200

Death and the Three Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · 48 min

> *Following the death of his sister, Guy Armstrong offers a profound reflection on mortality through the Buddha's teaching of the three characteristics (tilakkhana). Drawing from personal experience and the wisdom of forest masters like Ajahn Buddhadāsa and Ajahn Chah, he explores how understanding anicca (impermanence), dukkha (suffering), and anattā (non-self) can transform our relationship with death and life itself.*
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> *Armstrong examines how our search for security in relationships, possessions, and even spiritual states inevitably leads to disappointment because everything is subject to change. He discusses how our clinging to the impermanent creates dukkha, and how the investigation of anattā - the sense of self we take for granted - reveals the luminous awareness that remains constant through all experience. Through vivid analogies and stories from his monastic training in Thai forest monasteries, he shows how these teachings point toward the "deathless" - that which is beyond birth and death.*
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> *The talk culminates in recognizing our fundamental interconnectedness and the spacious awareness that holds all phenomena. Rather than something to fear, death becomes understood as part of the natural flow within an undying vastness. This dharma talk offers both comfort for those facing loss and profound insight into the nature of existence itself.*

As a staff, we just completed a Passover dinner a little early since the sun is just setting. And this is also Good Friday. So I'd like to wish all of you a happy Passover and happy Good Friday. These are holidays that celebrate freedom and the oncoming of resurrection. It seems very fitting that we're here together coming to greater freedom.

I think most of you know that I joined the retreat a little late because of a death in my family. A week ago today my older sister named Judy died. She was someone who was really special to me and to many people. She had a really big heart, a big laugh, and was someone who has always been kind to me and who has enriched my life forever. I'd like to dedicate this talk tonight to her memory.

Jack talked last night about the mystery that we all swim in—the mystery of our existence. Death is such a part of that mystery. It is such a mystery in itself. It shocks me every time that someone close to me dies. How can that person have been here and now not be here? Where did they go? As my other sister said when we were at Judy's house, it just doesn't register. It's so hard to comprehend.

Who dies? Or what dies? What happens after death? What's this separation of the spirit and the body? How can it be that I will die? And what will that be like? There's a huge mystery and because of the mystery there's a sense of fear of the unknown. And so our lives as humans are connected with a fear of dying.

It was interesting—there was a survey that was taken some years ago about what people are afraid of in this country. Fear of death came in at number four. I thought that was pretty interesting. Number one was fear of public speaking. I don't know about you all, but personally I'd rather be here tonight.

Maybe to some extent we're not prepared for death because we're not fully prepared for life, because we don't fully understand what it means to be alive. I'd like to suggest tonight that death is a mystery that takes place on several layers. At the core of life and death are mysteries that we will never solve, that we will never understand. There is a mystery intrinsic to existence. I mean, why is there something and not nothing? It's baffling.

But I feel that one or two of the outer layers of this mystery that death represents for us can be better understood than they currently are in our culture. Our culture has not given us the deepest wisdom to understand the issues of birth and death. Over my time of practice, death is still very much a mystery to me, but a little less so than it was in the beginning. My fear of death is still present, but a bit less so than it was at the beginning. At times, in my life and in my practice, death seems to me sometimes just like changing the channels, just switching to a different frequency.

In this evening's talk, I'd like to talk about unwrapping a little bit of these outer layers of mystery around birth and death. I'd like to talk about it in terms of three aspects that the Buddha talked about as very central to his teaching and to an understanding of life. He called these the three characteristics of existence. He described that all existence, all human existence is colored by three facts. I think of these as the facts of life for grown-ups. They are impermanence, suffering, and no-self, or selflessness. This last is a concept that causes the most confusion when we tend to present it in retreat, so I'll leave that for the last. But I want to talk about all three of these aspects tonight. They're often known by the Pali terms that the Buddha talked about them in: anicca, dukkha, and anatta.

The first of the three is impermanence. Just to give you a sense of the Buddha's own importance that he attached to the concept of impermanence, he said this: "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's." Isn't that a nice line? You can tell he lived in a little different time than ours. "Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." Foremost among reflections.

The implication is that if there's anything you want to hold in your mind and turn toward from time to time to reflect on and grow in wisdom from, it is the reflection on impermanence, of change.

In retreat, this becomes one of the most remarkable features of our experience, as several people have already commented. Everything changes, and nothing lasts very long. We're crippled by pain in our back as we sit on the cushion. We stand up, and it goes away. We have a sitting of incredible dullness and drowsiness, and the next period there's great clarity. Then we rush back into the meditation hall only to find great agitation, then more clarity, then anger, and so forth.

I hope you don't think this is going to stop at some point during the week and you're going to land in mindful clarity for the rest of the retreat. I hate to disappoint you, but it's probably not going to happen. I asked someone today how their retreat was and he just looked at me for a minute and said, "That's a really hard question to answer. How do you single something out from this changing experience to highlight? There's really nothing to highlight."

Just to prepare you for your re-entry into the world, a lot of people are going to ask you how your retreat was. You're going to have the same problem that fellow had today. So I have one recommendation—an insider tip for you. All most people want to hear is you say, "It was great." They'll go away happy, and you don't have to think about it very hard. We usually save that tip for integration day, but I'm giving you advance warning.

In this way, our retreat is a microcosm of our life. We look over our entire world, the entire field of our experience. What lasts? What have you found in your life that lasts?

We are so vulnerable as human beings because of this fact of death. Everything that lives is vulnerable to death in any moment. Out of that vulnerability, we all come to life with a great longing for security, for safety, for finding a place of rest and comfort. When we grow up as children, we tend to look for that very much in our parents. To some extent, as children, parents are necessary to satisfy that. Yet that relationship is probably not totally satisfactory for most of us. Certainly by the time we become teenagers, most of us are glad to make the move away from that relationship to more independence.

Often it seems we try to recreate that relationship through our intimate relationships or marriage, looking for another form of security. Sometimes we have to learn about this tendency the hard way.

I came to a meditation retreat a number of years ago—a two-month intensive retreat. As I entered the retreat, my partner at the time stayed behind because she was getting involved in a different spiritual practice, a different spiritual scene. I thought as I left and came into the retreat, "Gosh, I really feel good about this relationship. This relationship is really the bedrock of my life in the world." Bad thought. I should have known when I said that to myself that meant trouble.

So nature set out to prove me otherwise. I came out of my two-month retreat feeling very open and very vulnerable. I'd practiced really intensively—worked hard to get my sleep down to four hours a night and about eighteen hours a day of just sitting and walking, with very little time for meals and personal hygiene. A very effortful retreat.

After two months, I came out and called my partner, only to find that she had become very involved during my time away with a guru. The other spiritual scene she was involved with centered around this guru. It was a relationship in which, if I were to be catty—which I don't mind being in this situation—I would say there was room in his concept of relationship for only one love, and that was with him.

I felt the connection with my partner really fading as I understood the nature of the relationship she was becoming involved in with this other teacher. When I began to understand it, I felt like the bottom dropped out of my world. That bedrock I had been taking for granted dissolved into what it had always been—spaciousness. It was very upsetting to me. I went through a month or so of incredible turmoil and fear because of the security I had invested in this relationship and adjusting to this possible change.

As it turned out, when I came back home and we had a chance to reconnect, she rethought her relationship to her guru and eventually left him. I've observed that scene over the years, and every single relationship that has come into that scene has broken up.

So I felt that my perceptions were accurate and it was not just a case of fantasy on my part.

We look for security in so many places. We look to parents, we look to intimate relationships, we look to all the objects that the world provides—money and possessions. You've probably seen those bumper stickers or license plate holders that say, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Maybe it's a Bay Area thing, but I see those a lot. We seek security through career, through some kind of status or title or power. But in today's economic times, these things are very tenuous—money and career and status. They can go away overnight.

We invest in memories or our anticipations for the future. We look for a lot of security in this body. It seems to be a constant through our life. It's always with us. We look for health, we look for a certainty there. And this too is subject to change. Certainly at this time in my life, I'm very aware of the process of aging.

This came to me actually about ten years ago. I considered myself to be a fairly young man at the time. I was at a talk with my wife, and at the end of the talk, she and I were chatting at the back of the hall. I went away to talk to someone else, and someone who was sitting beside her turned and said, "Who was that man?"

She said, "What man?"

And he said, "That middle-aged man you were talking to."

And I was shocked. I had a few of these gray hairs back then, but I considered myself really very young. I sort of added up the years and thought, "Oh, I could be halfway there." Okay, middle age was upon me, so I started to deal with my own aging.

I have a friend who started to go quite bald in his early twenties, and he said for him the hardest thing about it was when he washed his face, because when he got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop.

So there's aging. And in our relationship with the body, of course, finally there's death. The end of aging is death. And that marks the separation from all that we've come to know or depend on.

We look to many things in this world for refuge and for security, but every single one of them is subject to the law of impermanence, is subject to change. It's just a matter of time.

The Tibetans have a formulation of this, and they say that impermanence has four ends: The end of birth is death. The end of gathering is separation. The end of accumulation is dispersal. And the end of building is destruction.

So in every aspect of our existence as a human being, we're confronted by change. We're confronted by beginnings and by endings.

Some of us catch on to this fact and we come to meditation practice. And perhaps in coming to meditation practice, we may be looking again for some ultimate security, for some lasting mental state or place of rest. So we come to a retreat like this. And what do we find? More impermanence.

The breath comes and goes. Sounds arise and vanish. Body sensations arise and glimmer and pass away. Feelings succeed one another like the wind. Thoughts come and go in a torrent. And as we become more in touch with our body, even what we thought was solid sometimes can seem to be dissolving, as some of you have reported in interviews. So we find it difficult through our meditation practice to find anything here that lasts also.

The Buddha advised his nuns and monks to live very simply and to practice in the middle of nature. This was one of the constants of his advice. He advised them to live in, as the old texts say, remote forests and jungle thickets. So if you can find any of those, highly recommended. To live at the foot of a tree or in a cave.

One of the beautiful things about practicing in nature is that nature is always showing impermanence.

That's one of the great gifts of this facility and the closeness of the desert. The wind is always changing. The light is shifting. The clouds come and go. Animals appear for a moment and then disappear back into their holes or trees. We glimpse an owl or a tortoise or a snake just briefly, and then it vanishes. Other creatures die and leave their bones to become food for others. Living close to nature, we begin to really feel this impermanence right to our bones. It becomes part of us because we realize that we are part of nature.

Nature is not a place we go and visit on holiday or a backpacking trip. We discover that nature is within as well as without, and all of nature is characterized by impermanence. Even ideal situations change.

One of the beauties of practicing in Asia is that one has the opportunity to live still very close to nature for an extended period of time. For that reason, I went to Thailand and ordained as a monk and spent a year practicing mostly in two different forest monasteries. The first one I practiced in was in the north of Thailand near Chiang Mai, and I had what seemed like the perfect situation—really one of the best practice situations I've been in.

Because I was a Westerner, I was given the best hut in the monastery. It was across a stream and then up a path that dead-ended. The stream was at the base of this beautiful canyon, and the river ran through the bottom. From my hut, I couldn't see another person or another hut. And the teacher there didn't speak English, so I was really left on my own just to do my own practice of sitting and walking, which I did day after day for several months. I thought, this is really the perfect spot.

But I had made a commitment to spend another period of practice time at a monastery in the south of Thailand, so I knew that I had to leave this place soon. As time came to leave, I became very clingy. I didn't want to go. This is just perfect, I thought.

Then the rains came. And when the rains came, the river right outside my hut started to pick up volume. The roar of water began to sound day and night. That was okay for a while, but then the river started to sing a song. And the song it started to sing was Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues." From an album I had bought seventeen years before, I was able to recall every single line of the song. At that point I became glad to be moving to another monastery.

All of our experience in any dimension we look at is just rising and passing. This is one of the reasons we invite you to look at your experience with some precision and in some detail—to convince yourself that there's nothing in the whole field of your body and your mind that's static, that's not subject to this law of change.

When I went to the other monastery in the south, that monastery was called Wat Suan Mok, and the abbot was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who is one of the probably greatest Thai meditation masters of the second half of this century. He passed away last year, unfortunately. But while we were there, the Westerners had the chance to meet with him once a week. He spoke quite good English and would give us teachings directly in English. There was a group of just about seven of us Westerners there, so we had quite a lot of intimate contact with him.

His recommendation, his meditation instructions for us in that period were like this. He said, "Okay, consider one of the senses. Consider the sense of sight. For the sense of sight to arise, there have to be three components. There has to be a visual form, something to see—a person, a thing, an animal. There has to be a functioning sight organ, or the eye. And then visual consciousness arises as the impact of those two."

So in any moment of seeing, there is the visible shape, the sense organ of sight or the eye, and visual consciousness. These three things in relationship to sight are called the sense bases of seeing, or in Pali, the ayatanas. That's the sense of sight. The same schema gets replicated for the other five senses—the four senses of the body and the sixth sense of the mind. So we have the senses of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. And then in Buddhism, the mind is considered a sixth sense, the cognition of all the mental states—the emotions, the images, perceptions, intention, and so forth.

So the approach he advocated was to not grasp either end of the snake, but to see the whole snake. To acknowledge that both pleasure and pain exist, that they're both equally transitory, and to relate to them in a way that doesn't involve clinging to one or pushing the other away.

This teaching points to a fundamental misunderstanding we have about the nature of happiness. We often think that happiness comes from getting what we want and avoiding what we don't want. But the Buddha's teaching suggests that this very approach—this constant reaching and rejecting—is what creates our suffering.

Think about it: when we're grasping after pleasant experiences, we're already in a state of dissatisfaction. The very act of reaching implies that we don't have what we need right now. And when we're pushing away unpleasant experiences, we're in a state of resistance, which is itself a form of suffering.

The Buddha described this pattern as tanha, often translated as craving or thirst. It's this deep-seated tendency to always want things to be different from how they are. We want pleasure to last longer, pain to end sooner, and neutral experiences to become more interesting. But this constant wanting keeps us in a state of agitation, never quite satisfied with what's actually happening.

In meditation, we can observe this pattern very clearly. We sit down with great intentions, hoping for a peaceful, concentrated experience. But maybe our mind is restless, or our body is uncomfortable, or we're feeling sleepy. If we're trying to grasp onto some ideal meditation experience, we immediately create suffering for ourselves.

Or perhaps we do have one of those wonderful sittings—clear, spacious, filled with ease. If we try to hold onto that experience, to make it happen again next time we sit, we've already lost it. We've turned a moment of natural peace into an object of desire.

This is why the practice isn't about having particular kinds of experiences. It's about learning to relate differently to whatever experiences we're having. Instead of immediately evaluating them as good or bad, desirable or undesirable, we can learn to meet them with a quality of open awareness that doesn't immediately reach for or push away.

The Pali term for suffering is dukkha. It's usually translated as suffering, but it had a broader range of meaning in that time. It meant not just direct suffering, but the unsatisfactory nature of phenomena, the unreliable nature of phenomena, because none of them can provide what we're really looking for, which is a lasting peace and a lasting happiness.

Suzuki Roshi, a Zen master, put it this way: "Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of the cause of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin."

So until we learn to let go completely, until we are really completely free of clinging, suffering is an inevitable part of life. It's just one of our realities.

As we meditate, we open more and more to the wholesome states of mind—to mindfulness and concentration, to compassion and joy and metta. But in that opening, we also open more and more deeply to suffering, to the pain of life.

This is a quote from an Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj. He worked in dialogue with people, and this is a dialogue that he had with a Westerner.

Maharaj said, "The essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful."

The questioner said, "Pain is not acceptable."

And Maharaj said, "Why not? Did you ever try? Do try, and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self, by its very nature, is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

The Buddha talked about this fact of change and suffering as an inspiration for his practice when he was still seeking, when he was still the Bodhisattva. He put it this way: "Suppose that I, who am subject to decay and death, were to seek my happiness in that which is also subject to decay and death. Would that be for my benefit and welfare?" His answer was no.

He said, "But suppose that I, who am subject to decay and death, were to seek my happiness in that which is beyond death, in the deathless. Would that be for my benefit and welfare?" And he said yes. And that really became the thrust of his practice—to discover that which is beyond death, that which is the deathless.

The third of the characteristics of existence that the Buddha talked about is what he called anatta, which we translate as no-self or selflessness. This is a little bit nuanced, so I'm not going to go into it so deeply, but I'll just say that it's a root question of our meditation: the question of who am I or what am I? What is this thing I call myself?

Most of our thoughts and feelings and actions revolve around this central concept of I. But do we really know what it is? Let me ask a couple of questions. I want to take a look at how we use the language around I and ask you some questions that shouldn't be too difficult.

How tall are you? And what color are your eyes? Everybody get those? Good.

Now, when I ask, "How tall are you?" I would answer, "I'm 5'10"." What does that really mean, "I'm 5'10""? Are my thoughts 5'10"? Is my happiness 5'10"? I'm really saying when I answer that, the body is 5'10", and I am the body, right? So here we're identifying I as body.

Okay, I'm the body. If that's true, suppose you cut your hair and it falls on the floor. Is that you lying on the floor? Hmm.

What about the other question? What color are your eyes? I'd say my eyes are brown. This is a little different.

Now I am someone who has eyes. I have brown eyes. Hmm, they're my eyes. Well, now I seems to be someone who stands apart from the body and owns it. I'm the owner of the body.

We do the same thing with feelings. I could ask you, "How are you?" and you'd say, "I'm happy," or "I'm sad." So are you your mind? Or I could say, "What are your feelings in this moment?" You can say, "Well, I'm dealing with my feelings of happiness or fear or whatever." So are you something separate that owns those feelings?

This is interesting. Sometimes we feel ourselves to be mostly an observer. We're sort of located in this space in the center of our head behind the eyes, and we kind of collect information through these two sense organs that work like a periscope—you know, that stick out and gather information and send the data back to the real self. Who's the observer? So is that what you are? Are you the observer that's in the middle of your head? But have you ever looked there to try to find you there?

It's all very curious. And the more we look, the less we find. So what it points to is that although we think we know what this "I" is, when we look for it, nothing there. Nothing there.

And the Buddha said that this sense of "I" is just a fleeting sense. It's just something that arises in the moment. But there is no solid entity called "I." There is no one to whom all this is happening. There is no owner of this body and mind and of this consciousness.

Similarly, all the things we experience that we call "mine"—there's no owner, so they're not really mine. We experience a pain and we think, "my knee." We experience a thought and we think, "my thought." Misleading. When we see clearly, we just see pain. We see anger. We hear sound. We see sight. We see thought. The "my" is extra. The "I" is extra.

So what's the true nature of the world? What are things really like? The Buddha talked about the truth of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. He put it in those ways because we tend to see in terms of permanence, happiness, and self. He's trying to correct a misperception—our misperception of the world.

When we begin to see in terms of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no-self, we start to see things more as they are. In doing that, there's a degree of freedom that comes. But it's not the final freedom. It's not the last or greatest freedom possible.

These three characteristics are really just doorways for seeing more deeply what our true nature is, how we're really put together. They encourage us to let go, not to hold so tight. And as we let go, we can inquire into that experience.

So in this very moment, in any moment, what is your experience when nothing is being taken hold of? When there's no clinging to body sensations or sounds, to sights, to thoughts, to feelings, to breath. When there's no clinging anywhere as "I" or "mine"—what is your experience? What is left when clinging goes?

We start to see that as the objects come and go in our field of experience, what remains constant is our capacity for awareness.

Over the course of these days, you've had so many different experiences. If you look at the thread that links them all together, don't you find that there's a thread of awareness through all of them?

Suzuki Roshi talked about this capacity for awareness as what he called big mind—this vast and limitless space of awareness in which all the objects of the world are arising and passing. It's empty, like space is, but it also has the capacity to cognize, to recognize.

This was brought home to me in a really direct way. One of the interesting things about being a monk is that you're allowed to observe autopsies. Traditionally, in the Buddha's time, the meditation was on funeral grounds, charnel grounds, where bodies were left to decompose and decay. Part of the training of a monk or a nun was considered to be to sit with those bodies and observe their decomposition. Today, monks are encouraged to observe autopsies.

When I was spending time in Bangkok, I had the chance to do this at one of the hospitals in the center of the city. It was extraordinary—it had a very profound impact on my understanding. I walked out of about an hour and a half of watching two or three different autopsies, which I had never seen before. I had never even seen a dead body up close.

I walked out into the street, and as I was waiting for the bus, I was watching the people pass by on the sidewalk by this big parade ground in Bangkok. And I saw them entirely differently. I didn't see any solid personality there. I saw walking corpses—corpses that were animated just with this spark of awareness, this spark of spirit.

When I thought about it afterwards and tried to understand what I had seen, what I felt I had seen was what we really are: this sensing organism with memory. When we come fully into the present moment, we are just alive to each moment of sense impression.

Seen in this way, we start to see that that spirit—whatever we want to call it—that brightness, that luminosity that shines through each other's eyes, that luminosity in us, holds the entire world. And in that luminosity that holds everything, we recognize a new relationship to life. We recognize that we are interconnected with everything that is. Thich Nhat Hanh's word for this is interbeing. That world is our reality. We are that world. Just as I am your reality now as I speak, you are my reality as I speak to you.

In this, the division between what we consider to be self and what we consider to be other starts to break down. There's an image from the Huayan school of Buddhism, a Chinese school, called the Jewel Net of Indra. The image is that the universe is a vast net connected by strands throughout the entire universe. At each intersection of two strands, there's a gem. Each gem is different—some are diamonds, some are emeralds, some are rubies, some are big, some are small. But each gem has the capacity of reflecting all the other gems on the net. Each gem reflects the totality of the universe.

This is a description of our situation. Each of us holds the cosmos. And in that holding, we are the cosmos. We are the entire universe, each one of us.

That sort of interpenetration wouldn't be possible if there was anything solid in us. It would put up a barrier, put up an opacity. We can interpenetrate because we're not solid.

The Diamond Sutra put it this way: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world—like a star at dawn, like a bubble in a stream, like a flickering lamp, like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a mirage, a dream."

So as we sense this lack of solidity, we find we've jumped out of the plane, we don't have a parachute, but we start to realize there isn't any ground either. There's nowhere to crash. And so we can let go. We can trust in our flight. We can trust in that unfolding.

We start to see that what there really is is the constancy of our big mind—this luminous emptiness that holds the universe, that holds all phenomena. It holds the arising and passing of all that is. This is our reality: this luminous emptiness and the ten thousand phenomena. And in the middle of all that vastness, we find birth and death.

But birth and death aren't the whole show. They're only a part. They're just a part of the comings and goings within that vastness. And that vastness itself is beyond birth and death. That vastness is undying and contains all the comings and goings. And this is the greatest mystery—that vastness and how it is untouched by all the coming and going.

I'd like to conclude with a poem. It's called "The Snowstorm" by Loren Eiseley, a naturalist. It's a little bit long, so if you'd like to get comfortable in order to listen, please do.

"It is the first and last snows, especially the last, that blind us most," Thoreau once said. And I wonder what he possibly could have been thinking, since snow is always with us and keeps falling in its proper season, the generations accepting it without first or last, save perhaps this: There is a single snow which a child stores in his memory—the first snow when he falls in a drift, the first snow that reveals secrets, like the flake on his sleeve, always to be remembered because it brought knowledge of crystalline perfection, infinite diversity to be tasted with his own salt tears—the immeasurable prodigality of the universal worlds in which we are lost, the first and blinding snow of childhood.

Second, the view from the farm window, the last, with the black guest waiting at the door and outside falling and falling across corn shocks, wheat stubble, plow land, the whiteness of the void. Lucretius must have so seen his atoms, created out of them a world. A wind whipped the flakes aside, perhaps—a snow flurry that conceived a farmhouse kitchen and a stove made fields.

Look, can you say I am not composed of snowflakes? My eyes are filled with them. They are falling faster now. Suppose I go outside and join them. Could you say that I was even here? No, no. The first blindness is to see the ultimate, minute perfection. That is the illusion of the water drop. The second is to believe the black guest at the door.

My friend, there is only the blindness of a million years of snowfall, and you and I race, race, discoursing as we fall. Do not bother to throw up the window. Snow is already blowing. The room is disassembled. Our substance, the room's substance, is snowflakes. We are falling apart now. We have reentered the eternal storm.

Let's sit for just a minute.

CHAPTER 201

Accepting Life's Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · 49 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong guides us through the Buddha's teaching on the three fundamental characteristics of existence that we must learn to accept. Drawing from personal retreat experiences and traditional Buddhist wisdom, Armstrong explores how impermanence (anicca) permeates every moment of our experience, how our resistance to change creates suffering (dukkha), and how our sense of self (atta) may be more elusive than we imagine.*
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> *Armstrong skillfully weaves together teachings from the Fire Sermon and insights from masters like Ajahn Buddhadasa and Ajahn Chah, showing how our constant search for security in an inherently changing world leads to disappointment. He examines how we seek safety in relationships, possessions, careers, and even our bodies, only to discover their unreliable nature. Through vivid analogies - from the Buddha's comparison of grasping to holding river grass in a flood, to the modern parable of the movie "Groundhog Day" - he illustrates how radical acceptance offers the only true refuge.*
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> *The talk emphasizes how precise mindfulness practice reveals the moment-to-moment arising and passing of all phenomena at the six sense doors, leading to the profound recognition that there is nothing solid to grasp. Armstrong concludes with the liberating paradox that by fully accepting life's inherent uncertainty and selflessness, we discover an unshakeable peace that doesn't depend on controlling our experience.*

You don't need to anymore. This is what it's like. It's sweaty, it's noisy outside, and you feel uncomfortable all day. So, you don't have to go.

I asked someone in an interview today how their retreat was going. And the person just sort of looked at me for quite a long time before they answered. I knew when I asked the question that that's a tough question to answer. What do you say—twenty-five words or less—how has your retreat gone? Nevertheless, I appreciate that each of you every day try to answer that question for us and do a pretty good job. Be prepared that when you go home you're going to get this question. People are going to say, "How was your retreat?" And what do you say?

If you say, "I was really happy all the time," well, that's not quite it. If you say, "Boy, I really went through a lot of suffering," that doesn't cover the times when everything was so beautiful and you were glowing. So I'll just give you a little tip. This is what I've worked out. I just say, "It was great." And that's all people usually want to know. End of conversation, so just a little tip ahead of time.

But the reason it's so difficult is that our experience keeps changing. We go through all these swings of mood and different body feelings and different degrees of concentration and being distracted by thoughts and spacing out and hurting and feeling wonderful. This changing experience of the retreat is really one of the most noteworthy features of the whole experience. Nothing in our experience lasts very long in this setting.

Sometimes you can be very happy about that. The concentration is totally shot in a sitting and your mind is all over the place. You can tell yourself, "This too will pass." Then the next sitting is very calm and wonderful, and you're really with the breath. You can also tell yourself, "This too will pass," and you'll be right.

The Buddha made a comment in one of his discourses where he said, "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's." I love this phrase. It's not something you'd hear from a teacher today, typically, but it was a reality for him and the monks and nuns back then. They were living in the forest and there were elephants and tigers and all sorts of things. It was part of the beauty of the old talks—you really sense how close to nature the people lived back then.

"Foremost among footprints is the elephant's. Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." So he was pointing to the fact that if we want one topic always to remind ourselves of in any situation of life at any time, it is this fact of impermanence, of the changing nature of our experience.

The retreat is sort of a microcosm of our whole life in that way. We've become familiar with the changing experience here, but it's really no different in the world. I think that as human beings we tend to recognize that at a very early age. We tend to recognize that we're vulnerable. We realize that our death could come at any time and that there's a longing in us for a sense of security and safety in this uncertain world.

As we grow up, we tend to latch on to different things or people to try to bring about that safety that we really crave. We all have a very deep longing for safety and for security. So we start out as a child, and the safety really comes from our parents. We grow up and over time that becomes not safety but a hell of its own in certain ways. And so

we make our break for independence to grow up as adults. We may try to find some of that safety again in an intimate relationship with a partner. We may find too that that has its own risks. Sometimes life shows us that in the hardest way possible.

I went to do a retreat one time, quite some years ago, a two-month retreat in Massachusetts, and I left my partner behind. We were in a committed relationship, and at that time she was not interested in going for a retreat. In fact, she had connected with a different spiritual teacher. She wanted to do her practice, and I went off to the retreat to do mine. As I entered the retreat, I thought, "This relationship is really the foundation of my life."

I should have known then I was in trouble.

I got out of the retreat and spoke with my partner by telephone, discovering that in the spiritual scene she had become involved with, she had grown very committed to this guru. I'll try to observe right speech here, though I may not entirely succeed. My opinion was, and remains to this day, that with this particular guru, there was only room for his students to have one love relationship—and that was to him.

As soon as I heard of her deepening commitment to this person, I felt the floor drop out from under me. I felt that bedrock I had counted on had just completely vanished. This brought up for me a whole swirl of anxiety, fears, uncertainty, pain, and suffering through what I experienced as the loss in that moment of the certainty of that relationship which had become so important to me.

To make a long story short, when we got back together, my partner—I shouldn't say saw the error of her ways—but saw more clearly some of the drawbacks or limitations of that particular scene, left the guru, and we resumed our relationship. So everything had a happy ending.

But it made very clear to me how much I had invested in that relationship in the way of security, because when it was gone—when I felt it was gone—the fear came up so strongly.

This is not to say that we shouldn't form relationships. When we do form relationships, there is apt to be a certain investment, because we care. We care for the other person. We care for our connection with them. But we must be aware that in our constant search for security, we may tend to put some of it in that kind of longing.

Commonly we turn for security to outer things like money or possessions or a nice home or our career or some kind of title or status that comes with that. And with the economy and the situation it's in today, we all know how uncertain these kinds of securities are.

We put our security often in the body. And we come into a situation like this and we see how the body can become a source of some discomfort, some anxiety. And of course, looking around the room, many of us are going through a relationship to the aging process. I know I certainly am.

It started for me quite a while ago. I still considered myself quite a young man—this was about ten years ago—but I was already starting to get some of these gray hairs. I was at a talk at a monastery in England with my partner, and I got up and walked away to talk to someone else. Someone next to her said, "Who was that man?" And she said, "What man?" And he said, "That middle-aged man you were just talking to."

When she told me later, I was really very shocked because I hadn't in the least thought of myself as middle-aged. But actually, I was about thirty-five at the time, and I thought, well, that's about halfway through the three score and ten, so I guess I am. And I started to relate to my aging process.

A friend of mine began to go bald when he was in his twenties. He said that for him, the hardest thing about it was washing his face. He said when he got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop. I'm glad he had such a sense of humor about it.

So we look at many things in this life for a sense of safety, a sense of comfort, a sense of security, sensing our vulnerability as people. We're all in the same boat with this.

In Tibetan Buddhism they say that impermanence has four ends. They say that the end of birth is death, the end of gathering is separation, the end of accumulation is dispersal, and the end of building is destruction. These are sobering reflections.

We realize that our own death could come at any time. The fact of our death is certain. The time of our death, completely uncertain. And so we're extremely vulnerable in this situation. We realize that. We're not dumb.

We start to realize that we come to meditation practice because religions have traditionally been the refuge for people with these kinds of questions and these kinds of concerns over the ages. And so we may come to meditation looking for some ultimate form of security through our experience here.

But we come into a retreat such as this and we find again the truth of impermanence. Our experience is always changing. The breath comes and goes. The body feels great one sitting and is full of pain in the next. Sounds are appearing and disappearing. Thoughts are the most transient phenomena of all. Have you ever tried to really grasp a thought and find out what it is?

It's so fleeting and subtle, as are our mind states. We look more closely into the body through the meditative process and we find that the bodily sensations themselves, where we thought there was a solid chest or a solid leg, we find there are only sensations arising and passing, sort of like points of light, as one teacher said.

One person came into an interview yesterday and said, "I'm starting to touch non-being." He said that when he was with his experience, his body was no longer there. So the bodily sensations become so subtle that at times we can't even touch the body. In meditation vocabulary we talk about this as the sense of the body dissolving in our experience. It's a phenomenon that many meditators have reported.

So we continue to look more and more closely. As Silvia said in her talk last night, becoming calm is the first step. Once there's a degree of calm, we don't just rest there, but we start to look around and see what we find, see what that calm mind can point out to us.

We stress in our meditation instructions some precision in noticing. We encourage you really to pay attention to the details of your experience, and it's for a reason. The very first day of interviews, someone came to the group meeting and posed what I thought was a really great question. The person said, "I'm really interested in opening my heart. Why are you giving us so much technical information on how to be with the process of breathing?"

This is a great question. I think everybody, I hope everyone in the course of their meditation experience has investigated and come to some relationship to this question. We really want with our practice to open up to the whole breadth and width of life, to touch the depths of life and to investigate all the questions that life presents. So why do we start with something as tiny and seemingly insignificant as our breath? And why do we put emphasis on noticing the beginning, the middle, the end, and the gap, and refining the attention there?

Part of it is so that you can begin to see very clearly for yourself this fact of impermanence on a moment-to-moment basis. When we investigate our experience in as much detail as we can bring to the looking, we see that even in a moment it's changing.

It's not just that it changes from the course of the morning sitting to the evening sitting, but if we really look closely, our experience is undergoing change in that very moment. There is no moment when everything is static.

When I was a monk in Thailand, I practiced for a while with Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was one of the greatest meditation masters in Thailand of this century. He passed away last year, unfortunately. But we had the opportunity to meet with him for evening talks and discussions, just a handful of the Westerners who were at the monastery over this period of several months.

One of the instructions that he gave us in our meditation went like this. He said there are six sense doors—the five physical senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste, and then the sense door of the mind with the images, the emotions, the intentions and the thoughts that pass through. In each case there is a sense organ. For seeing, the sense organ is the eye. And then there is the sense object or the sight that arises at that sense door. And then finally there's the sense consciousness.

So for each of the senses there are three of what are called the sense bases: the organ, the object of the sense, and the consciousness related to that sense. With the eye, it's the eye, visible sights or forms, and then eye consciousness or seeing that actually arises. So we have six senses times three of these sense bases, or eighteen sense bases altogether.

He said, "Take those eighteen sense bases and for any experience you have in one of them, look at its origin, its nature, its arising and its passing." So he wanted us to look at eighteen times four phenomena with all our sense experience. In any moment that we're having experience, he wanted us to see one of these seventy-two aspects and to investigate our experience fully until we had convinced ourselves that there was nothing else going on but these seventy-two things arising and passing.

So we bring a precision into our awareness, not necessarily to that level. Let me give you an example. In that hearing, there is, first of all, the object of the sound, which is the striking of the cymbals. If you didn't have ears, you wouldn't be able to hear it. But because there is the object, which is the symbol striking, and you have ears, then hearing consciousness arises. So those are the three sense bases associated with this experience.

Now we could take any one of those. Let's take the hearing consciousness. We could look at its origin. It has a moment of arising which is conditioned by the striking of these objects. It has a nature, and that nature is just the quality of the sound. There's a certain pitch and a volume to it, and it has a moment in which it comes into being, which is its arising, and then it has its passing away.

So for the hearing consciousness, those are the four items to investigate. But we can apply that to any aspect of our experience. When we do, we find that all our experience at any of the sense doors is just arising and passing in this moment. There is really nothing solid to hang on to, even in one moment. Not just that your experience changes from one sitting to the next, but even in one moment, your experience is constantly coming into being and passing out of being at all the different sense doors.

Now you may feel this is a terrible tragedy, that nothing lasts. But it's really not good or bad. It's just the way life is. It's the reality of life. It's the truth. It's the law of how things are. Our entire field of experience is constantly arising and passing away.

The Buddha had an analogy for this. He said that if we try to cling to something in this field of experience, it's like a person being swept away by a river. They're in a raging river and the current is carrying them downstream, but there are grasses growing on the bank. They reach out and try to hold on to one clump of grass, but the current is too strong and it comes out in their hand and they continue to be swept away by the river. He said, that's what we're doing in our search for security in trying to hold on to what is inherently changing.

Another of my teachers, Joseph Goldstein, had an analogy that he said, it's like you jump out of the airplane and you find yourself falling through space. You realize that your experience is dissolving beneath you and it's like you're falling through space and you forgot your parachute. This is a little bit the experience when we first start to touch that sense of impermanence in the moment, moment by moment. This analogy goes on, but we're going to leave you hanging for a while without that parachute.

So this transitoriness leads into the next of what the Buddha called three characteristics of this life. He said there are really three things you need to be aware of if you want to see this life clearly and deeply. The first is the truth of impermanence. He said the second is the truth of suffering—that as long as we're looking for security by holding on to what changes, we're going to suffer.

You can look at this in two ways. First of all, you can take a look at the pleasant experiences of our life, which is normally where we hold on. When something is pleasant, we hold on. But when it passes, then we tend to hurt. You can see this very clearly here.

You come in for a sitting and the mind is still and settled. You're really connecting with the breath. There's a great deal of peace, discovering that calm. You go out for a period of walking. You hurry to come back in because now you've mastered the meditation, and you know you're going to pick up where you left off. And you come in. It's not there anymore. The mind is very active. The body has all kinds of energy going. There are thoughts and feelings. Where did the calm go? And we tend to suffer through the loss.

On the other hand, if we have a painful sitting, then we suffer directly. So if there's pain, we suffer. If there's pleasure and we cling, we suffer when it changes.

Ajahn Chah, another of the great Thai meditation masters of the last fifty years, said that it's like grabbing hold of a snake. If you grab the head, then it bites you directly and it hurts—that's the painful end of the snake. But if you grab the tail thinking you're going to miss the head, then sooner or later the head whips around and bites you, and you suffer then too. So if we grab at this life, we end up suffering. It seems to be what happens. Even pleasure can become a seed for later suffering.

The term that I'm calling suffering, the Buddha used the term dukkha. This is a Pali word that has not only the sense of suffering and mental anguish, but also just the sense of unsatisfactoriness or unreliability. We could say that there's an unreliability to life because we want security. We want there to be some reliable and lasting source of happiness and safety and security in life.

And yet the fact is that the world is unreliable in this sense. There's nothing in all the objects of our experience that we can guarantee will always give us that.

There was a monk staying at a monastery in Thailand called Wat Khao Tum—this means Temple of the Cave. After he died, people went into the cave and found out that he'd painted all sorts of wonderful paintings on the wall. One of the paintings was of a person in a monk's robe with a big smile on his face, and underneath was the inscription: "Oh, what joy to discover that there is no happiness in this life."

That's quite paradoxical, but what he really meant was there is no lasting happiness that we can hold on to, so we don't need to try. We can just surrender ourselves to being in this moment. We don't have to try to find something that's going to last.

Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, put it this way: "Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of the cause of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin."

This fact of unsatisfactoriness can seem kind of discouraging when we first start to connect with it. It doesn't hold out a great deal of promise on the surface. And yet this fact of unsatisfactoriness can be a tremendous inspiration to our practice. When we begin to see the truth of it, a lot of our outer-directed activities start to acquire a new perspective. We can approach our outer life without so much grasping, without so much longing for security, and the outer life lightens up, takes on a quality of being more playful, ultimately more happy.

But it also points us toward a different direction in our search for real happiness. The direction may be more inward.

So the Buddha said: "There is one thing, O monks, the not-seeing of which keeps you bound to suffering, keeps you bound in unhappiness. What is that one thing? It is the unsatisfactory nature of this life, the unreliable nature of this life."

The third of the characteristics that the Buddha talked about is probably the most mysterious of all, and in some ways the most difficult to talk about and hardest to understand. He called it a teaching on selflessness, sometimes called no-self. In the Pali language it's called anatta.

I don't want to spend a great deal of time on this third aspect tonight because it is quite subtle and difficult to understand on first hearing. But I will just say this: that the Buddha basically calls us to question this concept of "I" that we carry.

In some ways, it's the most natural and central part of human life, the sense of I. The Plains Indians had a name for the North Star, which was "Star that Stands Still." That's what they called it because all the other stars seemed to revolve around it. Well, that's a little bit like what our concept of I is for us. We sort of think that the I is the star that stands still in our center and everything else revolves around that.

And yet it's quite interesting because if you actually look for this star and try to find what it is that makes up you, it becomes vaguer and vaguer. The harder you look, the harder it is to find.

So let me ask you two questions right now that might point to some of this. I'll just ask you first: How tall are you and what color are your eyes?

Okay, everybody get those? Good. We're on the right track.

When I would answer the question of how tall I am, I would say I am 5'10". And normally we don't think twice about that, right? Well, is my breath 5'10"? Are my thoughts 5'10"? Are my feelings 5'10"? What's 5'10"? Isn't it just this body? So here we're expressing the idea: I am this body. I am 5'10".

What about when I asked you what color your eyes were? Did that seem jarring? No, that's a normal question. And you would say, "My eyes are brown."

Now I'm not my body—I'm someone that owns those eyes. Hey, those are my eyes. My eyes are brown. So which is it? Am I the body or am I something separate from the body that owns the body? Maybe we're not so clear on this I.

What if I ask you how you're feeling right now? Are you happy or sad? Light, or heavy? You might say, "I'm happy in this moment." So, are you your emotions? But another time we might talk about "my joys and my sorrows." So, are you something separate from your emotions that sees them, observes them, and owns them? Which is it?

Sometimes it seems like the most deep sense of I that we carry is this sense of being a separate observer. It's like I'm right in there behind my eyes, and I look out, and I can send my vision all around, and I'm observing through this sort of periscope. And that's what I really am—what's behind those eyes. So you can search and see if you find something there. Good luck.

What I would say is that we aren't really clear on this sense of I. And what the Buddha said is that it's really worthwhile looking at the question because all of our life revolves around this pole star of the I. Almost one hundred percent of our thoughts and concerns and activities revolve around this sense of I. And yet we don't really know what it is or if it is. Am I or am I not?

When I was practicing at Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery, we would go out every morning on alms round. This was a traditional way that over the past twenty-five hundred years monks have collected their meals. They go out with a begging bowl and pass through villages and houses. And when people feel to, they come to offer food as the monks pass by.

We had a particular route that we followed every day. We left the monastery about six in the morning and walked for about a mile and a half down a dirt road. Then we walked across the dikes between rice fields to houses of farmers that were actually out in the rice fields themselves.

This was a very, very beautiful walk because it was summertime. The young rice had been planted the month before and was starting to grow up with that fresh green of growing things. The sun was just coming up and streaming over the rice fields, reflecting off the water. We'd just be walking between these stalks of waving rice, going up to villagers' houses.

At each house, a couple of people would come out—one or two people—and put some food in our bowl. There wouldn't be a word exchanged. There would be no eye contact. We never even got the opportunity to say thank you. That's just the custom in that country. Their support for those who meditate is such that they have a joy in offering. Then we would go on to the next house, come back to the monastery, get some more food from the monastery kitchen, and eat our one meal of the day at about eight o'clock.

I was walking this path with a friend who was another Western monk. It was just the two of us on this particular route every day. His name was Vasudhachara—that was his monk's name. We were starting to walk out from the monastery and Vasudha was walking in front of me because he was a senior monk. He stopped dead in his tracks and turned around to me. He said, "Guy, the ego is just friction." And then he turned around again and walked on.

I had quite a long time to contemplate this profound statement, because the rest of our walk continued in silence for about an hour and a half. So I pondered what Vasudha had said: "The ego is just friction."

Now, in Buddhist terminology, this word ego is simply another way of referring to our sense of self, or the sense of "I." We all carry this sense of ourselves, and we refer to that experience by the term ego. So I began to think deeply about this insight.

For those who may be interested, Vasudhachara eventually disrobed and returned to the States, where he now teaches meditation in Seattle under the name Rodney Smith. We've maintained our friendship over the years, and some of you may know Rodney. He teaches on the West Coast and also in Barre, Massachusetts.

This observation is truly fascinating: the sense of self really is a form of friction. We can discover this for ourselves in our sitting practice. From time to time, there's some sense of friction present—is that a fair statement? If you reflect on your meditation experience, you'll likely find there's some quality where the inner wheels seem to be rubbing up against something, creating friction through the process of our thought patterns, emotions, and feelings.

If we look closely into that expression of mind—which sometimes seems to be in incessant movement—we discover that this movement is generally directed toward trying to make things more pleasant for ourselves. We want to arrange life in such a way that we bring the pleasant into our field of experience while keeping the unpleasant at bay. If we examine the movement of our thoughts closely, this is generally the underlying trend.

We constantly find ourselves expressing preferences—liking this and not liking that, hoping for this and fearing that, trying to maintain this state and prevent that state from arising. There's this ongoing manipulation of both our outer situation and our inner situation, attempting to make everything conform to what we perceive as pleasant.

In this constant movement to change, we tend to resist what is. We resist what is actually here and now. I'm sure you've all had the experience of being in a beautiful spot in nature—by the ocean or in the mountains—and yet finding yourself caught in this incessant movement of thought: thinking about the situation at home, what you're going to say to your partner, what happened at work the week before, how you're going to fix that problem when you return, how you're going to raise your children not to be as obstreperous as they seem to be turning out to be.

And in the middle of that mental conflagration, you might suddenly stop and say, "Wait a minute. I came here to be in a beautiful spot. I don't have to think about this now." When you open your mind, there's the beauty—the light on the ocean, the flight of a seagull, or the sun setting on a mountain peak. You open your heart to that beauty, just in that moment, and the experience is completely different, completely transformed through the dropping away of that self-concern and the simple opening to be with what is.

This same process occurs not only in beautiful natural settings, but right here on your cushion. As I'm sure you've experienced many times this week, you find yourself caught in some storyline about an outside situation. Finally it passes, and you come into contact simply with the breath. How relaxing! How peaceful! What calm! What delight! Just to come simply into this moment without resistance.

So we can ask ourselves: Where does this resistance come from? Why can't I always be in this state of acceptance and openness? When we begin to investigate, we see this is exactly the Second Noble Truth that the Buddha taught, which Sylvia mentioned a few nights ago—the truth that the cause of our discontent is wanting or craving. This constant movement, moment after moment, of wanting something else is precisely what prevents us from simply being here, now, and open to what is.

After the Buddha became awakened, his first discourse was on the Four Noble Truths. His second discourse was called the Fire Sermon. I'd like to read you a passage from the Fire Sermon. It begins like this:

"O monks, everything is burning. And what is the everything that is burning? The eye is burning. Visible shapes are burning. Eye consciousness is burning. The ear is burning. Sounds are burning..."

Auditory consciousness is burning. And he goes through each of the six senses. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of craving. Burning with the fire of hatred. Burning with the fire of confusion.

What the Buddha taught was that when we are involved with grasping, with this constant movement to make things better or make things right, we get caught in suffering. But he also taught how to find a place of coolness, how to find a place of stillness where the fire is extinguished, where the sense of burning goes out.

In our meditation, we begin to find that place of stillness through acceptance. Simply through accepting the way things are in this moment, we begin to find that place of coolness. And this place of coolness is one that is not based on grasping. It is not based on acquiring or sustaining or perpetuating. It is simply based on the resting that we find in a full acceptance of what is here and now.

We could call this state of mind a radical acceptance because it's so complete. It goes to the root of what acceptance means. It's radical because in that moment we've stopped trying to shape or mold our experience to any degree at all, in any direction at all. And in that radical kind of acceptance, there's a very deep stillness that is very refreshing and very healing. It's a stillness that undoes a lot of conditioning, not only the personal conditioning of this lifetime, but even that old, old tendency to grasp, to crave, to make things different.

This process is described in every spiritual tradition, and they just have different names for it. In Vipassana, we tend to call it acceptance. If I were a Hindu bhakti, I might talk to you about surrender. If I were a Christian, I might talk about dying to the small life and being reborn to the eternal life. If I were a Taoist, I might talk to you about non-interfering. But all of these are pointers to the same process, which is letting go of wanting and simply opening to the truth of this moment, to what is.

There was an Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj who lived in Bombay and died about ten years ago. He taught through dialogue. He didn't give long Dharma talks, but when someone came to meet with him, he would just talk with them about their

questions. So one Westerner came and he told this Westerner, "The essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it's painful."

The questioner replied that pain is not acceptable. And Maharaj said, "Why not? Did you ever try? Do try and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its desires and fears enables you to return to your real nature—the source of all happiness and peace."

This theme of acceptance is becoming so popular that Hollywood is starting to pick up on it. You know something's made the mainstream when you see it in big-budget movies. The one that particularly struck me over the last couple of years was Groundhog Day. The premise was that Bill Murray found himself in a situation visiting this small town on Groundhog Day, where the groundhog popped up, and found himself repeating the same day over and over and over. There was nothing he could do to move beyond that date. Every night he went to sleep, and when he woke up the next morning, it was still the same day, he was in the same bed, in the same town, and the same events started to repeat themselves throughout the day.

It started to drive him crazy. He tried everything he could do to get out of it. He even tried suicide. So he killed himself, but he woke up the next morning back in his bed with the same events of the same day going over and over. He finally realized, "Hey, I can use this. There's a woman I'm really attracted to. I'll get to know what line really turns her on and she'll fall in love with me." So he started to try to manipulate the situation to find his pleasure from it, to see what he could get from it. But fortunately or unfortunately, nothing worked.

All his stratagems backfired and he found himself waking up in the same day again and again. He finally became very despairing. He completely despaired of ever changing it, and he actually gave up hope, completely gave up trying at that point.

And it was at that point that everything changed for him. When he settled into that day, just being that day, with all its ordinariness and predictability, beautiful things started to happen for him. He actually developed compassion for other people. And he started going around town fixing all the things that he knew were going to go wrong for other people on that day. And from that heart of compassion he actually discovered a real sense of love for another person and his heart really opened in a new way.

Now on one level this is just an entertaining Hollywood film. On another level it's a beautiful parable about the teachings of the Buddha. Because the way I read it, Bill Murray was imprisoned in the cycle of existence known as samsara, where we are repeating over and over again our birth and our death time after time. In a way, we're trapped in this endless cycle of becoming.

But when he gave up and accepted it just as it was and brought to that a feeling of compassion and love, the total experience was different. He found his freedom within that cycle and his heart flowered and he no longer resisted. And by the way, when that happened, the day turned over to the next day. So he truly was out of the cycle.

So this quality of acceptance, although it's a simple term and points to a simple truth that we can use every day, has a very deep meaning and a very deep significance. Part of what we need to accept are these three characteristics: the fact that life is changing, is unreliable, and that the sense of self is vague and perhaps illusory and can be questioned. Maybe there's really nothing there that we can call an I.

As we accept this truth, we find a peace in the moment that's not dependent on grasping, that's not dependent on carrying over, that's not dependent on holding onto. And it's a peace that's accessible in any moment when we come to that full acceptance, when we open our heart and don't look for anything beyond.

I'll just close with another quote from Maharaj, who echoes some of this feeling. He says that wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. And between these two poles, my life flows.

Let's sit for just a moment.

CHAPTER 202

Accepting Ourselves

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *Guy Armstrong offers a layered exploration of acceptance as both a practical life skill and a gateway to the Buddha's deepest teachings. Beginning with a personal story about camera batteries failing during a scenic flight, he examines how small disappointments reveal our patterns of resistance. Armstrong then delves into the crucial work of self-acceptance, particularly relevant in Western culture where many lack traditional spiritual grounding. He addresses how meditation practice invites us to embrace the full range of human experience—both blissful and difficult states—without judgment.*
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> *The talk explores the unique contribution of samādhi (mental unification) as a healing quality that naturally softens difficult emotions through inner peace and stability. Drawing from his time as a monk in Thailand, Armstrong shares the profound teaching that "the ego is just friction"—pointing to how our sense of separate self creates constant mental restlessness. This connects to the Buddha's foundational teaching in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta on the Four Noble Truths, where craving and resistance to present-moment experience create suffering.*
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> *Armstrong distinguishes between healthy engagement with life's challenges and the deeper spiritual acceptance that leads to liberation. He concludes by addressing practical questions about anger and finding balance between inner work and outer activism, emphasizing that true acceptance doesn't mean passivity but rather responding from wisdom rather than reactivity.*

I'd like to talk this evening on the theme of acceptance. It's a theme that I often get reminded of, and because I've given a talk on it, I feel like I have to practice it.

It came up for me this past week, the first really beautiful day that we had after all the rains—I think it was last Wednesday. A good friend of ours called up in the morning and said, "Would you like to go flying today? I think it's going to be really clear. The rain's just ended. The sky's going to be crisp, really good visibility." So he booked a plane out of Petaluma, and my wife Sally and I went up with him.

We flew for about an hour and a half. We went over Point Reyes and then came back over Black Mountain, flew over Nicasio, and took a photo of a friend's house. The highlight of the trip was going to be flying over Woodacre where we live and taking some photos of our house from the sky, and then flying over the Spirit Rock land because

we'd always wanted some aerial photos of Spirit Rock. Sally and I are both on the committee that's designing the new buildings up here, and we'd like to see from the air how they're located.

We were incredibly happy to be up there. It was a really clear day—you could see for fifty or sixty miles. We flew over Nicasio and were heading to Woodacre when the battery in my camera died. I had brought two spares, so I was feverishly unscrewing the little button on the bottom with a penny I'd pulled out of my pocket, meanwhile trying to keep my headset on and talk to the pilot.

It turned out my camera has two batteries in it, so I popped them both out and put the new ones in and screwed it back together. It didn't work. I took them out again, and I noticed we were flying over my house. Well, I hoped Sally was getting some photos with the other camera, because I wasn't. I tried putting the batteries in again, and I noticed we were over the Spirit Rock land and I wasn't getting any of it. The batteries still didn't work. I did it a third time.

My friend circled over the area twice, and all the time he was circling, I was messing around with these batteries. By the time I got the batteries in, he said, "Well, we've only booked the plane for an hour, we have to go back." So that was the highlight of my trip over Woodacre—fumbling with the batteries.

I started to get really frustrated. I could just feel this impatience and frustration and disappointment and anger coming up. Then I realized I could either make a scene about it or I could accept it. It was such a beautiful day and the flight back was so pretty that I decided to accept it. I'm glad that I have to talk about this from time to time because it really makes me more interested in trying to live it. But it's a lesson that I'm learning and working on all the time.

I'd like to talk about this theme of acceptance tonight. For me, it's one of the central themes of the Dharma. It's a really simple word, and we all go through little situations like that one all the time in our lives where we can open and accept something disappointing that's happened, or we can really work ourselves into a bind about it. That's the superficial level of the meaning of acceptance. But acceptance also has a depth to it that goes right to the very heart and core of the Buddha's teachings.

I want to talk about several different layers of this quality of acceptance. I want to talk first about the whole process of coming to terms with and accepting ourselves, which is a big area for acceptance. I want to talk about how it's a pointer to the heart of the Buddha's teachings. And then I also want to talk about the larger picture, which is an acceptance of life.

This question of self-acceptance is obviously a key one in our society, as you can tell by the popularity of somebody like Woody Allen, who's sort of the apostle of self-doubt, or Groucho Marx, whose famous comment was, "I wouldn't like to belong to any club that would have me as a member." There's also the popularity of books like *I'm OK, You're OK*, which was one of the very first pop psychology bestsellers.

Looking around the room tonight, I can see that many of us are of a similar generation where one of the things we have to work with in self-acceptance is relating to our aging. It's something that I've been working with for some years. I was just at a gathering, sitting with my wife, and got up and strolled away. This was quite some years ago—I still thought of myself as a young man. Somebody next to my wife said, "Who is that man?" She said, "What man?" They said, "That middle-aged man you were talking to." I had not thought of myself as middle-aged at that point.

This awareness of aging forced me to confront something fundamental about human experience. I was about thirty-five at the time—Oscar Wilde once observed that thirty-five is such an attractive age that London society is full of ladies and gentlemen who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years.

A friend of mine began losing most of his hair in his mid-twenties, which can be particularly difficult when you're young and single. He told me the hardest part was washing his face—when he got to his forehead, he wasn't sure where to stop.

We all must reckon with our aging, with the reality that our bodies become less reliable and perhaps less beautiful than they once were. This is simply part of what we must accept as human beings.

As human beings in the West, I believe we face a unique challenge. We may be among the very few cultures in human history that has grown up without a strong spiritual center to society. Only in the last century or so has the rise of scientific rationalism truly undercut spirituality as a central organizing factor in European civilization.

This shift has had tremendous consequences. We've grown up in such a secular way that many people now doubt there is any wisdom in the creative force of the universe—believing instead that we are merely the outcome of some random chemical combination of molecules. This prevalent worldview is profoundly heartless.

This fragmentation—for scientific materialism captures only a fragment of life—has left its mark on our minds, hearts, and spirits. When Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western civilization, he replied that he thought it would be a good idea.

D.H. Lawrence, one of my favorite novelists, came to America in the 1920s and lived in the Southwest, spending several years near Taos. He said this was when he felt most connected to religion in his life. Lawrence observed that Americans—meaning European Americans—were profoundly affected by the size and openness of the landscape in their westward movement. Yet while settling it, they broke the land, and something in them was also broken by its vastness and emptiness. American men, he noted, had lost their warmth and affection for one another, now living isolated and lonely with no real sense of community. This was in the 1920s.

Growing up without the support of a rich and integrative spiritual culture, I believe we encounter more difficulty than many in accepting the fullness of what it means to be human.

All human beings across time experience a range of feelings. We know the positive emotions—joy, happiness, enthusiasm, excitement. We also know the difficult mental states of fear, shame, anger, guilt, depression, and sorrow. We all know this whole spectrum.

Yet depending on our upbringing, we may have vastly different relationships to how we hold this complete range of human experience. I believe we've reached almost a crisis point in America where so many people find it extraordinarily difficult to accept this full spectrum of human capabilities and experience. Too many of us remain caught in judgments about which emotions are acceptable and which are not.

This represents one of the key thrusts of meditation practice: allowing us to explore all corners of our experience so that we come to know all corners of our minds and hearts—the light as well as the dark—and truly come to terms with the range of what we find there.

Meditation practice is not a path that carries us over difficulties to some remote pot of gold at the end. Meditation is a practice that takes us directly into the whole range of our human experience. Sometimes meditation brings very blissful, uplifting, joyful, life-giving, heartful experiences. Sometimes meditation brings us face to face with the most difficult parts of ourselves—raw experiences of fear, sorrow, loss, grief, anger.

We need to develop kindness in holding all of this. Even after years of practice, I continue finding areas that surprise me or trigger reactivity.

I was doing a personal retreat one winter in New York State not long ago. I had a little cabin in a beautiful part of the state, on the edge of the Catskills in farming country. I spent two months there alone—October and November. A friend brought me food once a week, but apart from that, I saw no one for those two months.

I looked out over about a hundred acres of land that opened onto rolling hills and farmlands beyond. I could literally see for hundreds of acres without encountering another soul.

And I was just carrying on my practice of sitting and walking day after day in silence. October, with the weather turning and fall colors blazing, was quite beautiful. Then November came. November in upstate New York is the start of winter, at least it was that year. For about two weeks there was rain and hail and snow and high winds, and the skies were gray for two weeks straight. I did not see the sun.

I got frustrated first because I couldn't do my walking meditation. Like a foolish Californian, I'd forgotten to bring boots. I thought the first snowfall would come around Thanksgiving. All I had were tennis shoes and sandals. Finally, to do my walking meditation, I would tie little plastic bags around my feet with string—little produce bags—and go out and walk. But they wouldn't last very long. On the days it was raining or snowing, I really couldn't go out at all, so I felt quite confined.

It was getting quite dark. I was starting to feel lonely and sorry for myself. All of a sudden, I just wanted to be out of there. I'd had enough of this retreat.

There's a classical term for this experience in meditation practice. It's another of the five hindrances called doubt. The essence of doubt is: what on earth am I doing here? Some of you may have asked yourself that at Spirit Rock from time to time.

Doubt was coming up strongly for me. Since I talk about it, I thought I should know something about it. So I said, "Well, let's look at this. What's this doubt about?" I looked more closely and waited until the next time it came. What I saw was that just before the doubt came into my mind, there was an experience of real loneliness and despair at the situation—just being all by myself in this gray climate, being cold, not being able to walk. There was this self-pity and despair that I just couldn't stand. As soon as it came up, I wanted to escape.

Actually, for me the doubt was more about escaping what I was feeling than about it not making sense to be on retreat. When I understood that, the doubt went away. I thought, "Oh, that's what I have to do. I have to come to terms with that despair, which is still a part of me." When I realized that, the doubt was gone and I was back with despair—and that was real progress, I can tell you. It was a step in the right direction.

If we can't accept ourselves, if we have some idea that some parts of us aren't okay, then our inner life becomes quite tangled. We create a complicated web around our feelings because we're trying to allow some—the good ones—to come. We want to open to the positive things in life, but we don't feel we want to open to the difficult things, the

negative side. We get in this habit of trying to support half of our emotional life and suppress the other half. The only thing this leads to is deadness. We deaden our vitality when we do that.

We also create this division. We live life in a split way where there's a judger on one hand and the doer or the be-er on the other hand. The judger is always passing comments: Are you being acceptable or not? Is what you're feeling okay or not?

The interesting thing to investigate about that sense of judger is: where does it get its opinions? It's really founded on nothing. That judge is just a fragment of our belief system. One thing you can always be sure of is that the judger does not have the whole picture. That fragment does not contain the whole picture of the human being. Because it's an incomplete view, it's not reliable. But because there's that constant sense of tension, of judgment, we can't relax. We can't feel comfortable. We can't really come to a deep sense of inner peace.

If we can't accept ourselves, then we always look for acceptance outside of ourselves. If we can't love ourselves, then we need that affection and approval to come from out there somewhere. So we're always looking for it from others. There's this underlying sense of need in our relationships.

But here's the thing: if we really don't believe we're acceptable, we also don't believe the affection when it comes. The world is sending all of us messages of affection and caring and love all the time. Day after day we're getting those messages from friends, family, co-workers, sometimes from strangers. But if we have the view "I'm not lovable," we'll block them. Rather than change our view, we'll actually perceive that no one likes us or that no one cares for us. So even though the affection may come, it doesn't satisfy. We can't let the affection really sink in because we feel that it's just a matter of time before we get rejected.

I was on retreat once in England with a person who was really my primary teacher for years and years in my practice, an Englishman named Christopher Titmuss. We were practicing on this hillside right near the border with Wales, just a few miles up from where Wordsworth wrote "Lines from Tintern Abbey." It's one of the rainiest parts of a very rainy countryside. My difficult retreat experiences, I should have learned by now, have to do with weather. I was going through another period where in about three weeks the sun was out about twice.

I came into an interview with Christopher and I had not been feeling good about myself at all. Especially during my walking meditation, a lot of thoughts and feelings came in about not liking myself. I told Christopher that I was having kind of a hard time and

he said, "In what way?" I said, "I'm having some difficult thoughts." I kind of hoped he'd stop there. And he said, "Oh, what kinds of thoughts?" I hadn't known Christopher for very long at that time and I didn't know whether I could really open up to him. But I told him what was going on with me and he very compassionately said to me, "You don't accept yourself. You have lots of good qualities, but you don't accept yourself."

So I took that as my theme for my meditation for the next few years in my practice. I had to come to understand—I had to figure out for myself—what did it mean then to accept oneself? In Buddhism there's not supposed to be a self, is there? So what was I supposed to accept? That confused me for a while. I kept sort of waiting, thinking maybe I was going to come across in one of my meditation periods some inner entity, some little guy that I just had to wrap my arms around and then it would be all okay. That sounds kind of facetious, but in a lot of ways I think sometimes there's the expectation in our meditation practice that we'll have some kind of peak experience that will make all the difficult stuff go away—that we'll enter a period of everlasting light and bliss, sometimes referred to as the enlightenment retirement option.

But I think that it's a little bit of a misleading figment to think that way. One of the things that the Buddha said about this practice, one of the ways he described it, is that it's a gradual development. He said it's like the ocean floor sloping away from the shore of the land—it slopes away very gradually. So even though very interesting and intense and mind-opening and fresh, insightful moments do occur in this practice without a doubt—transformative moments—the idea that there's all of a sudden going to be a sudden switch from this mixture of light and dark into all light is misleading. This mixture will be with us for a long, long time, and the way that we work through it is just greater and greater self-acceptance.

What I finally came to in my understanding of what self-acceptance meant for me is it didn't mean finding any one thing that I had to accept. It meant being willing to accept my experience moment after moment after moment through all the changes that it went through. So it meant being willing to accept a moment of knee pain, being willing to accept a moment of fear, being willing to accept a moment of real opening and happiness, being willing to accept a moment of sadness or grief or a feeling of loss. I think this is a much better metaphor or model for our development in meditation—that we just develop a growing capacity to open more and more fully with more and more of our heart really being there to all the range of our experience, which is always changing.

Meditation also makes, I think, a unique contribution in the area of self-acceptance. A lot of what I've just talked about we could also find through psychotherapy. A lot of good therapists use similar language and point to a similar approach. But there's another, I think, unique contribution of meditation, and it has to do with what I'd call a very healing quality of mind, which is the quality of samadhi.

Samadhi is a Pali term, a term in the language that the Buddha taught in. It's usually translated as concentration, and it's one of the factors of the Eightfold Path, along with mindfulness and wisdom and effort and understanding. So it's a key term within the whole range of the Buddha's teachings. But samadhi, when translated as concentration, to me has a sense that we have to focus our attention down and be with just one object. When I say I'm concentrating, I usually mean I'm trying to pay attention to this and I don't want to hear that.

But samadhi doesn't have that flavor of exclusivity. Samadhi has a concentration flavor more in the way that frozen orange juice gets concentrated—it throws out the dross and retains the essence. I think the better word to translate samadhi is unification of mind or wholeness of mind.

So we can have this wholeness of mind, for instance, by being with the breath fully. That has the aspect of concentration. When I can be fully with the breath, then my mind is unified around a narrow object, a narrow focus, and samadhi is developing. The mind is coming together.

But we can also have that wholeness of mind with the attention very wide open. Some of you, I know, like to practice meditation with sounds. It gives a very expansive quality to the awareness and offers a kind of relaxation, especially if the sounds are natural. One can be with sounds that exist in a 360-degree field around us, where the mind feels very whole and very unified.

When the mind gets unified, it gets strong. It becomes stable and calm. This is the great value of this quality of samadhi. With that sense of strength and wholeness and stability comes a sense of well-being—experienced as peace, calm, rest, relaxation. As that sense of stability and peace grows in meditation, it becomes a very strong factor for mitigating or easing the painful states of mind and the painful experiences of life. We find within this quality of samadhi a place where we can rest.

As the meditation develops over time, that state of samadhi becomes more and more our natural resting place. One teacher explained it like this: In the beginning of practice, it's as though we're pushing a ball up a hill. We push the ball up the hill and get to the top of this curve where it can rest for a moment. In the early days of practice, we

feel that we connect with the breath for a few breaths at a time, and we get a sense, a taste of that peace, of that unification of mind, of that calmness. But very easily, a few thoughts come along or some sounds disturb our concentration, and the ball slides off quickly to one side or the other.

Over time, that U-shaped curve flattens out. It gets easier to get the ball to the top where it rests, and when it rests there, it's not so pitched or sloped. It rests there more easily and for longer periods of time. As the practice continues, this curve actually inverts and goes the other way. The natural state of mind, after some time, becomes this resting in samadhi, this wholeness, this peace.

It still gets disturbed. Events come along—thoughts, emotions, mood swings, outer circumstances, situations—and we get flung out of that sense of peacefulness. But we develop this growing ability just to let the mind settle by itself, not to stir it up further, and it comes back to its place of rest again.

This place of rest has a very healing quality. It has its own sense of well-being that starts to soften the edges of difficulty. Without even doing anything with our difficult mind states—without doing anything with our fear or shame or grief or anger—they start to be worn away. This sense of peace begins to wash away many of the difficulties we may have experienced. I think this is a unique contribution that meditation has to offer to self-acceptance.

I also wanted to talk about the deeper dharmic theme of acceptance. I'd like to tell a story from when I was a monk in Thailand. I was practicing at a monastery in the south of Thailand, right out in the country—a forest monastery. The abbot was Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great Thai meditation masters of this half century.

I had a little hut out in the forest. There were about eighty acres of forest and about eighty huts scattered throughout. Living in my simple hut, I couldn't see another person. It had just been carved out of the rainforest, and animals would pass through my clearing. Monkeys would swing overhead, and I could carry on my sitting and walking in this rather idyllic spot.

Every morning at six o'clock, a friend and I went out on what's called alms round. The tradition of Buddhist monks—and also the nuns when that order was alive, when that lineage existed—was to live on food donated by lay people. This tradition continues to this day.

We would leave the monastery at six in the morning with our begging bowls and head off down the road. We had a certain route we traveled every day, involving about a twenty-minute walk until we reached the farming area where the rice fields were planted. This was early summer, so a crop of rice was just coming up. The villagers we visited had their houses located out in the middle of the rice fields.

So we would walk on the dikes between the fields of growing rice, which were flooded, of course. We'd walk over these dikes and come up to one of these houses dotted around the area. The villagers knew that we'd be coming about that time every day, and one or two people would come out from each house, standing at the end of a lane or a dike from their house. We'd walk up. It was all done in silence. We'd simply take the lid off our bowl and they would put in the food that they were offering, close the lid up without saying a word or even making eye contact, then we would go on to the next house.

So we'd pass about six or seven houses to get our morning alms round, and then we'd walk back to the monastery. It took us about an hour and a half altogether. But it was a beautiful way to start the day.

I would go out with a senior Western monk who had been at the monastery longer than I had, whose name was Visuddhachara. Because he was a senior monk, he would always walk in front of me. So we would walk for most of the hour and a half in silence —I would walk behind him, he'd walk in front.

We were going out of the monastery one day on our traditional alms round, and Visuddhachara stopped dead in his tracks, turned around to face me. In a very intense way, he said, "Guy, the ego is just friction." And he turned around and kept walking. I, of course, followed him.

I had quite a long time to contemplate what Visuddhachara had said because our walk was about an hour and a half and most of the rest of the time was in silence. So I just thought: the ego is just friction. What did he mean by that? I actually came to a real appreciation of what Visuddhachara was pointing to in that statement.

By the way, for those of you who don't know him, Visuddhachara is now a lay person again also, living in the Seattle area and teaches meditation. His name is Rodney Smith. We're still good friends and still stay in touch.

The ego is just friction. Well, ego in a Buddhist context has a specific meaning. It means the sense of I. It doesn't mean a puffed sense of pride. It means the sense of I, or the sense of our self, oneself, as a separate entity—not a part of the whole, but a separate solid thing that kind of experiences the world. So it's in a way a center. We kind of make the ego a center of our existence.

A lot of the teachings of the Buddha encourage us to look closely at this sense of I, to see if it's real or not. Because it's such an easy thing for us to talk about—this really is the center of our life, the sense of I. Our thoughts and actions and wishes and hopes and fears all revolve around it. But the Buddha said when you look for it, it's very hard to find. It's very hard to discover what this sense of I comes from or where it is.

So the sense of I is just friction. We might notice this kind of friction sometimes in our meditation practice, because this sense of self, of separate self, often expresses itself through constant movement of mind. I'm sure you didn't have that experience tonight, but some people who meditate have that experience. They come to sit, and instead of being with the breath through forty-five minutes, as I'm sure most of you did, it's generally the case we can be with the breath for a few breaths, and then the mind goes away into thoughts—thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, plans, hopes, fantasies, expectations, desires, fears.

This constant movement and the emotions that come with it create this sense of unrest in us. It creates a sense of constant restlessness, and that restlessness carries with it a sense of not being fulfilled, of needing something else, a sense of insufficiency. When we're caught up in that effort, we really lose touch with the present moment.

I'm sure this has happened to you many, many times. You'll go out—it's a beautiful day like this past week has been. You'll go out to the beach or climb a hill at Point Reyes or some beautiful viewpoint and you'll just want to enjoy the scenery and the spectacular view. Perhaps you're up on Mount Tam. Rather than being with the view, all sorts of thoughts and images and emotions just keep flooding through, keep flowing through. You'll be dwelling on some situation with your partner or your children or your work or something that's coming up tomorrow. You forget why you're even there. You forget why you've come. All of a sudden a little light bulb goes off and you go, "I don't have to do this right now."

And you're right back there in the moment, with the beauty of the sunshine, the sun on the waters, the sound of the wind, the flight of a bird, whatever it may be. You're back connecting with the beauty of the moment as it is unfolding fresh from the empti-

ness of creation. So in that letting go of our self-concern, our self-interest, we can come back into this broader picture because life is always unfolding right under our nose. And all we have to do to contact it is to let go of this stream of self-interest.

Some of you may remember this quote from last week from a medieval Catholic poet named Angelus Silesius, who said, "God, whose love and joy are present everywhere, can't come to visit you unless you aren't there." So he's pointing in the same way, to the same phenomenon, that when we can let go of self-concern, there's an openness to a much bigger picture that's always emerging fresh.

Well, the Buddha was pointing to this kind of restlessness when he gave his very first discourse after his awakening. It was a discourse on the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that there's unhappiness in life. The second truth is that the source of our unhappiness is wanting, is craving, is this restless sense of insufficiency that's always looking to be filled from something outside, from something other. And this is really where that sense of resistance comes from—this constant craving that feels like it's never enough. And so in indulging in that, in giving our attention to that, as we do much of the time, we lose touch with the truth, the living, breathing truth of this present moment. And it's being in that full presence in this present moment that we find our freedom, that we find our happiness.

The Buddha went on to say in his second discourse, which is called the Fire Sermon: "Friends, everything is burning. And what is the everything that is burning? The eye is burning. Visible forms are burning. Eye consciousness is burning. The ear is burning. Sounds are burning. Auditory consciousness is burning," and so on through the other senses. "Burning with what? Burning with the fire of craving. Burning with the fire of aversion. Burning with the fire of confusion."

So sometimes when the attention is quite subtle in our meditation practice, we can actually experience this relentless movement of thoughts and feelings as a kind of burning, a kind of restlessness that when we give ourselves over to it completely, it really erodes our inner peace. Peace is a natural state of mind when we don't interfere. But this constant doing that we're involved in—plotting for the future, regretting about the past—is a way of continually disturbing our essential peace.

When we start to accept, deeply accept, then we put an end to that constant churning, that constant restlessness. And this is really the teaching of the Buddha on the third noble truth, that the end of this restless craving is the end of sorrow, the end of unhappiness. And he equated it with this place he called nirvana, or this understanding that he called nirvana. So it was about finding an ultimate kind of peace, an ultimate kind of rest.

So we could say that this is a kind of radical acceptance that we come to in our practice, that we discover, where the mind finds its bearing in a way that isn't moving to any object whatsoever—is not moving to hold onto, is not moving to push away, is not disturbing that deep, deep peace. And this is a very healing and refreshing place in practice.

So this kind of radical acceptance wears away, washes away centuries of conditioning, lifetimes of conditioning, years of conditioning—the legacy of our upbringing, legacy of our parents and their parents before them, and even this movement of restlessness which has gone on, according to the Buddha, since beginningless time. All get washed away in this deep, deep rest.

This is really an aspect of all major spiritual traditions. In the Hindu bhakti path, you might call it surrender. In a Christian path, you might call it dying to the small self and being reborn to eternal life. In a Taoist path, you might call it non-interference. In Vipassana, we're rather more prosaic, and we call it acceptance. But it's really the same pointing.

I'd like just to close with a quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a Vedanta teacher of this century. He said, "The essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful."

And this questioner said to him, "But pain is not acceptable."

And Maharaj says, "Why not? Did you ever try? Do try and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its desires and fears enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

So we'll close there and open it up for comments, discussion, questions, anything that anyone would like to share. Sometimes I can't see so well in the back because it's a little dark. So if somebody's got a question in the back, you might just feel free to speak up.

The question of balance between contemplative practice and engaged action touches the heart of spiritual life in our modern world. I've found that my own path has naturally organized itself into three distinct modes: periods of intensive meditation practice, often in solitary retreat; work to sustain myself materially; and service to others. Rather

than trying to juggle all three simultaneously, I've taken chunks of time to focus deeply on each aspect. This approach has worked for me, though many practitioners successfully integrate all three elements into their daily lives.

What I've observed, both in my own experience and in the lives of many fellow practitioners, is that authentic inner work naturally leads you back into engagement with the world. The spiritual journey seems to move in organic cycles—periods of turning inward for contemplation and retreat, followed by a natural impulse to take whatever wisdom or understanding has emerged and offer it back to the world. These alternating rhythms of withdrawal and engagement appear to be an essential pattern in mature spiritual development.

This cyclical movement requires deep listening to the authentic call of each moment. Sometimes the pull toward solitude and inner work is stronger; other times, the world seems to be calling for our active participation. Neither withdrawal nor engagement is superior to the other—they are complementary aspects of a complete spiritual life.

It might appear that meditators are turning their backs on the world when they enter retreat, but Joseph Campbell's profound work in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* illuminates the deeper pattern at work. Campbell identified what he saw as the one universal myth present in human consciousness: the journey of the hero or heroine. This archetypal journey follows a clear sequence—withdrawal from the ordinary world, the discovery of extraordinary inner resources, and then the return to share that discovery with others.

This same pattern emerges in the lives of the great spiritual teachers throughout history. The Buddha's six years of intensive practice before his awakening, followed by forty-five years of teaching, exemplifies this rhythm. Christ's periods of withdrawal into the desert, followed by his ministry in the world, reflects the same archetypal movement. The contemplative journey is not an escape from responsibility but a preparation for more effective service.

The wisdom tradition teaches us the art of acceptance and inner peace, while our Western heritage offers a strong foundation in activism and social engagement. Rather than seeing these as contradictory approaches, we have the unprecedented opportunity to discover their synthesis. This integration requires wisdom—the same wisdom captured in that familiar prayer about having the courage to change what we can, the patience to accept what we cannot change, and the discernment to know the difference.

These cycles are a really natural part of an ongoing spiritual life, requiring us to listen deeply to ourselves and feel which direction more strongly draws us at any particular time.

It sometimes looks like meditators turn their back on the world by going into retreat. But Joseph Campbell wrote this beautiful book that many of you probably know called *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which traces the archetype. He says there's one myth in human consciousness, and it is the myth of the hero or heroine. What that myth is about is withdrawal from the world, discovery of extraordinary resources, and then a return to the world to share that discovery. This is really the archetype for the life of Christ and the life of the Buddha, and many other myths around the world.

So I think one really has to listen inwardly to see where the call is. Because our culture is so outward oriented by our history—the West does not have a history of going inward apart from some very few contemplative traditions—I really encourage people where there's the urge to look within to follow that. Follow that and trust in that because it will lead you back. Don't worry about turning your back on the world for a limited period of time. Trust that call, and then when you come back, you'll have more to share. It's worth the journey.

Question about anger: Would you have anything to share to help us with dealing with accepting anger?

Anger is one of the things we do have to come into great acceptance with. It's one of the most difficult emotions we experience. In my mind, there are the big four—they aren't the classical hindrances, but in my view of meditators, the four that catch people are anger, fear, grief, and wanting. Anger is one of the big four, and it comes up on retreat and off retreat.

I think there are two things we really need to distinguish with anger. One is feeling the emotion in and of itself—this is the realm of meditation practice—to become comfortable with our experience of the emotion of anger.

The ways that anger manifests: first is that mental feeling, however you describe that for yourself—the hostility or aggression or resentment or whatever. There's a mental tone to that, an emotional tone. The second is the way you feel it in the body, because strong anger has a strong impact in the body. I feel it particularly in the chest, the neck, the head. So really come to let yourself feel those body sensations.

The third way anger manifests strongly is in thinking. Often the thoughts are about: "They shouldn't have done this to me, why'd they do this to me, they had no right doing this to me, and what I'm going to do to them is..." So all the thoughts are going on at the same time.

To become aware of those three aspects of the experience of anger—that's the constellation. It's the thoughts, the emotion, the body sensations. That's what in meditation we have to come to really open to and let ourselves feel without the judgment that it should go away or that it shouldn't be there. That's the belief that really interferes with the quality of acceptance.

So it's really helpful if we can bring an attitude like we're observing any other part of nature. Emotions are part of human nature. Can we bring that same kind of eye that we would have coming across a bobcat in the wild? Can we bring that same kind of awareness to the nature of anger when it comes?

This is what meditation practice is ideal for if you have a quiet period to do that in. The difficulty with anger is we often feel it and have to relate at the same time, and that's what takes a lot of skill. The more skill you can acquire in just being with anger in a quiet way—sitting on your cushion, alone, in nature, whatever way you can experience it in solitude—that's a very helpful foundation for acceptance.

Acceptance takes some of the element of conflict out of anger, brings in more spaciousness, and gives us a foundation so we can still relate in a way that's not so controlled by the anger. So the difference is that we want to accept the experience of it. We don't necessarily want to act directly out of it because that can be destructive for others as well as ourselves.

I find the growing ability to accept it, just for what it is, gives me a spaciousness that means my speech and my actions aren't so controlled by the anger. I can maybe think a little bit about what a sane person would say in this situation before I put my foot in my mouth.

Response from participant: One tool I've used to free me from my anger a little bit is to have the understanding that much of my anger is self-centered fear. When I relinquish my grasp, when I surrender myself, then I don't get trapped into the self-centered fear, and therefore anger is easier to release.

Beautiful. The observation was that when he realizes his anger has its root in self-centered fear, it makes it easier to let go of, and I think that's true and a very helpful insight.

Thanks.

I often find what's at the root of my anger is a feeling that I'm invisible. Somebody has done something to me that shows lack of respect because they haven't even seen me. And it brings up a fear that I don't really exist. That's kind of the root fear for me.

Okay, let's close with just a minute of metta meditation to close the evening.

For this metta period, I would like you to bring to mind a difficult aspect of your life. It could be a person. It could be part of your own experience. It could be a situation. It could be a group of people. Bring to mind some difficult aspect of your life.

Let yourself feel for a moment the difficulty that this brings you. And hold the situation, the person, the aspect in your mind with an image or a sense in your body, your thoughts, whatever's helpful.

And in this case, we'll direct the loving kindness to ourselves in relation to this situation. In contact with this, may I be safe and protected from harm. May I develop a sense of peace. Even though it's difficult, may I find within me the capacity to accept this difficulty. Even though I might normally contract, may I allow myself to hold this situation and let my heart be fully open. May I live with peace. May I live in happiness. May I live in freedom.

Just a couple of short announcements to close. Next Monday, the sitting will be led jointly by myself and Fred Wapipa. Fred is a wonderful Native American teacher who lives in the area. I'll be doing the meditation, basically the silent part. Fred will be doing the talking part. That's the way I like it.

Sylvia's class will happen this Wednesday, although Sylvia's out of town. Someone will be leading it. I'm not sure whom, but someone will be there.

And I just wanted to mention something about our family program. For those of you who are not aware of it, Spirit Rock does have an ongoing program for children, really of all ages. We're thinking about now starting a program, a special program for teens, separate from the younger children. And we're really working to make Spirit Rock a place where children of all ages will feel at home, will feel that it's their spiritual home from a young age.

So we will be inviting children to come from time to time from the family program, which meets in the dining hall on a Monday night, and interact with the group here. And, of course, the invitation is always out for children to take part in the meditation periods and the Dharma talks here of a Monday evening.

Okay, hope you have a good week.

Just one comment. We do sell cookies on Monday evenings that support the children's program, and if somebody left their black pocket knife on the cookie table this evening, I have it. So thank you for all your support, and see me afterwards.

Thanks for coming, and good night.

CHAPTER 203

Relating Wisely With Anger

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines anger as one of the fundamental kilesas (mental defilements) and hindrances in Buddhist practice. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching in the Simile of the Saw, he explores how anger often masks deeper feelings of hurt and existential fear of not being seen or acknowledged. Armstrong presents a three-phase approach to working with anger: examining the original incident and questioning whether others truly 'make us angry,' staying present with the intense bodily and mental experiences of anger itself, and finding skillful means to communicate about anger when necessary. He emphasizes the Buddha's guidelines for right speech - speaking what is true and useful - and quotes the teaching that one should speak 'in due season, in truth, gently, to their profit, and with kindly intent.' The talk balances acknowledging anger's destructive potential with recognizing its occasional usefulness in confronting injustice and breaking through oppression. Armstrong advocates for a 'long-enduring mind' approach, recognizing that freedom from anger develops gradually through the stages of awakening, with loving-kindness (metta) practice serving as a powerful antidote to aversive mental patterns.

Anger is a very powerful force. It has a tremendous impact on our own bodies and minds, and it also has a tremendous impact in the world. Anger possesses an incredibly destructive power. We need only look at situations like Rwanda, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East to see the effects of anger that has been clung to and cultivated for generations upon generations of people and the tremendous destruction that follows.

In our own personal lives as well, anger is a force that has tremendous power and impact. We find evidence of this all the time in the daily newspaper. If you read the San Francisco Chronicle, every day there seem to be reports of homicides and assault and armed robbery and burglary, and it gets pretty depressing. That's why I like to pick up the Point Reyes Light, which is the newspaper of West Marin. It covers this valley and the towns like Point Reyes Station and Inverness, and I read about the kinds of things that anger leads people into here.

This is a report from the sheriff's calls in Dillon Beach. These are the kinds of things that the Marin County sheriffs get involved with: "A man returning to his home in Tomales got in a traffic dispute on Oceana Drive with another driver who flipped him the bird. A deputy was called and determined that no crime had occurred." This is one of the things I like about West Marin—the anger sort of seems manageable out here.

Just to give you another sense of what people get up to out in West Marin, this is from Marshall: "A citizen reported two men parked beside Highway 1, quote, 'snorting something into their noses,' unquote. They replied to him that they were merely picking their noses." And if you believe that, we have a bridge to sell you.

But anger is a tremendously powerful force. When it's present in our lives, when it's strong, it really forms a dark cloud in our mind. It can create difficulties in our relationships and in our personal life. It's a force that's really important to deal with.

Classically in Buddhism, anger is listed at the core of what are called the *kilesas*, or these fundamental distortions of mind, one of which is aversion or the sense of disliking or hating. Anger is really one of the key expressions of that mode—one of the *kilesas*. It's also listed in the hindrances, the classical five hindrances of meditation practice, also under aversion.

When the Buddha talked about ways of becoming free, he said that there are ten fetters that bind us as ordinary people in this world. The one who has come to full awakening has destroyed all of these ten fetters, has slipped the noose, as it were, of these ten restrictions. One of the ten fetters is ill-will or anger. In traditional Buddhism there are said to be four stages of awakening, four levels or degrees of freedom. Only at the second stage does one start to really get some relief from anger, and only at the third stage—which is right before total freedom, which is the fourth stage—does one become free of anger.

I think it's important when we start to work with anger to have an attitude that's been described as a long-enduring mind, because anger has that quality. It is a long-enduring emotion. If we approach it with the attitude that it shouldn't be there or that we want to get rid of it, we're only going to get more frustrated and more angry with ourselves. We need to find a way in our practice to learn to relate to anger that is not coming from a place of wanting to be rid of it, because we are not going to be rid of anger, most of us, for quite a long time.

One of my friends went to a very highly regarded Tibetan teacher, one of the senior lamas who came over from Tibet in the late fifties and who's very well respected and teaches on the West Coast. He had sat a couple of retreats with this Rinpoche and de-

veloped a good connection with him. He went and formally requested if he could be this teacher's student. This is an old man in his sixties with a beard and all the respectful signs of age. This teacher thought for a minute, looked down at my friend, and said, "Okay. I'll be your teacher, but there's one thing you have to know about me first. I still get angry."

I thought that was really beautiful, actually, that he had the humility and courage, from the sort of revered position that he was in, to say that to someone who was coming as a new student. It just points to the fact that it's not an easy thing, even for those who have practiced many years, to be free from anger.

The Buddha talked about the importance of working with anger under the precepts of right speech—that not speaking harshly is an important part of the Buddhist path. When we speak harshly, we cause pain to others, and we end up causing pain to ourselves.

For many years in my practice, I thought there was one relationship that was exempt from the precepts, and that was the relationship with my partner, or my wife, or significant other. Growing up, I had a lot of stormy relationships. For those of you who are interested in astrology, my moon is in Scorpio, and when I tell that to people who are into astrology they sort of go, "Oh, you poor guy." I don't know that much about astrology, but it indicates that the emotions are not always the easiest place to hang out.

I've had a lot of stormy relationships in my past, and I always thought it was okay to get angry at my significant other. It took me a long time of practice to realize that the precepts actually do apply to our partners as well. I think that's why this relationship is such a fertile ground for practice.

There's always more to work with there.

So, it's really important to take some care with anger, but at the same time, we don't want to get too uptight or judgmental about it. If we develop a really condemning attitude toward anger or a judgmental attitude, we end up trying to repress it or make it go away. And that simply doesn't work. So it's a very delicate balance and a delicate dance that we need to find out how to do with anger.

When I was thinking about how to sum up the dharmic perspective on anger, this is the kind of summary that I came to in my own mind: embrace the feeling and guard the action.

What we want to do with the experience of anger is to really open fully to the experience of it, to our feeling. That means, as we discussed in the meditation tonight, becoming really clear on what the feelings are in the body that anger brings up within us, what the mental tone is in the mind, what kind of thoughts go along with anger, and how it makes us want to react—to unsheathe the claws, or to go on the attack, that urgency of action that anger seems to propel us into. And as far as possible, not to act through our speech and through our physical actions in such a way that we give unrestrained vent to that feeling.

So this is our koan of anger: to embrace the feeling and guard the action.

Because if we simply blindly react from the feeling of anger, all we're doing is strengthening that conditioning. Every time we give expression through our speech or through our physical acts to a feeling that's in our mind, we are deepening that karmic groove. Karma and volitional action are really synonymous—they mean one and the same thing. When we do an action from a wholesome motivation like generosity, kindness, or compassion, we deepen that groove. When we do an action from an angry place, we deepen the groove of anger.

So in addition to deepening the groove of anger, we also put it out into the universe in a way that the universe will eventually reflect back to us. The skill around working with anger is to allow ourselves to feel the feeling very fully, but learn to develop this really spacious container for it through our meditation practice so that it doesn't dominate our behavior. That's essentially the direction we want to take with anger, and that's really why I think it's a lifetime of practice.

In this we have to come to what's at the heart of the paradox, at the heart of spiritual practice: this combination of complete surrender to the feeling and a very careful vigilance around the actions. There's this balance of letting go and control that we have to find with anger. It's like walking the edge of a razor.

Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism into Tibet, put it this way: "Although my view or my understanding is as expansive as the sky, my actions as regards cause and effect are as fine as grains of barley flour." That's the kind of approach we need in our meditation. We need to develop this vastness of view, a meditation that can hold everything that arises within ourselves and within the world. And then from that vastness of view, we need to take really great care with our actions, not to hurt others and not to hurt ourselves.

This kind of approach, as it's practiced within a community, creates a safe kind of space where each of us can really flower. That's why the practice of the precepts within a community like the sangha, within a spiritual community, really creates the ground from which each of us can open and flower, because they create a space of safety.

Recognizing that it's not easy to do, even for practitioners of a long time and even for teachers of this stuff—because, of course, the only thing we're doing in the teaching role is reminding us of what we all know and all have heard—I do want to tell you a funny story from a retreat that I was on with Sasaki Roshi. He was one of the great Zen masters of our time, who lives in America in a place called Mount Baldy in Southern California. This was in the late seventies.

One of the healthy things about our community is that we're very open to practicing with other teachers, other Buddhist teachers and non-Buddhist teachers alike. At this time, I was living at a meditation center in Massachusetts. About ten of us from this meditation center went to sit a retreat, a seven-day retreat with Sasaki Roshi, in a very strict Zen style.

He worked in the koan method, and he would give us these baby koans because we were beginning students. We would have to go to him four times a day—he saw every person four times a day to give him our answer to the koan. The grown-up koans are questions like, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Our baby koans were much simpler. Nonetheless, those of us from a vipassana background did not have any foot up in this particular practice. Our mindfulness practice didn't give us any clue about how to answer a koan.

So we were just, most of us, going crazy trying to deal with this question. My question was, "How do you realize Buddha when you hear this sound?" And I had to go in four times a day to present my answer. I have never felt like such a fool in all my life. I didn't have a clue what I was doing.

Well, there were not only senior vipassana students on that retreat, but some of my vipassana teachers were on that retreat. I'm not going to name names, but I know that they were even more frustrated than I was. So one of them, after several days of just being humiliated in this practice, got so fed up and so frustrated...

Can I ask first, are there any children under sixteen here tonight?

This Vipassana teacher was so upset at this point—so frustrated and so angry. He didn't know what else to do. He picked up the bell that was sitting in front of the Roshi, rang it in front of his face, blew out the candle and said, "Fuck this!"

But Sasaki Roshi was not a great Zen master for nothing. He simply sat there in his imperturbable way, picked up his bell—which he rings when he signals the interview is over—rang the bell and said, "Not the answer."

The dance of anger, even for Vipassana teachers. And names shall go unnamed here. This is all confidential.

So, working with anger in our own life. I wanted to go through the exercise with you of actually calling forth an experience of anger so that we could really take a close and kind of analytical look at our experience of anger.

In our life, usually something happens quite abruptly that throws us into this state of anger. Something arises that we weren't expecting. Someone says something unkind to us. Someone cuts in front of a line at the supermarket. Our partner criticizes us in a way that we don't think is fair. Our boss lays some expectation on us that doesn't seem appropriate to us. And immediately, almost without noticing what has happened, we find ourselves sometimes in this very intense state of anger.

I want to just look for the time being at personal anger or self-centered anger. We'll come back a little later to anger on behalf of others—anger based on injustice. But I want to just look right now at our self-centered anger that often comes up so quickly.

The first thing I want to ask is, when you take a close look at what has happened in that moment before the anger gets full-blown, is there any feeling before the anger comes? Someone tonight mentioned hurt, and I think that's a very good observation. Often there's a sense that we've been hurt by someone's not considering us, not being thoughtful, not being kind to us. And that causes a hurt. Very often it's as though we can't let ourselves feel that hurt because it makes us too vulnerable. It's too close to the quick. And we often move into anger as an escape from feeling the hurt.

Sometimes it's just useful in the middle of anger to reflect: Is there some hurt underneath this that I need to go back and get in touch with? I think that's one answer that's very, very close to the heart of things—that often anger is a refuge from hurt.

The other thing I'd say is that I notice for myself that even before the hurt, there's a fear that is associated with anger. And for me it has to do with the fear of not being seen. I find I get angry when somebody does something like cutting in front of me at a line or not acknowledging some piece of work I've done—I feel they haven't seen me. And in some ways, particularly with things like being cut in front of, it's as though I question for a moment whether I'm there or not. Have I just become invisible? Couldn't they see I was standing in that line?

I think there's something very real in that fear of not existing. Because, you know, in a way, we don't exist. We don't exist in the way that we take ourselves to—as a solid, separate individual. There is a body. That's true. But when you look within the whole mind-body process for something solid, there isn't anything there.

There's just the flow of changing phenomena—thoughts and feelings and sensations. So I think in some way we all know that this breeds insecurity. We don't really have any solid core to hold onto as a human being. That's the way it is for us as human beings. And so this not being seen reignites that kind of existential fear of not being.

Anyway, that's something I tap into and that I get in touch with when I feel that I've been overlooked. That's also another seed for me of anger. So it's useful to tap in with those to know that anger is not always the bottom line, that sometimes it's a reaction to something else.

When the anger comes, normally I find that it starts as quite a swirl. And a couple people mentioned tonight delusion, confusion, losing our sense of ourselves in their experience of anger. And it's important to recognize that there's often a real confused quality in the experience of anger.

I'd like to break that down a little bit. Because I think that there are—what's confusing is that there are several things going on in anger on a few different levels. And we get confused because we aren't clear in our intention which one we're going to relate to first and which one we should relate to first.

So just in the discussion tonight, people reported body sensations of constriction, of tightness in the chest, the throat, the hands, the gut. Those are certainly there. People reported emotions of a feeling of wanting to attack or aggressiveness. People reported lots of different thoughts coming in, running through the mind—she did this and they said this to me, and then what am I going to say to them next time I see them? So there are these three levels of the sensations, the feeling, and the thoughts that are all going on at the same time.

If we can develop a real interest in this whole phenomenon and realize that this play of anger is just a part of human nature, then maybe we can start to look at it with the eye of a naturalist and really want to understand how it works. Because once we understand its mechanism, it takes a lot of the power out of anger.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, this great Indian teacher, said, "Of what we understand, we are the masters. Of what we do not understand, we are the slaves." So if we can bring that kind of understanding into anger, we can find some clarity and find our own power within it.

What I'd like to talk about are what I see as three phases that we get into with anger. These are the phases, first, that we run over and over the original incident—as to why they did that and what could they possibly have been thinking of and they shouldn't have done that and I was right and they were wrong. We run over the original incident again and again.

The second thing is we've got a very intense experience going on in the mind and body. It's intense emotionally. It's intense physically. And we need to relate to that in a very direct way.

And then the third thing that's going on is we have to figure out what in the world we're going to say to that person the next time we meet them.

So we run back and forth between these three phases of the incident—the past, the present, and the future of the whole chain of anger. And what I think is really important to do is to look at each of these three times separately. Because they each need to be related to in a different way.

The first thing we do typically, if we're not coming from a very conscious place, is to say, "That person made me angry." And we assign all the responsibility for our anger to their action. And I wonder if that's really an honest and accurate appraisal. I wonder if it's really accurate to say, "They made me angry." We certainly tell ourselves that. We're often very fond of telling the other person that. But I wonder if it's really true.

Just to cast a little question: in remembering a time when—as you looked back on the meditation tonight—an incident that made you angry, let me ask, was there ever a time that somebody did a similar thing and you didn't get angry? Can you ever remember a time that something like that happened and you didn't get angry?

If it doesn't work for that particular incident, maybe on your way home, think about another incident where you reacted with anger and you blamed the other person and see if in that case there was another incident where you didn't get angry.

I think that probably all of us, if we look at it, can see that sometimes we get angry and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we're feeling very spacious and contented and happy and mellow. And we can just see—we may see really clearly—oh, that person did something inconsiderate. They were rude. They were thoughtless. They may even have been cruel. But I don't have to get angry because of it. I don't have to take up anger because of what they did.

So I think it's really important to question that assertion that the other person made me angry and see if perhaps that action, unskillful though it may have been, thoughtless, impolite, inconsiderate, is not the sole cause of my anger. That was a contributing factor, but my own state of heart and mind is another contributing factor. And if we start to see in that way, maybe we can find that we have some freedom in relation to anger.

Maybe we can find that somebody can do something thoughtless. It's not to deny that people do thoughtless things to us, but that there might be another response possible, another response available to us than anger.

The Tibetans say that if we want to walk on this earth, there are lots of sharp points —thorns, rocks, gravel, bees. We have two possibilities of walking on this earth without getting hurt: We can cover the whole earth with shoe leather, or we can put shoes on our own two feet.

The stance of expecting that the rest of the world is going to become perfect so that I'm not irritated is like trying to put shoe leather on the earth. But if we find a way in our practice to deal with our own anger, to accommodate our own responsive anger and to take responsibility, that's a way of putting shoe leather on our own two feet and has a much better long-term prospect for success.

So one of the things I would distinguish between is the unskillful action that someone else has done and our response to it. And see that those two aren't necessarily so tightly coupled.

I'll give you an example of the extreme of the Buddha's teachings in this area. This is from a sutta called The Simile of the Saw. The Buddha said, "Even if bandits were to meet you on the road, hold you down, and sever you limb by limb with a two-handled saw, one who gave rise to a heart of hatred towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. Now this is how you should train yourself: We shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, without hostility or ill will, extending over the all-encompassing world."

This is serious practice. And it's not to say that we're going to be there. But you can imagine in the situation where Jesus was being nailed on the cross, that Jesus might have had that kind of attitude to the men who were driving the nails into his hands and legs: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That is a possibility within our human potential.

Ajahn Jumnian, who is coming here in July—a Thai teacher who's a lot of fun—said the last time he was here, "I haven't had anger for 25 years." That's a wonderful testament to his practice. He's done a lot of metta practice.

So phase one relates to the source of the incident: Can we decouple the person's action from our response of anger?

Phase two concerns the present: How do we relate to the experience of anger in the here and now? We want to get in touch with how it feels in the body and take those body sensations, unpleasant as they are. Everyone who talked described senses of constriction, tension, stiffness, tightness, closing, contracting. This is not a pleasant state of mind. But take those sensations themselves for the focus of the meditation. Go right into that feeling.

If you're getting angry in your daily life situation—at work, with your partner, with your children, wherever it happens—see if you can just take a minute's breather and go right into those very sensations. Ground the awareness in the body. This is the very best place to ground the attention in daily life mindfulness practice. Connect directly with those sensations. See if you can bring that sense of open, accepting, allowing softness into the meditation at that point. If we can open to those feelings, then they stand the possibility of flowing through, of passing through.

Get in touch with what that tone is in the mind. What's the feeling of anger as a mental state, as a mood? Somebody mentioned a fiery kind of quality. There's a sort of burning that goes along with anger.

And then, what is the impact on our thinking? There's a certain kind of thought that tends to come up with anger. Somebody mentioned earlier feeling righteous. Don't we think thoughts about how they were wrong and I was right? The more we think those thoughts, they're actually quite addictive, aren't they? People mentioned also—and I really appreciated this—it's fun to be angry. So really, if you really want to be free of anger, start to tune into how enjoyable it is to be right. Because that's what sustains our anger.

When we put those thoughts of blaming the other and making ourselves right, we add that to the anger, and each thought is like a log that we toss on the fire. Want to stoke the burning? Keep fueling it. Think more about them being wrong and me being right. So that increases the burning, it increases the pain, it increases the conflagration. The more we keep thinking, the more we burn and the more we suffer.

In that state of anger, we may want to hurt the other person, but take a close look. Who's suffering in the moment?

We are, because the state of anger is a painful state. It's a state of contraction, of suffering, and we're suffering with it. So we start to realize that we're actually caught in a bind. We enjoy the pleasure of being right and making the other person wrong, but we're perpetuating our suffering at the same time. And so we start to see that we're in deep conflict with ourselves at that point.

It's only the sensing of that pain that we cause ourselves that gives us the trust or courage to let go. It's as though we've grabbed hold of a stick that's on fire and we're holding on to it for dear life—the torch of our self-righteousness. And the only thing that will make us let go of it is when we realize we're burning our own hands. Then maybe we're willing to put it down.

So it's important to be with our anger that clearly, that we can see that conflict within ourselves, that we can sense the pleasure of the anger and also sense the pain. Sensing the pain is what encourages us to let go.

Then the third thing that we need to give some reflection to is what do we say to the person when we meet them next? And this is sometimes the most difficult area. Finding skillful means to communicate about anger is really, really hard. We've run the whole gamut in our experience of not saying anything, and that didn't feel so good, of just blasting the other person with our anger, and that usually doesn't work so well.

So how do we find a way to be honest about our anger and to do it in a way that really works to create a win-win situation where we feel better after the communication and the other person does too? The Buddha's main guideline for right speech is to say what's true and what's useful. We really need to look at our communications about anger in that light.

In my experience, it's generally not so useful just to blast the other person with the full force of our anger. Number one, they can't hear it. They become defensive. They close or they get angry back. And the communication gets really deadlocked. But it's often really important to communicate that we are angry, that we feel anger, and that it had to do, at least in part, with something that they did. Sometimes it's really important for that to be said and heard.

So the art, then, is to communicate the fact of our anger in a spirit that doesn't communicate the harshness of the anger. I think I mentioned this a few weeks ago—Suzuki Roshi said that if you're angry with somebody, what you should say is, "Oh, I'm so sorry, but I'm angry with you." That's great. That's beautiful, if you can do that. But for us mere mortals... not always possible.

So we do the best we can. That's the important thing. Our good intention is what's really important in our communication with anger. If we come from a place that's as good an intention as we can bring to that moment—I want to communicate because I care about this relationship. I want to clear up something that is a barrier between us. I want to keep our relationship clean and clear and straightforward. I want to clear what's happened. I need to tell you that I feel angry about something—we communicate with as good an intention as we can bring into that moment. And that's the best that we can do.

And we trust in the practice that as time goes by, as we work with this practice of anger and become clear in ourselves, our intention will also clarify. As time goes by, we find we can bring more and more skill into that communication, more and more clarity, more and more kindness. We can actually bring the spirit of metta into the communication about anger. And that's really a transformative intention.

Again, one of the Buddha's guidelines: "One who is about to admonish another must realize within themselves five qualities before doing so. In due season will I speak, not out of season"—that is, at the right time and place. "In truth will I speak, not in falsehood. Gently will I speak, not harshly. To their profit will I speak, not to their loss. And with kindly intent will I speak, not in anger."

This again is a high standard for communication, and it's also to acknowledge we're not going to be there right away—but to realize that our intention is to move in that direction and to get more and more skillful in that kind of communication.

Okay, so that's some of the difficulties with anger. When is it useful?

When is anger useful?

In confronting injustice, anger can be a terrific motivator. It can really lend that energy of determination to take action through political channels, social action, environmental action. So very, very helpful energy, again, if we can learn to bring the spirit of metta into the actual work.

Anger is a really helpful movement coming out of oppression. Whether one has been oppressed because of social conditions such as racism or sexism, or personal conditions such as an oppressive relationship, or whether the oppression is internal, coming out of one's own tendencies toward fear and depression, anger is a very useful breaking through of oppression. So it's highly valuable for people who are suffering either inner or outer oppression. It's only an interim step—not to get stuck in that feeling of anger, but to realize that it's a very valuable breaking through because it breaks up that oppressive pattern.

It's probably really useful also in parenting teenagers. I haven't been a parent, but I used to teach teenagers, and I just know that sometimes one had to pump up the volume to get the attention. It just happens. One time Ram Dass asked his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, if it was ever appropriate to use anger in teaching the dharma. And Neem Karoli roared at him, "No!" Make of that what you will.

In terms of our practice, mindfulness is a great ally in dealing with anger, becoming mindful of the sensations, of the mental tone, and of thoughts. It's really our first line of alliance. But metta is also a terrific practice, the practice of loving-kindness. It's an excellent practice if you're one who is of an angry temperament, an angry or aversive or critical temperament. Metta is an excellent practice for softening that kind of personality, and I speak from experience with this.

I'll close with a quote from Milarepa, who was doing a lot of solitary practice and dealing with his demons like anger and fear and pride and so forth. He said, "After battling with these demons for many years, I developed a great heart of compassion for them. I decided to offer them my body, which I had learned by then not to cherish so very greatly. Finally, I put my head in the mouth of the demons, and when I did, they all turned into rainbows."

May all your demons turn into rainbows.

Now let me open it up if anybody has comments, anything you'd like to share, or anything you'd like to ask.

Yes, please.

[A participant asks about the expression of anger, noting that sometimes meditation feels like holding it or releasing it, and wondering about how to verbally express anger.]

Yes, the question is about the expression of anger. The comment is that sometimes she feels she has to sit with the anger for some time before actually verbalizing it. And I think actually there's a lot of wisdom in that. I think sometimes if you feel that you're in a real state of confusion with anger, sometimes the wisest thing is not to act then and there, but to actually take it home and live with it for some time. It may be a few hours, sometimes for me it's been days, until I really become clear what action I want to take to express it.

And the expression can take many forms. Sometimes it can be writing a letter. Sometimes it can be as simple as a phone call. Sometimes you really need to meet with the person and say it face to face. Sometimes, despite all our good intention, there's still quite a lot of charge that comes when we communicate the fact that we're angry, and

we really have to not be judgmental about ourselves about that. Realize that we're in a learning process. We're practicing how to express it cleanly. And realize that the anger may come across as well, the force. But it's really important to express clearly at times to the other person that you're angry and that you feel that they acted in an inappropriate way.

[The participant clarifies that she's asking about expressing anger to get it out of the body.]

Ah, in expressing to get it out of the body, sometimes that can be helpful to scream or shout or stamp around or shake. Sometimes just rocking with the force of anger can be really helpful.

So if any of those approaches prove helpful for you to let the energy flow through, by all means, embrace them as part of your meditation practice. Sometimes it's not necessary with anger, but if you feel that physical expression gives you space or relief from holding too tightly, feel free to stomp around the house or shout or scream—whatever needs to happen. The purpose is to let the energy flow through and clear.

Donna offered a beautiful parallel: "It's like when you feel deep pain and hurt and let yourself cry—just letting it move through you instead of holding on to it or trying to make yourself big enough to contain it."

Marshall shared an insightful observation about using anger to intimidate, particularly when avoiding something another person is saying or bringing to his attention. "I use it to intimidate," he said, "and it's always to cover up a hurt." This reveals how anger sometimes serves as our best defense—a good offense protecting us from a sense of vulnerability.

Chris raised an important concern about physical expression potentially deepening grooves of anger rather than creating space around it. He had observed people in workshops who beat pillows and engaged in similar practices, only to find their anger patterns seemingly reinforced rather than released.

This touches on a crucial understanding. I don't believe that purely physical expression—pounding pillows, stomping, or shouting—is what ultimately frees us from anger. While these practices can serve as skillful means to let energy move through, what truly liberates us is that movement of heart that opens to the anger itself.

If we regard expression merely as another technique to eliminate anger, it won't lead to genuine freedom. Approaching it as just another method to "get rid of" our emotions misses the deeper point. What actually frees us is understanding anger so completely, developing such a spacious and accommodating quality of mind, that we simply allow anger to arise and pass away naturally, as all emotions do.

Within Western psychology, we often trap ourselves between two alternatives: repression or expression. We feel we must either hold emotions down or let them out—these seem like our only choices. The meditative path offers a middle way between repressing and expressing. It allows us to contact emotion directly with awareness and mindfulness.

Ultimately, it's this contact between emotion and clear seeing that liberates. This is what allows emotion to reveal its inherent impermanence. All emotions naturally want to dissolve and pass away. We simply need to offer them full, undistorted attention. Nothing can cling in the light of complete mindfulness. When we bring that quality of awareness to bear, emotion naturally dissolves back into the emptiness from which it arose.

This is the heart of the meditative approach to anger. Physical expression can be helpful if it opens up the energy, making it easier to bring clear mindfulness to what we're experiencing. But the real transformation happens through that direct, intimate contact with whatever arises in consciousness.

Barbara shared another layer of complexity: during a period of great sorrow in her life, she found it much easier to be angry than to cry. This speaks to how emotions can mask one another, how sometimes we unconsciously choose the more familiar or seemingly manageable feeling over what lies beneath.

Yes, that element of shock and disbelief is quite common. It can indeed shut down our thinking processes and leave us operating from pure reactivity. Often that reaction of shock or disbelief does come in and then plunges us into a state of confusion. I think it is very helpful to take a breather before responding, if you have the luxury to do that, and kind of let some of those cycles move through. It's usually not that easy to bring clarity into the first few minutes—sometimes the first few hours—of anger. But if you have the ability to just step back a bit and get in touch with your own feelings and what's going on, then often it's easier to respond later.

One thing about that element of shock and disbelief that I often reflect on is how closely anger can be linked with humor. Because anger comes about because somebody's doing something that's not appropriate, and humor comes about because some-

body's doing something that's incongruous or not appropriate. And if you can ever look at an angry situation and see the incongruity in a funny way, it's tremendously powerful for defusing the situation.

Kelly?

"I found that metta practice is very useful in terms of lowering my level of anger. But the way you describe this meditation—that all emotions want to pass—don't you find that metta, loving-kindness, is one that doesn't pass? It seems to not pass. It seems to build."

Well, that's beautiful. The comment was that most emotions seem to pass, but metta seems to build. I think looked over a long period of time, metta does build if we practice it. But if you look at closer periods of time, I think you'll see that metta has its cycles like all the other emotions. There will be times when it's strong in the day, and then there will be times when it's weak. Some days it'll be strong, and some days it'll be weak. So I think metta does have the property of coming and going like all the emotions do, but we do strengthen it over practice.

But there's one other thing I'll say. Someone who is very clear and well-developed, like for instance the Dalai Lama, seems to have an almost perpetual metta presence about them. The way that I understand this is that metta is actually part of our deepest nature. To me, the two fundamental aspects of this true nature, which we talked about last week, are wisdom and love—or sometimes it's called intelligence and compassion. I think that's part of the deepest aspect of us as human beings. I think it's part of that in us which is indestructible.

So the more the other stuff gets cleared out and that light shines, that light doesn't have comings and goings. It's indestructible, and the coming and going is not part of its property. What tends to happen is that clouds drift over and obscure the wisdom and love. So we experience metta coming and going because the clouds are still drifting in front of us.

But I think you're right that for somebody who is very, very clear, metta can be an almost constant companion because it's part of our deepest nature.

When we have cleared away the obscurations—those clouds of confusion, fear, and reactivity that drift across the sky of consciousness—what remains is this fundamental goodness. The love and wisdom that constitute our true nature are not things we have to manufacture or create. They are what we discover when we stop covering them up.

This is why the practice of loving-kindness is not about forcing ourselves to feel something artificial or imposed from outside. Rather, it's about removing the barriers that prevent our natural love from flowing freely. It's about recognizing what has always been there, waiting to be uncovered.

For those who have done the deep work of clearing away these obscurations, metta becomes less of a practice and more of a way of being. It arises naturally from the space of clarity and openness that has been revealed. This doesn't mean such practitioners never experience difficulty or challenge, but rather that their fundamental orientation remains rooted in love and wisdom.

This understanding can be both inspiring and relieving for us as practitioners. We don't have to create love; we simply need to discover it. We don't have to become someone else; we need to uncover who we truly are. The path of dharma is ultimately a path of revelation—revealing the light that has never actually been extinguished, only temporarily obscured.

CHAPTER 204

Relating Wisely With Fear

Guy Armstrong · 53 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines fear as one of our deepest psychological conditionings and offers practical guidance for relating to it with wisdom. He explores how fear always connects to thoughts about the future, creating unnecessary suffering through our mental projections - what he calls "drawing pictures of tigers" that frighten us. Armstrong discusses the intimate relationship between fear and clinging (upādāna), noting how our attempts to find security in impermanent things perpetuate the very fear we seek to escape.

The talk offers two complementary approaches to working with fear: the traditional Vipassana method of gentle acceptance and mindful observation of fear's three components (bodily sensations, emotional tone, and thought patterns), and a more direct "warrior" approach that involves courageously confronting fear when gentleness alone proves insufficient. Drawing from forest monastery traditions where monks meditated in charnel grounds and near tigers, Armstrong emphasizes that avoiding fear only strengthens its conditioning.

Throughout, he weaves together insights from Buddhist psychology with practical meditation guidance, showing how fear blocks our natural capacity for love and openness. The talk concludes with Chögyam Trungpa's teaching that true fearlessness comes not from the absence of fear, but from the willingness to open our hearts completely to our experience, developing what Armstrong calls "bravery mind" - the courage to be present with whatever arises.

I'd like to talk this evening about discovering a wise relationship to fear.

To start, I'd just like to ask each of us to reflect for a moment on whether there's ever been a time in our life as adults when we felt free of the influence of fear for a short period of time. And what did that feel like?

Blissful. Free. Spacious. Serene. Natural. Sleep.

This last response reminds me of a statement I heard from Manindraji, one of Joseph Goldstein's first teachers, who said that sleep is the ordinary person's greatest pleasure—perhaps because of that freedom from fear.

There's a wonderful quality in our life in the absence of fear, a really delightful quality. I think this serves to show by contrast the sort of shadow that exists in our life when fear is present—how fear casts a cloud of darkness over our being, over our mind, over our life, over ourselves, even when many of our fears are really unnecessary or unfounded.

We react to the whole range of fears. We react to really little fears: Do I have enough gas to get home? Is there Häagen-Dazs still left in the freezer? How can I do this seminar when I have a run in my stocking?

Then there are the middling levels of fear—things like the fear of public speaking. Someone took a poll a few years ago and found that the fear of speaking in public was actually the number one fear among Americans surveyed. The number one fear in this country was fear of speaking in public, while fear of death was somewhere down on the list like number four. Personally, I'd rather be here tonight.

There are the fears that come up around job interviews—ever feel your stomach turn to jelly before going for a job you really want? Or fear of confrontation with a co-worker or manager?

And then there are the really big fears, the significant fears we confront in our life: the fear of serious illness, the fear of loneliness, the fear of death—our own or of those we love. One of the greatest fears adults have is probably the fear of harm to their children.

Fear is one of our deepest psychological conditionings, such a strong force for most of us. When it's present, not only does it cast this dark, oppressive cloud, but it brings about a contraction we feel in the body and mind that blocks our unfolding. When Jesus talked about not hiding your light under a basket, the basket most of us hide our lights under is the basket of fear. Fear keeps us constrained and small and doesn't allow our inner beauty to come out and flower.

That flowering begins to take place as fear lifts, as this contraction starts to unfold for each of us. It's really the pathway to love.

Gerald Jampolsky is a teacher and healer many of you probably know. He created the Center for Attitudinal Healing, and much of his work was inspired by *A Course in Miracles*. He wrote a book that was his interpretation of *A Course in Miracles*, titled very suggestively *Love is Letting Go of Fear*. There's a deep truth in that. When the cloud of fear lifts from our being, we find ourselves automatically in the state of love. It's not like we have to get rid of fear and then find love. Love is the natural state when the mind is not clouded by fear.

This is really a key to our opening, a key to spiritual unfolding—being able to work with fear.

Fear is also closely tied to other root emotions. We talked last week about working with anger, how sometimes underlying anger can be the fear that I don't exist. When you don't acknowledge my existence, I start to become afraid that maybe I'm not visible in this world, maybe I don't exist. That seed of fear triggers aggression and hatred and acts of unkindness, war, and revenge.

Fear is also closely related to desire. If you look at the way our minds move and what disturbs our peacefulness, typically the mind swings between two poles: wanting what we like and not wanting what we don't like. One movement we call desire, the other we call fear. They're really closely tied.

And you'll notice that any time you really want something very much, very badly, if you look underneath, there's a fear of not getting it. So fear always accompanies wanting. And at the same time, if you look at why we want a lot of the stuff that we do, it's based on insecurity. And this is really a key in looking at fear.

We really have to acknowledge that as human beings, the situation of our lives is uncertain. Nobody is guaranteed security on this earth. Any of us could die as we drive out of Spirit Rock tonight. Any of us could wake up in the morning feeling ill and find that we are in touch with the beginning of an illness that will take us directly to our death. That can happen to any of us at any moment, young or old. And so for us as human beings, life is inherently uncertain. That is a fact. That's the truth.

Recognizing this inherent uncertainty, we tend to look around the world for something to make us feel safe, something to bring that security back. And so we tend to latch on very early on to our parents, later on to friends, partners, and significant others. We tend to find our security with possessions, with money, with status, with a job title. We tend to find some security in a self-image that we believe ourselves to be a certain way and that that lasts over time and seems to give us something to fall back on. We find security in views and opinions: "I believe the world is like this. I don't believe the world is like that." And to each of those areas we cling to some extent.

One of our greatest forms of clinging is to the body itself. As long as the body is somewhat healthy and reliable, we feel safe. And yet that can be jeopardized in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

So in coming to understand fear, we need to look into the nature of clinging and the effect of clinging. If I'm afraid, if I feel my vulnerability in this world and out of fear I pick up something that makes me feel secure, what happens as long as I hold on to that

thing? Look what we're perpetuating. As long as I'm holding on to something, on some level I know that that thing I'm holding on to is itself precarious—whether it be another person or possessions or a big bank account or whatever. Anything that we hold on to is also subject to impermanence.

And so somehow we know that this thing can pass away. And so in holding on, we are afraid to lose this because if we lose it, we think the fear will return. So as long as we hold on, there's actually a fear involved even in clinging. Because on some level we know that this can pass. So in holding on, in the very act of holding to something for security, we're also perpetuating fear. So it doesn't turn out to be the satisfying answer. It doesn't turn out to be a final answer either. So fear and clinging really go together. They're intimately connected.

And one of the useful things about fear is that whenever we feel fear, we can use it as a pointer and say, "Well, what is being held to?" And we're all holding in many different ways. Actually, as long as there's a sense of a separate self, there is some clinging going on. The sense of separate self, or the sense of I, or ego in Buddhist terms, is formed by holding. These two are virtually synonymous in Buddhist thought—the sense of I and the sense of holding. So as long as there is a sense of I, on some level there is holding and the operation of fear.

And the only freedom, final freedom from fear, comes with letting go of this sense of a separate self, realizing our deep, deep connection to the whole universe.

The Buddha put this very succinctly when he said that wherever there is clinging, there is trembling in the mind. And this image of trembling or wavering is one that he used over and over again to pinpoint the location of fear. Ah, in one who is holding, the mind is not steady. The mind is shaky. There's trembling.

So one of the things we want to come to understand with fear are the mechanics of it. How is it triggered? How does it really operate? One of the things that we noticed in doing the short guided meditation this evening on fear is that fear is always connected to some thought about the future. And it's important to see the arising of the thought and then the emotion that trails in its wake, as it were. There's some thought about the future that we don't like and then fear comes, that emotion of fear.

This has been compared in the Zen tradition to an artist who draws a painting of a tiger, a very lifelike painting of a tiger, and when he's done drawing it, he steps back and looks at it, and he becomes frightened. And that's what we do in our minds all the time.

We draw these pictures of tigers, and then we react - how scary! That's why Mark Twain observed that "the worst things in my life never happened." Krishnamurti, this great Indian philosopher, put it very succinctly when he said that thought breeds fear. Thought breeds fear.

This is a profound pointer because what it means is that life is not inherently frightening. Life is not frightening. Life may be uncertain. It may be unpredictable. There may be an element of the unknown or an insecurity inherent in existence, but it doesn't mean that we have to relate to it with fear. Fear is the product of thought projecting into the future a fantasy of its own making, of its own creation.

So we can learn through our meditation practice to start relating wisely to this projective quality of mind. Our mind has incredible projective strength. We actually, when we start to look closely, project out of our thoughts and imaginings the whole structure of the world. And that includes the structure of what we take to be myself. It's all a fabrication of our concepts.

In meditation, more and more we can let go of that unnecessary addition and just rest directly with the bare experience of the present moment. And that is a pathway to freedom - just resting with the natural state of things as they are in this moment without introducing past and future. Then fear doesn't find a foothold and we're simply at ease just as things are unfolding here and now.

So how can we work to start relating wisely with fear? Well, the first thing to say is that it's our tendency to want to avoid situations that bring fear up. We don't like the experience of fear. And so in our lives, we tend to weave a path through life so that this emotion doesn't arise very often. For the most part, if we could live our lives and have it never arise again, that would really be ideal for most of us.

Fortunately, it doesn't work that way. It can't work that way. If we just keep avoiding difficult situations that bring up fear, actually we only strengthen its conditioning. It strengthens that groove in the mind that says fear is really something to be avoided. But actually it's not - it's just a paper tiger. And we need to come to terms with that paper tiger through our practice. If we take the risk to start exploring fear, then we may find a way to go beyond it.

This is a time-honored tradition in Buddhist practice, this experience of confronting fear. From the very early days of the Buddhist teachings, the Buddha would often direct his nuns and monks to go do their practice in the charnel grounds - in places where bodies had just been left out in the open for animals to feed off of them, for birds to

peck them for sustenance. And it was considered a very great place to meditate because it would bring up fear for people. It brings up the fear of our own mortality when we see other bodies decaying. Great meditation practice.

Ajahn Chah's teacher was a very fierce monk in the forest, a teacher named Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Chah, for those of you who don't know, was Jack Kornfield's first teacher in Thailand. He passed away a number of years ago. But his teacher was Ajahn Mun, who was born in the early part of the 1900s and was a forest monk, very ascetic.

When Ajahn Mun's monks or nuns had malaria - which is a dreadful disease; if you've ever had malaria, you get wracked with this fever that's over 100 degrees, chills and shaking, extremely unpleasant, all you want to do is curl up and wait till it passes - Ajahn Mun would make his monks and nuns meditate a full schedule during the day, even with malaria. "It's just sensation. Don't worry. Keep sitting." He was very fierce.

One of the things that he loved to encourage, particularly his monks to do, was to go sit out in the forest where they could hear the sounds of tigers roaring. In the early part of this century in Thailand, that was not hard to find. You go out in the forest, sit down for a while, and you could hear tigers roaring. And the closer, the better. So this was serious advice. He would make people sit out where there were tigers nearby and meditate all night long, just sitting out in the forest. And that brought the fear right to the surface.

None of this five-minute imagining of some visualized situation. So this direct confrontation with fear, even though it's the last thing we want to experience, is actually a blessing in our practice. Because as we start to understand fear and relate to it directly with wisdom, there's the possibility of going beyond it—the possibility of not being so limited by fear.

So in our meditation practice, we really want to open to this experience, not to brush it aside and say, "Oh, that's just anxiety, let me get back to a place of calmness," but really to take the opportunity to see: "Oh, anxiety. Oh, nervousness. Oh, fear, trembling, panic. Let me taste this. Let me see what this is like."

So we start to explore how it feels in the body. For each of us the sensations may be a little bit different—we all have our individual physical reaction to fear—but we begin by becoming familiar with our own experience. What is it in my experience? Where do I feel this fear in the body?

As several of you commented earlier, it can be in many places. You can feel a tightening in the neck, constriction around the heart, tightness in the abdomen, maybe sweating under the arms. What I find sometimes with fear is that I get a sense of flutteriness all over my body. My body becomes very light. It's as though a breeze could blow me away because it's become so soft and shaky.

Are there any of those sensations that you can't tolerate? Look closely at those sensations and see if you can just accept them and meet them just as they are.

Then we look into the feeling tone in the mind. And again, as several of you commented, there's this sense of wanting to escape, wanting to flee, a panic sense of being trapped. I think that kind of characterizes for me the sense of fear—that I just want to move away. It's a sense of wanting to move away from something. If we look closely at what we want to move away from, sometimes it's just fear itself. We become afraid of fear itself, and that's what we want to flee.

So just noting that sort of tone in the mind. Can we tolerate that? Can we bear that emotion of feeling like we want to run away, feeling like we want to flee?

And finally, the influence of thoughts. Noticing—and this is a really important insight—that fear is always related to thoughts of the future. Because what that says is the present isn't so bad. It's not the present that we're really concerned about. It's not this moment. It's the next moment. What might come after this?

So if we can just take our pointer from that: don't worry so much about the future. Come back to the refuge of the present moment. Then that's where we can find some sense of ease, some sense of rest.

So these are the three components, again, as we looked at with anger, that we want to become familiar with: the sensations in the body, the mental tone or emotion, and the influence of thoughts. And of course, the more thoughts about the future we think that are difficult, the greater the stimulation of the fear is likely to be. So the fear breeds the thoughts, and the thoughts in turn react to create greater fear.

The comment was that fear may be related to the past. And I think that's very true. Often our sense of the future is connected with the past. And particularly if there's been a trauma in the past, it may have left a sense of fear. So there are actually two issues here. It's a good point.

If there's been trauma in the past—let's take the case of a young child who's undergoing physical abuse as an example of severe trauma—the child is fearful in that state, perhaps, of being killed. And so the emotion of fear gets locked in at that moment be-

cause the child doesn't know how to relate to the fear with wisdom. It gets locked into the body through the contraction of fear, and we experience it as adults once we start to open to our body sensations, to our memories, to our thoughts and so forth. So there can be a residue of fear that's come from the past.

But the nature of fear itself, whether it's what the child felt at that time or what we imagine as adults, is related to a fear of what's going to happen—the fear that if this abuse continues, I'll be killed. Sometimes we take the past and project it into the future: "Oh, I was rejected by my parents in the past. Therefore, I'm not lovable. I will be rejected again."

So often the past leads through the present into the future. But this is something worthwhile to investigate. See that relationship of the future with fear.

So we look at all these components and we ask, can I be with the bare experience of fear? Because mostly what happens when fear arises, we feel more afraid. We don't want to experience the fear directly, but we lock into a feedback loop with fear. The first wave of fear makes us more afraid, and the fear amplifies, and we search for some escape. And so we never come to understand the experience of fear as it is.

And it's the experience and acceptance of fear as it is just in this moment that is freeing. Because we start to see, I can tolerate these body sensations. I can tolerate this panicky sense of being trapped or wanting to flee. I can tolerate these thoughts, these imageries about the future. I can tolerate all of that.

So in our meditation practice, we don't try to get rid of the fear. We don't try to push it away or suppress it. We open to it and see if we can really accept it. And if we can really open to the fear and accept it, what we've done is we've made our home, we've found our refuge again in the present moment. And there is an ease and a sense of safety in that.

So in a sense, what's required at this point is that we take our focus off the future. To some extent, we have to be willing a little bit not to be so concerned about what might happen tomorrow in my job interview. We need to be more interested in what's happening right now. And how can I relate to this moment of my experience with wisdom and discover my freedom in relation to this moment, just as it is, this moment of fear?

It's a little bit like that statement of FDR's, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." I'd give him about 70% from a Dharma perspective on that. But it's a pointer anyway. For a politician, it's a pretty good Dharma talk.

So actually having fear come up in our meditation practice or any time in our life when we can give our full attention to it is actually a blessing. Because it's only through this intimate contact with fear that we can start to understand it. In understanding it, we can open to it and accept it. And in accepting it, fear starts to lose its power. We no longer have to stop doing things because we think we're going to feel fear when we do them.

You know, when you think about trying to meet somebody new or asking a new person to do something with you and there's this momentary hesitation of fear, how much of it is because we don't want to go through the anxiety or the discomfort that that action brings up in us? A real space of freedom and spaciousness opens when we're willing to experience the fear around our actions. We can go ahead. So what if I feel afraid or nervous doing that? I can handle that. I know this guy fear. I've accommodated it. I've understood it. I can let it be there and I don't need to let it change my actions.

So in accommodating fear, we actually create a lot of space around it. And it no longer has such a power to dominate and control and rule our lives in that way. And with that spaciousness, we can act more from clarity. One of the worst things about fear is we're such fools when we act from fear. We do such stupid things, all of us—me included—when we're afraid. You know, we snap at people, we get defensive, we project onto people. Developing through meditation some spaciousness around fear, we can let the fear be there and not be so shaken by it and act somewhat from clarity, somewhat from wisdom.

So you'll notice sort of a common theme in relating to fear as in relating to anger, as we talked about last week. And the guidelines for both of them really are to embrace the feeling and guard the action. Really open fully to the feeling, whether it be anger or fear. Let yourself feel it directly. And take some care with how you act. Because if you act directly out of just a reactive state, being controlled by the emotion, to some degree you'll be strengthening its conditioning. The more awareness you can bring into your actions, even while you're feeling the feeling, the more you'll decondition the arising of that emotion. And that's another step toward greater freedom from it.

There's another approach with fear that I want to mention. I'm always a little reluctant to go into it because it's a really different approach than our sort of usual Vipassana—you know, be spacious, be accepting, open up, be gentle. And this approach with fear involves quite a lot of firmness.

And I think we've all had the experience where fear arises and our immediate impulse is to do something to escape it. Get up and walk around, or distract ourselves, or somehow avoid it. But he was taking the stance that, no, I'm going to sit right here with this until it's finished. I'm not going to be moved by it.

There's a wonderful story from Tibet about a woman named Machig Labdron, who was a great Tibetan yogini. She was practicing in a cave, and she was visited by demons—terrifying apparitions that would appear to her during her meditation. And her initial response was the traditional one: she tried to get rid of them, to push them away, to protect herself from them.

But eventually she realized that this approach wasn't working. So she changed her strategy completely. When the demons appeared, instead of trying to get rid of them, she would say, "I see you. I know what you are. You are my own fear. And I'm not going anywhere. If you want to stay, fine. If you want to go, fine. But I'm staying right here."

And she took it even further. She said to them, "In fact, not only am I going to stay here with you, but I'm going to feed you. I offer you my flesh, I offer you my blood, I offer you everything I am." And when she took that stance—when she completely stopped fighting the fear and instead offered herself to it—the demons disappeared.

This is the same kind of warrior energy that sometimes we need to call up in relationship to fear. It's the energy that says, "I'm done being pushed around by this. I'm done being controlled by this. I don't care what you do to me, I'm staying put."

But this approach requires some discernment. It's not appropriate in every situation. If you're new to meditation practice, if you're not well-grounded in mindfulness, this kind of confrontational approach with fear might not be skillful. It could be overwhelming.

But if you've been practicing for a while, if you have a good foundation of mindfulness and concentration, and you find yourself in a situation where fear just seems to have gotten a stranglehold on you—where the gentle, accepting approach just isn't making any headway—then sometimes this warrior approach can be exactly what's needed.

The key is to bring that energy not from a place of hatred or aversion toward the fear, but from a place of, "I refuse to be diminished by this. I refuse to let this limit my life or my practice."

It's like saying to fear, "You know what? You've been the host long enough. Now I'm reclaiming my seat."

Of course, you have to remember this is the same man who vowed that he would die under the Bodhi tree if he didn't get enlightened. So there was extraordinary courage there to begin with.

There's a wonderful story of a modern encounter with a Japanese Zen teacher written by Lawrence Sheinberg. He recently published a book called *Ambivalent Zen*, which tells about his studentship under a Japanese Zen teacher in New York City. An excerpt appeared in *The Sun* magazine last month, and the book is also available online.

This Zen teacher is wonderfully innocent and idiosyncratic, as many Zen teachers are. He has his own approach to the English language, which is often charming. Lawrence would often begin sentences to his teacher with phrases like "I'm worried that..." or "I'm afraid that..." And this was his teacher's response one time:

"I said, Larry-san, why are you always afraid? Forty-five years old, talk like baby. What do you think? Zen about quiet mind? Relaxation? No, no. Zen about bravery. Zazen mind, bravery mind. Must bravery, Larry-san. Must sincere. Must bravery."

That's good advice for all of us: Must bravery.

Sasaki Roshi is another great Zen master—I think I've mentioned him before. He's in the Rinzai tradition of Zen, which is the fierce, warrior-like Zen tradition. He wrote in a book once about his retreats where you meet with him for interviews four times a day. You're supposed to answer these koans, which are very puzzling and stumping. He said he felt like a fool meeting with him every time—he didn't want to go. But Sasaki Roshi would say, "Don't be cowardly. When you come for an interview with me, prepare to kill or be killed."

So, bravery mind. Vipassana teacher interviews are not like that—that's how I survived in this practice!

Let me close with a statement from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in a lovely little book called *Shambhala* about working with fear and working with fearlessness. Sometimes we think that fearlessness is the opposite of fear—that fearlessness comes when fear has gone away. But Trungpa says it's not like that. He says fearlessness is really the state of being able to be open to our fear.

"True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear, but going beyond fear. When we relax with our fear, we find sadness, which is calm and gentle. This sadness comes because your heart is completely exposed. There is no skin or tissue covering it. It is pure, raw meat. Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. It comes from letting the world

tickle your heart, your raw and beautiful heart. You are willing to open up without any resistance or shyness and face the world. You are willing to share your heart with others."

So we have a few minutes left. If anyone has any comments about fear, anything you'd like to share, any questions, anything you'd like to talk about, please feel free.

"Two different things. One is sometimes I'm not sure if it's fear or excitement. The other situation is sometimes the body sensation and the fear is telling me I have to move away from the situation, and it's the correct decision to make."

Good point. So how do you know those things? Yes, good questions.

The first comment is that sometimes fear is very close to excitement. I think that's true—sometimes something that's about to happen evokes mixed feelings, and the mind goes back and forth between success and failure. "Oh, is this going to be great, or am I going to fall on my face?" Sometimes we have both reactions to the same situation.

It's interesting to start looking at excitement from a meditative frame of mind. When you really encompass either fear or excitement with a very spacious meditative mind, you see that both are just energy. The way the energy gets colored has much to do with our thoughts or beliefs. When we can relate to it just on the level of energy, it takes away much of the added charge. Again, it returns us to a sense of freedom. So yes, they are really close at times.

The second comment—sometimes it's absolutely true that situations are not safe and we need to respect that feeling. Sometimes fear is a good pointer that we need to move away, and that's wisdom. That's really seeing what's skillful in a certain situation.

The encouragement to confront our fear isn't an encouragement to put ourselves in situations where our life is actually in jeopardy or something really unfortunate might happen to us or those we care about. We really want to use discriminating wisdom to know when to move away.

I think there's no rule of thumb to tell when to avoid situations and when to stay present. We have to make an appraisal of the seriousness of the threat. You don't want to walk in certain parts of New York City after dark alone—that's just reasonable precaution. But you also don't want to avoid things that would be wholesome in your life because of fear. We have to find that balance. I don't think there's a formula.

Another point about recalling fear—about ninety-eight percent of the fears I've had have been apprehension about things I thought were going to happen, and very few have turned out to be what I thought they would be. When you try to recall something you were afraid of in the past, you know what it was. Unless it really was fearsome, by that time it's academic. It's not like anger, which you can remember forever.

This is true. In my experience, the twenties and thirties were times of much more anxiety than my forties have been. When I look back to all the fluctuations my mind went through in my twenties and thirties, I think, "What was the point of all that?" Everything turned out fine, but when we're younger we don't know it's going to have a happy ending.

If you want to cultivate fear for practice purposes, it may be necessary to think about things that have yet to happen. Sometimes I say with meditations like this, it's like those TV commercials: "Filmed on a closed course with professional drivers—don't try this at home." These meditations on fear and anger aren't meant to be done at home very often. It's just to get in touch with the sensation.

I was wondering about the whole notion of avoidance. In the past when I've experienced a fearful situation, I realize I'm feeling fearful. Then the fear is so unpalatable that I force myself through it and do what I need to do. In a way, it's avoiding—I mean, it's going through the fear, but afterward I feel good. Really, it's almost like I just don't want the fear because it's so unpalatable that I push through it. I'm not sure if that's avoiding it. In a way it is, because I don't want to deal with it, so I just go through it.

The comment was that sometimes fear arises, the experience is so unpalatable, and we act really quickly to get to the other side, to complete the situation, to get through the fear. And I think that happens all the time in the world. Something comes up that we have to do, it doesn't feel comfortable, we sort of plow ahead and we do find ways to kind of block out the experience of fear by focusing on what has to be done. And it serves to get us through the situation in the world.

But I think it is a kind of avoidance of the fear itself. Sometimes in the world we just have to do that. Sometimes if you have to make a sales presentation to 500 people and your manager is sitting at the front table keeping an eye on how you're doing the presentation, it can bring up nervousness, but you've just got to perform at that point. So there are times when you just have to go ahead and do that.

But if you have the luxury to be still and be with yourself for a while, the more attention you can give to that bare experience of fear, the more palatable the experience becomes. And that's really what starts to decondition the fear response. If we can be okay with feeling the fear, it really starts to lose a lot of its charge. Fear becomes not such a big deal.

And to tell you the truth, the aim in our meditation practice is to develop a degree of spaciousness and a degree of equanimity that fear can arise and be present and we literally don't care whether it's there or not. That's the degree of equanimity that we want to find through our meditation practice. And it's not to say that we can find that in every situation then for the rest of our lives, but we want to know that that's possible. We want to know, and usually it's through our meditation practice or through an experience where we feel pretty strong and centered, that fear can be there and we really don't care. It's fine for it to be there. Just as good for it to be there as if it weren't there.

The question is, is that courage? I think it takes courage to let the fear be there with that much openness. So courage is kind of the other side of this fearlessness or opening to fear. A lot of courage is required.

There's another thought I just had, which is that a lot of times I will create situations that will put me in fear because I'm in a boring routine. So I create fear as a way to entertain myself. I hear a few rumblings around the room. It sounds like you're not the only one with that entertainment device.

Well, it's really interesting to look at this in relationship to a 45-minute period of meditation practice. And you kind of realize each of us has two choices. We can just be with the coming and going of the breath. But after a few breaths, that gets kind of boring, doesn't it? Or we can divert ourselves with all sorts of thoughts. And some of the thoughts are going to be positive and some of them are going to be negative and some of them are going to be exciting and some of them are going to be fearful.

But I think it's really interesting to tune into the fact we have an appetite for this stimulation. And it's our appetite for this stimulation through our own thinking that blocks us from resting in the peace of the moment. Because frankly, to tell you the truth, most of us find peace boring. And so, honestly, we are all choosing moment after moment to be entertained by the flow of thoughts with their ups and downs and the positives and negatives, rather than to rest in peace, because peace is always accessible. It's always here, and we turn away from it. It's a great insight.

In the light of what you just said about getting to a point possibly where one wouldn't care whether or not fear is present, I was just thinking about the other thing you said about coming to a point of not being able to tolerate the fear and having anger saying, fear out. Would you say that that's just a possible technique on the path towards getting to where you don't care whether fear is present or not?

I basically see the anger as a kind of temporary way through that kind of breaks the grip. It's really important to break the grip when a pattern has really set in. And then once the grip is broken, then you still need to go back and accept fear with that total equanimity. And that may take years. For me, it was sometime after that before I could be that equanimous with fear. It was probably a couple of years later before I could be really equanimous with fear. But for me, it broke the grip. And so it was a temporary helpful thing.

One aspect concerns what I would call chronic fear or chronic anxiety, chronic anger. The second involves when these emotions come from other people—for example, a person who is chronically angry that you must deal with, which naturally creates a situation where you may find yourself chronically fearful of how to handle that relationship. So it isn't just about working with your own emotions in isolation; you're dealing with another person as well.

The question addresses both chronic fear or chronic anger and the habitual pattern of fear that arises in response to someone else's chronic anger. This is remarkably common in our culture—perhaps in all cultures—this tendency to become afraid when someone directs anger toward us. It's a deeply ingrained conditioned response.

Yet in most cases, this fear isn't necessary. For the most part in our society, people aren't going to physically harm us, damage our property, or threaten our safety simply because they're angry with us. So there isn't necessarily any real threat when someone becomes angry with us, yet we instinctively respond with fear.

One participant offered an important observation: "Often the fear and the anger arise when you feel caught in someone's judgment. It's not that you're invisible—quite the opposite. It's as if you're being seen, but only through a particular lens, a distorted perception of who you are."

This insight points to something crucial. Even when anger comes with direct personal condemnation, I would suggest that responding with fear remains a conditioned reaction that isn't necessary. Consider this: even if someone thinks I'm the worst person in

the world, why must I fear that possibility? If I know myself well—my motivations, my intentions, the reasons behind my actions—and their perception doesn't align with truth, why can't I simply rest confident in my own understanding?

And if what they're saying does contain some grain of truth, why should I fear seeing that truth clearly? This inquiry leads us into deeper territory—questions about self-image, our desire to appear a certain way to the world, and how threatened we feel when others don't perceive us as we wish to be seen.

I suggest that much of this particular kind of fear stems from clinging to self-image. This doesn't mean such patterns are easy to work through or become free from—they're deeply embedded in our conditioning. I certainly include myself among those who struggle with these reactions. But these patterns are workable. They can be investigated, understood, and gradually transformed through patient, mindful attention.

The key lies in recognizing that beneath our fearful reactions often lies another form of clinging—attachment to how we want to be perceived, to maintaining a particular identity or image. This clinging, like all forms of attachment, creates suffering. Yet when we can see it clearly, we create the possibility for greater freedom.

CHAPTER 205

Healing and Freedom

Guy Armstrong · 49 min

> *Guy Armstrong examines the twin aspects of Buddhist practice that draw most practitioners to the path: healing from suffering and the aspiration for complete freedom. Drawing on classical teachings about the kilesas (mental torments) and the five hindrances, he explores how contemporary practitioners work with anxiety, low self-esteem, trauma, and other forms of psychological suffering that characterize our current cultural moment.*
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> *Armstrong discusses how mindfulness naturally leads to healing through its quality of non-adherence—nothing sticks to pure awareness. He emphasizes that we don't "do" the healing ourselves; rather, mindfulness by its spacious nature illuminates and releases whatever it touches. The talk moves from addressing personal healing to the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice: complete liberation or nirvāṇa, which the Buddha described as "the unshakable deliverance of mind."*
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> *Using vivid analogies and personal stories from his time as a monk in Thailand, Armstrong encourages practitioners to examine their deepest motivations and consider whether they're content with the "twigs and branches" of spiritual benefits or are willing to seek the "heartwood" of absolute freedom. This dharma talk offers both practical guidance for working with difficult emotions and inspiration for the highest aspirations of the spiritual path.*

James talked the first night we were here about the importance of reflecting on our motivation for being here, what brought us here. This reminded me of a situation I witnessed at the gym a few months ago.

I had been going to the gym over a couple-month period just to bring back some muscle tone. I'm certainly not a serious weight builder, as you can tell by my physique—and it wasn't much better back then either. I've always tended toward the wimpy end of the male spectrum. I would just do a few rounds on the Nautilus machines and some sit-ups.

But I'd look at the other half of the gym where all the free weights were, where the serious guys worked out. I'd watch them lifting these huge barbells racked with weights on both ends, and I was in awe.

One day, two teenage guys walked into the gym. They were probably sixteen or seventeen and even skinnier than me. They went straight to the free weights section. They were buddies, and one would lie down on the bench while the other would, with all his

effort, lift one of these huge barbells loaded on the rack above him. His friend would lie there with his thin little arms—just like mine were at sixteen—and with all his effort, he'd press it up as high as he could go. He could barely get it up there, and then his friend would help him bring it back down.

They were so into it, and I eavesdropped on a bit of their conversation. One was saying to the other, "Boy, did you see Lance in here the other day?"

Lance is kind of the hero of the gym. He's about six-foot-five and built out of brick. He came over to work with me on a machine one day, and I put my hand on his shoulder and thought I was touching concrete. Lance is incredible. At the very front of the gym, the advertising poster shows Lance in one of his entries into the Mr. America contest. He's really heavy duty.

These two teenage guys were saying, "Did you see Lance the other day? He pressed 515 pounds." That was an astronomical number to me, and probably to them too. But I could tell that something in them was really inspired by Lance pressing that amount of weight. Lance had become their ideal in the endeavor of bodybuilding and weightlifting. I could tell they were going to keep pumping that iron as long as they could until they felt they'd gotten a little bit closer to where Lance was.

I mention this because it really brings out this factor of motivation. I was impressed by their motivation. Even though it wasn't my motivation, I was impressed that it was theirs, because they had an aspiration to move toward that starry ideal that Lance represented for them. I could tell that their whole path of bodybuilding was going to be way different from mine. Two months later, I dropped out of the race. I'm sure they're still going on.

This factor of motivation or aspiration has a profound effect on our spiritual life. It points us toward some distant star or distant wish. In some ways, the farther we set our aim for that distant wish, the higher our trajectory will be over the course of our path.

I'd like to talk tonight about two of the common aspirations or motivations in spiritual practice. Basically, as I see it, most people come to practice either to reduce our suffering or to increase our happiness—sometimes both. These are the two primary motivations for people.

In looking at these two, we can divide them, for the sake of discussion, into the areas of healing or reducing suffering, and freedom—increasing our happiness. Tonight I want to talk about these two aspects of our spiritual practice: the aspect of healing and the aspect of freedom.

We've been talking throughout—all of us have talked about—how if we can come into the present moment with that full attention of mindfulness, without greed and aversion and delusion, there is a moment of freedom. There's a moment of that spaciousness.

But as Silvia said in her talk last night, sometimes it's not so easy to come out of our own personal history and our own personal suffering. For that reason, healing occupies a really important part of this journey for many of us.

Classically, the difficulties that people find in their meditation are described in terms of the kilesas...

a term in Pali that's often translated as defilements. I actually don't like that translation very much. A lot of the Buddhist texts were first translated into English during the time of Queen Victoria, and the terminology still carries a bit of the Queen's English upon it. This word "defilements" is one of those words.

Originally, the word kilesa meant "torment of mind." Another way we can think of it is as a bias of mind or a tendency of mind that takes us away from clear seeing. Mindfulness really represents that clear seeing of things as they are. The kilesas of greed, aversion, and delusion represent a movement away—a tendency away from clarity. And they bring their own forms of suffering.

You might notice in your practice which of these tendencies is most predominant for you. When your mind slips out of balance, what direction does it go? Does it go to wanting, to some form of desire, some projection of what's incomplete and needs to be fulfilled? Or does it move in the direction of aversion or negativity with all its different flavors—the flavors of disliking, of judgment, of criticism, of anger, of fear? Or is it in the direction of delusion, of not seeing clearly, of a kind of veil of ignorance or dullness around our contact with the world?

Each of these three tendencies is its own strategy to make us happy. We follow it because we think it will bring happiness. The strategy behind greed is: "I'm going to draw in all the pleasant stuff. And if I keep the pleasant stuff coming and I'm full enough of it, I won't ever have to feel the pain of life."

The strategy in aversion is rather to push away what's unpleasant. We aversive types—and this is my type, this is where I get fixated—try to keep ourselves safe by blocking out whatever might be threatening or unpleasant.

The deluded type has a way of dealing with pleasure and pain by insulating themselves from the fluctuations of pleasure and pain. The deluded type clouds their contact with the world to keep everything at a safe distance. There's a little bit of haze or spaciness in between. Deluded types are usually very genial people. They're lovely to hang out with, and they're said to be the best traveling companions. Because you wind up in a new city somewhere and check into a hotel room and say, "Which bed do you want?" And the deluded type says, "I don't care. You pick." So that's lovely. If you're thinking about traveling, they're highly recommended.

The greed type, of course, will say, "Well, that one's by the window and it has a nice view. I want that one." And the aversive type will say, "Well, this one's right by the door and you'd keep walking in and out all night and wake me up, so I don't want that one." So they both have preferences.

It's interesting to note that this kind of classification has really been in the Buddhist texts for hundreds of years. Around 400 in the Christian era—I'll just notice that Buddhists don't say Anno Domini, AD. We don't say 400 AD because that's not particularly our lord. What you tend to say is Christian era, CE. So you might start to see that coming in more and more.

Around 400 in the Christian era, this monk in Sri Lanka named Buddhaghosa put together this thick volume of all the practices and understandings that were current at that time. This was less than a thousand years after the Buddha died, so it was still almost fresh in people's minds. And he's actually the one who first put down on paper this sort of psychological classification of greed types, aversion types, and delusion types.

Let me read how he says you can tell yourself. He says you can tell by your step, for one thing. "The step of one of greedy temperament is confident and graceful. The step of one of aversive temperament is rigid. And that of one of deluded temperament is muddled. Likewise in sitting."

He says you can also tell when you go to bed. "One of greedy temperament spreads his bed unhurriedly, lies down slowly, composing his limbs, and he sleeps in a confident manner. When woken, instead of getting up quickly, he gives his answer slowly as though doubtful. One of angry temperament spreads his bed hastily anyway. With his body flung down, he sleeps with a scowl. When woken, he gets up quickly and answers as though annoyed."

One of deluded temperament spreads his bed all awry and sleeps mostly face downwards with body sprawling. When woken, he gets up slowly saying, "Hmm?" You might check this with your roommate on the last day—not yet, please.

Well, one has to take some of these old texts with a grain of salt, a healthy grain of salt. It reminds me of a comment that someone made about channeling—you know, channeling where a human being receives words from a being who has died and is on another plane. The comment was, "Just because they're dead doesn't mean that they're smart." We might even say the same about the venerable Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa.

So a classical way of describing the kinds of difficulty, the kinds of suffering that we're liable to, is in view of the kilesas. And becoming familiar with our own tendencies of mind is part of self-knowledge. We all have these tendencies.

Another way that they've been described classically is through the hindrances, as Carol talked about a couple of nights ago—the hindrances of sense desire, of aversion, of dullness, of restlessness, or doubt. You can start to see the influence of the hindrances as well in your meditation practice and the suffering that they bring.

But frankly, I feel that our times call for different terminology than the classical ones. Maybe it's the age we live in. Maybe it's the culture that we're in today. We live in unusual times.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was one of the great bringers of the Buddha Dharma into America and founded Naropa Institute in Boulder in the early seventies, was talking one time about the similarity of the Buddha Dharma coming to Tibet and the Buddha Dharma coming to America. He said when the Dharma came to Tibet, it was in about eight or nine hundred of the Christian era, and it migrated up from India. He said it came into a country that was absolutely wild and quite barbaric. The population was sparse. There were not many cities. There were a lot of people living a nomadic life. Bandits were absolutely rife throughout Tibet. Anywhere you traveled, you were in danger of your life and your possessions. And there was no established religion like Buddhism or Hinduism. The Bon religion was there, which was quite shamanistic. You had all these old guys probably hanging out in caves with hair down the middle of their backs, practicing white and black magic all over the place. It was a wild country. And morality was unheard of at that time in a formal religious way.

Trungpa said that actually lent a certain vitality to the Dharma that flourished in Tibet. He said it actually provided very fertile ground. And he went on to say that the same barbaric situation exists today in America. Because of that, he was very confident that American Buddhism was going to have a lot of vitality.

So having grown up in this, shall we say, less than fully civilized era, we've all been affected by that. There's a sort of fragmentation in our culture that we've all come under the influence of.

For myself, when I first came into practice, the overriding difficulty that I had to deal with was fear and anxiety. I was sort of a survivor of the sixties. One of my main gurus at that time was Timothy Leary—"turn on, tune in, drop out." I followed his advice, to excess. So I sort of emerged from the sixties with a lot of confusion. My adherence to the precepts was, shall we say, less than ideal. I had a lot of confusion and unhappiness and fear when I came into the practice. For many years, that's what I worked with. The bliss of concentration was not for me for a long time in practice.

Other people experience in their practice a great sense of worthlessness or coming into contact with low feelings of self-esteem. This seems to be really widespread in our culture today—that we just don't feel that great about ourselves by and large.

The Dalai Lama was meeting with some Western teachers, as he does every year. In fact, Sylvia is just back from a recent meeting with him. Maybe we'll talk about it later. This question of worthlessness came up and how to help people work with this feeling. The Dalai Lama couldn't get a handle on what this feeling was. I mean, this is a man who has had such a sense of grace and self-acceptance for his adult life. This is a man who can go into Madison Square Garden in front of 15,000 people giving a serious tantric initiation.

This happened once. He climbed up onto the platform that had been built for him, felt that the cushions were quite soft, and in front of 15,000 people, bounced up and down a few times like a little kid, just to get the feel of the cushions. He was so comfortable with himself, so relaxed.

He couldn't understand what this feeling of low self-esteem or worthlessness was about. And yet, for many of us, it's a striking feature, especially of our retreat practice. We may walk around for days just not feeling very good about ourselves. We compare ourselves with other people who seem to be practicing much better and sitting much more still and walking much more slowly and eating much more mindfully. We feel we'll never measure up on the scale of the good meditator.

Another of the strong characteristics that we see in retreats is the legacy of childhood abuse and the feelings of hurt and shame and betrayal that this leads to. These are probably some of the most difficult experiences that meditators can deal with. I've been

really impressed at the number of people, both men and women, who out of that background have come into intensive meditation practice and really come to grips with the legacy of that kind of upbringing.

During the three-month retreat every year that Carol helps to teach in Massachusetts, there are always a number of people who come on that retreat from this particular background of abuse. It is absolutely awesome to hear some of their stories and the amount of courage and dedication and commitment that they have to go through essentially the same atmosphere that we've gone through together these five days—they go through for three months, carrying all the pain of those memories, and yet working through the practice of meditation to heal those wounds. Some very impressive healing has been done in that context. Tremendous courage for those women and men.

Self-hatred is another pattern that comes up often for people. It's sort of an amplification of the low self-esteem, and many people suffer from this.

When I was a monk in Thailand, I had just ordained and was on my way to a practice monastery in the north of Thailand near Chiang Mai. I stopped at a monastery in Chiang Mai that had been founded by my preceptor and hung out there for a few days—a little bit of a break in the travel. There was another Western monk staying there, and I liked this guy immediately. He had a big physique, kind of built like a bear, and he was somebody you immediately felt would take care of you if there was any problem. He had this wonderfully friendly vibe—he just radiated warmth and metta. The Thai people really liked him too. He had been in robes for something like fifteen years and spoke fluent Thai.

In the mornings, he would carry on his own practice in a little hut by a pond—a very beautiful setting. In the afternoons, he would receive visitors, Thai people and Western people impartially, about half and half. The Thais would come and tell him their problems in meditation or their life and he would counsel them. Westerners would come and he would give us instruction in meditation. He was a great guy.

When he went out for his morning alms round, he had a begging bowl that was enormous. I've never seen an alms round like this guy had. He would go out and it would soon be full because the people nearby the monastery knew him and they all loved him. They'd just line up out on the streets to give him food every morning. It got to where he had to actually take a couple of the small novices with him and they'd carry plastic bags. When his bowl was full, he'd take the food out of his bowl and put it in their plastic bags, and they'd put the plastic bags under their novice robes and keep walking behind him. So he had this little entourage every morning for his alms round.

He came back and would share the food out with the other monks and nuns who maybe weren't so fortunate in their alms gathering. But I noticed that he still ate quite enough himself—he was well taken care of.

When I came to talk to him about his practice, he said that for the first nine years that he was in robes, all he was doing was working with his self-hatred. For nine years. And yet the product of it, the fruits of that work were so clear.

He had such a big heart and such understanding and love. Everybody loved the guy. Everybody who met him. He was a beautiful example.

So some of the other common things that you might find as you start to practice and start to touch your own personal hurts and personal history are feelings of depression or loneliness or despair, or a sense of alienation—of not fitting in this world or this culture—of disconnection, of having your heart closed, of having a numb heart, of having a broken heart, of feeling some shame, an embarrassment even about being here.

All of these reasons for our suffering are workable with our Dharma practice. The beautiful thing about this mindfulness practice is that it can go to any level of the mind or body. Absolutely anything that is capable of being experienced, of being felt, is capable of attention. So we can take our mindfulness into absolutely any level of our existence and apply it there.

For some of us, the healing takes the form of healing in the body. This is another area I want to spend a few minutes on. Often the emotional patterns actually show themselves first in the body. What happens is that as the awareness is sustained over a period of days, it starts to penetrate different parts of the body.

Generally what's happened is that through our life, with our unconsciousness and not knowing how to work with our emotional life, events have come along that we haven't fully accepted, haven't fully allowed. We've held those emotions down and they've gotten locked in the body—maybe feelings of fear or anger or shame or hurt, grief, whatever.

Often those areas that have been held for a long time are first experienced as numbness. We actually direct our attention to that part of the body and don't feel anything. As the days go by, the awareness starts to have some effect and we may start to feel a little bit of ache or tension in that area. As we continue to just give a soft kind of attention, that pain may become very, very visible. Particular areas where you're likely to feel that kind of stored tension are the back, the shoulders, the neck, the chest area, the abdomen.

As the awareness penetrates and softens in those areas, sometimes they will open up and release whatever has been held there. Sometimes the release is just a physical energy. Sometimes it comes with a strong emotion. Sometimes with the emotion may come a memory of some event or image from the past. Whatever the experience is, it's simply to keep giving that really soft and kind attention throughout the process.

As the release takes place, then some clearing happens—some clearing of long-held accumulated material, both psychic and physical. And as it clears, our whole experience of life becomes lighter, a little bit freer.

It requires some finesse in working in this area. It requires a kind of combination of a lot of courage, a firmness of intention and resolve, and also a lot of gentleness—to really be gentle with yourself in working with those areas of holding.

When the release happens, it can feel really chaotic. The physical energy gets released. Sometimes there's a lot of emotion, a lot of thoughts, and you feel like you've gone backward in your practice. Somebody came into an interview today and said, "Gosh, I feel like I've gone backwards. The first few days I was getting settled, and now it's just all gone. Mindfulness was settling, I was feeling stiller, and then boom! I've lost it. I can't get it back."

Often that's a sign that the meditation is progressing just right—not that you've lost anything, but that you've touched that deeper level and some unfolding is happening. And that's really a healthy and healing part of this practice. So not to become discouraged. It's actually a sign that things are opening and that you can trust in that. That's something really to welcome.

There's another level to working with pain that I wanted to share. This is a quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was an Indian teacher of Vedanta. He died about ten years ago. He said, "The essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful."

The questioner, the person in dialogue with him said, "Well, pain is not acceptable." And Maharaj says, "Why not? Did you ever try?" He said, "Do try and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its desires and fears enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

With all this emphasis on healing and talk of healing, sometimes this retreat atmosphere takes on a little of the flavor of a ward somewhere. I don't know if you've ever just taken a look outside during the slow walking as though you'd come in off the street—it looks a little at times like a bit of a mental asylum here.

Jack's first teacher was an old Thai monk named Ajahn Chah. The first time he came to the States, I think it was in 1980, he came to Barre, Massachusetts, where the Insight Meditation Center is, and he taught a retreat there in this fashion, which was not at all his fashion. His style of working was just to have people live a very simple life in the forest—do your work, do a little bit of sitting, live in community, be mindful, live in nature, be simple—and five years later things start to happen. Because we're so American, we're hell-bent on speed, and we have these jam-packed ten-day retreats.

So he came to one of these and helped to lead it. In the afternoon one day, he was walking around the grounds, the front lawn, people were doing their slow walking back and forth very nicely, and he would walk up to each person and say a few words in Thai, give the person a big smile, and then walk on. At the end of the day, someone asked his translator what Ajahn Chah was saying to people. And he said, "Oh, he was going up to everybody and saying, 'I hope you get well soon.'"

I hope we all get well soon. We can all use it.

So what's mindfulness in this healing process? We've been talking for about five days, really non-stop, about mindfulness. How does it relate to this process of healing?

Well, what happens ordinarily when you're in the middle of a meditation period and some strong emotion comes? Something difficult—anger or fear or embarrassment or something like that. What's a normal reaction? Often don't we resist? Don't we find ourselves resisting? We didn't come here to suffer. This is not what I want to be doing. This is not it. I came here to get peaceful, so this is the wrong thing. Go away.

And somebody in an interview the other day said that it's kind of like when that kind of emotion comes and there's resistance, it's like being in a room where a young child is pounding on the door and wants to get in. And you don't want to let the child in, so you keep the door shut. And as long as the door's shut, that child's going to keep pounding, and your peace is disturbed. So finally you get the idea, "Oh, I'll open the door." So you open the door, and the child comes in and plays quietly. Conflict gone.

I thought that was a really beautiful analogy to the process of not resisting that strong emotion. When we can really open to it with mindfulness, we find that the energy kind of drains out. Often with our resistance we feed that energy. When we open to it, the energy goes out of that difficult emotion and into the seeing. It goes into the

mindfulness and into the clarity. So in that way we find a new relationship in our emotional life. We don't have to get free by getting rid of. We can get free by changing our relationship to our experience.

So this is really a key. As we do that, we find that emotions start to clear themselves out. We don't have to force the healing. It happens naturally. And it's not to say that through this we get rid of anger, we get rid of fear, we get rid of desire, but rather they start to re-find their natural balance. Just like a child goes through so many emotions during the course of the day, but they can just let them flow through. When we're not fixated on our past, we can do the same. So the emotions start to clear up and start to wash through us. And in that way, we come to a balance in our emotional life. Still have the light and the dark, but they start to assume a more natural balance for us.

So this is one of the great healing properties of mindfulness.

And an interesting question comes in at this point. And that is, do we think, in doing our meditation practice, if healing's a goal for us, and it's a very wholesome goal, do we think that we're doing the healing? Do we think that we're doing this meditation practice in order to carry out our own healing? This is kind of an interesting question.

I'd say that's not quite the right understanding. If we see the healing as primary and the mindfulness as secondary, or just a tool, the mindfulness can become a tool to the healing—a little bit we're putting the cart before the horse.

And we could say the same thing about using mindfulness to reduce stress. It can be used to reduce stress, but again I'd say that we're perhaps putting the cart before the horse.

I'd say that there's another way to look at this process of healing in relation to mindfulness. The quality of mindfulness itself is so spacious, so vast and so pure that nothing sticks to it. Mindfulness has this quality of non-adhering. So whatever mindfulness illuminates can be released. Anything that mindfulness has the power to illuminate, it has the power to release.

Through mindfulness, as we pay attention to all our experience, everything that we've ever held becomes available for release. That may start with our bodily tension. It may go on to our stored emotions, to all the conditioned patterns of feeling and ways of reacting that we've built over the years. All the ideas we've built about ourselves that we've fabricated out of concepts and held onto for many years can come up and be let go of. And our views about the world and everything in it.

By its very nature—not by any working at it or application or functioning of it—by its very nature, mindfulness leads to letting go. It is simply too spacious to hold on to anything. And then when we let go, we're able to live much less burdened, much more lightly. We travel much more simply on this earth through letting go of what we don't need, of what's just a carryover from the past.

Suzuki Roshi put it this way: "Those who know this state of spaciousness will always be able to dissolve their problems through constancy."

So this gets kind of interesting. There is this wonderful part of ourselves called mindfulness and it has these qualities that can be very useful. In the beginning we kind of get more interested in the objects that the mindfulness shines on than we do in the mindfulness itself, because it has a utility for us. But as time goes by, meditators generally find that they start to get more interested in the mindfulness itself than in any of the phenomena that are being illuminated.

It's like we had a light and we shine it all around and we get fascinated by what it picks up—this stack of papers and that stack of papers and the clock and the bell. And we never stop to look back at the light. At some point, we usually get interested in looking back at the light and wondering, what is this thing? What is this amazing thing called mindfulness?

The Buddha actually talked about mindfulness as the link to nirvana, or the link to the unconditioned. In the Four Noble Truths that I talked about the other day, the Third Noble Truth is that the end of suffering is in the end of craving, a state that the Buddha equated with nirvana—the unborn, the undying, the unconditioned.

And he said about it, in a dialogue with someone who came to visit him, this man came up and said to the Buddha, "There are these five senses—the senses of sight and sound and smell and taste and touch. Where do these five senses come together? What's the resort of the five senses?" And the Buddha said the five senses come together in the mind.

The man thought for a moment and said, "Well, where is the resort of the mind? What holds the mind?" And the Buddha said, "Awareness is the resort of the mind."

"Okay, what's the resort of awareness?" And the Buddha said, "The resort of awareness is freedom."

The guy said, "What's the resort of freedom?" And the Buddha said, "The resort of freedom is nirvana, the unconditioned, the unborn."

The guy said, "What's the resort of nirvana?" And in one of the very few instances of humor in the whole of the Buddha's teachings, he said, "This is going too far," and he stopped the man.

But it's very interesting because awareness is right in the middle of that chain, from our sense experience to the unconditioned. And it plays that kind of role.

It's always a little dangerous to talk about nirvana because immediately people start thinking about enlightenment. And it seems like when we think about enlightenment, we all go a little bit crazy. And so I always hesitate to bring the word up or to use it.

This kind of craziness really came through in a book that I read recently. I don't know if any of you have discovered this young writer named Mark Salzman. He wrote a book called "Iron and Silk," which was about learning martial arts in China. He's a really wonderful writer, and he's just written an autobiography of his childhood. He grew up in a suburban setting in Connecticut.

And he calls his book *Lost in Place: Growing Up Absurd in Suburbia*. So I knew this was a title I could relate to.

He starts off in the first chapter by saying that when he was thirteen years old, he saw his first kung fu movie. Before it ended, he decided that the life of a wandering Zen monk was the life for him. He announced his willingness to leave East Ridge Junior High School immediately and give up all material things, but his parents did not share his enthusiasm. They made it clear that he was not to become a wandering Zen monk until he had finished high school. In the meantime, he could meditate down in the basement.

So he immersed himself in the study of Chinese philosophy with the kind of dedication that is possible only when you don't yet have to make a living, when you're too young to drive, and when you don't have a girlfriend.

He says he turned their basement into what he thought a Buddhist temple should look like. He marked off boundaries with candles and set up a shrine. He outfitted the shrine with objects from a cookware shop—the only store in town that carried oriental gifts—a bamboo placemat, a package of chopsticks, a sake cup which he turned into an incense burner, and a plastic Chinese kitchen deity with the character for "tasty" painted on his stomach.

He goes on to say that the trickiest thing was what to do about his hair, because real Zen masters shave their heads, as anyone knows who has watched the *Kung Fu* series on television. His father had never liked his long hair and had often said that he wished

he could shave it all off. So he went directly to him and asked if he'd like to have a wish come true. His father's response was to raise one eyebrow, which he understood from experience to be a no.

As an alternative, he ordered something from the back of a comic book called a "surprise bald head wig." When it arrived by mail four weeks later, it turned out to be a disappointment. It was floppy, dimpled, and a sickly gray color. Nonetheless, he tucked his hair up underneath and wore it proudly for his meditations. His sister Rachel, two years younger than his younger brother, thought he looked like a giant fetus.

So we don't want to dwell too much on this enlightenment stuff. But nonetheless, in practicing mindfulness, we're really doing something more profound than it may at first appear. We're really activating that link to our deepest nature, to our truest nature.

I wanted to read you something from *The Questions of King Milinda*, where an awakened monk named Nagasena went to visit this king and the teachings were conducted in question and answer fashion. This is one of the books outside the core Buddhist teachings that's central to our tradition. I'm going to read a passage about nirvana, but I'm going to substitute the word "mindfulness" because I think it still works well.

It says, "Mindfulness shares two qualities with water. As the lotus is unstained by water, so is mindfulness unstained by all the defilements. As cool water allays feverish heat, so also mindfulness is cool and allays the fever of all the passions. Moreover, as water removes the thirst of humans and animals who are exhausted, parched, thirsty, and overpowered by heat, so also mindfulness removes the craving for sense pleasures, the craving for becoming, and the craving for the cessation of becoming."

This is really in the direction of an unlimited freedom. Mindfulness leads in only one direction, and that is a freedom that doesn't have any limits.

In moving in that direction, one of the concepts that comes up for us that we may want to let go of when the time is right—not before—is the concept of healing. Because as long as we are fixed with the concept of healing, we sustain a view that something's wrong, that something's broken, that we're broken, that there's something wrong with us. And that belief that there's something wrong with us really undermines a lot of our confidence.

I wonder if fundamentally anything can go wrong with us. I wonder fundamentally if anything has ever gone wrong with us. And I wonder fundamentally if anything can go wrong with life as a whole.

There's this wonderful Native American teacher who comes to Spirit Rock named Fred Wapipa. In doing a sweat lodge with him last summer with James and a few other people, Fred started off by telling us that in his language there was no word for hope. He said there's no word for hope because we know that everything's all right. Just as it is, everything's all right.

So I wonder in our meditation practice, where can we touch that level of faith? Where can we find that kind of trust? And are we prepared to find it? Are we prepared to keep looking in our practice until we find that absolute trust that brings that unlimited kind of freedom?

The Buddha said that the spiritual journey is a journey that brings many benefits. He said it brings the benefits of being respected by those who value wisdom and compassion. It brings the benefits of outer harmony. When we live a life that's grounded in the precepts, we establish harmonious conditions with the other people that we live with, with all the creatures that we interact with. It establishes the conditions of inner harmony, which are really synonymous with healing. Healing is really the work to come out of discomfort and into greater harmony in ourselves. It establishes the conditions for coming into great insight, understanding, knowledge, and vision. It's really what each of you are talking about when you come into the interviews every day.

And yet the Buddha said that if we stop at that point in our spiritual journey...

We're like someone who has gone into the forest intending to build a house and coming to a great tree in the forest, needing the heartwood of that tree to build their house. If we stop with respect, with outer harmony, with inner harmony, with knowledge and with insight, he said it's like somebody who's come to this great tree and gone away with the twigs and the branches, leaving the heartwood standing.

What he said is that the heartwood of the spiritual life lies in this complete freedom. I'll read you the passage: "So this holy life, my friends, does not have respect or outer harmony or inner harmony for its benefit or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, the heartwood of this holy life, the end of this holy life."

So I wonder if we can keep looking at our motivation from time to time, keep checking and see if we have that kind of aim in our spiritual journey. To see if that's the trajectory that we envision for ourselves. Really to come away from this path not with the twigs and the branches, but with the very heartwood of a complete freedom that's unshakable.

I'd just like to close with a little poem from Rumi. It's called "Tending Two Shops." He says:

"Don't run around this world looking for a hole to hide in. The only real rest comes when you're alone with God. Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. You have eyes that see from that nowhere, and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops, and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller. Checkmate this way. Checkmate that way. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish."

Let's just sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 206

Mettā & Concentration

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong delves into the profound practice of mettā (loving-kindness) and its intimate connection with concentration. Drawing from the Mettā Sutta and traditional Buddhist teachings, he explains how mettā begins with simple moments of human warmth and connection—the "friendly heart" that wishes others well. Armstrong illustrates the practice through vivid metaphors, comparing the initial effort of mettā phrases to making fire without matches, where persistent gentle effort eventually kindles the flame of love that can grow into the Buddha's "immeasurable deliverance of mind."*
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> *The talk explores how mettā practice works through three components: phrases, imagery, and feeling, which together compose the mind stream in wholesome ways. Armstrong discusses the jhānic factors (vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, ekaggatā) that develop with deepening concentration, showing how the unification from both mettā and samādhi support each other. He emphasizes finding the balance between active effort in generating loving intentions and the receptive surrender that allows mettā to flow naturally.*
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> *Throughout, Armstrong weaves together insights from forest tradition masters like Ajahn Mun and contemporary teachers, alongside poetry from Rilke and Rumi, demonstrating how mettā transforms our perception of the world and integrates all aspects of our being through the power of love. This practice, he explains, doesn't just develop pleasant states but fundamentally shifts how we see and relate to all beings, ultimately pointing toward the boundless heart that recognizes no separation.*

Mettā & Concentration

I'd like to talk about the quality of mettā itself, and then discuss some of the mechanics of the mettā practice—how it ties in with the factor of concentration, and how the technique works in combination with vipassana to provide the unfolding of this path.

I was teaching a mettā retreat fairly recently, and I'd been talking for about a day and a half. During an interview group, somebody asked me, "What is it we're doing here? Could you put it in a few words?" The way I summed it up, and the way I often think about this practice, is that it's really a practice of bringing forth the friendly mind or the friendly heart that's already within us.

We already have these qualities of friendliness, of mettā, within us. All we need to do in the practice is uncover it and bring it out in each moment. The more moments that we bring this friendly mind out, the more moments it will arise spontaneously in the future. It's just like mindfulness in our vipassana practice. Each moment of mindfulness sets the condition for the arising of another moment of mindfulness. So we're strengthening that quality in the mind and in the heart simply by practicing it, by bringing forth this friendly mind more and more frequently.

We can sometimes think of mettā in very exalted terms. Certainly if you read the teachings of the Buddha, his words about mettā are very exalted. We can get the idea that if we're not feeling boundless and unconditional love, we're not experiencing mettā. This is one extreme of the development of mettā, and I think it helps if we lower our expectations a little bit for what mettā is.

Mettā has a very wide range of feeling, and it just starts with this little flicker of human warmth and connectedness. Just this friendly spirit that sees another person and says, "Oh, I want you to be happy. May you be healthy." Just that little flicker of connection and caring that can come so easily in a moment is really the heart of mettā. Our practice is to acknowledge that moment after moment. Out of that little beginning, that humble beginning, all the power and depth of our practice grows.

Mettā is said to be a happy practice, but in the first few days of retreat, you might not all agree with that. It's also a lot of work. Especially in the beginning, it can feel like you're really cranking with the phrases. The first time I did a mettā retreat, I thought, "This is supposed to be happy?" Those first ten days were more work than I'd ever done in vipassana. But it does get easier.

This reminds me of when I was a Boy Scout and had to earn a merit badge by building a fire without matches. I'm amazed that the human race has gotten to where we are now, when for millions of years we didn't have matches. To earn the merit badge, I got a flat piece of wood and made a little round hole in the center, then shaved some very dry wood shavings into that hole. I took a round stick, put it in the hole, and could either twirl it really fast with my hands or use a little bow with string wrapped around it to turn the stick back and forth.

My hands would get raw and chapped, the stick felt rough, and I didn't believe there was ever going to be a fire that way. Despite the fact that humans still walk the earth, I didn't believe it was going to work for me. Then, sure enough, a little bit of smoke curled up from those wood shavings. I kept twirling and the smoke turned into just a little tiny flame. I could put a little tiny twig into that flame and it would burn a little bigger, then a bigger stick to burn brighter, until I could light the bonfire we'd made.

Our mettā practice is just like this. The phrases are twirling the stick. In the beginning, it feels mechanical and rote. You may think nothing's ever going to happen and your hands may feel chapped. But sooner or later, this little tendril of smoke curls up—that's this first feeling of connecting with another and wishing them well. That's the first tendril of mettā. As you keep twirling, it can build into this huge blazing bonfire that the Buddha described as an immeasurable deliverance of mind.

There is tremendous potential in this practice, even though it starts from very humble beginnings. One aspect that's really inspiring to me is that all the people I've talked to experience it from these humble beginnings and then describe its transformative power. Three of us in a group this morning who have been practicing mettā for a few years all voiced very strongly how much they felt this practice had transformed their whole lives within just a few years. There is incredible power and potential here—really transformative power.

Part of the beauty of this metta practice, part of what I love about it, is that it cuts through our habitual emphasis on self, on ourselves. An Indian teacher named Shantideva, who wrote the definitive manual for bodhisattvas, put it this way: "All happiness comes from thinking of others. All unhappiness comes from only thinking of myself." So in this practice we learn how much happiness there is in thinking of others and including ourselves in that as well. In our practice we add just a subtle little touch of self.

The practice starts from just causing to arise again and again this intention, this subtle intention of happiness for others and ourselves. And after that we can surrender. We just generate this little bit of connection and then we can surrender. We start with beings where it's easier to feel the connection and then work up, as you'll see over the course of the retreat. The general rule is that we pick the subject where the metta flows most easily. We spend our time with those beings who evoke that friendly mind in us.

So the practice is not particularly about clarifying all the relationships in our life or making sure that everyone in our life gets a healthy dose of our metta during these seven days. We have plenty of time for that later. It's rather to see if we can learn how to contact this heart of friendliness and bring it out and begin to let it flow.

There's a poem from Rilke that expresses a little bit of this feeling. This is from Rilke's Book of Hours, subtitled Love Poems to God. He wrote these poems beginning when he was twenty-three, particularly moved by the traditional religion he found in Germany. Every poem has this spiritual strain to it. This translation is done by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows, both Buddhists, who bring that background into their translation, which I think is lovely.

Rilke writes: "I believe in all that has never yet been spoken. I want to free what waits within me so that what no one has dared to wish for may for once spring clear without my contriving. If this is arrogant, God, forgive me, but this is what I need to say. May what I do flow from me like a river, no forcing and no holding back, the way it is with children."

That sense with our metta practice of no forcing and no holding back really describes the feeling when that friendly heart starts to come out, starts to be available. And we may need to stay with one particular subject for quite a while if that's where the metta is flowing. You may need to stay with yourself, your benefactor, a good friend, a pet, a child, or an animal. I heard of one meditator who actually stayed with themselves for three years of practice and was unable to generate loving kindness for anyone else. For three years they practiced metta for themselves, and then at some point the door opened and other people could begin to be included. So it's a really individual practice—find where that friendly heart comes out for you.

But in its development, the feeling of metta can be boundless. The Buddha often talked about it as a boundless practice, and it's boundless in two ways. One is the extent or the range of beings to whom we can direct our loving-kindness. As you've gotten a little feeling for today as we've moved beyond just one friend, many friends are out there accessible to us through our loving kindness. As you've done the walking practice, probably you've directed it to birds or the frogs that you hear croaking toward nighttime or just the different people who are walking by during the retreat.

The Metta Sutta from the words of the Buddha expresses this kind of range really clearly. He says of one who is practicing loving kindness: "Let them think, may all beings be happy and secure. May their hearts be wholesome. Whatever living beings there may be—weak or strong, tall or middling, short or large, without exception, seen or unseen, dwelling far or near, already born, or yet to be born—may all beings be happy. Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, let the wise cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let their thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world, above, below, and across, without obstruction, without hatred, without enmity."

Metta can really be felt and directed in a very universal way. Sometimes we forget this. The Buddha reminded us that it is hard to find a being who has not been your mother or father in some past life. This is an extraordinary reflection. Imagine if you looked around the room and could really realize that every person here has parented you in another life, has cared for you when you were unable to stand or walk or feed yourself. This is what the Buddha said the case actually is. Imagine if we loved every

being that we met. What would that feel like? It would be like living in a heaven realm. Often in Buddhist traditions they talk about the pure land, and sometimes it's seen as a place that one aspires to for rebirth.

But the pure land is the place where we can love every being that we meet, and it's available here in this life on this earth.

The second way that metta is boundless is that there's really no limit to its development within us. The Buddha called it an immeasurable deliverance of mind and refers to it in the terms that he uses for liberation. In metta there are the depths of freedom.

It's extraordinary to meet beings who have developed this beyond what we might think is possible. There's this wonderful Thai monk who comes to Spirit Rock every year named Ajahn Jumnian. I know some of you have met him. Usually you just mention his name and a few people in the room start smiling. He is a master of metta practice. He's about sixty years old and has taught metta for many years and has practiced a lot of metta himself. You just feel the joy in his being. He's such a delight to have there.

He's very low-key and an easy teacher to have. We ask him what he wants to do on any day and his first response is, "Is there anybody who wants to listen to the Dharma?" And if there's anybody who wants to listen to the dharma, we take him down and set him up front in the meditation hall. He's sort of the dharma fountain style of teacher. You set him in the front of the meditation hall and he can talk dharma all day long. As long as there are people to listen, Ajahn Jumnian loves to talk dharma.

We'll ask him things like, "Well, do you want to go see San Francisco or the Golden Gate Bridge?" He'll say, "Hmm, is there anybody who wants to listen to dharma? If there's anybody who wants to listen to Dharma, I'd rather talk Dharma. If there's no one, I could sit here. I'm very happy sitting here. But if you'd like to take me to San Francisco, I'd be happy with that too." Whatever he does, he's happy. It's unconditional. It really is.

When I was in Thailand waiting to be ordained as a monk, a friend who spoke good Thai took me across the river north of Bangkok and we walked through the jungle for a ways and visited this Thai monk named Ajahn Sanong. He's not very well known and he doesn't speak English, so he's not someone I ever practiced with, but he was a fantastic person to meet.

The story was that he had done a lot of practice in cemeteries. This is a traditional Buddhist practice to conquer our fear. We live right in the middle of the dead, and it really makes us confront our own fear of death. So he'd done a lot of cemetery practice, and he was very fearless. He'd also done a tremendous amount of metta practice. You could just feel that radiating from him.

I was actually embarrassed to be in his presence. His eyes had sort of this laser beam of love just staring out and it would zap you when he looked at you. I kind of felt like he had x-ray vision and all my impurities were just shining out to him. And so I was a little shy around him. But what an extraordinary quality of mind through the development of the metta practice.

Metta, when it's developed, brings a really deep sense of contentment. When the metta is present—I'm sure you've already experienced this to some extent—we can really rest. We can really stop searching, stop looking for anything else. Because as the Buddha said, this is one of the most sublime states that there is. Why would we want to look any further? It is so sweet.

One of my Tibetan teachers is a lama named Sokyni Rinpoche. He's considered to be the third in his line of reincarnate lamas. You probably know how the Tibetan teaching system works—they replace themselves after they die. He's considered to be the third in his line. The first Sokyni Rinpoche was a practitioner who put in a lot of effort in East Tibet. And this is Sokyni Rinpoche III. There was a poem by Sokyni Rinpoche I that had a line I really like. It said: "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face."

When we contact that feeling of metta, we have the feeling of coming home. We know we're there and we can rest in that. That is our natural face.

That is our own home. And it's utterly wholesome. There is nothing to doubt or mistrust or be worried about in the feeling of metta. You can completely trust in that feeling. Because it's so wholesome, it utterly blocks the arising of the unwholesome. The difficult states of mind that we encounter simply cannot arise when metta is strongly present.

Vipassana is supposed to be the insight meditation, but there's actually quite a lot of insight in the metta practice too. When we start feeling this kind of love for ourselves, for others, it affects the whole way we see the world. It changes our perception.

A friend of mine was recently talking with a teacher and describing some experiences. The teacher said, "Well, you know, experiences in meditation are of two kinds. There's one kind that has to do with different mental states, and there's another kind of perception." The experiences that come from a shift of perception are actually the more transformative.

The metta practice causes a shift in our perception of the world. We actually see things differently. We feel things differently in our body when metta is present for us. It's extraordinary because we can have this feeling of metta for one person—ourselves, a benefactor, or a dear friend—and when that feeling fills our heart, the whole world looks different. This is the magic of the practice. We generate that flame, we find those sparks around one person, but it changes our relationship to the whole world.

In other traditions, there's a lot of emphasis placed on the element of devotion. The Christian path, if taken up as a path of contemplation, is basically a devotional path, often toward Jesus, toward Mary, or toward the saints. In the Hindu tradition, there's a long-standing tradition of bhakti yoga, a devotional path within Hinduism. In some of the Buddhist traditions, there are also strong devotional elements. One of the foundation practices in some schools of Buddhism is called union with the teacher. One visualizes either the Buddha or one's teacher or teachers. In that visualization, one comes to hang out with them so closely, so intimately, that one begins to feel their qualities as one's own qualities. There's a union. You might almost say there's a kind of Vulcan mind meld that takes place.

You may have experienced this because our benefactor practice is a little like this. When I first did the metta practice, I did it in a six-week retreat, and I spent the first three weeks with my benefactor. At the end of the three weeks, I was told to move on to a good friend, and I was actually a little reluctant to go because I had chosen one of my Dharma teachers, and it was like having darshan every day. It was just hanging out with this loving, wise, free being day after day for every waking hour. It was terrific.

At times, I had a real sense of merging with that person. Someone in the group reported this today also—that one of the persons they'd chosen for their metta practice, they had a sense the person was no longer out there, but had come right inside them. That was my experience also, strongly with the benefactor. In feeling their good qualities, I realized that I couldn't feel those qualities unless they were also in me. Being with the benefactor, we as it were absorb their love, their wisdom, their kindness, their freedom just through that intimacy of contact.

More and more we find as this friendly heart emerges that this warm and close and intimate feeling develops with the rest of the world, sometimes in ways we don't quite expect. I'd been doing the metta practice for a while at my first retreat, and I was standing outside doing walking meditation, as many of you were today, and directing it to people who came by. Out on the street, there was a guy driving a garbage truck. It was somebody who in my normal life I wouldn't have come in contact with. Most garbage truck drivers don't come on retreats like this. But I looked at that guy and I just wished him happiness and I felt so much love for him. I felt like he could have been my brother. There was no division between us.

These kinds of strange connections pop up with the metta practice. Part of what's happening is that there's a unification going on. With devotional practices and with metta practice, the quality of love begins to unite the mind. It leads to oneness. It leads to merging.

There's this lovely quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj that some of you heard in the last retreat where he says, "Wisdom tells me that I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything, and between the two, my life flows." That's sort of our vipassana practice—wisdom tells me that I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything.

Within our tradition, Vipassana tells us we're nothing, and metta tells us we're everything. It unites us with the whole world. It melts the barriers that we've constructed through making distinctions. At times when I was practicing metta, I couldn't tell the difference between my mind and my body. I sometimes wasn't quite clear about what was inside me and outside me. And there was a way in which it became very clear that even though we're separated, our bodies are separated by physical space, we're actually both here now. For me, you are here now. And there's a way in which for you, I am here now. And that sense of space as a separator goes away and space becomes more an area in which we can feel our connection, through which we can relate.

We have a deep longing for this kind of relationship with the world, for this experience of oneness and connectedness with the world. It's as though in the metta practice we're unfolding some deep parts of our nature that we've forgotten about. We knew this way of being as children, if not since, and we long to find it again, to touch it again.

Another poem from Rilke expresses some of this: "I'm too alone in the world yet not alone enough to make each hour holy. I'm too small in the world yet not small enough to be simply in your presence like a thing just as it is. I want, in the hushed moments when the nameless draws near, to be among the wise ones or alone. I want to unfold. Let no place in me hold itself closed, for where I am closed, I am false. I want to stay clear in your sight."

Staying clear in the sight of God is a good description for our metta practice. This kind of unfolding brings a real sense of wholeness to our being. It brings a huge degree of integration because in the light of love, the parts that we had found unacceptable now become acceptable. The parts of ourselves like fear, anger, grief, shame, or guilt that we have pushed aside or pushed down can be accepted, can be owned, can be integrated in the light of love. So there's a tremendous amount of healing through the metta practice.

You might say that the early stages of Vipassana practice dissolve us. We see the constituent parts. As the Buddha talked about, we see the five aggregates. We break ourselves down into body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness. We see that there's no solid core or solid center holding it all together. But the metta practice puts us back together. The metta practice integrates all the pieces through the influence of this love or friendliness.

So metta is said to be cohesive like the element of water. You know how when you spill water on the ground, it puddles together, it coheres. If you drop a glass and break it, it shatters apart. So like water, metta brings things together. And also like water, metta is sweet and wet and juicy. It's kind of the juice of our practice. And sometimes Vipassana—a number of people have said in interviews and groups—the Vipassana practice can sometimes feel a little dry, a little like our heart isn't fully engaged. Metta is the complement that brings out that heart warmth.

Another way to say it is that the Vipassana practice reveals emptiness and metta fills it with warmth. Another of my teachers said, "Compassion is the juice of emptiness," or "Metta is the juice of emptiness."

Some people say that metta develops naturally with Vipassana and I think there's truth in that. I think that it does to some extent. One of my teachers said early when I asked him about that, "Love is the child of freedom," saying that the path to love is to discover freedom, and then love unfolds. I think there's truth to that, but my personal point of view is that for different people, the love dimension unfolds in different ways. And for myself, I felt that I needed kind of a booster shot, which is what the metta practice has been for me, to really open the heart side of myself. And that although the heart side was opening to some degree, with the metta practice it has opened a lot, lot more. It's been a really powerful adjunct to Vipassana. So everyone can decide for himself or herself. But this heart quality of the metta is a really sweet quality in the spiritual life. And when it's missing, when it's not there, somehow we don't have the ability to touch others as deeply.

The unification of the metta practice is one of its strongest features. And what's particularly powerful about the way that we practice here is that the unification of the metta is supported by the unification of the concentration. So I want to talk a little bit about the concentration aspect of our practice.

Basically, the concentration means to gather in the attention that we're normally dispersing. Throughout a normal day, we have lots of thoughts, lots of feelings, hopes and fears and likes and dislikes sort of constantly running through. And all of those sort of random, chaotic thoughts and feelings really disperse our energy. They take the energy and feed it in a lot of different directions. With our practice either of Vipassana or of metta, we start to gather that energy back and direct it toward an object.

In vipassana to the breath, in metta to the phrases. There's tremendous power when we collect this kind of energy. When you hear stories of yogis who have developed amazing powers of mind, it's through this gathering of energy.

There's one teacher that I think about named Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun was a Thai master in the early part of this century, and he was Ajahn Chah's teacher. He was a very, very strict forest monk in Thailand. A lot of you, I know, have been suffering with colds and coughs this week. At Ajahn Mun's monastery, even if you had malaria, you were expected to do a full schedule. So I don't know if you've had malaria or known anyone who has—it's a terrible disease. You're wracked with fever. You get chills and shaking. And Ajahn Mun expected his students just to keep sitting the full schedule. So he was very, very fierce.

One of his favorite practices for students was to send them out in the forest where the tigers roared. At that time in Thailand, there were still lots of tigers around, and he felt that was really good for working with fear. Very good practice.

Well, Ajahn Mun had developed some of these powers of mind that come with strong concentration, and it was said that he could read people's minds. It's one of the powers that's said to come with concentration. So he'd be with his assemblage of monks, giving instructions, giving a meditation talk, and all of a sudden he would stop and he would say, "Someone's having lustful thoughts." And he would sort of sweep the audience with his gaze. I mean, in any assemblage of celibate people, chances are someone is going to be having those kinds of thoughts, so he could have been right anyway. But you can imagine how you would feel if you were such a person. I thought about doing that tonight, but I didn't want to embarrass anybody, so I didn't.

So that's one of the powers of mind that comes from the development of concentration. Another yogi who had great abilities in this direction was Dipa Ma, who I'm sure you've heard Sharon talk about. One of Sharon and Joseph's early teachers, someone who I had a chance to spend a little bit of time with. Seemingly a very simple and humble woman, but incredible powers of mind.

Someone asked Dipa Ma once what was in her mind and she said just three things: concentration, peace, and metta. Wouldn't it be nice to inhabit a mind like that? Goodness.

Dipa Ma had developed some of these powers that come through concentration and she was said to be able to recollect her past lives. In Buddhism, that's one of the things in Asia that's quite taken for granted, that we have had past lives. And Dipa Ma was said to be able to recollect them to the extent that she could travel back in the sequence through her past lives, remember the life when she lived in the time of the Buddha, and listen to the Buddha give discourses. So if you keep practicing your metta, see, they say these things happen.

So for us, maybe we won't recollect a past life in the time of the Buddha, but we can still benefit from this concentration. We're building the concentration every time we return to the phrases or to the image of the metta practice. This is the focus for us. This is our chosen object. In coming back again and again and again, we're developing that quality of concentration.

What happens as the concentration develops is that our attention becomes steady and stable. Instead of flitting off here and there, to the past and the future, all over the map, we find the ability to stay with our chosen object for longer and longer periods of time.

In vipassana practice, we use this stability primarily for insight. It's not considered that crucial an end in itself. We use it toward the end of understanding, of seeing things as they are. And it's like if you were on a carousel and you're going round and round and round and a friend came up and held out a newspaper for you to read. They came up to the edge of the carousel and they held out a newspaper for you to read. Could you read it while you were going around on the carousel? Not very well. And that's what our normal life is like. We're stuck on this carousel. Sometimes it feels more like a hamster cage of thoughts and hopes and fears and likes and dislikes. And we're trying to read the news. But we're going around too fast and we can't quite read the news.

When the carousel slows down and we come to a stop in front of the newspaper, ah, then we can read it. And what does the news say? The news says things are changing. Nothing is permanent. Nothing is stable. That's the news we need to read.

And we're trying to read the news. But we're going around too fast and we can't quite read the news. When the carousel slows down and we come to a stop in front of the newspaper, ah, then we can read it. And what does the news say? The news says things are changing. Nothing is permanent. Nothing is stable. That's the news we need to read.

So curiously enough, in our vipassana practice, the real purpose of stability is to see change, is to see impermanence. But in the metta practice, we see stability as an end in itself. You could say in a way it's one of our goals in the metta practice to develop that steady attention that is known as concentration because that also unifies the mind. That also brings the mind together and collects it. So the unification of concentration strongly supports the unification that comes from the metta. They both support one another. And that's why this is such a powerful integrative practice. Both practices together are working to bring the mind to a point, to make it one.

Of course, the stability is also impermanent. There will be times when you're really focused on the phrases, on the image, when everything seems steady and you can sustain the attention all the way through a sitting or a walking, and then the next sitting it may all dissolve, and more thoughts and energy and feelings are just flooding through you. That's okay. Metta practice, like vipassana practice, has these cycles of stillness and activity, stillness and activity.

We could say that in our vipassana practice there is no goal, in the near term at least. There's this goal of full enlightenment, but that might not happen this week for all of us. So the rest of us have to think about a more immediate situation. And this fact really came home to me during the three-month course I was just sitting, which Sharon and Carol were both teaching. And Sharon said something a couple of times in the hall in the morning that really stuck with me. I'd heard it before, and I probably said it before, but there was something about the way she said it and the timing that went very deep for me.

And what she said was, people were asking questions about difficulties, and she said, "It doesn't matter what you're experiencing. What matters is whether you're aware of it." And this is in the context of vipassana practice, of teaching vipassana. It doesn't matter what you're experiencing. And I reflected on that during the day, and I thought,

that is really radical. I mean, I spend most of my life trying to make myself feel certain ways and not feel other things. And here's Sharon telling me, all that doesn't matter. What really matters is whether I'm aware of it or not.

It was a beautiful pointing to the direction of freedom because the liberating factor in vipassana practice is awareness. Awareness, you might say, points to the unchanging in the middle of all the sea of change. Because vipassana is the foundation of our metta practice, we do this metta practice in the context of our vipassana practice, we can also say that that's true here. In a very bottom line way, a very fundamental way, it really doesn't matter what we experience here either. All the difficulties that come, all the ways that the mind gets distracted, the struggles with the mind states and moods and emotions of fear or anger or self-doubt or critical judgment—those are actually all fine because we hold that within the overall context of our whole journey. Whatever arises is okay. It's acceptable.

At the same time we are practicing metta and we are practicing concentration, so you could say when we look at the metta practice alone, we could say within that we have some goals—the goal of bringing forth this friendly heart, the goal of unifying the mind. And because we have these goals or sub-goals, you might say, we can get ourselves into some trouble. It can be a little tricky to work with goals.

First, because both these goals are impermanent. Whatever is of the nature to arise is of the nature to pass away, as the Buddha said. So we find the heart doesn't always stay open. Sometimes it's open and sometimes it closes. Concentration can be there in one sitting and gone in the next. And we start to realize that these are somewhat impersonal factors that are really beyond our control. We can set the conditions, we can lay the groundwork for the metta and the concentration arising, but we can't actually make them happen. They have their own natures and our body and mind has its own nature. Sometimes they come together, sometimes they don't.

So we really need to have that understanding of change and impermanence in relation to both these sub-goals that we work with. And we have to learn how to make a full effort and not be so concerned about the immediate result. This is really a trick. This really takes some craft and some skill.

I'm going to steal a story that may have been told in the last retreat because not many of you were there. And that is about a young karate student in Japan who wanted to learn to be really good in the art of karate. And so he journeyed to find the greatest teacher in the country. And he went up to the teacher and he said, "I want to be the greatest karate student in all of Japan. How long will it take me?" And the teacher said,

"Ten years." The student said, "Ten years? I'll work twice as hard as all your other students. Then how long will it take me?" The teacher said, "Oh, in that case, twenty years." And the student said, "Twenty years? No, no, no, you don't understand."

I'll work night and day. I'll train at every available waking moment. Then how long will it take me?

And the teacher said, "Oh, in that case, 30 years."

The student said, "Well, how can you say that? I'm willing to do anything."

And the teacher said, "One who has one eye on the destination only has one eye left to see the way."

This is really true for our metta practice. If we have one eye on the destination, whether it's metta or concentration, we really only have one eye left to see the way, and we need two eyes to see the way.

This came home to me very strongly on my first metta retreat. I had been practicing for a few days, and I was getting quite concentrated, and it felt wonderful. I've never had a lot of concentration in my practice, so this was like going from broccoli to ice cream for me. And then something happened externally, and the concentration fell apart. Concentration has this slightly impermanent quality, unfortunately.

When it fell apart, I was bound and determined to get it back. I reached for those metaphors with all my energy and really tried hard, but nothing was happening. I was getting tighter and tighter.

I went to see my teacher, who at that time was Joseph, and I told him what was going on. Joseph just looked at me and said, "We're not doing this practice for ourselves. It's for the others."

All of a sudden, the light went on. Oh, right. I had been doing the practice just to get back my own happiness. I had been forgetting that the practice is about wishing others happiness as well.

As soon as he said that, I thought, "Okay." I went back out, let go of my disappointment, let go of that goal, and just reconnected with that simple wish: "Oh, may you be happy." The practice started to settle back down, the calmness came, and the concentration settled back in. It was a very interesting lesson.

It's like when you feel like being generous in order to get the fruits of generosity. I don't think that works either. We really need to learn how to be generous in order to be generous. And we need to learn how to do the metta practice in order to feel metta for other people and for ourselves.

But that little urge of happiness toward ourselves or others is the purity of intention that we have to keep coming back to. If we have that, everything else unfolds from there. If we lose that and just strive for the pleasant feeling or the concentration, we'll wrap ourselves up in knots. We'll just get ourselves more and more deeply bound.

When we really start to trust in that purity of intention and the practice flows, it can be beautiful.

Often we feel victimized by our own thoughts and feelings. If you look at what really causes us the most difficulty in our practice, sure, bodily pain is one thing, but honestly it's our own mental states and reactions and thoughts and hopes and fears that truly torment us. We could say that we're really victimized by our own mind stream—this flow of thoughts and images and emotions that makes up the content of our mind.

In the vipassana practice, we learn to relate to our mind stream in a very non-interfering way. That's the essence of the practice: to be with things as they are without disturbing them.

But when you think about what we're doing with the metta practice, it's actually quite audacious because we're starting to directly influence that mind stream. First of all, we're controlling the thoughts that go on by repeating the same phrases again and again. We're taking control of the thoughts in our mind stream. By holding the image of a friend or a benefactor, we're starting to take control of the image part of the mind stream. And when the metta starts to flow, we find that we're also able to influence the feeling or the emotional tone of the mind stream.

When all three of these pieces come together—the thoughts or the phrases, the image, and the feeling of metta—we have more or less composed that mind stream in a very wholesome way. This is a huge undertaking. It's revolutionary to think that we have a direct influence over our own mind stream, to which so often we are just the victim.

Because it's such a huge undertaking, you really need to be patient with its development. Sometimes only one piece will come together—only the phrases will be there, the image is weak, there's no feeling. Sometimes maybe two things will come together: the feeling and the phrases, or the image and the phrases. Sometimes maybe none of them will come together. So you really need to be patient.

If you can even sustain a thought for a short period of time, that's a huge stride over what we do in our daily life, where the mind is just buffeted from one random thought to the next, from one feeling to the next. So this is a great undertaking—be patient as you take these steps.

Once you start to get the flavor of the phrases, the image, and the feeling all coming together, it's enormously empowering. We learn in a limited way how to fashion our own mind stream, how to fashion it in a very wholesome way. And when it's in that wholesome state, it actually, again as love does, suppresses the unwholesome aspects of mind—what Sharon described last night as the hindrances of sense desire, of aversion, of dullness, of restlessness, and of doubt. Those qualities simply cannot arise when the mind stream is shaped in this particular way by the practice.

I want to talk a little bit, before I finish, about some of the factors that develop as concentration deepens. In the tradition, these are referred to as the jhanic factors. Jhanas are described in the Buddha's suttas as deep states of concentration where the mind is, as it were, absorbed within itself. There are certain qualities of mind that, when developed and maintained, lead to these absorptions called jhanas. I want to mention them tonight because some people have already reported in the interviews today experiencing some of these things. So I just want to let you know that you can start to tune into these as signs of developing concentration.

The first of the five factors is called vitaka in Pali, the old language of the Buddhist texts. It's usually translated as aiming or connecting, and it means that sense of connecting our attention to the object—in this case, primarily the phrases.

The second factor is called vichara, usually translated as sustaining. Where vitaka is that initial movement of mind that connects firmly with the phrase, vichara is that quality of mind that can sustain the attention on the phrase for some period of time.

The third factor is called piti, usually translated as rapture, also translated as delight or rapt attention. It's the joy that we find in our practice when we really feel wholeheartedly connected and we're enjoying doing this metta practice. There's a sense of rapture that comes with that. This is a mental quality, but sometimes it expresses itself through the body, through sensations. There may be a release of energy throughout the body. There may be a sense of a chill or a shiver—different ways that it can manifest.

The fourth factor is called sukha, usually translated as happiness. This is one of the qualities that develops with metta. Someone mentioned in an interview the other day that they like to practice with a smile on their face. Other people said that sometimes,

just in the development of the metta, the smile came out naturally. That expression of the smile is that quality of sukha coming through. There's a happiness when we can feel in touch with the metta and feel in touch with our friends and benefactors.

The final factor is called ekaggata, translated as one-pointedness. It really means that collectedness of mind where we can bring all our attention to bear to be with the phrases, the image, and the feeling of the metta practice.

You might start to notice if these factors are present in your practice: the sense of connecting with the phrases, directing the attention and connecting; the sense of sustaining that attention; the delight or rapture in the connection with the practice; the happiness that comes; and the unified mind or one-pointedness that comes with the practice.

All these qualities come out of the sense of right effort. This right effort is, again, just very simply getting in touch with that purity of intention and expressing it through the phrases. That's really all we need to do. If we try to force the metta or force the concentration, that's when we tie ourselves in knots. It's really not possible. It's not workable. It doesn't happen like that.

One of the things that took me a long time to see—I came into the metta practice from doing a lot of vipassana and I thought, "Oh, this is a really active practice. I guess I have to stay busy all the time." You may have felt that. It is an active practice. It's a practice where we're making effort moment after moment after moment. Because I thought it was just an active practice, I bore down a little too hard. I put a little too much pressure into the phrases, into the image.

What I learned after a while is that there is an active side to metta, but there's also a side that's like prayer. In a lot of ways, these phrases are like prayers. And what do you do after you make a prayer? You surrender. You go into an utterly receptive frame of mind. So that's the other side of our metta practice—to feel this high degree of receptivity that acknowledges, "Yes, I have this purity of intention, I wish well for others or for myself," and then we really surrender because we don't know what will come from that. The surrendering part is just as important as the active part.

So there's a high degree of openness in our metta practice as well—finding that balance between the active part of our practice and the truly receptive part where we simply open to what is. And again, from these humble beginnings comes what the Buddha described as this immeasurable deliverance of mind.

I'd like to share his description of metta along these lines. The Buddha spoke of how a practitioner abides pervading one quarter of the world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness. Likewise the second quarter, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above, below, around, and everywhere, one abides—and to all as to oneself—pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will. This is called the immeasurable deliverance of mind.

This immeasurable deliverance of mind begins very simply with this quality of friendliness. Friendliness is the alchemy of the path. What a moment of friendliness does when it contacts suffering is transform that moment of suffering into a moment of goodness.

So we can begin to ask ourselves as we bring forth this friendly mind more and more: What in our life can we not open to with this friendly mind? What experiences do we encounter—like the hindrances—where that friendly mind goes away and instead we're stuck in resistance, in aversion? At that point what we need to do is find that fire of metta, steal that fire of metta, and open to that experience too.

Because in the Buddha's understanding, there's nothing in the world, no experience possible that blocks that mind of friendliness. And when we find that same degree of openness, then we too have become like the Buddha. We've become imperturbable. But it's an imperturbability that's not closed or shut off—it's very open and deeply connected.

I want to finish with a poem from Rumi. To understand this poem, you just need to know that the word Shams refers to his teacher, Shams of Tabriz, who was the first person to unlock for Rumi the door of the divine. He often uses the word Shams as synonymous with the divine.

Don't unstring the bow. I am your four feathered arrow that has not been used yet. I am sunlight slicing the dark. What is hidden in our chests? Laughter. What else? Compassion. What is love? Gratitude. Someone asks, how does love have hands and feet? Love is the sprouting bed for hands and feet. Your father and mother were playing love games. They came together and you appeared. Don't ask what love can make or do. Look at the colors of the world. The river water moving in all rivers at once. The truth that shines in the face of Shams.

Let's sit for just a minute in silence, holding these words: To all as to oneself, one abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will. This is called the immeasurable deliverance of mind.

CHAPTER 207

Faith (Saddhā)

Guy Armstrong · 50 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines faith (saddhā) as an essential element of Buddhist practice, beginning with the Buddha's teaching on purification of mind. Drawing from the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purification), he explores how the three root causes of suffering—greed (lobha), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha)—manifest as the five hindrances in meditation practice. Armstrong demonstrates how mindfulness transforms our relationship to these unwholesome states, not by eliminating them but by bringing clear awareness to them.*
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> *The talk delves into faith as "placing one's heart upon" something trustworthy, distinguishing it from blind belief. Through the story of Bāhiya and the Buddha's teaching on "just the seen, just the heard," Armstrong points toward a deeper understanding of non-self and the possibility of liberation through non-clinging. He explores how genuine faith emerges from direct experience and insight, ultimately leading to trust in awareness itself and the innate wisdom within. The teaching concludes with reflections on surrender, the unified mind, and living in accord with the Dharma.*

I'd like to talk this evening on the subject of faith, and I'd like to introduce it by a particular angle, which is the purification of mind.

One of the Buddha's statements summed up his teachings in this way. He said: "Help others when you can. Don't harm living beings and purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas." It's very simple, really.

One of the main commentarial texts in our tradition is a book called the Visuddhimagga. That title translated literally means "the path of purification." And so that is really what we're embarked on in the practice—the path of purification. We might ask, well, what is it that is supposed to be purified? What is it that needs to be refined?

There's a cartoon that I like that sort of points to our human dilemma. It shows a human being on the edge of a lake, and a series of creatures have evolved from the lake. There's a tadpole crawling right out of the lake on the sand, and the thought bubble in the tadpole's mind is: "eat, survive, reproduce." The next creature crawling up out of the lake is a lizard, and the thought bubble out of the lizard's mind is: "eat,

survive, reproduce." The next creature is a bird with the same thought bubble. Then there's a monkey—"eat, survive, reproduce." Then there's a human being standing there, and the human being goes: "Hmm, I wonder what it's all about."

This may be our question when we come to sit. What are all these strong and seemingly primordial forces that are stirring within our being when we come to our meditation cushion or our walking space and just plan to be calm?

The Buddha talked about three fundamental forces in the mind that cause difficulty, that cause unhappiness. He said that these three root tendencies are really the cause of all the other unhappy states. These are our tendencies—the mind's tendency to greed, to wanting more than we need; to aversion, to the dislike of our experience; and to delusion or ignorance, the tendency not to see clearly the way things are.

We can take a look at our practice over these two days and we may, if we look closely, be able to see the traces of one or two of these tendencies of mind.

This inclination of wanting comes so often. Did you find yourself on your cushion today ever wanting to be somewhere else? Wanting to experience something else? Often a desire comes for something more pleasant, something more entertaining than just the breath or just the next step.

The force of aversion—what in our practice today did we resist? What experiences came that we didn't really want to have happening? What did we find in our moments of meditation that we couldn't really open to or accept? That's a movement of aversion at work, of wanting to push away what's unpleasant.

Or what have we not really seen clearly today? The third of these forces is less familiar to us—the force of ignorance or delusion. It's not seen clearly. Often we overlook what we find neutral. When there's an experience in our life, whether it's a person or a taste or an experience in the body, that isn't highly charged one way or another—it's not particularly pleasant, it's not particularly painful—we tend to gloss over it because it doesn't have enough charge for us.

Sometimes our relationship to the breath is founded on this factor of ignorance. How many times have you moved away from the breath because it wasn't very exciting? Actually, the breath is a beautiful meditation object. It's chosen as our beginning focus for awareness partly because of this neutral aspect. It doesn't stir us particularly one way or another. So we can see that tendency of mind that isn't fascinated by the neutral, that wants to slide away into something more gripping, something that delights or even something that disturbs. We find both much more entertaining.

So beginning to see in our practice the movement of these three forces: the wanting to hang on to what's pleasant or change to something that's pleasant, the pushing away of what's unpleasant, and this quality of ignoring what is neutral. These three inclinations of mind can keep us restlessly busy not only through our meditation practice but in our daily outside lives as well. We see those movements much more clearly when we slow down and can simply pay attention to the mind. But it doesn't mean that it's only in our meditation that these activities are going on, that these tendencies are expressing themselves. We see them clearly here because they're highlighted against a more spacious background.

In our daily life, these tendencies tend to drive our activities and drive our relationships. They can keep us in constant movement inwardly. There can be a constant sense of restlessness, of being pushed and pulled by these various forces in the mind. And when our life is like that, when our meditation is like that, we can't find any peace.

We can't find any rest. We can't find a resting point. Because the next wave of one of these forces comes along and destroys that potential peace or calm.

These three tendencies of mind not only keep us often in a state of turmoil or agitation, but the Buddha said that they're actually the root causes of our suffering. This is a direct quote from the Buddha: that one should make an end to suffering without making an end of greed, aversion, and ignorance—this is impossible. These three states, you could say, are virtually synonymous with our situation of suffering when we are in a state of suffering. You could also say that these three in different combinations are the roots, the combining qualities of all the unhappy states that we experience.

As human beings, we've all known the range of joyful states of mind—delight and friendliness and excitement and joy and so forth. We've also, as human beings, known the full range of the difficult or unhappy emotions: the states of fear or anger or depression or grief or sorrow. The Buddha said that these three tendencies of greed, aversion and delusion, when compounded, make up all the unhappy states of mind, all the suffering states of mind in different combinations.

There are five of these states in particular that it's helpful to tune into in our meditation practice. These are the states called the five hindrances. Those of you who have been to a few meditation retreats probably know these very well. They become real old friends in our practice. But for those of you who are new, I just want to mention them briefly because they're important forces in the mind to tune into.

The five are sense desire, which we've touched on briefly and Christopher talked about last night; aversion, which is this element of disliking or resisting; sleepiness or drowsiness, which those of you who've been at the sittings after lunch are well familiar with; the state of restlessness, of inner agitation; and the state of doubt. The state of doubt is usually announced by the arrival of the phrase, "What on earth am I doing here?" which we usually experience a few times in the first few days of a retreat.

Start to become familiar in your practice with the movement of desire, when there's a feeling of wanting some other experience or wanting to be somewhere else. Look at how that affects the mind. When there's a movement to disliking, to pushing away our current experience, see how the mind feels when that state is present. Feel the contraction that that kind of resistance brings. Notice the cloud of dullness or drowsiness, the agitation of restlessness.

Doubt in some ways is the most insidious of all the hindrances because when doubt is there and we're unaware of it, it really cripples our motivation. We stop our practice. We stop looking when doubt is strong. We don't have the courage or the faith or the interest to keep looking, to continue to be mindful. So it can actually pull the plug on all of our practice.

If we can be mindful of these forces in the mind, of the five hindrances, then there is a possibility of not being caught by them. The hindrances are such that they have a way of seducing us into their worldview and seducing us out of a mindful and balanced attention. If we can stay centered in the present and just see the arising of desire as desire, the arising of aversion, dullness, restlessness, or doubt, then we can actually sustain our meditation practice in the face of these difficult forces.

But if we get unconscious, if we become unmindful, the chances are that we're simply swept away with the force and we lose that ability to be present to the moment. As the mindfulness develops and we're able to maintain mindfulness in the face of these hindrances, they don't have to be problems. They can simply be another focus for our awareness, another thing to be conscious of as we practice. But they're difficult energies because by their very nature they tend to seduce us out of that mindfulness. So it's very important to pay attention. These are typically the forces that undermine our ability to be aware, to pay attention.

The process of purification of the practice is one that primarily involves bringing the light of awareness into these distracting forces, whether we consider them the root causes of greed, aversion, and ignorance, or these compounded forces of the five hindrances. Purification is not necessarily a process that takes place over a long period of time. Any mind moment when you can bring a clear attention to any of these difficult

forces of mind—that is a moment of purification. That is a moment when you've actually transformed a moment of confusion or greed or even hatred into a moment of clear seeing. The purification is happening in that moment.

It's not that these states have to go away immediately. It's not that you have to get rid of these states for that purification to begin. Rather, the presence of that clear attention is itself the purifying factor that transforms that moment from being caught in the unwholesome to greeting the unwholesome from a very clear and understanding place of mind. So the transformation is not so much that we get rid of these states, but we transform our relationship to them. When we can be aware of them clearly, they don't have the same power to move us, to bother us, to motivate us as they did before.

The purification takes place in any moment when you can bring that clear attention and understanding to each of these difficult states of mind. Mindfulness then starts to take the power out of the unhappy states, out of the states that lead to suffering. As the forces of greed and aversion and delusion lose their power in the mind, correspondingly, just like the opposite side of a balance, the forces that are their opposites become more strong, become increased.

The opposite of greed the Buddha usually described actually as non-greed. The opposite of aversion, being very precise, he described as non-aversion. And the opposite of delusion, he described as non-delusion. The Buddha often talked in these terms. I think he was very skillful with words and didn't want to set up goals for us to generate more desire around.

But speaking in more familiar terms, we know that the opposite of greed, or trying to gain more, is generosity—feeling that we have enough to give. The opposite of aversion or disliking is the mind of friendliness, or metta, which means loving-kindness in English. The opposite of delusion is the state of wisdom, or the state of seeing clearly things as they are.

So as the purification takes place and the qualities of greed, aversion, and delusion are decreased, correspondingly there's more generosity in our experience. There's more love and there's more wisdom. This is all in the direct work of awareness in relating even to the difficult states of mind. It's a direct outcome.

But in reducing the power of the difficult emotions, there's not just a quantitative shift going on. It's not just that our emotions kind of get healthier and stronger and better. That's sort of the bodybuilding model of meditation, where we want those wash-

board abs and well-defined pecs. That would be that approach to meditation—polishing our emotions more and more highly for the rest of our meditation career, the sort of fixing ourselves project that can go on and on.

But I think there's also a qualitative shift that happens. More than just a shift in quantity, there's a qualitative shift in our experience that starts to happen with the practice of awareness. I describe it primarily as a shift in identity—that we stop taking ourselves to be one thing and learn a new way of seeing who or what we actually are.

As we're involved and consumed by these forces like greed, aversion, and confusion, they're generally in relation to one person. And guess who that person tends to be? They all tend to revolve around the I—all the self-centered concerns that we express through our thoughts, speech, and actions, trying to gain more pleasure, trying to keep the pain away.

As we let go of these individual self-concerns, the work of the isolated ego, then naturally, on its own, awareness opens to something greater. We realize that there is a greater force at work in the universe than just our own self-interest. And I would say it's at this point that the issue of faith becomes important or becomes relevant. This is where faith can become significant in our practice.

Faith is one translation of the Pali word saddhā. The root meaning of that word in Pali, as it's been explained to me, means to place one's heart upon.

So in our tradition, faith doesn't necessarily have anything to do with a system of beliefs. In some religious traditions, faith is really "Do you believe A, B, C, and D, and sign your name at the bottom, and then you're a member of our community." That's really not the way it's viewed in dharmic terms.

A synonym for faith might be trust. Another synonym that people like is confidence. So this Pali word saddhā has all three of these connotations: faith, trust, confidence. The key thing is that it's an experiential pointer—a pointer to something from our own experience of an inward conviction that doesn't have to do with a set of beliefs or views or opinions about anything.

And it's also not particularly about blind faith, where some teacher or some supposedly learned person says something and we say, "Oh yeah, that must be so because so-and-so said it." It's not particularly about that blind faith either. It really grows out of our own experience, our experience of meditation, our wise understanding of life. So the faith that we talk about in the Dharma is really a faith that comes out of our own experience.

So the question is, what do we place our hearts upon? What do we trust in? What do we have confidence in? Because constantly through our lives, we're expressing that trust and confidence in various elements. But when we actually stop to reflect about it, it's a little mysterious what we actually trust in.

There was a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon that I liked that sort of expressed this dilemma. This came out around Christmas time, and Calvin was talking to Hobbes, saying, "This whole Santa Claus thing just doesn't make sense. Why all the secrecy? Why all the mystery? If the guy exists, why doesn't he ever show himself and prove it? And if he doesn't exist, what's the meaning of all this?"

And Hobbes says, "I don't know, isn't this a religious holiday?"

And Calvin replies, "Yeah, but actually I've got the same questions about God."

So this is sort of the situation we find ourselves in.

If there is such a thing, why doesn't it show itself and prove it? So what do we have faith in? Do we have faith in our own thoughts, our own beliefs, our own emotions, our friends, our family, our teachers? All these things are pretty changeable, pretty subject to impermanence.

Traditionally, there is an answer within the Buddhist lineage. If you went to a classically trained practitioner in Asia and asked them what the proper source of faith was, I would almost guarantee that you would get the answer: the triple gem, or the three refuges—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These are the areas in which a devout Buddhist should have faith.

If you have a connection to the tradition and these ring true for you, that's terrific. The Buddha was an amazing individual. His teachings, the Dharma, were very inspired and still inspiring. And the community of practitioners is a refuge for all of us. So if these words ring true for you, that's beautiful. They can be very valid and genuine sources of faith.

But if you don't, then I think it's important to look within your own experience and find out experientially what that source of faith is for you. One of the things I'll suggest, and it's something I hope that you really learn in this retreat, is that mindfulness or awareness is a tremendous source of faith. Mindfulness or awareness can always be trusted. There's not a situation where that quality of awareness is not a helpful resource, not a helpful tool. Over the time together, as you go through all the ups and downs that the retreat life brings, if you continue to trust in the power of awareness, you'll see how it carries you through all the difficulties that the retreat brings and all

the joys that the retreat brings to a place of deeper understanding, deeper wisdom, and deeper trust. So awareness really is our ally on this whole journey and can always be trusted.

Awareness is also an avenue to insight. And insights are also great sources of faith. I had a friend who had done a lot of meditation practice and had had some very deep insights that she felt transformed her relationship to life. She described her meditation practice this way: "I did meditation of an analytical style for years and years." What she meant by this was a kind of meditation practice where we look at the changing nature of our experience very closely. We look at the arising of the breath, the arising of thoughts, the arising of sounds, the arising of sensations, and also, for each of those, the dissolution in their turn of those same phenomena. Everything in our experience that has the nature to arise also has the nature to pass away.

From looking at all these different phenomena, all characterized by impermanence, she realized that she couldn't say that she was any of those things, because they were all coming and going. She'd looked into her experience so carefully and so closely, she couldn't take herself to be any of those things because she could see them all coming and going. So she said, "From those years of analytic meditation, I clearly understood what I was not"—was not any of these phenomena that she could point to.

Then she said, "I had a really deep insight from an opening that came. And from that opening, I found out what I was." It's that finding out of what we are more truly or more deeply that becomes the real ground of faith, that becomes the source of a lasting faith.

When you look at great spiritual teachers, one of the things that I notice about them is that they seem to have discovered something completely trustworthy in life, and that they have in some way or to some degree surrendered to that. They've surrendered this incessant movement of self-concern that's fueled by wanting and not wanting, by hope and fear. They've surrendered that and let go into something that's vaster and far more trustworthy.

Suzuki Roshi, a great Zen master, put it this way: "We need to have faith in something that has no form or color, but that is always ready to take on form and color." This is kind of enigmatic—something that has no form or color. What is this, I wonder? Because everything that we can point to in our experience, all these phenomena that I was just referring to, all in their own way have a form or a color. Certainly sights we associate with that. Sounds sort of have a shape. Emotions have a coloration. Thoughts even seem to take a form in our mind. Anything that we can point to or describe, we

could say has some sort of form and color. So it's nothing that we can directly experience with our senses, with our six senses. And yet it's something that's always ready to take on form and color. Isn't that mysterious?

I pondered on this statement for years in my own practice, and at first I thought that he was talking about something in the material world. I thought he was talking about some kind of raw matter—bare neutrons and electrons and protons, or some raw stuff that came about from the Big Bang and then took on form and color. I thought of it like that for years, and now I don't see it that way. Now I don't think of it as something material or external.

I don't see it as being out there so much. I more think what he's referring to, if we have to pick sides on this dilemma, is more on this side of things—the side of what's looking. And I now take this to mean something in the nature of the mind itself.

Because consciousness has this ability to take on any form and color that greets it in quite an impartial way. Consciousness takes on the painful as well as the pleasant. It takes on the beautiful as well as the ugly. There's no discrimination.

There's a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a teacher in the tradition of Vedanta in India. Someone asked him how his spiritual path unfolded. He described it this way: "I saw that in the ocean of pure awareness, the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside beginninglessly and endlessly. There's a mysterious power that looks after them. That power is awareness, life, God, whatever name you care to give it. It is the foundation and ultimate support of all that is, as gold is the basis for all jewelry."

In the ocean of pure awareness, the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside. Another pointer to that inward dimension. When we start to get a sense of that inner dimension and can start to release into it, then we let go of the clinging to all those phenomenal waves. We don't have to hold on to any of the appearances of the mind or of the body.

And this requires an act of faith. This is an act of trust. And this act of non-clinging is what the Buddha pointed to again and again and again as the direct avenue to liberation. Direct path to liberation.

So how can we get a handle in our practice of that avenue? There's a story from the Buddha's time about a man who had journeyed over half of India to come and see him and hear about his teachings. He'd heard about the Buddha as a great teacher, made

this long journey, and finally caught up with him one morning when he was on alms round. Being a mendicant, he went about early in the morning to a nearby village to beg for his food, for his meal for the day.

And this man, whose name was Bahiya, caught up with the Buddha on alms round, immediately approached him and said, "Venerable sir, I've come a long way. I'd really like to understand your teaching. Can you briefly tell me what it is?"

And the Buddha said, "Not right now, sir. I'm gathering my morning meal. Can you see me later?"

He said, "I've come a very long way. I'm very impatient to hear your teachings. Can you please just give me a brief summary?"

And the Buddha said, "I'm sorry. This is not a convenient time. Please see me later."

So Bahiya was not to be put off. He asked the Buddha a third time, "Please, can you tell me your teachings, briefly?" And as always happens in these stories, if you ask the Buddha the third time, he always says yes. So it's said that he did this time. But he gave a very condensed version. And in this discourse, we almost are hearing the pith instructions of the Buddha for meditators.

And so what the Buddha said was, "All right, Bahiya, this is how you should train. In the seeing, let there be just the seen. In the hearing, let there be just the heard. In the sensing, let there be just the sensed. In the knowing, let there be just the known. This is how you should train herein."

This is very interesting. In the seeing, let there be just the seen. What's missing? The seer is missing, isn't it? The experiencer, the hearer, the sensor, the cognizer. It's a very interesting pointing.

In our meditation practice, when we are fully with the experience of the breath, when the interest, the attention, the energy, the presence is so complete that we are entirely with that sense of the breath going in and the breath going out, is there an I even in that situation? When the full awareness is taken up with this swinging door in the abdomen or this fluttering wave of sensation in the nose or the rising in the chest, is there any separate observer present to comment?

Begin to note the times in your practice when the awareness is so full, so complete, that the sense of I doesn't really seem to be present. Use this as an avenue to understanding the Buddha's instructions to Bahiya. Explore that sense of the separate observer that we call the experiencer or the I. See if that really has to be there all the time, or if that's something else that arises and also passes.

A medieval Christian contemplative, Angelus Silesius, put it this way: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for that, the more it will appear."

When we relax, when we are not striving, when we are not driven by these compelling forces of liking and disliking, of hope and fear, when there's a sense of relaxation and greater harmony, then the sense of a separate I is not so strong. Become familiar with what that feels like in practice, when the I is not so strong. And when the I is not so strong and incessant with its demands, what is the quality of that moment? What is the quality of our experience at those times? Let that be a pointer—not stopping there, but letting that be a pointer.

Krishnamurti described this way of seeing the world as the awakening of intelligence. He spoke of a wisdom, an understanding already within us that only needs to be woken up. This intrinsic wisdom—not something we have to fabricate or create—only needs to be awakened, and it starts to explain the seeming mysteries of this world to us.

This sense of inner intelligence is not just something vague, not merely a buzzword, but something we can discover in our practice. In the beginning we may just get a sense or intuition that this rings true—that there is an intrinsic wisdom we can touch, that we can awaken. We get that intuition and that becomes the source of our faith for some time, just a sense of trust in our own feeling about that. As time goes by and we trust in that sense more and more, it may reveal itself more and more clearly until we know directly for ourselves through our own realization what that means.

As one surrenders into this innate intelligence, then one can take the hands off the steering wheel that we often grip so tightly to control our way through life. We can trust that this innate intelligence will take us through life situations easily, spontaneously, effortlessly.

Again, from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "You may not be quite conscious of your physiological functions, but when it comes to thoughts and feelings, desires and fears, you become acutely self-conscious. To me, these too are largely unconscious. I find myself talk-

ing to people or doing things quite correctly and appropriately without being very much conscious of them. It looks as if I live my physical waking life automatically, reacting spontaneously and accurately."

This is a statement from someone who has really taken the hands off the steering wheel, who has surrendered this small sense of grasping and control to this innate intelligence, this vast intelligence.

When the mind is released in that way, released from the clinging to all phenomena, then it becomes unbound in a particular way—unbound from any clinging. The analogy that the Buddha often used in the suttas to describe this unbound state of mind was like a fire that has gone out. When you see a flame hovering around a log, you can see how the flame is clinging to the fuel of the log. When the fire goes out, it is no longer clinging to its fuel. The Buddha said that's exactly what the mind of a liberated being is like—it has gone out and is no longer clinging to this world of phenomena.

The Buddha said: "When those who know seek a bhikkhu who is liberated, they do not find anything of which they can say his or her consciousness is supported by this. Why is that? Because one thus gone is untraceable here and now." One who is liberated is untraceable here and now, because the consciousness is no longer clinging to any phenomena.

The Buddha often described this sense of liberation in negative terms. One is untraceable. The mind is unbound. It is unfindable. It is not supported. He was reluctant to describe the state in positive terms, I think because he didn't want to set up a goal.

But other teachers and traditions have not been so reluctant to describe this liberated or awakened state. In the Hindu tradition, they speak of three words: Sat, Chit, Ananda. Sat means being—the appearance of the world of form. Chit means consciousness. And Ananda means bliss or delight.

And they talk about these three as an inseparable unity. When we look at our experience, they say this is a description of our nature—that we are always in contact with the realm of being, with the realm of form. We are conscious throughout the process, and there's an underlying sense of delight in that experience.

Now, touching this sense of delight may be a little remote after a couple of days of a meditation retreat. It may seem like the hindrances are really the uppermost of experiences. But I like to tune into that sense of delight or the joy of existence sometimes by just reflecting on the play of light. Often I'll just stop in the middle of the day, and there's something about the way that light plays on objects that to me always reveals that radiance, an inner radiance of existence that bespeaks that joy.

Thomas Merton put it this way: "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being." Again, it's that combination of awareness, of being, and of delight.

We spend a lot of time in retreats like this talking about some of the difficult aspects of existence. We talk about the fact that it's impermanent, that there's no lasting refuge, that there's an element of unsatisfactoriness if we're looking for our happiness in the world of the senses. So the challenge is: in the full awareness of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, can we trust? Can we find that faith to open and to trust, to not cling?

There's a haiku from the Japanese that expresses this combination of factors. It says: "Simply trust. Do not the plum blossoms flutter down just like that?" It's a beautiful image of release, the plum blossom fluttering down.

I think that all of us know on some deep level that the universe is really trustworthy, that the universe does have a core of goodness, of basic goodness, that can be trusted. But we forget. Children know this very well. There was this beautiful story—I don't remember the author or the source—but there was a mother who was sitting on the rim of a reflecting pool in some shopping center or office building. Her three-year-old daughter was walking around the rim of the pool, which was raised about two feet off the ground. The mother was sitting on the other side and she was thinking, "I know she's going to fall in. I just know she's going to fall in. Should I go grab her now or should I let her grow up and fall in?" And she decided to just let her daughter be on the edge of the pool.

So the daughter was walking around, and sure enough, a few seconds later, the daughter fell in the pool. She screamed, and the mother went over and pulled her out of the pool. And when the daughter came out of the pool, she said, "I thought I'd be afraid, Mommy, but when I slipped, my little voice said, 'Have fun falling.'"

Have fun falling. So on some deep level, I think we know to trust, but we forget. We forget to trust. We forget to have faith. And sometimes we don't quite know how to step out of the way. That I is so insistent with its conditioned responses.

Someone asked Nisargadatta Maharaj about his degree of freedom. They said, "Does your spontaneity come as a result of realization or by training?" And Maharaj said—you know, it's an interesting question. Is it just one flash of insight that liberates, or does this path of gradual training that we're all embarked on play a role? It's an interesting question. Maharaj said both. "Devotion to your goal makes you live a clean and

orderly life, given to the search for truth and to helping people. Realization makes virtue easy by removing for good the obstacles in the shape of desires and fears and wrong ideas. Both are necessary."

So in our practice, can we start to tune into this phenomenon of the self, the small self when it expresses itself—these sometimes incessant demands of wanting and not wanting, of hope and fear? Can we come to know that simply as the movement of the I, the movement of desire in its different forms?

And then can we also come to know those times when the urgency of the self is not so strong, not so compelling? Look at your experience in those times. What are those moments like? Is there a sense of peace when that small I isn't active? Is there a sense of calm? Is there a sense of greater harmony? Is there a sense in those times of an active intelligence? Is there a sense of being able to trust at those moments?

It's not to say that faith is only applicable in those moments when the mind is quiet. If that were the case, this would be a very limited possibility, because our minds are always going to be back and forth between movement and stillness, movement and stillness.

But rather, it's in those times of stillness that we can start to receive those inklings—those glimpses into a deeper nature that is ever-present, that exists in the times of movement as well as the times of stillness. Our trust in that nature can sustain us through all the changes the mind goes through.

Faith can actually be a path in itself. This is not much talked about in the Buddhist tradition. Faith as a path is more commonly associated with the Hindu bhaktis or the Christian path. Yet this is something that the Buddha said to a bhikkhu in his time, one of his students. The Buddha said, "Pingya"—that was the name of the bhikkhu—"other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. Vakali, Bhadra Buddha, and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Another time that the Buddha spoke about faith, he discussed it in terms of what he called the five spiritual faculties—five qualities of mind that when developed and maintained lead directly to liberation. The five spiritual faculties are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. He said that when these five spiritual faculties are developed and maintained, they reach to the deathless, they end in the deathless, they merge in the deathless. Deathless is another word for the absolute or the unconditioned or nirvana in the Buddha's vocabulary.

So faith can be a tremendous path in itself. This is from a poet named Lalla, a mystical poet who lived in northern India in the fourteenth century. She wrote long lines like Kabir, and she said: "Meditate within eternity. Don't stay in the mind. Your thoughts are like a child fretting near its mother's breast, restless and afraid, who with a little guidance can find the path of courage."

This is another expression of the path of faith.

I'd like to close with a quotation from actually one of my favorite texts in the whole Buddhist tradition. It's a little text called the Xin Xin Ming, a Chinese text that translates as Verses on the Faith Mind. This is from the conclusion of that text:

"For the unified mind in accord with the way, all self-centered striving ceases. Doubts and irresolution vanish, and life in true faith is possible. To live in this faith is the road to non-duality, because the non-dual is one with the trusting mind."

Let's just sit for a minute or two together.

For the unified mind in accord with the way, all self-centered striving ceases. Doubts and irresolution vanish, and life in true faith is possible.

CHAPTER 208

The Five Hindrances

Guy Armstrong · 46 min

> *Guy Armstrong begins with the archetypal story of the Buddha's awakening night, drawing parallels between Mara's attacks and the internal forces that obstruct our spiritual journey. He explores the five classical hindrances (nīvaraṇa) that arise in meditation: sense desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (byāpāda), sleepiness (thīnamiddha), restlessness (uddhaccakukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). Using vivid analogies of a clear pool of water being obscured by weeds, dye, cloudiness, waves, and mud, Armstrong shows how each hindrance colors our perception and blocks clear seeing.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with each hindrance through recognition, direct experience, and skillful antidotes. For desire, he suggests reflecting on impermanence; for aversion, cultivating metta (loving-kindness); for sleepiness, arousing energy; for restlessness, developing calm; and for doubt, strengthening faith. Armstrong emphasizes that freedom comes not from eliminating these mental states but from understanding them completely and meeting them with friendly awareness.*
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> *Drawing from his own practice experiences and concluding with Rumi's poem "The Guest House," Armstrong presents the hindrances as uninvited but valuable teachers. He shows how the alchemy of practice transforms moments of confusion into awakened clarity through accepting whatever arises with mindful awareness.*

One night in northern India, about 2,540 years ago, a young man sat underneath a bodhi tree. He had left home six years earlier and for that time had pursued very single-pointedly and with great ardor the spiritual practices taught by the foremost teachers of his day. But in all those six years, he had not come upon an answer to the quest that he had set out on, which was to solve for himself the problem of human suffering.

So he took a seat under the tree, and he said to himself, "I'm going to find out the answer to the problem of human suffering while sitting under this tree, or I'm going to die trying." The next time that forty-five minute sit before tea seems kind of long, you might reflect on that—the incredible devotion from this young man.

As he took his seat with that firmness of resolve and intention, almost inevitably, as you might expect, the first part of the evening was not easy. He was besieged by what have been called in the descriptions the armies of Mara. Mara is the eternal antagonist

in the Buddhist texts. He always brings forces that oppose the seekers of goodness and light and truth. In this evening, he sought to dissuade the young man from continuing his quest.

The first thing that he did was to cause to arise in front of the young man visions of armies of fierce warriors descending on him with spears pointed at him and arrows nocked in their bows ready to be fired at him. Through this, Mara hoped to scare the young man off his cushion and away from his quest. But the young man was unmoved. He'd already made the intention to die trying if need be. So fear didn't affect him. He sat unmoved, continued with his investigation.

Mara felt he was slightly foiled but not giving up, brought out his next weapon. He caused to appear before the young man images of three beautiful women, alluring and enticing, hoping to draw the young man off his quest by the force of wanting, by the force of desire. But the young man had experienced all the kinds of sensual pleasures when he was growing up, and he knew that they were limited in their own way, and so again he was unmoved.

Finally, Mara drew his final weapon. He said to the young man, "Hundreds of thousands of people through the ages have tried to solve this problem of human suffering. None of them have been able to. What makes you think you can? What makes you so arrogant that you can presume to solve this problem in one night?" Mara was trying to arouse the force of doubt.

At this point, the young man struck a pose which has been illustrated many times in statues depicting this night's struggle. You can see it in the statue behind us tonight. He reached down with his right hand and placed it on the earth in that pose that's been called the gesture of touching the earth. And he said, "I ask the earth to bear witness. I ask the earth to witness how many lifetimes and how many years I have worked toward this understanding. Through countless lifetimes of generosity and giving and selfless service and purity of intention, the earth bears witness to my right to ask this question."

At that, Mara was truly vanquished. He gave up and went away. It's said that as the night wore on, the young man's insight and understanding continued to deepen until just before dawn he reached that ultimate realization that brought him the understanding that completely liberated him from suffering and became in that moment known, as he has been ever since, as the Buddha, the awakened one, the one who has awakened to the truth.

The life story of the Buddha not only functions as a beautiful and inspiring story of one human being, but it's really an archetype for all of our spiritual practices. The stage that you are at right now is the same stage that the young man was in when he took the seat under that tree and resolved to understand, despite the forces that might oppose him.

The forces that opposed him are also archetypal in their nature. These forces of Mara will rise up to obstruct anyone who tries to solve this question, who tries to make a journey to pierce the veil of ignorance and reach our true center, the center of freedom and understanding. Mara can be seen in this archetype as just the personification of the forces in our own minds and hearts that oppose our journey, that oppose our destination of wisdom.

The difficulties that you are experiencing now are actually an integral part of your spiritual life, and they will be with you for a while to come. The Buddha actually talked very specifically about five particular kinds of forces that obstruct us as we deepen in our practice. These are five energies of the mind that can act as obstacles to our practice when we're not aware of them, when we don't know how to work with them. But when we know how to work with them, they can be transformed into subjects for our meditation themselves and become sources of deep learning and wisdom and opening.

So I'd like to talk tonight about these five particular forces or energies that the Buddha spoke of many times in his life. They're classically known as the five hindrances. This terminology stresses their obstructive power, but they can also be five grounds for wisdom and understanding. So we want to talk about both aspects tonight.

The five, put very simply, are the forces of sense desire, of aversion or disliking, of sleepiness, of restlessness, and of doubt. These are forces that, as we begin to pay closer and closer attention in our meditation, we see are arising again and again. They arise very often in the course of our meditation practice. As we start to tune into them, we can see them more clearly. We also learn how to relate to them more skillfully.

The art of relating with these forces that are called hindrances is one of the major pieces of the craft of meditation. It's a key area of learning. These hindrances are tricky. They're sneaky, much like Mara creeping up on the Buddha that night. These forces try to trick us too. They try to deceive us. They try to knock us off our seats of wisdom.

When the hindrances are present and we're not aware of them, they color the mind in a certain way. It's as if we have a colored filter in front of our eyes and can only see the world through that hindrance. We can't quite see it clearly.

In classical terms, the analogy is made that the mind—the wisdom mind, which we all naturally possess—is like a pool of clear water. When you peer into a pool of clear water, you can see right to the bottom, and everything is transparent, crystal clear. The hindrances are likened to forces that come in and obstruct this view.

Desire is said to be like a pool that's become tangled in weeds, choked in weeds, because the forces of desire become very intertwined and intricate, like a net. The force of aversion or disliking is like putting a certain dye or color in the water—perhaps the color red, often associated with anger. Sleepiness is said to be like water that's become very cloudy. It's there, but you can't quite see through it. There's a murkiness, an obstruction to your vision just from the cloudiness.

Restlessness is said to be water that's been stirred up by wind on the surface. It's not necessarily anything that goes very deep, but it whips the water into waves and breaks up the clarity. Doubt is said to be like a pond that has been stirred up from a muddy bottom so that it's in turmoil all the way through, blocking our view.

With each of these hindrances, our view has become clouded in some way or another. The cloudiness is not because of the hindrance itself—it's because we believe in its story. When we believe in the story of the hindrance and become identified with it, then we slip into ignorance. We actually lose our mindfulness and our wisdom and slip into the ignorance of the spell that the hindrance can cast if we're not aware.

You may have seen this happening a few times over the course of the retreat. You may be very mindful of your breathing, in the middle of a walking period, present with each step of each foot, and then all of a sudden some irritation comes up. How could that person do that to me in the food queue? How could they take so much when there was only a little bit left? And then we start running around on that.

Or you're in the middle of walking meditation and you immediately remember—as Christina mentioned this morning—how important it is to rearrange your socks at that particular time. And before you even have a chance to think about what's happening, you're on your way to your room, imagining the sock drawer being opened.

When we don't see these forces in operation, they slip underneath the radar of our mindfulness, and they take us over before we even know what's happening. We react out of irritation, out of annoyance, out of anger, out of wanting, without even knowing that we're doing it. In doing that, we've lost our mindfulness. We're no longer in touch with what's happening in the present moment. We've surrendered the mindfulness and given our energy to a kind of blind obedience to the hindrance, whatever it might be. And this happens again and again.

This enchanting spell that the hindrances cast is why they can be such difficult subjects for our meditation. The key, clearly, is to take the mindfulness and turn it directly on the hindrance itself. That's how we fundamentally work with these energies.

If we give ourselves over and follow the story of the hindrance, we're led away from the present moment to something usually in the past or the future—the person who did something unskillful, the messy sock drawer—and all our energy is pointing in that direction. We can return to the present moment by just noticing that force of wanting or disliking or sleepiness or restlessness or doubt. In that noticing, we're right back in the present moment again. Our mindfulness has been recovered, restored to us.

So the first step in dealing with any of these hindrances is just to recognize that the hindrance is at work. In that step, it's very helpful to actually name the hindrance. Know for yourself whether it's the force of wanting, the force of disliking, or any of the others.

The next step is to turn the spotlight of awareness, turn that light of mindfulness, onto the energy itself. Let yourself feel the feeling directly. Feel how wanting feels. Feel how aversion feels. Feel sleepiness and restlessness and doubt. Let yourself experience it all the way through in the body and in the mind. Give yourself over to feeling these things just as they are.

That's the basic approach with each hindrance, and now I'd like to talk about each of them in turn, because there are specific ways to work with each one.

Sense-desire is defined as wanting some pleasant experience in any of the senses. In Buddhism, there are considered to be six senses. There are the five physical senses of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. In addition, there's the sixth sense of the mind. The objects of the mind as a sense door are thoughts, moods and emotions, states of mind, and images. So the hindrance of sense desire is wanting pleasant experiences in any of these areas.

It comes up often in the retreat setting, just around the things of the retreat. What do we want on a retreat? We want to be comfortable. We come in wanting the body to feel good. Maybe we've had one good sitting—a sitting where the thoughts quieted down a little bit and we could really connect with the breath and have a taste of the calm that's possible through the practice. Then we can't wait to get back into the next sitting after the walking because we know that's going to happen again. We really want that meditation again.

Or we want people to think we're a good meditator. Doing our walking practice, I used to have this fantasy that sometime at the end of a retreat, somebody was going to come up and say, "You were such a great walker, I really enjoyed walking next to you." I waited for twenty years and it still hasn't happened. I had a friend who said that he was working with the noting practice in his walking. In the noting practice, you often notice the lifting, the moving forward, and the placing of the foot. He was feeling a little bit self-conscious, and the note transformed into "lifting, moving, looking good." Looking good.

So this force of wanting comes up in many subtle ways in the retreat. It's not that these things are so unreasonable—we want people to like us, we want people to appreciate us. The problem is if we hang on to those wants when they're not able to be satisfied. And pretty much, it's hard to find out in the middle of a retreat if anybody likes you or not. If we're hanging on to that, we'll suffer if it's not there.

There's this amazing image that appeared of the suffering of clinging. It came in the Bay Area newspapers. There was a man who owned a blimp and made his living by taking people up for rides in the blimp for commercial purposes or recreation. He came back down after a flight to the landing field and tethered the blimp, but it wasn't quite tethered. He turned his back on it and the blimp started to lift off again. He turned around and saw his whole livelihood vanishing up in the air. He didn't know what to do. He was panicked and grabbed for one of the tie ropes. And he couldn't let go. The force of attachment was such that he could not let go. The paper reported that he was then carried up into the air by the blimp. But after a certain time, he couldn't hold his grip anymore. He fell to his death. The really sad part of the story is a few hours later the blimp lost enough of its air and landed back on the ground safely. But the force of attachment was too strong in that moment and he could not let go.

This is kind of the essence of sense desire—not being able to let go.

How can we work with the force of wanting? How can we work with sense desire? We live in a culture that really glorifies desire. All the advertising messages on television basically tell us that if you have the right deodorant and you drink the right beer, then you'll also be able to play beach volleyball with all those really nice-looking people. Basically, that happiness comes from satisfying sense desires.

But it's very interesting to investigate that. The next time you want something really badly—whatever it is, whether it's a good sitting or a good walking or a relationship or a job or a car—let yourself feel that wanting energy and feel whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. That raw wanting energy, when it's not being satisfied, is not very pleasant.

The question is, does the unpleasantness come because we don't have the object? Or does it come just out of the nature of that wanting energy? Because you'll be sitting here in meditation and you may be very happy, very contented, connecting with your breath, peaceful and calm, and all of a sudden a desire will come up for something you don't have. "Oh, I want to see a friend. Oh, I want to take that vacation next month. Oh, I want to get that job that I've heard about."

And the next moment, turmoil, turmoil. So the moment before, you were peaceful. You didn't have the object then either, and you were still peaceful. The wanting comes in, peace is gone. The disruption is there. That kind of agitated feeling of wanting is there.

So take a look at that. Is it the absence of the object or is it the wanting energy that is the source of the pain?

Our desires deceive us. They deceive us into thinking that our satisfaction lies outside of ourselves. The teaching of the Buddha was to take it back home. The teaching of the Buddha is that happiness lies in letting go of the desire itself. Then peace is there. Contentment is there.

So we need to see the desire clearly just for what it is. It's an urge. It's a longing. It's a force that arises in the mind. It lasts for a while. And then what do you know? It passes away.

This is also a revelation. All the hindrances are impermanent. If we allow them to come, they'll flower, they'll exist for a while, and by their very nature, they'll decay. In this retreat, we really have a beautiful opportunity to witness this again and again, to become really convinced that these forces aren't problematic because they'll go away on their own. You don't have to make them go away. They will go away. All you have to do is feel them, experience them.

One of the classical antidotes for desire, actually, is to reflect on impermanence—similar reflection, but this time in relation to the object. Say you get that object that's going to make you happy. Does the happiness last forever?

It's a curious thing, isn't it? If you look closely at the nature of this wanting, there is some wish that the next thing is going to provide a lasting happiness. But have any of them ever? Not really.

So we can reflect on the fact that whatever we gain, eventually it will cease to satisfy us. Either it will pass or the satisfaction will pass.

Manindraji, one of the early teachers of both Joseph and Sharon in India, had a real sweet tooth. And he used to reflect a lot on his desires for sweets. And so he worked with it in meditation in this way. He'd be sitting and be wanting something sweet and he'd say, "Okay, the mind wants ice cream. Let the mind go get ice cream. The body's staying right here." You can work with that one.

One of the other forces of desire that comes up is around sexual imagery. And sometimes on retreat this can be quite powerful. One of the things that's really helpful with sensual or sexual imagery is to note the pleasant quality of the image itself. Notice what it is that the desire is around. Just note that pleasant feeling in the images that are coming, and that can kind of undercut the attachment or clinging to it.

The second of the hindrances is called aversion, classically, sometimes translated as negativity. It's a basic force of disliking. Desire is wanting pleasant experience. Aversion is wanting to push away the unpleasant in life.

There's this one root stem of disliking, but it's a stem that has many, many types of blooms. This flowers as straight disliking, as anger, as fear, as sadness, as grief, depression, shame, guilt, boredom. There are a whole lot of variations on this basic state of aversion. I won't talk about them all tonight.

But I'll just hit a few of the high points or low points, as the case may be.

The primary antidote classically to aversion is the force of loving kindness, or metta as it's known in Pali. Later this week we'll be doing some guided meditations on the theme of loving kindness. You'll have some experience with this kind of practice. It's basically developing a mind that is friendly and loving toward ourselves, toward others, and in doing that, toward all of life, toward all of our experience.

This friendly mind obstructs aversion. When that sense of friendliness or love is there, the sense of anger or disliking really can't arise. So it's a very powerful antidote. What was not acceptable before in the light of love becomes acceptable. We can open to things in life that we couldn't open to before.

That's a long-term strategy. It's a very powerful strategy, and I speak as an aversive type. This is where my temperament tends—toward aversion. When I began to do metta practice intensively a couple of years ago, I found it very transforming. It has made a real difference in my life. I had been doing vipassana practice for eighteen years, and the aversive quality was shifted significantly after just a couple of years of metta practice. So for my fellow aversive types out there, it's highly recommended.

In working with disliking—again, disliking comes in many different flavors: irritation and frustration, impatience and judgment. You can feel the irritating quality when we're in a state of disliking. It colors the whole world. We may have just gotten irritated or frustrated about one thing, but when we're in that state, everything takes on the color of not being very appealing.

In addition, we tend to think that we're suffering because of some outside condition. It was the word that someone said to me that's making me feel bad. It was the fact that I couldn't quite accept the food that was offered today that's making me feel bad, or whatever.

There's a story from the time of the Buddha. The Buddha was talking with some of his monks. As they were talking, standing out by a forest, they saw a jackal run out of the forest. The jackal stood for a minute and then ran into the underbrush. It stayed in the underbrush a minute. Then it ran out again and ran into the hollow of a tree. It stayed there only a minute. Then it ran out again and dashed into a cave. And then it ran out of the cave.

The Buddha observed that the jackal had mange, was suffering from mange in its coat. The Buddha said, "Monks, did you see that jackal? Standing, it suffered. Running, it suffered. Lying down, it suffered. Sitting still, it suffered. In the forest, underbrush, tree, or cave, it suffered. It blamed standing for its suffering. It blamed running for its suffering. It blamed sitting, lying down for its suffering. It blamed the forest, the underbrush, the tree, and the cave for its suffering. In fact, the problem was with none of those. The discomfort was with none of those. The problem was the jackal had mange."

This is our condition when we're in a state of aversion. We tend to blame the conditions outside ourselves, but the problem is we're in a state of disliking. The mind has gotten locked into this feeling of negativity. So feel how the mind feels when you're in a state of disliking. Feel that kind of contraction that happens, the tightness, the tension, the kind of burning quality of it.

Another aspect of disliking is sadness—some form of disliking of loss, of change, of things that we've lost in the past. Sometimes as the mind gets quiet, we start to feel the sadness creep in a little. It's as though for some, the activities of life are a way of moving away from some underlying sadness.

This fear that sadness might be limitless if we open to it is only a projection, only a future thought. Please let yourself open to that sadness if it's there—it is, after all, a part of life.

The Buddha once asked his monks: "Which do you think are greater, the tears that you have cried through all your lifetimes or the waters in all the oceans of the earth?" He answered that the tears we have cried through all our lifetimes are greater than the waters in all the oceans of the earth. This sadness is an integral part of life. So in our practice, we open to both the beauty and joy of life as well as its difficulties. As the heart becomes more available, as that tender heart starts to emerge, we can feel what has been sad in our lives. Let yourself feel that.

One of the other ways that negativity manifests in this culture—it seems almost epidemic—is that we don't have a very good way of liking ourselves in the West these days. There's a sense that we don't value ourselves very highly. For many people, there's an almost pervasive feeling of worthlessness.

A few years ago, some Western dharma teachers were meeting in India with the Dalai Lama. They raised this issue: how can we help people work with this feeling of not valuing themselves, of not feeling worthwhile? The Dalai Lama couldn't understand it. He could not grasp what they were talking about. He had no idea what this feeling was. Apparently, it's not very common in Tibetan culture because by and large, Tibetan children are truly valued. It's understood that they're all capable of great wisdom and liberation, and they're widely loved by their extended families.

So he went around to each of the Western teachers asking, "Do you know what this means? Have you had this feeling?" All the Western teachers said yes, they could relate to this feeling—they knew what it was to not value themselves very much.

I was practicing in my early years and went through a phase of having many self-judging thoughts. I happened to have an interview on one of these difficult days. When I went in to see the teacher, they asked how the retreat was going. I said, "Oh, well, I'm having a hard day today," hoping they'd leave it at that. But of course they didn't.

"Well, what's going on?"

"Oh, I'm just having some aversive thoughts," I said, certain they would leave it at that. I'd confessed it was a hindrance—I thought that should be enough.

"What kind of thoughts?"

"Well, I'm feeling like I don't like myself very well. Nobody likes me. I'm feeling really lonely and that nobody likes me."

The teacher said, "You're not seeing things the way they are. The problem is you don't accept yourself. You need to accept yourself."

So this theme of accepting myself—or valuing myself, put another way—became central in my practice for years after that. I had to struggle with this theme because what did it mean to accept myself? I thought in Buddhism there wasn't a self to accept or reject. What did that mean? Was I going to find some little guy inside and then wrap my arms around him and say, "You're okay after all"? That didn't sound right either.

What I came to understand as I worked with this theme over time was that accepting myself really meant accepting every moment of my life just the way it was—accepting what was beautiful, accepting what was difficult. When I could really do that, accept each moment as it was, then I could accept myself fully.

I'm still working in that direction. There are still things that stump me. But over the years, I've gathered in many more of the lost brothers and sisters that make up my personality, and it's gotten much easier.

That issue has gotten much more comfortable for me. So watch the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. You know, we tell ourselves these stories about we're not good enough or we're not well loved or this or that. And be aware that it's just a story. And the story is never as much as the storyteller. No story can ever define the storyteller. That's a hopeless pursuit.

One last aspect of aversion that I'll mention is fear. Fear is a sense of aversion about something that is a future thought, something that might happen to us in the future. Take a look when fear arises. What is usually your reaction to it? When you feel fear in your meditation, how do you feel about that fear? For most people, when fear arises, we usually become more afraid. And then because it's a bigger fear, we get more afraid, and more afraid.

Again, the key in working with fear is to open to it. If we can accept the feeling of fear itself, that raw emotion in its very bare quality, then there's no problem with fearful situations. We can go into a fearful situation. It may still bring up the emotion of fear. But if I can experience that fear and don't have a problem with that, the situation is no longer a barrier. The fear is not a barrier.

As we open to our fear, we actually start taking its power away. Fear holds its grip of power because we're afraid to confront it, because we won't let ourselves experience it. As we open more and more, feel how it is in the body, feel how it is in the mind, see the thoughts that arise about fear, it starts to lose its charge.

Those are a few of the aspects of aversion that I wanted to mention.

The third of the hindrances we've talked about a bit already on the retreat. It has to do with sleepiness. Classically, it's called in English sloth and torpor. I love this phrasing, sloth and torpor. When was the last time you told somebody you were feeling particularly slothful today? A lot of these Dharma terms got translated when Victoria was still Queen of England, and they have some of that era of terminology still. But I like this particular one.

There was an early maintenance crew around this center. I was on staff here in the early days. It's an early maintenance crew that were not exactly known for their work ethic—and totally unlike the current maintenance staff, I want to stress that. But in the old days, they acquired the nicknames of McSloth and McTorpor. I like this hindrance for its historical relevance.

With sloth or torpor, one is a physical manifestation, one's more a mental manifestation, and dullness and drowsiness manifest in both. The basic effect is the mind is cloudy, and you just can't see clearly. There's a lack of energy. You can't connect to the breath. You can't connect with the body. Everything's seen through a fog or through a haze.

And sometimes it's not very unpleasant. I mean, I've spent many a pleasant hour on the cushion, sort of lost in this fog, as I imagine some of you may have over the last couple of days, too. But while we're lost in that fog, we're not deepening the awareness. The meditation is not really developing because the mindfulness is not really present. It's not strong.

This is very common in the first days of retreat. Continue to work with it with the antidote of energy, as I think we've talked about a couple of times. When you're feeling this dullness of mind or body, do something to arouse energy. That's what counters it. So you can sit up straighter, you can open your eyes, you can stand up in a meditation. That's perfectly good etiquette in the meditation hall. Next walking period, go for a brisk walk, splash some water on your face, make sure you get enough sleep at night.

Whatever you can do to pick up the physical energy will help with this particular hindrance. Usually after the first three, maybe four days of a retreat, this really decreases for people. We've made the adjustment to the retreat setting, the energy starts to come in from another source, and there's not so much problem with this particular hindrance.

If, however, the dullness and drowsiness continue to be there a lot for you after the first three or four days, then I'd get curious. And I'd start to investigate. Because sometimes this dullness comes down as a kind of shield to keep you from feeling something.

So it's as though we'll be sitting in meditation, things are fairly clear, and out of the corner of our eye we get a little glimpse of something that we're not very comfortable with. Some memory, some emotion, some little glimmer starts to come through and then, boom, down comes the veil as a way of not experiencing it. So sleepiness sometimes manifests as a device to keep us from feeling. If it continues a lot after the first three or four days, get curious about that and start to see just before the sleepiness comes what was going on, what was your experience, what was happening.

With restlessness and agitation, it's just the opposite of sleepiness. There's too much energy. So you'll come into the hall and you'll feel like the body's just on fire with this energy. The thoughts are very active. They're racing. The emotions are in high gear. And you'll feel like you just can't sit still for another minute on your zafu or you'll go crazy. And yet somehow you manage to keep doing it.

Let yourself again just feel what this restlessness feels like. Give yourself to it. Let yourself just embrace that feeling of agitation or restlessness. As Jack Kornfield says, let yourself become the first meditator to die on your cushion from restlessness. See if it happens.

In working with restlessness, the antidote to restlessness is calm. So, for instance, at the start of the sitting where you're starting to feel restless, you might just take a few deep breaths, just deep in the sense of calm and relaxation. Often we think that if I'm restless, it's because I've lost concentration. I need to bring back a focus on the breath and we'll try to concentrate more. But that actually increases the energy and can just increase the restlessness.

So often with restlessness it's more helpful to give the mind a big, big box. Give that energy a big space to kind of roam around in. And one of the things I recommend if you're feeling restless is to meditate for a while on sounds. Let your awareness become very broad and take in all the sounds. And that gives the energy a big field to roam around in. It can also be helpful to ground the attention lower in the body. Because restless energy has a way of rising up into the head. Put the attention lower down and really have that sense of connecting with the earth.

Again, with restlessness, take a look. Is there something that the restlessness is masking? Was there some unpleasant feeling just before you became very restless, for instance, and wanted to leave the hall? Take a look.

Doubt is the last of the hindrances, and you know when doubt has arrived because you start hearing in your mind the words, "What on earth am I doing here?" Also very common in the first days of a retreat. It may be doubts about the practice. Does this

mindfulness stuff really go anywhere? It might be doubts about the teachings. You know, what are those people talking about up front anyway? About the teachers, about the other people, about ourselves. You know, we may feel other people can do this. I open my eyes, they're all sitting like Buddhas or Buddhinis. But I can't do this. I can't do this practice.

There's a profound spiritual truth actually in that phrase—I can't do this—but we'll leave that for another talk.

The fact is this practice works by a law that is as unavoidable as the law of gravity. If you do mindfulness, it leads to freedom. There are no two ways about that. But doubt is a particularly insidious hindrance. Because when doubt is there, if we believe it, it saps our energy to practice. We stop looking.

As William Blake said about the sun, if the sun would doubt, it would immediately go out. And that's what happens to our practice when we doubt—our practice goes out.

So please, when you catch this factor of doubt, do something to work with it. The antidote to doubt is faith. Do something that re-strengthens your faith. Find that faith that you came in with. You all came in from your outside lives with this determination and conviction to give yourself to this process for nine days with the hope of finding peace or clarity, understanding and compassion. Remember what you came here for. Remember what motivated you. It was a good reason then and it's a good reason now.

Reflect on the Dharma. What could be more important than developing in wisdom and understanding and love and compassion? How could you possibly spend your time more fruitfully?

And then talk to one of us in a group interview or individual interview. Please bring out your doubt and please bring out your questions. It's not something to be ashamed of or want to hide away. Really, part of being a student is bringing out the deep questions that you have about the practice and opening those up for discussion and another perspective.

So just to summarize, there are a few steps in relating to the hindrances. The very first and most important one is to know that the hindrance is at work. And in that naming, it can be helpful. Know whether you're experiencing wanting or disliking or sleepiness or restlessness or doubt.

Then if you can, open to it and just let yourself feel it. Get familiar with it. We're not trying to make these states go away. Like the Aitken Roshi quote last night was pointing to, it's not that these forces will go away from our mind, but if we can understand them thoroughly, we can be free of them even as they arise. That's the direction of freedom. So open to them, let them come, experience them, get to know them.

But sometimes these hindrances can still overwhelm our mindfulness. We can try to be with them, but sometimes the storyline is just too strong. The story they're painting just sweeps us away into the fantasy, into the story. We lose our mindfulness. If your mindfulness is being overwhelmed, you can't stay with the direct experience, then apply an antidote. Not out of aversion, not because you want the hindrance to go away, but out of wisdom so that you restore mindfulness.

The basic antidotes, as I mentioned: for desire, you can reflect on the impermanence of gratification. For aversion, the classic antidote is metta. For sleepiness, it's energy. For restlessness, it's calm. And for doubt, it's faith. Let's see if you can just tap back into those energies.

And finally, if all else fails, don't think about letting it go. Just think about letting it be. Just let it be and surrender to it. And sometimes it'll just hang around for a while. That's okay, because the other thing is it'll also pass away. Let it come, let it be, and then let it go. It's this opening with real acceptance that really transforms us in our practice.

Freedom is not about getting rid of the states. It's about opening and accepting them. Then we take the conflict out of our life. Then we take this lack of self-acceptance out. If we can open to these states, we no longer have to fight them. And ultimately, when we understand them, they're not even disturbing.

And we find that we can more and more bring into these energies a kind of friendly attention. Even when they come, they may not have been the guests we invited to the party, but they're the guests that showed up. And if we can open to them with friendliness, we'll have a great party.

This is really the miracle of our practice, because originally these guests show up and we hate them. We're caught in that mind of hating. But if we can bring forth in that moment a heart of friendliness and clear seeing, then we've transformed that moment from a moment of hatred to a moment of friendliness and clarity. This is pure magic.

This is really the alchemy of our practice—that moment of transformation. There's no technique that can show you how to do this. Sometimes you have to dig deep into your hearts to be able to open to these energies. But that potential is there in each of us. It's the challenge of our practice. And as we do it more and more, it comes easier and easier. We get very good at it. And this is what really transforms our lives.

One of my Tibetan teachers, a young lama named Sogyal Rinpoche, put it this way: "The sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusion." The liberation of confusion. And that's what you're doing in a moment when you open to one of these difficult energies. You're liberating the confusion and replacing it with a truly awakened energy and awakened nature.

I'd like to close with a quotation from Rumi—a poem called "The Guest House":

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness.
Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all.
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows
who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice—
meet them at the door laughing
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

Let's sit for just a minute together.

CHAPTER 209

Dharma in the Workplace

Guy Armstrong · 2h03

In this pioneering daylong retreat at Spirit Rock, Guy Armstrong examines how to integrate Dharma practice into our working lives. Drawing from his diverse background in technology, education, and the Peace Corps, Armstrong frames workplace practice through the Buddha's Eightfold Path, organized into three areas: ethical conduct (sīla), meditation (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). He addresses right livelihood, exploring what constitutes appropriate work for practitioners and whether service work is necessary. The talk covers formal meditation practices that can be adapted for the workplace—from brief breathing breaks to metta practice during meetings and commutes—as well as informal mindfulness in relationships with difficult colleagues. Armstrong discusses the eight worldly concerns (pleasure/pain, gain/loss, praise/blame, fame/disgrace) and how attachment to these creates suffering in professional settings. He emphasizes that workplace relationships offer rich opportunities for spiritual development, often more challenging than our chosen personal relationships. The session includes practical guidance on maintaining right intention, dealing with ambition and competitiveness, and cultivating the bodhisattva spirit of service within organizational structures. Armstrong's honest sharing of his own struggles with ego and ambition during his Microsoft years provides authentic examples of how practice can transform our relationship to work, status, and material success.

Good morning. I'd like to welcome you all to this day at Spirit Rock exploring Dharma in the Workplace. This is the first time we've devoted an entire day to this theme, so from my perspective, the whole experience is quite experimental. We'll simply have to see how it unfolds. But I'm truly delighted to see you all here today.

I found myself filled with enthusiasm while preparing for this day, because it addresses a topic I care deeply about, yet I've never really had the opportunity to explore it with others. I believe this could serve as an interesting opening both for me and hopefully for all of you as well.

My name is Guy Armstrong, and I'm one of the teachers here at Spirit Rock. I've also worked in various other fields, many completely unconnected to Buddhism or Dharma practice, which I'll discuss shortly. What I particularly appreciate about today is how rarely these two domains—Dharma and our relationships at work—have the chance to come together. Sometimes I wonder if they're even meant to be integrated at all.

I was watching the televised proceedings on C-SPAN this week of the Senate Judiciary Committee conducting an investigation called "Competition in the Computer Industry." The proceedings were chaired by Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah, and featured three prominent computer industry leaders: Bill Gates of Microsoft, Scott McNealy of Sun, and Jim Barksdale of Netscape—companies currently engaged in bitter rivalries.

Essentially, the entire hearing was designed to increase pressure on Microsoft, which was the real purpose behind the proceedings. There's a federal antitrust investigation occurring concurrently. This made me wonder whether concepts like right speech and truth-telling have any place at all in our public forums. The committee chairman, who is notably anti-Microsoft, declared with a perfectly straight face, "This proceeding today is not directed to be critical of any one company in particular." Right.

Then Bill Gates, called upon to defend Microsoft's business practices, replied with equal composure, "No, Microsoft does not have a monopoly in PC operating systems." Right.

There's often this sense in the world of work, and certainly in public discourse, of a constant parrying of words where truthfulness—and Dharma is fundamentally about truth—doesn't really have space to exist. This may make it challenging for us to bring these two worlds together.

I also recently read a Wall Street Journal story about entrepreneurs who had made hundreds of millions of dollars in various startup ventures, again in the computer industry, claiming that their interest in their work wasn't about money. Not about money. Yet they quoted a venture capitalist connected to one of these firms who explained, "The idea is, first we do an IPO so that the stock options of all employees become valuable and they get rich. Then the next step is we aim to get bought out by a larger company through merger and acquisition. They purchase us and our stock rises further, giving us a double pop." Meanwhile, the company heads maintain, "This isn't about money." Excuse me.

In my work life, apart from the Dharma teaching I began in 1984, I've worked as a computer programmer. I served as a teacher overseas in the Peace Corps for two years in Malaysia. I helped run a small alternative school in Palo Alto during the mid-seventies when such ventures were quite popular. What worked best about our school, I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit, was its name: the Renaissance School for Creative Unfoldment. We didn't quite live up to that potential, but it was certainly an impressive name.

My most recent position outside the Dharma world was five years with Microsoft, which I began in technical support because I enjoyed introducing people to computers. I then moved naturally into sales and eventually into sales management. That represents my most recent experience, and it happens to be with the company currently under federal scrutiny.

I still carry this bag from my Microsoft days—it serves as my economical briefcase. I was reflecting that much like the company itself, it's actually held up remarkably well. It's ten years old now, but it's beginning to show some wear. That's happening to Microsoft as well, so it seems quite fitting.

What I'd like us to explore today represents just one of many possible approaches to this subject. This is not a corporate workshop on practicing mindfulness in the workplace, though we'll certainly touch on that important aspect. I'm not a management consultant, so I won't attempt to advise on employee relations or enlightened HR policies. I don't have any David Whyte poems to share, so some of you may be disappointed and wish to leave immediately.

I am primarily a Dharma teacher, and what I want to discuss today is the life of work viewed through the lens of Dharma practice—specifically for people committed to following the Buddha's teachings via the Eightfold Path. I believe this represents a very rich field for inquiry and investigation. I think all of us, having been practitioners for some time, have much to share from our own struggles and efforts to integrate these two worlds.

Today will combine some instruction from the front—I do have several points I'd like to address—but I also want to provide ample time for discussion, both in our large group where we can all listen to one another, and in various small group formats. This will allow you to speak more personally with each other, hear one another's challenges, and express your own. Since all of you have developed different approaches and understandings in this field, we can learn from one another.

This is a day where I intend to learn a great deal from you, while hopefully sharing some of my own reflections as well.

I'd like to just get a feel for the group to begin with. I'm curious, because people can come into these questions from many different angles.

How many of you are currently involved in the world of business? How many earn your livelihoods there? Great. So it looks like somewhere between a third and a half of the group.

How many of you are in some form of administration that involves service or nonprofit? Good, thanks.

How many of you are doing direct service work, like teachers, therapists? Thank you.

How many of you work with your hands? Good. Please enlighten me if there are more, but I'm thinking of people like builders, carpenters, fine artists, craftspeople, cooks. Gardeners, body workers. I don't quite put typists or clerical workers in that category.

You all are a lucky group because you actually get to use your work as mindfulness practice. That's a rather rare category. The so-called information workers find it very hard to combine work with practice directly. If you're sitting in front of a computer screen all day or your main task is intense interactions with other people, it's difficult to make that strictly a mindfulness practice, although we'll talk about ways to bring that in. But for people who actually work with your hands, it lends itself very well to that.

Developing Dharma in the workplace is no different than developing Dharma in all of our life. We shouldn't compartmentalize or separate these two, and we shouldn't imagine that there's a magic bullet for bringing Dharma alive in work any more than there's a magic bullet for bringing Dharma alive in all of our lives. The Dharma practice of our life is a lifelong project. If you believe the teachings of the Buddha on rebirth, it may be a project of many lifetimes. At any rate, it's not a small-scale endeavor. And bringing Dharma alive in the workplace is no different.

I actually believe that our aspirations, our goals in the workplace should be no different than our goals in our whole life, which is that we would like to embody in our work our deepest human potential for awakening, for living with true wisdom and compassion. So these are the standards and the goals that I think we should be aiming to bring into our work as well. I really don't see any difference between the two. And I think as the day goes on and we talk about some of these issues in more detail, hopefully we can get a flavor of why that is.

Just as practice transforms our daily life, our everyday life, so practice also ought to transform our work. And if it doesn't, then it may not be working. The practice may not be working.

In my own life, I've experienced a tremendous change in my relationship to work. The first job I had when I got out of college was in 1969. The Vietnam War was going on, and I took a job with Shell Oil in Houston, Texas, as a computer programmer. I was doing Fortran programming on a large mainframe. I absolutely hated it. I hated the work.

I was stuck in a small office—a private office that didn't have any windows. Even the door didn't have a window. I was basically cooped up in that office for eight hours a day reading manuals and writing programs.

I didn't have a heart connection with anyone else who worked there. I was starting to get interested in Buddhism and the whole field of psychology, and at Shell Oil in 1969 Texas, I couldn't find anybody else who shared these interests. I felt very isolated, and I was miserable. That was the beginning of my work career.

Later, sort of midway in my career life, I was working at Hewlett Packard in California. There I felt a lot more connection with people. I felt a lot more openness from the company.

I was kind of in my hippie phase then, so I actually had very long hair and a beard. I'd come to work in jeans. That was fine with HP. One day on Halloween, we dressed up in costumes, so I wore a business suit. It was my Halloween costume that year. I felt like the bridges were starting to be made.

When I worked at Microsoft—oh, but one other thing I want to say about HP—I still felt overwhelmed and fearful in my work setting. I felt that the corporation was too large and too impersonal, and I was just lost within that. I felt very much exposed and at risk. I now look back and see that mostly as a function of my own psychology at the time.

In my latest job with Microsoft, I felt that I had grown up enough that I was actually able to play a constructive role in the office, helping other people who felt threatened or vulnerable or at risk. I could at least be a sympathetic ear, a sympathetic shoulder. So in my own personal trajectory, I can see my situation go from being isolated, from being fearful, from feeling overwhelmed, to feeling—I won't say in charge because it's too volatile a company—but feeling comfortable, feeling that I could provide some stability and provide an ear to other people in the organization.

This is just one way in which, as we mature as people, we have the opportunity to bring a different spirit to our work. And practice should aim at moving us along that kind of continuum.

I'd also suggest that the workplace may be the richest area in which we can test our Dharma understanding and apply our Dharma understanding. You know, in our family, in our personal life, we have a lot of choice about who we're with, who we spend our time with. Not so much with our children, granted, but usually there's a lot of love there

to begin with. Certainly with our choice of partners, with the friends that we spend our time with. In some ways we can tailor that situation to suit our likes and dislikes a little better.

In the workplace, those choices are taken away from us, and we can end up spending quite a lot of time with people we might never have wanted to walk through the same door with, much less hang out with for eight hours a day.

The workplace, I feel, for most of us today, is our primary community. It's a little bit scary that the way our society has been structured through the Industrial Revolution is that our community, for most of us, is not where we live. When you think about the way humans have grown up on this earth for the last million years, our community has been the people near whom we live, who have worked together with us to survive, who become part of our extended family, and that we share our whole lives with, usually from birth to death.

With the Industrial Revolution, that has all changed. That kind of community has been killed away for most of us. But for most of us, the people that we spend more time with, the people that we hang out with, the people we interact with the most, are often the people at work.

So then the real test of our Dharma practice is, can we bring our understanding and our kindness and our compassion into those relationships? And it's difficult because we don't have the element of choice there.

The main thrust of our Dharma practice in our life or in our work is to take the self-centeredness out of our life. In brief summary, that's what Dharma practice is all about: taking out this self-centered attitude that thinks that my needs and wants should be the center of my universe. As we take that self-centeredness out in all of our life, we open up to more compassion and more kindness.

But the work setting is no different. It is entirely possible to approach our work without as much self-centered investment. And when we do that, we become a much cleaner vehicle for the Dharma. Those of you who are in direct service know this firsthand, that when we aren't present, something else can come through us that can really help people. But for anyone who's in a life of relationship, the opportunity for service is there by being more absent, by not being so self-oriented in our views.

This is a comment from Krishnamurti, which is talking about love, but I think it can also apply just as well to the relationships in work: "Love in relationship is a purifying process as it reveals the ways of the self. Without this revelation, relationship has little

significance." I feel this is very true of our relationships at work. If we are not using our work situation to illuminate ourself—and another way to say that would be our clinging and grasping and identification—then work has little significance beyond survival.

It's very important to begin to inquire in the work setting: what is it revealing of the ways in which I'm holding, of the ways in which I'm bound?

The Buddha basically gave us the three main areas of the Eightfold Path in which to look at this question. So this is the way I'd like to structure the day today. The Buddha divided the Eightfold Path, this path to awakening, into the areas of ethical conduct, sometimes called virtue, of meditation, which involves the fields of effort, of concentration, and of mindfulness, and the third of the fields is wisdom or understanding.

So what I'd like to do is to really look at our relationship to work, look at our workplace environment in the light of ethical conduct, of meditation, formal meditation practice, and wisdom or understanding. I think that any approach to work that doesn't involve looking at all three of these areas is going to be incomplete. We really need to take a close look at all three of these as they impact our work.

So the way I've basically structured the day is that I want to give a short talk on each of these three topics—virtue, meditation, and wisdom—as it applies to our life of work. After the talk, I'd like there to be some time for discussion in the large group, but then I have specific questions or areas that I think it might be helpful to investigate through small groups. So typically after a talk, we'll break into smaller groups, maybe about five or six, seven, for you all to share your understandings in those areas. Then come back together and hear what's come out of the large group. Then we'll put some sitting time in throughout the day so that we can all come to a greater stillness, greater depth, and that will allow these issues to have a deeper resonance for us.

I wonder if there are any questions or comments about the day so far. We'll get into all these areas in more detail. So if it's a specific area on mindfulness, for example, I'd ask you to hold that.

But any questions about the basic themes?

"I have more of a comment. I haven't attended one of your sittings before, and I'm delighted to have an experience with someone that doesn't start from a psychology background and has come to the Dharma and has started from the technical world."

"Okay. So it's very interesting."

"Okay, thanks. Yeah, I feel a deep relationship between my love of science and my love of the Dharma, because I basically feel that what the Buddha put out was the science of happiness. He just laid out very clearly, if you want to be happy in a wise way, here are the steps to take to do it. It's empirically verifiable, and each of us is our own laboratory for doing that."

"Thanks."

Any other comments, questions?

Okay, then I'd like to begin the day actually with a period of sitting, hopefully to allow us all to settle in a bit. And this will be about a 30-minute period of sitting meditation. I'll give some brief instructions because the day is open to those who haven't had meditation background. Let me just ask, are there people here who haven't had meditation instruction at Spirit Rock before? Okay? That's great. So I will give meditation instruction through this period.

Another aspect of ethical conduct is right livelihood. This is another way that the Buddha framed it. Unfortunately, the teachings of the Buddha aren't a great amount of help in this area. The Buddha was largely teaching monks and nuns. They have a very different form of livelihood. It's called begging. Now, if any of you want to learn how to be good beggars, the Buddhist texts provide great instruction. But the Buddha didn't envisage job titles like multimedia graphics engineer or substance abuse counselor. So he didn't have many discourses on those kinds of livelihood.

Here's what he said about right livelihood, just to give you an idea. "And what, friends, is right livelihood? Here a disciple, having abandoned wrong livelihood, earns his living by right livelihood. This is called right livelihood." Okay? Have you got that?

Now, there are certain things that the Buddha defined as wrong livelihood, specifically trading in weapons, trading in living beings, trading in meat or fish, slaughtered animals, because the spirit of that goes against the first precept, which is not killing, trading in drugs and intoxicants—not pharmaceutical drugs, not medically alleviating drugs, but intoxicating drugs—and trading in poisons. Those are considered to be wrong forms of livelihood or any livelihood that transgresses the precepts.

So I think for ourselves in the modern world, there are other issues about right livelihood. I think one of the big ones is, is this the right work for me? Is this the job that lets me flower as a Dharma practitioner and as a person? Is it a job that contributes to my unfolding? It's a big question. Does it contribute to the well-being of myself and others? Or is it taking away? Is it a job that's injuring my well-being and injuring the well-being of others?

A question that comes in often for practitioners who are committed to the path of Dharma is, do I need to be involved in service work? Because a lot of jobs aren't directly in service work. When I was selling Microsoft software, I mean, for God's sake, what difference does it make if the customer ends up running Microsoft Word or WordPerfect, right? I'm not making anybody's life better. I'm carrying out the aims of a business whose aim is to make money.

So, is it important for a Dharma practitioner to be involved in a job that's directly service-oriented? And I think that's a big question. I think it's a question each person has to answer personally. So I don't think there's a blanket answer.

For myself, I found a service component in my life through going through different jobs. At one part of my life, I was doing part-time work as a computer consultant and part-time work as a Dharma teacher. Other times, I've been full-time in one or another, a service job or a computing job. And that was the way that I brought it into my life, and that was okay for me. But it's a question I think everybody needs to look at for themselves. And I would recommend that people find a way to serve, even if it's not through their livelihood.

But those are some of the things I thought we could discuss when we come back.

I don't think there's a blanket answer to the question of how to integrate service into our livelihood. For myself, I found a service component through going through different jobs. At one part of my life, I was doing part-time work as a computer consultant and part-time work as a Dharma teacher. Other times, I've been full-time in one or another—either a service job or a computing job. That was the way I brought it into my life, and that worked for me. But it's a question I think everybody needs to look at for themselves. I would recommend that people find a way to serve, even if it's not through their livelihood directly.

That's basically all I wanted to say about ethical conduct. Are there any questions or comments?

Well, I actually didn't know about the sexual component of that situation until months later. So mostly what I saw was a bad decision taking place. I also realized that if I had tried to do anything about that bad decision, nothing would have come of it. I would have created a lot of trouble for myself, and the outside situation wouldn't have changed at all.

My manager actually did sort of hurl himself at that wall and created a lot of enemies among the people who were supporting that decision. He ended up leaving the company under a cloud—and since I'm not mentioning any names, I'll tell you he left

behind ten thousand options in Microsoft stock that today would be worth twenty-eight million dollars. I just did the calculation yesterday because I was curious. I'll tell him that next time I see him. Spirit Rock says don't worry about it.

When you were talking about how sometimes we don't intervene out of our own timidity, what I've noticed is that we have that anxiety, so we don't intervene. Later, when things escalate or continue, we're so enraged that when we do intervene, we do it with blame and charge. That's hard to remember when you're faced with the fear though.

Yes, that's a very good point. Often when the thing first comes up, it may look like a smaller thing at that point, and we think we can let this go by. But we accumulate a charge around it, and then when it does get to be a bigger thing—which most problems do if they're not dealt with—our charge is bigger and the whole stakes are bigger. That's really insightful. Thank you.

You talk about service and making that choice—with respect to being engaged Buddhists, isn't that a choice? I mean, one of the choices is to sit in a monastery meditating. The other is engaging and getting out in the streets, practicing business, participating, really showing that Buddhism and the Eightfold Path can be practiced in an environment of greed and everything else.

I definitely believe that. I think the work world, the business world particularly, needs more examples of spiritual business. So I think it does make a difference, and it can definitely be a service component of a business job. Finding that service component in a business job is an important thing for a practitioner to do.

Can't that be through the person's individual integrity and just having that quality, with people looking up to them knowing that they're doing that?

I definitely think it can. I also think that most businesses—certainly publicly owned businesses—have a bottom line commitment to making a profit for the shareholders. So you could say the overt or stated aim of the organization is not necessarily along service goals. As a person working within the organization and committed to it, one of our goals is certainly not an explicitly stated service goal—it's to help the company make more money. So I see there's a blend. I think it's important in that situation to respect the company's orientation, but also to find our own service meaning within that.

When I'm talking about the individual—the leader of the company being able to engage people day-to-day in business—doesn't that provide a great service?

Yes, I think it does. I think an individual at any level, whether it's a CEO or the person at the very bottom of the hierarchy, can manifest that integrity and commitment to ethics that makes a very strong statement in the world—and that's an important statement.

I think one has to be careful when you start talking about profit for shareholders or stakeholders, because that becomes kind of political economics rather than substance. There's nothing wrong with making a profit for shareholders, especially if it provides hundreds and thousands of people with right livelihood.

I don't feel bad about that at all. I don't feel opposed to the basic capitalistic direction of our society or companies making a profit. As you say, it provides many benefits to workers and their families and creates positive ripple effects. At one point, my division of Hewlett-Packard was moving up to Oregon.

I was invited to make the move up there. One of the statistics they shared at the time—I don't know if it's true—is that every job they brought to the town of Corvallis in Oregon would create five other jobs in that economy. So that's terrific.

One of the questions is that we tend to always look at service as being the externalization or the form of how we spend our time or what we actually do. At least for me, I found that in many years in business and attempting to find ways to have a spiritual practice in business, service actually comes from an internal process of how to address the conflicts and the paradoxes and how to come to some form of peace inside oneself and then transmute the patterns that are in the mass consciousness. That's actually where the service occurs, rather than looking like one is doing something that is of service, but maybe doing it in a relatively unconscious way.

It's certainly true. There are lots of people in so-called service jobs who may be doing more harm than good. I'm reminded of a book I just read called Angela's Ashes. I don't know if any of you have read that. I thought it was a fantastic book. This poor kid was growing up in a poor section of Ireland in the 1930s, and his teachers—teachers are supposed to be educating and bringing out the best in young people—were so harsh and so abusive and so dismissive that I'm surprised they didn't cripple his spirit entirely. So it's a very useful point.

"In practicing a number of these precepts, I find it very difficult to protect myself from the demands of the people around me that I just get on with it. If I'm in a place where I don't want to make a decision now because I need to sit with it or watch things evolve, there's a whole way of communicating that I need to do it in a certain way.

Without yet coming across as—and this is practice—there's a whole world of people who just want you to go, do, decide, be, get it over with, and get on to the next thing. I think that's, for me, one of the largest challenges: to say, not yet."

It's difficult, and this kind of comes down to the question of how do we influence other people around us and what kind of influence can we have? I think we have to be realistic that we may not always be able to change the outcome of the decision-making process—one of whose decisions is time frame of the decision. So we can certainly put in our voice of deliberation and call for more time for deliberation, and I think that's usually useful, while realizing that sometimes it's going to be a compromise and we may not be able to make that happen.

So not to think that we aren't having any influence if the decision doesn't always go our way, but just by putting out that request for more pace, a more leisurely deliberation, you may actually be influencing the process in ways that don't make it appear that there's an outright win, but it may be slowing it down somewhat. So it still seems like a good thing to keep doing. And in that way, you're kind of like a brake pad. The wheel's running like this. You're kind of like a brake pad. You might get worn down a little doing that over and over. But the brake pad is an important part of an organization.

"When you mentioned timidity, I was really quite struck by that. I work in a public library, and I'm a manager there, and it has nothing to do with the library, but the timidity factor is a very powerful and strong one, I think, because the risks are seen as so great. Because the risk area and the threat of risk is a significant problem, timidity just comes to play much too often. And courage doesn't blossom as you wish it could."

There's a lot of inertia also in the status quo. The one who begins to even pull interpersonal relationships into the light of awareness in a workplace is bringing in a threat for many people, because there's often an unspoken agreement not to talk about interpersonal dynamics in a business setting or a work setting. So that's a risky thing to do.

Thank you all for the comments. What I'd like to do right now is to take about a ten-minute break.

I'd like to talk now about the second part of the Eightfold Path, which is meditation. It consists of three components, which are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. I don't want to get so detailed on the three aspects, but what I'd like to talk about is the issues of formal practice in the workplace and informal practice in the workplace, because I think they can both be helpful.

How many times have you heard meditation teachers say something like this? "In the middle of your work day, take three minutes, stop what you're doing, sit there and breathe." How many people have heard an instruction like that? How many people have done it? Almost as many. How many people make it a regular part of your work life? Two. Thank you.

I'd like to come back a little later and ask you all to comment on that. I think it can be a really important part of work life. And when we're looking at the work setting, one of the qualities we need to bring in more than we currently do is the quality of right effort.

When you look at the difference between—I'm sure a lot of you have done day longs of meditation or you've done certainly forty-five minute periods of meditation. A lot of you I know have done intensive retreats, silent retreats of seven days or longer of meditation. The element in there that's unique when we do the formal practice is the coming back to the present.

that we have the intention and we remember to do that again and again. It's that coming back that does the work. That's what starts the process of change.

What happens when we get involved in a work day is we forget to do that. So our work day is not meditation because we're not bringing in that moment after moment effort of coming back into the present moment. The best way to make your work day more of a meditation day is to do that more often—just to remind yourself in more moments to come back to the present and feel what's happening.

A real support for that can be just taking a three-minute break in the middle of a busy day, putting the phone down, not looking at the computer screen, closing your eyes, and just being with your breath for three minutes. Now why, among all these smart people who have heard this instruction so many times, are there only two people in this room who do that?

I'd like to suggest a couple of reasons. One, we forget. Number two, when we stop in the middle of a busy work day, the experience isn't always so pleasant. Because what we find when we stop is we run into that mind that has been cranked up. We feel the thoughts going through so rapidly. We feel the agitation in the body. And it's not a place we're comfortable hanging out. That's been my experience. We don't like to sit in that place of suffering, which is self-created. We have generated that suffering through our own rapid-fire thinking and acting and behavior.

So a couple of things to say. One is, how's that thinking ever going to unravel? How's that pressure ever going to release unless we stop and give it time to vent? If you take the time and actually sit through it, whether it's three minutes at your desk or half an

hour when you come home from work, you may come home from work and that same thing's still going on and you think, "Geez, I've wasted this whole sitting period. I've done nothing but think for the whole thirty minutes." It's not a waste. The nice thing is that's the mind releasing its pressure. That's what it needs to do sometimes is just release. So the beautiful thing about taking that time when you come home from work is then you can go into the evening and some of the steam has been let out. Similarly in the workplace.

If you just take a few minutes and realize you're just going to be letting some of the steam off, you're not going to have that profound samadhi experience that you had on the sixth day of your last ten day at Yucca Valley, where the body dissolved and there was just light throughout your field of vision. That's probably not going to happen. But in stopping, you let some of the steam out, and that's useful.

The other thing that's important about that stopping is we actually feel what we're doing to ourselves with the pace of our work. The Buddha said, on a number of occasions, "There is one thing, my friends, that keeps you bound. That is the not seeing of suffering." When we don't see the extent to which we induce our own suffering in the workplace, we don't have any motivation to change it. If we're going to be serious about taking a more balanced approach, being kinder to ourselves, being a little bit slower in our pace, we have to see the suffering that comes from the push. And the best way to do that is to be right there in the middle of it.

So when you take that three-minute break—and now I know everybody's going to go incorporate it—when you take that three-minute break, don't have the idea that you're going to have three minutes of calm, but be willing to experience whatever is there. That's what's in the moment. If you have the idea you're going to go into three minutes of calm, forget it. You're just going to be really frustrated. But that's not what mindfulness is about. Mindfulness is not about having my three minutes of calm. Mindfulness is about feeling what's real. And what's real in this moment is this agitation that's a leftover of the pace. That's what we want to connect with. That's what connects us to the present moment. That is the truth of that moment. So just go ahead and experience that. That's okay. It's going on subconsciously anyway.

So I would encourage you to take those moments both as a break and as formal mindfulness practice. The other thing that you can do in the workplace is start to bring formal practice into periods that are not particularly productive. How much time do you spend in meetings just sort of wishing that that person would finish up their rambling harangue and get on with something useful? During that time, you could be doing something actually useful, which is you could be doing a metta practice. The practice of

loving-kindness, of directing thoughts of well-wishing to yourself and those around you is terrific meeting practice. And believe me, you can do plenty of it and still hear every word that's going by. We've got that much bandwidth. And it really changes—it can change the flavor of your participation in that meeting.

Otherwise, it might just be totally dead time. You can practice when you're waiting in a queue—when you dash out at lunch to do errands and find yourself waiting at the ATM, the dry cleaners, or the supermarket. You can do standing meditation there, feeling your feet on the ground, connecting with your breath. You can practice metta in those moments.

For a long time, I had a lengthy commute when I was working at Microsoft—about an hour and fifteen minutes each way. When I was a sales rep, it wasn't such a bad deal because I'd be out with clients during the day. But when I became a manager and had to be in the office more, reporting to the same place every day, it was a long drive.

For a long time, I tried doing mindfulness practice while driving. I wasn't very good at it. For some reason, I couldn't really keep my attention on my arms or stay with my breath. But what I found I could do much better was metta practice—the loving-kindness practice of sending these wishes to people around me. In the Bay Area, there were always people around me, no matter where I went.

Ordinarily I'd be bugged by the guy in front of me going too slow, or the guy behind me wanting to go too fast. One thing I noticed is that in any driving situation, I was the only person who wanted to go the right speed. Everybody else was too fast or too slow. The right speed for me was about ten miles over the posted speed limit, but I was the only person at that speed. So everybody else was basically an irritant to me—they were either in my way or trying to get me out of theirs.

Doing the metta practice really changed my attitude. I highly recommend that practice to you.

When you have to walk—from your office down to the photocopier—you could take that as the one time a day you do walking meditation. Don't try to do walking meditation everywhere you go; you're not going to enjoy it enough to sustain that. But pick one path that you traverse over and over again and simply say to yourself, "When I do this path, I'm going to do walking meditation." That means you just experience the feeling in your feet and legs as you walk. That's going to be your project during that time.

Finding little ways to bring practice into the work situation brings in more reminders of the life of Dharma and adds that little bit more calm and attention to our experience.

But I feel by far the vaster field of practice at work—and probably the more important area—is in the realm of relationships: relationships to others and relationships within ourselves.

What normally happens in the workplace is that some communication—whether it's a phone call, a meeting with a colleague, something a client says—triggers reactions in us. These reactions are often difficult for us to be with. It might be a sense of fear, feeling belittled or embarrassed, anger, or desire. You walk down the hallway and somebody says, "God, I can't wait to tell you—the boss just came in and gave me a ten percent pay raise." You know your pay raise last period was six percent, and you're supposed to be happy for them. So desire might stimulate wanting a pay raise yourself.

These qualities are an equal part of our meditational work and probably the more profound part of our practice in the work setting. There are many teachings from all the different Vipassana teachers about how to relate with anger, desire, and fear. I'm not going to cover that basic ground today—it's very important ground, central ground, but you can get that from many other sources.

What I want to encourage you to do is to take that as part of your meditation practice. Really learn how to work with the experiences of these difficult emotions, which in the classical tradition we call the hindrances—the forces that oppose clarity. They're forces that come again and again in a work setting and in our outside life.

So the question becomes: Do we have the courage to be with these states of mind? It's difficult to be with the agitation of the fast pace, perhaps the restlessness of that. It's also difficult to be with these emotional states. And I want to encourage the development of what we might call courage—the willingness to feel them.

That's all it starts with—just the willingness to feel them. Or what Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan teacher, called fearlessness.

I'd like to read you something from Trungpa's book *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, on relating with fear and fearlessness:

"Fear has to be acknowledged. We have to realize our fear and reconcile ourselves with fear. We should look at how we move, how we talk, how we conduct ourselves, how we chew our nails, how we sometimes put our hands in our pockets uselessly. Then we will find something about how fear is expressed in the form of restlessness. We must face the fact that fear is lurking in our lives, always, in everything we do.

On the other hand, acknowledging fear is not a cause for depression or discouragement. Because we possess such fear, we also are potentially entitled to experience fearlessness. True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear but going beyond fear. Unfortunately, in the English language, we don't have one word that means that. Fearlessness is the closest term, but by fearless we don't mean less fear, but beyond fear.

Going beyond fear begins when we examine our fear, our anxiety, our nervousness, concern, and restlessness. We must look into our fear and look beneath its veneer. Meditation is the tool for doing that."

The meditation we learn on our cushion that lets us contact those feelings as we're sitting is the same mind we then want to take into the workplace—to feel the fear when it arises and know it as fear, to feel the anger when it arises and know it as anger, and to let ourselves feel that as part of ourselves, not to disown it or say it shouldn't be happening.

Let me back up for a moment. When I first worked in the corporate world, I didn't have the support of meditation. I felt often overwhelmed. Of course, what I felt overwhelmed by were my own feelings—that's all that can really overwhelm us. Once I gained more stability of mind through meditation, I no longer felt overwhelmed in those settings. This was because one of the primary things meditation develops is the quality we call *samadhi*.

Samadhi is usually translated as concentration, which is a little misleading. In the West, when we say concentration, we mean focusing on one thing while ignoring everything else—there's an exclusive sense in how we use the word. But *samadhi* doesn't have that exclusive quality. *Samadhi*, as the Buddha spoke of it, means a mind that is whole. It means a mind that has become collected in its attention and energy. When the mind becomes collected, it has tremendous strength—firmness, steadiness, stability.

When you sit down and try to pay attention to your breath, sometimes you'll find you can connect with quite a few breaths in a row. Sometimes you'll find you're with one breath and then the mind wanders, then one breath and the mind wanders again. This quality of being able to keep attention where you want it is a sign of increasing *samadhi*. That's how you can tell when it's there. But the felt experience is that the mind feels very strong and stable.

It's that inner strength that lets us be in a difficult environment where our emotions are being stretched without feeling victimized or overwhelmed. In these three areas of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom, if the primary feeling in the workplace is vul-

nerability and fear of being overwhelmed, then the element that needs development is *samadhi*. That comes through the formal practice of meditation—that's what can give that kind of strength.

One aspect of *samadhi*, when it's well established and the mind becomes strong, is that this factor actually prevents difficult states of mind from arising, or from arising with any real strength. In classical terms, it's said that *samadhi* suppresses the hindrances. When that stability of mind is there, the upsets can't enter. Even if they do arise, they can't really take hold and dominate.

So that's one aspect—the formal practice. Through moments of mindfulness or *metta*, through the informal practice of being with the hindrances and difficult emotions in all their forms, we make the effort of coming back together.

There's another important area I want to discuss, which I heard about in several small groups—the whole question of simplicity. What is the balance in our life between work and practice? How much time do we give to one? How much to the other? Do we have the idea that we can enter into an eighty-hour or hundred-hour work week and come home well balanced? I question that.

For many, many years these teachings were preserved by monastics—nuns and monks who led very, very simple lives—and that was for a reason. I think there's a reason that perhaps the Dalai Lama doesn't have a wife, three kids, two cars, a big home in the suburbs, and the responsibility of heading a large corporation.

I think there's a reason for that.

That's not to say that as laypeople we can't work with these practices, but I think as laypeople it's really important that we take a look at the balance in our lives between work and practice.

In our terms, I would talk about this as simplicity, and it doesn't have anything to do with being poor. It has to do with having enough leisure time that your mind can actually settle. Whether it's settling through formal practice or whether it's settling through doing things that you enjoy, not so important. But finding some leisure time so the mind can settle a bit.

In the classical terms, this quality is talked about as renunciation. And the purpose of renunciation is not some moralistic ideal that being poor is better or having no relationships is better. It's a way of keeping the mind less cluttered. Because when the mind

is less cluttered, it can penetrate more deeply into life, and it can grow wisdom more easily. So it's a question that every person needs to look at and discover for themselves. Different people have really different tolerances for complexity than other people.

This is some advice from the Dalai Lama. It's from a book called Awakening the Mind, Enlightening the Heart:

"Practicing the Dharma does not mean you have to give up your profession or do away with your possessions. There are various levels of practice according to individual ability and mental disposition. Everyone cannot renounce the world and meditate in the mountains. This is not practical. How long could we survive? We would soon starve. We need farmers to grow food, and we need as well the support of the business community. People in all trades and professions can work honestly and conscientiously without contradicting the Dharma. In this way, they serve the community and help the overall economy. I usually advise people to devote half their time to the affairs of life and half their time to the practice of the teachings. This, I think, is a balanced approach for most people."

Wow. I usually don't advise people like that because I'd probably be laughed off the podium, but this is advice from the Dalai Lama. It's not to say that each of us has to do that, but it just might be an encouragement to look at where we've drawn that balance line in our life and think about other ways to approach it. 50-50. What would that look like in your life? Could you even imagine that? That's a challenge.

So there's something of a question about how do you make the trade-offs in your life between practice, your spiritual life, and your work commitments. And then also, of course, in that same level of importance come the family commitments. How do you balance those three? It's a difficult question.

When I was working at Microsoft, I got two weeks of vacation a year. And the first time I got my first week of vacation, I went on an intensive retreat. I signed up for the old students' retreat at Santa Sabina. I was going to do a week and then come back all charged up. I got about three days into it, and I realized that after that pressured life I'd been living for about the past year, I didn't want a bunch of bells telling me what I had to do that day either. And just going through this very demanding schedule with all these people around and queuing up for food, that was not what I wanted. I put my retreat practice aside for five years.

And I'm a retreat junkie. I'm a big-time retreat junkie. I love life in retreat. I've spent probably three years of my life in retreat over different times. I put it aside for five years because it wasn't what I wanted in my two weeks of vacation a year.

So one of the ways we can make this balance is by doing work for a while, you know, really full on, and then doing Dharma for a while more full on, or moving into a less work, more Dharma kind of balance. So it's not that we have to establish this 50-50 balance today, but to give some thought to how in our life we can find ways to bring in the Dharma practice more, ways to bring that balance about.

I think that's all that I want to say right now about meditation as it relates to the work environment. Again, the important pieces are balance between spiritual life and work life, formal practice in the work setting and finding ways to do that, and the informal practice of relating to our own inner life, our own emotional life.

Questions or comments?

"I have a question. When the Dalai Lama is saying 50% work and 50% practice, by practice does he mean formal meditation?"

Well, the way he understands it, I think he said practicing the teachings. So I think for him, study is also a way of practicing the teachings. Meditation practice is another way.

Hearing the teachings is a way. So I think all of that would come into it for him.

"But not some kind of incorporation practices?"

He doesn't mean that necessarily. I think it's fine to separate the work life over here and the practice life over here as formal practice. Study comes under that also, or hearing the teachings.

"In the work life, is that where we include family?"

No. That's why—sometimes it is hard work, but that's why I added that on as a third one when I talked about establishing balance. "What about sleep?" That's an important one, too. But I think the balance, really, as we talk about it, comes between family life, work life, and practice. So there's even more. And that's why I say I don't think you should think of applying this as 50% of every day has to be practice.

"Yes, Nancy, I wanted to comment since you raised the issue of the daily stopping. It turns out Mary and I—because I started doing it during a period of great difficulty, and actually it was a dharma teacher who suggested I get a clock, you know, watch the sound of the hour, which you know is the bane of my existence, people who don't turn off their watches, their beeper watches. And what surprised me—you said that you find that you have to be with the uncomfortable feelings. But what I also found was often there weren't uncomfortable things. So I had this idea that my life was very..."

So I think what we're going to do is skip the small discussion groups on this topic of meditation, the formal meditation. I don't know how much there is to say about that anyway, and spend just a few more minutes on that topic in the large group.

One of the things that I wanted to say is for people who work with your hands, you can actually use virtually all of your work time as formal meditation practice. The way to do that is just keep your attention in touch with the sensations in your body as you're working. Stay in touch with your arms and the sensations in your hands, and let that be your primary focus of attention.

So if you're doing body work, for instance, on a client, if you're doing carpentry, if you're doing gardening—you need to give a little bit of attention, obviously, to the task, but there's quite a bit of free attention that you can put in a formal meditation direction. So that's highly encouraged, and it's something you can also use in meetings. Just keep the attention focused in the body.

What I thought might be interesting to talk about now in the group is to put together the first two things that we've covered—which is right speech and right action and ethics in general—with these difficult emotions that come up in the workplace, which is the field of meditation, and talk about a question that often comes up: How do we deal with a difficult person at work? Almost everybody that I talk to has got one somewhere, one of these difficult people.

For myself, I had a manager who I felt was being very restrictive with me. I had gotten an email from a friend at corporate asking about what kind of computers I thought the technical support people in the field sales offices needed. So I wrote back a long email that said, well, I don't think our current specs are entirely adequate, and this is what I think the spec should be for our computer systems. I sent that back to this person, and they sent it around to a few other people.

Somehow my manager got copied on that mail. The decisions on computers were made at a district level, but out of corporate recommendations. My manager thought that I was being insulting to their specification and support. So she called me into the office, read me the riot act, said, "Don't you ever send email to that person again. I don't want your comments on this office going out across this whole corporation."

I tried to explain to her I was simply answering a mail that someone had sent me. But she didn't see it that way at all. I got so angry. I held my temper, and I bit my tongue. But I said what I felt about it, which was that I thought that was unfair, that it was very important for us to communicate with other people and our peers, and she wouldn't have any of it.

So I left the meeting. I was very angry. I went to the basement in the parking garage, and I just stormed around up and down the aisles of the garage for a while, just really angry. When I calmed back down enough to come back in, I just picked up working again. But I had a very rocky relationship with that person for quite a long time from my side, mainly around this incident.

Looking back now, I think there was a trust issue there that I just didn't see at the time. I didn't see, oh, she doesn't trust me. And looking back, I could see some earlier incidents. Now I understand. But for a long time, I just did not have a good relationship with the person.

We all probably have stories like that.

So I'm wondering if anyone would be willing to share stories about difficulties with coworkers, managers, or customers, and how you found skillful ways to navigate those situations?

One participant shared: "I work for a woman who is verbally abusive. She never really targeted me directly, but she would frequently attack our shared secretary—being sarcastic, critical, using that harsh tone of voice. When I first started working there, I thought, 'Oh my goodness, what am I going to do about this? I can't just ignore it. I have to do something.' But I was also new and wasn't sure how to give that kind of feedback to my boss.

"What I decided to do—and it took a long time to figure out the right approach—was to support our secretary in strengthening her own response. When she would complain to me about the boss, I would encourage her: 'Have you thought about just saying, "Don't speak to me that way"?' I also decided to model this behavior myself. Any time this woman would start using that tone with me, I would stop it right there. It's been five years now, and it almost never happens anymore. I don't know whether I had anything to do with that change, but certainly everyone seems happier in that situation."

That's beautiful. You can imagine how the secretary would feel going home after a day of being verbally attacked—she could be devastated for days. That kind of skillful intervention really makes a difference in people's lives.

Another participant offered: "I was working for a man who was restrictive, punitive, dismissive, unresponsive, uncooperative, and unsupportive, among other things. It was incredibly difficult. I tried every skillful means I could think of, but nothing worked. I just wasn't at a level to deal with it, so I suffered.

"During this period, I was doing a lot of driving and listening to tapes by Caroline Myss. She had one tape where she discussed the function of Judas in Christianity. Her conclusion was that Judas was responsible, in a way, for creating the Savior, because Christ had to die to be resurrected. She said, 'If there's a really terrible person in your life, thank that person as your Savior.'

"That was the only thing I could think of doing. Every time he did something horrible, I didn't say it out loud, but I thanked him internally. It was incredibly transformative—it changed everything. That internal response helped me, and eventually it helped me find my way out of there. When I finally left, I felt complete. I had taken what I needed to take and gotten what I needed to get."

These two responses beautifully illustrate the two different avenues we can pursue when working with difficult people. One is direct outer communication; the other is inner transformation. Sometimes it may be helpful to do both. Sometimes only one avenue is available to us. There are some difficult people in work situations you simply cannot talk to directly.

That's been my experience. To try would only compound the problem. So when that avenue is closed, inner transformation becomes the only path available.

The kind of gratitude you're feeling is exactly how the Dalai Lama speaks of feeling toward the Chinese, who came in and killed hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns, tortured people, and reduced the Tibetan population from about seven million to six million during their occupation. The Dalai Lama says something like, "We need to be grateful to our enemy"—and he used that word, "enemy," which is a strong word—because they teach us patience. He said, "How else would I have learned patience if it hadn't been for the presence of my enemy?"

That's a very difficult kind of appreciation to come to, but if you can find that or develop it as a way of practice, it can be really powerful. Thank you.

There's another situation where you don't necessarily have to deal with it alone. I had a new manager at a time when I was very depleted, and she was the opposite of helpful because she didn't know anything. She was also extremely anxious, so instead of being supportive—at least emotionally—she was adding to the burden by micromanaging and saying things that were so ignorant they felt insulting.

Luckily I had one other person I could go to. I was in very bad shape emotionally, a combination of my work situation and that person, and I had somebody I could tell the truth to. I really felt psychologically that this was character stuff with this person, and I saw absolutely no chance for help.

But the good news is we had a healthy person I had talked to, and he did research among all the people working for this person and found that my feelings were universal. What's amazing is that I was dead wrong about this person's ability to change. She was tasked with talking with all of us about what our needs were, and I was pleased that I could tell her the truth compassionately.

This woman meets all my needs now. It's like a miracle to me. That doesn't mean I think she's perfect—she's human and could be better in some things—but as far as really being a support and strategic resource, she really is. It's amazing.

That's terrific. It sounds like a healthy organization, in some ways. So looking for allies, especially people with influence and willingness to use it. That's a beautiful story. Thank you.

Others? Yes, Nancy?

I have worked with someone for years, and he and I have had a pattern of conflict for years. For a long time he could do nothing right in my mind, and probably I the same. At one point I was doing an explicit practice of generosity every day, doing something generous. One of the things about him that bothered me is that he speaks at length—it takes him half an hour to say good morning.

So he started this one day, and I said, as my practice of generosity... I thought through my schedule and said, "I can stay here until he finishes." I listened. There had been a meeting I had heard about, and I had already heard the other side of the story. He had, in my mind, done his usual screw-up.

He started telling me about the meeting—the background of the meeting, the background of the background—and finally got to how hurt he was by all of this. Suddenly he was a human being. All these years I had kept him as a bad guy, and suddenly what I heard was different. I couldn't hold him at a distance anymore.

Then he did something I actually appreciated. I ran into him in the stairwell and without even thinking said, "I really appreciate what you did."

Well, we now talk. And he doesn't talk at great length. He was disrespectful of everyone, including me, or so I thought. He is now much more respectful. I think it was this mutual disrespect that was feeding one another.

One of the things that irritated me was that he would do things—I thought he had very bad judgment—and then I would have to kind of backpedal and resolve the problems he had created. The other day he called me and said, "I'm thinking about doing this. What do you think?"

That's fantastic. It brings up a few different thoughts. For me, there's this lovely saying by Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching where he says, "If you want to shrink something, you must first let it expand." That really seems true with people who have a compulsive need to talk. As you say, what I've noticed is a lot of those people feel very isolated. It's a way of making some kind of connection or putting their story out. If you do give it the space, it takes away some of the need for that to happen. That's beautiful.

The other thing that I really appreciate in your story is the connection to the humanity. A lot of you probably know that when we do the loving-kindness practice, we start with the people that we feel close to—ourselves, friends, loved ones—and then we move to people we don't know, and then we move to people that we have a difficult time with. We call them, classically, the enemy or the difficult person.

One of the things that the metta practice does as you develop it is help you see—you can't do the metta practice without seeing what's lovable in each person. That's basically the focus of the metta practice. You find out what's lovable in the person and therefore why you can feel friendly toward them. Even in doing a difficult person, we're almost forced to see what's likable in that person. How would this person's mother see them, for instance?

I think that's a very skillful thing to do with someone who's a difficult person at work: just keep in mind, where's their humanity? How would this person's mother see them? It can really change our relationship.

Any other difficult person stories? Well, those were all really terrific. They all illustrated something different, and the movement within each one was inspiring. How long did this take—the whole situation, until it started to change? It was over a period of months from when that first conversation where I really listened. That's cool.

I thought I would talk now about the third area of the Eightfold Path, which is wisdom in the work situation. Then we'll move into some group discussion and small discussion groups.

There are two aspects of wisdom in the Buddha's teachings. The first is right view, or sometimes called right understanding. The second is right intention, or motivation, or aspiration—the attitude underlying our actions. Why do we do the actions we do?

I think it would be appropriate to talk about right intention in relation to our work. It poses the basic question: why do we work? I think it's really important that this intention in us be understood clearly because it's the background for everything we do at work.

In the teachings of the Buddha, this quality of intention or motivation is so important because it is the seed of karma. When the intention is wholesome, then the action that comes from it is said to be wholesome, and the results of a wholesome action are wholesome in our lives. If we can set our intention straight in the beginning with an action, then it unfolds in a wholesome way, and the fruits of that action come back to us in a wholesome way. This really is the nub of it.

Tibetans have a saying that everything rests on the tip of motivation. This is true in work as well.

But before we answer that question, I want to step back once more and examine why we practice. This gives us a fundamental direction in our life of motivation.

There's a beautiful saying of the Buddha that you've probably all heard: "Not to harm others, to help others if you can, and to purify the mind—this is the teaching of all the Buddhas." These three aspects form what I consider the basic aspiration or direction of Dharma practice.

When I think about right intention as it applies to work, I connect these three areas to it: not to harm, to help if we can, and to use work to purify our own hearts.

Some of the motivations that come to mind that fit within this wise intention: first, to provide the requisites for ourselves and our families. That's part of helping ourselves and our families. The requisites in the Buddhist sense are clearly defined as food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—the four things the community of monks and nuns was always said to need access to. These are wholesome motivations.

The motivation might be simply because we enjoy the work—it lets us use our talents and we find joy in that. That's a wholesome motivation. It might be directly because we believe we can benefit others or benefit the world through our work, embodying this attitude of non-harming and helping.

This is one of the real benefits I see in the work arena. I've known many people, including myself, who have tried to avoid the work arena at times in their lives. Sometimes I see people avoiding the arena of work for many, many years because the conflicts they feel around it are too severe. But I feel what people miss out on when they do that is the chance to develop confidence and self-esteem.

I think the workplace is actually excellent ground for developing this trust in ourselves. Confidence is sometimes talked about in Buddhist terms with the words confidence, trust, or faith. I think all these qualities come into play from developing ourselves through work. It can be an area where we honestly develop a deeper faith in life and a deeper faith in ourselves. And faith is what really allows for surrender.

These are healthy reasons for being involved in work.

What are some of the unhealthy ones? Basically, when the project of self or the project of ego gets involved in our work situation, motivation can go astray. The reason becomes not some of the wholesome motivations we mentioned, but work is used to aggrandize our sense of self or aggrandize the ego in some way.

I'm sure you've seen this in people who take jobs as a way of defining themselves. As they grow in status or power, their ego just gets grander and grander, and they become more and more of a pain to people around them. That's the kind of unhealthy motivation of work.

Because those kinds of approaches—using status or power or wealth to build up or inflate our sense of ourselves—only create more separation. They don't let us see the interconnectedness; they build separateness.

Of course, Dharma practice can be used in the same way: "I'm a practitioner, or I'm a Buddhist, so therefore I'm better than the people who aren't practicing, or better than the non-Buddhists." But hopefully within our meditation practice are the tools to see through that kind of pride, to see through that kind of comparison. In the work world, usually those tools of questioning, of investigation, of paring away the unwholesome aren't built in. So we have to do that work ourselves.

The Buddha identified eight concerns that tend to move the mind in an unhealthy direction that he called the eight worldly concerns. These are distinguished from what you might call right intention or right motivation—these are ones that lead us astray.

The eight worldly concerns are in four pairs: concerns with pleasure and pain, with loss and gain, with praise and blame, and with fame and disrepute.

It's not that there's anything wrong with any of these items. We all experience the alternation of these qualities in our lives. It's not like you've got your life wrong if there's blame, if somebody's criticizing you, if there's pain in your life. These things fluctuate for all of us. But if we get attached to these as the primary direction of our life, our motivation goes astray.

These things come naturally in the process of living, in the process of developing a livelihood. Sometimes they manifest on a huge scale. Someone mentioned last week that Bill Gates was worth $45 billion at current Microsoft stock price levels—$45 billion! Yet he says it's not about the money.

So it's not that these worldly conditions are wrong in themselves, but rather our clinging to them, being driven by them, or becoming obsessed with these results that brings suffering. It's when we tie ourselves to these outcomes as proof of our worth or validation of ourselves that we suffer.

I find it helpful to keep the eight worldly concerns in mind and regularly check: How much am I being driven by praise or blame? Am I doing something because I want personal glory, or because I genuinely want the outcome? Am I investing in a job that lacks inner meaning but promises wealth? Or am I following what I honestly love, and if wealth comes, it comes?

If you set your life's direction as following the Buddha's teachings—not to harm, to help others, and to purify the mind—this orientation itself becomes a safeguard against being consumed by the eight worldly concerns. But frankly, without this kind of spiritual or at least humanistic bent, it's very difficult not to be consumed by them.

You can observe this dynamic in Silicon Valley. The enormous wealth generated by high-tech startups reveals telling patterns. One report I read noted that people who have gotten rich through entrepreneurship in our generation have contributed less to charity than most previous generations—perhaps because they're still young, but there seems to be wealth pursued for its own sake, for enormous houses, multiple cars, and private jets that go far beyond what's needed.

Having a Dharma orientation while living in the world means—and this phrase may sound trite—being in the world but not of it. The societal mainstream is essentially fabricated from these eight concerns. So to work and play in the world without being dominated by these concerns requires a different strategy.

Letting go of the eight worldly concerns is essentially letting go of clinging to ego. If our work is truly to reduce the element of self and self-concern in our lives and livelihood, then these concerns are what repeatedly draw us back into the constellation of ego in the work world. They serve as useful pointers for keeping our motivation pure and direct.

This is a lifetime practice, not something achieved overnight. Our motivation purifies just as all other aspects of the Eightfold Path purify through practice. Just as mindfulness, wisdom, and ethics purify, so too our motivation and intention purify as our Dharma practice develops.

There's another aspect of right view I wanted to mention—an attitude I tried to carry and heard expressed often today: in work settings, people are more important than organizational ends. People are the true means of an organization, and I believe they're more important than the ends.

When I was at Microsoft, I wasn't overtly Buddhist, but I tried to tune into everyone's well-being. I would go out of my way to visit people's desks and check in on their work lives, their concerns about managers, their home situations. I knew something about the home lives and relationships of those who worked for me. I felt this was an important part of being there—ensuring people felt there was always a sympathetic ear somewhere in that office.

Interestingly, while I was there, nobody showed much interest in meditation. I made good friendships at Microsoft, but at most got two people to attend one Monday night talk with Jack. However, I was deeply touched that after I left, three different couples, knowing what I was doing, asked me to perform their weddings. There was clearly a connection there.

Another wholesome intention you can bring to the workplace is what I call the bodhisattva spirit—being there to listen to people's difficulties, to draw out where they're struggling. This can become a powerful motivation for being present.

Great teachers are described as wish-fulfilling gems who bring to each person exactly what they need. Imagine the blessing of having such a presence in a workplace! When one person in an organization is truly loved by everyone, it exerts tremendous unifying force. This is one way to build genuine teams, why leaders can be so transformative. When everyone loves one person, it draws the whole group together—love has this unifying influence.

What qualities can we cultivate in our workplace relationships to bring out this loving presence? If it's there, it can truly transform the workplace, even if we're not the leader or manager.

So can we be bodhisattvas in our work? Can we be there to love others and listen to their difficulties?

The only thing that limits our capacity to be a bodhisattva in the workplace is our own development. If we're not able to love and listen to our colleagues, it simply means we haven't learned to love enough ourselves. And so that becomes our practice—to grow enough that we can love the people we work with.

I want to talk about some specifics around the eight worldly concerns, beginning with money, which has come up several times this morning. It's such a charged issue, and while this isn't unique to our culture, it may be more pronounced here because we have more material abundance.

First, let me clarify the Buddhist attitude toward money. There's the possibility of getting very different messages about money from the Buddhist tradition because nuns and monks are often held up as ideals of Buddhist practice, and they take vows of poverty. They take vows of poverty and celibacy. So somehow this might influence people to think that it's better to be a poor Buddhist. God forbid you should be a Buddhist with resources. Best of all would be if you had absolutely nothing.

The Buddha designed monastic life as a way to allow total focus on dharma practice. For some people, that's a beautiful lifestyle. For most of us in the West, at this point, it's not unfolding that way. Most of us who are teaching and practicing are laypeople.

The Buddha talked about money very differently with laypeople. Basically, he said that wealth is the result of generosity. There's a karmic connection between the generous acts we've made in the past and the abundance we experience today in our lives. He taught that there is great value in having wealth if it is used to enrich the dharma. When wealth is directed toward positive ends, it becomes a very positive force—another opportunity to be generous for both the giver and those receiving its benefits.

The relationship between monastics and laypeople in Buddhism was designed so that monastics depend on lay support. As a monastic in the Theravadan tradition in countries like Thailand, you can't keep food overnight. When I was a monk, if I wanted to practice somewhere far from villages and working people, I couldn't do it because I'd starve. The Buddha arranged it so that monks and nuns had to live near villages where they could collect their morning meal by begging from those communities. Therefore, monastic survival depends on the wealth and generosity of the surrounding community.

Spirit Rock exists only through the generosity of many people—some with little money, some with moderate means, some with great wealth. Spirit Rock is here because we've been blessed with generous gifts from wealthy people as well as those who don't have much.

The Buddha felt what mattered was keeping proper perspective on money. This is a paraphrase, as I don't have the exact source with me: "Of small concern for a practitioner is an increase in wealth. Of great concern is an increase in wisdom. Of small concern is a decrease in wealth. Of great concern is a decrease in wisdom." In the Buddhist tradition, wisdom is often spoken of as the wealth of a practitioner—the true wealth.

With money, so many questions arise in relation to work: How much is enough? How much do I need? Am I going to run out? Am I getting what I'm worth? Is someone else getting more than me? What do I do with the money I have? How much can I spend on myself and my own pleasures? How much should I direct to other causes, to helping people, to charitable uses? There are so many misconceptions and strong feelings around money that it's often hard to have clarity about it. But it is one of the eight worldly concerns that's important to monitor.

Another fascinating concern is around responsibility and fear of failure or blame. This comes up frequently in work because we're essentially paid to take responsibility. You don't hire someone unless you're giving them a chunk of work for which they are accountable. How does that feel? When you have responsibility for a major piece of work, how does that feel?

It can be a real burden, because if we mess up, many people will know about it. It's often quite obvious whether we succeed or not. Sometimes we don't want more responsibility simply because we don't want more visibility. I definitely felt this way at Microsoft. The road was open for me to go higher on the corporate ladder than I did, but I didn't want to. Because the higher up you go, the more visible you are.

And the more visible you are, the more praise and blame you receive. I was quite comfortable with my current level of praise and blame. I wasn't making a lifelong career out of it, and I essentially hid in the organization for a while because I didn't want to deal with any more praise and blame. This was probably a reflection of both my wisdom, to some extent, and also my fear. Perhaps I would have grown more in a more visible position—I don't know. But I think both qualities were present in me.

The way to be free in this area is something Krishna told his charioteer Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita: "The way to freedom in this world is to act without attachment to the fruits of your action." This is a profound spiritual teaching. This is another way of saying that the eight worldly concerns shouldn't drive us. In a sense, this is the essence of right effort.

In our work and in our dharma practice, in our meditation practice, we want to pay attention, but then we don't know what will result. We have to pay attention and trust that mindfulness leads to wholesome states, but we can't force that. In our work as well, we make our right effort, but we really can't control the results.

When I was a sales representative, I used to get nervous before certain presentations because there was potentially a lot of money on the table. If the customer bought from us, it could mean millions of dollars in income, and much of it might be influenced by one or two presentations. If we lost it, it would be clear—I was the account rep, I lost the account. I felt that responsibility keenly.

But what I started to realize is that I couldn't control the outcome of the customer's decision. All I could do was deliver the best presentation I could. I really learned this lesson from sports. I play tennis, and it's clear that some days I can go out playing really well and still get beaten because my opponent is simply too good. So I go into a match realizing I can't control whether I win or lose. The only thing under my control is whether I play my best game.

This has been a really helpful reshaping of right effort for me—just to play my best game. If I win, that's great. If I lose, that's unfortunate, but I can't control that. What I can do is play my best game. And when I play without fearing the result, it goes better. I play better, I present better.

I think about this a lot at Spirit Rock. Deborah Urban is with us today—Deborah has just joined our staff as development director, and she has the lofty assignment of trying to fundraise the rest of the money we need to finish the meditation hall, which you probably saw on the hill at lunchtime. We have about another $1.3 million to go, hopefully by the end of this year.

Organizationally, Deborah has some responsibility for that. But if Deborah felt she had to control the outcome of securing that money, she'd probably go crazy. So I want to say publicly, Deborah, you don't have that responsibility. Deborah's responsibility is simply to identify the best means for us to try and raise the rest of that money and then implement a plan. But we can't control what happens with that plan. Maybe we'll get the money, maybe we won't. If we don't, we'll borrow it. It's okay—it just means people will pay a little more for retreats than they would have. But it really is okay.

If we can just have that attitude—that we do our best and we can't control the outcome—it's a way to be more comfortable with responsibility.

Another area where a lot of ego gets tied up is ambition in work, which is basically the ego investment in recognition and being rewarded with money and title and so forth.

When I went to work for Microsoft, I made a vow to myself. My vow was that I wasn't going to get my ego involved in my work. I was just going to go in and do the job, and I wasn't going to get caught up in the office politics, or whether I got a promotion, or whether I was getting paid enough. I knew it was enough money to keep me alive, and I wasn't going to get involved in praise, recognition, rewards, awards, and so forth.

I succeeded for about six months. And then my ego got totally involved. I could see myself really wanting to be recognized and wanting a good review. We had performance reviews every six months and they were numerical, so I knew exactly where I stood. I found myself wanting the highest percentage increase that would be based on that numerical rating each time and wanting awards at sales meetings. So it snuck in even though I was trying to be aware of it and didn't want it to happen—that level of ambition.

All I could do then was watch it with perspective. And that's okay too. If we can watch that stuff with perspective, we don't have to be ashamed of having an ego. In case you haven't noticed, the whole world does, except for maybe the Dalai Lama and a few other people. So it's not shameful to have an ego. How can you be in sales in that type of environment and not get caught up when they have the big board showing who sold what this month? That's a horrible job not to have that involvement. I couldn't do it. That's the simple answer. I couldn't. I'm sure the Buddha could have, but he probably wouldn't have bothered.

The more we understand that those things don't ultimately matter, the more freely we can play in that world. I knew people who were freer than I was about that stuff, and they hadn't even done meditation practice or psychotherapy. I respected that a lot.

This ambition is really always focused on my pursuits and interests and self-concern. And ultimately, that's suffering. That's why clinging is suffering. Shantideva, who was an eighth-century Indian teacher, said, "All happiness in this world comes from desiring others to be happy. All unhappiness in this world comes from wanting only myself to be happy." So this ambition stuff is usually only about myself. But when our interest is truly in the welfare of others too, that's when the potential for happiness really grows.

I mentioned the person I knew, my friend and manager who left Microsoft basically out of ambition. He had had ambition for promotion to the next level, and when it was thwarted, he got so upset he left, leaving behind what turned out to be $28 million.

Someone I know was married to a man who was very ambitious. He graduated from the Naval Academy and became a commercial airline pilot, then went to work as an executive for GE and started up General Electric China back in the late seventies. They moved to Hong Kong for a few years while he was heading up that operation. His wife didn't like traveling, didn't like being the corporate wife, didn't like that he was away all the time, didn't like having to move every few years so he could get another promotion. At one time she said, "God, if he'd only been a couple inches taller, he wouldn't have had to go through all this." It was just a quick quip, but it's a pointer to the fact that this kind of ambition often comes from personal insecurity.

It's often a lack of real fulfillment that makes us invest in things like title and status and power over other people, as though because we have the ability to tell other people what to do in the workspace or to allot them their percentage raise, it makes us a better or more important person. It's a fundamental illusion.

I think I'll stop there. I had a little topic on competitiveness, but we'll maybe let that come out in the discussion. I'd just like to close by reading a quotation from Chuang Tzu, who was a Taoist master of 500 B.C. Many of you have probably heard this before. It's called "The Empty Boat," and in many ways it's a beautiful model for living in the world.

"If a person is crossing a river and an empty boat collides with his boat, even though he is a bad-tempered man, he will not become very angry. But if he sees someone in the other boat, he will shout at him to steer clear. If the shout is not heard, he will shout again, and yet again, and begin cursing—and all because there is somebody in the boat."

Yet if the boat were empty, he would not be shouting, and he would not be angry. If you can empty your own boat crossing the river of this world, no one will oppose you and no one will seek to harm you.

So I thought we could open up to some discussion in the large group first. Then we'll probably take one more break and come back, and I think some small groups might be interesting to discuss some of the issues we've touched on—money, ambition, self-esteem, and so forth. So, comments please.

Question: Your comment about not controlling the outcome—I find that a wonderful thought, but it seems like in the workplace it's really difficult, because basically all evaluations, and even if you're in charge and other people are looking at you to see

what you're doing, are pretty much based on outcomes. Spirit Rock sounds like a wonderful employer, but other places aren't. I'm just wondering how you think one can realize that in the context of what the work world tends to be like.

I think that outcomes go best when we're not attached to the result. It's the same in meditation practice. Meditation practice is such a deep teaching on this very topic, because if you approach your practice with a specific goal in mind, you're going to be frustrated again and again, because meditation unfolds according to the ripening of the individual process.

For instance, people come on a meditation retreat thinking they're supposed to come to greater peace, and after three days they find their mind is going crazy—and that's the good part. After four or five days, it's dredging up the most terrible memories of anything we've ever done or said to someone. After six days, it's unfolding deeply held grief or sadness that we've carried since we were ten years old that we didn't even know was hiding there. It feels anything but peaceful.

So if we come into that meditation experience thinking the outcome should be peace, we're going to be frustrated. If we surrender to the process and stay with it, with that good intention, then eventually there's this huge clearing out and a great deep level of peace that's accessed and touched and becomes really available to us. But we have no control over when that happens.

In the workplace, obviously we have much closer control and more immediate results, but we really can't strictly determine what somebody around us is going to do in response to what we do. All we can do is our best job. If we do our best job and the goals have been set reasonably, then the best results will come. So I think that element of surrender is really important for anyone in a work setting as a way of doing their best job. When you do your best job, you have the best chance of getting the best results.

We do take responsibility in our workplace for not having gotten results, and I think that's entirely appropriate. But we also have to understand with wisdom the interdependence that means we can't control outcomes entirely. For example, Kofi Annan goes to negotiate a truce with Saddam Hussein, and he does his best effort, but he can't control the outcome. He has the whole responsibility for the peace of Iraq riding on his shoulders, but he can't control the outcome. He just goes and does the best job he can. In this case, fortunately, the outcome came.

There has to be the sense of responsibility, but underneath it, we have to know with wisdom that we're not totally in control of anything—not even our own health.

Question: I'm just curious—what happened to the manager that left Microsoft?

Well, it was actually a sad story because he went to a few different companies that didn't seem quite the right fit. He's still in the high tech industry and still in sales. He was vice president of sales for a well-known software company for a while, but that ended up in difficulty. So he bounced around a bit. I think it was very unsettling to his confidence the way that story happened.

Question: Could you comment briefly on the distinction between right effort and right action?

In terms of the Eightfold Path, right effort is really defined in psychological terms. It's what we do to bring about more wholesome states within our own hearts and minds and what we do to decrease the unwholesome states within our hearts and minds. Right Effort is directly connected with meditation practice and mindfulness practice and awareness.

The link is that when we have purified the heart more and we can see more clearly, then our intention becomes purified, and it's through the link of right intention that our actions become pure. So right action is what we do in the world in relation to others, and it's purified by clear seeing and then traveling through this vehicle of wise intention.

Question: How do you come to terms with the difference between how much money somebody makes and what they do in terms of its value to society? You've got athletes who try to kill their coaches and they're worth millions, then you have Mother Teresa on the other end. And then people that seem to be money magnets who really are mean or abusive people that don't have a whole lot going for them, yet they always seem to have plenty of money. Then you have bright, articulate, attractive people that have a lot seemingly going for them, but they have trouble getting jobs or getting really well-paying jobs or seem to always be underpaid.

I mean, if money's energy, why is it not flowing toward what's righteous almost?

I wish I knew. I share your dilemma. There seems to be a lot of injustice in the world around this issue of money.

I'll tell you basically the answer that one of my Tibetan teachers gave to me. When a similar question like that was asked, he basically said, "This is samsara, and we don't expect things to work right in samsara." And it's not a cynical answer, but in the teachings of the Buddha, the world is deeply troubled. The world is not in good shape in the eyes of the teachings of the Buddha.

There is a tremendous amount of blindness going on in the world. As you can tell from the wars and the corruption and the fighting and the greed and so forth, there's a tremendous amount of blindness going on. That blindness expresses itself in human suffering. So there's also blindness in the consumer society. As long as the larger mainstream society is not driven by a deeper underlying motivation for the liberation of heart and mind and the welfare of all sentient beings, there are going to be huge injustices.

I think that the road to smoothing them out is twofold. I think it's interaction through people who are interested in transforming their own consciousness, and I think it's through outer action of social activists pointing out the failings of the society at large to do what's needed in areas that need to be attended to. But there's clearly no quick solution, and I think there's a lot of injustice in the world today.

"Isn't karma, doesn't that play a large role?"

Say some more.

"I believe that people come in with a particular dharma that's based on whatever karma they've had in previous lives. And some people are not here to make money right now. I mean, that's just not their dharma. They have other things they have to learn. Other people make enormous amounts of money, and they have things to learn from that. There's a balancing of the scales. I think we tend to look at things over such a short period of time. I mean, a lifetime is no time in the scheme of things."

Yes, this is definitely within the teachings of the Buddha. It's very clearly stated that people carry with them into each life the mental tendencies that have built up through their actions, based on their intention, in past lives. And so people come into this life with different propensities.

The Buddha said, I think I mentioned earlier, that one of the prerequisites for abundance was generosity. He said that people who are kind in their relationships to living beings are blessed with long life. And he made a number of comments around karma like that. So that's certainly one explanation. That's one possible explanation for all the discrepancies of talent, of welfare, of wealth, of health that you see around the world.

"And yet also we hear the stories so often of those good Samaritans who risk their life to help someone, and their life has got short. And we also hear the term, why did he or she have to go? He was such a good human being. It's a hard one to... And we never know. People like Martin Luther King being killed so young, John Kennedy, Princess Diana. We never know why. And it's one of those mysteries that we know we're exposed to also."

Nancy?

"Could you say something about being the bodhisattva of the workplace and balance? When we're already trying to balance work and not work and various aspects of work, and then in most workplaces there is so much need and so few people filling that role that if you step in, then it becomes a bottomless pit."

Good question. I think you have to bring a sense of balance to that as well. And it's clear that if you want to devote some time in your workday to listening to other people, there's going to be a price to pay either in the quality of your own work or spending more time on your own work. So I think it's just another of the things you have to balance.

I think you have to learn in the work setting when to say no to people. If somebody drops by for a chat, being able to set time limits on it. Being able to tell people that you'd love to talk to them but you can't today. Getting sort of time management rules, you might say, within your bodhisattva relationships. But I think you just have to manage that like all the other tasks. You know, I just kind of saw it as one other task on my to-do list and I had to prioritize it and give it time within my other tasks.

Yes?

"That makes me think about a workplace where there are a variety of competencies, a variety of energies, and a variety of willingnesses, so that some are there a whole lot more than others, and they're all expecting, or they're all perceived as the same or equal. And so that really does have a, I mean, something really does begin to erode..."

for those people who are contributing more while others contribute less. And the confidence in the whole workplace begins to get fuzzy.

Well, in the places I've worked—which have been both for-profit and non-profit operations—I actually found that the for-profit organizations had much better performance review systems than the non-profit places. I strongly endorse performance review systems, and I think numerical ratings are terrific.

The challenge in spiritual communities is that we often resist these kinds of clear evaluative structures, perhaps thinking they're somehow unspiritual or that they create hierarchy in unhelpful ways. But I've found that clarity about expectations and honest feedback about performance actually supports everyone's growth and the health of the community. When we avoid difficult conversations about unequal contribution, we often end up with the very erosion of confidence that you're describing.

In the end, whether we're talking about time management, setting boundaries, or creating fair systems of accountability, the dharma asks us to bring wisdom and compassion together. This means being kind but not being naive, being generous but also being realistic about our limitations and the limitations of others. The middle way applies here too—between being a doormat and being overly rigid, between endless accommodation and harsh judgment.

These are some of the most practical applications of our dharma practice, and they're often the most challenging because they require us to live our understanding in the messy complexity of human relationships and institutions.

CHAPTER 210

Uncovering Ego: Renunciation and the Hindrances

Guy Armstrong · 53 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong draws on his experience with renowned Burmese meditation master Mahāsi Sayādaw to explore the transformative power of renunciation in spiritual practice. He examines how the simplicity of retreat life strips away external distractions, revealing the raw nature of our inner experience—both the clarity of awareness and the obstacles that impede it.

Armstrong discusses renunciation (nekkhamma) as one of the ten pāramīs or perfections, sharing inspiring stories from traditional practitioners like the Tibetan yogin Shabkar and contemporary nun Ani Tenzin Palmo. He explains how retreat conditions naturally bring forth the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇa): sensual desire (kāmacchanda), ill-will (vyāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā).

The talk emphasizes that these hindrances are not obstacles to overcome but opportunities for deepening wisdom. Through mindful awareness, moments of difficulty can be transformed into awakened consciousness. Armstrong encourages practitioners to befriend these energies with acceptance rather than aversion, recognizing them as impersonal forces of nature rather than personal failings. This approach represents the "alchemy of practice"—the direct transformation of suffering into wisdom through present-moment awareness.

The talk tonight is on Uncovering Ego, Renunciation and the Hindrances.

I was on the staff of Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts in the late seventies when we had a visit from one of the most renowned meditation masters of the world, Mahasi Sayadaw. He was quite old at that time, and I think it was his first trip to the West. But in the Theravadan countries of Southeast Asia, particularly Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, he may have been the most influential monk of this century, because he revived a meditation technique founded in the *Visuddhimagga*, one of the ancient texts from the fifth century Christian era, and built a meditation technique around it that generated hundreds of centers throughout Southeast Asia.

This is the practice that we teach here of the continuity of awareness through sitting and walking and with the employment of the soft mental notes to label what our experience is. That was basically the contribution of Mahasi Sayadaw in this century, and it became enormously popular.

So it was his first visit to the West and I had actually, as a manager of the center, written the letter inviting him to come, and I was very excited about his arrival. We went down to the Boston airport to pick him up. We waited at the gate where his plane was coming in from Asia, and everybody else got off the plane. You can't miss bald men in orange robes, and we hadn't seen any of those yet. We thought the plane was empty and we were wondering if they'd missed the flight out of Thailand or something.

And then as we were standing there at the gate, out they came marching, out through the gate, slowly, mindfully—the senior Sayadaw, Mahasi Sayadaw, in front, and all five of them were carrying fans, brown cloth fans that were embroidered with the writing "Mahasi Sayadaw, 1979 World Tour." It may not have been the Rolling Stones, but it was just as exciting for us.

Actually, the fan is a very significant symbol in Asian Dharma because the monks often speak behind it. They will sometimes give whole Dharma talks holding a fan in front of them. And by the end of the evening, you may never have known who was speaking. This points to the important truth that the words of the Dharma are really what's important and not the personality of the speaker. We thought about doing that here, but we knew you'd recognize Sylvia, so we gave it up.

Mahasi Sayadaw came to our center and gave a two-week retreat that was open to the public, and I had the good fortune to sit it. It was very interesting. It was my first real exposure to a traditional Asian teacher, and I found out that they teach quite differently than my teachers at that time—Joseph and Jack and Sharon and Christopher—had been teaching. They don't tell Sufi stories. They don't quote Mary Oliver poems. And they don't give many descriptions of embarrassing things that happened to them in second grade. Basically what the monks did was to repeat the words of the Buddha.

I was young in my practice then, and I didn't fully appreciate what they had to offer, because they were repeating the words with a deep understanding from their own personal experience of the meaning and the profundity of that message. And I was looking for Mary Oliver poems. So it was sometimes a frustrating experience for me at that point in my development.

The visit was enlivened by a little bit of controversy. At one point, somebody in the hall asked Mahasi Sayadaw a question about sexuality. Going to an eighty-year-old celibate monk for questions about sexuality is like coming to me for financial advice. But he did answer, and his response was that sex is gross, base, and disgusting. So that caused a few ripples. It caused a few ripples until one of the staff members figured out the solution. They said, "Oh, actually what happened was the translator just misstated it. What he actually said is that it's engrossing, basic, and worth discussing." Then everybody felt better about the Sayadaw.

So there was a little collision of cultures in my early encounters with Asian Buddhism and the Asian traditions. Over the years, I feel I've bridged that a lot and feel very close in spirit now to those teachers that I spent time with in the early years.

But one of the things that struck me at the time was just the power of their being—the power of their presence. Mahasi Sayadaw came over with about four of his senior monks, including Usi Lananda, who's still living in the Bay Area and teaching on the peninsula, and Ujanaka, who now has his own center outside of Rangoon, where some of our friends have practiced.

I felt when I was around them that I was in the middle of a vibration that I had never experienced before with a Westerner. There was a degree of stillness in their being, a degree of composure, a power of innocence, and a power of purity that I hadn't found in the teachers that I'd been studying with. It really impressed me a lot.

As I reflected and heard the stories of their lives, most of them had ordained quite young as novices and then moved into the monkhood. I felt that what I was feeling in that transmission was the power of renunciation that was a thread that had run through their lives possibly before they were even teenagers. It's not uncommon in Asia for novices to ordain at age seven or eight, to be schooled in the monasteries, and then to make the transition to full monkhood when they're eighteen, twenty, twenty-one.

I felt the purity of that entire lifestyle in a system that cultivated mindfulness and concentration and virtue, in a system where their focus from so early on had just been single-pointed on the Dharma. I felt the power of their renunciation. There was an unshakability that came from that lifestyle because they weren't looking for anything from us. They had their air ticket home. That was really all they needed. And they could just be simply themselves in this really strong and unshakable way. It was a really great lesson.

Well, we too develop this same kind of strength in our retreat experience.

Coming into a silent retreat like this is a major act of renunciation for us. The renunciation that we carry out here works on many levels. We may never even know all the levels it's operating on until years afterwards.

One of the things that happens quite clearly is when we come into an environment this simple, the mind settles and calms. You may feel that already just in the first few days of being here. Another aspect of the silence that I've often appreciated is when we don't speak and we don't act very much, we really don't get in as much trouble. In classical terms, it's said that this really protects our virtue. It protects our karma, protects our sila.

There's also a great strength in self-sufficiency. We find that we can bear these conditions, even though they're difficult. They're difficult for all of us. I just did a period of retreat this fall at the center in Massachusetts, and I've done a lot of retreats over the years. I'm used to the experience. I had a fairly good experience in the retreat, nothing of major difficulty, and yet I still found it arduous to go through the routine of sitting and walking and staying in silence and not having human contact day after day.

I think that for all of us, there is a difficulty in dedicating ourselves, in giving ourselves to this kind of lifestyle. I want to honor and respect your work with that. I know it's not easy. And yet this kind of dedication and bearing these hardships really brings an inner strength that I don't know any other way to come by. I actually believe that we'll all face death a lot more comfortably because of the time that we've spent in situations like this. I have great faith in that.

So renunciation is a very powerful aspect of practice. It's one of the ten paramis. The Buddha made lots of lists, as you know, and he made lots of lists of the good things in life and the difficult things in life. The paramis are one of the lists of the good things. Actually, they're referred to as the beautiful factors of mind. This is a list of the qualities of mind that, when we develop them through action, have the power to liberate us.

These are the qualities that the bodhisattva over many lifetimes brought to fruition so that he could be born and come to fulfillment and liberation in that life as Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha. It is really the cultivation of these ten qualities that ripen the mind, that fulfill the mind, and bring it to the possibility of liberation.

The beautiful thing about the paramis is that they are intentions that accompany actions. As such, we can develop them in daily life as well as in the retreat setting. They're not something we need to leave behind at the gate of the retreat center when we go home, but they're practices and cultivations that we can take with us always in all situations.

This aspect of renunciation is really at the core of spiritual practice in our Buddhist tradition. This is a quote from the Buddha himself who said: "There are these roots of trees, there are these empty huts. Meditate bhikkhus, do not delay or else you will regret it later. This is our instruction to you."

Fortunately, we have something a little better than an empty hut or the root of a tree. At Spirit Rock, we're practicing not exactly the austere form of asceticism, but we've given this its own name. We call it the Upper Middle Path. It seems to work also.

There are many beautiful stories in the tradition of renunciation. One autobiography that I like a lot is the autobiography of a Tibetan Lama named Shabkar. He was born in 1781, so it was the time that we were fighting for our independence and killing the native people of this country. He practiced to great fruition and wrote one of the most beautiful Dharma books that I know of called *Flight of the Garuda*, which is in the Dzogchen tradition.

When he was twenty-five, he entered his first three-year retreat on his own. He went to an island in a remote part of Tibet and stayed there through all the seasons, of course without any heat, and just carried on with the practices that his teacher had given him in solitude. In fact, there were a few other meditators on the island and they would come over to ask him for advice, and he thought that was interrupting his retreat too much. So one year he mudded up the front of his cave so that he couldn't get out and nobody else could get in, and he meditated that way for a year.

This is the account of one of his years and his food supply. He said: "Throughout the year, one of the local people occasionally brought me goat's milk and curd. In the summer, some vegetables were to be found. By the end of autumn, however, my supplies were exhausted, and for two months I was reduced to eating only a thin soup of tsampa"—which is roasted barley grain. Can you imagine two months eating a thin soup of tsampa? It makes you appreciate oatmeal, doesn't it? It never sounded so good.

This was one of his statements to his teacher when he went into retreat. He called his teacher Father: "Until I achieve unchanging stability of mind, I won't remain in busy worldly places, but will stay alone in isolated places of retreat."

Father, accept this offering made to please you. The length of my practice shall equal the length of my life.

Coming into a situation like this, we also make a great renunciation. We give up family and friends and home and pets, our choice of meals, our entertainments, our restaurants—so many things of our life. You know, I think if this was imposed in prisons, it would be outlawed as cruel and unusual punishment. And yet we take it up gladly.

This level of giving up can bring its own challenges. It can bring a sense of insecurity, of loneliness or isolation, of feeling disconnected. Sometimes it can bring up a sense of unworthiness because we're not getting the contact and the feedback that affirms us as we do in our daily life. Sometimes we might wonder, what have I gotten myself into and why did I do this?

I'm reminded of another story from my early days at the meditation center in Massachusetts. There was a fellow who used to come around quite often for retreats. He was very worldly. In fact, we heard that he had made a lot of money in the real estate market. In those years, people of my age did not have a lot of money, and so we all looked on him with some fascination. Wow, this guy really scored big in the real estate market.

He ended up taking robes and ordaining with Ajahn Sumedho, who by that time, a student of Ajahn Chah, had set up a monastery in England, an early monastery in England. We were all amazed because he seemed so worldly. In fact, he said to Ajahn Sumedho, "I have all this money. What shall I do with it?"

Ajahn Sumedho said, "Give it away. Stick with me and you aren't going to need a penny of it."

And he did that. He gave all his money away, and he said about a year later, "You know, I was just about to invest that money in oil stocks. If I had, it would be worth a million dollars today." This was 1980, so he gave away a lot.

Entering the life of the renunciate, the monk's life, is its own challenge. It is arduous. And for such a worldly person, it was difficult. We often said of him that we felt his past virtue had kind of dragged him kicking and screaming into Sumedho's arms. I often think that way about coming on retreat. If I can just let my virtue take me there, once I get there, I know I'll be okay. But sometimes it feels like I've been dragged kicking and screaming.

So what is the purpose of this kind of renunciation? Why do we put ourselves in these situations?

Part of the beauty, the real essence of renunciation, is that when we let go of so many outer activities and our life becomes stripped bare in a way, what really stands out are the inner workings of our hearts and minds. Just as these little weeping trees—I think they're willows in the courtyard—losing their leaves now, you see so clearly the structure of the branches. When those trees were full of leaves, it just looked like a big bush and you couldn't really tell what supported the leaves. Now that the leaves have fallen, the branches are really clearly revealed.

So when our outer activities fall away, we are just left with the inner workings of our heart and mind. That is really where we learn. That is where we go to school in this practice. We are really here to understand how our hearts and minds work. This is what wisdom is about.

Particularly, the wisdom that we want to understand is: what activities of heart and mind and body lead to happiness? What activities of heart and mind and body lead to sorrow? This is really what we take up as a central theme of our investigation. And in this situation, that's all so clearly revealed.

It's a little bit like Gil said this morning. When we focus very clearly on the breath for a period of time, it tends to highlight whatever is not of this simple awareness of the breath. The other thoughts and plans and hopes and fears and wants that come in are so apparent because we're used to seeing the breath in its bare simplicity.

Similarly with this situation. It's so simple that when other things come in, we see them, sometimes for the first time. Someone said in an interview today, "Boy, this is really challenging."

I'm seeing again and again and again all these judgments of other people, all my opinions, the full extent of my comparing mind. It's just leaping out at me.

And this is part of the result. Sometimes it seems like we're going backwards. This stuff seems like tough stuff to see, to handle. It's kind of like one teacher said—Ruth Dennison said that self-knowledge is never good news. So sometimes in this setting, we see a lot of stuff that doesn't look like good news, but it actually is because it's in the seeing of it that we can learn from it and become freer.

There's another story of renunciation that I wanted to pass on. There's a book that's just come out about an English woman named Ani Tenzin Palmo who was born in 1943 in London and took robes in the Tibetan tradition in 1964, at the age of 21, in India. She felt a strong longing to be in solitary retreat and went way up in a cave in the Himalay-

as, 13,000 feet up, and spent most of 12 years practicing on her own in that cave. She's now come out of the solitude, returned to the West, and is founding a center in Italy and beginning to teach.

She passed through Spirit Rock last year and gave some teachings and had lunch with some of us. I said to her, "I have so much admiration for what you did. I feel it's completely beyond my capacity to do something like that." She said—she was very humble and very simple—"I only did what I wanted to do. I just felt drawn to be there, and I just did what I wanted to do." So she's very humble, and very, very dedicated.

Someone asked her—actually it was a journalist who wrote this book, who didn't know a lot about the practice—"Don't you feel you're escaping when you go into retreat like that? Don't you feel you're escaping the real realities of this world and the things that people deal with day by day?"

And her reply was: "Not at all. To my mind, worldly life is an escape. When you have a problem, you can turn on the television, phone a friend, or go out for a coffee. In a cave, however, you have no one to turn to but yourself. When problems arise, you have no choice but to go through with them and come out the other side. In a cave, you face your own nature in the raw, and you have to find a way of dealing with it."

I think this really expresses well our situation here. We face our own being in the raw, and that's where our learning is. The inner life, when the externals drop away, becomes so vivid, becomes so alive, it stands out, really maybe for the first time.

Sometimes dreams get very vivid. People often report that the dream life has become very strong, very rich, seems very meaningful, and there's a strong temptation to pick up the dream and figure out what it means. Someone asked Joseph Goldstein a question about that in a retreat. He said, "I have these really important dreams. Jung said that if you don't analyze a dream, it's like receiving a letter that you don't open." And Joseph's reply was: "When you're in retreat, it's a good idea not to open your mail."

That's actually a good piece of advice. Enjoy the dreams while they're there and leave them there as you wake up.

Sometimes our emotional reactions become really strong. This is the phenomenon that's become known as "yogi mind," when small things in our daily life look like huge things here. When I entered retreat this fall in Massachusetts, we'd had a small board meeting the day before, and there were a lot of issues that we discussed that were going to impact Spirit Rock for a while. I got into retreat and about a week in I started thinking about all these issues and I felt I absolutely had to write a letter to our executive

director because they were so important and my input on them was absolutely crucial to the future sustenance of Spirit Rock. Of course it wasn't, and I'm glad I never put pen to paper, but it seemed awfully big at the time.

This situation is really designed to bring forth the difficult mind states that are still lurking in us. What happens is when we simplify and we meditate, we turn our mind to our bare experience, we get one of two outcomes. One possibility is we connect with our bare experience directly. We're with the breath, we're with the body, we're with sounds. And the meditation deepens, the concentration and mindfulness go on a steady path of deepening.

The other alternative is that we get whatever is blocking our ability to be present. Then if there's a block to our ability to be present, that's where the learning comes from. What's beautiful about this process is that it really doesn't matter which way our experience is going. It really doesn't matter so much if we're with the chosen object directly—the breath or body—or if what we're meeting is the impediment or the obstacle to being with that chosen object, because either way is the perfect deepening of our practice.

The process of this unfolding, the process of our deepening, is so organic. It's so natural. It is just like how a rose knows which petal to unfold next so that the whole bud can come from this tightly coiled mass to the full flowering. Our practice is just the same way. In our thinking mind, we really don't have a clue which petal is to open next. Sometimes we might think we came on a retreat to work on one particular issue.

And as the retreat unfolds, it's something entirely different. Sometimes we think we came because we want to recapture a meditation experience that was profound and insightful and transformative from an earlier retreat. And sometimes that experience never presents itself again in our life.

But what you can trust in is that the experience that is presenting itself is the experience that you need to learn from. I think that's really the beauty of the simplicity of awareness or mindfulness—because mindfulness doesn't inject anything different into the situation, but only connects with what's already there. It allows the coming into life, the coming into flowering of what is already there without adding anything new.

So sometimes as we sit, we feel the deepening of mindfulness and concentration. Sometimes as we sit, what we feel is the releasing of accumulations—the inner holdings stored in body and mind from past experience that has never quite had the time or the

wisdom to be digested. It's a bit like fasting. When we stop taking in food, then what comes out are the toxins that have been stored in the body. And by coming out, they can be released.

In our practice, the stored accumulations—the tensions of body and mind, the underlying knots—begin to come to the surface. And in that coming to the surface, there's difficulty, there's struggle, there's conflict, there's pain, but there's also the possibility of release, of freedom.

So much of the fruit of our practice is this unburdening process—the letting go of all the holdings from the past that have weighed on us unconsciously and now have the possibility of really being released by that bringing into awareness. Carl Jung said, "The process of enlightenment is not one of throwing circles of light around everywhere. It comes from making the darkness conscious. This latter process, however, is disagreeable and therefore unpopular." But this is what our work is. This is part of what we're engaged in.

So it's very important to trust in the miracle of this unfolding—that what is presenting itself is what we need to learn from. If we start to doubt that, we can really get in trouble because we think that what is presenting itself is because we've landed in this lousy situation where the room's too cold and it's raining all the time and nobody's friendly to me and people don't make eye contact when I go by. If we could just get out of this lousy situation, everything would be great again. But actually, of course, it's the same mind, whether we're here or at home, and the same underlying structure is being shown.

When I started this retreat in the fall, I went through a lot of resistance at different points—to the arduousness, to the weather, to periods of walking when I didn't feel like walking. And I'd go through these periods of real aversion and I'd start to blame it on the walking or the weather or the facility or something else. And I finally connected: Oh, there are times in my life when I really drag my heels too. I feel this resistance in my daily life, in many different situations that I just don't feel like doing at that point. And I came to see, this is just resistance. It's just non-acceptance.

When I could frame it like that, and I knew it wasn't the situation, then I could start to see the flimsiness of the resistance. And I asked myself the question: what would this moment be like if I met it with acceptance instead of resistance? And at times that veil just pulled away. And there was no more resistance to what before had been a solid mass of aversion.

So there are great joys in renunciation as well as the difficulties. The kind of clarity that we can see when we see an old pattern just evaporate before our eyes—there's a huge relief and a joy in that. The sense of stillness and peace that we touch, the heartfulness, the sensitivity to nature and each other.

In terms of the difficulties that get revealed, the Buddha talked about a number of ways of classifying them. One of the key lists is the list of the five hindrances. I know you all have heard about these many times before, and I'd like to talk about them briefly tonight. Another of the lists is what in Pali is called the kilesas—the three kilesas, often translated as defilements, but the real root is torments of mind. There's a lot of overlap between these two lists.

Before talking about the hindrances, I wanted to explain how I see the difference between the two. The way I understand the hindrances is that these are the forces in particular that greet the meditator. These are the forces that when a meditator sits down and makes the intention to be mindful and to pay direct attention to our experience, these are the particular forces that oppose that mindfulness.

So they're a little different from the list of the kilesas or torments of mind, which are much more universal. They are the roots of suffering in all beings, in all times, in all situations, which are considered to be greed, aversion, and delusion.

The hindrances the Buddha talked about were the forces of sense desire, of ill will or aversion, of sleepiness, of restlessness, and doubt. You'll notice that the first two really overlap with the kilesas, very similar to greed and aversion, and point to this central tendency of mind that is always trying to change our experience. It's really the movement toward pleasure and away from pain that keeps the mind moving all the time, that makes it difficult for us to experience peace. This is in a way the pivoting of the mind, always trying to gain pleasure and avoid the unpleasant.

So let's talk a little about the different forces that visit the mind. I'm sure you've seen many times already the wanting mind that comes in practice. It may be a wanting for something externally, missing some things from home that we've left through renunciation. It may be a wanting for something here—an experience of concentration or peace or stillness or a particular meditation experience.

One of the underlying assumptions with wanting is that there's going to be lasting happiness if we get what is wanted.

And this is one of the things that we have to question with every hindrance: the difference between the story of the hindrance and the feeling of the hindrance. If we're taken in by the story of the hindrance, we're taken away from this moment because the hindrance of desire is always pointing to something in the future. If we follow that arrow, we're taken away from our present experience and we're deceived.

This is the trick of the hindrances—we are deceived out of mindfulness. But we can actually take that energy, turn it around, and look directly at the hindrance itself. In that, we're reestablished in mindfulness. So instead of looking at the object that desire is pointing at, we become familiar with the feeling of desire itself—how that toppling forward feels in mind and body, that reaching out. And we question: is it really the lack of the object that leads to the suffering, or is it desire itself that is difficult to experience?

With aversion, the feeling is that the situation is just not good enough. There's something wrong with the situation—the food or the people or the temperature or the hall or the teachings or whatever. That's where the problem is.

The Buddha was meeting with a group of monks and nuns and he said, "Did you see that jackal that just ran out of the underbrush?" The jackal ran out of the underbrush and sat for a moment in the open, then didn't stay long and ran into the hollow of a tree. It sat down in the hollow of a tree for a moment, but it didn't stay long. It got up, ran away, and lay down in the forest. Then it got up from lying down and ran away somewhere else.

He said, "Everywhere it went, it blamed its situation. It wasn't comfortable in the undergrowth. It wasn't comfortable in the open. It wasn't comfortable in the hollow of the tree, and it wasn't comfortable in the forest. It blamed the undergrowth. It blamed the open. It blamed the hollow of the tree, and it blamed the forest." He said the problem was with none of these. The problem was the jackal had mange. Mange was the problem. Mange was the reason the jackal suffered, not the situation.

Aversion is like that. We feel like we're suffering because of the situation, but the actual source of the suffering is our own disliking of it. When we can drop the disliking, the situation can be just fine, can be accepted.

One of the most insidious ways that aversion turns, of course, is toward ourselves, where we feel that we're not worthwhile, or we can't accept ourselves, that we're not complete. The Dalai Lama came to the center in Massachusetts in 1979—at the time he wasn't as famous as he is now. There was a question from the audience about this feel-

ing of not being worthy, not feeling worthwhile. The Dalai Lama just said very directly, "That is not true. You mustn't think that way. You are very, very worthwhile—as much as any being that is created, as much as any product of nature. Trust in that."

I had a friend who was also a monk in Thailand who had been there longer than I had. After I was ordained, my preceptor asked me to stop at his monastery on the way up to this practice wat near Chiang Mai that I was going to practice at. He was a Western monk, so I stopped to visit him in Chiang Mai. We hung out and got to know each other a bit, and he had this really strong metta vibe. Everybody loved this guy. He had been around quite a while, and in the mornings he would stay at his hut. He would practice. He would be quiet. In the afternoon he would receive visitors—both Thai people came to visit him because he spoke fluent Thai, and Westerners came to visit him. He'd give his afternoons to being with people and counseling them on their life or their meditation practice.

We went out for alms round the first morning I was there. He had the biggest alms bowl I had ever seen, and he had a waistline that sort of matched it. He was doing very well, as we say, in the monkhood. I mean, the bowl wasn't quite this big, but it wasn't far off. I was looking forward to going on alms round with him. So we started off, we set off. He went in front because he was the senior monk and I went behind.

And then these two novices were coming with us—younger boys around the monastery—and I was a little puzzled because normally the novices don't go on alms round.

So we set off and we'd just gone a couple of blocks when his bowl was full and my bowl was overflowing. I wasn't accepting any more. We ducked into an alley and he called the novices up. They opened their robes and I saw that each of them was carrying a plastic bag slung over their shoulder. He took all the food that he had collected from his bowl and put it in their plastic bags. They covered their robes back up again, his bowl was empty, and we walked on. We did that a couple more times.

Then we went back to the monastery and he shared his food around, feeding probably a dozen people from his morning alms round. Those same people lined up to give him food every morning because they knew he would walk that way and because they loved him so much. He had this great energy—he was always giving, and the people appreciated it.

In talking with him personally, he told me that he had spent the first nine years in robes working with his self-hatred. I was absolutely amazed because I didn't see a trace of it. What I saw was this wonderful, spacious quality of affection and kindness and compassion. Through his practice—primarily through his meditation practice—he had completely transformed that trait in himself.

The third hindrance of sleepiness I think we've talked about quite a bit already. Just one other suggestion: be really clear in your noting of sleepiness or dullness, and see if the noting itself serves to sharpen the attention and give a little break in the dullness. Also take a look and see if you're averse to the sleepiness, because sometimes the aversion can actually increase the dullness. See if you can open to it with real acceptance.

With restless attention, give it a very big space. Make the mind very wide, very soft. Sometimes when we get restless, we think, "Oh, I need to get concentrated again," so we try to shrink the focus down and make a narrow focus on the breath so we can get concentrated. But that tends to bottle the energy up and can make it more restless, more explosive. So let the mind be very wide, very soft. It can be helpful with restlessness to focus on some point low in the body—maybe the contact of the seat with the cushion, just that touch point. Very simple, very clear touch point to ground the attention.

Doubt is said to be the most insidious of the hindrances because when we believe in it, it cripples our practice. We stop paying attention, we stop deepening. As William Blake said, "If the sun would doubt, it would immediately go out." And that's what happens with our practice when we doubt.

So with doubt, it's important to reflect on your intention—which we've been discussing in the early days of the retreat—reflect on your motivation, reflect on earlier retreats and the benefits that you found in the practice. Then it's also helpful to look at what came before the doubt. Doubt usually doesn't come after you've just had that really crystal clear, still sitting where you felt absolutely peaceful for forty-five minutes. Somehow that's not usually when doubt arises. So see if, before the doubt came, there was a difficult experience.

This really came clear to me when I was doing a self-retreat a few years ago. I was staying in a small cabin in upstate New York, and I had chosen to go there for a two-month self-retreat in October and November. I was quite alone. Every few days a friend would come and bring me food that I'd requested, but otherwise I didn't see people at all.

I was a California guy at the time, and I thought, "October will be nice weather, and usually the first snows come about Thanksgiving, so I should be able to make it through October and November." I just went with my tennis shoes and my Birkenstocks—bad decision, because the first snow started coming in early November. There I was with my tennis shoes trying to do walking meditation, my feet getting very cold and very wet, and I was getting frustrated. So I took to tying plastic produce bags around my feet and then going out to do walking meditation in the snow. That was okay until the produce bag wore out and then I'd get cold feet again.

Then there was about a two-week period where I didn't see the sun. It was snowing and raining and gray and cold, and I felt very oppressed by the weather—feeling gloomy and disillusioned. The solitude was difficult for me and I just went into this funk. I thought, "I need to go back to California. I'm sure it's much more pleasant there now." Actually, it was about this time of year. I was starting to think about how I could go home.

Then I suddenly connected: "Oh, this is doubt." It took me about a day, but I realized, "Oh, this is doubt." And then it took me a little bit longer, but I realized: "Oh, just before I started doubting, I was feeling some kind of despair." All the things together had combined to bring up this despair in me that I wasn't comfortable with, that I hadn't felt before and just didn't like. That was really what was at the root of the doubt.

When I could see that, I was back in the despair. But that was a lot better than being in the doubt.

Because at least there was clarity. So with all these difficult energies, clarity is worth a lot.

With all these difficult energies of the hindrances that will inevitably arise as part of the situation, as part of the deepening of our practice, what we really need to think of is not that we want them to go away, but to discover that we have the potential to make friends with them. So not relating with them with a sense of aversion or wanting them to disappear, but opening to these experiences directly with a sense of real acceptance.

It may not happen the first time that we see a particular desire or a form of aversion, but it calls out a deeper strength from us than we maybe knew we had—that we can actually accept them and understand them. Because really, they're just forms of energy until we invest. They're quite impersonal. It's not my anger or your anger. It's just anger. So can we open and see them with a friendly kind of attention? And mindfulness has this quality of friendliness in it.

If we can do this, this is really a miracle of practice. Because what happens is, in a moment of difficulty—whether it's a moment of aversion or desire or fear—in that moment, if we can be aware and open, we're transforming that whole moment from a moment of difficulty, a moment of suffering, and a moment of the unwholesome, really into a moment of the awakened mind. We're giving birth right in the middle of the suffering. We're giving birth to the qualities of clarity, of friendliness, of compassion, of acceptance. And that's like magic.

There's no technique that can do this. But it's something that we learn from doing it again and again and again in our practice. And every time we're able to do it, it comes more easily the next time. This is really the alchemy of our practice. This is the transformation of our suffering directly, moment by moment, into the awakened mind.

One of my Tibetan teachers, a young Lama named Sukhne Rinpoche, said that the sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusion. The sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusion.

I'd just like to close with a quotation from another Tibetan. This is a teacher from the 12th century named Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa. And he had a little poem that he called The Four Blessings, that are referred to as The Four Blessings of Gampopa. This is put in the form of a prayer or a supplication, and it doesn't matter so much whom the prayer is directed toward. It can be directed toward the teacher, could be directed to the Buddha, could be directed to the Dharma or to life itself.

These are the four blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's sit for just a minute.

CHAPTER 211

The Five Aggregates - Part I

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

In this foundational dharma talk, Guy Armstrong introduces the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) as the Buddha's analytical framework for understanding human experience and the root of suffering. Drawing from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta's teaching on the Four Noble Truths, Armstrong explores how ignorance—not seeing things as they truly are—underlies all suffering. He examines the first aggregate of rūpa (material form) in depth, using the metaphor of a magic show from the suttas to illustrate how we mistake appearances for solid reality. Through scientific analysis of perception and references to the Heart Sutra's teaching that "all five aggregates are empty," Armstrong demonstrates how recognizing the insubstantial, dreamlike nature of experience can lead to liberation. He introduces the mental aggregates of vedanā (feeling tone), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness), showing how they operate in every moment of experience. The talk emphasizes practical investigation of the three characteristics—anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), and anattā (not-self)—within one's direct experience of the aggregates, offering a path toward the "ultimate ease" described by the Thai forest master Ajahn Mun.

Last night Gil talked about the Four Noble Truths and the Second Noble Truth, which points to the Buddhist teaching that the cause of our suffering—our optional suffering in this life—is craving or thirst or *tanha*, this incessant movement of mind that seeks new pleasure now here and now there, never being satisfied.

You could say that the Buddha delivered the discourse on the Four Noble Truths as his very first discourse, and the rest of his 45 years of teaching were really just a footnote to that teaching. Everything is contained within the Four Noble Truths, and everything that followed is a subplot of the Four Noble Truths.

But in other teachings, the Buddha drew an even more fundamental analysis of the cause of suffering and investigated why even craving was present in the mind. In tracing it back, he said that the root cause, the very most fundamental cause that anyone could discover or point to for our suffering, actually is ignorance.

Ignorance in the sense that the Buddha used the word doesn't mean a lack of facts or that we haven't been told enough. It means that we don't see properly. It means that we don't see things the way they are. And because of not seeing things the way they are, we

suffer. We suffer because we live in illusion, because we misunderstand the world. As long as we misunderstand the world and ourselves, we're actually bound to suffering. This is what bondage means. We are bound as long as we are in ignorance.

The Buddha put this truth of ignorance very strongly. He was talking about ordinary beings and undeveloped practitioners like ourselves, and he said, "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that." It's a pretty strong statement. Why do we bother? Might as well stop conceiving, and it'll all be a lot simpler.

One of my earlier teachers, Christopher Titmus, who's quite given to provocative statements, put it this way. He said to a group in a dharma talk one time, "Everything you think is wrong. Everything you think is wrong." Often as people get into the deeper meaning of dharma and the deeper truths within dharma, they talk about feeling turned inside out, and that all their ideas and views get turned upside down and stood on their head.

Everything we think is wrong. This is really hard to keep in mind. It's sort of hard to keep functioning in the world and keep this truth in mind because it really undercuts our self-confidence. It undercuts our belief in our views, and sometimes we feel that we need our views to operate in life. Gil actually talked last night that clinging to views is one of the primary sources of suffering. So it's really in clinging to the way that we see things wrongly that we set ourselves even further adrift.

I wonder if we can remember that we're actually at this moment, all of us, living in some degree of illusion, some degree of misperception, and to the extent that we live in misperception, not seeing truly. That's a very hard thing to remember. If we are willing just to keep that possibility in mind, it lends a real humility to our approach to life. We're willing to open to the possibility that we're not always right, unbelievable as that may sound.

The Buddha talked about different ways that this fundamental misunderstanding can be talked about. He said that it can be talked about as not seeing the Four Noble Truths. This is often the basic definition of wisdom or clear seeing—that one sees the Four Noble Truths and that is enough.

Another way the Buddha sometimes talked about this misperception was in terms of what are called the Three Characteristics—three aspects of everything that comes into existence, shared by all things that come into existence. They are the characteristics of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, and of selflessness. He often said that we suffer because we don't see the truth of these three, and instead we believe that things last, that from the objects of this world we can find a lasting happiness, which we try over

and over to do with them, and that we believe that there's a self somewhere in this whole fabric of existence that then has to occupy itself with bringing in pleasure and keeping away pain. Because we perceive these three wrongly, we get caught in grasping. And because we get caught in grasping, we suffer.

There's one other way of formulating the misunderstanding that you find a few places in the teachings of the Buddha, and that is in the concept of emptiness. He pointed in a number of passages in the Pali text to the truth of the insubstantiality of everything that exists in this life. This insubstantiality is a way of saying that things are empty, that they're more empty than we imagine them to be. So another way we could understand this wrong take on life is that we see things as being solid and substantial when actually they're not.

I'd like to talk a little bit about how the Buddha actually saw the world, how he understood himself, and by extension, how we can understand ourselves, and out of that how we can see the world in a truer way. I'd like to approach it through one of the categories that the Buddha used again and again to teach what are called the five aggregates.

These are five component parts, you might say, of a human being. When we look at a human being, we see a person, and that seems self-evident. But when the Buddha looked at himself or another being, I believe, he saw the five aggregates, not a human being. That is a different take on life. It feels different to see in that way. And when one sees in that way, the truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness, and emptiness become very clear.

So I'd like to talk about these truths tonight in relation to the five aggregates. But I have to put a couple of disclaimers up front. One is that I feel a little shy to talk about emptiness because it's quite a profound topic. And I feel very naive on this particular subject because it is profound.

There was a young Tibetan Lama who was here at Spirit Rock this summer and led a retreat in Santa Rosa. His name is Mingyur Rinpoche. I don't know if any of you had the chance to meet him. He's twenty-three years old. And at the age of twenty-three, he has already done two three-year retreats in India where he lives in a monastery. He's a monk. And he's now been the retreat master—that is the head teacher—for another three-year retreat. And he's done all this by the age of twenty-three. So he started when he was about thirteen or fourteen.

When you meet him, when I met him, I felt that I was meeting somebody who had the wisdom of a sixty-year-old seasoned teacher. And yet it's in this very young body. He's really quite an extraordinary being. He's so light that you almost feel you could pass your hand through him. He feels transparent in that way. And yet he conveys the deepest teachings and manifests them through his personality.

So I took a walk—actually Sally and I took a walk with Rinpoche and his translator because he doesn't speak English. It was his first visit to the West. And we asked him what he thought of the West. Truth be told, he actually didn't want to come here. He would much rather have stayed in his monastery in India and practiced or taught. But he was coerced by his older brother to come. And so he came.

We asked him what he thought of the West. And he said, "Well, it's very clean. And it's very square." And that was all he would say about it. I guess he didn't want to offend us.

So I tried to get a little more philosophical with him. And I asked him about some different schools in Tibetan teachings. There's a school who follows the teachings of Nagarjuna, who was a great philosopher in the second century AD, called the Madhyamakas. And there's another school that follows the teachings of the Nyingma lineage called the Dzogchen school.

So I said, "Rinpoche, what's the difference between the Madhyamaka view of things, of life, and the Dzogchen view of things?" And his eyes lit up, because that's the kind of stuff he loves to talk about. And so he went on about a ten-minute discourse about the difference. But he prefaced it by saying, "The first thing you have to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness—eighteen different kinds of emptiness. And they're all spelled out in the texts of his lineage."

I haven't a clue what the eighteen are, although I have read a list at one point. So I'm just going to talk about a little piece tonight of emptiness, maybe half a kind of emptiness tonight, no more. Really just in relation to the five aggregates, the five what are called in Pali khandas. And the Sanskrit term is skandhas.

This term skandhas has somewhat come into Buddhist vocabulary and is the term that most people use if they want to use a foreign term for this. And the term khandha is not in very wide use, the Pali term. So I might use one or the other.

But the original term skandha actually just meant heap or bundle. And when we translate it as aggregate, it sounds very technical. "The five aggregates." Wow, that sounds really scientific. That must be something really arcane that's being pointed to here. I've got to put on my thinking cap to get this one, the five aggregates. It's like some composite of mineral that they're going to use to pave the driveway.

But when you think that the original term meant heap or bundle, it makes it more understandable. And actually the translation I like best for aggregate is "kinds of stuff."

So I take it that our experience in the way of rupa, or form, includes everything that we see, the whole physical world. I also take it to mean that it includes the way that matter interacts. So when one hand hits another, the sound that comes is also an aspect of form. When something tasty touches the tongue, the taste that arises is also a manifestation of the material world. When we touch something in the world, the sensation of touch that comes is part of the material world. When we smell a delightful meal from the kitchen, that smell is part of the material world. So I take it as the visual world and all the senses, the world of the five physical senses, basically.

The Buddha said that we don't see this realm very clearly. We don't understand it quite rightly. One of the things we often hear about the world is that it's kind of magical, that there's an awesome property to the physical world. There's a great mystery and there's a sense of magic with it.

So I thought I would start with a little magic trick. I never learned very many magic tricks, but I learned one. In the way of discoursing on magic, I would start with a little magic trick.

We have this deck of cards. As you can see, it's just an ordinary deck of playing cards. I'm going to ask my friend and Dharma brother, James, to pick a card out of the deck and not show it to me, but to hold it up and show it to the rest of you.

"Pick a card, any card. You can show it now to the group. Careful I don't see the reflection in the window."

"Now that everybody's seen it, you can slip it back in the deck. Thank you."

I'll shuffle a few times. I don't have a clue what card it was. But we'll do it one more time. Maybe I'll get it this time.

"Pick another card, James. Any card."

So please show them.

I found my calling! Now, will you put it back in the deck? We'll shuffle the deck—a good shuffle. Let me see. Is that your card? Is that it?

It's magic, isn't it? Wow. I'm impressed.

You know, these magic tricks are really amazing. The first time I saw this, I wondered, how did he do that? Until you hear the explanation. And actually, I'll share the explanation with you.

It's a marked deck of cards—a trick deck. The cards are actually tapered. They're not exactly rectangular, but longer at one end than the other. So when the card gets pulled out and then gets turned around and stuck back in, there's only one card whose edge sticks out at one end. The reason it didn't work the first time is because James turned the card around and I turned the deck around. I didn't train my subject properly—that was my mistake. The second time, he turned the card around, but I knew not to turn the deck around. So when you run your hands across the deck, you simply pull out the card whose edge stands out.

Now that you know how it works, there's no more magic in it. It won't be a fun trick again. But when we don't know the secret, it looks pretty cool—pretty mysterious.

I actually saw something on television the other day that was like this. I don't know if you ever see pro wrestling when you're flipping through channels. Ever since that guy got elected governor of Minnesota, the stock of pro wrestling has gone way up in the world. It's actually an avenue into politics now, which isn't too surprising. Some of the politicians seem like they were dropped on their heads a few times.

What I saw while channel surfing was a demonstration of how they do the pile driver. One wrestler grabs another wrestler's head between his thighs and then appears to drive his head into the mat. It looks like the second wrestler's head is going to break or his neck is going to snap because he's being driven down head-first. They explained how it actually works: the wrestler braces his shoulders against the other wrestler's knees, and his shoulders absorb the whole blow. He doesn't actually land on his head. That's how they survive those moves. So the next time you're watching pro wrestling, now you'll know the secret.

The Buddha compared this life not to pro wrestling, but to a magic show. I want to read this passage from the suttas:

"Suppose that a magician or a magician's apprentice should hold a magic show at the four crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should see it, ponder over it, and reflect on it with wise attention. As he or she sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it with wise attention, he would find it empty, he would find it hollow, he would find it void of essence. What essence, monks, could there be in a magic show?

"Even so, monks, whatever form, whatever feeling"—he goes through the rest of the five aggregates—"whatever of the five aggregates there are, a monk sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it with wise attention. And as he ponders and reflects, he finds it empty. He finds it hollow. He finds it void of essence. What essence could there be in form and the other aggregates?"

The Buddha is comparing our experience of life to a magic show. When we can actually get behind the stage and see how the magic show is being put together, we see through it. We see how the display is created and we're no longer deceived by it. Not being deceived, it doesn't cast the kind of spell over us that it used to. It doesn't enchant us, as Gil mentioned the other day.

This seeing of the empty or unsubstantial nature of life is said to be a way to freedom. One of the most popular texts in all of Buddhism is the Heart Sutra. Near the beginning, it makes the statement: "The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress."

So this seeing into the nature of the five aggregates is not a trivial thing. In this very key text in Buddhism, the statement is that the perception of the emptiness of the five aggregates relieves us of all suffering and distress. I think there was a question the other night about why emptiness is considered important, and this is why. It has the potential for liberation, for truly freeing us.

I got into reading quite a bit about emptiness last fall. Actually, I was reading this central text by Nagarjuna called *The Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way*. It's in a new translation by Jay Garfield, and it's the most readable version I've found of this work. It's very good. I started to have dreams about emptiness during this period because the words were not just remaining as intellectual concepts, but they were really starting to penetrate my experience of the moment.

In one dream that came shortly before I woke up in the morning, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, fully clothed in a normal outfit. The question that came into my mind as I stood before the mirror was: why is emptiness important? The answer actually came from the image in the mirror, and the answer was: because it means you don't exist.

It means you don't exist. The "I" that we take as separate and independent and not connected to the rest of being—that's the part that when we see emptiness, we see through its fiction. This separate sense of I gets dissolved. And because it gets dissolved, the self-concern that goes with it—the burden of supporting and feeding and caring for and providing pleasure for and avoiding pain for that separate self—gets dissolved also. This is the liberating potential of emptiness.

This statement that the Buddha made about the magician's show went on to include all five aggregates, which are form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. We'll explain the others later. And he added a poem that reads like this:

"Form is like a mass of foam and feeling but an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations a plantain tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick altogether. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun"—one of the names for the Buddha.

Form is like a mass of foam. Can you imagine that? A mass of foam floating down a river that's been stirred up by sediment or some pollution. You just see these bubbles drifting on the river's surface, and every once in a while a bubble pops and is no longer there. This entire physical world, the Buddha likens to a mass of foam. That's an incredible statement.

I think we are so conditioned by and large by the scientific worldview that it's hard for us to feel that in our bones. And I think there's a fundamental error in the scientific worldview that deceives us and has cast a spell over us in this century. There was a question this morning about whether Buddhism is a religion. In many ways, I feel that the religion of our culture in the twentieth century is science, because science has defined for most people alive today in America what's true and what's false. Science provides for most of us our most fundamental worldview.

And science has a fundamental error in its take on the world. I think that most of the time, conditioned by this worldview, we take the physical world as being the ultimate truth of things. We take this world as solid and what really exists—this is the most fundamentally true thing that exists. And of course, the scientific worldview is that our life and consciousness is just a kind of random byproduct of chemical interactions among molecules that have existed for a long time in this physical reality. So in the scientific worldview, consciousness is an accident and a byproduct of matter.

This communicates to us that—and I think most of us live our lives this way, and I live most of my life really believing that this physical world is what's most true and that we are born into this physical world, we are trapped in this physical world until the time that we die, and then we leave this physical world. This is the scientific worldview, but I think it ignores a really fundamental truth.

And that is the truth that this physical world only appears to us conjoined with human consciousness.

There is never a moment when we recognize the physical world without it being held within our human consciousness. So rather than viewing the physical world as giving birth to human consciousness, the Buddha turned this around completely. He taught that the physical world is perceived only through human consciousness, and perhaps human consciousness is more fundamental. Maybe mind actually came first.

We're not going to definitively answer that question—the Buddha didn't really answer it either. But maybe that's closer to the truth. This understanding casts an entirely different light on our experience. I would maintain that the Buddha's description of the world as consciousness conjoined with impressions of the physical world is more truthful, more accurate, and more fundamental than the materialist view. Most importantly, it offers the possibility of liberation, which the scientific worldview doesn't.

Through this kind of examination, we can begin to shift some of our fundamental assumptions about the world and how we perceive it. Sylvia talked early in this retreat about opening up to new ways of perceiving, opening up to a new way of understanding the world. This is one of those understandings that can shift.

So how can we come to see that this physical world is like a mass of foam? We come to stillness in our meditation and begin to see the impermanent nature of things. We notice that sounds are just flickering on and off. Tastes become fleeting. Smells arise and pass away similarly.

Then there are two physical senses that remain somewhat opaque to us in the beginning: the sense of the body and the sense of sight. But as our meditation deepens, as stillness and concentration develop, something remarkable happens. When we actually experience the body directly and inwardly—when our awareness becomes completely intimate with the body—we discover there's nothing solid there. The whole body, as felt from within through direct contact with awareness, reveals itself as pure flux, pure change. Its nature is pulsation, vibration, tingling, itching, pressure, lightness—all in constant movement.

From the very inside, we know experientially that there's really nothing solid here. We may refer back to our anatomy books from seventh-grade health class and believe that the body is full of bones, muscles, sinews, and tissues that appear solid. But when we actually turn to our direct experience of the bare physical nature, we see there's nothing solid there at all. It's simply pulsing on and off, moment after moment, with our awareness. Through this, we begin to see that the sense of touch reveals insubstantiality.

This leaves us with the sense of sight, which in some ways remains the most opaque. We look at the world and it appears completely solid. Change is hard to perceive. These walls have been here since we walked in, seemingly unchanged. So how can we see through the apparent substantiality of sight?

I'd suggest we return to our old friend science and deconstruct how vision actually takes place based on what we know scientifically. There's a source of light—currently the lamps in this room, or in daytime, the sun. Photons are scattering all over the objects in the room, being partially absorbed and partially reflected. The reflected light from all the different objects comes to our eye and lands on the retina. These photons carry energy that triggers cells in the retina, starting electrical impulses traveling through the optic nerve up to the brain, where they register.

Then comes the completely mysterious step that science has no explanation for: how that physical impulse gets translated into the actual experience of sight, into the consciousness of seeing. It's entirely mysterious. I don't know how that gap is bridged either, but we know that somehow it happens.

What we do know is that everything we see comes about only because millions of photons every second are impinging on the retina. Therefore, the image that we perceive is not a solid image at all—it's being formed microsecond after microsecond from these impulses to the brain. When we truly reflect on this, we recognize that the image we see "out there" is not a solid thing. The image I have of you is not solid—it's flickering on and off, microsecond after microsecond.

What does this understanding do to the seeming solidity of sight? It reveals sight as a magic show. These visual appearances arise as a magical display, as the texts sometimes describe it.

So we can feel the insubstantiality in sight, but we can take it a little farther. One of the things I like to ask is a question like, where is red? This sweater is red. In your experience, where is red? Does red really abide in this sweater? Is it in the nature of the sweater? Or is it only in your consciousness?

In actual fact, if you know from your seventh grade science about how light reflection works, red light reflects off the sweater into your eye because this sweater has absorbed all the colors of the spectrum except for red. So the actual color of this thing is not red. That's how red is arising in your consciousness right now. So where is red? It's not in this, is it? It's only a display in consciousness. Only a display.

There's another way we can see some more insubstantiality in this situation. Sometimes it's described by people who know the teachings of the Buddha that our awareness is unbounded—virtually infinite, and extends as far as the farthest star. That this room, this land, the earth, and all the galaxies are actually included within our consciousness. And we have the idea that the awareness expands outwardly, physically, to reach the farthest star.

So let's think about that for a minute. We can go out under the night sky tonight, and it's not totally cloudy. We can look up and we can see stars. But let's think for a minute about how that seeing happens. Those photons also have been traveling a long way. The nearest star is five light years away. At light traveling 186,000 miles a second, that's a long way away. It takes five years to get here. So that light has been traveling for five years, and that impacts our retina. And here and now, that gives rise to the image of a star.

But that sight of star isn't five light years away. That light landed here, and that image is being generated now. That seeing of star is here and now. And you can bring it closer still. Everyone in this room is the same way. My image of Sandra is not actually over there. My image of Sandra is also here. Everything we see is actually here and now.

In the scientific or materialist worldview, we assume that awareness resides within space. But in the actual truth of things, as we see from the perspective of our human experience, space is only an aspect or something that we construct through consciousness, through awareness. So awareness doesn't reside within space. Space is an outcome of awareness. So again, I might say that awareness seems to be more fundamental than physical space.

So it's not that awareness is embedded in the physical world. Rather, the physical world is an appearance within awareness. So everything that we see is only an appearance. We assume that it's solid. We assume that it's substantial. But actually, there's no evidence for that belief. There is no evidence for that assumption.

So in our relationship to this world, if we want to learn from the point of view of emptiness, we can shift our vocabulary a little bit and not talk about the world as being made up of objects, but as containing appearances. So you might just play with that change in vocabulary as you relate to sights over the next few days—not taking the sight to indicate an object, but taking it to indicate an appearance.

That leads into the sense of magical display. That leads into the sense of the magic show that the Buddha talked about. It bears very strong resemblance to a dream. Just in this moment, in your experience of this moment, is there any real difference between your experience right now and your experience in a dream?

We can say dreams don't have the kind of continuity that daily life does. Dreams don't have the kind of karmic repercussions that daily life does. Thank goodness.

But in our just-felt experience of it, is there any difference?

So that's why the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu could write, "I just woke from a dream in which I was a butterfly. Or am I a butterfly now dreaming to be a man?" These two worlds are not really so different.

One of my Tibetan teachers—actually Mingyur Rinpoche's brother—is a thirty-three-year-old lama named Sokny Rinpoche, also very wise, very young, very playful. And he said something rather devastating at one of the early retreats that I was on with him. He said, "In fact, everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever." Real in the sense of its being solid or substantial. The way we take the physical world to be, it's only an appearance.

We were talking about this in a group of senior students at Spirit Rock a couple of weeks ago. And one of the meditators had been working with this vocabulary shift—objects versus appearances—for about a week and reported in the next class how her experimentation had gone. And what she said about it was, "It's spooky. It's spooky, but I found it fascinating. I would look at everything, like this Japanese lamp that I love, and I'd see that it's only an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all just appearances."

When you go from an object to say that that's an appearance, then to a person and say that this is just an appearance, it can really make your hair stand on end. But I believe it. It's true. And it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile.

So this intuiting of the emptiness is not just a philosophical or intellectual speculation, but when it starts to penetrate our bones, when we start to get the feeling of what it means, it does evoke this sense of compassion. It's not a cold or philosophical inquiry, but it's an inquiry that really transforms the heart.

So let me talk just briefly about the mental components of the aggregates. There are four mental components in addition to the physical component.

The first of them is called feeling. But it doesn't mean emotion the way we usually think of feeling. The better translation probably is feeling tone. The Pali word is vedanā. And it refers to the tone of feeling that every experience has of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

This feeling tone is a root issue in Dharma practice because it's on the basis of the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience that we act out our tendencies to greed, aversion, or delusion. We tend to be greedy or to hold on to those things that have a pleasant feeling tone. We tend to push away or withdraw from those things that have an unpleasant feeling tone. And the things that have a neutral feeling tone, we tend to ignore. We tend to go blank. We tend to space out on.

These influences of greed, aversion, and delusion are what keep the mind in turmoil and what keep us from finding peace. They're all based on feeling tone. So it's the element in our experience that drives our craziness, you might say, that drives our turmoil, that drives our disturbance.

The fact is we can't stop life from showing its changing face of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Most of the time, we think that our happiness is bound with that change. When our experience is pleasant, we're happy. When it's unpleasant, we're unhappy. And when it's neutral, we're kind of blah. We tend to be bored.

If we live our lives that way, we're always bound to an alternation of happiness and sorrow, sorrowing when the happiness goes, when the unpleasant comes. So it's very important to find a freedom that is not bound to the feeling tone. And that's the freedom that mindfulness offers, an awareness that can be with the pleasant and the unpleasant and not be moved by them, not be tied to them.

The second element in the mental factors is called perception. In Pali, the word is saññā. And here, perception means the factor of recognition or memory, that when I look out into the room tonight, I'm able to see men and women and chairs and pillows and walls and lamps and shawls. Perception is the element that operates from memory and organizes our visual sphere into things that we know and are comfortable with and familiar with.

We might think that this is just a spontaneous part of existence, but it's not. Oliver Sacks was reporting on a patient that he saw who had had his sight restored at age forty-five.

He had sight as a very small child and then had become blind, and at age 45 had an operation to restore it. That's miraculous. So everybody was waiting around the patient's bed. The man's name was Virgil. They took the bandages off, and the surgeon was there, his family was there, and Sacks was there. Everybody expected him to cry out, "I can see, I can see," because the operation was a success.

But here's Sacks' report of what happened. Virgil seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing at the surgeon, who stood before him still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke, saying "Well?" did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face. Virgil told me later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, "Well?" Then and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face—and indeed the face of his surgeon.

We take perception for granted, and it's a necessary tool for living, but it's not intrinsic. It's something that we learn.

The fourth of the mental components is called formations. The Pali term is *sankharas*, and it means the formations of mind—primarily thoughts, emotions, and images. But it also refers to those as they affect actions of speech and body. Sometimes it's called karmic formations. These are going on all the time within us. We feel them clearly in our meditation. They make up a substantial part of our experience. They're called formations because they're not intrinsic. They're rather thrown up in a kind of fabricated way, moment after moment, by the mind. It's part of this projective quality of mind, this producing that goes on in the mind moment after moment.

The fifth and final factor of the aggregates is consciousness. Consciousness in the sense the Buddha used it in the five aggregates is used in a very particular way, and it means the knowing quality within every moment of experience. So for example, when you hear a sound, there are actually two components to that hearing. One is the sound itself, just that tone that's emitted by the bell. We could characterize it as an A or a C or a D or whatever. That tone has its nature. But there's also an element in you that's knowing that experience—not in a conceptual way, a totally pre-verbal way—but there's a quality of its registering in your mind. There's a knowing quality where your mind is meeting the sound.

Now these two actually come up together. The sound and the knowing of the sound arise simultaneously. It's a little hard to tease them apart in our experience, but there are actually two separate things going on in that moment of hearing. The way that you know there's a mental thing happening is because if I asked you ten minutes from now what was that sound like, you'd have a memory of it. The memory is only there because the mind knew it and stored it.

So these are the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. They're all present in every moment of experience. For instance, again in striking the bell, hearing the sound is the form aggregate. That sound will have a quality for you that you either like or don't like, or it's neutral. That's the feeling tone. Actually, that bell has quite a pretty sound. So for most of us, the feeling tone of that is a pleasant one.

There's the element of perception because you recognize, "Oh, that's the bell that ends the sitting." That's the recognition. It's very helpful when you've been sitting an hour and you hear that sound and you know that's the bell that ends the sitting, because then you can use that knowledge to get up and walk. And finally, there are the thoughts around the bell: Didn't the bell get rung a little bit early? When's it going to ring next? When's it going to ring for the end of this talk?

Is the sitting over now? And so forth. All these thoughts that come are the formations. There might be a resentment: "Oh, I think that bell should have rung ten minutes ago. The person up front has lost track of the time."

And finally, through all these experiences, there's consciousness. There's the mind that is registering all the different events—the sound, the feeling of the sound, the perception or recognition, and all the thoughts that are arising. Consciousness is what's revealing each of the other four aggregates. In every moment of our experience, all five aggregates are present.

So the Buddha asked about these aggregates: Is form permanent or impermanent? The physical world—permanent or impermanent? It's impermanent, isn't it? Sooner or later it will all pass. Then he said: Is what is impermanent possibly a source of lasting happiness? Is it possible that the impermanent can give us lasting happiness? No, it can't.

So then he said: Is what is impermanent and ultimately unsatisfactory fit to be regarded as "I" or "mine"? He said no, it's not. Only something that would give lasting happiness is what we should regard as "I" or "mine."

In his teaching, he most often stressed how the aggregates reveal the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

This is the way I would encourage you to work with the aggregates in your practice: to look within your experience closely with the steady eye of samadhi, with the steady eye of your meditation, and ask yourself: Is this impermanent? Is there anything within the aggregates that is lasting? And if there is not, is there anything here that can give me lasting happiness? And if there is not, is there any ground for believing in an ongoing and independent self? Is there any steady, stable "I" to be found within this field of human experience that we call the aggregates?

That is to be investigated and discovered. Is there a self?

I'll close with this quotation from Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun was one of the greatest monks of this century in Thailand. He was the teacher of Ajahn Chah and of Ajahn Mahabua, and a number of other great Thai masters. He was a wandering monk, a forest monk. He wandered in the forests of northern Thailand into Laos, into Burma for thirty years or more, teaching when he would be near a village, very dedicated to practice. This was taken from a poem that he wrote after his liberation, called "The Ballad of Liberation from the Five Skandhas":

"So in brief, there's suffering and there's the Dharma. Dharma here is the truth of freedom, the truth of our intrinsic freedom. Always with the mind. Contemplate this until you see the truth and the mind will be completely cool. However great the pleasure and pain, they'll cause you no fear. No longer drunk with the cause of suffering, the mind's well released. Knowing just this much is enough to soothe your fevers. The heart, knowing the Dharma of ultimate ease, sees for sure that the skandhas are unsatisfactory. The Dharma stays as the Dharma. The skandhas stay as the skandhas. That's all."

Let's sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 212

The Five Aggregates - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong continues his exploration of the five khandhas (aggregates), focusing on their relationship to the three characteristics of existence and the conventional nature of selfhood. Drawing on the story of the bhikkhuni Vajirā's encounter with Māra and the classical chariot analogy from the Questions of King Milinda, Armstrong examines how what we call a 'human being' is merely a conventional designation for the coming together of the five aggregates.*
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> *The talk explores each aggregate in detail: how we identify with form (rūpa) as 'mine' or 'I am the body,' leading to fear of death; how perception (saññā) colors our fundamental experience of reality; how mental formations (saṅkhāras) provide familiar patterns we mistake for selfhood; and how consciousness (viññāṇa) appears both conditioned and unconditioned. Armstrong demonstrates how the sense of 'I' arises moment by moment through identification with these aggregates, citing the Buddha's teaching of twenty ways belief in self comes to be.*
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> *Through practical examples and personal anecdotes, including experiences from his time as a monk in Thailand, Armstrong shows how seeing through the conventional self leads to profound freedom and compassion. He concludes by pointing toward the unconditioned awareness that accommodates all arising and passing phenomena—our deepest Buddha nature that is 'deathless' and beyond the three characteristics.*

A few nights ago, I talked about the five aggregates, particularly in relation to the emptiness of the material world, or what's called form. I spoke about how the Buddha said that form was like a mass of foam, empty and insubstantial. This refers to the whole physical world that we inhabit. Our use of language can reflect this understanding if we talk about appearances rather than objects—we get in touch with that insubstantiality.

Tonight I wanted to talk a little more about the five aggregates, particularly in relation to what Sylvia spoke about last night: the three characteristics. These are the qualities of everything that arises—being impermanent, being unsatisfactory or incapable of giving lasting happiness, and being without a self.

The fundamental question in practice, the fundamental thing we're trying to solve or see into, is the question of what am I? Who am I? What is a human being? What is this thing that we experience that we call life? This question has obviously preoccupied people from the time of the Buddha and before.

There are these lovely stories—Gil read one about the nuns who were practicing and the accounts of their deliverance, the accounts of their struggles. I wanted to read one other nun story tonight.

If you remember from the one he read in a talk early in the retreat, the nun was visited by Mara. In Buddhist mythology, Mara personifies the difficult forces of the mind—the hindrances. But actually, the way you hear Mara described in the old texts, it seems that people truly regarded Mara as a being—a being on some other level that would come and visit people. You can understand this being of Mara in two ways: one is just a kind of mythological archetype; the other is an actual being. I don't know which is true, but it's a really interesting figure in all the Buddhist texts.

So the nun Vajira, a nun of some understanding, as will be apparent from the dialogue, had taken her alms bowl and entered Savatthi, a town in northern India, for alms and came back to the grove where she was staying. After her meal, she sat down at the foot of a tree and began to meditate.

Then it said that Mara approached the bhikkhuni and desired to cause her fear and consternation, to make her hair stand on end and cause her to fall away from concentration of mind. Have you had any visits from Mara like that so far? That sounds kind of familiar.

So Mara came to the bhikkhuni Vajira and put to her this question that was intended to unsettle her: "Who put this living being together? Where is the maker? Where does this being come from, and where will it end?"

Vajira, being a pretty together meditator, replied immediately, "What's this 'being' you go on about? That's your delusion. We are nothing but the aggregates. There's no being to be found here. It's like this: A certain combination of parts is called by the name 'chariot.' So with the aggregates, the elements of mind and body, it's just common usage to say 'a being.' It's suffering that exists, suffering that endures, suffering that disappears. Nothing but suffering exists. Nothing but suffering comes to an end."

Then Mara, the evil one, thought, "Vajira knows me." And sad and dejected, he slunk away.

This is a very interesting reply from Vajira when she says, "There is no being here. That's only a concept. What's really here are the aggregates." This response takes us into a level that in the Buddhist texts is talked of as the level of ultimate truth and conventional truth. Gil talked about the level of thusness and concepts—this is another way to express that.

In the teachings, there are said to be ultimate constituents of experience that have a reality, a limited reality. The aggregates are among these things that have a true reality, that have a way of being. Others of the constituents that are said to be real in this sense are the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air, which really refer to qualities of body sensations. At first I thought the Buddha was being a really primitive chemist and saying that this is what makes up matter. But these are the qualities that we feel in our body. The sense bases and their objects are considered true and real, and nibbana, the unconditioned, is considered to be a reality.

But the term "human being" is just a conventional description of these things taken together. There is no thing that is a human being.

The term human being doesn't point to anything that really exists. And Vajira mentions this analogy of the chariot. This is a classical analogy in the texts that's explored in an ancient work called *The Questions of King Melinda*.

There's quite an interesting story behind this. There was considerable interchange between ancient Greece and ancient India, and these Buddha images that we see today didn't exist at the time of the Buddha. Though we think of them as products of Indian art and culture, they weren't created until much later. There was no statuary 500 years before the birth of Christ. The symbols that were used at the time of the Buddha to represent him and the teachings were a footprint, a dharma wheel—an eight-spoked wheel representing the Eightfold Path—or sometimes a footprint with a dharma wheel between the toes.

It was only when Indian culture had contact with Greek culture that the Roman-Greek style of sculpture was introduced, and we began to see figures like this. This is actually a very European artistic tradition, even though now it appears quintessentially Asian.

One of these Greek kings was named Menander, who conquered part of India and lived there sometime after the death of the Buddha. King Menander was visited by an enlightened monk named Nagasena, and they engaged in a series of dialogues that

were recorded. The name was slightly altered over the years, so the book is called *The Questions of King Melinda*, though his actual name was apparently Menander, and he was indeed Greek.

So Menander was dialoguing with Nagasena, the Arahant, and asked, "Who is Nagasena? I see you before me, I hear your voice, but who are you really?" He said to Nagasena, "Are you your form?" And Nagasena replied, "No." "Are you your feelings?" "No." "Are you your perceptions?" "No." "Are you your mental formations?" "No." "Are you your consciousness?" "No." Because all of these are only fragments.

So the king said, "Well, maybe Nagasena doesn't really exist."

Nagasena's reply was brilliant: "King, you're a wealthy man. How did you come here? Did you come on foot or by chariot?"

The king said, "I came by chariot."

So Nagasena asked, "What is this thing you call a chariot? Is it the wheels?"

The king said, "No."

"Is it the axles?"

"No."

"Is it the pole that attaches to the horse?"

"No."

"Is it the sum of all of these?"

The king said, "Not really."

Nagasena concluded, "It's just this way with a human being. We can't really be said to be any of these components."

This is quite mysterious. We can see why we're not the individual aggregates, but why aren't we all of them put together? What we see in the description of the chariot is that a chariot is really just these individual pieces—the box, the wheels, the axle, the pole—that are assembled together in a certain way. If we disassemble them, we no longer have a chariot.

Consider a simple example: a pen. We look at this and say, "That's a pen." But if we start to take it apart, we have the individual pieces—the barrel, the refill, the cap, and so forth. Is this collection of parts a pen? Not really, is it?

If we put the pieces back together, then again we have something that we recognize as a pen.

So what we call a human being is only these aggregates that are assembled in a certain way and interact in a certain way that give the appearance of one thing—a unity, an organism. But if you were asked to find the one part of you that "human being" refers to, there isn't anything like that, is there? So "human being" is just a concept. And in practice, we want to keep coming back to seeing the reality of our actual experience, which we can describe as the aggregates. That's what's real or true.

So in a way, this is seeing a level of emptiness in the human being. Another way that it's sometimes described is selflessness. And I know there are lots of feelings about getting into this concept of selflessness. So if this is really uncomfortable, this might be the time for the earplugs or the tuning out. But I wanted to explain a little about the relationship of selflessness to the aggregates.

And so what I want to do to get into it is to ask the question: what do we mean by this word "I" or "self"? Because the Buddha wasn't denying that there are beings, but rather that there's a certain way we use the word "I" or "self" that is being negated. So we really need to understand what that is first.

The sense I think we have of "I" is that there's something to which it refers that was there when we were born, has been there all throughout our life, is here in this moment, will be with us the rest of the life until we die—at least, if not longer. That there's some kind of abiding or ongoing independent part of ourselves that continues through time. It's like we feel that there's something at the core of us that is lasting. That in some ways, I'm the same person who sat in that second grade classroom and learned the fundamentals of arithmetic as the person I am in this moment. There's some sense of the continuing nature of an "I" that's gone through all those experiences.

And we also kind of employ it in this moment. We identify it as the one that's watching the breath, as though there's some entity that's separate from the breath that's observing it. Sometimes we talk about it as the owner of the body—as though there's a car registration made out to Guy Armstrong that this body is registered to. It's the one who hears sounds. There's a hearer of sounds in it.

This is the piece that the Buddha was negating. That there's some kind of unchanging core at the center of us that is the owner, that is the observer, that is the onlooker, that's separate from our experience. He wasn't denying our individuality. It's really clear that

on a certain level of understanding there are individual beings, that we all feel different things, we perceive differently, we act differently, we obviously take up different space with our body. So that level of individuality isn't being denied or discounted.

One way of thinking about that is that each of us is a complete mind stream—a stream of mind and body. And that stream, you might say, has a continuity over time, but the individual components of body and mind stream are changing. And that this stream of body and mind is a little different than that stream, or that stream, or that stream of body and mind.

One way to understand this is: when the Buddha got enlightened, it solved his problem, but it didn't solve ours. So sometimes you hear this view in spirituality that "all is one." But if all is one, I would expect the Buddha's enlightenment would have taken care of this mind stream also. So there's a level of individuality that's true that we don't really question. But within that individual stream, the Buddha questioned whether there's any kind of solid core that's unchanging.

So the question then is: given this stream, the experience of the aggregates, how is it that we build a sense of self? How does it come into being? One of the core ways that we do it is that we take the body to be self. We take the body to be "I," or we take the body to be "mine."

I don't know if you remember, but when the Buddha attained his understanding under the Bodhi tree near the town of Gaya, he almost didn't teach. It's said that he just abided in the bliss of freedom for seven weeks after his awakening. And he thought about not teaching. He said, "Nobody's going to get it. What I have discovered is too subtle, too hard to understand. No one will get it if I go out and proclaim it." So he almost didn't teach. Then he kind of looked over the world and surveyed the world and he said, "Well, there are some beings that don't have a lot of dust in their eyes, so I'll go offer this."

But this concern evidently came up for him at a later point too, because he was talking to Sariputta, who was one of his chief disciples. And he said, "You know, Sariputta, whether I teach the Dharma briefly or in detail, those who understand it are hard to find." So you get this sense of a little bit of unfulfillment in his sense of teaching, that it wasn't going quite as easily as maybe he thought it might. And Sariputta replied, "Oh, blessed one, now is the time for it."

Teach the Dharma briefly or at length and there will be those who understand. Because at least Sariputta understood. He was considered to be the Buddha's equivalent in wisdom. So the Buddha said, "Well then, Sariputta, this is how the training should be

done. Concerning this body with its consciousness, let there be no self-centered imaginings of I and mine and no such bias. We shall then abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom."

This is a pretty powerful statement. Basically, as long as we believe that we are the body, we're subject to the fear of death. Because we know that the body comes to an end. And if our identity is tied with it, then there's the fear: oh, I also come to an end.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was a great Thai meditation master, one of the greatest Thai monks of the last half century. He died a few years ago. He lived very simply out in nature. Most of his life was spent in a forest monastery in the south of Thailand that had been given to him when he was a young monk. It still exists today. It's called Wat Suan Mok. For those of you who visit Thailand, it's a wonderful place to visit because you get the flavor of what living simply in the woods as a practitioner is like in Asia. It has a wonderful feeling, and it has a lot of his spirit there.

He was a very radical teacher for a traditional Buddhist country. He wouldn't allow any images of the Buddha on the property. People always kept wanting to donate these things, these statues of the Buddha, and he wouldn't have it. He didn't want people to get involved in the kind of ritual and devotion that statues sometimes lead to. When we were monks, we would sit there in a big semicircle for the morning meal. And in the center of the semicircle, there were three big rocks piled one on top of another, decreasing in size. Those were as close as you could get to the image of a Buddha at Wat Suan Mok. He was very radical. He was very much on the wisdom side of things.

Living in nature, he felt that you could just abide in a quiet life and the qualities of nature would sink into your bones, sink into your marrow as you led a simple meditative life. You could learn a great deal from the trees, from the forest, from the creatures, from the weather, from the clouds.

What he said about this learning was that you came to understand that this body came from nature. It just came from the joining together of the seeds from our parents, the sperm and the egg, just a physical joining. Then the body was nourished by nutriments over the course of our life—food and water and air—and grew up. It still belongs to nature. It doesn't actually belong to us. It's never belonged to us. The body belongs to nature. It came from nature. Give it back to nature. And when we do, there's a tremendous relief in that.

This is a matter for insight, for seeing that the body has never departed from nature. We don't have to feel the burden of ownership.

So this is the self in relation to form. In relation to feeling, I think we talked about that in the meditation instructions. I won't spend more time on that.

In relation to perception, I'd like to talk a little bit about the arising of self in relation to perception. It's very interesting. Perception is one of the most powerful and most underrated faculties in our being. It is the faculty of insight, essentially. The deepest insights come not from seeing different things, but from seeing the same things differently.

Some of you this week have been reporting on seeing clearly the arising and passing—that is the insight into impermanence. We all sit down and can tell that body sensations are coming and going, and thoughts are coming and going, moods are coming and going, sounds, breath, everything's coming and going. But sometimes there's the very clear perception of that coming and going, of that arising and passing. It's not that we see anything differently, but we see that same constellation in a different way. And we know, really in our gut: all the facets of my experience are simply arising and passing. That's the power of perception.

Perception colors our fundamental take on the moment. It arises again and again in daily life and in retreat.

I heard this story this summer. John Kabat-Zinn, who began the mindfulness-based stress reduction program at UMass Worcester, has started to offer the practice in the military. They'd heard about the successes in coping with pain and increased clarity. Those instructions are going out into the military right now. I happened to mention this to Christopher Titmus, who is a very devoted member of the Green Party and very active politically. His first question was, "Are they being taught the precepts?" Which is a very interesting point, because one could simply use the practice to become more efficient warriors.

One of the stories John Kabat-Zinn came back with was about a military officer who was living on a base and shopping at the PX, the grocery store on base. He was standing in line where a woman cashier was checking people out. An older woman came through the line holding a baby and reached the cashier. The cashier rang up the purchase, but then the woman with the baby started talking to the cashier, handed the baby over so the cashier could hold it and admire it and coo over it. They talked back and forth for some time.

The officer was getting impatient—tapping his feet, thinking "What's going on? I don't have all day." He grew frustrated and resentful. Finally, the cashier handed the baby back to the older woman, who left and went on her way.

But he had heard some training about watching your mind, not jumping to the first reaction that comes. So he was trying to be a little bit aware of his resentment and reactivity. When he got to the cashier himself, he struck up a conversation and said, "Nice baby."

The cashier said, "It's my baby. My husband was an Air Force officer killed in a training mission just a few months ago. I've had to find a job to support my children. I took this job. The woman who was here is my mother. She looks after my baby during the day and comes in a few times just so that I can have these few moments of contact with my baby."

The man's whole relationship to the situation changed—from reactivity to concern and compassion—all based on that shift in perception from seeing strangers to seeing a mother and a child.

We often perceive ourselves as unlovable or unlovely. That's really a deluded misperception. That's a flaw. Because we are all worthy of love. Every human being is worthy of love. But we forget that.

There's this beautiful poem by Galway Kinnell that expresses this. I think one of the functions of art is to shift our perception of the world and show us where we're mistaken or what we've forgotten. This is called "St. Francis and the Sow."

"The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers from within of self-blessing, though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing, as St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow and told her in words and in touch blessings of the earth on the sow. And the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout all the way through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail, from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine down through the great broken heart to the sheer blue milk and dreaminess spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths, sucking and blowing beneath them, the long, perfect loveliness of sow."

Perceptions can change in a moment. When I was on retreat this fall in Massachusetts, the chipmunks were really active. It was the start of fall season. The leaves were turning colors and falling, and the chipmunks were scurrying around all over the place, storing up food for winter. Then the maples started to reach their maturity and let down those little propellers with the maple seed in the middle. The chipmunks really seemed to love those. They'd go scrambling around everywhere.

We saw lots of chipmunks, and they're very cute—much cuter than squirrels, actually. They can hop so quickly and so high. They look like cartoon characters. So I got very fond of the chipmunks. Being on retreat, you get kind of mushy.

And I grew quite mushy about these chipmunks. Sometimes in the evening, when sunflower seeds or peanuts were offered alongside tea, I would sneak a little handful and scatter them outside for the chipmunks to discover the next day.

One day, while doing a mindful walk along the road, I came upon a dead chipmunk. It hadn't been run over, so its form was still intact. Seeing it there dead really touched me, moved me deeply. I began wondering what family it had been trying to return to when it died on that road. What were its connections? What beings missed it, noticed its absence? How did it feel in that moment of dying? It was very tender.

What really struck me was the size of its ear—so tiny, only about a quarter of an inch long, a delicate grayish pink. In seeing that ear, I realized the chipmunk had possessed all the same senses we do. It was so small, yet within that body of only six inches were all the same aggregates that we have. It had experienced its own life of pleasure and pain, fear and love of life, just as we do. It was a very moving perception.

A few days later, walking along a gravel path, I spotted a small crumpled form on the ground fifteen feet ahead. "Oh no," I thought, "not another dead chipmunk." Looking closer, I wondered: is that a dead chipmunk or just a pile of leaves? I couldn't tell from where I stood.

So I remained there, observing. When I saw it as a dead chipmunk, my heart would sink into sadness. When I saw it as merely leaves, everything felt neutral. The same sense data, yet I could perceive it two completely different ways, and my emotional response shifted entirely. Walking closer, I discovered it was indeed just a pile of dead leaves—much easier to bear.

We can experience these perceptual shifts in a single moment. Do you remember that old song "Silhouettes on the Shade"? A man walks around his girlfriend's block, approaching her door to knock. There's a light on in the living room, and two people are kissing passionately in front of it, their shadows cast on the window shade. He becomes despondent—his girlfriend is in love with another man. But then he realizes it's the wrong house. It's not his girlfriend at all. He goes to the right house and kisses his own girlfriend.

That shift in perception can feel like the difference between heaven and hell. In our practice, sometimes we see the glass half empty, sometimes half full. We can look at a moment of experience in meditation and declare, "This is a bad moment. I can't accept

this. This is painful." Or in a millisecond, we can shift perspective: "Oh, this is okay. There's some discomfort here, a little pain in my body, but my mind isn't too unbalanced. Lunchtime isn't far off. I think I can make it through this." Suddenly it becomes acceptable.

The Buddha taught that a good practitioner can see the beautiful in a moment of unbeauty.

if he or she wishes, or the practitioner can see the unbeautiful in a moment of beauty, if he or she wishes. The reason for seeing them different ways is this: if we're caught in desire, then it's more skillful to see what's not so beautiful, to cut through the wanting. Or if we're caught in aversion, it's more skillful to see the beautiful, so we're not caught in hatred.

The fourth of the aggregates are the sankharas, the formations—the mental formations, sometimes called the karmic formations. These are the expressions of thought and emotion and image that usually express something with a sense of will. The reason that we don't feel peace all the time is that urges come in of wanting or not wanting that keep the mind in motion. We're kind of bombarded by thoughts that express our likes and dislikes and our hopes and fears. The mind doesn't feel peace often because of the impingement of these thoughts. This is what keeps us stirred up.

Well, these are also a way in which we really feel comfortable in the sense of ourselves being there. I get very used to my own particular patterns. I'm a fear type, as personality types go, so I'm very used to a thread of anxiety being present. And some complaining. When that's going on, I sort of think, "Oh, I'm really here now." It gets kind of reassuring. Sometimes when that isn't there and I feel like I'm not here, I sort of wonder where I am or what is going on.

So there are a few things to see with this. One is that we can hold on to a sense of self just through familiarity with these things. But the truth is that if we watch closely, these things also pass.

Suzuki Roshi had this beautiful line which explains why mindfulness is so potent for dealing with the afflictive emotions. He said, "Those who know the state of emptiness will always be able to dissolve their problems through constancy." If you know the state of emptiness, you can always dissolve your problems. Because you simply are patient and stay in the present until that particular mood or fear or anger or wanting or sense of hopelessness or despair or self-judgment passes away, which it will in time. And then you return to this state of balance and openness where nothing is really dominating.

That's true because the sankharas are basically these formations that occur temporarily and unexpectedly—as Silvia said in the talk last night, two useful words. If you forget all the rest of your dharma, you can remember these very useful words.

This is actually what brought me into practice. When I did my first meditation retreat in 1976 at Lama Foundation with Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg, I became totally hooked after that ten-day experience. When I look back on what hooked me into the practice, it was feeling this sense of emptiness and feeling that it had the potency to uproot my suffering.

The particular suffering I was caught in right at that time in my life was a kind of fear and confusion. I'd sort of emerged out of the sixties as one of the walking wounded, with too much of everything that the sixties was famous for. When I found meditation, I felt that it was the one place where I could see that emptiness, and I could see the potential for anything being uprooted through the power of that openness.

This is one of the real healing properties of awareness—that it has the ability to unstick anywhere we feel stuck, anything at all, to reach back to that state of openness. So on the level of the emotions included within the sankharas, they're also temporary. They're passing and transient. And yet they provide a comfortable sense of who we are. If we look closely, we can see that that passes too.

But one of the last refuges of the self—one of the ego's last stand—is in the realm of thought. Even as we get really still in our meditation, and we may be connecting well with the breath, connecting well with sounds, with sensations, very firmly present in the moment, there can be this ongoing line of subconscious chatter: "Oh, I see what's happening now. Now I'm going to stay with the breath for a while. Oh, I got a few of those and then I spaced out for a while. Okay, that wasn't very good, but I'm going to come back. Now what I'm going to pay attention to is sounds because I feel I was too tight and I need some spaciousness."

We can keep this running commentary up even as we're connecting clearly to the focus of the meditation. And in this running commentary, we reestablish the sense of the separate observer. We create, as it were, this sense of observer by these thoughts that haven't been clearly looked into.

So this is one reason that we offer the awareness of thought as an important part of the practice. When we become aware of the thoughts coming and going, then we undercut one more place where the sense of self tends to take a stand, even in very subtle and good periods of meditation. So it's useful to be clear that the thoughts are also coming and going.

One place you can get in touch with that is to start observing the nature of your experience in between thoughts. The time when one thought has ended and before the next thought has arisen—what's the quality of that moment like?

That's a moment that's a little bit freer of this grip of self.

Finally, the last of the aggregates is consciousness. This is more complicated. For now, I'm just going to stick with the definition the Buddha used of consciousness, which is that it was the knowing that arose in relation to a sense experience—to a sound, to a touch, a smell, a taste, a thought, or whatever. When that sense experience went, the consciousness passed with it. So in that sense, consciousness is also arising and passing.

Yet what many people come and report in interviews is that at times when the meditation is steady, when there's a sense of stillness and spaciousness, they feel there's a kind of presence there that's stable and ongoing. They feel that there's a quality to the awareness that isn't characterized by this coming and going. Is that consciousness or is that something else? There's a sense that all the mental components, all the physical components are coming and going, except this awareness seems kind of steady. So what's that about?

That's another talk. I want to mostly avoid that tonight because it's a big question. I'm going to come back and touch on it briefly at the end. For right now, I'll just say that consciousness has a little bit of a dual nature, a dual character. We can see the ways in which it's just conditioned and subject to arising and passing. We can also, from another angle, see that it has a quality of ongoingness. And we'll come back to that before we finish.

So we see that all these components of the aggregates are just arising and passing, moment after moment. In each moment, they come and they go.

So how does the sense of self get generated? Well, it gets generated out of a certain speed of these things happening. The five aggregates can all arise so quickly. A knee pain comes in. You're sitting, you're clearly with the breath. What we call knee pain comes in. By the way, that's a concept because knee is a concept. But you notice that there's this physical sensation arising about here.

You might notice the first thing is this sharp sensation. So that's the manifestation of the form aggregate and also the consciousness aggregate that knows that experience. Form and consciousness are there right in that moment. Then you might note there's an unpleasant feeling with it. You might note "painful." That's the feeling tone, the second

aggregate. Then there may well be a perception of pain or stabbing. That's the third aggregate. And then you might start to feel, "Oh, my knee hurts." That thought might arise: "My knee hurts." That's sankara. That's the fourth aggregate.

Well, it's in that leap—"my knee hurts"—that the self is getting formed again. There's the ownership of that experience. Now, if we simply left it with "stabbing, stabbing," then the self is not being brought into creation again. But when we call it "my knee," all of a sudden, out of those bare aggregates, the I has come into being. So that's actually the moment of birth. The I has taken a birth at that moment. You are the owner of a bad knee. Congratulations.

Fortunately, birth also leads to passing away. At the end of the sitting, you get up, and that owner of the bad knee has gone away. Great. You can walk. It's comfortable again. Phew. That death was a relief.

Some deaths are not so nice. You're sitting in this really lovely, quiet space.

I'm having a great sitting. So you take birth as a good meditator. And with that, there's a feeling of satisfaction, of fulfillment, of accomplishment, of contentment. You get up and walk out. Maybe the walking meditation isn't so settled. Maybe the next sitting isn't so settled. Oh, that self dies—the good meditator dies. And that's sad. That's hard. It's hard to let go of that.

So in this constantly taking birth and passing away, there's joy and there's sorrow bound up in this process. The formation of I happens again and again in relation to the aggregates.

An interesting question to ask is: does the I ever arise without being tied to one of the aggregates? Does the sense of I ever come into being purely on its own? Can it stand alone? Can the I stand alone? Or is it only defined in relation to an experience among the aggregates? It's an interesting thing to investigate, so I'll leave that with you to take up.

You can see how over and over we form these conclusions, simple conclusions. I see a chair. I feel happy. I am a bad person. I am lovable. I'm feeling excited. All the different ways that we put the label of I on our experience.

The Buddha was asked once, "How does belief in a self come to be? How does this happen over and over that we form this view of the self?" And he explained it in terms of the aggregates and said that an untaught ordinary person—it's basically us—an untaught ordinary person regards form as self, primarily this body. So that's the sense "I

am the body." Or self as possessing form: "This is my body." Or form as in self: that is, the body is a part of me. I'm bigger than the body, but the body is a piece of it. Or self as in form: I dwell within the body.

So these are the four options: form as self, self as owning form, form as in self, or self as in form. Then he goes through the same four formulations with regard to the other four aggregates, the mental aggregates. So he spells out twenty ways that the sense of self gets created. It's an interesting thing to reflect on. I think it pretty well covers the territory.

The name we can give to this whole process is identification. Identification is the labeling of I or mine on an aspect of our experience. What the Buddha said is that that I and mine is not intrinsic to the experience, but we give the label, and in giving the label, when we believe in it, we create that sense of self, moment after moment.

So the self is not an ongoing thing in any way, shape, or form, but it's something that we ourselves generate moment after moment after moment. That's why in Buddhism sometimes the goal is stated as the destroying of the ego, but that's completely false. As Wei Wu Wei pointed out, that's all well and good: catch the ego and cook its goose, but first you have to find it. And that's the problem, because there isn't really one. It's just this transient sense that comes and goes.

Nor are the aggregates altogether a self either. And that's something that's difficult to grasp. It's just a conventional term that we give to the joining. The way that all the pieces are put together, we give the term human beings, but that term human being doesn't actually point to anything that has its own existence. Just like pen is nothing more than a collection of the pieces of the pen. This sounds theoretical.

But what I want to say is that when we actually see in this way, it transforms our whole relationship to the world. I don't see this way all the time, but I see this way some of the time. And when I see this way, it's tremendously freeing. When I see that there's no separate core to this life process, that this life process is one of constant flux, there's a tremendous sense of freedom and ease that comes in.

Something else happens that's really interesting, that shocked me the first few times I saw it: when I see myself that way, I also see other people that way. Most of the time I walk about and I see personalities, especially with people that I know. I look at James and I know, oh, that's my friend James. I know many things about him. He has a great heart. I have a lot of affection for him. I sort of crystallize him into something that I take for granted. But when I can see on the level of clearer seeing, I just see this impersonal process going on for all of us, all beings that I turn my attention to.

There's a very deep sense of freedom in that. And also what gets strengthened is our sense of connectedness. Connectedness doesn't even say it right. It's dropping down to the level where we actually are the same being. Or you could even say we're different limbs of the same being. We're connected somewhere down here, but we poke up as different fingers. We're joined at the base.

What I find so inspiring about that is that the whole purpose of practice then becomes not just eliminating the obscurations to seeing in this mind and body stream. The whole game becomes to eliminate the obscurations to awareness wherever awareness is found. It becomes the same game. This really opens our practice out to take in all of life, so that our practice just spontaneously starts to include practicing for the liberation of all beings everywhere—not as a theoretical thing, but as a felt sense, because we see that we are all the same.

Another aspect of seeing on this level is expressed in an ancient text, a classical text called the Visuddhimagga, where it says, "There is no doer of a deed. There is no one who reaps the fruit of a deed. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true." There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is freedom, but there is no one who is freed.

Seeing in this way—there is suffering, but there is no one who suffers; there is freedom, but there is no one to be freed. In many of the Mahayana texts, you actually read statements such as, "There are no such things as beings, as separate individual beings." Somehow this sounds cold and off-putting, but the actual felt sense of it is one of great compassion. Because we see that we suffer because we all take up the belief in a personality or the belief in a self. Because of it, we have to protect it and defend it and nurture it. And in that, there's a struggle that doesn't need to be there. We've added something on top of our experience that doesn't need to be there.

I had a clear pointing out of this when I was a monk. In the Satipatthana Sutta, there's a whole section that deals with contemplations in cemeteries and charnel grounds—contemplations of dead and decaying bodies. The idea is that the meditator looks at what's happening to other bodies and then imagines what will happen to her or his own body.

In most of the world today, you can't find a charnel ground. It's considered unhygienic. So the modern equivalent in Thailand is the autopsy rooms. As monks or nuns in Thailand, we're able to go and view autopsies. So I did that a couple of times and stayed in the room for a couple of hours each time.

I was about thirty-four years old. I'd never been next to a dead body in my life. So that was a complete shock for me. Not only did I get to stand next to corpses, but I got to watch them being taken apart. I got to watch the bodies being dissected. And they do quite a thorough job. I'm only going to do the PG-rated version of the talk tonight, but there is an R-rated version that is quite unsettling. I won't do that tonight.

So watching the bodies being taken apart for a couple of hours—and I'd been sitting quite a bit—

I was in a monastery in the city, waiting for my visa to come through. I'd been doing probably six hours of practice a day, and I walked out of there feeling quite sensitive. I felt that the experience had made a very strong impact on me.

I walked out into the street. The hospital was near the parade ground, the Sanam Luang in Bangkok, which is a very busy part of town, the central part of downtown. Lots of people lined up waiting for buses, kids playing in the park, couples holding hands and walking down the street, young people, old people, middle-aged people.

As I came out and looked at people, all I could see were walking corpses. That's all that I saw. And I was fascinated. I just kept watching. And it stayed with me for half an hour, an hour, something like that.

Then I reflected later: what did I mean by seeing walking corpses? What was that insight? The felt sense of it was that there were bodies which were no different than the bodies I had just seen taken apart on the autopsy table. But these bodies were different. These bodies were animated, and out from the eyes shone this brightness. These bodies had a brightness that the other bodies hadn't.

And this brightness was something to do with consciousness. So the consciousness was still there. And that consciousness, I realized, was not anything to do with time. This brightness was just purely in the present moment. It abided only in the present moment. It had nothing to do with past or future. It was just here and now.

It had the capacity to receive sense impressions through the doors, the five doors of the physical senses and through the mind. Through that capacity to receive impressions and this peculiar quality of memory, the brightness constructed a history. And it projected that history into the future. And out of those dual constructions, it created the sense of a self, a personality that was ongoing over time.

When in truth, there was only this extraordinary brightness purely in the present moment. Until we see through that construction of past and future out of the present moment materials, we're bound in the delusion that something continues over time. We're bound in the delusion of an ongoing personality.

What we are more fundamentally is the space in which everything arises and passes. This is the way of freedom. If there were only the aggregates, then we'd be bound on this wheel of arising and passing, of taking birth in new forms and dying. But the Buddha pointed to a liberation just basically through the qualities of wisdom and awareness. This is the way forward, the way to freedom.

From Ajahn Mahabua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, suffering, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

We could say that this is a substratum of awareness that's a dimension of our being that illuminates everything that arises but is itself empty. Because of this empty awareness, everything in the universe is accommodated. Everything has allowed its being of arising and passing. And yet this empty awareness abides with the quality of knowing.

What we are most fundamentally is this empty space, which has the knowing property. This is our deepest nature. This is what's sometimes referred to as our Buddha nature. It is lasting, it is not subject to arising and passing, but it's ungraspable. We can't identify it as a separate thing because it's the context within which everything takes existence. So it itself is beyond existence and non-existence.

This nature is, but it doesn't exist. It doesn't partake of time. So one way of saying is that it has always been, it is now, and it will always be.

But it itself is beyond change. It's beyond coming and going, and it's beyond birth and death. The Buddha taught that when we take our being in that dimension, then we are beyond the draw of death. Then we abide in the deathless, and this is the end of suffering.

To recognize and rest in this deathless nature is the ultimate fruit of the dharma path. It is not something we need to create or achieve, for it is already our deepest reality. Rather, it is something we uncover by releasing our grip on all that is impermanent, all that comes and goes, all that we have mistakenly taken to be our true self.

In this recognition, we find the peace that surpasses understanding—not because the world has changed, but because we have remembered what we truly are. We discover that what we have always been seeking was never absent, never lost, never threatened by the constant flux of experience.

This is the gift of dharma practice: to awaken to what has always been present, to rest in what cannot be disturbed, and to find in that resting the end of our long search for home.

CHAPTER 213

Renunciation

Guy Armstrong · 52 min

> *Guy Armstrong examines renunciation (nekkhamma) as one of the ten pāramīs, exploring both its outer manifestation in the simplicity of retreat life and its deeper meaning as letting go of preferences and attachments. Drawing from the Buddha's own renunciation story and examples of dedicated practitioners like Mahāsī Sayādaw and Tibetan masters, Armstrong illustrates how simplifying external conditions allows us to see the workings of mind and heart more clearly.*
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> *The talk addresses the challenges and benefits of retreat life - giving up entertainment, relationships, choice of food, and familiar schedules - as supportive conditions for practice. Armstrong shares stories from his time as a monk in Thai forest monasteries and encounters with Asian teachers to demonstrate how renunciation develops inner strength and unshakeability. He explains how difficulties that arise in retreat aren't obstacles but necessary material for understanding the roots of suffering.*
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> *The deeper aspect of renunciation involves letting go of our need for experience to be a particular way, finding a center of peace independent of changing conditions. This leads toward the Buddha's own realization of the "unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless supreme security from bondage" - the ultimate goal of our practice and the reason for undertaking the path of renunciation.*

I'd like to talk tonight on the quality of renunciation.

When we look at the form, the outer form of our life here in retreat, one of the most obvious and striking features is the extreme simplicity of what we do day by day. We really pare our life down to the simplest human activities of sitting and breathing, of walking and paying attention, and of eating. We let go of so many of the mundane daily activities that may end up being distractions from our central aim in life. We let go of many entertainments and diversions. This is a really important and very supportive aspect of what we do, this simplifying of life on retreat. It's also one of the most arduous things about being here.

So I want to acknowledge the courage and the commitment that you all are showing in undertaking this kind of simplicity for three weeks or for six weeks. It's really a great testament to your dedication.

Renunciation is a frequent theme in the Buddhist tradition, and the Buddha was the first archetype of this quality. When he was young and still living in the palace, you may know the story, he had three palaces, one for every season of the year. He had whole groups of minstrels to serenade him—in his own words, none of whom were male. The gardeners were trained to pick off dead flowers before he could see them so that he wouldn't have to look at anything ugly and decaying.

Somehow in his youth, he happened upon what are called the heavenly messengers: seeing a person who was ill, a person who was old, and a corpse. Then he saw the fourth messenger, which was one who had gone forth from the home life into homelessness, a renunciate. At that point the Bodhisattva understood that he too was subject to illness, to aging, to death. He said he saw the potential suffering inherent in human life subject to these forces, and that was really what inspired his departing from home.

So he left home at age 29, leaving behind a young wife and a young son whom he knew would be well taken care of because his family was royal, was wealthy. He described it himself in this way: "While still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, I shaved off my hair and beard, though my mother and father wished otherwise and grieved with tearful faces. And I put on the yellow robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness."

The Bodhisattva gave up all personal comfort in order to find an end to suffering, to find freedom. There's a very moving image of the Bodhisattva at one stage in his practice, which lasted for six years altogether—the image of the emaciated Buddha. You've probably seen this image in Buddhist iconography and art. It shows him extremely thin with sunken cheeks. He's very gaunt because he's gone without eating for some time. The theory being in India at that time that if one starved the body, the soul would become liberated. So the Bodhisattva undertook these extremely austere practices.

Again, in his own words, he says of that stage in his practice, "My vertebrae stood out on my spine like beads on a cord. My ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn. When I touched my belly skin, I could feel my backbone. And when I touched my back skin, I could feel my belly."

This degree of renunciation, fortunately, isn't necessary for us. That's one of the things the Buddha found in teaching the middle path. We don't have to go that far. But I love this image because it really stands for the difficulties that we are all willing to face coming upon an extended retreat like this one. The courage and the determination that are required.

One of my first encounters with renunciates came in 1979. I was working on staff at Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. I'd been on staff for about a year and a half, and we had a visit from an old Asian monk, an old Burmese monk named Mahasi Sayadaw, who was about 80 at that time. You may know that Mahasi Sayadaw was really more or less the creator of the style of Vipassana meditation that we do here and that we normally teach. The paying attention to the different sense doors, being with changing objects, and using the mental noting are all techniques that he imparted to thousands of practitioners. He has left as his legacy hundreds of meditation centers throughout Burma and Thailand and Sri Lanka that carry on this particular practice which he called the Satipatthana technique of Vipassana.

So he was really one of the greatest meditation masters of the century, and when he came to IMS we were really excited because he was in a way the father of our teachers' teachers. He was very senior and revered.

I was on staff and so we got to go down to the Boston airport to meet him when he came. He arrived with four other monks. They like to travel in force. We got to the gate and we were waiting for him to come off the plane, and everybody else got off the plane and there was no Mahasi Sayadaw. You don't really overlook old men in orange robes and shaved heads in the Boston airport. So we were pretty sure we hadn't missed him. We started wondering, did his flight get canceled out of Thailand? Did they miss the connection or what happened?

We waited, and pretty shortly, out from the door of the gate came walking very slowly, very mindfully, sort of lifting, moving, placing—Mahasi Sayadaw as the first one, and then the four other monks who were all junior to him in single file behind him. Just bringing that meditative consciousness right into the middle of the Boston airport.

And each of them carried in front of his chest a fan. The fan is a teaching device in Asian countries, in Buddhist countries, where the monk will often hold a fan up in front of his face while delivering a dharma talk so that the people may not even know who's speaking. It's a technique designed to emphasize egolessness so that the star quality doesn't get perpetuated and sustained.

So they were all carrying these fans. And when we looked closely, there was English embroidery on each fan that said, "Mahasi Sayadaw, World Tour 1979." Below, the same thing was written in Burmese. So they all came forward with their fans, and then we took them back to the center where they led a two-week retreat.

At that time I was somewhat young in my practice and had been mostly influenced by Western teachers. I found their teaching style a little dry because it wasn't full of Rumi poems or Sufi stories or recounting embarrassing incidents that had happened to them in second grade. I thought the flavor of the teachings was a little dry at times.

Now I have much more appreciation for what they did, because basically what those men did was repeat the words of the Buddha that were not mere words to them. They were words that they had proved for themselves through decades of practice and investigation and meditation. So looking back, I really appreciate the power of what they offered.

At the time, there was a little controversy about their visit. They were all celibate, and many of them had been celibate since very early on, had never known sexuality at all. I remember one of the monks said one day in the meditation hall, in response to a question, "Well, yes, because sex is gross, base, and disgusting."

You can imagine that touched off a little bit of controversy, which was only resolved a few days later when one of the women on staff figured out what had gone wrong. She said, "Oh right, the translator actually missed it. What he actually said was sex is basic and grossing and worth discussing." Then we all felt a little better about it all.

But one of the things that I felt really strongly in those five monks, even from early on in my contact with them, was tremendous power in their presence. There was a great sense of purity about them, almost an innocence, as though they had never lost some of their childlike wonder and purity of heart.

When I reflected on it at that time, about twenty years ago, I really felt that it had come from their renunciation. They had lived lives that were so simple, so uncluttered, so clean and pure that their beings had just flowered in this really lovely way—a way that was almost untouched by a lot of the effects of the world.

In their relation to us, they were really unshakable. It's a quality I've come to appreciate about Asian teachers. Some Asian teachers will talk on for an hour, hour and a half, two hours, because they're not afraid of offending anybody, they're not afraid of boring people, and they're not afraid of being disliked. There was this great unshakability that they all had. I believe that unshakability also comes from renunciation.

As we abide in this retreat setting and find our stability and contentment in a life of such great simplicity, we drop a lot of our attachment to the supports we may have thought were needed in our life outside. We find that actually consciousness can stand

on its own, does stand on its own, unsupported, without foundation, without attachment. And it's very freeing. For me, it's been one of the great freeing experiences of the retreat life.

The Buddha talked about renunciation as one of the ten paramis. The paramis are qualities that he himself developed, it's said, over many lifetimes, once he made the vow to become a Buddha. He said the way he went about it was to develop these ten qualities, which are the paramis. They're qualities that we'll be speaking about a lot over the course of the retreat—qualities like generosity, virtue, metta, equanimity, truthfulness, determination, patience, wisdom, and renunciation as one of the ten.

They're qualities that when we cultivate them provide the force that actually liberates the mind. The mind really doesn't get liberated accidentally, but it gets liberated when we have accumulated enough wholesome force in the mind to free it. The Buddha said it's by the cultivation of the paramis that we generate that power, that force.

The paramis are intentions. They're mental factors that accompany action. Because of that, they're qualities that we can develop in daily life as well as in retreat. That's why for me as a layperson they're a really beautiful and inspiring list—because the practice of the paramis can go on throughout our life. It is not just a retreat practice.

In describing renunciation more fully as a parami, it's said in the tradition that the proximate cause for renunciation is a sense of spiritual urgency. It is that deep questioning and wanting to understand that leads us to renounce, that leads us to be in retreat, that leads us to give up some of the comforts. It's really at the core of a lot of the Buddhist tradition.

The Buddha was fond of saying to the practitioners, "There are these roots of trees, there are these empty huts—practice with diligence before it's too late." This comes in again and again in the suttas.

I wanted to share with you a little bit about this man who was a teacher in the Tibetan tradition. His name is Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He was one of the most respected Tibetan teachers of our time. In practice terms, he was on a par with the great heads of the school, such as the Karmapa and Dudjom Rinpoche, and in practice terms, even the Dalai Lama.

I'd like to read a letter that he wrote to his parents. This was written when he was thirteen years old:

"My dearest parents, you gave me birth with all the freedoms and advantages of human life and you have cared for me with love from my infancy till now."

Since you introduced me to an authentic teacher, it is thanks to your kindness that I have encountered the path of liberation. After hearing, thinking about, and meditating on the life of my perfect teacher, I have resolved to slip quietly away from all this life's concerns and roam through empty, uninhabited valleys.

Father and mother, stay in your handsome, lofty house. I, your young son, long instead for empty caves. Thank you for the fine, soft clothes you gave me, yet I don't need them. I would rather dress in plain white felt. I've cast aside this luxury and wealth with no regrets. A handbook of profound advice is all I wish to collect.

I leave this garden full of splendid flowers and head for the wilderness of overhanging cliffs alone. I need no attendants who just fuel anger and attachment. Birds and wild animals are the only company I long for. Although for now your son will hide away in mountain glens, your smiling faces will be with me always. Nor shall I forget your loving care. And if I reach the citadel of experience and realization, I shall repay your kindness. Of that you can be sure.

That was written when he was 13. When he was 15, he entered a cave and spent the next seven years in retreat, three years not speaking to anyone. When he left that cave, he went to a hut out in the wilderness. I have a photograph of the view—this is the site. I'll put this up on the bulletin board so you can see it later. You can see how this kind of retreat would help to develop a spacious mind. Just the sky and the mountains, the view from his retreat hut. He spent four more years in that retreat hut. In all, he spent 22 years in retreat. He became one of the softest, most gentle, and most loving teachers in the tradition that I know of. John had the good fortune to meet with him many times in Nepal during his life.

Now in our retreat situation, it's not a seven-year stint in a cave, thank goodness, but we give up a lot. We give up our partners, our friends, our children. We give up speaking. We give up our choice of food. We give up books and music and movies and television. We give up our roles in the world. When we come here, in our day-by-day actions, we're no longer mothers and fathers and wives and husbands and friends. We just come into the simplicity of our direct experience. It's a big giving up of this identity that we carry.

We give up our choice of food, although with meals like lunch today, I don't think that's much of a sacrifice. We say that the Buddha taught the middle path, but at Spirit Rock we've developed what we call the upper middle path. Welcome to practice in Mar-

in County. Renunciate life takes on a different flavor with radiant heating and air conditioning. We have a very well-appointed cave to practice in. But there's still a lot of renunciation.

One of the beautiful spirits in the renunciate life, one of the great expressions of it, is this sense of taking and accepting what's given. I was a monk in Thailand for about a year, and that flavor pervades the whole of the monk's life. When you go out for your morning alms round, begging for food, you just take whatever anybody wants to put into your bowl. Sometimes it's things that you really like and look forward to. Sometimes it's things like three-year-old goose eggs that you wouldn't normally choose to eat if you had a choice. You simply take and eat what's offered. That's part of the practice.

A lot of my practice was at forest monasteries where the people around, the villagers, were quite poor. What they had to offer was not the finest. Sometimes the monastery would supplement it with their own food, and I think that was intentionally a little bit on the Spartan side because they didn't want people staying at that wat, at that monastery, unless they really wanted to be there to practice. That's what we figured out later. We thought, why is the food so bad here? Well, they're trying to put off people who might just be coming looking for a cushy place to hang out.

So it was one of the things we needed to live with. At the forest monasteries I stayed at, I only received one meal a day, served around eight o'clock in the morning. I could save a few things from that meal and eat until noon, but after noon there was no more eating for monks in those countries. Then there would be no food until eight o'clock the following morning. What you received at eight o'clock the next morning on an empty stomach sometimes wasn't that exciting. If you've never eaten red fish curry at eight in the morning on an empty stomach, you really haven't lived.

So it was a good practice. In Zen, they have a saying that the mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace that can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease. Now, I don't think you'll be served the latter here, so don't worry about that. But developing this spirit of accepting what is given is a beautiful way to approach retreat life. Sometimes the food from the kitchen will be absolutely what you would have ordered in a restaurant—better than most. Sometimes it may not be exactly to your liking, but the spirit really is to accept what's offered in that spirit of simplicity.

I have to say, I got so hungry at night while living in these monasteries that I was reduced to a point of shamelessness I'd never experienced before. Do you know sweetened condensed milk? Those little tins of sweetened condensed milk? They were permitted to be added to tea after noon, but I never imagined I would find myself eating it spoon by spoon. Yet I did, because I was so hungry. It's part of the lifestyle.

Our accommodations weren't great either when we were monks. I would live for months at a time in these little huts up on stilts, about six feet by ten feet—just wide enough to sleep in, with space for my sitting cushion in the other part of the hut. But periodically we would be invaded by the creatures of the forest. Sometimes there would be attacks of ants that would start running up the pillars, swarming all over the cottage in a matter of ten minutes. If you've never seen an Asian ant attack in a tropical forest—there's nothing like it here. We'd go to work trying to sweep them off and keep them out of the house.

One evening, I got up in the middle of the night to go outside. I walked down my stairs, put my hand on the banister in the darkness, and got bitten by a scorpion. Another evening, just as I was preparing to sleep—I'd stretched out, turned off my light, it was about ten o'clock—I was covered by a mosquito net, so I thought I was safe. But underneath the mosquito net had crawled a poisonous centipede, which bit my foot. It was actually the most painful sensation I've ever felt, as though they had injected venom that caused the muscles to cramp incredibly. It didn't go away until the next morning.

Sometimes at night, around nine o'clock, I would hear the sound of my neighbor banging on his roof with a wooden pole. I couldn't see another hut from where I stayed, but there were huts scattered throughout the eighty acres of forest. I would hear this rhythmic banging: *bang, bang, bang, bang, bang*. After a while I realized what was happening. A poisonous snake had dropped from an overhanging tree onto his roof, and he was sitting in meditation when he heard it land. He was pounding his roof to try to get the snake off, because otherwise it would come over the eaves, crawl in underneath, and try to make a home in his hut.

This was some of the life we lived as monks there. Even though some of the rooms here are doubles, they don't look so bad to me in comparison. And the bathrooms are a lot cleaner too. But still, it's a renunciation.

Another big area of renunciation is around the schedule. This is a very interesting area, and I hope you'll all explore this with great consciousness during your time here. Each of us in the course of being here for three or six weeks will find our own personal relationship to the schedule. For some people, it's basically an outline of when the three meals are served, and the rest doesn't matter too much. For others, we approach the schedule with the kind of religious fervor we might bring to the words of the Buddha and follow it very closely.

And honestly, what works well for one person with the schedule might not work so well for someone else. So you really need to find your own way in relation to it.

But I'd like to put in a plug here for trying out, at least, surrendering to the schedule. It is a very powerful way to approach the retreat. If one simply surrenders and says, "When I hear a bell, if it's inside, I'm gonna walk. And if I hear a bell and it's outside, I'm gonna come sit," those are the only decision points, really, of the day. If you hear a bell, you know what to do next.

What's nice about that approach to the schedule is it keeps life really simple and it keeps the mind from getting involved in a lot of thinking. Because once you start making choices like, "Well, maybe I'll skip this walking period and have a cup of tea. And then would this be a good time to wash my socks, or the sweater that I want to wear in two days time?" Once those sorts of thoughts start creeping in, the whole day can kind of get filled up planning what we're going to do next, and it can get really complicated.

So I just encourage you to play with this. Try maybe just for a day—maybe when you're a little further into it—try and surrender to the schedule and see how it feels. Talk with your teacher about your relationship to it and see how it goes for you. It really can greatly simplify the thought process.

So why do we do this? What's the purpose of this kind of simplicity, this kind of renunciation? Well, first of all, we become unburdened. I think that's really at the heart of it. We become unburdened, and yet have you noticed how the days can seem really full, even though you're unburdened? I mean, there have been days in retreat I've been hard pressed to find twenty minutes to take a shower. I don't know if you've experienced that, but sometimes it seems like it's really busy here.

But when you look at it, apart from the work meditation, you only have one job all day long, and that is to be with your experience. That's really the only occupation that you have here. So looked at in that way, it gets really simple.

That sense of unburdening then really lets us focus on what's important. I came upon this from an Audubon magazine. This is written by a backpacker about his experience coming home from a backpacking trip:

"One moment I can lay everything I need on the corner of a poncho. The next moment, it seems, I couldn't fit all my furniture into a warehouse. Coming home, I can see that there are too many appliances in my cupboards, too many clothes in my closet, too many strings of duty jerking me in too many directions. The opposite of simplicity as I understand it is not complexity but clutter. Returning from a backcountry trip, I vow to purchase nothing that I don't really need, give away everything that is excess, refuse all chores that don't arise from central concerns. The simplicity I seek is not the enforced

austerity of the poor. I seek instead the richness of a gathered and deliberate life, which comes from letting one's belongings and commitments be few in number and high in quality."

I think this is a lovely way to think about what we're doing here. Our commitments are few in number, but they're really high in quality. The Buddha said that this quality of present moment awareness, of paying full attention to our experience in each moment, is the single greatest gift we can give to ourselves, the single greatest source of virtue. So this unburdenedness is an important part of it.

There's another level though to renunciation that goes a little deeper. When the outer activities fall away, what really stands out are the workings of the mind and heart. And it's in the workings of the mind and heart that we understand the fact of suffering, the origin of suffering, and the end of suffering. So this is the deeper relevance of renunciation.

Somebody said in an interview, "Gosh, with all this quiet, what I really see clearly are all my own opinions and views and judgments," and they become really loud, don't they? When everything else is so quiet and there's nothing else to take our attention away, this internal chatter comes right into the foreground. That's what we need to see. We need to see where the mind is hanging on, where it's attached, and therefore where it can be free.

There's another book that's come out recently that I like a lot. It's called *Cave in the Snow*. It's about a woman named Ani Tenzin Palmo who is a Tibetan—well, she's a Westerner in robes as a Tibetan nun. She actually ordained in India with a Tibetan teacher when she was twenty-one years old in 1964, so a long time ago, and she's been ordained ever since then. She asked for years and years to get the teachings and to be able to go off and practice alone, but they weren't used to Western nuns at that time and nobody would allow her to do it.

Her teacher wouldn't give her the teachings and they wouldn't provide a place for her to go practice. She begged and pleaded and begged and pleaded, and finally she was given this space of a cave up at 13,000 feet in the Himalayas in India. She moved into the cave and stayed there for twelve years, summer and winter.

In the cave, she had one little wood stove, which she would only light at lunchtime to cook her noontime meal. You can imagine the snow outside. Sometimes the snow was so high that it went over the top of her cave. One time she actually had to tunnel out

through the snow to get air. She had a front on the cave, so it wasn't just back in the cliff. Her lay supporters mudded up the front of it, so she was somewhat protected from the elements, but not completely.

She was in the middle of one three-year retreat—in the Tibetan tradition you're supposed to do three years, three months, and three days so that you really get three good years of practice. She was about three years in, hadn't spoken to anybody or seen anybody for three years, and an Indian policeman barged in her front door and told her that her visa had run out and she'd have to leave. How do you keep your equanimity in the middle of that?

She persuaded him to let her stay a little longer, but that's what eventually made her leave her cave. Now she's settled in the West, setting up a center in Assisi, Italy. She passed through Spirit Rock about a year ago, and I had a chance to meet her and have lunch with her. I told her how much I admired what she'd done, because I have a great respect for people who really live this renunciation—I know how difficult it is. She just said, very simply, "You know, it was just what I wanted to do. It was nothing special. It was just what I wanted to do."

There are many people who would hear that you are doing a three-week retreat or a six-week retreat and probably think to you, even if they don't say it, "My, you're so brave. How can you possibly imagine doing that? I could never do something like that. I have so much respect for what you're doing." For you, it probably feels like a stretch, but it probably also feels like just what you want to do. And that's beautiful.

The reporter who wrote this book on her life, obviously not a heavy-duty practitioner herself, said to Tenzin Palmo, "Well, wasn't it just an escape from life? You're going to this cave. Aren't you just avoiding the trials of real life?"

You know the answer to that one, don't you?

Tenzin Palmo replied, "Not at all. To my mind, worldly life is an escape. When you have a problem in daily life, you can turn on the television, phone a friend, or go out for a coffee. In a cave, however, you have no one to turn to but yourself. When problems arise and things get tough, you have no choice but to go through with them and come out the other side. In a cave, you face your own nature in the raw, and you have to find a way to work with it and deal with it."

I think this is really a great truth and one of the great strengthening aspects of a retreat, especially a long retreat. We gain so much self-confidence by being willing to come up against these difficult areas in ourselves and find that we have the strength to go into them, go through them, and come out the other side. We do this again and again in a long retreat.

Sometimes as we confront these difficult parts of ourselves—and the beautiful parts of ourselves too—the inner life becomes very vivid. You may notice this quite early on, that you start to get sensitive to nature, that things touch you really deeply. You may start to have really vivid dreams, and there can be a tendency to really want to go into the dreams because they seem so rich and meaningful.

Someone asked Joseph Goldstein this question on a retreat. She said, "You know, in this retreat, my dreams take on so much life and vitality. I really think I should analyze them because, as Carl Jung said, a dream unanalyzed is like a letter unopened."

Joseph replied, "Well, you know, when you're on retreat, it's a good idea not to open your mail."

So by and large, the dream life may get very vivid. It's probably most helpful to kind of leave it there. Leave it in the dream world. Once you wake up, just come back into the practice of this present moment.

Sometimes our emotional reactions get quite strong, even over little things. This is a phenomenon we call "yogi mind." I'm sure you've seen many times how we can make mountains out of molehills. Sometimes we lose a little touch with reality. One meditator in a retreat in Southern California asked the manager if they could please call the airlines and have them reroute the planes because they were flying over the retreat center and it was a little too noisy. Usually not possible.

When I went on retreat last fall for a six-week retreat at IMS in Massachusetts, there were a whole lot of issues related to Spirit Rock and the board that came up for me again and again in the early days of the retreat.

I spent many sitting periods writing letters to Arlene, our executive director, telling her what I thought should happen while I was in retreat. Fortunately, I refrained from ever putting them on paper, and Arlene, fortunately, never had to receive them. But I sure wrote a lot of letters in my mind about things that it seemed like my advice was just indispensable.

So when these impulses come, give them a little space. Don't act on them too quickly.

Sometimes we may get irritated with someone else who's on the retreat with us. It may be somebody who comes in late to a sitting or somebody who's sitting near us who's a very heavy breather. I was sitting next to someone at a retreat once whose breath was so loud I had to make a choice—I either followed his breath or mine. It was a hard choice.

Or somebody comes in and they keep wearing a really crinkly jacket and they're sitting near you and every time they shuffle it's rattle, rattle, rattle. And the temptation to write notes to one another gets really strong at this point of the retreat. It seems so important that you stop that person doing what they're doing. And so you write this note that says something like, "Dear fellow meditator, please leave that crinkly jacket out in the hall next time. Don't come in and do that again." And of course, they're always signed metta, right? I always sign metta, but the person who gets it of course reads it and feels the passion of the anger that really went into the note. And it can be really upsetting for people.

Getting a note in the middle of a silent retreat can be such a shock. You all know how sensitive you get in this setting. It can upset people's equilibrium for days. Really.

So one of the things I would really like to reinforce—Lynn mentioned it the other night—is to ask you please not to write notes to one another. I know you'll be thinking that you're doing it with all the loving kindness in your heart, and it's good for all sentient beings in the hall, and it really advances the cause of the Dharma. But please, if you're upset about a fellow meditator's behavior, please write the angry note to us and let us interact with them. It'll be much more helpful for everybody involved. In fact, if you'd like to write them to Eugene, that would be best. He's really good at dealing with that stuff.

All of this is really just part and parcel of the retreat experience. You could say in a way that this situation is kind of designed to bring the difficult stuff up into consciousness. If there's any material left in our minds, this setting will bring it forth. And that's actually a very good thing. Sometimes it may not feel like such a good thing, but it's actually a very good thing because what's held deep within us, we can never become free from. We can never find liberation in relation to what's deeply held. Only when it actually comes into our actual experience can we begin to understand it and release it through awareness.

So as we sit and we do this practice, basically taking up the meditation, we get one of two outcomes. Either we get the direct connection with the meditation focus—the breath or the body or sounds—and in that direct contact, the qualities of mindfulness and concentration deepen, deepen, deepen in a very steady way. So that's one possible outcome.

Another possible outcome is that we get the unresolved issues or accumulations that are the material of the mind, that are expressions of our holding of difficulties we haven't yet come fully to understand. And if that's the case, then these are the things that are hindering the deepening of awareness and of concentration, and it's in the understanding of these that the meditation actually deepens to the next level.

So in fact, both outcomes take place throughout the retreat for both of us. It's really not an either-or situation. Sometimes the mindfulness and concentration are developing very steadily because we can connect with the chosen focus. Sometimes we get the obstructions or what are sometimes called the hindrances, which Marie will talk about in a few nights. And then the meditation deepens by our understanding those processes and those forces.

Either way, whatever your experience is in that moment, what is happening is just what needs to happen for you. This is sometimes a really hard thing to trust in, but if you can trust in this, it will really help the unfolding of your process.

This unfolding is so organic and it's so individual. It's not something we can think out ahead of time. It's not something we can direct with our thoughts or beliefs. We have to surrender to the process of awareness and let it show us where we need to open and how we need to open.

If you look at a rose where it's in the form of a bud and all the petals are very closely overlapped and tightly tied around that bud, if you tried to open it with your mind and say, "Well first this petal needs to go and then this petal needs to go and then this," it would just become ripped apart. But in the unfolding of the bud, it knows exactly which petal needs to open next. And just one by one, the full beauty and richness of that rose becomes open to the world.

Our practice unfolds in precisely the same way. If you can trust in the rightness of both the mindfulness and concentration that arise, as well as the difficulties that emerge, this will provide tremendous support for your practice and confidence during the retreat.

When we don't trust in this natural process, we begin to believe that our aversion stems from external circumstances. We think we're actually suffering because lunch was five minutes late, or because the person next to us coughs during sitting meditation, or because the door rattles when someone arrives late to the hall. We may genuinely believe our suffering comes from these outer conditions.

But we fail to see that the force of aversion itself is what we need to understand, because that is the root of suffering—not the outer situation, but this reactive force within our mind that objects to what's happening.

The difficulties we experience here aren't actually peculiar to this retreat setting. Though the degree of renunciation can make it seem otherwise, making us feel we're suffering because we miss friends and family, because we can't go out, because we lack opportunities for intimate conversation, or because noises disturb us. But if we simply trust in this process, we'll begin to understand our minds more deeply.

During that six-week retreat, I found myself reacting strongly to various situations. Sometimes I disliked the weather—it was fall in New England, often rainy and cold, and I couldn't walk outside for days. Sometimes I disliked the food. I found myself deeply averse to walking meditation practice. For a while, I blamed each of these circumstances.

Then I began to notice something interesting: the same reaction kept arising again and again. It was the force of disliking, the force of negativity. I realized this was where freedom could emerge. When I thought the external situation should change, I could never transform my own mind. But when I recognized that the root of suffering lay in my own mind, ah—there was the possibility of freedom.

So I began looking directly at the aversion itself. I discovered it was transparent. Then I could be with the rain, and it was perfectly fine. I could be with the food—fine. I could be with the walking meditation—fine. The aversion would fade in and out, and I could see how it wasn't solid, but simply another layer of mind that could be seen through and released. There was tremendous freedom in this recognition.

Ultimately, the deeper sense of renunciation is an inner letting go. Through renunciation, we release our preferences, our need for experience to be one particular way or another. We could say we're letting go of our hopes and fears, our likes and dislikes, so that clear awareness can simply abide in the truth of the moment. That is the true place of freedom.

As we allow awareness to rest more and more in the truth of each moment, a greater sense of trust and peace becomes established within us. We discover a way of relating to life's changing conditions that isn't bound to the conditions themselves. We find a place of rest that is, in some way, independent of changing circumstances.

Having taken birth, we're all subject to the fluctuations of pleasure and pain—this is inescapable. But through practice, we begin to find another center of gravity: a state or dimension of peace, an absence of conflict that doesn't depend on changing conditions.

I'd like to close by reading a passage where the Buddha spoke about the quest he undertook in leaving home, and the fulfillment of that quest through his liberation:

"Then, friends, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I attained the unborn supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Being myself subject to aging, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, I attained the unaging supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Being myself subject to sickness, having understood the danger in what is subject to sickness, I attained the unailing supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Being myself subject to death, having understood the danger in what is subject to death, I attained the deathless supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. Being myself subject to sorrow, having understood the danger in what is subject to sorrow, I attained the sorrowless supreme security from bondage, Nibbana. The knowledge and vision arose in me. My deliverance is unshakable. This is the last birth. There is no more renewal of becoming."

This is truly why we practice. This is the purpose of our renunciation: to simplify enough that we can discover that dimension of peace present even amidst all the changing conditions of birth and death.

Let's sit together for just a moment.

CHAPTER 214

Purification of the Heart

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's summary of all spiritual teachings: "Do good, don't harm others, and purify the heart." He explores the Pali term citta, which encompasses both mind and heart, and how our attempts to control experience through the strategies of greed (lobha), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha) create suffering. Drawing from the Visuddhimagga and stories of great teachers like Dīpa Mā, Armstrong explains how meditation naturally allows stored emotions and accumulations to surface and release. He describes the cyclical nature of practice—periods of calm followed by upheaval—and emphasizes that liberation comes not from eliminating difficult experiences but from meeting all states with warm, clear awareness. This open-hearted attention, he teaches, is the very functioning of our Buddha nature, transforming every moment of difficulty into an opportunity for awakening. The talk beautifully illustrates how mindfulness dissolves conditioning and purifies the heart, leading to the arising of generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.*

I'd like to talk tonight about the purification of the heart.

There's a cartoon that was posted in the office at Spirit Rock. It's a cartoon on evolution that shows a fish rising up out of the sea next to a beach with a thought bubble coming from the fish's head saying, "eat, survive, reproduce." Then you see the next stage in evolution—a lizard-like amphibious creature—with the same thought bubble: "eat, survive, reproduce." The chain of evolution continues with a land-like reptile, then a chimpanzee clamoring about on the beach, each with the identical thought bubble: "eat, survive, reproduce."

And the culminating stage, of course, is the human being standing beyond all of them on the beach. This man is standing there with a very quizzical look on his face, stroking his chin and going, "Hmm, I wonder what life's all about."

It wouldn't be too hard, even if you were a serious observer of the world, to look around and see that we're so ruled as a race, as a species, by our fears and our desires, our wanting for food and sex and our fear about being able to survive or not. We could be forgiven for thinking that this really is where evolution has led us, that this is what we really are—unless we had some kind of other perspective on the situation, hopefully a more spiritual perspective.

The Buddha once summed up his teaching, and in fact all teachings, this way: "Do good, don't harm others, and purify the heart. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas, all the awakened ones."

It sounds simple put that way, doesn't it? What we are primarily about in our meditation, in being here, is this work of purifying the heart.

When the Buddha made this statement, of course, he didn't use the word "heart" because he wasn't speaking in English. He used the word *citta*, which is a word in both Pali and Sanskrit that sometimes we translate as "heart" and sometimes we translate as "mind." It has dual meanings—both the meaning of the emotional life that we normally refer to as the heart, and also the meaning of the world of thought or intellect that we refer to as mind.

If you ask an Asian where her mind is, she'll typically point to her chest. If you ask a Westerner where we feel our minds are, we normally point to our heads. So this word *citta* really refers to this unity of emotion and intellect. But because the emotional life is so predominant in the work of purification, I want to talk tonight about this as a process of purifying the heart.

As we look closely at our experience, we run into the basic problem that I think all humans are subject to: we try to control our experience. That effort to control our experience involves us in some degree of struggle because we want things to be one way and we don't want them to be another.

We want to come in and sit down and have the body be comfortable, not have a pain in the knee or a knot in the upper back or a clenched fist in place of the heart. We want all our meditations to be like Sylvia's description last night of the seven factors of awakening—mindful and investigative and energetic and rapture-filled, full of tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. We really want those experiences in our meditation, and we'd really rather they not be filled with what Marie talked about a few nights ago: the five hindrances.

We have these preferences on every level of our being, and so we tend to relate to all of our experience through three basic strategies that we've learned to kind of cope with the way things are. These are the strategies that the Buddha called greed, aversion, and delusion. He thought that these were so linked to our difficulties that he called them torments of mind. He called them the *kilesas* in Pali, often translated as defilements, but "torments of mind" is more accurate. We can see these strategies in the way we approach our life and our meditation both.

Acting out of the strategy of greed, what we try to do is keep pleasant experiences coming in. If we can surround ourselves with a never-ending stream of pleasurable experiences, there will be a kind of security in that. We'll always be able to be safe and protected. So this is a strategy of greed.

With aversion, what we try to do is keep anything that's painful or unpleasant at some distance from us, with the thought that if we can keep it away, then we'll protect this area that we call myself, and that will not be subject to the unpleasant in life.

The strategy of delusion is that we sort of create this veil between ourselves and our experience so that we don't have to feel it very clearly. We can use a fog or we can use a little bit of stepping back, a little bit of unclarity or confusion so that the world doesn't impinge on us quite so dramatically.

These are three ways that we have of basically avoiding the hot and cold, raw nature of life as it is, to soften the blows of the pleasant and the unpleasant that we're all subject to.

It's said in the Buddhist texts that each of us has a preponderance of one or the other of these strategies—that there are some people who are more conditioned by greed, some more by aversion, and some more by delusion. In Buddhist psychology, these are said to be the three main personality types that people get categorized into, if you're into that kind of thing.

I'd like to read you a little bit from an ancient text. This is from a book called the *Visuddhimagga*, which means "the path of purification." This idea is so central that one of the main commentaries is titled that. This book was written about fifteen hundred years ago in Sri Lanka by a monk named Buddhaghosa who tried to compile all the primary practices of his day.

It was very encyclopedic, very detailed. It gets a little dry in places—I don't recommend it as bedtime reading. It's about that thick.

So I'd like to just read you a little description in case you're wondering which of these three you are. This might help. He starts by describing the walking meditation of the three types:

"When one of greedy temperament is walking in his usual manner, he walks carefully, puts his foot down slowly, puts it down evenly, lifts it up evenly, and his step is springy. One of aversive temperament walks as though he were digging with the points

of his feet, puts his foot down quickly, lifts it up quickly, and his step is dragged along. One of deluded temperament walks with a perplexed gait, puts his foot down hesitantly, lifts it up hesitantly, and his step is pressed down suddenly."

Now you might also want to know what the sleeping situation is like, so he goes into that:

"In sleeping, one of greedy temperament spreads his bed unhurriedly, lies down slowly, composing his limbs, and sleeps in a confident manner. When woken, instead of getting up quickly, he gives his answer slowly as though doubtful. One of aversive temperament spreads his bed hastily any which way. With his body flung down, he sleeps with a scowl. When woken, he gets up quickly and answers as though annoyed."

Recognize your roommate?

"One of deluded temperament spreads his bed all awry and sleeps mostly face downwards with his body sprawling. When woken, he gets up slowly saying, 'Huh?'"

This is the wisdom of the ages being revealed to you in these secret teachings. You might have a little reaction to this, like the person who was skeptical about channeling, who said, "Just because they're dead doesn't mean that they're smart." But enough for cynicism tonight.

So these forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are very prevalent in our moment-to-moment experience, in our daily life, in our retreat experience. The Buddha actually said that they are the roots of suffering. They are more or less synonymous with our human dilemma that leads us into suffering. In fact, he said to make an end of suffering without ending greed, aversion, and delusion—this is impossible, can't be done. They're really one and the same.

So we could say that the purification of the heart must mean to come to some degree of freedom around these tendencies of mind. This is the way out of bondage. Bondage is bondage to greed, aversion, and delusion. Freedom is freedom from these forces.

I was a little surprised that some of our politicians are learning to speak the language of bondage—hopefully with freedom also. This was a comment from a presidential hopeful. I'm sure you'll recognize the name: J. Danforth Quayle, who said that Republicans best understand the importance of bondage between mother and child. I never knew he had that much depth.

So we approach our experience with this intention of controlling, wanting things to be a certain way, and we act that out mentally, moment after moment after moment. But the problem is that our experience is basically ungovernable. Our experience is the unfolding of many, many conditions, most of which are outside our control. Not all, but many of which are outside our control.

And so we don't really have a way of controlling. Nobody has a handle on controlling what arises moment after moment. And if we're living from a strategy that wants to shape it a certain way, we will always be vulnerable. We really can't arrange the world to always be pleasant. That's the bad news.

The good news is that it is possible to become more and more free in relation to these forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. What we need to trust in, in approaching life as Dharma practice, in bringing a Dharmic understanding moment by moment, is that our freedom doesn't rest on making life painless. It doesn't rest on removing all the difficult experiences from living. It rather rests on being free in our response to life from these reactive tendencies of greed, aversion, and confusion.

So the possibility of the end of suffering isn't dependent on the outside world. It's really dependent on our inner awakening. That's really good news. Because as they say in the Tibetan tradition, we really have two approaches to ending the painfulness of life. One approach is that we could cover the whole world in shoe leather. The other approach is that we could put shoe leather on our two feet.

So which is more practical? We will never succeed in covering the world with shoe leather and removing those spikes and thorns and bumpy rocks. But we may succeed in covering our own two feet with shoe leather and being able to walk softly.

This unpredictability of life reveals itself in the most unexpected moments. I want to share a story from my last visit to Vancouver that illustrates this beautifully. I was teaching a weekend retreat on loving-kindness practice, and on Sunday afternoon, I created space for individual conversations since the large group format hadn't allowed for personal meetings during the weekend. Four or five people came forward for these brief one-on-one exchanges.

One woman approached and sat beside me, tears flowing from the moment she began speaking. In those few precious minutes, she shared her story, and I understood completely why she wept. The previous evening, after our Saturday practice had ended around five o'clock, she had gone out for a walk with a friend—a woman who had actually introduced her to the Dharma, a fellow meditator who had awakened her to practice.

They were walking together, heading to dinner, when her friend, who was about forty years old, suddenly collapsed from cardiac arrest and died that very evening. Despite this tremendous shock, this woman had returned to the retreat the next day because she felt it was the most healing place to be, and she continued with her practice. But the jolt to her system was enormous—and perhaps also a profound teaching on the unpredictability and uncontrollability of our experience. One moment you're walking with a friend, and a few hours later, she's simply no longer there.

This is the reality for all of us. Even the Buddha couldn't avoid such changes. When Sariputta, one of his chief disciples, died before him, the Buddha said it was as if the sun and moon had gone out of the sky with his passing.

Through our moment-to-moment relationship developed in meditation, we begin to recognize the uncontrollable nature of life. We see how our attempts to relate to experience through greed and aversion, through likes and dislikes, actually fill us with tension. These very efforts to control become a source of suffering. We start to see the limitations of our strategy and may begin to discover that peace comes when we're able to relax the controlling, even for brief periods.

In the beginning, there may not be whole hours or days that are primarily peaceful, but even these moments when the effort of greed and aversion subsides—when you feel restful and peaceful and calm, simply abiding within the moment—offer profound guidance. This really points to the third noble truth that Sylvia spoke about a few nights ago: the ending of struggle, the cessation of craving, of trying to shape things according to our preferences. It's a powerful indication of where happiness truly lies—in this purified heart that has not taken up the struggle, that in this moment is not engaging with the battle of likes and dislikes.

Some of you may have heard stories about Dipa Ma, a great Indian teacher born in Calcutta who suffered tremendous grief when she was quite young. She had four children and a husband, and in a very short period, her husband and several of her children died. This pitched her into despair—a bottomless well of grief she didn't know how to navigate. She said she essentially retired to her room and went under the covers for a year or more, so paralyzing was her grief.

Then someone suggested she try meditation—Vipassana in the same style we're practicing. She enrolled in a retreat with an Indian teacher named Munindra, and it turned out she had extraordinary aptitude for meditation. She once described how, when she first began walking meditation, she focused intently on the sensations in her feet—just lifting, moving, placing. Then she began to feel some friction around her foot, an unfamiliar sensation she hadn't expected. She continued walking, and the sensation

persisted. When she finally looked down to see what it was, she discovered a dog that had bitten and fastened onto her ankle. But her attention was so concentrated, so unwavering, that this barely registered on her consciousness.

She continued developing her meditation, progressing very deep very quickly, moving through many levels of insight as well as concentration. She became one of the most developed people I've ever encountered. I was fortunate to spend about a month with her when she made her first trip to America—I had the privilege of looking after her and cooking for her.

She brought with her surviving daughter, Dipa, and her four-year-old grandson named Rishi. "Rishi" means seer or wise person, but I can assure you this boy was not particularly wise in the conventional sense. He was pure energy—quite wild, as four-year-olds can be, whether in the house or out shopping in the malls. Rishi was everywhere at once.

This situation became the perfect demonstration of Dipa Ma's equanimity. I never saw her flicker into even a moment of irritation with him. She remained completely balanced, completely peaceful, completely loving throughout. When someone once asked her what occupied her mind, she replied simply: "There are three things in my mind—peace, concentration, and loving-kindness."

She didn't even consider herself fully liberated. She thought she was still just on the path like the rest of us, a little further down the path perhaps, but she remained a practitioner. She still considered that she was developing. And yet she had this tremendous purity that I never saw waver. As Ryokan said, "When your heart is pure, all things in this world are pure."

This purification of the heart really transforms our relationship to life. One of the things we purify in practice is our intention. As we begin the practice, we may think that we want to shape our experience, to mold it to be a certain way. As our intention evolves, we become more and more accepting of a relation to experience that's not trying to shape it, but that is eager to learn from it.

So that's the shift that happens—we start to open up and become available to learn from our experience, not demanding that it be a certain way. We listen to our hearts, we listen to our bodies, we listen to our thoughts so that we can understand. And when we understand, then things are easier.

Sylvia told me about a lovely phrase from the Jewish prayer service that says something like, "May we purify our hearts so that we may truly serve." I think this is a beautiful inclination. When we become pure within ourselves, we're better able to help oth-

ers. The Dalai Lama himself said that altruism by itself is a noble thing, but by itself it's not very powerful. It really needs to be joined with wisdom. And with wisdom and understanding comes the freedom from conflict. And then when that freedom is there, we're really better able to touch others, to help them.

As the factors of greed and aversion decrease, it's like two pans on a scale. As these decrease, the opposite qualities are increasing. So the opposite quality of greed, of this grasping nature, is said to be either generosity—this open-handed giving—or renunciation, relinquishment, simplicity. These are the transmutations of greed.

The quality of aversion goes in two different directions, related but a little dissimilar. One is loving-kindness. It's a basic shift. Instead of having an antagonistic relation to the world, the relationship becomes friendly. Or compassion, caring about others' suffering. Delusion clarifies into wisdom itself—it becomes clarity or seeing things as they are.

So these qualities of generosity, of love, and of wisdom are the fruits of the purification of heart. You could talk about it in terms of the decrease of the unwholesome or the increase of the wholesome. Either way, it's the same thing.

Sometimes it may seem like we focus a little too much on the negative here, and so I like one of the answers on the interview sheets. You know the question that says, "Have you ever had prolonged depression?" One of the meditators answered by saying, "No, but I've had prolonged happiness."

As we slow down through our practice and listen, our experience starts to unfold in a new way, as though it wants to talk with us, as though it wants to share things with us. Basically, one of the things that happens is some of the accumulations start to unfold themselves.

What do we mean by this accumulation? Throughout life, we've had experiences that have maybe been difficult to handle—something has happened either outside or inwardly, some emotion comes, some physical energy that's difficult to accept. A sadness or fear or rage, a sense of humiliation or shame, and we haven't been able to allow that experience to go through us. We've been scared by it, basically. In response, we've used various techniques to shut it off, to close to it, to keep from experiencing it.

When we stop that process partway through with some kind of contraction, what we do is we lock in that emotion that we were frightened of. It gets locked in often on a bodily level. It gets locked into the heart as well. So after going through twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years of life, we all usually have some storage of these feelings, these stored, suppressed feelings.

In the silence and with awareness, these energies that wanted to express themselves now have the space to do that. And so they start to come into consciousness. They start to be experienced. It may be in the beginning we just feel a little tightness in the body, maybe in the heart or the back, or contraction in the belly. And as we just stay with that with a gentle attention, it may open into some feeling of sadness or fear or anger. Sometimes that feeling will come just by itself. Sometimes it will come with a release of physical energy.

Sometimes there may even be memories—very clear memories of a situation or an event in our lives that come with the feeling.

We see that this leads to a natural cycle in practice: the deepening of mindfulness and concentration creates steadiness of attention and stillness, which invites the emergence of stored energy. This stored energy can be quite strong, and its release often feels chaotic. So this is a really common cycle in practice—to have deepening stillness followed by a period of upheaval, often one right after another.

It may feel like, "Gosh, I'm just starting to understand this practice. Things are finally calming down. I can stay with the breath, being with it consistently. It feels peaceful. I'm starting to get the hang of what they were talking about. Now I understand those instructions John was giving the other day—just stay with the body sensations. It's all coming clear now. I've got the hang of this meditation. The rest of these six weeks is just going to be a cruise."

Then that deeper connection with ourselves allows the release of some deeper material, and that experience is normally quite tumultuous. It feels like upheaval. Suddenly it's very difficult to connect with the breath. There are lots of emotions, lots of thoughts, lots of physical energy—just racing, racing, racing.

We think, "What did I do wrong? I had it just yesterday, or just the last sitting. I shouldn't have let myself have that daydream about the vacation I'm going to take in the summer. I shouldn't have allowed myself to linger over tea at lunchtime. I did something wrong that's making all this happen."

But it's really not like that. Actually, your steadiness is what gave the space for the stored material to emerge. So it's a really natural part of the practice.

During that time of upheaval, it may feel like the practice is just blown to the four winds. Concentration? Never knew it a day in my life. More than a breath at a time? Can't get to it. Just not happening. This is a time when it's easy to feel discouraged.

But if you just maintain your steadiness—and it may simply be being willing to sit and walk through the disturbance—what you'll find is that after a little time passes, the connection with the breath comes back. Calmness returns. You feel that steadiness again. The practice more or less puts itself back together.

So often when we're going through an intensive retreat, we experience these cycles where the practice really comes together and feels the best it's ever felt. It feels so easy, so effortless during these times. This is when you start thinking about signing up for the three-month retreat in Massachusetts in the fall, or going over to Burma to ordain as a nun the next time you have some time off.

Immediately following that can be what seems like the worst period of practice you've ever had. These cycles may keep repeating. And of course, in those really difficult times: "Is my car still running? Am I going to be able to get a getaway vehicle together to get out of this place? Do I need to call my house sitter to tell him to vacate because I'm coming back tonight?" All plans to leave start flooding in.

This is such a good training ground because both phases present real challenges. In the periods where practice seems easy and flowing and effortless, we really get to discover what the sweetness of meditation can be like. We taste some of the fruits of the sustained attention we've cultivated. We know that potential of real peace and real clarity—being able to see things as they truly are, so rich and satisfying.

But we also have to be aware that sometimes the biggest obstacle to mindfulness is pleasure. I don't know if you've noticed this. When I sit down at lunch and take the first bite of a really good meal—

I space out like no time else in the day. As soon as I get a really pleasant taste, I forget to taste anymore. It's like, "Oh, this is so great," and I'm off somewhere in some pleasant thought escapade.

The same thing happens with sitting. When the calm and the peace and the concentration and connection to the breath arrive as these unexpected visitors, we might think, "This is what meditation is supposed to be like. Now I don't have to work so hard at being with the breath. I can just settle in and enjoy this because it's happening naturally and it feels so good."

It's really important, even in times that feel good, to sustain the mindfulness moment by moment—still to put in that effort of connecting with the breath, with the sensations.

When you get into the tumult, then it feels like nothing can connect. It feels like the meditation has dissolved. What's the point? Why should I try? At those times, it's still helpful to keep coming back and connecting with the present, but you may not be able to do it in a very precise way. Connecting with one breath may not be possible. Seeing one thought may not be possible because they're going by like a waterfall—too fast, too furious.

So at times like that, that's okay. Connect with a more panoramic understanding of the situation and just feel it as restlessness. Feel it as confusion. Just make space in the mind for this experience of tumult, of the waterfall, and then you're connected with your experience just as it is. Don't worry about being precise. Trust that if you just keep staying present, the calmness and balance will return.

And really what you gain from all those cycles, again and again, is a greater and greater sense of equanimity—seeing the pleasure and the pain, the easy times and the hard times as just two halves of what meditation has to offer. You start to trust that every time you get lost, you know you'll get found again. And every time you get found, you can be pretty sure you're going to get lost again—and it's okay. Both halves of that cycle are all right.

So don't feel that you have to hold on really tightly to one or that you have to be afraid of the other. Start to recognize that these are the two faces of retreat practice, of meditation as it unfolds in its depths. We gradually, over time, just get more and more trust that that process is a good one—that it strengthens us, that it heals us, that it opens us, that it purifies us.

This is from Rumi: "This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness. Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all. Even if they're a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."

This is so true. Each can be seen as a guide from beyond because they are our opening. When we turn our attention to the breath or sensations, to the present moment, we get one of two outcomes. We either get the connection to the present moment with clarity, or we get an obstruction to that present moment awareness. Either one is just where we need to learn. It's just perfect in that moment. So being open to both is really, really helpful.

Now some of these accumulations come in a way that we struggle with them. Mostly they come in a way that we struggle. And sometimes we struggle in a way that we actually draw the noose tighter. This is when we're in a situation that's described as a knot. A knot is basically created when there's a kind of energy coming up in us that we can't open to, but we meet with the same kind of response.

A good example is fear. If fear comes into your practice and you're afraid of it, what happens? The fear builds into a kind of crescendo. It's created this knot of fear that we don't see a way out of.

I was doing a long period of metta practice last fall. Doing the metta practice intensively over a period of some weeks is basically a concentration practice. Insights come also, but because you're returning to the phrases and the metta again and again, it's largely strengthening the factor of concentration. I talked to a lot of friends who'd done the practice—I'd done it myself—and some of my friends, their concentration just seemed to keep deepening in a very steady and gradual way. My experience had always been that my concentration deepened for a while, and then I'd go through this period of upheaval.

And then it would settle down, just the cycle that I've been describing. I started to notice that what happened was because I wasn't so comfortable or familiar with the metta practice, when I got into the upheaval period, I couldn't trust that it was okay for that to happen. So when I got agitated, I got worried that I was getting agitated. And of course, that just made me more agitated. I really struggled with it.

Over time, I started to trust: oh, that agitation will pass. It's okay. Just let it come and let it go. But as long as I was getting worried about it, I was just prolonging it.

So in working with these uprushes of energy from accumulations or from knots, the skillful thing is just to be with them in a very open and accepting way. Sounds easy. I know it's not.

If we can be there with a clear attention that's not moving toward it—why would we move toward it? Because we can make of this untying a project. We can actually see our meditation as being primarily about the loosening of these accumulations. Then we might get invested in the uprushes of energy. We might get invested in the knots even, and think that if I'm having the opening of the accumulations, my practice is unfolding as it should. That can become our central purpose.

Actually, the unfolding of the accumulations is just a byproduct in meditation. It's just a byproduct of awareness. It's not the central path to liberation. So as long as we're involved in that as our main project in meditation, then we might miss out on the deeper pointings to freedom, to the essence of liberation.

Also not moving away. Of course we tend to move away because these are difficult energies—the energies of anger or fear or sadness or shame. So we want to find that middle path that's not moving toward out of making an agenda, that's not moving away out of resistance or fear, but an awareness that can clearly be there with these difficult states of mind and body and just allow them to express themselves.

Someone came in today to an interview and was talking about a real shift in relationship to these energies. The person said, "You know, I struggled with these upheavals for a long time and I finally got it that I could just be with it in a really spacious way." He said, "Now it's like the lights are on, but nobody's home. There's just the energy unfolding itself." And when that happens, you can trust in the Dharma to unfold it in the most skillful way possible.

The lights are on but nobody's home. If these difficulties arise and we don't make a big deal out of them, we don't hold on to them, we don't cling, we could say that they self-liberate. They arise and like everything that arises, they pass away.

This self-liberation is described in one tradition as like a snake that's coiled up and just uncoils itself. It's also described as like writing on water—it just passes without a trace. No big deal, really easy. But if we get involved in grasping, either because we're resisting or because we want to fix things and help the project along, then we get tangled. That's how the tangle gets created.

Well, basically in relation to these states, to be there with full awareness—a keen awareness and interest is crucial—but then to kind of take the hands off the steering wheel and surrender. This movement of surrender is a movement that we can do in any moment of practice.

Krishnamurti had this beautiful phrase. He said, "The first step is the everlasting step." And I think you could say that this movement to surrender is an everlasting step in our practice. Because when we get out of the way, then we put our whole trust in the hands of the Dharma. And the Dharma knows what to do. The Dharma knows how to unfold the situation.

So in our practice, can we start to know when we're reacting to what is with trying to control through greed, aversion, or delusion? Can we also know the states of non-greed, of non-aversion, of non-delusion? Be aware of how they feel. Be aware of their impact.

There are really simple teachings around these states of mind. I was visiting some friends over Christmas, and my friend who's a meditator called her daughter and then spoke to her granddaughter. The granddaughter came on the phone and said, "Oh, Nana, I got a lot of really good presents this Christmas. You should see it, Nana. A lot of presents under the tree."

And her grandmother said, "Well, now that you have all those, does that make you happy? Or do you feel like you want more?"

The little girl said, "Oh, Nana, I'd like to have more."

And he said this went on for about 20 minutes. Then I realized this turtle was teaching me something. When I was just sitting peacefully with both the calm states and the painful memories, both were fine—I could be present with either. But when I reached for the peaceful states, when I tried to grasp them or hold onto them, they disappeared, just like the turtle withdrawing into his shell.

This is such a beautiful teaching about non-attachment. When we try to grasp the pleasant experiences, even the most wonderful meditative states, they slip away from us. When we try to push away the difficult experiences, we create more suffering for ourselves. The practice is really about developing this quality of awareness that can be present with whatever arises—the turtle coming out of his shell or the turtle withdrawing, the moments of peace or the moments of pain.

This is what we call equanimity—not a bland indifference, but this wise and compassionate balance that recognizes both pleasure and pain as part of the human experience. In the Pali teachings, this quality is called upekkha, this beautiful balance of heart and mind that neither grasps after what we want nor pushes away what we don't want.

So in your own practice, notice this tendency to reach for the pleasant states. Notice how when you try to manufacture calm or create bliss, those very states become elusive. And notice too how when you resist the difficult emotions or thoughts, they tend to become more solid and persistent. The practice invites us into this middle way—being fully present with whatever is arising in this moment, whether it's the turtle's head emerging from the shell or retreating back into safety.

This doesn't mean we become passive or that we don't take appropriate action when needed. But there's a difference between wise action that comes from understanding and reactive grasping that comes from wanting our experience to be different than it is. The turtle taught my friend about the difference between these two ways of engaging with life.

He said, "At that moment, I got it. Opening and closing are just part of life. The turtle is showing me that being open isn't always the right way to be. Sometimes being closed happens or is appropriate. And I saw that with my own heart. I need to be allowing of these cycles where my heart opens and my heart closes, and it's all just a part of the natural flow."

So he shifted into that more allowing kind of panoramic relationship to the openings and closings, and he said that it brought him a much deeper sense of freedom in relationship to them.

Remember that life is relationship. There's our present moment experience and then how we're relating to it. And these two factors keep interplaying with one another. They condition one another. In tuning into our present moment experience, we may find sometimes it's nice, sometimes it's not so nice. Look at then how we relate. That's the more important piece.

I was sitting, again, extended period of retreat, one of my teachers was Sharon Salzberg, and Sharon said something in the Dharma hall one day that I'd probably heard a dozen times before, I'd probably said a dozen times before, but she said it and it really struck me. She said, "It doesn't matter in this practice what you're experiencing. What matters is how you relate to it."

That's a really radical statement. And that is the view of this meditation. It doesn't matter what our experience is, whether it's joyful, delightful, happy, open, or if we're experiencing some fear, some anger, some sadness and terror. The important thing as relates to the practice is: how are we relating to that moment?

If we can bring into that moment this warm and clear attention—because that's really what mindfulness is. Mindfulness truly is free of greed, aversion, and delusion, and therefore has this basic warmth, has this heart quality to it. That's the transforming factor. That's the liberating factor.

It actually doesn't matter so much whether your practice of mindfulness is developing on difficulty or developing on ease. The Buddha said there are four different types of meditators. There are ones who go swiftly with pleasure. There are those who go swiftly with pain. There are those who go slowly with pleasure. And there are those who go slowly with pain. I will tell you right now, I'm in the fourth category.

It really doesn't matter because the liberating factor is this open-hearted attention that we bring to whatever our experience is.

Why is it liberating? This is a question that really grabbed me after a while. Why is this open-hearted attention fundamentally liberating? The clearest way I know to say it is that it is the functioning of our Buddha nature. We've talked a few times about this deep dimension of ourselves, which is timeless, as John was saying this morning, which is unstained and unsullied, which is fundamentally pure—pure beyond any possibility of impurity.

The activity of this Buddha nature is mindfulness. As we become mindful moment after moment, what we are doing is basically giving birth to our own awakened nature. We are bringing forth the awakened mind moment after moment after moment.

When we shine it on an area of difficulty, we transform that moment. Even though the experience in the moment may be of sadness or hurt or anger or fear, when we meet it with this warm, clear attention, we're bringing the wholesome alive in that moment. So you cannot say that a meditator who's working with mindfulness is only in an unwholesome state. The awareness itself is a powerful, wholesome element in that moment and transforms over time those feelings.

As we bring forth more and more this open and spacious, essential nature, all the accumulations, all the knots, all the karmic conditioning basically dissolves in it. The Buddha said that the fetters, the difficulties, rot in mindfulness, the same way that the ropes and sails of a seagoing vessel rot in the sea air, the salt water, the wind, and the sun. They simply decay because this nature is so fundamental that nothing can stand up to it. It has the possibility of absorbing and dissolving every structure that it's presented with.

This is the alchemy of our practice. In meeting these difficult emotions, difficult states of mind, bringing this wholesome and warm attention to them, we transform that difficult moment into a moment of activating the awakened nature. This is pure magic. How can we bring forth enlightenment in the middle of difficulty? Just by paying clear and warm attention, moment after moment.

So we find our freedom not in getting rid of the difficult emotions, but in bringing out this deeper dimension of ourselves, which is open, accepting, spacious, and friendly, until there are no more corners of the mind that we can't meet with that kind of openness and that kind of acceptance. In the mind of the Buddha, there are no more rough edges that can't be opened to.

For us, every rough edge is another opportunity to open and move one step closer to Buddhahood.

As one of my Tibetan teachers said, the sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusion.

I'll close with a quote from Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa. This is a prayer, and it doesn't so much matter who it's directed to. It could be directed to the teacher, to the Buddha, to the Dharma, or anywhere you feel appropriate. These are called the Four Blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's sit for just a moment in the beauty of this teaching.

CHAPTER 215

The Three Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's core teaching on tilakkhana—the three characteristics that define all conditioned existence. Drawing from personal experiences and retreat observations, he explores anicca (impermanence), showing how everything from relationships to mental states constantly changes. He discusses dukkha (unsatisfactoriness), explaining why seeking security in impermanent phenomena inevitably leads to suffering. Finally, he investigates anattā (not-self), questioning our conventional sense of an ongoing, continuous self.

Armstrong references the Satipatthana Sutta (MN 10) and shares teachings from Thai master Ajahn Buddhadāsa on the eighteen āyatanas (sense bases). He illustrates these profound teachings through accessible examples—from retreat experiences to nature's cycles of life and death. The talk emphasizes how understanding these three characteristics points toward non-clinging awareness, where genuine peace may be found. Rather than bitter truths to accept, Armstrong presents these insights as liberating wisdom that frees us from futile attempts to find lasting security in the changing world.

I often ask people at the start of interviews, as a warm conversational gambit, "How's the retreat going?" Most people respond by telling me how the retreat's going. But every once in a while, the question just strikes someone dumb. They simply say, "Ah," because when you think about it, it's really a hard question to answer.

Usually it's been four days since I've seen somebody, and in those four days the retreat has gone every which way for people. It's difficult to edit your experience of four days down to one or two sentences to offer to a teacher. Of course, this problem gets compounded many times when you leave the retreat, whether it's three or six weeks later, and you go home. All the people who have missed you ask, "Gosh, how was your retreat?" How do you edit down three or six weeks of some of the most intense experience of your life into a conversational gambit?

So I want to give you a tip—this is the secret teaching. What I usually do is just say, "It was great." That's usually all they want to hear, so the conversation wraps up and we move on to the basketball scores or something like that.

The quickness of change in retreat is really one of its most striking features. Mental states come and go. The body feels good, then it feels bad. Energy is up one day, then we're sleepy the next—always in flux. This is sometimes frustrating, but the Buddha talked about it as one of the most important areas of learning in our whole lives.

When he described the way things are in this life—the nature of things—he talked about three characteristics of everything that exists, everything that comes into being. These three characteristics he described as impermanence, the quality of unsatisfactoriness or suffering, and the quality of selflessness or not-self that pertain to all things that arise. I think of these three as the facts of life for grownups. So given that we're all adults, this is a good topic for us to look into.

In Pali, these three are called *anicca* for impermanence, *dukkha* for unsatisfactoriness, and *anatta* for selflessness. These are the three qualities of things I'd like to look into tonight.

Regarding impermanence, the Buddha said, "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's. Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." He considered it one of the highest areas to learn about in the whole realm of Dharma. So no matter what our experience is, if we tune into this simple truth, we can remind ourselves: whatever I'm experiencing, this too shall pass. The Buddha commented that there's great wisdom in that knowledge, in that reflection.

When we look at the world and what we as humans get up to in the world, it seems like we spend a lot of our time and energy trying to find some security. It's as though we recognize our vulnerability and look for some form of security, something lasting that we can rest upon in life. One of the main areas we look to is personal relationships. Often the sense is that if we get this part of our life together, it will solve a lot of problems.

This reminds me of a number of years ago when I went on an extended meditation retreat—a two-month period. I had a partner at that time who decided not to go on the retreat but chose instead to stay home and get involved with a spiritual scene near our home. There was this teacher operating very much in a guru style who demanded a lot of devotion and surrender.

I started the retreat, which was very much like this one—a silent retreat of sitting and walking. I entered with a great deal of confidence, thinking, "This relationship is really the bedrock of my life. This is the most solid thing in my life. I'm really grateful for it." I should have recognized there was a little red flag going up in my consciousness, but I didn't.

I completed the retreat, practicing quite intensively as you all are here. You're beginning to get a sense that you become a little sensitive in these settings. Little things that might just be a pebble dropping in the pond in outer life have huge ripples when your mind gets quieted down.

So like you, I came out of my two-month retreat very open, very vulnerable. I called my partner as I got out and asked, "How are you doing?" I found that she had become very involved in this other scene and had gone through a big surrender to this guru. When I heard that, my stomach started tying up in knots. I felt a huge wave of anxiety come over me because I had seen many couples get involved in this scene, and every time—whether one or both of them were really into it—the relationship had fallen apart. I've observed that scene over many years now, and that's still the case with that particular scene.

So as I started to realize what was going on, I felt like the bottom had fallen out of my life. Where there used to be a stomach, there was just a yawning abyss. I felt a huge amount of insecurity arise because this foundation of my life was being shaken. I didn't know if the relationship was going to survive this hurdle.

Looking at that scene, if you don't mind my being a little catty, I really believe there was an expectation from this guru that anyone in relationship with him would have no other love but him. I honestly believe that's why he forced people to cut away their relationships. I could see this in our future, could see us heading that way. And I felt very anxious for quite a while.

It was still some time before I was due to return home, and over that whole period, I just felt ungrounded, insecure, fearful, nervous. When I finally got home, we went through a lot of conversation, as you can imagine. I did a little bit of deprogramming, and my partner at the time decided to move away from the guru and basically reenter the Vipassana fold, which as you know is warm and friendly and completely non-threatening, very supportive of relationships. So we carried forward for some time longer.

But it was a really clear teaching to me of the impermanent nature of things—even something in which I had put a lot of faith and store. And also a real teaching about the attachment I had formed and how upsetting it was to have it questioned. It hadn't even gone away; it had just been questioned, and I felt like the bottom had fallen out.

So we look in many areas of our life to find some way to avoid feeling this kind of anxiety, to find security through relationship, through family, through our jobs, through friendships, through possessions, through having a nice home. In one way or another, we often spend enormous time trying to make sure those stay in some kind of order.

There's even a project that emerged in the 80s and 90s called "Getting My Life Together." It's become a new project because we have so many pieces we want to weave together—relationship, practice, being away for long periods of time hoping your partner's there when you get home, being away from work for long periods hoping there are still people who want to hire you when you return, family, children, and so on.

We're always hoping to put all these pieces together in some configuration where they'll snap into place and stay that way forever. I'll report from my own experience: it hasn't happened yet. There are many beautiful things happening in my life, and there's always something that seems a little out of balance.

A simple example: I started teaching in 1984 in England, moved to the States in 1988, and put teaching aside for five years while I worked in the corporate world. I worked for Microsoft—before they got hit with antitrust charges. I know there are many Apple lovers in the dharma community. It was after I left that it all went downhill.

I came back into teaching in 1994, about five years ago. Being a new teacher in the States, I felt incumbent to go to places the established teachers weren't so crazy about going, like North Dakota in the middle of February. I was accepting all invitations, and I found I was traveling too much, away from home too much, away from my relationship. It was exhausting.

Just in the last couple years, I've started cutting down on travel. Since Spirit Rock is now here, I'm looking forward to spending more time at home. Well, just as I'm becoming more of a homebody, my wife Sally is getting into the teacher training program with Jack Kornfield, and now she's going to be the one going to North Dakota in February and being away. Eugene is spiriting her off to St. Louis to teach with him in a couple of months.

So just as one part comes into balance, often another slips out. Putting it all together may never happen—another feature of impermanence. We have to learn to flow with these changing conditions all the time. And what better place than a retreat where conditions change as quickly as the weather? It's such a perfect metaphor for this retreat—one day rain, one day sun. One day rain, one day sun. It's really a great reminder.

One of the changing conditions that we all live with is the body and the aging that the body goes through. One of my friends started to go quite bald in his twenties, and it was a blow to his vanity. But he said actually the most difficult thing about it was that when he washed his face and got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop.

For myself, balding hasn't been my problem, but the coloring has been my problem. This coloring started to go when I was about thirty-five, and I thought I was still quite a young man. I was at a gathering somewhere, and I got up and walked away, and the guy who was sitting next to us, who we didn't know, turned and asked my friend, "Oh, who was that man?" And she said, "What man?" And he said, "That middle-aged man who was sitting next to you."

I just couldn't believe it. Middle-aged at thirty-five. So I've been dealing with that one ever since, and now it sort of fits. It's okay. Dealing with the changes in the body.

And of course, we all know where those changes are heading. The Buddha talked about it often. Aging leads to illness, and illness leads to death. So in the Buddhist tradition, this reflecting on aging and death is really an integral part of the practice. In the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the cornerstone of our meditation practice, the Buddha gives a number of reflections that he offers to practitioners as an integral part of the practice—to reflect on their own body after death, to reflect on our own corpse in various stages of decomposition and decay. This awareness of our own mortality is really integral to the practice.

And you know, it's something that I think we need a little bit of encouragement to reflect on. You may have heard about this poll. They polled people in America and asked them what was the scariest thing in their lives or in their thoughts. Fear of death came in number four. Number one was speaking in public.

Now that could be a statement of great courage on the part of the American people. But I somehow suspect that it's more a function of deep denial—that we just aren't comfortable holding this thought of our own death. It's frightening. It's sad. It's something that as a culture we spend a lot of time avoiding.

I was doing a long personal retreat a couple of years ago, and this reflection came up really strongly for me. One of the things that I realized in thinking about this is that my own death seems accommodatable. It seems manageable. It seems holdable. But what really touched me was the reflection that at some point in the future, I will probably witness Sally's death, or Sally will be there witnessing my death. And that for me carried even more sadness than just the idea of my own dying.

The Buddha said that in many ways, death is like this great mountain that's rolling over the landscape toward us and obliterating everything in its wake. And he asked the question: what can one do in the face of this kind of situation, the oncoming inevitability of death? And his response was the only thing to do is to practice the Dharma, to live with as much calm as we can, and to do good. This is really the crux of life in the face of our death. Fortunately, you're in just the right place for this instruction.

The Tibetans say that impermanence has four ends: The end of birth is death. The end of coming together is separation. The end of accumulation is dispersal, and the end of all building is destruction. We get so involved with all the things of this world and of our lives that sometimes we forget this.

This is from an ancient Indian sutra: Some children were playing beside the ocean. They made castles of sand, and each child defended his castle and said, "This one is mine." They kept their castles separate and would not allow any mistakes about which was whose. When the castles were all finished, one child kicked over someone else's castle and completely destroyed it. The owner flew into a rage, pulled the other child's hair, struck him with his fist, and bawled out, "He has spoiled my castle. Come along, all of you, and help me to punish him as he deserves." The others all came to his help.

They beat the child with a stick and then stamped on him as he lay on the ground. Then they went on playing in their sandcastles, each saying, "This is mine. No one else may have it. Keep away. Don't touch my castle."

But evening came. It was getting dark, and they all thought they ought to be going home. No one now cared what became of his castle. One child stamped on his. Another pushed his over with both hands. They turned away and went back, each to his home. And that night, the tide obliterated all traces.

So we look at the outer situation, seeing this fact of change and mortality, and realize that there isn't anything lasting to hold onto. And perhaps from that understanding, we come to meditation practice.

There's a terrific promise in meditation practice—the promise of release, of freedom. It's an interesting promise because our understanding of the end of meditation practice, which the Buddha called right understanding, one of the factors in the Eightfold Path, evolves as we practice. All the path factors develop as we practice the path. Right understanding evolves likewise.

When we come into meditation practice, we may think that the Third Noble Truth, which the Buddha expressed as the end of suffering lying in the end of craving, actually says that lasting happiness is found in the end of craving. When I came into practice, as

Eugene said, confessing my delusions, I came looking for the security through meditation that I wasn't able to find through outer circumstances—thinking that I would find some way, some state of mind that I could put together through meditation that would last and keep me in a permanent state of happiness and well-being.

Actually, what the Third Noble Truth is pointing to is something a little more subtle. It's pointing to the end of suffering, but it doesn't say what form that takes. As time has gone on, I've come to feel that the Third Noble Truth is not pointing to a static mental state of unending happiness seen as a particular way of being, but rather to an equilibrium and a peacefulness that can be present in any form of experience.

So when I came in, I was definitely looking for a fixed kind of security through meditation. As I've practiced, my understanding of that has changed a bit.

Someone actually asked the Buddha, "For someone who is completely enlightened, do they dwell in a perpetual state of well-being?" The Buddha said, "Of one who has become fully awakened, there is nothing by which they can be measured. There is no static state by which such a person can be defined."

In retreat, as we begin to explore, we see that we're really involved in a microcosm of life here. Just as our outer life has changed, the inner life here has also changed. Sounds, breath, thoughts, all coming and going. Emotions and states of mind rapidly changing.

One of the most interesting areas to open up, and several of you have talked about this in interviews, is looking closely at the experience of the body at this point in the retreat. Normally we take the body as something really solid. If there's anything that's going to be dependable and lasting and that we can count on, here it is—the body. We remember from our third grade health textbooks peeling off one layer to find the bones, peeling another layer to find the arteries and the internal organs, and it all seems very complete, very fixed.

But a curious thing happens when we actually explore with our awareness in the deepest intimacy that we can have with this body—we get a different picture. We start to touch the bare actuality of our physical nature and see that there is nothing solid in the experience, but rather just pulsing, changing vibrations, sensations, flux throughout this whole field.

This is a very liberating insight. We take the leg as something solid, but when we look closely, we see that all the sensations are just rapidly blinking on and off. There's nothing fixed here, but a whole field of change. Some people actually experience the body seeming to dissolve in a sitting, just held in the space of awareness.

Impermanence can also show itself in a project of trying to get our practice together or keep our practice together. I did this a lot in the early years when I was doing retreats. I would think that I couldn't really start to meditate until my body was free of pain, until it was clear of tension or knots or holding. So if I'd find an area that was tight in my body, I'd direct my attention there. Over time, I got somewhat skilled with some concentration, some mindfulness in bringing change into that sensation. If I could stay with it long enough, I could open it up. I could sort of tap into the vibratory nature. I'd work on that one and get it a little bit open. Then maybe there'd be another holding over here. So I'd go work on that for a while.

And after, you know, half a day or so, I'd actually experience some ease and flow and openness in the body. And then I could settle down and meditate. That would last about one sitting. The next sitting I'd come back and it would all have gone scrunch. It would all have contracted again. Why? Because the mind that caused contraction had never been really looked at. As long as the mind is going to contract around greed or aversion, the body will follow. I was trying to untangle the body without looking at the source, which is the mind. It was a very fleeting and temporary fix. I spent a lot of time doing it and I would have been a lot better advised to just live with some degree of tension and instead relax into the experience. It would have been a much smarter thing to do. It took me years to learn it, so I'm offering it to you as a shortcut.

The body keeps changing, goes from comfortable to uncomfortable. Nature is a great teacher about impermanence. The lovely thing about being in this setting is that you can spend a lot of time outdoors and let that truth of nature's change come into your bones. The Buddha really encouraged the nuns and monks to live simply in nature, to live close to nature, because then the teachings of change just come into our marrow. We see in nature how the clouds are always coming and going, the planets are shifting, the phases of the moon we stay in touch with when we're on a retreat like this. Whereas in city life, we might go weeks and not even know what phase the moon is in. We see life and death living close to nature.

We were practicing here in November, the old students retreat. And one evening during the dharma talk, there was this heart-wrenching scream from outside. We didn't know what it was, but when we went to look later, there was a dead deer. It had apparently been attacked by a dog or a pair of dogs that had gotten onto the land. It was a small deer, and by the time we reached it, it was already dead. Probably its neck had been broken. It was a young deer. So a number of us gathered around and sent it metta for a while. After doing that, a lot of people came by and looked at the deer and reflected on its passing, sent metta. Then it was moved out of the retreat area.

Actually, the Humane Society was supposed to come pick it up. The caretakers moved it so they could come pick it up, and they never came. So over the next days, you could actually observe what was happening to the deer's body, and it disappeared in fairly short order. There are a lot of vultures here, as you may have noticed. The birds with the really big wingspans that you see around a lot, circling and gliding—they look like hawks from a distance, but in fact almost all of them are turkey vultures. They're eaters of dead flesh, carrion eaters. The way you can tell a turkey vulture is that its wings go up in kind of a V, whereas hawks' wings are much more horizontal when they fly or glide. So most of the big birds you see circling here are actually vultures.

So the vultures had done their work at picking apart the flesh of the deer, and we also have coyotes near here, and they were visiting and eating parts of the deer. So in a relatively short period of time, that deer's body was just gone. It was one of the teachings of nature that everything that comes into existence really does pass away. It's not the case that that deer is hanging out somewhere in what we call the past. That deer was here and now she's really gone.

One of my Tibetan teachers told me that a sign in your meditation that you're seeing clearly is that you're in touch with this facet of change. This is something you can actually tune into in a period of sitting. As you're with the breath, as you're with sounds, as you're with sensations, as you're with thoughts, are you sensing the nature of change, the arising and passing in that moment? Or have you concretized something? Have you made a fixation, a solid viewpoint or perspective out of a fantasy, a memory, a plan for the future, some fixation of concept? Look closely and see which you're in touch with.

If we're in touch with the changing nature of things, we're in touch with things as they are, at least to some very important degree. When we get fixated in concepts, past and future, we lose touch with that quality of change. When we look closely in our practice, we see that all our experience is just arising and passing moment after moment after moment. This is really one of the key insights in meditation. This is one of the reasons that we really

In the tradition of Buddhist practice, this teaching suggests that you develop a stability of attention so that you can open to this perception of change in a very clear way. We can see change in our daily life—it's almost an intellectual perception. But in meditation, when we can really still the mind and see this moment-by-moment arising and passing, it hits us in a much deeper way.

This is why we stress some precision in paying attention to changing objects. It's not just breath watching, it's not just body watching, but it's in order to see the nature of things—to see the true nature of all the appearances.

When I was practicing in Thailand, I spent quite a bit of time at Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery in the south of Thailand. Ajahn Buddhadasa was really one of the great masters of the last fifty years in Thailand. He died a few years ago. He was a meditator, he was a scholar, he was an iconoclast. He didn't do things in the traditional way.

Typically in Thailand, the style of Buddhism is very devotional—a lot of statues, a lot of candles, a lot of incense, a lot of bowing, a lot of prayer, a lot of chanting. Ajahn Buddhadasa wasn't interested in that side of the Dharma. He was really only interested in wisdom. His teaching and his whole monastery was set up just for wisdom.

Rich donors would come along and say, "I'd like to give you a big gold Buddha statue. Where could we put it?" He'd say, "We don't take statues here, I'm sorry." He did not have a single statue of the Buddha in the whole monastery. The only thing he had was a semicircle where the monks would gather to eat their morning meal—it was a one-meal-a-day kind of place. In the center of that semicircle there were three stones piled on top of each other that sort of suggested a pyramid. That was the closest approximation to a Buddha image that he would allow.

I appreciated his teaching greatly, and during the time we were there, there were about half a dozen of us Westerners. He spoke pretty good English, and we got to meet with him once a week for teachings that he would give to us in English. It was really wonderful to hang out with him. He had a great deal of spaciousness, a great deal of kindness.

We had been with him for some weeks, and this was the last week of our teachings. This is what he told us to do. He said there are these bases for sense contact. There are the six senses—the five senses of the body: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, and the sense door of the mind, which in Buddhism is considered the sixth sense.

For sight, for example, for a sight to arise, you have to have an eye that's working—you have to have a sense organ. You have to have a form, something out there that can be seen, and you have to have consciousness. You have to have the vitality of a living body to have eye consciousness. When these three come together—the consciousness, the form, and the working eye sense organ—then a sight can arise.

These are the three bases related to sight: the organ, the object, and the consciousness. These three bases are also there in each of the other five senses. So we have six senses, three bases in each. That makes eighteen of these sense bases, which are called the *ayatanas*—it just means sense bases.

He said, "Every time you experience something in any one of the six senses, I want you to look at the three *ayatanas*, the three sense bases for that experience. And I want you to understand the origin—what conditions caused that. Nothing comes out of nothing. Everything arises because of prior conditions. So take a look so that you start to understand these things came out of prior conditions. Notice the moment of arising. Notice its persistence. Notice its passing away."

So we had eighteen sense bases and we had four things to notice in relation to each one. When you go through your experience in that level of detail, everything that can come into your consciousness can be examined in that way. You become very clear. Everything we experience is of the nature to arise and to pass away. You really know there's nothing fixed, nothing fixed that we can apprehend with our senses anywhere.

When the truth of this degree of impermanence starts to dawn, it can be a little bit unsettling.

You may feel that this is a terrible tragedy, or you may feel this is wonderful. Many of you know Wes Nisker, who teaches here—one of our teachers and also an author and former radio personality. Wes has a lovely daughter who is now about twenty or twenty-one years old. She grew up in a dharma household where both parents were deeply involved in the practice.

When she was fourteen—very precocious—she asked her mother about a word she'd been hearing around the house. "Mom, this word 'duality' you guys are always talking about—is duality good or bad?" We could ask the same question about impermanence: Is it good or bad?

Well, it's not really either. It's simply the way things are—the truth of the way things are.

In relation to the hindrances, impermanence is actually something quite wonderful. When the hindrances arise, you never really have to do anything with them except pay attention. In time, every one of them will pass away. This offers tremendous freedom because you realize you can feel anything. You can open yourself to experience any of the difficulties—wanting, aversion, dullness, restlessness, or doubt—and you don't even have to do anything. Of themselves, they will pass away.

This understanding gives great freedom. You don't have to hold yourself back.

I'd like to read a poem from Rainer Maria Rilke. He wrote a book of poems with a deeply religious orientation when he was in his early twenties. This particular poem imagines God shaping the human being and offering advice before the human being leaves the field of creation and journeys into life:

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your memory,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.*

"Let everything happen to you. Just keep going. No feeling is final." This captures the essence of our practice. You can keep going with your awareness without worrying that you'll get caught or stuck anywhere, because the feelings will continue to change.

We see that throughout the entire field of our experience—mental, physical, internal, external—there's nothing really to hold onto. Everything arises and passes away very quickly.

Ananda, who was the Buddha's cousin and attendant for many years, once asked the Buddha, "You speak of this thing called 'the world.' What do you mean by world?" In Pali, the term for world is *loka*, sometimes translated as realm—this realm we're living in, this earth we inhabit.

The Buddha responded with a pun on the word *loka*. He said, "It disintegrates"—and the Pali word for disintegrates is *paloka*—"therefore it is called the world." This is the nature of what we're living in: a realm that is constantly disintegrating, constantly dissolving. This is why there's no fixed security.

The Buddha offered an analogy: Our situation is like a man being swept away by a river, caught in the current, flowing swiftly downstream. As he's carried along, he keeps reaching up to the bank, trying to grab hold of a clump of grass. But because the current is so strong and the grass so weak, the grass simply pulls out in his hand and he's swept further downstream. Then he grabs another piece of grass, but it too pulls out, and he continues being swept away.

This is our situation when we're clinging, when we're trying to hold onto changing phenomena for security.

Joseph Goldstein once said this point in practice is like jumping out of an airplane and realizing you don't have a parachute. It can be deeply unsettling.

So if we continue looking for happiness in things to hold onto, we're bound to suffer. You can see this very simply in the microcosm of sitting practice. If we come in and sit and have a difficult sitting, the suffering is immediate. The pain is immediate. We want something pleasant to happen, but something painful is occurring. There's disappointment. If you have a good sitting and go out wanting it to happen again, there will probably be disappointment when the quality of the next sitting changes. So if we have direct pain, it's suffering. If we have pleasure and want to repeat it, eventually it becomes suffering as well.

Ajahn Chah said it's like grabbing a snake, this quality of clinging. If you grab onto the head of the snake and it bites you, that's pain. If you grab onto the tail of the snake and hold on, in a very short time the head swings around and bites you—that's pain too.

The Pali word for this quality is *dukkha*, usually translated as suffering, sometimes as unsatisfactoriness, sometimes as unreliability. The world is unreliable because it cannot give us the security we're seeking. This is really our dilemma as human beings—we all have a deep yearning for security, for safety, for a happiness that isn't temporary or transient. Yet the world isn't capable of giving us that. The objects of this world cannot provide that.

This recognition can actually bring up a lot of compassion, because it's our shared situation. It's the predicament each one of us faces. In meditation practice, we start to see that there's no state of mind we can construct that will last in this way.

But something very interesting emerges: in any moment when we let go of clinging in its forms of greed, aversion, and confusion, in that very moment of letting go, we find there's a peace available. That kind of peace may not be temporary. Perhaps that peace is like a foundation for all our experience, available anytime we're not disturbing it. And if so, perhaps that peace is not subject to arising and passing.

Let's set that aside for a moment and talk about the last of the three characteristics of existence: not-self, or *anatta*. Basically, the Buddha said the root question in spiritual practice is finding the answer to: What am I? Who am I?

To look at this question freshly, we probably need to examine what we commonly mean by the word "I." It's a word we use every day. When you stop to think about it, don't you have a sense that there's some way you've been constant from when you were very young until today? That there's a way the same person went to kindergarten on that opening day when you had to leave your mother for the first time, right up to now as you sit in this hall?

This word "I," if you look into it a little, comes with a sense of continuity—an ongoing sameness to who we are. Even though our bodies have changed, our thoughts have changed, our moods have changed, we have some sense of an ongoing center through all those changes. That's the self the Buddha said needs questioning—this ongoing center. Is there such a thing? This is something that really needs investigation in each of our meditation practices.

One way the Buddha described this inquiry: Does the sense of "I" ever arise by itself, or does it only arise in relation to other things? In other words, pain comes in this thing we call a knee. Then arises: "I have pain in my knee," or "my knee hurts," or "I'm in pain." A thought comes about what we want to do after the retreat, and the "I" gets formed: "I want to go there. I want to do that. I want to see that person." A mood of sadness or happiness comes: "I'm sad. I'm happy."

So an interesting area to investigate: when these experiences come—knee pain, sadness, thoughts about the future—can there just be the pain? Can there just be the sadness? Can there just be the thought without someone who owns it? Experience for yourself in practice the difference between simply noting pain and noting when you call it "my pain." When you think "future thought" versus "my future thought." When you think "anger" or "happiness" versus "my anger" and "my happiness." The "my," the Buddha said, is actually something extra. It's not intrinsic to the experience.

It's something we generate out of our own thoughts. What's the experience like if there's just the anger? Just the knee pain, just the feeling. This is clear seeing. The sense of identification of joining it with an "I" is something extra. The clear seeing is just to see the thing itself as it is.

When we see in that way, we start to get a sense there's actually no one at the center of all this. There's no ongoing entity in here, or behind the eyes to whom this is all happening. What we are is just the changing process of our six senses, all the facets arising and passing moment after moment. There's no solid ongoing center that it's all happening to.

After a talk on impermanence at a retreat in the desert, one of the meditators asked the next day, "Is this just a bitter pill that we're supposed to swallow? Why do you tell us all this stuff? This is not very good news."

Actually, there are two levels of the answer to that. The first answer is no, it's not just a bitter pill. It's actually very freeing to see impermanence. The Buddha said that if you see impermanence over and over again, it leads to the end of craving, it leads to the end of ignorance, and it leads to the end of the conceit "I am," or the belief that I am something or other. The point in talking about all these three is really to encourage us, to inspire us not to cling. Clinging is more to the heart of things. These are all pointers or ways of looking at the mind that doesn't cling.

In fact, this mind that doesn't cling is very closely related to that peace that I mentioned a few minutes earlier—that peace that may not be subject to arising and passing, that peace that may be a kind of baseline or foundation or ground for our experience. When the mind is not involved in clinging, see what your experience is. See if it has this quality of peacefulness to it.

When there's no clinging to the breath, nor to the sensations in the body, nor to the mood or state of mind, and yet there's a fullness of presence—there's a fullness of awareness that's not of past and future—in that very moment, is there any suffering? Is there any conflict? Is there any problem?

This opening into the realm of non-clinging is really what's being pointed to by these three characteristics. The three characteristics themselves are not an ultimate truth. It's so precise the way the Buddha phrased it. These are the characteristics or the qualities of existence—that means that which comes into existence. But any kind of ultimate truth has to encompass existence as well as non-existence. Just as in this room, nothing would be possible if it weren't for the space that's between us all. The space is every bit

as important as the appearances or those things that exist at this moment in the room. So impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self are really pointers to this dimension of non-clinging in which something more ultimate can be discovered.

I did a session once with a great Zen master named Sasaki Roshi. And one of the koans he posed during that retreat is, "How do you catch the wind?" I don't think he was a big Donovan fan, but it was a great koan. How do you catch the wind?

I never actually got a chance to give him my answer to this koan, but my first inclination was something like this: grasping empty air. But you know, that's what we're doing all the time. We're grasping empty passing appearances. I realized he would have just shooed me out of the room and rung his bell and dismissed me.

And when I thought about it later, the gesture that came to me was this: the way that a sail catches the wind by being fully open, by being fully outstretched, by having an awareness that embraces the arisings as well as the space that contains all the arisings. That space of non-clinging is a space that can't be harmed because nothing has contracted into a small self that can be threatened. This is the sense of emptiness: an open awareness fully present that embraces all the appearances. And in this, it's as though we've jumped out of the plane. We realize we don't have a parachute, but we also know there's no ground to fall into.

This is from the Diamond Sutra: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world, like a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flickering lamp, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a mirage, a dream."

When we can hold this dreamlike nature of the world with full awareness and full presence, there's a terrific freedom in that experience. The Buddha put it this way: our experience is empty and insubstantial to one who sees it wisely.

So should this body and mind be looked upon by a practitioner with strong energy, continually aware, clearly aware and mindful. Let them leave behind all bondage, make a refuge for herself, and, as though her head was on fire, act to gain the deathless Nibbana.

This is the invitation before us—to practice with the urgency and dedication as if our very life depended upon it, because in the deepest sense, it does. Not the preservation of this temporary form, but the awakening to what is truly deathless within us.

The Buddha speaks of acting "as though her head was on fire"—this is the quality of energy and commitment that spiritual awakening requires. It's not a casual interest or a hobby we pursue when convenient. It's recognizing the precious nature of this human birth, the rarity of encountering the dharma, and the fleeting nature of the opportunity before us.

When we truly understand the dreamlike nature of all phenomena, when we see through the illusion of solid, permanent existence, we don't become passive or disconnected. Quite the opposite—we become more present, more engaged, more fully alive. We act with the wisdom that nothing is permanent, and therefore every moment matters infinitely.

This is the paradox of the spiritual path: the more clearly we see the insubstantial nature of all things, the more precious and vivid life becomes. Like lucid dreamers who, knowing they are dreaming, can move through the dream with complete freedom and joy.

Let's sit for just a minute in the silence that holds all of this—the emptiness that is not vacant but vibrantly alive, the awareness that needs no ground to stand on because it is itself the very space in which all experience unfolds.

CHAPTER 216

Karma

Guy Armstrong · 54 min

In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong explores the Buddha's teaching on karma, emphasizing that karma means 'action' accompanied by volition or intention, not merely the results of action (vipāka). Drawing on the Dalai Lama's advice that understanding karma is more crucial for Westerners than studying emptiness, Armstrong explains how wholesome intentions rooted in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion lead to happiness, while unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion create suffering.

The talk examines karma operating through body, speech, and mind, with bodily actions having the strongest karmic impact. Armstrong discusses the ten unwholesome actions outlined by the Buddha and shares practical examples from retreat centers and juvenile detention work. He addresses the relationship between karma and the five precepts, rebirth teachings, and the cosmology of 31 realms of existence, while acknowledging that belief in rebirth is optional for sincere practitioners.

The dharma concludes by connecting karma to the Eightfold Path and the pāramīs, explaining how the accumulation of merit supports wisdom in the journey toward liberation. Armstrong emphasizes that liberation involves transcending individual karma entirely, allowing spontaneous compassionate action to flow naturally from wisdom and freedom.

A group of Western teachers were meeting with the Dalai Lama a few years ago and asking his direction on what Dharma should be communicated in the West. He said there are these vast teachings of the Buddha on emptiness and the whole tradition, and then there are the more relative teachings on cause and effect and karma. What do you think is really most important for Westerners to learn about?

The Dalai Lama said that in his opinion it was far more valuable that Westerners learn about karma than that we learn about emptiness. So tonight I'd like to take the Dalai Lama's advice to heart and talk a little bit about this mystery of karma.

The word has become popularized in our culture now but in a slightly misleading way. John Lennon had his song "Instant Karma" and you hear it bandied about. What the Buddha actually meant by karma was related to the word at the time in his language where karma just meant action. That's all it meant was action.

But in explaining how he understood it, the Buddha said, "By action, I mean volition because it's from volition that action comes." So a synonym for volition really is intention. You can think of it as intention or will or desire or volition. They're all pointing to the same thing. There's an urge that arises in the mind, and from this urge spring forth various actions—actions of body, of speech, and of mind.

So the term karma doesn't actually mean the results of the action. It means the action itself when it's accompanied with a volition or an intention. There's another term that means the results of the action, and that term is vipaka. When people talk about karma vipaka, it's the results of actions.

The results of actions can be wholesome or unwholesome, basically according to the intention or the volition in the action. Volition is a mental factor that's said to accompany every waking moment. There's some kind of intention or volition present. And the volitions can be categorized as either wholesome—those which lead to happiness—or unwholesome—those that lead to more suffering.

So the karma or the action takes on a wholesome or an unwholesome quality depending on the wholesome or unwholesome nature of the volition or intention that guides the action.

When we look into the roots of karma, the wholesome roots are said to be our old friends: non-greed or generosity, non-hatred or kindness, and non-delusion or wisdom. So the unwholesome roots then are our old buddies: greed, aversion, and confusion.

In the way the Buddha saw things, an act itself isn't wholesome or unwholesome in itself. It's the intention that accompanies it. For example, the same act could have either very wholesome or unwholesome intentions. A robber might stab somebody in the belly with a knife in order to steal their belongings, but a surgeon might cut the same person with a knife in order to perform an act of healing. So the act itself isn't the source of the karma—it's the wholesome or unwholesome intention.

It's also said that karma is acting out in three fields: body, speech, and mind. Each of these three fields has different levels of impact, different degrees of strength. The actions of body are said to be the strongest, the actions of speech the second strongest, and the actions just of thought the weakest.

Someone mentioned the other day they were a little worried about getting into thoughts of anger in their meditation. Just to reassure you, when you're just thinking about the anger and not actually acting on it, the karma of that is relatively weak. When we carry it into speech, it gets stronger, and when we carry it into bodily action, stronger still.

You can look at this really directly in your own experience. I was having a discussion with someone a couple of weeks ago about practice. We were talking about whether a certain teaching was going to inspire people to do practice or not—formal meditation practice. This person who's also a meditator said, "Well, it doesn't really matter because that's not the point. It's not the point whether people do the formal practice or not. The point is, does it change their daily life?"

I found myself getting a little reactive because I feel very strongly that there is some value to doing the formal practice, and that not to honor that was overlooking a really important aspect of the Eightfold Path. As the person talked more and more, I found myself getting more and more reactive and more and more annoyed. I was holding myself back from saying something until finally I couldn't hold any longer and it just blurted out of me: "Oh, I must have missed something then. I must have missed something in the Buddha's teaching in that case." It's just a very sarcastic thing to say.

As soon as I said it, I could feel the amount of reactivity in me, the amount of irritation take a quantum jump up. Before, it had sort of been manageable, and as soon as I said it, it was like putting my foot right in a big pile of something. Automatically, there was just a lot more energy.

I've also noticed times when I'll be in the middle of an argument—and these levels of intensity usually happen with my devoted wife, who is the only one who hangs in there with me through them. We might be having just some exchange of words. Then at some point, if I get really angry, I'll stomp off and slam a door. I notice that when I move from the speaking to the taking bodily action, like stomping out of the room and then slamming a door, again, the energy level goes up another notch.

So just to start to tune into that in your own life. The power of thinking a friendly thought towards someone is good.

That's really what the metta practice is based on. The power of saying something kind to someone is stronger. And if you've noticed what power there is in giving someone a gift—if you've really carefully thought about what would make them happy and you actually give them something as a bodily action—that can be even stronger still.

Now, of course, this isn't the time and place for the saying of kind things and the giving of kind gifts. But again, back in your daily life, notice these different strengths connected with action.

The Buddha felt so strongly about this he said that karma makes the world go round. You might have thought it was a 20th century lyricist who said something like, "love makes the world go round." The Buddha said, "karma makes the world go round. Living beings are bound by karma like the chariot wheel by the pin."

So the basic teaching is that when we act out of wholesome intentions, it leads to happiness for others, and it leads to happiness for ourselves. When we act out of unwholesome intentions, it leads to unhappiness for others, and it leads to unhappiness for ourselves.

The Tibetans have this very beautiful phrasing of the metta and compassion phrases. They actually have a set of phrases for all four of the Brahmaviharas—for mudita or joy, and also for equanimity. But I love their phrasing for metta and compassion. The metta phrase is in a chant that they call the four immeasurables, and the phrase is: "May you have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." And their compassion phrase is: "May you be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue."

To me, this is a beautiful reflection because it really points to the root of human happiness and unhappiness. The Buddha expressed it really clearly in the second verse of the Dhammapada when he said, "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with an impure mind and trouble will follow you like the wheel of the cart follows the oxen. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak and act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable."

So the teaching is that actions have consequences. I find it interesting that this idea is really filtering into the mainstream of our culture today. Very different situation than 20 or 30 years ago.

A couple of years ago, James Baraz and I were giving some teachings on meditation at a juvenile hall—a juvenile hall in San Mateo. For those of you who don't know about the justice system in this country, juvenile hall is where teenagers are detained before they go to trial. So these are kids generally between about 13 and up to the age of 18 when they become adults in the eyes of the law. It's a holding facility before they go on trial for things like armed robbery, assault, murder, grand larceny, and so on.

One of the people who was working at this facility in San Mateo is a meditator and thought it would be great if the people who were staying there could get some exposure to the Dharma. So she asked James and me to lead a class, and we did. We did a five-week series, and we didn't call it meditation because we figured that would turn everybody off. We called it "mind power." That's a better marketing term in that environ-

ment. At the end of the class, we gave them a little graduation certificate that showed they had completed their course in mind power. And one of them asked me, "Could I show this to the judge?" I said, "Sure, you can try."

So we'd been teaching them for about four classes. We went down every week, and we'd been teaching them for about four weeks on the basics of mindfulness and paying attention to the breath. And mostly what we tried to teach about was how to work with their fear and their anger. Because you can imagine that they're cooped up in these cells all day long, they're just kids, and in a few weeks their life is going to be on the line when they're brought to trial. And they don't know whether they're going to end up in jail for the next 10 or 20 years, whether the judge will decide to try them as an adult when they could be put away for life, or what might happen to them.

So they're in a great state of insecurity. They have no way to deal with the emotions. We gave them very basic body and emotion techniques for paying attention to their feelings. And several of them said that they found it very helpful. So they kept coming to the class. We weren't sure that they would, but they kept coming.

So the last class was coming up and I said to James, "You know what? I'd really like to teach on the precepts." And he sort of looked at me like, "Are you crazy with these guys?" Because we were dealing with the guys who were in maximum security, which means they were in for some of the offenses that I mentioned earlier.

And I said, "Yeah, you know, it might be the last time that they ever hear these teachings. I'd like to try it."

So I approached it through the Buddha's understanding of what brings happiness and what brings unhappiness. I told them, "This guy, the Buddha, sort of figured out the science of what makes people happy and what makes them unhappy." I said, "Have you ever noticed that when you do things out of a kind heart, kindness comes back to you? And when you do things out of an angry heart, anger tends to come back to you? Have you ever had that sense?"

One of the young guys put up his hand and said, "Do you mean like what goes around comes around?"

And I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Yeah, I get that."

So it was a language that they could really grasp instinctively. There were many beautiful moments in that class. One thing that touched me deeply was a young African-American man with a very soft, sweet presence in the group. We'd ring the bell at the end of sitting, then ask them to share about their experience. He said, "When I heard that bell, I just followed it on up to the window in the roof." We were in a room with a skylight. "I just went right out the window with the sound of that bell." Very beautiful.

The teaching is that actions have consequences. We can think about this and see that we can relate to it directly in our lives. Actions have really immediate consequences in the moment. When we act out of kindness, when we act out of giving, it feels good in the here and now. When we act out of contraction, out of fear, or out of cruelty, it doesn't feel very good. You can actually feel the pain of the contraction when that is happening. As Sylvia said the other day in a talk, anyone who's causing a lot of pain is himself in a great deal of pain.

We also find the results of our actions in the memories of them. Often in metta practice, we encourage you to reflect on things you've done for yourself or for others that have been really helpful—to reflect on your own good deeds. This is not to generate pride, but so you can actually take joy and delight in the memory of your goodness, to have real conviction of your own goodness, to feel it directly.

Also in meditation, as we get still, we may often find memories coming of times when we haven't been so kind, of times when we've been unthoughtful to people.

The teaching on karma is also that these actions have consequences in the future in really mysterious ways, in ways we cannot fully understand, in ways we can't directly see for ourselves. The Buddha talked about this clearly, and it's a part of the teaching that, for the most part, we can't really verify.

Most of the Buddha's teaching is wonderful because it's so pragmatic, so empirical—we can check it out. If you pay attention to the breath, you become peaceful. Check it out. See if it's true. You can find that out for yourself. If the mind is contracted with fear, it brings pain. Check it out. We can look and see.

But this level of the teaching on karma we're not really able to verify. So in talking to you about it tonight, I really want to just put it out as part of the Buddha's teaching, as something he felt was important, and then kind of leave it with you. It's not something that anybody else can convince you of. It's not something that I want to try to convince you of. But I do want to let you know what the Buddha said about it so that you can hang out with it and reflect on it and see if it resonates for you. See if it feels true.

Over many years of practice and observation, I've developed great faith in it. To what extent it's blind faith and to what extent it's verified faith, I can't really say. But I have very deep trust myself in this teaching.

One of the ways that karma really makes sense is in the field of ethical conduct. When we opened the retreat, we talked about all of us taking the five precepts together. Those precepts are really expressions of the wholesome intention of non-harming. They have immediate benefits in that we don't cause suffering to others. They have long-term benefits in that we don't cause suffering to ourselves. The precepts are really great protections for each of us.

The Buddha actually outlined a list of ten unwholesome actions that he said were expressions of unwholesome karma. Three of them are expressions of body, four of them are expressions of speech, and three of them are expressions of mind. So he gave us very clear and concrete guidelines for working in this area of wholesome and unwholesome action.

Basically he said that in actions of the body, killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct are unwholesome and lead to further suffering. In actions of speech, the actions of lying, speaking harshly or abusively to someone, speaking maliciously about someone, and gossiping

are unwholesome actions of speech. And in thought, he said the unwholesome actions of thought are covetousness, ill will, and this last one is really curious—wrong view. That is, having an understanding of the world that doesn't align with the truth.

The Buddha said a lot of suffering arises from misunderstandings. He identified one of the most pernicious forms of wrong view as believing that actions don't have consequences. You can see this in the world today. There's a level of nihilism or lack of faith that leads to things like a callous disregard for other people, that leads to stealing or killing or infidelity—not being aware of the pain that sexual misconduct causes others. There's harshness of speech that isn't moderated or restrained. I think you can see in the world that society at large doesn't have this understanding that actions have consequences. It's a great gift for us as meditators that we have this appreciation of the precepts.

Sometimes this getting stuck in nihilism actually comes because people get too attached to the teaching on emptiness. When people think that seeing the wisdom side of emptiness is all that matters, they start to believe that actions aren't important. There's a really beautiful quotation from Padmasambhava, the Indian saint who brought Buddhism to Tibet, that states the truth about this. He said, "Though my view is as spa-

cious as the sky"—meaning his understanding is vast and his equanimity is equally vast—"my actions as regards cause and effect are as refined as grains of barley flour." This is that combination of a vast degree of freedom and real impeccability in action.

At retreat centers, you get many great opportunities to look at this skillful means in terms of not taking what's not given and not killing. There was a dilemma at the Minneapolis Zen Center, which was led by Katagiri Roshi, a Dharma brother of Suzuki Roshi and Japanese Zen master. They were finding at that time that there was a problem with cockroaches in the Dharma hall. People would come in for sitting, come in to hear the Dharma, and there'd be the scurrying of little feet that you'd hear in the silence. Some people were really bothered by that. They didn't want to sit with cockroaches, and the attendance started declining.

This put the students in a real dilemma. What do we do? If we kill the cockroaches, we break the first precept. If we don't kill the cockroaches, nobody comes to the zendo. They really didn't know what to do. So they went to Katagiri Roshi and put the problem to him and said, "Roshi, what shall we do?" He took it in and said, "I'm not going to tell you." And he didn't. He put the problem right back on the students.

They decided in the end to have the hall fumigated. So the cockroaches were killed, and then people started showing up for meditations again. Even though this is the precept not to kill, even though they were aware that it was an unwholesome action, there was also the understanding that sometimes it may be the appropriate thing to do, even in a dharma context. Similar questions arise for really sincere practitioners around issues like euthanasia—maybe where pets are concerned—and abortion. There's real deep struggle around these questions, but sometimes the action that the precept is stating not to take may actually be the right action in that situation.

It was also interesting to be on staff at a retreat center because in being on staff for long retreats, the meditators would get really comfortable in the place and start to feel that the kitchen was their home as much as any other part of the facility. One staff member came into the kitchen one night about two in the morning and found about four meditators in there frying eggs and making toast. It was a little disconcerting because from the point of view of the cooks, not taking what isn't given means taking what the cooks put out and drawing the line there. That's the way it's meant to be understood.

Another time, a staff person walked into the walk-in fridge, and one of the meditators was in there with his hand in a box of dates, lifting a date to his mouth. The staff person said, being a friendly, compassionate staff person, "Can I help you?" And the meditator said, "Oh, I was just looking for the caretaker's office." Which they were then happy to show him to.

I know one time I got a really early teaching on karma when I had just graduated from college and taken my first job. I was twenty-one years old and very nervous about going out into the world and not having enough money, leaving the protected life of university and moving into the work world full time. I didn't have a great deal of resources, and my car, which was a VW Beetle that was about ten years old, broke down. I took it in for repair, and they said, "Well, to repair this, it's going to cost you about $600." I said, "No, I can't do that."

So I sold the car, and I sold it to somebody without telling them how bad the damage was, even though I knew. I didn't actually tell a lie, but I also wasn't truthful. I knew I was hiding something from them. My conscience tormented me about it afterwards, but I still kept the money. I went out and bought a little sports car. After I'd gotten a couple of paychecks, I bought a Triumph TR4.

It was really representative of British auto engineering in the 1960s, which meant it broke down all the time. I owned it for two years and had two valve jobs on it, which is a really major expense. And I started to realize, oh, maybe this is happening because I sold somebody a bad car and somebody just sold me a bad car. Since then I've done a little more truth and disclosure in advertising and I haven't had those problems. It was an instant lesson.

So paying attention to the areas of right conduct in body and speech and mind really can lead to a lot of clarity and a lot of happiness.

In fact, the phrase of the equanimity meditation, also in the Brahma-Vihara family, points to this truth as well. The basic phrase in the equanimity meditation is a little hard for Westerners to accept when we first hear it. It says something like, "All beings are the heirs of their actions. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their own past actions more than on my wishes for them." This is a very sobering reflection.

In doing the equanimity practice, you basically repeat this phrase over and over again all day long, holding the different individuals as you have in the loving-kindness—yourself, a benefactor, a friend, a neutral person, and so on—with the reflection that each person's happiness and unhappiness comes from our own past actions. It was a very powerful practice.

One year, in an intensive retreat of about six weeks, I did each of the Brahma-Vihara practices for ten days in an intensive fashion. And for me, after the metta practice, which has been the strongest for me, the equanimity practice was the most powerful of the other three Brahma-Viharas.

The Buddha went on to say that if you want to see someone's past actions, take a look at their present circumstances. If you want to see someone's future circumstances, take a look at their present actions.

Now I want to throw in a caution around this area, and that is that it's really impossible to know the details. We can get really inclined to figure out, "Oh my gosh, I got this terrible illness. It's a life-threatening illness. What did I do wrong in the past that has caused this?" You can really dwell on a question like that. Or something really unfortunate happened—"I got in a car accident this week. What did I do that was responsible for that?" This isn't productive thinking.

It's really impossible for us to know the workings of karma to that level of detail. The Buddha actually said that the workings of karma are one of the four imponderables. And if you think about them, he said, it will drive you mad and cause you vexation. He didn't say which of those was stronger, but you'll go mad and experience vexation.

The other three imponderables, just in case you're curious so you don't have to think about them either: the range of mind of the Buddha, the power of a concentrated mind, and the beginning of the universe. So just to take a load off your mind, don't worry about those.

So I take this teaching on karma in very broad brush terms. People's general level of happiness and unhappiness are related in some mysterious way to past actions. And that's really as refined or as detailed as I feel I can be about it for myself.

One of the other teachings that comes in around the teaching on karma is the teaching on rebirth. And I want to talk about this a little bit too because the Buddha talked about it quite frequently.

Basically, the Buddha taught that if we're not fully free at the time of death, the unfree parts of ourselves—the degree to which greed, aversion, and confusion are still active in us—has a propelling tendency of forward momentum that will lead to another being arising linked in some way to the continuation of our habits of mind. These tendencies, the forces of greed and aversion and delusion, until completely uprooted, result in future becoming. And something about the tendencies passes on to the new being.

Moreover, he said, the life situation that we take birth in is a reflection of the wholesomeness of our actions from the past. So if we have acted in a very wholesome way in this life, chances are that we can take birth in a situation that is basically pleasant. And people who have acted in very unskillful ways and caused a lot of harm to others in this life find themselves reborn in situations that are intrinsically painful.

The Buddha actually described different realms or planes of existence that beings take birth in that are categorized by these qualities of pleasantness or unpleasantness. This is all part of a grand cosmology that is unfolded in his teachings.

Again, whether you believe in this or not is completely up to you. It's possible to be a very dedicated practitioner and not have any sort of faith or belief in this at all. But for some people, this is an inspiring view of practice because it means that the unfolding of our path takes place over a vast, vast period of time, and it can give an inspiring and awesome view of the project that we're embarked on—this great and total purification of the heart.

So I'll just say a few more things about the cosmology. There are thirty-one realms of existence in all, and they're sort of graded from the most suffering to the most pleasant. Beginning at the lowest, the most suffering realm, the Buddha also referred to realms of hellishness—very intense suffering. And then working upwards through realms that are ruled strongly by desire, which are called the realm of hungry ghosts. Realms that are ruled by ignorance, which is the realm of the animals. Realms of demons, of conflict and aggression. And on top of those four comes the human realm.

It's said that in the human realm, a particular capacity of our mind is that we have the ability to experience the mental states of the beings of all thirty-one realms.

From the human realm, ascending in happiness, there are said to be six heavenly realms called the deva realms—realms of intense pleasure filled with great sense enjoyments. Beings in these realms experience no suffering at all until they die, and their greatest suffering at the time of death comes from being ignored by the other beings of that realm.

Above these are even higher realms called the Brahma realms, essentially godly realms of existence. Among these divine figures are considered to be creator beings who may have actually shaped this world and other worlds in which beings take birth.

However, whether one takes birth in a realm of intense suffering or intense pleasure, one's lifetime in that realm is limited. There is no such thing in Buddhist cosmology as eternal birth. The sequence generally unfolds as beings experiencing pleasure for a

time based on past wholesome actions, but unless they have renewed the wholesomeness of their actions, it becomes possible that past unwholesome actions will lead to rebirth in a less happy realm.

The picture emerges of beings moving from one realm to another, experiencing happiness in one lifetime and pain in another over countless eons. The Buddha said that if you gathered together the skeletons from all your lifetimes, they would form a vast mountain.

I offer this simply as a glimpse into the potential vastness of the view of life that the Buddha himself claimed to see. In the teachings and ancient texts, this is presented not as speculation, but as something the Buddha said he could actually perceive through his own developed psychic powers. Again, whether you believe in this or not is completely up to you.

Manindraji, who was Joseph's first teacher, used to teach about this material, always prefacing it by saying, "You don't have to believe in this. It's true, but you don't need to believe in it." If you feel completely disbelieving of it, you're in good company. Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of my teachers in Thailand and a deeply respected monk, considered this entire teaching on rebirth completely irrelevant. He didn't teach it, didn't believe in it, and didn't think it held any particular value for his practice. And he was a very good Buddhist—a wise and enlightened practitioner.

Stephen Batchelor, whom I consider one of the most creative writers on Buddhism today, is also an agnostic when it comes to rebirth. He essentially says, "I don't know from my own experience. I'm not going to say it is or isn't. I'm going to stay with this position of not knowing because for me, that's the truth." This too is a deeply respected position within the tradition.

All the teachings on rebirth that we encounter can be understood in terms of these thirty-one planes that the Buddha described. We can also understand them in terms of moment-to-moment birth, because we actually take a new birth every moment we identify with an aspect of our experience. A new "I" gets formed.

If you come into a sitting and experience great calm and concentration, and there's any clinging to that, any identification with it, then you take birth as "the good meditator." This is quite a happy birth, as births go in this human realm. You can enjoy that identity for a while, carrying it out to the walking period, feeling pleased with your sitting and this sense of yourself. It's a genuinely happy birth—until you die, until you return to the hall expecting that same concentration and calm to be there as before. When it's not like that, there's suffering in that death.

Or you might become filled with hunger. Perhaps you're sitting here in the 11:45 session and suddenly find yourself very hungry. You think about that wonderful meal you had a couple of days ago and imagine you can smell roasting onions drifting up from the kitchen. Then you're born as "the hungry meditator"—a bit like the hungry ghost realm. There's unsatisfactoriness in that birth, which may continue until you walk down the hill, get your plate, and take a few bites as the hunger fades.

We're constantly being born into situations that are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in this setting. You can completely understand rebirth on this level, and all the Buddha's teachings on rebirth fit perfectly within this framework.

One question that often arises about rebirth is: if there's no self, what is it that gets reborn? I don't want to go into great detail, but I'll share what Chögyam Trungpa, that great Tibetan teacher, said about this. He explained, "Basically what gets reborn are our bad habits." We'll leave it at that.

So one level of understanding karma is that when we act wholesomely, wholesome results and happiness come into our lives. When we act unwholesomely, unwholesome results and unhappiness follow. There's a further understanding of this message of karma that I think is crucial for us as meditators: the entire Eightfold Path is founded on karma. The whole journey to liberation rests on the belief and trust that the actions we take in alignment with the path deliver us to freedom.

Karma thus has both this mundane aspect—that good actions bring happiness—and this transcendent dimension, pointing toward the truth that by following the path to liberation, we act in a way that truly frees the mind completely. The Tibetans express this beautifully when they say:

They say that liberation rests on two accumulations: the accumulation of wisdom or insight and the accumulation of merit.

I love this teaching. I think it's a really profound pointing because what it says is that even if we open our mind and the mind gets strong and can see into the deepest truth of things in a moment that's enlightening and awakening and very, very profound, such a moment on its own may not be enough. For most of us, we have to support moments like that with the accumulation of merit—that is, with the accumulated power of our past wholesome actions.

Many, many, many eons ago, it is said, there was an ascetic named Sumedha who came in contact with the Buddha of his time, whose name was Dipankara. And the ascetic Sumedha was developed to such a degree in mind training that if he had had one

word of teaching from the Buddha Dipankara, he would have become fully liberated. But he was so inspired by his first glimpse of this Buddha in an earlier time that he didn't want to become liberated. He decided he would rather be a Buddha.

So he made the aspiration at that moment: "May I myself develop all the wholesome qualities that would be needed to awaken by myself at a time when the teachings of the Dharma have faded away from the face of the earth." And it is said that that Buddha Dipankara saw this wish of Sumedha's, saw it with his psychic vision, and told him, "I hear your wish and your wish will be granted. You have the potential to become a future Buddha."

So Sumedho took that blessing and went off back to his retreat hut and reflected on what were the things that he would need to do in order to develop the strength of mind and the wholesomeness to become a Buddha himself. And the answer that he came up with was the list that's called the Ten Paramis, which we've talked about a lot—qualities like Sylvia talked about the other night: patience and determination, truthfulness, loving kindness, wisdom, renunciation, and so on. The paramis are the list that really detail how the wholesome forces of the mind, when cultivated in meditation practice and in daily life, have that cumulative power that liberates the mind.

So there's the need for insight, deep understanding. There's also the need for this accumulation of wholesome activities. The Dalai Lama in one book said that the Tibetan word for inspiration actually literally means "force of transformation," meaning that the virtuous qualities of what we're inspired by actually have the power to transform the nature of your mind.

There's a name for this quality among the paramis, this particular pointing. A few years ago, I visited a great Tibetan teacher named Tulku Ergen Rinpoche. He was living at a monastery outside of Kathmandu, and we spent about two weeks going and visiting with him and getting teachings. And at the end of the two weeks, we asked if we could take refuge in his tradition. Of course, we'd taken refuge in the Theravadan tradition, and a number of us had been monks and nuns, but we wanted to take refuge in his teachings as well.

And so he did it, and he gave each of us names. That's one of the things you do in a refuge ceremony typically—you get a new name. To symbolize renunciation, we went up to him, and he pulled our hair up a little bit and cut a little lock off to symbolize the Buddha's shaving of his head when he left the household life, as nuns and monks do today. And he gave us a new name. He gave us the names of paramis, some of us, and my name was Ergen, which was his name, Tsondrul. Ergen Tsondrul. Let me introduce myself.

Tsondrul is the parami that in Sanskrit is called virya. Virya is normally translated as energy or effort. But in Tibetan, they understand it as taking delight in what is wholesome. And I really was glad to get that name because in my practice, I've needed a lot of virya. I've had to have a lot of virya. I started practice with a lot of unhappiness. I had a lot of fear, a lot of bodily tension, a lot of mental unease in the early years of my practice. And I really needed to have a strong determination and a lot of energy to work through that.

So I feel in myself a tremendous appreciation for what is wholesome in this practice. And I feel that if you don't really have that deep love of what's wholesome from Dharma practice, you can't sustain your path because it's a hard path. It's arduous—sitting here hour after hour and walking and being quiet and not having contact. It's a very arduous path. And if you don't love the fruits of it, I don't think you'll sustain your journey. If you don't love the stillness and the wisdom, the clarity and the heartfulness of it. But if you love that, then that will really sustain you on your journey.

So in every moment, really, we make this choice of being with the wholesome or being with the unwholesome. And time and time again, of course, we get dragged away by the unwholesome. I was doing a six-week period of metta practice in the fall and going through all the ups and downs of retreat practice. And there was one situation in my outside life that would come up from time to time that I feel angry about. I'd be doing my metta practice—"may all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful"—and then, "Boy, I'm so angry at this person" would come in too. And it would sort of come in and be dominant for a while.

And one sitting, after I'd been carried away a number of times, this image came up spontaneously of the direction of anger.

And the image that came spontaneously to mind was being on this deserted road at night. It was dark, and by a tree that was dead and bare, there was a wind howling across the road, and it was very lonely. I was all on my own. That was the image that came to me of where the anger was taking me—a place of real desolation and unhappiness and fear. I thought, do I want to go down that road again?

Just as I was contemplating this, without generating any effort, another image arose on the other side of my field of vision. I simply noticed this vision appearing. When I turned my mind toward it, there was a circle of light filled with yellow radiance. In the middle of the circle, a Buddha was suspended in the air, surrounded by rainbows and circles of light. On the ground below were bodhisattvas and practitioners, and flying through the air were Thai-style devas—those celestial beings you may have seen in paintings, gliding gracefully with their legs tucked beneath them.

I sat there and thought, "Where should I go?" It was such a graphic representation of the wholesome fruits of the path and the unwholesome direction of my anger that it completely sobered me in that moment. I turned my mind back to the metta practice, which became a great support.

In every moment, we're all making that choice: coming back to the present moment, connecting with the breath, with sounds, with sensations, establishing mindfulness and presence with an accepting heart, with this flavor of metta. These moments of wholesomeness are very powerful. We may not feel transformed by one moment, but little by little, they accumulate.

The Buddha expressed this beautifully: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." This is where our mindfulness practice is leading. No moment that you're awake is ever wasted, because each one helps fill this jar. When that jar overflows, that's what liberates the mind—the overflowing into real freedom.

So there's the karma of wholesome and unwholesome actions, and there's the karma of the path that leads to liberation. The Buddha said something remarkable about the end of the path: for one who is fully liberated, there is no more karma. For one who is completely awake, there is no more individual will, no more desire, no more motivation. There is only presence.

Sometimes we can touch into this in our meditation practice—those moments when we feel freest. There's a sense that in that freedom, there's no compulsion in any particular direction. Yet as life's situations present themselves, we can respond spontaneously with wisdom where needed, with compassion where needed, with metta where needed. The actions of the free heart arise without premeditation; the appropriate response emerges naturally.

Rumi expressed this beautifully: "Drink the wine that moves you as a camel moves when he's been untied and is just ambling about."

The Buddha taught that the karma which leads to the ending of all karma is the Noble Eightfold Path—the path of wisdom, ethical conduct, and meditation. We engage in techniques and practices to bring the mind to stillness, so the movements of volition aren't so impactful or powerful, allowing us to feel that natural calm. Once we rest in that calmness, we can simply abide in the stillness—not needing to do anymore, but being with that freedom, that peace, and letting whatever wants to emerge from that moment unfold as it will.

I'll close with another poem from Rilke's Book of Hours:

*I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.
I want to free what waits within me
so that what no one has dared to wish for
may for once spring clear
without my contriving.

If this is arrogant, God, forgive me,
but this is what I need to say.
May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back—
the way it is with children.*

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 217

The Practice of Loving Kindness

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

Guy Armstrong presents a comprehensive exploration of mettā (loving-kindness) practice as one of the two essential wings of Buddhist practice, alongside wisdom. Drawing from the Theravāda tradition, he explains how mettā serves as the foundation of the four brahmaviharas - loving-kindness, compassion (karuṇā), joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkhā). Armstrong discusses the traditional teaching where the Buddha instructed monks to use mettā practice for protection from fear, and shares contemporary examples including stories of the Dalai Lama embodying boundless love.

The talk provides practical guidance for integrating mettā with vipassanā practice during retreat, addressing when to shift between practices and how loving-kindness can soften difficult emotional states. Armstrong explains the traditional sequence of extending mettā from oneself to benefactors, friends, neutral persons, difficult people, and finally all beings everywhere, referencing the beautiful metaphor of cascading pools from classical texts. He emphasizes that mettā is not about fabricating feelings but uncovering our natural capacity for love, quoting the Buddha's teaching that "this mind is naturally radiant and brightly shining, but it's colored by visiting impurities." The session concludes with an extended question-and-answer period exploring the relationship between acceptance and transformation in practice.

The Practice of Loving Kindness

Tonight I'd like to talk about the practice of loving-kindness. I know John spoke about this some last night as well, and I think it's a great theme for the midpoint of the retreat. Your qualities of loving-kindness and compassion get a lot of testing in these days, so hopefully this offers a little more support.

It's said in the Buddhist tradition that just as a bird really needs two wings to fly, our practice needs two wings in order to soar, in order to come to its full ripening and maturity. These are said to be the wings of wisdom and, in one tradition, compassion. In our tradition, we could say love or loving-kindness.

The wing of wisdom is that which sees the way to freedom, what sees the Four Noble Truths. It's what sees how we get caught and how we find freedom in every moment. Only wisdom has this capacity. Wisdom is really the heart of our path. Vipassana is our primary practice because it is the wisdom practice in our tradition, and its essence is the unfolding of this truth of freedom, of liberation.

But just as important is the side of heartfulness of the human being—you could call it love, you could call it compassion. Where this isn't developed, there's not a sweetness, there's not a beauty, there's not a delight in life. That kind of delight, I feel, is what really has the potential to reach out and transform others, to inspire them, to encourage them, to make them feel safe and comforted and reassured in whatever line of work we find ourselves. Where that heart quality is there, it's such a great gift to the whole world, such a beautiful thing to share.

To some extent, the Vipassana practice by itself encourages this opening of heart. It really asks for this opening of heart. In every moment, the practice challenges us to open with real acceptance and non-conflict to our present moment experience—not to hang on when it's pleasant and not to resist when it's unpleasant. That takes a great deal of heartfulness, a great deal of giving of ourselves moment after moment.

For some people, that opening may be enough. My personal observation is that some people walking the path of Vipassana practice find that their hearts naturally and spontaneously open to a great degree, to a lovely degree, just through this one central practice. But also in my observation, there are people for whom that doesn't happen so easily or so spontaneously, and I count myself in the second group.

Where people's nature tends to be quite emotional, I think the opening of the heart proceeds rather spontaneously with the wisdom practice. But in my case, I felt that my opening of the heart, because I tend to be fairly cerebral, was really accelerated and really supported by the undertaking of specific heart practices, the metta practice being the primary one.

So I'd really like to encourage all of you to explore the metta practice to as great a degree as you feel drawn to it, both in the context of this Vipassana retreat and also to consider specific intensive metta retreats. I think it's a beautiful way to open.

In our tradition, which comes out of the Theravadan Buddhism of Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka, metta is considered the primary of the noble emotions. In other Buddhist traditions, it's probably compassion. But for us, it's considered to be this quality of loving-kindness, of friendliness, of warmth.

It's so extraordinary when we meet someone who has touched that in a really deep way. Some teachers have that deep heart quality and transmit that force of inspiration. I love to tell stories about the Dalai Lama, partly because I just like to hear them again, but also because he always manifests that in his being, in his presence.

He was at a peace conference in San Francisco a couple of summers ago. You know how in Asia, when people greet one another, they put their hands at their chest, and in the West, when we greet one another, we tend to put our hand out to shake the other person's hand. So the Dalai Lama, because he's such a beautiful bridge between cultures, was going through the whole conference representing both worlds in this kind of way—one hand at the chest, one hand extended and shaking, always out to greet people.

There was a lot of security at the conference, so there were guards at every door because he's a head of state as well as head of religion. Every time he went in and out through the doors to the outside, he would stop and acknowledge the security guards. He'd say a few words and he'd thank them for their work. Somebody said that at the end of the conference, the security guards were all in love with him. You could just imagine how many celebrities have gone in and out of those doors and never acknowledged that there was a person there. The Dalai Lama just took the time to make that personal connection, to feel their heart, to touch them.

The noble qualities of mind are talked about in this list called the Brahma-Viharas.

Brahma is heavenly. Vihara is abode or home. You can think of these as the divine abidings. I like to think of them as where consciousness hangs out when it's in a really heavenly state. They're the qualities of metta or loving-kindness, compassion or karuna, of joy or mudita, and equanimity or upekkha.

You're probably very familiar with them from watching the signs on the buildings every day. We thought it was a nice way to name the buildings so you could be staying in a state of joy or equanimity without having to sound schmaltzy about it. We also thought the Four Noble Truths might be kind of good, but we didn't want you staying in suffering, craving, cessation and path, so the Brahma-viharas were a little more appealing.

In our tradition, we really hold loving-kindness as the foundation of all the Brahma-viharas. It's the heart quality that develops an openness and a receptivity and a friendliness to everything we encounter. When that openness has been generated, has been established, the other qualities come about spontaneously.

When that open heart looks upon a state of suffering, whether it's in ourselves or in someone else, the natural response of that heart is compassion. Compassion is said to be the quivering of the open heart in response to suffering.

When that open heart meets happiness, ours or another's, the natural response is to resonate with that happiness with a sympathetic kind of joy, a resonant joy or an appreciative joy. This is the joy of mudita, of being able to take delight in others' happiness.

And when that open heart simply rests in its own experience, it can hold all the joys and sorrows of life in this beautiful balance that is equanimity. So the state of equanimity is not about having feelings go away, but it's rather about a balance and a spaciousness of mind that can hold them all—the times of suffering and difficulty, the times of joy and delight—and not be so deeply swayed by either side of our experience. This is the power of equanimity.

This quality of love, of course, is something we've all known very deeply, certainly as children and many times in our adult life. And I feel that for a lot of us, the whole pull of spiritual life is to uncover this quality that we know is within us, that we know is intrinsic, and be able to abide there.

This really was, when I look back, my main motivation in coming into Dharma practice. I had, as I mentioned before, come out of the 60s with a lot of confusion and a state of unhappiness and a lot of fear, and I just wasn't willing to live a life where love wasn't accessible, where it wasn't available to me day by day. For myself, I think it was the main reason that I took up practice. This call has always been so strong.

Rumi put it this way. He uses the word "you" to mean the beloved, the quality of the divine that evokes this feeling of love in us. He said, "I have three things to say. First, when I was apart from you, this world did not exist, nor any other. Second, whatever I was looking for was always you. Third, why did I ever learn to count to three?" This is the heart of the spiritual path.

In doing our metta practice, sometimes it might feel like we're contriving something. People come into interviews and they say, "Well, I like the idea of the metta, but these phrases just seem so phony, seem so contrived. Can't I just kind of hang out with that feeling of love in my heart?" And of course you can, if it's always there. More happiness to you.

The phrases are beautiful because they have a way of actually developing that quality of love. To me, it's an amazing gift that such a practice exists on this earth, a practice to evoke the quality of love from our hearts. But ultimately, it's not something we have to fabricate. It's part of our own nature.

I'm reminded of that because one of the most loving people I've ever met in my life was my grandmother. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890, was poor all her life, lived with one of the most cantankerous and ornery men that I've ever known, who was my grandfather. And through it all maintained this really sweet, unfailingly sweet disposition. She gave so much love to all of us as kids when we would come to visit them.

My most striking memory of her is every time we'd come into her house for a visit, she would give us a big hug and she would put her lips in the hollow of our neck and sort of grope around and sort of nuzzle us down there and say that she was trying to steal our sugar. She said, "I know it's here somewhere. I'm going to steal your sugar." That was just what she did to every kid who came in her house.

And she hadn't done any Buddhist practice at all. She hadn't even been in psychotherapy. So it's not that we actually have to drum up something that's not there. It's more a question of taking away the obscurations, taking away what's concealing or hiding the love.

The Buddha said, "This mind is naturally radiant and brightly shining, but it's colored by visiting impurities." So we need to be reminded from time to time that that's at our center, that love is really at our heart. Again, it's something that the Dalai Lama is so good at reminding us of.

He was at a conference last fall in Charlottesville, Virginia. It was a conference for Nobel Peace Prize winners.

So there were a lot of heavyweights there—the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and the other living Nobel Peace Prize laureates. It was a very august and solemn gathering, and they were going outside to have their pictures taken all together.

Desmond Tutu was standing in front of the Dalai Lama, and as they were posing for the camera, the Dalai Lama reached down and playfully ripped off Desmond Tutu's hat. The Bishop grabbed it back onto his head, and there's actually a photograph that recorded the incident—I'll put it on the bulletin board so you can see. The Dalai Lama is just breaking up in one of his big belly laughs after pulling this good joke on old Desmond Tutu. Such beautiful spontaneity.

One of the benefits of metta practice I feel most strongly is that it brings us happiness. It's kind of a paradox because we start off doing the practice thinking a lot about other people—wishing for their happiness, safety, and wellbeing. Maybe it helps them, and I hope it does. Actually, I believe that it does.

You've probably heard about the study done on patients in a hospital in San Francisco, where people recovering from operations and illness had their names divided into two groups. Half the names were sent to a Christian prayer group, and prayers were said for them. The other half was a control group with nothing done for them. The study showed that the fifty percent who were prayed for had statistically significant higher rates of recovery than those who weren't prayed for.

I believe in this kind of power of metta, although I can't prove it. We may never know whether our loving kindness for someone else helps them or not, but what we can definitely know is that it really affects us. It really helps us, really touches us.

Sylvia talked a few nights ago about the eleven benefits of loving kindness: you sleep easily, you wake easily, and you have pleasant dreams. People love you, devas love you, animals love you, and devas protect you. The mind is joyful, the face is serene, and you die peacefully. Sounds pretty good.

One of the people who comes to Spirit Rock every year is a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jomnian. He's one of the happiest people I've ever met. He sits up on the stage, and while his verbal teaching goes through spells of being really interesting and spells of being a little dry—he can talk for eight hours a day and never exhaust his lore of stories and dharma teachings—what I can always tune into is just his happiness level. He sits at the front of the room radiating these waves of wellbeing and joy.

Sometimes Jack or someone will ask him, "What would you like to do today?" and he'll say, "Well, are there people who want to hear the dharma? I'd like to go talk dharma to them." Usually there are, so we take him to the hall and he speaks dharma.

Other days we'll say, "Ajahn Jomnian, what would you like to do today? Would you like to see the Golden Gate Bridge? Go into San Francisco? Go out to Point Reyes?"

"Are there people who'd like to hear the dharma?" he asks. "But anything you want to do will make me happy. If you want to take me to San Francisco, I'd be happy with that. If you want to take me out in nature, I'll be happy with that. And if there are people who'd like to hear dharma, I'm happy there too."

He's always happy. He actually said on one of his visits that he hasn't had any anger for twenty-five years, and I believed it from his energy, from his vibration of joy.

One of the ways I feel that loving-kindness practice brings happiness is that it opens our practice to all of life.

It connects us with all living things in a really natural way, in a way that becomes an integral part of our dharma practice.

With vipassana practice, we can do it in a way that gets a little self-centered. It's not meant to be that way—that's not the way it's supposed to happen—but we can take it that way so that our vipassana practice becomes revolving around my pain, my difficulties, my neuroses, my progress, my happiness, my path, my liberation. It can become a little self-enclosed.

But with the loving-kindness practice, we stay with ourselves some, and then it opens us up to our benefactors, our friends, people we don't know very well, people we have difficulty with, and then all beings everywhere.

Shantideva, who was the ninth century Indian sage, put it this way: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy." This is a really beautiful expression.

Part of what happens as we engage the practice of loving-kindness is that we break down some of the barriers that we hold between ourselves and the rest of the world. And it can remove the sense of loneliness that our own concepts have created—the self-created isolation of the view of an individual self.

This is from Sharon Salzberg's book, *Loving Kindness*: "The concepts of separateness that have dominated our lives have produced tremendous suffering. What we have taken to be real is in fact a hallucination. The division between self and other is the degradation of our highest human potential, the liberation of the mind that is love. The critical moment of the path which breaks open the loving heart is the realization that we have never existed as separate, isolated beings. When wisdom recognizes our oneness and sees the interconnectedness of all beings, it fills us with a degree of happiness that transforms our lives."

This practice was originally taught by the Buddha as a way to be protected from fear. He had instructed a group of monks to go off and meditate in the woods at night. They went out and sat down in a grove in the dark, and they came running back in a few minutes and said, "We can't meditate there. That place is full of spirits. We sat down and they started making sounds in all the trees and they were casting lights on us and they made these terrible smells. We can't stay in that grove. It's haunted."

The Buddha said, "Well, I'll give you the only protection you'll need." He taught them the metta practice and sent them back into the grove. They came back the next day and he asked them how it was. They said, "It changed everything. We started sending out

thoughts of loving-kindness and well-wishing to all the spirits around us and they turned completely friendly. They said that they wanted to take care of us." So it transformed the world around and it transformed them.

Someone mentioned in an interview the other day that they had had to go out in the world in the middle of the retreat. They had decided to take up the loving-kindness practice while they were in the middle of a big public place. Making a quick transition from this environment to a crowd out there can be a little challenging. So they were feeling a little shaky, a little nervous in that setting. They started doing the metta practice and it immediately filled them with that sense of connectedness and took away the sense of fear and unease. It's really a great practice to do out in the world.

For a lot of years while I was commuting to work at Microsoft, I tried to do mindfulness while I was driving. It's difficult because the mind gets pulled out so often. So I switched to loving-kindness practice after a while. It was great because there was always somebody nearby. You notice that on Bay Area freeways? There's always somebody nearby. So there was always somebody to direct loving-kindness to. Even the people who cut in front of us really quickly. Oh, may you be happy too.

It's also a great antidote for aversion and ill will. It's said that anger really can't stick in a mind that's loving, in a mind that's friendly, because the mind has become so spacious and so open, the anger just can't find a foothold. The analogy is that it's like throwing paint through space and it can't adhere to the space because there's nothing there to stick on.

As you do the practice of metta, you don't need to have too grandiose an idea about what you're supposed to be feeling. Sometimes we talk about metta as boundless, unconditional love, and it seems really remote. Maybe the Buddha could touch it or Jesus, but for us, it doesn't seem very approachable.

Think about metta just as friendliness, just as a spark of connectedness. It has qualities like acceptance of ourselves and others. It has the quality of patience, the quality just of friendship, the quality of connection. Really the gist of it is to see another, see ourself, and just have the sincere thought, "Oh, I hope you're well." To look in the eyes of another human being or to hold them in our mind's eye and just to feel, "I hope things are good for you. I hope life is going well." That intent, that feeling is really the gist of the metta practice.

If you want to experiment with doing this practice as a real art, then before each phrase, have that feeling of connection and well-wishing in your heart, and then say the phrase so that the words flow naturally out of this feeling. "Oh, I hope you're well." That's really the heart of it. That's the seed. And if that feeling is there, the phrases will start to do their magic. They will start to unfold the love that's in us.

So you really don't need to force any particular feeling as you do the metta practice. You don't even have to try to feel any particular way as you say the phrases. Just let yourself feel that connection, the intention of wishing well, and then trust that the phrases will evoke that feeling in a stronger and stronger way. And don't worry if it feels dry or mechanical or rote, or that nothing's happening. Just trust that what you're doing is planting seeds—the seed of your good intention—and then watering it with the phrases. After that, you don't have to do anything else. Nature will take care of the rest. Nature will take care of bringing all those feelings forward.

It's a little bit like starting a fire by rubbing two sticks together. It really takes a lot of effort at first. You rub and rub and you get blisters on your fingers and you think nothing's ever going to happen. And then finally, after rubbing for a long time, this little wisp of smoke comes up. And then that wisp turns into a little flame. You give it some more shavings. It turns into a bigger flame and a bigger flame and so on. So there's this little bit of contriving at first in the metta practice. The rubbing of the stick is the saying of the phrases. But then once it gets going, it takes on its own life. It takes on its own warmth and heat. You can just trust in that.

I want to talk a little about how to integrate the metta practice with vipassana. So far, we've been giving some guided loving kindness once a day for about fifteen minutes, and you can also bring it into the start or the end of each sitting for five or ten minutes if you'd like to do that, if you connect with it, if you find it helpful.

You can also use the metta practice when you feel like you've gotten into a difficult place in the vipassana practice. If some particular mood or state of mind is coming up strongly—could be anger or fear or sadness—and you start to feel kind of overwhelmed by it, you can switch to doing the metta practice for a little while and see if that brings in a little different flavor. See if it brings in a little different quality in the mind, a little more softness, a little more acceptance that can just soften the mind around the difficulty. So you can use it if you feel overwhelmed.

You can use it if you feel a little stuck, like you've been relating to a difficult experience for some time and the mind is getting stuck in that groove. Bring in a little metta practice to just see if it'll transform the moment. Or if you just find yourself getting contracted and tense and a little hard in the vipassana practice, you can use the metta just to soften a bit.

Sometimes if we're connecting with really difficult experiences of fear or anger or sadness, it can seem like this wish for happiness is too theoretical. "Me? Happy? No way. Not possible." If it feels like the metta just is too idealistic or too remote, you can also try at that point the compassion practice.

Compassion is like loving kindness, but there's only one phrase. It's something like, "May I be free from this pain and sorrow?" And you can adjust the wording to more directly touch what you're actually experiencing. "May I be free from this fear" or "May I be free from this grief?" So you're relating directly with the feeling, but it starts to bring out a different quality of the heart.

There was a workshop today down in the lower meditation hall. I don't know if you had any sort of strays wandering up here. It's actually a benefit for Spirit Rock, put on by a fellow named Byron Brown, who's a teacher in the Diamond Heart approach. He's written a book called *Soul Without Shame* that teaches all about how to deal with the inner critic or the judging part of our nature—the same thing that Eugene explored through the image of Mara. In his benefit today, the workshop was along the same theme. He said that the single most useful thing in working with the judging mind is to bring compassion to ourselves.

So also anytime you feel that there's too much criticism, not enough self-acceptance, you can use the compassion phrase: "May I be free from this pain and sorrow."

You might also sort of keep in mind the metta and the compassion for the people who are arriving tomorrow evening as a way to make space, as a way to accept. And also, you know, they're going to be going through all the adjustments of the start of a retreat. You remember how that felt?

Not easy.

I want to talk a little about the different beings that the practice opens us up to. The image from the text is that metta is like a river that runs downhill in a stream and fills a pool that it runs into. And then as it fills that pool, that pool overflows and runs down the hill into the next pool. And then that pool gets filled and it overflows and runs down the hill into the next pool.

This is the image of developing the loving-kindness first with the people who are easy for us—with ourselves, with a benefactor, or with a friend. The idea is that when the metta for each of those people is overflowing, we let it run down the hill to the next person. Then let that build up and overflow. And then it runs down the hill to someone we don't know very well, a neutral person. Then it fills up and runs down the hill to someone that we may have difficulty with. And then it fills up and overflows to all beings everywhere.

There's a story about why we start with ourselves. It's said that at the time of the Buddha, one of his supporters was the king of Kosala named Pasenadi, who had a wife named Mallika and many consorts. One day the king asked Mallika, who was his queen, "Who do you love the most?" Being the king, he thought he knew what the answer should be to that question. She was also a follower of the Buddhist teachings, and she immediately said back to him, "Why, myself, of course."

He was shocked and took umbrage, and said, "Well, what do you mean?" She said, "Well, yes, I do. I look, and honestly, I love myself the most." So they thought they'd better go straighten this out. They went to the best marriage counselor that they knew, who was the Buddha, explained the situation to him and asked who was right.

And the Buddha said, "Why, the queen is right, of course." Then he said, "When I was still an unenlightened bodhisattva, I visited all the quarters of the universe with my mind and found no one dearer to me than myself. So likewise does every person hold himself or herself most dear. And who loves oneself can never harm another."

This is why we start with ourselves as really the foundation of the loving-kindness practice.

So as we develop the phrases as they relate to ourselves, let them be universal also. Let them be phrases that can apply to anyone, so that when you take up all the other people, the same phrases more or less can work. You can let them evolve, but you don't want to get too specific with anyone.

There was a woman at a metta retreat in Vancouver, and she was using the phrase, "May I live with ease." Then she was doing her son as a friend, and her son was about twenty years old and in college. She said, "When I got to this phrase, 'May you live with ease,' my mind rebelled. I thought he's living with too much ease already. He's staying at home and lying around in bed all day and I'm paying his bills and his tuition and his books. I don't want him to live with any more ease."

The phrase she wanted to use was "May you develop some backbone." And I said, "Well, I'm not sure that's really metta. It sounds like you're trying to fix him."

So with the metta phrases, we want to have the quality of acceptance—acceptance of people as they are—and not a phrase that tries to fix somebody.

As you play with the phrases, hopefully you'll find a good rhythm with them. Once the phrases become rhythmic for you, then one leads to the next, to the next, to the next. I started off working with long phrases, and over time they've evolved to be quite short. And now the short ones have that same rhythm.

But when I was working with the long phrases and getting them into a rhythm, they actually transmuted at one point into a country and western song, which I won't inflict on you because it might stay around for a while. But Sylvia actually said—and she said it publicly so I'm sure she won't mind my sharing it—that she often, in fact most of the time, sings her metta phrases. And that's a way to really keep them rhythmic, and that rhythmicness keeps them present, keeps them going.

So then working with a benefactor or a friend—this is lovely because in the metta practice, the practice really is to gladden the mind. That's the whole point of it, to make the mind joyful. So we get to hang out with these people that we love, like our benefactors and our friends.

The idea in the metta practice is that you go where the metta is easiest. Isn't this a great invitation? Go where it's easiest. If it's easiest with your benefactor, go there. If it's easiest with yourself, spend most of your time there. If it's easiest with a friend, go there.

It's really different for different people. One meditator said that they had to be with themselves for three years before they could open up to somebody else, before they could include anybody else in their loving kindness. Other people have to be with a benefactor or a friend for a long time before they can bring any of that love home for themselves. One meditator said the only being that she could feel any sort of loving kindness for, for months and months, was a stuffed animal. So that's fine too.

Really, whatever works—whether it's a child or a pet or a friend—wherever the metta flows, that's the place to start. And then trust that it can just flow down in those cascading pools to all the other beings that you want to turn to, so that eventually it becomes boundless. As it says in the Metta Sutta, "Even as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world." This is said to be the supreme abiding.

I think that's probably a good place to stop for now with the talk. I'll just read one more quotation about the benefits of loving kindness, where the Buddha said, "Friends, whatever kinds of worldly merit there are from qualities like generosity and giving and sila—whatever kinds of worldly merit there are—all are not worth one sixteenth part of the heart deliverance of loving kindness in its shining and beaming and radiance. The heart deliverance of loving kindness far excels them all. Just as whatever light there is of stars, all is not worth one sixteenth part of the radiance of the moon."

So we have some time left, so we can open up for comments about your metta practice, if there's anything you'd like to share, if you have questions about metta practice.

[Question from practitioner about confusion between Vipassana instruction to see things as they are versus metta practice feeling like trying to change something]

It's a good question. This aspect of Vipassana practice—that it is only to see things exactly as they are and not to transform them—has a beautiful elegance to it. There's a simplicity and a cleanness. It's easy to get behind a practice like that. And it can also become a ground for a little bit of intellectual favoritism, you might say. Some people actually look down on the metta practice because it's not intellectually as clean or elegant as Vipassana or mindfulness practice.

But actually, mindfulness practice is also primarily a skillful means. We use mindfulness practice in order to purify the heart of greed, aversion, and delusion. It's a factor of the path. And when it has done its work of purification of greed, aversion and delusion, it's not needed anymore. As the Buddha said, when you reach the other shore, you can toss the raft away. So mindfulness, similarly, although it has this beautiful elegance and cleanliness about it, is just another skillful means that's really designed for purification.

So I would look on the metta practice also in the light of skillful means. If it can be brought to bear on a moment where there's suffering and it can transform that moment of suffering into a moment of ease or happiness or relaxation, that's a great path factor also. Basically, the way the Buddha defined right effort was that it's to develop wholesome states of mind and abandon unwholesome states of mind. So whatever tools we can find that are consistent with our practice to do that, I think are really wonderful.

And the metta practice isn't really about making ourselves happy by our will in that moment. The only effort of will in the metta practice is this sort of wishing ourselves well. It's just looking on ourselves and saying, "I hope you're happy." That's the right amount of effort. That's the right effort in metta. It's not to try and put ourselves in a happy place or make ourselves happy, but just connecting with that sincere wish. "Oh, I really hope for my own happiness, or I really hope for your happiness." That's all.

[Another practitioner shares about being recommended metta when wanting to do Vipassana, becoming angry about being recommended loving kindness practice, then becoming disappointed in themselves for the whole cycle]

There must be a poetic justice in there somewhere.

There must be some poetic justice in there somewhere, indeed. I guess it builds humility, if nothing else.

Someone shared a profound observation about the convergence of metta and wisdom—how these two paths ultimately meet at the same destination. This mirrors what we find in Hindu traditions as well, where both the bhakti path of devotion and the jnana path of knowledge lead to the same realization.

She described working with a deep, tender wound—something so raw that any direct approach felt too aggressive. The only way forward was to surround it with compassion, returning again and again to gentleness when everything else proved too much. In that space of infinite tenderness, a phrase arose: "I'm not there." And in that recognition came the wisdom that it's the "I" that creates the suffering.

This beautifully illustrates how wisdom and love are inseparably joined in our deepest nature. We might say that our most fundamental essence is emptiness, but as soon as something appears in that vastness, love is there—love and wisdom together. They're the most essential aspects of who we are.

Developing wisdom naturally supports love; developing love naturally supports wisdom. It's actually quite difficult to remain truly loving without wisdom guiding us. And here we discover one of the great mysteries: when we can simply be with suffering without adding anything to it, the suffering transforms itself. When we step out of the way of our own knots, they unravel on their own.

In working with both vipassana and metta practice around emotional difficulties, I've found that the traditional compassion phrase "May I be free from this pain and sorrow" can sometimes feel too intrusive—almost aversive in its undertone of wanting the pain to leave. I've softened this for myself, often using the phrase "I care about this pain" or "I care about this sorrow." This gentler approach allows for a less active way of being present with difficulty.

Someone asked about practicing metta aloud. While I haven't explored this extensively myself, I've heard others do it beautifully. There's wisdom in this approach—speech actions are said to be more karmically potent than mental actions, so speaking

metta might indeed be more powerful. Speaking aloud also helps prevent the mind from wandering, making it harder to drift into other thoughts while actively voicing the practice.

A question arose about the relationship between metta and bodhicitta in the Tibetan tradition, where it's taught that full Buddhahood cannot be achieved without bodhicitta because it takes us beyond ourselves. While we don't make that exact claim in this tradition, there's profound wisdom in the bodhicitta teachings.

Bodhicitta—literally meaning "awakened mind" but perhaps better translated as "awakening heart"—recognizes that our inner transformation naturally changes our impact on the world. This understanding can become a source of motivation: we practice not only for our own liberation but because we see how deepening our understanding benefits others.

This might seem like a stretch early in practice, but the more we meditate, the more clearly we see the ripples extending outward. In a gathering like this, I imagine many of you have already witnessed how your meditation practice has transformed your work life—whether you're teaching, doing social work, parenting, or perhaps bringing mindfulness into stress reduction programs. The degree to which you've transformed yourself is already impacting the world around you.

Bodhicitta invites us to take this reflection and weave it back into our motivation, saying: "Yes, this is why I want to practice."

I want to practice in order that I can be of most help in the world. Because if I don't purify within, there's a limit to how useful I can be in helping others to come out of suffering.

So there's a very deep connection between bodhicitta and metta, or between bodhicitta and compassion. It's really taking that caring for other people and bringing it back into the very motivation that sustains our practice. I think they're very closely linked and they really support each other. I'll probably talk a little more about bodhicitta in a few nights.

A student asked about metta in daily life, wondering when to choose different focuses for loving-kindness practice. She also shared how she turns to metta when feeling sorrow for loved ones going through difficult times - aging parents and a friend facing cancer for the third time. She questioned whether using metta to quiet her mind in these situations might be avoidance.

Let me address the second question first because it's simpler. If the situation externally is such that you really can't do anything to benefit them, then metta can be a way of yourself coming to more peace with that reality. In that case, I think it's skillful. If there is in fact something you could be doing, but you might use metta in order not to feel the pain of wanting to act, that could be avoidance. But if there's really nothing you can do, then the most important thing is to be at peace within yourself about that reality. Whether it's sending metta to yourself or to them, that may be the most skillful thing you can do in that setting. So I don't think it's avoidance.

In terms of metta in daily life, it's really up to you who you feel drawn to use as your focus for loving-kindness. It's absolutely fine to take yourself for long periods of time. What I usually do in my daily metta practice is focus on myself a little bit and either a benefactor or a friend for a little bit - a little of me and a little of somebody else. But there are times when I might really feel like doing all beings for a long time, or focusing on a particular friend. The nice thing about going through all the categories is that you learn metta can work with anybody. That's the core teaching. It can work with people we like, with people we dislike, with people we don't know. Once you understand that, then you can start to activate metta in any relationship in your life.

Let me share something from my own experience this past year. I had a difficult relationship with someone, and it was coming into my metta practice a lot. I'd be doing metta, trying to generate these caring thoughts, and then I'd find this situation arising and I'd start getting really angry about it.

I started to look at the anger more closely because in most Buddhist texts, the word used for the second hindrance - in the list of the five hindrances - is not anger. The word most often used is "ill will," a translation of the Pali vyāpāda. I started to let that resonate in my mind, and it really changed my understanding of what metta is.

I saw that what was happening when I was angry at someone is that I wanted them to feel bad. In anger, as it says in the texts, it's like picking up a hot coal and getting ready to throw it at somebody else. But before it can reach them, it burns me. The other analogy used is that it's like picking up excrement and wanting to soil somebody else. But before it soils them, it soils me.

I started to realize that I was really wishing this other person to feel bad. That was really what was going on in my anger. And that's really what ill will is - we want someone else to feel bad. I thought, I don't need to do that. So I started doing metta for them, and it was just a little shift to see, "Oh, I actually can wish that they feel okay." I

could sincerely wish that they feel okay. Even though I was upset with them, that was not a very big step. It didn't make me like them any better, but I no longer wished them ill. And I found it very easy after that.

Anytime the anger would start to come up, I'd just make that little step from ill will to good will, and I'd start practicing metta for them. And it was very accessible. It didn't mean that I fell in love with them. It just meant I stopped wishing them bad. So I found it very, very helpful with people outside.

Okay, one more question. Chris.

You used as an example that story about the control group and the people who were praying, being prayed for, and the people who weren't. And I'm wondering if you think it would be fair to say that metta is supposed to include a form of prayer.

I think of it that way myself. I do think of it as the form of prayer in our practice. And you know, there are two ways to look at prayer. One is we pray in order to get the results, but honestly, that's just attachment. The other way to look at it is that we pray because it purifies our heart.

And I think that's the truth of the benefit of prayer. When we pray, we open our heart to all the possibilities of the universe. We state our wish, which is, I really wish that all beings are happy and healthy and safe. We state it even as we know that's not always true. So we kind of let go of the result even as we say the wish. But the wish can really be true. The wish is really wholesome. And that opens us up in that really receptive way that kind of takes the individual will out of the situation. So I think it's a lot like prayer in that way.

Thank you.

Okay, let's close here. It's just about 8:15 and in a minute it will be time for walking. But before we close and before you leave, this is Marie's last night up on the podium with us. And she wanted to say a farewell.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

CHAPTER 218

Motivation In Practice

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the vital role of motivation in Buddhist practice, emphasizing that intention (cetanā) is the seed of all spiritual action. Drawing from the Therīgāthā (Verses of the Elder Nuns), he shares the powerful stories of early practitioners like Sīhā and Paṭācārā, whose extraordinary perseverance through suffering led to liberation. Armstrong discusses how motivation naturally evolves through different phases of practice - from initial comfort-seeking to deeper acceptance, and ultimately toward the bodhicitta aspiration for universal liberation. He addresses common challenges like doubt (vicikicchā) when facing difficult experiences, the tendency to seek special states, and periods of apparent stagnation. The talk includes practical guidance on recognizing when motivation drops due to resistance to unwanted experiences, and offers the Buddha's teaching on not stopping short of the 'heartwood' - complete and unshakable deliverance of mind. Armstrong encourages practitioners to hold their deepest spiritual goals with maturity, trusting that consistent mindfulness naturally unfolds toward liberation while honoring each person's unique healing journey and practice intensity.

I wanted to talk tonight about motivation in our practice. The first thing I want to say is that sometimes when you hear someone is going to talk about motivation, you might wonder if something is wrong with yours. Are they telling me this because there's a problem here? I want to say up front that this is not a remedial talk.

I'm very touched every day by the people that I meet and the extraordinary amount of motivation that everyone is bringing to their practice. This is not in any way an attempt to fix anything anyone is doing, but rather to share some reflections from my own practice and observations that I hope might speak to you or touch some points that we share together. I'd especially like to dedicate this talk to those of you in the room who were the best yogi today—because I know you all had really fine motivation.

In the interview groups today, some of us looked into the question of what we're doing here. In my group, I asked the people I was meeting with to look and see what their deepest intention was in undertaking this retreat. Being here for three weeks is a long time—it's essentially infinite once you get into it. You'll feel that it's a long time.

There were a lot of really beautiful answers to that question. You could tell that everyone in the group had done quite a bit of practice before. There were answers like healing—healing of the body or healing of the heart—opening of the heart, wanting to

look into the arising of the sense of self. Where does this mysterious thing called "I" come from? A greater ability to rest in our true nature, trusting that at the center we're all pure in the sense of wisdom and compassion, and being able to rest more in that. Becoming less reactive from our conditioned or habitual reactions. Learning to listen more deeply within ourselves. Being able to connect again and again with a deep sense of peacefulness and calm.

These are all really beautiful intentions, and they're intentions that can sustain you over a long period of retreat.

We ask this question for two reasons. One, it helps us to know what you're here for, because then we understand better your process and can better guide where you might want to go. But also because there's this age-old truth that what somebody else tells us we don't remember very well, but what we tell somebody else we remember really well. The hope is that by speaking your intentions aloud, you would remember them, and when the time comes in the retreat when you start to wonder what on earth you're doing here, these ideas might come back to you and help you find your way, find your direction.

I love the way that Sylvia put it last night. If I remembered correctly, what we're doing here is discovering and cultivating our natural capacity for wise discernment and compassionate response. I really like this statement because when you look at it closely, it actually includes the whole of the Eightfold Path. There's the compassionate response, which is the area of conduct. There is the cultivation of a natural capacity, which is the whole area of mental training or meditation. And there's the development of wise discernment, which is the area of wisdom. So conduct, meditation, and wisdom—this really is the Eightfold Path all in one sentence. It's a good little formula to remember. It says a lot.

But this quality of intention is itself a very root quality. We touched on it last week, for those of you who were here, when we talked about karma and how the whole unfolding of our journey—the spiritual journey—takes place according to the laws of cause and effect. That cause and effect concatenation or unfolding begins from intention. Intention is the seed that forms the heart of our actions.

In Tibetan, they say it this way: everything rests on the tip of motivation. If our motivation is pure and wholesome, our whole unfolding will be beautiful and pure. If our motivation and intention are in the direction of liberation and spiritual deepening, then that's the way our life will unfold.

There's a tremendous power when we incline the mind in a spiritual direction. This force of intention is tremendous in a very mysterious kind of way. I can't even begin to understand all the workings of it. But I know that the mind contains everything within it—contains all potentials. When we urge it and feed it and nourish it in a given direction, it has the elasticity, it has the pliability, and it definitely has the talent to grow that way. So all the intentions that were mentioned earlier in my group will all help unfold your being in a very beautiful way, in a way that leads to a lot of blessings.

You know, this term "attachment" is kind of a dirty word in Buddhist thought, but the Buddha himself didn't always view it that way. He was giving instructions to the monks one day, and he uttered this verse: "Let not a person revive the past, or on the future build their hopes. For the past has been left behind and the future has not been reached. Instead, with insight, let them see each presently arisen state. Let them know that and be sure of it, invincibly, unshakably."

One who dwells thus ardently by day and by night—it is he or she who has one fortunate attachment. If we're a little attached to our intentions, that's perfectly fine. That's a fortunate kind of attachment. This abiding in the present and being able to see each presently arisen state, dwelling ardently, is a fortunate attachment.

So all these intentions lead in the direction of the beautiful. They all lead in the direction of happiness. And yet each intention has its own flavoring, its own character or personality. The intention of healing, for example, has a different flavor in our life, in our heart, than the intention of seeing the nature of the self—the personal I, the small self that arises. It has a different flavor than the interest in simply abiding in peacefulness.

Because of these different flavors, different people, as you practice here, will have different outer forms. I think of it a little like a recipe book. If you want to bake a soufflé, you have to be delicate with it. You can't go stomping around the kitchen, and you don't crank up the heat to the highest level. You may have to turn it up for a while and back down to get the browning just right on top.

In healing also, there's a delicate balance of the heat or intensity of practice that's needed. So someone who is here primarily to do healing of body or heart might have an outward form where the temperature isn't so high—the intensity of their retreat is not as high.

Someone who is here to really look into the structure of the self—maybe that's more like baking a pizza. You can't do much to hurt a pizza. And so you can crank the temperature up and really go for the sittings late at night and early in the morning. Be really meticulous with your noting, slow down and be very precise, very present, put in maximum effort. That's the way you'll see how the self is put together.

As you start to get a sense of each other over these days, please have an understanding that different people are practicing with different intentions. They're all wonderful. And as you practice with different intentions, the outer form might look different. So please have respect. If you're one of the more speeded up ones, try not to knock over the people who are going at what we call "snail's pace vipassana" in the lunch line, in the walking room. Just be sensitive to those who are really slowed down. If you're really slowed down, also try to be spacious and loving toward people who are going a little faster. We're all doing just the work that we need to do.

An interesting thing about motivation is that it itself is a factor of the path. I'll talk later about how it fits into how the Buddha discussed it, but it itself is a factor of our awakening. And as such, it develops as our practice develops. The motivation isn't a static thing that we take up in the beginning of practice and remains the same until the end. It's a living thing. It's something that grows when it's supported by understanding, when it's supported by loving-kindness, when it's supported by balance of mind.

Particularly when we come into retreat, those of you who are starting a retreat now, the motivation will feel very different today than it might a few days later. I know when I start a retreat, I usually get preoccupied in the first couple of days with one goal: I just want to make myself more comfortable. Peace, freedom, liberation, healing—forget it. I just want to sit for an hour without my back aching. I just want to find out when I can take my shower and not have to scramble in the bathroom. I want to know that I'll be able to eat the food, that I'll be able to sleep at night.

So I find in the early days of retreat, my mind is turning around a lot of little issues. If you've seen the mind turning that way today, that's fine. That's normal. That's just part of the settling-in process. And with it, there may be a little struggle with not being at home in the body yet because it's kind of achy, or not being at home with the mind because you've told it to stay on the breath, but it's really all over the place—past and future. You may find yourself wishing you were somewhere else altogether.

This kind of struggle is really natural in the early days. It's just an indication of the settling in. And then somehow after a couple of days, something just seems to click—usually for me and I know for a lot of people—and suddenly a factor of acceptance comes in. A deep factor of acceptance. And the mind that was struggling with the body

pain can now be still in the middle of it. The mind that was struggling with wandering and being away from the breath can now accept it in a non-judging way. It's okay that the mind goes off. That's what minds do. So then the motivation becomes a little more pure.

Instead of trying to make ourselves comfortable, we realize, oh, I'm comfortable enough. And the motivation becomes, ah, I don't need to change my experience now. What can I learn from it? This is a really wonderful shift because we become open to our experience, to our life in a much deeper way, a much more authentic way. We don't need it to be a certain way. Rather, we can just be a student and say, how is life, and what can I learn from it just the way it is?

When our motivation is strong, everything in the practice seems workable. It's such a key influence. When we're interested, when we're excited, when we're enthusiastic, when we're passionate, when we're dwelling ardent, as the Buddha said, everything else seems workable. The ups and downs of the heart, the aches and pains of the body, the restless mind—it's all okay. But then from time to time the motivation seems to go somewhere south, and we really wonder, what am I doing here?

So I want to look a little bit at the cycles of motivation in practice and also talk about some enduring kinds of motivation for us.

I was on a self-retreat a few years ago. I had just decided that I wanted to spend some time not in a group and not having an external schedule. Some friends have a cabin in upstate New York that they offered. So I went to stay there for two months—actually the months of October and November. It's out on about 500 acres of farmland, and from the cabin I couldn't see another house. I was really quite alone, quite secluded in a beautiful natural setting.

My friends lived a few miles away and once a week one of them would come over and ask me what food I needed, then she'd go out shopping for me and bring me the groceries. Then I might not see her again for a week. So I spent those two months really very much on my own.

Well, I was a California kind of guy, and I thought October and November, pretty good weather, snow usually doesn't fall until about Thanksgiving. So I just showed up in my Birkenstocks and my sneakers. Big mistake.

This year in upstate New York, the snow started to fall about the 1st of November. And all of November was really snowy. So from about the 1st of November till the 15th, every day it was snowing or it was raining or it was cloudy and I didn't see the sun. Be-

cause I only had sneakers and Birkenstocks, it was getting really difficult to do my walking practice outside. My feet were getting cold and wet and my shoes were soaked, so I was getting discouraged about that.

What I did finally was take some plastic produce bags that my friend had bought groceries in and tie a plastic produce bag around each foot. So that was my makeshift boots. Then with my plastic produce bags I could go do my walking meditation out in the snow. I'd clear a walking path and go walking in the snow and then I was fine. The produce bags would last about a day and they'd rip through and I'd have to put new ones on.

The days went by and the sun didn't come out and the snow kept falling, the wind kept blowing, and I was all alone on this mountaintop. I started to really get discouraged. I just started to feel, what am I doing here? You've probably heard that phrase once or twice in retreat yourself. And I thought I should really go back to California. It'd be much better. I know there'll be some sunshine still in the Bay Area. It'll be a little warmer. I'll at least be able to walk outside.

But unfortunately, I'd sublet my house. So I really had nowhere to come home to.

Then one day I came down from a sitting and I looked out the window and it was snowing again. And I just felt, I just want to get out of here. I just didn't want to stay. And of course, we have a name for this in our practice. We call it doubt. When you don't feel like being here, we recognize it as a hindrance, and it's called doubt.

So I got sort of curious. I thought, well, I teach about this. I ought to know something about it. So I started looking at it, and what I saw is that that urge to get away was coming up right after I had a really uneasy feeling. The weather and the grayness and the isolation, the solitude were bringing out in me some kind of despair. It was like touching some part of myself that I really wasn't comfortable with.

I wasn't used to feeling that despair, that loneliness. I didn't like it. And the doubt wasn't really because I didn't like the weather or because it was cold outside. It was because I didn't like this feeling in my heart.

When I saw that, I could say, "Oh, so I just need to open to that despair." And when I could accommodate it, then it was okay again.

It was a really good lesson. My motivation had gone away because I was experiencing something I didn't like. It was really, really simple. This often happens when motivation drops. Do you notice your motivation doesn't usually go away after your best sitting of the retreat? You know, you come in and you have forty-five minutes where

you're really settled and really with the breath, and after that you start thinking, "Oh, maybe I'll sign up for two months next year, or maybe I'll go sit the three-month course in Barre."

But when doubt comes in is when there's been something difficult. So this is a really good pointer. When the motivation drops, take a look and see: what was it that was difficult? What in your experience did you have trouble opening to? What did you have trouble accepting in yourself?

Sometimes we get discouraged in practice because we want something special. There was one retreat I was on where I had heard about this particular insight into impermanence, and I really wanted it. Everybody was talking about it. Books were talking about it. Teachers were talking about it. I thought, "I should have it." And I tied myself up into knots looking for this one particular experience about impermanence. When it didn't come, I got very frustrated, I got very judgmental, and I felt basically like quitting. Didn't get it that whole retreat.

A few years later, I got it. Not such a big deal—hardly worth worrying about. But sometimes the discouragement comes because we're expecting something special. So look at that too. Is there a special result you're seeking?

Sometimes starting a new retreat, we want to repeat a really favorite experience from our last retreat. But the funny thing is that favorite experience often happened eight days in, or ten days in, or longer. But we want it back the first day. "Oh, that should be happening by now." So look and see if there's an expectation about some particular experience.

Sometimes in retreats we want some special experience because it validates us. It validates us as a good meditator. It validates our experience. And we can get disappointed if it's not happening.

Sometimes in practice we hit these periods that are a little bit like a plateau where things are going along smoothly, but it's not very dramatic, and we think, "Oh, nothing's happening now." Actually, those plateau periods often have a lot going on under the surface—a lot of integration, or a lot of gathering of energies, preparing for another deepening—but it may seem like nothing special's happening. At times like that, Joseph Goldstein, one of my teachers, used to say that he would just tell himself, "Look, your job is just to sit and walk. The Dharma takes care of all the rest." So we can remind ourselves of that. All we have to do is sit, walk, and be present. Everything else is up to the Dharma, not our responsibility.

Sometimes in times of low motivation I really take a lot of inspiration from other meditators. I was sitting in the fall in Massachusetts for six weeks, and there was a woman who was sitting with me named Anne Creamer. She's someone I've known over the last several years, and I've come to have a really deep affection and appreciation for her.

Anne is seventy-seven years old. I know she wouldn't mind my sharing that because she tells everybody who'll listen. She lives in Santa Fe with her sister Rita, who is eighty-one.

Then my mind became free.

I saw clearly the difficulty of this world, this samsara. My heart came to rest. As I stood there, I saw the immense suffering inherent in existence. My meditation deepened, my mindfulness strengthened, and my bondage was torn apart. Only then did I sit down at the foot of the tree, profoundly happy and peaceful.

I had reached the end of suffering. All my fetters were severed. That was a nun's commitment—and fortitude.

There's another story that I find equally inspiring about a woman named Vasitthi. She had an especially difficult life by any standard. She was a courtesan, and had been abandoned by her lover. She had a child who died, and then she herself became quite ill. She was poor and had to resort to begging for survival. When she heard the Buddha teach, she also ordained as a nun.

After her ordination, she practiced with tremendous dedication. But even after years of meditation, she still had not reached awakening. She was getting quite old, and began to worry that she would die without having achieved realization. Then one day, she was doing walking meditation, and she tripped. As she was falling, in that moment of completely letting go, her mind opened and she awakened.

She left this beautiful poem: "I was a courtesan, elaborately dressed, my mind was intoxicated with my own beauty. I looked down on other women. Then old age came upon me, destroying my beauty. My body became weak and shaky. I've lived in the forest, lived in a hut, meditated at the foot of trees. I have reached the state of no-desires. I have done what the Buddha taught."

These women inspire me so deeply. They faced tremendous difficulties—physical hardship, emotional turmoil, years of unrewarded practice—and yet they persevered. Their faith in the Dharma carried them through periods when they might have reasonably given up.

Just then my heart was set free.

We may presume that she untied the noose, returned to the community, and left us this amazing poem. Sometimes in the depths of discouragement, liberation breaks through when we least expect it. Sometimes when we're pushed to an edge we didn't know we could tolerate, some of our greatest openings come—unexpectedly, completely as a surprise.

That's one story I cherish from the early women practitioners, but there's another that moves me even more deeply. This is the story of a nun named Patachara. I'd like to tell you something about her life before she encountered the teachings, because I think it's profoundly moving.

She was brought up in northern India in a fairly well-to-do family. Her father was a banker. The family was stable—the mother was at home, and she also had a brother. It was a family of four, and she was well looked after. As she came into puberty, her family arranged a marriage for her with a suitable young man in the same village. It would be a match of equals, and she could have expected a very comfortable middle-class lifestyle from this arranged marriage.

However, Patachara, for better or for worse, had fallen in love. The person she was in love with was a servant in the village—not somebody who in that rigid caste system was considered her match or equal for marriage and child-rearing. Her parents forbade her to be with her lover and insisted that she carry out the arranged marriage with the other young man.

Patachara wouldn't do it. She ran away from home with her lover. They settled in another part of India and made their living through simple trades, but got by. She became pregnant, and she felt that having this child far away from her family was dangerous. So she said to her husband, "I know I haven't spoken to my family for a long time, but I want to go back and have my child in my parents' home, because I feel I'll be well looked after there."

Her husband agreed, but he kept procrastinating. Finally she saw he wasn't going to do anything, so she took off by herself. He realized she'd gone and made haste to catch up with her. They reached her parents' home, she had the child safely, reconciled with her parents, and then returned to where she and her husband had been living with their newborn baby.

She raised the child, a few years passed, and she became pregnant again. Again she said to her husband, "I'd like to go back to my parents' home to have our second child." He agreed but kept procrastinating. So again, she took off by herself with the eldest child.

They were on the way to her parents' home when a great storm broke out. The husband realized they had left and made haste to catch up with them, arriving just as the storm was breaking. Great rains were falling, the wind was blowing, it was cold. The husband set off with a machete to chop down trees and branches to make a shelter for the night. While he was in the forest gathering materials, he was bitten by a poisonous snake and died on the spot.

When he didn't return, Patachara went looking for him and found him dead. Just at that time, she began to give birth to her second child. In the middle of this intense storm, as rain fell and winds howled and night was falling, she gave birth alone. All night long she tried to cover both children with her own body, having no shelter. She let the rains fall on herself while trying to keep her children dry. They survived the night.

In the morning she picked up the newborn baby, led the older child who could walk, and made her way grief-stricken toward her parents' home. They came to a river mightily swollen by all the rain. It was too dangerous for the youngest child to cross alone, so Patachara carried her baby across and set it down on the other side. As she was recrossing to get her oldest child, a hawk swooped down from the sky, picked up the newborn baby, and carried it away.

The mother screamed at the hawk to let go, but it didn't. The newborn was gone. But the older child thought her screams were calling him to come, and he plunged into the river and was swept away by the flood.

Within twelve hours, Patachara had lost her husband and both children. Totally devastated, she continued alone to her parents' village. When she arrived, she saw a villager on the outskirts.

And they recognized each other. She asked him to share news of her family, but he replied, "Ask me anything but that." When she insisted, he reluctantly told her that during the previous night's storm, her parents' house had collapsed, killing her mother, father, and brother.

Having lost everything in the world, Patachara went mad with grief. It was completely devastating, completely overwhelming, and she descended into insanity. In her state of grief, shock, and madness, she could no longer care for herself. It is said that

she wandered throughout that part of India, her clothing wearing through and falling away. Much of the time she wandered naked, and when people occasionally gave her rags to wear, these too would wear through and fall off.

This is where her name originates—Patachara means "cloak wearer." When she approached villages, people would drive her away, saying, "Here comes the mad woman. Drive her away."

Finally, during one of her wanderings, she encountered the Buddha. In her state of incomprehension, unable to understand what was happening around her, and wearing no clothes, she approached him. The Buddha said simply, "Sister, please recover your mind."

With that simple statement, he brought her out of her insanity and she recovered her senses. Seeing that she stood naked among a group of people, she accepted a robe someone offered and covered herself.

Then she had this interchange with the Buddha. "Help me," she said, and told him her terrible story.

He replied, "Patachara, don't think you have come to someone who can help you."

What an incredible statement—don't think you have come to someone who can help you. He continued, "In your many lives, you have shed more tears for the dead than there is water in the four oceans."

This made her grief less heavy. He went on to explain that when she herself went to another world, no kin could help her, and that even in this world, no kin can truly help. Then he taught her about the Buddhist path.

When he had finished, she asked to be ordained. The message was that he could not help her because she had to come to understanding herself. She had to find the motivation and interest to look deeply and closely into life for herself.

Patachara, ordained as a bhikkhuni, received the teachings and then practiced. She was not one who heard and understood immediately—she too had to practice. This is the poem she left:

When they plow their fields and sow seeds in the earth, when they care for their wives and children, young Brahmins find riches. But I've done everything right. I followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?

We can do everything right in our practice, and still the karmic accumulations, the habitual conditions of mind, are so strong that it can take time to release them, to break through them. "I've done everything right—why haven't I found peace?"

Bathing my feet one day, I watched the bathwater spill down the slope.

To me, those lines have such a sense of clear seeing—not a great intrusion of "I" or "mine" or owning or confusion, just bathing the feet and watching the bathwater run down the slope.

I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed.

And then she herself became a great teacher, said to have brought awakening to a number of other nuns, a number of other bhikkhunis.

This story really touches me deeply because it's hard to imagine a greater need for healing than Patachara's. It's hard to imagine a heart more wounded than hers. And yet even through this difficult work of healing from madness of the most extreme kind, and practicing for years—you know that she felt the residue of that difficult period all through her being—just with the steadiness of attention and that opening of clear seeing, the freedom came, the freedom dawned.

This kind of story points me to certain turning points in motivation that I wanted to mention. First is when we first come into the practice and we see the potential for some easing of our suffering, some possibility of greater peace. I still remember how powerful my first retreat was for me—touching a depth of peace I had never known before and how sweet it was, how satisfying that peace was. It really gives us faith that the third noble truth is for us. This possibility of the end of suffering is for us. It's not just people in old stories that find this kind of peace, but it's you and I, here, today, now, who can find this peace.

And from that faith then comes effort. Actually the Buddha drew this link in a teaching called The Chain of Dependent Arising in the Transcendental Sense—that suffering led to faith and faith led to effort, and effort basically led to happiness and release. So we undertake the practice and we find that we can discover more peace, we can discover more happiness. A greater degree of contentment comes in.

But this itself can be a turning point in motivation because if originally we practiced in order to heal, in order to overcome suffering, when the contentment comes, then what are we here for? What are we here for if the suffering isn't weighing so much?

I was in a three-month retreat one time and I had an insight that I thought was kind of special. It brought me a lot of really kind of amazing sense of freedom. So I went to tell my teachers about it, and I thought they should think it was kind of special too. And they didn't seem to think it was very special at all. They didn't seem to make a big deal about it.

I'd actually been sitting in my room for a couple of days after I had this insight, just reflecting on what a special insight this was. And then they said, "Nah, no big deal." One of my teachers actually said to me—she'll remain nameless—"You're not very deep. I can tell by the way you walk in the room, you're not very deep. So-and-so"—and then they named a good friend of mine who was also sitting—"so-and-so is much deeper than you are."

We promise not to say that to any of you.

And I got a little discouraged, because I still thought it was a pretty cool insight. And far from being appreciated, I felt like it was not appreciated at all. So I became very discouraged at this point. For the rest of the retreat, I felt like I was just kind of wandering and struggling to keep up with the schedule. It was actually many years later before I met a teacher who could put that insight into some kind of perspective for me so that I actually came to feel that it was as special as I had come to feel it was.

If you don't get the answer you want from one of us, try another. That's why you have two teachers for your interviews.

It actually took my motivation a while to recover from that, because two things had happened. One is in touching this place of greater freedom, some of the reason I had for practicing went away. I'd actually reached one of the things I was looking for, was understanding freedom in a really deep way. And then the other thing that was discouraging was that it wasn't validated. So I was left with this not knowing or this level of confusion.

Sometimes when you reach that kind of next rung of contentment, don't be surprised if the motivation sort of falls off for a while. Don't beat yourself up or think you're doing something wrong. I think it's really natural, and I think it's a sign that maybe it's time to enjoy the fruits of your practice for a while. Enjoy the happiness and the spaciousness and the peacefulness that you've opened to. Really bask. Take some time to bask in the blessings that the practice has opened for you.

And then after a while of basking, after the confusion died down, I started to see, "Oh, you know what? There's a lot more contentment now. There's a lot more happiness and there's a lot more peacefulness and there's still suffering."

It didn't finish the job. So over time, even though that suffering was more subtle, I was more sensitive. And so it felt like it was chafing also, the new, more subtle kinds of unhappiness. And then that motivated me to go back and practice more.

Someone in the interview group today in talking about intention said something that really excited me. She said in the last retreat that she had been at, she had some real opening in the course of the retreat and went to her teacher and said, "I want to be free." Stated it really strongly for herself and out loud for her teacher: "I want to be free."

This can be another really beautiful turning point in motivation—when we realize that it's not really enough just to come out of some of our suffering, but we really want to find the way out of suffering altogether and not to stop until we find that limitless freedom that the Buddha talked about over and over again. This is a beautiful motivation because it's a very long, enduring one. It's one that can be with you for the rest of your life, the rest of your practice.

There's another shift in motivation that happens. You know, we talk a lot about this factor of selflessness or anatta, coming to see that there's no separate self, no abiding center within this mind-body process. At first it sounds kind of intellectual. It doesn't sound like it really means very much. But as we start to connect with it, it affects everything in our life and in our practice.

And one of the things that it starts to do is to take away the sense that I am different than you. If there's no abiding center here that's unique and there's no abiding center there that's unique, then what are we both? You and I are both this vast awareness that holds the body sensations and all the qualities of the human heart and all our thoughts as they go by and knows them all in a very deep way.

I was on a retreat actually where we were practicing this reflection about the liberation of all beings everywhere. And I came to see that that was really the logical outcome of seeing through the separate self. So my interest in practice made this little shift from just wanting to liberate the nature here, the Buddha nature here, to wanting to liberate the Buddha nature wherever it was being obscured.

So as we really sense that there's no separation between me and you, between each other, our sense of practice can become much, much wider. In the tradition, this is talked about as the broadening out of the great highway of practice, sometimes called the great vehicle of practice. And it becomes great because our scope of practice becomes limitless. Wherever there's obscuration to this Buddha nature, that's where the opportunity for practice and for liberation is.

As we take this as an actual interest of ours, we can begin to practice with it in a practice that's called bodhicitta. Bodhi means enlightened, citta means mind or heart. So literally this might mean enlightened heart, enlightened mind. But the way that I actually like to read it is the awakening heart. It's the motivation of the awakening heart that sees through all distinctions and sees through all separation to bring liberation everywhere for all beings.

If this touches you, if this speaks to you, even a little bit, you can start to bring this into your daily practice. The Dalai Lama has a very simple formulation of this wish for bodhicitta, this aspiration, in two lines. He says, "By the force of generosity and other virtues, may I achieve awakening to benefit all sentient beings."

By the force of generosity and other virtues—this is actually a code phrase for the paramis. It's considered that the paramis are the wholesome qualities within our heart that have the power to liberate the mind. Generosity is the first of the paramis. Other qualities are compassionate conduct, loving-kindness, equanimity, truthfulness, renunciation, determination, wisdom. So by the force of all these beautiful qualities, by developing them over our practice, may I achieve awakening to benefit all sentient beings. Because if we can awaken ourselves and come to that place of steadiness and unbounded compassion and unshakable fearlessness, that's really how we can best help others.

So for myself, when I sit, when I sit down, I do the three refuges. I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. And then I just recite this short verse on bodhicitta, on the awakening heart, which sets my intention for the rest of the sitting. And I've been practicing that way for a number of years now. And I find what it does is that it always keeps my practice linking me to the rest of the world so that my practice doesn't become kind of self-enclosing and limiting.

You know, in making a statement like "I want to be free," it's a very brave thing to do. Often I feel in the West today in our practice, we've gotten a little afraid of stating clearly, "This is what I want from my practice. This is my goal. This is my aim, this is my destination, and I'm not going to stop until I reach it." I feel we've gotten a little shy about just saying that in a really straightforward way, probably because enough of us have been burned by taking up a goal and kind of striving after it without a great deal of wisdom. And so we've tended maybe to toss the goal out of our practice. But I feel that may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Because a goal can be a really beautiful and inspiring thing in practice. And I think what we need is the way to hold the goal in a mature way.

For me, it's a little bit like when I was a child and we were going on a long trip. We used to drive to my grandmother's in North Carolina. And I'd get in the car, and my father would be driving the car and we'd be about twenty miles down the road and I'd say, "Dad, are we there yet?" You know, and every couple hours I'd repeat the question. "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" As a child, I couldn't hold that goal in an easy way. The goal itself kind of grated on me because I couldn't wait for it.

But for my father, holding the goal wasn't a problem. He knew what lay at the end of the road. And he knew that if he just drove this next mile, sooner or later we'd be there.

So as practitioners, can we hold our goal, our deepest intention, our deepest longing, with that kind of maturity? To recognize that it is the end of our path, and yet we don't have to rub it against our present moment experience and downgrade the moment by comparison. We can simply trust that, as Sylvia said, we don't need to go from here to there. All we need to go is from here to more and more fully here. And we understand the way that mindfulness works is that that coming home is what unfolds us toward that liberation, what unfolds us toward that goal.

And holding that goal somewhere in the back of our mind, we know that we don't stop our efforts. We don't let our motivation down until we've reached it.

The Buddha used an analogy. He said that one goes forth into the spiritual life and develops gain and honor and renown, becomes known and respected in the community for the depths of one's practice. And then one can become intoxicated and satisfied with that result and says that such a person can become negligent and then falls into suffering and stops short of the goal.

He said, "It's like someone who goes into the forest looking for the heartwood of a tree, wanting to build a solid house, and finds a great tree that has heartwood, but instead of taking the heartwood, just pulls off the twigs and the leaves of the tree, goes away and is satisfied."

He said, "But there's another kind of practitioner who isn't satisfied with the leaves and the twigs, isn't satisfied with honor and renown, instead develops virtue. But it's possible to stop short at virtue and become negligent and to fall into suffering." And then such a person, the Buddha said, is like one who has gone to the great tree and taken just the outer bark, thinking it was the heartwood.

But another person doesn't stop at the outer bark and instead develops the quality of concentration, of unification of mind, which brings not only happiness but great insight. And if one stops at the virtue of concentration, then the Buddha said it's like stopping at the inner bark of the tree, taking away the inner bark, thinking that it's the heartwood.

But other practitioners go beyond the inner bark and develop the quality of knowledge and vision of seeing things as they actually are. But then a person can stop short there. And then the Buddha said it's like taking the sapwood of that great tree.

But the last practitioner is not satisfied with the sapwood, continues and attains what the Buddha called perpetual liberation. And the Buddha said, "From this it is impossible to fall away."

And he concluded by saying that this holy life, friends, does not have gain, honor and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end.

Let's sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 219

Faith and Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong explores two fundamental aspects of Buddhist practice: faith (saddhā) and awareness, and how they lead us to discover the unconditioned refuge beyond impermanence. Drawing from the Thai Forest tradition and teachers like Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and Ajahn Mahāboowa, Armstrong examines how the direct insight into impermanence (anicca) can initially create fear and uncertainty, but ultimately points us toward what lies beyond change.*
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> *The talk investigates the Buddha's 33 synonyms for Nibbāna found in the Saṃyutta Nikāya - including the unconditioned, the deathless, and the refuge - and explores how we might discover this ultimate dimension in our practice. Armstrong presents Ajahn Buddhadāsa's radical teaching that "at any moment our minds are void of I and mine, that is Nibbāna," making the unconditioned accessible in present-moment awareness rather than a distant goal.*
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> *Through personal stories and teachings from various masters, the talk reveals how true refuge is found in the pure awareness that illuminates all experience - empty yet knowing, timeless yet present. This awareness, described as our Buddha nature or innate wakefulness, is what catches us when we fall in practice and what we can learn to trust and rest in as our path to freedom.*

Sylvia talked last night on the theme of impermanence, the fact that in our outside life among the people we know, everything is subject to loss, to change, to decay. People have been reporting on this also in the interviews. A number of people have come and said that when their awareness is clear and they turn their attention to a thought, it dissolves. Or when they become aware of a pain in the body, they see the transitory nature, they see the unsolid nature of that sensation. And even turning our minds to different emotional states, when the awareness is clear, sometimes those states dissolve upon looking at them.

Ananda, who was the Buddha's cousin and his attendant for many years, once asked the Buddha, "What do you mean by the world?" The word in Pali for world is loka. It means realm also. And the Buddha replied with a pun. He replied, "It disintegrates." And the word for disintegrates in Pali is paloka. It disintegrates, therefore it is called the world, or loka.

This really refers to all our sense experience, which we can see when we look closely in retreat: the nature of arising and passing, the moment-to-moment level at every sense door that we investigate. When we start to see that momentary nature of all our experience, it can be quite unsettling. As Sylvia said last night, it can lead us into fear, upset. In one particular system of practice, it's said that following this direct insight into impermanence is a period of practice that's marked by fear and dread. And it rather provokes a crisis in the spiritual journey out of which arises a tremendous urge for freedom and that then leads in that very direction.

So this can be very deeply felt in our practice, the immediacy of impermanence and how it takes away the solid ground that we thought we knew, that we thought we rested upon. And out of that can come an urgency to find: is there somewhere in our experience, is there a dimension that isn't touched by disintegration, by transiency, by change? Maybe there is.

After all, impermanence is not what philosophically we could call an ultimate truth. The Buddha, ever precise in his language, said that it was only a characteristic of existence. Impermanence is a descriptor of that which exists. So a really ultimate kind of truth should point to something that's beyond existing and not existing. So impermanence isn't that kind of truth.

In fact, the Buddha pointed in his practice and his teaching for our practice, pointed us to discover some more ultimate meaning or ultimate truth in life that can form a true refuge or true security in our life. And this true refuge and true security he talked of as Nirvana or in the Pali, Nibbana.

The Buddha was loath to be very precise in his descriptions of this state or this dimension, but in one passage in the Samyutta Nikaya, one part of the Pali texts, he gives 33 synonyms for Nibbana, among which are these: the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the harbor, the refuge, and the beyond. This is about as detailed as he got to speaking about nirvana, but all these words point to a release, a state of freedom, of safety, of refuge beyond change.

So I wonder in our practice, where might we look to discover or come upon that refuge that is really beyond change? And that's really what I'd like to explore in the talk tonight. The talk really has two themes: the themes of faith and of awareness.

I have to give a little bit of disclaimer at the start of the talk. When the Buddha came upon his enlightenment, you may know the story, he almost didn't teach. He spent 49 days after his awakening sitting in the same spot where he had awakened, just enjoying

the bliss of deliverance, the bliss of liberation, and reflecting on the implications of what he'd found. And he thought in that time, "Should I teach or shouldn't I?" And at first he thought, "No, I'm not going to." He said, "There won't be many people who will understand."

And then he reflected and he thought, "Oh, my first teacher – he would understand if I told him about this." And then he, with his psychic vision, turned his eye toward that teacher and found out that he had died a week ago. He said, "Shucks, he's not here to understand. But my second teacher was also very clear and wise. He would understand." And he turned with his psychic vision to his second teacher and found that person had just died that day.

So who was he going to teach? And he said at this point, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and hard to understand." Fortunately, as we all know, he went ahead and taught anyway. But I mention this phrase because I won't claim that this talk is either profound or subtle, but it may be extremely hard to understand.

So I ask your forgiveness in advance for that and I really urge you to approach it with a light touch. I'll try to give it with a light touch and I urge you to receive it with a light touch that lets you take in what makes sense to you and leave behind what doesn't. It's not intended to spur a lot of conceptualization, but rather just if parts of it touch on your own practice, open and use that and let go of all the concepts.

The other caveat I have to make about this talk is we're talking about what doesn't have any form, and so there's no right view on this point. Nobody can be definitive in speaking about what doesn't have form, like nirvana.

These different perspectives are simply metaphors or poems pointing the mind in a certain direction. As such, nobody holds final authority—at least nobody I've encountered.

This view of the unconditioned comes primarily from the Thai forest tradition, and it may differ significantly from what you'd hear in the Burmese tradition. I'll be quoting some of the elders from the Thai forest tradition—teachers you've likely heard before like Ajahn Buddhadasa, and the group of practitioners that included Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Maha Boowa. But realize that not even all Buddhists in our lineage would necessarily agree with this perspective. That's perfectly fine. You can hold it simply as one person's opinion.

My wife's sisters visited us last year from Australia—their first trip to the United States. For one sister, it was actually her first journey more than about 300 miles from home. So we took them to Yosemite, which is wonderful for foreign visitors because there's nothing quite like it anywhere else in the world.

Of course, they loved it. They delighted in seeing the wildlife—coyotes, deer, smaller animals. We didn't actually see a bear, unfortunately, but we saw their marks every morning. We were staying in tent cabins in Curry Village, where there's a large parking lot with about a hundred cars. Every morning we'd emerge to find that about five cars had been ripped open by bears. Every single morning.

The rangers are quite clear in their instructions: don't leave food in your car, don't leave anything that resembles food, don't leave picnic coolers because the bears know what those are, don't leave hand lotion or scented products. Yet every morning we'd discover four or five damaged vehicles. The bears particularly favored minivans—they'd pop out the back window and crawl inside. I suppose they'd learned that minivans usually contain children, and children often have candy.

So while we saw bear tracks in the morning, we never encountered the bears themselves. It's delightful to visit Yosemite to observe the wildlife, and almost equally entertaining to watch the people. Yosemite attracts everyone. The big tour buses arrive at Yosemite Falls, and out pour visitors who seem to share a universal uniform from around the world: Bermuda shorts and video cameras hanging from their shoulders, filming anything that moves.

Backpackers straggle into the backpacking campground after a week in the backcountry, unshaven and unwashed—quite an appealing sight. Then there are the climbers preparing to ascend El Capitan. It's always fascinating to observe climber culture, which strikes me as a cross between the Grateful Dead and the US Marines. Quite a group indeed, with all these different energies.

I noticed a new group that day, one I hadn't seen in Yosemite before—a diverse collection of young people who looked like they might be on a YMCA training camp. Boys and girls from various racial and ethnic backgrounds had joined hands in a circle, placing one person in the center. That person would fall backwards, trusting the others to catch them. You probably know this exercise—basic sensitivity training, the kind used in team-building to develop group trust. Someone simply closes their eyes, falls back, and gets caught. It's quite revelatory when you experience it firsthand, discovering you can actually trust others to that extent, and that they do indeed catch you.

Watching this reminded me of our practice, because we're constantly falling down in one way or another. Things go well, then we stumble and fall apart.

But the curious thing is that every time we fall down, something catches us. Something holds us in this mysterious way.

As we go through the days and weeks in retreat, I think one of the things we really start to have faith in is that it's okay to fall down in practice. It's okay to stumble. It's okay to lose the thread of mindfulness. It's okay to get lost in the chaos of restless energy, the strong bodily waves that come, the emotional currents that run through us. It's fine to get lost in all of that, because if our intention is to come back, eventually it all settles out and we're there—clear and present again.

So we just trust more and more in this practice that it's really safe, that we can let ourselves go, and we develop more of this quality of just falling back or surrendering.

This sense of trust in the basic safety of our experience is what in Pali is known as *saddhā*. *Saddhā* is usually translated as faith, but it also means trust or confidence—just a basic sense that the universe is a safe place to be. Literally, the root of the word *saddhā* means "to place one's heart upon."

I love this because it goes right to our core. What in our lives do we really place our hearts upon? All of us have different things. Traditionally, it's said that the Triple Gem is the right place to place your heart upon: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These are our refuges. If these connect for you, that's beautiful. They are refuges. They are safety. They can be trusted.

But early in practice, these particular words may not have that deep, heartfelt connection for us. And then we have to tune in for ourselves. Where is that gut sense of trust for us? Can we connect with that really deep sense of trusting in the universe?

I had a lovely teaching on this quality from Fred Wahpepah, whom many of you know. He's a Native American elder who teaches at Spirit Rock, often with John Travis, who was here for the first half. Fred leads sweat lodges, which are purification ceremonies in his tradition. The first time I did a sweat lodge with him, just down in the meadow below the dining hall, we all got in. The fires had been in there, the stones had been in there for a while, and it was quite hot. He was explaining to us the spirit with which one enters a sweat lodge, talking about this quality of trust.

He said, "In the Indian language, there's no word for hope. No word for hope. Just not part of the vocabulary." He said, "That's because we know that everything is already all right. So we don't have to think about hope. Everything is already all right."

I thought that was an incredible statement coming from a man whose culture has been more or less destroyed over the last 150 years: "Everything is already all right." It's a strong expression of that faith and that trust.

So the two questions I'd like us to look at tonight in our practice: What does it mean for us to fall, or we could say, to let go? And when we do that, what holds us? What do we let go into? What is it that we can really trust in?

This quality of letting go—we're really invited to make it moment after moment after moment, because that's what mindfulness is about.

What happens when we're not mindful? What's your experience? Reflect on your experience when mindfulness isn't present. It's usually made up of a lot of thoughts, isn't it? When there's not this clear tuning into the present moment, we're usually wandering back and forth between past and future. Those wanderings are driven—they're not random—but they're usually driven by forces of liking or disliking, of wanting or not wanting.

In a very short way, we could say they're driven by the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. We could call this shorthand for what the mind does when we're not mindful. As we talked about in the first half of this retreat, greed, aversion, and delusion are our basic strategies of relating with life when we don't have the quality of trusting in the moment. We use these forces of trying to mold our experience so that life will be a certain way, to try to control it.

To give up our hopes and fears is really to give up control. This is the challenge we're invited to in every moment of mindfulness. We're invited to let go of trying to shape our experience and instead open to it just as it is—to be with it without changing it, to accept it, to allow it.

Another way of saying it is that when we stop trying to control the world, we actually give up our individual will. Or you might say more accurately, we refine our will just to be present, to be with what is. We give up that will of trying to shape it, control it.

So in that way, we stop making I and mine. When we stop making I and mine, there's a lot of peace. There's a lot of peace.

Ajahn Chah has this beautiful line: "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace." This is the letting go of our hope and fear, letting go of control, letting go of I and mine.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was one of my teachers in Thailand, explained it a different way. He related this letting go of I and mine directly to the meaning of nibbana, the meaning of the unconditioned. The meaning of the word nibbana is clearly defined as freedom from suffering and as freedom from the mental defilements, which are the causes of suffering. That is freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion.

At any moment that our minds are void of I and mine, that is nibbana.

This is quite a radical statement. Most of the time in the teachings, nibbana is posited as something really far away, some really remote goal that comes at the end of a long, long period of very intensive practice. Six weeks is just kind of the foot in the door. But Ajahn Buddhadasa is making it much more accessible.

"At any moment that our minds are void of I and mine, that is nibbana. For example, at this moment, as you sit reading or listening, you probably have a mind void of the feelings of I and mine because there is nothing engendering those feelings. There are just the words you are hearing for the sake of abandoning I and mine. If there is some voidness—and I merely use the word 'some,' it's not completely or unchangeably void—then you are dwelling within the sphere of nibbana. Even though it may not be absolute or perfect nibbana, it is nibbana, just the same."

I really like this as an entry point. To me, it provides a really accessible way for each of us in our practice to feel the touch of nibbana. You might say the outskirts of the unconditioned. And by getting kind of the whiff of that, we can follow its trail back to the source.

So this letting go of I and mine, letting go of control, takes a lot of trust. It's one of the things that we grow into. Coming fully into the moment is a huge act of trust. I don't know if you've felt this at times, but when you come into this moment very fully, you're sort of naked. You've really dropped your defenses. You've dropped the escape into conceptualization. You've dropped your images of yourself and how you'd like to be or how you usually are. You're just open. Your heart is open to feel what is. That's a very naked place.

When you meet some great beings, you get the feeling of this quality very much from them—that they've kind of released into something greater. It's not just that they've worked on their positive qualities, kind of like building muscles, you know, the body-building school of mental development, but they've actually let go into something.

The Dalai Lama, for me, has this flavor a lot in his playfulness and his spontaneity. He was at a conference about a year ago at Gethsemane Abbey, which is where Thomas Merton lived when he was a Trappist monk. It was a cross-congregational meeting of

Buddhists and Christians, all contemplatives, all people who had spent a lot of time in solitude. He was there with all these other heavyweights from both sides, the Buddhist side and the Christian side. And it was such a kind of heavyweight gathering that PBS was filming it to show on television.

The Dalai Lama was the keynote speaker. So the klieg lights were on and the video cameras were rolling and it was going to be broadcast to forty or fifty million people later that day. The Dalai Lama is up there telling about his time at the Abbey. He said, "You know, the way the monks here support themselves is they make cheese and they make fruitcake. Yes, I learned this today. They took me on a tour of the Abbey, and they told me this. And every place they would take me, they would say, 'You know, we support ourselves. We make cheese and we make fruitcake. Would you like to try some cheese?'" And he said, "But all I wanted was the fruitcake." And then he just giggled. "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." He said, "They'd take me somewhere else, and they'd say, 'Would you like to try some cheese?' And I'd think, 'No, I just want the fruitcake!'"

And then he'd giggle again - right there in front of his hosts at the Abbey, in front of national television and all these other dignitaries, just playing with his own desire force, just like a kid, so innocent.

I think there's something there that we can release into and then live out of and trust - something that has this quality of spontaneous playfulness.

There's another teacher I enjoy a lot who comes to Marin fairly regularly named Byron Katie. Some of you may have run into her. She didn't come out of any particular tradition. She awakened, she said, by herself about ten or twelve years ago, quite spontaneously, and has now been teaching her understanding. She's someone who I feel has a lot of wisdom and a lot of love. I like her a lot.

She was telling a story about her husband, who is a recreational vehicle salesman in Barstow, California. As you might imagine, there's not a huge sangha in Barstow, California. In fact, her husband doesn't relate to any of this stuff. It's not his bag of tricks. But because his wife has gotten so into spirituality over the years, he's had to sort of learn to accommodate somewhat.

So this is one story that she told about their marriage. She said they were in a supermarket, just doing their grocery shopping, and she had the idea that she had never in her memory been wheeled through the supermarket in a shopping cart. She thought that was something she would like to experience, and she couldn't think of any reason why she shouldn't. So she said to her husband, "I'd like to get in the shopping cart and have you wheel me through the supermarket. Would you be willing to do that?"

And he said, as she says he often does, "Oh, Jesus Christ, Katie." He really didn't want to do it. But she said that he agreed to do it because he knew that if he hadn't, she would have asked someone else to - and then he would have been even more embarrassed.

So she jumped in the shopping cart and he wheeled her around the supermarket, and she said the most interesting thing was that no one would meet her eye. Nobody would make eye contact with her, as though everybody was used to seeing a middle-aged woman being wheeled through the supermarket every day of the year. Of course.

So Byron Katie, I think, has released into something also. Very trusting. Very trusting.

This other thing that we sometimes talk about that we fall into or release into is sometimes called our true nature. Sometimes it's called our Buddha nature. It's what we share with the awakened ones. It's said that it's in us in every moment already. It's not something that we only attain or only acquire when we reach awakening, but it's said to be with us here and now in every moment. It's only the fact of waking up to its presence that constitutes real discovery.

Ajahn Mahabua gave a pointer to this. Ajahn Mahabua was a kind of dharma brother of Ajahn Chah. They both practiced under the same teacher whose name was Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun was a very fierce teacher in the Thai forest tradition. He wandered throughout the forests of Thailand and Laos for about thirty or forty years. Only very late in life did he ever set up anything like a monastery. Everybody would always want him to stay and teach and be resident, but his whole practice was just wandering through the forests and teaching as he went. A number of the great teachers of the last fifty years practiced and trained under him, including Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Mahabua, who is still alive and still teaching in the northeast of Thailand.

This is from Ajahn Mahabua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics - impermanence, suffering, and not-self - the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

I find this really beautiful. His pointing is that the very nature of our mind is undying, that it holds within it all the phenomena that are coming and going, that are subject to impermanence and suffering and selflessness, but that the nature of the mind itself is not subject to this passing. This nature you could also call our basic goodness. It is what we can trust in. It is what holds us.

So let's look a little deeper into what this really is and how we can come to it through our practice. And again, I'll turn to one of Howie's favorite gurus and also one of mine - Calvin and Hobbes.

This is a strip that came out around December of one year. Calvin's talking to Hobbes and saying, "You know, this whole Santa Claus thing just doesn't make sense. Why all the secrecy?"

Why all the mystery? If the guy exists, why doesn't he ever show himself and prove it? And if he doesn't exist, what's the meaning of all this? And Hobbes says, "I don't know. Isn't this a religious holiday?" Calvin says, "Yeah, but actually I've got the same questions about God."

That's curious, isn't it? We may have a really deep gut sense of what is trustworthy in the universe—whether we call it the Dharma or Buddha nature or God or whatever, the unconditioned—but do we really know what that is?

It's so delicate because basically this thing can't be seen. It can't be heard. It can't be touched. It can't be grasped. Why is that? It can't be touched because if we could reach out and touch it as an object, then it would be something that had come into existence. And if it had come into existence and we could just grab it as an object of our senses, it would also have the nature of passing out of existence. And then it wouldn't be ultimate. It wouldn't be beyond arising and passing.

So whatever it is that we're looking for of this ultimate nature, it can't be seen, it can't be touched, it can't be heard. It has to be invisible. It has to be intangible. It has to be silent.

This is from a medieval Christian mystic named Angelus Silesius: "God is a pure nothing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for that, the more it will appear."

I like this formulation because it brings out a couple of great points. One is that the touching of that is founded upon trust. And trust comes from relaxing. That's why we often say at the beginning of a sitting, "Begin from a place of ease. Relax your body and mind. Don't strain. Don't strive." If we can bring in that quality of relaxation along with the alertness, then we're close to this presence.

The other thing I like about it is that it really points that the ultimate is found in the here and now. We shouldn't conceive of the ultimate as some separate destination apart from what's naturally arising here and now. It's found right in the midst of the here and now.

Suzuki Roshi had this quotation about it. He said, "It's necessary to trust in something that has no form or color, but that is always ready to take on form and color."

This really perplexed me for a lot of years in my practice. Something that has no form or color, but is always ready to take on form and color.

In the Buddhist jargon, form and color are sort of buzzwords. They basically refer to the world of sight. Everything within the world of sight can be described as having a shape and a particular color, like this zafu. What we actually see when we look around the world are not objects. We only learn over time to recognize them as woman or cushion or chair or man. What we really see are just patches of form and color. So form and color is a jargon way of saying the world of created appearances, the world of phenomena.

So it's necessary to trust in something that is not of that world of appearances, but it's always ready to take on form and color.

Now, I come from a scientific background myself, and when I first heard this quotation, I thought Roshi was pointing to something like raw matter—something like electrons, protons, neutrons, quarks, before they got formed into atoms, molecules, wood, leaves, grass, earth, and so on. But when I thought about it more, I thought that can't be right because even protons and electrons have some form and some shape and some qualities of appearing. So I decided that wasn't what he was talking about.

I decided he wasn't talking about anything on that side—the side of matter—but instead he was more talking about something from this side, the side that sees, the inner experience. That he was pointing to something in the nature of our consciousness itself. Because that's an interesting thing about consciousness. It doesn't actually have form or color, but it's always ready to take on form and color.

And gradually, we become familiar with the consciousness of sights. We can also take on sounds, smells, tastes, thoughts, emotions, sensations. Consciousness takes on all those qualities.

So I think Suzuki Roshi was pointing to something on the side of consciousness. But in the Buddha's teachings, consciousness has a really particular meaning. It's one of the five aggregates. The aggregates are considered to be the elements of the human being, including body; feeling tone, which we've covered in the instructions—that quality being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; perceptions, that recognition that knows something is a bell or a man or a bench; mental formations, basically thoughts and images; and consciousness is the fifth.

Consciousness, as the Buddha described it, is this quality that knows all of our experience. It's a quality that's on the receptive side of every facet of experience. It's preverbal, but it's that which holds the bare sense data. And you can, as a synonym, think of knowing before any words have come in. So it's just knowing the raw sense data of our experience.

Well, the Buddha said that all our consciousness is also characterized by coming and going. So for instance, when you hear the bell, there's a knowing of that sound, but the knowing passes when the sound passes. Consciousness as the Buddha defined it arises with sense experience and passes away as that sense experience passes.

But maybe the unchanging is somehow related to this. It's interesting if we look at the instructions—we start in the meditation instructions with sounds and then we turn to breath and then body sensations and then emotions and thoughts and experience in walking, sights and tastes, until everything eventually is included. All the changing appearances are included, but what's the one thing that doesn't change in the instructions? What's the thread that weaves all the instructions together?

It's mindfulness, isn't it? Whatever the changing objects or appearances, there's always mindfulness at work or at play. So I wonder if the deathless is somehow related to this quality of mindfulness, of awareness.

This is from an Indian teacher named Maharaj: "I met my guru when I was 34 and I realized by 37—maybe that's a practice we should be doing—pleasure and pain lost their sway over me. I was free from desire and fear. I found myself full, needing nothing. I saw that in the ocean of pure awareness, the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside, beginninglessly and endlessly. There's a mysterious power that looks after them. That power is awareness, life, God, whatever name you give it. It is the foundation and ultimate support of all that is, as gold is the basis for all jewelry."

So it's not just human beings that have this quality, that have this Buddha nature. It's said that all sentient beings have this. All animals, all creatures that are conscious have this.

This is from an old Zen master named Huang Po: "Buddhas and bodhisattvas together with all wriggling things possessed of life share in this great nirvanic nature." We share this with all the wriggling things that are possessed of life. This is our connection, our deepest connection to everything that lives—us and the earthworms.

Ajahn Jumnian, who was here last year, gave a talk to the staff and teachers about this unconditioned nature of mindfulness, and he put it this way. He said, "The best way to develop great awareness"—actually the word he used was mahasati, great mindful-

ness—"is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that's the place of the deathless. From this pure awareness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

This again is from Ajahn Mahabua: "There's no escaping this truth. Whatever arises has to vanish. But whatever is true, whatever is a natural principle in and of itself won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind."

So how can we start to get a sense of this in our practice? How can we start to get a flavor for this pure mind?

As Ajahn Buddhadasa pointed to, it's at times in the practice when the sense of I and mine is not so strong, when the sense of self with its demands and its needs and its wishes and its dislikes and its hopes and its fears aren't so insistent. That's the time that the mind has a degree of purity, has a degree of freedom in it. So you can begin to investigate—what's the feeling of those times when the demands of the I are not so strong? Really wake up at that point in time, bring your clear seeing into it.

This true nature emerges as a harmonious union of mindfulness's brightness and alertness with the calm and tranquility that arises when the defilements subside. Both dimensions are essential—the bright, alert energy of mindfulness and the deep tranquility and peacefulness. You can trust in this union as possessing qualities of clarity, fullness, and deathlessness.

This awareness illuminates everything. Sometimes when you sit with eyes closed, listening to sounds, you can feel how it pervades the entire universe. This quality of awareness encompasses the farthest stars and galaxies, all the sounds arising and passing away. Not only does it contain them, but it reveals them, illuminates them.

This awareness itself is empty—it must be empty to hold what is. Yet it's not a vacant emptiness. It's an emptiness pervaded with the quality of knowing, sometimes called luminosity, that illuminates all arisings. What we are most fundamentally is not the comings and goings, those transitory changes. What we are most fundamentally—that which continues—is this empty space in which all appearances arise and pass away and are known.

It possesses two essential qualities: emptiness and knowing. You could say this truly is the nature of mind or the nature of awareness. It's sometimes called our innate wakefulness. We can observe it and see that it's always like this, but we can't grasp it because it's not a thing. We only know it by relaxing into it and feeling its functioning. Through this we come to trust more and more that it is there.

This nature has always been, is now, and will always be, because it's beyond change—beyond coming and going, beyond birth and death. Being beyond change, it's beyond time. In itself, it's timeless. This is another quality of the ultimate.

It functions like a mirror, reflecting anything that appears before it completely and impartially. It reflects the beautiful and the ugly, the painful and the pleasant. It reflects movement as well as stillness, reflecting the defilements as well as the Brahma-Viharas, but it remains untouched by any of these. It's not harmed by the appearances. Fundamentally, it cannot be stained or corrupted. It's not made brighter by happiness, nor darkened by suffering. In itself, it has none of the characteristics of greed, aversion, and delusion, so it's free from the very beginning. It is that dimension in us which is already free.

So the question arises: do you take yourself to be free here and now, or do you take yourself to be bound? If you identify with the transitory, there will be bondage in that. That will be subject to birth and death, and what's subject to birth and death is subject to suffering. If you take yourself to be this limitless and pure, empty knowing, then in that there's already freedom. Freedom doesn't need to be created—it only needs to be seen and trusted.

Once you gain an intuitive sense of this quality of mind, you can simply relax into it. You can start to rest in it.

This comes from Ajahn Buddhadasa again: "When you hear a phrase like 'Nibbana for everyone,' you may shake your head in disbelief and understand that someone has tried to dye a cat just for sale." Perhaps you don't get the image—it's like painting up a cat. Maybe the cat is partly orange and partly gray, but you spray paint it all black so you can sell it and get a higher price. If you're a teacher, you'd dye a cat for sale if you wanted to appeal to your students. So he's saying that you might think I'm just trying to dye a cat for sale. You might not have any interest in the subject, but nibbana is a natural condition. It's the cool state of mind when the defilements are absent.

When can we tune into that in our practice? When does the mind feel really cooled out? When does it not feel churned up by the forces of liking and disliking, the forces of greed and aversion? We can trust in that. That can become its own path. It's enough

simply to rest in that and trust that in resting there, we are actually tuning ourselves to the unconditioned. We're tuning to Nibbana, and we can trust that this will carry us to freedom.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha advises us to reflect again and again on our own death and what will happen to our body after death. In traditional Buddhist countries, practitioners are encouraged actually to go to cemeteries and charnel grounds to observe corpses that are decaying in various stages of dissolution. We can't do that anymore today because of cemetery regulations and health codes. So the modern day equivalent for practitioners in Thailand are autopsies. As a monk or a nun, you're permitted to go to hospitals and observe autopsies being done.

I took advantage of this a couple of times when I was a monk in Bangkok and went down to a hospital, Siriraj Hospital, near the parade grounds in downtown Bangkok. I was thirty-two years old at the time and had never been next to a dead body. Now I was next to several dead bodies. I could walk right up to them and touch them. When the coroner came, we took seats in the operating theater, and he put one of these dead bodies on the stainless steel table and began to take it apart.

Coming from not even having seen a dead body to watching it being taken apart was completely shocking for me. I felt like I was getting blown away by observing that. But it was also fascinating. I couldn't take my eyes off the process. So I watched as the coroner dissected one body, which took about twenty minutes and involved removing all the internal organs, including the brain, and weighing them. He sewed the body back up, then went to the next body. I observed this for several bodies in a row.

Then we went out to catch a bus back to the monastery. We were waiting at the parade ground, which is a really busy part of downtown Bangkok. I was watching all kinds of people go by—young people and students and couples walking hand in hand and older people who had come down to the marketplace to do their shopping, dogs running across the grounds. I had just come out of seeing these bodies taken apart, and the phrase that came to my mind as I was looking around at everybody walking by was: all I could see was walking corpses. I could only see walking corpses.

I thought to myself later, what did I mean by that phrase? That's such a strange phrase, a walking corpse. What did it mean to me? When I looked at everybody, I could see that the body was no different than those bodies that I had just seen on the autopsy table. No difference at all in the physical form. But these bodies at the parade ground—there was still a brightness that was shining out through the eyes. I was really struck and in touch with that brightness, that vitality of the life force and of consciousness that was still shining, that I could see in their eyes.

As I got in touch with the characteristics of that brightness, I realized that brightness was completely of this moment, of this present moment. It didn't have any past and it didn't have any future. And that most fundamentally, that is what we are. We are this body that is alert with this present moment brightness, completely of the present moment.

But this brightness has a capacity to receive sense impressions. And because of that capacity and another peculiar capacity of storing them up, which we call memory, we're able to construct a past. And out of the construction of the past, we're able to project a future. So these things aren't intrinsic to that brightness, but they're sort of built out of the components of it.

This brightness is that resting place. This brightness is that pure awareness that is beyond time, beyond birth and death. And when we rest there, that has the quality to hold us, to be our safety, and to carry us through this whole journey to freedom.

The Buddha was talking to a monk in his day about this quality of trust or faith. The monk's name was Pingiya. This is what he said about it:

"Pingiya, other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. Vakkali, Bhadravudha, and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 220

The Five Aggregates (Pañcakhandha)

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's fundamental teaching on the five aggregates (pañcakhandha) - the constituents that make up what we conventionally call a 'person.' Drawing from the Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta (SN 22.95), Armstrong explains how the Buddha described these aggregates as empty of inherent existence: form like foam, feeling like bubbles, perception like a mirage, mental formations like a banana tree, and consciousness like a magic trick. Through vivid analogies including an actual magic demonstration, he illustrates how our usual perception of solid, permanent selfhood is actually a collection of constantly changing processes. Armstrong connects this understanding to the three characteristics of existence (tilakkhana) - impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and not-self (anattā) - showing how seeing through the illusion of a fixed self leads to freedom from suffering. The talk weaves together scientific insights about perception with traditional Buddhist analysis, demonstrating how mindful investigation of our moment-to-moment experience reveals the 'magical display' nature of existence. Armstrong emphasizes that this understanding of emptiness (suññatā) naturally gives rise to compassion, as we recognize that 'there is suffering, but no one who suffers' - a realization that both liberates us from the burden of defending a non-existent self and opens the heart to care for all beings caught in the same fundamental delusion.

I think Howie talked last night about the three characteristics of existence—qualities that a number of us have pointed to over this retreat of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, of selflessness. In a way, you could say that these three characteristics really point to the key understanding that the Buddha wanted to communicate. Throughout his years of teachings, he kept coming back and pointing to these three things again and again. I think the reason he was pointing so often is because they're linked to the source of our suffering.

He was really saying that we suffer because we don't see the world the way that it really is. The way that it really is is described by the three characteristics, but we find ourselves living in some degree of illusion. You might say that we suffer because we're all deluded. Rather than being an insult, this is actually just the typical human condition.

The Buddha talked another way about the fundamental root of our suffering being ignorance. Ignorance isn't so much that we don't have all the facts. You can go to a book of teachings from any religion and you can read the facts, the information, but ignorance is that we don't see things the way they are. We're blinded in some way. We live deluded.

The Buddha was talking about this issue of self as being such a central one. He said that in whatever way people conceive of self, the truth is ever other than that. You can't say it much more clearly. However we conceive of self, we're wrong.

One of my teachers put it a little more dramatically. This is Christopher Titmus, who many of you know has a great habit for speaking controversially and directly. Christopher's statement was to us: "Everything you think is wrong." That's a good one to wake a meditator up. This really has a beautiful truth about it, and it's really hard to keep it in mind.

We keep telling ourselves all the time the way the world is, the way that we are, the way that other people are. We know it so thoroughly. Because of this storytelling, we really believe that we know what's so. It's really hard to remember that we are living from illusion. Every one of us who has not completely let go of the concept of "I" is living in illusion.

It takes a lot of humility to recognize this. It's hard to keep that humility with us, to doubt the views that we hold to so often, and also to trust in our deepening wisdom. This is sort of the balancing act of spiritual practice—to trust in our wisdom and not to believe in our opinions. Not an easy balance.

So one of the ways that we get confused, one of the ways that we see wrongly, is when we look at ourselves or we look at each other, we think we see a person. This is really commonplace, right? There are lots of people in this room here tonight, but I don't think that's the way the Buddha saw.

When the Buddha looked at a human being and described what he saw, he usually described it in one of two ways. One was that he saw six types of consciousness and six types of sense objects. These are really the foundation of our practice throughout our time together, whether you've been here for two weeks or for five weeks. We keep coming back to the sense doors—the sensations, the sights, the sounds, the tastes, the smells, and the objects of mind, the thoughts and moods and images. So six types of sense doors, six types of consciousness, six types of appearances. This is one of the ways that he described the human being.

But actually the way that he employed more often in his teaching when he wanted to teach understanding was a teaching device called the five aggregates. This is what I'd like to talk about tonight—this model of the human being called the five aggregates.

The word aggregate is a translation from the Pali word khanda. In Sanskrit, it's called skanda, and the Sanskrit is actually in much more common usage in the Buddhist world. So if I use a foreign word, I'll use the word skanda for the most part.

This word skanda, although aggregate sounds very technical, actually didn't have a technical meaning in India at the time of the Buddha. Skanda just means heap or bundle. That's all it means. You could look at a heap of sticks that are lying on the ground and you could call that a skanda of sticks.

So I think that the word that best translates skanda is not aggregate because it's so technical we think there's something really deep or complicated being pointed at. I think the best translation is the five kinds of stuff. That's the way I think of it. The aggregates or the skandhas are the five kinds of stuff that make us up, that make up what we call a human being.

They're usually divided into two groups. One group points to the things of the material world and the other group points to the things of the mind.

So another synonym for the five kinds of stuff is nama-rupa. Nama literally means name, while rupa literally means form. This is sometimes translated as "name and form," but a better translation for us is "mentality and materiality." Nama literally means name, and so it points to the fact that so much of the activity of mind is around naming and designation and terminology—the use of language. Then the world of materiality is the world of form. Rupa just means form.

So in the five kinds of stuff, we have on the one hand the materiality, and that is all included in this one aggregate, the one skanda called form or rupa. Then when the Buddha looked at mind, he broke it down into four different pieces for the purposes of this list. And those are feeling tone, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. And he said, outside of these five things, there isn't anything. Everything that falls within our human experience can be classified into one of these five areas.

So I'd like to talk a little bit about how these things function and then go into detail about each of them. I'll give a simple example. In the world of materiality, if I strike the bell, you hear a sound. As you attend to that sound, the sound itself is of the material world. So it's an evidence, an instance of rupa. As that sound hits your ear, you hear the sound. The sound is form.

You have a feeling tone associated with it. It may be a pleasant sound, maybe an unpleasant sound. Because it's usually struck at the end of sittings, it's usually a pretty pleasant sound. It's kind of like the key that opens the prison door for us, so we tend to like that sound. So the feeling is usually pleasant.

And then sometimes when you hear it, you might just say to yourself, "Oh, that's the bell." That quality of naming it as a bell is perception—the act of recognition or memory, perceiving a specific object as the bell.

And then there might be thoughts about the bell. The thoughts might be, "I'm so glad the sitting's over." The thought might be, "That's a really nice bell." I often think—I don't know how many of you know this—this bell was donated to Spirit Rock by San Francisco Zen Center. And there was a day last fall when we had a teacher meeting here and Norman Fischer, who's one of the abbots of the Zen Center family, brought it around and taught us how to strike it. And it was a really touching moment because I felt like there was this transmission.

It came from Japan. It was cast in Japan. And he told us that they had some people who knew how to get really good deals in Japan. I don't know. He may have just said that to make us feel better because it's quite a nice bell. And he taught us how to strike it, and I'll show you the way that he taught us to strike it. He said you hold the striker at an angle and you just let it fall against the bell.

As I listened to him ring the bell for the first time, one of my perceptions was of Japanese culture. I kind of felt like what this gift was, was the gift of an ancient culture that had long studied and lived with the beauty of silence and the mystery of silence coming into the West, where we're just starting to appreciate that quality and all the richness of the sound of a bell. So that was one of my thoughts and one of the things I often think about with this bell is the transmission from that ancient culture.

And then also with the sound of the bell often comes a feeling of great ease. You often notice that at the end of a sitting, the bell goes and you think, "I could sit here forever," all of a sudden. So the thoughts about the bell, the feeling of ease, fall in the realm of mental formations. These are things that come out of the world of mind.

And then with each piece of this—with the sound, with its feeling tone, with the perception of it, with the thought and mood—comes consciousness. Consciousness is there at every step of the way. It's the quality in the mind that receives all that activity, that holds the activity and knows it.

And what's interesting about this way of looking at the human being in terms of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness is that all five of these are there in every moment of experience. They're arising at different sense doors, but all five of them are always present. There are some altered states where some of these go away, but for the most part in our ordinary experience, all five of them are there. So it's a very comprehensive view. If we take the six sense doors, not all the six sense doors may be there in every moment, but all the five aggregates are. So it's a really good pointer to our moment-to-moment experience.

I'd like to talk a little about the aggregate of form.

When James put his card back, he turned it around so it went in the opposite direction. Now that card is thicker where all the other cards are thin. So I can feel for the thick card among all the thin cards, and that's his card.

So the mystery is gone once you know how it works. The trick depends on you not knowing how it's constructed.

And the Buddha said the five aggregates are like a magic show because they give the appearance of being a self, a solid, continuous, separate self. But when you understand how they work—how they're put together—the magic disappears. The illusion of self falls away.

Let's look at how this magic show works, starting with the aggregate of form. When you watch the world of sights, there's this feeling that you are here and the world is out there. There's a sense of separation, of inside and outside. But when you look more carefully at the experience of seeing, what's actually happening?

Light bounces off objects and hits the eye. The eye receives these light patterns, and somewhere in this process, the brain constructs what we call "seeing." But where exactly is the boundary between you and the world? Is the seeing happening in the eye? In the brain? In the object being seen? The experience of seeing seems to happen everywhere and nowhere at once.

This body that we think of as so solid and permanent—it's constantly changing. Every cell is replacing itself. The atoms that make up this form are mostly empty space. And yet there's this persistent sense of "my body," as if it were a fixed, separate thing.

The aggregate of form includes not just this body, but all material phenomena—the chair you're sitting on, the walls around us, the air between us. When you really examine it, where does "your" body end and the rest of the world begin? The air you breathe becomes part of your body. The food you eat becomes your flesh. The heat from your body warms the space around you.

The magic trick of the self depends on not looking too closely at how these aggregates actually function. It depends on the assumption that there's someone in here having experiences, someone separate from what's being experienced. But when mindfulness reveals how each aggregate actually operates, this assumption begins to dissolve.

And while he was showing you the card, I turned the deck around so that when he put it back in, the thick end was at one end of the deck and I can find it by just running my finger up the deck and it comes out. So now you know the secret and now I will never impress you again. That's okay, it's all worth it. It's worth it for the insight.

So now I'd like to read you this comparison that the Buddha made of our existence—the human body and mind—to a magic show. The Buddha put it this way:

"Suppose, friends, that a magician should hold a magic show at the four crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should see it, ponder over it, and reflect on it with wise attention. Even as she sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it with wise attention, she would find it empty. She would find it hollow. She would find it void of essence. What essence, friends, could there be in a magic show?

"Even so, friends, whatever form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness a practitioner sees—when she sees it, ponders over it, and reflects on it with wise attention—she would find it empty. She would find it hollow. She would find it void of essence. What essence could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness?"

The Buddha closes the passage with a little poem, which he composed spontaneously as he often did:

"Form is like a mass of foam and feeling but an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and mental formations a plantain tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick and tire. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun"—another epithet for the Buddha.

I should mention this analogy to the plantain tree. I didn't understand it at first. The plantain is a kind of banana. If you know the way the banana tree works, as soon as it grows and sprouts a clump of bananas, it dies because its essence is hollow. A banana

tree does not keep producing generation after generation the way most fruit trees do. It comes up once, it produces, and then it's gone. The mental formations are like a banana tree.

What the Buddha is pointing to in this passage is the sheer emptiness of this whole experience that we call a human being.

I want to talk a little bit about this teaching on emptiness because it comes in so often in the Buddhist tradition. The Heart Sutra, which is one of the summations of the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, has very near the start of it the line: "While practicing deeply the paramita of wisdom, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara—who's the Bodhisattva of compassion—perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress." That's a powerful perception. The very seeing of the emptiness of the aggregates, it's said in this ancient sutra, was enough to save Avalokiteshvara from all suffering and distress.

Last fall I was doing a retreat at home while reading quite a bit of an author named Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna is the author par excellence of emptiness in the whole Buddhist tradition. He wrote in about the second century in India. Through twenty-eight chapters, Nagarjuna just takes apart the substantiality of not only our experience, but then the whole Buddhist path, so that what you had thought you might stand on instead of our usual experience also gets cut out from under you.

I was reading this while doing a lot of retreat practice, and as I was reading it, I started to have dreams about emptiness. In one of my dreams, I was standing in front of a mirror, and I obviously had the same question that probably many of you have. Standing in front of the mirror and seeing my image, this thought came up in my mind in the dream: Why is emptiness important? Because on the face of it, it just can seem like a philosophical idea. Does it really impact our lives?

So the question came in the dream: Why is emptiness important? And the being in the mirror spoke back to me and said, "Because it means that you don't exist. It means that you don't exist."

Now obviously it doesn't mean that I don't exist as a body or as mind states or as intentions and so forth. But what if this world didn't contain you as a problem? What if this world didn't contain you as a center of fear that had to be maintained and defended and protected? What if that kind of identity was taken away? Imagine the freedom and the spaciousness and the ease of life. That's the potential of the insight into emptiness.

In talking about emptiness, I want to go into it a little bit. I met last summer a really impressive teacher—one of the most impressive teachers I've met in my life—a Tibetan teacher named Mingyur Rinpoche, who's twenty-three years old and teaches as though he were a sixty-five-year-old enlightened master. At the age of twenty, he had completed two three-year retreats and led another group of people as the retreat master of a three-year retreat, all by the time he was twenty.

This is a fairly special being. It was his first trip to the West. I got to go around with him for an afternoon, and we asked him what he thought of the West, because it was his first time here. His answer was, "It's square and it's clean." That was kind of interesting. Coming from Kathmandu, or India, I could see why he meant that. But he was obviously not fascinated with the West at all. That's all he had to say about it.

I said, "Do you think Westerners are as happy as Tibetans?" He said no. He really didn't think so from the Westerners that he'd met. And he didn't have a lot of interest in talking about things on that level.

So we were going for a walk. We were actually walking around the top of Mount Tam. You probably know there's a nice circular walk that takes about twenty minutes. And I asked him, "What's the difference between the kind of emptiness in the Dzogchen school and the kind of emptiness they talk about in Nagarjuna's school of Buddhism?"

And then his eyes lit up. He got so excited. He sat down right on the spot, right on the path. We sat down with him, because he obviously wasn't going anywhere, and he started to talk to me about that answer. I received it through a translator. But the first thing he said in that answer was, "What you need to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness in our tradition. Eighteen different kinds of emptiness." And then he went on to answer my question at quite some length. It was very interesting.

So of the eighteen kinds of emptiness, we're not going very far tonight. We're just touching on a little bit of it.

Let's just take a look at this line that form is like a mass of foam. That means this body and everything else we see out there. How can this be like a mass of foam?

To take a look at that question, I'd like us to reflect for a minute on our usual view of the world. You know, growing up in the latter half of the twentieth century, we've all been conditioned by a very scientific view of the world. Unfortunately, the kind of science that we've picked up, the kind we were taught when we were young and formative, was mostly nineteenth-century science because the insights of quantum physics and later physics haven't really permeated people's being yet.

The nineteenth-century view of science is that this world is the true reality. If you think about the Newtonian view of the way things are, this world is really seen as something solid. It's seen in a way—and this is what I'd like to point to—as an ultimate truth.

I believe that in the culture in which you and I have grown up, the assumption is that this physical world is the ultimate truth. We enter this physical world when we are born. We are trapped in it, completely trapped in it and embedded in it during our lifetime. And when we die, we go out of it. I think the assumption is that this is the ultimate substratum of things.

Now, when the Buddha looked at the world, he put in a different piece, a piece that I think is really important. And that is that everything we experience of this world, we only experience through the human senses and with human consciousness.

So in the view of the Buddha, we may never know. We probably can never know exactly what that physical world is or is like because we're always holding it with human consciousness.

This human consciousness is a really important piece because maybe—just maybe—that is more fundamental than this. And if that's true, it stands our worldview on its head. Maybe consciousness is more fundamental than this physical reality. Maybe instead of consciousness being embedded in the physical reality, maybe the physical reality is just an appearance in consciousness, just an appearance.

When we come to meditation, some of this sense of transparency starts to come through. We've always assumed that the body was solid, but as we practice and develop mindfulness and concentration, we start to see that the body is just the location of changing sensations that are arising and pulsing and throbbing and vibrating and then passing out of existence, one after another.

Despite the fact that our third-grade health book looked like there were solid things in here, when we look with awareness, it's all in flux. It's just change. Its nature is nothing but change. So we start to feel the insubstantiality of the body. We tune in very strongly to the insubstantiality of sounds, of thoughts, the cloud-like nature of our emotions, of tastes and smells, how they're all just passing and drifting through.

This breaking up of solidity is one of the most notable features of a retreat, especially a long retreat. And I know that all of you have tasted it in some degree or another.

But there's one sense door that's really hard to penetrate with this sense of fluidity, and that is the sense door of sight. We look around these eight walls and they look so solid. The floor looks so solid. Even people look quite solid. How can we penetrate that seeming solidity of sight?

Here we can call on science to support our inquiry. Remember from your seventh grade science text how vision gets created. There are photons streaming out of the lights that are all around the room. These photons are bouncing off of every surface in the room and coming to the eye where they enter through the pupil and fall on the retina. That stimulates a nerve transmission that goes up to the brain and in reaching the brain, somehow mysteriously, consciousness is created. Consciousness of sight, seeing happens.

When you think about that, you realize that the appearance of these walls is only coming because photons are continuously striking the retina. And that means that sight is not at all solid, but it's just a flickering on and off of consciousness that's created by millions of photons impinging every microsecond, giving rise through transient nerve impulses to the brain, to some kind of vision, some kind of sight.

We can take it one step further. If you look at the sweater that I have on, and I asked you what color it was, everybody would probably say it's red. It seems really clear. But when you think about what that actually means, you're not saying anything about my sweater being red. It's actually the red light that's bouncing off the sweater into your eyes to create the impression of red. So actually my sweater is every color in the spectrum but red. And the red is what's bouncing off to you.

So when I ask you the question, where is red? What's the answer? Red's really not in this sweater, is it? Red's just an appearance in your consciousness. It's just a blossoming for a short period of time in your sphere of sight. There's nothing solid in this appearance red, just the trickling of photons and the striking of nerve impulses. This whole appearance that seems like a solid world is just a flickering in sight consciousness, nothing more.

We can take it a step further. I think I said in a talk a while ago that our consciousness extends out to the farthest stars. But when you think about it, that's actually a metaphor. What's actually happening is that light has traveled across five million years or so to strike our retina. And then our consciousness projects it as a small light that looks like it's out there. But that light is here and now. It's five million years old. We're actually not seeing the star. We're just seeing some photons that came from it a long, long, long time ago.

So we're actually not seeing the star. We're just seeing light from the star and that light is here and now. That flowering into consciousness is just here and now. Everything is just here and now.

One of the ways that you can work with this in your practice is to speak not so much about objects in our experience, but appearances, and not so much about objects of meditation as subjects of meditation. You can play with this terminology as you go throughout the day. Everything that arises for you is only an appearance.

If you see the world as an appearance rather than as objects, then the world takes on this quality that Kent mentioned this morning talking with Howie about a magical display. Everything that appears to our senses is just this magical display. How did it get here? We don't know. How does it keep functioning? We don't really know. How is consciousness generating our experience? We don't know that either. We just know that everywhere we turn, there are these magical appearances in consciousness.

You know, it's really like a dream. It's very hard to say in a moment of our experience how it is any different than a dream.

One of my teachers put it very directly in a way that was kind of shocking when he said, "Everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. No real existence whatsoever." In the way that we usually take things to exist, we usually take things to exist solidly. And then we start to realize that that feeling of solidity is just sense data transmitted through touch of hardness—that's all it is.

We were talking about this in a group of old students last fall, and one of the people in the class was Jean Lafond, who practices here at Spirit Rock a lot. I asked her, "What difference did you feel when you started looking at things as appearances rather than objects?" And this was her response:

"It's spooky, but I found it fascinating. I would look at everything—like this Japanese lamp that I love—and I'd see that it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When you go from an object to say it's an appearance, and then to a person and say they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But I believe it. It's true. And it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile."

This is the felt sense of emptiness, this lack of solid substance within any of us anywhere in the world. And it brings more compassion and more wisdom.

The second of the aggregates is the quality of feeling tone, or vedana. We've talked about this a lot in the instructions—this quality of every moment of our experience being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. So I'm not going to spend a lot more time with vedana. I think we've investigated that extensively.

The third is the quality of perception. Perception here means to recognize. It has the sense of memory acting so that we have had to learn to recognize these patches of form and color as constituting walls, lamps, women, benches, chairs, men, and so on. It's not intrinsic.

Oliver Sacks has this beautiful story where he was witnessing an operation where a surgeon had restored sight to a man who had lost it very, very young. This man was now in middle age and had learned to function very well as a blind person. When the bandages were removed from the individual at the end of the operation, everybody expected that if the operation was a success, the bandages would be peeled off and the patient would cry, "Wow, now I can see!"

It didn't happen like that. The bandages were taken off, but no cry of "I can see" burst from Virgil's lips. He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing, right at the surgeon who stood before him still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke, saying "Well?" did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face.

Virgil told Sacks later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color. It was all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came this voice that said, "Well?" Then and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face, and indeed the face of his surgeon.

Sacks goes on to say that Virgil never actually learned all that well to put the visual world together again, because these tracks in the brain seem to form best when we're really young. So this act of perception—he could never quite get right again.

As we see the world, so we relate to it. There's a story that Jon Kabat-Zinn tells. He's been teaching mindfulness-based stress reduction in the military at quite extensive levels from what I've heard. He was giving one training and heard this story from an officer who was in the training group.

The officer said that he was at the supermarket one day buying some groceries. He was standing in line and the cashier was taking quite a bit of time chatting to an older woman who had brought a child in with her. The cashier had rung up the woman's gro-

ceries and still kept on chatting. He was getting really impatient. "Why doesn't this woman move through? Why is the cashier spending so much time with this customer? I'm ready to pay for my groceries."

Why doesn't she get out of my way?

He was getting quite irritated, but with mindfulness-based stress reduction, he was starting to learn to be aware of his feelings, to label his impatience, to try and relax into the present moment, feel his body—all those good skills you've been learning.

He got to the cashier and he just thought he'd check it out. He said, "Well, you certainly seemed to have a nice chat with the customer in front of me."

And the cashier said, "Oh yes, that was my mother. You see, my husband died in an aircraft training exercise only a few months ago, and I have two small children. I've had to go to work now because his life insurance policy didn't leave us enough to live on, and that was my baby. So my mother babysits for me while I come to work here, and she brings my baby in a couple of times a day so that I can see it and check how it's doing."

In that moment, of course, his whole relationship to the situation changed. Instead of the impatience, he just felt this great humility and compassion in the face of what the woman had suffered, the loss that she'd suffered, the difficulty of having two children without a father that she was still working with.

The basic shift that happened was a shift of perception—from perceiving her as an idle, careless, thoughtless worker, to seeing her as somebody who had a human life to live with a great deal of difficulty and complexity. Just in the space of a few moments, that shift of perception happened. His whole relationship to her was different.

Perception is a really powerful faculty. One Tibetan teacher said to a friend of mine that there are two kinds of insights that come in practice. One is when we have special experiences. Another is when we have just ordinary experiences, but we see them differently. We see them differently because there's been a shift in perception. He said the shifts of perception are actually more powerful than the experiences.

This has been interesting for me to reflect on. In the last few days, people have been coming in and reporting some really powerful meditation experiences, really moving and beautiful experiences. Someone mentioned that they were in touch with a stillness that was so profound that as it deepened, the very sense of an observer of the stillness—the observer went away because it got folded into the depth of the stillness as the stillness deepened.

A couple of people have come in and talked about very difficult memories and emotions connected with childhood hurt and abuse, and then coming through the practice and a great deal of work over a number of years to periods of happiness, contentment and acceptance. That's extremely moving. To be able to find that depth of contentment after a really difficult past is really nothing short of a miracle.

Someone else came in and talked about spending time in nature recently, spending three hours with a very full sense of being in the present moment, being one with nature without any sense of desiring anything. What a powerful experience—just to be completely here and without the confusion, the unsatisfying nature of desire.

So all these experiences are extremely significant and extremely important. And as you also are seeing, they all also change. They decay, they move on, something else happens. And we're often left with this question: what was the meaning of this experience that I had that touched me so deeply?

And what I think is important with these special experiences is to take a look at the fact that the experience leaves, but what really can transform is insight. And in those special times, how were you seeing the world differently? What did you learn from that altered state of being? How does the world look different to you from that vantage point, than from the ordinary vantage point of being caught in confusion or disappointment or upheaval? If you can get in touch with what you're learning from the experience, that will stay.

So one of the things we often recommend, if you can recall how the experience was for you bodily—how did you feel in your body when you were in that special place? That can be a doorway back to connecting with the experience a little bit, not to grasp or to try to recreate or out of greed, but so that you can let it unfold a little more and find: what did I learn from that? What did it show me that's new? How do I see things differently?

And then other people were reporting that their experience was going more and more to the ordinary. Instead of all the striving and strain and effort and working that was in the early part of the retreat, they found that they were just dropping into an effortless kind of mindfulness that felt quite unpressured, quite unforced, very natural, and they wondered if that had any value.

This is another really beautiful turning point. The real ordinariness of experience, but with just a sense of contentment and settledness and ease. You can really trust in that place. It is special. It may not feel very special. It may feel like you're just kind of in a very ordinary frame of mind, but you can trust with that effortless unfolding that it will deepen on its own.

The fourth of the aggregates is mental formations, sometimes called karmic formations. It means that there's some urge that's bringing them forward. Mostly these are thoughts, emotions, moods, and images. To a large extent, these are what we identify as personality. You know, our consistent mood—that's a happy person, that's a kind person, that's a sad person, that's a fearful person. And the kind of thought patterns that go with those things kind of define the personality to a large extent.

There's a conditioned quality to this patterning. Sometimes it's precisely what motivates us to come to practice—it certainly was for me. The first time I did a retreat, I was emerging from a period of profound confusion and fear. What I touched in meditation practice was a depth of openness where nothing was there from the beginning. I had that sense really clearly early on: nothing was there from the beginning. Everything was simply coming and going.

Suzuki Roshi expressed this beautifully: "Those who know the state of emptiness will always be able to dissolve their problems through constancy." This is the profound healing quality of meditation. As Sylvia spoke about the other night, there's that opening of the heart that comes when there's no longer outer pressure upon it. The heart becomes able to offer up and truly release patterns it may have been holding for years upon years. When the heart can let go of that burden of the past, it can enter this moment with such heartfulness, presence, and ease. We begin to feel what is pointed to by the natural peace and ease of the unburdened heart.

The last of the aggregates is consciousness—the knowing quality in each moment, the receptive quality that holds the sense data. It also holds feeling, perception, and mental formations; consciousness holds all of our experience. In every moment, there's the sense data and the knowing of it arising together. You can't really take them apart. The sense data may be physical, but there's always a mental component—our consciousness. Without this mental component, experience couldn't enter memory; we couldn't recall it later. Yet we can—if I ask you to remember the sound of the bell, you can, because there was a mental receiving and storing of that sound.

This is a fascinating investigation for meditation: getting in touch with that knowing quality of mind that meets sense data. You can turn your attention to the knowing side rather than the object side. You can work with this through the breath, through sounds.

This leads into the big mind meditation that Howie led this morning—turning attention to consciousness itself. This brings through the sense of insubstantiality to our experience, the consciousness side.

These are the five aggregates—our mental and physical components of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.

I'd like to share a story from a nun practicing at the time of the Buddha. Her name was Vajira, one of the nuns visited by Mara. As Eugene discussed in the retreat's first part, many Mara stories appear in the ancient texts. Mara—the embodiment of temptation, confusion, or evil—often visited practitioners, particularly nuns. Here, Mara comes to distract a nun deep in meditation, hoping to draw her from her practice.

Mara approaches and says, "Who put this living being together? Where is the maker? Where does this being come from and where will it end?"

But Vajira was no beginning meditator. She responded: "What's this 'being' you go on about? That's just your delusion. We are nothing but the skandhas. There's no being to be found here. It's like this: a certain combination of parts is called by the name 'chariot.' So with the skandhas, the elements of mind and body, it's only common usage to call it a 'being.' It is suffering that exists, suffering that endures, and suffering that disappears. Nothing but suffering exists. Nothing but suffering comes to an end."

What Vajira was pointing to is that when we take up the concept of self or being, we bind ourselves to suffering. There's really no difference between grasping onto a self and suffering. When we begin to see this clearly, we also see the way out of our suffering. If we don't take ourselves to be the body, if we don't take ourselves to be the owner of the body, then where's the problem?

Ajahn Buddhadasa put it this way:

He said, "This body came from nature. It's never departed from nature and it belongs to nature. So give back to nature what belongs to nature." It's a great relief.

We call it a being, but as we look closely, investigating its component parts, we only find form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. We don't find any solid center that we could call an "I." We create an "I" where there really is no evidence for one, and by holding on to it, we suffer.

One meditator described suffering simply as rope burn—holding on to what's slipping away. That's why it's said in the Visuddhimagga, one of the ancient texts: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true."

Empty phenomena rolling on. This is you and me. There's no one inside of this. Essentially there's the body, there's the consciousness, and there are our thoughts and feelings. That's it. There's no owner.

And yet, as Jean pointed out in the quote I read earlier, this kind of seeing actually brings out compassion, because we see how each of us has been caught, how each of us is stuck in this "I" view. And then we start to connect with this beautiful image of Kuan Yin, the other image on the altar.

Kuan Yin is the bodhisattva, the awakened being who embodies compassion. She's often depicted with many heads, many eyes, a thousand arms and a thousand hands. It's said that she can hear all the cries of pain and sorrow from every being throughout the whole world and has a thousand arms and a thousand hands to bring them relief, to bring us relief. She is the very embodiment of compassion.

But Kuan Yin is also a bodhisattva, and bodhisattvas are also not deluded about the nature of beings. Bodhisattvas understand clearly that there is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. And so while she cares deeply about the pain that each of us feels, she also knows that there's no one at the center of this who is suffering.

This is the beautiful balance of wisdom and compassion that grows out of this understanding of emptiness. And that's why she's left us this beautiful pointing of freedom in an utterance of hers, a phrase that I like a lot, and I'll close with:

"The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?

So let's just sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 221

Renunciation

Guy Armstrong · 51 min

In this opening dharma talk for a three-month retreat, Guy Armstrong examines renunciation (nekkhamma) as one of the ten pāramīs—the perfections leading to liberation. Drawing from the Buddha's own renunciation story and examples of great contemplatives like Mahāsī Sayādaw, Dingo Khyentse Rinpoche, and Ani Tenzin Palmo, Armstrong illustrates how outer simplicity creates space for inner transformation. He explains how retreat conditions—giving up speaking, reading, special foods, and social contact—mirror the Buddha's departure from household life into homelessness. The talk addresses practical aspects of retreat living while emphasizing that true renunciation involves releasing inner grasping rather than mere external austerity. Armstrong explores the relationship between discipline (sīla) and freedom, showing how restraint leads to gladness of mind rather than deprivation. He discusses the challenges that arise when external distractions fall away, revealing the mind's fundamental patterns of attachment and aversion. Through stories from forest monasteries and mountain retreats, the talk demonstrates how renunciation cultivates the 'open hand' of letting go versus the 'closed fist' of grasping, ultimately supporting the practitioner's journey toward the 'unshakable deliverance' the Buddha described.

For those of you who weren't here last night, I'd really like to welcome you to the beginning of this year's three-month retreat, which, as we remarked last night, is the 25th since the beginning in 1975. It seems quite historic to me.

I can't help but notice tonight that this half of the hall is a little more densely populated than that half. There are only three rows of zabutons for the men while there are four rows for the women, and the women are still denser. What does that say about the spiritual center of gravity for our culture these days? I don't know, but hats off to the women.

After the opening last night, the teachers went back to the staff room and were talking about how inspired we all felt by the opening. It was really your commitment—seeing that so many of you have come together to dedicate this much of your life to deepening your dharma practice is very touching and very moving for us.

For myself, I've been on your side quite a lot in these retreats. I've been at about eight of these retreats in the past, mostly as a yogi, sometimes on staff. This is the first time I get to be on this side of the equation, and I feel really honored to be here.

What's great in teaching a long retreat is being able to watch how much change, how much growth, and how much opening you all go through. It's very touching for us on the teaching side, and for me, it really strengthens my faith. I just see again and again—this stuff works. This stuff really has the power to transform lives and uproot suffering. So it's really a privilege to be here with you, and I'm looking forward to getting to know a lot of you and seeing the rest of you over the course of these six weeks.

It's really a time of rejoicing, and I hope you feel that also. Sometimes we go into a long retreat and we go into our room after the opening dharma talk and we close the door and the silence is really palpable. Sometimes there's that little gulp of "what have I gotten myself into here?" There's understandably a little apprehension at the start of a long retreat. But I also hope you'll feel and really tune into and let yourself appreciate the joyfulness of this beginning.

I actually can't think of any other activity, any other form of life that is such a great support for strengthening the wholesome qualities of mind and heart. So we all have a lot to be thankful for in being here. The outcome from our work together will really do a lot for each other, for ourselves, and ultimately for the world. So I really want to appreciate you for taking the time to dedicate yourself to this work.

This period of withdrawal from a busy life—time to slow down, time to be quiet, just time to contemplate—is a way of life that is praised by every culture that is grounded in spiritual values. It's something that's even more needed today, I feel.

This is a quote from a Tibetan teacher in Ladakh named Drukchen Rinpoche, whom Andrew Harvey met when he was traveling in Ladakh some years ago and wrote about in a book called *Journey to Ladakh*. It's a young Tibetan lama who's been exposed to Western ways.

Drukchen Rinpoche said, "I was given a Western education for which I am grateful in many ways, but I lost something. I lost the peace of mind that I might have had in another generation. Everyone in our generation lives in a fragmented, complex, and disturbing time in which it is hard to keep one's spiritual balance, hard to find the time to build the balance in the first place. I feel increasingly that I must go into retreat more, must meditate more, must discipline myself more. Otherwise, I shall be of no use to my people."

I really like this passage because not only does it remind us what we're doing here and the importance of it in bringing that balance into our own lives, but it also reminds us of what I hope is a motivation that we all share. We're doing this work not just for ourselves alone, but we really have the understanding right from the beginning that the

work we do will benefit those that we come in contact with, and those circles will spread out in ways we may never understand. So we say that we do our practice in order to benefit all sentient beings everywhere. We never know if our actual practice has or not, but this is our understanding. This is the way that we practice.

I'd like to talk tonight about one of the aspects of the retreat that is a great support for our practice and a great support for our awakening, and that is the aspect of renunciation. Obviously, one of the biggest differences between what we do here and what we do in our daily life outside is around this aspect of simplicity of lifestyle, of having put aside a lot of the occupations and, in many cases, distractions that we live with day by day.

The archetype, of course, for this kind of practice was the Buddha, who as a young man, just twenty-nine years old, was visited by the heavenly messengers in the form of a sick person, an aging person, a corpse, and then a renunciate. After being visited by those, he saw the vulnerability that we're all exposed to—of illness, aging, and death—and the possibility of a way out. The bodhisattva understood that within this bodily form, we're all subject to suffering. From that understanding, he dedicated his life to finding the way out.

So he left home at twenty-nine. I'm sure you know the story, so I'll just read this short passage from the Middle Length Discourses: "While still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessings of youth, in the prime of life, I shaved off my hair and beard, though my mother and father wished otherwise and grieved with tearful faces."

I put on the yellow robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness.

This is really the same journey that each of you has made in coming here. In leaving behind family, in leaving behind friends, perhaps in leaving behind children or parents, you have all made that step of renunciation, of leaving the home life. And for the time that you're here, whether it's six weeks or three months, you're really in a homeless kind of lifestyle. It's a floating monastery that we create for the time that you're here.

In this homeless life, you've had to give up. You've had to renounce a lot of comfort. The Buddha gave up all his comforts, as you probably know. The idea at the time was that if he mortified the flesh, the spirit would be liberated. So he began to consciously starve the body. He was eating one spoon of rice a day, and then one spoon of rice a week, and then one grain of rice a day. This is the time in the bodhisattva's career when he became extremely thin, what's called the emaciated Buddha.

He says of his life at that time, "My vertebrae stood out on my spine like beads on a cord. My ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn. When I touched my belly skin, I could feel my backbone."

Fortunately, this is not required practice here at IMS. The Buddha came to understand that the mortification of the flesh didn't work and turned back to the middle path of taking enough food to be healthy and to keep the body fit and strong, but not indulging in luxury.

I'm reminded of the power of this quality of renunciation. Michelle mentioned that she and I were on staff together in the late 70s. In fact, the last thing that I remember doing on staff was giving the manager's talk for a retreat. It was a special retreat for us at the time. In the spring of 1979, we were visited by somebody I'd been hearing about for years, somebody who's one of the greatest meditation masters of this century—Mahasi Sayadaw.

It was really his meditation technique that we teach and practice during this retreat. He was responsible for founding hundreds, if not thousands, of meditation centers in his lifetime. You could almost say he revived the widespread practice of meditation in Burma. Mahasi Sayadaw was the teacher of Joseph's teacher, Munindra, and also the teacher of one of Jack's teachers, Ajahn Asaba, whom Jack practiced with in Thailand. So we were very excited to have him come visit. He was the grandfather of our whole sangha.

As a staff person, I got to go to the airport to meet him. A few of us drove there and went into Logan and waited at the gate where his flight pulled in. We were standing at the gate, watching all the people walk off. No monks. A lot of people kept coming out, but no monks were appearing. It's hard to overlook bald men in brown curtains. We were pretty sure we hadn't missed him. Everybody filed off the plane, still no monks. We were getting a little worried. Did they miss their connection in Bangkok? Did we get the wrong day?

So we were standing there, still intently watching the exit gate, and then very slowly, very mindfully, one step at a time, came Mahasi Sayadaw and four other monks who were traveling with him. Each of them was carrying a fan. If you see any photos from that retreat—and there are some around in the archives of IMS—you'll see these brown fans that they all carried. They had orange embroidered lettering that said something like, "Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, 1979 World Tour." So the rock star lineage of the tour was in effect.

It was really a very powerful assembly. Mahasi Sayadaw himself, of course, was very renowned. And he brought with him two monks who have continued to teach Westerners, who I know some of you have practiced with. One was Sayadaw U Janaka, who still teaches Westerners in Burma. Another was Sayadaw U Silananda, who lives and teaches in the Bay Area now, and two other monks as well.

At the time, I was still fairly young in my practice. I'd been practicing for a couple of years at that point. Looking back, I feel I didn't appreciate their teachings as much as I would today. There was a simplicity and an unadorned quality to their teachings that at the time I wasn't quite mature enough to receive. I enjoyed being with them in certain qualities of their being.

I really was struck by many qualities, but the teachings at the time I found a little bit dry. I wish now I'd had a chance to go back and listen again, because basically what these men were about was repeating the words of the Buddha—not just in a blind way, but repeating the words of the Buddha as they had proved them and experienced them through their own lives and practice.

Individually they had a great deal of power. There was a purity and nobility and great presence in every one of these monks. I could tell right away that they didn't need anything from me—I was just a staff person here. Joseph and Sharon and Jack and Jacqueline were the teachers, but they didn't need anything from them either. They had their air tickets home and were so self-reliant in a way that felt like a great testament to their renunciation. They were complete within themselves, and because of that, they had an unshakability. They weren't looking to be liked. They weren't looking to impress us. They were just there.

Renunciation is actually one of the ten paramis—these qualities of heart and mind that when developed fully bring the mind to liberation. Renunciation in the Theravadan list is the third of these qualities. Some synonyms for renunciation that give you a sense of its power are relinquishment and letting go, both of which point to the undoing of grasping. If grasping is symbolized by a closed fist, renunciation is symbolized by the open hand, much like generosity. As you probably know, grasping and the undoing of grasping is the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Renunciation goes right to that heart.

From the Dhammapada: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness one attains to a happiness which is greater, then the wise pursue that happiness which is greater."

In the list of the paramis, it's said that the proximate cause of renunciation—what really triggers it—is a sense of spiritual urgency. I imagine that most of you can relate to that. Having committed this much of your time to Dharma practice, I have a feeling that there's a little fire going on in all of you, that fire of ardor and urgency.

I want to tell a few stories about renunciation in the Buddhist tradition. One of the great Tibetan masters of the century is a teacher named Dingo Khentse Rinpoche. He was one of the leaders of the Rimé school, a school that tried to unify the different Tibetan sects. He was very accomplished in the Nyingma and Kagyu methods of meditation, and a very loving and compassionate man. Khentse Rinpoche spent about twenty-two years in retreat over the course of his life.

I thought I would read to you one passage from a letter he wrote to his parents when he was first embarking on the renunciate life. This was written when he was thirteen years old:

"My dearest parents, you gave me birth with all the freedoms and advantages of human life, and you have cared for me with love from my infancy till now. Since you introduced me to an authentic teacher, it is thanks to your kindness that I have encountered the path of liberation. After hearing, thinking about, and meditating on the life of my perfect teacher, I have resolved to slip quietly away from all this life's concerns and roam through empty and uninhabited valleys.

Father and mother, stay in your handsome lofty house. I, your young son, long instead for empty caves. Thank you for the fine soft clothes you gave me, yet I don't need them. I would rather dress in plain white felt. I leave my valuable belongings behind. A begging bowl, a staff, and Dharma robes are all I need.

Although for now your son will hide away in mountain glens, your smiling faces will be with me always. Nor shall I forget your loving care. And if I reach the citadel of experience and realization, I shall repay your kindness. Of that you can be sure."

This was written when Rinpoche was thirteen. When he was fifteen, he left his teacher to enter a cave where he spent seven years, from fifteen to twenty-two. Three of those years, he actually didn't speak.

Sometime after that period of cave practice, continuing on in his spiritual journey, he spent four years at a spot in Tibet called White Grove, a very isolated place. I have a photograph that some of you can see—his hut perched on top of a hill, looking down into an isolated valley, and then across to broad, deep mountains in the background. When he was in his early to mid-twenties, he spent four years in this place. In total, he dedicated twenty-two years to retreat practice.

Another Tibetan lama who intrigues me greatly is named Lama Shabkar. Born in 1781, he began a three-year retreat on a remote island in Tibet when he was twenty-five. That would place the date in the early 1800s—about the time on this continent that we were making the Louisiana Purchase, taking away more land from the native people, and preparing to fight the War of 1812 with the British. Just to give you a sense of the enlightened nature of life in America at that time.

Lama Shabkar wrote one of the greatest meditation manuals I've ever encountered, called *Flight of the Garuda* in the Nyingma School of Meditation. It's a truly beautiful work, translated by Keith Dowman, and he wrote it while on this remote island. As you know, Tibet gets quite cold in winter, and he was staying in this cave without heat. There were just a few other people on this remote island, but they would come asking him meditation questions. He was already renowned, even though young, as a great meditator.

Lama Shabkar found that these interruptions were disrupting his meditation practice somewhat. So for one particular winter on the island, he mudded himself into his cave. He took in some supplies of butter and tsampa and water, and completely sealed himself off from human contact for the entire winter.

For the rest of the year, he wrote: "Throughout the year, my teacher's attendant occasionally brought me goat's milk and curd. In the summer, some vegetables were to be found. By the end of autumn, however, my supplies were exhausted, and for two months I was reduced to eating only a thin soup of tsampa"—roasted barley, a staple in the Tibetan diet.

This is not an austerity we will inflict on you during this retreat—you will have truly wonderful food, as you know. But this exemplifies the kind of dedication and courage that practitioners have embodied over the centuries.

Here was another statement of his commitment: "Until I achieve unchanging stability of mind, I won't remain in busy worldly places, but will stay alone in isolated places of retreat. Teacher, please accept this offering made to please you. The length of my practice shall equal the length of my life."

That is a beautiful vow.

Coming into this retreat situation, you all sacrifice a great deal. You give up contact with your loved ones, families, and friends. You surrender the opportunity to speak. You release special foods, reading, writing, music, television. You even give up your email—quite a sacrifice indeed.

To keep pace with technology at Spirit Rock, part of the manager's talk now includes asking people to turn off their cell phones during retreat. It happens. I suspect that in another year or two, we'll need to ask people to disable wireless internet access as well. It's all coming, making things increasingly complex.

There's nothing inherently wrong with these things we enjoy in daily life, these sources of pleasure. The issue is that most of us lean on them. We've grown accustomed to depending on them. When they're removed, we feel unhappy, lonely, or deprived. This signals that there's an aspect of the Dharma we haven't quite grasped—because consciousness itself is self-sustaining, self-supporting.

When our consciousness becomes wrapped around an object, another appearance, or bound to that object, our being becomes slightly distorted. We become off-center. Coming into a situation like this retreat, we truly have the opportunity to let the mind return to its natural strength and steadiness.

Because consciousness is self-supporting and self-sustaining, we don't actually need those other things. We don't need to rest on them or rely on them. They serve as wonderful grounds—relationships are magnificent grounds for understanding, for developing compassion and love—but we need not depend on them.

In this situation, we get to rediscover our inherent strength, which is our own true nature and our birthright. The essential spirit of the renunciate life is something that truly applies here.

It's the spirit of taking what's given—taking that which is freely offered and not demanding more and not taking more.

If you've practiced in Asia, you probably know this spirit really well. When I was a monk in Thailand, our whole training was we took what was placed in our bowl. We might like it or we might not—that wasn't really so important. It took some acculturation to get to appreciate some of the things we were offered. Goose eggs, for instance, that have been pickled—if you haven't had them, it's kind of a wake-up call to the taste buds.

Most of the places I practiced were forest monasteries, and we tend to eat one meal a day there. It was usually served at 8 in the morning, and then there wasn't anything until the next morning at 8 o'clock. So when we gathered the food for our morning meal, we were usually really hungry. And sometimes it was great food, and sometimes, I have to say, it was pretty disappointing, especially when you're that hungry. If you haven't, for instance, eaten a red fish curry on an empty stomach at 8 in the morning, you haven't really lived.

The place I spent most of my time was Wat Suan Mok, which was Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery in the south of Thailand. Ajahn Buddhadasa had a very, very spacious mind in practice. He incorporated many different elements in his teaching—Mahayana elements, Zen elements, Tibetan art—very broad-minded man. There weren't many demands placed on us at his monastery. He just wanted to set us loose in the forest and let our minds calm and let us develop meditation.

The food at his monastery was the worst of anywhere I practiced in Thailand. It was absolutely the worst food. I actually think he intended it that way, so that people wouldn't just come and hang out because it was a comfortable place to be. You really had to want to practice in order to stay there. So it was a good filter, actually. It was a great spirit in that monastery.

In the Zen tradition, they say that the mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace—it can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease. So you won't be served that either, but please keep that in mind as you accept the meals that the kitchen prepares. Sometimes they'll be to your liking and sometimes they may not. Most of the time they probably will be.

There's a saying up on the notice board in the kitchen at Spirit Rock. It says that when we serve you delicious food, that's our practice. This is the cook speaking to the yogis. When we serve you delicious food, that's our practice. When we serve you undelicious food, that's your practice.

Please try to work with it in that way. Know that the cooks really are putting their hearts and souls into the food that they prepare for you. And then try to work with your own likes and dislikes really as an important part of practice. It's another way to release grasping and to release fixed views, really to open to the reality of what is.

In the monastery, sometimes our accommodations weren't so ideal. Again, at Suan Mok, we were living in little huts out in the forest, and there were all the tropical forest creatures who would come to visit us. I could tell sometimes that one had come to visit because I could hear in the next cabin over a thump, thump, thump—actually, it was more like a bang, bang, bang on the tin roof from inside. And I knew what that meant. It meant my friend was hitting a stick against the roof of his house from inside because a snake had fallen off onto the roof from a tree and he wanted to scare it off. Because if he didn't scare it off, what it would do is slither down to the edge of the roof and then come in under the overhang and make a nice, cozy place for itself in the rafters of his cabin. And because half of the snakes were poisonous, he really didn't want that to happen.

So I'd hear that thump, thump, thump, and I'd know that a snake was on the roof.

One night in the middle of the night, I got up from my kuti, my hut, to go out and pee in the forest, and I was walking back up the stairs, put my hand on the handrail, right on top of a scorpion. Boom. That was a sting. That was a painful moment.

Another night, I was just going to bed. I just sort of tucked my mosquito net in around my little mat, and I felt another bite in my foot that actually became the most painful sensation I think I've ever experienced. It was a poisonous centipede.

These are really scary-looking creatures. They're sort of orange-colored, about eight inches long, and their pinchers look like they make up about half of the body. They're really wicked-looking pinchers at the top. And they inject this venom. It felt like what it did was inflict about an eight-hour cramp into my muscle. It wasn't until the next morning that it relaxed enough that my foot felt normal again.

So again, you don't have to deal with that kind of stuff here. Of course, you have other things to deal with. We really wish everybody could be in single rooms. The long-term plan is for the retreat center to be transformed so that everyone on retreat can be in single rooms, but unfortunately we're not there yet.

Some of you may have really wanted a single room and it just wasn't possible to offer you one. Some of you may have accepted being in a double room and then discover uncertainties about your roommate. Others of you may be in a room and wish you were on a different side of the building. Why can't I be in a south-facing room? Why does my room have to be above the laundry?

These are the things that we need to accommodate and really work with as practice. To look at the force of wanting or aversion that comes in the mind and to take our stand of mindfulness right there. Not to make a demand on the staff that it be different—because in most cases it's just not possible—but to really work with it as part of our own renunciation, our own letting go inwardly. And that's where we can really expand our freedom, our internal freedom.

One of the other big renunciations that you make here is around communicating. As Michelle talked about last night, part of the silence obviously is not speaking to one another, not writing letters or receiving letters or cards. We give up phone calls. We give up reading and writing. These are big changes. So we really ask for your support in that.

This is an area where the impact on the community is especially strong. When we have the motivation that we're practicing to benefit all beings, the beings we can most immediately benefit are those right around us. So please remember that your guarding of the silence, your attention to the silence, will not only help your own practice, but will really also help everyone who's practicing around you.

When we give up all these outer things, it definitely has an impact on the inner life. We become less burdened. Our hearts become open in a way. Because we drop off a lot of unnecessary activities, the channels are really clear for the Dharma to come in.

One of my Tibetan teachers was just talking about this phenomenon. You know how you go into the toilet on an airplane and you lock the door and then it says "occupied"? So it's kind of like when we busy ourselves with all the other activities, there's a sign on our hearts that says "occupied." And then the Dharma can't come in. So when we drop those things, then the heart is really open to receive. It's open to receive the teachings of life, and life is teaching us all the time when our eyes and ears and hearts are open. This is a beautiful aspect of the simplicity of retreat.

This is from a writer named Scott Sanders from Audubon Magazine who had just come back into his home after being away on a backpacking trip and was totally shocked by all the stuff in his house. He said: "One moment I can lay everything I need on the corner of a poncho. The next moment it seems I couldn't fit all my furniture into a warehouse. So I vow to purchase nothing that I don't really need, to give away everything that is excess, and to refuse all chores that don't arise from central concerns. The simplicity I seek is not the enforced austerity of the poor, but the richness of a gathered and deliberate life in which your belongings and commitments are few in number and high in quality."

This is really a great description of what you all are doing here.

When the outer activities drop away, sometimes what we see isn't always so easy to see. Michelle likes to use the expression of being here through the autumn. As we watch the leaves fall off the trees, what gets exposed are the bare branches—you might say the framework of the trees, the more fundamental framework.

In a similar way, when we drop our outer concerns, what gets exposed for us as meditators are the inner structures of the mind. So we start to see the fundamental patterns of our minds that don't have so much to do with the externals. These forces of liking and not liking, of wanting and fearing, of preferring one thing and not another—the whole complex of grasping gets laid out clearly before us.

Sometimes that's not so easy to take. At this level of renunciation, often some of our deepest fears and emotions get triggered.

In the early days of retreat, I often notice myself experiencing what feels like grief—a mourning for all that I've left behind. My wife, my activities, commitments, friends. This letting go can bring up waves of insecurity, loneliness, or feelings of unworthiness. All of these emotions are part of seeing that inner structure clearly, witnessing the bareness of our hearts and minds just as they are. This becomes a place of profound learning.

I think of Ani Tenzin Palmo, a remarkable Western Tibetan nun who was among the first Westerners to take robes. She ordained in India in 1964 with Kamtrul Rinpoche at just twenty-one years old, having been born in London. After spending years convincing her teacher to grant permission for solitary practice, she retreated to a cave high in the Himalayas—twelve thousand feet up in a bitterly cold, utterly isolated location—where she practiced for twelve years.

Toward the end of her time there, she undertook a three-year retreat in complete silence, speaking to no one. Her supporters would bring food, but she maintained her vow of silence throughout. Imagine her surprise when, near the retreat's conclusion but not yet ready to emerge, she heard an unexpected knock at her door. Opening it, she found an enraged Indian policeman declaring that her visa was invalid and she must leave the country immediately.

Talk about integration challenges! After three years without speaking to anyone, how would you like that for a transition back into the world?

She asked for just one day to prepare, then went down to speak with him. As they talked, the policeman's heart softened—he too had a love for spiritual life. He allowed her to complete her retreat, though she did have to leave afterward. She now lives near Assisi in Italy.

When she visited Spirit Rock for a public talk, I had the chance to meet her. She struck me as remarkably grounded, down-to-earth, and clear. I told her how much I appreciated her commitment to such extended practice, acknowledging that twelve years in a cave was beyond what I could imagine for myself. Her response was wonderfully matter-of-fact: "You know, it really wasn't such a big deal. It was just what I wanted to do."

I suspect many of you would receive similar reactions if you told friends and family exactly what you're doing on this retreat. "How can you possibly sit in silence for six weeks or three months without talking to anyone?" Yet for you, there's likely that same knowing: this is simply what I want to do. And it is also, undeniably, a big deal that you're doing it.

When a journalist writing her biography—the wonderful book *Cave in the Snow*—asked if going on retreat wasn't a form of escape, Tenzin Palmo's reply was illuminating: "Not at all. To my mind, worldly life is an escape. When you have a problem, you can turn on the television, phone a friend, go out for a coffee. In a cave, however, you have no one to turn to but yourself. When problems arise, you have no choice but to go through with them and come out the other side. In a cave, you face your own nature in the raw, and you have to find a way of dealing with it."

This is precisely our situation as well. In retreat, the inner life becomes extraordinarily vivid.

Cutting off the outer entanglements really wakes up the inner. Just like when you're listening to a symphony with your eyes open and suddenly you close your eyes and go more within—how much more alive the music becomes. It's the same way in our setting. As we drop off our connection to the outer, the inner life becomes extraordinarily alive and awake in all its beauty, and in all its glory, and in all its difficulty too. This is part and parcel of the package.

Sometimes our emotional reactions become quite strong on retreat—this phenomenon that I'm sure you all know called yogi mind. I've witnessed many great examples of yogi mind over the years. My favorite is the one where a retreat manager at Yucca Valley in California received a note asking if he could please contact the airline so they could change the flight patterns so the planes didn't have to fly over the retreat area. This was a serious request. Sometimes perspective gets a little lost in the middle of yogi mind.

Often this lack of perspective really shows up around our relationships with one another. In the middle of retreat, I'm sure you know, we can get on each other's nerves. Things that we do will annoy or frustrate one another: the person who always comes into the sitting late, the person who almost knocks you over in the lunch line, the person who won't wait their turn for dishes or by the tea urn, someone who wears a crinkly nylon jacket in the middle of all the meditations and just happens to be sitting right next to you.

In one retreat, quite a long retreat, I was sitting next to someone who breathed really loudly. I had to make a choice really early on: Was I going to follow my breath or was I going to follow his? I had two easy objects to choose from.

So one of those typical notes might read something like: "Dear fellow meditator, we've been asked many times not to wear nylon in the hall. In case you haven't noticed, this is actually a mindfulness practice. Please don't ever wear that nylon jacket in here again." And of course you know how the notes are always signed—Metta. Always signed Metta.

What's so striking is that when we're in the middle of one of those attacks of yogi mind and we're about to write a note like that, we might not even know that we're angry. This is actually the way the hindrances work. The hindrances sort of swoop in below our radar, and they're in full display before they've quite crossed our screen yet. We don't know quite what's on the map. So we think this is all very reasonable: "Well, of course, anybody would write this person such a note at this time. I'm doing it for the benefit of all sentient beings, right?"

But if you've ever been on the receiving end of one of those notes, you know that they can be really devastating. As we go through the days and weeks here, we all become extraordinarily sensitive. Part of the opening up process—the Indian teacher Goenkaji describes this as open heart surgery without the anesthetic—is that you become very vulnerable. Everything that touches you touches you quite deeply and immediately. When you feel a burst of anger from somebody else in this sanctuary, in this safe place, it can have an extraordinarily disturbing impact. It can honestly take days or even a week for someone to recover from a note like that.

So please, please don't write each other notes. If there's any communication you feel needs to happen with a fellow meditator, please do it through one of us or through the course manager. Please don't contact each other directly. It can be so disturbing—it can ruin days of someone's practice. So please be very careful in that area.

If you feel you really need to write an angry note, better to write it to one of the teachers. Joseph is actually a good person to write to if you're really upset—Joseph is so spacious that he would be a good choice. So much better than writing to one another.

On retreat, we simply take these turmoils of our own mind as part and parcel of the experience. We try not to share them with the rest of the retreatants who have their own turmoils, probably quite enough to deal with.

This facet of outer renunciation is so important because it clears the decks for the inner work. And then inwardly, it's really important also to have a heart that's free from a lot of grasping. There's this inner attitude of renunciation where we don't hold so tightly to our own hopes and fears and likes and dislikes and wants and not-wants. What that does is create a lot of space within—a great deal of openness where we can start to really accommodate our own movements of heart and mind.

So this is the dance of our practice during our time together. Outwardly, in the realm of discipline and our behavior with one another, we follow the form with great care. We are truly mindful in our actions with each other. And then inwardly, we remain very open—very light, very informal. This is a beautiful combination and a wonderful direction for practice.

I just returned from a retreat at Spirit Rock where I was sitting, led by a Tibetan teacher named Sogyal Rinpoche and Ajahn Amaro, a Theravadan Buddhist monk who has taught here many times and whom I'm sure many of you know. It was the first time I had ever witnessed a Theravadan monk and a Tibetan teacher leading a retreat together. It was truly beautiful to see how well they harmonized. By the end of the retreat, it was clear they had developed genuine affection and deep respect for one another.

Sogyal Rinpoche said something very touching about Ajahn Amaro at the retreat's conclusion. He said, "You know, this bhikkhu—I never met anybody like him before. He has very strict vinaya. In his discipline, he is impeccable. But inwardly, his heart is very open. I never met anyone like that before. Usually the ones with strict vinaya are very tight inside. This one has very good discipline and is very open within."

This offers us a wonderful model for our own practice—to keep finding that joy and ease within ourselves as we remain truly careful about our interactions with one another. It is the best way to practice.

This is again from Drukpa Kunley Rinpoche: "We must be still within ourselves, still and calm, and yet we must also, at the same time, be moving forward towards each other and towards the world. What is not useful for this endless transformation must be abandoned. Anything that prevents a finer flowering of our spirit must be left behind. The clearest and wisest person becomes awake, becomes the world. She enters without fear and without hope into the full presence of reality."

The Buddha himself taught that discipline is simply the first step of a sequence that leads to freedom. He explained that discipline is for the sake of restraint, and restraint is for the sake of freedom from remorse. Freedom from remorse is for the sake of gladness of mind. Remember that this is truly the spirit behind renunciation, behind restraint—it is for our own gladness of heart and mind.

I would like to close with words from the Buddha, where he spoke in a sutta about his own liberation, his own enlightenment. We remember that the spur to his practice was the encounter with the four heavenly messengers in the beginning. This, then, is the summation of his practice, also in relation to those heavenly messengers:

"Then, friends, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I attained the unborn, supreme security from bondage, nibbana. Being subject to aging, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, I attained the unaging supreme security from bondage, nibbana. Being subject to sickness, I attained the unailing security from bondage, nibbana. Being subject to death, I attained the deathless security from bondage, nibbana. And being subject to sorrow, having understood the danger in what is subject to sorrow, I attained the sorrowless supreme security from bondage, nibbana. The knowledge and vision arose in me. My deliverance is unshakable. There is no more renewal of becoming."

Let's just sit together for a moment.

CHAPTER 222

Mettā: Effort and Fruits

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses the doubts that often arise when Vipassana practitioners begin mettā (loving-kindness) meditation, particularly around the use of phrases and the apparent busyness of the practice. Drawing from his own experience of feeling like a complete beginner after 18 years of Vipassana practice, Armstrong explains the mechanics of mettā meditation and how it cultivates what he calls the 'juice' in spiritual practice—qualities like love, compassion, devotion, and warmth that can make the dharma path more alive and connected.

Armstrong offers practical guidance on working skillfully with the traditional mettā phrases, suggesting techniques like resting attention in the heart center, visualizing the recipient, and allowing phrases to emerge from genuine caring rather than forcing them. He discusses how mettā practice develops both loving-kindness and samādhi (concentration), creating a unified mind that naturally suspends the hindrances. The talk explores different categories of recipients—benefactor, friend, neutral person, and difficult person—and how each reveals different aspects of mind and heart.

Drawing on stories from Thai teacher Ajahn Jomnian and encounters with the Dalai Lama, Armstrong illustrates the fruits of sustained mettā practice. He emphasizes that authentic practice must arise from genuine care for others' welfare rather than self-centered desires for pleasant states, quoting Śāntideva: 'Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy.' The talk concludes with reflections on surrender and the paradox that by giving without expectation, the heart naturally opens to its inherent goodness and liberating qualities.

It's always interesting to come into the hall after being in here for sittings. You come in for a talk and it's like a bomb has dropped in the middle of the room or a big boulder, and everybody has splashed out to the sides. I hope it hasn't been too much of an explosion.

I wanted to talk tonight about right effort and the fruits of our practice of loving-kindness. I thought I'd take up a little bit where Sally left off last night in her talk on the hindrances, particularly in relation to the last hindrance of doubt.

What I've heard often over these days of interviews and the questions in the hall is that for people who have done even a lot of vipassana practice in the past—and maybe especially for people who have done a lot of vipassana practice—when you come into mettā practice, a lot of doubt tends to come up about what this practice is for and why we're doing it this way and why all this emphasis on the phrases. It sounds so busy and forceful.

It was actually just the same for me when I took up the mettā practice. I'd been doing vipassana practice for probably eighteen years. I did my first intensive mettā retreat and felt like a complete beginner. It reminded me of how I'd felt when I started vipassana. I came in not really knowing the techniques and practices. I didn't know where it would lead. I didn't know how to work with my wandering mind and the different hindrances that came up. I felt really adrift. It threw me back into beginner's mind in a way that really shook me up. It didn't feel comfortable at all. I didn't know what to do in my practice. I didn't know if it would work for me. That was my particular form of doubt—I didn't know if I could do it or if it would happen for me.

All these questions that come in the early days of a mettā retreat I can really relate to personally. This factor of doubt, as Sally said, is such an important one because if we stop there, it keeps us from making the effort that deepens our practice.

A couple of weeks ago, I was sitting a retreat in Santa Rosa with a young Tibetan Lama teacher who has been one of my primary teachers for the last seven years, a teacher named Sogyal Rinpoche. Some of you have met him. Toward the end of the retreat, we were having a discussion on doubt, this quality of the doubting mind, and one of the students told a story that I thought was quite revealing.

He said he was a high school math teacher offering a number of courses one semester. A student came up to him at the start of the semester and said, "Well, I'm thinking about signing up for your course on calculus, but I don't know if it will really help me. I don't know if it will do what I want it to do."

He got all enthused. Here's a bright young mind—I can turn her on to math! There aren't so many bright young minds into math these days, probably. So he gave her this glowing pitch. He said, "Look, I've got seven kinds of problems right here in my mind that calculus can solve that nothing else can. Let me tell you about one of them." He went into detail. "This is a really helpful problem for aerodynamic engineers and for people who are designing bridges. There's no way you can solve it except through calculus."

She said, "Well, that's very nice, but how can I know that if I take this course, I'll learn how to solve that problem?"

He was stumped. He'd never heard a question like that before. He said, "Well, you have to trust me."

She said, "But before I can take the course, I have to know that for myself. I can't just take your word for it."

They discussed back and forth a little bit, and she dropped the course. She couldn't be convinced. She couldn't get past that initial doubt to give it a try.

The Tibetan teacher's comment on this exchange was, "That's a good story, but it's a bad ending. It's kind of like a European movie." He's getting pretty tuned into Western culture, as you can tell. So hopefully in this movie, because it's in California, close enough to Hollywood, the ending is going to be different. We'll give it a try.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is how this practice works—something about the mechanics of the practice, what we're doing with all these phrases and all this activity and where it leads.

One way of talking about why we do this practice is to bring into our spiritual life what my Tibetan teacher and I would call the juice in our practice. There are all these wonderful, sweet, juicy qualities of the heart within us—qualities like love and compassion and devotion and warmth and dedication and sincerity and friendliness, humor and kindness. These qualities are latent within every one of us. They're all part of our human nature.

The question is: in our spiritual life, how do we activate them? How do we bring them so that they're a living force in our lives? Because if we don't, if we ignore that side of our being, the spiritual path can become quite dry.

quite arid, quite intellectually satisfying, but rather sterile and without that real heart quality of openness and connection, love.

So I would say that we do the metta practice because in our tradition, it's the way to the juice in our life. It's the way to juice up our spiritual practice. It is the avenue for all those sweet qualities, like devotion and compassion and love and warmth. This is the doorway in.

For some people, as I've observed, just doing the Vipassana practice can be enough. People who come from a very emotional temperament—maybe those who were in Italy in their last lifetime or Tibet—seem to open up in that way just through the Vipassana practice alone, and that sweetness and the juice start to come through.

But for myself, I came from a background where my major in college was physics and my minor was math, where my head had been trained much more thoroughly than my heart ever had. When I came into meditation practice, that emphasis or imbalance in me sort of continued. For me, the metta practice has been a really important part of my whole unfolding.

Just to authenticate this, several people who are teachers here have actually told me they think I've softened over the years since I've been doing metta practice. So I figure that's a pretty good sign, because I can be pretty feisty in meetings, and they've seen that.

In our tradition, the Theravada tradition, we talk about two kinds of practitioners of Vipassana. We talk about the wet and the dry practitioners. The dry practitioners are people who have completed their training in Vipassana without undertaking the concentration practices, of which metta, as you know, is one. The wets in this lingo are those who have done Vipassana in complement with a concentration practice, because traditionally the concentration practices have been the ones that have unlocked in the early deepening of concentration such qualities as happiness and rapture and bliss. So concentration has always been a path within our tradition for touching off some of those sweet qualities.

This Tibetan teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche, was giving us heart advice at the end—the advice that a teacher gives before they send you off in the world, knowing that they won't see you for another year or so. His parting words went something like this: He always tells us, "Please be normal. Don't let your meditation practice make you more strange, because then if you go out in the world and you're really strange and people ask you what you're involved with and you say Buddhist meditation, they're going to think, 'Oh, I'm going to stay away from that stuff.' So please be normal." His final words were: "Be a normal, wise, juicy person."

I think this is beautiful advice. I'm sort of working on it myself. The wisdom part you could say is our Vipassana practice—just seeing things as they are, seeing the impermanent, empty nature of things. The juicy part is our metta practice, that unfolding of the heart. The normality I think might be our psychological training.

There was a conference here about a month ago of the three main traditions of Buddhism in the West. The Theravada tradition, Zen, and Vajrayana was held in this room. There were 220 teachers here for about five days. I was really touched by many of the people in the conference—they were very strong, dedicated practitioners from all three traditions. But what I came to feel about the Vipassana group in general is that we have a beautiful normality. We're kind of very down-to-earth and practical, and I really appreciate that in our tradition. We're also not afraid of hard work.

If you really want to see the effect of this juiciness of heart, I'd encourage you to hang out with some people who've done it for a long time. Every May, this Thai teacher comes to Spirit Rock named Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian started doing the metta practice when he was quite young and became a master of it, teaching it all through his life. He's now in his mid-sixties, and he is one of the happiest people I have ever seen.

We bring him into the meditation hall, and whether there are ten people there or one hundred people there, he's just happy to talk Dharma all day long with whoever shows up. The only way we get him out of the hall is to serve him lunch, and then he goes in the meadow. He's got so much energy and so much joy. I've never seen anything like it.

We'll sometimes say, "Well, Ajahn Jumnian, would you like to go out today? Would you like to see the Golden Gate Bridge or the ocean or Point Reyes?" And he'll say, "Are there people who'd like to hear the Dharma?" His face kind of lights up. "Then I'll talk to them about the Dharma." He said, "If there's no one who wants to hear the Dharma, I'm happy to just sit there. But if you want to take me somewhere, that's okay too."

I'll be happy whatever you want me to do." And he really shows it. He just beams. He actually said that he hasn't had any anger in twenty-five years, and I tend to believe it. He has that kind of nature, that kind of vibe.

So the juice is what we're all aiming for in the long term, and probably why we were drawn to metta practice in the first place. But when we come to a retreat like this, that juice isn't so apparent upfront. It just seems like a lot of hard slogging, tough work—saying the phrases again and again, bringing up the benefactor, the friend, the neutral person.

It reminded me of when I was in Boy Scouts and had to earn a merit badge in camping and outdoor life. One of the requirements was to start a fire without matches. I thought, well, I know people used to be able to do that, but didn't that die off with the Native Americans? I didn't think European Americans knew how to do that anymore.

But I read the book and my father helped me. You take a dry piece of wood and make a little hole in it, just about the roundness of a finger. Then you take a slim stick—you can use a dry tree branch—and cut off all the knots. If you can, file it down at one end so the inner wood is exposed, underneath the bark. Then you cut some wood shavings and put them in that little round hole you've made in the dry wood. You set the stick into the wood shavings and twirl it back and forth quickly.

What happens is that the heat from the friction of the stick against those wood shavings eventually makes a little puff of smoke. Then you get really excited because you didn't think it was going to happen. Your hands were getting sore, you didn't think anything would happen. But you keep twirling faster and faster, and then you see a tiny flame pop up. A little faster, and the flame spreads around. When all the wood shavings are on fire, you can add more wood shavings or little twigs, then bigger twigs. And then you have a fire.

I was delighted to discover that this skill hadn't been lost from our civilization—it really restored my faith. But it took a while. While I was rubbing the stick, my hands were getting sore. I thought my hands were going to catch on fire before the wood did. My hands were sore, it wasn't feeling very good, it was a lot of work, and I wasn't sure anything would happen. But in time, that curl of smoke came up and the fire started.

This is very much like our metta practice. We just keep going and going and going. The phrases are like twirling the stick, and it doesn't seem like anything's happening. A few people have mentioned this in interviews—"I'm really diligent with the phrases, but nothing's happening." It may not seem like anything's happening for a while, but it took that early twirling to make enough heat for the fire to start. The same with our metta practice. Eventually that flame, that warmth starts, and then it can sustain itself. The practice generates its own momentum.

Although it's very hard in the beginning and starts with a lot of hard work, some people have said that the phrases actually seem to get in the way of the loving kindness. A number of people have come and said, "I can really call forth that feeling of metta, but when I put the phrases in, it seems to obstruct it. It gets too involved with thinking and I lose touch with the feeling."

So I want to talk about how to work with the phrases in a way that supports the feeling, so you don't feel like you're dampening that initial warmth.

One way is to get in touch with the silence before you say the phrase. Be aware that the phrase is coming out of a deep silence that holds your feeling of loving kindness. This silence is actually an aspect of emptiness—the emptiness at the ear door. If you're in touch with that emptiness, then the words are just a tiny drop of thinking in the vastness of that silence. They don't occupy the whole stage. This has been helpful for me.

There's another way I'd like to describe that I consider a really artful way to do the practice. I talked about this a little in the interview groups today.

I think it's a beautiful way to do the practice and it requires a certain steadiness of attention. So I'll just describe it and then you can see if it fits for you.

When I'm able to, what I will do at the start of a set of phrases is rest the attention in the center of my chest, in the heart center, and get in touch with that physical sensation. Then that will be the doorway where I'll feel any emotions like metta or anything else that comes through. I'll let myself feel them in the heart center. So that's the first focus.

Then I bring up an image of the subject—could be myself or another person—and I see that image as clearly as I can. If I can, I'll make it so it's like the person is in front of me. Now I didn't start off being able to visualize. I was weak in that field. So it took me a while. It was hard work to bring up these images. But I found when I could bring the image there, it really made the person much more alive for me. More alive than saying their name and far more alive than just saying the phrases without the image. So I would have an image of the person just in front of me.

And then this is kind of the key moment. I would let myself feel that I cared about them and that caring took some kind of intention—just as simple as "I hope you're happy. I hope you're well. I hope life is really going good for you." But it wasn't verbal. It was just a momentary feeling of caring about their welfare. Just a flicker of that intention. That little flicker where the mind is just leaning toward and interested in their wellbeing—that actually is metta.

It may not feel like very much. It can just start off as a little spark. It's kind of like that little curl of smoke from the wood shavings, but that actually is loving kindness. So if that flicker of caring is there, that's really what we're offering to the person in our metta practice. And that little flicker of caring is the germ or the seed that the whole practice then grows around. So you don't need to try to force anything more than that. You don't need to try and be deeply in love with them.

Actually, you don't even need to like the person. This came as a revelation to me when I was doing the difficult person one year. You don't actually even have to like the person. All you have to have is enough interest to care about their welfare. The whole

practice will grow from that. Upandita Sayadaw used to say something like, "Just incline the mind to metta. Don't try to force anything. Just let the mind incline in that direction and that will be enough."

Then once you can touch just that little flicker, let the phrase carry the intention. So the phrase actually comes out of the intention of metta toward them. It comes out of your caring. So you're not trying to put the phrase on top of the metta, but you're letting the metta kind of give birth to the phrase. And then you offer the phrase to the other person like a gift. It's a real gift to care about somebody and to express it with those words. So with each phrase, you can feel that it's just riding on your intention so that the phrase and the metta feeling go together toward the person.

If you don't actually get in touch with that intention, that's okay too. Just let the phrase go and also you can trust that in time the phrases will evoke the feeling. These phrases have been tested for 2,500 years and they are really appropriate for this particular brahmavihara. As you'll see when we move to compassion and sympathetic joy and equanimity, the different phrases will evoke those feelings. These phrases evoke the metta feeling.

So it's almost like I'm just going to pretend. Even though I don't feel it exactly, I'll just pretend and I'll say the phrase. And this reminds me of an old saying from the Tibetans. The Kadampa masters, who were an ancient lineage in Tibet, had this saying that if you don't have teeth, just chew with your gums. I think about this often when I'm sort of fabricating the phrases and I can't marry them with the metta intention. I don't have teeth at that point, but I can still chew with my gums.

Then after you've offered this phrase as a gift to the other person, take a moment and let yourself feel its resonance. Again, if you rest your attention in the heart center, you can let the phrase reverberate for just a couple of seconds in your heart and feel how that feels—the safety, the happiness, the health, the ease of life. It feels good.

Let that bell ring for a moment.

If your mind is steady enough—if your attention is steady enough to try it this way—I'd encourage you to practice with this approach and see if it's supportive for you.

You'll notice there are actually four places your attention goes in this style of practice. The first is resting the attention in the heart center. The second is the image of the subject. The third is the metta intention or flavor. And the fourth is the phrase.

This is a lot of balls to keep in the air. If you're doing that, you're a juggler who's got four balls up at once. This takes considerable concentration, but because it's a stretch, it builds concentration. So the more of these elements you can actually include, the more it shows that you're developing concentration and strengthening that quality. It's like working out at the gym and upping the weight from ten pounds to twenty pounds on the pull-down machine. You'll build your concentration in that way.

But don't expect that you'll always be able to keep all four balls going. When you're first learning to juggle, two is a lot. If you can add a third, you're well along the way. And if you can do four, that's really excellent juggling.

The same applies here. If you just connect with one of those elements, that's great—you're into the practice. If you can do two or three or four, all the better. But realize that this condition of being able to keep all four balls connected is something like a peak experience in meditation. It won't always be there. So just let the concentration come and go. See where you are at any given time. Any combination is fine.

The first fruit of the practice is the feeling or deepening of loving-kindness, of metta. It develops in a gradual way. It's hard to see any shift over one or two or three days. Someone in a discussion group this morning shared that she'd done a month-long period of loving-kindness practice, and it had made a big and lasting shift in her life and her practice.

This is something that builds gradually, but you all know that's also how mindfulness develops in vipassana. The first few times you meditate, it doesn't feel like anything's happening. Remember that feeling? "Why should I be with the breath? Nothing's coming." But little by little, that builds.

As the Buddha said in the Dhammapada: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, the jar is filled."

Just as mindfulness works in vipassana practice, metta works in this practice. It's a beautiful quality that develops little by little by little. Eventually we want to be able to access that feeling of metta wherever we are and whatever our experience is. Just as in mindfulness, we want to be able to be with whatever's happening for us.

Essentially we want to be able to find this heart of metta, of loving-kindness, independent of the circumstances of our life. This is a powerful quality if we can cultivate it. One of the things it suggests to me is that the Buddha encouraged us to rest our hearts in loving-kindness, regardless of the outside situation.

This means if somebody is being friendly to us, we can respond from loving-kindness. If somebody's being indifferent, we can respond from loving-kindness. If somebody's being aggressive, we can respond from loving-kindness. We're not just driven by the external situation, but we find an inner freedom and an inner friendliness that's independent of circumstances.

When we start our vipassana practice, we begin with the breath in our teaching tradition. We open to sounds and body and emotions and thoughts and all our experience—the vast spaciousness of consciousness. We develop the practice based on the subjects we find most useful. Most of us spend considerable time with breath and body and space.

At first we think these choices we're making are really important ones, that they're the key to the practice. When I was a beginner, I thought vipassana meditation was about being with the breath. I thought that defined it—that's what it was. It took me a while before I realized that the thing we're with isn't so important. What's important is the mindfulness.

And we just pick these different focuses as skillful means to develop the quality of mindfulness, because it's the mindfulness that frees us. It's mindfulness that liberates—not the breath, not sounds, not the body.

Similarly with our metta practice, we work with different individuals to generate the metta. In the beginning it seems like the people are really important, and they certainly have their own role to play. Each one brings a different flavor. But the key again is the quality of metta more than the specific individual.

What we're really looking to do is to stabilize our heart in the experience of loving kindness so that becomes the place we live from more and more of the time. As we do that, we find the heart becoming more responsive, more sensitive, more open, more juicy.

Then we can start to see where the tracks of vipassana and metta come together. They seem like different tracks right now. The practices are really different and sometimes appear to be going in dissimilar directions. But over time, we want to converge the two practices so that from vipassana, we bring this full presence in each moment that's in touch with our experience. From the metta side, we bring this openness of heart, this friendly relation to life.

You could say they come together in this quality of warm attention—a mindfulness that is colored or flavored with the quality of loving kindness or friendliness.

Different individuals do have distinct roles to play in the opening, and it's important to understand that too. For example, the relationship to the benefactor can be enormously inspiring. When I was doing my benefactor practice the first time I did metta practice, I stayed with the benefactor for three weeks. It became very powerful for me. I felt that I was doing a kind of—you ever watch Star Trek? Remember how Spock could do this Vulcan mind meld with people where he would just put his head next to theirs and their minds would mingle? I felt that was happening with my benefactor. As I carried the person in my heart over those three weeks, I really felt like all their good qualities were starting to come out of my heart. I felt like I had united with my benefactor in that relationship.

This seems a little alien to our tradition, but actually in the Pali texts, you can find talk of this kind of relationship. The Buddha himself said that those who have sufficient faith in and love for the Tathagata—which is another name for himself—are liberated by faith. Those who have sufficient faith in and love for the Tathagata are liberated by faith. So this devotional quality goes back a long way in our tradition.

My teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche, was a student of a real master of the Tibetan practices named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who died just last summer. The last time my teacher was seeing Khenpo, the older teacher gave him some tender advice as he was leaving. It was very simple and very direct advice. He said to him, "Love me." Those were his parting words: "Love me."

That was a really beautiful statement to me of the kind of quality that can be there in the teacher-student relationship. Love me—not because he needed any kind of adulation, because he wasn't interested in that at all, but because it was a way for my teacher to continue opening his heart and developing the juice in his own practice.

There's this beautiful book I just read this past week called *Sorrow Mountain*, written by a Sangha member named Dede Donnelly, who lives in the East Bay. She met a Tibetan nun named Anipachen, who's now sixty-seven years old, living in Dharamsala. Anipachen grew up as the daughter of a warrior chieftain living in the rugged country of eastern Tibet, living out in Kham. Her father was a very fierce man and the chief of a large group, but also a devoted practitioner. So she grew up with great devotion to the Buddha Dharma.

When the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1949, after a few years they came and took over her region of the country. She and a few other people escaped to the hills and undertook guerrilla warfare against the Chinese for a number of years. They were actually aided by the CIA. They were getting food drops and drops of guns and ammunition for some time. But eventually the Chinese covered the whole territory, even those remote

wilds, and she was captured. Because she was known to have been the daughter of a chieftain and to be leading the forces, she was imprisoned and tortured quite routinely on the pretext of trying to get information about the guerrilla war. She spent years in prison undergoing steady beatings and torture.

For one nine-month period, because she had been flippant in her response to a guard, she was thrown into solitary confinement in a room that no light entered. For nine months, she was in this completely dark enclosure. She did not see another person except the guard's hand slipping watery gruel to her a couple of times a day, and didn't see any light for nine months.

Her devotion to the Dharma was unwavering through that time. While she was in her cell for nine months, she decided she would take that time to undertake her hundred thousand prostrations, which is one of the preliminary practices in Tibetan Buddhism. She actually, at the end, started to pray that she wouldn't be released from that confinement until she completed her prostrations.

After twenty-one years in prison, she was released and started to demonstrate against the Chinese authorities in Lhasa. But as you may recall, in the late eighties, there was quite a crackdown on the demonstrators. Monks were killed and beaten. As one of the leaders, she was being pursued by the authorities, so she escaped to India.

When she finally arrived in India, she got to meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In their meeting, she shared her entire story with him—the flight from her village, the guerrilla war, her capture, the beatings and torture, and her years in prison. She said that as she recounted these experiences, both she and the Dalai Lama would often break down in tears. Yet all her trials had only seemed to strengthen her devotion and commitment to the Dharma.

Years later, someone asked her what had kept her alive, what had sustained her through all those difficult years. She replied, "I wanted to live to be able to see His Holiness in person." The figure of the Dalai Lama had been that meaningful for her. And she finally did.

Let me share another story from this Teacher's Conference. As many of you know, the Dalai Lama was here about a month ago, sitting in this very room speaking to the Teacher's Conference. He was seated right up there in the center. For me, it was truly the high point of our time together—such a privilege to be able to spend time with him and simply experience his being.

I want to relate one conversation that emerged, just to give you a flavor of his character. The conference was organized around different topics, with various teachers presenting their perspective from a Western viewpoint, after which the Dalai Lama would sometimes respond—or if he had nothing to add, he would remain silent.

Lama Surya Das, a Westerner teaching in the Tibetan lineage, was speaking to the group and to His Holiness about how Buddhism is entering the mainstream in the West. He discussed how it's becoming widespread enough that it's even getting somewhat fashionable—Hollywood is starting to embrace Buddhism, and when that happens, we should all take notice.

Surya Das explained that there are dangers in becoming too popular, as the teachings might get misrepresented or lose their depth. He then turned to the Dalai Lama and said, "Your Holiness, you're the biggest popularizer of them all. What advice do you have for us in the West?"

The Dalai Lama thought for a moment and replied, "People call me many different things. Some people say I'm a living Buddha." He laughed gently. "No, I'm not. I'm not. Some people call me God King. No, I'm not that either. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk—a simple Buddhist monk."

He continued, "Other people see me very differently. They call me a counter-revolutionary. They call me a wolf in monk's clothing. So you see, I have to check back to my own intention. What is my own intention? If my intention is to help beings come out of suffering, then that's what is important to me. How others see me is up to them, and I don't care. I don't care." He said this very strongly. "I just don't care."

For me, this was a profoundly powerful moment. I could feel both sides of his experience—being called a living Buddha or being labeled a counter-revolutionary. I sensed the enormous responsibility he carries as ambassador for the Tibetan people, as perhaps the only person who can make a long-term difference in their situation. I felt the burden of that responsibility on his shoulders and the maturing effect it has had on him. And then, to be able to emerge from all that weight of responsibility and say, "But inwardly, I don't care. I'm free." I experienced both simultaneously—the tremendous burden he bears and the vast inner freedom from which he operates. It was a very moving moment.

One of the most perceptive comments about him came from Caroline Kornfield, Jack's daughter. She was in the room helping to video the conference as an assistant. At fifteen years old, she has grown up around the Dharma—practically nurtured on Yucca Valley retreats. About the Dalai Lama, she observed, "He's born anew in every moment." I found this to be a remarkably insightful and beautiful comment.

The benefactor can reveal much to us about our own depth, because all the qualities present in the Dalai Lama, all the qualities in your teachers and our teachers, exist within each one of us as well. It's simply a matter of bringing them forth, allowing them to manifest.

And then also with the other individuals, we learn about different aspects of our mind. From our friends, we might learn about the inclination to hold on, to grasp or to attach—the near enemy of loving kindness. This is really a pointer to the force in our minds of grasping or greed, of clinging. From the neutral person, which we practiced with today, we might learn about the force of ignorance. Because mostly what we do in our life, if somebody doesn't hold a charge for us one way or another, we don't take them very seriously. We don't think they're important. "Oh, that's somebody I don't have to bother with. I can ignore them." When we meditate on the neutral person, we can find that those people actually are full human beings in their own right. Every being is full in his or her own right and they're worthy of our attention too. So it cuts through the tendency to ignorance in us.

And the difficult person who we'll begin to work with tomorrow can help us to find a caring even in the midst of aversion. Even if we don't particularly like someone, we find that we can get in touch with that metta anyway. So all these qualities—the desire, the ignorance, and the aversion—these are the three root kilesas, what the Buddha called defilements or distortions in our mind. And the loving kindness practice helps us to purify all three of them through these different individuals.

The other key fruit of the practice is the quality of concentration, which is the translation of the Pali word samadhi. Samadhi refers to a state of mind that has become whole, that has become unified or collected, that's been gathered together. A state of mind like that becomes strong, becomes firm, becomes less wavery, more unshakable. And we develop it by bringing our whole attention to whatever we do. This sense, as well as metta, bring with them a great sense of well-being and contentment. With the feeling of metta, there's a richness, there's a sweetness, and with the quality of samadhi, there's a steadiness, an unshakability.

And with these two together, there's a sense of really it being enough. There's a sense of deep satisfaction. My Tibetan teacher happens to be Sogyal Rinpoche III, which meant that he had two previous incarnations. The first incarnation, who is known for his great effort, had a poem that had a line I particularly liked. It said, "There is nothing else to search for, rest in your natural face." This is somewhat the flavor when the loving kindness and the samadhi come together. There's a feeling that we're just held by that combination, that that is enough.

When both of those factors are strong, the hindrances that Sally talked about last night get suspended. They can't arise in a mind that is held in that container of sufficient samadhi, especially with the metta. And then when the hindrances aren't disturbing our minds, we can see things more clearly. We can see the vastness of the love. These are really special moments in the practice when it comes together in this way, when you can connect with a few of these qualities at the same time and the mind isn't so disturbed.

It's rare. And sometimes we think, "Oh, this isn't that important because it's just a passing meditation state." But actually what these moments are revealing to us are the depth of our true nature. This is the feeling, it's kind of a preview of the deepening of our spiritual life. These kinds of feelings, these experiences come more and more. They become more our resting place, more our home in practice. So not to take them lightly. They may be rare. They are usually rare in retreat, but they're very important. They're real pointers on the path.

Metta and samadhi support one another. Metta through the force of love tends to bring the mind together. Love brings about a union. The samadhi brings about a steadiness. So the metta encourages the samadhi and the samadhi intensifies the metta. When the mind becomes concentrated, the feelings go deeper. The experiences are more deeply felt. So these two really help each other. And that's why this practice is such a potent way to develop a practice of samatha, of tranquility.

So the metta practice can bring us these beautiful fruits of both loving kindness and concentration, but one key is our motivation, what the spirit is that we approach the practice with. I was practicing at IMS in my first extended period of loving kindness, and in the first ten days of the retreat, the practice was going fairly well, and I thought, "Wow, this is just gonna keep getting better and better. I'm glad I signed up for this because all my friends had told me about, you know, it's really different from vipassana practice. It can get really sweet."

When I approached my teacher Joseph Goldstein with my frustration, I explained how well the practice had been going just days before and how desperately I wanted to reclaim that state. Joseph, having undoubtedly navigated similar waters in his own metta practice, cut straight to the heart of the matter with profound simplicity. "Guy," he said, "we don't do this practice for ourselves—it's for the other." That single insight unlocked my mind.

I suddenly saw with stark clarity that I had been doing loving kindness practice essentially to make myself feel good inside. In this self-centered approach, I had completely lost touch with the other person. I had stopped caring about what was happening for them because what truly mattered to me was what was occurring within my own mind and body. I had lost the entire spirit of what the practice is about.

This awakening transformed everything. I returned to my cushion, loosened my grip, and began thinking about the other person for a change instead of focusing solely on myself. Within half a day, the practice began to settle back down. This became a powerful teaching for me about the quality of right effort.

This experience brought me deeply into connection with a stanza I cherish from Shantideva, a Buddhist practitioner in ninth-century India who wrote *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*:

"Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever sorrow there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

This verse pointed directly to a profound truth—the same truth embedded in the teachings on generosity and sila. When we open and genuinely care about another, beautiful things arise within our own hearts and minds. But if we give only to receive that blessing, it doesn't work. If we practice metta for another only to achieve calm, it doesn't unfold that way. We must sincerely want to give to the other. We must sincerely want the other to be happy.

The practice truly requires this approach of non-clinging. This is partly why teachers emphasize that metta is not merely a samatha practice—profound wisdom emerges through it as well. Deep understanding flows through this practice: understanding about the nature of the open heart, about what creates harmony between beings, about the profound level on which we are connected, and about the fundamental level on which we are essentially the same being.

Whatever our outward appearance—our gender, race, color, social class, age, background, or education—underneath all these surface differences, these qualities of heart and mind are identical in all of us. Our bodies are simply minor variations on the same theme. Fundamentally, we are the same organism. The metta practice provides a direct path to perceive this unity.

As we offer the phrases "May you be happy, may you be safe, may you be healthy," we must extend them to the person without grasping or control.

In a way we offer it and then we surrender because it's out of our hands. It's like making a gift. We make the gift and then we don't know how it will be received. We don't know how the other person will take it. When we say the phrases, we don't know if the other person will be affected or not. We don't know if it will bring health or happiness or safety, but what we do know is that if our wish is sincere, if our intention is sincere, and if it is rooted in that caring for the other, then the practice will truly unfold in us.

This is what I love—it's the paradox of spiritual life, whether in vipassana or metta: we have to make this very full effort, give it everything we've got, put all our heart and soul and mind and body into it, and we don't know that we're going to get anything back. And in metta it goes one step further. We put everything into it and then we give a little more away without expecting anything back.

But that is exactly the place from which all the beautiful qualities, all the juicy qualities start to come through our hearts. It's in that total giving and the total surrender that the heart can really start to open because it's no longer under pressure. It's no longer being squeezed by the force of grasping and self-interest.

This is from Rumi: "The way of love is not a subtle argument. The door there is devastation. Birds make great sky circles of their freedom. How do they learn it? They fall. And falling, they're given great wings."

This is like our vipassana practice and our metta practice both. We have to open in that very surrendering kind of way. Open ourselves to the fall and then see what comes. And the beauty of our innate nature, our basic goodness, is that those are the conditions for it to flower and to manifest—to respond with these beautiful qualities of loving-kindness, of compassion, of devotion, of faith and friendliness and humor.

This is from Rilke, Rainer Maria Rilke: "I believe in all that has never yet been spoken. I want to free what waits within me so that what no one has dared to wish for may for once spring clear without my contriving. If this is arrogant, God, forgive me, but this is what I need to say. May what I do flow from me like a river. No forcing and no holding back the way it is with children."

This is the flavor of surrender in our metta practice. It's an active practice, but there's also a very receptive side to it where we just open ourselves and wait to see what comes. That openness is really, really important.

At the same time, the active side of it is doing something very powerful. I don't know if you've reflected on this yet, but when you do the loving-kindness practice with the image, as I described earlier, you're creating an image in the mind. You're bringing forth the flavor of the emotion of metta. And the thoughts in your mind are wholesome phrases: may you be safe, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you live with ease.

So at the time when the metta practice has come together in that way, you have planted in the mind the image, the metta quality, and the thought phrase. I don't know if it's struck you what an incredible accomplishment that is, but basically at that time you have shaped the mind stream. Our mind stream is made up of images, thoughts, and emotions. And when the practice is flowing, you have filled all three of those areas with the wholesome qualities of loving-kindness.

That kind of mind is removed from suffering. It's removed from disturbance. It's removed from wavering. That kind of mind is very beautifully protected and secluded.

So this is a big deal. Don't be disappointed if it takes a while for all these pieces to come into place, because it's actually a really audacious thing that we're doing. Who would have thought that we could find a way to fashion our whole mind stream toward a wholesome end? This is a very big deal. So be patient with yourself if it doesn't all come together at once. It can take a while.

This is very empowering and it gives a real sense of freedom when you start to tune into this quality of heart and mind. And this is why the Buddha called loving-kindness an immeasurable deliverance of mind, an immeasurable deliverance of heart. And he said of it that this deliverance of heart is more than sixteen times greater than any worldly blessings—blessings related to worldly activities such as generosity.

The heart's deliverance of loving kindness is more than sixteen times greater than these worldly activities. As these beautiful, juicy qualities of the heart unfold, they actually can become a path of their own.

And the Buddha pointed to this also, faith being a primary one among them—faith being this willingness to surrender and to open through that trust in our basic goodness, in the beautiful qualities of our true nature.

The Buddha spoke to a monk named Pingya. "Pingya," he said, "other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. Vakali, Bhadravuda, and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

And this is just one of the promises that's opened by the development of the heart through our metta practice. This is a channel that opens to touch our basic goodness and release these liberating qualities that are there within us.

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

Other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the furthest shore beyond the draw of death.

So we have about thirty minutes now for walking meditation. Then we'll have the last sitting of the day with the chanting.

CHAPTER 223

Paṭiccasamuppāda: Dependent Origination

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), which the Buddha considered his most profound insight. Drawing from the Paṭiccasamuppāda Vibhaṅga Sutta from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, Armstrong guides listeners through the twelve links that explain both the cycle of saṃsāra and the path to liberation. He uses the traditional Tibetan Wheel of Life (Bhava Chakra) to illustrate how beings cycle through different realms of existence based on the three root poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. The teaching traces the sequence from avijjā (ignorance) through saṅkhāra (formations), viññāṇa (consciousness), nāmarūpa (name-and-form), and the six sense bases, leading to contact, vedanā (feeling), taṇhā (craving), upādāna (clinging), bhava (becoming), jāti (birth), and jarāmaraṇa (aging and death). Armstrong emphasizes that freedom comes through breaking the chain between feeling and craving - learning to rest in awareness without reactive formations of greed or aversion. This is where mindfulness practice becomes transformative, allowing practitioners to see clearly and act with wisdom rather than from ignorance. The talk demonstrates how dependent origination encompasses both cosmic and psychological dimensions, showing how we create and recreate the sense of self moment by moment, and how wisdom can interrupt this cycle to reveal our inherent freedom.

The subject of this evening's talk is dependent origination. This is a technical topic in the Buddhist teachings, and I hope it won't be too technical for this group. If it is, I encourage you to remember the advice that Ajahn Chah gave Jack Kornfield when he came to meditate there. Ajahn Chah told him, "I hope you're not afraid to suffer, because there are two kinds of suffering: one that leads to more suffering and one that leads to the end of suffering." Even just listening to this topic leads to the end of suffering, so you'll be okay.

Before the Buddha was awakened, he started to reflect on where this human problem of suffering came from. He asked, "Why do we have this condition of illness, aging, and death?" He said, "Well, it's here because we got born." Then he asked, "Where did we get born from? Why did that happen?" He traced this sequence back through twelve different links that established the whole foundation of our vulnerability to suffering. He traced it all the way back as far as it could be traced, to the factor of ignorance or *avijjā*, a quality in the mind of not understanding.

After his awakening, he taught this sequence of links again and again to many groups at many times to show where suffering comes from. It also shows the way out of suffering. You could say that what dependent origination is really about is taking the second and third Noble Truths—the cause of suffering and the end of suffering—and explaining them in incredibly minute detail to show us clearly the way out. It not only shows where we're caught, it also shows the way to freedom.

In Pali, this sequence is called *Paṭiccasamuppāda*. The sutta I'm going to base this talk on is from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses, and it's called the *Paṭiccasamuppāda-vibhaṅga Sutta*—the Analysis of Dependent Origination. I chose this sutta because it's quite a straightforward reading of the links with the explanation of the factors together.

The Buddha actually regarded this as his most profound insight, and he said that one who sees dependent origination sees the Dharma, and one who sees the Dharma sees dependent origination—that these are more or less identical. His good friend and attendant for many years, Ānanda, once came up to the Buddha and in his light-hearted and friendly way said, "Oh, Venerable Sir, this teaching on dependent origination is so wonderful. It is profound, but it seems just as clear as clear can be to me. It seems easy and clear." And the Buddha said, "Say not so, Ānanda, because this teaching appears profound and it is profound." He's always just slightly adjusting Ānanda's understanding.

For me, this teaching is awesome. It's my favorite teaching of the Buddha's. It encompasses a range from the vastness of cosmology and a whole view of how we came to be born—a very global, high-level perspective of why there's birth and why we find ourselves in this situation. But at the same time, it also provides a very minute and detailed look, moment by moment in our meditation practice, of how we get caught and how we get free. It really spans the whole range of our experience from the lofty philosophy down to the very pragmatic principles of Dharma practice.

It takes in the law of karma leading to our birth. It takes in the second and third Noble Truths. It takes in this mysterious union of mind and body through the activity of our consciousness and how they come together. And how from a completely unobstructed and primordially open space of awareness, we construct the limitation of this fiction of a separate self. All of this is within the twelve links of dependent arising.

One of my early introductions to this teaching was at Wat Suan Mok. I was a monk and I'd been involved in Dharma practice for a few years and had studied this and practiced it a little bit. But Wat Suan Mok is a very special place. It was the monastery cre-

ated by Ajahn Buddhadāsa in Thailand. Ajahn Buddhadāsa was an iconoclast who read well outside the Theravāda tradition. He read in the Mahāyāna tradition, the Zen tradition, the Tibetan tradition, and had a very original view of Dharma.

He has a building in the monastery called the Spiritual Theater where he has reproductions of famous spiritual works of art. On the wall of this building is a very large painting of a beautiful Chinese Zen work of art depicting a Zen master sitting by the side of a stream enjoying the freedom of his awakening. He has several Theravāda works and a wall-high painting of a Tibetan image known as the Wheel of Life. In Sanskrit, it's called the *Bhavacakra*—Wheel of Existence, Wheel of Becoming, or the Wheel of Life. It's a very striking image.

When Sally and I heard some teachings from the Dalai Lama in England in the 1980s, he gave us a reproduction of this maṇḍala. After the talk, I'll put it up on the board so that you can take a look at it. In color and the height of a wall, it's a little more impressive. But I want to use this picture tonight to explain what dependent arising is all about.

I'll describe it a little bit as I speak, and then you can take a closer look later.

You may be able to see that the center of it is a circle—this is the wheel of life. This circle is held by a rather fearsome monster who has fangs instead of teeth, claws for hands that grasp this wheel, and a quite ferocious appearance. As decoration through his hair, he wears a band of human skulls. The wheel of life takes place within his grasp.

In the very inner circle of this wheel—it's several concentric circles—in the very innermost circle is a picture of three animals: a pig, a snake, and a rooster. These symbolize the forces in our mind of greed, hatred, and delusion. The pig represents greed—he'll eat anything, spending all day eating. The snake represents hatred because of its attacking quality. And the rooster represents delusion or stupidity. If you've ever owned chickens, you'll know exactly what this means. They're absolutely untrainable creatures.

In the next circle, there's the evolution of the human being from a rather contorted and twisted lower form through many births to the evolution as an enlightened being, an awakened one or a Buddha.

The next outermost circle shows the realms of existence that beings are born into. Traditionally in Buddhist cosmology, in the Theravadan tradition, there are thirty-three different realms that beings are born into. The human realm is the fifth from the bottom, so we can't be totally conceited about our position in the scheme of things, but we

do have the advantage—as Sylvia was talking about yesterday—that we have the capacity to understand and become free. In this image they've been simplified from thirty-three down to six.

The highest realm is considered the realm of the devas and brahmas, the realm of the gods. It's a life where everything is easy and pleasant. It's said that one spontaneously appears in those worlds with no going through a birth canal. One dwells as a being of light and everything is provided. One doesn't have to work hard to maintain oneself. The only suffering in that life is said to be that when a deva or a Brahma dies, the others don't really want to hear about it because it's kind of the only stain in this beautiful existence. So the deva has to go off to a corner and pass away in solitude. That's the only suffering.

Coming down a level from the Devas are called the Asuras, often translated as the jealous gods or the angry gods. These are people who have a lot of power, but maybe not so much wisdom. I usually think of them as like the Titans of industry—if you put Bill Gates and Larry Ellison in the same room, this is kind of the clash you'd get from the jealous gods, these great competitors in the software world.

Then is our human realm. The characteristic of our human realm is that we're able to experience the mind states, the kind of life of all the other realms, from the highest to the lowest. The human realm is uniquely positioned sort of in the middle of the happy realms and the unhappy realms, and we're open to all of the universal experience.

A step below the human realm in the traditional cosmology is the realm of the animals. Because we share the planet with these creatures, we know firsthand that there is at least one other type of being that is similar to human beings but not exactly the same. Sylvia also drew on in her talk yesterday that creatures don't really have the ability to develop their hearts and minds and to come to awakening the way that humans do. As much as we love our cats and dogs, we can't really train them in mindfulness. Of course, they may be pretty well developed in loving kindness, but mindfulness doesn't seem to be up their street exactly.

One down from the animal realm is the realm of hungry ghosts. These are pictured in this chart and in the mythology as beings who have very, very big bellies and very narrow necks. The idea is that as much as they try to eat, they can never fill their enormous belly because their neck is too narrow. Where the animal realm is characterized by delusion and inability to understand deeply, the hungry ghost realm is characterized by desire, the force of desire and never being able to get enough.

The very bottom realm is said to be the hell realm. It's a realm characterized by very intense kinds of suffering—both hot realms, cold realms, realms of being stabbed and pricked, realms from which there is really no release at any point in one's existence in that terrain.

Now whether you choose to view this circle as actual beings existing in actual different places or not is not so important. The key about this teaching is that we all visit these places in our life and in our practice. I hope you can relate to this.

This came home to me when Sally and I were traveling to the retreat in Italy this summer. We'd flown on this overnight flight from San Francisco to Milan. To get up to near where the retreat was, we had to go through Milan Central train station. It was a rainy day, totally gray, cold for Italy in the summer, and quite dreary. We pull up to this train station and walk up these huge stairs to this cavernous open space that has rain falling outside. Quite grimy, actually.

It's an old station and not particularly clean, filled with smoke—because as you may know, in Europe there are still quite a few more people smoking than in the States. We'd been traveling all night, so we were tired. Our mind state was not the greatest. The food all looked like train station food, kind of greasy and unappetizing. There were no benches or chairs to sit down on, so it seemed like everybody was wandering around, toting these huge suitcases, trying to find someplace to rest.

We finally did find a bench by a public toilet, of which the aroma was quite strong. Our train wasn't due to leave for about two hours. After hanging out in this space for a while, I realized where I was: I was in the place of the hungry ghosts. Everybody was walking around with this kind of restless wanting energy—When's my train going to go? When can I get something good to eat? Where am I going to find a place to sit down?—all in the middle of this gray and quite gloomy setting. So we can tune in to the energetic quality.

The heaven realm is when our practice is really going smoothly. We have this sitting and a walking and another sitting that's just effortless. It's peaceful, we're present, and we're connected. We think this is the way it should always be. We don't realize we've temporarily been born in a heaven realm. But after being born in a heaven realm, we die from that realm and are reborn somewhere else.

Sometimes it's the hell realms—the state where the body is on fire, where the mind can't settle, where we're tormented by suffering mental states of fear or anger or restlessness. We know we're just in a place of great suffering, and struggle as we might, we can't find our way out. That's the feeling of being in the hell realm. But if we just persist, we also die out of that realm and take birth in one of the other realms.

So our practice—and in fact our human life—is a cycling through these different ways of being, through these different states of mind and body.

Then the outermost circle is the subject of the main part of our talk this evening: the twelve links of dependent origination, each one expressed as a particular image. When you look at this outside, you'll see twelve little images around the outside going from one o'clock up to twelve o'clock. Those are the links in order from one to twelve. So that's what I'd really like to talk about tonight—those twelve links and how they describe our situation.

The first link is ignorance. In Pali it's *avijja*, and it means not seeing things the way they really are. In the artwork, the image for *avijja*, for ignorance, is a blind person walking forward leaning on a cane—the state of not seeing.

When the Buddha was asked to be more detailed, in the suttas he describes what we are not seeing. He said we're ignorant of the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, of the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering. So fundamentally, you could say ignorance is of the Four Noble Truths—not seeing clearly how we get caught and how we get free.

That sometimes seems a little abstract, so you can also think of it in another way. Another way it's sometimes explained is we don't see the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. We tend to see permanence in things that will fade away. We tend to see lasting happiness where we're subject to suffering. And we tend to see a self, an I, where in fact there is not a separate self or I.

A fundamental way you can always remember this quality of ignorance is a belief in a self—believing that there really is an I within this set of mind-body circumstances that we're in. And the Buddha said this is as fundamental a source for suffering as can be found. There is no possibility of tracing things any further back than ignorance.

When we think about the fall from grace as represented by Adam and Eve in Christian or Judaic terms, the Buddha said you can't trace a beginning point that was initially pure. Rather, ignorance is as far back as you can go. He said, "No beginning can be

found for ignorance, such as before this point there was no ignorance, but then it arose." So I take that to mean that as long as there have been beings, we have been clouded by ignorance.

The second link is called formations, and the Pali word is *sankharas*. What this really means in this sense is volitional formations—when we urge ourselves to do something out of a motive. Volitional formations happen through thoughts, through speech, and through body. Actions through body have stronger consequences than those of speech.

Actions of speech are considered stronger than those of thought. But this entire realm represents karma. Karma means action with intention or volition, so we could equally call these things karmic formations.

The image in the traditional art depicts a potter making clay pots, sitting with the wheel and throwing vessels. The pots represent the formations—creations from our own mind that we act out. When we act from motive, from volition or intention, we're usually expressing some will connected to self-centeredness. So we often act from some kind of desire or aversion. Or we can act in wholesome ways, from motives of generosity or kindness.

The basic teaching is that our action is wholesome if the intention is wholesome. The karma or action is unwholesome if the intention is unwholesome—such as greed or aversion. When we act wholesomely, it brings consequences that create happy results in our life. When we act unwholesomely, it brings consequences that return suffering to our life. This is the fundamental teaching.

The Buddha connects these first two links by saying that ignorance conditions volitional formations. In Pali, these all have a beautiful ring: *pachaya* is the word for conditions. *Avijja pachaya sankhara*—ignorance conditions formations. This is such a profound concept.

Ajahn Sumedho says he likes to translate it as "ignorance complicates everything." When we don't see clearly what's happening, we don't act very skillfully. When we're burdened by fear, we often act in ways that manifest that uncertainty, that hesitation, that unclarity. When we're motivated by greed, we often act in ways offensive to other people. And delusion is an accompanying factor where we don't see the greed that's present. We don't see the aversion that's present. If we did, we wouldn't act from them. So delusion accompanies these unskillful actions.

Basically, when we're burdened with the sense of self, we act in the world unskillfully. We try to protect and defend our territory. We try to garner more things for this self, whether emotional things like love and praise, or material things like wealth, house, car, and so forth. This involves us in a lifelong struggle.

I thought this "ignorance complicates things" was really highlighted by the story of a bank robber who went into a bank and handed the teller a stick-up note saying he had a gun, demanding all the cash, and instructing them not to tell anybody. The tellers are trained to follow such instructions, so the teller complied and handed over the cash. The robber got it and left the bank, immediately going home. When he arrived, he found police waiting for him. He was arrested with all the cash from the bank.

He asked, "How did you track me down?" The police replied, "You wrote your stick-up note on the back of your deposit slip. We just read your name and address and came to your house." So ignorance certainly complicated his life.

When we're not aware of what's moving us, we act unskillfully. Sylvia Boorstein has a line I appreciate: "When we see clearly, we act impeccably." When we see clearly and ignorance is not at work, then we act impeccably with wholesome karma.

The third link in the chain is called consciousness. The Pali is *vijnana*. This is the knowing faculty, the faculty in our mind that receives all our experience. It receives our sense impressions, mental events, our own bodily events, external events. It's the receptive faculty of mind that knows the world.

The image in the art is of a monkey swinging from branch to branch. It illustrates how our consciousness lights first on a physical experience, next on a sound, next on a thought, then on an emotion, then on another sight, always leaping from one thing to another. This doesn't necessarily mean we have restless or unmindful attention. This is simply what consciousness does—it's always flitting from sense door to sense door like a monkey.

When we say that formations condition consciousness, the classical interpretation—and I think this is what the Buddha meant—is that as long as karma is being generated from a sense of self, we end up being reborn. So the consciousness being discussed here, according to the suttas, is called rebirth consciousness. It explains why each of us finds ourselves in this particular form, in this particular life.

According to the teachings, you don't have to believe it. As my teacher Munindra used to say, "You don't have to believe in rebirth. It's true." You don't have to believe it.

At the end of the prior life, if there is still some form of individual will, some form of a belief in a self, there will continue to be urges in the psyche, latent in the psyche. And those latent urges at the moment of death will continue in the form of a consciousness that passes from one life and then becomes the seed of the next birth. The Buddha actually says that this consciousness comes into the mother's womb at the time of conception. And if there is no consciousness there, there cannot be a being even from the union of a man and a woman. So this is the way that rebirth is described in the suttas.

The Buddha said, "If consciousness were not to come into the mother's womb, the new mind and body could not develop there." But when consciousness meets with the union of the father and mother and the egg and the sperm, then this combination of mind and body come together and this is the next link in the chain.

In Pali it's called *namarupa*. Literally it means name and form, the form being the body, name being a word that's given to the cognitive part of the mind. Technically, it includes factors like feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention. But you can just think of it as the cognitive part of our own individual mind.

When these two come together, a new being is formed in the mother's womb. The image in the art is of two people in a rowboat or a canoe rowing across a lake. This refers to the union of mind and body that is what we are as beings. We have these two aspects to our nature, the physical aspect and the mental aspect. It begins at the moment of conception and it grows up through childhood, adulthood, and then to death, the ending of that particular form.

Because we are a mind that is embodied, because we are this union of mind and body, the body provides what are called the six sense bases. That is, the organs through which we connect with the world, through which we have contact. Because we have a body, we see sights, we hear sounds, we taste tastes, we smell odors, we touch things, and we have mental events like thoughts, images, and emotions. So these are called the six sense bases that are connected with our taking birth into a body. And what they do for us is they give us the ability to access the world.

I remember being on my first three-month retreat when another yogi came up to Joseph Goldstein. There'd been some teachings on dependent origination, and this yogi said to Joseph, "Joseph, why am I here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean at this retreat?" And she said, "No, no, no. I mean, why am I here as a human being? Why am I alive?" And he said, "It's because you wanted to see and hear and smell and taste and touch and think." And in a word, that's why we take birth—so we can have more contact, so that we can experience more.

From the six sense bases, then, we get this contact with the world. And this is the next link. In Pali, it's called *phassa*. The image in the art is of a house with six windows, the six windows representing the six sense doors. The house basically represents the body. Sometimes in that image, in some versions of this wheel, you'll see the monkey inside, which is consciousness peering out through the six windows, experiencing the world.

From the six sense bases, we experience contact of the six types: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and mind events. In the art, the image for contact is a man and a woman lying down in an embrace. What this symbolizes is our embrace with the world. We actually live in this intimate relationship with the world of form. We are experiencing it as our reality moment after moment after moment.

Sometimes—I don't know if you've felt this—in the quiet places in meditation, there can be an intense yearning to shut off this stream of experiencing because it comes to be felt as too much, too restless. But it's not possible to shut it off by willing it or wishing it. Because we're alive, we're in this intimate contact with everything else that's created in our realm.

Because of contact, we have feeling. Feeling—as Sylvia mentioned this morning in the instructions—the Pali term *vedana*, means that every kind of contact we have can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Through all these six sense doors, there are pleasant sights and unpleasant sights and neutral ones. There are pleasant thoughts, unpleasant thoughts, and neutral ones. So in all our contacts, we're constantly subject to this feeling tone, this quality of *vedana*. It can be pleasant, it can be neutral, but it can also be unpleasant, which means that having taken birth, we are subject to unpleasant experiences as well as pleasant experiences. That's our fate.

That's our ticket for this trip. Even the Buddha was not immune from that. He had back pains. He ate poisoned food that caused him to die and experience suffering, physical pain on his way to his dying. This is part of the package.

So the last few links that we've been looking at—the links of consciousness, of name and form, mind-body, of the six sense bases, of contact and feeling—are not things we have any choice about. Once we get propelled into a new birth, these things happen as karmic results. We are just in line for some package of these things due to having taken birth.

Now the plot shifts. The plot thickens a little bit.

Oh, the image for contact, by the way, is of a person with an arrow in his eye. It's a little bit gruesome. It kind of gives you shivers even to think about. But that's the image for contact, and it points basically to our vulnerability. Because of contact, we're subject to things like the pain of illness, the pain of injury, the pain of accident, and so forth.

Now, in relation to feeling, we can respond. We usually do respond to the pleasant things in our life and the unpleasant things in our life. The next link in the chain is craving. This is our old friend from the Second Noble Truth—tanha. And it makes us relate to the pleasant with the force of greed, to the unpleasant with the force of aversion or pushing away, and to the neutral with the force of blindness or not really seeing. Because the neutral doesn't really satisfy anything in us. So these are the reactions that we talked about the other day of greed, aversion, and delusion being really synonymous with craving.

The image in the art is of a wealthy man counting his golden treasures. You can sort of think of it as a miser who has this great lust and desire for the accumulated treasure that he's hoarded.

So craving is the place where now we start to want to look really closely in our practice, to look at these manifestations of pulling toward or pushing away or ignoring. This is where our own choices come back into play. This is where we can establish our practice.

And it's such an important place because we can't control our experience. Life will continue to present experience to us. According to the teachings of the Buddha, it's mostly in the form of karmic results. We can't control that. When you come in for a sitting period, you really can't control whether it's going to be pleasant or unpleasant, whether you're going to be mindful and concentrated and present, or whether you're going to be spacing out, whether the body's going to be at ease or contracted. The basic uprising of our experience is out of our control. But we can have a choice, an increasing choice, in how we respond.

So this is where we establish our practice. How do I respond to the experience that I'm given?

Now with craving, what happens is that we single out one little bit of our experience. We take one instance of contact, we single it out from all the rest of the field, we focus our attention on it, and we react to it with liking or disliking.

Let's take a simple example. You're sitting in meditation and things are fairly neutral, fairly calm, but suddenly a strong pain comes in the back. Okay, this is contact that's born of the sense of touch. In having a body, we will have physical sensations born of

the touch sense. They can be pleasant or unpleasant. In this case, for the sake of argument, let's say it's a painful sensation. So the contact is through the touch sense door. The vedana or feeling tone is painful.

Now, how do we relate to that when it comes into our experience of meditation? Typically, for any of us, the first thing that will happen is the mind will be strongly drawn, the attention will be strongly drawn to that experience. And we will incline toward it with our attention in some kind of way. The primitive or unreflective reaction is one of aversion. We don't like that painful experience. And either we want to push it away or more likely we sort of withdraw from it. We kind of create a distance between the I, standing back as an observer, and this unpleasant experience.

This is where craving is coming in. The force of craving has come into work.

It's wanting that pain not to be there, wanting ourselves not to have to experience it. And so we react to it by drawing away. This kind of bending away in the sense of the unpleasant, or if it's a pleasant sensation, it might be bending toward to take hold of. This is the distortion.

We basically have been given this mirror-like awareness, which purely reveals phenomena exactly as they are. Mindfulness is the discovery and strengthening of this capacity, this natural awareness that just illuminates all the sense contacts just as they are. Everything is held in that panoramic awareness where all the senses are functioning and alive.

But in this instance we've narrowed down our focus to just the pain in our back. We forget about the sounds. We forget about the fact that the knees feel okay. We forget about the fact that the mind was basically calm. And we focus the mind, we incline the mind away from that unpleasant situation.

This is the fundamental movement of craving, away from or toward. We also usually don't see that we're doing it. And that's the concomitant factor of delusion. We're blind to our habitual reactions, and that's how we get caught. This is really the start of the slippery slope. You may have noticed we're on our way to suffering. This is where it begins.

From craving, the next link in the chain is called clinging. In Pali, the term is upadana. Clinging is where we go beyond inclining the mind in that direction and we actually take hold of that facet of our experience. Again, we've just singled out one particular sense contact out of all the ones that are going on, but we grab hold of that one. In

this case, to push it away with the pain in the back. That means we really focus our attention on it. We take firm hold of it as a meditation object or just something to react to. And we have, in the Buddha's terms, grabbed hold of that particular experience.

The image here is of a monkey who's climbed up a tree and is taking hold of a piece of fruit, something shiny and attractive. He's grabbing hold of it. This term is also sometimes translated grasping. Clinging or grasping, more or less synonymous. Clinging refers a little bit to the past holding that's carried on. Grasping is kind of the present moment taking hold of. But another term that expresses it well is fixation.

When we get fixated on some part of our experience, then we've narrowed the lens down. We're just grabbing hold of that with an emotional investment, with the investment of greed or aversion. Essentially what we're doing with fixation is we're trying to freeze the flow of impermanence.

Impermanence keeps bringing us pleasant experience, unpleasant experience, pleasant experience, unpleasant experience. If we could just let that happen, there would be no problem. There would be no suffering. There would be ease. Sometimes it would be pleasant, sometimes it would be unpleasant. But we wouldn't be in conflict.

But because we don't know how to do that, we've had, the Buddha would say, lifetimes of conditioning. We try to freeze the flow and we say, stop this unpleasantness. I don't want it. I'll pull away. Or stop this pleasantness from changing. I want it to last. On and on and on.

One way to see if you're clinging in a moment of practice is to see if you're really aware of impermanence at all the sense doors. Or is there one where there's a sense of being stuck, where there's a sense of freezing or fixating on something in that moment? That's something you can use as a meditation instruction.

The Buddha said that we cling to sense pleasures, we cling to views and opinions, we cling to religious rules and vows, and we cling to the idea of a self. These are the forms of our holding. So in this instance, we hang on to back pain as something fearsome. We establish ourselves by maintaining a distance.

What clinging actually does is it gives a sense of solidness to an experience that is fundamentally not solid at all. Fixation tries to solidify what is impermanent, what is ephemeral, what is passing, what is very light and insubstantial. But when we make a holding out of it, we turn it into a thing. We reify it by saying, "Oh, that's a pain in my back," and we make something solid out of a very light sensation.

Clinging then matures into the next link, which is called becoming or *bhava*. Becoming starts to fix the self into a new identity, and I think of this state of becoming as identity seeking—finding a new identity. The image in the art is of a pregnant woman about to give birth. The sense of ourselves starts to get crystallized in relationship to what we've singled out and taken hold of.

For example, the back pain gets crystallized as a problem and starts to extend into the past—it's been here for a minute—and we begin projecting it into the future: it's going to be here a while longer. So we start to build an idea of ourselves as a person with a problem. Actually, this sense of self is misleading because it's only temporary.

Let me ask you this: can the sense of "I" ever come up without being related to some particular sense experience? Think about this for a minute. Often a pain in the back comes in and we say, "My back hurts." Or we feel happy and we recognize, "I am happy." Even if we're looking at a tree, we might say, "I know that tree, I see that tree." Or if we're really with the breath for quite a while, we might say, "I'm really clear. I'm a good meditator."

Is the sense of "I" ever established independently of one of these sense experiences? We'll leave that an open question. Take a look in your own practice and see. But we can tell that the sense of "I" is arising again and again based on these experiences, based on these changing sense objects. So in your practice, you can actually start to tune into the emergence of this sense of "I."

Part of the craving for becoming I often think of as a search for identity. A lot of fantasies have this quality. Fantasies sometimes attract us—of a job or a relationship or a vacation—because we're going to be someone new in that setting.

A few years ago, I became a big fan of tennis, and in particular, I really liked Pete Sampras. I think he's a fantastic player. Sally gave me, as a Christmas present, a pair of tennis shorts that was the Pete Sampras model for that year—a pair of Nike shorts that Pete happened to wear when he won the US Open. So I was really happy to get them. I'd put them on and go out to the tennis court and actually felt like I was channeling Pete Sampras. I'd look down and see those shorts on my legs and think, "Pete Sampras"—and then I'd step up and occasionally even serve an ace after that. It was an identity thing.

Back in 1988, Sally and I were living in England and were just moving back to the States. I was wondering what to do with my career here, having been a computer consultant part-time and a part-time dharma teacher in England. For some reason this image just came up as we were coming back: I want to wear a coat and tie and carry a briefcase. I have no idea why or where that came from. But when we returned to the

States, I got a job where I could wear a coat and tie and carry a briefcase. I did that for a few years until I could leave and come back into the dharma world. It seemed to satisfy some karmic aspiration I had. Fortunately, it burned out that karma and I happily put my coats and ties in the back closet. But it's really interesting to see this kind of identity formation come up.

One of the ways it comes up in retreat is through these golden chains of identity, which are dharma chains. We might imagine ourselves going back to our friends or family and giving them the most uplifting dharma talk they've ever heard in their lives. It will convert them and they'll immediately come totally into practice. That's another kind of identity connection.

So from the sense of becoming, the next link in the chain is birth. In Pali it's *jati*, and this is the full-blown formation of a new self. Classically, the interpretation is actually the birth in the next life.

So the first part of the links was about how we got born into this life. The very last links in the chain are considered to be what happens when we die at the end of this life. If this urge for becoming, for further existence, is still active in us, then it's said that will lead to another birth. We will be born in a new situation. The image in the art is of a pregnant woman actually giving birth - the baby is born. So this is the solidification of the sense of self from clinging to becoming to birth. The self is just getting a little more solid all along the way.

We can look at this sense of self as it exists through the last couple of days. When you were listening to Sylvia's Dharma talk, when you came down to the dining room for Thanksgiving lunch, what kind of self was being born then? Do you remember?

I don't know what your experience was, but as I was listening to Silvia's Dharma talk, I felt very much a part of this unity of us as a Dharma family. I felt in that time, "I'm part of this Dharma family. These are my Dharma sisters and brothers." As we went down for the Thanksgiving dinner, I continued to feel that really strongly. Then at the end of the meal, when we all went our different ways, that sense sort of broke up and went away from me. That was a form of a self that lasted for a while.

Then a little later, it was the self that loves pumpkin pie. And that lasted a while. There was the self who didn't particularly want to get up this morning, who didn't want to come to the sitting. There was a self who had a good sitting this morning. There was a self judging other people. Maybe there was a self who was good at the work meditation

this morning - vegetable chopping or toilet scrubbing or whatever. A self who got afraid of the pain in the knees or in the heart. All these selves come, they last for a while, and then they go away.

Where are those selves now? They've died, haven't they? They've passed out of existence and another self is being born - one listening to a talk, maybe one whose back is getting a little tired again. How many selves are we in one day? We actually are a new self anytime we identify with, cling to, a new aspect of our experience. Then we live as that person for a while and that self invariably breaks up.

Sometimes in the passing there's relief. Sometimes in that passing there's real sadness. There was a kind of sadness when we came to the end, for me, of Thanksgiving lunch yesterday. And it was the passing of a really beautiful couple of hours, starting with the Dharma talk and the metta and the blessing. So sometimes the passing away is happy, sometimes it's sad, but there's always a sense of turmoil about it. There's a sense of movement and activity.

This is the last of the links - it's called aging and death. The image in the painting is of an old person walking along with great difficulty, bent over, unable to straighten up fully, infirm in body, painful in their movements. This term aging and death is shorthand actually in the Buddhist teachings for the truth of suffering and all the different forms of suffering. As soon as we're born, we're subject to illness, aging, and death. As soon as we're born, we're subject to sorrow and grief and wanting and fear and anger and aggression and all of it. So aging and death typify that.

These are the twelve links. And then when we get to aging and death, or we could say suffering, the circle starts again because we still haven't let go of ignorance. Because ignorance is still in place and we don't understand the cycle fully, the circle starts all over again, moving again through new kinds of contact, new feeling, new craving, new clinging, a new becoming, a new self.

This cycle goes up through all the heavenly realms of being, through all the most pleasurable parts of life, and then it goes down for each of us into difficult places - into places of loss, of physical pain, of embarrassment, of unhappiness, of suffering. We don't really have much control over it. We're sort of riding the waves of life and riding the waves of our own karma through all these different realms.

Whether you understand this as repeated rebirths in actually different levels of existence per the cosmology, or whether you want to understand it as the different ways we go up and down through one life, the meaning is the same. This cycle, which is unending as long as we're in ignorance, is called the cycle of samsara. It is the cycle of

bondage which always exposes us to future suffering until it's understood. The meaning is that we recreate the sense of I and mine over and over and over. And through that recreation, through clinging, we expose ourselves to suffering.

Is this the end of our fate? Is this all there is for us, this unbroken round of bondage and samsara? Fortunately not. And that's why this cycle is also used to explain liberation. It's not deterministic. It's not that one link causes the next, rather they condition it.

Where can we find freedom? The Buddha said that the place to find freedom is the link between feeling and craving. If it's pleasant, we don't have to react with holding on. If it's unpleasant, we don't have to react with pushing away. If we can simply rest with the pleasant and the unpleasant and not get involved in these reactive formations, we have interrupted the chain. We have seen with wisdom and we have understood clearly. And then no further suffering is generated. We have stopped the cycle of future suffering.

The key elements are these two factors of clear seeing, so that we don't react out of habitual greed and aversion, and of acceptance. Again, as with the Third Noble Truth, this factor of acceptance is of profound importance—the ability to be open to the unpleasant experiences as well as the pleasant in our life and not to hold to either.

This is the way the Buddha expressed it: "On seeing a form with the eye, one does not lust after it if it is pleasing, one does not dislike it if it is unpleasing. One abides with mindfulness established and one understands as it actually is the freedom of mind wherein those unwholesome states of craving cease without remainder. Having thus abandoned favoring and opposing, whatever feeling one feels—painful, pleasant or neutral—one does not delight in that feeling or remain holding to it. As one does not do so, delight in feelings ceases. With the cessation of delight comes cessation of clinging. With the cessation of clinging, cessation of becoming. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering."

This is exactly where we establish our practice. In any form of sense contact, in every moment of our experience, if we can be fully with that moment without the reactions of greed or aversion, if we can see it clearly, we're free. Not only are we free in that moment, but then we're not creating the future cycle of bondage that will lead to more suffering. This is wisdom. This is clear seeing. This is also the place of nibbana. This is where the formations, the karmic formations, the volitional formations come to a stop. This is one of the ways that the Buddha often described nibbana: the cessation of volitional formations.

We're also at that point interrupting ignorance, because we're clearly seeing the arising of feeling and yet the not sliding into craving. So as we bring more wisdom in at this point throughout the chain, wherever we can see clearly this chain happening, we start to weaken the whole chain.

Joseph Goldstein had a wonderful image. He said you may have a strong steel chain of many links and you pick one link and you start to bang on it. You may bang on that chain ninety-nine times and nothing seems to happen—still a solid link in the chain. You hit it the hundredth time and it breaks.

This is the impact of wisdom on this cycle of dependent origination. The first time we hit it, the ignorance doesn't go away. The second time, it doesn't go away. But we just keep applying that mindfulness and clear seeing again and again and again. And with each moment of mindfulness, ignorance is being undercut, is being weakened, and eventually it can be uprooted.

The good news is that wisdom can uproot ignorance, but ignorance can't uproot wisdom. So the purity of our being, the innate purity, is actually stronger than all these visiting obscurations. That's the good news of the Dharma. It's never too late. It's never impossible to be free.

And then the Buddha says, "With the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of formations. With the cessation of formations, the cessation of consciousness." And all through all the other links in the chain, including the end of craving, the end of clinging, the end of becoming, the end of birth. And that is the final freedom when all those have become completely ended. We become still inwardly through trust.

One Tibetan teacher, a professor at Naropa, said, "The entire Tibetan Buddhist path consists in nothing more nor less than learning to rest in the gap between feeling and craving ever more deeply and subtly."

So this really is the heart of the Buddha's practice, the heart of the Dharma.

When we rest in that gap, we are resting in Nibbana. We are resting in the unconditioned freedom that is truly our original nature. As long as we can trust in that, as long as we have faith, and don't mess with it, we're free. We're free.

So let's just sit for a minute and let this teaching settle.

The entire path consists in nothing more nor less than learning to rest in the gap between feeling and craving ever more deeply and subtly. This is where liberation awaits us, in each moment of choice, in each breath of awareness, in each opportunity to simply be present with what is without needing to grasp or push away.

May this understanding support your practice. May you find that gap, rest in it, and discover the freedom that has always been your birthright.

CHAPTER 224

Transcendent Dependent Origination

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this inspiring dharma talk, Guy Armstrong presents the Buddha's teaching on transcendent dependent origination from the Upanisā Sutta (SN 12.23), which describes the positive process of liberation. Unlike the traditional twelve links of paṭiccasamuppāda that show the arising of suffering, this teaching traces how suffering itself becomes the proximate cause for faith, which then leads through joy, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, right knowledge and vision, disenchantment, dispassion, liberation, and finally the knowledge of the destruction of the āsavas (mental taints).*
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> *Armstrong illustrates these teachings with personal stories and examples, including his own journey from the difficulties of the 1960s counterculture to finding vipassanā meditation, Ajahn Chah's powerful encounter with fear at a charnel ground, and work with young people in juvenile detention. He emphasizes how our deepest challenges can become doorways to awakening when we learn to face them with awareness and the support of dharma teachings. The talk beautifully balances the recognition of dukkha with the cultivation of joy and the positive mental factors that naturally arise in practice, showing how both difficult and pleasant experiences serve the path to liberation.*

Something else emerges from this general law that the Buddha detailed in the teaching of dependent origination with its twelve links. Those twelve links represent only one application of this fundamental teaching. Tonight I want to explore another application of this general law of cause and effect—this time showing the process of liberation.

The original chain also revealed the process of liberation, but it did so in negative terms: ending this, ending this, ending this, ending suffering. Now the Buddha describes the process of liberation in positive terms, which I find deeply inspiring and motivating. This is what I want to share with you.

This teaching is based on a sutta from the Samyutta Nikaya called the Upanishad Sutta. *Upanishad* means something like proximate cause or supporting condition. It's not strictly a causal relationship, but rather something that must be present for the next factor to arise.

The Upanishad Sutta begins by addressing what the Buddha calls the knowledge of the destruction of the taints. The taints represent the impurities within our heart and mind. When they are said to be destroyed, this is equivalent to saying that one has fully awakened—one is completely enlightened.

The Buddha declares: "I say, bhikkhus, that the knowledge of the destruction of the taints has a proximate cause. It does not lack a proximate cause. And what is the proximate cause for the knowledge of the destruction of the taints? It should be said: liberation." That is, after liberation one knows that the taints have been destroyed. Liberation is freedom itself.

He continues: "I say, bhikkhus, that liberation too has a proximate cause. It does not lack a proximate cause. And what is the proximate cause for liberation? It should be said: dispassion."

This reveals something profound: liberation itself has a precondition, a cause. Liberation in the Buddha's teaching is not something that happens randomly—it occurs according to prior conditions. This means that if we establish the proper conditions, liberation will naturally arise.

The Buddha then traces back this sequence of links from dispassion through a series of positive factors to the quality of faith. He continues: "I say, bhikkhus, that faith too has a proximate cause. It does not lack a proximate cause. And what is the proximate cause of faith? It should be said: suffering."

This statement appears almost as a non-sequitur—how did suffering become the cause of faith? The sutta then continues by showing that suffering also has a cause, tracing it back exactly like dependent origination: through birth, becoming, clinging, craving, feeling, contact, and so forth, all the way back to ignorance.

What emerges is a complete teaching: the entire chain of dependent origination from ignorance to suffering, followed by a new chain leading from suffering to faith and ultimately to liberation and the knowledge of liberation.

This new chain has been given various names by different teachers. Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of my teachers in Thailand who specialized in dependent origination and wrote an extensive work on the subject, called this positive part of the cycle the Radiant Wheel, in contrast to the Wheel of Existence or the Wheel of Becoming. It has also been called the Wheel of Awakening.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, the American monk living in Sri Lanka who translated this volume and the Majjhima Nikaya, wrote a detailed exploration of this teaching and called it transcendental dependent arising. He noted that the commentaries named it transcendental or transcendent because it transcends suffering—it is the wheel that carries us beyond the possibility of suffering.

This sequence of transcendental dependent origination is what I wish to explore tonight.

So to transcend the need for Novocaine tonight, I'll go through the list of the factors that I want to explore in the talk.

It starts with this very surprising linkage of suffering with faith and then continues that faith leads to joy. Joy leads to rapture, to tranquility, to happiness, to concentration, to knowing and seeing things as they are, to disenchantment, to dispassion, to liberation, to knowledge of the extinction of the taints. So these are the twelve links that I want to explore tonight.

Suffering is the proximate cause of faith. This is a little hard to understand because we look around the world and there is lots of suffering and there is not so much liberation. So somewhere in the samsaric conditions of things, suffering is not leading to faith and the rest of the wheel for most people. So what is it that makes the difference? What is it that puts the wheel in a positive spin?

In the commentaries they say there are two conditions for suffering turning into faith. One is an awareness of suffering so that we stop denying it, we stop trying to avoid it, we stop trying to believe that it shouldn't exist, but we acknowledge it as part of our human experience. The second is that we hear the teachings. We hear the teachings and we find a way to transform suffering.

When I looked at this in my own life, I found there was actually a lot of truth in this, of suffering leading to faith. Because I grew up in a fairly ordinary, middle-class household. I grew up in the Midwest and had just a normal amount of human neurosis, which was certainly enough to make my adolescence hell. But I started to get a little more together in my early twenties, and then I discovered the drug culture and the hippie years and the counterculture and all of that.

And I came out of the sixties with a lot of confusion, having had an excess of everything that the sixties were about. And came out quite unhappy, quite confused, a lot of improprieties in my conduct, a lot of wrong understanding. And at that point I really was forced to grapple with my situation, my psychological state, seriously for the first time. I found myself living in California, and so I tried all the things that people

living in California in the early seventies were supposed to try, like rolfing and encounter groups and EST and the EST follow-ups and many, many different kinds of techniques, and none of them touched my fundamental situation very much.

And then I happened to wander into and encounter the vipassana practice. And when I did, I really felt I had found something that had the depth to touch my suffering, to really transform it. Without having come into that kind of deep pain, I don't know that I would have had the motivation to find meditation and to follow it. But suffering for me was kind of the sand that rubbed the oyster the wrong way and through its friction produced the pearl.

When we're suffering we become very open to looking at things in a new way, to really throwing out all our assumptions because maybe we become a little bit desperate. And in my case, I was very desperate. I would have given anything to find my way through that mess. So this quality of being taken to an edge with suffering can actually make us really open to something new.

And I'm reminded of the time a few years ago when James and I got together and went down to teach a class at Juvenile Hall in San Mateo. We were thinking about wanting to start a service project out of Spirit Rock at that time. The board later told us they weren't ready. There were too many buildings to build, too many other things to do, so we shelved it. But as part of our exploration, we were invited by a friend of James who's a practitioner and worked there to conduct a series of classes.

I wasn't familiar with the justice system for juveniles in this country until I went, but what happens is that while young people under the age of eighteen are awaiting trial, they get put into juvenile hall. We were working with young men who were living in the high security unit, which meant that they'd done something pretty serious. People were in there for armed robbery, for assault, for attempted murder, and for murder.

And as you can imagine, like with most of the criminal justice system, the emphasis is not really on compassion and healing. So these young kids were kind of tossed into basically a holding tank with quite strong security guards to sort of keep them in place. And often they wouldn't know how long they would be in there until their case would come to trial. So you had sixteen and seventeen year old kids whose lives were now on hold, who knew that for their offense, they could be locked away in jail for years and years and years. And they were basically just bouncing around the walls of this holding tank hour after hour, day after day, with other young people who were in a similar situation.

So you can imagine that the levels of fear, anxiety, despair, and aggression were running very high for those young guys. And of course they didn't have the tools to deal with that stuff. So James and I thought we would go in and try and keep it really practical. And we didn't know if they'd be interested in meditation at all, so James had a brainstorm. He said, we won't call it meditation. I mean, forget about calling it Buddhism. We weren't going to be that stupid. But even calling it meditation sounded kind of namby-pamby. You know, that's got to be for sissies. So James had the brainstorm that we would call it mind power. And that's what we did.

So we invited them to come to our weekly classes on mind power. With the support of one of the security guards, a bunch of them did come. We would have about ten young guys at every class.

I hadn't worked with young people in that situation before, and James hadn't either. So we went in not knowing what we were doing, not knowing if it was going to connect or not. These were pretty heavy-duty guys. We sat down and gave some instructions, trying to make it practical.

We found that the things they really responded to were the teachings on how to work with difficult emotions like fear and anger. We'd give them the breath as kind of a warm-up exercise, but then we'd say something like, "Imagine a time you were afraid. Imagine a time you were angry. Now go into your body and feel that. Where do you feel it? What are the sensations? Keep your attention there. Tell us what you're feeling." Then we would invite them as homework to continue to do the practice.

Some of them really took to it like ducks to water. They had a lot of free time and they had plenty of material to work with. They were some of the most motivated students I've ever encountered. Some of the shifts we saw were very moving. I don't know how many of them lasted—our class only lasted about six weeks. But some of them came in and told me that they were able to get relief from their fear for the first time. They were able to start to manage some of their feelings of anger.

One time after loving-kindness meditation, they were talking about loving-kindness to other gangs that they'd had fights with. One guy said, "I'm not going to practice loving-kindness to those other guys. They're trying to kill me." Another guy who happened to be a gang leader said, "Oh, but you know, those people have mothers and sisters also who really care about them." So there were some beautiful shifts taking place, and it came out of the extreme state of suffering that they found themselves in.

When we are challenged and suffering challenges us, we can reach deeply inside and open up in a way that we may not have any other time. We hear this every day in the interviews. I wish sometimes that we could pipe the interviews into the meditation hall—sort of like on Monday night, when if the room's full, Jack gets piped into the book room, the disembodied voice comes in. I sometimes wish we could do that here, because it's very inspirational.

The first couple of days, we sort of feel like we're giving the Dharma talks. But after the first few days, when your practice starts cooking, we just sit in there and receive the Dharma talks. You come in and tell us the truth of the practice, especially at this stage in the retreat.

Just thinking back about the interviews today, people come in and say things like, "I'm learning so much about what it means to accept the pain in my life, so much about opening to it and not being in conflict with it." Or "I'm opening to fear in a new way and finding out that it doesn't have to control me, doesn't have to take me over, dictate to me." Or "I didn't even know that there was a gap between feeling and craving. I didn't know there could be a gap. I thought it was all run together all the time. And now I'm finding out I can rest there sometimes."

In all these situations, people are working directly with their difficulties, with their suffering, and finding a way to find some freedom. Finding, in fact, that our suffering is workable. That's really what we're hearing day after day. You're finding your own strength and your own faith coming out of looking closely at your own difficulty. Difficulty often is the greatest teacher in our retreat practice and in our daily life.

When I did my first meditation retreat, which was in 1976, I worked up to it through a couple of years of daily life practice and then took the plunge. It was at Lama Foundation with Joseph and Jack and Sharon. I had a very, very difficult time. I had a lot of pain in my body. I had a lot of wandering mind. There are people for whom the path progresses quickly and easily. I was not one of them. But in the middle of it, I started to see there might really be the possibility of an end to confusion and pain.

And that was so inspiring for me. It was so touching. Because before, my suffering had just been this thick mass that I didn't really see any way into. And with the precision of the practice, I could actually see its arising, and I could see the possibility of its disappearing. It gave me tremendous inspiration. I've cried, actually, with gratitude that this message has come to me—that there is suffering, it has a cause, and because it has a cause, it has an end.

So this is part of the origin of faith. I want to share a couple of other stories that illustrate this fact: when we get taken to an extremity of suffering, sometimes the greatest openings and the greatest breakthroughs come to us.

Ajahn Chah was, as most of you know, Jack Kornfield's first teacher. He was probably one of the greatest half-dozen Thai meditation masters of the last fifty years. As a young monk practicing in the northeast of Thailand near the Lao border, he decided that he would confront his deepest fear.

Culturally in Thailand, one of the scariest things for anybody at any level of society is the idea of ghosts or spirits. We kind of make fun of it on Halloween, but in Asia these things are felt to be very alive, very present, and of a possibly mischievous to malevolent temperament. So Ajahn Chah had a fear of ghosts, a fear of spirits that he'd never fully explored.

He decided as a young monk that he would take himself and sit in a charnel ground. These are the grounds where in Thai communities the dead bodies are brought and burned, then simply left there. If the fire goes out, there are parts of the body left. And of course the spirit is considered to stay close to the body after death.

He went there the first night and set himself up in meditation. As it happened, a child had just been burned at the charnel ground that day. He sat down to meditate, and he was really afraid. But he decided what he needed to do was to face his fear, so he sat all night. All night long, he said, he was shaking. He was trembling. He was very, very afraid.

But then he made it through the night. He was okay. He thought, "Oh, there's nothing to this. I've got this mastered. Charnel grounds aren't going to scare me anymore." The sun came up. He enjoyed the warm day. He kept sitting and walking. And he decided to stay another night.

Near sunset of the second night, people from the village came carrying another corpse. But this was of a grown man. They put the corpse on a pile of wood and lit it, and it burned. The lay people stayed with it for a while and then they went away, and the fire kept burning, the corpse kept burning.

Night was falling and Ajahn Chah realized he had to take his seat again near the burning corpse to face his fear again. So he sat down to meditate and he said, because it was a grown person, this time he was much more afraid. The fear was even stronger. He sat and he could hear the flames flickering away, licking on the wood, licking on the body. He could smell the pungent smell of the burning flesh as he sat with his back to the corpse. He was full of fear. Night fell, but he kept sitting.

As he sat, he started to hear a noise over by the pyre. His ears pricked up. What is that? Is it a dog who's come to sniff around the corpse and take some of the flesh? And then he heard very near the pyre the sound like footsteps on leaves. The steps started coming toward him. He kept his eyes shut. He just kept sitting. It was pitch black. He couldn't see a thing. He didn't even turn around to look. The footsteps came right up toward him, walked around, and stopped right in front of him.

And he imagined that this spirit, half disembodied, maybe half with the burned flesh, was staring at him as he sat with these really intense eyes. And he said then his whole body just filled with fear. He said he'd never felt anything like it in his life. He said he became so afraid he didn't know what else to do. He was practicing saying "Buddho, Dhammo, Sangho" as a way to focus his mind. He couldn't even get a hold of his meditation object. He was just filled with fear.

And he said it was like when you pour a pitcher of water into a jar—every little bit of the jar gets filled with the water. He said his whole body was just pervaded with the fear and he was paralyzed with it. And he said he sat there filled with this fear and then this thought came to him: what's the worst thing that could happen? And the thought came: I could die. And then the thought came: well, everybody has to die. Suppose I meet my death now. That's the worst thing that could happen.

And he said when he came to that understanding, the fear in a moment transformed. And that energy that was filling his body became very, very blissful. Full of blissful, radiant energy. And then the footsteps went away. They walked away. And he sat through the night with this great joy that he said really marked a turning point in his practice. Having opened to the fear, opened to the fear, and it transformed.

So he tells this story in a book called Food for the Heart. If you're interested in reading, it's very moving. And then he goes on and talks about the insights that he took from it and the strength that that gave his mind to face the fear of death and then continue through it. So out of this really close encounter with our suffering, with our pain, we come away with a strength and a certain degree of faith.

So the second link in the chain is this quality of faith, or in Pali the term is saddhā. Saddhā in Pali means to place one's heart upon—where we place our heart for rest, for ease. So faith in the Buddhist sense doesn't mean what you believe in. It doesn't mean an intellectual, conceptual thing. It's really a gut check. What's your level of trust in the world? Or what's your level of confidence in yourself? It's really a pointer to this inner experience that we have.

Traditionally, faith is based on hearing the teachings, hearing the truth, hearing the Dhamma, and checking it with our own experience and coming to believe in it. And then it's said that faith becomes like a gem, that as we rest with the quality, the purity of the gem, it clears the hindrances from our being. The Buddha said: "Endowed with faith, one receives the gladness associated with the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha."

So traditionally, faith is talked about as faith in the three gems—the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. But I really think it's important that we each come to our own connection to what our own faith lies in. It may be the three gems, it may be something different. It may be a trust in nature, or the basic goodness of the universe, or God, or something else. So to look within and find out where that faith is for us.

But in very practical terms, as faith grows, we start to realize that, yeah, I can check out these teachings. They are verified in my own experience and therefore I have the confidence that I can walk the path, that I can walk the path to greater freedom based on the teachings. So out of that confidence then we take up effort. We apply ourselves through the practice, the formal practice of mindfulness and the rest of the Eightfold Path.

And then going into the practice, we find that even though it's difficult at times, there are moments, there are times of great joy. And this is the next factor. The Pali is pāmojja and it's often translated as joy or gladness. It's really, really important that in our practice, in addition to looking at the quality of suffering, we also look at these beautiful factors along the path. The factors in this sutta talk about qualities like joy, rapture, serenity, happiness, liberation.

It's easy to get focused on what's difficult in our life and in our practice. And if we become too focused on that, we kind of turn our mind that way and we overlook the moments of joy. So can we hold ourselves in kind of a middle position where we're open to a moment of joy or a moment of difficulty without a built-in bias. Some people come from an ecstatic tradition of spiritual practice or psychological view of the world that everything should be happy.

They come to a practice like this and think, "No, too much focus on suffering. Suffering is not really that real." And they miss the First Noble Truth. They miss the deep significance of that truth.

Other people may immerse themselves too much in the First and Second Noble Truths and miss the moments of joy, the times when wholesome qualities are actually coming into their practice all the time. So can we keep our minds in the middle, where we're ready to go to happiness or joy, or we're ready to go to suffering? Either one is within our range.

One teacher said that another word for mindfulness is readiness. Can we sit in that moment ready for anything that's going to present itself, ready for anything that's going to come without preconception?

So in retreat, this can mean tuning into the really simple pleasures of the day—like coming in cold for lunch and having that steaming bowl of chili to eat. Finding that the council house has a fireplace and that somebody's lit the fire on this raw, wintry day, and just being able to sit in front of the fire and feel its warmth and its light. Being able to lie down in our bed at night and feel the body relax and the mind relax. Getting up in the morning and feeling refreshed, feeling rested. Having a warm shower at the start of another chilly day.

Because we're so sensitive through this practice, these pleasures can become really heightened. I've had cups of tea and apples on retreat that have been more delicious than expensive meals in restaurants. Sometimes it can seem we're living like queens and kings even when we're eating very simple things and enjoying very simple activities.

The Buddha pointed to this too. He said, "Bhikkhus, your robes, alms food, hut, and straw seat will seem rich and luxurious to one who is renounced." And this is a beautiful thing to discover—that as we simplify our lives, the things we do enjoy can become even richer.

There's the joy of nature. Even on a day like today, appreciating the quality of the fog, appreciating the way the trees look shrouded in that mist, appreciating the swirling patterns that the fog makes. And even that chilly breeze—the air is so fresh, so clean in this kind of weather.

Nature has sustained me a lot through my practice. I think back to the time I was newly ordained as a monk in Thailand and went up to practice in a little monastery up north near Chiang Mai. It was a monastery set at the bottom of a deep river gorge, with high hills on both sides lined with trees. There were caves up in one of the hills. The river was meandering through the valley, and the monks' huts were on one side of the river, the nuns' huts on the other.

Because I was a Westerner and kind of a rare animal up there, I was actually given the best hut in the whole monastery—the most remote hut that was furthest up the gorge. It was apart from all the others, sitting right next to the river. It was a really beautiful place to practice. I was completely alone.

I did a three-month period of practice there, an intensive retreat just like we're doing here, and didn't have dharma talks in the evenings or interviews because the Ajahn, the teacher, didn't speak English. But he was a very sweet man, and he'd come up to check on me from time to time. I'd look up from my sitting and he'd be peering in through my window. He'd catch my eye and say, "Oh, dee, dee"—that means good. "Oh, good, good." He was really happy I was practicing.

Occasionally he would come up when I was doing walking meditation, and the one instruction he always would give me was to take off my sandals. He'd point to my feet and I got it—he wanted me to walk barefoot. I can't remember why I was always walking with sandals, but I always seemed to be. And he'd go, "Dee, dee, dee maak"—very good. He was really happy that I was practicing.

But I never really got to talk with him. Looking back on that time, I was very motivated in my practice. I was very glad to be there and have this ideal practice setting. We only got one meal a day at eight in the morning, but the food was vegetarian and suited me really well. I had a very rewarding period of practice there. It wasn't easy, but looking back on that time, I see that the thing that really sustained me was the contact with nature.

because I was quite isolated. I actually had a friend at the monastery who was a nun, but I couldn't speak with her because monks and nuns weren't allowed to mingle. They were quite strict about that. So I wasn't supposed to cross that bridge over to the nun side of the monastery. I really didn't have much of a conversation with anybody for that three-month period.

But the river was so wonderful, the hills were so beautiful, the trees way at the top of the hill, the sun as it struck the trees in the morning when it was rising. There was a mango tree just down the path from me and it was mango season, so the aromas of the mangoes were coming in and we'd get those for breakfast in the morning. So even though I look back and see it was quite isolating and a difficult period in that way, the contact with nature really sustained me. And it's one of the things we can always touch on here, one of the beauties we have.

There's the joy of increasing peace. Almost everybody has talked in interviews about touching some deeper place of peace in your practice over the course of the retreat. If you can think back to the start, which seems so long ago, you remember how uncomfortable the body was? Remember how scattered the mind was and how refined you are now by comparison? You've really all come a long way.

So in touching those moments of peace, sometimes it's such a delight, it's such a relief—there's a joy in that. When I think about my own practice, the course of it, somehow I think touching deeper and deeper experiences of peace were a lot of what kept me coming back. I kind of wanted to see where all this peace would lead. What was the potential for the depth of peace that I could find in meditation? Where was that going toward? What was the possibility?

There's the joy of being with the truth. Even when it's difficult to touch something that's really true and deeply true in our lives, it does have a joyful quality. We may not feel it at the time because it may be painful. But if we start to tune into it, if we start to look, there is a very deep kind of satisfaction in touching that.

Somebody was talking in interviews today about an insight of seeing into a very subtle way that the notion of self was being fabricated, was being created and sustained. It had to do with subtle mind states that created a kind of familiar mood that created the sense of self. These subtle mind states probably weren't all that pleasant. But in being able to see them, there was a great delight in the release of bondage, of thinking that they constituted an enduring sense of I, an enduring self.

So when your insights come, take a look. One yogi in a retreat last year said, "One of the most joyful things here is being able to be with the pain and open to it." Especially when we feel it's kind of a core part of our being, a core issue that we've worked with outside, that we've struggled with. It might be fear, it might be anger, it might be our self-judgment. Being able to touch it really directly gives us the possibility of release, of freedom.

This joy is never very far away. It's always just there if we want to tune into it.

You probably remember a Hindu teacher named Swami Satchidananda. He was quite famous in the early seventies, well throughout the seventies. And there was this great poster of him—I'm sure it was an amalgam, but a picture of him on a surfboard with the ocean waves breaking under him. And the caption was, "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf." And of course, Swami Satchidananda is an older man dressed up in a white robe with long gray hair and long gray flowing beard. The picture of him on a surfboard itself brings a lot of humor.

But his name is actually a teaching. In the Hindu tradition, it's a key pointer to the reality of things. Sat, chit, ananda. Sat means being—you can see it in the Pali word satta. Bodhisattva is an enlightenment being. Sat is being. Chit means mind or consciousness, like our Pali word citta. And ananda means bliss.

Satchitananda then means being, consciousness, bliss. This is the kind of inseparable trinity in Hindu teaching. These things go together to make up every moment. Or you could say these three qualities are present in every moment—being, awareness, and bliss. So at any moment you can tune into that bliss, the joy of creation, the divine play.

And the way I often do it is I look at the quality of light. For me, the quality of light—even just now reflecting off this book cover, the glimmer of it, the radiance of it—reminds me of that delight, that play, that divine quality. So when the mind is relaxed, the amount of joy in just a really ordinary moment can be huge.

This is from Thomas Merton: "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being." From all created being, this joy radiates. It's really the same pointing.

Joy then intensifies as we become more and more accustomed to it in our practice. It intensifies into the next factor, which is rapture. Rapture is sort of defined as a rapt attention in what we're experiencing, in what we're paying attention to. So rapture really has this quality of wholehearted and full connection with what our experience is. It's very much associated with meditation, very much associated with the practice of mindfulness and also of concentration. The wholeheartedness of attention on our chosen focus is the quality of rapture.

The Pali term is pīti. This is one of the jhanic factors that is associated with strong concentration. Rapture is a mental factor, an aspect of the mind. But it often expresses itself in bodily energy. So you'll often hear people talk about a trembling, an uprising of energy, a lifting of energy as being manifestations of rapture. So though it's a mental factor, it's one that's often felt in the body. And it often has, even as it gets strong, a very turbulent quality in the body. It can feel almost overwhelming or a lot to handle as it becomes intensified, as it becomes strong. But it is actually the growth of joy or gladness.

Then rapture, as it gets accommodated, mellows out into the next factor, which is called tranquility. The Pali term is passaddhi. And this calms down the turbulence of rapture—sometimes translated as relaxation, calm, ease, or serenity. So this allows the waves of turbulence to settle down into some kind of quietude within our being. And as that bodily settling happens, the mind is also settling.

And that leads to the next factor, which is happiness. The Pali term here is sukha. I really like this word sukha. It reminds me of the root of sugar or sucrose. It has that same ring and maybe they're connected, I don't know. But sukha really first refers to a sweet quality of mind, a pleasant quality of mind. It's another of the jhanic factors that lead to deepening concentration.

Sukha, of course, is really connected with our practice because you could frame the Third Noble Truth in other terms. You know, if the Buddha was growing up in California today, I'm convinced that the First Noble Truth would not be the truth of suffering. I think the First Noble Truth would be something like: "Bhikkhus, I say to you, there are many opportunities for growth in our human existence." So if this is the California First Noble Truth, then I think the Third Noble Truth would not talk about the end of suffering, but the possibility of real happiness.

The Third Noble Truth really is a pointer to happiness. When suffering ends, obviously that is immense joy. I can't even imagine the kind of joy that would be—great happiness. That's really the pointing of the whole practice.

And happiness is considered to be a deeper flowering than joy is. It's been refined and stabilized by intensifying into rapture and then pacifying through tranquility. So it's kind of taking the joy and suffusing it through our being in a relaxed and harmonious way. Joy has a sense of depending on conditions, being a momentary appreciation of the beautiful. Happiness has a sense of being independent of conditions and something that's pervading the mind and the being. It has more of a sense, a flavor of contentment, acceptance, and peacefulness.

In some ways I think the way that the practice leads is not so much to an ecstatic, exuberant happiness, but a kind of happiness of settledness, of coming home. Trungpa Rinpoche used to talk about finding through practice our basic sanity. And when that returns, that is so sweet. It's so dear. You know, those moments when you just feel like: I'm totally back in the present moment. I'm unburdened from the past. I'm just here. I'm fully inhabiting my body.

Life is okay. If we could live from that place of basic sanity, we could accept anything. We could work with anything. It's the clouds of disturbing thoughts and emotions, the fantasies, the unreality of the thoughts and emotions that make life so difficult. So there's a great happiness in this process of coming home.

Sometimes we distort it or we misunderstand it by trying to make it permanent. And then we tie ourselves up in knots. But happiness can only be found in the moment. The problem is we try to assure it for the rest of our life. And that is impossible. So we feel frustrated. "Oh, well, I could be happy now, but I can't guarantee I'm going to be happy the rest of my life, so I can't be happy now." Nobody can guarantee that happiness for the rest of their lives except a fully awakened one, maybe. So if we lower our aim and just say, "Can I be happy in this moment?" Just take care of this moment and you take care of all time. Much more doable aim.

But it's interesting that practice doesn't stop here. The chain doesn't stop with happiness. In most Western teachings, I think this would be considered to be the end of the road. When you reach happiness, phew, done with the path. But in the Buddhist teaching, we're still walking. There's further to go.

The Buddha actually said two things I never lost track of in all my own years of practice: never to quit my effort and never to settle merely for wholesome states of mind. I find this tremendously inspiring. There have been so many times in my own practice that I would have given everything I had to settle for wholesome states of mind. I would have rolled up the mat, I would have called it the end of the path, I would have been glad to be home. But the Buddha said there's further to go. Not just hanging out with the wholesome, but to continue, to continue toward liberation.

The next factor is the factor of concentration. And it's very interesting that in this sutta the Buddha says that concentration has a proximate cause. And the proximate cause of concentration is happiness. This is fantastic. Because I always assumed the proximate cause of concentration was intense striving. And if I hadn't gotten it yet, I just had to strive more and harder after that breath. And if I could stay really on top of it every moment, then I'd get concentrated. So this is really radical. The proximate cause of concentration is happiness.

When that peacefulness and easy feeling pervades our being, then we can give up the struggle. Then there's the sense that in a really, really deep way we can let go. And in that letting go, the mind can just settle into itself. That's how the unification happens, the mind settling within itself instead of trying to reach outward in this divided way to past and future.

The image that came to me was—I don't know if you remember the old Prell commercials from the 1950s, when the pearl was just gliding down this thick, viscous, green fluid coming to the bottom of the bottle. Just that slow, peaceful glide. That is the mind settling in concentration through happiness. It's great. If you think of it as green, that's okay. But it has about it that kind of effortless quality. You just let gravity take it. You don't have to do anything at that point. In fact, the less you do at that point, the better. Because the mind knows its own way home. It knows its own way to rest. So you just let it go there.

Then from that place of great settledness and peace and contentment comes the next link, which is knowing and seeing things as they truly are—knowing and seeing things as they truly are. And this essentially means seeing the three characteristics of existence, seeing the truth of impermanence, of dukkha, and of anatta. We see clearly that the world is unstable, that the phenomena of the world can't give us that lasting happiness that we crave. We see that more and more clearly. Whatever is born also dies.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 10/11). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

Whatever comes together falls apart. The Buddha said the world is disintegrating. Everywhere we turn our attention, we see it.

This true understanding leads to the next phase, which is called disenchantment. I like this term because it's actually not a negative term. It means the spell of enchantment is being cut. This promise that the world seems to offer—that its beautiful things are going to give us lasting happiness—is the spell. It's the spell of illusion. It's not quite true.

So at this stage, we cut that spell, we break the spell, we wake up to things as they really are, and we see that we're not going to find it out there. We're also not going to find it within the process of change of our own mind and body. We're not going to find it in changing phenomena.

This is not to depress us. The purpose of the seeing is not to get discouraged. It's to encourage us to let go, to stop grasping at anything, anywhere. And in that letting go, there's the settling into even deeper peace, which is the next link in the chain called dispassion.

The Pali term is virāga, and the literal meaning is "without lust," without craving. So this sense of dispassion is not that we lose our warmth or our caring or our commitment to life or to the path, but it means that we give up the craving that seeks to find its happiness in what can't give it.

There are actually many, many terms in the Dharma that refer to the wholesome qualities that in the West we might call passion. People often hear this term dispassion and say, "Do you mean I'm supposed to become really cold and aloof and all my feelings cut off and no more warmth? Am I supposed to become as glossy as a Buddha statue?" Not at all.

There are many, many terms that talk about this quality of warmth. In the Buddhist jargon, passion is usually used to refer to this force of greed, desire, lust that's unhelpful. So that's just kind of a vocabulary adjustment that I hope you can make as you listen to this term dispassion.

But there is the emphasis on ardor. Sāriputta said one cannot attain enlightenment without ardor, this inner fire. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the meditator practices ardently to be aware. There's the quality of zeal, which is one of the bases of power. There's the quality of vīrya, which is often translated as courage, energy or effort—delighting in what's wholesome.

So virāga is actually the quality of abandonment of greed, aversion and delusion. And as such, it's synonymous with nibbāna. It means the real letting go of the distorting passions of mind, the things that lead us astray. So it stands for coming in touch with nibbāna, with the deathless, with the ultimate.

And out of that comes the next link, which is liberation—vimutti—often described as the unshakable deliverance of mind. For one who has attained to this level, the mind is no longer capable of being shaken by any occurrence.

And that is what leads to the final link: knowing the destruction of the taints. One realizes at this stage of full liberation that all the underlying tendencies to suffering, to ignorance, to desire have been ended. So after that moment of liberation, one realizes, "Lived is the spiritual life, done is what had to be done. The taints are destroyed."

So this is the process of transcendental dependent origination.

When I first heard this whole scheme, I went to my teacher and said, "How long is it going to take? When's it going to happen for me?" And my teacher, of course, said, "You know, there's no way to tell. You just keep walking. And if you keep walking, you have to get there. There's no alternative. If you keep on this path, it only leads in one direction. There's no other way. But we don't know how long it will take. It develops according to our own individual natures."

This is from Ajahn Chah: "As a result of his experience, the Buddha taught that the practice has to develop naturally, according to conditions. You allow things to develop according to your accumulated wholesome kamma and pāramīs. That doesn't mean you stop putting effort into the practice, but that you continue with the understanding that whether you progress swiftly or slowly, it's not something you can force."

It's like planting a tree. It knows by itself the appropriate pace to grow at. If you crave to get quick results, see that as delusion. Even if you want it to grow slowly, see that as delusion. It knows its own pace.

I'll close with this dialogue from the Buddha. Continuing this image that Silvia used in last night's talk of crossing the stream as a symbol for coming to freedom, somebody once asked the Buddha, "How did you cross the flood?" Which is basically another way of saying, "How did you become liberated?"

The Buddha replied, "I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I hurried, I sank. And when I tarried, I was swept away. I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying."

This perfectly captures the middle way of practice—neither forcing nor being passive, neither rushing ahead nor holding back. The path unfolds naturally when we engage with it skillfully, with patience and persistence balanced in perfect harmony.

Let's sit for a minute in the silence of this teaching.

CHAPTER 225

Purification of the Heart

Guy Armstrong · 50 min

> *In this New Year's Eve dharma talk from Spirit Rock, Guy Armstrong explores the Buddha's profound teaching that "this mind is naturally radiant and brightly shining, but it is colored by the defilements that visit it." Drawing from the Dhammapada's core teaching to "help others if you can, don't harm living beings, and purify the heart," Armstrong focuses on the emotional dimensions of purification work.*
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> *The talk addresses how to work skillfully with what he calls the "meditator's big five" difficult emotions: desire, anger, self-judgment, sadness, and fear. Rather than trying to eliminate these states, Armstrong teaches that healing comes through understanding them fully - recognizing their bodily sensations, mental coloring, and storylines. He emphasizes that strong emotions aren't problems unless we make them so, drawing parallels to how children naturally move through the full spectrum of feelings.*
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> *Using the Buddha's teaching on the five hindrances and stories from retreat life, Armstrong demonstrates how mindfulness creates spaciousness around difficult states, allowing us to relate to them with wisdom rather than being overwhelmed. The talk concludes with Gampopa's Four Blessings, emphasizing how confusion itself can dawn as wisdom when met with the awakened heart of acceptance and understanding.*

The talk tonight is on the theme of the purification of the heart. I feel very privileged to be sharing this evening with you. This is the last night of the second millennium in Western countries. There was all the hoopla a year ago about the millennium, but as you know, that was the false dawn. This is the real thing, so it's a great way to start the third millennium in a dharma setting.

I couldn't help but reflect, though. I have a Buddhist calendar upstairs in my room, and the year on the calendar—it's from a group based in Thailand—is 2,544. That's the number of years since the Buddha was on the Earth. So if the millennium means anything, I reckon it means that the Thai people are about 544 years ahead of us in their wisdom and metta. We still have some ways to go yet. That's why the theme of the purification of heart seemed appropriate for tonight.

There was a cartoon from a magazine called Natural History, a science magazine. It showed a beach with a little fish with legs struggling out of the ocean, just coming up on the beach. There was a thought bubble above its head that said, "eat, survive, repro-

duce." A little further up on the beach was a full-fledged lizard that looked like a miniature dinosaur, walking quite happily on land. It had made the transition, and above its head was the thought bubble: "eat, survive, reproduce." A little further up was a monkey scampering along the beach quite happily on its four legs, and above its head, the same thought bubble: "eat, survive, reproduce."

Then there was a man standing on the beach dressed in 20th century garb. He had a very puzzled expression on his face, stroking his chin and looking very quizzical. The thought bubble above his head was: "Hmm, I wonder what life's all about. Eat, survive, reproduce."

If you look back over the history of human beings on this planet, or even the history of our own life, you could be forgiven for thinking that these are the primary urges and forces in the human psyche—the forces concerned with survival and all the fights for limited resources, for the conquest of land that can provide food, and all the energy that we've put as a species into sexuality and conquest in that direction too. This is not a very optimistic view of human nature, but from the history of humans on the planet, there's some reality to it.

The good news is that from the Buddhist perspective, our deepest nature is good. When we look most deeply inside each one of us, we find something that is pure from the beginning, pure now, and pure into the eternal future. Something that is basically uncorruptible. That is the center of each one of us.

The Buddha put it like this: "This mind is naturally radiant and brightly shining, but it is colored by the defilements that visit it. This the untaught person does not understand, and so for them there is no cultivation of the mind."

This natural goodness that's within us has been covered by these other forces—these self-centered forces basically of desire and fear. The point the Buddha is making is that the radiance, the natural radiance of the mind and heart is intrinsic, is always there. But the things that cover it are only visitors. They're only temporary, so they're not intrinsic. Sometimes it's hard to connect with this innate goodness because the forces that cover it—hope and fear—are so strong.

Then the Buddha goes on: "This mind is naturally radiant and brightly shining, but it is free from the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way understands as it really is. So for them, there is cultivation of this mind."

When we can perceive that intrinsic goodness free from the defilements, we realize that that's our human potential. Then we become inspired to live more and more from that center. The cultivation is the work of gaining access to that intrinsic goodness again and again and again so that it becomes a more stable place from which we can live our lives.

The purpose of meditation then can be seen as the thinning of these veils that cover that goodness within each of us—the lifting of the visitors that keep us from seeing that innate purity.

It's from the Dhammapada. He said, "Help others if you can. Don't harm living beings and purify the heart. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas."

Of course, he didn't say "heart." He was speaking in the Pali language, and the word he used was *citta*, which can be translated either as heart or mind. It's a word that in Pali and Sanskrit includes our whole emotional life as well as our rational mental life. So the purification of *citta* really means two levels: purification on the emotional level—what we call the heart level or feeling level—and purification of how we understand the world, the purification of view, or purification by wisdom.

Tonight I'd like to talk more about the emotional side of that purification work and focus on the purification of the heart. In the purification of the heart, which is really what brought me to meditation practice, our work is about healing. It's about healing our emotional life and the struggles and conflicts and difficulties that we encounter by not quite understanding how to work with the painful emotions we face in living.

If you look at a child, children go through every emotion on the map. They go into them totally, experience them totally, express them totally—much to their parents' and teachers' concern often. But then they'll come right out of that emotion into the next one. So whether it's happiness or terror or anger or joy, the child is into each one fully, and when they leave it, it's gone. It's just over.

But somehow for us, we've lost that ability to go into an emotion fully with great trust and faith and then leave it fully when it's passed. So the healing work is really about restoring that childlike innocence and openness to the whole range of our human emotional life.

The foundation of this work is the trust, the faith that we don't have to get rid of any of these emotions. In order to heal, in order to find a harmony within ourselves, we don't have to get rid of the emotions. Now in the Buddhist path, in the long run, these

obscurations, these difficult emotions are said to lift completely. In the mind of the Buddha it's said that greed and hatred and all their forms were no longer operative, were no longer even dormant. That's a beautiful possibility, an inspiring possibility.

But in order to heal, to find that emotional balance and harmony, that level of understanding is not needed. We can come to a great sense of well-being and joy and happiness in life without going that far. So for the work of healing, the purification of the heart in terms of the emotional life, there's no need to get rid of any of the emotions that we experience. The need is to understand them better. Seeing with wisdom the way they really are is all that's needed to purify them. And then we can have that ability that the child has to go into the emotion fully, trust it, and when it goes, to come out.

We recognize in starting this emotional work that we're all human and we all share the same package of emotions. In many ways we're the same organism, each one of us. We've been put together just the same and there are just these minor variations—how far our eyes are apart and what color our hair is and what color our skin is. But basically within each of us we know joy, we know happiness, we know enthusiasm, we know excitement, we know friendship, we know delight. We also know the difficult side. We know fear and sorrow and grief, despair and loneliness. We all have all these within us, and in our meditation practice they will all come to be experienced. The whole range of our human possibilities will visit us in our practice. And it's really just a question of coming to know each one of the visitors, coming to understand it, not about getting rid of any of them.

Robert Aitken put this in a rather dramatic fashion. One time he was leading a retreat—he's a great Zen teacher, a Western Zen teacher who lives on Oahu. He's mostly retired, but in my view he's one of the greatest Western Dharma teachers alive. He came in for a Dharma talk at his Zen retreat and he sat down and said, "The difficulties you're experiencing now..."

Then he went into a long pause. He had everybody's attention. This was the phrase that rang home for people in the middle of a Zen retreat like ours. And after the pause he continued, "...will be with you for a very long time."

Whoa. Is this man bringing good news or what?

So it sounds discouraging when he says it like that, but the actual meaning is very liberating when you think about it. It means we don't have to change anything about the way we are. We don't have to change ourselves in this practice. It's more a question of opening with full acceptance to what we are here and now, not getting rid of or changing any part of ourselves.

Strong emotions really aren't a problem unless we make them one. The life of a child, the emotional life of the child, really illustrates this. If we can let emotions come, express themselves, and go, where's the problem? But the problem comes when part of our emotional life isn't comfortable for us. If we don't feel it's acceptable, if we don't feel it's okay, if we don't feel we can allow it to be in us, then when it comes, we want to close down around it. We constrict, we contract with fear and non-acceptance. Then it gets bottled up.

The emotion gets repressed, and when we repress an experience or emotion in the psyche, it goes deep and doesn't get released. This is basically what's happened to most of us somewhere along our growing up—somewhere in adolescence, probably. We started finding feelings we couldn't move through easily. The outside culture, teen culture, told us we weren't cool if we felt that way. Or our parents told us we shouldn't be feeling that way. Or we were just too apprehensive. So we closed down around some of our emotional life.

It's actually beautiful in the retreat setting, in meditation practice, when some of the richness of that emotional life starts to come back for us. Not always so easy, but it's a very enlivening and opening part of the process.

The first step in purification is to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. This is much harder than it sounds. It sounds straightforward, but it's not.

I think about a time I walked out of this meditation hall, sitting a retreat here, and I was going to my walking spot. I tended to walk down on the grass below the parking lot. I was heading out for my usual walking spot, being quite mindful—lifting, moving, placing. Slowed down. I'd been in retreat for a while. Lifting, moving, placing. I was very, very present.

I looked up toward my walking path, and there was somebody in it. Somebody was walking in my path. Lifting, moving, placing. Very mindful again. What's that person doing in my path? I've been walking there for a week already. Don't they know I'm there? Lifting, moving, placing. What kind of person would do something like that? They must not be very developed. Lifting, moving, placing.

So I walked down and got another place on the grass. It was actually just as good, but that didn't really matter. Lifting, moving, placing, and I was still annoyed. I'd still think about what was wrong with that person. Lifting, moving, placing.

About halfway through my walking period, I realized: I'm annoyed. I thought I was being so mindful, and all this time I was annoyed and I didn't even see it. So then I went, "Oh, annoyed, annoyed. Irritation, irritation." I'd been feeling it for about half an hour and hadn't even known it.

That's the sneaky thing about these states of mind—they kind of zip in under our radar. We've got the mindfulness radar set up. We're catching breaths, we're catching sensations, we're catching sounds. And then zoom, these mind states come in.

It eludes all our radar and takes us over. While we're in the grip of it, we're really caught by it, bound by it. There's no space. We're so identified—in my case, I was so identified with being annoyed, I couldn't see anything else.

When that annoyance is in place, or the other states, they act like a color, like a screen over our eyes. We see everything in the world through that kind of color. Everything that happens when you're feeling annoyed isn't quite satisfying, isn't quite right.

The first thing—the most important thing and about half the battle—is to be able to name the feeling. Just to be able to say, "Oh, I'm feeling angry," or "I'm feeling afraid," or "I'm feeling hurt," or "I'm feeling anxious," or "I'm feeling desire." Whatever the thing is, if you can name it, that's half the battle.

What the naming does—and I actually encourage you to use the note at that point, just that soft note: "anger, anger," "wanting, wanting"—that soft note seems to create a kind of spaciousness around the feeling. It lets us know we're not just anger. We're not just desire. We're not just fear. We're also mindfulness. We're also awareness.

When we recognize that that awareness is there, it gives us a lot of choice in relation to the feeling. We don't feel like we're just under its power or that it's taken us over. What we do at that point is start to create a relationship with it, a relationship that's based on understanding, observation, mindfulness, and wisdom.

It's really the setting up of that relationship that alters the power these states have over us. It gives us a new place to come from in relation to them. Even though the state may still be there—I may still be feeling annoyed or fearful or wanting—we have a new degree of choice in the situation. We're not quite as controlled by it. That means a little bit of the power has gone out of this state, this strong emotion.

The next step is just let yourself feel that state directly. Give yourself over to feeling the emotion once you've named it. There's really nothing else that you need to do with it. You don't have to wonder about where it came from. Was it related to your childhood

upbringing? Is this here because of something your father said to you thirty-five years ago? You don't have to figure out the source, because this practice is all about here and now.

All you have to do is bring that here-and-now attention to the experience of that feeling. That's where the freedom will come in.

Emotions generally have three areas where they really impact us. The first—I think Sharda mentioned this this morning—is in the body. Any strong emotion will have a resonance, an impact somewhere in the body. If you tune into the sensations where you feel the emotion impacting you, that's a good way to stay grounded and in touch with the feeling.

The second is the mental tone itself, the coloring in the mind of that mood. Every emotion has its own flavor, its own color in the mind. That's a mental attribute, not particularly of the body. So tune into that—the flavor of anger, the flavor of fear, the flavor of wanting.

The third is that each emotion has its own storyline. It's strongly connected with thought. Thoughts can bring up these emotions, and when we're in the emotion we tend to think a certain pattern of thought. Those kinds of thoughts we call the storyline, and I'll talk about those in a little more detail.

If you are aware of the impact in the body, the mental color of the emotion, and the kind of thoughts that go with it, then you have the whole constellation of that emotion. Mindfulness of emotions is about letting yourself feel all three of these aspects.

When the Buddha talked about the difficulties that come for meditators, he talked about a list called the five hindrances. Many of you are familiar with this list, have heard it lots of times.

Usually when we announce the five hindrances, half the room goes to sleep. You could probably give this talk as well as any of us, so I'm not going to give that talk tonight. But just to remind the veterans here, the five hindrances are sense desire, aversion or negativity, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt.

I'm going to do a little bit different list tonight—what I see as the meditator's big five. These are five hits that tend to play over and over for myself and a lot of the people that I meet. In no particular order, the big five that I see are desire, anger, self-judgment, sadness, and fear. These are five that it's very helpful to get some experience working with in practice.

Actually, if they visit you during the retreat, you're very fortunate. Because in the retreat you don't have anything else to do but learn about these. If you're in the outside world, you're going to get distracted. "Oh, I can't pay attention to my sadness right now. I've got to go do my job. I've got to do my work. I've got to take care of my children. I've got to relate with my partner. Got to drive to the store." We rarely get that opportunity to just come into intimate touch with these forces that are so strong and so central in our lives.

In a retreat we don't have anything else to do but give ourselves totally to that relationship. We can get to know them really, really closely. This is very healing—this kind of intimate knowledge. Very healing in the emotional life because as we understand our emotions we take the unknown quality out. We take that scary quality out of them.

So we'll see how far we get with the big five. We'll probably only do two or three tonight. But they're very typical. Once you've learned how to work with one, the ways to work with the others become easier.

I'll first talk a little about desire. Very central in the Buddha's teaching, obviously. The second noble truth was the truth that the cause of suffering is craving. So this force of desire is really central in the connection to unhappiness in life. It's this basic movement of mind that wants a pleasant experience. And it can be very strong and captivating in the middle of a retreat because our retreat experience is often devoid of pleasant experiences. So the austerity highlights pleasure by contrast.

I was teaching a retreat in Italy this summer, and a fellow came in for an interview on about the second or third day. He said, "Well, I'm having a little trouble settling down into the retreat." I said, "Oh really, why is that?" He said, "Well, I'm on my vacation. And I had two choices. A few of my friends were going on a vacation in the Caribbean and they invited me to go along. And my other choice was to come here." I said, "Well, it's great you came here. What made you choose that?" He said, "I couldn't get a ticket to the Caribbean."

So of course, that really made me feel wanted! But I understood why he was having a hard time settling down. He hadn't given up the Caribbean trip yet. So I said, "Look, just hang out with it for a few more days. Keep coming back to the present. Remember what it was that you valued about your meditation practice. Give yourself some encouragement and see if you land on earth soon."

And he did. Next couple of days I saw him, he'd kind of gotten over it and his practice unfolded really beautifully after that. But take a look at the storyline—the thoughts around that experience for him. The storyline was basically if he'd been in the Caribbean, he would have been happy. There may have been some truth to that.

But of course, as we all know, it's just a very limited and inferior kind of happiness. We really wouldn't wish that on a good friend. But when the mind becomes convinced that "if I had that, I would be happy," then the storyline catches us up in a state of unfulfillment. Because along with that goes the corollary: "I can't be happy now. I can't be happy until I have that. So I'm unhappy now." And that's what he was suffering with—he was actually miserable at the time.

This is the way that desire tends to work. We see an object, a thing, a person, a place, and we project that as something that we want. The storyline, the underlying assumption is: "If I had it, I would be happy." Now to some extent that can be true—these external pleasures do bring a kind of happiness for a while. There's no denying that.

But what the projection into the future doesn't ever take into account is that vacation being over, that dish of ice cream being eaten, that relationship finishing the honeymoon phase and going into—what was it Jack said—"the laundry after the ecstasy" phase of relationship. Somehow the desire storyline never looks at the ending of the pleasurable experience. It never looks beyond the limited satisfaction.

Once we look beyond that into impermanence, we see we're just going to be back in the same place we were before. And so what have we really gained by that temporary satisfaction? Ultimately, nothing. But desire doesn't want to see that. It just wants to see the temporary satisfaction.

Dharma teaching turns the whole thing around. Instead of saying, "I'm unhappy because I don't have the object," the teaching, the impact of the second noble truth is: "I'm suffering because of the presence of this desire force." The desire force itself brings an unsatisfying feeling, brings a feeling of unfulfillment, of lack, of inadequacy.

When we tune in to the actual experience of the desire, we realize that in itself, that's suffering. And that's what the attention to desire needs to see—that the wanting itself hurts. It doesn't satisfy.

Now in addition to things in outside life that we wish we could experience, there are lots of things in the retreat setting that we want. We want our body to be comfortable. I spent many years on the cushion, actually in this very hall—because this is where I did

a lot of my early practice—trying to make my body comfortable through manipulating the energy inwardly. I'm sure some of you who've been doing this for a while have learned a lot of those tricks.

If you flood an area with awareness, it tends to soften up the solidity of that area. You can soften up knots that way, by being there with a gentle attention again and again and again. You can soften some of the pain that way. So I would soften up one area. That would take me a few sittings. Then I'd notice that the tension had gone somewhere else. So I'd go soften up that area for a while. I'd get that soft and then I'd notice that another part was constricted. So I'd go soften that up. Then I'd get my whole body clear and I'd think, "Now I can meditate."

That would last for about half a sitting. Then my body would go into a huge overall contraction, and I'd start all over. So about one half of a sitting every other day I would have a good time, and the rest of the time I was struggling, struggling, struggling.

I would have been much better off, I would have been much smarter if I'd realized: "You're in discomfort. You're going to have some discomfort. You can bear it. Work with equanimity. Work with accepting this physical discomfort and let your mind settle." If I had let my mind settle, I would have gone much deeper in my practice much more quickly.

This is actually a wholesome approach to working with physical discomfort. Find that we can tolerate it to a certain degree. Don't try to make it go away—it's really pretty much a wasted effort, unless you can adjust the posture slightly in a skillful way. But find that increasing ability to be with the physical pain, and then this wanting, this kind of endless rat race of wanting can die off.

The other thing that we often want is to re-experience a pleasurable sitting or walking meditation. We'll have a really great sitting, and then the next time we come into the hall, we're eager to have that sitting again. We want to get back in the hall, but it doesn't happen. And then we want it to happen. So we find ourselves in the position of trying to make it happen or straining for it. And then we start wondering why our mind is scattered, why we can't rest effortlessly in the present the way we did the last sitting. It's because the desire force has kicked up. We want that back.

I start to look within myself when I'm beginning to recognize that feeling of meditative striving, straining to recapture something. It almost feels like I'm being pulled out of myself, leaning forward. I'm reaching out for something that's not here, and my being feels split. It's the exact opposite of the relaxation that we've talked about so much—where we just come and settle so easily into the present moment as it is.

So start to look for that in your practice. That feeling of leaning forward to grab something, and the contrast of just settling into how the moment is.

Another of the big five hindrances is anger, or we could say negativity, or we could say aversion. It's a feeling of being dissatisfied with the situation, mostly with the externals of a situation. We tend to put the blame, put the fault on something outside ourselves. We go through the lunch line and see someone who took too much food, and that's irritating. Or someone's making too much noise in the hall, or someone took a shower outside the shower hours and we couldn't sleep, or the weather is depressing and that's not right for us. And then we get into this unpleasant, negative, critical frame of mind and we think that it's caused by the outside.

The Buddha told a story to his monks about a jackal that illustrated this kind of tendency of mind. He said, "Monks, did you see that jackal that was around the edge of the forest this morning? It stood for a while and then it ran into the underbrush and then it ran out again. Then it ran into a tree hollow and then it ran out again. Then it ran into a cave and it ran out again. It wasn't comfortable standing, it wasn't comfortable in the underbrush, it wasn't comfortable in the tree, it wasn't comfortable in the cave. It blamed its unhappiness on the ground, it blamed its unhappiness on the underbrush, it blamed its unhappiness on the tree, and it blamed its unhappiness on the cave. But the problem, monks, was with none of these." He said that jackal had mange. The problem was the mange. That jackal wasn't going to be happy wherever it sat.

When aversion gets established in our minds, it's like the mange. Nothing is going to satisfy. And we think that the problem is the weather, the food, the person sitting next to us—whatever the external looks like. The problem is the aversion itself. The state of mind that's always critical, where nothing's quite right.

So again, the storyline with aversion or anger is that the fault is out there. But if we look more closely at the actual experience of the aversion, we can feel that it feels tight. It feels constricting. It feels burning. And when we feel that again, we can see the suffering that we bring to ourselves in holding on to that negativity. If we can let go of the storyline that blames it on the outside, the feeling will go in its own time. We don't have to make it go. It will lift.

The third one I want to mention is the area of self-judgment, where we turn this negativity toward ourselves. And it leaves us feeling that we're not good enough, that we're not fully human, that something is wrong inside of us. Something has fundamentally gone off in us, and so we're not really worthy to be a full human being. This sense of not being worthwhile or worthlessness seems almost like an epidemic in the West today. So many people have this feeling.

There's a group of Western teachers who were meeting with the Dalai Lama some years ago in Dharamsala, and they told the Dalai Lama about this problem and asked him how to work with it, how to address it. The Dalai Lama said, "What do you mean?" He didn't know what they were talking about. He couldn't relate to it. He said, "In Tibet, children are really valued, loved, and they're shown that kind of love from the time they're really young." And he went around and asked each teacher, "Do you know what this feels like? Can you relate to this?"

And every teacher there said, yeah, I got it.

So the Dalai Lama himself seems entirely free of this feeling. He's a beautiful inspiration. He came to Spirit Rock this year. We had a conference of Western teachers that we were at, and he was with us for a day and a half. He was talking about how he views himself and how other people view him. And talk about someone who's exposed to praise and blame.

The Dalai Lama said, "You know, some people call me the God King." I didn't know that he actually knew people called him that, but it's true. And he said, "Other people call me the living Buddha." He said, "No, no, no, I am not. I am not. I am just a simple Buddhist monk. That is all." He said, "But other people, they call me a wolf in monk's clothing." I've read that statement myself. "Or," he said, "they call me a counter-revolutionary. That's what they see." He said, "But I don't care. I just don't care. I look at my own intention. If my intention is good, then I trust in that. What somebody else sees, that's their problem. I look at my own intention."

So he has this tremendous self-confidence and at the same time an openness to whatever somebody else's point of view is. For me it was really inspiring—one of the most beautiful moments of the conference—that inner strength that he has in the middle of this huge responsibility, bearing the weight of the Tibetan people on his shoulders.

So this sense of worthlessness is one that we can actually experience also in our meditation. When it comes, again, if we can separate out the storyline from the actual feeling, the feeling can be touched directly. The feeling of inadequacy, of not being good enough, of some degree of shame or embarrassment about who we are. But then there's a storyline also that goes with it: "People don't love me. People don't care for me. People don't express their affection. Nobody cares about me."

If we can learn to let go of those thoughts or even question those thoughts—because mostly they're not true—just abide with the feeling. See if we can open ourselves up and bear the feeling, accept the feeling. We can find our way through that kind of inner conflict.

I had a friend when I was in the robes who was another Western monk, a man with a lot of metta, a lot of heart, very warm and a well-loved person. And as I got to know him, he told me that he had spent the first nine years that he was in robes working through his self-hatred. It was incredible to me because I didn't detect any of it from him. But that had been his work for the first years of his practice. He had really worked through it, and it was very inspiring to see. He was full of warmth and love.

So with all these states, what transforms us in relation to them? Where's the transformation coming from? The beautiful thing is that all these states are workable. They all can be understood through our practice. They all can be accommodated within our hearts. And as our hearts get bigger, we can hold them more and more from a place of compassion. There's nothing in us that we can't open to and accept.

It's not easy and it won't happen the first time that we run into one of these states, or even the second time or the third time. But we meet them over and over again, keep trying to open a little further each time, and over time we really find that we're able to accept them.

I went through a huge change in my relation to fear through the course of practice. I spent many, many hours being afraid of my fear.

not being able to accept it, feeling that it shouldn't be there, feeling that it was going to really destroy me or damage me. But as I opened to it little by little, I came to the place where whether that fear arose or didn't arise, I really didn't care. It was easy either way. And that kind of acceptance really is possible for us.

When I came to that level of acceptance about fear, I really felt like it wasn't a problem anymore. Now I've gone in and out of that level of acceptance since, but I've touched that level many times. So any of these states can be seen and related to in that way. If we can accept them fully, they're really not a problem and they lose their power over us.

The key thing is being able to feel them directly. And for that, the more you can generate an attitude of interest, curiosity, investigation, and really wanting to understand—that will support the opening. They're really just forms of energy. Until we invest in them, they're not a problem.

Can we see them with mindfulness? Mindfulness being not just a cold sort of clinical look under a microscope, but mindfulness being a quality that has a lot of friendliness in it, a real accepting kind of attention. Can we see fear or desire or anger or sadness with a really friendly kind of attention?

If we can, this is really a miracle of practice because what we're doing is a very profound thing in that moment. We're taking a moment that to our ordinary mind would just be full of negativity, full of this difficult emotional state. And we're starting to suffuse it then with the qualities of mindfulness. And that means the qualities of attention, of friendliness, of wisdom, of patience, of compassion, of openness.

What that means is that we're actually giving birth in that moment to the awakened heart. Right in the middle of our most difficult experiences, we're bringing forth from ourselves our deepest nature, our truest nature, this inherent good that we talked about earlier.

A moment of anguish and difficulty is being transformed into a moment of openness, awareness, wisdom and compassion. This really is the alchemy of our practice. There's no technique that can do this. This kind of bringing forth doesn't come out of a meditative technique. It has to come from your heart and it has to come fresh every time. It's not a recipe and it's not a formula.

But the more we're able to do it, the easier it becomes to bring that kind of awakened heart out in the middle of any situation, of any circumstance that we find ourselves in. This is what transforms us, this bringing forth of that beautiful heart moment after moment.

One of my teachers, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a young Tibetan Lama, said to me, "The sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusions." That's what is sacred that we're doing.

I'd like to close with a quotation from Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa, the great Tibetan saint from the 11th century. This is put in the form of a prayer or supplication. Who it's directed toward isn't entirely clear. It could be toward anyone—toward the divine, toward a teacher, toward a lineage master, toward the great mystery.

This is called "The Four Blessings of Gampopa":

Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

CHAPTER 226

The Buddha Knows the Dhamma

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong shares insights from a retreat with Ajahn Sumedho on the meaning of "The Buddha knows the Dhamma" - understanding our pure awareness as the Buddha nature that receives all arising phenomena. Armstrong explores the Buddhist view that our basic nature is radiant and good, drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya teaching that "this mind is radiant and brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it." He offers practical guidance for working with the five hindrances (pañca nīvaraṇa): desire (kāmacchanda), aversion (byāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). Through personal stories and classical teachings, Armstrong shows how mindfulness transforms our relationship to difficult emotions not by eliminating them, but by understanding them clearly. He emphasizes that these challenging states are temporary visitors while our pure awareness is the permanent resident - the Buddha nature that remains unchanging as all phenomena arise and pass away.*

The subject of this evening's talk is "The Buddha Knows the Dhamma."

As you know, a few of us just finished spending time with His Holiness the Dalai Lama down in Mountain View. About two weeks before that, we also had the opportunity to sit with another great teacher here at Spirit Rock—Ajahn Sumedho. Ajahn Sumedho is a Theravadan monk who's been in robes for thirty-five years. He's really the senior person in the Western form of the Vipassana teachings as they come from Asia. He's an American who lives in England, and I had such deep appreciation for his teachings and so much respect for his being and his development. I really think he is one of the very few Western masters that we have today.

In tonight's talk, I have borrowed his title, and I'd like to share some of the teachings from that retreat with you because they're still alive for me—still resonating. If I was going to be cynical, I might say that I was stealing some of his thunder, but I prefer to think of it as paying tribute to a great teacher.

This title, "The Buddha Knows the Dhamma," was a line that he used again and again throughout the retreat, and it was kind of cryptic. The Buddha knows the Dhamma. I thought, well of course he did—he made it up. Who else would have invented it? But when he explained the meaning of it, I got a different slant on it.

When Ajahn Sumedho talked about the Buddha, what he meant was the way we describe the refuge in the Buddha, which is the refuge in our own awakened attention. The Buddha being that part of ourselves that is the pure awareness, the awareness that's uncluttered by any afflictions. And then the Dhamma in this case means the truth of the moment, the truth of this present moment's arising, which means all the phenomena that we experience in the here and now—the sights, the sounds, the smells, the bodily sensations, the thoughts and emotions that go through our mind, everything that makes up the quality of our life as we feel it here and now. Because dhamma with a lowercase "d" from the Pali just means thing, object, phenomenon, event, sense experience.

So "The Buddha knows the Dhamma" means that what's actually going on in our life is that this awakened intelligence of ours, this pure awareness, greets and receives all the different arisings that are generated through our sense contact of our five physical senses and the sense door of the mind. So "The Buddha knows the Dhamma" is kind of an enlightened view of our experience of the world.

I just want to put that in as a kind of frame for the talk, and we'll get into the pieces as we go.

It's really quite encouraging to me that the Buddhist perspective on life is that our basic nature is good—our basic nature is really good. It's considered to be pure from the very beginning. Even today, after all the struggles of our life, it's considered to be untouched or unstained by our suffering. And it's a resource, it's a treasure that we uncover through the practice of meditation as we walk the path.

Sally and I were teaching earlier this year in Australia, in Perth. Perth is a really interesting place. It's kind of the farthest edge of the Western world. You go from the East Coast and you go through California. You know what they say about California—they turned the country on its side and all the loose pieces ended up here. Then you go a little further and you get to Hawaii. Then you still go further and you get to Australia, still going west. Then you go all the way to the other side of Australia and you get to Perth. Perth is actually in the same time zone as Singapore, so there's a big Asian community in Perth.

This retreat was the first time I actually had the chance to meet a number of Asians in a practice setting. It was such a delight because I love Asian culture. I've spent over three years living in Asia, practicing in Asia, and it was a chance to give just a little bit back of what I had gotten from the Asian culture.

We were talking about the state of mind of Westerners and the state of mind of Asians with a psychiatrist there. He's of Sri Lankan descent, but speaks very good English and is a practicing MD and psychiatrist. We were talking about how a lot of people in the West have a feeling of not being very good about themselves, not being very worthwhile. I said, "Do the Asians that you come in contact with tend to have this feeling?" And he said, "No, by and large they don't." I said, "Well in the West it seems like an epidemic. What do you think the difference is?"

He said—and I don't know if this is true or not—"I think it comes down to the concept of original sin." It's very interesting that this concept, which goes so far back in our Judeo-Christian heritage, really could be coloring our whole culture and our whole view of what it means to be human. And it's radically different from the Buddhist view, which is that the core of us—the part we get closer and closer to as we get right down to the center of who we are—is pure and good and wholesome.

The Buddha described this in the Anguttara Nikaya in a sutta where he said: "This mind is radiant and brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This the untaught person does not understand, and so for them there is no cultivation of this mind."

There's actually a lot in here.

The mind is radiant and brightly shining, but it's colored by visiting attachments. So the qualities of fear or aggression or desire or sadness or self-criticism that come in color the mind so that we don't quite see that natural brightness. But these visiting attachments are only temporary. They're only visitors, and the goodness is a resident. That's the home base.

But if you don't understand that, then you take the visitors as real, and you don't realize that there's a way to develop this basic goodness. And the sutta continues: This mind is radiant and brightly shining, and it is free from the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way understands as it really is, and so for them there is cultivation of the mind.

When we sense our potential of purity, of freedom, of awakening, then we know that all we have to do is work to purify these temporary obscurations and we have the possibility of abiding in that purity and in that freedom, in that goodness. This is really the work of our practice.

This description brings together the two halves of the Buddhist teaching. The Buddha said over and over again, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering"—always these two together. So we look at the visiting attachments as the source of our suffering,

the difficult emotions that we encounter in life. And then the end of suffering is the touching, the uncovering, the living more and more in this place of innate freedom and purity.

Because there's so much talk in Buddhism about suffering, some people think it's gloomy. "What a pessimistic religion. Why are you guys always going on about dukkha, dukkha, dukkha? Geez, can't you lighten up?" But it's so interesting that it's almost always in the suttas paired—suffering and the end of suffering—in this beautiful balance.

When we start to look, of course, suffering is pervasive in a way. If we look into our own life with a really impartial eye, we can see the suffering that we have touched from early childhood on up through our teenage years and into our adulthood. If we look in the outer world, the world is full of conflict and fighting and argument and destruction. Even in places where we don't expect to find it, it kind of pops through.

A newspaper reporter visited Disneyland not long ago. You may have seen the ads—the Disneyland tagline is, "The place where happiness never ends." So that's a destination where there really shouldn't be suffering, right? He was backstage, and you know the characters are actors who dress up in the outfits of the Disney characters. So he was backstage and there were a couple of the actors who were just taking a quick break and hadn't gotten out of their costumes. He was basically watching a conversation between Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. And Mickey was saying to Donald, "I've really got to get in some overtime hours. I don't have enough money to pay my therapist." Even for Mickey Mouse, this life is not so easy.

So as we sit and practice, of course we're going to experience both these elements of the Buddha's teachings. We're going to come in contact with suffering, and hopefully we're also going to touch that point of the end of suffering, where the mind is steady and clear and not under these visiting attachments. And I hope you really start to get a sense of even moments of that in your practice.

The objects of our practice seem really interesting at times. At times they seem incredibly boring—the breath and the sensations of walking and the sounds and the sights and the tastes and so on. But over time what tends to happen is the objects which are so primary in the beginning—our understanding starts to shift and what actually becomes to the forefront is the mindfulness itself. The mindfulness being this thread that kind of weaves together all the different objects.

You notice that in the instruction that whatever the thing we're pointing to—breath, body, sound—the constant factor is the mindfulness. And this really becomes our home over the days as we practice together. Whatever object it's illuminating, the mindfulness or the awareness starts to take the center stage in our view.

And this is really the discovery of our Buddha nature, the discovery of that purity. It's very closely tied to the awareness. This is something really precious, this ability to understand our experience. It's said that this constitutes the preciousness of our human birth, and that the creatures don't have this capability. So this is really something that we're blessed with as human beings.

And I think this is true. Sally and I have a few cats. You may have heard from earlier talks. And one of them is very fearful. And since her birth she's been fearful. And even though we've given her a lot of love over the years, that fearfulness hasn't changed.

And there's a way in which it really can't change because she can't understand it. She just sees it as the true nature of the world. So she doesn't have the capacity to see it in context of this purity of awareness.

We have this capability. We have this ability to find our home in our basic goodness and to see the attachments in perspective.

In Asia, an important part of practice is reflecting on our own goodness. People are instructed to do that, they do that, they're comfortable with it. One of the ways that they take to reflect on it is through acts of generosity. So they are generous to their parents, to their relatives, to their family members, in their support of the monks and nuns, and then they're told to reflect on how good the generosity feels.

And in fact, there's kind of a science of it in Thailand. There are sort of outlines of if you do this act of generosity, this will be your return. One of our friends told us that if you'd like to be beautiful in your next life, you should bring flowers to the temple. I won't vouch for that. But I do know that giving creates joy when we reflect about it.

So Ajahn Sumedho was talking about this practice of reflecting on our goodness. And he put it in a way I hadn't heard before, but that rang true for me. He said when he reflected on it, he realized that as a child, he was always a good child. He tried to be a good child. He wanted to be good. And that in his life, he was always drawn to what was good and what was noble in character. He said, "You know, I realized I'm basically a good person."

And I thought about all the people that I meet on meditation retreats and the people who come to dharma centers, and I realized we're all basically really good people. And sometimes we lose sight of that view because we don't see the broader society of the six billion people on the earth. How many people would dedicate a week just to developing their goodness? A week that's quite difficult, quite demanding. In order to do that, you have to have a really strong conviction in what's wholesome and what's beautiful. And people who are dedicated to this kind of practice have that.

So I think we can remind ourselves that we are basically good people. Even though we make mistakes, even though we hurt others, that there is a real purity in our intention to do what's good in the world, to seek what's just and true.

When we come into meditation, actually that tendency to goodness creates its own problem. Because as good people, we tend to want to do it right. We tend to want to do in our meditation practice what's really good, what's really perfect sometimes. And that can be a great burden.

So we can approach our meditation with a sense of trying to get it right and being afraid of getting it wrong. And that creates a kind of tension of success and failure, just like in worldly life.

Ajahn Chah said that in worldly life, success and failure are opposites, but in spiritual life, success and failure are of equal value. I thought this was a beautiful reminder. Ajahn Chah was Ajahn Sumedho's teacher and Jack Kornfield's first teacher, a great master. Success and failure are of equal value. Therefore, you can learn from both. And he said that success actually is noticing what's happening. So whatever you do, if you do it and pay attention, you can't really go astray. You'll be succeeding.

And that can actually, when we take that into our meditation practice, give us a real confidence. For instance, people wonder about which technique to use at a particular point in their practice. It doesn't really matter. You can try all the choices, see what works for you, and learn from it. Sometimes we learn a lot more from failure than we learn from success.

So as good people, there's a way in which we need to be bolder about our practice and be more trusting in ourselves. Not be afraid to make mistakes with our practice. It's a way we learn in practice like in life. And especially for those who have been doing it for a while and who have some faith, as James talked about last night, to be in a way a bit more nonchalant in your practice. Because we can monitor it and kind of stay on top of it a little too closely. So to develop this confidence that we can't really go wrong with it, then we can give ourselves or we can surrender even more to the practice.

And the reason that it's so safe is the truth of impermanence. Because we're not going to get stuck anywhere. Impermanence is what makes it safe for us to feel.

I want to read this poem from Rilke, the German poet. It's from a book called Rilke's Book of Hours, subtitled Love Poems to God.

It's translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows. It was written when Rilke was quite young and had gotten onto a religious path. He was in Russia visiting many cathedrals, and he was deeply touched by the power of the religion he found there. So he returned home and these overtly religious poems poured out of him.

This is one where God is speaking to human beings as he creates each being before their journey into life:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You'll know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand.

Experience the beauty and the terror. No feeling is final. This is really the kind of trust that opens us up to the whole range of our experience.

In this evening's talk, I'd like to explore some of the difficulties we encounter in meditation practice. The Buddha spoke about them repeatedly. Working with these states of heart and mind forms a huge part of what meditation practice is about.

When we consider what's difficult in life, there's the difficulty of the body's vulnerability—the body is vulnerable to sickness, pain, aging and death. The other main source of vulnerability is our mind and our own tendencies toward difficult states of heart and mind: our sadness and grief, reactions to loss, our fears, anxiety, and worries.

We can't do much about the illness and aging of the body and its eventual death, but we can make a huge difference in how we relate to the emotions. A very significant part of our practice is coming to understand how to work with the difficult emotions that we all face.

The Buddha had several lists of these qualities of mind, and the one I'd like to discuss tonight is what he called the five hindrances. He identified five particular states of heart and mind that always arise for meditators. As soon as one begins the process of deepening awareness, these states come up almost as a reaction or response. The five are: desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt.

I want to explore each of them this evening.

Desire is this force in the mind that seeks satisfaction in the future. Something feels not quite right as we are. We attach our wanting to some object we don't have right now, that we hope to have in the future. There's a storyline underneath: when I have it, it will make me happy. There's an incompleteness now, and I'll reach that completeness when I get that object. You can feel this moving in your practice—it may be connected to objects outside, or to objects or experiences here. But when desire is present, it brings with it a sense of incompleteness, a sense of insufficiency.

We were teaching a retreat in Italy last summer—Carol, Franz, Sally and I were all there. It was actually a delight to work with Italians. I'd never taught in Italy before, and everything you imagine about Italian people I found to be true. They were very warm. Their emotions were really close to the surface.

It's not that they didn't have difficulties in their lives—everybody did, just as we do here. But they would come into interviews, and there were some quite serious things happening for people in that retreat. There was one woman dealing with a recent diagnosis of terminal illness, and she was there to try to find some equanimity with it. There was a mother, a young woman probably in her early thirties, whose seven-year-old daughter had been diagnosed with an illness that would probably lead to her death within a year or two. She was dealing with that profound sadness.

But as people came into interviews—and they were very open in talking about what they were going through, even though we worked through a translator since they didn't speak much English and I don't speak Italian—they would preface these moving stories with this sort of rueful smile. "Oh, I'm having such a hard time today," they'd say with a smile, and then tell me these deeply touching stories.

And they would often smile as they were telling me about it. What it communicated to me was a kind of fluency with their own emotions that I found just remarkable. They were at home with this whole range of feelings that we all have as human beings. So it was very uplifting to be with them.

One of the guys who came in for an interview early on was a young Italian man, and he said, "Well, I'm having trouble settling into the retreat." I said, "Oh, really? What's going on?"

"Well," he said, "I'm having doubt."

I said, "Okay, that's a hindrance. I know about that hindrance. We can talk about that hindrance. What's up for you?"

He said, "Well, I don't really want to be here."

"Oh, okay, well, what's happening?"

And he said, "Well, you know, this is August. This is my vacation time. And some friends of mine had booked a vacation in the Caribbean. And they asked me if I'd like to go with them. And I thought, oh, the Caribbean. What great beaches. What beautiful women. I really want to go to the Caribbean." And he said, "But I couldn't get a ticket. The flights were all booked. This was my second choice."

So it didn't stack up to the Caribbean beaches for him. He was constantly in these fantasies of being in the Caribbean with his friends and having a really good time, and then he'd sort of come back to the present moment and his body was sore and we were in this Catholic convent and what am I doing here? So he had a little bit of struggle coming back to Earth.

But he'd been on a retreat before and he knew how to work with it. He could see that it was just a form of wanting. And when he could let go of the wanting, there wasn't really a problem. And this is what's so interesting. The desire makes us feel incomplete. But then you have to stop and ask: is it really the absence of the object that's the problem? Or is it the feeling of the desire that's the problem? And it was clear for him, it was the feeling of the desire that was the problem. When he could let go of it, the present was actually fine.

So what's important with desire is kind of tuning into how it feels in the mind, how it feels in the body. I've started to recognize that desire is active when I feel a strain with the present moment. It's like there's a force that's pulling me in a different direction. And I've started to recognize how that feels in my body. There's a kind of distortion that comes into the way my body appears to me. And I've started to notice that there's a leaning forward or reaching out connected with that.

So then I just stop to look. Can I connect with something that I'm wanting? Can I tune into an object that I'm looking for? And often I can. And tuning into it and being willing to feel it means I can bring awareness to it. And if I can bring awareness to it, then I'm partway there to being able to let go of it.

One of the tips that a friend gave me—I have a good friend who's a greed type. I tend to be an aversive type, so I wouldn't have thought of this myself. But being a greed type and having a lot of desire, he said he'd worked with it often. When he felt the presence of desire, he would ask himself the question: is there anything truly lacking in this mo-

ment? Is there anything truly that I need that I don't have? And the answer would almost always come back, no. And that would help him just settle in and kind of appreciate the moment that was here.

The second of the five hindrances is the state of aversion or negativity. And this is a particular term that has a lot of different blooms, a lot of different forms. Aversion can be expressed through disliking, through hatred, through negativity, complaining, criticism, impatience, anger, fear.

These are all different expressions of not liking. Sadness is another one—not liking the past. Fear—not liking the future.

Retreat seems like particularly ripe ground for aversion to bloom, which makes it a good training ground in this practice. So I want to pass on a prayer to you that may be helpful. The prayer goes like this: "Dear God, thank you for your strength and comfort today. Thanks to you I haven't been impatient or grumpy or cross with anyone so far all day. But I'll be getting out of bed soon and I think I'll really need your help then." You can take this as your mantra if it helps.

Often the thing that's so tricky with aversion is that we think it's appropriate to the situation. We think the situation is the cause of the aversion. It's not in my mind. It couldn't be in me. It's definitely the outside situation.

I was on a fairly long retreat a few years ago. I'd been on retreat for about two weeks and had a favorite walking spot that I went to every walking period. I would walk there for the whole walking period. I'd worn a track in the grass, done everything short of spray painting my initials in the track.

One day I went out from the meditation hall and was walking very mindfully down to my track—lifting, moving, placing. And I saw somebody was there. Someone had gotten to my track before me. I immediately felt annoyed. I thought, "What are they doing there? I've been walking there every walking period. Don't they know that?"

Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving. I was very mindful, I thought. I wondered, "Is this some kind of weird head game? Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line or something? Are they trying to get back?" Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing.

So I kept being irritated and trying to figure out why someone would do that. They must not be very well developed. Then I just walked to a different walking place, which was absolutely fine. I had a walking period that was just as good as my old spot.

But it wasn't until about halfway through my walking period that I noticed, "Oh, I'm angry. I'm actually irritated." I'd just been putting my attention on lifting, moving, placing, and I hadn't even noticed the anger that was there. I thought I was being mindful.

This is what these hindrances do, and aversion is a good example. We set up the early warning system with the radar of mindfulness. We're really looking out for what's happening. But these states of mind zip in underneath our radar. They take us over and we may be feeling them and acting from them for quite a while before we even know what we're feeling.

This is actually a great challenge in practice—to know at any given moment what we're feeling as we're feeling it. This can become a whole avenue for practice, an excellent reflection throughout the day. Just checking in every five minutes if you like: What am I feeling right now? What's the predominant mood, state of mind, state of my heart?

Because until we can identify what we're feeling, we're a slave to it. We're taken over by it. We're caught in a reaction. And there's no freedom in that. As soon as I could identify it as anger, I could start to relate to it. I could be aware of it. I could start to investigate it. I could question it.

Is he really out to get me? Or could that be a projection? Maybe he's just as confused as I am. And I could start to work through it. Actually, once I recognized it and could let go, it started to fade quite quickly in just a few minutes.

So this tuning into what the experience is, is really the key with these hindrances. To know this is what aversion feels like. To feel it in the body, to feel its tone in the mind, and then to start to relate with it.

What happens with all the hindrances is that they generally come with some kind of story, some kind of line of thought that justifies them. With desire, the story is: "I'll be happy when I get that thing." With aversion, the story is: "This situation is the cause of my unhappiness." We don't see that the source of desire and fear is actually in our own mind. We get deceived by the story about the hindrance.

If we keep focusing on the story—"You made me angry, it's your fault"—we can never get to release the feeling. So as far as possible with the hindrances, it's really helpful to drop the story that thoughts are feeding us and just come back to the bare feeling. Just feel the desire, feel the anger, feel the fear in the body and the mind.

Sometimes aversion sets in as a long-term situation. I think this comes when there's been a lot of pain in our life that we haven't been able to open to. The mind can get locked in a state of resistance or not wanting that experience of pain. When we're in a mind state like that, it's as though everything in the world is unsatisfying and is a source of friction.

There's a story from the Buddha's time. He was in the forest with a group of monks and he asked them if they saw the jackal that was running out of the forest in the morning. He said, "Did you see the jackal run out of the forest into this clearing? It came into the clearing and stood for just a short while, then was obviously uncomfortable and ran away into the hollow of a tree. It lay down in the hollow of a tree, but it didn't stay there very long either. It quickly got up and ran into a cave. It sat down in the cave looking out, but it wasn't comfortable there either. And it ran out of the cave back into the forest."

The Buddha said that the jackal was uncomfortable in the clearing and blamed its discomfort on the clearing and on standing. Then it went into the hollow of a tree and wasn't comfortable—it blamed its discomfort on the tree and on lying down. It went into the cave and blamed its discomfort on the cave and on the sitting posture. The Buddha said the problem was with none of these. The jackal had mange. It wouldn't be comfortable anywhere.

When aversion sets into our being in this way—as a long-term or entrenched state of resistance—then we're not comfortable anywhere. We're not comfortable until we can accept the very fact of the resistance and open to that level of pain. When we do that, we find the heart actually has the capacity to accommodate it. But we have to move out of the sense of struggle, a resistance to the resistance itself, a resistance to the aversion, to open up to feel it directly. Then there's the possibility for peace, some softening, and some release.

One of the ways that aversion expresses itself often on retreat is as negativity toward ourselves, criticism of ourselves. This was strong for me in the early years of my practice. I sort of staggered out of the 60s, kind of a product of all the excesses of that era. I came into practice with a lot of confusion and unhappiness. In the early years of my practice, which were not at all easy, I had a lot of self-criticism, a lot of self-judgment.

I remember sitting on one retreat and getting very, very unhappy. I came in for an interview with my teacher, and he said, "How are things going?" I said, "Oh, I'm having a hard day." He said, "What's up?" I said, "Well, I'm having a lot of difficult thoughts, a lot of aversive thoughts." See, I put it in meditation terms. I thought that would be good enough. A lot of aversive thoughts. Let's move on and talk about something else.

But he kept probing. He said, "Well, what kinds of thoughts?" I said, "Well, I'm feeling like I really don't like myself very well."

And he said, "You're not seeing things as they are. Your problem is that you don't accept yourself." So this really came home like a lightning bolt to me—that I didn't accept myself the way I was.

This is an important facet of our metta practice. Sometimes when we say "may I be happy," happiness can seem too remote. A really good phrase instead is "may I accept myself just as I am." I didn't have the metta practice back then, I didn't know it, but I took this theme of self-acceptance for a long time, for years in my practice, and really struggled with it.

I didn't understand it at first. Accept myself? Wait, I thought in Buddhism we don't have a self. How can there be a self to accept? Am I supposed to find some little being inside me and kind of wrap my arms around him? So I had to work with it and find my own way.

What I came to realize is that accepting myself just meant accepting my experience moment after moment after moment—accepting my experience in whatever form it came. That's what I needed to be at peace with. That was my direction for years, and it was a really helpful direction.

It's amazing for me to be around people who have come to such deep levels of self-acceptance. Ajahn Sumedho was inspiring in that way. He would talk about himself very honestly. We had a teacher's retreat for the Spirit Rock teachers after the public retreat, and we had a discussion group in the afternoon. He just started off the discussion group saying, "You know, when I sat down to teach you all this morning, I was very nervous. I didn't know if I had anything to say to a group of people who'd been doing this practice for a long time. I was quite anxious." I thought that was very self-revealing of him.

I was also encouraged to find out that when he started teaching, he didn't have a great deal of self-confidence at all. He said the first time Ajahn Chah asked him to give a Dharma talk, it was in Thai, and he was really nervous. But he really prepared, made some notes, and the night came when he was supposed to talk to the villagers in Thai. He was getting more and more nervous as the time for the talk approached, really working himself up into quite a state of anxiety.

Ajahn Chah said, "It's time to give the talk, Sumedho."

And Sumedho said, "I can't do it. I'm just too nervous. I can't do it."

I thought Ajahn Chah would push him and say, "You have to anyway." He didn't. He said, "Okay, okay, okay. You don't have to do it tonight."

Then just a little while later, villagers were at the temple again. They'd done chanting and some meditation. All of a sudden, Ajahn Chah turns to Ajahn Sumedho and says, "Sumedho, give the talk." He didn't have time to get nervous, so he got up and gave the talk. He said it was a little bit primitive—he was saying things to the Thai people like, "Buddhism is good. I like it very much." And he said they gave him really great feedback on his talk.

Now he's so self-confident. He spoke impromptu at these retreats for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening every day, and I was rapt. I loved the talks.

Another person who has this incredible self-acceptance is the Dalai Lama. You could see it again when we were down with him in Mountain View. I don't really like to get into news reports in the middle of retreats, but there's one piece of news I did want to pass on: today the Dalai Lama had a meeting with George W. Bush. It was a formal and scheduled meeting that was on Bush's agenda. There are official photographs of the two of them sitting down and talking together.

And yesterday, he also had a formal meeting with Colin Powell. The Dalai Lama said that both men listened to him very intently, and he found them quite sympathetic. Afterwards, Bush expressed something quite significant—he wanted to convey the United States' commitment to the religious freedom and cultural traditions of the Tibetan people. He said it very strongly and directly. That was very uplifting, very nice to hear.

The Dalai Lama was in Mountain View last week, teaching to probably six or seven thousand people. It was a big deal. This event took probably a year to organize. There were three days of teachings and then a couple of other events. The stage was huge—it's Shoreline Amphitheater, so it's a place where Bruce Springsteen can play, so of course it's massive. The Dalai Lama was sitting on a high throne in the center of the stage, with about a hundred monks and nuns on either side, facing toward the center. That's kind of an imposing situation in itself, looking out on a sea of six or seven thousand faces. His image was projected on one of these huge video screens above him, so the people in the very back on the lawn could see him too.

He actually talked about the situation of being on the throne and said, "We do this often in Tibet. We have teachings from a high throne." He explained that it's important to understand the throne is there not because the person is important, but because the teachings are profound and important. "Some teachers confuse these two," he said. "For them, feelings of pride and self-importance arise because they're sitting on a high

throne talking down to people. We actually have a name for this in Tibet. We call it the high throne syndrome. But I don't have that problem. Pride and self-importance don't arise for me in this situation."

It was amazing—looking out on seven thousand people, with the talks being webcast live so you could listen anywhere in the world, being videoed and recorded—and he was completely at ease. He would sit up there, and while the translator was translating his Tibetan, he would be smiling at people in the audience, looking at his watch, scratching the back of his head, examining his fingernails. Totally at ease. There is this really beautiful possibility of this really deep inner peace and acceptance that's just one of the qualities he manifests so beautifully.

The next of the hindrances is one you're all familiar with, generally called sloth and torpor in the old Victorian language. Dullness and drowsiness felt through mind and body. But I like this term sloth and torpor—it's really quite evocative. Also in the early days at Insight Meditation Society, our sister center in Massachusetts, Carol and I were on staff together in the late seventies. We had a maintenance crew that were not exactly known for their work ethic. They got nicknamed—the pair of them got nicknamed McSloth and McTorper. I think of them fondly when I think of this.

With drowsiness, we can't see clearly. Everything's like in a fog. The body is in a fog. The breath is in a fog. Sounds are in a fog. We can't connect directly with anything. This is not actually that unpleasant a state often. I have personally spent many happy hours fully asleep on my meditation cushion and not falling over.

But the problem is that the meditation doesn't really develop from this place. The dullness obstructs the deepening. So it is useful to start to probe it a little bit, to work to bring up energy. Energy is the antidote to drowsiness. All the things that I've seen a lot of you doing are right on track. Sitting up a little straighter, taking a few deep breaths to bring up the energy, opening your eyes. And then if you're still sleepy, standing up. It's much harder to fall asleep standing—although someone in this retreat said they just about did it the other day.

So it's possible. During the next walking period, perhaps take a brisk walk. Over the days, this drowsiness tends to get cut through as different sources of energy arise from our meditation.

If the drowsiness persists beyond these first three days, become curious about it. Get a little skeptical, because sometimes the dullness can be a defense. What happens is we're moving along in our practice when we catch a glimpse—out of the corner of our

eye—of some feeling, some memory, some situation we don't really want to know about. Then almost automatically, it's as if a curtain descends, cutting us off from whatever was arising.

If this occurs after the first few days, start getting curious. Simply look: what was there right before the drowsiness came in? Was there a glimpse of anything? There may not necessarily be, but if the dullness is acting as a defense, there may be something worth investigating.

The next hindrance is restlessness—the other end of the spectrum from drowsiness. Instead of being too low on energy, we're far too high on energy. The physical body is full of energy, thoughts race at lightning speed, perhaps many emotions surge through us, and it feels like there's a swirl inside. We can't even untangle what's the body and what's the mind—it's all a big blur.

In such moments, trying to find the breath is like trying to find a piece of straw in the middle of a tornado in Kansas. It simply won't work. Often our tendency when there's abundant energy is to think, "Oh, I need to get concentrated. Let me find the breath again. If I can get really close to the breath, I can cut through this swirl." So we struggle and strain.

But this approach—trying to be really precise—bottles all that energy up. It's like taking a ten-megawatt reactor and forcing it into an incredibly tiny space. This is usually counterproductive.

The most helpful approach is to make the awareness really broad, really spacious. Sounds offer a good avenue into this spaciousness, so you might try listening at that point. Have the sense that awareness is truly vast. Also cultivate the sense that you're grounded to the earth, connected through your sitting. Feel the touch points of your sitting bones or feet—whatever connects you to the earth so you feel some stability.

Then simply be willing to let all that energy rip within the big space you're giving it. Don't feel you need to be precise or calm—it might not be possible. Just let the wildness of that energy move and stay in touch with it, perhaps by noting "restlessness." Or as James mentioned last night, "confusion." That's enough. That's mindfulness. It's a different lens opening, as James said, but it's still awareness of what's true in the present moment. The meditation will develop.

So let yourself feel the restlessness. Let yourself know what that experience is actually like.

The last of the hindrances is doubt—the question "What are we doing here? Why am I doing this practice?" James spoke about this beautifully last night in discussing the development of faith, so I don't want to explore it in further detail. But know that if you can see doubt as doubt, you don't have to buy into it. That's the key. If you don't buy into it, it will pass. Just keep doing your practice—keep doing the sittings, keep doing the walking periods. The doubt will pass, and the connection will return.

These are the five common states of mind that meditators encounter.

Desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. The beautiful thing in our practice is that these all purify as we go. But the purification doesn't mean that we get rid of them, because the beautiful thing is we don't have to get rid of them in order to purify. What we purify is our relationship to them. And we do that through the tool of awareness or mindfulness.

So please don't have it as your goal that it's wrong to feel desire, it's wrong to feel aversion or judgment or sadness or fear or doubt. That's not the message. The message is that we want to use this meditative space to understand them. Because when we understand them, we don't have to be fooled, deceived, and misled by them.

Ajahn Sumedho had a line that I really liked a lot in describing this kind of relationship. He said, when you experience desire, know: "Oh, desire is like this." When you're in a state where desire is absent, know: "Oh, non-desire is like this." Aversion is like this. Non-aversion is like this. Suffering is like this. Non-suffering is like this.

So you really get the feel of that state of mind, that difficult state of mind and its absence. You understand how it feels when we're in suffering and also the end of that suffering. You know the state of bondage and you know the state of freedom. And in a way, we don't even have to have in this retreat a very preferential attitude toward those two. That's one of the things that it's really helpful to give up as you're in the process of this kind of training.

We're really here to learn about these experiences. Because in learning about them, we develop wisdom. And it's the wisdom that brings the freedom.

So it's actually a great gift to be able to explore fear in this setting, to explore anger in this quiet, silent place where we really don't have anything else to do, to explore our sadness, our grief, our self-judgment. Then just to know: that's what this feels like, that's the truth of this Dhamma, this current phenomenon is like this. Its absence is like this. Then we really get an understanding of the way that the mind works when it goes in the direction of suffering, of clinging, of attachment, of bondage. And we also know

firsthand the quality of the mind when it's in that state of purity, of freedom from the attachment, of ease, of peace, of that lack of struggle. So it's very helpful to know both sides of this equation extremely well.

In relating to the emotions directly, it's very helpful to name them. Because that naming is activating the wisdom factor. And it's activating the awareness. So we name it as anger. We name it as fear. Then having named it, we can start to relate to it. We can bring it within our field of awareness. Then the Buddha is knowing this Dhamma. This pure awareness is starting to create a relationship with this difficult, painful state of mind that has often led us into suffering again and again and again. And it's the contact between this clear awareness and the painful mind state that starts to purify it. We don't have to do any more than that—touch it and know it for what it is.

And then these states are so deeply conditioned in us. They've been active for so long. They've fascinated us for so long. They've gripped us. More exactly, we've gripped them for so long. But the awareness starts to loosen that. The awareness and the influence of the wisdom, the wise seeing, starts to loosen the hold of that conditioning.

In classical terms, it's said that this is a path that leads to the end of karma. Karma is the investment in all our conditioning from beginningless time. And the influence of awareness undoes karma and that investment in those mind states.

And we find as we start to move in that way, one, we understand the state of mind and the emotion through seeing it clearly again and again, but then we also start to shift our sense of identity. The more we can trust in the seeing, in the awareness, the energy comes out of the mind states. It's like a balance pan. You take the weight off of one side and the other side goes up. In this case, you take the energy out of the mind state by putting it into the awareness.

The awareness gets stronger, the state gets weaker. And so we just constantly keep poking holes in it, aerating it through this steady application of clear and kind attention, again and again and again.

And then we actually start to see that our sense of self changes. Who are you? Are you the difficult mind stuff? Are you a sad person, an angry person, an unhappy person? Is that really a constant and ongoing identity? Or could you more appropriately take your identity from this steady and clear attention that's always accessible?

The mind states are just visitors. They come and go. So why should I claim that as my personality or my being? Why not more take it in the sense of this pure awareness that's intrinsic and deep and in a way unchanging? Maybe that's who I really am. And maybe that's how I should consider myself.

Ajahn Sumedho said, if you believe that you're an unenlightened person and you have to totally change through lots of work in order to become awakened, you'll never arrive. But if you hold the view that your basic being is this clear awareness, you're already there.

So then the means and the end come together. Where we want to be in the path is how we walk the path. By abiding in this clear and pure awareness, we're activating our Buddha nature and we're arriving at the destination at the same time.

This pure awareness has a tremendous spaciousness to it. It can hold all these difficult emotions because of its basic emptiness. It can hold them all without reacting. This is how the Buddha knows the Dhamma. The changing Dhammas of life are all held within this steady and ongoing pure sense of presence.

I'll just close with a quotation from Ajahn Mahabua, who was a colleague of Ajahn Chah's. They were both students of the same teacher. And Ajahn Mahabua is still alive, teaching as an abbot in Thailand today. This is his comment on the Buddha knowing the Dhamma:

"There's no escaping this truth. Whatever arises has to vanish. Whatever is true, whatever is a natural principle in and of itself, won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind. All that remains is simple awareness, utterly pure."

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

Whatever arises has to vanish. Whatever is true won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish.

CHAPTER 227

The Eight Worldly Conditions

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines one of the Buddha's most practical teachings for navigating daily life: the eight worldly conditions (aṭṭha lokadhammā) of gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, and success and failure. Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Armstrong explores how these alternating conditions keep "the world turning around" and why our attempts to always land on the positive side inevitably lead to suffering.

The talk addresses a fundamental challenge for lay practitioners: sustaining spiritual practice while managing worldly responsibilities. Armstrong shares personal stories from his time at Microsoft and experiences in dharma teaching to illustrate how these conditions manifest in modern life, from Silicon Valley's boom-bust cycles to the challenges of receiving feedback as a teacher.

Central to the discussion is the Buddha's guidance on developing equanimity—understanding that all eight conditions are impermanent and subject to change. Armstrong explores how an "instructed noble disciple" relates differently to these experiences than an "uninstructed worldling," emphasizing the importance of not letting our minds become engrossed by either gain or loss, praise or blame. The talk concludes with reflections on renunciation as right priority—caring more about freedom and awareness than outcomes—and how this shift enables us to act in the world from compassion rather than attachment to results.

Somebody asked in an interview the other day what I thought was a really great question: why is it so hard to stay present in daily life?

We looked at it and discussed it, exploring several different reasons. First, we simply don't have the habit of being present. To a certain extent, it's just a habit that we can develop—being here more often. It's really why retreats are so powerful. We generate that habit again and again and again. In daily life, we get quite busy. Thoughts and emotions get active, stirred up, and carry us away. It's hard to focus on the present because the thoughts are quite active.

But then another aspect of daily life is that we're involved in things that we care about, and we get subject to a lot of ups and downs because of those things we care about—our work situation, our relationships with coworkers, whether a project is com-

ing together, whether our kids are home at the time they said they were going to be, whether our partner is upset with us because we forgot to do something that particular day. We meet a lot of changing conditions in our daily life.

In a way, you could say that as laypeople there's an inherent tension with dharma practice. I think it exists with monastics too, but for laypeople it's even more exaggerated. We have to sustain two tracks of intention in our daily life.

One is that we have to take care of ourselves and our families. This is part of the metta phrases—the fourth phrase that says something like, "May I care for myself happily in this world." It really refers to our outer life: our livelihood, our relationships with partners, with children, with parents, with friends. May all that go smoothly and easily. As you know, that's kind of a full-time job all in itself. Sometimes being a worker, a partner, and a parent is more than a full-time job—much more.

And then, in addition, we're supposed to sustain this intention of dharma practice—coming back to the moment, nourishing mindfulness, and developing metta. And you've also found that that's a full-time job. So it's as though going back into the world, we're assigned two full-time jobs, at least. If you're a parent, maybe three.

How do we do this? The good news is that over time it gets easier. It gets easier to combine those intentions of paying attention with the intention of carrying out our activities in the world.

But there's also a built-in pitfall: the worldly activities themselves can be so involving and consuming that we lose track of the spiritual orientation. This easily happens in outer life. Not only are the daily activities consuming, but they're also really seductive. They offer so many intriguing possibilities, don't they? All the interesting jobs there are to do, all the different projects we could get involved with as volunteers, all the different people we could meet, ways we could take our work into new areas, different activities we could do with our kids and partners, richness we could bring to our parents in their older years. There are so many rich possibilities and ways to spend our time in the outer world.

We can see as we get back into it that the forces of wanting, of desire, can lead us down a lot of these different tracks. It really is easy to forget to keep bringing in the spiritual focus, to keep coming back to awareness as a refuge, to metta as a direction and compassion. So it's actually quite easy, I think, to go back into the world and get lost in the pursuits of our daily life.

One reason is that the desires in outer life are so manifold and so compelling that we may lose our sense of spiritual purpose. We may lose an orientation or a direction.

This is a quote from Tony Parsons. He's the new competitor to Eckhart Tolle in the Western self-realized category, which you may have discovered is a blooming category these days. All these masters are coming along who've never had any spiritual teacher but blossom spontaneously. Eckhart Tolle is one, and Franz just turned me on to Tony Parsons, who's a British guy born in 1933. He had a spontaneous awakening when he was twenty years old and has now been teaching for the last few years.

This is a quote from Tony Parsons: "Whatever I seek or think that I want, all of my desires are only a reflection of my longing to come home. Home is my original nature. It is right here, simply in what is."

I'll read something from Eckhart Tolle's book The Power of Now that says something similar. For those who don't know him, Eckhart Tolle is now fifty-three and had a spontaneous awakening at age twenty-nine. He's German-born but lives in Canada and is now teaching quite a bit in the States.

"All negative emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who we are beyond name and form."

I'll read that again because it's quite dense. All negative emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who we really are beyond name and form.

What both these comments are pointing to is that we've lost touch with our true nature. You could call it awareness, you could call it emptiness, you could call it presence or being or God, if that language speaks to you. Having lost touch with this nature in this kind of fall from grace, there's a deep sense of disappointment, of frustration, of abandonment, of incompleteness that befalls us sentient beings separated from our Source.

Because this sense of disappointment and loss is so burdensome, we escape from feeling it through all the outer activities of our lives. The spiritual path begins when we start drawing back that outer-directed energy and realizing that the only thing that will truly satisfy us is returning to the source, returning to our true nature, our true home.

We're conditioned by society to look in worldly directions for happiness and satisfaction, but the message of the spiritual path is that these directions are actually misleading, taking us away from what will truly heal and bring us genuine happiness and satisfaction when we put our real emphasis and intent there.

One of the best descriptions of the ways our life can go off on worldly tracks is found in a sutta from the Anguttara Nikaya titled "The Vicissitudes of Life." This gives us the title for our talk this evening: "The Eight Worldly Conditions."

The Buddha speaks: "These eight worldly conditions, O monks, keep the world turning around, and the world turns around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure."

The Buddha teaches that these eight conditions are something we're all subject to, and what's particularly striking is that they're all impermanent, always changing. We can never land forever in any one of them, neither the positive nor the negative sides. We continue to be exposed to their alternation.

If our attempt in life is to find happiness by landing in one of the positive states—gain, praise, pleasure, or success—and to always keep away from experiencing the negative states of loss, blame, pain, and failure, we simply can't do it. It's not possible because the conditions of the world are such that these will always be alternating.

As practitioners, our understanding and direction should be that we can't escape these changing conditions of life, but we may be able to find a kind of equanimity amidst them. Rather than pinning our hopes on always being on the positive side—which doesn't happen for anyone—we can find a way, a place within ourselves, a strength of character and understanding to move more and more easily through the fluctuations of the ups and downs.

Let me explore these four pairs and how they impact our lives. The first pair the Buddha mentioned is gain and loss. It's fascinating to live at this time in 2001 with the phenomenon of gain and loss, because our society is so affluent. Here in the Bay Area, the impact of the computer industry is so significant that stories of gain and loss are everywhere around us.

I mentioned earlier that I used to work at Microsoft, joining the company in 1988. The man who hired me was a wonderful manager—I loved working for him. He was very supportive and skilled, and I thought he was excellent at his job. I discovered after a while that he had been given stock options when he joined the company: 10,000 shares.

Those 10,000 shares of Microsoft in 1988 weren't worth much at the time. But over the following thirteen years, the stock split by a factor of 72. Those shares would today represent 720,000 shares of Microsoft stock, which even after the market's decline, is still worth considerable money.

In early 1989, my boss was passed over for a promotion. The position was given to someone he didn't respect, another manager he considered incompetent, and he was told he would have to report to this person. This really upset him. He felt mistreated, unacknowledged, disrespected. After a conflict with his new manager, one Friday afternoon he wrote a resignation letter and walked out of the office, leaving behind his 10,000 options.

Monday morning, he called his manager to apologize and tried to withdraw his resignation, but it wasn't accepted. The manager said, "No, I accepted your resignation. You're terminated from the company." With that one fit of temper, he essentially left behind about $40 million.

Then, in this past year, the Internet boom has gone bust.

And then the next sitting, the mind is scattered and restless, and there can be a real sense of loss. "Oh no, I've lost my concentration. Where did it go? I had it just an hour ago, and now it's gone." This attachment to meditative states can create the same kind of suffering as attachment to material gains and losses.

In meditation, we can practice this very teaching of the Buddha by recognizing when we're getting elated about a good sitting or dejected about a difficult one. We can reflect that this too is impermanent, bound up with suffering, and subject to change. The concentrated mind will pass. The scattered mind will also pass. Neither state defines our practice or our worth as practitioners.

I remember when I was on my first long retreat, I had what felt like a breakthrough sitting. The mind became very still, and there was a profound sense of peace. I was so excited about this gain that I spent the next several sittings trying to recreate that experience. Of course, the more I grasped for it, the more elusive it became. I was caught in exactly what the Buddha was describing—letting my mind become engrossed in the gain, and then suffering when I couldn't maintain it.

The practice becomes much more peaceful when we can approach each sitting with fresh eyes, not carrying the burden of our previous experiences, whether they were wonderful or terrible. We sit down with whatever mind we have right now, work with whatever arises, and don't get caught in comparing this sitting to yesterday's sitting or hoping for tomorrow's sitting to be different.

This teaching applies equally to our daily life practice. When mindfulness is strong during the day, when we catch ourselves getting angry and are able to step back, when we respond with kindness instead of reactivity—there can be a sense of spiritual gain.

"I'm really getting good at this dharma thing." And then the next day, we explode at our partner over something trivial, we spend the whole day caught in worry, we act in ways that we know cause suffering. The sense of spiritual loss can be devastating.

But here too, the Buddha's instruction applies. The mindful day is impermanent. The unmindful day is also impermanent. Neither defines who we are or determines our capacity for awakening. They're all just changing conditions to be met with equanimity.

This doesn't mean we become passive or indifferent. We still make effort in our practice, we still care about our actions and their consequences. But we hold it all more lightly, with less attachment to outcomes, with more acceptance of the natural fluctuations that are part of any genuine spiritual path.

But concentration is one of the really variable factors in meditation practice, as you probably have noticed. It comes together, it grows strong, and you can do absolutely nothing wrong. You can be doing your practice fully and carefully, yet the concentration just decays. It's one of those factors that's really out of our control.

Again, when it goes, we may get unhappy and think, "Oh, I've blown it." But it's just the natural decaying of the factor of concentration. As we continue with a steady application of mindfulness, it will build back up. So concentration really manifests through the retreat in these cycles of gain and loss, and so do the experiences of calm.

Mindfulness tends to be much steadier in development. Mindfulness—being the capacity of the mind to know its experience—seems to grow little by little, but more steadily through our practice. The kind of gain in mindfulness that you develop over a retreat doesn't entirely desert you when you leave. I think it's one of the things that carries over most powerfully. The concentration will probably go, sorry to say. Most of you know that's going to disappear fairly soon. But the mindfulness is much more steady.

The second of the pairs is praise and blame. I used to think that once one reached a certain level of togetherness, integration in one's life, one was somehow free from blame. But the Buddha actually said somewhere in the suttas that there's no one who is not subject to blame. Looking back on his own life after his awakening, he got this in spades.

You'd think that somebody whose heart was kind and whose actions were thoughtful might possibly be exempt, but it wasn't the case. He went places where people were jealous of him. Teachers in different schools were threatened by him. People spread lies about him, defamed him, tried to keep him from being respected or cared for in different places that he went.

There's a very interesting story about one of his bhikkhus, a bhikkhu named Puna. Puna had come from a land on the west coast of India, and he wanted to go back to that land in order to practice. He didn't like the area where the Buddha was teaching, so he wanted to return to the west coast, to this land called Suna Paranta.

The Buddha said, "But Puna, the people of Suna Paranta are wild and rough. If they abuse and revile you, what will you think about that?" In other words, if you come upon this kind of blame in this land of wild and rough people, what are you going to do about it?

Puna replied, "Venerable sir, if the people of Suna Paranta abuse and revile me, then I will think: these people are excellent, truly excellent, in that they do not give me a blow with the fist."

The Buddha says, "But Puna, what if they do give you a blow with a fist? What will you think about that?"

"Oh, well, if they give me a blow with a fist, then I will think: these people are excellent, truly excellent, in that they do not give me a blow with a clod."

Of course the Buddha replies, "But what if they do give you a blow with a clod?"

Puna replies, "Well, then I will think: these people are excellent, truly excellent, in that they do not stab me with a knife."

"Well, what if they do stab you with a knife?"

"Well, then I will think: these people are excellent, truly excellent, in that they do not take my life with a sharp knife."

This is equanimity. This is being strong in the face of praise and blame.

We have a kind of modern-day example in the figure of Bill Clinton. He's somebody who I think could say something like that and kind of mean it. I don't know if you saw this news item—I think it came before the retreat started. He was at a meeting in Europe, and a protester who was concerned about globalization threw an egg at him. Clinton said, "Young people ought to get angry. They should have somebody to get angry at." Equanimity.

Praise and blame is also kind of an integral part of dharma teaching. It keeps the job juicy, so it always provides interest. If somebody comes up to me after a dharma talk and says, "Can I give you some feedback?" then I know I'm in trouble.

One of the interesting stages here at Spirit Rock is the Monday night class that Jack Kornfield leads. Probably a lot of you have seen that and may have come into Spirit Rock through that class. Teaching up here is like a heaven realm because you all have so much commitment and dedication to the practice.

You're really a wonderful group to work with. The Monday night people are often new to Spirit Rock, new to spiritual practice, and don't have the kind of commitment that people on eight-day retreats always have. There are many committed people in the Monday night group, but it's also where newcomers first encounter Spirit Rock. People come from all sorts of backgrounds, and you do meet some interesting characters on Monday nights.

I actually took over Monday night for about six months a few years ago when Jack was away. I was a fairly green dharma teacher at the time, and looking back I wonder how I ever had the nerve to do that. It was like being president of the Jack Kornfield fan club when Jack Kornfield was away. I did learn a lot from the experience.

I kept Jack's schedule: we sit, then we have a break, then a talk, followed by questions. So we reached the break after sitting for about forty-five minutes. I announced the break and immediately started going through my papers to prepare my talk. There were about two hundred people there that night, and I was still pretty nervous, being fairly new to that scene.

This guy comes up to me and says, "I'm really angry. I'm really angry about the way you manage the time here. Would you like me to go into it now with you, or shall I write you a letter?"

I looked at the two hundred people, looked at my notes, and said, "Why don't you write me a letter?"

He said, "Okay," and started to walk away. Then he turned around and said, "But if you don't answer it, I'm going to be really angry."

I was glad he didn't stab me with a sharp knife.

In my early years, I really resisted that part of dharma teaching. I didn't want those experiences. I thought I shouldn't have to endure them. But I've actually changed my view on this, and Ajahn Sumedho has been helpful to me in this regard.

As a young monk—I mentioned he's been in robes for thirty-five years—when he was young he took to the practice easily and was very happy and contented on his own. He spent years with Ajahn Chah, and what he really wanted was to go off to the forest and just meditate. He wanted to find a peaceful place, live in a small hut, and be really quiet on his own.

But Ajahn Chah, for various reasons, kept pushing Sumedho into community life. When Sumedho had been a monk only eight years, he was made abbot of the first Western monastery in Thailand called Wat Pah Nanachat, which is still operating. They've had a series of abbots over the years, and it continues introducing many Westerners to the practice.

He kept grumbling, thinking, "Only eight years. I've only been a monk eight years and I have to be an abbot. Chah got twenty years of practice before he had to be an abbot. Now he's making me be abbot at eight years."

Not many years later, Ajahn Chah sent Sumedho to England to establish a Western monastery there. He had to live in London for two years and then start a whole community, becoming abbot. Now there's a huge and thriving network of monasteries in England and branch monasteries around the world that Ajahn Sumedho has launched. He's the head of a very large community.

In community life, as you know, it's not always easy. The number of problems in a community basically goes up exponentially with the number of people. So the bigger the community got, the more difficult it became. And he received a lot of blame and criticism from his community. The women were upset that they weren't being treated equally—they didn't have the same opportunities as monks. The young monks who were coming up and starting to feel their own power rebelled against him as the father figure and authority. Different people didn't like the way he was managing various aspects of the community. He really got blasted.

He talks about this quite openly—this is not private news. He said when it first started happening to him, he got very shaken by it. He really couldn't take the criticism. But over time, he started to use it as dharma practice.

He started to examine these experiences through the lens of personality view—recognizing how criticisms would trigger different self-images he held about himself, attachments to being perceived in particular ways that didn't truly define who he was. He realized that while he couldn't make his personality perfect—and nobody can—he could find his perfection in Buddha knowing, in Buddha mind. Taking refuge there, he began to see personality problems as simply arising and passing away phenomena.

He spoke about this transformation frequently, saying recently that he's genuinely grateful he didn't get to become a hermit. He's actually thankful that Ajahn Chah pushed him into community life, because otherwise he would never have faced his deep-seated fear of people.

I've heard others express similar gratitude—actually welcoming difficulties in their practice because these challenges illuminate areas where they're still clinging, still attached. Without the conflict that brings up such difficulties, these shadow areas would remain hidden. But when they're illuminated through the suffering of attachment, we gain the possibility to understand them and move toward greater freedom. This is why this aspect of blame can actually serve our practice and growth.

The Dalai Lama addressed this theme when he was here last summer. Surya Das, a Western teacher in the Tibetan tradition, posed a provocative question during a gathering of about 225 teachers in this very hall. He said, "There's significant popularization of Buddhism happening these days, which risks watering down or trivializing the teachings. Your Holiness, you're the greatest popularizer of us all. What do you make of this? What do you think about your role in popularizing Buddhism?"

The Dalai Lama was quiet for a moment before responding with characteristic directness: "Some people call me a living Buddha. Some people call me God King. No, I am not. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk. But other people call me a counter-revolutionary, or they call me a wolf in monk's clothing." Then he said something that struck me deeply: "When that happens, I look back at my own intention. And if my own intention is good, I don't care what other people say. If they perceive differently, that's their problem. It's not up to me. If my intention is good, then I don't care."

He said those last words—"I don't care"—with remarkable strength and conviction. I was deeply moved by this combination of tremendous responsibility—being the main voice for Tibetan culture in the world—alongside the extreme praise and blame that comes his way, and his inner strength to hold that entire spectrum by returning to his own intention.

This offers us guidance when we encounter criticism. Can we examine our own intention? Was there something unskillful in our action—some thoughtlessness, intent to harm, or negligence? If so, can we simply acknowledge that and apologize? And if there wasn't, can we trust in that clarity? Can we recognize that the criticism isn't appropriate or justified and remain confident in our own understanding, our own honest assessment?

For me, the challenge with criticism has been that when I've done something wrong, I become devastated as a person—as if I've transformed into a completely bad person because I've offended someone or acted unskillfully. This, of course, is unrealistic. We're all going to make mistakes occasionally, and that's actually perfectly fine. The key is not letting these mistakes invalidate our fundamental worth as human beings.

We're doing our best, and when I make a mistake, that's okay. This capacity for such spaciousness of heart comes from growing self-acceptance. The more I trust that overall I'm genuinely trying to do my best, the more I can allow imperfection to exist without devastation.

The other side is praise—how do we relate to appreciation and positive feedback? In many cases, this proves even more challenging to receive gracefully than blame.

I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but if you've done something in a group, one person might come up and say, "Wow, that was great. I really appreciated your comment." And somebody else will come up and say, "I thought that was really the worst comment of the whole thing. I was very offended by what you said."

Which one sticks in your mind longer? The praise just sort of comes in and out, and the blame really tends to hang around for a while.

So with praise also, take a look and see if you can take in what's being said, because often what's being said, the real subtext of it is, "I love you," or "I dig you," or "I care about you." Something like that. Often praise is just kind of a way of touching another person and expressing affection.

When I was younger, I think I took praise in a kind of narcissistic way. I'd take it in and I'd kind of inflate my ego. I'd sort of pump myself up with it. But now I just try to tune into the kindness of what's being offered and the sense of affection that's being exchanged. And that just feels wholesome. It doesn't feel like there's a need for a whole lot of clinging around that piece of it.

When we are offering feedback to somebody else, constructive criticism, of course, the Buddha had some really clear guidelines for that that I try to keep in mind. He said, "One who is about to admonish another should realize within themselves five qualities before doing so: At the right time will I speak. Gently will I speak. Truthfully, not with exaggeration, will I speak. To their benefit will I speak, not to their harm. And kindly will I speak, not in anger."

These are beautiful guidelines for saying what sometimes needs to be said, but doing it with a real spirit of care and mutual benefit, mutual interest.

The next of the pairs is pleasure and pain. These also alternate all the time in life, as you see so clearly in meditation retreat. Even for the Buddha, these alternations didn't go away. The Buddha had back pain. You can find this in the suttas. He'll say, "Moggallana," one of his two chief disciples, "you give the Dhamma talk tonight. My back is aching. I'm going to go lie down." And now they'll describe him going off to one side and lying down while Moggallana gives the talk.

His cousin, Devadatta, tried to kill him. Rolled a rock down a hill trying to kill the Buddha. Someone sent an enraged elephant after him, which it's said that he caused to halt with the force of his loving kindness. And he died actually from eating a poisoned meal. It's not any suggestion that it was poisoned purposely in order to kill him, but maybe the food had gone off or it was bad or something. He died from that.

So this alternation of pleasure and pain will come all the time.

In the ascetic traditions, in the Thai forest tradition, there's often an emphasis that the monastics try to reduce the pleasure in their life in order not to develop clinging. And Ajahn Chah at his monastery used to take all the beautiful Thai food that was brought by the lay people to feed the monks, dump it into one bowl, stir it all around, and then serve it out. So you'd get a curry mixed with a banana, mixed with a dessert, and that would be glopped into the bowls of all the monks and nuns. And Sumedho said it tasted awful. He said, "I can't eat this food any longer. I can't bear this any longer." And then he found a way to bear it longer.

Where I was practicing at Wat Suan Mok, Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery, it was a fantastic setting. We were given a huge degree of independence and self-reliance, and I think basically he trusted us. But because it was so comfortable, they made the food terrible. Because otherwise it would have been too attractive for people to just come down and hang out and have a cushy life for a long time. So the food there was awful. But everything else about the monastery was fantastic.

This is not an ascetic tradition, as you may have noticed. We actually refer to this style of practice as the upper middle way. We trust that you'll find enough pain from other sources in your practice.

The last of the pairs is called success and failure. Sometimes this couplet is put as fame and disrepute. Sometimes it's translated success and failure.

I want to talk about success and failure because I think it's a little broader for us. We often look at our lives this way around areas that we're responsible for. We look at our job situation. We look at our relationship. We look at our parenting or taking care of our own parents.

In all these areas, clearly, success is helpful. Doing a good job in all these areas is really, really a good thing. We need to provide for our families. We need to raise our kids in a loving way. We want to have a partnership, an intimate partnership that has kindness as its foundation and not conflict.

So there's a certain amount of self-confidence that comes when we bring a level of success into these areas. And again, this ties into the fourth of the metaphors, being able to look after ourselves happily. This is important. It's self-confidence, it's not pride. We don't get pumped up about it, but we reassure ourselves that we can take care of ourselves well in this world.

And it's a little bit similar in meditation. We want to find a way that our meditation goes reasonably well, so that over the long term, we're seeing that our difficult emotional states and reactions are declining rather than increasing. I think this is kind of the best long-term gauge for our practice, that the difficult emotions are going down, not going up.

One of my teachers actually said, if you practice over a few years and these difficult emotions aren't going down, you're wasting your time with your Dharma practice. And you might as well take a break. Have a holiday. Do something different. But for the most part, this is a good gauge.

But beyond that broad generality, which really takes some years to see, we can get really concerned with too much detail of success and failure in a meditation retreat. And then it turns into striving. We get very goal-oriented, and we're near-term goal-oriented.

I was practicing quite some years ago in a system of meditation where certain experiences are considered a standard sequence of unfolding. And I knew a little bit about this sequence, and I knew my teachers would be very happy if I came in and described one of these experiences. So I was really putting myself under a lot of pressure to have one of these experiences. And as you know, you can't force experience in meditation. I hadn't really learned that yet. I was still trying. So I kind of tied myself up in knots trying to make certain things happen in my meditation.

I went in for an interview with my teacher and reported an experience I had and he said, "You're not very deep. I could tell by the way you walked in the room, you're not very deep. So-and-so is much deeper." And he named a friend of mine who was practicing on that same retreat. "They're much deeper than you are."

This didn't exactly raise my motivation level in the retreat.

So I think if we hold a very long-term view of practice, then we don't get so caught up in short-term success and failure. Because when we do and we fall into striving, we can really make ourselves tense. And if we're tense, then the real heart of the meditation—qualities like freedom and relaxation and compassion and loving-kindness and even wisdom—don't have a chance to flower. Those things flower from letting go, not from striving.

So have the sense that you really can just keep your orientation toward this moment, not try to create some special experience here and now. And trust that the letting go and the softening, the gentleness and the relaxation will allow the Dharma to unfold you, rather than you having to push the Dharma. That way it will unfold beautifully in the beginning, it will unfold beautifully in the middle, it will unfold beautifully in the end.

Ajahn Chah said, and I think I mentioned this earlier, that for a practitioner success and failure are of equal value. I love this. Because when we really take that to heart, we realize we can learn from our successes, we can learn from our failures. And it gives a kind of trust and fearlessness about our life. We're not so afraid to make a new step and maybe get off course, because if we are, we can learn from that too.

This kind of leads into an area I want to explore a little bit, which is what success means in work and relationship. Often success means, or I'd say has meant for me, getting my way. I have an idea of something I want to have happen in an organization or in a relationship, and I'll try to direct things so it unfolds in that way.

As an example, two years ago I was president of the board here at Spirit Rock.

I did that for a year. I'd been on the board for a few years, and then for one year, I was the president. And I felt a new burden when I became president of the board because I felt all of a sudden I was responsible for the organization. I felt responsible for what the organization decided to do.

So I felt as president, I had to get the rest of the board to make the right decision—right being the way I thought it should go. Partly this was just coming out of personal involvement, my own attachment. And partly it was really trying to take good care of the organization and have it unfold in the way that I thought was most skillful. So there was an interested and a disinterested component to it. But I really felt that if I didn't control the organization in that way, I was letting it down.

I remember one of the issues that came up at that time—we were looking for a director. We met Evan, who's our current general manager, and who I think is a really great director. He happened to be the first candidate we met. So we hadn't interviewed any other people. We met Evan and I really liked him right off the bat. I wanted to hire him without interviewing anybody else because he had another job offer pending.

Sally was also in the group involved and we both agreed, but we couldn't convince anybody else to do that. We tried. We struggled. We may have threatened and bullied a little bit. And we couldn't get it to happen. So we gave up. Evan took the other job. We went on a long search for a director and hired somebody else. Then about a year ago, we had another vacancy. Evan came back in the picture, went through the process, and he got hired. It would have been great if we could have hired him a year earlier perhaps, but this is the way it unfolded.

So I got quite frustrated at that at points. And I realized from that I couldn't control the board. I have enough trouble controlling my mind, much less the minds of fifteen other people. There's often in organizational life this wish to have our decision go, but it's something that's out of our control. In relationship, the same way. We may want it to go a certain way, but our partner might not want it that way.

So this is a quote from the Bhagavad Gita. This is Krishna speaking: "The way to freedom in this world is to act without attachment to the fruits of your actions."

Now this seemed really idealistic to me for a long time, but the more I started working with it, the more it became really practical to me. And I take it now as my direction for acting in the world without so much concern about success or failure.

The way that it comes across for me is I start to realize the limits of my control. I can't control fifteen other people's minds. I can influence them. And so what I try to do is to put things as clearly and as wisely and as lightly as I can because then I think it has the best chance of being heard. If I put things in a heavy way, there's going to be resistance.

So one of the ways that I check my own attachment is, can I be light with this idea? With this proposal, with what I'm trying to have accomplished? And if I see I can't be light with it, that's a sign of my own attachment. But if I can be light with it and put it clearly and my own emotions aren't disturbing the delivery, then it has the best possible chance of being received in a favorable way by the people who are listening.

And then I realize that's all I can do. I can put it out clearly and lightly and then it's out of my hands. And then I have to surrender to how everybody else sees it. This has been a fantastic learning for me in getting along more easily in groups, in relationship with other people. I can't control the outcome. I can only put in my best and cleanest effort.

This is also really true of meditation practice. If you're with the breath in order to get concentrated, you have an ulterior motive—it's not going to work. If you're with the breath in a pure and light and clean way with no ulterior motive, you'll get concentrated. So check your attachment.

in being with the breath or being with a meditation object.

So with this looking at these four kinds of outcomes—gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure—coming to a clearer relationship is really a way of purifying our motivation as we act and live in the world. And as our motivation becomes purified just to do what's right from loving-kindness, from wisdom and compassion, then we trust that the outcome will take care of itself, will take care of us. So we just find lighter and lighter ways to do the things that we're already doing.

Ajahn Jamnian was here about a year ago. He's a Thai teacher, a great master of loving-kindness and vipassana. And he said that in his monastery he sees people from the moment he gets up until the moment he goes to bed. He's receiving visitors. Lay people come and want to consult with him. Monks come to see him to talk about their practice. Nuns come to see him. Monks come to talk about running the monastery. And he says he never gets tired. He can be with people all day long and he never gets tired.

And we said, "How can you do that?"

And he said, "I do it because all the time I'm speaking and interacting, I'm resting in emptiness. I rest in emptiness the whole time and I never get tired. I tell my monks to do this, but they can't do it. They keep grasping at the things that come by, at the people, at the things that are happening. But I can rest in emptiness."

That is a fantastic talent. And what that really says to me is that he cares more about this place of freedom that he abides in than he cares about the passing, changing show of gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure.

And I think when we also care more about our freedom than the passing show, when we care more about awareness and attention than we do about outcomes, we will also be resting in emptiness, just like Ajahn Jamnian.

This is really why renunciation is such an important factor on the path. Renunciation doesn't mean we become a monk or nun and we put everything away. It means that we see things in the right priority. We see that the practice of freedom is the greatest contribution we can make for our own life and the well-being of the world. We trust that the right action will come from that place of freedom, so we try not to get too anxious about it.

Then our motivation for being in the world can shift from always trying to accumulate the positive aspects of this cycle—always trying to accumulate gain, praise, pleasure, success—to being in the world from a place of having renounced outcome. And our fundamental reason for being there can more become compassion. Compassion for ourselves, compassion for others. Just present, kind of hanging out, ready to purify our own hearts, deepen our own freedom, and offer that freedom to others.

I'll just close with a quotation from the Sutta Nipata. Someone asked the Buddha, "What is the greatest blessing?" And he answered in a few different ways, and this is one of the ways that he answered:

"When one's mind is sorrowless, stainless, and secure in the deathless, and one is not disturbed when touched by life's vicissitudes, this is the greatest blessing."

Let's just sit for a moment together.

CHAPTER 228

Cascading Pools of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · 45 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong uses the beautiful metaphor of cascading pools from the ancient suttas to explain the traditional progression of mettā (loving-kindness) practice. Starting with the classical sequence of self, benefactor, friend, neutral person, difficult person, and all beings, he acknowledges that for many Westerners, developing mettā for oneself can actually be the most challenging. Armstrong emphasizes that mettā should develop "where it's easiest," encouraging practitioners to find their natural entry point into loving-kindness.*
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> *The talk explores mettā as a powerful healing practice in the Buddhist tradition, examining how it works differently from vipassanā meditation. While vipassanā reveals spaciousness through mindfulness, mettā fills that space with warmth and acceptance. Armstrong discusses the "near and far enemies" of loving-kindness, explaining how genuine mettā differs from attachment-based affection. He highlights the significance of the neutral person as a turning point where we begin caring beyond self-interest, opening to boundless compassion.*
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> *Drawing from the Mettā Sutta, Armstrong presents loving-kindness as a concentration practice that transforms our entire mindstream—images, emotions, and thoughts—into wholesome directions. He emphasizes patience with the practice, using the Buddha's teaching about gradual accumulation like raindrops filling a jar, and encourages practitioners to trust their own wisdom in finding the right balance between mettā and vipassanā practices.*

Through the day today we've been using different individuals to develop the loving-kindness with, and the thinking behind this comes from an image in the ancient texts in the suttas which is the image of cascading pools.

The idea is that if there's a river running down a mountain slope and there's a big rainstorm on the top, the river will start to fill up at the top. As it gets to one pool, that pool will fill up. As the rain keeps coming down, it will overflow. When that pool overflows, it will run further down the mountainside and come to the next pool. Then that will fill up, overflow, and run down to the next pool. So this is the image of the cascading pools.

The reason it's an analogy for the mettā practice is it's considered classically that it's easiest to develop the loving kindness with ourselves. So we let that pool fill up, and then we let it run down to the next pool, which is our benefactor. Then as that one fills

up, we let it overflow and run to the next, which is a good friend. Then it fills up and runs over, spills over to a neutral person, and then to a difficult person, and then to all beings. So there's actually a logic to this sequence of the way we develop the mettā practice. We start closest to home, extend to those we naturally feel affection for, those we're neutral toward, those we have difficulty with, and then we can extend to all beings.

Often for us in the West, it doesn't work quite in this logical order. Many people find that doing mettā for ourself is actually the most difficult. It's very helpful to have someone like a benefactor or a friend where it's easy because you can let that pool fill up and then come back to yourself and let it spill over to you.

So check this order out for yourself, but know that this is the principle of mettā: we develop it where it's easiest. This is actually quite refreshing after Vipassana, where it seems like everything develops in the most difficult way possible. But in mettā, it's intended to develop in the easiest way possible. So if the easiest access for you is through yourself, that's where you should spend most of your time. If it's easier for you going in through a benefactor or a friend, spend a lot of time there and then bring that mettā back to yourself.

The mettā coming back to oneself is really a key. As we said at the beginning of the day, if we love ourselves, then we don't harm others. Everything starts inside and if there's love here, it's so easy to share it outwards. But often the love for ourself is the most difficult part to touch, and so we need to borrow from other sources. We also need to be really persistent with it. It's a process of training the heart. Like every other part of us, the heart is trainable. It can learn to love. We can learn to love. It's part of our nature. We just need to bring it out.

By and large, we've never been taught how to do it. Our culture doesn't provide us the guidelines. Our parents don't provide us the guidelines. Typically religions have not provided us the guidelines. But there are practices such as this that are proven to bring it forth. We just need to do the work.

When we develop the mettā for ourself, we find that mettā has a range of flavors. Just like there are a range of people that we can extend it to, it comes in a range of flavors or degrees. When mettā is really strong, we feel this strong sense of unity, of oneness, of integration that is a characteristic of love, of deep, true love. When it's a little toned down from there, we feel a warmth or a friendliness to others. When it's a little toned down from there, mettā takes on the quality of acceptance. We may not be

crazy about ourselves or the other person, but there's a growing sense of it really being okay with us, how we are and how others are. So just that spirit of acceptance itself is mettā too.

One of the phrases people sometimes like to substitute is an acceptance kind of phrase. You'll be going through a hard patch in practice and you'll be saying a phrase like, "may I abide in happiness," and you just go, "that's out to lunch. Happiness? Not in this lifetime. I don't think so." So when the phrases start feeling that remote or disconnected, bring it back to earth. Acceptance is a really good way to do it. So instead of "may I be happy," you might say something like, "may I accept myself just as I am." That is also the flavor of mettā. Acceptance is an important aspect. Some people like to phrase this, "may I love and accept myself just as I am."

This is a nice way to make metta more approachable for ourselves. Metta is a powerful healing practice—it is essentially the healing practice in our tradition. Where there's a sense of incompleteness in our relationship to ourself, from earlier wounding or a strong sense of unworthiness, metta is the recommended approach.

You can stay with metta for yourself for a long, long time. Sometimes people connect with the practice and intuitively feel it's right to keep returning to themselves. There's simply a sense that there hasn't been enough care for oneself, and so there's a need to replenish the tank. If you feel this way, you can pour metta into yourself for as long as necessary. You don't need to bring in other people in the beginning. One meditator worked with themselves for three years with metta before they felt ready to include anyone else. And if that's your case, that's absolutely fine.

Also be really open to what works, to bringing out the quality of metta. One meditator found that there wasn't a good connection with any beings, so she used a stuffed animal that she had actually brought on retreat with her and kept on her bed. Other people like to use pets because we can really open to their vulnerability and innocence. The important thing is the quality of loving kindness. The being that awakens it is not as important.

It seems curious—when we start the metta practice, the emphasis appears to be on my benefactor, my friend, my neutral person. But from the point of view of practice, the important emphasis is on the feeling tone, the connection, and the caring. It really doesn't matter what we use to get it going. Once it's flowing, it changes our relationship to the whole world. When your heart is full of metta, you see everybody from that space of metta. The whole world looks different from a place of metta. So we don't really care how we get there. The important thing is to start drawing it out, strengthening that sense of caring and connection, and little by little that flame grows.

When we first touch metta, it seems insignificant. We think, "Yes, okay, I can care about my friend, so what?" It doesn't seem like it's going to go anywhere. Often because of this, we don't keep planting the seeds. We think, "Oh, that was a nice little thing," or we feel a moment's peace from our meditation and think, "That was nice, but no big deal."

But what we don't see is that this is a radically different approach than we normally live from. It's subtle in the beginning. The really wholesome mind states are actually hard to appreciate at first because their vibration is more subtle than the strong reactive mind states. If we get into fear, anger, or self-judgment, it has a lot of pop—we can really tell something's happening. Yesterday, some veteran practitioners shared that difficult mind states sometimes give them a greater sense of vitality, a sense of being alive when they're really grappling with fear, desire, or anger.

The beautiful mind states have a subtler kind of vibration. They don't come up and knock you over the head immediately. But that subtle vibration can get stronger and stronger over time, and loving-kindness is definitely like that. The first time we feel the sense of connection, we may think it's no big deal. But we don't realize the potential that's there when we cultivate it.

So may we not give up planting the seeds. The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, thinking this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled."

This is a beautiful image because in Asia, rainwater is usually collected in large earthenware jars about three feet tall and two and a half feet across. When I was a monk, I had one of these at the base of my hut. The rainwater would fall down into a gutter, and the gutter would channel it into this jar. Storm by storm, in the rainy season, my jar filled to a very great height. If you put any container out during one of our Marin winter storms, little by little, drop by drop, it fills up.

So it is with loving kindness. Each drop doesn't feel like much—it feels like something we could write off. But please begin in your practice to tune into how it feels. Tune into that quality of connection, whether it's strong or weak, because that's what is going to grow and become as big as love can be. It can be huge.

You meet somebody like the Dalai Lama and you realize how big the force of love can get. And it all comes from one drop after another. As you notice what each one feels like, then it gets easier and easier to put the mind back in that place. You're creating actually a channel to that quality of connectedness and affection and caring each time

you activate loving kindness in yourself. And then you can start to see it manifest. You can start to see it ripple through your life. And you know it's happening when your friends or partner tells you that something's changing. You can really count on it.

The Dalai Lama is always an inspiring example to me. He was here, as I mentioned, a year ago. And because he's the head of a state in exile, the U.S. State Department provides security for him wherever he goes. So while he was on the land teaching for a couple of days last year, everybody who came in to see him had to go through a metal detector. The people who were staying up in the residence halls had to evacuate their rooms at about seven in the morning so that the Secret Service could search and send dogs in to sniff for explosives.

The security guards, when we passed through the metal detector, were heavy duty. They had a gun on one side and a nightstick on the other. They were strong. They were professional, like professional bodyguards. They were hired by the State Department. And you didn't joke around with these people.

At the end of the conference, every one of them wanted to have their photograph taken with the Dalai Lama because he had so touched their hearts just in his coming and going. So they all got together for a group photograph. Now, would they have done that for Bruce Springsteen? Maybe. Bill Clinton? I don't know. So this quality of love has such a potential to reach out and touch others and to invite them into the way, into awakening.

I also want to talk a little bit about how metta and vipassana work differently with our conditioning. I mentioned that metta is a very strong healing practice. And the way that it works is as the sense of friendliness or warmth grows, it's not that we get rid of our stuff—our psychic stuff, our reactive mind of wanting and anger and impatience and self-judgment. But more and more, it all starts being held in the space of acceptance and friendliness.

One of the qualities of love is it's tremendously integrating. Love joins things together. And when love starts to awaken in the psyche, it pulls the psyche together. So those parts of ourselves that we couldn't accept before—we just thought, this is not good enough. If I allow myself to really feel my fear or my anger or my incompleteness or my sense of abandonment, I'm not a good enough person. Often we take these difficult emotions as invalidating us in some way. But when love is present in the mind, we can look at those things and go, "Oh, that's okay. That's just a part of being human. We all have the whole package. We all have all those feelings." And love makes it all acceptable. It brings it all together under the light of acceptance. So there's this very deep unification and healing that takes place through the metta.

The other thing that happens with the metta is that positive states of mind—the brahmaviharas for shorthand: love, compassion, joy and equanimity—are starting to really take root and flower in the mind. And these are real alternatives to our habitual reactions. The mind finds a new home in these positive states.

Now my experience was that this was a little different from vipassana. The wholesome qualities that vipassana activates are more neutral in tone. Mindfulness, for example—awareness is extremely powerful. I'd say it may be the most powerful factor on the whole path, but it's very neutral in its quality. It's like clear water. It doesn't have a property of its own. It doesn't have a coloring of its own because it can go with everything. You can put clear water with rocks, with soup, with sugar, with anything. Mindfulness goes with anything so it doesn't stand out.

What I found with many years of vipassana practice was my dominant mental tendency in the beginning was fear. If my mind went off balance it would go to fear or anxiety. And over years and years, that got smaller and smaller and smaller with the influence of mindfulness. But still, if I went somewhere, I would tend toward fear.

That was the conditioning. Vipassana, through its great spaciousness, reduces this conditioning, yet on the emotional level, it doesn't necessarily put anything in its place. The Brahma Viharas, however, do.

After practicing metta for a while, I discovered that instead of leaning into fear, my mind would lean into metta. This became the new home it found. I was generating a new kind of conditioning—a wholesome conditioning that my mind could rest in, different from my old conditioned reactions.

I sum it up this way: Vipassana reveals this vast emptiness, and loving kindness fills it with warmth. These two practices are profoundly supportive of each other. As Vipassana empties the mind, space opens for metta to come through, to be truly felt and color our entire world. As metta flows more freely, we become more inclined to let go of the reactive patterns. And it's this letting go that opens us into the emptiness.

These two sides are deeply complementary. They develop one another and offer alternative ways of working with our conditioning—both tremendously helpful.

Metta, because of its quality of friendliness, serves as the antidote to aversion. Aversion manifests in countless forms. In Buddhist psychology, people are sometimes categorized as one of three types: those dominated by greed or wanting, those dominated by aversion or negativity, or those dominated by delusion or confusion. We all contain all three tendencies—it's simply a matter of which predominates in our makeup.

In someone particularly prone to aversion, it usually expresses itself as anger, critical mind, judgment of others and ourselves, irritability, or fear. I would include depression in this list of aversive reactions as well.

Because metta embodies affection, warmth, and friendliness, it undoes aversion. The mind cannot simultaneously hold metta and negativity. For those whose personalities are governed by aversion, metta is the traditional antidote—the practice that counterbalances the tendency toward negativity. This is why, with my fearful temperament, metta was such a perfect fit.

When I discovered metta practice, I dove in completely for about two years. I had been practicing Vipassana for fifteen or sixteen years when I attended my first metta retreat. I was so captivated by metta that I essentially stopped doing Vipassana for the next year and a half. Everything I practiced, both in retreat and daily life, was metta.

Sharon Salzberg used to tell stories about her early metta practice with Upandita, a fierce Burmese master. Whenever she'd sit retreat with him, he'd insist on Vipassana practice. She'd request to practice metta instead. He'd counter, "You're sitting for three months—two weeks of metta, the rest Vipassana." She'd negotiate for two months of metta. "No, maybe one month." "How about six weeks?" "Done." They'd bargain until she secured a bit more metta time than he initially offered.

As you navigate your spiritual path—and I assume most of you practice or will practice some Vipassana—find your own balance between these two approaches. If you feel drawn to metta practice, it can be your primary or even exclusive practice for some time. This is perfectly appropriate.

In the long run, you'll want to integrate it with Vipassana, because Vipassana is the practice that liberates. In our tradition, the wisdom practice is Vipassana, and it's wisdom that ultimately frees us. Opening the heart can take us far, but without clear seeing into the nature of things, there's no lasting freedom. At some point, Vipassana practice—or some equivalent wisdom practice—must be included for your spiritual path to be complete.

You can find your own schedule, your own pace. In daily life, you might practice some metta and some Vipassana each day—perhaps ten or fifteen minutes of metta, then the remainder of your sitting in Vipassana, as feels right for you.

Feel your way into this. See where your intuition leads you, where you feel drawn. Follow that. Trust that.

Trust your own sense of what is right for you at this time.

Ajahn Sumedho was here about a month ago. He gave a nine-day public retreat, and then he gave a five-day retreat for the Spirit Rock teachers. I happened to sit in both of them—the first time I'd sat a long retreat with him—and he was a very impressive and inspiring teacher. One of the things he commented on, looking over the whole spectrum of meditators that he's seen, and he's seen a lot, is that he thinks the main thing people need is to trust themselves more. There needs to be more trust in our own wisdom. I thought that was a really interesting comment. He basically said we know more than we give ourselves credit for knowing. So we're often looking to an outside authority for the answer, but we need to start trusting in our own seeing.

He also said something beautiful about good qualities. At the start of a metta session, we're instructed to reflect on our good qualities. Sometimes those are hard to find, especially when we've been sitting for three hours and feeling a little lonely because of the silence. It's hard to connect with those good qualities. So he said something I found really refreshing. He said, "I thought about when I was a child and I realized that I always wanted to be a good child. And I've always loved what was noble and beautiful in life." I thought, you know, I bet that's true of most of us.

In the spiritual scene, most people who come here have very good intentions. You wouldn't sit through the discomfort if you didn't. But sometimes we lose sight of the fact that in the general scheme of things, we're basically pretty good people. Generally, we do care about others. We could do a poll—I bet a good part of this room is involved in service work as livelihood, for example, or does volunteer work of one kind or another, and generally has a sense of coming from a place of caring about the world, caring about the environment, caring about creatures.

So in the general scheme of things, that makes us pretty good people. It's not to puff up about that, but just to take it as our intentions are basically good and we can trust in that. And maybe reflecting back to your childhood will be a way into that for you too. We tend to be way too critical of ourselves.

As the pools cascade and we come into relation with the benefactor, this can be another really powerful part of practice. There's a tradition in one school of Buddhism called union with the teacher—it's called guru yoga, actually—where we meditate a lot on our teacher. In that tradition, the teacher is usually the benefactor. The point of that meditation is not worship. It's not like putting them way up. It's to realize that their wisdom mind and our wisdom mind are one and the same. So if they can be free, we can be free. It's actually coming to an understanding of our basic nature being the same as the Buddha's, already being awake in our basic nature. And it actually increases our self-confidence.

When you pick a benefactor, if you pick somebody who's got a lot of wisdom, a lot of love, a lot of understanding, as you hang out with them in doing the metta practice, you're going to soak all those things up. So you're actually sort of practicing union with the teacher if your benefactor is that caliber of being.

I had some very strong, almost ecstatic moments in doing the meditation on the benefactor when I did the intensive metta retreat. I was practicing with the benefactor for three weeks of the six-week retreat and got very familiar with them. It really deepened my connection with them, but it also deepened my trust in my own wisdom mind. Because how could I recognize their wisdom except from my wisdom? How could I recognize their love except insofar as it touched my love? So picking a benefactor who has those qualities is a really good way to bring them out in yourself.

That's why some people like to use, even if they don't know them personally, the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh or somebody of that stature, like the Karmapa. I don't know if you've tuned into the Karmapa. He's a seventeen-year-old kid who just escaped from Tibet into India. It was quite a big international news story when he did it. He's tall, he's young, he's very good looking. I think he's going to be incredibly charismatic. And his predecessor was an amazing yogi, the last Karmapa who died in the early eighties—I think it was the 16th Karmapa. He's the head of one of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

When he was dying, he was in a Chicago hospital, and his followers were looking after him. They were very concerned about his passing.

But every time they came into the room to check on how he was doing, he would sit up and ask them, "Oh, how are you doing?" And have this big smile. But after a while, he could tell they were really worried about him. And he didn't want to see them worried. So he told them, "Oh, don't worry. Nothing happens when I die."

What an incredible place of freedom to see one's death even as "nothing happens." That kind of a mind has really transcended birth and death. That kind of a mind has found a freedom beyond any kind of change. It's awesome and inspiring. So taking someone like that, even if you haven't met them, can be a beautiful way to start opening our own hearts and minds.

What we're trying to do in developing the metta moment after moment based on these different beings is basically to try and stabilize the heart in that quality of friendship. Just like in vipassana practice, we practice mindfulness moment after moment. What we're really aiming at is stabilizing ourselves in a state of awareness. So in metta, we're aiming to stabilize the heart in the quality of loving kindness or friendship. And

this stability actually becomes more important than the changing events of life. It gives the mind greater strength and greater steadiness as it becomes more rooted, more of a home in our being.

It's really supported by the factor of concentration. I mentioned earlier that metta is a concentration practice. You may have noticed when the metta practice is going well - take a look at what's happening in your mind when you sustain the metta practice, even for a short time. It's pretty amazing. You've pulled up an image of, let's say, your benefactor, which is a positive image for you. You have developed a quality of caring or connection or friendship through the metta. And the phrases going through your thoughts are very wholesome phrases about wishing the other person safety, happiness, and health.

What makes up our mind stream at any moment in time? Isn't it basically images, emotions, and thoughts? Is there anything else there? That's pretty much it. So when the metta practice is going well, you've taken control of your entire mind stream and set it in a very positive and wholesome direction. Even if that doesn't last very long, that's an extraordinary thing to do. How many moments in a waking day of daily life are we in charge of our images, emotions and thoughts? Not very many. And when we're not in charge of them, often they're in charge of us. Often we're invaded by unwholesome tendencies of reactivity, thoughts of anxiety, images of what might happen next week.

So this is a very audacious undertaking, the metta practice. That's why you shouldn't be discouraged if they don't all come together at one time for you. This is a big deal, pulling all three together. Sometimes maybe just the image will be there. Sometimes just the emotion. Sometimes just the phrase. Maybe two will be there. And then sometimes when all three are really there together, that's kind of like a peak experience in life. But as the concentration grows, we find more and more the ability to hold all three of these at the same time and to stabilize that kind of experience. That's a very wholesome direction to put into the mindstream.

What we want to come to in the long run - the vipassana developing the awareness and the loving kindness developing the warmth - is a fusing of the two. We want to develop a mind that is here and now, really awake and aware, but filled with warmth. I like to remind myself that we're really developing a warm attention. Bringing the quality of warmth into our mindfulness practice and bringing the quality of present moment attention steadily into our loving kindness practice.

When we come to the friend, often for many people this is the easiest. A lot of people in the West don't really have a benefactor. It wasn't part of our growing up often. So the friend is often the easiest person for us to connect to. But one of the things you might find is that the relationship with the friend can slide into what are called the near and far enemies of loving kindness.

Every one of the brahmavihāras has both a near and a far enemy. The near enemy is a feeling that looks like the brahmavihāra but is an unwholesome state of mind. The far enemy is the exact opposite, so it's definitely unwholesome. With metta, the near enemy is affection with attachment - clingy or grasping kind of love. And the far enemy is anger or ill will.

So with friends, we often encounter both the near and the far enemy. We find that, yes, we like them, but we want something back. And if they don't give it to us, then it can slide into ill will or anger. So especially with friends, it's important to start tuning into metta's tendency—how our mind slides into the near and far enemies.

One of the qualities of metta is that it doesn't come with strings attached. We don't say, "I like you if..." or "I'll be friendly to you if." It's just a kind of unconditional state of caring. It doesn't expect anything particular back. But affection with attachment is looking for something back. You hear this all the time in pop music—it's hard to miss. "I love you, I want you, I need you. I'll die if I don't have you." It can't really be true love if there's a demand attached to it. It's the near enemy of attached affection.

With a difficult person, especially, of course the far enemy tends to come in, and then you have to find ways to make space for that. Sometimes it's helpful to be creative with the difficult person. One person said that they could do loving kindness for the difficult person only if they imagined them bound and gagged, so they couldn't talk back. Somebody was doing loving kindness for the difficult person on a retreat up here and they said they could only do it if they imagined them as far away as Woodacre. They couldn't bring them in the room, but if they were far enough away, then they could do it. So it's okay to get creative in that way.

The neutral person is actually a really interesting one because it's kind of the turning point of the metta practice. It's the place where we start to open up not based on self-interest. Self, benefactor, friend can all be based on self-interest, but the neutral person we really don't care about. That's why they're the neutral person.

And what's our tendency with someone we really don't care about? We ignore them. With someone we like, we tend to develop greed. With someone we don't like, we develop aversion. And with somebody we don't care about, we develop delusion. So these are

the three main distortions of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. With the neutral person, it's delusion. We just kind of write them out of our lives. They don't matter because they're not important to me, to my satisfaction.

So when we start to look on the neutral person and find we can care about them—in spiritual terms, this is a big deal. This is really opening up to the possibility of a boundless compassion, a boundless caring. And that's what makes it possible then for us to go into all beings, because the neutral person is kind of like the representative of all beings. It's kind of the generic being in the universe. And if you can care for the generic being, you're there, basically. You can care for any generic being.

It's very interesting to develop this meditation on the neutral person because most people who do find that they actually fall a little bit in love with their neutral person. There was a fellow who did a day-long with me a few years ago who picked a supermarket cashier for their neutral person. And he said he worked with that neutral person for about a year. Then he came back and told me that he started to get nervous every time he went into the supermarket because he developed a secret love for the person. And every time he got around her, he got a little bit fluttery like she was going to find out that she was his secret love.

So this is really cool, that we can care that much about people that we don't know and who don't trigger us in any particular way. That's what opens it up to the possibility of all beings.

I'd like to read just a little bit from the Metta Sutta. This is one of the main texts from the Sutta Nipata on the theme of loving kindness, where the Buddha said:

"Wishing in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be—the seen and the unseen, near and far away, those born and to be born—may all beings be at ease. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world. Freed from hatred and ill will, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding."

So that's a really beautiful and inspiring vision, I think—that we can sustain this recollection of a really unconditional care for all beings everywhere. But it doesn't come particularly easily. It's one of those things that develops more and more through practice. But this is the potential, this is the direction of the practice of loving-kindness.

So I think we'll stop there with the talk and ask if you have any comments, questions, or experiences you'd like to share—anything to clarify.

Question: How can you tell if you're in the near enemy?

This is an excellent question. How do you tell if you're in the near enemy as opposed to authentic metta? One way I discern this is by examining whether the emphasis is on me or on the other person. When we're in the near enemy, the focus is really on what I need from them.

Sometimes we may not actually know it at the time. If there's a hidden link back, if there's a condition on the affection, we might not recognize it immediately. So sometimes in the middle of it, it's not possible to tell. You have to track it over time and see. I think it's a question of tuning into to what extent the relationship is gratifying me, or whether there are demands that aren't being met. That definitely tends to highlight the quality—or whether the focus is really on their well-being or not.

You could also imagine different situations. I have to be honest: intimate relationships always have this quality of need, as far as I can tell. If you're with your partner, you could say, "Well, if they were happier with somebody else, good for them." But we aren't actually going to feel that way. So it's important not to be too idealistic about this.

Realize that relationships with intimate partners are going to have a lot of the near enemy. It's probably a big part of what motivated us to get involved in them. These relationships tend to clarify fairly slowly over the whole course of spiritual practice. So don't set out to make a project of clarifying the impurities out of your intimate relationship—that's a lifelong practice. Just be accepting that we got into those relationships out of need. And even if our needs went away, hopefully we'd stay out of compassion. But the point at which our needs will go away is some way in the future. So don't get impatient about that or judgmental about that.

Question about difficult emotions arising during metta practice

Yes, one of the main ways I think metta practice works is through purification of heart. When we undertake this practice and keep turning the mind to the wholesome—to love or compassion or joy or equanimity—it actually tends to evoke the opposite from our being. There's some way in which when we set our direction toward wholesomeness, everything of the other nature pops up.

When it pops up, there's the possibility of transforming it through holding it in love, holding it with compassion, and seeing it clearly with awareness. When those things are buried and don't pop up, we don't have any possibility of releasing or transforming them. So the metta practice is particularly beneficial because it evokes the difficult states so readily. When they're evoked, we can work with them.

At the same time, it's growing the wholesome. Through these seeds we're planting, the wholesome is growing up, and the wholesome is part of what does the work of purifying the difficult.

I think what I'd like to do is close with loving-kindness meditation, but we've been sitting for a long time. Maybe before we close, could you lead us in about five minutes of stretches? That would be great—just to get a little juice in the body.

CHAPTER 229

Cascading Pools of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · 45 min

> *Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of mettā (loving-kindness) practice using the traditional metaphor of cascading pools from the ancient suttas. He explains how mettā naturally flows from ourselves to benefactors, friends, neutral persons, difficult people, and finally to all beings - though he notes that for Western practitioners, the sequence often works differently, with self-mettā being the most challenging.*
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> *Armstrong discusses mettā as both a healing practice and the antidote to aversion in all its forms - anger, fear, criticism, and depression. He explains how mettā differs from vipassanā in working with conditioning: while vipassanā reveals vast emptiness through mindfulness, mettā fills that space with warmth and creates new wholesome conditioning. He addresses the near and far enemies of loving-kindness, offers practical guidance for working with difficult emotions that arise during practice, and emphasizes that acceptance itself is a form of mettā.*
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> *Drawing from the Metta Sutta, Armstrong presents the Buddha's vision of boundless loving-kindness extending to all beings everywhere. He concludes by exploring how mettā practice works as purification, evoking difficult states so they can be transformed through the growing wholesome qualities of love and compassion.*

Throughout the day today, we've been using different individuals to develop loving-kindness with, and the thinking behind this comes from an image in the ancient texts, in the suttas, which is the image of cascading pools.

The idea is that if there's a river running down a mountain slope and there's a big rainstorm on the top, the river will start to fill up at the top. As it gets to one pool, that pool will fill up, and as the rain keeps coming down, it will overflow. When that pool overflows, it will run further down the mountainside and come to the next pool. Then that will fill up, overflow, and run down to the next pool. This is the image of the cascading pools.

The reason it's an analogy for the mettā practice is that it's considered classically that it's easiest to develop loving-kindness with ourselves. So we let that pool fill up, and then we let it run down to the next pool, which is our benefactor. Then as that one fills up, we let it overflow and run to the next, which is a good friend. Then it fills up and spills over to a neutral person, then to a difficult person, and then to all beings.

There's actually a logic to this sequence of the way we develop the mettā practice. We start closest to home, extend to those we naturally feel affection for, those we're neutral toward, those we have difficulty with, and then we can extend to all beings.

Often for us in the West, it doesn't work quite in this logical order. Many people find that doing mettā for ourselves is actually the most difficult, and that it's very helpful to have someone like a benefactor or a friend where it's easy, because you can let that pool fill up and then come back to yourself and let it spill over to you.

Check this order out for yourself, but know that this is the principle of mettā: we develop it where it's easiest. This is actually quite refreshing after vipassanā, where it seems like everything develops in the most difficult way possible. But in mettā, it's intended to develop in the easiest way possible.

If the easiest access for you is through yourself, that's where you should spend most of your time. If it's easier for you going in through a benefactor or a friend, spend a lot of time there and then bring that mettā back to yourself.

The mettā coming back to oneself is really key. As we said at the beginning of the day, if we love ourselves, then we don't harm others. Everything starts inside. If there's love here, it's so easy to share it outward. But often the love for ourselves is the most difficult part to touch, and so we need to borrow from other sources. We also need to be really persistent.

It's a process of training the heart. Like every other part of us, the heart is trainable. It can learn to love. We can learn to love—it's part of our nature. We just need to bring it out. By and large, we've never been taught how to do it. Our culture doesn't provide us the guidelines. Our parents don't provide us the guidelines. Typically religions have not provided us the guidelines. But there are practices such as this that are proven to bring it forth. We just need to do the work.

When we develop mettā for ourselves, we find that mettā has a range of flavors. Just like there are a range of people that we can extend it to, it comes in a range of flavors or degrees.

When mettā is really strong, we feel this strong sense of unity, of oneness, of integration that is a characteristic of love—of deep, true love. When it's a little toned down from there, we feel a warmth or a friendliness toward others. When it's a little toned down from there, mettā takes on the quality of acceptance. We may not be crazy about ourselves or the other person, but there's a growing sense of it really being okay with us—how we are and how others are. So just that spirit of acceptance itself is mettā too.

One of the phrases people sometimes like to substitute is an acceptance kind of phrase. You'll be going through a hard patch in practice and you'll be saying a phrase like "may I abide in happiness," and you just go, "That's out to lunch. Happiness? Not in this lifetime. I don't think so."

When the phrases start feeling that remote or disconnected, bring it back to earth. Acceptance is a really good way to do it. So instead of "may I be happy," you might say something like "may I accept myself just as I am." That is also the flavor of mettā. Acceptance is an important aspect. Some people like to phrase this: "May I love and accept myself just as I am."

This is a nice way to make it a little more approachable for ourselves.

Metta is a powerful healing practice. It is essentially the healing practice in our tradition. So where there's a sense of incompleteness in our relationship to ourselves, from earlier wounding, from a strong sense of unworthiness, something like that, metta is the recommended approach.

And you can stay with metta for yourself for a long, long time. Sometimes people connect with the practice and they just intuitively feel it's right to keep coming back to themselves. There's just a sense that there hasn't been enough care for oneself. And so there's a need to replenish the tank. So if you feel like that, you can just pour that metta into yourself for a long, long time. It's absolutely fine. You don't need to bring in other people in the beginning. One meditator worked with themselves for three years with metta before they felt ready to bring in anyone else. And if that's the case, that's absolutely fine.

Also be really open to what works, to bringing out the quality of metta. One meditator found that there wasn't really a good connection with any beings, so she used a stuffed animal that she actually had brought on the retreat with her and that was on her bed. Other people like to use pets because we can really open to their vulnerability and to their innocence. The important thing is the quality of the loving-kindness. The person that awakens it is not as important.

It seems kind of funny. When we start the metta practice, the emphasis appears to be on my benefactor or my friend or my neutral person. But from the point of view of practice, the important emphasis is on the feeling tone and the connection and the caring. It really doesn't matter what we use to get it going. The fact is, once it's going, it changes our relationship to the whole world. If your heart is full of metta, you see everybody from that space of metta. The whole world looks different from a place of

metta. So we don't really care how we get there. The important thing is to start drawing it out, strengthening that sense of caring and connection, and little by little that flame grows.

When we first touch it, it seems like something insignificant. It seems like, "Yeah, okay, I can care about my friend, so what?" It doesn't seem like it's going to go anywhere. And often because of that, we don't keep planting the seeds. We just think, "Oh, that was a nice little thing." Or we feel a moment's peace from our meditation, and we think, "Oh, that was nice, but it was no big deal."

What we don't see is that it's a radically different approach than we normally live from, and it's subtle in the beginning. Actually, the really wholesome mind states are hard to appreciate at first because their vibration is more subtle than the strong reactive mind states. If we get into a good bit of fear or anger or self-judgment, it has a lot of pop. We can really tell something's happening. We were having a discussion yesterday with some veteran practitioners who said that the difficult mind states sometimes give me a greater sense of vitality. I have a sense of being alive when I'm really coping with fear or desire or anger.

The beautiful mind states have a subtler kind of vibration, so they don't come up and knock you over the head immediately. But that subtle vibration can get stronger and stronger over time. And loving kindness is definitely like that. The first time we feel the sense of connection, we may feel it's no big deal, but we don't realize the potential that's there when we grow it. So may we not give up planting the seeds.

The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, thinking this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." This is a nice image because in Asia, rainwater is usually collected in these large earthenware jars that are about three feet tall and two and a half feet across. And when I was a monk, I had one of these at the base of my hut. The rainwater would fall down into a gutter, and the gutter would channel the rainwater into this jar. So storm by storm in the rainy season, my jar got filled to a very, very big height. If you put any container out during one of our Marin winter storms, little by little, drop by drop, it fills up.

So it's this way with loving-kindness. Each drop doesn't feel like much. It feels like something we could write off. But please begin in your practice to tune into how it feels. Tune into that quality of connection, whether it's strong or weak, because that's what is going to grow and become as big as love can be. It can be huge. You meet somebody like the Dalai Lama and you realize how big the force of love can get. And it all comes from one drop after another.

As you notice what each one feels like, then it gets easier and easier to put the mind back in that place. You're creating actually a channel to that quality of connectedness and affection and caring each time you activate loving-kindness in yourself. And then you can start to see it manifest. You can start to see it ripple through your life. And you know it's happening when your friends or partner tells you that something's changing. You can really count on it.

But the Dalai Lama to me is always an inspiring example. He was here, as I said, a year ago. And because he's the head of a state in exile, the U.S. State Department provides security for him wherever he goes. So while he was on the land teaching for a couple of days last year, everybody who came in to see him had to go through a metal detector. The people who were staying up in the residence halls had to evacuate their rooms at about seven in the morning so that the Secret Service could search and send dogs in to sniff for explosives.

The security guards, when we passed through the metal detector, were heavy duty. They had a gun on one side and a nightstick on the other. They were strong, professional—like professional bodyguards hired by the State Department. You didn't joke around with these people.

At the end of the conference, every one of them wanted to have their photograph taken with the Dalai Lama because he had so touched their hearts just in his coming and going. They all got together for a group photograph. Now would they have done that for Bruce Springsteen? Maybe. Bill Clinton? I don't know. So this quality of love has such a potential to reach out and touch others and to invite them into the way, into awakening.

I also want to talk a little bit about how metta and vipassana work differently with our conditioning. I mentioned that metta is a very strong healing practice. The way that it works is as the sense of friendliness or warmth grows, it's not that we get rid of our stuff—our psychic stuff, our reactive mind of wanting and anger and impatience and self-judgment. But more and more, it all starts being held in the space of acceptance and friendliness.

One of the qualities of love is it's tremendously integrating. Love joins things together. And when love starts to awaken in the psyche, it pulls the psyche together. So those parts of ourselves that we couldn't accept before—we just thought, "This is not good enough. If I allow myself to really feel my fear or my anger or my incompleteness or my sense of abandonment, I'm not a good enough person." Often we take these difficult emotions as invalidating us in some way.

But when love is present in the mind, we can look at those things and we can go, "Oh, that's okay. That's just a part of being human. We all have the whole package. We all have all those feelings." And love makes it all acceptable. It brings it all together under the light of acceptance. So there's this very deep unification and healing that takes place through the metta.

The other thing that happens with metta is that positive states of mind—the brahmaviharas for shorthand: love, compassion, joy and equanimity—are starting to really take root and flower in the mind. These are real alternatives to our habitual reactions. The mind finds a new home in these positive states.

My experience was that this was a little different from vipassana. The wholesome qualities that vipassana activates are more neutral in tone. Mindfulness, for example. Awareness is extremely powerful—I'd say it may be the most powerful factor on the whole path—but it's very neutral in its quality. It's like clear water. It doesn't have a property of its own. It doesn't have a coloring of its own, because it can go with everything. You can put clear water with rocks, with soup, with sugar, with anything. Mindfulness goes with anything, so it doesn't stand out.

What I found with many years of vipassana practice was my dominant mental tendency in the beginning was fear. If my mind went off balance, it would go to fear or anxiety. And over years and years, that got smaller and smaller and smaller with the influence of mindfulness.

But still, if I went somewhere, I would tend into fear. That was the conditioning. The Vipassana, through its great spaciousness, kind of reduces the conditioning. But on the emotional level, it doesn't necessarily put anything in its place. The Brahma Viharas, though, do. And after I'd been doing metta practice for a while, I found that instead of leaning into fear, my mind would lean into metta. That's the sort of new home that it found.

So what I found is that I was generating a new kind of conditioning, a wholesome conditioning, that my mind could find a home in that was different from my conditioned reactions. The way I kind of sum it up to myself is that Vipassana reveals this vast emptiness and loving kindness fills it with warmth. So the two practices are actually very supportive. As Vipassana empties the mind, the space is there for the metta to come through, to really be felt and to really color our whole world. And as the metta comes through more and more, we're more inclined to let go of the reactive patterns. And it's the letting go that opens us up into the emptiness. So these two sides are very complementary. They really both develop one another and offer alternative ways of working with our conditioning. Both are really helpful.

Metta is also, because of its quality of friendliness, the antidote to aversion. And aversion has many forms. You probably know that in Buddhist psychology, people are sometimes talked about as one of three types: a type dominated by greed or wanting, a type dominated by aversion or negativity, or a type dominated by delusion or confusion. These are the three ways that psychology classifies us from a Buddhist point of view. It's just to understand that we all have all three of these. It's just whichever one happens to be predominant in our makeup. It's not that we get rid of the other two or don't have the other two.

So in someone who is particularly prone to aversion, it usually expresses itself in anger, critical mind, judgment of others, judgment of ourselves, irritability, or fear. Those are all different manifestations. I would also probably include depression in the list of aversive reactions. So because metta has this quality of affection, warmth, and friendliness, it undoes aversion. The mind cannot be in a space of metta and negativity at the same time. So for people whose personalities are governed by aversion, metta is the traditional antidote. It is the practice that undoes or counterbalances the tendency to negativity. So that's why for me, with the fear temperament, it was such a good fit.

When I discovered the metta practice, I got into it big time for about two years. I'd been doing Vipassana practice for probably fifteen or sixteen years at that point when I did my first metta retreat. And I was so taken with the metta, I basically didn't do any Vipassana for the next year and a half. Everything I did in retreat and in daily life was metta.

Sharon Salzberg used to tell stories about when she was getting into metta. She was practicing with Upandita, who is this very fierce Burmese master. And every time she'd go to sit a retreat with him, he would want her to sit Vipassana. And she was also really getting into the metta practice and would say, "But I'd like to sit in metta this retreat." He'd say, "Okay, okay, you're sitting for three months, you can do two weeks of metta, the rest Vipassana." She'd say, "How about two months of metta?" He'd say, "No, maybe one month." She'd say, "Okay, six weeks, done." So they'd negotiate and she'd get a little more metta than he had first thought.

So I think as you go through your spiritual path, and I'm assuming most of you are also doing some Vipassana practice or will be doing some Vipassana practice, find your own balance between the two. If you feel really drawn to the metta practice, it can be your primary practice or exclusive practice for some time. That's absolutely fine.

In the long run, you want to incorporate it with Vipassana because Vipassana is the practice that liberates. In our tradition, the wisdom practice is Vipassana, and it's wisdom that frees us in the end. Opening the heart can go a certain way, but without

the clear seeing into the nature of things, there's no lasting freedom. So at some point, the Vipassana practice needs to come in for your spiritual path to be complete, or something equivalent, some equivalent wisdom practice.

But you can kind of find your own schedule with it. You can do it at your own pace. In your daily life, you might like to do some metta every day and some Vipassana every day. You do ten or fifteen minutes of metta and the rest of the sitting Vipassana as you like. So feel your own way and see what your own intuition leads you to. See where you feel drawn and follow that.

Trust that. Trust your own sense of what is right for you at this time.

It's interesting—Ajahn Sumedho was here about a month ago. He gave a nine-day public retreat, and then a five-day retreat for the Spirit Rock teachers. I happened to sit in both of them, the first time I'd sat a long retreat with him. He was a very impressive and inspiring teacher.

One of the things he commented on, looking over the whole spectrum of meditators he's seen—and he's seen a lot—he said the main thing he thinks is that people need to trust themselves more. There needs to be more trust in our own wisdom. I thought that was a really interesting comment. He basically said we know more than we give ourselves credit for knowing. So we're often looking to an outside authority for the answer, but we need to start trusting in our own seeing.

He also said something beautiful about good qualities. At the start of a metta session, we're instructed to reflect on our good qualities. Sometimes those are hard to find, especially when we've been sitting for three hours and feeling a little lonely because of the silence. It's hard to connect with those good qualities.

So he said something I found really refreshing. He said, "I thought about when I was a child, and I realized that I always wanted to be a good child. And I've always loved what was noble and beautiful in life." I thought, you know, I bet that's true of most of us. In the spiritual scene, most people who come here have very good intentions. You wouldn't sit through the discomfort if you didn't. But sometimes we lose sight of the fact that in the general scheme of things, we're basically pretty good people.

Generally, we do care about others. We could do a poll—I bet a good part of this room is involved in service work as livelihood, or does volunteer work of one kind or another, and generally has a sense of coming from a place of caring about the world, caring about the environment, caring about creatures. So in the general scheme of things, that makes us pretty good people. It's not to puff up about that, but just to take it

as our intentions are basically good and we can trust in that. Maybe reflecting back to your childhood will be a way into that for you too. We tend to be way too critical of ourselves.

As the pools cascade and we come into relation with the benefactor, this can be another really powerful part of practice. There's a tradition in one school of Buddhism called "union with the teacher"—it's called guru yoga, actually—where we meditate a lot on our teacher. In that tradition, the teacher is usually the benefactor. The point of that meditation is not worship. It's not like putting them way up on a pedestal. It's to realize that their wisdom mind and our wisdom mind are one and the same. So if they can be free, we can be free. It's actually coming to an understanding of our basic nature being the same as the Buddha's, already being awake in our basic nature. And it actually increases our self-confidence.

So when you pick a benefactor, if you pick somebody who's got a lot of wisdom, a lot of love, a lot of understanding, as you hang out with them in doing the metta practice, you're going to soak all those things up. You're actually sort of practicing union with the teacher, if your benefactor is that caliber of being.

I had some very strong, almost ecstatic moments in doing the meditation on the benefactor when I did the intensive metta. I was practicing with the benefactor actually for three weeks of the six-week retreat, and got very familiar with them. It really deepened my connection with them, but it also deepened my trust in my own wisdom mind. Because how could I recognize their wisdom except from my wisdom? How could I recognize their love except insofar as it touched my love?

So picking a benefactor who has those qualities is a really good way to bring them out in yourself. That's why some people like to use, even if they don't know them personally, the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh or somebody of that stature, like the Karmapa. I don't know if you've tuned into the Karmapa. He's a seventeen-year-old who just escaped from Tibet into India. It was quite a big international news story when he did it. He's tall, he's young, he's very good looking. I think he's going to be incredibly charismatic. And his predecessor was an amazing yogi, the last Karmapa who died in the early eighties—I think it was the 16th Karmapa. He's the head of one of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

When he was dying, he was in a Chicago hospital. His followers were looking after him and were very concerned about his passing. But every time they came into the room to check on how he was doing, he would sit up and ask them, "Oh, how are you

doing?" and have this big smile. But after a while, he could tell they were really worried about him. He didn't want to see them worried, so he told them, "Oh, don't worry. Nothing happens when I die. Nothing happens."

What an incredible place of freedom to see one's death even as "nothing happens." That kind of a mind has really transcended birth and death. That kind of a mind has found a freedom beyond any kind of change. It's awesome and inspiring. So taking someone like that, even if you haven't met them, can be a beautiful way to start opening our own hearts and minds.

What we're trying to do in developing the metta moment after moment, based on these different beings, is basically to try and stabilize the heart in that quality of friendship. Just like in vipassana practice we practice mindfulness moment after moment—what we're really aiming at is stabilizing ourselves in a state of awareness. So in metta, we're aiming to stabilize the heart in the quality of loving-kindness or friendship.

This stability actually becomes more important than the changing events of life. It gives the mind greater strength and greater steadiness as it becomes more rooted, more of a home in our being. It's really supported by the factor of concentration. I think I mentioned earlier that metta is a concentration practice.

You may have noticed when the metta practice is going well—I mean, take a look at what's happening in your mind when you sustain the metta practice even for a short time. It's pretty amazing. You've pulled up an image of, let's say, your benefactor, which is a positive image for you. You have developed a quality of caring or connection or friendship through the metta. And the phrases that are going through your thoughts are very wholesome phrases about wishing the other person safety, happiness, and health.

What makes up our mind stream at any moment in time? Isn't it basically images, emotions, and thoughts? Is there anything else there? That's pretty much it, isn't it? So when the metta practice is going well, you've taken control of your entire mind stream and set it in a very positive and wholesome direction. Even if that doesn't last very long, that's an extraordinary thing to do.

How many moments in a waking day of daily life are we in charge of our images, emotions, and thoughts? Not very many. And so when we're not in charge of them, often they're in charge of us. Often we're invaded by unwholesome tendencies of reactivity, thoughts of anxiety, images of what might happen next week.

This is a very—I would say quite an audacious undertaking, the metta practice. And that's why you shouldn't be discouraged if they don't all come together at one time for you. This is a big deal, pulling all three of these together. So sometimes maybe just the

image will be there. Sometimes just the emotion. Sometimes just the phrase. Maybe two will be there. And then sometimes when all three are really there together, that's kind of like a peak experience in life.

But as the concentration grows, we find more and more the ability to hold all three of these at the same time and to stabilize that kind of experience. And that's a very, very wholesome direction to put into the mind stream.

What we want to come to in the long run—the vipassana developing the awareness and the loving-kindness developing the warmth—is a fusing of the two. We want to develop a mind that is here and now, is really awake and aware, but is filled with warmth. Or a way that I kind of like to remind myself about it is, we're really developing a warm attention. To bring the quality of warmth into our mindfulness practice and to bring the quality of present moment attention steadily into our loving-kindness practice.

When we come to the friend, often for many people this is the easiest. A lot of people in the West don't really have a benefactor. It wasn't part of our growing up often. And so the friend is often the easiest person for us to connect to. But one of the things you might find is that the relationship with the friend can slide into what are called the near and far enemies of loving-kindness. And every one of the Brahmaviharas has both a near and a far enemy.

The near enemy is a feeling that looks like the Brahma vihara but is actually an unwholesome state of mind. The far enemy is the exact opposite, so it's definitely unwholesome.

With metta, the near enemy is affection with attachment—a clingy or grasping kind of love. The far enemy is anger or ill will.

With friends, we often encounter both the near and far enemies. We find that, yes, we like them, but we want something back. And if they don't give it to us, then it can slide into ill will or anger. So especially with friends, start tuning into the tendency of our mind to slide into the near and far enemies.

One of the qualities of metta is that it doesn't come with strings attached. We don't say, "I like you if," or "I'll be friendly to you if." It's just a kind of unconditional state of caring that doesn't expect anything particular back. But affection with attachment is looking for something back. You hear this all the time in pop music—it's hard to miss. "I love you, I want you, I need you. I'll die if I don't have you." It can't really be true love if there's a demand attached to it. It's the near enemy of attached affection.

With a difficult person especially, of course, the far enemy tends to come in, and then you have to find ways to make space for that. Sometimes it's helpful to be creative with the difficult person. One person said that they could do loving-kindness for the difficult person only if they imagined them bound and gagged, so they couldn't talk back. Somebody was doing loving-kindness for the difficult person on a retreat up here, and they said they could only do it if they imagined them as far away as Woodacre. They couldn't bring them in the room, but if they were far enough away, then they could do it. So it's okay to get creative in that way.

The neutral person is actually a really interesting one because it's kind of the turning point of the metta practice. It's the place where we start to open up not based on self-interest. Self, benefactor, friend can all be about self-interest. But the neutral person we really don't care about. That's why they're the neutral person. And what's our tendency with someone we really don't care about? We ignore them.

With someone we like, we tend to develop greed. With someone we don't like, we develop aversion. And with somebody we don't care about, we develop delusion. So these are the three main distortions of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion. With the neutral person, it's delusion. We just kind of write them out of our lives. They don't matter because they're not important to me, to my satisfaction.

So when we start to look on the neutral person and find we can care about them, this in spiritual terms is a big deal. This is really opening up to the possibility of boundless compassion, boundless caring. And that's what makes it possible then for us to go into all beings. Because a neutral person is kind of like the representative of all beings. It's kind of the generic being in the universe. And if you can care for the generic being, you're there, basically. You can care for any generic being.

It's very interesting to develop this meditation on the neutral person because most people who do find that they actually fall a little bit in love with their neutral person. There was a fellow who did a day-long with me a few years ago who picked a supermarket cashier for his neutral person. He said he worked with that neutral person for about a year. Then he came back and told me that he started to get nervous every time he went into the supermarket because he developed a secret love for the person. Every time he got around her, he got a little bit fluttery like she was going to find out that she was his secret love.

So this is really cool that we can care that much about people that we don't know and who don't trigger us in any particular way. That's what opens it up to the possibility of all beings.

I'd like to read just a little bit from the Metta Sutta. This is one of the main texts from the Sutta Nipata on the theme of loving-kindness, where the Buddha said:

"Wishing in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, the seen and the unseen, near and far away, those born and to be born, may all beings be at ease. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world. Freed from hatred and ill will, one should sustain this recollection."

This is said to be the sublime abiding.

So that's a really beautiful and inspiring vision—that we can sustain this recollection of a truly unconditional care for all beings everywhere. But it doesn't come particularly easily. It's one of those things that develops more and more through practice. Yet this is the potential, this is the direction of the practice of loving-kindness.

So I think we'll stop there with the talk and ask if you have any comments, questions, or experiences you'd like to share—anything to clarify.

"How do you tell if you are in the near enemy?"

Good question. Let's just take metta to keep it simple. One way that I approach this is to examine whether the emphasis is on me or on the other person. When we are in the near enemy, the focus is really on what I need from them.

Sometimes we may not actually know it at the time. If there's a hidden link back, if there's a condition on the affection, we might not recognize it right away. So sometimes in the middle of it, it's not possible to tell. Then you kind of have to track it over time and see.

I think it's a question of tuning into the extent to which the relationship is gratifying me, or whether there are demands that aren't being met. That definitely tends to highlight the quality—or whether the focus is really on their well-being or not.

You could also imagine some different situations. I have to be honest: intimate relationships always have this quality of need, as far as I can tell. If you're with your partner, you could say, "Well, if they were happier with somebody else, good for them." But we aren't actually going to feel that way.

So it's important not to be too idealistic about it. Realize that relationships with intimate partners are going to have a lot of the near enemy, and it's probably a big part of what motivated us to get involved in them. I think they tend to clarify fairly slowly over the whole course of spiritual practice.

So not to set out to make a project of clarifying the impurities out of one's intimate relationship, because I think that's a lifelong practice. Just be accepting that we got into those relationships out of need. Even if our needs went away, hopefully we'd stay with it out of compassion. But the point at which our needs will go away is some way in the future. So not to get impatient about that or judgmental about that.

Any other questions?

"Could you say some more about metta practice as purification?"

Yes. One of the main ways I think metta practice works or is helpful is as a purification of heart. Basically what it means is that when we undertake this practice and we keep turning the mind to the wholesome—to love or compassion or joy or equanimity—it actually tends to evoke out of our being the opposite.

There's some way in which I'm going to set my direction this way, and something in us says, "Oh, no, you're not." And anything that's of the other nature pops up.

So when it pops up, there's the possibility of transforming it through holding it in love, holding it with compassion, and seeing it clearly with awareness. When those things are buried and don't pop up, we don't have any possibility of releasing or transforming them.

The metta practice is particularly good because it evokes the difficult states so easily. When they're evoked, we can work with them. At the same time, it's growing the wholesome. All the time, through these seeds that we're planting, the wholesome is growing up, and the wholesome is part of what does the work of purification of the difficult.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 230

The Power of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · 48 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong explores mettā (loving-kindness) as one of the two essential wings of spiritual development, alongside vipassanā wisdom practice. Drawing from his experience at Insight Meditation Society and encounters with Asian masters, he explains how mettā practice opens the heart qualities that may not develop spontaneously through insight meditation alone.

Armstrong introduces the four brahmavihāras (divine abidings) - mettā, karuṇā (compassion), muditā (sympathetic joy), and upekkhā (equanimity) - showing how loving-kindness forms the foundation for all heart practices. He addresses common challenges practitioners face, including the initial sense of artificiality and periods of dryness, while offering detailed guidance on technique: starting from silence, connecting with the heart center, generating clear images, and allowing phrases to carry genuine wishes for well-being.

The talk emphasizes that mettā is fundamentally about planting seeds of caring rather than controlling outcomes, comparing the practice to the gradual filling of a water jar through accumulated raindrops. Armstrong explains how this practice naturally brings up whatever needs purification in the heart, making it a powerful healing modality that teaches us to 'reteach a thing its loveliness' - both for ourselves and all beings.

When we start a retreat, vipassana or metta, we often ask people on the first evening to reflect why they came, what they are doing here, because we feel that point of motivation is so important to how they guide themselves during the retreat.

That question came back in a lot of the interviews this morning, but framed a little differently. It was: what am I doing here? And what's this practice about? Where are we going? So what I wanted to do in the talk tonight was to try to answer this question of what we're doing here and talk a little about the mechanics of the metta practice—how it works, how it's meant to work, and what it does for us.

It's often said in the Buddhist tradition that a bird needs two wings to fly and our spiritual life really needs two wings to take off. These wings are called the wings of wisdom and compassion. In our tradition, the wisdom practice is said to be the vipassana practice, the insight practice that reveals the deepest kinds of freedom that are available. The other wing—you could call it compassion, you could call it loving kindness, you could call it the wing of the heart—is represented in our tradition by the

metta practice. It's a practice that's designed to open up the heart qualities within us and bring them to flowering so that they can enrich our lives and the lives of the people that we touch, that we meet.

One of my early vipassana teachers—I asked him about the development of love in practice and he said, "Oh, very simple. Love is the child of freedom." The implication was just develop your vipassana practice and as the freedom grows, the love will come spontaneously. And there is a certain truth to that. Love does flower with more freedom.

But in my observation, it's not always that simple for people. And it wasn't that simple for me. My observation is that people who have a pretty emotional temperament tend to develop a lot of emotional openness through doing the vipassana practice. But people who are a little more cerebral or maybe people whose temperament tends to be aversive can really benefit—both of those describe me—can really benefit from the introduction, the addition of the loving-kindness practice. In my experience of vipassana and metta, it has been the most transformative for my own heart qualities.

I had another illustration of this. I was on staff at a retreat center in Massachusetts, Insight Meditation Society, in the late seventies. We had a visit from a very famous Asian master. We'd been preparing for months to receive this monk and four other monks who were traveling with him. It was a big deal for us. First time really that we'd had Asian leaders coming to the retreat centers in the West. Working on staff, we put a lot of preparation into it. We got to go to the airport to meet them and pick them up.

So we drove to the airport, Boston Airport, walked to the gate where the monk was supposed to arrive on the flight. You know how it is watching a plane arrive. A hundred people, a hundred and fifty people must have gotten off that flight. Couldn't see any monks. And it's not easy to miss those guys. Shaved heads and the orange robes. You're going to spot them. And no monks.

So finally, everybody came off the plane. We thought, well, maybe he missed his connection in Bangkok or something. But very slowly, very mindfully out of the gate came walking the head monk. Just another mindfulness day for him and the four other monks behind him. Each was carrying a fan, which is a teaching device in Asia. Often dharma talks are given with a fan in front of the speaker's face. The idea is that you should pay attention to the words and the dharma and not the personality delivering them. So it's a way to deflect the sort of personality cult that can develop.

Each of them was carrying a fan, and it was embroidered with the name of the monk. And then it said, "World Tour 1979." So it's not part of the monk standard issue, but it had obviously been provided by loyal supporters who wanted to wish him well on his trip.

So we took them home with us and had them in the center for a little over two weeks. Being on staff, I got to be with them behind the scenes and also I got to sit a part of the retreat that they led. They were very impressive individuals. Most of them had been monks since they were boys, probably eight or ten years old as novices and then took full ordination when they reached adulthood. I really felt a tremendous power of purity from their presence. They weren't looking for anything from us. They already had their return ticket, so that was covered. They didn't really care if we liked them or not. They didn't tell stories from their second grade schooling experiences or read Mary Oliver poems. It was very straight, straight dharma teaching. And I was very moved by the power of their words and that aspect of the transmission.

And in observing this head monk for two weeks, behind the scenes and in a group, I never once saw him smile or laugh or give any hint of joy. And I thought, hmm, is this the fulfillment of the spiritual life? Is this the fulfillment of the path that I want to go down? And for me, it was not an inspiration, that aspect of their being.

Another friend commented that this monk's metta was like starlight. It was there, it was pure, but it was rather distant.

So I've come to feel that for a lot of us, the opening of the heart really doesn't happen all by itself. It needs the extra support, the extra attention, and the kind of extra prompting that the practice of loving-kindness can give.

And I think this monk wasn't suffering. He was very cooled out, very equanimous. It's not necessary to have this juicy kind of heart quality to be peaceful. But my observation is that we touch other people more directly through the heart qualities that we manifest. And so I think of this almost as a bodhisattva practice—that we like to light up our own heart in order to touch other people in the world. And maybe as a gift for the world to share that part of our being as it wakes up.

So one way that I think about it is that the vipassana practice, which is really the foundation that we all teach from, reveals the emptiness, the spaciousness, the equanimity of our being. And emptiness on its own can get a little cold. So the metta practice pervades it with warmth. And the two come together—they're slightly different tracks of practice, but they come together down the road in this building of a warm attention,

this kind of warm present moment awareness that takes in the truth of life but can relate to it from a place of friendliness. And in my view, that's the kind of support that the metta practice can give to our vipassana practice.

One of my teachers said that what these practices do is that they bring juice into our lives. They're basically to juice up our practice and juice up our life. And juice here means the wet, fun, sweet stuff that's there in us. It means qualities of love and compassion and faith and devotion and joy. And all these qualities get activated by the practice of loving-kindness.

It's extraordinary when we meet someone who has developed these qualities to a great degree. And the person I often reflect on is the Dalai Lama who manifests this all the time. He was at a conference once and somebody asked him what his religion was—I guess they hadn't read the program notes very clearly. And he replied without any kind of irony: "My religion is kindness." And he said that many, many times.

He was at a conference here. He was actually in this room a little over a year ago with 220 Asian and Western teachers. And Sylvia and Sally and I all had the chance to sit in with him for a couple of days and meet with him. And he said it to us too. We were talking with him about how to transmit the Dharma in the West. And he said, "I'm not interested in propagating Buddhism. I'm interested in propagating human values"—which is basically kindness, the way that we can reach out and touch one another.

And it's very interesting to see how well he does that. Because at this conference, because he's the head of a state in exile, the U.S. State Department set up security here. So everyone who came to meet with him had to pass through security guards and metal detectors. And the people who were staying in the residences here had to evacuate their rooms at 7 in the morning so the guard dogs could run through and sniff for explosives and bombs and that kind of thing. So it was very serious stuff.

And let me tell you, the State Department security guards are not amateurs. They were manning the metal detectors with a pistol on one hip and a nightstick on the other. And if you tried to get a little too close, they very firmly stopped you—serious security professionals at this gathering.

At the end of the conference, all the security guards, who had no interest in Buddhism, asked if they could get their pictures taken with His Holiness. They all wanted to come together and hang out and just kind of bask in his glow because they felt what he had, the kind of heart quality that he had.

So metta is really just the introduction to the opening of the heart. And it's the first of these four states that in Pali are called the brahmaviharas. Brahma means heavenly. Vihara means home or abode. So we often translate this as the divine abidings. They are the beautiful states of consciousness that are available to us that really are a natural part of our being. They are metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

They are actually separate practices for each of the four, and we'll be working with all of them before the retreat is over. But in our tradition, we consider that metta is the foundation for the other three.

And loving kindness, as we've talked about, is simply a sincere caring about the welfare of a being, ourselves or another being. There's this kind of open-hearted friendliness that holds another person or holds ourselves and really cares about how it feels inside to be this person or that person. How's the mind? How's the body? How's the heart? How's the outer life going for you?

It's said that when this open heart of metta turns to someone who's in suffering, the response of that heart is compassion. In fact, compassion is defined as the quivering of the open heart in response to suffering. And suffering is said to be the proximate cause for compassion.

Then when that open heart looks on someone whose life is going well, who's having a lot of happiness, what comes forth is a happiness at their happiness, sometimes called sympathetic joy. It's like those strings on the sitar, the little strings that resonate in tune with the big strings up top. They're called the sympathetic strings of the sitar. They're what give the richness to the sound. So this third quality of joy is considered to be a sympathetic resonance with someone else's happiness. Your happiness makes me happy. I get a response of happiness when I look on your happiness. That's the third of the brahmaviharas.

And the quality of equanimity is the balance of mind that can hold this whole range of the joys and the sorrows of life without being so deeply disturbed by them.

So in this way, the four brahmaviharas kind of provide a map of the emotional life. And not only a map of the emotional life with all its ups and downs and the beauty and the terror of our human life, but they also point us to a wise response that's already within us. So instead of looking on suffering and becoming depressed, we can touch, we can open up that place in us of compassion, whether it's our suffering or another's. Instead of looking on somebody's happiness and feeling envious or jealous, we can discover that place in ourself that can be happy and share in their happiness. And then all of them get held within this balance of equanimity.

So metta is the foundation of these four brahmaviharas, and it's really a part of our true nature. It feels like a lot of work in the beginning. I see some heads nodding. And I know after two days of it, you know how much work it is. It often felt to me in the early days of my metta practice like I was just pushing this big boulder uphill all day long. I'd done quite a lot of vipassana practice and I was reasonably comfortable in sitting. But just going over the phrases again and again and again—oh, it wore me down. It really did. It was very hard work in the beginning.

It does get easier. And it seemed kind of contrived to me at first. I'm kind of a wisdom type, basically. And I thought, this stuff's kind of hokey. "Oh, may I be happy. May I be peaceful." Blah, blah, blah. It was for other people. It was not for me. I had a lot of skepticism about it.

But I put in my time and it started to make a difference. It started to make a shift for me. So even if in the beginning it feels a little bit artificial or a little contrived, if you're willing to hang in with it for a bit, in time the phrases really do start to evoke the quality of loving kindness, of caring. So hang in with it.

This is an intrinsic part of ourselves, but it just needs to be uncovered and uncaged. So the phrases are a way of bringing it out into the light. The Buddha said, "This mind is radiant and brightly shining, but it's colored by the attachments that visit it." And you've probably seen a lot of those attachments over the course of today. The restlessness, the sleepiness, the impatience, the frustration, the wanting to be somewhere else, the not wanting to be here. But when these clouds start to thin, then the loving kindness can start to show through in a purer and purer way.

The quality of metta is said to be unconditional.

And when I first heard this, I thought, "Boy, that's a really high bar. I don't know if I can jump quite that high. Unconditional love. Maybe Jesus or the Buddha, but not me."

But it actually doesn't mean unconditional in the sense that it never goes away. It means there aren't any strings attached to it. So when we look upon a friend or someone we don't know, we're willing to be friendly to them without asking for something back. That's all it means. We're willing to make the first step in friendliness.

Oftentimes in worldly life, friendship is kind of a bargain where I'll be friendly to you if you promise to be friendly to me. And this is friendship without bargaining. That's why it's unconditional. It's also different from romantic love in that way. Usually with romantic love, there's a lot of expectation about the return, or else the romantic

love tends to crumble. I'm just waiting for a pop song—maybe the heavy metal bands will do this—whose lyrics go something like, "I love you, I need you, and I'll kill you if I can't have you." The essence of some kind of romantic love.

As we do this practice, we're connecting to ourselves and we're connecting to others. One of the questions that came up today was: Is this going to change something for the other person? As I send them my wishes of loving-kindness, can they feel it? Is it going to make a difference in their life?

Well, the texts say—the traditional texts say—that it can and does, but it depends on the power and purity of the sender and the clarity and purity of the receiver. So there are no guarantees in this business.

They actually did do an experiment, which I'm sure many of you have heard about, on patients who were recovering in a San Francisco hospital. They did it as a controlled experiment. Half the group was a control group and nothing happened for them. But for the experimental group of patients, they wrote their names out and gave them to Christian prayer groups in the city. They asked the prayer groups to say prayers for these patients. And the fifty percent who were prayed for had a statistically higher rate of recovery than those who weren't. Kind of interesting.

So it could well be that what we're doing does affect the other, does reach them and touch them and help them. But we might never know that. If you're doing it in order to make that happen, it might be unreliable. You might never know the effect.

But what we do know and can feel firsthand is that it really affects us. Sylvia talked last night about the eleven benefits of loving-kindness—the list that starts with "sleep easily, wake easily, and have pleasant dreams. People and angels love you." It's a nice list.

The Buddha said that the heart of loving-kindness, even if sustained just for a moment, brings really great blessings in our life. He said there are great blessings from worldly actions like generosity. Giving and expressing our caring for people through sharing what we have brings merit, brings wholesome results to our own life. But he said that the benefits of generosity and worldly actions are not one-sixteenth the benefit of a heart of loving-kindness.

So that's a very powerful force to awaken in our lives.

And somebody who manifests this a lot—this kind of benefit—is Ajahn Chah. He's a Thai master, about sixty-five now, a Thai forest master who was just here. He was here in the latter part of June. Ajahn Chah has done a lot of vipassana practice and a lot of

metta practice. He's one of the happiest people I've ever met. He actually says that in the last twenty-five years he hasn't had any anger, which is astounding. And he's a teacher who can talk from the moment he sits on a platform in the morning until ten o'clock at night when everybody else is ready to go to bed. He can give Dharma talks all day long because he has that fantastic energy. And his favorite teaching—he doesn't know much English, but his favorite teaching is just two phrases. He goes, "Empty, empty, happy, happy. Empty, empty, happy, happy." And he just manifests it.

He's got this beautiful, strong, radiant energy that you can just feel when you're in his presence. And it's a combination of his Vipassana practice, but also his metta practice. He has a huge heart.

The other thing I really love about the practice of loving kindness is that it opens us out to all of life. It can't help but do that. It's part of the design. With Vipassana practice, it's not meant to do this, but it can be kind of self-enclosing. With Vipassana practice, we can get really concerned about my suffering, my problems, my pain, my patterns, my conditioning, my progress, my peace, my liberation, and so on. But the metta practice you can't use in that way because from the very beginning it opens us outward. First to someone that we're close to like a benefactor and then further in these rings until it takes in all beings. So it's really a beautiful way to open our practice to connect to all of life. It connects us with everything that lives.

This is from Shantideva, who was a Buddhist philosopher in India in about the 9th century AD. He said, "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy." This really gets to the heart of our practice of loving kindness. It's a tremendous source of happiness to care for others. And it's also a tremendous source of happiness to care for ourselves. Both pieces are really true. And this is actually the mechanism by which the loving-kindness practice develops happiness in us.

The Dalai Lama said, "If you can get off on somebody else's happiness, your chances for happiness go up by the odds of six billion to one." So this is a very good gamble to be making. It's putting your money on a winner.

Sometimes when metta gets described as unconditional love or unbounded love, it seems really grandiose. And I think it's really helpful, especially in doing the practice, to bring it down to your and my reality, to something that's really accessible. Just think of it as this sense of friendship, or warmth or caring or connection. This is really the essence of metta. If you, as you think of someone, just can have that spark of connection, sort of just touching the truth of their human life and thinking, "Ah, I hope you're

happy. I see there's a human being in there. I hope you're happy." That little spark of caring is the fuel for the whole power, and it's a really transforming power of loving kindness. That is metta.

That little wish, or you could call it an intention or an aspiration, is what fuels the whole practice. And that's all that needs to be there. It doesn't have to be a full-blown, overwhelming, blissful, tearful experience. Just that inclination of caring is enough and everything will unfold from that.

So I want to talk a little bit about how to refine the artfulness of doing the loving-kindness practice, built around the idea that this seed is really what's important. When people were asking today in interviews, "Isn't this a lot like affirmations?" or it could be compared to prayer. And I think this is a Buddhist kind of prayer, actually. Although who it's to, I'm not quite clear. I haven't figured that part out yet, but I do believe it's a prayer.

But I think one of the real differences between affirmations and prayers and loving kindness is that in the first two, generally we're really interested in the result. If we say something like, "May you be happy" or "May you be healthy," what we really focus on is the outcome, the production of the happiness or health in the other person. But in the loving-kindness practice, we realize that that outcome is kind of out of our control. As much as I wish for my benefactor's happiness, I can't change it very much. If they're ill, I can't heal them through my wishes. So that result is kind of out of our power to a large extent.

And so the motive in the metta practice is different. The outcome is really secondary. That's not our main focus. The main focus in the metta practice is on this aspiration. The wish that we have for their well-being is real, independent of the actual outcome, whether they're happy or not, whether they're healthy or not, our wish is genuine. And it's the genuineness of that wish that does the change, that makes the difference in our heart. So it's by putting ourselves in this very wholesome place of wishing well for another that little by little and moment by moment we're transforming the way we relate to the world.

It's actually the exact analogy to the quality of mindfulness in our Vipassana practice.

In Vipassana, we want to just touch that quality of pure awareness moment after moment after moment. It's that which purifies our consciousness—purifying the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion. In the metta practice, the exact analog is this little seed

of caring. It's a very pure quality. As we plant that seed in our heart again and again and again, it purifies our hearts moment after moment by bringing out the wholesome that's already within us.

Often when you first touch it, it doesn't feel like it adds up to much. Similarly with mindfulness—you connect clearly with one breath and say, "Okay, that was no big deal. I don't get the power of this. What's going on?" But you put a lot of those moments together, as most of you have done in intensive retreats, and you see that there's a tremendous momentum that grows from those moments when they're put together. This is the onward leading quality of mindfulness practice, and it also applies to the practice of loving-kindness. Moment after moment, as we purify our heart through this caring motive, the heart becomes clearer and purer—again, relieved of the forces of greed and hatred and delusion.

The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, 'This will come to nothing.' By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." However big the jar is, it is filled. I used to have, when I was in the monastery in Thailand, this huge earthenware jar outside my kuti that caught the rainwater when the rainy season came. It was a very big jar and at the start of the season could be bone dry. As the rains fell, little by little that huge jar would fill up and then became a reliable source of water for me. It's the same way with our practice, either of mindfulness or of loving-kindness. Our mind fills up with these qualities—either of the pure awareness of Vipassana or of this open-hearted caring of the metta practice.

So I want to talk a little bit about the way that I try to do this practice when I can do it the best that I can. To get a little bit more into the technique of it. People commented that it's tiring to always be involved with the phrases—it's kind of wearying just to be with phrase after phrase. So one of the things that I do is start my phrases from silence. When I'm going to start a set of phrases, I touch into the silence that holds all the words. That gives me a sense of being able to rest without interrupting the flow of the practice, but starting from a place of quiet, of peace, of restfulness. So I interrupt any sense of busyness or habituation by touching into the silence before I say anything.

Then I put my attention into the center of my chest, into the heart center, and just let it rest there for a moment. I get in touch with any physical sensations that are there. The heart center is a strong emotional seat and a good place also to experience a lot of different emotions. In connecting with that physical center, you're also opening yourself to feel any of the emotions that might come through.

Then I generate an image of the person, because I found this is really helpful for keeping the connection. In generating the image, I let myself feel their qualities—whether it's my benefactor or myself. I generate an image, and in doing that, I feel their vitality. I feel their uniqueness, their personality. It brings them alive for me.

Then, still in the silence, I try to connect with that sense of caring about them. It's a non-verbal caring, but it kind of expresses this: "Oh, I hope you're happy. I hope things are going well." Then I say the phrase. I sort of let the phrase carry the wish to the person, travel out across the space to touch the person, going from my heart outward. The phrase is just another expression of this wish—this basic wish: "Hope you're happy, hope you're well."

After I say the phrase, I return the attention to the heart center and just let myself feel the reverberations. Sylvia mentioned this last night also—listening for the callback. What's the response of your heart to the meaning and the sense of this phrase and the offering it to the other person? In that, I'm back into the silence again. So then I'm ready for the next phrase to go through the same sequence.

That's the way that I try to practice. I try not to rush with the phrases at all and have the sense that each one is like a gift that I'm sharing with my friend or my benefactor or myself. I have the sense that it's an offering from my heart in a very slow and relaxed way to them.

When I practice like this, I don't feel busy because I find enough space and silence within it that the whole thing feels really spacious to me. But I have to admit, it's hard to do that if the mind is quite active. I have to have a certain amount of stillness to do it. So you could say it takes a degree of concentration to do this. But at the same time, doing it this way really builds concentration.

Because think of all the things that you have to be aware of to do that style of practice. You have to connect with the physical sensations. You have to summon up the image of the person. You have to connect with the caring. You have to be mindful of the phrase and the meaning as you send it to the person. And then you have to come back and feel the effect in your own heart. So there's mindfulness, there's attention with each of those steps. And because you're with a lot of different objects, your concentration has to be good to do that. But doing it in that way, you will refine your concentration. It'll have to build up to meet that challenge.

So I offer this as one possibility. When my mind is very active, as I said, I'm not able to do it in this way. And then what I try to do is just stay with the phrases. And I find if my mind is active, but I'm able to stay with the phrases, then it starts to calm down. So

it's a way of using the phrases to bring back a little bit more stillness. And once the mind has settled again, I can go back to this really slow and more artful way of practicing.

This is just the way that I do it. You don't have to do it this way. It's just a suggestion if you'd like to play with it. There are lots of different ways to do the phrases. Some people like to sing their phrases, and I just thought I would mention that. Some people find that naturally comes to them, and that can be a really nice way to get the rhythm going.

One time early in my metta practice—I have a set of long phrases where I get a lot of meaning, and I have a set of short phrases that are really good for the rhythm—my long phrases started to fall into a country and western song. And I'm not going to share that with you because those things can be contagious and I wouldn't want to wish it on you. Fortunately, it didn't last very long, so I went back to the short phrases.

As you're with the phrases, you'll go through lots of different cycles with them. Sometimes the phrases feel incredibly dry to me. Dry and meaningless and rote and mechanical and repetitious and boring and unenlivening. Anybody familiar with that? Yes, it happens at times. And you might think, I'm doing something wrong or these aren't the right phrases or this isn't the right person. I need to be with a different person. But just know that the practice itself goes through cycles of dryness and wetness or juiciness. So there will be times when it will just be dry.

And actually, I don't know if it's possible for the heart to be open all the time. I don't know. Mine isn't. Mine goes through periods of opening and periods of closing, and I see that a lot in my metta practice. And I've come to realize it's not that there's something wrong with me. It's just the heart doing its thing. It opens for a while and it closes for a while. So just know that that's part of the natural cycle. Don't feel like you're doing anything wrong.

Also, don't worry if it doesn't feel like any strong feelings are coming through. You'll talk to some really emotional friends who've done metta practice and they say, "Wow, it was so powerful. I was crying by the second day and then I was in bliss on the third day and had strong concentration on the fourth day."

That's not the standard model. Don't take it as the standard for your metta practice. People respond very, very differently to this practice, and they're all perfectly fine.

Sharon Salzberg, who loves this practice deeply, said the first time she did a metta retreat, she felt absolutely nothing for the first week. But at the end of the retreat, as she reentered daily life, she found she had totally changed in relation to it. Something had shifted within her.

It's very difficult to evaluate a metta retreat while you're in the middle of it. Please, no need to try. Wait until you're able to go back home. See how you feel going back into your daily life before you judge the effectiveness. What happens is often subtle. The lasting transformations that occur are subtle—a subtle way that we change in relating to the world. That's what really emerges from this practice.

Instead of walking down a street wrapped up in our own fantasies, we start to walk and realize there are other beings out there. Every once in a while, we might tune in and wonder, "Hey, how's life for you? How's the heart? How's the body? How's life in the world for you?" We're simply reforming a habit of connecting to the happiness and sorrow in the lives of every being we meet. When we start to do that, it changes how we feel in the world. We feel more connected to people and to life.

This doesn't happen overnight, obviously. It takes cultivation, just like mindfulness practice does. We also can't control the rate at which the unfolding happens—the opening of the heart. We start to realize it's not our job to control that.

The phrases are actually just like seeds. Every time you say a phrase, you're planting a seed. That's all your job is. You plant it and you water it by doing it again and again and again. That's all you can do. You can't decide when the plant is going to grow up and how tall it's going to get and what color flowers it's going to have and when those flowers are going to bloom. That's not your job. Your job is just planting the seeds and providing the fertile conditions. Then you let go.

Trust that the phrases which have been working for at least fifteen hundred years—the details of this practice go back at least to the Visuddhimagga, which is fifteen hundred years old, with echoes of it before that and the Buddha's general instructions twenty-five hundred years ago—they've been working for people for all these centuries. None of us is so special it's not going to work for us. Just trust that all you have to do is say the phrases with that connection of caring, and nature will take care of the rest. The phrases will evoke the feeling. It will happen.

You don't have to worry that you have to create some special feeling as you're saying it. You don't have to summon up any strong feeling of any kind. One of my friends was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita, a very powerful Burmese teacher. He's actually the teacher who taught our teachers this practice—the one from whom we basically imported this practice. My friend was practicing with U Pandita, doing extended metta in Burma, and he said, "I'm not feeling much as I do the phrases and as I connect to different people. Is that a problem?"

U Pandita said, "That's no problem at all. As long as your mind is inclining to metta, that's all that you need. The practice and the phrases will take care of the rest."

So you don't have to force any particular kind of feelings. As we generate loving kindness toward ourselves, it actually tends to bring up all kinds of feelings. We may think that these are not at all like metta. This is not what we expected from this practice. We thought we were going to love ourselves more. But we actually start the practice and find ourselves feeling blame, judgment, guilt, sadness, or resentment.

All different kinds of feelings arise. It's easy to think, "Oh, I'm doing it wrong. This isn't what loving kindness is supposed to feel like." But this isn't true at all. Actually, the very act of directing the mind toward loving kindness tends to bring out anything in us that's not like that. As we incline the mind in one direction, everything that's a different flavor will come up as though to say, "It's not like that. You're not like that. That's not really true. That's not really the way it is."

This is part of the beauty of the metta practice. The fact that those states come, those difficulties, doesn't mean that it's not working—it means it is working. Because when we start the metta practice, it's as though we take a magnet with strong positive energy and run it right through our body. Everything that's of another charge comes right forward and is drawn to it.

This is part of the beauty of this practice. It's a purification practice. The only way all that material within us can be purified is by being brought to the surface. Holding it in the light of awareness, holding it with the flavor of metta, is what allows it to be released.

So this is a natural part of the practice and, I believe, one of the great powers of metta meditation. It's a practice that goes straight for the heart and brings out what needs to be purified within it. Whether it's sadness, grief, self-judgment, or anger—whatever it is—these feelings will come forth. This is why the metta practice is such a powerful healing practice. It is really, in my view, the main healing practice in our tradition.

I'd like to close by reading a poem that speaks to this aspect of healing. Many of you have heard this poem before. It's one of my favorites, by Galway Kinnell, called "Saint Francis and the Sow."

The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers from within, of self-blessing; though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness...

Let's sit for a minute together.

For everything flowers from within, of self-blessing, though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on its brow and retell it in words and in touch: it is lovely, until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 231

The Fruits of Mettā Practice

Guy Armstrong · 50 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the profound benefits that arise from dedicated mettā (loving-kindness) practice. Drawing from years of intensive practice, he explores the two primary fruits: samādhi (concentration/collectedness) and the brahmavihāra of mettā itself. Armstrong clarifies common misunderstandings about samādhi, explaining it not as narrow focus but as a unification of mind—like concentrated orange juice that becomes potent and powerful. He describes how genuine caring intention, rather than self-centered effort, becomes the karmic engine driving the practice forward.

The talk addresses practical challenges practitioners face, including doubt and the tendency to strive for pleasant states rather than maintaining authentic care for others. Armstrong emphasizes that mettā practice involves taking control of one's mindstream—replacing unwholesome thoughts, images, and emotions with wholesome ones through the cultivation of caring intention. He discusses the five jhānic factors and how they counteract the hindrances, creating states of protection and liberation. Through personal anecdotes and teachings, he illustrates how faith and surrender allow the Dharma to carry practitioners forward, transforming the practice from effortful striving into natural flowing generosity.

The talk tonight is on the fruits of metta practice.

When I started intensive metta practice some years ago, I'd been doing Vipassana practice for fifteen years or more. But when I started the metta practice, a lot of doubt came up in me, primarily because I didn't know if I was going to be able to do the practice or not. I didn't know if it was going to work for me. I really felt like a baby again, a new meditator. And I had to find out for myself the way through the doubt.

It reminded me of a story that I heard at a retreat about a year ago. I was sitting in a retreat and one of the other guys on the retreat was a college teacher. He teaches mathematics. He said there was a young woman who turned up for the first day of his calculus course and said she wanted to check the course out to see if she wanted to stay in it for the semester. She wasn't sure if she was going to stay or not. And she said that before she could commit to staying, she had to know that the course would help her.

And so the teacher said, "Well, what field are you in?" And she said, "Civil engineering." And he said, "Well, calculus is really a great benefit for civil engineers." And she said, "Well, can you tell me a problem that I could solve with calculus that I couldn't

solve without it?" And he said, "Sure." And he sketched up this civil engineering kind of problem on the board and said, "You see, you need calculus to solve this." And she said, "And your course will teach me how to solve it?" And he said, "Yes, it will." And she said, "Well, how do I know that?" He said, "Well, I'm telling you, you have to trust me." And she said, "But I have to know it for myself before I take the course that I'll learn how to solve that problem in the course of doing it." And he said, "You just have to take my word for it." She said, "I'm sorry, that's not good enough." And she dropped the course.

So this was told at a retreat with a young Tibetan teacher who was leading the retreat, a teacher named Sokny Rinpoche. And he likes to watch a lot of videos when he's in this country because it helps him understand our culture. And his comment was—his comment was, "Good story, but bad ending." He said, "Like a European movie." That was pretty tuned in, European movie.

So hopefully we're in the American version of the film, and this story is going to have a happy ending.

You know, I think there are still a lot of questions for people about this practice. People are still wondering: Do I have to use these phrases? Do I have to say phrases at all? Do I have to say words at all? Can I just hang out with a feeling? But by and large, it seems to me that there has been a real shift over these five days. I've felt it in the interviews that people have really engaged with the practice and found that it has a lot of power. I've heard a few people comment that they're surprised by the power of this practice. It just looks like a little kind of sentimental add-on to the Vipassana and finding it actually has a lot to offer.

So the faith has been there from various impulses to start to make the effort. And that's really what's needed. Faith leads to effort. Effort leads to the fruits of the practice. And the effort, as a lot of people have commented in this practice, is not an easy one. It's not like Vipassana where you can just come in, sit down, open up, and it all happens. There's a lot of work that's asked of each of us in the loving-kindness practice.

And what it reminded me of is a merit badge that I had to earn as a Boy Scout. I was going for a camping merit badge, and we had to make a fire without using matches. And I thought, surely that art isn't needed anymore in the world today, but I'll try it anyway. So the instructions were: you get a flat piece of dry wood, you make a little hole in it using your twentieth-century very sharp craftsman knife, and dig out a little hole about a quarter of an inch across, and you take a branch that's kind of round and about this long, you put it in the hole, and you shave some little wood carvings into the hole around the branch, and then you twirl the branch back and forth in your palms as fast as you can. And the friction of it in the hole...

And little by little, you get a little puff of smoke, and then a bigger puff of smoke, and then a little flame. But that's after a lot of twirling—a lot of twirling. My hands were getting sore, they were getting hot, and I was thinking, "I'm going to burn my hands before I burn anything in the wood." I didn't know what would happen, but finally it caught. And once it had caught, I could add more wood shavings and little leaves and branches, and then it burned by itself.

This is exactly like our metta practice. Twirling the stick is like the phrases. You say the phrases over and over again. It feels like it's wearing blisters in the mind. You kind of get worn out, but you keep going, and all of a sudden there's this heat, this warmth that comes from it. As you work with it, the phrases kind of become self-generating. They have caught fire over time, and a lot of the pushing that's so hard in the beginning starts to go.

People have talked about how the phrases can be going even while they're thinking about other things—one of the mysteries of the practice. So then you know it's really become somewhat automatic at that point. Not that that's a phase to stop at, but it's progress.

The fruits of the practice really are twofold. There are two main reasons that we do it. The first is concentration. The second is the loving-kindness itself, as one of the Brahma Viharas, and all the purification of heart that goes with that. These are the two things that I want to talk about tonight: concentration and loving-kindness.

Concentration is the translation we usually use for the Pali term samadhi. This is one of the most important factors of mind that the Buddha talked about. It's one of the aspects of the Eightfold Path under the meditation section. It's one of the five spiritual faculties, and it's one of the seven factors of enlightenment. So it's a very important concept in the overall path.

There's no English word—or no word in any European language that I know of—that adequately renders this term samadhi. When there's no word in the language for a concept, it means the culture doesn't know this concept. So basically European culture doesn't have a clue what samadhi is about, and that's why it's so hard to understand. Mindfulness is easier because we have words like awareness and consciousness that come close to it. But we don't have any word that really accurately conveys samadhi. For me it was one of the more mysterious concepts that only became clear after probably fifteen years of practice.

It's usually translated as concentration, but this isn't quite right. This misses something really important. When we say in English, "I'm concentrating," what we usually mean is that we're taking a very narrow focus of attention. We might say, "I'm trying to concentrate on my book, could you please turn off the television?" or "I'm trying to concentrate on my paper, can you please shut the kids up in the other room?" There's this sense of exclusivity—that we want to bring the attention to one thing and exclude everything else.

Samadhi doesn't have this connotation. Within samadhi, there is no sense of an exclusive attention. There is a coming together, a unification. But it's not particularly about a unified attention that's exclusive in any way.

I'd say that the mind gets concentrated kind of the way frozen orange juice has gotten concentrated. You take this very liquid, runny substance that's a combination of water and essence of orange, and you throw out all that's not really essential. You're left with this frozen orange juice concentrate that you put in your freezer, then bring out and add water to make orange juice. It's gotten really potent. If you ever taste that concentrate by itself, it's a very potent taste—kind of like essence of orange times two.

That's the kind of power that the mind gets when it gets concentrated. It means that all the juice of the mind has been brought together. But it doesn't necessarily mean that it's just on one thing.

It can be brought together in a very expansive way. You can be in a state of samadhi and be very wide open with your attention. Have a very spacious and open kind of awareness and the mind can be unified. So a good way to translate samadhi might be collectedness, unification, composure.

And what it feels like is that the mind, when it gets collected in that way, feels very strong. It's returning all the power to its source. So it feels strong, it feels stable, it feels firm, steady, unmoving. And in the depths of it, it feels unshakable. And all this comes about because we are letting go of the distractions that normally carry us away from this present moment. So samadhi comes from collecting all our mental energy into the present moment.

I thought it was a really interesting question this morning about why do we call it a natural state of mind? And aren't these distractions fairly natural? I think that samadhi is a natural state of mind. I think in Buddhism we use this word "natural" in a little different way. I think we use it to mean the mind that's not under the influence of self-centered bias.

And our distractions, if you look at them closely, aren't just neutral and random. They're really mostly about greed and aversion. They're about hope and fear. So they're fueling us to leave the present moment driven by these strong underlying emotions of self-interest. And that's why they're so powerful in their influence, because there's a strong force behind them.

So the natural state of mind, from the Buddhist point of view, is one where these temporary visitors of greed, aversion, and confusion aren't active. And we take a look at what's really there in our hearts, in our minds, without the influence of these distorting forces. And that's what we mean by natural.

So we acknowledge that the distractions are normal and universal in a way, but they're something that's been added to our natural being. And a lot of meditation is to find out what is your experience in a moment when those forces of self-interest aren't acting?

This becomes a really central topic for investigation, both in vipassana and in metta. What does it feel like when the forces of greed, aversion and confusion are suspended, even just for a moment, are temporarily absent? That experience is what we call the natural state. It's the state that's always there. It's, you could say, the foundation.

Somebody came into an interview today with a really interesting insight, and he said that he had discovered the silence in which all sounds are held, and a silence that's not disturbed by the arising and passing of any sound. And in the same way, there's a natural peace and undistractedness of our own heart and mind that we can discover. And when we discover it, we see it isn't even damaged by the comings and goings of greed, aversion and delusion. But it's hard to discover when those things are thick and really active.

So the function of samadhi is to collect all the mind's energy by letting go of those distractions. And then we find that the mind has a natural stillness and steadiness and power that returns to it.

How do we develop samadhi? We develop it by bringing our full attention to whatever we're doing. So if it's repeating a phrase, we give our wholehearted attention to thinking that phrase or saying that phrase. If it's feeling the echo in the body, we give our full attention to feeling that echo in the body. We're doing it in vipassana practice too, obviously, by being fully with our experience. In metta the objects are different, but the concentration is the same, or the samadhi is the same.

The Korean Zen teacher, Sansanim, said, "When you sit, just sit. When you walk, just walk." That was the way he expressed this flavor of samadhi. And then one day his students walked in on him in the dining room, and he was eating his breakfast and reading a newspaper. And the student said, "But teacher, you told us when you do one thing, just do that one thing fully." And he said, "Yeah, and when you eat and read, just eat and read." Samadhi continues.

When we bring the attention back in this way and bring it home—and a lot of people describe meditation as homecoming—when we bring it home in this way, then the mind can settle in its own steadiness, or in its own stillness.

And one of the images that came to me is actually when I was doing a period of metta practice and feeling the growth of samadhi. Anybody remember—I think a lot of us are of a similar generation—remember the Prell shampoo commercials on television in the late fifties? And there was this bottle of Prell, which you knew was green, even though the TV sets were black and white. You knew it was green because you'd seen it at the supermarket. And they were trying to illustrate the richness of the shampoo.

And do you remember what they dropped into the top? A pearl. They drop a pearl into the top, and then it just floats ever so gently and steadily down to the bottom of the bottle of shampoo. And that proves how thick and viscous the Prell shampoo is.

That's actually what samadhi felt like to me at that moment. I had the sense—this might be the Prell sutta—I had the sense that my mind was settling into my body, the thickness of my body, just like that pearl drifting down slowly, easily, relaxed, calm, peaceful, held in this really gentle way. That was what the actual experience of samadhi was like for me at that time.

So as the mind settles within itself, it finds a buoyancy, an ease, a quality that's very satisfying. And then it doesn't have to rush out to look for past and future, doesn't have to concern itself with hope and fear, because the present is very rich.

I'm describing my experience in fair detail, but I hope it relates to your experience when you're feeling connected to the phrases, to the person, to the loving-kindness, to your heart center. I know you've all had these moments when the phrases are going well, the connection with the person is there, the practice has come together, even if it only lasts for a set of four phrases. Take a look and examine that state of mind, the steadiness of the attention and the feeling in your mind and body. Part of it is the steadiness and firmness of samadhi, of the mind coming together.

The second fruit of the practice is the loving-kindness itself in all its expressions. It's really a spectrum from acceptance to patience, warmth, friendliness, all the way up to real love and passion. I've had some very passionate moments, particularly with my benefactor. There's a practice in one tradition of Buddhism called union with the teacher. The aim is to realize that our wisdom mind is the same as our teacher's wisdom mind—there's no difference. In doing the metta practice for my benefactor, I felt that their wisdom and their love and their kindness had completely penetrated my being. It was a very ecstatic discovery.

So loving-kindness has this whole range of feelings that are all aspects of metta. As the retreat has gone by, I know you've all touched aspects of this in different ways. We suggest the different individuals because each one might provide a better entry point for each of us. For some, the self is the best way in. For some, the benefactor. For some, the good friend. One of the beauties of metta practice is we're taught to go where it's easiest. Isn't that a relief? Go where the metta is easiest, because the practice really is about gladdening the mind. It's not to make things any more difficult.

Just as in vipassana practice, we start with the breath and then move on to body and sounds and thoughts and emotions. In the beginning, all the different objects seem so important, so critical. I think if there were going to be wars in Buddhism, they would be wars between people who say you can only do meditation on breath at the nose, and those who say you can only do it on breath at the belly. Sometimes these views get really tightly held. But that's not the key thing. The key thing is the mindfulness. What stone you want to sharpen it on is really secondary. The objects aren't the most important thing—the most important thing is that present moment attention.

Similarly in metta, the different individuals that it can be directed to are actually not the most important thing. The most important thing is the quality of metta that they evoke. Just as in vipassana practice what we're aiming to do is stabilize the attention in connection to the present, in metta practice our real aim is to stabilize the heart in loving-kindness. To be able to find a reliable channel to the quality of metta more and more and more. We just use whatever tools, whatever individuals best evoke that, so that in the long run we want to be able to find ourselves in metta independent of the circumstance of our life. Just as with vipassana we want to be in that state of clear awareness, untroubled by greed, aversion, delusion, regardless of the outer circumstance that we find ourselves in.

When we find that stability coming in more and more in the flavor of loving-kindness, then the heart starts to become really responsive. It starts to become really sensitive and open and juicy. And of course when the heart opens, it doesn't just open to the beautiful.

It also opens to the difficult. So sometimes in the metta practice it can feel like we're going backwards because we've opened up to beauty and then we might get hit by one of the difficulties, one of the hindrances that Sally talked about the other night. And because we're more sensitive, we actually may feel its impact more strongly than we did before. But that's actually a sign of deepening. That's not to be avoided. Because what's also happening is that the heart is getting wider at the same time and is more able to allow all of our emotional life within the spirit of acceptance, within the spirit of metta.

So both these developments of samadhi and of metta bring with them a really deep sense of contentment. That's one of the great combinations of this practice. They both reinforce each other in that way.

This Tibetan teacher I mentioned a little while ago, his name is Sogkni Rinpoche III. And Sogkni Rinpoche I, who was a couple of generations back, was the abbot of a large monastery in Tibet, in eastern Tibet. He actually had a large nunnery also. And to this day, the nunnery continues. There are a thousand nuns living at this nunnery in eastern Tibet.

It's kind of interesting because the Chinese government doesn't seem very concerned about nuns. They're not very threatened because they don't take them very seriously out in eastern Tibet. So they've continued with really deep practices. And they're allowed to continue in ways that at least monks in Lhasa have not been allowed to continue.

So a few years ago, Sogkni Rinpoche III was asked if he would take his old nunnery back under his guidance, because they consider him the third incarnation of the first Sogkni Rinpoche, and he said that he would. And so then they invited him to their tummo ceremony.

The tummo ceremony is an event they do on the midwinter, where the nuns wrap themselves up in sheets that have been soaked in ice water, walk around the nunnery walls at midnight, and they have to dry the sheet by the time they finish one walk around, with the power of tummo, which is the yoga of inner heat. And out of the thou-

sand nuns at the monastery, about seventy completed that exercise in the past year. So Rinpoche said he actually declined that invitation because he was afraid they would ask him to join in and do it too, and he didn't want to do that.

Anyway, this first Sogkni Rinpoche had a really beautiful poem. And part of the lines of this poem said, "There is nothing else to search for, rest in your natural face. There's nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face."

And this is kind of the feeling of this union of samadhi and metta. When they come together, there is the peacefulness, the steadiness of samadhi, and there is the warmth and friendliness of the loving-kindness. And the combination of the two leads into this deep sense of contentment because we really feel this is what we've been searching for—this combination of peace and warmth. And so there really is nowhere else to go.

So it reinforces both the samadhi, because we're more happy just to rest. We don't tend to look outside as much. And it reinforces the metta, because the growing sense of contentment brings a happiness with it.

Also, one of the really amazing things when these two come together and they're strong is that the hindrances are suspended. Sally talked the other night about the five hindering energies in meditation: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness and doubt. When samadhi reaches a certain depth, a certain strength, the hindrances can no longer arise. And when the loving-kindness is present as well, it acts as a further block to them.

So again, tune into your experience in these states where the concentration feels good and notice the absence of the hindrances in that situation. It's such a delight to have the mind not being assailed by desire and aversion, restlessness, dullness, doubt.

The Buddha said that one who has temporarily set aside the hindrances feels like someone who has been freed from debt, who has recovered from sickness, and who has been released from prison. It's a really beautiful state.

And we may only touch it for a few moments, and we may think it's nothing really special. It's just kind of a passing meditation state. But it's really a pointer to this true nature that we want to get more and more familiar with. This is what our hearts and minds are capable of when we're not distracted. This is, you could say, the basis of our being.

They say that as concentration develops, you can start to look for five factors that are signs of it. And these are called the five jhanic factors. When they're strengthened, they lead into strong states of concentration called jhana. And the first is connecting with the object. The second is sustaining the attention on the object.

The object here is the phrase or the image, the person, the heart center, and so on—the feeling itself. The third factor is a quality of rapture. The fourth is the quality of happiness. And the fifth is the quality of one-pointedness, which is that collectedness of mind, that samadhi.

It's said that each of these factors actually offsets one of the hindrances. For example, rapture offsets aversion, because when the mind and body are full of rapture, there's no interest in disliking anything—that experience is intrinsically pleasant. Connecting the attention offsets sloth and torpor. When we rouse the energy to connect to the meditation object, it cuts through dullness. Sustaining the attention offsets doubt, because when we're able to be with the meditation object for a period of time, doubt can't arise. Furthermore, happiness offsets restlessness, because the mind's not going outward. And one-pointedness offsets sense desire—again, we're not looking outward for satisfaction.

As concentration develops, the experience becomes greatly wholesome, free of the disturbances that our minds are usually subject to in normal life and in the early days of retreat. It's not that this kind of experience will be the ongoing reality for all the days of retreat—it may just be there for a few moments, a set of phrases. But tune into the quality of this kind of mind. As we access it more, we generate a pathway back. The more we're able to find it and get to know it, the more familiar it becomes, the easier it is to place ourselves back there. So start to look into these times when the attention is strong and clear, and feel in yourself what that actually feels like.

One of the things that helped me in understanding the practice of loving-kindness was understanding that the path of practice is basically a karmic unfolding. The whole Eightfold Path is an exercise in karma. The overall meaning of karma is essentially this: when we act in the world out of a wholesome intention, wholesome things come back into our life. When we act in the world out of an unwholesome intention, unwholesome results, painful results, come back into our life.

The whole unfolding of the metta practice depends on karma in the same way. The essence of karma is intention—what is our intention in acting? If it's a wholesome intention, what comes back into our life is wholesome. When we're doing the metta practice, we're generating wholesome intentions moment after moment after moment: this intention of caring about someone else or ourselves. It's that little seed of caring that is

the karmic engine that drives the metta practice. Moment after moment, we are developing the wholesome, acting on the wholesome. In fact, you could say that the path is really for those who love the wholesome, who delight in the wholesome.

In Tibetan teachings, the phrases for loving-kindness and compassion are clearly karmic phrases. The Brahma-viharas are called the Four Immeasurables, and the metta phrase in the Tibetan tradition is expressed like this: "May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue." The compassion phrase is expressed like this: "May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue."

So we start to look at our intention in practice really, really closely, because it is the key to the unfolding. For me, this became more clear with metta than with anything else I'd done. I was practicing in my first metta retreat, and I'd been doing it for about ten days. The practice was starting to develop nicely. The mind was settling down. I was starting to get some feelings of caring. Then something came in externally that interrupted the flow of my meditation. It threw me off track for about a day.

I started to settle back in, and I really wanted to get back to where I had been. Have you noticed that? Sometimes it's so sweet, all you want to do is get back to it. So I was in that headspace—I just want to get back. So I tried really hard. I tried really hard with myself. I tried really hard with my benefactor, which is what I was up to at that point. And it just wasn't coming together. I was struggling. My body was tense.

I was hurting. I wasn't getting any concentration. There wasn't any peace at all. And then I had an interview with Joseph, as it turned out, who was my teacher at that point. I told him my situation, and he did a very skillful little intervention. He pointed out that I was trying to get back to something pleasant. And he said, "But Guy, we're not doing this practice for ourselves. We're doing it for the other."

All of a sudden this light went off in my head. I'd forgotten about really caring about the other. And that's when I saw that my effort had become corrupted. It had become completely self-centered—I didn't care about my benefactor anymore. I just wanted to get back to my own peace and happiness. So I was doing the phrases in order to get calm, and what it was doing was making me tense. Or if I was doing the phrases in order to feel metta, because it felt good to feel metta, that was a selfish motivation. And that doesn't work either. Or if we do the phrases to make the result happen—you know, I think I'm going to make my benefactor happy—that's striving also, and that doesn't work.

So there's only one way to do this practice so that it works, and that is to genuinely care about the people that you're sending to. But the curious thing is when we genuinely care about the people that we're sending to, it feels great. And for me, this was a really beautiful teaching on karma, on right effort, on wise intention, and on generosity. Because what it points to is that when our real intention is wholesome and not self-centered, it rebounds in filling us up with peace and happiness and joy. But if we start doing pseudo-practice in order to feel those things, it doesn't work.

So the metta practice is a constant reflection of the authenticity of our intention. You can't trick this practice. If the intention isn't quite right, it won't deepen in exactly the same way.

Now, it's also important to say that the strength of our intention and our ability to really be with it goes through lots of ups and downs. Samadhi is a very impermanent factor. And you may have noticed that. You can get really concentrated in one sitting, do the same thing, bring the same integrity of effort, and the next sitting it will have fallen apart. And it's not because you have done anything wrong. It's just because samadhi is an impermanent factor. Whether you did it perfectly or imperfectly, it's going to come together and it's going to fall apart. It's going to come together and it's going to fall apart. So don't take it personally. It's a very impersonal process.

And mindfulness, for example, is a much steadier factor in life than concentration. The path kind of develops mindfulness on an overall upward line. But concentration is bouncing around that upward line like crazy all the time. So don't worry about it. Don't feel like you've done anything wrong or like you have to really change the way you're practicing. Just hang in there with it and wait for it to come back together, which it will.

You can't make concentration happen. The proximate cause of concentration—I thought this was really interesting—is happiness. It's not effort, which is what I'd assumed for a long time. It's happiness. So again, there's that sense of just the contentment of settling within ourselves as being the key to concentration. If we have our effort directed to a particular goal that's kind of a self-centered goal, that kind of effort doesn't work.

There's a story from Japan. A young student of karate goes to the greatest master of karate in all of Japan. And a very dedicated student, traveled all the way across the country to meet the master, goes up to the master and says, "I want to be the best student in all of Japan. How long will it take me?"

The master says, "Ten years."

And the student says, "Ten years, that's a really long time, but I'll train twice as hard as anybody else of your students. Then how long will it take me?"

The master says, "Oh, in that case, twenty years."

And the student says, "But I'll stay up all night training. Then how long will it take?"

"Thirty years."

And the student says, "Well, how come? I'm willing to do anything!"

And the master's reply is: "Because someone who has one eye on the destination has only one eye to see the way."

Can we bring this kind of quality into our practice of loving-kindness—really with our attention on the way and not on the destination? And what that really means is: can we make a really full effort and not be attached to the results, to the outcome?

When I reflected on this a little, I realized that's also what our Vipassana practice is asking. The Vipassana practice really, in its pure form, works when you're willing to be fully in the present moment without expecting anything back out of it. If there's an expectation of something back, then desire is active, and then the ego is involved again.

So in Vipassana: can you come into the present moment fully without expecting anything in return? But metta takes it a step further: can you come into the present moment fully without expecting anything in return and give away everything you've got? Give away your heart and your caring and your kindness. Then it unfolds.

That's the amazing thing about life in virtue, life in generosity, life in giving. This is from Rilke:

"I believe in all that has never yet been spoken. I want to free what waits within me so that what no one has dared to wish for may for once spring clear without my contriving. If this is arrogant, God, forgive me, but this is what I need to say. May what I do flow from me like a river, no forcing and no holding back the way it is with children."

I really like this image of "the way it is with children" to describe our natural state of mind. As children, we had access to that natural state of mind in a very ongoing way. Unfortunately, children don't have the wisdom to support it. And so that natural state of mind gets covered over and closed down as the years go by, and we have less and less access.

But if you hang out around kids, you'll see that natural state of mind. It's hard to get a kid out of the present moment. They almost don't know any other way to be than the present moment. And the joy and the love and the instinct for generosity.

Sylvia's grandson and granddaughter were at lunch today with us. And Harrison's grandson is three and a half—a very bright, verbally precocious guy and a beautiful spirit. At the end of the meal, we had all pretty much finished, and he had brought a box of cookies from home. He went around to each of us at the table and asked us if we wanted a cookie.

I was engaged in another conversation and didn't quite get what was happening. He came over and offered me a cookie, and I said, "No thanks, I'm not hungry." Sally kind of nudged me and said, "Yeah, take the cookie." So I said, "Oh, thank you. Thank you very much," and I took the cookie.

And Harrison said, "I brought this box of cookies from home so I could share it with the people here."

It was so sweet and so spontaneous and not something he'd been taught—just something he wanted to do. It was that natural impulse of generosity. It was a very nice cookie too.

This gives me a lot of trust that our basic nature, which we see in children all the time, is so good. There's so much goodness and happiness in it, but it's gotten obscured over the years of habit, over the years of self-centeredness, of unwise intention.

So often now, as adults, we kind of feel victimized by our own mind stream. We feel the victim of these forces that come in—the various manifestations of greed, aversion, and confusion. When we look closely, we see how we generate them ourselves. When we touch a certain depth, we see that they are volitional. But it's hard to touch that kind of depth.

But in the metta practice, we're doing something really pretty radical. We're taking the unwholesome thoughts that often come and we're replacing them with the thoughts of the metta phrases.

We're taking the images that often provoke anxiety or regret or grief and replacing them with images of people we care about. We're taking the feelings that frequently invade—of fear or sadness or wanting—and beginning to encourage the heart to move toward metta, toward acceptance, toward peace, toward love.

What we're actually doing is taking control of our own mindstream and orienting it in a wholesome direction. This is very audacious. This is a big, big undertaking.

When you feel in the flow with the phrases, with the image, and with the feeling of metta, you are protected. You are protected from any unwholesome influx from thoughts, images, or emotions. This is a big deal. It's not something we learn to master in a day or a single retreat. It's really a lifetime of dedication. But this is the direction we're moving in. This is the direction of the loving-kindness practice.

So don't feel badly if it doesn't all come together all day long. If you connect with one of these elements and you have wholesome thoughts in your mind for a good part of a sitting, that's a big deal. If you have wholesome images, that's significant. If the feelings of loving-kindness in its various forms start to come through, that's a real shift. Little by little, we develop it more and more and become increasingly protected.

The curious thing is it all revolves around this simple intention for caring. We can't replace these mental formations in a heavy-handed way because that would only come out of more desire, more greed, and more aversion. So we start the shift just out of this simple act of caring, and then we surrender. We put it out, and then we trust in the universe to grow those seeds into the flowers of metta and samadhi.

We can't force those things to happen. But we can plant the seed and then surrender. And so we're back again with faith. We're back again in the atmosphere of trust. We say the phrase, we connect with the caring, and then we just open and let the Dharma carry us. This path of faith is a whole path in itself.

The Buddha described this state of loving-kindness as an immeasurable deliverance of mind. Feel it when you're in that space. It is a deliverance. It is a liberation. And it's a boundless one, an immeasurable deliverance of mind, when the mindstream is protected like that. Then we trust more in opening up to the Dharma, to the flow of this current.

I'll close with a quotation from the Buddha: "Pingya," he said, "other people have freed themselves by the power of trust. Vakali, Bhadravuda and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Let's just sit together for a minute, please. Other people have freed themselves by the power of trust. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death.

CHAPTER 232

Vicissitudes of Life

Guy Armstrong · 1h05

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the challenge of maintaining spiritual presence while navigating the complexities of modern life. Drawing primarily from the Aṅguttara Nikāya teaching on "The Vicissitudes of Life," he explores how the Buddha identified eight worldly conditions that dominate our attention: gain and loss, success and failure, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Armstrong illustrates through personal stories and examples how these alternating conditions inevitably create dukkha when we mistake them for sources of lasting happiness.*
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> *The talk addresses why staying present in daily life proves so difficult, examining both external distractions and internal conditioning patterns. Armstrong emphasizes that true fulfillment comes from knowing our essential nature beyond name and form, rather than pursuing endless worldly desires. He discusses the importance of simplification and renunciation—not necessarily of outer possessions, but of inner clinging to these changing conditions.*
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> *Drawing on teachings from various Buddhist masters including Ajahn Chah and contemporary teachers, Armstrong shows how equanimity allows us to be "in the world but not of it." The talk concludes with reflections on the brahmavihāras (loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity) and how spiritual practice can shift our motivation from getting to giving, opening the bodhisattva path of service to others.*

For those of you who weren't here at the beginning, my name is Guy Armstrong. I'm one of the Spirit Rock teachers. Sylvia couldn't be here this morning, so she asked me to sit in with you all, and I'm really happy to be here. I've had great times with Sylvia's group in the past, so I'm delighted to come again.

What I thought we might talk about this morning is something along the themes of our worldly life and our spiritual life. While these two don't need to be in conflict, they often are. Especially living in Marin County in the twenty-first century—life is so complicated these days and so expensive around here. That breeds some of the problems, and some of it also is a shift in values that happens as we get more and more into practice. So I wanted to talk about this from a few different directions—looking at both the outer and the inner relationship to these questions.

Somebody asked me at the end of a retreat recently, up the hill. They were in an interview and asked, "Why is it so hard to stay present in daily life?" I thought that was a really good question because I think we should all be looking at that question in our own lives, in our own experience.

So I'll just put it out to you all as a group: Why is it so hard to stay present in daily life?

A participant responded that it seems normal, even more than normal—universal. "Well, the distractions are endless, multiplying, and overwhelming."

"Lots of distractions," I replied. "Such as?"

"Traffic drives you crazy, or the price of everything drives you nuts, and the crowds of people swarming around are incredibly aggravating."

Certainly there are lots of stimulations, lots of things to deal with out there.

Another participant shared: "I'd like to just say how I had a difficult time coming here today. The exits or entrances to the freeway were closed and I didn't know how to come. I thought I was going to beat the whole system by having a tape of Sylvia Boorstein listening to her talking about how to be happy. She also has one on road rage, so that's a good one. So I was very focused on listening to her tape. Consequently, I got lost.

"Trying to outdo the Fairfax construction and taking side roads, I ended up going back to the East Bay. When I finally realized that I was really on the wrong road, I had to turn the tape off. And then I started to cry because I thought, 'I'm really confused. I'm really trying very hard.' I was just on my first residential retreat this last weekend. I'm having a very difficult time re-entering, or holding on to that, and trying to come back here—it was the only safe place I knew to come, and yet I couldn't get here.

"I left in plenty of time, and it took me over an hour to get here, and I was late. Once I turned the tape off and clearly focused on what was going on—if I went on Center Street, I would avoid all that confusion. And I got here in a short time. So trying to beat the system doesn't seem to work. What happened is I wasn't fully able to listen to what Sylvia was saying because I had to pay attention to the traffic. Trying to do two things at once did not really work."

This is really a good illustration of spiritual values and worldly values, and where we put the emphasis in our attention.

Another participant offered: "I think the problem is that your mind tends to jump around from subject to subject anyway, even when there's no stimuli."

I'd like to look at both aspects of that comment. The first part was that the mind tends to jump around anyway, even when there aren't stimuli. I think this is a really important thing for meditators to start to notice and to take into account.

Our minds are habitual in their jumping around. This is sometimes described as monkey mind, where the mind just swings from one branch to the next and won't let go of one branch until it sees the next one to cling onto. This tendency of the mind to always be occupied with some kind of distraction is a really important thing to come to terms with.

This is something that can be trained. This is really the purpose of meditation—to train this habit to be in a different mode so that the mind starts to like being in the present moment more and more, and sees that it doesn't actually need these distracting thoughts to cling onto in times when there's basically peace or lack of stimulation around. So partly we could say this is a habit, but as you mentioned, when there are lots of stimuli coming in, it stirs the mind up even further.

Another participant observed, "I think the modern day tendency is that there are so many complexities in modern life that our attention is drawn in many ways. I've often thought that actually one of the banes of modern existence is this tendency towards what we call multitasking. And I think it's a fallacy because I read an interesting article that a scientific study has shown that attention cannot be drawn in more than one direction. Instead of increasing our focus, it actually decreases the focus on tasks. The concept of mindfulness seems to be a strong antidote to that. I noticed it the other day, making a peanut butter sandwich. It was actually a delight to take a moment and focus on what I was doing, spreading the peanut butter, cutting the bread. It was actually a delightful respite."

I think these comments are right on. The dividing of attention, when we look at what it does inwardly, fragments us. As a culture, we've kind of lost our ability to be wholehearted with what we do in the present moment. You look at kids—they have that. They're completely with whatever they're doing. You give them one thing to do, and if it engages them, they're 100% with it. Whereas for us, we've been so fragmented by training that it's hard to bring 100% of our attention and energy to anything we do. Mindfulness offers a clear alternative of fully being with what is in the present.

Someone else added, "Underneath that is the reason why we feel we need to multitask. There are so many cultural messages saying we're not doing enough, we should be more, we're not good enough the way we are. You can get rather desperate activity trying to remedy that, but it doesn't seem to work."

This gets to another piece of the heart of what I wanted us to explore this morning: In our worldly life, are we doing the things that will actually bring us happiness? Or are we getting lost and distracted in our very activities, leading down a trail that will lead somewhere but not necessarily to real happiness?

A final participant noted that this conditioning is something really highlighted by the practice of meditation. When we start to try to come into the present in an ongoing and consistent way, we really see how easily the mind just swings to the past or the future out of habit, out of conditioning. The good news is that this can be changed, retrained. We can learn a new habit.

These comments have highlighted many of the themes I hoped we would touch on this morning. Let me ask: how many people here have been on at least a day-long silent retreat? And how many have been on a residential meditation retreat?

One of the things we find when we try to sustain this practice of mindfulness over eight hours or eight days is that it becomes pretty much a full-time job. It can take all of our attention just to stay in the present moment. The nice thing about the retreat setting is we don't have any other responsibilities. We don't have to interact with people, carry out our jobs, take care of our children, or look after our partners. The only task we have in those settings is to be in the present moment with our experience. And we find out how difficult that is, even when we don't have anything else to do.

But I mean, I don't know if people would be willing to share—how much of the time are you able to be in the present moment even under these ideal settings? Ten percent? Twenty percent? A little tiny bit? It's hard. It's tough work. And that's when we don't have anything else to do.

Now, then we go back into worldly life. As practitioners, if we want to take this practice on as a real commitment, we want to bring that ability to be in the present moment fully into our daily life as well. This is not just something we do on the cushion or during a daylong or in a silent retreat. We really want to live from that place of being in the present moment. And there's no reason that we can't, with training and with practice. That's really what practice is for. It is possible, but it takes a lot of work.

So in lay life, we have this full-time job of wanting to be in the present. We have another full-time job in lay life, in worldly life—which I'm sure you've noticed—of earning a livelihood, taking care of our family, looking after our health, doing our volunteer work and service work, looking after aging parents and children, relationships and so

on. So we basically, in worldly life, have two full-time jobs: being in the present and attentive to all of that, and taking care of all the external things that we need to take care of.

So it's no wonder that it takes a while to put these two full-time jobs together. Don't be discouraged if this doesn't happen automatically or easily. This is a long process of training. They can go together, but what's happening is that we have to divide our attention—or we might say our intention—just as you shared about driving over here and trying to listen to a tape and also follow the detour signs.

In worldly life we need to bring our attention into the present moment. That's one sustained attention we need to maintain. But then we also need to care for all the things of our daily life with a lot of attention also. So we're kind of divided, and I'd say there's an inherent conflict in the beginning for us because we're trying to support two intentions, two different intentions at the same time.

"It seems like there's just not really enough time today if you don't move like that. If I'm not reading while I'm walking my dog..."

I think we are way overscheduled. I think that's really true. And sometimes it seems like the only answer is to jam things in further together.

How many of you have seen the movie *Himalaya*? About the same number who've been on these residential retreats. *Himalaya* is playing at the Rafael and probably other places in the Bay Area. It's about village life—theoretically in Tibet, actually filmed in Nepal—about the life of people who grow grain and then trade that grain for salt, trade the salt for more grain. So you get a sense—it could have been set a thousand years ago, could have been filmed a thousand years ago—of the simplicity of the life that people used to live.

This is true in our culture as well. In western culture, farming was the occupation of most of the nation a hundred or two hundred years ago. That simple, down-to-earth life where there weren't things like tax-free mutual funds and a hundred different kinds of sandwich that you could order every time you go to the deli, ten different activities for your children after they finish the school day. Life was much, much simpler and kind of lent itself to being in the present moment in a way that modern life really doesn't.

So on some level I think we probably need to take a look as practitioners at the complexity of our outer lives. I see in myself as I get older and in a lot of friends as we get older a real interest in simplifying. Now there's a time in life when that's not possible. When you're starting a career and raising a family, especially in this area—it's so ex-

pensive, there are so many demands—there may not be any choices for simplification. But as we get older and some of the family responsibilities start to lift, I really think we need to look seriously at simplifying and creating space.

When we create space outwardly, it creates so much more space in the mind. It's amazing.

Taking the outer clutter away just opens up a huge amount of inner spaciousness. Even choices like how much television we watch, how many films we go to, how many magazines we read during a week—renunciation in those areas can make a difference too. The outer dimension is important.

But I want to focus primarily on the inner. Part of the problem is that we have these dual intentions: to look after ourselves and our families while remaining present as we do so. But worldly life offers so many seductive possibilities. There are countless ways we can lose track of our spiritual orientation because our culture simply doesn't support spiritual values. I don't believe it supports them at all. Try talking to your employer about taking an extra week's leave for a meditation retreat and see how supportive the external situation is.

Worldly life offers many possibilities that are intriguing, fulfilling, rich—lots of people to meet, things to do, ways to become known, ways to serve. But they don't necessarily support a spiritual life. The problem is that we can get lost in any one of these avenues.

I was talking to someone this week who had lost her partner to cancer. She told me that before her partner's death, she was very wrapped up in her career—it was almost more important than her family. Going through the illness and death of her partner totally shifted her priorities. Her career now feels hollow to her because she sees how much more important the people in her life are.

But until we get a wake-up call like that, we can all tend to put a huge amount of emphasis on career. There are many enjoyable aspects to work situations these days, but at the end of the day, I wonder if it's the most important thing in our life. This is something we need to examine.

I want to share a couple of quotations from what might be called a new breed of spiritual teacher—people not connected with any tradition who have awakened on their own. Eckhart Tolle is a prime example. His book, *The Power of Now*, has been on the San Francisco bestseller list for about four months. It's not on the national bestseller list, but it has remained on the Bay Area list for some time.

Tolle is fifty-three, German by birth, now living in Canada. He had a spontaneous awakening some years ago and spent time sitting on a park bench, sharing his understanding with people who wandered by. Now he teaches, and I think his book is quite good.

He writes about working with difficult emotions, the afflictive emotions of the mind: "All these emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who you are beyond name and form."

This is dense, so let me clarify. Who we truly are is not this body and personality. Who we truly are is something that goes beyond our name and form—something the Buddha pointed to as the deathless. All major religions point to an aspect of immortality in our being that is formless. Tolle is saying that when we lose touch with knowing that we are deathless in the most fundamental way, a deep anguish arises from that disconnection.

I'd also like to share from another teacher in this same vein: Tony Parsons, a British teacher born in 1933 who had a spontaneous awakening at twenty. In his book *As It Is*, he writes: "Whatever I seek or think I want, all of my desires are only a reflection of my longing to come home. Home is my original nature. It is right here, simply in what is."

Both teachers are essentially saying the same thing. Eckhart Tolle points to the pain of that loss; Tony Parsons points to the desire to return. Parsons suggests that all forms of desire are really just a longing to return to knowing who we truly are, because that's the only place lasting fulfillment can come from.

What I think happens in our worldly life is that these myriad forms of desire point us in different directions—toward money, fame, sexual relationships, pleasures of food and drink, beautiful houses. All these proliferating desires are misleading indicators of what we really want. What we really want is to know our being beyond name and form, beyond birth and death, beyond perishing. But having lost touch with that, we seek it through many avenues that ultimately cannot lead to lasting happiness.

This doesn't mean these outer activities are wrong.

We need to be involved in a livelihood that takes care of ourselves. We need to be involved in looking after our family and our partners and our parents. So the question is: to what extent can we be involved in those areas and not get misled about what's really important and where our real happiness is going to come from?

To me, the best description of where we get misled is spelled out by the Buddha in a sutta from the Anguttara Nikaya called "The Vicissitudes of Life." It's a great title. And it starts off like this: "These eight worldly conditions, O monks, keep the world turning around. And the world turns around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, success and failure, praise and blame, pleasure and pain."

He's basically saying the way we get misled is we mistake these eight conditions as the most important things in life. And the degree to which we invest in them is the degree to which we carry ourselves off from our true spiritual track.

I find these very helpful topics for reflection and to look in my own life at how much my focus in living and where I put my time and energy is around these eight situations, as opposed to the true spiritual practice of knowing who I am, coming back to my source. Because the problem with these conditions is they're always changeable. They always alternate. Have you ever known anyone who has experienced only gain, only success, only pleasure, or only praise? It's not possible. They alternate for all of us.

And if our happiness is bound up just with the positive half, we're going to get slammed when we encounter the negative. It's not through any fault of our own that we encounter the negative. Everybody encounters loss and pain and blame and failure. Even the Buddha. And I'll tell some of the stories about the Buddha's difficulties as we go, just so you know, even if you're really cooled out, these things happen to you.

Let me talk a little bit about each of them. I'll talk first about gain and loss, and I don't really want to get into the kinds of great losses in our life. I think losing a partner to death, losing a child, loss of parents—those are major things and hopefully we only encounter those relatively few times in our life. But mostly the Buddha talked about gain and loss in more worldly terms.

And in worldly terms, this is a great territory, the Bay Area, to see gain and loss. You've probably noticed the stories in the newspapers over the last year—the dot-com downturn, the stock market collapse. There are huge stories of wealth rising and falling in this area.

I'll just tell one from my experience. About thirteen years ago, I went to work for Microsoft. They were still a small company back then. I worked for them for about five years. It was after I left that they started getting into all their trouble—that's their problem.

My first boss, the guy who hired me into the company, was a really great guy. I liked him a lot as a person and as a manager. Shortly after I was there, he got into kind of a political difficulty in the company. He got passed over for a promotion, and the job went

to somebody else in our office who he didn't respect, didn't think was a good manager. He was very upset that he'd been passed over, and he was more upset that now he had to report to this other person who he felt was not as good a manager as he was.

One thing led to another, and one day in a peak of anger, he resigned, tendered his resignation. Over the weekend he had second thoughts, because I came to find out he had about 10,000 stock options back then in Microsoft. And over the years since then, Microsoft stock has split a total of 72 times. So today that would be something like 720,000 shares of Microsoft, which he could have bought at something like a dollar a share. I figured out that today he would have been worth about $40 million if he had stayed with the company.

But in a fit of anger, he tendered his resignation. He called up on Monday and said, "You know, I'm very sorry. I didn't mean it. I'd like to take it back." But his new manager said, "I'm sorry. Your resignation has already been accepted." Forty million dollars. Boom.

A friend of mine commented because of the stock market collapse that he knows people who are worth twenty million dollars now who feel themselves to be poor because a year ago they were worth forty million dollars. And you know there's a lot of dukkha in the collapse of the stock market. We don't hear much about it, I think, because people at that level are embarrassed to talk about feeling poor with twenty million dollars—and probably they should be.

But there's a lot of dukkha in the collapse of the stock market, the gain and the loss.

So the Buddha goes on to talk about how he sees relating to these conditions. He says, "These eight worldly conditions are encountered by an uninstructed worldling"—meaning someone who hasn't heard the teachings—"and they are also encountered by an instructed noble disciple. What is the difference between these two?"

He goes on to say, "When an uninstructed worldling comes upon gain, he does not reflect upon it thus: This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change. He does not know it as it really is. And when he comes upon loss, he does not reflect upon it thus: This is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change. He does not know it as it really is.

"With such a person, gain and loss keep his mind engrossed. When gain comes, he is elated, and when he meets with loss, he is dejected. Being thus involved in likes and dislikes, he will not be freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, grief, and despair. He will not be freed from suffering, I declare.

"But, O monks, when an instructed noble disciple comes upon gain, he reflects on it thus: This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change. And so he will reflect when loss comes upon him. He understands these things as they really are, and they do not engross his mind. Thus he will not be elated by gain or dejected by loss. Having thus given up likes and dislikes, he will be freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, grief, and despair. He will be freed from suffering, I declare.

"This, monks, is the difference between an instructed noble disciple and an uninstructed worldling."

So the Buddha is basically pointing to an equanimity of mind as we meet the changing conditions that life presents—the changing conditions of gain and loss. And an important aspect of it is wisdom, that we see the impermanent nature of gain and loss. We see that nobody is always gaining. Nobody is always being praised. Nobody just has the positive side of these things. These things change for everybody.

There's another amazing story from the Tibetan tradition about this. This is a teacher named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He was born in Tibet in 1932, escaped from Tibet in 1959 and went to India. He's a very great Dzogchen master—one of the greatest probably of the last fifty years, and one of the few who came to the West and taught in the West, and somebody I had the pleasure of meeting. Very impressive man.

He'd practiced in Tibet and gotten a lot of high realization. He'd gotten instruction from some very great teachers. And then he came to India as part of the Tibetan refugee movement. And there wasn't a lot of provision for Tibetan refugees in India. There wasn't a great safety net, you might say.

He says, "I lived in India for twenty-five years by myself without accumulating anything. Just one old man alone. Sometimes I gave Dharma talks in monasteries. Sometimes I stayed with sadhus in Rishikesh and Hardwar, along the Ganges, in ashrams, under trees, wherever the descent of dusk found me. So many different dreamlike experiences. Sometimes I gave empowerments to great assemblies of people, including dozens of tulkus and lamas, where they put a golden initiation vase in my hand and I placed it on the heads of thousands of monks."

So here he was in this position of great exaltation and giving blessings to thousands of Tibetan practitioners.

"At other times I was utterly poor, living hand to mouth on the streets in Calcutta, wandering around with my hand out begging for pennies... So many unexpected ups and downs. Who can describe them? Life is like that—full of unexpected twists and turns, impermanent, ungovernable and unstable. What a spectacle!"

So even great realized beings encounter these same kinds of swings of fortune that we do. And then how do we relate to them? How do we deal with them?

The Buddha was not immune to these either. At one point it said in the suttas that he realized through his psychic powers he could take the highest mountain in the Himalayas and turn it into gold. And he contemplated, should he do that or not? I mean, that would have been good for the monks and nuns, right? To have a mountain of gold and then they could always be supported.

But he chose not to do it. And what he reflected on, he said, is that there's no end to the greed for gold. Once you start down that path, it's never satisfied. So he just didn't do it.

The Tibetan definition of renunciation is beautifully simple: to accept what comes into our life and to let go of what goes out of our life. Accept them both equally.

This teaching resonates with the Buddha's own words: "Insignificant, O monks, is the loss of wealth and fame. The loss of wisdom is the greatest loss. Insignificant, O monks, is the increase of wealth and fame. The increase of wisdom is the greatest gain. Therefore, monks, you should train yourselves thus: We will grow in the increase of wisdom."

Praise and blame present another fascinating area for reflection. I once thought the Buddha was so impeccable in his speech and actions that nobody could criticize him, that nobody could blame him. But this isn't the case at all. The Buddha encountered praise and blame just like everyone else. In fact, he taught that there is no one in this world who is not subject to praise and blame.

His own cousin tried to kill him. This cousin was also a monk who had grown jealous of the Buddha's position at the head of the Sangha. Wanting that position for himself, he attempted to murder the Buddha so he could take over. Fortunately, he missed.

The Buddha would often travel to villages with monks and nuns, only to have people spread false stories about them, slandering them and claiming they were evil people trying to harm the community. Sometimes villagers would try to deprive them of food out of jealousy or local disputes. Even the Buddha was not immune from such treatment.

Ajahn Sumedho, the great American teacher who was here about a month ago, shared a profound story about this. As a young monk, he simply wanted to be a hermit. He dreamed of going away to a cave or a little hut in the forest to practice on his own for the rest of his life. But his teacher, Ajahn Chah, kept forcing him into more and more responsibility in the monasteries, eventually making him an abbot after only eight years of practice.

Ajahn Sumedho protested: "How can you do this after eight years? You practiced for twenty years before becoming an abbot. How can you make me one after only eight years?"

Ajahn Chah simply replied, "This is what's needed, Sumedho. You go do it."

Now Ajahn Sumedho deeply appreciates what happened. Being thrown into community life meant receiving so much criticism and anger that he had to learn how to work with these reactions. If he had simply gone into the forest to live a peaceful, solitary life, he would never have learned to deal with praise and blame. He would have always remained afraid of other people. But through years of community life, he developed remarkable equanimity—a kind of fearlessness you can truly feel in his presence. Now people can say anything to him, and he remains untroubled by it.

Pleasure and pain alternate in our lives constantly. I don't need to dwell on this since it's so central to meditation practice—observing how we respond to pleasure with grasping and how we try to push away pain.

Success and failure present another key area for contemplation. In certain ways, we naturally want to be successful. In our livelihood, we want to earn enough to support ourselves and our families. In relationships, we want happiness rather than suffering. We want to contribute meaningfully to the world through our work and service. But there's a way we can go beyond what's actually needed, becoming focused on accumulating wealth or fame and pegging our self-worth to external measures of success.

The same pattern appears in meditation. We want a practice that helps us open and grow. To me, the true measure of meditation is whether difficult emotions are diminishing over the years—less anxiety and fear, more generosity and kindness, less anger. These are the real tests. But these aren't short-term goals. To make genuine character changes, I think in terms of about five years to truly gauge whether practice is working.

There's a way we want to be successful, but if we try to control what happens moment by moment and base our success on that immediate control, we tie ourselves in knots. It's essential to approach meditation with a spacious attitude: Whatever happens when I sit down to meditate is perfectly okay. This openness itself creates the optimal conditions for practice.

If you become tight about wanting high-level concentration right now, or insist on staying with every breath for an entire hour, you can make yourself incredibly tense in meditation.

You don't get the benefits of relaxation from it.

Ajahn Chah had a saying that I like very much. He said that in worldly terms, everybody wants to succeed and they don't want to fail. But in spiritual terms, success and failure are of equal value. Success and failure are of equal value. We often learn more from failing than we ever do from succeeding, and failure brings humility, which is such an important part of the path.

What we really want to develop as practitioners is a way to be in the world but not dominated by it. Sometimes we say "in the world but not of it," which I understand to mean not dominated by its values. When we're after worldly values, there's no lasting satisfaction because they're always changing. They alternate for everyone.

For me, being in the world but not of it means I'm in the world, but my intention is to deepen my understanding of who I am and to deepen my compassion and loving-kindness in the world. I try not to put my primary emphasis on gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure. The more I invest in those things beyond what's necessary to support my life and my family's life, the more I feel it takes energy away from the spiritual orientation.

There's a wonderful example of this attitude with Ajahn Chomnian, a Thai monk who comes here once a year. Many of you may have met him. In one dharma talk, he described his work as abbot of a very large monastery in Thailand. He's a famous monk there, and he explained: "I see people from the time I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night. Sometimes non-stop. I'm just seeing people all day long. It's monks and nuns who want to talk about their meditation practice. It's lay people coming from the nearby town or village to talk about their family life and work situation. It's monastery administrators who want to know how much money we have to spend on new buildings. I receive people all day long."

But he said, "I never get tired. I try to tell my monks how to do that, but nobody else seems able to do it. I'll tell you my secret: I never get tired because I'm always resting in emptiness as I talk to them."

The way I interpret this is that he is always in a space of non-clinging, a space of freedom. Even though these stories of gain and loss, suffering and happiness are going on in front of him, he doesn't cling to them. He's not drawn out of that space of peace—that clear, aware seeing—by the changing conditions of life. This is what's truly needed to be in the world but not of it.

This means we actually have to care more about our freedom, our inner freedom, than we care about the changing nature of gain and loss, success and failure going on all around us. This is why renunciation is such an important value. Renunciation doesn't mean you have to give away all your goods and move out of Marin to live in a shack in the Sierra. It means that mentally we're not so invested in those outward things. It's giving up the inner clinging that opens the door to freedom, not necessarily giving up the outer.

When we're not in the world so much about getting, getting, getting for ourselves, our motivation shifts. We can start to look at our reason for being in the world more from a place of giving. This is where our practice begins to enter onto the bodhisattva track. When our reason for being in the world moves from getting to giving, that opens the door for us to act and be in the world as bodhisattvas. A person like that, in the real flowering of the bodhisattva spirit, remains in the world out of concern for others.

I'll close with a quotation from Shantideva, one of the Dalai Lama's favorites, from the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life: "For as long as space endures and as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the unhappiness of this world."

Let's stop there and see if there are comments, reflections, or discussion.

A participant raised a point about my earlier comments on farming: "It's a little off everything you discussed, but at the very beginning when you talked about life on the farm as a life of simplicity and so much better than our modern complexity, my partner's parents and grandparents grew up on farms in Wisconsin. They worked night and day, and they hated it. I understand what you're saying—there's a simplicity that we would like to feel. I enjoy farming myself, for example, which doesn't have all the pressure to make money and survive attached to it. But I think the reality of farming may not have been so simple."

You're absolutely right. The ideal I'm speaking of is concealed within farming but is, of course, just that—an ideal. The reality of farming for survival was often grueling and difficult.

I agree with that. It's an interesting question how livelihood has evolved over the centuries, even thousands of years of human life. Someone who had studied anthropology quoted a figure to me that I haven't verified, but it may be true. She said that when human beings lived as hunter-gatherers, on average we spent about two hours of our day supplying ourselves with food. That meant there were basically twenty-two hours for other occupations.

From my time in Asia, farming is still very hard work and doesn't bring much income. But there are also seasons where there's not much work at all. Even if people work hard for six months a year—planting rice, tending to it, harvesting it—in the dry period, for rice farmers there's not much to do. So there seem to be much bigger chunks of leisure time built into farming lifestyles than in our modern way of life.

But it's interesting that when you present the alternative to young people today anywhere in the world—to move off the farm and come to the city—they almost all take it. Part of it is because farming life is hard work. Another part is that it's not very glitzy. The nightclubs, the discos, all the action is in the cities. This is happening throughout Asia. Traditional ways of life are being lost as countries become developed. It works for greater comfort and a higher standard of living. I'm not sure it works for dharma values.

Even though farming life is hard, there's a way in which farming economies can better support dharma values through their simplicity. Buddhism in Thailand was stronger fifty years ago than it is today, and I think part of that is the increased affluence. All through Asia, if communism doesn't get Buddhism, capitalism is going to. That seems to be the story.

"This might seem obvious, but I'm trying to understand non-duality. When you were talking about pairs of opposites and told the story of Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Chah being in emptiness or not reacting to either side—are they in non-duality? When you're not affected by both sides, is that what non-duality is?"

There are probably depths to the term non-duality. The main term I would use for their stance is equanimity—where you're not so thrown by the changing circumstances of life. If equanimity deepens, I think it goes into non-duality when you realize there's no self there to own the gain or the loss. Because that's the real non-duality: self and non-self.

When you see through the fiction of subject and object—a subject to experience the gain or loss, and gain or loss as the object—that's what creates the sense of dualism. When we create a strong sense of subject and object in relation to something happening, it brings up the sense of self. Non-duality really means the sense of self is not present, so there's not a very strong experience of subject and object. Even if there's a slight experience of subject and object, if the wisdom factor is present, we know there's no true self involved. Those subject-object formations just arise lightly in the moment, but they don't grab us. They don't deceive us.

"I'm following on what you said about staying in that sense of equanimity in all our relationships. You know, I call it being with somebody who—it's not their fault, but for me they're maybe an energy sucker. You're with them and you're just exhausted for whatever reason. To be able to hold that place of equanimity—I can see where that would be wonderful. To be in that place all the time, I think that would really be it. But I'm not sure I could do that on an ongoing basis. That must take a lot of practice."

The near enemy of equanimity is indifference. It sounds like the person you were with may have been manifesting indifference rather than true equanimity. True equanimity never closes the heart. It's not about withdrawing or becoming emotionally unavailable. It's about holding someone's pain or joy with complete presence and love, while simultaneously understanding that their experiences are unfolding according to the natural laws of karma.

When someone we care about gets cancer, true equanimity would look like being fully present with their suffering, offering whatever support we can, feeling the natural grief and concern that arises, and at the same time holding the bigger picture that their illness is part of their karmic journey. It's not about being detached or unmoved. It's about being deeply moved and simultaneously peaceful with the reality of what is happening.

Indifference, on the other hand, is a closing down, a withdrawal, an emotional distancing that can feel very cold and hurtful to someone who is suffering. So I think what you experienced was not true equanimity at all, but rather this near enemy of indifference.

True equanimity would have allowed that person to be completely present with you, to feel their own grief about your illness, to offer whatever support they could, and to hold you with tremendous love while also holding the understanding that this illness was part of your path. Does that distinction make sense?

The Brahmaviharas always work together. We can't practice true equanimity without metta, without loving-kindness. The heart stays wide open. We just add this quality of accepting what is, of understanding the lawful nature of experience, without closing down to the immediacy of what's happening.

And so equanimity really comes from a place where the heart is open and can feel and respond to other people's suffering, but there's no inner disturbance happening alongside that responsiveness.

What it sounds like to me is that your friend had an equanimity that was shading toward indifference and didn't have the kind of equanimity that includes a truly compassionate dimension. Equanimity can be used to armor the heart, which is not what's supposed to happen. The Brahmavihāras are meant to open the heart.

If you look at the Dalai Lama, he's like a grandmother when he's around somebody who's suffering. He'll enter a group and his radar will zero in on the person who's experiencing the most pain, and he'll go directly to them—taking care of them, talking with them, holding them. But at the same time, he does this with tremendous humor. He won't fall into pity or become glum about the situation. He maintains this bright, joyful presence even while being with people who are suffering. The full expression requires this balance.

A participant named Lynn offered a beautiful insight: "When we're truly wishing ourselves happiness and wishing happiness for other people, we're wishing them to be in that state of emptiness—that openness—so they can take whatever comes and see it in perspective, not owning the things happening around them, but remaining in that spacious state."

This points to something profound. The heart of happiness might indeed be freedom itself. When we engage with the mettā phrases over time, they reveal different sources and conditions for happiness. The first phrase points to being safe and protected from harm. The second relates to being happy at heart. The third connects to harmony with the body—either through health or acceptance of illness. The fourth involves living with ease in the outer world, through harmonious livelihood and family relationships.

As we dwell with these phrases through sustained practice, we see that all of these are components of happiness. But the deepest happiness the Buddha spoke of was inner freedom, inner peace. This becomes one of the essential qualities we wish for others.

There's an important recognition that equanimity is not a passive or neutral quality—it's profoundly benign and beneficial. Equanimity is one of the highest states the Buddha described. In the list of the seven factors of enlightenment, it appears as the factor that immediately precedes enlightenment itself. It appears on numerous important lists, including the Brahmavihāras.

This state of mental balance that remains unmoved by the constant changes of life—the comings and goings, the ups and downs—represents perhaps the closest approximation to nibbāna, to the unconditioned reality, that we can point toward. It is a great state of freedom, where we can meet whatever arises with an open heart that neither pushes away nor clings, but simply receives with wise and compassionate presence.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

CHAPTER 233

Vicissitudes of Life

Guy Armstrong · 31 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines why it's so challenging to stay present in daily life, exploring the tension between worldly responsibilities and spiritual practice. Drawing from the Aṭṭhalokadhammasutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, he discusses the Buddha's teaching on the eight vicissitudes of life: gain and loss, success and failure, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. These conditions, the Buddha taught, keep the world turning in saṃsāra when we become attached to the pleasant experiences and averse to the unpleasant ones.

Armstrong addresses the particular challenges of maintaining mindfulness in modern life, especially in affluent areas where complexity and overscheduling fragment our attention. He explores how our culture's emphasis on multitasking contradicts the wholehearted presence that meditation cultivates. The talk includes practical reflections on simplifying our outer lives to create inner spaciousness, and how all worldly desires ultimately reflect our longing to reconnect with our true nature beyond name and form.

Using contemporary examples from the dot-com era and teachings from modern non-traditional teachers like Eckhart Tolle, Armstrong illustrates how an 'instructed noble disciple' develops equanimity toward life's inevitable changes through understanding their impermanent nature, while an 'uninstructed worldling' remains caught in the cycles of elation and dejection that perpetuate dukkha.

For those of you who weren't here at the beginning, my name's Guy Armstrong. I'm one of the Spirit Rock teachers. Sylvia couldn't be here this morning, so she asked me to sit in with you all, and I'm really happy to be here. I've had great times with Sylvia's group in the past, so I'm happy to come again.

What I thought we might talk about this morning is something along the themes of our worldly life and our spiritual life. While these two don't need to be in conflict, they often are, especially living in Marin County in the 21st century. Life is so complicated these days and so expensive around here. That breeds some of the problems, and some of it is also a shift in values that happens as we get more and more into practice. So I want to talk about this from a few different directions—a little bit the outer and also the inner relationship to these questions.

Somebody asked me at the end of a retreat recently, up the hill, during an interview: "Why is it so hard to stay present in daily life?" I thought that was a really good question because I think we should all be looking at that question in our own lives, in our own experience. So I'll just put it out to you all as a group: Why is it so hard to stay present in daily life? It seems to be more than normal. It seems to be universal.

"The distractions are endless, multiplying and overwhelming," someone responded.

"Yes, lots of distractions. Such as?"

"Well, the traffic drives you crazy. The price of everything drives you nuts. The crowds of people swarming around are incredibly aggravated."

Certainly there are lots of stimulations, lots of things to deal with out there. What else?

"I'd like to just say how I had a difficult time coming here today. There were detours on the road. The exits or entrances to the freeway were closed and I didn't know how to come. I thought I was going to beat this by having the dharma tape on, trying to walk through the Fairfax construction, taking side roads and ending up going back to the East Bay. And when I finally realized that I was really on the wrong road, I had to turn the tape off. I was having a very difficult time re-entering or holding on to presence. And trying to come back here, it was the only safe place I knew to come, and yet I couldn't get here. I left in plenty of time and still was going to be late. But once I turned the tape off and then clearly focused on what was going on, I went on Center Street, avoided all that confusion, and got here in a short time. So trying to beat the system doesn't work. What happened is I wasn't fully able to listen to the tape because I had to pay attention to the traffic. So trying to do two things at once did not really work."

Thank you. This is a really good illustration, isn't it, of spiritual values and worldly values and where we put the emphasis in our attention. I do want to come back to this because I think this is a good example to explore.

The first part was that the mind tends to jump around anyway, even when there aren't stimuli. I think this is a really important thing for meditators to start to notice and to take into account. Our minds are habitual in their jumping around. This is sometimes described as monkey mind, where the mind just swings from one branch to the next, and it won't let go of one branch until it sees the next one that it's going to cling onto.

So this tendency of the mind to always be occupied with some kind of distraction is a really important thing to come to terms with. This is something that can be trained. This is really the purpose of meditation—to train this habit to be in a different mode, so that the mind starts to like being in the present moment more and more, and see that it doesn't actually need these distracting thoughts to cling onto in times when there's basically peace or a lack of stimulation around.

So partly we could say this is a habit, but as you mentioned, when there are lots of stimuli coming in, then it stirs the mind up even further.

I think in the modern day, there are so many complexities in modern life. I've often thought that actually one of the pains of modern existence is the pain towards what we call multi-tasking. And I think this is a fallacy because I read an interesting article yesterday or the day before in a San Francisco paper about a scientific study that has shown that attention cannot be drawn in more than one direction effectively. Instead of increasing our focus, we actually have to keep switching focus, and the tasks take longer.

Your comments are right on. The dividing of attention, when we look at what it does inwardly, fragments us. I think as a culture we've kind of lost our ability to be wholehearted with what we do in the present moment. You look at kids—they have that. They're completely with whatever they're doing. You give them one thing to do, and if it engages them, they're one hundred percent with it. Whereas for us, we've been so fragmented by training that it's hard to bring one hundred percent of our attention and energy to anything that we do. And mindfulness does offer a clear alternative of fully being with what is in the present.

I think this gets to another piece of the heart of what I wanted us to explore this morning. Are we, in our worldly life, doing the things that will actually bring us happiness? Or are we getting lost and distracted in our very activities and leading down a trail that will lead somewhere, but not necessarily to real happiness?

And this conditioning is something that really is highlighted by the practice of meditation. When we start to try to come into the present in an ongoing and consistent way, we really see how easily the mind just swings to the past or the future, just out of habit, just out of conditioning. And the good news is that can be changed. That can be retrained, and we can learn a new habit.

So I think these comments have highlighted a lot of the themes that I hoped we would touch on this morning, and I want to go into them all in a little more detail.

Let me just ask, how many people here have been on at least a day-long silent retreat? And how many people have been on a residential meditation retreat? Much of the same population, actually.

That's interesting. One of the things that we find when we try to sustain this practice of mindfulness over eight hours or eight days is that it becomes pretty much a full-time job. It can take all of our attention just to stay in the present moment.

The nice thing about the retreat setting or the day-long setting is we don't have any other responsibilities. We don't have to interact with people. We don't have to carry out our jobs. We don't have to take care of our children or look after our partners. The only task we have in those settings is to be in the present moment with our experience. And we find out how difficult that is. We don't have anything else to do. But how much of the time are we able to be in the present moment, even under these ideal conditions? Ten percent? Twenty percent? A little tiny bit? It's hard. It's tough work. And that's when we don't have anything else to do.

Then we go back into worldly life. As practitioners, if we want to take this practice on as a real commitment, we want to bring that ability to be in the present moment fully into our daily life as well. This is not just something we do on the cushion or during a day-long or in a silent retreat. We really want to live from that place of being in the present moment. And there's no reason that we can't, with training and with practice. That's really what practice is for. It is possible, but it takes a lot of work.

So in lay life, we have this full-time job of wanting to be in the present. We have another full-time job in lay life, in worldly life—earning a livelihood, taking care of our family, looking after our health, doing our volunteer work and service work, looking after aging parents and children, relationships, and so on. So we basically, in worldly life, we have two full-time jobs: being in the present and attentive to all of that, and taking care of all the external things that we need to take care of.

So it's no wonder that it takes a while to put these two full-time jobs together. Don't be discouraged if this doesn't happen automatically or easily. This is a long process of training. They can go together, but what's happening is that we have to divide our attention, or we might say our intention, just as you shared about driving over here and trying to listen to a tape and also follow the detour signs.

In worldly life we need to bring our attention into the present moment. That's one sustained attention we need to maintain. But then we also need to care for all the things of our daily life with a lot of attention also. So we're kind of divided, and I'd say there's an inherent conflict in the beginning for us because of trying to support two intentions, two different intentions at the same time.

I think we are way overscheduled. I think it's really true. And sometimes it seems like the only answer is to jam things in further together. How many of you have seen the movie Himalaya? About the same number who've been on these residential retreats. Himalaya is playing at the Rafael and probably other places in the Bay Area.

It's about village life, theoretically in Tibet—actually filmed in Nepal—and it's about the life of people who grow grain and then trade that grain for salt. You get a sense, it could have been set a thousand years ago, could have been filmed a thousand years ago, you get a sense for the simplicity of the life that people used to live. And this is in our culture as well. In Western culture, farming was the occupation of most of the nation a hundred or two hundred years ago.

That simple down-to-earth life where there weren't things like tax-free mutual funds and a hundred different kinds of sandwiches that you could order every time you go to the deli, ten different activities for your children after they finish the school day. Life was much, much simpler and it kind of lent itself to being in the present moment in a way that modern life really doesn't.

So on some level, I think we probably need to take a look as practitioners at the complexity of our outer lives. And I see in myself as I get older, and I see in a lot of friends as we get older, a real interest in simplifying.

Now, there's a time in life when simplification simply isn't possible. When you're starting a career and raising a family, especially in this area where it's so expensive, there are so many demands that there may not be any choices for simplification. But as we get older and some of the family responsibilities start to lift, I really think we need to look seriously at simplifying and creating space.

When we create space outwardly, it creates so much more space in the mind. It's amazing. Taking the outer clutter away just opens up a huge amount of inner spaciousness. So even choices like how much television we choose to watch, how many films we go to, how many magazines we read during a week—renunciation in those areas can make a difference too. I think the outer is important, but I want to focus most on the inner.

Part of the problem is that we have these dual intentions: to look after ourselves and our family and to be present while we do it. But worldly life offers so many seductive possibilities. There are so many ways that we can lose track of our spiritual orientation in worldly life because our culture doesn't support spiritual values. I don't believe it supports them at all. Try to talk to your employer about taking an extra week's leave to do a meditation retreat and see how supportive the external situation is.

Worldly life offers many possibilities that are intriguing, fulfilling, rich—lots of people to meet, lots of things to do, ways to become known, ways to serve. But they don't necessarily support a spiritual life. And I think the problem is that we can get lost in any one of these avenues.

I was talking to someone this week who had lost their partner to cancer. She was saying that before her partner's death, she was very wrapped up in her career—it was almost more important than her family. Then going through the illness and death of her partner totally shifted her priorities back. Her career right now feels kind of hollow to her because she sees how much more important the people in her life are. But until we get a wake-up call like that, I think we can all tend to put a huge amount of emphasis on career. There are a lot of fun things about many work situations these days, but at the end of the day, I wonder if it's the most important thing in our life. Again, something I think we need to look at.

I want to read a couple of quotations from a new breed of spiritual teacher that's popping up. They're not connected with any tradition, but they've sort of woken up on their own. One prime example right now is Eckhart Tolle. His book, *The Power of Now*, has been on the San Francisco bestseller list for something like four months. It's not on the U.S. bestseller list, I can assure you, but it has been on the Bay Area bestseller list for a while. He's fifty-three years old, German by birth, now lives in Canada, and just had a spontaneous awakening some years ago. He spent time sitting on a park bench and sharing his understanding with people who wandered by, but is now teaching. I think his book is pretty good.

He's talking about working with our difficult emotions, the afflictive emotions of the mind: "All these emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who you are beyond name and form."

This is a little dense, so let me read this again. All afflictive emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who you are beyond name and form. In other words, who we truly are is not this body and this personality. Who we are truly is something that goes beyond our name and form, something the Buddha pointed to as the deathless. All the major reli-

gions point to an aspect of immortality in our being that's formless. He's saying that when we lose touch with knowing that we are deathless in the most fundamental way, there's a deep kind of anguish that comes out of that.

I'd also like to read from another teacher in this same mode. His name is Tony Parsons. He's British, born in 1933, and he had one of these spontaneous awakenings when he was twenty. His book is called *As It Is*: "Whatever I seek or think I want, all of my desires are only a reflection of my longing to come home. Home is my original nature. It is right here, simply in what is."

These two are basically saying the same thing. Eckhart Tolle is pointing to the pain of that loss, and Tony Parsons is pointing to the desire to get back. What Parsons is saying is that all forms of desire are really just a desire to get back to knowing who we truly are, because that's the only place that lasting fulfillment can come from.

What I think happens in our worldly life often is that all these myriad forms of desire point us in all different directions—toward money, toward fame, toward sexual relationships, toward pleasures of food and drink, great houses.

And all these kinds of desires that proliferate are misleading indicators of what we really want. What we really want is to know our being beyond name and form, beyond birth and death, beyond perishing. But because we've lost touch with that, we seek for it in many different avenues that can't ultimately lead to lasting happiness.

This is not to say that these outer activities are wrong. We need to be involved in a livelihood that takes care of ourselves. We need to be involved in looking after our family, our partners, our parents. So the question is: to what extent can we be involved in those areas without getting misled about what's really important and where our real happiness is going to come from?

To me, the best description of where we get misled is spelled out by the Buddha in a sutta from the Anguttara Nikaya called "The Vicissitudes of Life." It starts off like this: "These eight worldly conditions, O monks, keep the world turning around, and the world turns around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, success and failure, praise and blame, pleasure and pain."

He's basically saying the way we get misled is we mistake these eight conditions as the most important things in life. The degree to which we invest in them is the degree to which we carry ourselves off from our true spiritual track.

I find these very helpful topics for reflection—to look in my own life at how much my focus in living, where I put my time and energy, is around these eight situations as opposed to the true spiritual practice of knowing who I am, coming back to my source.

The problem with these conditions is they're always changeable. They always alternate. Have you ever known anyone who has experienced only gain, only success, only pleasure, or only praise? It's not possible. They alternate for all of us. And if our happiness is bound up just with the positive half, we're going to get slammed when we encounter the negative.

It's not through any fault of our own that we encounter the negative. Everybody encounters loss and pain and blame and failure—even the Buddha. I'll tell some stories about the Buddha's difficulties as we go, just so you know. Even if you're really cooled out, these things happen to you.

Let me talk a little bit about each of them, starting with gain and loss. I don't really want to get into the great losses in our life—losing a partner to death, losing a child, loss of parents. Those are major things, and hopefully we only encounter those relatively few times in our life. But mostly the Buddha talked about gain and loss in more worldly terms.

In worldly terms, this is a great territory, the Bay Area, to see gain and loss. You've probably noticed the stories in the newspapers over the last year—the dot-com downturn, the stock market collapse. There are huge stories of wealth rising and falling in this area.

I'll tell one from my experience. About thirteen years ago, I went to work for Microsoft when they were still a small company. I worked for them for about five years. It was after I left they started getting into all their trouble—that's their problem.

My first boss, the guy who hired me into the company, was a really great guy. I liked him a lot as a person and as a manager. Shortly after I was there, he got into a political difficulty in the company. He got passed over for a promotion, and the job went to somebody else in our office who he didn't respect and didn't think was a good manager. He was very upset that he'd been passed over, and even more upset that now he had to report to this other person who he felt was not as good a manager as he was.

One thing led to another, and one day, in a peak of anger, he resigned—tendered his resignation. Over the weekend, he had second thoughts, because I came to find out he had about 10,000 stock options back then in Microsoft. Over the years since then, Microsoft stock has split a total of 72 times. So today that would be something like 720,000

shares of Microsoft, which he could have bought at something like a dollar a share. I figured out that today he would have been worth about $40 million if he had stayed with the company.

But in a fit of anger, he tendered his resignation. He called up on Monday and said, "You know, I'm very sorry..."

I'd like to take it back. But his new manager said, "I'm sorry. Your resignation has already been accepted."

Forty million dollars. Gone. Just like that.

A friend of mine commented, because of the stock market collapse, that he knows people who are worth twenty million dollars now who feel themselves to be poor because a year ago they were worth forty million. There's tremendous dukkha in the collapse of the stock market. We don't hear much about it, perhaps because people at that level are embarrassed to talk about feeling poor with twenty million dollars—and probably they should be. But there is genuine suffering in these cycles of gain and loss.

The Buddha continues by exploring how we can relate to these conditions skillfully. He says these eight worldly conditions are encountered by an uninstructed worldling—someone who hasn't heard the teachings—and they are also encountered by an instructed noble disciple. What distinguishes these two?

When an uninstructed worldling experiences gain, he does not reflect upon it thus: "This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change." He does not know it as it really is. When he encounters loss, he does not reflect: "This is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change." He does not understand its true nature.

With such a person, gain and loss keep his mind completely engrossed. When gain comes, he is elated; when he meets with loss, he is dejected. Being thus caught up in likes and dislikes, he will not be freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, grief, and despair. He will not be freed from suffering.

But when an instructed noble disciple experiences gain, he reflects: "This gain that has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change." He reflects in the same way when loss comes upon him. Understanding these things as they really are, they do not engross his mind. Thus he will not be elated by gain or dejected by loss. Having given up likes and dislikes, he will be freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, grief, and despair. He will be freed from suffering.

This is the difference between an instructed noble disciple and an uninstructed worldling.

The Buddha points us toward an equanimity of mind as we meet the changing conditions that life presents. A crucial aspect of this wisdom is seeing the impermanent nature of gain and loss. We understand that nobody is always gaining, nobody is always being praised, nobody experiences only the positive side of these conditions. These things change for everybody.

There's another remarkable story from the Tibetan tradition that illustrates this. It concerns a teacher named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who was born in Tibet in 1932, escaped to India in 1959, and became a great Dzogchen master.

CHAPTER 234

Meditation in the Noble Eightfold Path

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

In this retreat dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the meditation section of the Noble Eightfold Path, focusing on the three essential qualities that define vipassanā practice: right effort, right mindfulness (sammā-sati), and right concentration (sammā-samādhi). Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), Armstrong explains how these factors work together to create "full awareness in the present moment" - the essence of insight meditation.

The talk emphasizes mindfulness as the heart of the meditative path, describing it as "bare attention" that simply witnesses experience without interference. Armstrong explores how our karmic momentum from past actions creates the mental proliferation (papañca) that pulls us away from present-moment awareness, and how consistent mindfulness practice gradually weakens these patterns. He discusses the balance between mindfulness - which brings alertness and clarity - and samādhi, which provides stability and strength of attention.

Offered during the early days of a retreat when practitioners often struggle with restless mind and doubt, this teaching provides both practical guidance and encouragement. Armstrong reminds us that like drops of rain filling a large jar, each moment of mindfulness accumulates to create profound transformation, ultimately leading toward the "empty center" of the Eightfold Path - nibbāna itself.

So it's the second night of the retreat, and I trust that everybody's hanging in there. Hanging might be the operative word after a day like today. The first few days of retreat are not supposed to be easygoing. It's supposed to be difficult, and if it's been hard today, that's par for the course.

I was struck in the interviews today by how much equanimity and maturity people were bringing to these early days. Once you've gone through the experience a number of times, you just know that the first three days are going to be full of restless mind and aches and pains and a lot of discontent and struggle. People were just coping with that and not suffering too much with it.

I wanted to read a quote from a well-known spiritual teacher and see if you know who the author is: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to suffering, and those who go through it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life, and those who find it are few."

Do you recognize the speaker? It's Jesus. I had not come across this in my Presbyterian upbringing. It didn't seem part of what they wanted to share with us about the church, but I discovered it in Stephen Mitchell's book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, and he attributes it to Matthew 7:13. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life, and those who find it are few.

This practice is really simple. I think Joseph gave the basic instructions in about ten minutes the other morning, but it's obviously not so easy. In the first days of retreat, one of the common things that I see coming up in myself, especially when I do a long retreat, is a form of doubt that basically shows itself in the question: What on earth am I doing here? I can't remember at all why I signed up or why I came. I think of a hundred other things I should be doing with my time.

You look around and try to get some support from the people around you, and that doesn't necessarily help very much either. In the hall it looks like everybody's sitting like Buddhas—no ruffles on those oceans. You go out to walk and, frankly, it looks strange. Have you ever just stopped and looked at a walking period from kind of an outside point of view? It looks strange.

Ajahn Chah came here for the first time in 1979. His style of practice is not intensive like this—sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, walk. His style is more: "Hey, come live with me in the forest for five years. Don't get involved with much. Ordain as a nun or a monk, and your mind will quiet." They do a lot of talking and work and form community, so he thought this style was kind of extreme.

One afternoon in a walking period, he would go around to different people on the front lawn who were doing their walking. He'd say something in Thai and give them this big smile, then walk on. He'd go to the next person, say the same thing in Thai, and then walk on. At the end of the day, a few people asked the translator what Ajahn Chah was saying to us when he would come and talk to us during walking. The translator said, "Oh, Ajahn Chah was saying, 'I hope you get well soon.'"

I hope we all get well soon. But it does look funny, doesn't it? It's kind of a funny thing we're doing, and sometimes it's hard to remember exactly what we're about here.

In tonight's talk, I really wanted to go over the basics of meditation the way it's described in the Noble Eightfold Path and remind ourselves of the mechanics of what we're about—just so when that question comes up, "What on earth am I doing here?" maybe there will be a little more of an answer.

You could say that our way of meditation could be put in the phrase "full awareness in the present moment." It's not a bad description of our vipassana practice. If we tease apart the different aspects of this phrase—the fullness, the awareness, and the present moment—we actually come up with the qualities of effort to stay present, awareness or mindfulness, and the fullness described by the word samadhi, usually translated as concentration.

In this little phrase, we actually have the qualities of effort, mindfulness, and concentration, which are the three aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path in the meditation section. These are the three qualities I want to talk about this evening: effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

I think it's important as we consider them to think for a moment about what the Noble Eightfold Path is for. The Noble Eightfold Path is the way to the end of suffering, or nirvana. The way I understand it, it's often represented in a diagram, as it is on the wall behind me, of a wheel that has eight spokes. Like all good wheels, the center is empty. The hub is empty through which an axle could go. Then there are the eight spokes, which are the eight points of the path.

We're kind of eccentric. We've wandered away from our center.

And we're kind of on the outside of that wheel. As we travel the eight spokes, we actually walk toward the center of the wheel, which is emptiness, or the unconditioned, or nibbana. So as I understand the path, the eight spokes all lead to one point, which is the center—emptiness, nibbana, the unconditioned.

I think it's particularly striking in the meditation section because that's where the descriptions are most evocative. I think that the Buddha was describing from an outside view the experience of nibbana. So these three qualities of effort, mindfulness, and concentration more or less describe the state of mind that the Buddha inhabited. And as we follow them as closely as we can, we imitate his mind, and we more or less jump into the awakened state, or as close as we can get.

The whole practice of meditation is just trying to approximate over and over, as best we can, the nature of the Buddha's mind and heart. And I think these three steps particularly describe that quite eloquently.

I'd like to start by talking about mindfulness. This is really the heart of the meditative path. Very simply, we could say it's paying clear attention to something in the present moment—something real in the present moment. There's a sign in a Las Vegas casino that says, "You must be present to win." It's true in Las Vegas and it's true in meditation. If you're not present, you don't win this particular game.

But when we do dwell in the present, we find we can avoid a lot of problems, because the moment is basically so simple. As the Dalai Lama said, the moment is the only place that we can experience love.

This quality of being in the present is often described as bare attention. This term was coined by Nyanaponika Thera. It's a great description because it points to an awareness that isn't actively interfering or really even engaging with its contents. It's an awareness that isn't choosing or comparing or evaluating or judging, or projecting, or interfering. It's an awareness that is simply with the bare experience of what is.

What is is the truth. It is the Dharma. Practicing the Dharma means being with the truth, being with the moment just the way that it is.

We've forgotten how to do this. We've gotten lost in so many concepts. And sometimes it takes a shock to bring us back.

Somebody came to see Picasso early in his career, when he was not yet a world-famous celebrity. The guy said, "Why don't you paint something more realistic?" He didn't quite dig this abstract cubist stuff. Picasso said, "What do you mean? What do you consider realistic?" The guy pulled out his wallet and said, "Well, I've got a photograph of my wife. Why don't you paint more like this?" Picasso said, "Is that realistic? Is that what your wife looks like?" The guy said, "Yeah, that's really what she looks like." Picasso said, "Hmm, she's very small, isn't she? She's also rather flat. Is that really what she looks like?"

Through all of our concepts about reality, we've wandered away from direct contact. Our practice really brings us back in touch. And we find some very interesting things about it.

This won't be news for any of you, but I'd just like to refresh it for us in our experience. So I'd like to ask you to try a short experiment. Just sit for a moment. Eyes can be open or closed—it doesn't matter. Simply be present without any particular focus and be aware of what is. Then notice when the mind starts to drift into thought activity. If it's drifting into thought activity, let that thought activity go for a little bit. And now come back again to the present moment.

Make that effort to come out of the thoughts, attending in the present moment. And let the mind, if it wants, drift into thought activity.

So just take a look now within your experience. You can stop that exercise. Within your experience, what is the feeling in you when you're just easily in the present moment? Any comments? Anybody willing to share? What did that feel like?

Peaceful? Bright? Open? Vivid. Spacious. Embodied.

Thank you. So these are some of the qualities of present moment attention. Then when the mind moved into the thought activity, what did that feel like?

Tense. Removed. Drifting, heady, busy.

Thank you. Let's try it a little bit different way. I want to ask you to think a particular thought and encourage you to get into it. I'd like to ask you to think the thought, "I'm really a bad meditator." And see if you can summon up some conviction as you think about it. Just take a moment, maybe close your eyes and think that.

Okay, and let go of that thought. What did that thought feel like?

Contracted. A heaviness around the heart. Strained. Depressed.

Wasn't very pleasant, was it? Okay. Let go of that thought. Again, close your eyes for a minute and just let yourself think the thought, "I am." I am. And now let go of that thought.

What did that one feel like? Was it as strong as "I'm a bad meditator"? More neutral? Did you feel any of the contraction? Some did? Okay. Some did, some didn't. So for some it was quite neutral. For some there was still some contraction.

Now again, go back into not thinking any thoughts. Just experience the state of awareness and presence. And now just come back and open your eyes if you like. How did that feel? Again, not having any particular thought. Relief? Did it have that kind of open, spacious, vivid quality again?

Good. This is really the contrast between the state of awareness and the state of being engaged in thinking. Meditation is kind of a bipolar condition. And we're either in this present moment awareness to some degree,

or we're lost in this tissue of thoughts that brings with it qualities of being contracted or tense or strained or removed, cut off.

Our human situation is one that we have a whole kind of tidal wave. You could say a karmic momentum that's lodged in us, that's built up from our past hopes and fears and plans and aspirations and intentions and actions. All the places we've put our energy over the years to find satisfaction, to find happiness, to avoid the unpleasant, have generated an impact, a momentum in our hearts and minds.

And when we sit, that's what manifests as this drifting into thought. Although we might have our intention to be just in the present moment, it generally doesn't take too long before this karmic wave starts to assert itself. And we're away. We're away from the present.

This experience is one meaning of the equanimity phrase that I'm sure a lot of you know: all beings are the heirs to their karma. This is one way in which we inherit our karma. All those intentional actions, all those investments of time and energy live on in us through this force of the karmic momentum. It's really made up of our past clinging, our past investments.

And as the Buddha said, by whatsoever a person clings to, by that Mara will track them down. As meditators, we are sitting ducks. Mara is on our scent and knows just where to find us because we aren't defended. We have taken away all our usual escapes and defenses against this karmic momentum. And when we sit and open ourselves to the present, we're opening ourselves to that karmic force of our own hearts and minds.

This really provides the juice or the grist for our meditation practice. It's a powerful thing. You can tell, especially in these first few days, because it's what sweeps us away again and again, despite all our good intentions—this projective power of mind based on past clinging.

So often in the beginning of a retreat, people will come to interviews and report, "I could be with about two breaths, and then I was away for 20 minutes." This is not uncommon in the early part of a retreat. So if this is your batting average today, know that you're not alone. That's the force of this momentum.

This image of being swept away is one that I think illustrates the feeling of the experience of being caught in this wave of thoughts. And it's interesting that when the Buddha described our current situation in the suttas, he used a lot of water imagery, just like this. He talked about the difficulties of mind being compared to the influxes. He talked about the flood of becoming, the tides of conceiving, and the ocean of existence.

We often feel that we're at the mercy of this tide. We very seldom have any choice about what comes up, what is swept in with it. Sometimes it's really pleasant. I'm sure many of us have spent good parts of today thinking about pleasant experiences in the past or looking forward to pleasant experiences in the future, remembering vacations or family or loved ones. Sometimes it's painful and we don't have that switch to determine. The painful often comes unbidden. And so we think about regrets, remorse, blame, and anger related to past incidents. We can easily develop fear or anxiety about future incidents to come.

The advice is to be mindful. But at first, this doesn't seem to make much difference. We can be mindful at a number of moments through a period of meditation. It doesn't seem to do much to that karmic tide. And so it doesn't feel like mindfulness is any big deal.

The problem is that our mindfulness is like a baby. And this karmic momentum is all grown up. Because we've been following it for most of our life. According to the Buddha, we've been following it for countless lifetimes. So it's an adult, fully born, strong, capable. Mindfulness is just a little twig in the face of that for us.

But the important thing is to take a look and see how that mindful presence actually feels. This is the important thing. And so to notice the times when we're not lost in those thoughts, to notice the time when we're in touch with the vividness, the peace, the embodiment, the ease of the present moment, and to trust in that.

It may be a baby form of mindfulness, but it's real. And that baby form of mindfulness will grow up just by giving it our time and energy and attention over and over and over. And when it grows up and becomes strong, then it has the power to undo that karmic momentum, that karmic tide.

Again, with a water image, the Buddha said that mindfulness can dam any flood. Mindfulness can dam any flood.

It can interrupt the flow of conditioning. It can stop the momentum entirely. So every time we have a moment of mindfulness, we're applying a kind of brake to that wheel that's been built up with so much momentum. And as we apply it over and over again, sometimes that wheel comes to a stop.

So it's important to get in touch with the feeling of those moments when you're in touch with the present, to whatever degree. Start to know that feeling. Know that this is the feeling you want to connect with again and nurture and grow.

There's no technique for getting to that kind of awareness. The technique is just a tool for honing it, as it were. But the actual summoning up of that kind of awareness has to come from someplace really deep in us. The more we do it, the more easily it comes forth. We're conditioning the mind in that direction. But there's no technique to bring it forth. The more we get to know it, the easier it is to find.

And we start to realize this is what it means to imitate the Buddha's awakened mind. In touch with the actuality of our experience, we find there is a quality of freedom in it. Just as Carol was speaking about last night, learning to trust in this awareness. It not only is the doorway to freedom—there is freedom here and now when we touch that.

Something else that's useful in relating with mindfulness: we have a lot of training in vipassana of being mindful of the difficult. We spend a lot of dharma talks discussing the hindrances and greed, aversion, and delusion. We tend to spend a lot of time on the first two noble truths in dharma talks. And we become quite expert, especially in the early years of our practice, about working with the negative, working with the difficult.

And we sometimes forget to pay as much attention to the wholesome when it comes. I saw this in my own practice again and again. A moment of peace or happiness would arise, and I could have been noting quite steadily—anger, guilt, fear, blame, resentment, panic, desire. And a moment of peace would come, and I would sort of stop noting.

I realized that what was happening in my mind was this subconscious belief: "Oh, this is what it's supposed to be like." So I would just take that moment for granted. This is what it's supposed to be like, so I wouldn't think to notice it. But then I wasn't really tuning in to my own growth. I wasn't tuning into the beautiful qualities that were starting to unfold in me.

It's really important to tune into the beautiful—as important or more important than tuning into the difficult. Because the corollary of taking the wholesome for granted, because it was supposed to be like that, meant the unwholesome was not supposed to be there. So when the unwholesome was there, it meant I'd done something wrong. That's the very denial of equanimity. There's no ground for equanimity if we hold a view like that.

When we see with more equanimity, we see the arising of the wholesome and the arising of the unwholesome on more or less equal footing. And I think that's because this pure state of mindfulness, the empty state of open awareness, doesn't have any bias. It's not really enthralled to the negative, and it's not really enthralled to the wholesome. It's free of both. And it can see either one with equal ease.

It's very interesting in the suttas of the Buddha that they all tend to be very balanced in this kind of way. If he talks about the first two noble truths, it's always balanced by the last two noble truths. Suffering and its cause are always balanced by teaching on the end of suffering and the way.

So we begin to bring this kind of even-handed seeing into our own practice, into our mindfulness, delighting in the wholesome. We appreciate it when it's there. We don't take it for granted. We know it and appreciate it as a sign of our growth and development in the dharma.

Right mindfulness includes with it also an attitude of real acceptance. Because we don't think that the unwholesome is something that's gone wrong. It's just part of the makeup of our nature. So this acceptance actually has a kind of friendliness to it. And there is actually within true mindfulness a quality of metta, or loving-kindness—this embracing quality.

So a way that our metta practice and our vipassana practice come together is in this experience of a warm attention to whatever is arising for us.

So also noting that quality of warmth when it's there, that inclusive, friendly quality.

I gave part of this talk in Italy last year, and I had to share a story to illustrate this friendly quality, so I'll tell it again because it's a story I enjoy. I don't know if you remember a few years ago, there was a movie called Life is Beautiful, starring Roberto Benigni, the well-known Italian actor. He won the Academy Award the following year. It was a very moving story about people who tried to maintain their spirit in the concentration camps in Germany.

When Benigni won the Academy Award for it, he could hardly stop talking—he's a very ebullient kind of guy, as you probably noticed. So having won the Academy Award, he got to go to the White House to meet Clinton, who was president back then. When he met Clinton in the Oval Office, he ran up to him and jumped into his arms, saying, "I'm so happy to meet you!"

This is a very good illustration of that kind of friendliness—jumping into the arms of our experience, saying, "So happy to meet you." And Clinton, who I think is six foot four, held Benigni quite easily. The Secret Service guys were kind of freaking out, but it didn't bother Clinton at all. A good image of our metta.

This mindfulness is not only free in the moment, but it's onward leading. It goes further. It goes deeper. Its power builds as we access it, moment after moment, and it starts to change our relationship to our experience—which is to say, to our life—one moment at a time.

There's a quotation from the Dhammapada, where the Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." It's important to remember this. When we first touch the mindfulness, it seems weak. But one drop after another, huge jars can fill up.

When I was a monk in forest monasteries, the jars that were recommended for drinking water were these large earthenware jars about four feet tall and three feet in diameter. They'd be put beside the roof of our kuti. Cloth would be tied over the top, and when it rained, the water from the roof would pour off into the jar. Little by little over the course of the rainy season, the jar would fill up.

So that's the size of jar we need to think about filling with our drops of mindfulness. It's not a quick filling, but little by little that jar will be filled. Inevitably, it has to be. No moment of mindfulness is wasted. They all go to filling up the jar. It may not feel like anything is happening for a long time, but things are happening.

I had an interview with someone a couple of weeks ago from a group that my wife and I lead in California, Spirit Rock Senior Students. He was talking about the feeling of slowness of progress in his practice, but he said he actually still had a lot of faith. He told me a story about when he was a teenager and needed to earn some money over the summer. His girlfriend's father offered him some grunt work, which was to break up the concrete floor of a carport in their yard.

You can imagine how much concrete goes into a carport—probably twenty feet by twenty feet. That's a lot of concrete. So the father gave him a sledgehammer, pointed him to the concrete and told him, "Your summer job is to break it up." But he also helpfully gave him one technique: "Start near the corner."

So he started about eighteen inches in from a corner, and he just started pounding the concrete with a sledgehammer. Nothing happened. Pounding and pounding and pounding, no impact whatsoever. Pounding and pounding and pounding. Finally, a little crack appeared right around where he'd been hitting, and that was the way in. Then he started pounding around the crack, and pretty soon he had that eighteen-inch square out, then on to the next.

It wasn't an easy thing, but the mindfulness practice is like that. We apply this mindfulness to this wave of karmic momentum again and again and again, and it doesn't feel like it's having any impact. But after we do it enough times, sometime there's a crack in it. It comes to a halt. We open to just the freshness of the moment, really uncontaminated by the past. And then we see there's been an impact. And we keep going. We keep going with that constancy.

The Buddha compared it to an ocean-going vessel that's been brought up onto land near the ocean and just left out by the ocean.

And he said that the riggings and the sails of that ocean-going vessel will easily weaken and rot away in the elements of the salt air, the wind, the sun, and the rain. They're just left exposed to those elements. He said, in the same way, our fetters, our bondage, easily weaken and rot away under the influence of meditation practice. We just have to have the trust to be steady with it. It does rot away.

So this is the quality of mindfulness. I want to say one last thing about mindfulness before we go on. We often think of mindfulness as paying attention to the here and now. But there's another aspect to it that's really important, and you get this if you read the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness. When the Buddha describes mindfulness, what he says again and again is the quality of knowing our experience. This is what comes through in every passage in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Joseph referred to this yesterday morning: knowing that I breathe in long or knowing that I breathe in short; knowing that a feeling tone is pleasant or unpleasant or neither; knowing that the mind has desire or aversion or non-desire or non-aversion; knowing that the hindrances are present or absent, and so forth.

So in addition to this awareness, there's a quality in mindfulness of knowing what our experience is. This is an important point, because this knowing, which is key, is an aspect of wisdom. This is the entryway for wisdom to come in. And it's really wisdom that liberates us.

Let me give a really simple example of this. Wisdom is to see and understand things the way they are. It's not anything in our memory. It's not something that we've learned or stored up. It's a present moment clarity of knowing and seeing things the way they are. That's what's freeing.

Carol was talking last night about this beautiful, very helpful line from Ajahn Sumedho: "It's like this." Desire is like this. Non-desire is like this. Fear is like this. Confidence feels like this. Suffering is like this. Non-suffering is like this. The reason I believe that's so powerful is because it really draws out that wisdom aspect of mindfulness. We're seeing what is, but we're seeing it in its true nature and with some perspective.

This is also what's happening in the noting practice. If you do the noting practice, you're giving yourself a verbal cue moment after moment of exactly what your experience is, and that strengthens this wisdom quality of mindfulness. In the end, it's not necessary to verbally label it, but it's helpful when there's a struggle, when there's a conflict.

In the Thai forest tradition, mindfulness and wisdom are so closely related that they often talk about them as one word: *satipaññā* in the Pali. *Sati* is mindfulness, *paññā* is wisdom. They often talk about the growth of *satipaññā*, both together.

Now, mindfulness and effort. Sometimes we can abide in the present moment effortlessly. I'd be interested to hear your reflections at some time: what was it like when I asked you earlier in this talk to just abide without any particular effort in this sitting? Sometimes we can do that for a fairly long time in an easy way. Sometimes when we apply more effort or more technique, it can actually intrude on that ease. So it's wonderful when that effortless abiding comes and you can rest there, but it's never guaranteed.

So effort is stressed in the Eightfold Path very highly. In fact, I would say that of the wholesome factors that the Buddha talks about in the suttas, probably the four that come most often are energy or *virya*, which is the forerunner of effort—it's the source of effort—mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. We basically have three of those factors here in terms of effort, mindfulness, and concentration, with wisdom being the fourth. So effort is really all that separates us from liberation and from freedom.

Classically, effort is defined as abandoning the unwholesome and developing the wholesome.

And virya carries this beautiful sense. In fact, in Tibetan, the word for virya is sandrul, and in Tibetan understanding it means taking delight in what is wholesome. I love reflecting on this quality of effort—that the energy of effort, the very purpose of effort, is for us to take delight in what is wholesome.

This means delighting in qualities of heart and mind like wisdom and clear seeing, generosity and metta, non-clinging, renunciation, contentment, and compassion. I often like to pause and reflect that this is what unites us as a group. We're brought together as a sangha because together we all love and take delight in what is wholesome. Otherwise, we wouldn't be spending six weeks or three months cultivating these factors.

The Buddha said that just as the river Ganges flows east, when a person develops right effort, that person will flow to nibbana, to liberation.

In retreat practice, the primary form of right effort in Vipassana is simply to be present to what is—just to touch what's coming out of the nothingness into existence in this moment.

John Donne wrote: "I throw myself down in my chamber and invite God and his angels hither. And when they are there, I neglect God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door."

In the middle of this beauty and mystery, we give ourselves to distractions. So our effort is to come back out of distraction and contact that present moment.

But this brings up an interesting question: Have you ever tried to really find this so-called present moment? Is it findable? If you have one, I'd love to see it.

Yesterday morning during sitting, there was an insect making a very loud chirp every few seconds somewhere in the courtyard. In Zen, they have a saying: "How do you stop the sound of the river?" As I sat there, I experimented with trying to stop the sound of that insect chirping every few seconds. What was interesting to me is that the more I tried, the further I got from it. But the more I relaxed, the closer it came to me.

This effort is really a graceful kind of dance, and a crucial part of it is the quality of relaxation. The more we can relax really deeply within ourselves, the more the present moment is just there. When we strain after it, it runs away.

You can play with this sense of relaxing very deeply and easily within yourself as you begin a sitting, and see how the moment comes closer. Because fundamentally, the present is ungraspable. It's not solid. It's not a thing. It's a changing experience.

We often think that with effort we have to do something special to do it right. I especially found this when I started doing metta practice intensively a few years ago, never having done it before. The biggest question that came up for me in the first week was: "Is this going to work for me?" I remember feeling this in my early days of Vipassana too—"Is this going to work for me?"

But the wonderful thing is we can't be aware wrongly. If we simply make that effort to touch the present, it will start this chain of change and opening.

When Ajahn Sumedho was teaching at Spirit Rock this past April, he said that in his opinion, the biggest obstacle for experienced meditators in the West was that we didn't trust our practice enough. I think this is a really accurate observation.

We simply need to surrender into this relaxed presence with the present moment, and the Dharma will take care of the rest. It's like Munindra's statement: "If you sit and know that you're sitting, the whole of the Dharma will unfold for you." We really can trust this.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't make effort. When we're lost in distractedness, we need to make the effort to come back. But having made that effort, that's really all we need to do. The rest will be taken care of for us.

The unskillful sense of effort is trying to make something special happen—struggling with our experience. You might take a look today: Where has the struggle been? Where has it not been easy to open and relax to your experience? Is it physical discomfort? I spent a lot of time working with this in the early years of my practice. I had the idea that I had to be completely physically comfortable throughout my body before I could meditate.

It didn't happen very often. I would spend an entire day trying to sort out these blocks. Then the body would be relatively clear, and I'd have one meditation. I'd go out walking, come back, and find more contraction. Then I'd have to start all over again. It was a complete waste of time.

If I had simply relaxed into the discomfort with equanimity, my deepening would have gone much more easily, much more quickly. I had to learn this the hard way.

The wandering mind is often quite frustrating in the early days—this inability to focus, being all over the place. But if we try to stop the thinking, we just become more tense. And of course, thoughts are not the problem. A stray thought comes and goes; it's not an obstacle to mindfulness. Thought isn't the problem—it's our hanging onto thoughts that creates difficulty.

We get fascinated by their content, mesmerized by them. The stickiness is from our side, not the thought's side. The thought is quite happy to arise and pass, just like a sound. It's we who grab it.

So becoming aware of the feeling of peace, ease, and openness when we're present, and becoming aware of the sense of struggle when we're caught in some kind of distractedness—of course we know we ought to let go. We all know that's a good idea. But sometimes we just can't.

In those times when there's a caughtness with thought, when we can't let go, we can also tune into compassion for yourself in that moment. This is the truth of suffering. It is the fact of bondage. And being open to our own suffering opens us to the suffering of others.

The last of the three factors in the meditation portion of the path is samadhi. There's no word in English that really translates this effectively. It's usually translated as concentration, but that's a little off the mark. When there's no word in a language that translates a concept, it means we don't have that concept in this culture. In fact, in no European culture do I know of a word for samadhi. It's simply not in our vocabulary.

It took me a long time to figure out what samadhi was about, what concentration was truly about. Concentration in English means something like narrowing attention exclusively down to this little part of existence, not wanting to be bothered with anything else. There's an excluding quality going on.

Samadhi doesn't have this exclusive property. The samadhi mind is concentrated rather like frozen orange juice is concentrated—meaning that all the good stuff has been squeezed together and all the dross has been tossed away. Once it's concentrated in that way, it has come together. It's very strong. Concentrated orange juice, if you take a bite of it, is intense. It's powerful. So is the concentrated mind, the mind that has collected itself.

This is probably a better translation of samadhi: collection. The mind that has collected itself is stable, steady, still, unmoving. And it's strong. There's a strength to it. Because of this strength, it's not so easily moved by the arising of the hindrances. This is one of the great benefits of samadhi.

You can sort of take your samadhi temperature by finding out how long you're able to connect with the present moment. That's the measure, the metric of samadhi. But it's not samadhi itself.

Samadhi is an inner experience. And the length of time of connecting in the present is just like a thermometer reading of it—it's not the real thing. So get familiar with that sense. When you're easily in the present, when there's that stability of attention, that's the quality of samadhi.

One of the great opportunities in retreat is to develop samadhi much more than is usually available in daily life, and a great support is slowing down. When the body slows down, it sends a message and the mind also tends to slow down. So that karmic momentum tends to be interrupted a little bit. As you move around the building, as you get lunch, slowing down somewhat—to the degree that it's comfortable for you—will help develop the samadhi. And as Trungpa said, this slows down the speed of neurotic mind.

So just to sum up: mindfulness and concentration need to be balanced. Mindfulness brings in qualities of awakeness, alertness, brightness, interest, and clarity. These are all energizing qualities. The samadhi brings in qualities of peace, stability, stillness, and calm.

One of the ways to check your practice is: are they both present as you meditate? If the mindfulness side—the awareness, alertness, brightness side—is on the strong side, then there will be a kind of disturbing energy. If the concentration side is stronger,

there may be stillness, but there won't be very much knowing. That means that wisdom quality that really sees and knows our experience as it is won't be functioning. It won't be bright and alive. One of my teachers, in a kind of facetious way, describes this as "stupid samadhi." He talks about it quite pejoratively. It just means that it needs a factor added to it, which is this alert, aware, interested clarity of mindfulness.

So be aware of those balances. Mindfulness is kind of like water—like clear water that goes with anything. It doesn't have a special flavor of its own, but that's why it can accommodate every other flavor. It goes with anything, and that's why it's available in any situation. It is the liberating factor because of its entryway to wisdom. Wisdom comes in via the doorway of mindfulness. And that's why the Buddha said that heedfulness is the path to the deathless. Heedlessness is the way to death. And I love the Pali rendering of this which is from the Dhammapada, which says: "Heedfulness is the path to the deathless." It's also the open door to all the wholesome qualities that delight in the wholesome. Wholesomeness really flowers through mindfulness.

I wanted to talk about these topics tonight just to illustrate a little more of the mechanics of our practice. But also to remind us all: however much we talk about the mechanics, however much the Buddha talked about the mechanics, what goes on here is a total mystery. I don't know how it works. I don't know why it works. I'm not even sure the Buddha did.

What I know is that this silent awareness heals us and frees us. How does it do that? How is it that when we drop this karmic momentum of self-interest, some purity starts to shine through and acquires a tremendous momentum, an unstoppable momentum? Where does that wholesome power come from? I don't know. It seems to be built into the very fabric of our hearts and minds, into the very fabric of the universe.

But I do know that all we need to do is stay in that silent awareness and let it work through us. Let the Dharma do its work.

I'll close with this quotation from the Satipatthana Sutta: "Friends, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, and for the realization of nibbana—namely, this establishment of mindfulness."

Let's just sit together for a minute.

CHAPTER 235

The Four Noble Truths

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong presents the Four Noble Truths as taught in the Buddha's first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), delivered at Sarnath after his enlightenment. Armstrong skillfully addresses common misconceptions, clarifying that the Buddha never said "life is suffering" but rather identified dukkha as an inevitable component of existence that includes physical pain, emotional distress, impermanence, and the inherent instability of all conditioned phenomena.*
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> *The talk explores the three types of suffering: dukkha-dukkha (direct pain), pariṇāmadukkha (suffering of change), and saṅkhāradukkha (suffering of conditioned existence). Armstrong explains how tanhā (craving/thirst) - manifesting as desire for sense pleasures, existence, and non-existence - creates the cycle of suffering through our resistance to what is. He emphasizes balancing insight into dukkha with practices like mettā (loving-kindness) and compassion to avoid overwhelming aversion.*
>
> *The discourse culminates in the possibility of liberation through the Noble Eightfold Path, showing how temporary experiences of letting go offer glimpses of nibbāna - the unconditioned peace available when craving ceases. Armstrong presents these ancient truths with accessibility and warmth, demonstrating their practical relevance for contemporary meditation practice and daily life.*

The subject of the talk this evening is the Four Noble Truths. Sometimes when I would be on retreat and the teacher would announce that the topic was the Four Noble Truths, my body would sort of go into this contraction. And I'd think, oh no, not more dukkha. I can't hear about any more dukkha. So I thought I would open this talk with a quotation from the Buddha, from the Samyutta Nikaya, where he says that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So let's let that be the tone for the discourse this evening.

I want to base this talk on the Buddha's first discourse where he expounded the Four Noble Truths. Just to set the stage a little for that event, he had become enlightened near the town of Gaya. After his enlightenment, he stayed around the Bodhi tree for another seven weeks. In those forty-nine days, he was simply enjoying the bliss of his deliverance and reflecting on what he had come to understand.

He was inclined not to teach. He thought nobody would understand. Then Brahma came down and asked him to teach, saying there are beings with little dust on their eyes who would understand. The Buddha thought, who do I know who might get it? He thought of his first two meditation teachers. Then he looked with his psychic vision and saw that both of them had just recently died, so they were not available for him to teach.

Then he thought of five friends with whom he had been doing ascetic practice. He thought these five ascetics would be able to understand. Again, with his psychic vision, he saw that they were in Varanasi. So he walked to Varanasi to find them.

He encountered them at the deer park, what's now Sarnath. When they saw him coming, they didn't want to talk to him. They saw that he'd put on weight and therefore knew he had fallen off the true path. He was no longer mortifying his body, so they weren't interested. But he persisted, and finally they agreed to lend an ear.

The sutta has come to be called the Dhammacakka-Pavattana Sutta, which means setting in motion the wheel of the dhamma. Giving these teachings set this entire history of Buddhist teachings and awakening in motion that we are now participating in. It was all set in motion on this day over twenty-five hundred years ago.

The Buddha described to his five friends his progress in this way. He said the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which leads to enlightenment. This middle way he described as going between the extremes of indulgence in sense pleasures—trying to seek happiness through the pleasure of the body—and the extreme of self-mortification, of harming the body. He called both these extremes ignoble and unbeneficial.

It's also a way of balance between many other extremes. There's an extreme of trying to pull pleasure toward us called greed. There's another extreme of trying to push the unpleasant away called aversion. The middle way finds a balanced way in between those two. There's an extreme of over-efforting where we push ourselves too hard, become brittle and tense. There's a way of under-efforting where we're actually lazy and don't have the energy to fire the practice. There are extremes of eternalism and nihilism, believing that the world is eternal or believing that nothing is really here. The extremes of existence and non-existence. This middle way has profound depth to it, as became clear when the Buddha continued to teach.

So the Buddha began to expound his understanding to the five friends in the form of the Four Noble Truths. He declared that the first truth was the truth of suffering. This is often misstated as "life is suffering," but that's not what the Buddha said. He never made a statement like that. What he did say is that there is suffering that's an inevitable component of life.

The term he used, of course, was dukkha, and as you all know, this has many meanings. It's usually translated as suffering, but other good connotations include unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, unreliability, or stress. He went on to explain what he meant by this first noble truth. I'd like to read this passage from the text: "Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering."

Sorrow, grief, pain, distress, and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering.

I love this formulation because it's so universal. It's something that all of us can relate to. It describes our inner experience. When we look at the kinds of suffering that the Buddha touches on, we can see that we're subject to all of them. And when we look around the world, we see the world subject to these very intense kinds of suffering.

The events of three weeks ago are one extreme form that touched us and people that we know quite closely. But if we use that as an eye to look upon the world, we see that Americans or New Yorkers are certainly not alone in that kind of suffering. Just in recent years, we can look at the conflicts in Bosnia or Kosovo or the Middle East, and we see the influence of war, of starvation and poverty, the acting out of genocide and exploitation, and the occurrence as instruments of state policy of torture and rape. Even in our own country, which is said to be relatively civilized, the widespread influence of racism and abuse in its many forms touches so many lives with suffering.

These are the grosser forms that we can see on the face of the planet going on every day. Often we feel we're exempt somehow from these grosser forms. A couple of years ago, I was leading a class of senior students at Spirit Rock—people who have quite a few years of Dharma practice—and I asked them to talk about the kinds of suffering that they felt in their own lives. What really constituted dukkha for them?

This is some of what people said: They felt lonely or isolated or not connected with others. They had conflict in their intimate relationships. They were plagued by the afflictive emotions of fear or depression, sorrow or anger. They had to deal with their own aging, sickness, physical pain, and they also had to deal with the aging of their parents and the death of people that they loved. They described pressures in their work

life, the pressure to perform, the sense of overwhelm from having too many tasks, a fear of inadequacy in their jobs. They noted they had a lot of self-judgments, that they were critical of themselves and others were critical of them. And they had fear and anxiety about their future.

All these forms of suffering we are also exposed to. We're not immune from them.

The Buddha went on to describe that there are basically three kinds of suffering that we encounter as human beings. The first he called dukkha dukkha, or you could say the suffering of pain itself. This is the suffering that comes from difficult experiences in mind and body, the difficult emotions—desire, disliking, anger, fear, grief—and the physical pain, bodily experiences of pain, of tension, or injury, or illness, or aging.

A more subtle kind of pain—almost anyone can feel and describe this kind of dukkha-dukkha—a more subtle kind of pain he called parinamadukkha, the suffering of alternation or change. And this is the unsatisfactoriness that comes even from the pleasant in life, because in time the pleasant will decay and fall away and fade. And when it goes, if we've been clinging to it, we will suffer from its passing. Everything that comes to us will also change, will alternate.

In talking about these two, the first two kinds of dukkha, Ajahn Chah said that it's like grabbing a poisonous snake. If you grab the head of the snake, it bites you and you feel the pain immediately. This is dukkha dukkha, grabbing the head of a poisonous snake, feeling the direct pain in mind or body. But he said if you grab the tail, this is like parinamadukkha, the pain of alternation. You grab the tail, which seems pleasant enough, but soon the head whips around and bites you. And then there's dukkha dukkha. So the one leads to the other.

The third kind that the Buddha talked about he called sankhara dukkha. You could describe this as the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory because they're not solid or stable. They're decaying even as we experience them. Every state that is compounded, that is conditioned, that arises out of causes and prior conditions, is already falling apart.

Carol and I were teaching this May, this spring in California by the Dalai Lama. It was really a beautiful event. It was three days of teachings on the Heart Sutra. It was outdoors in Mountain View in the Bay Area. It was beautiful weather. There was a big stage and a huge amphitheater with probably about 6,000 people sitting and listening. And up on the stage were about 100 monks and nuns from all the Buddhist traditions with their colorful robes. The Dalai Lama was up on a high throne decorated the way

only the Tibetans can decorate. And behind him, there was this beautiful, huge canvas that stretched across the whole stage—a stage that is used in rock concerts—on which was painted the Potala against an evening kind of twilight, really deep blue in the sky.

It was almost like seeing His Holiness back in his home of Lhasa. The energy there was like a dharma Woodstock. We'd run into people we knew and hang out on the grass, have our lunch, and soak in the vibes he was emanating. It was really a beautiful event.

In talking about the Heart Sutra, which is on the theme of emptiness, the Dalai Lama said—and this is also in connection with bodhicitta—if you really want to help others, you have to understand all the ways that they suffer. Each of these three kinds of suffering that the Buddha talked about is a little more subtle than the one before. It's fairly easy to grasp dukkha-dukkha, and it's fairly easy to grasp the pain of alternation. But he said it requires quite a lot of meditative subtlety to see this third kind, the sankhara-dukkha, the pain of formations that are not stable.

He made a point of emphasizing this. He said that we sometimes have the idea that impermanence means that things are stable now, but at some time in the future they're going to decay. He said that's the wrong understanding. The right understanding is that everything is unstable, even in this moment. If you look at the body through the eye of meditation, through the eye of samadhi, you can feel how the body sensations are just coming and going moment after moment, and there's nothing solid that we can rest in throughout the whole body.

His Holiness was saying that this whole world of conditioned phenomena is just like that. It is always unstable. This is why certain mental states—happiness, joy, delight—don't last. Even refined states like mindfulness and concentration, much less the outer situations like job satisfaction and harmony in personal relationships and the health of the body, are not fundamentally lasting. They're not stable. They're not capable of that.

This is a verse from the Samyutta Nikaya: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not delight in form." We can feel this as we sit in meditation, feeling the fluttery energy within the body, which a number of people have talked about during this retreat as connected with anxiety or symptomatic of anxiety. As you pay attention to that fluttery energy throughout the body, you feel how there's nothing solid that we can hold to there.

But we don't usually see like this. We don't see these three kinds of dukkha that clearly. We really have a deep felt longing for the world to be stable, for phenomena to be solid, for there to be something that we can hang on to. We really would like the

world to be quite safe, cozy, predictable, warm, inviting, and not changing. Sort of like curling up in a Winnie the Pooh story. It would be really nice just to live with Pooh and Christopher Robin where everything would be taken care of. You have great adventures, but basically come to bed at night and get warm milk and a cookie.

But the world isn't like that. As we see through our meditation, it's quite intense, this world. The impingement of mind and body on our delicate consciousness is quite intense. It feels kind of piercing at times. It's very vivid. The pleasure and pain we take quite raw, undiluted, often. This is more the way the world is. Can we align our perceptions to it? Can we align our expectations to the way that the world really is?

It's not altogether bad that the world is this way. It's not good news when we first hear it—kind of upsetting, because we'd like that Winnie the Pooh world. But it's not altogether bad. The Buddha actually said that if there was one speck of form or matter in this world that was permanent, there could be no living of the holy life. There could be no liberation. That's an amazing statement.

The reason liberation is possible is because of the emptiness of created phenomena. If form were solid, suffering could be solid, and then it wouldn't be able to be abandoned. Because form is not solid, neither is suffering, and it's able to be abandoned.

The Buddha said that this truth of dukkha is to be understood. This was his advice. The truth of dukkha is to be understood. How do we relate to that point? This is an important point in our practice—how we hold the truth of dukkha. It's a painful truth to take in. It's not an easy one to hold.

It's very easy when we hear this truth of dukkha and learn about its pervasiveness to see the world as a scary place or view it in an aversive light. But on the other hand, if we don't stay in touch with it, we get fixated on ambition. We think that we can set goals and reach them, believing our meditation is going to land us on some cozy plateau of mindfulness and concentration that we can stay at forever—a kind of spiritual materialism. We get gaining ideas.

But as we hang out with the truth of dukkha, it's easy to let it condition a kind of aversion to life. If life is unsatisfying, then I can't like it. This is not the intention. The Buddha addressed this directly. He said, "A practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with the Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure."

I think this is a very interesting statement. If we feel ourselves overwhelmed with the suffering in our practice, we're not quite on the Buddha's track. Then we need to bring some uplift into the mind and to find ways that work for you to bring that uplift.

One of the ways that's been really helpful for me in practice has been the cultivation of loving-kindness. Developing the practice of loving-kindness generates a kind of friendliness toward the world, and with it a kind of joy that can hold the seeing of dukkha. So that in a way, the insight into dukkha and the presence in the heart of loving-kindness or friendliness can grow up together, side by side as we walk the path. This factor of metta is an antidote to aversion. Metta and aversion can't coexist. I think this is a very skillful way to deepen one's practice of opening to dukkha without falling into aversion.

Closely tied to that is the factor of compassion. Compassion actually arises out of the seeing of dukkha. It's said that suffering is the proximate cause of compassion. So if we feel strongly caught in the grip of dukkha, we can convert in that moment to a feeling of compassion for ourselves, first of all, and by extension to all other beings, knowing that this suffering is universal, knowing that we all feel it.

There was a great teacher in India from the 7th or 8th century named Atisha, who taught from a Mahayana point of view and gave a number of pith teachings that were like pointers for people along the path. One of his pith sayings that I recall again and again was, "Always keep a cheerful mind." I love this reminder: always keep a cheerful mind. It's not easy to do—I'm sure you've found this many times—but I love it as a direction. We can steer ourselves more in that direction, and we can find things like metta that bring us uplift. Or as Joseph talked about, the qualities of devotion, whether to the three gems of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, to a benefactor, to a teacher that you particularly love or are inspired by, like the Dalai Lama—to remember what is wholesome in life and on the spiritual path.

When Jack Kornfield went to practice with Ajahn Chah as a young monk, one of the first things that Ajahn Chah said to him was, "I hope you're not afraid to suffer." And Jack said, "Suffer? I didn't come here to suffer. What are you talking about?" Ajahn Chah said that there are two kinds of suffering: there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and there's suffering that leads to the end of suffering. "Hopefully, you're here to practice the suffering that leads to the end of suffering."

Suffering is a vital deepener of our practice. I don't think we can deepen our practice without touching suffering. And yet we have such a fear around it. We hold ourselves back from going in and touching it in all its energy and all its rawness. Sometimes this is skillful. Sometimes we know that too much suffering can overwhelm us, and we need to hold ourselves back. But at other times when we're in a balanced place, can we get an interest in that suffering and a kind of fearlessness about it, knowing that we can learn from it and not holding back?

I was on retreat here a few years ago and I was seeing Joseph as my teacher. I was in retreat for about a month, and I hit this phase of a lot of mental agitation and confusion. I was just having a real whirring of thoughts and energy and restlessness. It was very unsettling because my practice had been getting quite calm and pleasant and deepening very nicely up to that point. Then I hit this mass of confusion. I got particularly upset about it because I thought, "Oh no, I'm not going to be able to further my practice because of this."

So I went to Joseph, and I was crying on his shoulder about all this agitation and confusion. He said, "Well, what bothers you the most about it?" And I said, "Well, it's because my practice isn't going to deepen." Joseph replied, "Guess what, guy?

He said, this is the deepening of your practice.

That put such a different light on it for me. I could suddenly take it as a source of learning, something I could grow from and come to understand. It's another manifestation of dukkha. Let me open to this and understand this. It gave me a whole new relationship to it.

Sometimes when we find ourselves in a place of suffering and we aren't able to release, it's very helpful just to note it as suffering. Or "suffering is like this." Or simply "dukkha." I sometimes will just drop in the note "dukkha" if I'm really stuck in it, and it gives me a different relationship to it. It actually opens the door to compassion because I connect with the universality of it. I realize that it's not that anything has gone wrong with my practice. This is an integral part of life. As long as we're not awakened, this is an integral part of our practice. It's okay. It doesn't mean we've done anything wrong.

So the Buddha continued with the second noble truth, which he said is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. "Now, what is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight now here and now there. That is, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence."

To me, this is one of the most beautiful passages in human history—to know that there is a cause for suffering. When I came into the dharma, I didn't know that. I thought my suffering was this impenetrable block in my being, something I had no way of working with or changing. I thought it was just a mass that was an inevitable part of life. But when the Buddha said there is an origin of suffering, I realized that anytime there's an origin, there can be an ending. This is a fantastic doorway.

Craving in this passage is the translation of the Pali word tanha. The original meaning of tanha is very simple—it means thirst. This is a really evocative word in this context. The cause of suffering is thirst.

Number one, it points to the deep root of it. Which of us thinks we'll ever get beyond being thirsty? But it also points to the recurring nature of it—how it's just arising in our being, latching onto an object, getting satisfied, ending, and then coming back. When you're thirsty, you know how great it feels to drink a glass of cool, clear water. It feels fantastic, and the thirst goes. But how long is it before the thirst comes back?

Craving—another word often used to translate tanha—is desire. But I think this misses a little bit of the point of tanha. Of course, desire gets a really bad reputation in Buddhism. I mean, if you were the source of suffering, you'd get a bad reputation too. But not all desire should get tarred with the same brush.

There are all these words in the language of the Buddha that point to unwholesome forms of desire: tanha or craving, lobha or greed, raga or lust, kamachanda or sense desire. These are considered unwholesome forms of desire. But there are also wholesome forms of desire, and this is important to remember. Not all desire is bad.

One of the four bases for spiritual power—the qualities that when cultivated lead to liberation—is a factor called chanda, which literally means desire. It's often translated as zeal in most Western translations, but that kind of glosses over the simple meaning of chanda, which is desire.

The desire for liberation, the desire for freedom and enlightenment, is a potent force that carries us along the path. This is a very wholesome kind of desire. In the Eightfold Path, the second factor, samma-sankappa, is sometimes translated as right aspiration—another form of desire, we could say, of aiming ourselves toward liberation. In the metta phrases, we wish for happiness for others. This is a form of wanting: I want others to be happy. I sincerely do. This is a kind of desire, too. These are all wholesome desires.

But this craving is not. It is the source of suffering. Yet it's also not unidimensional—it's not just about desiring, although in this passage it sounds that way. The text speaks of craving "which is accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight now here and now there." It sounds like it's only about desire, but I think a better way to understand it is that it's the wanting things to be different than they are. The source of suffering is wanting things to be different than they are.

So this craving actually expresses itself not only in the force of wanting the positive, wanting the pleasurable, but also in the force of pushing away the unpleasant, and also in the force of confusion so we don't see those movements of greed and aversion. Basically, I understand craving as equated with greed, aversion, and delusion—the three unwholesome roots in the mind. So it encompasses wanting, fear, anger, sorrow, confusion, all of those kinds of unwholesome states.

The Buddha describes it as finding delight "now here, now there." This is evocative also. Craving picks different objects, but it's always the same force. It's always the same thirst. We tend with our conventional mind to get fixated on the object and to think the object is really important, as though in satisfying or acquiring the object, we will end the longing.

But I think the genius of the Buddha was turning the mind back to look at the force itself—the force of wanting—and seeing that as the problem. When we want something, there's actually, if you look, a storyline underneath that says something like, "If I get that, I'll be happy." There's a kind of promise of lasting happiness in the force of wanting. And of course, when we do experience it, it does satisfy for a while. But as we mentioned, the craving just comes again later.

We usually don't go back to the source, which is the craving. We usually get fascinated all over again by the new object, alighting "now here and now there." When we bring it back to look at the force in the mind, we see it's the same, whatever the external object. And we start to see that craving is something that just springs from our being again and again, clothing itself in all different kinds of masks and disguises—all the hindrances and all the variations on the hindrances—to fool us and trick us. But it's just one movement: wanting things to be different than they are.

And so the power of our practice is when we bring our full awareness in alignment with the way things are in this moment, when the mindfulness and the steadiness of mind are such that the awareness is fully meeting the arising phenomena. The awareness is knowing the dhammas of that moment. They are so close together that there's no room for the oozing out of craving. There's no room for the disturbance of greed or aversion. We are not wanting things to be different because we're exactly with the way things are.

So this is the retraining of the mind and pointing it in the direction of freedom, experiencing the freedom. But what we see is when the mind falls away from that kind of mindfulness and concentration and that real unity of awareness and experience, then almost like a dam has been opened, the deluded mind, the unfree mind, just starts spinning off craving in all its different manifestations.

One of the things that I notice on retreat a lot, one of the cravings that comes for me, is the craving for stillness. I don't know if you've noticed this—particularly after a quiet sitting, a peaceful sitting, you come back and the mind's busy again, and I start to really want to feel that stillness again. And I start to feel it as a strain in my body, that craving for stillness. And then after some time, I rediscover the stillness. It lasts a while, and it's pleasant, and it also passes quickly. And once again, I notice a craving for stillness.

What's the meaning of it all? Just going through that cycle: craving for stillness, having it be satisfied, and then having it pass again. And so sooner or later, we start to learn we actually don't need to crave for the stillness when it's not there. That craving is just an extra distortion in the heart and mind. And we just settle into the restlessness or the sleepiness or the wandering mind, the inability to focus, and have that be okay—just bringing more and more acceptance to the way things are.

Another way to think about this craving is in terms of self-centeredness. What we're craving is almost always our own benefit, our own betterment, our own welfare, our own pleasure. You notice how it's not so hard to put up with other people's problems? We don't usually get that bent out of shape because our neighbor has lost their job. But when we lose a job, it's a big deal.

So this self-centeredness gets activated again and again and again. And this is really the operation of karma. Karma is all the force of our self-centered actions—karma based on greed and aversion and confusion, all of our self-centered actions trying to bring ourselves happiness. But what the Buddha said is this self-centeredness is the source of the suffering.

This is a quotation from Shantideva, a ninth-century Indian teacher: "Whatever sorrow there is in the world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy. Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy." There's a beautiful expression of dana and compassion and metta. And it also points to the power of bodhicitta—that when we can take the welfare of others even a little bit into our heart, it is such a wholesome force, because it starts to undo a little tiny bit of the self-centeredness. And undoing the self-centeredness undoes the craving, and that undoes the suffering.

There's also the beauty of the practice of loving kindness, opening ourselves to caring about others. Even young people kind of get the sense of this course of things. There was a family retreat going on here one year, and one of the teachers came up to a five-year-old boy who'd been kind of rambunctious during the day and asked the child,

"What do you think will happen if you spend your whole life going around just trying to get what you want?" And he said, "Trouble." The thing is, as we grow up, the amount of trouble we can create gets a lot bigger. A lot bigger.

So the Buddha in this passage talked about three kinds of craving. He said the craving for sense pleasures, the craving for existence, and the craving for non-existence. The craving for sense pleasures is kama tanha. This really came home to me on a retreat that Carol and I taught in Italy a little over a year ago. It was early in the retreat, and we were doing one-to-one interviews. This really nice young guy came into the interview—nice-looking guy, good energy. And he said, "I'm having a hard time settling into this retreat." It was only the second day, so I thought that wasn't too unusual. I said, "Well, what's going on?" He said, "I don't want to be here." I said, "Oh, really? Well, why did you come?"

And he said, "Well, I had a choice. This is my vacation time. It's August. And some friends invited me to go to the Caribbean with them and have a vacation in a tropical country. Or I could come on this meditation retreat. I really wanted to go to the Caribbean, but there were no more airplane tickets left. So I came on this meditation retreat instead."

I understood why he didn't want to be here. His mind was full of blue tropical water and warmth... I shouldn't talk about this, should I? You can imagine the kind of pleasant images that were going through his mind. So we just had to talk about how desire works and how the force of desire is obscuring the ability to appreciate the present moment. And when the force of desire is absent, we can appreciate the present moment. And then he settled in and got into the retreat and had a great experience.

But it's like this too when we find ourselves drifting off into pleasant fantasies. And we start to see this connection between suffering and craving. When there's more suffering, there tends to be more craving because we want to get out of the suffering. And when there's less suffering, the craving also goes down often. And then when there's more craving, it tends to generate more suffering. So suffering and craving kind of go in this tightening circle until we can bring some mindful presence to it.

And that kind of cuts through the cycle.

The second kind of craving the Buddha talked about is the craving for existence, *bhava tanha*, sometimes called the craving for becoming. And in addition to pleasant fantasies, one of the ways that I see my mind go a lot when I'm sitting is into plans. I go into future plans where I'm living in some part of the world or having some particular

job or close to some particular community or hanging out with some particular people or doing some particular kind of work, or doing something around home that I really enjoy.

What I'm actually feeding off of is a quest for an identity. I paint this beautiful picture of what life could be like, as though if I got all those externals, I would have a solid identity that I could hang myself from. This is the flavor of the desire for becoming. Let me be this. That will satisfy my insecurity, my confusion, my unhappiness, my unfulfillment.

The Buddha said, again from the *Samyutta*, "When one intends and plans and has a tendency toward anything, that becomes a basis for future renewed existence." That generates this desire for becoming, which comes to fruition.

The third type of craving is the craving for non-existence, called *vibhava tanha*. This basically means wanting to get rid of what is unpleasant. This is where the force of aversion gets expressed through *tanha*. When I talked earlier about having an aversion to life that is conditioned by seeing *dukkha*, this is really nothing other than a form of *vibhava tanha*, a desire for non-existence, a not liking of some things that have come into existence—the painful aspects of existence.

So the Buddha said that this noble truth of the origin of suffering, this craving, is to be abandoned. The first noble truth was to be understood. The second noble truth is to be abandoned.

We've all heard this before: to let go. Especially in times of suffering, we know it's a good idea. We're not unintelligent. We would do it if we could. Sometimes we just can't. We know what we ought to do, and sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't.

Again, you might try, when you're caught in that place of knowing that there's a holding and not being able to let go, just noting "craving" or "thirst"—just to connect with that impersonal, universal force that comes into the mind.

This is also a place where the feeling tone might be helpful, *vedana*. If there's a force of wanting, you might just notice underlying it: What pleasant experience is being wanted? Where's the feeling tone that's creating the sense of pleasantness that we're wanting? If it's not liking, where is the feeling tone creating that unpleasantness that's engaging the pushing away? It can be very helpful for cutting through some of the stickiness.

The third noble truth the Buddha described as the noble truth of the end of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishment of it, the freedom from it. Elsewhere, it's described as the extinction of greed, the extinction of aversion, the extinction of delusion. And it's said that this indeed is called *nibbana*, or the unconditioned.

This extinction of greed, aversion, delusion is what constituted the awakening of the Buddha under the Bodhi tree—that full enlightenment. I just wanted to read this verse that he is said to have uttered upon awakening. You've probably heard it many times. I love its beauty:

"Through many a birth I wandered in *samsara,* seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth, again and again. O house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken. Your ridge pole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving."

This noble truth of the end of suffering is to be realized. How can we realize this in our practice? I think it's helpful to understand that this noble truth can be taken either as a permanent end of suffering—the full enlightenment, full awakening that the Buddha experienced—but it can also be taken as a temporary end of suffering. And that temporary end of suffering gives us a little hint of what the permanent end of suffering is about.

The Buddha often said that peace was the highest happiness. And this peace is available any time that we're willing to let go of craving. Ajahn Chah said, "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace."

If you let go completely, there's complete peace.

So to whatever extent we can let go, we can touch that peace. And in touching that peace, we get a little bit of a taste of the flavor of nibbana, of the unconditioned, the end of suffering.

I think it's very helpful in practice to pay close attention to how it feels when a particular form of suffering or craving ends. You're following a mind state like desire or fear or anger or sorrow. You're following it really closely, being with it, being with it, being with it—mindful, mindful, mindful. And then you notice the moment when it's no longer there. What is the feeling right then? What is that quality in the mind?

There's a feeling of relief, of release, of freedom, of ease, of peace. All these things are pointers to that final peace the Buddha talked about.

This flavor of release or peace is called deathless because it's always present. It's always available in any moment when we're willing or able to let go. It's not something that has to be conjured up. It's not a conditioned thing. It's there in letting go of craving. Ajahn Buddhadasa said that nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any defilements.

There are really two routes into this kind of peace, this kind of freedom. One is a letting go. This is the way we usually know. We've been caught in some form of craving, some kind of desire or aversion, and we mindfully follow it, let it go, and we feel the change. This is one way in.

But there's another way in, which is without reference to anything else, without reference to conditioned phenomena, to access that peace directly—not referring to what is clung to, not referring to whether there's clinging or not in the moment, but directly putting the mind into a state of freedom or non-clinging. As we become more familiar with the feeling of this state, we are able to just go there, to just put ourselves there.

Sometimes it's available, sometimes it's not. If it's not available, don't get hung up. Then go back to the mindfulness in connection with the difficult state that might be present.

But one of the ways that the Buddha described accessing this directly—this suggestion appears like a meditation instruction in at least a couple of places in the Pali Canon—is to direct one's attention to the deathless element, *amatadhatu*, the deathless element, which is a synonym for nibbana, or this peace. And the Buddha basically said, let go of everything that's conditioned. Direct your attention to the deathless element thus: "This is the peaceful. This is the sublime. The stilling of all formations. Nibbana."

We become able to access this more and more directly as we get used to abiding in that place of freedom, in that place of not clinging. And at times in our practice, that can be the predominant meditation instruction. That can be the predominant direction in our practice—resting in the peaceful, in the stilling of all formations. Resting in the deathless.

The fourth noble truth is that there is a way to the end of suffering, and that way is this noble eightfold path, which you know well: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The Buddha said that this noble truth of the way leading to the end of suffering is to be developed.

These four noble truths are to be understood, abandoned, realized, and developed for the last one. So I'm not going to go into detail on the Eightfold Path. We've talked about it a lot. More importantly, you're doing it. Every day, every hour, you're really activating that path.

I just wanted to close with a reading where the Buddha described this path. This is also from the Samyutta:

"It is just as if a man wandering through the forest were to see an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by people of former times. He would follow it, and following it he would see an ancient city, an ancient capital inhabited by people of former times, complete with parks, groves, and ponds, walled and delightful.

"In the same way I saw an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by the fully self-awakened ones of former times. And what is that ancient path? Just this noble eightfold path of right view and so on. I followed that path. Following it, I came to the direct knowledge of suffering, the direct knowledge of the origin of suffering, the direct knowledge of the end of suffering, and direct knowledge of the way leading to the end of suffering.

"Knowing that directly, I have revealed it to monks, nuns, male lay followers, and female lay followers, so that this holy life has become powerful, rich, detailed, well-populated, widespread, and proclaimed among devas and humans."

CHAPTER 236

Dependent Origination

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive examination of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), which the Buddha considered his most profound insight. Drawing from his experience at Ajahn Buddhadāsa's monastery in Thailand, Armstrong explores the twelve links of the chain: from avijjā (ignorance) through saṅkhāra (formations), viññāṇa (consciousness), nāmarūpa (name and form), the six sense bases, contact, vedanā (feeling), taṇhā (craving), upādāna (clinging), bhava (becoming), jāti (birth), and finally jarāmaraṇa (aging and death).*
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> *Using vivid imagery from the Tibetan Wheel of Life (bhavacakra) as a teaching tool, Armstrong demonstrates how this ancient wisdom applies directly to modern meditation practice. He shows how each moment of experience moves through these links, creating the illusion of a solid self and perpetuating suffering. The teaching emphasizes the crucial space between vedanā and taṇhā—between feeling and craving—where practitioners can apply mindfulness to break free from saṃsāra.*
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> *This dharma talk provides both philosophical depth and practical guidance, showing how understanding dependent origination can transform our relationship to pleasant and unpleasant experiences, leading to the cessation of dukkha through wisdom rather than reactivity.*

The subject of the talk this evening is dependent origination.

Before the Buddha became enlightened, it's said in the suttas that he took some time to reflect on the origin of suffering. And he saw that it was, as he said, headed by aging and death. So he asked, where did aging and death come from? He saw that they came from birth. And he asked, where did birth come from? He said it came from becoming. And so he continued to ask those questions and trace the origin all the way back to this quality that he called ignorance. In Pali, the term is *avijja*. It literally means not knowing or not wisdom.

This chain that he discovered upon reflection, he called the chain of dependent arising and used it many, many times to describe how suffering is born—and how it is born not just once, but over and over again, moment after moment. So you could say that this teaching on dependent origination really was the elaboration of the second

noble truth at an incredible level of detail. But it also expresses the third noble truth, the way to liberation, because by undoing the factor of *avijja*, the whole chain of suffering comes falling down. So it is both the teaching of suffering and the end of suffering.

In Pali, the term for this is *paticca-samuppada*. I once asked Andy Olenski, who's the director at the study center, what's the etymology of this term. And he said, well, it means something like things coming up together dependent on one another. This has a nice sense. It sort of has the sense in the broader meaning of everything arising in a kind of co-dependent way. And Joanna Macy, who's a great environmental activist, says that she bases her whole philosophy of interconnectedness and care for the environment on this teaching of dependent co-arising.

The most general form of the teaching the Buddha put like this: when this exists, that comes to be. With the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the cessation of this, that ceases. It's basically the teaching that everything that comes into existence comes into existence based on earlier conditions and causes. And then those new things that have come into existence then become the ground for other things coming into existence. So it's also a pointing into the emptiness of everything. Nothing exists by itself. None of us exist by ourself. We came out of the world and being in the world we affect it and then we'll pass out of the world as well.

The Buddha regarded dependent origination as his most profound insight. And at one point in the suttas it says that one who sees dependent origination sees the Dharma. One who sees the Dharma sees dependent origination.

Ananda, who was his cousin and attendant for many years, once was reflecting on dependent origination and came to the Buddha proud of his insight, as he often did. He said to the Buddha in his very cheerful way, "This dependent arising seems very clear and plain to me." And the Buddha said, as he often did, "Don't say that, Ananda"—kind of always having to tamp down Ananda's cheerful, blithe happiness. And he said, "This teaching is profound and it appears profound." So the message was, don't forget it.

For me, this teaching is awesome. It's dazzling, and it has a lot of drama. It's one of my favorite areas of the Buddha's whole teachings. It touches things like the vastness of life, the vastness of the cosmos, and how we have wandered through it and continue to wander through it by taking birth through the working of karma. It talks about this mysterious way that the body and consciousness get brought together. And it's this fusing that makes for what we call a human being, this mysterious fusing. It's a clear explanation of suffering in its end, an amplification of the Four Noble Truths.

And it also describes how we take our intrinsic freedom and create bondage out of it. How we are basically in the middle of this completely open and unobstructed situation of phenomena arising and passing and being known—completely an unproblematic situation—and how out of that we generate an illusory sense of self and all the contraction and limitation and unhappiness that comes out of it.

I was practicing in Thailand. I was a monk at Wat Suan Mok, which was the monastery created by Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great masters of the last fifty years. One of the things I really appreciated about Ajahn Buddhadasa was how eclectic he was. He was a true iconoclast. And for many years, the general opinion of him in Thailand was that he was too far out to really be a respectable Buddhist. And so for a lot of years, he was sort of in the public doghouse, as it were. And it was only late in life that people really came to appreciate what a gem he was.

As an example of his iconoclastic nature, people would come to him as they did to many great abbots and they would offer to donate large sums of money if the abbots would tell them a good lottery number. And Ajahn Buddhadasa just refused to participate on that level. And one time he told a potential donor, he said, "Go ask the dog by the gate. He is as good a source as I am."

A lot of gifts didn't get donated to Ajahn Buddhadasa. He would not allow a Buddha image on the grounds of the monastery. In the place where the monks gathered, which was an outdoor setting, all he had to represent the image of the Buddha were three stones piled on top of each other—a big one, a medium-sized one, and a small one—simply representing the image of a person sitting in meditation.

I was fairly new at Wat Suan Mok when another monk offered to give me a tour of the place. He took me into a building near the front of the monastery called the Spiritual Theater. That name in itself was fantastic—I thought I was stepping into Steppenwolf. We entered this room, which was basically an empty building with four walls, an upstairs and a downstairs. All the walls were painted with replicas of spiritual art: some Theravadan creations, some replicas of Zen paintings, and some replicas of Tibetan art.

One whole wall that went from floor to ceiling, about eight feet tall, displayed a huge reproduction of a Tibetan piece of art known as the Wheel of Life. The Sanskrit term is bhava chakra. I'd never seen this particular piece of art before, and it was fascinating. Being eight feet tall, it was overwhelming.

The central feature is a huge, fearsome being holding a circle filled with life that represents existence itself. This being has big fangs for teeth, and his hands and feet, which extend around the edges of the circle, end in sharp claws. The being wears an ornament of skulls as a necklace across his head. All of life circulates within this center that the being holds.

This picture, my friend explained, represents the chain of dependent origination—a graphic illustration of pratītyasamutpāda. At the center of the circle are three animals: a pig, a snake, and a chicken. These represent the roots of the unwholesome. The pig is greed, the snake is aversion, and the chicken is delusion. If you've ever lived with chickens, you know how accurate that representation is—they are absolutely untrainable.

When I was living in the forest at that monastery, I would put my leftover rice on a little ledge on a tree for the squirrels. But before the squirrels could get there, the wild chickens of the forest would fly up and take the rice first. Every day I'd throw water at them or sticks to drive them off. Did they ever learn? Never. The next day they'd be right back, completely untrainable.

These, according to the picture, are the roots of the wheel of life. The wheel of existence is kept in motion by the central forces in the mind: greed, aversion, and confusion.

In a bigger circle around those are images of the different beings who take birth based on these forces. In Theravadan cosmology, there are actually thirty-one realms of beings—thirty-one levels of birth that one can enter in the cosmos through rebirth, ranging from the extreme suffering of the hell realms to the very great heights of bliss and equanimity of the Brahma realms.

This outer circle depicted those different realms: the heavenly beings of devas and brahmas who have no pain in life apart from having to die—and at that point, they're abandoned by their friends because they're not such good playmates anymore, and then they suffer. The realm of the asuras, who are known as jealous demons or angry demons, always said to be at war. They're quite powerful figures, but they're always fighting. I think of them like captains of industry—like Bill Gates and Scott McNeely going at one another.

The realm of animals, whose creatures are beautiful beings, but the realm is characterized by delusion because, as beautiful as the creatures are, they don't have the capacity to understand their own nature. They don't have the capacity to become free in that particular form.

The realm of hungry ghosts, where desire predominates. These are depicted as beings with very long, thin necks, tiny mouths, and great big bellies that can never be filled because not enough food can come through.

The hell realms of very intense suffering driven by aversion.

And finally, the human realm—our realm. One of the characteristics of the human realm is that our psyche is open enough and fluid enough that it can experience the quality of mind of any of the thirty-one realms, from the hell realms up to the highest Brahma realms. It's said that it's the only realm that has that capability, that kind of fluidity.

Of course, you don't have to believe in this whole cosmological picture and the notion of rebirth to make sense of it, because these realms can be understood as states of mind that arise in life and in meditation. There are the heavenly times in practice when everything's flowing easily. You're present without much effort. Things are seen clearly, arising and passing.

And there's a great sense of ease and relaxation. It's like the heaven realm.

Then sometimes we get to taking it for granted. We get a little overconfident. We get a little arrogant and we topple into the asura realm. And soon we start to struggle with it because our very thoughts about it have taken away some of that beautiful presence. So we're in conflict with ourselves.

And then we might fall into an animal spell of practice where we're just plodding along and there doesn't seem to be very much happening. It's all we can do to put one foot in front of the other. There's not much wisdom, but we just keep going.

When we fall a little further, we hanker so much to have that heaven realm back. Our minds are filled with yearning and desire. And occasionally we fall into the hell realms where the suffering is intense from very strong states of fear or anger.

The last circle in the wheel of life is an image of the 12 links—actually 12 images of the links of dependent origination. I'll talk about those as we go through the chain.

The first of the links is ignorance. The sense is that, as we've talked about before, we don't see things in life the way they really are. Classically, it's said we don't see the four noble truths. We don't see suffering, its cause, its end, and the way to its end. Because we don't see suffering, we're bound over and over. It's also expressed as not seeing the truth of karma. In not seeing the truth of karma, maybe we believe that nothing matters, that we can get away with things.

Ruth Dennison had a very beautiful statement on karma that you've probably heard. She explained it by saying that karma means you don't get away with nothing, darling. But at times we don't believe that. We think we can get away with things.

Perhaps the fundamental sense of ignorance—or the way that I like to remember it in a simple way—is the belief in an abiding self, not seeing the truth of anatta, a belief in ourselves as an abiding and enduring I. The Buddha said that this is as fundamental a source for suffering as we can find. You can't find anything before the sense of ignorance. But he also made an interesting comment that no beginning can be found for ignorance, such as before this point there was no ignorance, but then it arose. So ignorance has a kind of beginningless or timeless quality to it in the past.

The second of the links is formations or sankharas. It's the same term that we ran into in the aggregates, the fourth of the aggregates, sometimes translated as volitional formations or, as Joseph called it the other morning, conditioned tendencies of mind.

The image of ignorance in this piece of art is of a blind person walking along with great difficulty, not being able to see. The image of formations is of a potter making clay pots. This is what we do with our tendencies of mind. We fashion them over and over again, and then they have a power that we give them.

You could say that these karmic formations are the impulses from our mind driven by volition or intention that we express through our thoughts, our speech, and our actions. If we look around the world, there are so many different personality types. You can see some people are driven largely by fear—that's the sort of predominant formation that comes. Some by desire, some by anger, some by confusion. These tendencies tend to govern or express themselves through our thoughts, speech, and actions.

As we develop on the path, we see in ourselves growing tendencies of generosity or renunciation—the opposite of greed—or of loving kindness or compassion, or of wisdom. All these forces, in whatever balance they are in our personality, create habits in the mind. They sort of wear grooves in the mind, and then our mind easily falls into that pattern because of the force of habit.

If we are someone who has often acted out of anger, anger becomes stronger in our mind. If we've acted out of loving-kindness, loving-kindness becomes stronger and we access it more easily. All these habits create tendencies in the mind, and in meditation we find that if we just leave the mind alone, it often tends to fall into this particular groove or this particular habit.

We strengthen them by believing in them, buying in, and going along with them for another ride. The habit maybe appears out of the force of past inclination, but we can strengthen it by buying in one more time, believing in it, encouraging it, furthering it, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome.

The connection between these first two is that ignorance conditions formations. Or conditioned by ignorance, formations arise. Basically what this means is when ignorance leaves us with this sense of self, the burden of self, we act out of that mistaken view of self, out of that need to protect, maintain, defend, feed, inflate, aggrandize the I. We undertake various actions based on tendencies of wanting, or fearing, anger, or confusion. If we look at the world, this is the history of the world.

It's a mass of actions based on the passions that arise around the false sense of self, of being self-centered in an unwholesome way.

Ajahn Sumedho has this beautiful line to explain this connection. He said, "Ignorance complicates everything." When we don't see clearly, life becomes complicated. It's the sense of self that gives rise to our struggle and our sense of agenda, our resistance and our pushing forward.

There's a story of a bank robbery that illustrates this factor perfectly. The bank robber handed the teller a stick-up note that said, "I have a gun. Turn over the money in your drawer or I'm going to shoot somebody." So the teller did what tellers are trained to do and handed over the money. The bank robber walked out with a bag of cash, drove home, and when he got there, the police were waiting for him. He said, "How did you find me so quickly?" And the police said, "Well, unfortunately, you wrote your stick-up note on the back of your deposit slip. We just had to read your name and address."

This seems like a silly story, but when we act out of desire or hatred, we're doing the same thing. We're injuring the world in some way, but we're leaving our return address in the form of karmic impressions, and it comes back to haunt us.

Sylvia Boorstein, who also teaches at Spirit Rock, has a lovely phrase about this. She said, very simply, "When we see clearly, we act impeccably." When we see clearly, we act impeccably. But when we don't see clearly, when ignorance is present, our actions are confused, and this leads to unhappiness.

The third link is consciousness. Again, our old friend from the aggregates, the Pali term is vijñāna. This is the knowing faculty, the faculty of mind that receives impressions through the five physical senses and through the mind. The image in the art is one that I particularly like—a monkey swinging from branch to branch. You really get the

sense with that picture of how consciousness is quite flighty. It lights on a sound, then on the breath, then on a thought, on a feeling, then on a body sensation. Consciousness is moving very rapidly from one thing to another.

Here, though, the particular sense in the classical understanding of dependent origination is consciousness as rebirth consciousness. That is, a being has died, but because impulses—volitional formations—are still continuing, there's a consciousness that continues beyond the death of the body. It carries the force of the unfinished cravings of that former life. So the rebirth consciousness is conditioned by the volitional impulses that still continue in us at the time of death—the self-centeredness that has not been exhausted at the time of death.

The next link is called name and form. The Pali is nāma-rūpa. Nāma basically means the cognitive mind. If you want to be technical, it's the factors of feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention—the factors of mind that let us make sense of the world, to name the world. You can just think of it as the naming faculty of mind. Form in this context is the body.

The image is of two people in a rowboat. It's really a sweet image because the two people represent the cognitive mind and the body, which are joined at birth. They're in a rowboat together on a sea. They're going to be together for the whole journey across this ocean of existence.

This is for those of you who've ever wondered how you got here. It reminds me of my first three-month retreat, when someone who was sitting the course came up to Joseph with those kind of wide eyes that only a yogi near the end of three months has, and said, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean at this retreat?" And she said, "No, why are we here alive?" And Joseph said, "Well, you're here because you wanted to see and smell and taste and touch and feel."

This is the sense of the volitional impulses connecting through consciousness with the new body. If we have more wanting at the end of one life, there's no way to satisfy it except to join with a body. The body is what opens the window onto the phenomena of the existent world. So this is the sense in the classical interpretation of the origin of our mind and body.

The Buddha actually said that if consciousness were not to come into the mother's womb, mind and body would not develop there. In another passage he said that conception depends on three things: the union of the parents, what he called the mother's

season, and the third factor—the being to be reborn. This rebirth consciousness that, in the Buddhist view of things, joins with the sperm and egg at the moment of conception to form the new being, the mind and body of the new being.

And it said, as you probably know, that when one is fully liberated, as the Buddha was, there are no more volitional impulses to propel the rebirth consciousness forward. So there is no more birth for one who is fully awakened. The cycle of rebirth is said to stop for the Buddha or for the arhant.

Having joined consciousness with name and form, then the body is born and is endowed with the six sense bases. These are the internal bases of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and touch, and the mind—the cognitive mind, the six senses, and their objects. The image here is of a house that has six windows. Sometimes in the image, inside the house is the monkey, which is consciousness. It's like consciousness is in a house, and there are six windows that it can look out through to connect with the world.

Because of the six sense bases, then we have the next link in the chain, which is contact. We experience the phenomenal world of the five physical senses and the mind. Contact basically means our sense experience. Technically, it's made up of the organ, the external object, and the appropriate sense consciousness. There are six types of contact. The image in the pictures is of two people lying down in a passionate embrace. This is a really evocative image because it describes how we're so closely and intimately married to the world of experience through this phenomenon of contact—the inner and the outer coming together, again in this dependently arisen way, to generate the world of appearances.

At contact, we really enter the heart of this chain for the meditator. If you're not interested in rebirth, you can sort of drop the stuff up to now. Don't drop ignorance, though. That's important. But a lot of this is considered to be karmic result. The rebirth consciousness, name and form arising, the six sense bases—that's just happening automatically. It's on autopilot. There's nothing we can do.

But now the chain starts to get interesting for the meditator because contact brings along the phenomena that we have trouble with, the phenomena that cause suffering. Simple example: You're sitting and there's a strong burning sensation in the back. This is contact through the sense door of touch, the sense organ of the body.

The next link in the chain is feeling, or vedana, one that we've talked about a lot. Sometimes we call it feeling tone. It just refers to the fact that all contact has a quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. There are six kinds of feeling connected with the six senses. The image here from the art is of a person with an arrow in the eye. This is

kind of gruesome. But I don't know if you've experienced this yet, but sometimes when the mind gets quite still and the awareness is subtle and refined, the experience of any kind of contact feels stressful. Sometimes in meditation, one just wishes that there were not this constant impinging of arisings and passings, arisings and passings. This inherently difficult nature of contact is symbolized by that image.

So in our simple example, there's a burning sensation in the back. The feeling tone of it is considered to be unpleasant—still out of our control. These are karmic results.

The next link in the chain is craving. This is the same as the tanha that we talked about in the second noble truth, the source of suffering. There are six types of craving in relation to the six sense bases. The image here is of a wealthy man counting his treasures of gold. You have the sense of the hoarding or the delighting in the richness of possible sense experience, pleasurable sense experience.

With craving, the volitional part of our being comes back into the picture. We get reinvested in the process. For a while, we were just riding on results. We weren't doing anything. But with craving, we get active again. This suggests this is a place that we really ought to look very closely.

There's a very curious thing that happens with craving. That curious thing is that we separate out one appearance from the multitude that are arising in the moment and we bend the mind toward it. Why do we do that? There's this basic experience of great openness, great vastness, in which all the appearances are coming and going and being known by consciousness. Why don't we leave it like that?

But we don't. So in craving, the mind starts to bend or incline toward one of the experiences out of an underlying motive that's some combination of greed and delusion, or aversion and delusion. Remembering that craving includes both liking and disliking, craving is really for things to be different than they are.

At this point, the basic nature of our consciousness is starting to get distorted. Its basic nature has been called an empty knowing or a mirror-like awareness that simply reflects what is. But now we're bending it toward something that has some element of fascination, either due to its pleasant nature or its unpleasant nature. This is the initial distortion of mind—moving the inclination toward or away from. The delusion means that we don't see it. If we saw it clearly, we wouldn't do it because it's not happening out of wisdom. This inclination is the start of the slide to suffering.

So, for example, we've noticed that there's a burning sensation in the back. There's an unpleasant quality to the feeling. The movement of craving is that we start to bend away from it. We start to pull back from it.

The next link in the chain is clinging. The Pali is *upādāna*. In clinging, we actually take hold of what we have started to incline to—whatever aspect of experience is drawing us with its pleasant or unpleasant nature. So we're becoming more determined about our focus. Craving singles something out and inclines to it. Clinging really grasps onto it to the exclusion of everything else. It really comes to dominate our attention.

The image is of a monkey in a tree grabbing a piece of fruit—latching on to one object. It could be translated as clinging, grasping. Sometimes it's translated as fixation. I think this is a nice term because it implies how the mind gets narrowed around the particular thing that we've singled out. In a way, you could say that what we're doing with this fixation is we're trying to stop impermanence. It's as though all this flow of changing appearances doesn't do it for us. The impermanence gives too much space, and we want to pull something out of that changing flow and freeze it. That's what the grasping or the fixation does.

One of my teachers commented that if you're in touch with impermanence in a moment of meditation, it's a kind of good check that you're not clinging. This is an interesting thing to look at—to see how the perception of impermanence in a moment relates to clinging.

So once we have started to incline the mind to the back pain, we cling by really narrowing our focus, latching onto it as a very unpleasant object that we don't want to experience. We start to define our relationship by either pushing it away or pulling back. In that, what we're doing is creating a distance between the subject and the object based on the aversion. We think that will make us secure. So the clinging gives more and more solidity to that impermanent thing. It doesn't seem so likely to pass now because we've fastened onto it.

The next link is called becoming—sometimes translated as existence, but let's call it becoming. The Pali is *bhava*. In becoming, we start to generate the I thoughts about what we've grabbed hold of. The image in the art is of a pregnant woman.

So we start to attach the sense of I to what we have just grasped. Remember that the grasping is underlain by greed or aversion, some kind of liking or disliking. Then the thoughts come in: I hurt, or I have a pain in my back, or my back hurts, or this pain is killing me—something like that. The arising of the I thoughts in relation to the unpleasant.

We see in this movement of becoming that the sense of I has popped into being out of this vast openness because we've narrowed our attention to one appearance that's fascinated us by its pleasant or unpleasant nature. The sense of self is arising out of nothing through this clinging, through this grabbing and taking hold of.

This is a really interesting thing to look at in your practice. Does the sense of I ever arise just by itself? Or does it always arise in relation to a sense impression? A pain in the knee and we think, "My knee." A feeling of happiness and we think, "I'm happy." The sight of a tree and we think, "I see the tree." A clear awareness of the breath and we think, "I see clearly."

Sometimes the I comes up around a craving for becoming, finding an identity, finding a place to fasten on and make some sense of security or some sense of delight. Sometimes identity is just about delight.

I'm a big fan of tennis. I love to play it, and I also like to watch. And the player that I've most enjoyed over the last ten years is Pete Sampras. He just, to my mind, has the most beautiful game possible. So one Christmas, my wife came up with one of her more inspired ideas for a Christmas present. Sampras had won the U.S. Open that year, and she bought me a pair of tennis shorts—the exact model he was wearing. I mean, not the same pair, but that would have been too much.

So I'd go out to play tennis in them, and I'd look down at my shorts and think, "Pete Sampras." It was like I was channeling him. It was like I had found my new identity being Pete Sampras. And I swear I could hit more aces when I was wearing those shorts.

Sometimes the becoming looks very golden. We have these great insights as we sit, and we think about sharing our dharma views with our friends or our partners or our family. We might think about co-teaching with the Dalai Lama somewhere. And there's such a beautiful feeling about who we would become if we could do that.

All these things can bring a sense of identity. It's kind of fun living in California because you see the proliferation of identity around money. There's this guy named Jim Clark who was one of the founders of Netscape in Mountain View. When he got into business, he was described in a book recently, his goal was to make ten million dollars—which is quite ambitious. But when he got to ten million dollars, that wasn't enough. Then he wanted a hundred million. And then he got to a hundred million, and that wasn't enough. He wanted a billion. And then he got there, and that wasn't enough. At the time the book was written, he had three billion dollars. But it still wasn't enough. He said what he wanted then was to have more money than Larry Ellison, another industry leader who had nine billion dollars.

So these kinds of things just become stepping stones for identity. We think that there's some security there. But they're just more becoming.

Becoming then leads to the next link, which is birth. In Pali, the term is *jāti*. This is where the I-thoughts have grown and coagulated, and we really have a sense of ourselves as being that person for a short period of time. The image in the art is that the pregnant woman has given birth. So the new baby is on the scene.

This happens very quickly—this movement from craving to clinging to becoming to birth can happen in the space of a few seconds, ten seconds. And we take on this new identity based on what we've identified with, based on what we've clung to.

So you can take a look back over the last couple of days and see how many different selves have arisen in your experience. Maybe there was the self at lunch yesterday who wanted two pieces of chocolate instead of just one. There was the self in the late afternoon who got really thrilled by the wind, or maybe stirred up by the wind and found an identity in that. The self who didn't want to get out of bed this morning. The self who was the vegetable chopper or the toilet cleaner. The self who became the good meditator by having a really clear sitting after breakfast. The self who's the owner of the bad knees that hurt after thirty minutes. The self who really enjoyed the beautiful sunset this evening.

Throughout the day we become all these different identities. We become the meditator or the owner or the doer or the thinker or the observer or the experiencer through the coagulation of I.

But where are all these selves now? All these selves that have existed over the last couple of days—what happened to them? They arose, and then they also passed, didn't they?

And that's the next link in the chain, which is aging and death. Everything that is of the nature to arise, including identity, also is of the nature to pass away. Aging and death is really used in the Buddhist terminology as a shorthand for suffering. It's not so pleasant to have our identities dissolving all the time.

when an identity dies, because we've constructed it out of a need for security. Often we're not willing to let go of it until there's another one to grasp. So even if the identity hasn't been a pleasant one, sometimes there's a satisfaction in the familiar knowing of who we are, and it becomes difficult to release.

This is the last link in the chain—the twelfth link of aging and death, or as we can understand it, suffering in all its different forms. But of course the chain doesn't stop with suffering, because typically, if we don't see with wisdom, suffering leads to or conditions further ignorance.

Suffering tends to strengthen our sense of self. It tends to lead to more wanting or more fear, more insecurity, more clinging. For most people, suffering actually strengthens ignorance rather than weakening it. It makes the sense of self stronger rather than less. And so we enter the chain again at ignorance and cycle through it all one more time.

This is bondage. Bondage is when we are tied to this cycle again and again, over and over, just walking through, living through the round of suffering, and it doesn't lead anywhere. Sometimes from a New Age perspective we have the idea that suffering is ennobling or must be leading in the right direction. The Buddha said this is not necessarily so. For many beings there is just a wandering over and over through suffering with no learning, no growth, no purpose.

This is the cycle of samsara. Being on this wheel, not understanding how we got on it or how to get off, but just rotating through all the different forms of suffering. Always changing, no resting place, but always underneath some sense of unsatisfactoriness, some sense of longing, of wanting, of fear, some form of craving that never quite gets quenched.

Whether you understand it as rebirth in the literal physical sense, or whether you understand it as rebirth of cycling through different forms of identity one after another, it really doesn't matter. The mechanism of samsara is the same. We create the sense of I and mine over and over through clinging, and the clinging involves suffering. We don't know where we'll take birth next. We don't know whether it's going to be one of the heavenly realms of easy, awake, effortless practice, or whether we're going to be dropped into one of the hellish realms of suffering, of being tormented by very strong and unpleasant mental states that we didn't ask for. But the cycle continues as long as ignorance is active.

But there's good news too. The good news is the chain is not deterministic. It's not fixed. And that's why the Buddha could teach a path. There is a way out.

So where do we find freedom in this chain? The key is to see the difference between our experience, which is presented to us, and how we respond to it, which is where we have a growing ability to choose. The experience is presented to us through contact and

the feeling of that contact—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We don't have any choice about that. Even the Buddha had pleasant and unpleasant and neutral experiences throughout his life after awakening.

But the link between feeling and craving is where we have a choice. We can either resist the feeling and move into greed or aversion, or we can open to that feeling with acceptance.

This is from the Majjhima Nikaya: "On seeing a form with the eye, one does not lust after it if it is pleasing. One does not dislike it if it is unpleasing. One abides with mindfulness of the body established, and one understands as it actually is the liberation of mind, wherein those unwholesome states cease without remainder. Having thus abandoned favoring and opposing, whatever feeling one feels, whether painful or pleasant or neither, one does not delight in that feeling or remain holding to it. As one does not do so, delight in feelings ceases. With the cessation of delight comes cessation of clinging. With the cessation of clinging, cessation of becoming. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering."

The Buddha is basically saying whether we meet something pleasant or unpleasant or neither, if we don't respond with desire or aversion, we're basically free in that moment. The mind abides in a state of liberation.

One of the hardest areas to see this in is in thoughts or feelings about ourselves. I don't know if Ajahn Sumedho has hit this point yet in the Saturday tapes that you're listening to, but he talks about these judgments about ourselves as being a kind of personality view. When a view comes along like "I'm not a lovable person," or "I'm a really bad meditator," or "Everybody else is doing it so much better than I am"—these are some of the hardest things not to react to with conditioned greed or aversion.

But these are exactly the place where we can also find the greatest freedom through looking at this space between feeling and craving. These patterns are strong because we've believed in them over and over and over again, usually for years upon years. And because of that invested belief, they have this great power to grab us and to become very sticky, to make us believe one more time in what they're saying.

If we can see this pattern, though, without buying in, we start to weaken it. By seeing it mindfully, we're actually starting to poke holes in it.

We aerate it. This could be a thought or self-judgment. It could be one of the particular tendencies of mind that come again and again. For me, it was fear. Fear came many times in my practice and caught me. I didn't like it. I was afraid of it. I reacted to it. I couldn't be easily with it. But after enough times of opening to it in the body and in the mind and through the thoughts, I started to make a friendlier relation with fear.

I went through long periods in practice where fear could come and I was completely equanimous. If it was there, it was fine. If it wasn't there, it was fine. When I was able to meet it with that kind of mindfulness, it really started to take the power away from the fear. It lost its punch. It lost its fascination.

When we do this over and over—puncturing the mind state or the personality view with clear seeing, without the reactivity—it starts to collapse. It starts to fall apart. The Tibetans talk about how the whole ego is built on these personality views stacked one on top of another, and as we puncture them one after another, at some point the entire ego collapses. The false sense of self-image altogether crumbles because there's no real foundation in it. The whole thing just comes tumbling down like a house of cards.

And then we see the truth that we are just in this vast openness with everything coming and going. And if we don't cling, nothing is a problem. Nothing is a problem. Pleasant and unpleasant physical sensations can come and go. Pleasant and unpleasant states of mind can come and go. If we simply allow them to, there's no friction, there's no holding.

There's a quotation from Reginald Ray, a Tibetan teacher, who says that the entire Tibetan Buddhist path consists in nothing more nor less than learning to rest in the gap between feeling and craving ever more deeply and subtly. When we rest in this space, we're accepting our experience. We're not interfering with it out of struggle or agenda. We're not creating more new karma. We're not adding to the bondage. As we do this, the old karma weakens. It still passes through, but it's weakening as we do it. This is the influence of wisdom. This is what weakens ignorance.

We can add wisdom at any point along the chain. Anytime we become clearly aware of the movement. But for meditators, the particular place of interest is contact, feeling, craving, and clinging. Contact, feeling, craving, and clinging. Over and over and over again.

The good news is that wisdom eventually can uproot ignorance. But ignorance can't uproot wisdom. So basically the strength is on the side of freedom. And then as the Buddha said, with the cessation of ignorance, there is a cessation of formations. With the cessation of formations, the cessation of consciousness, on and on through the chain to the cessation of suffering.

I'll close with this quotation from an Indian teacher named Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, who said that the essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful. And a questioner who was in the room at that point said, "But pain is not acceptable." And Maharaj said, "Why not? Did you ever try? Do try and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its desires and fears enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

This talk was given by Guy Armstrong at Insight Meditation Society on October 18, 2001. It is an offering of the Dharma. Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

CHAPTER 237

Faith and Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 50 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the aspect of faith that comes from taking refuge in our truest nature - what the Buddha called nibbāna. Drawing primarily from Thai forest tradition masters like Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadāsa, and Ajahn Mahābuā, Armstrong explores how letting go of our strategies of control (greed, aversion, delusion) leads to the peace the Buddha described as "the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all attachments."*
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> *The talk distinguishes between consciousness (viññāṇa) - the bare knowing of experience that arises and passes with objects - and a deeper awareness that illuminates all arisings without itself changing. Armstrong suggests this unchanging awareness may be connected to our Buddha nature or what Zen master Banke called "the unborn." Using the metaphor of sunlight pervading space that becomes visible only when reflected by objects, he points to how the unconditioned forms the background of all experience.*
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> *Through practical meditation guidance and contemplative exercises, Armstrong invites practitioners to recognize moments when the demands of "I and mine" are weak, allowing us to rest in natural awareness. This "voidness of I and mine," as Ajahn Buddhadāsa called it, reveals degrees of the peaceful state of nibbāna available in each moment of letting go.*

Last night James talked on the topic of faith and touched on many different aspects of faith. Tonight I want to take up one of the aspects that he touched on and go into it in more detail: the aspect of faith found by taking refuge in our deepest nature, our truest nature.

The Buddha encouraged us over and over again to find the true security in life in the state that he called nibbana, that dimension of our being. Even the far-reaching doctrines that he taught, like the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self, were only useful tools or skillful means—pointers to coming upon this dimension of nibbana, which he really saw as the ultimate truth.

These are some of the synonyms that he used for this state: the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the refuge. So I want to talk about where in our practice we can look for this kind of refuge that's beyond change, this kind of peace that is everlasting and deathless.

I have one warning about this talk. Before the Buddha began his teaching after his enlightenment, he almost didn't teach. He thought about what he'd discovered and thought, "I'm going to teach this and nobody's going to get it. I don't think I'll teach." In fact, what he said was, "This Dhamma that I have discovered, this truth that I've discovered is profound, subtle, and hard to understand." He decided he wouldn't teach because nobody would get it and that would be a bother to him. Actually, the word that's translated in the suttas is "vexation"—this would be vexatious for him.

So he wasn't going to teach, and then this heavenly being came down, a god, and said, "Oh, but there are some people in the world with very little dust in their eyes. Please teach for their benefit." And so he said, "Okay, okay." But he believed that it was profound, subtle, and hard to understand.

I can't claim that this talk is going to be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. I just want to set your expectations accordingly, so you won't worry about that. Really, the way to listen to this talk is just take it in, and don't try to figure it out as we go—and you don't have to try to figure it out later either. I'm being quite honest here: just kind of open your ears and open your mind and see what resonates, and if it doesn't resonate, let it go.

The other thing I want to say is, because I'll be talking about a view or an understanding of the unconditioned, don't take it as the gospel truth. There are many different views of the unconditioned. As the discussion this morning about God pointed to, there's one truth but there are many descriptions. The version that I'll be presenting tonight comes from the Thai forest tradition and is pretty uniformly embraced by that tradition, but not by other Buddhist traditions necessarily. So there are a lot of opinions on this topic and this is one view—if it helps you, use it as a skillful means and no need to cling to it.

A couple of years ago, Sally and I were up in Yosemite. We were hanging out in the valley, and it's always interesting to be in Yosemite Valley. There's a lot of wildlife. We saw coyotes and deer. We'd get up in the morning, and there would be bear prints on our car where they'd gone through the parking lot looking for food. The cars next to us had had their windows ripped out because they'd probably left a candy wrapper or some peanuts on the seat.

But almost as interesting as the wildlife is the human life in the valley. Everybody comes to the valley. The tour buses come through and all the tourists pile off with their shorts and their video cameras. Then at the other end of the spectrum you've got the backpackers who are coming in from a week in the high country and they haven't shaved or washed the whole time they've been out there. And then you have the

climbers who are setting up their base camp because they're about to go up El Capitan, three thousand feet straight up. You tune into their culture and it's kind of like the U.S. Marines meets the Grateful Dead. It's really a fascinating culture.

So we'd seen a lot of different characters in Yosemite, but I hadn't seen this one before. There was a circle of people who stood in the parking lot. One person from the group of about ten would get in the middle of the circle, and then someone else would stand behind them. The person who was standing in the middle of the circle would just throw their arms up and fall back, trusting that the person who was standing behind them would catch them—which they did, as we saw. It'd be kind of a dirty trick if they didn't. Then it might be a deep teaching on impermanence.

This is one of those trust exercises, a team-building exercise, so you know that your team is really there for you. But it kind of reminded me of our meditation practice. I kind of feel like in our meditation practice we're always doing this—we're kind of throwing our arms up and falling down. But the curious thing is that something is always there to catch us. Something's always there to hold us.

And this is really, I think, one of the lessons we learn about trust and faith in the Dharma: if we're willing to let go and take that step, we get held by something.

So I want to talk a little bit about what it is that holds us. And what does it really mean to let go?

Somebody said in an interview, "I really want to be with the breath, but thoughts are so seductive." And they really are, aren't they? We have the greatest intention to be with the breath in a sitting, but the thoughts come along and they just invite us away. They invite us to be somewhere else.

When we start to look at what's so fascinating about our thoughts, we find that they express a lot of our hopes and fears. They express a lot of our desires and likes and dislikes in terms of the world. And in a way you could say what we discover through our thoughts is that we have a tendency through our thoughts and those intentions born of thought to want to control our experience or control the world.

We want to set things up so that the pleasant things come our way and stay as long as possible and the unpleasant things are kept at bay and don't come anywhere near us. That's basically what our thoughts are expressing. It's these twin strategies of desire, of pulling to us the pleasant, and aversion, pushing away the unpleasant. And they're means of control. These are the basic strategies with which we try to control our experience and the world.

What we're invited to do in our meditation practice is to stop trying to control, to open ourselves up to the moment in whatever form it's presenting itself and just let that experience be felt in the body, in the emotions, in the thoughts, in the sounds. And basically we're being asked moment after moment to give up control, to surrender.

Ajahn Chah put it this way: if you let go a little, there's a little bit of peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace. So this is the opportunity to touch that really deep peace, but it's also kind of threatening to let go of the sense of control. Not that the control has ever worked particularly well. That doesn't seem to be the point. But it's a very deeply conditioned strategy.

And the Buddha's shorthand for it was: it is the strategy of greed, aversion, and delusion. Letting go of this strategy leads to peace. This is really the challenge, the peace that the Buddha called the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all attachments. That is nibbana. So he more or less uses this word nibbana as synonymous with this deep peace that comes from letting go completely.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great masters of the Thai forest tradition this last fifty years, said that this peace really comes from letting go of I and mine. Anytime you see the activity of I and mine in your thoughts, you're blocking the peace, if there's a clinging to it. But when you're willing to let that go, your mind is empty of I and mine. And he called that a state of voidness of I and mine. And he said, you touch that peace.

And he said, "If there is some voidness of I and mine, and I merely use the word some, it doesn't have to be completely or unchangeably void, then you are dwelling within the sphere of nibbana. Even though it is not absolute or perfect nibbana, it is nibbana just the same."

So he's talking about degrees of peacefulness and equating that peacefulness with nibbana. As we let go of these strategies of control, we are actually performing a real act of trust and faith. We're surrendering to the universe and we're trusting that we're going to be okay. We're actually very vulnerable at that point. We're very exposed. We're very open. We've dropped our defenses. But something in us is encouraged to try it. And then we find more and more that it's trustworthy, that space.

So how does it feel when you let go in that way? How does it feel when you're not clinging? And you can try it in this moment. You're not clinging to the body. You're not clinging to any particular thoughts. You're not clinging to any particular mood. You're not even clinging to the words that you're hearing. There's just a state of presence and openness.

Sometimes when you let go in that way, if you really let go completely, there's kind of a rush of energy. The energy is as though released from being held. Some people have said that at times it feels like they're floating or flying. As we practice it, it can feel quite calm, quite ordinary. Nonetheless, there's a sense of release, as though our center of gravity has shifted a little, away from the objects that have been clung to, into a sense of spaciousness.

But there's still an awareness at work. And this awareness kind of reveals our basic situation.

Our basic situation is one of vast openness.

When we're not holding on, we see that there's this awareness and there are all the appearances of the world, inner and outer, that are just coming and going. It's a little bit like we're sitting in a movie theater and there's a bright screen up front and all the objects of the world are kind of being tossed up in front of the screen. You know, mother, body, death, fear, joy, school, career, income tax, Britney Spears, in-breath, sounds.

Now if we leave our mind in its natural state, we sit in the movie theater, all those things that go up also go down and just pass away. But if we get preoccupied, we'll tend to reach out. It's like a hand comes out from a seat in the front row and grabs mom, body, career. And then there's grasping.

Once we've grasped, things get solid. We lose that vast openness that's really our natural state. And the focus starts to shrink down because we formed an "I" through the holding. Something has become of tremendous concern to us, and in that latching on, we shrink our experience from this vast oceanic mind state to a narrow, confined sense of self.

So the natural state of mind is just to allow the appearances to come and go and not be moved by them. Then the mind stays balanced and centered. But when an appearance comes along that has a certain charge on it, the mind inclines toward it, either out of desire or aversion, fixes on it, and solidifies a sense of "I" around it. This distorts the mind's natural peace and freedom. And it's only through the action of reaching out and grasping.

So in our practice we have this choice, moment after moment. We can rest in that natural freedom in which everything is coming and going, or we can give in to the self-centeredness and try to hold on and grab a hold of something.

This kind of natural state of freedom takes some recognition. It's not obvious to us from our upbringing. It takes some familiarity in getting pointed out. But I think when you look at really great spiritual beings, you can see they've kind of released into this. They've really come to trust this state and they've really let go into it. And out of that then there's a real spontaneity in their being.

There was a fantastic photo in the newspaper a couple of years ago. There was a gathering in a university in West Virginia of Nobel Peace Prize laureates. They got together to discuss the world situation and how to contribute to more peace in the world. So it was people like the Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu and Rigoberta Menchú from Central America. All these really well-respected peace workers were gathered in one place and at the end of their conference there was a photo opportunity.

They were all lined up on a couple of platforms, and the photographer was there to snap the photo to be released to all the national media. The Dalai Lama happened to be standing right behind Bishop Desmond Tutu, who I think of as a fairly august personage. And just as the photo was about to be snapped, the Dalai Lama leaned down and pulled Desmond Tutu's cap off his head.

The photographer caught the moment. The cap was being lifted up, and the Dalai Lama was just laughing this huge belly laugh. And Desmond Tutu was in the spirit too. He sort of saw his hat going, and he started cracking up.

That's trust. That's trust. Just to kind of let it rip, and at an assembly of Nobel Peace laureates.

So in our practice too, we start to feel this kind of effortless quality that awareness has, that we don't have to do anything special in it. We can relax into it. And if we just rest and we're not really pulled away with grasping, the awareness happens all by itself.

We try to point to this in the instructions on sounds—that just have the sense of resting in your sitting, opening to sounds. The sounds just come and go quite easily. And when we're not distracted, we can relax into that without a lot of effort. And the awareness happens spontaneously.

Now I'm using the word awareness, and I said a couple of nights ago that I wanted to talk about these three words—awareness, consciousness, and mindfulness—and what the differences are between them. So I want to go into that a little bit right now.

First thing to say is that there's no word in Pali, in the Buddhist language, that we need to translate by awareness. There's no word from the Buddha that we have to use the word awareness for. He basically used the words mindfulness and consciousness, sati and vijñāna.

So let's start with consciousness. Consciousness or vijñāna just means the bare knowing of experience. And it's a very ordinary use of the term in a way. Because we're sentient beings or we're conscious beings, we have an experience of phenomena.

And just that simplest receiving of the impressions of the world, inner and outer, is done by consciousness. When the sound of the bell arises in your mind and you just hear the sound, there's consciousness knowing it. If you were a trunk of a tree, presumably you wouldn't know that sound. Well, let's not get into that debate. If you're the back wall, you probably don't know that sound. But because you're a conscious being, that sound registers.

Now, before any words come into play, before you interpret it, before you think "bell" or even you think "sound," there's just that hearing. It's consciousness that knows that, that receives that sound. It's just a very bare and simple sense experience. It's quite automatic. Bell rings, we hear. Can't do anything about it. It's almost mechanical. Doesn't have any particular intelligence in it. It's just that receiving.

Then the other term the Buddha talked about was mindfulness. Mindfulness is the knowing of our experience but in a more conceptual and intelligent way. In other words, when the bell rings, if you're mindful, you'll know "hearing." So you'll recognize that your experience in this moment is one of hearing a sound. At least that.

So there's an intelligence at work that is kind of commenting on your experience. "Oh, now I'm hearing a sound. Now I'm feeling an in-breath. Now a thought is arising. Now I feel a mood of peace." This is the function of mindfulness, this knowing in a more intelligent way. This is why the noting practice is powerful. It really draws out this knowing quality.

And one other thing I'll mention is that the Buddha always used the term mindfulness in reference to a particular object. Mindfulness of body, mindfulness of mind, mindfulness of feeling, and so on.

So awareness is a word that we kind of use in a slippery way. It kind of glides between consciousness and mindfulness. In other words, we can make it mean whatever we want it to mean. Sometimes we use it to mean mindfulness, sometimes consciousness, sometimes a blend of both.

Because awareness, when you think about it, when you're aware of your experience, it has the kind of spontaneous quality like consciousness does. Just easily aware. But it also has this intelligent aspect that mindfulness does. I know what I'm experiencing. So it's kind of a nice word to use when you want to look at that combination. There's a spontaneity and there's also an intelligence together. This is more or less the connotation in the word awareness.

Sometimes this quality of spontaneity and intelligence is what's called our Buddha nature. This is from Ajahn Mahaboowa, also a Thai forest master: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and doesn't die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

"The natural power of the mind is that it knows and doesn't die."

Maybe this is what we can trust in. Maybe this is what holds us. Can we look a little closer into it through our practice?

So when I get to really profound topics, I like to consult one of my masters, and that is Calvin and Hobbes. This is a strip from Calvin and Hobbes. It's around Christmas time. And Calvin is saying to Hobbes, "This whole Santa Claus thing just doesn't make sense. Why all the secrecy? Why all the mystery? If the guy exists, why doesn't he ever show himself and prove it? And if he doesn't exist, what's the meaning of all this?"

Hobbes responds, "I don't know. Isn't this a religious holiday?" And Calvin replies, "Yeah, but actually I've got the same questions about God. Why doesn't he ever show himself?"

This exchange touches something profound. We all, I think, can resonate with that trust on some deep level—that the universe is safe, or we can put ourselves in the hands of God or the Dharma. But what do we mean by that? What do we mean by God or the Dharma? Have we touched them? Do we know that clearly for ourselves?

I think it's really the point of practice to discover this for ourselves in our own experience—that it is possible to know this firsthand. And I think that's what our practice leads us toward.

Calvin asks why God doesn't show himself. Well, actually, when you think about it, it has to be that way. If God or the Dharma was something that could be touched or seen with our eyes or heard with our ears, it would be of the nature to arise and pass away.

All phenomena that have the nature of arising at the sense door also have the nature to pass away. So the unconditioned can't be one of those things, or it wouldn't be deathless. It would have the properties of being born and dying.

Therefore, the unconditioned has to be invisible. It has to be intangible, and it has to be silent.

This is from Angelus Silesius, a Christian contemplative mystic: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear."

Let me read that again: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear."

I like this because in a very pithy statement, in four lines he's pointed to two fundamental things. One is that trust is connected with relaxation. "The less you reach for it, the more it will appear." It's about non-doing, non-grasping. The second is that the ultimate isn't separate from the present moment. It's concealed in now and here. It's not apart from this.

Suzuki Roshi put it this way: "It is necessary to trust in something that has no form or color, but is always ready to take on form and color." Something that has no form and color, but is ready to take on form and color.

Just as a side note, in Buddhist terminology, "form and color" is shorthand for the visual world. Every object of sight has form or shape and color. That's really all it is. So this is shorthand for all created phenomena.

This is interesting. It's not of form and color, but it takes on form and color. So it's not in the world, but it's not apart from the world either, this unconditioned thing.

I used to think—this puzzled me for a long time—I used to think it meant something like raw matter, atoms or nuclei or quarks or something like that. They didn't have form, but they could take on any form. But you realize, no, even atoms and quarks have form. They're somewhat locatable. They're somewhere there in space.

So I started to realize that what Suzuki Roshi was pointing to was not something from that side, but something from this side—something from the side that's seeing, something from the side of consciousness. Because consciousness doesn't have form or color, but it's always ready to take on form and color. It can take on any form and color.

So we're back to this term consciousness, or vijñāna. In the Buddha's teachings this has a very specific meaning. As I mentioned, it's what holds a sense experience. But it's considered to arise with the sense experience and pass away with it. And that means

that consciousness, as the Buddha talks about it, is arising and passing. It's one of the five aggregates. And like the other aggregates, it arises and passes. It arises with the object.

It passes as the object passes.

So what could be unchanging? Because our refuge needs to be unchanging.

Well, in our practice, we change the instructions every day. We talk about sounds, body, breath, thoughts, emotions, intentions, and so forth. But there's one aspect that doesn't change. Have you noticed that? What's the common thread that's linking all these different pieces of the instructions?

Mindfulness. Yes.

This quality of paying attention, or we could say in a way awareness, is the common thread, or you could say the constant thread in all of it. It's a string that connects all these moments of beads together.

So could the deathless somehow be connected with awareness? I don't want to say right now that it is awareness, but maybe it's closely related.

Someone came to the Buddha and asked him, "Venerable sir, I know there are these five physical senses. Where do they come together? What is their resort?"

The Buddha said, "The resort of the five senses is the mind. Chitta."

The questioner said, "Okay. What's the resort or the abode of the mind?"

And the Buddha said, "Awareness."

"Okay. What's the resort of awareness?"

He said, "Liberation."

"And what's the resort of liberation?"

The Buddha said, "Nibbana."

"Okay. What's the resort of nibbana?"

And the Buddha said, "That's going too far. You can't answer that question."

So awareness is kind of the link between the physical senses and nibbana, the unconditioned.

This is from an Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj: "I met my guru when I was thirty-four and realized by thirty-seven." That's kind of nice, isn't it? Good path. "Pleasure and pain lost their sway over me. I was free from desire and fear. I found myself full, needing nothing. I saw that in the ocean of pure awareness, the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside beginninglessly and endlessly. There's a mysterious power that looks after them. That power is awareness, life, God, whatever name you give it. It's the foundation and ultimate support of all that is, as gold is the basis for all jewelry."

Awareness is the ultimate support of all that is. It's not just human beings that have this nature. All sentient beings share in this.

This is the Zen master Huang Po whom James quoted last night: "Buddhas and bodhisattvas, together with all wriggling things possessed of life, share in this great nirvanic nature."

We share that nature with all wriggling things possessed of life. So nothing to be proud about. We all have this.

So this basic nature of awareness holds all the arisings and passings. This is from Ajahn Mahabua again: "There's no escaping this truth. Whatever arises has to vanish. Whatever is true, whatever is a natural principle in and of itself, won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind. All that remains is simple awareness, utterly pure."

So the Buddha said that consciousness was impermanent, and Mahabua is saying that what knows the comings and goings is lasting. How do we reconcile those two?

If you'll humor me, I'd like to lead you into a little thought experiment. I studied physics in college and it was accepted as a valid principle that if you could describe an experiment through thought and prove something would result from it, that was as valid a form of proof as mathematical or experimental, physical experimental proof. The name given to this is a gedanken experiment, thought experiment. So I'd like to do a little gedanken experiment with this quality of awareness.

I want you to imagine that you're in outer space. You're somewhere out there in the solar system, and you're facing away from the sun. And let's just make it interesting—let's say you're looking into an area of the sky where there are no stars. What do you see? You're facing away from the sun. You're looking into outer space. There are no stars in front of you. What do you see? This is not a trick question.

Nothing. Right. You see nothing. There's just blackness, isn't there? Is that blackness completely empty or is it filled with light? The sun's behind you. There's sunlight streaming through the empty space. So is that blackness empty or is it full of light? It's full of light, isn't it? But you don't see it.

Now, suppose a meteor comes from below and whizzes across your field of vision. Will you see it? So you see it. And when you see the meteor, what are you actually seeing? You're seeing reflected sunlight, aren't you? The light hits the meteor, bounces off it, and comes into our eyes. So if you turned around at that point, you would see the radiance of the sun directly. But when you turn away from it, you don't know it's there until something comes in to reflect it.

What I'd like to suggest is that this sunlight pervading empty space is the unconditioned. This is what's ever present. This is the quality of pure awareness. But we don't see it. When something arises in the field of our experience, it's illuminated by this pure awareness and reflects into our eyes. That's consciousness.

So I want to suggest that the unconditioned forms the background of our experience. And it is what illuminates the arisings when they're there. When they're not there, it's simply dormant. It's latent. And we don't see it until some moment, perhaps, when the mind turns around back to the source and touches it directly, knows it directly.

This latent quality of the unconditioned was described by a Zen master called Bankei, who taught in the late 1600s in Japan. He described it as the unborn. And his primary meditation instruction, which he repeated over and over and over again, was "live in the unborn nature of things." In the unborn, all things are perfectly resolved. Live in the unborn. This is an interesting instruction. I find this a very provocative instruction.

What happens to me when I hear that instruction is that my attention naturally releases its grip on the limited and temporary, expanding outward to touch this vastness. Then if we slip back into striving or grasping, we contract again and leave that unborn state. As Banke says, "If you harbor the slightest inclination to seek something, you are turning your back on the unborn." This is like grabbing at the images appearing on the movie screen instead of recognizing the screen itself.

How can we touch this quality of the unborn in our practice? We begin to sense it in those moments when the demands of the "I" are weak. You can learn to notice when the ego is insistent—or as Sylvia mentioned in an earlier talk, when it's "aggrieved"—when it's strong and demanding or complaining. Correspondingly, you can develop sensitivity

to when it's quiet, when it's not so demanding or agenda-driven. In those moments, there's a sense of clearer seeing. You can trust more deeply the seeing that emerges from that spacious awareness.

This awareness illuminates everything, yet itself is empty. Nothing is fixed about it because all temporary phenomena can arise and pass within it without obstruction. It's often compared to vast space—open, unlimited, boundless, empty in that same sense. But the crucial difference is that this vastness of awareness possesses a knowing quality. Physical space doesn't have this intelligence; it simply holds physical objects. This vastness of mind, however, has intelligence inherent within it.

What we are most truly and deeply is this empty space that is unchanging, that knows all the temporary arisings and passings. We are not the temporary arisings and passings themselves, though we become confused and mistake ourselves for them. What we really are is this empty space that also has the capacity of knowing.

This is called in some traditions the nature of mind, or our Buddha nature. This nature has always been like this. It is now. It will always be like this. It exists beyond change, beyond coming and going.

This awareness also possesses a perfectly reflective quality, like a mirror that reflects absolutely accurately anything arising before it. This awareness reflects the painful and the pleasant, the beautiful and the ugly, movement and stillness. It reflects impurities of heart like greed and aversion, as well as beautiful states like loving-kindness and compassion. It reflects all of them, yet notice—a mirror isn't changed by any of its reflections. The nature of the mirror remains constant regardless of what it reflects. This Buddha nature is the same.

It cannot be harmed by appearances. Its fundamental nature remains unchanged no matter what has happened to us or in us. This nature therefore has a quality of freedom, of remaining uncorrupted by any arisings. When we realize that this is who we are, we discover that fundamentally we are free. We have been free from the beginning. We have never actually been bound, but we haven't recognized this freedom, so we keep grasping. When we stop grasping, the freedom is immediately present again.

This is from Rumi: "Live in the nowhere that you came from"—notice the echo to the unborn—"even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere, and you have eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops, and you run back and forth."

Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, always getting smaller—checkmate this way, checkmate that way. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free swimming fish.

We are that free-swimming fish.

This emptiness, this empty knowing, is pregnant with wholesome qualities. As we develop the capacity to touch it again and again, the wholesome qualities just flower out of it spontaneously. It contains love and compassion and wisdom and patience and acceptance and faith and joy and peace. Different ones appear as the situation requires. When this empty, knowing heart is faced with suffering, compassion comes out. When it meets happiness in someone else, a resonant joy comes out.

So in our practice, can we start to tune to this kind of clarity? This kind of purity of knowing, starting by noticing when our mindfulness is clear, when it's strong, when the reactions of self are not so insistent. Then if we have the capacity, we can just rest in this knowing, sometimes called resting in awareness.

But the awareness is not a separate place. It's not like another destination apart from appearances. It's actually right there with the appearances. So maybe a better way to say it is we're resting with awareness. If you have the feeling that you've touched an awareness that's not holding appearances, that's delusion. Awareness is always of the arisings. The arisings and the awareness always come together. So look again and see what is being known in resting with awareness.

So this awareness is there. We're clearly in touch with the arisings and the passings. The appearances keep being illuminated. They keep being known. But we also recognize that the mind is in its natural state. It's not clinging anywhere, so it's not being distorted out of self-interest. It's not trying to hold on to anything. And we are in this state of the unborn.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa again: "The voidness of I and mine is self-existent. Nothing can touch it, concoct it, or improve it. This voidness is the eternal state, for it knows neither birth nor death. This is the unborn, the Buddha nature, the Dhamma itself."

Ajahn Mun, also from the Thai forest tradition, put it this way: "The Dhamma stays as the Dhamma. The appearances stay as the appearances."

As we recognize the nature of the unborn, the fundamental state of mind, we're actually tuning our being to the unconditioned. We're tuning our being to nibbana, to the safety, to the peaceful, to the refuge. This can become its own path. And we can simply,

at a certain point in practice, recognize if we're in that natural state, which is freedom, or if we have moved out of self-interest to try to take hold of something, out of desire or aversion. So we recognize when the mind is in the state of freedom, and we recognize the movements that constitute grasping. This can actually become our practice. And as we just trust more and more in that resting in freedom, it draws us down the path.

I'll just close with this quotation from the Sutta Nipata. The Buddha was talking to a bhikkhu whose name was Pingiya. He said, "Pingiya, other people have freed themselves by this power of trust. Vakali, Bhadravuda and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore, beyond the draw of death."

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

Other people have freed themselves by the power of trust. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the furthest shore beyond the draw of death.

Thank you for your attention.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 238

Since Feeling Is First: The Role of the Brahmavihāras

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

Drawing inspiration from E.E. Cummings' poem "Since Feeling is First," Guy Armstrong presents a compelling case for the heart practices of the brahmavihāras as essential companions to vipassanā meditation. He explores how mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (sympathetic joy), and upekkhā (equanimity) address the fundamental truth that "feeling is first" in our spiritual journey.

Armstrong shares vivid stories contrasting teachers who embody different qualities of realization - from a accomplished but emotionally distant Asian monk to the radiant joy of Ajahn Jamnian and the Dalai Lama's infectious warmth. He addresses common skepticism among vipassanā practitioners about heart practices, explaining how loving-kindness fills the "emptiness" of insight with warmth, creating what he calls "juiciness" in our practice.

The talk provides practical guidance for mettā meditation, emphasizing the importance of genuine intention behind the phrases rather than mechanical repetition. Armstrong explores how these practices naturally unfold into compassion when meeting suffering, sympathetic joy when encountering happiness, and equanimity as the balancing foundation. He concludes with Tibetan formulations of the four immeasurables and Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" as a musical meditation on the brahmavihāras, demonstrating how these ancient practices remain vibrantly relevant for cultivating wisdom and love in daily life.

The subject of tonight's talk is "Since Feeling Is First: The Role of the Brahmavihāras." The title comes from a poem by E.E. Cummings called "Since Feeling Is First," and I'd like to read a portion of it:

Since feeling is first, who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you. Wholly to be a fool while spring is in the world, my heart approves. Don't cry. The best gesture of my brain is less than your eyelids flutter, which says, we are for each other. Then laugh, leaning back in my arms, for life's not a paragraph, and death, I think, is no parenthesis.

I appreciate this emphasis: "since feeling is first." I think this is true in a very deep way. When you examine the first noble truth, it's really about feeling the truth of suffering. The noble truths are fundamentally about our feelings of sadness, sorrow, pain,

and distress. The entire path is a statement that there is a way for the heart to find its way out of misery—a misery that's basically brought about because of our ability to feel, to feel deeply.

This brings us to a second question: Is insight enough? Since feeling is first, is insight sufficient to find our way through suffering? Certainly we place the most emphasis on our insight practice. Vipassana is really the practice of wisdom in our tradition—the practice of seeing things as they are. It's said that when we see things as they really are, we are freed.

So what role does the heart play in this? I once asked one of my early teachers this very question: "Do you think that the wisdom practice is enough?" He replied, "Yes. Love is the child of freedom." We can touch this in our practice. When we feel in a space of being free and the heart being unburdened, it's easy to feel love, to feel metta, to feel connected. For some people, this may be enough—opening to freedom also opens the door of the heart.

But for other people, I don't think it's enough. In my case, it wasn't enough.

I was on staff at IMS in the late 1970s when we had a visit from a very renowned Asian monk. He was well-known, had established many centers in Asia, and trained many teachers. We'd been looking forward to his visit for a long time—it was one of the first major Asian teachings we had hosted at IMS.

Being on staff, I went to the airport to meet the monks as they flew in, since he came with a small retinue. We waited at the gate where he was supposed to arrive. The plane from Burma landed, and all the passengers poured off. No monks. We thought, could we have missed them? I didn't think so. In those days especially, there weren't many men with shaved heads wearing orange robes.

We stood and waited a little longer. Finally, after everybody had filed off the plane, very slowly and mindfully walking out of the gateway were five monks, each carrying a fan made for this occasion. The fans bore the name of the head monk and read "World Tour 1979." It was rather like greeting a rock band arriving in a foreign country.

They walked very mindfully down to the luggage area, we shepherded them to our cars, and drove them back to the center. They stayed for about two weeks and led a ten-day meditation retreat in the style we've just completed.

Being on staff, I got to spend time both "backstage" with this monk and practicing in the hall, both of which were very revealing. As I observed him in his informal moments, I was surprised by one thing: in all the time I watched him, I never saw him smile or laugh or show any signs of joy.

I truly believe that he was very well developed spiritually. He had done extensive practice, reached deep insight, and as far as I could tell, there wasn't any more suffering going on in him. But I didn't feel any spark of joy from him. As a result, speaking personally, I wasn't very inspired to seek him out for future practice.

One of my friends who was also on staff at the time and had the opportunity to serve him said that for her, it was like his metta was there, but it was like distant starlight.

It wasn't the kind of warmth that you can feel from some teachers where it's like a blast of the sun. It's like distant starlight. It's present but a little bit faint.

So the way that his personality was expressing didn't touch me particularly and didn't inspire my practice.

On the other hand, I practiced in recent years with another teacher who I feel has a lot of heart quality. At the end of one retreat recently, he was giving kind of pith instructions to his students. And he said, "When you leave the retreat, I want you to go out in the world and I want you to be normal. Don't go around being weird. People think Buddhism is weird enough already. So just be normal. Be wise. Don't go around messing up. Be kind to other people. Be kind to yourself. Manifest wisdom in the world." And the last thing he said was, "Be juicy."

Be juicy. I think this is the quality of heart that touches other people when we manifest our own juice. Then people really see, oh, that practice has something that can touch me. That practice has a heart quality that I can really resonate with and enjoy.

So maybe this quality of juice in our practice, the kind of sweetness of heart, maybe it's not even so much for ourselves. As I said, this monk was very, very cooled out, very peaceful, and not in a place of suffering. I really think he had completed his practice in a certain way. But maybe the quality of juice is for those who are interested in taking their practice really into the world and in small or large ways transforming the world through their work. Then developing these qualities of heart are the most straightforward ways to spread the qualities of kindness and love and wisdom, the most direct route.

So maybe if you consider your path to be the bodhisattva path of taking the great heart back into the world and changing the world, then maybe these heart qualities are a really integral part of what needs to be developed.

So I'm very grateful that there are in our tradition specific practices that open the heart, that bring about this quality of juiciness and sweetness. We've talked, I think, a lot over the retreat of the kinds of qualities that can come out of faith, devotion, surrender, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, happiness, contentment. All these qualities, fortunately, are also amenable to development. They are part of our heritage. They're part of our nature that unfolds as we unfold the whole path. But we can accelerate their growth, accelerate their relationship.

In our tradition, the fundamental practice is loving-kindness, metta. That's our primary heart practice and the one we spend the most time on. In Tibetan and Zen traditions, they emphasize more the Brahmavihara, the divine abode of compassion. But you shouldn't get too sectarian about this. I hope this doesn't become a dividing line—well, we're the metta team, and you're the compassion team, so we have to fight you.

Because actually, these two are the same flavor of heart. Somebody asked the Dalai Lama about this: What does this mean? Is compassion a really kind of gloomy quality? You're always harping about suffering. Is compassion a really gloomy quality? He says, "No, no, no. It's just a basic movement of caring in the heart. Basic human warmth." That's what we mean by compassion.

So this is really the same sense as our loving-kindness. When loving-kindness looks on suffering, it comes forth as compassion. But in their heart, they're the same.

This development of the heart is sometimes a hard sell to vipassana meditators. A lot of vipassana meditators are very skeptical about this stuff. You know, it's a little too touchy-feely, or they have real philosophical reservations about it. One way somebody expressed it in an interview, they said, "Well, it seems contradictory to me. Vipassana is letting go of everything. And with metta, you're trying to bring something in. Isn't that a contradiction?"

And I don't think it is. I think it's a complementary relationship.

The way I understand it is that our Vipassana practice opens up emptiness through the letting go, again and again and again. It opens up this great expanse of spaciousness or openness or emptiness. But for some of us, if we just left it there, it could be a kind of cold emptiness—a vacant, isolating, stark or bleak kind of emptiness.

So the role of metta is to come in and fill that empty space with warmth. When we open up to spaciousness, it's not a cold or dark experience. It's a spaciousness that's filled with the warmth of the heart. I think where our practice of loving kindness and our practice of mindfulness come together is in this quality of a warm attention that can hold all the arisings, including our other beloved sisters and brothers, in the space of friendliness—all arisings within the space of friendliness.

Another criticism that people sometimes make from a wisdom point of view is this: they say, "I think these phrases of metta practice are really deluded. May I be happy? May you be happy? There is no I. There is no you. What do you mean? This doesn't even make sense from a Vipassana point of view. They're just empty phenomena rolling on. You can't be happy. I can't be happy. There's no I there."

So I have an alternate phrase for you who have this philosophical reservation. You may do your metta practice using the following phrase. If I were doing it for Sally, for instance, I could say, "May this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena known as Sally experience the factor of happiness on an ever more frequent basis."

It's a little bit more long-winded, but it has the advantage of being philosophically impeccable. That might be important for some of you. So I want to really justify it on a philosophical level. But of course, that isn't really what's important.

The important thing is what you feel when you meet somebody who's really developed this heart quality. I love to reflect on the Dalai Lama in this regard. He was in this very hall—I'm sure a lot of you know this. He was sitting here in the hall for a couple of days last year. We had a teacher's conference of about 220 Buddhist teachers from Asia and from the West, and the Dalai Lama joined us for about two days of that.

He was sitting here giving teachings and engaging in discussion, and it was just wonderful to be with him. He said something at the time that I really think is true. He said, "I'm not interested in propagating Buddhism," which kind of surprised me because he's the best Buddhist ambassador that we have today. He said, "I'm interested in propagating human values." What he really wants to propagate is the heart qualities of kindness and care and compassion. And he touches people so directly.

Because he was here as a head of state, we had to have fairly tight security. At one point, the Secret Service was talking about putting riflemen up on the ridges and on horseback. There were bomb-sniffing dogs on the property. All of us had to come through a metal detector to come in to the property every day. It was staffed by State Department, United States government, State Department security guards. These are

not the people who inspect bags at the airport. These are heavy-duty professionals, and they are no-nonsense people. They have also provided security for people like Yasser Arafat. They know what they're doing.

So they manned the metal detectors with a pistol on one hip and a nightstick on the other. You did not mess with these people. You didn't joke with them. They were not there to joke. But after they got to know us, they did talk to us a little bit, telling us some of the other jobs that they'd done and how intense it can be.

But I thought what was most interesting is when the two days of teachings were over and the Dalai Lama was going to depart that day, all the State Department security guards asked to have their photograph taken with him. Because even just in their casual contact with him, they had felt something of his love. And they were touched by it.

So they took a photograph of the Dalai Lama with all the security guards with their guns and sticks. They all got to take that home with them.

So this is the domain of the Brahma-viharas, the qualities of loving-kindness, of compassion, of joy and equanimity. We really understand metta as the foundation for the other three—by developing metta we naturally sensitize the heart. The heart becomes responsive to the world, to the circumstances in the world. Then we don't have to specially sensitize it again for compassion. When the sensitive heart looks on suffering, compassion comes out. When it looks on happiness, sympathetic joy comes out. When it just rests in its own nature, then it holds the world in a balance of equanimity.

This really is part of our true nature, but because it's gotten covered over, it takes some encouragement for it to come out. It takes some development, which is why we do the practice. And it can feel fabricated at first. Some people feel it's a little bit phony, like we're trying to push something. Some people have a resistance to the phrases and the images and the formal practice, but they like the feeling of just touching in to the quality of loving-kindness and abiding with that.

What I'd say is that this really is the essence of the practice. That's the direction we're aiming in. But I've found, and a lot of people have found, that the phrases become a stable and dependable way in to that feeling. So as you practice with the formal practice of metta—working with the phrases over time and working with the images—then you can turn your attention to the phrases and to the image, and in a very short period of time, the feeling of loving kindness will start to come through in one of its flavors.

It's not always overwhelming. It's not always a grandiose thing of unbounded, unconditional love. Sometimes it's just friendliness. Sometimes it's patience. Sometimes it's acceptance. Sometimes it's trust. All of these are different flavors of metta. So the

phrases provide a way to elicit that feeling in a reliable kind of way, just as the breath provides the channel to bring out the mindfulness quality in vipassana practice. But ultimately, love is not a fabricated thing. It becomes more spontaneous.

I remember that one of the most loving people in my life was my grandmother. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890 and lived a hard life. She married my grandfather, for one thing, and he was one of the orneriest men that I've ever known. He was very prickly, not somebody you could get close to, strong aversive type. But despite that, she just manifested this sweetness her whole life, all the time I knew her.

We would go to my grandparents to visit in the summer. As soon as the three of us kids would come in, she'd immediately lean down and give us a hug. She'd put her lips right in this hollow of our neck by our shoulder and kind of nuzzle around in there, and she'd say, "I'm going to steal your sugar. I'm looking for your sugar." That's my feeling memory of my grandmother—she was looking for our sugar. She hadn't done any Buddhist training whatsoever. She hadn't even done psychotherapy. And yet there she was with this very great loving heart and quality of patience in the midst of a difficult life.

So we say that the love is intrinsic, but it needs to be uncovered. It needs to be encouraged out, a little bit like a shy animal, like the chipmunks or squirrels that run when a person gets too close.

We do the practice of loving-kindness, directing our thoughts toward others as well as to ourselves. Sometimes we wonder, am I really changing the other person? As I send my wishes, is the other person being affected? Can they feel it? Will it help them in their life? The classical texts say that it can. But of course, that depends on the purity of the transmitter and the purity of the receiver for those channels to be open. They say that it certainly can happen that way.

What we do know for sure—because we may never know the answer to that question—what we do know for sure is that it affects us and changes us. This is really the primary reason that we do the metta practice. It's really to open our own hearts. We come to see through doing the loving-kindness that the real source of happiness is in a purified heart.

It's not in external conditions. It's not in being adored by others or admired, or by being famous or wealthy. Happiness comes when the heart is pure. You can experience this through loving-kindness. You can experience it through the freedom of vipassana practice. When the heart is free of self-centeredness, there's a natural quality of contentment and happiness. This is a great blessing of the loving-kindness practice.

The Buddha said that the result of wholesome actions in the world—like generosity and service and morality—are not one-sixteenth the power of the blessing of metta. Not one-sixteenth the power of metta.

Someone else who really communicates this quality for me is Ajahn Jamnian. I imagine a number of you have met him. He comes here every year in May. He's a Thai monk, about sixty-six now. When he was young, he was very handsome, and people from all around would come to practice with him because they'd basically fallen in love with him. Not only did he have a really pleasing face, but he also had this great heart. Today, as he's aged and put on a little bit of weight, you can still see the handsomeness in him. But the heart has gotten even bigger.

He has such amazing energy. He always seems to be happy. I've never seen him unhappy for a second in all the time that he's been here. He also has incredible energy.

Ajahn Jamnian did a lot of loving-kindness practice when he was young. He was sort of a meditation prodigy. He fell into a trance when he was about three or four years old, and his parents couldn't communicate with him for about twenty-four hours. He just sat down and went inside and was gone for about a day. But then he came out. He was fine. His parents said, "This guy has some talent." So they took him to the village shaman and he was trained in shamanic powers. They took him to the village monk and he was trained in meditation from an early age. He did a lot of loving-kindness practice, and now he just radiates that kind of happiness and joy.

What we'll do often is have him down in the lower meditation hall for about five days, and he'll just give teachings from about nine in the morning till about five in the afternoon. If we didn't interrupt him for lunch, I think those would be continuous teachings. He can talk from all that energy.

We'll say to him, "Ajahn Jamnian, would you like to see San Francisco today? Would you like to go on a drive and see some of the nature around here?" And he says, "Well, I'm happy whatever you'd like me to do. If you'd like to take me on a drive, I'm happy to do that. If you'd like me to teach, I'm happy to do that. Are there people who'd like to

hear the Dharma? If there are people who'd like to hear the Dharma, I'd really like to talk the Dharma to them. But I'm happy whatever you'd like me to do." And he really is like that. He's always happy.

He doesn't know a lot of English, but his favorite kind of instruction combines vipassana and metta. He goes, "Happy, happy. Empty, empty. Happy, happy." That's his transmission, his heart transmission.

One of the things I really appreciate about the practice of the brahmaviharas is that it opens our practice up to all of life. We can take our vipassana practice and use it in a self-centered way. It's not meant to go that way, but it can. We can focus on my pain, my problems, my neurosis, my healing, my progress, my liberation.

But with a metta practice, you can't stay self-centered. It takes you out to connect with all of life, all beings. This is from Shantideva, a ninth-century Indian teacher, who said, "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

So when we open out in this way of caring for others, we actually find, as James alluded last night in that Tagore quote on service, that this is the path to happiness—the path to happiness is in caring for other people as well as ourselves.

In doing the metta practice, the core of it is the simple intention with which we send the wish to someone. These phrases—it's not like a mantric practice where you just have to say the words over and over and over again and it creates some kind of sense that does the work. With the metta practice, the meaning needs to be there so that the words are somehow coming out of your heart, coming out of your caring.

So as you connect with the person that you're about to send to, if you can just feel for a moment that little bit of caring—just something like, "I hope you're happy." You don't have to say it like that. But as you connect with the person, just have that feeling: "Oh, I hope things are good for you. I hope you're well. I hope you're happy." Then let the phrase carry that intention. That's what gives the metta its power. That's what does the work.

So as you do the practice, see if you can connect with that little bit of intention each time you send a phrase. And if you do, that's what creates the juice. That's what makes it unfold. And it will all unfold from there. There's not a lot else you need to do.

So that's planting the seeds. It may take a while for the seeds to sprout. We can't control that. But our work is just to plant those seeds, which are the intentions of caring. And we plant them over and over and over again. And sooner or later, the metta grows up.

And when the metta comes, it brings with it some really lovely qualities. One is a sense of contentment. When we're in that place of friendliness, feeling that we're in a friendly relationship with the world, we can kind of stop struggling so much. In a way you could say there's no better place to be than that. So in a way it feels like we've come home when we come into that field of metta. And then we can really rest. There's nothing more beautiful to look for. There's a Tibetan phrase that says, "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face." This is the feeling of resting in loving kindness. The search can come to an end.

Metta is also a concentration practice. Because you're coming back to the phrases again and again, it brings the mind together around that object. So it unifies the mind, as any concentration practice does. But what's so powerful about metta as a concentration practice is that love is also a very unifying force in the mind. Love binds things together. Love binds us together.

So under the integrating power of love as it gets developed, the different fragments of our personality that we may have pushed aside as too painful or too unbeautiful to own start to come back together again. And in that, we find our wholeness through this quality of acceptance and friendliness to ourselves. This unification of mind is really healing. And love has that healing property. It holds every part of ourselves in a large and wholesome container. It's not that it makes the difficulties go away, but it simply finds a big container, a big heart to hold them in. And they also get viewed with that kind of friendliness.

There's a really lovely poem that expresses this by an American poet named Galway Kinnell. It's called "St. Francis and the Sow." The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within of self-blessing. Though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.

To put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing. As St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow and told her in words and in touch, blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout all the way through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail, from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine down through the great broken heart

to the sheer blue milk and dreaminess spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths, sucking and blowing beneath them—the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

So that's the first of the brahmaviharas, the foundation of loving-kindness, the appreciation of ourselves and others. And that opens the door to the flowering of compassion.

This is such a big question. When we look out and start to explore the noble truths, when we look out with the eyes of the noble truths, we see how much suffering there is in the world. And it's really immense. Even the suffering in one human life is hard to conceive of. I don't really think it's conceivable to hold it in our minds at one time. Then how do we relate to suffering in a wise way?

There are so many ways that we relate unwisely. When I started to think about it, I thought of so many ways that I haven't been skillful in relating to suffering. I've often tried to avoid it or deny it, say it wasn't there, or turn away. Or I'd try to fix it to make it go away. Or I'd judge it and say it shouldn't be happening. I'd judge myself and say I'm wrong for having it happen to me. Or I'd try to find something pleasurable to take its place in my experience. Or I'd try to rationalize it—try to figure out where it came from, if it was something karmic that I'd done three lifetimes ago.

This response of compassion is maybe an unusual one in the world. But compassion really has the quality to just open to suffering and again hold it in this large space of acceptance. As we get more capacity to do that, what happens is that our hearts get bigger and bigger to be able to accommodate the suffering. And I'm not sure there's anything but suffering that can really enlarge the heart, that can stretch it in that way.

So by opening to our own suffering, we find we grow our ability to be with other people's suffering. And that's a really beautiful and rare gift in the world. How rare it is to have a friend or an acquaintance who you can go to in the hardest of situations and know that they'll just have you as you are and not try to fix you, not look down on you, not judge you, but just open their heart to what you're going through too. It's a really beautiful thing to bring into the world.

The near enemy of compassion has a couple of forms. One of the main forms, the classical expression, is pity. The near enemy of compassion is said to be pity. And what that means is that we look down on someone who's suffering. We feel sorry for them. But it kind of comes from a place where we're up higher and they're down below. There's a kind of condescension in the sense of pity.

But the state of compassion, on the other hand, knows that we're in the same boat together, that they're not weird for having suffering, because we know our own suffering. And we know how it really joins us with the world.

This is a poem from Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye called "Kindness":

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go, so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness. How you ride and ride thinking the bus will never stop, the passengers eating maize and chicken will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you can see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread, only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

So this quality of kindness really connects us to all of life because we acknowledge we all share in this suffering of being alive. That's the size of the cloth. The size of the cloth is everywhere. We're all in this together.

When we can hold that understanding with equanimity, then compassion isn't a state of suffering. The Buddha described it as a really beautiful state. There is a sweetness in it. But because it's contacting sorrow, there can also be a sad quality.

There often is a sad quality in compassion. One of my Tibetan teachers said that the quality of compassion is like the quality at sunset. You're sitting up on a mountainside, and you're watching the sun go down. There's a real beauty to the colors, the softness of the light. But there's also a kind of sadness about the ending of the day. He said that mixture of sweetness and sadness is the flavor of compassion.

Sometimes when we're reflecting on all the suffering in the world, it can seem overwhelming. The heart can actually get shut down because too much suffering is in mind. At that time, it's more skillful not to call all that suffering up, because the important thing is to keep the heart open and keep it light.

The other near enemy of compassion is grief. That's when the heart really gets weighed down with the sense of suffering. When compassion is sliding into its near enemy of grief, it's best to let go of some of the reflections on the suffering in the world, to narrow the lens down a little until you just take in enough suffering that you can accommodate with equanimity. Or drop the reflection on suffering at that point and turn to something wholesome and uplifting—a benefactor in loving kindness, a child, a pet, nature, something beautiful. Give the heart a little bit of uplift. Then if you like, you can come back to the compassion a little later.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche had a really lovely description of compassion. He called it our sore spot. He said, "It's as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts." That sore spot on our body is an analogy for compassion. Why? That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. Our heart is tender. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief.

Then he goes on to say that there's also an inner wound called Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound—that is, this sore spot or tender feeling about the world—and the internal wound of Buddha nature begin to meet and communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever.

That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore. This bodhisattva fever is when the heart is really open to all the changing circumstances of the world, of others' lives and our lives. Again we really feel that feeling is first. It all comes down to the feeling of suffering or release, suffering or happiness.

The third of the Brahmaviharas is sympathetic joy or mudita. Again, this is just the result when the sensitive heart looks on happiness. As a practice, it's a very upbeat practice. It's a very happy practice because it's like we get two doses of happiness as we're doing it. We focus on someone's happiness, and then we can feel happy in response to that. We get the hit of their happiness, and we get the hit of our happiness.

I called up a friend who I hadn't talked to for quite some time. I said, "How are you doing? How are you? We haven't talked so long. I've really been curious. How are you doing?" She said, really enthusiastically, "I'm wonderful." As soon as she said that, my heart just lit up. Immediately I said back, "You know, I'm wonderful too." It was just such a delight to be able to exchange that. But it was actually a thrill for me to hear the kind of enthusiasm with which she said, "I'm wonderful." I don't hear that every day.

The Dalai Lama said, "If you can be happy out of other people's happiness, then your odds for happiness go up by six billion to one."

This is indeed a gamble worth taking.

In one tradition, they recommend that we don't practice sympathetic joy for ourselves—they say it's only supposed to be about resonating with others. But I actually don't see it that way. I think it can be very skillful to practice sympathetic joy for ourselves. And what comes through when I do that, for me, is a feeling of gratitude. Sympathetic joy for oneself actually makes us aware of all the beautiful things that are in our life, all the things that we're happy for in our life.

If I could change one thing in the Buddha's teachings, it would be to add gratitude as the fifth brahmavihara, because I think it's a beautiful state of mind that is right up there with the other four. When you think about it, when you're in a state of gratitude, you've cut through both greed and aversion. You've cut through greed because you're so happy about what you have. And you've cut through aversion because you're focusing on the blessings and not the shortcomings in your life.

A friend of mine who's a dharma teacher and a grandmother was talking to one of her granddaughters on Christmas Day, speaking by telephone. The little girl was telling her grandmother about all the great presents that she'd gotten at Christmas. She was really happy about the presents she'd received. And her grandmother said, "Well, when you get lots of presents, does that make you feel thankful for what you have, or do you want more?"

And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, I'd like to have more."

Her grandmother said, "Oh, that's too bad."

The little girl said, "Well, what do you mean? Why is that too bad?"

Her grandmother explained, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, you feel good inside? And when you're wanting more, you don't feel so good inside?"

And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, that's right. That's right."

So she got that lesson about gratitude.

I have another friend—I talked to her at the beginning of the year. I hadn't seen her for a while, and I said, "How are you doing this year?" She's in the financial business, so you can imagine how her year has been with the decline of the stock market. It's been a rotten year in her business. She said, "You know, it's been a really difficult year in some ways. It's the first year I felt like a failure in my business. I couldn't do anything right this year business-wise." But she said, "It's also one of the happiest years of my life."

I said, "Why is that?"

She said, "Because I decided to practice gratitude this year. I've made a conscious practice of gratitude all year. And I just feel so happy about all the things that I have in my life that are going well."

I think this is a great practice. I did this during one retreat. I started on a long retreat, a six-week retreat, and I noticed my mind was getting a little depressed about the winter setting in and the long days of practice ahead. So I wrote down all the things in my life that I was really appreciative of, put them on one piece of paper. Then every morning when I'd get up, the first thing I'd do was read that piece of paper. It really put me in a great frame of mind for the rest of the day. It started that day off on a really terrific note. So I encourage you, if that appeals to you, to take up this practice of gratitude.

One of the other things that the mudita practice really brings out, I think, is the importance of joy. We spend a lot of time talking about dukkha—you may have noticed. But joy is a really essential part of the path, too. In fact, there's one teaching of the Buddha where he expresses the path to liberation in positive terms of joy, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, and on to liberation. So it's a really important part of the path. And doing the mudita practice tunes us into the joyful elements in life and gives us that uplift.

I'm not going to go much into equanimity tonight. We've talked about it in the guided meditations. It's not as directly tied to the feeling component as the other three, so I'll leave that for another night. But I'll just say that it's a critical component of all the other three.

It keeps the others in balance and keeps them from sliding into their near or far enemies.

The Brahmaviharas have truly become for us a map to wise response to life. The changing conditions of existence are always presenting us with pleasant circumstances and unpleasant circumstances—the potential for going up, the potential for going down. If we're not attentive, we slide into these near and far enemies rather quickly.

When something good happens in our life, we often get elated or over-exuberant about it. We think about it a lot. It's really the thinking that corrupts the happiness, and that's the near enemy of mudita. Or when something unfortunate happens to us, we easily get depressed. We dwell on it again with thoughts, and we sink into a negative space. That's the near enemy of compassion—grief.

But if we keep touching base with the Brahmaviharas, they can guide us back to center. Supported by equanimity, we can open to difficulties with compassion, not with grief. We can open to positive things that happen with a spirit of mudita and not over-exuberance.

We start to realize that all circumstances of life can become grounds for deepening our practice. Everything that happens, positive or negative, can be fuel for growth in the Brahmaviharas, therefore growth in our understanding. Then we begin to see that this intention toward the Brahmaviharas is actually an important karmic factor on the path. As we activate this wise intention, it helps propel us on the journey to liberation.

I want to close with two pieces. One is sharing the Tibetan phrases for the Brahmaviharas that bring out the karmic aspect of the path. Then I want to close with a listening reflection that expresses all the Brahmaviharas together.

The Tibetan tradition calls them the four immeasurables, or boundless states of mind. There are four different phrases for metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity:

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.

May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Let's sit together in silence for a moment, holding these intentions in our hearts.

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue. May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

CHAPTER 239

The Joy in Renunciation

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this dharma talk from a long retreat at Spirit Rock, Guy Armstrong examines renunciation (nekkhamma) as one of the ten pāramīs—not as deprivation, but as a practice leading to profound joy and freedom. Drawing from the Buddha's own renunciation when Prince Siddhārtha left palace life, Armstrong illustrates how temporary monastic life during retreat creates the conditions for deep insight.*
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> *The talk weaves together stories of great practitioners like Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Lama Shabkar, who spent years in solitary retreat, with practical guidance for modern retreatants. Armstrong addresses the challenges of giving up external supports—food preferences, comfortable accommodations, intimate relationships, entertainment—showing how this outer simplification allows consciousness to return to its natural, self-sustaining state.*
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> *Referencing the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's instruction to 'abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world,' Armstrong explains how renunciation reveals the mind's inherent freedom. He addresses the emotional intensity that arises in retreat settings ('yogi mind') and offers practical advice for navigating community living in silence. The talk concludes with the profound teaching that true happiness comes not from accumulation but from letting go, quoting the Dhammapada: 'How very happily we live, we who have nothing. We will feed on rapture like the radiant gods.'*

I think there's something about the start of a long retreat that has a different atmosphere than anything else that I know of. For me, this retreat, even though it's only the second day, already feels different than most retreats that I teach. And I think you all bring a different attitude coming in than in most other retreats.

Some people are here for two weeks, and that happens to be longer than any other retreat that we have on the calendar this year. Some of you are here for four weeks, some for six, some for two months. And I just want to say that I really appreciate the degree of commitment that you all are coming in with. It's something that I feel from you, and I feel like it makes us elevate our game also. So I just want to acknowledge that up front, that it's a special time that we're entering. And for me, it's really a privilege to be working with you all who have this degree of commitment. It's great to be here.

The subject of the talk tonight is the joys in renunciation. And it goes along with the commitment that you are making in coming here. In a way it's kind of an echo of what the Buddha did. The young prince Siddhartha Gautama left home when he was 29. This is how he described it in his own words:

"While still young, a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth, in the prime of life, I shaved off my hair and beard, though my mother and father wished otherwise and grieved with tearful faces. And I put on the yellow robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness."

You notice he doesn't say anything about the reaction of his young wife. But I attribute that more to Indian culture of the day than to this particular person.

So this has really been the heart of the life of monks and nuns for the last 2,500 years, this leaving of the home life and going out into homelessness. That's what constituted becoming a monk or a nun. And you all are actually doing the same thing here, because we're basically creating a temporary monastery here for the next two months.

And we give up certain things in entering. We give up using money for the most part. We give up entertainments. We're celibate. Well, you are anyway. You notice we didn't chant that third precept when the retreat started. We're on a different set of vows than you. In our tradition, the monks take—and it used to be the nuns took even more—the monks take 227 vows. The nuns used to take 254 before their order died out. And this is quite a difficult practice in and of itself to keep these vows in a conscientious way.

But I really feel from my own personal experience that what you're engaged in here is harder than that, is more arduous than that. It was easier for me to observe the monkly rules than it is to do the kind of intensive practice that we do here. So I think that you are practicing on the level of renunciation that monks and nuns historically have practiced at.

And in fact, the commentary to the suttas from ancient days says that in the context of mindfulness practice, anyone who sincerely endeavors to accomplish this practice is considered a bhikkhu. Or if you like, a bhikkhuni. That's the old term for a monk or a nun.

So as we read through the suttas during the retreat and you see the word bhikkhu, don't interpret it as a monk or as a nun. Interpret it as a committed practitioner, please, because that's what the commentaries say that is meant by the term. So you qualify for that category.

And in a very real way, you are homeless now. You've left behind the security of your home life. And you've kind of cast yourself upon the mercy, often, of strangers. The cooks, the managers, and the teachers kind of hold your fate in our hands, in a way. And yet you have trusted us to do that. And I hope your trust won't be misplaced. But we'll see how you behave first.

This retreat experience, this renunciate experience, is in a large part powerful because it's a withdrawal from busyness. It's a great simplification of our daily life. It's a time for silence, for slowing down, and for contemplation. This is really honored by all cultures that have a strong spiritual value. And we may think that we don't have enough time today to do this, but just because of that, we need it even more than ever.

This is from a young lama in the Tibetan tradition who's living in Ladakh, India, named Drukchen Rinpoche. He's a modern teacher:

"I was given a Western education for which I am grateful in many ways, but I lost something. I lost the peace of mind that I might have had in another generation. Everyone in our generation lives in a fragmented, complex, and disturbing time in which it is hard to keep one's spiritual balance. It's hard to find the time to build that balance in the first place."

I feel increasingly that I must go into retreat more, must meditate more, must discipline myself more, otherwise I shall be of no use to my people.

This degree of renunciation is solidly within the tradition that we're practicing, beginning from the time of the Buddha. One of the most striking images of his practice career—I'm sure you've seen it—is the emaciated Buddha. During one period in his practice, he had resolved that if he diminished the body enough, the spirit would become free. So he cut down his eating, ultimately to one grain of rice a week. The statues portray him at that time in his life when he had become extremely thin.

This is his own description of that period: "My vertebrae stood out on my spine like beads on a cord. My ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn. When I touched my belly skin, I could feel my backbone." That was the degree of commitment with which he approached his own practice. I like to reflect on that sometimes when I go down to tea and think there's not enough protein in the meal. I like to remember the emaciated Buddha and that level of renunciation.

Renunciation is one of the ten paramis. These are considered the factors that, when we develop them over time, blossom into liberation. They lead to unqualified freedom. Renunciation in this context is a practice—a practice like mindfulness or concentration,

like energy, like generosity, like sila or virtue. You could say that this particular practice is freedom from desire, freedom from wanting. In this way, I think of it as the practice or the manifestation of the Third Noble Truth.

The Third Noble Truth states that the end of suffering is in the end of wanting. The practice of renunciation—of giving up or letting go—is the practice that acts out our trust in that Third Noble Truth, in the giving up of wanting.

Sometimes in our culture, renunciation has a dark tone, something we don't want to get too close to because it seems unpleasant, something being forced on us by some spiritual authority. But that's not meant to be the flavor of it at all. This is from the Dhammapada: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness one attains to a happiness which is greater, then the wise pursue that happiness which is greater."

This is really the spirit of renunciation as a practice. It's letting go of less important things in order to reach the highest kinds of happiness available. So renunciation itself can feel like a beautiful quality, can feel like a natural movement of the heart, and its outcome is happiness.

It's said that the proximate cause—the near cause—of renunciation is spiritual urgency, a sense of wanting to understand. This is expressed over and over in the suttas when the Buddha would say to practitioners, "Look, there are these roots of trees. There are these empty huts. Practice with diligence before it's too late." None of us knows how much time we have left. So that sense of urgency is to really take advantage of this moment, of this opportunity, and to look to the deepest understanding while we still can.

Because this is such a core practice in the Buddhist tradition, I wanted to share a few stories and examples of practitioners over the ages. Someone from this century whom I have tremendous respect for is a Tibetan named Dingo Khyentse Rinpoche. You may have seen photos of him before. He was born in Tibet quite early in this century, and when he was thirteen years old, he resolved that he would leave his worldly life. He was brought up by parents who were fairly well off and was given a good education, but he resolved to leave his worldly life and go off into the wilderness to meditate.

This is from a letter he wrote to his parents when he was thirteen, telling them of his wish:

"My dearest parents, you gave me birth with all the advantages of human life, and you have cared for me with love from my infancy till now. After hearing, thinking about, and meditating on the life of my perfect teacher, I have resolved to slip quietly away from all this life's concerns and roam through empty, uninhabited valleys.

Father and mother, stay in your handsome, lofty house. I, your young son, long instead for empty caves. Thank you for the fine, soft clothes you gave me, yet I don't need them. I would rather dress in plain white felt. I leave my valuable belongings behind. A begging bowl, a staff, and Dharma robes are all I need. I've cast aside this luxury and wealth with no regrets. A handbook of profound advice is all I wish to collect. Although for now your son will hide away in mountain glens, your smiling faces will be with me always."

Nor shall I forget your loving care. And if I reach the peak of experience and realization, I shall repay your kindness. Of that you can be sure.

So he went away into retreat when he was thirteen. When he was fifteen, he entered a cave and spent seven years in retreat, three of them without speaking, from age fifteen to about twenty-two. Then he went into a meditation hut that was several days' walk into the wilderness from where he was brought up. This is the view from that hut, where he spent four years in a tiny little cabin out in the wilderness in solitary practice.

I'm going to put this on the board afterwards as a reminder of the possibilities of dedication that people realize in this life. Altogether, he spent twenty-two years in silent retreat. When he came back to teach, it's said that he had a mind that was so spacious that no one ever saw it ruffled. He could give teachings all day and receive visitors and attend all kinds of meetings, never disturbed from that profound place of rest he had found through his retreat practice.

Another great Tibetan practitioner was Lama Shabkar. He was born in 1781—not that long ago, actually. This was between the Declaration of Independence and the forming of the Constitution of this country. So while we were out on the plains of New England battling, he was engaged in very deep practice.

He went into a five-year retreat on a very remote island on a lake when he was twenty-five. There were some other retreatants meditating on this same island, but they would come over and ask him questions occasionally, and he didn't want to be bothered. So he actually mudded himself up in the cave for about two years, because life was too disturbing otherwise. He did his practice in the cave there.

He wrote about this time: "Throughout the year, my teacher's attendant occasionally brought me goat's milk and curd. In the summer, some vegetables were to be found. By the end of the autumn, however, my supplies were exhausted, and for two months I was reduced to eating only a thin soup of roasted barley." Amazing dedication and commitment.

We actually go through the same kind of thing here. It's only a question of degrees. You all have made tremendous sacrifices to come here. There's the income that you may be losing from your work, and there's the leaving behind of all your connections—your partners, your family, your children and friends, your creative activities, your work relationships, all the entertainments of the world of movies and books and music and television. You've given all those up to be here.

You've also renounced the Super Bowl, which some of you may not be aware you've renounced. It's the best kind of renunciation—effortless renunciation. I know there are always people on retreat who desperately need to know the score. That information is available, but at a price. We will tell you, but you have to listen to the tape of this talk again. Let us know if you want to make that devil's bargain.

So we leave behind all these things, not because there's anything wrong with them. There's nothing wrong with them. But because the problem is that we've gotten used to leaning on them. We are, for the most part, in relationships of some dependency on these fixtures of our daily life. What happens in doing that is that our consciousness actually gets distorted. It gets bent out of that leaning on and clinging relationship to the things, the people, the affairs of daily life.

It doesn't need to be that way. When consciousness gets distorted in that way, it loses some of its innate strength and power. Consciousness is actually quite self-sustaining and doesn't need external supports. When it returns by letting go of the external supports and comes back into its own natural balance, then we rediscover the strength that we actually possess—our birthright, a natural part of us.

But when we're separated from the things we've come to depend on, of course we all feel a kind of loss. The Buddha talked about, in one sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, the six kinds of grief based on the household life. These are the kinds of sadness that come to us when we abandon the six kinds of sense objects—the objects of the six senses, the five physical senses and the mind—in order to live a renunciate life and practice the Dharma. He said such grief as this that comes from that loss is called the grief based on the household life.

Fortunately, though, it's workable. Because in the same sutta the Buddha goes on to talk about the six kinds of joy that are based on renunciation, and how these six kinds of joy based on renunciation offset, abandon, and surmount the six kinds of grief.

Basically what he says is that we come to understand through wisdom the truth of impermanence, and that understanding brings a joy that the objects themselves can't give. When we truly come to understand the changing nature of these outer props and

relationships, these external objects, when we see with wisdom clearly that they all have the nature of arising, persisting and passing away—that seeing brings a joy that no outer kind of support can. So these are the six kinds of joy based on renunciation. It's basically the happiness of insight, the freedom of insight.

As we let go of the externals, the mind can come back and rediscover that innate freedom where it supports itself, where it doesn't need to rely on anything outside. And that's why you read in the Satipatthana Sutta on the foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha said over and over: "A practitioner abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world."

This is a great joy—to find that we have this freedom that's already inherent in our mind. It really contributes to a great sense of self-reliance. This joy was really apparent in the time of the Buddha. There's a section in the suttas where the king of Kosala, King Pasenadi, was visiting the Buddha and just remarked on the quality of the Sangha, the practitioners. The king said to the Buddha: "Here I see practitioners smiling and cheerful, sincerely joyful, plainly delighting, their faculties fresh, living at ease, unruffled, subsisting on what others give. I thought, surely these venerable ones have realized states of distinction in the Blessed One's teaching." This is the manifestation of their freedom—this joy and serenity.

So we give up a lot of things to come here. We give up our choice of food—it's a big one in our daily life. Although with the meals we have here, it's not a great deprivation. I mean, I eat better here than at home. I don't know about you.

The food issue really brings out an essential aspect of the renunciate life, and that is an attitude of taking what's given. It's really the foundation for the way that the monks and nuns ate. They went out with their begging bowl in hand, they were offered food, and they subsisted off whatever they were given for that day. So that's very much the spirit that we try to work with as yogis on a retreat like this. We really have the sense of taking what's given. It's been prepared with a lot of thought by the cooks here. It may not always be exactly the meal we wanted at that particular time, but we really approach it with the spirit of: this is what I've been given, this is my practice to accept and work with it.

When I was in Thailand as a monk, this was a big area of practice for me. Mostly I lived in forest monasteries. We only got one meal a day. Not only was there no tea—most monasteries have no dinner because there's no eating after noon for monks and nuns on these precepts—but in most of the monasteries I practiced in, there was also no lunch. So there was one meal a day, and it was served at eight AM. You took your bowl,

you ate what was there. That was it for the next twenty-four hours, pretty much. And if you've never feasted on red fish curry at eight in the morning, you really haven't lived. That was a frequent staple of our diet.

Actually, the monastery that I enjoyed the most was Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery in the south of Thailand, Wat Suan Mok. And I have to say—I think now that he's dead, I can safely say this—that monastery had the worst food of any place I have ever eaten. And I think they did it on purpose, actually. The monastery wasn't poor. It was very well supported. He was a very well-known teacher, even then. But I think they felt that if they made it too comfortable, people would stay for the wrong reasons. So they made the food very plain and not very tasty, and then you really had to want to be there in order to stay. And so it worked. There was a great atmosphere there.

In Zen, they have a saying that the mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace that can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease. So I don't think the cooks have any dried cow dung in the fridge for this retreat. Nonetheless, it may not always be exactly what you like. There's been a sign—I don't know if it's still in the kitchen—that is from the cooks. And it says: "When we prepare a delicious meal, that's our practice. When we prepare an undelicious meal, that's your practice."

It's very well said.

As monks, our accommodations weren't always the greatest. We were living out in the forest in really simple conditions. We only had electricity for about two or three hours a day in the evening, and there were all the creatures of the forest that we were sharing it with. Some were lovely—I'd look up in the afternoon and monkeys would be swinging by through the high boughs of the trees overhead. These little deer would come wandering through the clearings during the days.

But there were also some really fiendish insects out there. They had this type of insect I'd never seen before called brocks—basically like a big ant, but their pinchers are kind of like the size of little crabs. They would form long lines that often crossed our walking paths, and we'd be going out for alms round at six in the morning before the sun was up. We couldn't see very well what was on the path in the darkness. You'd cross one of those paths with the brocks on them, and they'd get their pinchers into you. It was very hard to get them out and very painful.

One night I got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom—it was outside, a walk down a lane. Foolishly, I didn't take a flashlight, put my hand on the railing of my kuti, and was bitten by a scorpion. So you don't have those same risks here.

Another evening—this happened more than once—I'd be sitting in my kuti about nine o'clock, doing my last meditation before going to sleep. I had a good friend, another Westerner, who had a kuti about fifty yards away from me. I couldn't see him, but I could hear him. All of a sudden I'd hear this pounding—the roofs were metal on our huts—this pounding of a wooden stick very loud against the roof. I'd understand what had happened: a snake had fallen out of a tree and landed on his roof. What the snakes then do is crawl down the edge of the roof, slide around under the eaves, and make their way inside to live in the ceilings of the huts if you let them. So here was a snake looking for a new home, had dropped onto the roof, was preparing to crawl in, and my friend was trying desperately to get it to leave. Generally it worked—they go off with that kind of prodding.

So here, the accommodations are pretty luxurious compared to that. Pretty luxurious, but still it can be difficult. We come and we wanted a single room, but we've got a double room. We wanted one roommate, but we got a different roommate. Or we wanted a really quiet room by the creek, and we got a room by the road right by the stairs, where we can hear people coming and going all night. There's still more renunciation and sacrifice needed to practice in this situation.

Again, I hope that with the same kind of attitude of taking what's given, we can approach it with the sense that the situation is what it is—my reactions are where I establish my dharma practice. I work with the kinds of mind states that come up, with a willingness to go through them as best I can.

In coming on retreat, we may be giving up our intimate relationship partner, and because that's one of the biggest aspects of our outside life, this can be the person we miss the most. I want to talk a little bit about this because I've worked with this over many years.

For those of you who don't know, Sally and I are a couple. We've been married for seventeen years now, together eighteen years. We spent a lot of time in retreat when one of us would go away and the other would be at home. Other times we would both be sitting the same retreat, somewhere between six weeks and three months. We've done that kind of retreat together or apart.

I have to say it's been nothing but strengthening for our relationship. What happens is we find that when we come back from retreat, because we've both gotten more established in our own self-reliance, our own individuality, there's less clinging, less leaning on each other. We actually have more strength in ourselves and therefore more to offer to the relationship. When the other person is having some difficulty or problem, the other is better able to give support.

It's been a very wonderful part of our relationship. Our time apart has been great—she would agree.

If you come on a retreat with your partner, my basic advice to you is pretend they're not here. Let's really pretend they're not even here. We regularly go through six-week retreats together where we're both sitting, and we don't make eye contact for that length of time. We don't communicate by note. We don't try to sit near each other or touch or hold hands or anything like that. It's just like the other person isn't there, and yet we really know that they are.

I always look out to see where she's going to walk, if she's on time for her walking, if it looks like she can still smile. So we're still staying in touch with each other, but there's no outer contact. Nobody would know that we were connected in any way. I feel it really helps support both of our practices and makes the retreat congruent for the other meditators.

Sometimes it's difficult if you're not in a relationship or your partner isn't here to see two people on a retreat who are communicating and keeping up the relationship. I want to really encourage you if you're practicing with a partner at this retreat or another time to do it in a really separated way. It will support your practices best that way.

We also give up a lot of choice around our schedule, our daily schedule. Your time is pretty well accounted for from 5:15 in the morning until 9:40 at night. There aren't too many hours during the day when it's unclear what you're supposed to be doing.

Obviously, we're all adults here, and everybody makes her or his own relationship to the schedule, and that's perfectly appropriate. We're not trying to fit everybody onto a Procrustean bed here. So it's helpful to find what works for you with the schedule. Also I'd suggest if you want to deviate from the schedule, talk with your teachers about it in your interviews. We've worked with people going through a wide range of experience on retreat. We have a lot of flexibility in how we encourage people to work with the schedule. But it's really helpful if you make that a topic for conversation and trust that we can offer some helpful support and guidance in that area.

Our basic feeling is that if you're able to do the schedule, it's really good to do it. If you have basically the fortitude of mind and body to do the schedule as it's written, we really feel that it will deepen your practice the best to do it that way, by and large. Again, the tailoring can be done in the interview.

There are times when you're settling in where you might want to sit a little longer or walk a little longer. That's fine. But the basic concept of moving from a sitting and going fully through a walking period, fully through the next sitting, fully through the next

walking—that kind of continuity there is no substitute for. There is no intellectual approach to the Dharma that can get you the kind of insight that comes from that continuity. That is really what will give you the deepening of the mindfulness and concentration that insight is born from.

So I want to encourage you to really be wholehearted in your effort in relation to the schedule. If you find it's not working for you, talk with one of the teachers and we'll help you tailor it for you. It gets so much simpler when you surrender to the schedule. When the bell rings, you sit. When the bell rings, you walk. There's really not much to think about. So a whole layer of conceptualization and decision-making is just taken away. It's just eased.

So where does all this lead? What's the purpose of all this structure and the renunciation and simplicity? It can lead to a lot of joy and happiness, as I mentioned earlier, but it's also really difficult. We know that. We've done these retreats in this way too. We know it's arduous.

It can bring up a lot of different feelings, this level of renunciation—sadness, loss, insecurity from not being in your own home, a sense of loneliness. The loneliness can kind of accentuate a sense of unworthiness. There can be feelings of self-doubt and self-judgment that are heightened through the isolation. All those things are a part of the experience. Sometimes when they're strong, we kind of wonder, well, why did I do this? What have I gotten myself into and what's the point of it?

So I want to say that the first point of the simplicity, the kind of extreme simplicity of life, which Sylvia last night referred to as a Spartan kind of life, which it really is—very extremely simple—is that we become unburdened. As we let go of the outer burdens, what happens is that inwardly we become unburdened too, so that the mind really can be open, be uncluttered.

And in that way, when the mind is really uncluttered, the Dharma can come in so directly and so easily. When the mind isn't distracted by anything else, the insights that you have, the words of the Buddha, the meditations on loving-kindness can come right in as deeply as they can ever go.

This is from an essay in the Audubon magazine from a journalist who had just come back from a backpacking trip and was commenting on this issue of simplicity:

"One moment, while backpacking, I can lay everything I need on the corner of a poncho. The next moment, it seems, I couldn't fit all my furniture into a warehouse. I then vow to purchase nothing that I don't really need, to give away everything that is excess, and to refuse all chores that don't arise from central concerns. The simplicity I

seek is not the enforced austerity of the poor. I seek instead the richness of a gathered and deliberate life, which comes from letting one's belongings and commitments be few in number and high in quality."

This is the situation that you all have created for yourselves right now. Your commitments are very few in number—your yogi meditation job, showing up for sittings and walkings, taking care of your body. And apart from that, your only real commitment is to be present. And they're very high in quality. So there's a beautiful opportunity to drink that in.

When the outer kind of distractedness falls away, really what we're left with is the bareness of our own experience. And what we really come to see is the way that the mind works. It's a little bit like in the wintertime when all the leaves fall off the trees—you really see the outline of the branches very clearly. So the outline that we're looking for in this simplicity is how the mind works. That's really why we simplify. We want to understand basically what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering.

And when everything else is stripped away, we're really just left with the mind and our reactions, our relationship to life, to the food, to the accommodations, to the weather, to one another, to the talks, and so on. That's all we're left with. And as Sylvia said, I love that quote from the movie Kundun that she used last night—the Dalai Lama, in rephrasing the second noble truth, expressed it as: "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind."

So this is really the point. When we can start to see that the areas of conflict in this simple situation mostly come from our own habits of mind, then we have a possibility of understanding those habits and, in understanding them, becoming free or freer.

There's a Western teacher who really inspires me named Ani Tenzin Palmo. She ordained in 1964 as a nun in the Tibetan tradition and spent most of the next twelve years practicing in a cave in India. She now teaches and is establishing a center in Assisi, Italy, and did some very serious and long stretches of practice.

She was getting to the end of one three-year retreat where she'd taken a vow of silence. So she'd been on her own, not speaking to anybody for three years, in this cave high up in the mountains. And then that day, she was getting near the end of her retreat, there was a knock on the door. She said, "Who is coming to barge in on my retreat? Everybody knows I've taken a vow of silence." And she opens the door, not knowing who's going to be there, and it's a policeman—an Indian policeman who has come to tell her that her visa has expired, is no longer valid, and she needs to leave the country. Several days before the end of her three-year retreat.

So she has to climb down from the mountain, go to the police station. They won't renew her visa. She has to leave the country. And she just had to deal with it.

When she was here at Spirit Rock a couple of years ago and gave a talk, some of us had lunch with her, and I just expressed to her how much I admired her commitment, doing those long periods of solitary practice. It's way beyond what I felt I could do. And her reply was really instructive. She said, "You know, it was just what I wanted to do." She didn't make any big deal about it. She wasn't laying any claim to fame. "It's just what I wanted to do." That was a beautiful teaching for me.

So a journalist was writing a book about her and said, "Well, aren't you escaping when you go on retreat? Isn't it an escape from the world?" And her reply was, "Not at all. To my mind, worldly life is an escape. When you have a problem, you can turn on the television, phone a friend, or go out for a coffee. In a cave, however, you have no one to turn to but yourself. When problems arise, you have no choice but to go through with them and come out the other side. In a cave, you face your own nature in the raw and you have to find a way of dealing with it."

As the outer activities fall away, the inner life becomes much richer and moves to the forefront. It's like attending a symphony where you're initially captivated by the beauty of the concert hall, the musicians in their elegant black dresses and tuxedos, the gleaming instruments. You find yourself watching the performers as much as listening to the music. But then you decide to close your eyes, shutting off the sense door of sight, and suddenly the music becomes extraordinarily rich—alive in an entirely new way.

The same transformation happens in retreat. As we release our grip on the outer world, the inner realm becomes vivid, colorful, and intensely awake. Sometimes people report having remarkably strong and vivid dreams, especially early in retreat—dreams so disturbing they wake up energized, carrying the full emotional weight of what they experienced in sleep.

Emotional reactions intensify dramatically in this setting. Things that would barely register in daily life—moments we'd simply walk past without a flutter—suddenly seem enormous and can completely overwhelm us. This is the phenomenon we affectionately call "yogi mind"—the remarkable ability to make mountains out of molehills while on retreat.

One manifestation appears as the retreat progresses: teachers and managers begin receiving lengthy notes from yogis about various logistics or format issues that desperately need attention. These notes seem almost reasonable as we read them, almost making sense but not quite. For instance: "Please ask yogis not to unzip the Velcro on their shoes so loudly when leaving the meditation hall."

The classic story comes from a retreat in Southern California where airplanes frequently passed overhead. A yogi wrote to the manager: "Could you please call the airlines and ask them to reroute those flights? They're really disturbing my practice."

As you notice your emotions intensifying throughout the retreat, take time to reflect before acting on them. We especially request that you resist writing notes to other retreatants about how they should be fixed. Like you, your fellow retreatants are experiencing yogi mind and heightened sensitivity.

Living closely together as a community, we inevitably irritate one another. We're human beings, and that's simply what human beings do—we cause problems for each other. It's no different here. You'll notice people who arrive late to every sitting, move around frequently, take your customary seat in the dining hall or your usual walking path, or wear noisy nylon clothing in the meditation hall.

The typical note reads something like: "My dear fellow yogi, didn't you hear the manager say not to wear nylon clothing in the meditation hall? And if you must wear it, please don't move around. Please observe the rules. Signed, Metta." These notes are invariably signed "Metta."

I genuinely believe that people writing such notes often don't realize they're angry. This is how hindrances operate—they're sneak attacks, and we remain unconscious of what we're actually feeling. But a note like this, delivered to someone in such a sensitive state, can be like a depth charge. The recipient might feel their entire being shaken to its core, precisely because we all become so vulnerable and tender during retreat.

So please be really respectful of each other's space and each other's silence. If somebody is really troubling you, write us a note—perhaps write to James, as he's particularly skilled with such matters. But especially, let us handle the communication. Either refrain from writing the note altogether, or inform us first. If there's a communication that needs to happen with another yogi, we'll facilitate it. This way we can truly protect each other's silence and sensitivity, allowing the practice to continue deepening.

All these challenges are simply part and parcel of the experience. You might say that this situation is designed to bring such things up—that's part of why it's structured as it is. When we meditate, we encounter one of two outcomes: we get the meditation object,

in which case mindfulness and concentration continue developing, or we get the obstacles to the meditation object. We encounter the karmic knots, the unresolved issues in our lives, the accumulation of tension and pain in our bodies that prevent us from connecting with our chosen object.

Either way, as James said on opening night, is just what we need. Remember he said that when we come here, we get exactly the retreat we need. It's mysterious how that happens, but this is part of how it unfolds. Either we get the object clearly, or we get the obstacle. If there's an obstacle present, wouldn't you really rather know about it than not? Isn't that where we're bound? If we're going to become free, isn't that precisely where we need to bring freedom in order to find freedom?

So either way is actually just fine. We either deepen simply and naturally, or we meet the obstacle. Most often, we deepen simply and naturally until we meet the next obstacle. Then we learn to work with that, to relate to it, and to find our freedom in relation to it. Then we deepen simply and naturally again until we encounter the next obstacle. This is really how the practice moves through these cycles, and both sides of the cycle are equally important, equally valuable. Because in the long run, this practice only leads in one direction—the direction of freedom, of liberation.

The outer renunciation is an important piece. We truly ask that you please try to stay closely with the form of the precepts we took together, the noble silence, the respect for one another, your wholehearted commitment to your own practice. The Buddha put it this way: discipline is for the sake of restraint, restraint is for the sake of freedom from remorse, freedom from remorse is for the sake of gladness of mind. All these forms of discipline—the precepts and all the rest—are really for the sake of greater happiness. They lead in that direction, so the outer discipline is important.

The inner renunciation is also really key. You could say that in a way, the deepest letting go is the letting go of our own desires and aversions, our own likes and dislikes, our hopes and fears, our views and opinions. When we let go in that inward way, it brings great spaciousness to mind. We can let life unfold and accommodate our own reactions to life, to our relationships.

This reminds me of a quote from T.S. Eliot that you may have heard many times before, which comes near the end of the Four Quartets: "Quick now, here, now, always—a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything. And all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." This condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything is this inner state of renunciation where we've let go of the clinging, the holding, the views that form this concrete notion of self, of who we are.

When we're willing to really let go of those things—those likes and dislikes—we find ourselves in a very open and clear relationship to our experience. This is again the area of the Third Noble Truth. In letting go of craving, letting go of desire and fear, we open ourselves to that deep, deep kind of peace that's very close to nibbāna, to the unconditioned, to very deep realization.

So the combination of outer discipline and inner renunciation is really powerful. A couple of years ago, we had a retreat here led by Sogyal Rinpoche, a teacher of Dzogchen from the Tibetan tradition, and Ajahn Amaro, a Theravadan monk living a couple hours north of here. They had never taught together before, and I'm not sure how long it had been since any Tibetan Lama had ever taught with a Theravadan bhikkhu—perhaps back in the days of Nalanda in India around 1000 AD. These two traditions haven't been exactly close for the last thousand years, so we felt it was a beautiful, historic occasion.

At the end of the retreat, Sogyal Rinpoche paid what I thought was a wonderful compliment to Ajahn Amaro.

He said, "I've never met anyone like this bhikkhu before. He's very strict in his vinaya, his code of discipline for the monks, but inside he's very open." He observed that usually when a monk is very strict in vinaya, he tends to be very tight inwardly. "But this one," he said, "very strict outwardly, but very open inwardly. That's a beautiful way to practice."

That's the kind of spirit that can really make the practice come alive for us here. To have that sense that we're going to be really impeccable in our outward form—with the discipline, with the silence, with the non-communication and respect for others' space, in relation to the schedule as it seems fit to you. But inwardly, we practice with being really loose and free. That's the place where happiness can really flower most beautifully, because it's based on not clinging and leads directly to freedom.

I'll close with this quotation from the Buddha, from the Dhammapada:

"How very happily we live, free from anger among those who are angry. How very happily we live, free from unhappiness among those who are unhappy. How very happily we live, free from busyness among those who are busy. How very happily we live, we who have nothing. We will feed on rapture like the radiant gods."

Let's just sit for a moment together, please.

How very happily we live, we who have nothing. We will feed on rapture like the radiant gods.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 240

Empty Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 57 min

In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's teaching on the five khandhas (aggregates) - rūpa (form), vedanā (feeling), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (volitional formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness) - as an alternative way of understanding human experience that is free from the mistaken notion of self. Drawing on the Buddha's statement that "in whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that," Armstrong guides practitioners to empty the mind of preconceptions and investigate what we truly are beyond our constructed sense of identity.

The talk offers practical guidance for working with the aggregates in meditation, particularly when experience simplifies to just body awareness and consciousness. Armstrong explores the nature of consciousness itself - this "empty knowing" that receives all experience - and how we can take refuge in awareness rather than in the fabricated stories of selfhood. He weaves together insights from Thai Forest masters like Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Buddhadāsa with Zen koans and references to the Sutta Nipāta, showing how understanding the aggregates leads naturally to the recognition of anattā (not-self) and the spacious emptiness that is our true nature.

The teaching emphasizes how mettā practice can warm this empty space, making it inviting rather than cold, and how trust in awareness itself can become a complete spiritual path. This is essential guidance for intermediate practitioners ready to investigate the deeper questions of identity and consciousness.

When I talked a week ago about the deepening of practice, I explored how coming to greater depth in practice is really a question of finding out more fundamentally what's true for us in our experience of life as human beings. When I think about this, I find it very helpful to empty the mind so that we can have a fresh look at this question.

I like to recall a quote that Sally mentioned in an earlier talk, a quote of the Buddha's, where he says: "In whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that." One of my teachers who liked to be provocative put it a bit more directly. He said, "Whatever you think is wrong." That brings it to our attention—whatever we think is wrong, mostly about the idea of self. When the Buddha uses the term "conceive" in this sense, he's mostly talking about the way we conceive of ourselves.

It's hard to keep in mind that everything we think is wrong. It sort of cripples our ability to function, doesn't it? If we can't trust our judgments—what time is it now? Is it time for breakfast or lunch?—we have to trust a little bit to function. But we overly trust. We depend and count on our views being correct, which of course they're not.

This is why in practice such good support is what Seungsahn, the Zen teacher, called the "don't know mind"—really having the openness to realize moment after moment we don't know the way things are. If we knew, we'd be free. Because we're not free, it's proof that we don't quite know yet.

I also like this line of Rumi's that I call to mind again and again. In one of his poems he says: "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." That puts the biggest perspective on our life as human beings. We got born into this not knowing—where did we come from and what are we supposed to be doing? That's really the truth of our situation.

This is helpful to keep in mind when we look at ourselves or another person. We may not really know what constitutes a person. We look at one another and say, "there's a person, there's a person, there's a person." But the Buddha didn't see this way. He said somebody who's really studied the mind-body process wouldn't say that. He said that would be like a butcher, a skilled butcher who's been working for years in his trade, cutting up the carcass of a cow, and as he cuts it into different pieces, saying "cow, cow, cow." The butcher doesn't do that. He says sirloin, tenderloin, rump, ribs.

So someone who studied this mind-body process doesn't say "person." What do they say? They say five aggregates, or they say six inner and outer sense bases. Because we talk about the sense bases a lot in relation to our meditation, I want to talk a little more about the aggregates tonight.

Gil mentioned them in an earlier talk, and this is kind of a refresher. I've found this a very helpful model for bringing greater freedom into my life. It's been the main way that I've been reflecting and exploring in dharma terms for the last few years, so I want to share it a little further tonight with you.

Like the concepts of not-self, the aggregates are not something that we can wrap our intellects around in one evening or one day or one retreat. I think they're concepts that we have to hang out with over a period of time. It's like another map. As we get familiar with the terms and apply them to our experience, we start to see what the Buddha was pointing at. More and more our understanding starts to align with his. His was free from suffering. And as we align our understanding with his, our view becomes freer of suffering also.

The main way that he saw was without the deluded notion of self—the false notion of self. So the aggregates is a way of looking at our experience as human beings. It takes in all of our experience. But it's a view that's free from the mistaken notions of self. It sees us without ego.

In Pali, the term is khandha. In Sanskrit, it's skandha. It's usually translated as aggregate.

Another good translation would be component - these are the components of the human personality. But all those sound a little too technical. In the Pali, khanda just means heap or bundle. If you were gathering firewood and you went out and gathered a bunch of twigs, you would call that a khanda of twigs. It's just a bundle. So it's a very ordinary term. Aggregate seems way too technical. Even component seems way too technical. So I think the best translation is: these are the five kinds of stuff. That's the way I think of it. These are the kinds of stuff we're made of. Nothing more, nothing less.

The five aggregates are material form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. Let me run through them briefly so you'll have a sense of what the map is about.

Material form is the whole physical world. It includes this body, but it's not limited to it. The Buddha didn't put a wall around body and say, "This is part of the being, but the rest of our experience isn't." What is body but sight and touch? It's just another form of sense data, just like the sense data of this platform, the bell, the chair. All material form and its interactions - not just the sight of things, but also smells, tastes, touches, and sounds - come under the category of form, material reality. When you hear that sound, for instance, that sound is in the realm of form. This one aggregate covers the whole physical world; the other four deal with the mind.

The first mental aggregate is feeling. This is in the technical sense - the Pali term is vedanā - of the quality of every moment of experience, every sense door, being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We usually introduce this in the meditation instructions because it provides the lever for grasping to arise. Desire arises around the pleasant, aversion around the unpleasant, ignorance or delusion around the neutral. So it's a key part of our experience. It's the springboard for craving in all its forms.

The sound of the bell that we just heard is usually pleasant in itself because it was manufactured by a venerable old Japanese company who've been making bells probably since before this country started. And also because of its associations. This may be the most pleasant sound on retreat because it means, "Ah, sitting's over. I can get up now." Very pleasant association.

The third aggregate is called perception - saññā in Pali. This is the factor of recognition. When we hear the sound of the bell, we know that it's a sound, we know that it's a bell, and we know that it's the bell that ends the sitting. All those things come out of memory and are aspects of recognition that the mind applies from experience. It interprets experience to this degree. And this is a fine and necessary function of mind. It's not something we need to get rid of. But it is true that perception can be either accurate or inaccurate.

One time I was doing walking meditation on retreat. My mind was quite still and I was walking and listening to the subtle sounds at IMS in Barre. I thought I heard a marching brass band. The meditation center is two miles outside of town, so there aren't too many marching brass bands on the road, but I was sure I was hearing one. So I stood stock still just to listen, and I could definitely hear the drums. I could hear the bugles, maybe a trumpet or two. I was having a great time listening to music, just waiting for it to get close enough so I'd really get into sort of a patriotic fervor about it.

As I listened, it did get closer and closer, but it didn't get much louder. And as it got closer, I realized that it was actually a garden cart fitted out with bicycle wheels being rolled down a gravel track. It was bouncing up and down, and that was making all the metallic, rhythmical sounds I was hearing. There wasn't actually a brass band, although I was sure there was. I was a little disappointed, but then I thought I could turn it into a dharma story, so I made up for it.

But perceptions can be more difficult when they're inaccurate. The Buddha said that a lot of our suffering comes because we think things are permanent when they're actually impermanent, or we perceive self where there's actually no self.

We perceive happiness where there's actually unsatisfactoriness. So we actually do get in trouble through mistaken perception.

Sometimes our preconceptions about things—with labels and names and terms—blind us to seeing the reality of things. Someone commented in an interview recently that the label of "fear" had kept them from just experiencing the simple nature of fear in the body and mind. There was so much baggage associated with the concept, they weren't able, until they saw this, to just feel it directly. When they felt it directly, it was just light. There was no big deal about it.

They play with this a lot in Zen training. Conventionally, if you ask somebody what this is, in this hall they would say, "A bell." But that puts it in terms of an overall cultural context and memory and past and all that. If you just looked at it fresh, couldn't it also be a planter? A flower pot? A bowl for feeding? Couldn't it be, if you turned it upside down, a really cute hat for a big statue? It could be any of these things.

So in Zen, there are lots of these koans where the master says, "What is this? If you call it a stick, I will hit you. If you say it's not a stick, I'll also hit you. What is it?" And you're supposed to manifest your understanding. Koans like that are why I never practiced Zen very much. I just had the feeling I'd wind up getting hit a lot. I could never figure it out.

There's another funny story—a lot of you have heard it, but for the five people in the room who haven't, it's so good I just want to share it. The Zen master Seungsahn, a Korean Zen master, uses these kinds of koans a lot. He was introduced by some students to the great Tibetan master Kalu Rinpoche when they were both still alive. They had a very short meeting, their first meeting. In Asia, great masters from different traditions don't meet each other very often at all. This is kind of a phenomenon from the West.

So there they met, and Seungsahn wanted to check out Kalu's understanding. He picked up the nearest object, which was an orange. They were sitting down having tea together. He picked up an orange, held it out to Kalu, and said in a very strong voice, "What is this?" This is Seungsahn's teaching style. They don't do this in Tibetan practice.

So Kalu just kind of looked at him and kept doing his mala. He was probably thinking, "Om Mani Padme Hum. What is this guy on about? Om Mani Padme Hum." Very cooled out.

Seungsahn didn't get an answer. He wasn't used to this. He was the Zen master. He was used to getting an answer. So he held it out again and in his very strong voice said, "What is this?"

And Kalu was doing his beads and turned to the interpreter and said, "Don't they have oranges in his country?"

So you can get in trouble with this perception thing. But keep checking it out. It's an interesting faculty of mind.

The fourth of the aggregates, the third of the mental aggregates, is called volitional formations or *saṅkhāra*. This refers basically to the kind of fabrications that we generate out of our impulses, out of our intentions—thoughts, emotions, moods, states of mind, and then actions of speech and body. All coming out of intentions that can be

wholesome intentions of generosity and kindness and compassion, or unwholesome intentions of anger or greed or fear or confusion. These are the fabrications of mind that are being created moment after moment.

You can experience this as you sit. It kind of feels sometimes like—in the term that Carol quoted the other night in her talk—the tides of conceiving are sweeping over us.

Or sometimes these are called karmic tides. They are the projections of mind that disturb our essential stillness and peace—something we feel really clearly when we sit down and try simply to be with the breath. These outgoing manifestations of movement come again and again. They're sometimes called karmic formations because the intention with them is a key part of their power. It's the intention that determines the wholesome or unwholesome quality.

Another word I like for these is conditioned tendencies. It's a recognition that the mind can be trained either in an unwholesome direction, out of fear or desire, or a wholesome direction, out of wisdom, mindfulness, understanding, and compassion.

So in hearing the sound of a bell, all of these come into play. There's the perception of the sound. Then there may be an accompanying volitional formation of ease or relaxation. I often notice when the bell rings, I think, "Oh, it's so easy to sit. I could sit for another half hour now." But I get up anyway.

The fifth skanda, in some ways the most interesting, is consciousness. The Pali term is vijñāna. It is basically the aspect of mind that knows experience in a very primitive way—the most primitive kind of knowing, before any words come in, before any perception or interpretation. It's just the receiving of our sense experience.

So now as you look toward the front of the room, you might see the white wall, men and women in different colored clothing, the wood of the floor or the platform. The consciousness that's receiving those shapes and colors, that's just holding that bare sense experience, is the consciousness we're talking about as vijñāna—just that bare knowing, the holding or receiving of the bare sense data.

So in the sound of the bell, there's a mental component to your experience. The sound is a physical thing, but the knowing of it is done by your mind. If you were a corpse, that knowing quality wouldn't be happening. Your body would be here, the ear would be here, but the consciousness wouldn't be present. So the knowing of the sound wouldn't take place. You would no longer be a conscious or sentient being. At this moment, because we're conscious and sentient, we know all this stuff of the six senses. So consciousness is a fundamental part of the aggregates. It's with every other aggregate.

In hearing the sound of the bell, consciousness receives the sound. There's a pleasant feeling, and consciousness holds the pleasant feeling. There's the perception that that's the sound of the bell, and consciousness knows that perception as it arises. And if there's the formation of ease or relaxation or the thought, "I could sit forever," those too are held in consciousness. So consciousness is with each of the other aggregates as it comes in.

As we practice over the days and weeks together, we're instructed to pay attention to what consciousness is receiving—that paying attention is the mindfulness property. But then we're instructed not to hold on to it. Let it arise and let it pass away. And this is what all the aggregates are doing moment after moment. The impact of the physical world is coming and going. Our feelings, perceptions, and formations are coming and going. And consciousness is coming and going as it holds each of them.

The idea is that consciousness arises to meet the object as it arises and passes away as the object passes. So all five aggregates are constantly arising and passing, coming and going, nothing fixed in any of them.

I thought the aggregates was a funny list when I first heard it. It seemed really arbitrary. Why did he put feeling and perception up there with body and consciousness? They just didn't seem that central to me. And over time I realized it really doesn't matter. It is somewhat arbitrary. In another list the Buddha breaks out mind further to note feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention. It's a list called nāma. It recurs in the suttas quite a bit. So it's broken down more finely.

The degree of fineness isn't important. The important thing is that every aspect of our experience can be slotted into one of the categories, and you can see that they're all impermanent. So that's why it's helpful to play with this model, to check it out against your experience, to verify that—to see if it's true that everything you know and experience is in the aggregates and it's all coming and going. This is the investigation.

Now as we pay attention and let go, pay attention and let go, pay attention and let go, over and over, one of the things that happens is that things start to clear out a little. And in particular, this projective tendency of mind of the sankharas, that starts to quiet down. There's not quite such an insistent train of thought. There may not be quite so much emotional charge around the thoughts that are coming.

This is from Ajahn Chah, the great Thai master: "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace."

One of the things I love about a longer retreat is that as you all come in and talk to us in interviews, we hear more and more of this letting go and peace story. Little peace, lots of peace, really deep peace as the weeks go by, for some. Moments of it for everybody. So whether it's a long-lasting peace or a short-lasting peace, the nature of the peace is the same, and that's what we're concerned about—understanding that peace.

Sometimes when the thoughts are subtle and emotions not so strong, people report, "Oh, there's really not much going on." If we ask them to describe it more closely, basically there's just the sense of the body. Or maybe they'll mention the breath. Or maybe they'll mention sounds. But in that moment anyway, that's about all that's going on.

Let's leave the sounds aside for just a moment, and I want to talk about body and consciousness. This is really a wonderful opportunity for practice when these are the two most obvious elements. When you say there's just the body but you're aware of it, you're also introducing or acknowledging the factor of consciousness—I'm just sitting and I'm with the body and my knowing of it.

It's a very interesting place because these are actually the two most important aspects of the aggregates. If you understand the body and consciousness in the aggregates, you're really getting to the heart of what they're about.

Normally we take this body really personally, don't we? It is as much "I, me, mine" as anything. I look in the mirror and I think, "Oh yeah, that's Guy. I know him." And I associate all the old history and personality and all the stories with this body. I really think that's who I am. And I take pride in it or I'm embarrassed by it, depending on whether I'm looking at the wrinkles and saggy skin or the fact I'm still able to stand upright and am in relatively good health. I have a lot of charge around the way this body appears, and it's as though I have some pride or shame about it.

It's so curious, isn't it? Why should I be proud if I'm attractive? Why should I be embarrassed if I'm not attractive? Why should I be proud if I'm tall? Why should I feel uneasy if I'm short? Did I make this body? Did I have anything to do with the color of my hair or my eyes or my height? I don't think so. I don't remember that. I think it was my father's sperm and my mother's egg coming together and their genes combining in some way that basically produced this body. And then I woke up in it sometime in childhood. My consciousness started looking out. I started to be able to conceptualize. And that's our basic situation.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, the great Thai forest master, said it like this: "This body belongs to nature. It doesn't belong to you. It grew out of nature. It's been sustained by nature, by physical nourishment, and it will go back to nature when it dies. Give it back to nature. It'll be a great relief for you."

It's not ours. It came out of nature just the way a flower comes out of nature, just the way a tree comes out of nature. Do we need to go around and name every flower and say, "Oh, I hope you're having a good life. I hope the other flowers like you a lot and really think you're the cutest flower on this bush"? A flower is just a physical manifestation.

This body is just a physical manifestation. It gets joined with consciousness. Consciousness is even less personal. This knowing quality—I don't know this for a fact, but I assume it's pretty much the same in you as it is in me. I don't think there's anything personal in my knowing.

So we have this impersonal body, which is the fruit of nature. We have this impersonal consciousness, which is another of the building blocks of nature. And from them, we fabricate a personality. This consciousness looks out and takes ownership of the body, of our success and failure in school, of whether we were or were not attractive to the opposite gender or the same gender as the case may be. It looks at our job records. It looks at our level of brightness or not brightness. And it forms all these opinions and conclusions based on the past. And it says that's who we are.

It's all constructed. Fundamentally, there's just this brightness. The consciousness is just a brightness that shines out of every pair of eyes here. That brightness isn't anything to do with the past, isn't anything to do with the future. It's alive here and now. It only has its life here and now. But it has a capacity for memory. And because of that, it builds this long, complicated story about who we are, and we believe in it.

When we see the truth of the aggregates, we see the body is a product of nature, the consciousness is only here and now, there's nothing else there. As someone said in an interview the other day, the whole personality is like a house of cards that's been put together on very shaky ground. Seeing the aggregates in this way kicks out the bottom layer of that house of cards that we call personality, and it can just start to collapse, can start to come undone.

This is a very fruitful place to explore in your meditation when there's just the body and the awareness, just the body and the consciousness. What is that like? What is there in that experience? I sometimes like to ask, what is intrinsically present? A lot of the arisings and passings are kind of accidental. A frog chirps at just the right time. A

thought of the past happens to come. A moment of sadness or delight kind of wafts up from the heart center. All those are, if not accidental, at least adventitious. They're just circumstantial. What's intrinsically there beyond change, beyond the accidental comings and goings? That's what's intrinsically you. What doesn't change?

So this is a very interesting point in practice when you have the experience of awareness and a lot of what you might call space or openness. Not feeling crowded in by the pressure of thoughts and difficult emotions, but a certain amount of ease and spaciousness. How do we relate to that?

I want to say that there are a number of meditation techniques that are very good at this point. There's no one right way to practice. You can continue to pay attention to the breath. Absolutely fine. It's part of the body. You can open to the whole body experience as you sit and feel the breath within that. You can make the attention really wide, take in all the sounds, sensations within that, and the breath within that. It's also a very relaxing and spacious way to be. You can be with changing objects, as we've talked about in the instructions. An in-breath, a sensation in the knee, a sound, an out-breath, a thought, a mind state. Just letting the attention move easily from one to the next. Connecting and sustaining with each one. All these are wonderful ways to practice. They're all good.

But before applying any technique, I think it's really helpful to just take a few moments and let yourself feel kind of your existential situation. Right in that moment when there's not much going on, what does that feel like? And what does it tell you?

One of the things that comes through for me is a sense of vulnerability.

I'm just sitting there, completely exposed to everything in the universe—everything outwardly. Someone could come up and hit me or push me or kick me or shout at me. And I'm exposed to everything inwardly. Anything can come up from the mind at any moment.

So I have a feeling of real vulnerability, which is not a bad thing. Actually, it's quite a beautiful thing to be that open. We've let down our defenses because we've stopped the train of thoughts. Defenses are mostly about thought. We're kind of open and kind of bare.

And often we can feel the fragility of our situation. We feel that: what is going to support me in this? What is going to hold me up? Is there anything that's really there for me to rely on in this moment?

This is really the domain of faith, as James talked about. Faith is the knowing of what it is that we place our heart upon. What do we really, in a very gut sense, trust in? Not in a belief kind of way, but is it safe to be this vulnerable? And if it's safe to be that vulnerable, why? What is it that holds us?

There's a great guy who teaches at Spirit Rock named Fred Wapipa. He's a Native American who lives in the East Bay. He does sweat lodges here and teaches often a combination of Native American wisdom with Vipassana meditation in the Buddhist path. I had the opportunity to do a sweat lodge with him one time, and he was explaining the procedure and the feeling tone of being in the sweat lodge where you're basically enclosed in this structure of saplings that have been tied together and covered over with blankets, with hot stones put in the middle.

As he was explaining to us how to approach it, he was talking about connecting with the earth and feeling grounded. And he said something that we ought to know: in his language, in his Indian language, there's no word for hope. He said, "That's because we already know that everything's all right. We already know everything's all right."

I thought that was a fantastic statement from somebody whose whole culture has been destroyed over the last 150 years or so. Everything's all right. So do we have that kind of trust? Can we have that gut sense in ourselves that it's safe to open in that vulnerable way, that it's safe to let go?

Because what's happening when we come into this spaciousness is that we're kind of touching an aspect of emptiness. There's not much there at that time. There's no support for ego in that openness. There's no support for the relational self because there's just this space, this empty space. So there's the sense that the space is empty of I or mine. There's not really a support for I or mine.

Now sometimes I think it's possible to kind of find our way into this space through a lot of effort. Strong concentration, diligent application of attention to the breath, very strong sense of not letting the mind move away from the breath—very firm, strong effort can take us to that place. But it's been manufactured contingent on effort and depends on the effort to sustain it. When the effort is stopped, the space will usually crumble.

There's another way into that space, and it's through relaxation. But for most of us, when we start practice, the way of relaxation is blocked by an obstacle or one or more. And these are called karmic knots. Most of us, when we enter practice, have some accumulation of the past that expresses itself in tension in the body and some storing of emotions and maybe memories in the mind. And as we relax, that's what we tend to hit.

So for example, when I came into practice, I had a lot of fear. It was not very specific. I didn't have specific memories. But every time I'd sit and try to open and be quiet, I'd just be seized with a lot of anxiety. In my early years of practice, it was all about learning how to open to this nearly constant state of anxiety and fear that I would find when I sat.

And I remember one time I was doing standing meditation out of doors. I'd gone over to England to do a retreat, and it was early summer. I think it was May. I was practicing in a retreat center that was in Wiltshire at the time.

And it was one of those beautiful English twilights. I was standing, I think, right before tea time. The air was soft, and the late afternoon light was golden, falling on this beautifully cultivated garden with apple blossoms and flower beds and a lawn that looked like it had been rolled for the last five hundred years.

I was doing standing meditation under a tree with my eyes closed and I was just full of fear. I stood there trying to relate with the fear, getting wound up about why I had all this fear and where it was coming from and how I was going to get through it. At that moment I thought to open my eyes and I looked out on this beautiful English garden with apple blossoms and birds in the trees and that golden light. And I thought, "Hmm, pretty scary place, isn't it?"

I just had to laugh because my reality inside was so different from the true nature of the world around me.

These karmic knots, when we haven't faced this frozen energy, keep us from seeing the world as it is. They keep us from seeing the spaciousness that's really there, that's really our basic situation. For many of us, the first years of practice are occupied with the loosening and releasing of these karmic knots.

They carry with them a very powerful sense of self. I think it's very hard to really understand anatta, the truth of not-self, when these karmic knots are active. There's so much history and emotional charge and usually discomfort around them that we tend to constellate the ego around these knots.

Once these knots are loosened and that energy is released—and when it releases it can be just gone—then it becomes effortless to sit and open to this spaciousness. Years later in my practice, that anxiety has for the most part simply disappeared. At times—not always, but at times—it becomes just effortless. Someone simply intends to let go of thought and that open space is available. Then the sense of anatta comes through much more clearly, much easier to access.

But this work of loosening the karmic knots is honorable work. It's important work that shows us impermanence, not-self, and dukkha. We learn tremendously from doing it. It's a valuable and noble part of the practice cycle for many people.

So in that sense of openness, what do we become aware of? I asked someone the other day who was describing an experience of that kind of openness, and the answer was, "I'm aware of awareness. That's what I'm aware of."

This is an interesting situation, and I don't know if you have turned your attention in this direction, but it's a fascinating avenue to explore. What is awareness? What is consciousness? What are these qualities of mind?

This is tricky ground because consciousness is what holds everything else. Can consciousness see itself? Is consciousness an object that can be known with consciousness? Is it dualistic in that way, that one bit of consciousness holds another bit of consciousness as an object? Or is it more like the eye trying to see itself? Can the eye ever see itself? It can't, can it?

Ajahn Sumedho was talking about this on his retreat last year. He said, "You can look in the mirror, but then you're seeing a reflection of the eye. But the eye can never see itself." So how do you know you have an eye? We know by its functioning. Because there are sights, we know that we have an eye that's working, although the eye can never see itself.

I think it's like that with consciousness. It can't hold itself as an object, but maybe we know it by the fact that we're sentient beings and consciousness is working to receive all the impressions. You know you're not just a bump on a log, right? I hope. Maybe by this point in the talk, half of you are, but hopefully you're not.

This becomes really interesting. You can explore this in your practice as you get intimate with any object, like the breath. Attending to the breath usually means attending to the physical sensations of breath. We feel its qualities of being rough or smooth or hard or fast or slow. But you can also, in that moment of experiencing the breath, start to tune in to the knowing side of the experience.

Like all sense experience, what's happening here involves two dimensions. The physical—in this case, the bodily sensations of breath—and the mental, which is the knowing of it, the consciousness. You are receiving that as a mental experience.

So start to try to intuit what is knowing the breath. What does consciousness feel like for me in this moment? One cautionary note: don't try to locate it in the head. There's no reason to assign consciousness to the head. More likely, look for it right alongside the physical sensation—there with the physical experience of breath. The two arise together and pass together.

When we start to look in this way, we see that every object arising in our experience is conjoined with consciousness, never separate. Another way to say this is that every object that's arising is arising in consciousness. Or simply, it's only an appearance in consciousness.

Normally we take this world as so real. This is the materialistic worldview, the nineteenth-century scientific perspective: a solid external reality within which we're entrapped. This is the ultimate truth of existence—the solidity of this material world. Our consciousness is just an accidental byproduct of evolution, some random mixing of chemicals in the primordial sea.

The Buddhist worldview is different. All that we see is only an arising in consciousness. One of my Tibetan teachers put it like this: "When you see in this way, you see that everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. It's only an appearance in consciousness."

So the functioning of consciousness comes to be much more central in our view of our situation. Maybe this is more like the center of who we are—this aspect of consciousness.

Then I'll return to an earlier question: Is there anything fixed in that consciousness? Is there any object that's always there? Or is every object—sensation, sound, thought, emotion, breath—coming and going? They're all coming and going, aren't they? Because of that impermanent nature, we say that essentially the space is empty. Our basic situation is that the space is empty.

You might check this out. Just right now as you sit, eyes open or closed—it doesn't matter—take a look back at what your consciousness is like. Take a look at the nature of consciousness itself. Is there anything fixed within it? Or is it basically empty?

As you investigate, you'll probably find there isn't anything fixed. Everything comes and goes, so there's this basic emptiness. But this emptiness isn't a void completely. We're also conscious. And as Gil mentioned in his talk the other night, we don't have to do anything special for this consciousness to happen. It happens by itself.

So maybe our most essential nature is this combination of emptiness—this empty space—and consciousness. Maybe that's mostly who or what we are.

Now if that feels like a cold thing, then it's not going to be very inviting to open to that. This is where metta practice has a great contribution to make. When we practice metta, we warm up that empty space. You might say that the function of vipassana is to show us that emptiness, and the function of metta is to fill it with warmth.

When it gets filled with warmth, it starts to feel really inviting. It starts to feel rich, happy, sweet, juicy. And then we want to open to it. Even though there's vulnerability, we want to open to it more and more.

Ajahn Jumnian is a great Thai teacher who comes here about once a year. He did a lot of metta practice in his youth.

He's done a lot of vipassana practice and has one of the greatest energies I've ever encountered. I encourage you to meet him if you haven't. He's one of the happiest people I've ever known.

He doesn't know many words of English, but he does know two, and he teaches them often. He does this sort of transmission where he points to the space and goes, "Empty, empty, happy, happy, empty, empty, happy, happy." And that's one of his key teachings. This emptiness is so happy when it's pervaded with the warmth of metta, of loving-kindness.

So we could say that there's the emptiness, there's the knowing, and there's the warmth. These three things together make up our essential being. And this is what many of the sages in this tradition have called Buddha nature. This can become our real refuge as we open to that spacious place of knowing within us.

This is from Ajahn Mahabua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration." This is our basic goodness.

There's a little bit of a conflict here, because when we talk about consciousness, we talk about it coming and going. And when we talk about this knowing, as Ajahn Mahabua talked about it, he talks about it not dying. How do we resolve that? Can we take refuge in something which is coming and going? Does that make any sense, to take refuge in what is impermanent? Or can we only take refuge in what is lasting, in what doesn't die? Isn't that a better refuge?

I asked Ajahn Sumedho this question when he was here last fall, and I liked the way he answered it. He said, "Well, when I sit down and I turn my attention there, it seems like my awareness is steady. So that works for me." I love this as a skillful means. And we can talk more, if you're interested, about the metaphysical resolution of this dilemma. But for now, I really encourage you to check and see if it feels like that awareness is something steady as you sit. And if it is, to trust in that, at least for the time being. It worked for Ajahn Sumedho, and he came out pretty good. It can work for us.

So trusting in this sense of the effortless knowing that happens within this space of emptiness.

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "I met my Guru when I was thirty-four and realized by thirty-seven. Pleasure and pain lost their sway over me. I was free from desire and fear. I found myself full, needing nothing. I saw that in the ocean of pure awareness the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside beginninglessly and endlessly. There is a mysterious power that looks after them. That power is awareness, life, God, whatever name you give it. It is the foundation and ultimate support for all that is."

Trusting in this refuge of awareness is really trusting in not doing. It is trusting that the capacity of this space will bring out the flowering that we need, whether that flowering is in terms of metta, compassion, joy, wisdom, devotion, or warmth—that it will all come out of this openness and trust. This kind of opening and trust can really be a path all of its own.

And I'll close with a quotation from the Sutta Nipata. An unusual quotation from the suttas because the Buddha doesn't point to this a lot. This is almost a devotional path that's being expressed here, but it is found in the suttas. The Buddha's talking to a bhikkhu called Pingiya, and he says, "Pingiya, other people have freed themselves by the power of trust. Vakali, Bhadravuda, and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Let's just sit for a minute together. "Other people have freed themselves by the power of trust. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Thank you for your attention.

This talk was given by Guy Armstrong at Spirit Rock Meditation Center on February 22, 2002. It is an offering of the Dharma Seed. Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

CHAPTER 241

Living in a World of Change

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

> *In this profound dharma talk delivered six months after September 11th, Guy Armstrong examines how we can live skillfully amid life's constant flux. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on the eight vicissitudes of life from the Aṅguttara Nikāya—gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure—Armstrong illustrates how these conditions affect all beings, even the Buddha himself.*
>
> *The talk centers on the Brahmāviharas (divine abodes) as a roadmap for responding wisely to changing circumstances. Armstrong explains how mettā provides the foundation of open-hearted caring, how karuṇā naturally arises when the heart meets suffering, how muditā allows us to rejoice in others' happiness, and how upekkhā (equanimity) supports all three with balanced awareness. He shares moving stories, including that of Kisāgotamī and her encounter with death, to demonstrate how grief can transform into compassion when held in the 'empty awareness' that Thai master Ajahn Jumnian describes.*
>
> *Through vivid examples from both ancient texts and contemporary life, Armstrong shows how the Brahmāviharas offer alternatives to our habitual reactions of envy, cruelty, elation, and overwhelm. This teaching provides practical guidance for meeting life's storms—both personal and collective—with wisdom and an open heart.*

Living in a World of Change

The subject of tonight's talk is living in a world of change. Today marks the six-month anniversary of September 11th, and it has been an intense time for all of us in different ways. We have witnessed countless responses to the events—to the loss of life, to the damage, and now to the war. Obviously there has been a lot of grief, sadness, and a certain amount of anger, along with arguing. But we have also seen incredible bravery, love, understanding, and forgiveness. All these human possibilities have emerged.

There was a very interesting television program last night that was filmed inside Tower One of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11th. Two young cameramen had been following a particular fire company—Ladder One of the New York City Fire Department—for several months. They said they had gotten great footage

of everything except a big fire. On the morning of September 11th, they thought they had really struck pay dirt because there was a big fire. So they followed Ladder One to the World Trade Center.

They were among the first on the scene because their station house was near the center. They went right in with the firemen and were stationed in the lobby where the command post was set up, and they basically ran their video camera for the entire time they could remain in the lobby. It was quite amazing to feel that event from within.

One of the first things you noticed was how the firemen just went up the stairs without any hesitation. There were no elevators operating from the very beginning, but the firemen didn't even think twice. They just threw their hoses over their backs and started up the stairs in what they thought was going to be a big and hopefully successful rescue operation.

As the hour wore on and the cameras continued rolling, the firemen had all gone upstairs and the chiefs were the ones who stayed in the lobby to command the operation. You could see the faces of the chiefs change over the hour—from confidence and engagement and optimism to a look of being stunned. They appeared overwhelmed by the situation they found themselves in and realized it was probably going to be beyond their control. This was quite amazing to see. These were middle-aged firemen who had been doing this kind of work probably all their professional lives, and they were just lost in the enormity of it. Some firemen commented that they actually saw fear in these faces for the first time they had ever known them. Fear was not part of their vocabulary, but they saw it that morning.

Then, partway through the day, off-duty firemen started coming in, totally unprompted and uncalled. One fire chief who had been retired for three years came down, got a suit, and headed right for the World Trade Center, saying that these were his people, his men, and he couldn't leave them alone. That level of bravery and solidarity was present through the whole operation as well. As you know, it continued throughout the day. After the buildings collapsed, the firemen and police worked around the clock to try to find survivors, to try to help anyone they could find.

But I think the most startling part of the whole video was that it filmed the lobby for about an hour. As you remember, people were jumping out of the windows very high up on the buildings because the fires were from about the 80th floor and above. About every ten minutes in the video, there would be this huge slamming noise that took place outside the building—the sound of a body hitting the ground from eighty stories up. You could see every time it happened, the firemen would be startled again and

would look around through the windows. The camera never turned to show that, but you could see the impact on the firemen when it was happening. Then another ten minutes would go by and another intense slam would happen.

You could take that sound as a way to go into the suffering of those people, because what kind of terror would prompt someone to jump from eighty stories high? The jumping was a preferable alternative to what they were facing up there.

The cameras continued rolling and showed many people coming down through the stairways and leaving safely from Tower One. They also, of course, showed the collapse of both towers and people running away from the disaster. It was a sobering reminder of something I had seen many minutes of on the day itself but hadn't watched for quite a while. From this perspective, it put me right back into the feelings I had on September 11th. Again, it was very hard to be with.

What it reminded me of at this distance is the enormity of the stakes that we face in living. Sometimes we forget this. Living in a comfortable place like Marin County or Northern California, we tend to forget that life is full of extremes of joy and extremes of sorrow. Seeing video like what was on television last night reminds us of what that potential is for all of us. Life is intense.

In a way, we tend to forget about that intensity as we settle into the routine of a life. We forget that this kind of intensity and the impact it has on us is part and parcel of human life—in fact, all of sentient life.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist monk who trained in Vietnam and was exiled because of his protests during the war. He ended up settling in France. From time to time he would still travel back to Asia to check on what he could of his people. He came back from one trip where he had seen the suffering of boat people who were trying to flee Vietnam but who were attacked on the seas by pirates—people who were killed on the seas, who were robbed, who were not admitted to other countries because of asylum policies. After making a trip like that, because he cannot return to Vietnam itself, he came back to Paris. Looking around, he wrote that as he looked around Paris, coming back from this trip, all the suffering there seemed really minor to him.

And we can understand this from our own experience. There are certainly times when we feel centered, when we're able to respond to difficult situations with clarity and compassion rather than reactivity. And there are times when we lose that center completely, when we get swept away by the intensity of what's happening around us.

The difference isn't usually in the circumstances themselves, but in where we're operating from within ourselves. When we're operating from that centered place—what Ajahn Jimnian calls emptiness—we have access to our natural wisdom and our natural capacity for love. When we're operating from a contracted, defended place, we tend to get overwhelmed and lose access to these qualities.

The practice of the Brahmaviharas—loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity—is designed to cultivate this centered place within us. These aren't just nice feelings we're trying to generate. They're actually the natural radiance of an awakened heart, the natural expression of that empty, spacious awareness that Ajahn Jimnian talks about.

When we practice loving-kindness, for instance, we're not just trying to manufacture good feelings toward people. We're actually training ourselves to rest in that place from which love naturally flows. We're learning to find our way back to that centered space again and again, so that even in difficult circumstances, we can respond from wisdom and care rather than from fear or reactivity.

This is why these practices are so practical. They're not just about becoming nicer people, though that might be a side effect. They're about finding a way to meet the intensity of life—whether it's the intensity of September 11th or the intensity of our own personal struggles—from a place that's stable and open rather than defensive and closed.

And this is what makes all the difference. When we can find our way to that centered place, even the most difficult experiences can become opportunities for deepening rather than sources of trauma. The waves are still stormy, but we learn to surf them rather than being overwhelmed by them.

It's a nice description. I like to think of it as an empty awareness pervaded with the quality of loving kindness, or metta. Whatever description works for you, we're looking in our practice for both these qualities of seeing clearly and having an open, responsive heart to the conditions of life—the changing conditions of life.

The Brahma Viharas provide a really good roadmap to how the heartfulness side of our practice can express itself. I basically see them as a description of the wise response to the changing conditions of life. We have many responses to the changes of life that are not so skillful, that bring suffering to us immediately and that bring suffering to other people, short-term or long-term. But the Brahma Viharas are particularly there to describe what's a wise way to hold this situation, no matter what it is, and the maps of how we slide off from those wise responses.

We develop metta as the basic foundation of caring. It's an open heart that doesn't tip one way or another. When that open heart confronts suffering, the natural response is compassion—compassion is simply caring in the light of suffering. When that open heart touches on somebody else's happiness, the natural response is this appreciative joy, this quality of becoming happy with somebody else's happiness. The Dalai Lama said that if you can do that, your chance for happiness goes up by six billion to one. So it's a good bet to make.

And then there's the equanimity that holds them all in balance. Remember that equanimity is not about being shut down. It's not closing off and being indifferent. We feel the other person's happiness. We feel their difficulties. But we hold all of that within a balanced mind so that we ourselves are not suffering on account of their situation.

You can see how equanimity really becomes the foundation for the other three. It holds metta because it lets the open heart rest. It holds compassion so that we don't become too weighed down by the suffering we're feeling. And it actually holds joy in a sane way so that we don't float off like a balloon with the uplifting energy.

The beauty is that it describes how to relate to different circumstances—basically circumstances of joy and sorrow. And the fact is that these circumstances are changing for everybody all the time. They're not just changing for you and me; they change for every being in the world, the ones who are free as well as the ones who are still struggling and working.

Even the Buddha, you'll be happy to know, had lots of back pain. Even after he was enlightened, he would sometimes say, "Ananda, my back is really killing me tonight. You give the Dharma talk. I'm going to go lie down for the evening." So the Buddha was not immune to pleasure and pain even after his awakening. He still went through the same cycles that we do.

There's one sutta I want to read a little bit from. This is from the Pali Canon, the record of the teachings of the Buddha, which were written down 500 years after his death and constitute about twenty volumes in English translation today. This is from the Anguttara Nikaya, and it's called "The Vicissitudes of Life." The Buddha is speaking:

"These eight worldly conditions, O monks, keep the world turning around. And the world turns around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure."

I'll just read those eight again: gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure.

These eight conditions alternated for the Buddha also. You might think that after he was enlightened he had a really easy life. But it wasn't like that. There were lots of people who didn't like his teachings. There were other teachers whose words he threatened because he disagreed with them. There were power struggles within his community. His cousin was a monk and thought that he should be at the head of the community. So he actually tried to kill the Buddha and one time sent a mad elephant charging down an alleyway trying to trample the Buddha in its path. It's said that the Buddha stopped the elephant by the force of his loving kindness.

So these eight conditions change for all of us. We're always going through ups and downs of all these different factors. If we're holding on tight, we go up and down with them. If we can learn to rest in more of a place of equanimity, then we don't get so tied to the changing fortunes.

Equanimity—the word in Pali is upeka, and the literal meaning of it, etymologically, is "looking on." We develop this faculty for looking on, even on the events of our own life.

And then that gives us the strength to look on at the events of others' lives as well.

So these fluctuating conditions happen all the time for all of us. These are the stormy waves of life, and they are also the grounds for developing the brahmaviharas. They are the very conditions that can evoke the states of metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity. So we can actually train the heart around these changing circumstances.

We have many different conditioned ways of reacting, but if we come back to the brahmaviharas, they can show us a skillful way to respond. And as we find more choice in our life, that makes a huge difference in freedom. Freedom is really about choosing how we might respond to an outer situation. Often we can't change the outer circumstances—they simply come together through various factors. We have to let that be. We have to accept that in many, many situations.

But what we do have the potential to affect is our response to the outer situation. This is where we build our practice. This is where we uncover our own freedom.

I'll share a quick example from a month-long retreat I was teaching in February. Someone came into an interview who had been sitting for a few weeks at that point. If you've observed this, when people go on retreat for a while, they get really slowed down—though it still seems like they're moving fast to them.

This meditator told me that one day she was going through the lunch line, moving really slowly. She was approaching the serving dish, just reaching out her hand very slowly and mindfully for the serving spoon, when somebody else who wasn't quite as concentrated bolted up on the other side of the table, snatched the serving spoon, and started dishing onto their plate as her hand was still moving toward it.

In just that moment, she said, this huge bolt of rage came up in her. She was so angry that somebody would overlook her practice, her mindfulness, her slowness, and just cut in front of her in line. But also because she was quite slowed down, she saw it immediately. She knew, "Oh, that's rage." And she just dropped it right on the spot. Just like that, she let it go.

That's the choice that real awareness and freedom can offer us. I often find myself driving down the freeway when somebody cuts in front of me. I haven't been going slowly or mindfully, and I spin out for a few cycles with that. So I was really inspired by this story—seeing it that clearly really opened up her choice with the situation.

We could take a look at the first of these worldly conditions—the conditions of gain and loss—and examine how we might relate from habit and how we might relate through the brahmaviharas.

Let's take loss as a beginning. How do we usually react if we suffer a loss? My older sister died several years ago. I was pretty close with her, and her death put me into a period of depression for about two months. I felt a lot of loss and sadness after she died. It was quite unexpected—I wasn't expecting her to die at all. She hadn't been particularly ill.

I practiced every day as I do now, sitting for an hour in the morning. The interesting thing was that the practice and mindfulness didn't seem to touch the grief very much. Day after day I would sit with it, and it didn't seem to be wearing down particularly. I just kept sitting with it. It would go through some ups and downs of intensity. Then after about two months, it kind of lifted.

It was a really interesting thing for me to watch because the way it felt is that the loss or grief had its own expression that it was going to make regardless of what I wanted it to do. It had its own life to live. I think this is not uncommon—when any of us lose something, we tend to respond with grief and depression.

There are also stories from the time of the Buddha that illustrate this in an even more dramatic way. There's a famous story of a woman during his life whose name was Kisa Gotami. She was actually a cousin of his who came from the same village that he had grown up in.

She had gotten married through an arranged marriage and had not gotten on well with her in-laws. Coming in as the wife in that society, you moved into the husband's house, but the husband's parents ran the house. If they didn't like you, you were the low person on the totem pole, and your life could be miserable—and hers was.

So she was quite unhappy, but then she bore a son. Bearing a son in that culture at that time raised the woman's status tremendously, so she got some degree of satisfaction in her household life.

But then her son died.

The loss of her son when he was still young—let's say a toddler, probably three or four—drove her crazy, drove her mad with grief. She clutched her son and started going from person to person in the village asking them for medicine. "Do you have medicine that can save my son?" She wouldn't listen to any of their replies.

Finally some kindly person suggested that she go talk to the Buddha. So she went and talked to the Buddha, and he said, "I can make a medicine for your son. What I need is for you to bring me a white mustard seed from a house that hasn't known any death."

She said, "Thank goodness. My son's going to be able to be cured." So she started to go from house to house in the village asking for a white mustard seed if they hadn't known death. And of course, what happened? Every house she went to had known death. "We lost my mother two years ago." "My daughter died last year." "We lost my sister this year." Every house she went to had known death.

Having gone to all the houses in the village, she finally understood. She buried her son in the forest. She came to the Buddha and said, "I see my son was not alone. I am not alone. Death is a condition that all of us face as people." Then, as the story went on, she ordained as a nun, practiced seriously, and came to liberation. It's the way those stories always go.

I find a couple of things interesting about this story. When she went to the Buddha and told him about her problem, he didn't give her wisdom teachings. He didn't say, "All conditioned things are impermanent. The way your son has gone is the way we're all going to go. Get with the program." He didn't say that because she couldn't have heard that at that time.

At first, I think what his teaching did was it didn't take away her grief, but it took away her madness. In this newsletter, Sylvia has a lead article that has a really lovely line. She's talking also about September 11th. She said, "Wisdom statements don't work in the middle of heartbreak. Heartbreak requires silence."

Wisdom statements don't work. Heartbreak requires silence. I think that's a beautiful pointing. When we are in the midst of heartbreak, of our loss, are we able to find that degree of silence? Because if we are, then some other movement might come out of that silence.

Particularly, I think, when we can touch that silent place—again, it's Ajahn Jumnian's awakened space—in the midst of difficulty, the flavor that naturally comes from the heart is compassion. We start to see that our thinking about the difficulty somehow often can't hold it. When things are really difficult, like September 11th, if you've lost a partner, if you've lost a child, you're having real conflict in your relationship, our thoughts about the situation can't hold that much pain. I actually think if any of us were to try to reflect on all the pain in one human life—our own human life—we couldn't hold all of that.

But the magic thing is that the silence can hold it. You could say that emptiness can hold it. Or you could say that compassion can hold it. So we discover that there's another possible response to pain, whether it's our loss or another's loss, and that is the response of compassion.

When I found the compassion practice, just as we did it tonight, I took it up quite seriously. I did actually a ten-day retreat of compassion practice, doing nothing but that from five in the morning until ten at night. It was very powerful finding that it was a new relationship to pain. Compassion, for me, brought in with it a kind of equanimity that was able to hold the pain without being disturbed by it.

Interestingly enough, compassion itself is not a suffering state. Even though the pain can be strong, when compassion starts to come out of the heart in response to the pain, there's a sweetness to compassion and it is not a state of suffering. When you look at the half-smile on the Buddha, the Buddha was deeply in touch with suffering. But that half smile is the equanimity that let him hold the suffering in a skillful way so that he was able to respond to someone like Kisagotami and able to help and say the right thing, say the appropriate thing to her in the midst of her suffering.

One of my teachers offered a beautiful image for understanding the feeling of compassion. He likened it to sitting on a mountainside at twilight, watching the sun slowly set in the west. In that moment, there is profound beauty unfolding before you, and yet

there is also a tinge of sadness—the gentle melancholy that comes with the ending of the day, the passing away of what was. He said compassion carries this same quality: there is beauty and sweetness within it, and it's perfectly natural for it to hold a touch of sadness, since it is touching suffering. But compassion itself need not become suffering.

This is the essential distinction. Compassion offers us a way of looking upon suffering without being consumed by it ourselves. Grief, like what I experienced for my sister, is itself a state of suffering that requires the support of equanimity to transform into compassion. Sometimes it's said that grief is the "near enemy" of compassion—meaning the heart slides into grief when it lacks sufficient strength, support, or equanimity to hold pain with pure compassion.

This brings us to the other side of the equation: how do we relate to gain? Let me offer a less dramatic example. When the Buddha spoke of gain and loss, he often referred to material fortune. Cast your mind back to the ancient history of internet time—two years ago, when the stock market bubble was soaring. Did you know people who were getting rich during that period? I knew a few who were riding that wave of prosperity.

How did it feel to witness their good fortune? Were you able to feel completely happy and joyful about their happiness, even when you hadn't made the same investments? Or was there perhaps a small tinge of disgruntlement? A quiet voice saying, "I wish it weren't going quite so well for them. I wouldn't mind if their stock had risen fifty percent, but tripling?"

The Brahmaviharas invite us to feel genuinely happy with another's happiness—and we're not asked to judge whether that happiness makes sense to us. We're called to tune into their joy, not our version of what should bring joy. If they feel happy because their investments have flourished, can we simply connect with that happiness and enjoy it alongside them? This is mudita, appreciative joy, the third of the Brahmaviharas.

But often the heart slides into that subtle disgruntlement, which the Buddha called envy—the far enemy of appreciative joy. This happens when someone experiences happiness that feels like "too much," as though their abundance somehow diminishes our own potential for joy. It's as if happiness were a limited resource, and their having more means there's less available for us.

So when a friend experiences gain—a new relationship, a better job, material fortune, whatever form it takes—can we genuinely celebrate with them? The classical commentaries note that appreciative joy is often the most difficult of the four Brahmaviharas to practice, precisely because of envy's persistent influence.

But consider what happened when the bubble burst and your friend lost that fortune. What arose in your heart then? Was it pure compassion? Or was there perhaps a touch of satisfaction, a sense that "this is justice—those gains never should have been so high in the first place"? Did you find yourself, even slightly, enjoying their downfall?

This tendency toward satisfaction in another's suffering, however subtle, is what's called cruelty. Cruelty is the heart's capacity to take pleasure in another person's pain, whether great or small. It is the far enemy of compassion—its direct opposite.

As we learn to witness loss, can we hold compassion as our gold standard? Whether the loss belongs to us or another, whether the pain is ours or theirs, can we meet it with compassion? And can we develop sensitivity to those moments when the heart begins sliding either into grief unsupported by equanimity, or into cruelty?

Cruelty is a harsh word, and none of us wants to be seen as cruel, yet I believe we all carry this tendency. Notice how often in media reports over these past months there has been a kind of reveling in military operations from all sides. "Hundreds were killed today in our action in Afghanistan"—delivered with a tone of satisfaction. Or from opposing voices: "Thank goodness we finally got some American servicemen—it's what they deserved." This taking pleasure in death and destruction is another manifestation of cruelty.

This is true whether one supports the war or not. This is still cruelty—enjoying the suffering of another.

With delight, the delight of happiness and gain, the far enemy is envy. The near enemy is becoming overexcited. We can see this with our own gain very easily. Do you notice when something good comes into your life, it's very hard to just hang out with that in silence? Sometimes it's harder to hang out with happiness in silence than it is with difficulty.

What happens, I think, is our minds tend to latch on to the happiness as a possession and then build on what we're going to do with life now that we have this possession. This mental interference of thought with happiness corrupts it. It undermines the happiness because we start to spin out in our thoughts about it and we can't just feel the

pure joy of the thing. This is called elation—the English translation of the Buddha's term. Elation is the near enemy of appreciative joy, and it really undermines the impact of the joy itself.

So these are the roadmaps offered by the Brahmavihāras for these changing alternations of pleasure and pain, of gain and loss, of praise and blame, of success and failure. When we encounter pain, can we meet it with compassion? When we encounter joy, can we hold it with an appreciation that resonates with that joy? And can we look for these slides away that move into grief or cruelty, or the sliding away that moves into elation or into envy?

Because all the Brahmavihāras are supported by equanimity, as we find our home in them more and more, we really come to a greater balance with all the change that's in the world. Like Ajahn Jemini, we're not so moved by it. We don't have to reach out and get entangled with it as much. But our heart is still very responsive. It's not that we're turned off or cold, but the entanglement with it really tends to get cut down.

As we're not getting so entangled in the ups and downs, our motivation can really shift from getting to giving. I think this is really the start of the bodhisattva path, the path where our practice, where our life really starts to have a dimension of not just being for ourselves, but being for the benefit of all beings. That moves from being a cliché to being an actual motivating reality for us.

I'll close with this quotation from Śāntideva, an Indian Buddhist teacher of the 8th century, one of the Dalai Lama's favorite quotations: "For as long as space endures and as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the unhappiness of this world."

We have about ten minutes left. If you have any reflections, comments, discussion, or questions, I'll open it up.

"After 9/11 happened, our president used the word justice. And with everything we've talked about, how does justice and the word justice play a part in this? Is it justice to take another's life?"

How can we understand justice in light of the emphasis on compassion and non-harming in the Buddha's teachings?

First, I think the Buddha was very dedicated to a life of non-violence. You can get a sense of how that might show up in the world today by the Dalai Lama and the way that he speaks and teaches.

This is from the newsletter and fits here. At the end of a talk, someone from the audience asked the Dalai Lama, "Why didn't you fight back against the Chinese?"—because this also could be a form of justice, to fight back against an invader. The Dalai Lama looked down, swung his feet just a bit, then looked back up at us and said with a gentle smile, "Well, war is obsolete, you know." Then after a few moments, his face grave, he said, "Of course the mind can rationalize fighting back, but the heart, the heart would never understand. Then you would be divided in yourself, the heart and the mind, and the war would be inside you."

I think that might be taken as a fairly accurate pointer to the way that the Buddha might answer the question if he were here today. The Buddha felt justice was appropriate. In the rules he set up for the community of monks and nuns, there were offenses described against those rules, with specific punishments for each offense proportional to the transgression. Some involved being excommunicated from the order altogether. Others involved lesser penances.

So the idea of justice is in the Buddha's teachings, but I think he would look very long and hard to find nonviolent ways of coming to justice. I obviously don't have any easy answer for what that would mean in terms of the world situation today or Afghanistan.

But I do have the feeling that the leaders of our country and the world have not put as much time into exploring nonviolent alternatives and tend to move rather quickly to violent alternatives.

"Any other comments, questions? Yes, please."

"I have a question that's a little off the topic. It's about non-harming. And I always have a problem with refraining from killing when it gets to a level of insects. And it sounds funny, but we had termites in our house, and I couldn't justify selling the house to someone else and I couldn't justify to myself leaving the shelter for my family either, and yet I felt guilty about killing them. How do you decide when what you're doing is really rational or when you're fooling yourself?"

The question is about the precept on not killing and the attitude of non-harming and what to do with insects in the house with termites, for example. It's a real question for serious Buddhists.

I'll tell you a little story. The Minneapolis Zen Center years ago had cockroaches, and they were infesting the meditation hall. New people didn't want to come in and practice because cockroaches would run over their legs. So the senior students thought, well,

we'll ask the Zen master. He must know what to do about this. So they went up to see the Zen master who was Katagiri Roshi and explained the situation and said, "Roshi, what should we do?" And he said, "I'm not going to tell you."

So what the senior students decided to do was to have the meditation hall exterminated. They killed the cockroaches so that meditators would come and practice. And they felt that was the right alternative. I think many other people who are good, sincere Buddhists come to a similar kind of decision.

What I think is that there are times when killing insects may be the right option for any one of us. It may be the option we choose. And it doesn't take away from the fact that we're breaking the precept. And in breaking the precept, there's a certain amount of unskillful action going on and we'll have repercussions in our life. I believe that happens.

So I hold the precepts not as an absolute commandment, but as a guideline to use in skillfully choosing your own route in this situation.

One other thing I wanted to say—this gets back to the first question also—I think there are Buddhists who have different views on pacifism. I think there are responsible Buddhists who would say that the Tibetans should have defended their country against the Chinese. And there were certainly Tibetan fighters who wanted to do that. The Dalai Lama did not encourage them or would not support them. But I think that one can be a conscientious Buddhist and believe that at times war might be the right response. World War II certainly comes closer to that situation than today's war.

But what I also want to add is along with the situation with insects, I think the situation with killing humans is the same. I think there are huge karmic repercussions from the taking of human life. And those are not dismissed because one believes that it's the right course and it's justified.

"One last comment, please."

I've heard of that sutra too. The story that I heard went that there was a pirate on board a ship who was going to kill all 500 people on the ship. And one person on the ship killed the pirate, thereby taking one life but saving 500 lives. The scripture, which is from the Mahayana—so it means it didn't come out of the mouth of the Buddha, but came out of very enlightened beings centuries later—the scripture goes on to say that that being did suffer the karmic consequence of taking a life, which was that he spent one moment in hell. But then he was immediately reborn after that one moment in a very happy life.

The Buddha also said that the workings of karma are one of the four things that can drive you crazy if you think about them too much. So I would encourage us to take the messages from the suttas and kind of leave it there.

So I'd like to just close the evening. We've come to 9:15 with this dedication of merit from the Tibetan, having the sense that we want to take whatever goodness has come out of our time together this evening and have that goodness be shared with all beings everywhere for their welfare, for their happiness, for their freedom.

Through the merit of this practice, may all come to awakening. Overcoming the obstacle of my own misconduct, may I free all beings from the ocean of existence with its stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death. May all beings be freed.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

CHAPTER 242

Faith as a Spiritual Faculty

Guy Armstrong · 50 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines saddhā (faith) as the first of the five spiritual faculties (pañca indriya) that support spiritual development. Beginning with reflections on world events and uncertainty, he explores how some people respond to difficulty with despair while others use it to deepen their spiritual practice. Armstrong explains faith not as blind belief, but as placing one's heart upon something trustworthy—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as sources of refuge. He describes Buddha-nature as our essential awareness beyond change, and discusses how bright faith develops through inspiring examples, leading to verified faith through personal experience. The talk emphasizes faith as the foundation for spiritual vulnerability and openness, enabling the heart qualities of loving-kindness and compassion to emerge. Drawing from the Third Zen Patriarch's "Verses on the Faith Mind," Armstrong shows how deep trust allows us to accommodate life's imperfections without anxiety, supporting both meditation practice and engaged response to world suffering.

You all tuned into the news this morning, but I did, and I sort of wished that I hadn't. When I tune into the news these days, there was a fragile peace starting to establish itself in the Middle East, and then yesterday and today there were two suicide bombings of Israelis. Sharon returned from Washington from peace talks vowing retribution, and I also heard there was a suicide bombing in Pakistan today. Of course it brings up for me the events of last September and what the repercussions of all of that are going to be.

I read something in the news the other day that really shocked me and was kind of a wake-up call. Warren Buffett is the second richest man in the United States. He's mostly an investor, but his core holdings are insurance companies. So he got very interested in the ramifications of September 11th and how to look at insurance in a new light because his companies had something like $3.5 billion in charges relating to the events of September. He's also a pretty smart guy.

His comment was, after looking at this whole situation, he came out and said that a nuclear attack on the United States is a certainty. He said this is not just something that might happen—it's virtually certain that this will happen. Because with the proliferation of the technology of how to make nuclear bombs, and the increasing anger direc-

ted at the United States and the rest of the world, he said this is not a question of if, it's only a question of when. It could be within the next 10 years, it could be within the next 50 years. He said most likely it would be New York or Washington.

I don't know about you, but I'd sort of settled back in since September 11th to feeling more comfortable and like maybe we were over the worst of it. And then someone as smart and obviously wary of the risks as Warren Buffett says something like that, and we have to think again. So it's kind of a wake-up call that the world is an unpredictable place. It's a place that's fraught with insecurity for our bodies and minds and hearts. The possibility of loss is huge for all of us, and the events of last September woke that up as well.

Then I started to think: you can take this kind of understanding about the precarious situation that we're all in in one of two directions. You can get really depressed about it. There's a lot of sadness that accompanies this, and you can just spiral down in that weight of depression and despair. Or there's also the possibility to take that information and use it to actually awaken our spiritual life—to crystallize a sense of urgency and caring and compassion and to use it to deepen our spiritual qualities.

So I wanted to toss out for your reflection the question: what is it that sends some of us in one direction, just kind of being bowed down in despair at the situation, and that allows other people actually to grow from that kind of insight, that kind of awakening? What makes the difference? When you look around yourself and your friends, you probably can see people who are going in two different directions with all this news and these changes. What's the capacity or what is it that lets people respond differently, either to grow and open or to basically close down further?

One response was that it can resolve grief and trauma—that people rely somewhat on practice, so carryover from the past that hasn't been examined or opened to gets re-stimulated.

Another perspective: "I think the people that I see who are able to have it—at the end of the day it's the balance—but the people that I see that are holding it in a way that I really admire, they live their life that way. It's like they walk that path. And so when it comes, if they have the balance to be with the pain and to also hold it in some way, it's really a magnificent thing to see. But I think this practice is the path, for me. I'm taking baby steps on that path. But when you see people that have practiced for a long time, I think they do have it."

So it really has to do with the amount of preparation that people have put in their lives to finding that kind of balance through their practice.

Another insight: the person who goes forward is often the person who is willing to take that risk to go forward, doesn't know what's going to happen, but is willing to leave the comfort zone. The relationship to change, the willingness to let go, the ability to be flexible and adapt.

And finally, coming from a belief that we are a part of something much bigger.

Thank you. Connection to nature, to pets, to the bigger picture of life once again. Faith in people, faith in humankind. And then there was this beautiful insight about the skill of listening—listening interpersonally, listening globally, and listening to the pain within our own bodies, the stored trauma and unresolved grief. Meditation really can be described as the art of listening, both inwardly and outwardly.

I appreciate all those comments. There's profound wisdom in every single one of them, and they really help bring focus to what I wanted to explore with you. My own reflection brought me to a similar place. I felt that it comes down to whether one is able to meet the events of the moment with a balanced mind that also holds compassion and understanding. This kind of ability often emerges from having practiced it. It's difficult to suddenly find this capacity on September 11th if we haven't discovered how to cultivate it beforehand.

Sometimes in meditation it seems like we offer many different instructions. This morning I probably gave five instructions, and that was brief. I could easily give a hundred different meditation instructions. There's working with sounds, with space, with the body, with thoughts and emotions. We can become particular about body sensations, focus solely on the breath, get precise about the in-breath and out-breath, practice sweeping attention through the body, or meditate on no object at all. The list goes on and on. This technology has been refined for 2500 years, so there are countless techniques.

But I believe it all comes down to one basic instruction: Get as good an approximation as you can of what the awakened state of mind is, and put yourself there.

What the Buddha was trying to convey through all his words and teachings was to share with us what he had discovered. The discovery is, in one way, fairly simple. It's a way of looking at the world, a way of experiencing the world that is awake and peaceful. These are two fundamental qualities of the awakened state—awake and peaceful.

When we can rest in that place, different aspects shine out spontaneously. The doors open for all the beautiful qualities of heart and mind to express themselves naturally. We don't have to call them forth; they're already there when we're established in that awakened place.

So our job as meditators is to discover for ourselves what that awakened place feels like, as best we can. This is a gradual path, so we're not Buddhas yet. We don't see the world as clearly as the Buddha did. But to the extent that we can intuit where he was pointing, can we place ourselves there, moment after moment?

In our meditation first of all—that's our training ground. Suzuki Roshi said that meditation is like learning to bake bread. You just keep putting it in the oven. You mix the dough and put it in the oven again and again until you discover what makes a perfect loaf of bread. This is what we're doing in meditation—trying moment after moment to find that awakened place within us.

There are many different ways to describe this state. At the end of our February retreat here, someone asked the teachers to sum up the essence of what we're looking for, what we're aspiring toward. We each had our own expression. Sylvia's was something like "the mind is clear and the heart is open." My summary was "an empty awareness pervaded by loving-kindness."

Different people had other variations on the theme, but you can get the flavor. There's this one kind of taste of awakeness, and within it, many beautiful qualities can emerge. That's why I wanted to check in—when you touch this place of being awake and settled, what do you find?

To refresh, some of the qualities you mentioned were peaceful, pleasant, relaxed, spacious, with boundaries between self and other dissolving, heightened senses, contentment, and a sense of wholeness through the body. These actually map quite beautifully onto a framework that the Buddha described.

The Buddha had different ways of describing this awakened state. One concept cannot capture it—it's a felt sense, a non-verbal experience. So it gets described from different angles. In the Tibetan tradition, they speak of it being like a diamond. Twirl the diamond one way and you see certain facets; twirl it another way and other facets appear. We need to become familiar with all the facets of this diamond that is our awakened nature.

One of my favorite groupings of these qualities is what the Buddha called the five spiritual faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. These are essentially five aspects of this diamond. Let me connect them to your observations this morning.

The faith aspect was echoed in comments about belief in something greater, connection beyond ourselves, faith in humankind. Energy appeared in Joe's mention of dedication to doing this work over years and years, building up this strength of mind. Many of

you spoke to the mindfulness aspect—heightened senses, awareness touching every aspect of experience. Concentration showed up in the stillness you mentioned, the peace and relaxation, and especially that sense of wholeness through the body. This wholeness is actually a sign of what we call unification of mind—everything coming together. And wisdom emerged when Lynn spoke of seeing change and impermanence, understanding the non-separation between ourselves and the world—what came through in comments about merging, connection to something greater.

I want to explore each of these five qualities in more detail, but please keep in mind that you've already been touching on them all. This isn't foreign territory—we're simply drawing out different aspects of a state you're already familiar with.

Faith is really crucial. The Buddha placed it first. He understood these five qualities both sequentially and circularly—faith leading to energy, energy to mindfulness, mindfulness to concentration, concentration to wisdom. Yet they also work circularly: as we develop wisdom, faith deepens, which strengthens our commitment and energy, and so forth.

Faith serves as a real beginning point in Buddhism. You all had to have some faith to sit down and try meditation for the first time. Someone told you this was worthwhile, or you read something that convinced you to give it a try.

Just last week on retreat in Colorado, during an interview, someone came to me saying, "I have a really important question and I'm not going to be able to keep from crying when I ask you." Then she said, "I look around and the world is such a mess. What can one have faith in?" And she did start crying. "What can I have faith in?"

This connects back to listening to the daily news. Without some kind of greater faith, it becomes truly depressing. What can we place our faith in?

I want to make one comment about keeping faith in touch with the world. Sometimes we all become overburdened by what's happening globally. You can focus on the destruction of the earth, the death and poverty and starvation, the ongoing wars, torture as state policy in many places, the oppression of women, the neglect of children—the list is endless.

And sometimes in looking at all that, we can get really a sense of it being too much to hold. One of my teachers who's an activist said something I thought was kind of wise. He said, when there's that sense that it's too much to handle, narrow your focus of seeing. Don't send your imagination and your thoughts out that far. Because it's really important that we maintain our own inner balance.

I'd say especially in doing work of an activist nature, if you're really looking to change the world and you care a lot about it, one of the greatest things I think we can bring to the world is our own sanity, our own balance. I often wonder, does the world need more anger? Does it need more frustration? Does it need more blame? Does it need more name-calling? I'm not sure. But I know that it needs our love, our kindness, our own inner balance. And if, in an activist role, that can start to come through, that's a beautiful way to change the dialogue. The Dalai Lama is a great example of that, working with the Chinese government.

This is from a young Tibetan Lama. He's living in Ladakh, a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. He was talking about his own situation. Born outside of Tibet and having grown up since the devastation happened, he said, "I was given a Western education for which I am grateful in many ways, but I lost something. I lost the peace of mind that I might have had in another generation. Everyone in our generation lives in a fragmented, complex, disturbing time in which it is hard to keep one's spiritual balance, hard to find the time to build that balance in the first place. I feel increasingly that I must go into retreat more, must meditate more, must discipline myself more. Otherwise, I shall be of no use to my people."

This is in Ladakh. It's too busy in Ladakh. It's too crazy in Ladakh. So what does that say about North America in the 21st century? How much time do we need? How much balance do we have to work to find?

This quality of faith in Buddhism is a translation of the Pali term *saddhā*. Pali is the ancient Indian language that the teachings came down in. *Saddhā* literally means, the etymology is to place one's heart upon. I think this is a nice reflection because in Buddhism faith isn't about belief. It's not about "I hold this set of principles to be true, this is the only truth and everybody else is crazy so I'm ready to fight with you." It's not particularly an intellectual thing. It's more a heart sense of trust, or you could say confidence.

So another interesting reflection is where do we put our trust or confidence? Because we all put it somewhere. It's interesting, if you look around the world, everybody has their own philosophy of life. Everybody's a philosopher. Everybody puts their trust in something, believes in something. Where is ours? And is it in a place that can hold it effectively?

If we didn't have faith, if we didn't have that kind of trust, we'd be in a panic right now. So there's something that we all have placed our hearts upon. One of the things the Buddha said is it's wise to place your heart on something that's beyond change. Because the things that are subject to change, when they do change, your faith can crumble.

So before he started his practice, he was 29 years old, and he said, "I saw that I was subject to aging, and I saw the pain in what is subject to aging." He said, "Seeing that, I gave up the vanity of youth. I saw that I was subject to illness. I saw the pain in what is subject to illness, and seeing that, I gave up the vanity of health. I saw that I was subject to death. I saw the pain in what is subject to death. And seeing that, I gave up the vanity of life."

This is pretty amazing insight from somebody who's 29 years old. I think most of us, when we're young, tend to put our faith in our youth, in our health, and in life. But sooner or later, all those things will be taken away from us. And then what do we have to put our faith in when that happens?

Fred Wahpepah is a beautiful Native American teacher who teaches at Spirit Rock from time to time, and we built a sweat lodge just over the creek for Fred to use when he comes. He usually leads sweats as part of his teaching here. So one time, it was the first time I did a sweat with him. The stones were brought in and he had just sealed the flap and was starting to talk about the philosophy of the sweat, how to hold it.

One of the first things he said to us was, "You know, in our Indian language, we don't have any word for hope. There's no word for hope. That's because we know that everything's all right."

I thought that was an amazing expression for somebody whose whole culture had been mostly destroyed over the last 150 years. "We know everything's all right." That's that quality of real faith, the heartfelt faith. Despite all the change, despite the suffering that goes on in the world, somehow the sense that everything's all right. That's beautiful.

In every spiritual tradition, there is some pointing to this perfection of things, even in the midst of imperfection. The way Suzuki Roshi put it—he's a great Zen teacher—he said, "The world is perfect and there's a lot of room for improvement." But can we see both those sides? Can we see the perfection and the beauty of the world and at the same time not blind ourselves to seeing the shortcomings, what can still be improved?

I think nature is a good pointer to that, physical nature. The beauty of the physical world in its natural state is a reminder to us of the presence of beauty, the presence of goodness in the world that our hearts can connect with and touch. But physical nature alone isn't enough. It's not the end-all and the be-all. It's not the core of a spiritual path in Buddhist terms. But it can be a pointer to that kind of perfection.

In Buddhism it's more pointing us back to our own hearts, that we take nature as a reminder or a cue or a demonstration of the native goodness of the universe that's also in our own hearts.

I'm just going to share one cartoon with you, one because Sylvia turned me on to it, so it's a way of bringing her into the class, but also because it kind of illustrates this concept of trust seeping into the mainstream. The cartoon is this: There are two policemen in an urban setting, and they've got a guy spread-eagled against a car. They're reading him his Miranda rights. And so the caption is, "You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney. Anything you say can and will be used against you. Whether you understand it or not, you are a child of the universe and everything is unfolding just the way it should." If I have to be arrested, I'd love to have the cop read me that. Unfolding just the way it should.

So what can we as practitioners find that offers that kind of faith? What can we put our trust in?

"No matter what happens, love will still arise in the human heart," someone offered.

Yes, faith and love surviving in the human heart.

Rose shared, "My definition of faith for a long time was just the absence of fear. Having that absence, I can relax and be okay in a way that I couldn't before." So faith is the absence of fear and a returning to that knowing, that understanding.

Sam reflected, "I remember where this really sank in. All of a sudden I understood that the 10,000 sorrows do not negate the 10,000 joys. The 10,000 joys are always here, they're always there. And so that's been phenomenal for me. They're right here." Yes, not losing touch with the joys and beauty of existence also.

Another student said, "For me, it's sitting and being present. Being with what is right now. Not what I'm cramming into my future, but allowing me to be present." So faith in being with what is in the moment. You could say being with the truth of things.

"For me," someone shared, "after decades of practice, there's this experience of being able to have access to something within, just below. I don't have any blindness about it, yet I can still have access to it, and I can open up to it so it can come through."

The pain, confusion, and suffering I've experienced have been profound gifts. They've slowly carved out an avenue within me, because I wouldn't know how else—how I or anybody—could learn to stay present with such intensity.

Using the suffering of life to spur one toward discovering what can possibly hold it or resolve it, and then trusting in what you discover through that process.

In this part of my life, I find myself deeply drawn to working in a Zen hospice setting. What I witness there comes without my asking, without effort on my part. Just yesterday, I saw a man smoking outside—someone whose leg had been amputated, leaving one shorter than the other. I allowed myself to really look at him and take in his presence. The experience I had was of incredible wholeness radiating from him.

He caught me looking at him and smiled, beginning to engage me in conversation. I realized that this sense of completeness, this peace I witnessed, had nothing to do with me at all. It was simply manifesting through itself, creating genuine contact between us.

This brings us to the classical teachings on faith. The Buddha taught that practitioners can place their faith in the three gems: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These are traditionally the three sources of refuge, of trust, of confidence that we can come to know for ourselves.

The Buddha died twenty-five hundred years ago. He's not here anymore. How can we have faith in someone who is dead? There are a couple of ways to understand this.

We can understand the Buddha in terms of that awakened state of mind. There's a beautiful story about a monk who was completely smitten with the Buddha, following him around like a puppy dog wherever he went. When the Buddha would turn around, this devoted monk would be right there, trying to absorb his presence, sitting and gazing at him in complete adoration.

Finally, the Buddha turned to him and said, "No, no, go off and practice. You don't need to hang around me. Seeing me isn't going to do you much good. The one who sees the Dharma truly sees the Buddha. One who sees the Dharma sees the Buddha."

So one who really understands the deepest truth has seen the real nature of the Buddha. In this way, the Buddha can be alive for each of us today. The closer we get to this awakened state, the more we sense for ourselves what the Buddha is—what the Buddha is in our own heart, our own potential for Buddhahood, because we all have that.

In the Mahayana traditions, this is often described through three aspects of our essential nature—who we truly are beyond change. We're not really this body. All spiritual traditions tell us this. It's the mistake of identifying ourselves with this body that creates the root of our limited sense of self, this constricted and contracted self-centeredness that causes all unhappiness.

Who we really are in our essence is empty space. Our nature is basically this empty space that, secondly, has the quality of awareness. When you opened up earlier and listened to sounds, could you sense that your awareness extends on and on forever? That there are no boundaries to your awareness?

As far away as the sounds reach, your awareness can go there and receive them. As distant as the sun, your awareness can touch. As remote as the stars, our senses can maintain some connection. The sense is that awareness pervades that space—not as two separate things, but as one unified reality.

What we really are is this empty space of knowing.

These two qualities also include a third quality—that awareness is ceaselessly responsive. This means that out of that empty awareness manifest all the beautiful qualities of heart and mind: wisdom, compassion, listening, understanding, gratitude, faith, insight. All these arise naturally from that space.

When you think about yourself in terms of the Buddha or what to have trust in, this is what is sometimes called Buddha nature. It's said to be most deeply what we are. It's unchanging—this is our nature beyond change. Different facets will manifest, different qualities of this diamond will radiate at different times. But this essential nature of empty space pervaded with awareness is what we most deeply are.

As we come to trust in that, we come to that which is within us but is not of us, as you were saying. It's something that's in us, but it's not personal. It's not mine or yours because we all have it. This also lets us feel the true inner connection when we realize that we share this with everything that lives. One of the Chinese Zen masters said, "All human beings, and in fact all wriggling things, are possessed of this great nirvanic nature." It's a nature like nirvana—unchanging in that way.

The Dharma are the teachings of the Buddha or the truth, the instructions that point us to this discovery. In the ultimate sense, Dharma is used for this nature that we discover as well. So we have faith in the teachings, and often that's our first source of faith. It was mine.

I was sixteen years old, living in Webster Groves, Missouri, in the dark ages, let me tell you. This was about 1964. I wandered into a bookstore that I frequented from time to time—I had a kind of reflective state of mind back then. I saw this book on the shelf called *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts. There was this Buddha image on the cover, and I don't know why, but I bought it. I didn't read it right away. I kept it on my shelf, and a couple of years later I picked it up and started reading it. That was my first connection to anything really spiritual. I'd been brought up Protestant, which is about as remote from real spirituality as I know of. Sorry. That was my Midwestern experience—I don't mean to make a blanket statement about that. There are many beautiful Christians from Protestant denominations in the world as well. That was just my experience.

This really awakened me to another way of looking and the possibility of freedom. Freedom from all suffering? You mean my teenage neuroses could be liberated? That was pretty attractive to me.

So it could be a book, could be a Dharma talk, somebody sharing their understanding. The other avenue for many of us is the Sangha. We run into somebody who embodies some of these qualities, these beautiful qualities of heart or mind, and we're just struck that such a human being is possible.

The first retreat I went to was led by Joseph Goldstein, among others. I liked Joseph from the very beginning. He's so light. I'd never met anybody who carried himself and viewed his life with such a feeling of lightness. His mind just didn't seem to get hooked or caught anywhere, and he always had this happiness about him. So I spent a lot of time with Joseph over many years. That was 1976, and this is twenty-six years later. I've come to know him as a teacher, spending much time just learning from him.

I've come to know him as a colleague. We've worked together on three-month courses in other places, and as a friend. We hang out and do things together. Over the years, seeing Joseph in all these different modes, I'm even more impressed than I was at the beginning. He really does have that kind of freedom in almost every area of his life. There are still a couple of places where he can get hooked and caught up, but not many. Not many. I tell you, he's pretty amazing.

When we see somebody who inspires us like that, who manifests these qualities, and we recognize that it's a possibility, this is the beginning of what's called in the tradition "bright faith." There's a quality of wonder to it. It lights us up. We get a hit off that person, off that possibility, and our eyes brighten thinking, "That's really possible for human beings?" Someone like the Dalai Lama is great at evoking that quality of bright faith in people. You really see the human potential.

The Buddha talked extensively about how important this is—to be around people who inspire us. Ananda was his cousin and attendant for twenty-five years, the last twenty-five years of his life. Ananda was a very beautiful, giving, kind, and generous person, but the Buddha always had to correct Ananda's understanding. Half the suttas involve the Buddha correcting Ananda's understanding.

In one case, Ananda comes up and says to the Buddha, "Venerable One, I've been thinking. I believe that spiritual friendship—that is, association with wise people—is a full half of the holy life." And the Buddha said, "Say not so, Ananda," as he always did. "Association with spiritual friends is the whole of the holy life."

He went on to explain why. It's not just because it's pleasant to spend time with people who are peaceful. It is pleasant to be around peaceful people, but that's not really what it's about in its essence. The Buddha continued: "For when one associates with spiritual friends, one can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

Good spiritual friends accept us as we are, but also challenge us to grow. They motivate us, they encourage us, they challenge us to develop those highest qualities within ourselves. Associating with such people, we can't escape that encouragement and stimulation and inspiration. So it's not just because it's wonderful to be around them, but also because they foster our own development. A good spiritual friend will actually encourage our development in that way.

We see that faith in this context has another implication for us as practitioners, for us as Buddhists: it ought to lead to effort. Faith is a beautiful quality in itself. It opens us up in that way of trusting, that absence of fear that was mentioned, but it needs to go further. It needs to say, "Look, you've seen what's possible. You've seen these qualities manifest in someone else. You can develop those in yourself. What's holding you back?"

The faith needs to spur us to make the next step, which is effort or energy. As we begin to make that effort, then we investigate the teachings, we explore the qualities of the path, and when we find that they can indeed develop, we move to the next level of faith, which is called "verified faith."

So the movement is bright faith, effort, and then verified faith. We verify it through our own experience. That's how I think of this path. To me, it's like the science of the mind. Science is about universal laws that can be repeated under proper laboratory conditions. We create the proper laboratory conditions when we sit down and look at our own minds and bodies, and from that we can repeat the same results that the Buddha found.

Attention brings calm. Calm brings concentration. When the mind is steady, we can understand. Life is change. If you cling, you suffer. We can repeat those experiments and verify them. Then it's the level of verified faith.

I want to talk a little about this quality of opening that a couple of people touched on, and look at what's involved in that. When you come to that place of stillness and presence in your meditation practice, have you ever gotten nervous?

When we settle into that place of stillness in meditation, it's remarkable how many people experience nervousness. This is actually quite natural and understandable. In stillness, we've dropped our usual defenses—we're not carrying our life history or personal story into the moment. We're not bringing our relationships, our worries about finances, our familiar identities. We've simply dropped everything, allowing our attention to meet the bare facts of life directly.

In this state, we are utterly exposed, vulnerable, open. Our attention meets life itself—unmediated, raw, immediate. This directness can feel unsettling. It takes real courage to release the security of past and future, to drop our carefully constructed personality, and simply touch the moment without buffers.

This willingness to be present without protection—this absence of fear—is essential to the practice. As we grow more familiar with this vulnerability, we discover it's not actually dangerous. Being open and exposed begins to feel natural, even though initially it may seem far too raw.

Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan teacher, offers a beautiful analogy for this tender openness. He suggests imagining a very sore spot on our body—so sensitive that we avoid rubbing or scratching it. In the shower, we're careful not to soap it too vigorously because it hurts. This sore spot represents compassion. Even when we're caught in aggression, insensitivity, or laziness, we always have this soft place somewhere within us—a point we can cultivate.

He elaborates: "A more vivid analogy might be of an opened wound, which is always there. That opened wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough, we would like to come on strong, but there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time."

What relief this brings—to realize we don't have to be perpetually armored!

This vulnerability becomes the very place where our heart opens and can be touched. When the heart is accessible, it becomes the doorway through which all the heart qualities can emerge. In our tradition, we call these the Brahma-viharas: loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. That tender, vulnerable space allows these qualities to flow forth naturally. The world can touch us, and we can touch the world through this sensitive, open heart.

Trungpa continues with even deeper insight: "There's also an inner wound or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the inner wound and the outer wound begin to meet and to communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever."

In this understanding, vulnerability itself becomes compassion. We no longer have any way to defend ourselves—nor do we need to. Faith creates the pathway to this tender openness, and this openness becomes the gateway through which loving-kindness and compassion naturally extend into the world.

There's a beautiful passage from "Verses on the Faith Mind," a classic Zen text by the Third Zen ancestor, that speaks directly to this. You can find it in Jack Kornfield's excellent collection, "Teachings of the Buddha"—a wonderful reference if you're looking for a single book sampling the Buddha's teachings.

Near the end of this text, we find these verses:

"For the unified mind in accord with the way, all self-centered striving ceases. Doubts and irresolution vanish, and life in true faith is possible. To live with this realization is to be without anxiety about non-perfection. To live in this faith is the road to non-duality, for the non-dual is one with the trusting mind."

When doubts and irresolution vanish, life in true faith becomes possible. Living with this realization means we can release our anxiety about being imperfect. This faith itself becomes the path to non-duality—for the non-dual mind and the trusting mind are one and the same.

So we come back to this deep sense of trust in the basic goodness of life, of ourselves, and that gives us the ability to accommodate without so much anxiety all the things that are wrong, all the things in the world that aren't right, that aren't perfect. We can open to them because of this really deep-seated trust that's more basic.

We only explored one of the spiritual faculties today, but we talk about the others most of the time—mindfulness and concentration and wisdom and energy. I wanted to speak about faith because it's one that we don't tend to verbalize very much, so I wanted to touch on it today.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 243

The Three Characteristics

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's fundamental teaching on the three characteristics of existence - impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and not-self (anattā). Drawing from personal retreat experiences and stories from the tradition, Armstrong illustrates how all conditioned phenomena are subject to constant change, from the gross level of aging and death to the subtle moment-to-moment arising and passing of sensations, thoughts, and mental states.*
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> *The talk explores how our attempts to find lasting security in impermanent things inevitably leads to dukkha - suffering, unsatisfactoriness, and unreliability. Armstrong discusses the three types of suffering: the suffering of pain (dukkha-dukkha), the suffering of change (viparināma-dukkha), and the suffering of conditioned existence (saṅkhāra-dukkha). He emphasizes how understanding impermanence can actually be liberating, as it means no difficult state lasts forever.*
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> *The exploration of not-self (anattā) forms the heart of the teaching, questioning our conventional sense of identity and inviting direct investigation into the nature of the 'I'. Referencing the Bāhiya Sutta, Armstrong points toward the possibility of pure perception without a perceiver, leading to the recognition of awareness itself as our deepest nature - that which knows the coming and going of all phenomena but itself remains unchanged.*

I asked somebody in an interview today, "How's the retreat going for you?"

They looked really perplexed. I could see the wheels stirring as they went back over the events of the day. Finally, they said, "That's a really hard question to answer. It's kind of been going every which way."

I could really relate to that. I want to pass on a tip: when you get home, you're going to get this question a lot. How was your retreat? You can imagine the wheels stirring as you prepare to speak to people at home. So I have an insider piece of advice—you just say, "It was great." That's all people want to know, and you can go on to the next topic about what's been happening for them.

The reason it's so hard to answer is that it's always changing. Our experience is always changing. It's one of the most striking things about a retreat and something we see early on. It's actually one of our first insights in practice, which is good because this is called insight meditation. You feel you ought to be having some insights or you wouldn't be getting your money's worth. At least you get that insight out of this.

The Buddha talked a lot about this aspect of change. He actually said, "Foremost among footprints is the elephant's. Foremost among reflections is that on impermanence." It was a really key part of his teaching. He came back to it again and again. He often combined it with two other aspects that he called the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness—sometimes called suffering—and not-self, or selflessness.

In tonight's talk, I'd like to go into these three areas of the Buddha's teachings in more detail. I sort of think of these as the facts of life for grown-ups. They're sometimes a little hard to take in, but if we want to be an adult in this world, it's really important that we understand these facts. The Buddha stressed them again and again.

I think we all grow up with a sense of vulnerability. We look at the world and see the turmoil in it. Every human being, from adolescence on, is plagued with a sense of some insecurity. Where in all this confusion am I going to find lasting happiness? How is this going to work for me? What will we find that lasts?

Of course, the culture gives us a set of answers: lots of money, good job, handsome or attractive partner, big car, lots of gadgets—the latest of all that. I think all of us are here because we already know that doesn't really do it. We may have tried it, but I think all of us know that's not where it's at.

I think we often still look outside ourselves—I know I have. One of the areas we look to a lot is an intimate relationship. There's a tendency to put a lot of eggs in that basket.

I didn't really realize this until I was on a long retreat. It was a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. I went away on a two-month retreat and left my girlfriend at our home. When I got to the retreat, I thought, "That relationship is so solid. I know I can completely count on that relationship. I don't have a single worry as I go into this retreat."

That should have been the tip-off, but I did not heed that call.

I went into the retreat and practiced for two months. I got quite still, quite open, quite raw. I came out at the end of the retreat and called my girlfriend as soon as we could talk again. I found out that she'd gotten involved while I was away in a spiritual

scene where the guru basically broke up every single relationship that came into the scene. In hindsight, what I suspect—what I believe—is that this guru couldn't allow students to have a love relationship with anyone else. It was too divided.

I saw the handwriting on the wall as soon as she told me that, and I just felt the bottom fall out of my world.

And all the time that I was reflecting on this particular attachment, I kept thinking about how the meditator's path is often a progression from one attachment to another until we see through the whole process.

My stomach just went empty and hollow. And I'd been in retreat for two months, so you can imagine how sensitive we become when we sit for extended periods. The next few weeks were filled with turmoil and spinning and insecurity. What it revealed was the depth of attachment I had to that relationship at that point. It was a crystal clear lesson. It's not that I shouldn't have been in the relationship, but I didn't realize how much I had invested in it until the bottom fell out.

In case you're interested in how the story unfolds, we did reconcile. Essentially, she left that scene, which I believe was the only way our relationship could move beyond that hurdle. But for me, it felt like deprogramming. There was something occult-like about the atmosphere in that particular spiritual community. So there was considerable turmoil as everything got sorted out. That was a long, long time ago. Sometimes we learn the hard way.

Another place where we easily invest our sense of security is in this body. Many years ago, I started to go gray. When I was in my early thirties, I began to develop gray hair. At one gathering with a friend, somebody turned to him and asked—I couldn't hear clearly—"Who's that middle-aged man you're with?" I was genuinely offended and shocked. The aging process was happening, but I hadn't quite caught up with the reality of it yet.

Now, as this baby boomer generation advances, we were discussing in an interview today all the bad knees and bad backs and bad hips. A good friend of mine had hip replacement surgery last year. It's becoming increasingly apparent that we witness this nature of the body—change, impermanence, aging, and illness.

One of the most compelling stories in the tradition of someone who had everything and yet wasn't satisfied is King Asoka. He ruled in India about two hundred years after the Buddha's death. He had inherited his kingdom from his grandfather, who was an emperor. Asoka was an extremely warlike king whose aim was to conquer all the surrounding territories.

He had engaged in one particularly bloody battle with a neighboring kingdom and emerged victorious. The day after the battle, he was walking around the battlefield, surveying the terrain he had conquered. He was appalled by the death and carnage and the bloody bodies strewn across the battlefield. This scene led him to reflect on all the greed that had spurred his conquests and how it had left him feeling.

As he stood in the middle of this misery, a Buddhist monk walked across the battlefield. The monk possessed such serenity and radiance, even amidst all the carnage, that the king was completely struck by his presence and taken with his appearance. Asoka said to himself, "How is it that I have everything and I'm miserable, while this monk has nothing and he's so happy, so radiant, so serene?"

At that moment, Asoka converted to Buddhism. In embracing the dharma, he genuinely adopted dharmic principles and attempted to rule his kingdom in accordance with them. He stopped the animal sacrifices, began tolerating all the religions present at that time, supported the sangha of monks and nuns, and ceased making war. He encouraged charity throughout his kingdom—for the people, for religious mendicants. His reign is remembered as one of the golden ages in Indian history, this rule of righteousness by someone who had possessed everything material yet remained miserable.

In Tibetan Buddhism, they teach that impermanence has four inevitable conclusions: The end of accumulating is dispersing. The end of building is destruction. The end of gathering is separation. The end of living is death.

This is, of course, inevitable. The Buddha strongly recommended a daily reflection on the fact of our own death. We have such a pronounced tendency to deny this reality, especially in our culture.

But worldwide, it's a human tendency not to believe in our own death. So one of the monks' reflections, ten daily reflections, goes like this: "I reflect that I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death. I will eventually be parted from all that is dear and beloved to me."

We see this here as we get close to nature, too. Sometimes we see the death of lizards or frogs or insects on the ground. We had a dramatic one a couple of years ago. James and I were teaching here in November, and I happened to be giving the talk one evening at about this time. In the middle of the talk, there was this blood-curdling scream from outside. I didn't know what it was, but everybody in the hall sort of sat bolt upright. What's going on? It sounded like a young child screaming at the top of their lungs. So a couple of the staff people went out to see. After the talk, we went out also to see.

What had happened is a deer had gotten killed. Apparently, it had been attacked by a couple of dogs because they had attacked it at the neck and broken its neck. It was a small deer, not even a year old, just over by Mudita, the third residence hall. By the time we got there, it was already dead. So we did some loving kindness practice for it and tried to ease its passage, if that's possible. These things, of course, happen in nature. Being in the middle of nature, these things happen around us.

We called the SPCA, and they said they would come and take the body away. The caretakers actually dragged it down to the front of the property so the SPCA could take it, but they never came. What was very interesting is that that carcass was down there for the next week. Every day, it looked different. Every day, a little more of it was gone because the vultures and the coyotes would come and eat at it. In about a week, there wasn't much left that was recognizable as a deer. There were some flaps of hide and the bones, but all the flesh had been picked clean by the visitors who feed on that.

It was a really impactful reflection and meditation because it was a reminder of what will happen to our bodies also. That same state is what these bodies will come to at some time in the future. As the Buddha said, the fact of that is for certain, but the time of it is completely unknown. It could be tomorrow. It could be ten, twenty, thirty years from now. But it will happen for all of us.

We encourage this reflection not in order to get depressed or get morbid, but because this reflection can be a real waking up to our limited time period. Our time on this earth is really quite short. Especially as I get older, I notice how quickly each new year goes. I don't have that much time left. So it's an incentive to spend it wisely.

But something else the Buddha said I find very interesting. He said that there are people who fear death. He said someone who fears death does so for one of four reasons: they either have a strong desire for sense pleasures, they have a craving for this body, they have not done good deeds in this life, or they have doubt about the Dharma, about the truth of things.

Conversely, he said, people who don't have those four qualities do not fear death. Those who do not strongly desire sense pleasures, who don't have a craving for the body, who have done good acts, and who have confidence in the Dharma, he said, don't fear death and have no need to fear death.

I take this as an interesting point because in our culture we often think death is something horrible. When we look from a spiritual view, it's a part of life. How could birth be great and death be bad? They're both integral to life. If we think life is OK, that means birth is OK and death is OK.

So we see that life consists of these moments of sense experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, emotion. Does it really matter if we have one more moment or 100,000 more moments? In any case, death is going to be there at some point.

So we come to meditation as another way to deal with this kind of existential crisis of life. This is a real dilemma. We realize that external things can't ultimately bring happiness. And I think as we come to meditation, most of us—I know I was—are looking for some lasting state of mind that would bring happiness. There must be a way to get a permanent kind of euphoria from this practice, a permanent kind of exhilaration, a permanent up, a permanent high. This was really, when I look back, more my expectation in the beginning than the goal of freedom.

But of course, as we practice, our intention and understanding changes. And we start to see that what really brings happiness of the deepest kind, as Sharda mentioned the other evening, is a purified heart. It's not outer experiences. It's also not a particular inner experience. But when the heart becomes free of the forces of greed, of hatred, and of confusion, then that itself is a happy state, a contented state, a peaceful state.

So we come into the retreat situation, and we come upon this fact of change, this constancy of change, just like in our outside life. Retreat is just a microcosm of that life. Sounds are coming and going. The breath is coming and going. Thoughts arise and persist and pass. And then we start to investigate the change in the body.

This is a really interesting point in practice. We see that the sensations change. Sometimes the body's comfortable, and sometimes it's not. Can you control that? Can you come into a sitting and say, "Body, be comfortable. Body, be free of pain." We really can't, can we? The change is going on, but it's not under our jurisdiction. It's not under our control.

I tried to do this a lot in my early years in practice. It sounds silly, but I did. I spent many, many hours on the cushion trying to make my body comfortable. And you've probably seen that as you generate some awareness, you can loosen up the energy in a part of the body. So if I felt tense or tight, I'd put the attention there and I'd try to loosen up the energies, get it flowing and become unblocked. My ideal was to become unblocked, completely free-flowing sensation.

So I'd spend most of the day becoming unblocked. And I'd have about thirty minutes of this free-flowing sensation. I'd go out to walk. I'd come back. And it all would have contracted up again. So I'd start the process all over, working on unblocking, working to get comfortable in the body. It was a waste of time. It was a waste of time.

I wasn't practicing mindfulness. I was practicing greed and aversion. I don't like the way the body feels now. I want it to feel differently. I'm going to make it happen. I would have been much, much better off if I'd just let the mind settle in some kind of equanimity in relation to the discomfort. The mind has the capacity to bear physical discomfort. Finally, after years, I found that out. I could have saved myself a lot of wrong effort. That's why I'm sharing it with you—if I can spare you some of those hours.

And we start to investigate more closely. We can't control pain. We can't control pleasure. So we look into the nature of sensations more closely. And the question at some point becomes really interesting: Is there anything solid in this whole field of physical experience?

As we get in touch with the actual nature of sensations in the body, despite all the anatomy textbooks we may have seen—we may have seen that you open it up and there's solid stuff in there, there's bones and liver and intestines and spleen and

and all that stuff. But apart from all the pictures, as awareness penetrates the body and becomes as intimate as we can with the body, take a look and see. Is it solid? Is there anything solid? You can take a look right now in your experience. Or is there only the quality of flickering, pulsation, vibration, tingling, coming and going, pulsing on and off?

We look at the leg, and it seems like a solid thing. But when we send the awareness there, we can feel just this play, this dance of sensations that's always changing. Somebody today mentioned in an interview that their body had basically gone away during part of the meditation. Couldn't feel the body. The mindfulness was strong. The concentration was strong. The sense of the body just was not there for them. Is it a solid thing? Or is it just flickers of sensing?

We start to investigate the mind, and we see too how changeable all the patterns of mind are. James talked about the different weather patterns that move through. One sitting, we're calm and present. The next sitting, it's very stormy, and we can't settle for more than a few seconds on any object. The next sitting, it might be dull. The next sitting, there might be a lot of happiness.

The Buddha actually said, if you're going to identify with anything, it's much better to identify with the body than the mind, because at least the body stays more constant. He said the mind changes so fast, don't try to make a constancy out of that. No point.

And with the mind states, are they controllable? Can you come in and decide to have a concentrated sitting? Can you come in and decide to be present with the breath for ten minutes? Can you come in and decide to experience joy? Can you come in and decide not to feel restless? The mind also is ungovernable due to this fact of constant change.

One great teaching of this lesson, as Sharda mentioned also, is proximity to nature. Because you see this message carried out again and again in nature. The death of the deer was one example. The changing weather patterns are another example. If you're outside, you're almost always aware of change. Changing sounds, change in the wind or the breeze, change of light and shadow. So the Buddha always advised the meditators to go out, sit at the foot of a tree, sit in a cave, sit in a clearing, in a grove, and feel that change of nature.

I spent the better part of a year in forest monasteries in Thailand, living very close to nature, living out in a very small and not particularly well-insulated hut. And living in that kind of proximity, you really feel this in your bones, how nature's always changing. Sometimes even these beautiful natural settings change due to nature.

I was doing a three-month retreat recently in a little hut in the north of Thailand. And I was right by a beautiful little creek that went down the middle of this canyon. It's at the base of a high canyon with walls on both sides covered with tropical foliage and trees. And it was a very beautiful sound from this little stream.

But I'd committed to go to another monastery and leave the one I was in. And I was really getting settled in, and I thought, this is really a mistake. I shouldn't be leaving such a good situation. The food is good. It's quiet. I have the best hut in the place. The brook is beautiful. The cliffs are fantastic. I got really agitated. I shouldn't be leaving.

And then the rainy season hit. And all of a sudden, my quiet little brook started to fill up with water. And it became this roaring river all day and all night. The sound was deafening.

So my tranquility was taken away due to the change of nature. That itself wouldn't have been so bad, but then the stream started to play an old Bob Dylan song. All I could hear in the sound of the stream was "Subterranean Homesick Blues." And I discovered that I actually remembered every single verse of the song—and I'm going to spare you from the recital of them. But at that point, it was time to go to the other monastery. The conditions had changed.

This teaching of impermanence through nature is a really powerful one. I encourage you sometime in your sitting career to try sitting outside and get that feeling. You can sit outside on a bench, on the ground, eyes closed or eyes open—it doesn't really matter. Connect with your usual meditation object, connect with the breath, and then open your senses to nature and see what comes through, because the teaching is really there.

One of my teachers said a really good way to check if you're in touch with reality is: Can you tune into impermanence in that moment? Are you aware of change in that moment? If you are, then you're in touch with the truth of the moment. You can check that out.

So as we look really deeply with this steady mind that the retreat can bring, we start to see that every aspect of our experience is changing—not just from one sitting to another, but really changing in each moment. Moment after moment, things are arising and passing away. This is one of the most important areas in practice to investigate. Given the kind of stillness and steadiness of attention that you can find here, turn it to investigate in that direction. Start to look at what James mentioned this morning, and I think coming at something Sharda had said: look at the beginnings of things, look at the endings of things. Breath, sounds, thoughts, emotions, body sensations. Start to become aware of that play of life.

One of the forest monasteries where I was staying, the teacher was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was one of the great Thai masters of the last fifty years. He's now dead. Franz also spent quite a bit of time at that monastery. While I was there, we were lucky that we were able to have teachings every week for one period, one part of the retreat, directly from Ajahn Buddhadasa, who spoke good English. He'd give us a different theme every week and then a new one. One week was our last meeting with him, and he gave us a theme that I think could last probably the rest of our lives.

So here's the teaching that he said to investigate. It's a little complicated, so I want to take a little time, but I hope you'll stay with me.

If we look at a sense like the sense of sight, the Buddha said there are three pieces to seeing. He said the eye has to be working—there has to be a good sense organ. There has to be an object out there for us to see. And there has to be consciousness that can receive that sight. A corpse can't see. Someone who's blind can't see because the sense organ isn't working. A corpse can't see because the factor of consciousness has gone. If it's dark in the room, you can't see because the object isn't illuminated. So sight depends on the organ, the object, and the consciousness. There are these three elements for the sense of seeing.

As people, we have six senses in the Buddhist view: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and the mind is considered the sixth sense—the qualities of thought, emotion, ideas, and so on. So with these six senses and three elements in each sense, there are eighteen different elements. Is that clear so far? Six times three. I know you're slowed down, but I just want to make this clear. Eighteen elements called dhatus. In the Pali, the term is dhatu.

So Ajahn Buddhadasa said for each of these elements, every time you contact it, investigate five things about it: its arising, its passing, its pleasure or potential for pleasure, its potential for suffering, and how to be free in relation to it—the possibility of freedom in relation to it. So the arising, the passing, potential for pleasure, potential for suffering, and potential for freedom. Eighteen times five is ninety.

So we essentially have ninety different ways to investigate impermanence and, within impermanence, the possibility of suffering or freedom in relation to each of them. This is a practice that could occupy you for the rest of the retreat, probably for a lot longer than that. You don't have to take it on, but I mention it as one of the possibilities—to see impermanence on that steady or constant level with every aspect of our experience.

So we start to see that nothing in our experience is exempt from this process of arising and passing moment by moment. And we start to see that there's nothing really fixed in this whole world. Everything is coming and going, every part of our experience.

When we first start to get a sense for this, this can feel a little unsettling. It's a little bit like the rug's been pulled out from under us, because we like security, we like constancy. So is this a good thing or a bad thing, this impermanence?

One of our friends is married to another practitioner, and they had a daughter who's one of these precocious, beautiful Dharma kids. When she got to be about fourteen, she'd been hanging out around Dharma language for a long time. And one day she came to her mother and she said, "Mom, is dukkha good or bad?" We could say the same thing about impermanence. Is it good or bad? Or maybe it doesn't fall in those categories.

In relation to the hindrances, impermanence is pretty wonderful, isn't it? Do you notice that when greed comes, it doesn't stay? When anger comes, it doesn't stay? When fear comes, it doesn't stay? When sadness comes, it doesn't stay? None of the emotions last, and that's really why we can feel them. That's why it's safe to open to any state of mind. There is ultimately no harm in any state of mind if we meet it with mindfulness, because none of them will stick around.

I want to read this passage from Rainer Maria Rilke from a poem in a really lovely book called The Book of Hours, recently translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows, who are both Buddhists. And in this poem, Rilke was going through a very Christian phase. He'd been to Russia and visited a lot of churches that inspired him. A lot of these poems are written to God. In fact, it's subtitled Love Poems to God. So in this one, he imagines that God is making the human being and then giving advice before sending the human being out into life. So that's the setting for the poem.

"God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You'll know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand."

Let yourself feel everything, the beauty and the terror. No feeling is final. Impermanence is our safety net, an opening to any experience that comes.

But there's another side to it. This is a difficult truth to take in because we have a really deep longing for security. All forms of life have a very deep longing to be secure. All the phrases that we say in the metta practice apply to all living things. We want to be safe. We want to have mental happiness. We want to have physical happiness. We want to live with ease. This deep longing for security can't be found in the middle of impermanent things.

This insight cannot be found from impermanent things. Anything we grasp from that deep longing for security is bound to change, and as it changes, we suffer. This brings us to the second fundamental characteristic of existence that the Buddha called dukkha. While usually translated as suffering, dukkha encompasses a broader range of meaning—it includes suffering, but also unsatisfactoriness and unreliability. Because things are constantly changing, they simply cannot be relied upon. This is not that kind of world.

The nature of our world was beautifully described by the Buddha in a dialogue with Ananda, and to fully appreciate this teaching, it helps to understand the wordplay in the Pali language. When Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and attendant, asked what he meant by "the world," the Buddha replied with elegant simplicity. The Pali term for world is "loka," and the Buddha answered, "It disintegrates. Therefore, it's called the world." The word for disintegrate is "paloka." Why is it called loka? Because it palokas. This is why it's called the world.

The world disintegrates moment after moment. This is the very nature of reality. We yearn for something solid to grasp, but such solidity doesn't exist over long periods of time—it doesn't even exist from moment to moment. This is where your meditation practice can reveal truths that no amount of conceptual reflection can uncover. When you have the direct experience of every aspect of phenomena arising and passing away, you can no longer believe in that kind of solidity, a solidity that extends beyond a single moment.

The Buddha offered a vivid metaphor for our struggle in this disintegrating world. He said that trying to hold on in such a world is like someone being swept down a river with a swift current. As the person is carried along, they keep reaching out desperately for something on the bank to grasp, something to stop the flow downstream. But all they find are grasses. They grab one type of grass and it's simply pulled out of the bank, leaving them to be swept along. They reach for another kind and grab it, but it too is uprooted from the bank, and they continue downstream. This is the image of beings struggling within the river of change, seeking something concrete to stabilize them.

The Buddha described three different kinds of suffering that range from the more gross to the increasingly subtle. James and I, along with some friends, attended teachings about a year ago with the Dalai Lama in Mountain View. Some of you may have been at those sessions at Shoreline Amphitheater. It was like a dharma festival—absolutely magnificent. The Dalai Lama was on a large stage in this concert setting, and behind the stage, where you'd normally see racks of amplifiers and speakers, was painted an enormous mural of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, his former home, rendered in beautiful twilight light as though it were late afternoon.

Sharing the stage with him were about one hundred and fifty monks and nuns from all three traditions. Tibetans sat on one side—a whole sea of red robes—while on the other side were Theravadan, Korean, and other Zen monastics. The sight was simply delightful. It was sunny, with something like six thousand people in attendance. I thought to myself, "Well, I didn't get to go to Woodstock, but this might be even better." We basked in that dharma glow for three days.

The Dalai Lama explained a text on emptiness, and as he spoke about the world's nature of dissolving, he said—being a bodhisattva who encourages the bodhisattva path—"If you really want to help beings emerge from their suffering, you must understand all the ways in which they suffer, from the gross to the subtle."

He explained these three levels of suffering that the Buddha also taught. The first is called "the suffering of pain"—dukkha dukkha in Pali, like a double shot of suffering. This refers to unpleasant experiences in mind and body: when the body aches, when we're sick, when the mind experiences difficult states.

When we experience sadness and grief and longing and fear, this is straight dukkha.

The second kind is called viparinama dukkha, and it's translated as the suffering of alternation. This means that if we are enjoying something pleasant—because if it's conditional, if it's a phenomenon of the six senses, and it changes, which it will in time—if we're holding on, we experience pain in its loss at that time of change. This is the pain of alternation. The pleasant will eventually turn into unpleasant, and when that happens, it hurts.

Ajahn Chah talked often about these two kinds of pain. He said it's like if you grab a snake—either end is problematic. If you grab its head, it can bite you, and that's dukkha dukkha. You're directly bitten and hurt. If you grab it by the tail, the other end, and you're holding on tight, the head will swing around and bite you. And that's the pain of clinging to the pleasant. Either way, eventually, one gets bitten if you're holding on.

The third is called sankhara dukkha, and this means the suffering—or you could really say the unsatisfactoriness—of conditioned formations. This is the sense in which we can't take hold of anything, we can't find security because of the dissolving nature of all our experience. Everything that is conditioned, everything that arises based on prior conditions—this means anything in the senses—has this disillusioning quality to it. And as we try to find our security in the middle of it, we can't. And yet as human beings we have a deep longing for security. All of us do. So this is our situation. This is our dilemma. We see there's no way to guarantee a lasting kind of happiness by holding on to what is going to change.

This is from Suzuki Roshi: "Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transience, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of the cause of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin. Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure."

The corollary is that if we can accept the fact that everything changes, there's the possibility of finding perfect composure. This is a really interesting statement to me. Although the world is unstable, there is the possibility of finding composure within it. What's the key? Where does the avenue lie to that?

And to look at this, I want to talk a little bit about the third characteristic, which is the teaching of not-self, or in Pali the term is anatta. In many ways, this is the central question in meditation: Who am I? Or what am I?

Stephen and Martine Batchelor were just here. I don't know if any of you got a chance to listen to them. Martine spent ten years in a Korean Zen monastery where the meditation technique was to sit down, watch the breath in, watch the breath out, and ask the question, "What is this?" Watch the breath in, watch the breath out, ask the question, "What is this?" For ten years. This is the same question. Who am I? What am I? What is this? It's all the same question.

So as human beings, we have a sense of a self. And in our current situation, most of our life revolves around it. Most of our activities and thoughts and plans and hopes and dreams and worries revolve around this self. It's where we put most of our energy. But what's curious is that we generally haven't taken a very close look at it.

And so I wonder if in your meditation you've ever tried to find this I. Where is this I located? Have you ever looked?

Where is this I? The Dalai Lama said that if you just think about it, it seems obvious that there is an I. Who would question it? It's the most self-evident fact of life. Obviously there's an I. But when you look closely, you can't find the thing. Is it in the head? Is it behind the eyes? Is it somewhere in the middle of the heart? William James, the Western philosopher, said when he looked for the location of the I, the closest he could get was a little tickle in the back of his throat. That's as close as anyone can get, probably. Our concept of I hasn't been examined, and if it's examined, it doesn't stand up very well.

Let me ask you two simple questions—they're not trick questions. How tall are you? And what color are your eyes? Is everybody able to answer those? Pretty simple, right?

I would say I am 5 feet 10 inches tall. Now when I stop to think about that, I really have to wonder, is that an accurate representation of I? Are my thoughts 5 feet 10 inches tall? Is my metta 5 feet 10 inches tall? Are my other emotions 5 feet 10 inches tall? We really mean the body, don't we? Here, when we say I, we mean the body. So we're saying I am the body.

Now I asked, what color are your eyes? I would say my eyes are brown. Well, this is curious. Now I'm not the body. I'm the person who owns the body. These are my eyes. Oh, really? Who? My. I own these eyes. They're mine. Well, that doesn't fit. A moment before we were the body and now we're the owner of the body who's standing separate from it.

You could do the same thing with the mind. You could say at one point, I am happy, and then we are the mind. We are the state of happiness. The next moment you talk about my sadness, my grief, my longing. And then we're the owner of the emotion who stands separate from it.

Maybe even more fundamental, after we get past those two, there's a sense that we are an observer and it's almost like we live behind our eyes and we look out at the world through those eyes, taking in all the experience, and it's all happening to me who am located somewhere inside here. This doesn't hang together. It really doesn't make sense.

The more you investigate the sense of I—which is encouraged, the delusion is encouraged through our language—the more you'll see it doesn't make sense.

I want to ask another question to explore this. Does the sense of I ever come up by itself? Take a look in your practice and see. Or does it only come up in relationship to something that's happening at one of the sense doors? For instance, we notice that there's a pain here in the knee, and we might think then, I have a pain, or there's a pain in my knee. The I is forming in relationship to an experience of a bodily sensation. We might look out and see a baby deer. The deer doesn't really involve us, but very often we'll think to ourselves, I see the deer.

So we create an owner of the sight or an agent of the seeing in relationship to that sight. Maybe that's the only place the "I" comes from—connecting with an experience.

Take a look and see if you can feel this self emerging. And if you can, what's happening? What's the feeling in the body of that formation? See if there's a kind of sense energetically of a contraction around the emergence of that "I"—a kind of solidification and narrowing down around the sense of self.

This "I" limits us. We construct a kind of constant, ongoing entity that maybe doesn't really exist, not in that ongoing way. We have the feeling—obviously we have the feeling there's an "I"—but when we look for it, it gets more and more elusive.

There's a sutta of the Buddha's called the Bahiya Sutta, and he was asked to give his pith instructions to someone who came for teaching. And he said, "I'll tell you in a nutshell: In the seeing, let there be just the seen. In the hearing, let there be just the heard. In the sensing, let there be just the sensed. In the cognizing, let there be just the cognized. This—just this—is the end of suffering."

What's missing in this formulation is the seer, the hearer, the sensor, the cognizer. Experiment with this in your practice. Can there be a moment of experience where there is only the seeing, no one claiming it? Only the hearing, no one claiming it? And see if in a moment of that kind of pure perception, there isn't a quality of expansiveness, of peace—in fact, of freedom. The "I"-making experience narrows our experience, contracts us over and over and over again.

And it also builds up this quality, which is really the heart of the problem: self-cherishing. We become so fixated on my wants and needs and hopes and plans and fears and schemes and worries that we lose touch with the situation for the rest of the world. As we undo this contraction and open up to this spacious awareness that we really are, that we deeply are, as the knot of "I" starts to unravel just a little bit, we have the space to connect with the rest of the world's situation.

And we see everybody is in the same boat. Every human being is dealing with this problem of a longing for security where it's not to be found. And we can tune in on all those levels of insecurity that everyone faces. And when we see that clearly, there's really only one response, and that's compassion.

So this process of looking into the nature of the "I" is not just an intellectual exercise. It's not just a Buddhist mind game that philosophers play because they got tired of counting the number of angels on the head of a pin. It is to undo our self-centeredness and open in compassion to the rest of life. And I think this is really strongly supported with the practice of the Brahmaviharas—of metta and the other divine abidings.

As we open in this expansive way, we start to see that what we most deeply are is this awareness. This awareness that holds all the comings and goings, all the changing phenomena called the dhammas—things, phenomena, appearances—all the comings and goings of the momentary flashings into existence and passing out of existence are held within this vast spaciousness.

But curiously, this vastness of mind doesn't seem to come and go. Do you notice how it's always there—always illuminating, always functioning? This seems to be more of a constant in our experience. It seems to be the nature, really, of who we are.

As we shift our ground of being from grasping the particulars and let it expand into this vast awareness that holds all of life, out of which compassion flowers, we find the possibility of not clinging. We find the possibility of not generating that restriction of "I." And of course, we will continue many, many, many more times to grasp and form that "I." But we've seen the possibility. We've seen the doorway to freedom through letting go of what changes.

I just want to close with a quotation from Ajahn Mahabua, who's a master in the Thai Forest tradition, a dharma brother of Ajahn Chah, who put it this way: "There's no escaping this truth. Whatever arises has to vanish. Whatever is true, whatever is a natural principle in and of itself, won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind of awareness won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind. All that remains is simple awareness, utterly pure."

So let's just sit for a minute together. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind.

CHAPTER 244

Transcendent Dependent Origination

Guy Armstrong · 54 min

In this inspiring retreat talk, Guy Armstrong presents the Buddha's teaching on transcendent dependent origination (lokuttara-paṭiccasamuppāda) from the Upanisa Sutta (SN 12.23), sometimes called the "radiant wheel" or "wheel of awakening." Unlike the traditional twelve-link chain that traces suffering's arising from ignorance, this positive formulation shows the path from suffering to liberation through twelve uplifting stages: suffering, faith (saddhā), joy (pāmojja), rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), happiness (sukha), concentration (samādhi), knowing and seeing things as they are, disenchantment (nibbidā), dispassion (virāga), liberation (vimutti), and knowledge of the destruction of the taints.

Armstrong skillfully weaves together personal stories—including powerful accounts from teaching meditation in juvenile detention and Ajahn Chah's transformative encounter with fear at a charnel ground—to illustrate how suffering can become the catalyst for spiritual awakening when met with awareness and genuine teachings. He emphasizes that joy and happiness are not merely byproducts but essential factors in the path to freedom, explaining how each stage naturally conditions the next in an organic unfolding toward liberation.

This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a refreshing perspective on Buddhist practice, showing how the cultivation of positive mental factors like joy, tranquility, and concentration creates the foundation for liberating insight. Armstrong's accessible presentation makes profound Dharma principles immediately relevant to meditation practice and daily life.

The subject of tonight's talk is transcendent dependent origination. Having said that, I must admit that's the hardest part about the talk—it's all easy from here on.

First, I wanted to check in with you all as this is the last night of the retreat. Does it feel a little different than the first night of the retreat? Have you gone through some change in these seven days? Are you feeling happy? Ready to go home? A little mixed? Yes, I can see it's a little mixed.

In tonight's talk, I want to discuss the development and role of happiness and joy in the practice. One of the Buddha's most famous teachings is called Dependent Origination, in which he traces the arising of suffering based on ignorance through a chain of twelve links. At its heart lies the arising of craving and clinging as the main causative

factors in suffering. This teaching shows the way to freedom by the undoing of those twelve links, beginning with the undoing of ignorance and leading to the undoing of suffering.

The teaching I want to explore this evening is another chain, also in twelve links, but one where the Buddha describes the journey to liberation in positive terms. I find this a really inspiring way to look at the practice because it frames everything in terms that I personally find truly uplifting.

This sequence is based on a discourse that appears in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Upanisa Sutta. It's sometimes called the radiant wheel because of its uplifting quality, and sometimes called the wheel of awakening. The commentaries call it transcendent because it describes the journey that transcends suffering, that overcomes suffering.

I can't resist slipping in a riddle at this point: Why did the yogi refuse novocaine? Because they wanted to transcend dental medication. Yes, it's bad—that's the low point of the talk, no more like that.

This chain begins where the other one left off. While the traditional Dependent Origination traces the journey from ignorance to suffering, this one starts at suffering and traces the journey to liberation. Let me first mention the twelve links, then we'll go through them in more detail.

It's said that suffering leads to faith, and faith leads to joy, which leads to rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowing and seeing things as they are, disenchantment, dispassion, liberation, and knowledge of the extinction of the taints. This is the sequence I'd like to explore this evening.

The first two links state that suffering is the cause for the arising of faith. This is quite surprising when you stop to think about it, because when we look out into the world, there's a lot of suffering going on, yet not a lot of liberation happening. Somewhere this chain isn't getting completed in normal life.

Generally, suffering conditions deeper ignorance. Suffering usually causes us to respond with more craving, with more greed and aversion, and this thickens the sense of self, which prevents us from seeing the way things really are. The Buddha said that suffering has one of two outcomes: it results either in bewilderment—we could say confusion—or in search.

So here, if suffering is going to lead to faith, something is running counter to the tendencies of samsara, of the pain of cyclic existence that governs most of the world. This tradition teaches that there are two conditions for suffering to turn into faith. First,

there must be an awareness that we're suffering, so that we're no longer in denial about this basic fact. Second, we must hear true teachings—teachings that truly have the power to liberate that suffering.

When I look back into my own life and the way I came into practice, I can really relate to this teaching that suffering is the cause for the arising of faith. At a certain point in my life, I went through a very unhappy period and was strongly motivated to find an answer to it. I was strongly motivated toward that search. In a way, the suffering becomes like the sand, the friction in the oyster that by rubbing over and over again creates the pearl. This is one of the ways that suffering can work in a spiritual life. We become truly open to looking at things in a new way when we're suffering, in a way that we're not when we're just gliding along complacently.

This really came home to me a few years ago when a friend and I received an invitation from the juvenile hall in San Mateo to teach meditation to a group of young people who were incarcerated there. We accepted and went into the maximum security wing of the building.

For those unfamiliar with this feature of our justice system, juvenile hall is where young people under eighteen who have been arrested for crimes are held before trial. In the maximum security wing, there were fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year-old young men who had been arrested for serious offenses—murder, attempted murder, armed robbery, assault—but had not yet appeared before a judge or gone to trial.

They were locked in their cells for most of the day—probably eighteen hours—with only some common time in the shared room. You can imagine the fear and insecurity they carried about their lives. They didn't know whether, in the coming months when they went to trial, they would be imprisoned for years, perhaps for the majority of their remaining lives. Being sixteen or seventeen years old, they had no tools to cope with this situation of fear and uncertainty.

In the common room where they spent their waking hours, they were surrounded by others who had experienced difficult upbringings. The atmosphere was violent and angry—there wasn't a great deal of loving-kindness, that's for sure. Then they would return from that environment to be locked in their cells, bouncing off the walls with all the emotions, uncertainty, and insecurity churning inside them.

We came into this setting to share some meditation tools, having no idea whether they would be relevant. We knew nobody who had tried this before, and we had no inside experience of what these young people were going through. It was probably the most nervous I've ever been teaching—I had no idea if this would connect. I felt like a fool several times, but that was okay.

We thought we'd better not call it meditation, and especially not Buddhism, because that would seem too soft. These young men weren't going to show up for that kind of class. So we billed it as "mind power"—something they could relate to. "Come and get some training in mind power."

We started teaching them the same techniques we've been exploring this week: beginning with the breath, opening to body sensations. But here's where it got interesting, and where we ended up spending most of our time—teaching them how to deal with their fear and anger. We gave the same instructions we've given here: go ahead and feel it in the body, don't try to do anything with it or make it go away, but simply let yourself experience it. See that it's just another emotion, that you can be with it, that it will come and then go.

Some of these young men turned out to be among the most motivated meditators I've encountered, because they desperately needed a way to work with what was happening inside them. Nobody had given them any tools for this. From that dire situation, some really took these practices to heart and worked diligently during all those hours lying on their bunks. They would return each week to share their experiences.

I remember one young man talking about using the breath to help him fall asleep. I asked him to investigate and report back: "Do you fall asleep on an in-breath or an out-breath?" The following week, when I asked what he'd discovered, he said, "I haven't figured it out yet, but I'm going to keep looking."

That was beautiful—seeing how, when we're in difficulty, we can dig deeply within ourselves and find strength we didn't know we possessed. This is something we hear in interviews every day. People say things like, "I was able to be still and accepting with strong physical pain," or "I watched an emotion arise without feeling so attached to it—I could observe its coming and going."

Sometimes when we're pressed to our limits, we discover something new, or something new emerges through us from that very friction of suffering. This is why we don't hesitate to place you in a fairly rigorous schedule here. I know for those new to retreat,

sitting still for forty-five minutes hour after hour, with only walking meditation in between, is demanding. But the difficulty this brings up becomes the sand in the oyster that creates the pearl of wisdom.

Sometimes practice brings us to an extremity of suffering where something genuinely new breaks through. I want to share a story from the life of Ajahn Chah that illustrates this. Ajahn Chah was one of Thailand's great masters of the past fifty years. He died about ten years ago and was Jack Kornfield's first teacher.

When he was a young monk progressing in meditation, he felt he needed to face his deepest fears. In Thai culture, there's considerable fear of ghosts. When someone has recently died, people feel nervous about being near the body because the spirit is believed to wander for a while, and these spirits can be mischievous if not outright malicious. There's a general cultural anxiety about this, and Ajahn Chah acknowledged having this fear as well.

Deciding to confront it directly, he chose to meditate by a charnel ground. In Thai villages of that time, most people were cremated, as they still are today. There was a particular area near his village where bodies were burned. Knowing there would be a cremation on a certain day, he decided to arrive at dusk and sit all night beside the funeral pyre.

He arrived as the sun was setting. The body burned that day was a small child. The fire was dying down as he took his seat near the pyre. As he began to sit, fear arose. He thought, "Well, this is what I came for."

I'm not going to run away now. So he just kept sitting. And the fear was strong for him. But his determination was also strong, and so he just sat through the night, and he made it. No real problem. He came to the morning, and he said, "Time for my alms round." He collected his food, took some rest during the day, and he thought, "Well, that wasn't so bad. I think I'll do it again tonight."

And so he went to the charnel ground again that evening, but on this day, an adult man had been cremated. And that's a little scarier because the spirit is thought to be a little stronger. So he took his seat. The pyre was still burning. And the body hadn't been completely consumed at that point. So he took his seat with his back to the fire. It was dusk, getting dark. And as he sat and began his meditation, he could hear the flames licking and the sizzling of the body as it was still burning behind him.

And he said, then the fear really started to come. It was dark. And he knew that the body was very freshly burned. He said as he sat there, he started to get very afraid, more afraid than the night before. But he was determined. He just sat. As he was sitting

with his eyes closed, from the direction of the pyre, he started to hear footsteps crinkling on the leaves, one after another, moving in his direction. Hadn't heard anybody approach. Just heard these footsteps.

So he resolved he was not going to open his eyes. The footsteps came closer and closer and they started to walk around him. And they walked around and stopped right in front of him. And he said at that point the fear was just rising all the time, every moment, just getting bigger and bigger. And when they stopped in front of him, he said the fear filled his whole body. It was just like somebody had poured a pitcher of water into a vessel and the fear was filling every corner of his body. He'd never been so afraid in his life.

And he sat there just scared out of his mind. He said, "I didn't even have the wits to meditate anymore. I couldn't think. I couldn't think what to do in meditation. All I could do was remain sitting there and be full of this intense fear." And finally, the idea came into his mind: what's the worst thing that could happen? And he thought, "The worst thing that could happen is I could die right here tonight." And he thought, "Well, I have to die someday. I might as well die meditating. It's a better way to go than almost anything else. If I have to die, I have to die."

And in that moment of accepting the worst that could happen, he said all this intense fear energy that was filling his body just in one second turned into bliss. His body was just full of this strong, blissful energy. And he said at that point, it just filled him up, and he sat through the night with no problem at all. Just in one moment, that changed. And then his body felt light, obviously still energized. And at that point, the footsteps just walked away. And he never did open his eyes. He never did find out what they were from.

But he sat through the night, and he said later, looking back on that point in his practice, that he really felt he had turned a major corner in his practice because he had faced his strongest fear and it had transformed for him. He said he was never really bothered by fear again after that.

So sometimes even the things that sound like the worst experience we could have in practice turn out to be the moments of greatest understanding and in a way greatest freedom. And so we shouldn't necessarily hold ourselves back from going up against something that is very scary or very difficult to feel. But often a strength comes through that we didn't know we had. And it's that kind of understanding, that kind of insight that leads to the second link, which is faith.

The Pali term is saddha. The etymology of the term is "to place one's heart upon." So faith in Buddhism is not about subscribing to a series of beliefs—"I believe X, Y, and Z, therefore I have faith." Rather, faith is truly a heartfelt quality. A synonym for it is trust. Another synonym is confidence. So it's really looking inside your own heart and seeing what you trust in life. What can you place your heart upon that you feel can support you, can help you?

Traditionally in Buddhism, it's said that one feels this faith toward the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. But I think rather than accepting some rote formula, it's more important to feel the growth of trust in yourself—the kind of trust that lets you open in a moment of full awareness and presence without holding anything back. We resonate with the teachings to the extent that we think, "Yes, that sounds true." We hear the teachings and something in us recognizes their validity. Once we put the teachings into practice, we carry them out and see that they work. We see that they have the potential of freeing us from some of our suffering. On that experience, faith is built.

So faith really grows from experience, from taking the teachings, applying them, and testing them. And then we start to have a faith that we can walk the path, that we can do this ourselves—that this is not just about the Buddha, not just about other people, but really about us, that we have the potential to walk the path that frees us from suffering.

So we make an effort, and you all have made tremendous effort over this week. It's been beautiful to see. And in that effort, even though there's been much difficulty, we come to discover that along this path of awakening, there's really a great deal of joy, too. And this is the third link—the link of joy or gladness.

It's incredibly helpful, as Christina was pointing to in a talk the other night, to recognize these moments of joy and to cultivate this as part of your path and part of your life. We hear much in the Dharma about dukkha, dukkha, dukkha—about the suffering side of life. Sometimes we don't talk as much about the joyful side. One of the things I appreciate about this particular discourse is that it really shows how central joy and happiness are in the path. It's integral. It's necessary. And it can be developed.

Basically, we develop it like we develop mindfulness—by tuning in to it when it's there, appreciating it when it's there, really letting ourselves feel the joy that comes. When we turn the mind in this way, it helps support us. It brings about a cheerfulness because we keep inclining the mind toward that beautiful quality, that beautiful possibility.

The Buddha said that a practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. I don't know if you've ever felt at times that you were overwhelming yourself with suffering, but it's not a recommended part of the procedure. So we tune into joy where we can, where we find it.

On retreat, we notice that it's in the simple pleasures—waking up and having a warm shower, coming into the dining hall and finding a beautiful meal before us, the simple pleasure of when you're tired, just being able to rest your body for sleep at night. All these simple pleasures we can tune into every day. Some of these simple pleasures, because we become so sensitive on retreat, become really heightened.

I remember times in the early days on retreat when what we had for evening tea was a cup of herbal tea, about five peanuts—they were rationed—and a piece of fruit. But I have to say that an orange and a cup of herbal tea tasted much better than many expensive restaurant meals I've had. It was like gourmet dining, just that piece of fruit and the tea.

The Buddha mentioned something like this too. He said that robes, alms food, and a small hut will seem rich and luxurious to one who has renounced, because the senses become so alive.

In a setting like this, there's also the joy of nature, and we can open to that almost any time. Seeing the sun for the first time in about three days brings such joy. It reminds me of one of the periods when I was practicing in Thailand. I'd recently been ordained as a monk and first went up to practice in a really small monastery in the north of Thailand, outside of Chiang Mai—about forty miles outside of Chiang Mai. This monastery was like a little gem, tucked down at the bottom of a deep canyon, with a river that ran through the middle of it.

The monastery was truly remarkable in its equality—the only place I encountered in Thailand where facilities for men and women were genuinely equitable. The nuns' kutis, or huts, were situated on one side of the creek, while the monks' quarters occupied the other, both provided with excellent amenities.

With their characteristic hospitality toward foreigners, the Thai community graciously offered me the finest hut in the entire monastery—the one positioned furthest up the canyon. From this secluded perch, I couldn't see any other dwellings, creating an atmosphere of complete privacy and seclusion that proved ideal for meditation practice.

The natural setting was breathtaking. We were nestled at the base of a steep canyon with walls rising dramatically on both sides. The sun would appear relatively early each day but would also set early, creating a rhythm of light and shadow. A river flowed constantly beside my dwelling, offering me the choice of sitting outside by the water or retreating indoors to escape the mosquitoes. It was an extraordinarily beautiful environment for practice.

Yet simultaneously, this period marked a challenging phase in my spiritual journey. Having recently ordained, I was still adjusting to monastic life, learning to embody the role of a new monk. For three months, I practiced under a teacher who spoke no English while I knew no Thai. This meant not only the absence of evening dharma talks, but no interviews whatsoever.

My interactions with the ajahn were minimal and rather amusing. He would occasionally bring visitors to observe the foreign monk in meditation. They would peer through my screen windows, and fortunately, I was always engaged in practice. I could hear the ajahn exclaiming, "Oh, di, di!"—"good, good"—indicating to his guests that I was indeed practicing diligently. Then they would depart, and I wouldn't see them for another week or so.

This situation demanded tremendous self-reliance. I experienced periods of profound loneliness and considerable physical discomfort during meditation. The isolation was palpable—there was no other Western practitioner with whom I could discuss my practice or share the challenges I was facing.

Despite these difficulties, I look back on that time with deep fondness because I felt profoundly sustained by the natural beauty surrounding me. The river, the rocks, the magnificent canyon itself provided such supportive energy that it literally kept me going through the challenging moments.

One particular memory remains vivid: a large mango tree grew directly outside my kuti. Each morning I would walk beneath its branches to breakfast and return the same way. It happened to be mango season, so ripe fruit was constantly falling to the ground, splitting open and releasing the most intoxicating fragrance as I passed. Unfortunately, monastic rules prevented me from collecting even fallen fruit—we may only accept food offered directly from another person's hands. All I could do was inhale that delicious aroma. It was a kind of exquisite frustration.

Opening to the beauty of the natural world provides tremendous support for our practice. There is profound joy and retreat available in the peace, stillness, and concentration that meditation offers. Someone mentioned in an interview recently, "I don't think my mind has ever been this quiet before in my life." This resonates deeply with my own experience.

When I reflect on those early years, I realize how delicious it was to experience such mental quietude, to touch that profound stillness. In many ways, this is what drew me back to meditation retreats repeatedly. I would think, "If the mind can become this still, how much deeper can this stillness go? What else becomes possible within this silence?"

The silence does continue to deepen, and insights continue to blossom from that stillness like flowers emerging from fertile ground.

There is also genuine joy in encountering truth, even when that truth proves difficult to accept—as it often does in retreat practice. Our colleague Ruth Dennison, a deeply respected teacher of German origin, had a wonderfully direct way of expressing this: "You know, darling, self-knowledge is never good news."

This observation rings true. Self-knowledge rarely arrives as pleasant news. Even our insights can be challenging to accept, sometimes difficult to fully absorb. We might recognize deeply conditioned patterns of inadequacy, fear, loneliness, or the desperate need for approval that have perhaps driven much of our lives. These realizations can be quite hard to bear.

Yet if you look closely, you'll discover there is genuine delight even in seeing these difficult patterns. In the very act of witnessing them clearly, we recognize the possibility of liberation. There emerges the potential for freedom from these habitual ways of being, opening us to entirely different ways of living. Even within the most challenging insights lies this seed of transformation and hope.

Joy is really intrinsic to the nature of things—intrinsic to our own life, as Christina mentioned, and intrinsic in existence itself. You can feel this in nature, just opening up to the lushness of this midsummer growth in Massachusetts, the play of sunlight on the leaves in the late afternoon. You can feel the delight in all of that.

Hinduism has this expression they use to refer to the nature of reality: Sat Chit Ananda—being, consciousness, bliss. These are understood as the three aspects of reality. And you can tune into this any time you want to open your eyes to it. I often use the play of light to tune into that—the radiance of life outside or the reflections of light

inside. It reminds me of the sparkle of that bliss in existence. When the mind gets relaxed and you can start to tune into this, the amount of joy in a moment can be huge, really huge.

This is from Thomas Merton: "There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and of joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created beings." It's really always there.

This quality of joy then intensifies into the next link in the chain, which is called rapture. The Pali for this is pīti. The understanding of rapture is that it's the intensification of joy as we bring it into our meditation subject. So we take that gladness and delight that we feel perhaps externally, and we find a way to activate it or transfer it into the domain of meditation.

Rapture is really about an interest and delight in what we're experiencing. In this way, a good synonym for it is rapt attention. So subjects like the breath at times become really fascinating and delightful. The level of detail that we start to find in taking a step in walking meditation becomes a real subject of interest and joy for us. Another good synonym for this kind of rapture is joyful interest—when you find that your mind is delighted in the process of being with your experience, being closely with it, experiencing it intimately.

The quality of rapture is highly thought of in the teachings. It's one of the jhanic factors associated with strong concentration, and it's also one of the seven factors of enlightenment. This particular quality is a factor of mind, but it's often accompanied by a lot of bodily energy. So it's said that rapture has physical manifestations like goosebumps, jolts of energy, uplifting energy, where the body starts to feel very light. And it's said the intensification of this can lead to levitation. So beware—you might find yourself bouncing around the room.

We often first notice this quality in a heightened sense of physical energy. The physical energy can come up really strongly in rapture and actually be quite turbulent. It seems like we might be going backwards in the meditation, but when the factor of rapture in the mind is there, it's not the case. It's a new deepening process.

But this rapture, because it has at times a turbulent quality, can be softened, can be mellowed. And that's done through the next step in the chain, which is tranquility. As the rapture intensifies in the mind, the mind's delight tends to start calming down the

bodily energy. So the experience of tranquility comes in. You could also call it relaxation or ease or serenity. And that starts to bring a calmness also in the body. What this allows us to do is really settle into the moment in an easy way, in a calm and relaxed way.

That then leads to the next factor on the path, which is often translated as happiness. The Pali word for this is sukha. I like this Pali word because it sounds like the same root as sugar. In French, sugar is sucre, which sounds a lot like sukha. And sukha has this kind of sweetness to it—it's like a very sweet state of mind. It is also one of the jhanic factors, one of the strong factors of concentration.

When the Buddha put his teachings together, he talked a lot about suffering and the end of suffering. But you know, this could all be expressed in a little different way. In California, for instance, talking a lot about suffering doesn't go down so well. Because the response is: "California, suffering? Suffering? Dude, I'm out of here."

I'm going to go surf today.

So, in California, rather than talking about the first noble truth being the truth of suffering, I think if the Buddha were alive today, he might say something like, "Well, the first noble truth is there are many opportunities for growth in life." Something like that. And the third noble truth—a Californian would never describe it as the end of suffering. They'd describe it as the development of happiness.

This is actually not too bad. When suffering goes away, obviously what's in its place is happiness. And you may have noticed that the Dalai Lama's most popular book so far was called *The Art of Happiness*. It was on the bestseller list in the Bay Area for over a year. If it had been titled *The End of Suffering*, I don't think it would have gotten there.

So happiness really is the outgrowth of the path. It's intended to be the outgrowth of the path. In this way of looking, it's a deeper kind of flowering than the gladness—the kind of momentary gladness that arises with conditions of nature or inner discovery. It's considered to be more stable, and so maybe a more accurate term for it is contentment. It has qualities of acceptance and peace.

There's a real settledness in this kind of happiness because it's joy that's been intensified to rapture but then mellowed out through tranquility. So it's a fuller kind of blooming. We could say that the momentary arisings of joy depend on some condition to be triggered, but happiness doesn't. This kind of happiness doesn't depend on external conditions. It becomes a more stable quality of heart and mind. But it's still impermanent. It's not completely stable, but it's a little more stable.

I think part of the happiness is the quality of coming home—that feeling of arriving in the present moment, feeling integrated, feeling balanced, and really being fully present, being able to have our whole heart and mind in touch with the present moment. I often feel if I could just always live with that attitude of fullness of heart and mind, anything could happen and life would be okay. I could meet anything in life from that kind of place.

This reminds me of a poem from Rumi. When Rumi says "you" in a poem, he usually means the divine, whatever form that means to you. But in this, I think of that basic sanity as another way that this "you" could be understood—this basic centeredness and wholeheartedness.

"Come to the orchard in spring. There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers. If you do not come, these do not matter. If you do come, these do not matter."

We find ourselves back with ourselves, really connected with ourselves in a deep way through this kind of stability. I think it's one of the most satisfying aspects of dharma practice.

Sometimes we misunderstand happiness and think that in order to be happy, we have to make it permanent. But happiness can't be secured into the future. If we think about just finding happiness in this one moment, that's really all we can do, and that's a lot easier. It becomes much more accessible if we think about it as a momentary arising. As we say in dharma language: take care of this moment and you take care of all time.

What's interesting is that the practice doesn't stop here. Even though we've arrived at this quality of happiness in the unfolding, there's still more. Many times in my practice I would have been quite happy to roll up the mat at this point. But there's more. That's one of the things the Buddha said. He said, "Two things I never lost track of in my practice. One was not to be lazy in my effort. The second was not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind"—not to settle just for wholesome states of mind, but to remember that what we're really walking the path for is unconditional freedom.

So happiness continues the deepening process. The next step in the link is concentration, or samadhi. We usually believe that concentration is the result of a lot of effort—that we have to work really hard to bring concentration about. But what this teaching shows, and it's stated explicitly in a number of places, is that the proximate cause of concentration is happiness.

I find that really interesting to reflect on. The immediate cause of concentration is happiness.

And you can get a sense of that when there's happiness—the mind is quite content to settle into the present moment, really settle fully into the present moment. It doesn't need to go looking outside itself through the movements of desire or aversion. It's really that external searching that creates the distraction that takes us away from this basic wholeheartedness.

So as we settle more and more with happiness, the mind just collects, becomes unified. And as it becomes unified, it gets that strength back. We've given away that strength through a lot of distracted thinking. As it comes back together, the strength returns to us, and that's where you have the feeling of stability, of steadiness, of stillness in your sitting.

Concentration also is not an end goal, although it's very pleasant, but it's considered the base for insight. So the next step in the chain is knowing and seeing things as they are. When the mind is still, we can see reality the way it is. When the mind is spinning, we really can't. It's kind of like we're on a merry-go-round. We've hopped on one of the horses, the merry-go-round's gotten cranked up, and it's just going round and round and round. This is the mind before this practice.

One of our friends walks up to the edge of the merry-go-round and is holding today's newspaper. They hold it up in front of us as we go round and round and round. But we can't read the headlines because we're going too fast. Every time we go by, it's just a blur. Then the merry-go-round slows down, and we come to rest in front of our friend, and then we can read the headlines: Everything's changing. Hold on and you'll suffer. Freedom is found through letting go. I get it.

So concentration or stillness of mind is the foundation for insight. This seeing things as they are really refers to seeing the impermanent nature of everything, of how everything that we can contact through our senses is just arising and passing. And if we try to hold on to it, we'll suffer. It won't bring lasting happiness.

As that seeing deepens, it leads to the next link, which is disenchantment. Christina mentioned this in her talk last night, this factor of mind. Disenchantment is really a recognition that none of the phenomena of the sensory world are going to do it for us. Our quest for security, for freedom, for lasting peace aren't going to be found by holding on to anything that comes out of the senses because every one of those is subject to passing. As that sinks in more and more, it cuts down our tendency to grasp and to look for happiness outside of ourselves or through special states inside of ourselves.

This disenchantment doesn't mean that the world all of a sudden looks ugly or that we think it's dreadful that we're here. I don't think it's that way at all. Somebody asked one of my teachers, a Tibetan teacher on a retreat, "All this talk about suffering, doesn't it keep you from enjoying the beauty of the world?" The teacher replied, "It's only the yogins and yoginis who are free from attachment who are truly able to appreciate the beauty of this world."

I think this is really true, and I think you can see it yourself in your experience in meditation. At times when you feel really present and clear and free, that's when the world really lights up. That's when you see the beauty of other people, of nature, of all these appearances. The Buddha said something similar: "The beauty of this world remains the same, but the wise do not cling to it."

As this disenchantment develops, it really affects a fundamental shift in our relationship to the world. We lose the motivation to be in the world for all the great things we can get out of it. As that tendency to grasp goes away, we start to be in the world more and more out of a sense of what can I offer back to it. You could say it's the awakening of a bodhisattva spirit, of a spirit of really wanting to be in the world to be of benefit to others, to be of service to others.

As this disenchantment deepens, it opens to the next link in the chain, which is called dispassion. The Pali term is viraga, and the literal meaning is "without lust." This is the state where the heart has really moved away from craving and aversion so strongly and abides in a place of deep peace. In actual fact, this term viraga or dispassion is a synonym in the texts for nibbana, which the Buddha described in this way: "Insofar as the practitioner has abandoned greed, aversion, and confusion, insofar is nibbana realizable, immediate, inviting, and attractive."

This direct realization of nibbana, the state of unconditioned peace and freedom, then is the precursor to the next link, which is liberation. The Pali term is vimutti. At this stage, the liberation that's talked about is irreversible. It's sometimes called in the suttas the "unshakable deliverance of mind." After someone has come to this level of realization, there's a standard phrase that's used to describe their situation. They often say, "Done is what had to be done."

Lived is the holy life. There is no more coming to any renewed state of being. The journey has been accomplished. The path has been walked to its completion.

Then there is one final step in this chain, which is called knowing the destruction of the taints. After liberation, it is said that the awakened one realizes that all the impurities—the deepest impurities of ignorance, sense desire, and desire for becoming—have all been lifted and removed from their heart.

So this is the state of the journey, the description of the journey itself: founded and beginning on suffering, moving through faith and the opening to joy and happiness, then that deepening sense of being that with insight sees things the way they are. It's presented as a linear chain, but in actual fact, I think we go through most of these steps over and over and over again.

I suspect that in the week you've been here, you've been through most of the early steps along this way. You've experienced moments of suffering and moments of faith, moments of joy and moments of tranquility, moments of happiness and moments of insight that lead to letting go, that lead to disenchantment. We circle through these stages many, many times on the path at deeper and deeper levels until hopefully liberation accompanies them.

I remember when I was on an early retreat here at IMS, and I heard a talk that spoke about the positive unfolding of the path, and I became very desirous. I got very impatient about reaching the end, and I think that's one of the risks of lending an ear to this kind of talk. I went to the teacher the very next day for an interview. The teacher had given the talk, and I walked in, and I really wanted to shake him by the shoulders and say, "Richard, when's it going to happen for me?" That was really what I wanted to know. When is this going to happen for me? This is really what I want. How long is it going to take?

He said, of course, being an honest person, "I don't know." And who does know? But the beauty of this kind of description is that happiness is not only possible as we continue the journey—it's really inevitable. It's such an intrinsic part of the whole journey that it does have to come in time. We just don't know when. We don't know the pace. We can't set the pace of our own unfolding.

The Buddha said something like this: "A practitioner doesn't know how much of the fetters are wearing away every day, but he does know they wear away." And then he went on to say that the fetters of the mind, the things that hold us in bondage, rot away in meditation the way that the sails of an ocean-going ship will rot away when the ship is beached and left to the elements of wind and salt air and sun and rain. The fetters of the mind rot away in meditation like the sails of an ocean-going ship rot in the elements.

So we know that this path is a path of purification. What we don't know is the rate at which it's going to unfold for any of us. We can't control it. We can't force it. Even if we devote all of our time to formal mindfulness practice, there's a certain point beyond which we can't accelerate the process. It's really out of our control. It rests on our past karma and on our current effort.

So the best thing is just to relax with that faith and trust that the Dharma will carry you there. You can relax into the stream of Dharma practice as you make your effort, and know it only leads in one direction. It leads in this direction of freedom.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "As a result of his experience, the Buddha taught that the practice has to develop naturally, according to conditions. You allow things to develop according to your accumulated wholesome karma and paramis, which means your virtues. This doesn't mean you stop putting effort into the practice, but you continue with the understanding that whether you progress swiftly or slowly, it's not something you can force. It's like planting a tree. It knows by itself the appropriate pace to grow at. If you crave to get quick results, see that as delusion. Even if you want it to grow slowly, see that as delusion."

So we really do just surrender into the stream of the Dharma. We trust and we let it carry us.

I'll close with one other quotation from the Buddha. Someone came and asked him, "How did you cross the flood?" What this means in Dharma language is, how did you cross the flood of existence, of becoming, of samsara? It basically asks, how did you become liberated?

This was the Buddha's reply: "I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying."

When I tarried, I sank. And when I hurried, I was swept away.

This profound teaching captures the essence of the Middle Way—neither clinging nor pushing, neither forcing nor resisting. The Buddha's words point to that delicate balance where we move with the natural flow of awakening, neither holding back in fear nor rushing ahead in impatience.

When we tarry—when we hesitate, doubt, or cling to our familiar ways of being—we sink beneath the waters of confusion and suffering. When we hurry—when we grasp for quick results or try to force our spiritual unfolding—we are swept away by the very current we're trying to navigate.

The path of liberation asks us to find that middle ground, that place of dynamic equilibrium where we can move with wisdom and grace. We learn to neither resist the current of change nor be overwhelmed by it. We discover how to be present with what is arising while remaining open to what wants to emerge.

This is the art of crossing the flood—meeting each moment with awareness, allowing the Dharma to guide us naturally toward freedom. In this way, we learn to trust the process of awakening itself, surrendering our need to control while remaining fully engaged with the journey.

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

[A moment of shared silence]

CHAPTER 245

The Power of Mettā: Is Insight Enough?

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the relationship between insight meditation and mettā (loving-kindness) practice, asking whether intellectual understanding alone is sufficient for spiritual development. Drawing on the Buddha's teachings and personal experience, he explores five key ways that mettā enhances our practice: making the heart more responsive and tender, purifying unwholesome mental states, building concentration (samādhi), connecting us more deeply to life, and bringing genuine happiness.*
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> *Armstrong addresses common reservations vipassanā practitioners may have about mettā practice, explaining how loving-kindness serves as a powerful complement to insight meditation rather than a contradiction. He shares stories illustrating the transformative power of cultivating heart qualities, including encounters with the Dalai Lama and Thai meditation master Ajahn Jumnian. The talk emphasizes how mettā practice can soften rigid mental patterns, integrate what insight meditation deconstructs, and provide the warmth that fills the emptiness revealed through wisdom practice.*
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> *This teaching offers practical guidance for balancing wisdom and compassion on the spiritual path, showing how the cultivation of loving-kindness can make our dharma practice more complete and our liberation more beneficial to all beings. Armstrong draws from both Theravāda and Mahāyāna perspectives, demonstrating the universal importance of heart cultivation in Buddhist practice.*

The Power of Mettā: Is Insight Enough?

I want to begin tonight with a quotation from one of my favorite romantic poets from the last century, E.E. Cummings. This is from a poem titled "Since Feeling is First":

"Since feeling is first, who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you."

What I really love about this poem is that first line: "Since feeling is first." Feeling is first in the Dharma in a very important way. The Dharma is not about intellectual gymnastics or clever understanding. The Dharma is taught and practiced in order to heal our feelings of sadness, grief, despair, and fear. This is why the Buddha taught, and it's why we practice. It's really on the feeling level that the Dharma makes sense.

I believe that on this feeling level, the influence of loving-kindness—the practice of mettā—has a profound contribution to make for those who wish to take it up. There are five ways that mettā can influence our practice and our lives that I'd like to explore this evening.

First, loving-kindness has the potential to make the heart more responsive, or we could say to make the heart tender. Second, it purifies the heart of the unwholesome and develops the wholesome. Third, the practice of loving-kindness builds concentration. Fourth, it connects us to life. And fifth, it brings great happiness.

Let me begin with the quality of making the heart more responsive and tender. In our tradition, Vipassana is our wisdom practice. Seeing things as they are is the way to understanding and the way to freedom. This is the foundation of what we're doing, and it's in this context that we practice loving-kindness. From the point of view of the Buddha's teachings, loving-kindness doesn't stand as a complete teaching on its own, but in the context of the wisdom teaching of Vipassana, it's a very powerful tool.

Joseph mentioned in his talk last week that compassion and emptiness have a very close relationship. As we begin to touch the true quality of emptiness through our practice, compassion—or you could equally say loving-kindness—unfolds from that. So you could say that mettā unfolds naturally from the practice of Vipassana. One of my teachers put it this way: "Love is the child of freedom."

For some, I think that really may be enough. People who have very soft natures and tend to be emotional by temperament often find the emotions unfolding very nicely just through the practice of Vipassana. For myself, it was a little different, and I want to share a story.

I was on staff here in the late 1970s, and we had a visit from a famous Asian teacher—somebody we'd been planning and preparing for months. We were really looking forward to his visit. Because I was on staff, I both got to sit part of the retreat and hang out backstage as this teacher had contact with staff. So I got to see him both in his teaching role and his non-teaching role.

In the whole two weeks that I observed him, I didn't see a smile. I didn't see a laugh. I didn't see a sign of joy. And I didn't feel a kind of human warmth of connection with him. The way I felt afterward was that the teachings didn't inspire me very much because this quality that was really important to me at that time was not present. Other friends were very inspired and went to Asia to practice with this teacher.

I also didn't feel that this teacher was suffering. He had a very peaceful mind, very cooled out, very much at ease. So I didn't think there was any particular suffering going on in his being. One of my friends said they felt there was a quality of mettā there, but it felt like distant starlight—unlike, say, a teacher like Dīpamā, whose loving-kindness comes across more like the warmth of the sun.

So it wasn't that there wasn't mettā there, or that there wasn't compassion there, but somehow it didn't touch me, it didn't move me. In my own practice, because I'm more of a thinking type of person than an emotional type, the Vipassana practice didn't unfold quite so easily for me into the realm of beautiful feelings. So I tried to balance this development of character in myself by doing quite a lot of brahmavihāra practice. Over about a five or six year period, I did a number of brahmavihāra retreats.

And those retreats, I felt, did really awaken that tender part of myself. I felt they truly had the capacity to bring it out.

At the end of one of my retreats with a Tibetan teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche, he was giving sort of parting instructions to his students. You can think of these parting instructions that a teacher gives you as pith instructions for how to conduct yourself, how to live your life. What he told his students at the end of this retreat, he summed up like this.

He said, "When you go back into your life, I want you to follow three things. Number one, be normal. There are already enough strange people in the spiritual world. If you go back and be really strange, people are going to think Buddhism is like that, and they aren't going to be interested in it. So please go home and be normal."

Then he said, "Be wise. Don't make a lot of mistakes in your life. Do what's sensible. Take care of yourself. Take care of other people. Act with wisdom."

And the third thing he said was, "Be juicy. When you go back into your daily life, be juicy." By juicy, he meant let these sweet qualities of the heart come out of you and manifest in your life. Let them come out and touch people.

The juice in our practice, or the qualities that we awaken, tend to be associated with the heart: love, reverence, awe, compassion, devotion, humility, kindness, faith, and humor. These qualities, when they're alive in our practice, alive in our being, they really make life a sweeter experience, a much sweeter place to be.

But I wouldn't say that it's absolutely necessary to develop them to great strength along the spiritual path. I think there's a little bit of a choice here. The task of developing these qualities strongly may appeal to some people and may not appeal to everyone. And I think that's okay. One can, as that teacher did, develop a great deal of freedom and peace without activating these qualities so strongly, and that's fine.

So to some extent, it's a matter of personal taste—whether insight is enough for you, or whether you feel you would like to develop these other qualities of heart that really bring the juice to life.

But perhaps the most important thing about these qualities is that they're the way we can touch other people. They're the way that when we go back into our daily life, other people feel the fruits of our practice. Other people can know that something has shifted in us as a result of dharma practice. And in that, maybe they're the best advertisement for dharma practice.

In a way, I think that if you take up seriously the motivation of bodhicitta in your path—that you are cultivating the heart and mind in order to benefit all sentient beings—then these qualities become of particular interest to you. Because it's really through the development of these qualities that, to a large extent, you can touch other people and perhaps bring them a little bit closer to the dharma, to the truth, and perhaps help set someone on the path to liberation.

I think this is why the heart quality of compassion, or you could call it loving-kindness, became so important in the Mahayana expression of Buddhism. As we direct our attention outward to take in all beings, it's these heart qualities that can touch them and bring them in.

And of course the Buddha had developed the quality of loving-kindness to an extraordinary degree. I have to believe that his personal magnetism was immense. Someone who could deliver a dharma talk and have 500 people enlightened at the end of it had an amazing transmission quality—part of which I think was emptiness, but part of which I do believe was loving-kindness.

There's a story from the later part of his life. The commentaries say that he was probably 72 when this happened, when his cousin Devadatta tried to kill him. You may know about this story. His cousin became very jealous and wanted to take over the sangha. So he made one attempt on the Buddha's life himself and failed. Then he decided to kill the Buddha a different way.

He went to the elephant handlers, the mahouts of the king at the time, and asked them if there wasn't a mad elephant, a very savage elephant known as a man-killer—an elephant that had already killed human beings—that could be turned loose against the Buddha. And the king's elephant handlers agreed to this.

At one time the Buddha was walking into the town, and Devadatta alerted the elephant handlers and got them to turn this savage elephant out onto the road. It began to charge toward the Buddha as he was walking into town. Devadatta gleefully rubbed his hands together and thought, "This will be the end of that recluse Gautama."

But as this great elephant charged directly toward the path of the Buddha, the Buddha's followers were saying, "Please step out of the way, Venerable One. Please don't let the Blessed One stand in the path of this charging elephant."

The Buddha said, "A Buddha never dies by violence. Don't worry."

And as the elephant came toward him, he encompassed the elephant with his force of loving-kindness. It's said that the charging elephant slowed down under the force of that loving-kindness and came to a rest just in front of the Buddha and bowed down in front of him so that the Buddha could stroke his forehead. Then the elephant, after being stroked, picked up some dust from the road and dropped it on the head of the Buddha.

And from that point on, this elephant was said to be tamed. He had been tamed by the force of the Buddha's loving-kindness.

One of the great blessings in our lineage is that we have heart practices—a variety of heart practices designed to bring these qualities to fruition in us, the primary one being loving-kindness. In the Mahayana traditions, compassion is usually discussed as the primary emotion. In our lineage, we speak of metta, though we shouldn't draw too rigid a line between these two. The Dalai Lama once explained that what he meant by compassion was simply basic human caring. This is really the same thing we mean by metta. They're just slightly different modalities of the same quality, both based on this simple sense of caring for ourselves and for others.

The seeds of metta and compassion are in everyone. It's what Trungpa Rinpoche called our "soft spot." I'd like to read this passage from Chögyam Trungpa:

It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for compassion. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft

spot, some point we can cultivate. A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief.

What Rinpoche is saying here is that in every human being, however much they have tried to armor themselves, there is always this tender avenue in. There is always a point that can be cultivated, a way into the heart.

He continues: *There's also an inner wound called Tathagatagarbha, or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and to communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. That is called bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore.*

If you have an inclination to dive into bodhisattva fever, metta is our avenue.

Some Vipassana practitioners have a philosophical reservation about the metta practice. I don't know if this is true for anyone here, so I may be addressing a non-issue, but some feel that the insight practice is so elegant, so impeccable, so pure—just being aware of what is. That's it. It's so clean. The metta practice, on the other hand, seems a little suspicious, somewhat contrived, perhaps even new-agey. It's like we're trying to put something on. Are we doing affirmations? Is it somehow fake?

Someone once said in an interview, "Vipassana is letting go of everything and metta is bringing something in. Aren't these contradictory?"

I think it's helpful to remember the Buddhist definition of right effort. Right effort is about developing the wholesome states of mind and abandoning the unwholesome states of mind. Whatever serves to do that embodies the primary sense of right effort. As loving-kindness develops the wholesome quality of metta, it is directly in alignment with the Buddhist definition of right effort.

These are different practices, but I feel they really come together. Down the road, along the track of our meditation practice, the practice of insight and the practice of loving-kindness can converge. Where they converge is in a present moment attention that's filled with warmth—in the generation of this quality of warm attention which we can bring to every experience we have.

Sometimes people complain that metta seems diluted: "We say, 'may I be happy,' but there is no I. What do you mean? This is delusion practice."

So, for those of you who have that concern, I have a reformulation of the metta phrase. This is for the Vipassana purists in the audience. Instead of saying something like, "May Kamala be happy," you could say it like this: "In this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena, conventionally designated as Kamala, may the mind state of happiness arise on an ever more frequent basis." So there we have a statement that I think even the Abhidhamma scholars could get behind, and that I hope you may also.

It is extraordinary when we meet someone who has developed the heart qualities, and the person that comes to my mind again and again is the Dalai Lama, who has said —and I don't think he's kidding—"My religion is kindness." He was at a conference, a teachers' conference at Spirit Rock a couple of years ago. It was a gathering of about 220 Buddhist teachers from around the world, from Asia and from the West. And he was with us for about a day and a half, answering our questions, listening to our concerns, and sharing from his point of view.

One of the things that he said struck me a lot. He said, "I'm not interested in propagating Buddhism. I'm interested in propagating human values." I think that's how deep his caring is. It's beyond all kinds of sectarian divisions or thinking. "I'm interested in propagating human values." And this kind of attitude is so contagious.

Because he's the head of the government in exile, the United States State Department had to provide really high levels of security for his visit to Spirit Rock. For example, the meditation facility at Spirit Rock is nestled at the base of high hills that are about 700 or 800 feet tall. The Secret Service part of the State Department asked to borrow horses so that their marksmen could ride up onto the top of the hills with rifles and look down and guard the meditation halls.

Every day at 7:30 at breakfast time, all the residence buildings had to be evacuated, and the rooms were searched with dogs one by one for explosives. And before we could enter into the grounds every day, we had to go through metal detectors that were staffed by security guards from the State Department.

These security guards were not lightweight. If you think United States airports are getting intense, you should have seen these guys. They had a pistol on one hip and a nightstick on the other and were bristling with walkie-talkies and cell phones and such. You didn't joke with these people. It was very clear as you were going in, you were not going to make fun with this crew.

I got to talk to one of them a little bit about their career. They traveled all around the world providing protection and provided protection for visiting dignitaries in this country under even more extreme security situations. So they were very heavy duty in their profession.

At the end of the conference, all of these tough State Department security guards packing their pistols asked if they could be photographed with the Dalai Lama. So of course he agreed and gathered for a photograph with all of them. His heart just touches people.

This quality of loving kindness is really within each of us. It's part of our nature. We've all known it, certainly when we were children. We've all known this. For me, a lot of the draw of spiritual life has always been to rediscover this quality of love in my life, to have it available, to have it accessible, to live in it more and more. So for me, it's felt like the pull of the whole path is my heart pulling me home. That's really been my deepest motivation all along.

And of course what we find is that this love can't be stabilized unless it's supported by wisdom. It can only flare up temporarily, kind of erratically, and in a way that we can't understand, much less control. But as we cultivate love and wisdom together, the wisdom provides the stability through non-clinging so that the love can flower and be accessible.

So sometimes this practice may look a little contrived, the practice of loving kindness. It is fabricated in the beginning. But then it kind of catches fire, and it can take off on its own. And remember that it is a natural quality of heart.

I think back to my grandmother, my father's mother, who's one of the most loving people that I've ever known. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890. And she was married to my grandfather, who was one of the orneriest, most aversive men that I've ever known. And yet she maintained the sweetness of her disposition all through her married life.

When we kids came to visit them, we would just be showered with her love. She would put her lips into the hollow of our neck and sort of nuzzle around in our neck, saying that she was going to steal our sugar. That was just the way that she related to us.

My grandmother had no formal training in Buddhism. She hadn't even done any psychotherapy. And yet, the love just flowed out of her. So it really is an intrinsic quality in us, but sometimes it needs a little encouragement to come out. It needs a little help in being uncovered.

So we get into the second aspect of the power of loving kindness, and that is the aspect of purification.

Metta is a strong purifier of the heart. All the work of purification begins with this simple intention—the wish for the welfare of ourselves or another. That's where all the power comes from. Whether the happiness of another actually comes about isn't so much our concern. In our metta practice, it's not about focusing on the results or the outcome for someone else.

In our practice, we think, "I hope you're happy"—whoever we're directing it to, we think, "I hope you're happy." And we try to be sincere in this wish. If we are, that's really the driving force of the metta practice: the sincerity of that intention for someone's happiness. If you can feel that with each phrase, the practice will develop. It will have the power.

The phrases don't work like a mantra, where you can just say them mindlessly again and again and expect the magic to happen. The phrases need this wish accompanying them. The wish is really expressed through the phrase. But when you marry the phrase with this wish, that is the seed that makes the practice go, that makes it happen.

You really can trust in this seed. You don't need to force the feeling or fabricate or manufacture any particular feeling. Our job is just planting the seed again and again, watering it again and again. It's not our job, once we've planted the seed, to make the plant grow up. Only nature can do that. It's our job to plant the seed and trust that nature knows how to grow the flower once we've planted the seed.

The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, thinking this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled."

In Vipassana practice, we understand this to mean the cultivation of mindfulness. The gradual falling of raindrops is the moment-by-moment development of mindfulness. Over time, that creates a huge power, a huge force in the mind.

In the loving-kindness practice, it is the moment-by-moment development of this wish for someone's happiness. That's the gradual falling of the raindrops that in time fills the jar.

As we direct these thoughts of good wishes toward ourselves, this can be a difficult part of the practice. Because as we direct the mind to love for ourselves, it brings up all the ways inside us that aren't loving. It can bring up feelings of self-judgment, of unwor-

thiness, of self-hatred, of fear, of shame, of regret, of remorse. Sometimes we think, "I'm doing it wrong. Something's gone off track. This doesn't feel like loving kindness. It's the opposite."

But in fact, because the metta practice is so purifying, sometimes these feelings are the very sign that it is working, that it is doing exactly what it's meant to do. Because metta will go straight for the heart. It goes directly there. And it will bring out anything that's not of its nature.

It's as though loving kindness is this positive pole of a very strong magnet. We're holding this magnet against our body, running it up close to our heart center. What that positively charged magnet will do is draw out toward it anything that's of the opposite polarity. Anything that's still in us that's not resonant with the positive force of metta will come to the surface.

This can be one of the most difficult times in the practice of metta, but it's also so valuable because those parts of ourselves—if the tendencies are still there—have been operating subconsciously, but we haven't been able to contact them perhaps. So this is a way of bringing them into the light of awareness, into that warm attention that metta provides. In the light of awareness, the healing can take place. The release can take place. The liberation can take place.

The Buddha often talked in the suttas of loving kindness as the main antidote for the force of hatred or aversion in the mind. This is another reason that metta was such a powerful practice for me. As someone in practice whose primary hindrance has been fear—a form of aversion—metta was a beautiful antidote to that fear. I recommend it really highly to all my brothers and sisters who are also aversive types. It is a really good fit for our temperament. It is the antidote to aversion, especially if pain has been a feature of life for a long time.

If pain has been with us for a long time, then we tend to develop a kind of chronic habit of aversion because of just not being able to open to it, not being able to accommodate it. And metta is strong enough, is powerful enough to get in and touch that chronic state of aversion or fear.

Because this can be a difficult part of the journey in loving kindness for self, it's why it's often helpful to bring in someone that you really can like quite easily—a benefactor or a friend—so that you alternate your practice at times, if it seems sensible, between yourself and a benefactor or friend. And then you can kind of generate the loving kind-

ness with the benefactor and borrow some of that love and bring it back to yourself. And use that warmth to soothe your feelings for yourself, to stoke the fires of love for yourself.

As the metta grows, it really has a strong unifying effect in the mind. Love unifies. It brings together. It is the attractive force, you might say, in the spiritual universe. It's interesting because in a lot of ways, vipassana takes us apart. The vipassana practice is a very analytic meditation. I'm sure you've noticed this. It sort of takes the human being apart either into the six sense bases or into the five aggregates. It deconstructs us.

It's very helpful that it deconstructs us because we've, coming into the practice out of unawareness, not understanding, we've come together around a false center—around self-centeredness or the false sense of self or craving or whatever you want to call it. That false collection needs to be dismantled so that it can come together around a true center. It could be the center of emptiness, as Joseph mentioned in his talk the other night. But metta is a beautiful glue that as we open to this quality of emptiness, the true center, is able to reconstruct the personality on a wholesome and wise basis and integrate what has been taken apart.

We've talked about how in doing the loving-kindness practice, if you run into a hindrance—that the suggestion is to leave the hindrance in the background. It could be fear, it could be sadness, it could be anger. Leave the hindrance in the background and continue doing the practice of metta. The inclination in vipassana is to turn to what's predominant, but in metta that's not the instruction. Leave it in the background and continue doing the metta practice.

And what's interesting about this, as you start to work with the hindrances in this way, is that you see that fear or anger or sadness can still be there, or desire, and you can still generate caring. And as you do that, what you find is that the metta starts to pervade even the hindrances. Or another way to say it is even these hindering energies sort of get wrapped up in the embrace of loving-kindness. And this is part of the integrating power, so that we don't have to push them out of the mind, but all of a sudden we start to be able to accept those parts of ourselves, those really difficult parts, in the spirit of kindness, in the spirit of acceptance, an aspect of metta. And this is very healing.

I'd like to read this poem from Galway Kinnell, which I'm sure a lot of you have heard before, but it says it so beautifully. It's called "St. Francis and the Sow."

The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within of self-blessing, though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness. To put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch. It is lovely. Until it flowers again from within of self-blessing. As St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow and told her in words and in touch, "Blessings of earth on the sow." And the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout all the way through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail. From the hard spininess spiked out from the spine, down through the great broken heart, to the sheer blue milk and dreaminess spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them, the long perfect loveliness of sow.

Everything flowers again from within with self-blessing.

One of the things that surprised me when I was doing the metta practice over an extended time is the way it affected my fear. I'd done a lot of vipassana practice by this time and had worked with fear a lot and had seen a huge change in my relationship to fear. And over the years, the fear had just gotten smaller, smaller, smaller, smaller through the force of equanimity, acceptance, spaciousness, non-identification. The fear could arise and it just wasn't that much of an event most of the time. But when the mind tipped off balance, it would still tip into fear. That was sort of its conditioning. It was its habit. That was the way it went.

After doing the metta practice, what I noticed is that the fear started to actually be displaced by loving kindness. The metta started to actually take the place of fear in the mind. So when it moved in a particular direction, it started to move in the direction of metta. And that was really interesting to me, but in my case it was true. The vipassana hadn't changed my conditioning very much. It had just worn it away more and more. But the metta practice actually put something different in its place and shifted the conditioning.

This is the second factor of purification of the metta practice. The third factor is concentration. And I think we've talked before about how the practice of loving kindness is a concentration practice in the way that we do it.

Concentration itself is a unification of mind. And as we've discussed, metta is also a powerful unifier of the mind. This is why the two go so well together. Both of them really bring the mind to a point. So the combination is so powerful because each one supports the other.

Someone once asked Deepa Ma, struck by her presence, "What's in your mind? What are the factors that are there?" And she said, "I only have three things in my mind: peace, metta, and concentration." What a mind.

As I was talking about this aspect in one retreat, somebody gave me a reading from a Russian saint from the 19th century named Theophan the Recluse, who was in the Russian Orthodox lineage. He has a passage that sounds like it could have been written about metta as a concentration practice. It's so unusual that I thought I would share it with you:

"For so long as the mind remains in the head, where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there. This concentration of all human life in one place is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of future warmth. This sensation, faint at the beginning, becomes gradually stronger, firmer, deeper. At first only tepid, it grows into warm feeling and concentrates the attention upon itself. And so it comes about that whereas in the initial stages the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will, in due course this attention, by its own vigor, gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth then holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting one another, the warmth and the attention. They must remain inseparable because dispersion of attention cools the warmth and diminishing warmth weakens attention."

The fourth aspect of loving kindness that I wanted to talk about was connection—that it really connects us to life. It opens our practice to all of life. Vipassana practice can do this too, but we can also stay in Vipassana in a kind of self-centered way for a long time. We can use Vipassana to focus on my pain, my problems, my neuroses, my path, my progress, my healing, my peace, and my liberation. This emphasis is quite appropriate for the first stage of the journey in Vipassana, but at some point it needs to be let go of, this solitary emphasis.

Metta kind of forces us into a broader view of practice. This is from Shantideva: "Whatever joy there is in this world all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

The Dalai Lama said that once we expand our concept of happiness to take in others, our odds for success go up by six billion to one. So if you're a gambler, this is a good bet.

You could say that the neutral person is really the turning point in opening our connection to all of life—someone that we don't particularly care about and we find that we can care about just because they're a being, because they're a being like us. And we start to get the sense of how metta is like this gentle rain that falls everywhere without discrimination. This is one of the aspects of the immeasurable nature of loving kindness.

And the Buddha said something pretty amazing. In the Samyutta Nikaya, he said, "It's not easy to find a being who has not been your mother or your father or your brother or your sister or your son or your daughter in some previous life."

What would that be like if we remembered that? Now, even as you're looking around the hall tonight, what if you thought that everyone here had been an intimate member of your family in some previous life, that our connections go that deep? Well, that may depend on how you feel about your family. But allowing for the possibility of happy connection—this is an amazing reflection. What if we could relate to everybody in this world from a place of love? What a place this would be to live. And there are people who seem to be able to do that, for whom that's a reality.

The last aspect I want to talk about is the happiness through loving kindness. One of the people who always strikes me this way is Ajahn Jumnian, the Thai meditation master who I mentioned the other night in a talk. Ajahn Jumnian is in Jack Kornfield's book, formerly called *Living Buddhist Masters*. But since most of them have died, we thought it really should be retitled *Recently Deceased Buddhist Masters*. But I guess the publisher thought that wasn't very commercially viable. So it's been re-released as *Living Dharma*.

Ajahn Jumnian is one of the few teachers from that book who's still alive. He has a monastery in the south of Thailand, near the town of Krabi. And he visits Spirit Rock once a year, usually in May. He is one of the happiest people that I've ever met. He's just kind of bubbling with energy most of the time. So, for instance, we'll ask him to give a teaching and people will come to the meditation hall.

He can start at 9 o'clock and teach pretty much through until lunch without a break. And then he'll take a break for lunch and come back in the afternoon to teach through the entire afternoon without a break. He has this boundless energy and tremendous delight in what he's doing.

Some days we might say to him, "Well, Ajahn Jumdian, would you like to go out somewhere today? We could take you to Point Reyes and you could see the Pacific Ocean. Or we could drive across the Golden Gate Bridge and you could see San Francisco." And he says, "Are there people who'd like to hear the Dharma? If there are

people who'd like to hear the Dharma, I'd like to teach the Dharma. But if there's no one there, I'm happy to go to Point Reyes or San Francisco. That's all right. But also, if you just want me to sit here, I'm very happy just sitting here also." Whatever he does, he is simply happy.

He has done long, long stretches, both of vipassana practice and of metta practice. One really feels both the concentration, the settledness and the stillness in his body, and the happiness that comes from the metta practice. He gives a short transmission in English of his teachings. He doesn't know very much English, but he will break into it for this special transmission, which is his pointing. He'll sort of just touch the air and say, "Empty, empty, happy, happy. Empty, empty, happy, happy." That's his energy.

In our loving-kindness practice, I think that this quality of happiness can come through in a really beautiful way, perhaps through our benefactor. And there's a certain amount of wisdom in choosing a benefactor who embodies these beautiful qualities of heart and mind.

When I did my first metta retreat, I worked with my benefactor for half the retreat, the first three weeks. So I had a lot of time to hang out with them. I picked someone who inspired me greatly in both wisdom and in heart qualities. Over time, I started to feel that as I hung out with them, I was soaking up their qualities of heart and mind. They were starting to pervade my being because I was with them eighteen hours a day.

This is why some people like to use for their benefactor beings who really inspire them—people like Dipa Ma or the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh. There's one practice tradition that has a central practice called union with the teacher, or guru yoga. In it, one is meant to visualize the teacher so strongly that one feels the teacher's being and one's own being becoming identical—that one sees that essentially one's nature is just like the teacher's nature. This is the kind of feeling that we can get from the benefactor practice.

There is a real merging that can go on so that the wisdom, the compassion, the joy, the freedom, the love of great spiritual beings can come to resonate with those qualities within us. This is really the purpose of developing metta for a benefactor—one of the purposes of that practice.

I think I've mentioned two of the Tibetan teachers that I've connected with: Sogyal Rinpoche, and in an earlier talk, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, where there's amazing transmission of emptiness. Sogyal Rinpoche has also practiced with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche.

One time after a period of practice when Sogyal Rinpoche was leaving to go back to his home, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche gave him a parting transmission of pith instruction. And the pith instruction was, "Love me. Love me."

This was not said out of any egotistical, grandiose, self-flattering inclination. It was so that the student's heart could be full of love by connecting with a beloved teacher.

When these qualities start to take real root in our heart—these juicy qualities that are awakened by the tenderizing of metta—they bring a really deep sense of contentment. We have the sense that we've come home, that in some ways the kinds of satisfaction that we've been looking for, we're starting to find within our own hearts and minds.

One Buddhist poem puts it like this: "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face." We really have the feeling that we can just rest in that contentment of metta, of love. In a way, as the Buddha said, it is a deliverance. It is a liberation of the heart.

The vipassana practice reveals the quality of emptiness, and metta is what fills it with warmth. It's metta that transforms what could be this kind of cold, lonely voidness into something filled with the spirit of friendliness, of connection, of love. So it makes this space inviting and rich and welcoming and kind of cozy in its way.

In one tradition, they talk about this as the avenue that opens up the treasure chest of the heart and mind. Each of our hearts is a treasure chest, and it's only waiting for the right key to let all that beauty out. In our tradition, loving kindness is that key so that we can begin to trust in this treasure that is in us. We can open to it. We can surrender to it. And we understand that this really is our own true nature.

And a sense of unworthiness or self-judgment or fear of insufficiency that we may have felt as we started the practice starts to evaporate as we just trust more and more that love really is our nature and that this warm, friendly quality is accessible to us, that we can touch it and rest in it. We really have the deep sense that our own nature is basically good.

And then as that becomes an area of faith and trust and confidence, then it becomes a joy to share it. It becomes a joy to open it up and allow it to go out into the world and allow the possibility that others can be touched by it.

I just want to close with another quotation from Shantideva. This is one of the favorites of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and I think it really expresses his own aspiration as the incarnation, as the embodiment of compassion, as a bearer of this treasure chest of love:

"For as long as space endures and as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world."

So let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 246

Purity and Purification

Guy Armstrong · 52 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses a common confusion in Buddhist practice: Are we supposed to accept ourselves as we are, or work to improve ourselves? He explores this through the Buddha's teaching of two truths - conventional truth (sammuti-sacca) and ultimate truth (paramattha-sacca). Armstrong explains how conventional truth operates through concepts and language, where we do indeed develop qualities like patience and wisdom over time. Ultimate truth, however, is the reality experienced beyond words and concepts - characterized by purity, acceptance, and freedom from conflict.*
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> *The talk delves deeply into working with difficult emotions like sadness, fear, and anger that arise in meditation practice. Armstrong introduces the helpful acronym RAIN (Recognition, Acceptance, Interest, Non-identification) developed by Michele McDonald-Smith for skillfully relating to challenging mind states. He emphasizes that these emotions are part of our conditioned tendencies rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion, but they need not define us or cause suffering when met with mindful awareness.*
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> *Drawing from the Majjhima Nikāya and referencing the Buddha's teaching on heartwood, Armstrong concludes that while healing, concentration, and insight are valuable fruits of practice, the ultimate goal is "unshakable deliverance of mind." This talk offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners essential guidance on navigating the apparent paradox between acceptance and spiritual development in Buddhist meditation.*

The subject of tonight's talk is purity and purification.

At the last retreat I was teaching at Spirit Rock, somebody asked a question that went something like this: "Sometimes you all talk to us about just accepting ourselves and just accepting the moment—just the way the moment is, just the way we are. And other times you talk about all these great qualities we're supposed to be developing, like love and compassion and wisdom and concentration. I'm confused. What is it I'm supposed to be doing here? Am I supposed to be accepting myself or am I supposed to be improving myself?"

Of course, asking this in a Buddhist context is always a little risky, because improving the self when there isn't supposed to be one is kind of a risky project to spend a lot of time on. But I thought this was an interesting question because it actually goes to

what I think is the heart of the Buddha's teachings as expressed in a concept known as the two truths—two different ways of looking at the world, both of which are important, but that seemingly contradict one another.

These two truths in the tradition are talked about as the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. We might say for the purpose of understanding it tonight that conventional truth is the way we see the world when we look with language, with words. It's the way we usually look at the world.

Looking really conventionally, we'd look this evening and we'd say, well, it's 7:30 p.m. and we're in the meditation hall. Looking around, we see a woman, a man, zafu, chair, floor, you, me, and so forth. That all makes really good sense. All these distinctions make a lot of sense, and it's very useful for socially relating. Because with distinctions like this, at the end of the retreat, I don't get into your car and drive away—and I hope you appreciate that. And at the end of the day today, you're not going to come into my room to go to sleep in my bed—and I will appreciate that. So these are very useful distinctions, this conventional truth.

Time is an aspect of conventional truth. Time is a concept. Past and future, seven o'clock, tomorrow, yesterday, 30 years old, 60 years old—these are all concepts. So when we talk about, as we do, how with our Dharma practice we develop over time through practice, we're in the conventional realm. We're in the language of concepts. And we do, over time, develop in qualities like a little more equanimity, a little more patience, a little more kindness, a little more wisdom. These are truths about Dharma practice, and this is not to deny the development of these qualities as they take place over time. This is absolutely true.

So we could say that self-improvement is a truth within Dharma teachings, within Dharma practice, or probably the way we prefer to say it is growth in the Dhamma—that we grow in the teachings, we grow in the truth. But it's an aspect of conventional truth.

Now an interesting thing about conventional truth is that it's from the Pali term sammuti-sacca. Sacca means truth. Sammuti has a really interesting etymology. The term literally means "all-concealing." So the implication is that the world of concepts is a truth, but it's a concealing truth. It conceals a more fundamental and more important truth from our eyes. So when all we see is the world of language and concepts, the conventional reality, we're blinded from seeing something more truthful, more underlying.

This more underlying truth is called the ultimate truth. In Pali, the term is paramattha-sacca. Paramattha means literally "highest meaning truth." So the conventional truth is a truth, but it's not the truth with the highest meaning. To get to the truth with the highest meaning, we have to see beneath the obscuring truth of concepts and words.

Let's just say that the ultimate truth is the truth we see when we look at the world without any language, without any words, without any concepts.

Now when we say reality in a Buddhist context, we mean something a little different than in a Western context. In a Western context, normally when people say reality, they mean the outside world, the physical world. But in a Buddhist context, when we say reality, we mean the reality of human experience.

So I'd like to ask you to take a look. What is the nature of your human experience when it's not touched by language? Just in this moment, take a look. Open your senses.

Open your awareness. What is the nature of your experience when no words intrude or shape or mold it? That means we can't be thinking about "me" or "you" because these are concepts. We can't move into past and future because those are concepts. What are we left with?

Can you describe it? Kind of tricky, isn't it? How do you describe something where words can't find a hold? You can't grasp it while you're experiencing it because if you grasp it and make any image of it, then words are coming in. So you almost have to enter it, abandon the words, and know you're in a territory that can't be described. And then as you come back out of that into the world of concepts and language, you may have a little memory of what that was like. And so then language may come in again.

So it's said that the ultimate truth is not describable. It's not describable. But that doesn't stop us from trying. Some of the words that people have used, that practitioners have used, that you may be able to relate to, are words like being, now, arising, passing, vastness, still, empty, free, beauty, love. You might say that these are words that kind of point to the nature of reality, or as Suzuki Roshi said in his beautifully fractured English, "the nature of things as it is."

This is the realm of the ultimate truth. One aspect of this truth is that we're not in conflict with it—that there's a quality in this coming beyond words, a real quality of acceptance, of a radical kind of acceptance that doesn't have any kind of friction, as Rodney said last night, any struggle, any sense of disturbance with what is.

So this movement of acceptance is a movement in the direction of an ultimate truth of things as they are. And as we start to contact that more and more, we also find that there's a purity in the nature of reality. The nature of things just as they are—there's an incredible purity. When we open to this purity, we can connect with a sense of freedom in the here and now because of this lack of friction, lack of struggle, lack of conflict.

As we open to that freedom that is the way things are, it doesn't stop there, but it furthers the journey. And it's really contact with this purity that provides the motive force that carries us along the path. So we might say that the sense of self-improvement grows directly out of our ability to accept. The more deeply we can accept and open to things as it is, the more the journey unfolds for us spontaneously. And we make the first step on that journey when we turn to mindfulness, because mindfulness is an aspect of this purity, of this ultimate kind of nature.

So we could say that what our practice is about is understanding this ultimate nature and also the conventional nature of things. In a way you could say it's like understanding the impersonal quality of reality, but also not denying the personal.

Dostoevsky has this famous line—I think it's at the start of Anna Karenina—where he says that every happy family is very much alike, and every unhappy family is different in its own way. This is that juxtaposition of the impersonal and the personal. The ultimate reality is all alike. Your ultimate reality can't really be any different than my ultimate reality, or we wouldn't be communicating about it. So the ultimate nature for you and for me is probably no different. This is all happy families. This is the purity.

But the way that the conventional world springs up, there are differences. One of the ways that we see these differences are in the ways that we suffer. The unhappy families are all different. And we could say that when we look at our suffering, we're all different in that way. We have different tendencies. We get caught in different ways.

This innate purity of mind in some traditions in Buddhism is called the Buddha nature. And it's described as basically having three aspects. It's awake, it's peaceful, and it's friendly. These are the three key pieces of our Buddha nature. And we activate it—we start to wake it up and touch it as we develop mindfulness. And it's really the activation of this Buddha nature that takes us down the path.

As we touch it and activate it, it starts to wake up and it has its own momentum. It will grow, it will deepen, it will expand all by itself. And it tends to do that as soon as we start waking it up with mindful attention—until it hits an obstacle, which it always will. For us, as beginners on the path, it will hit an obstacle. The obstacles we could talk about as the five hindrances that Rodney talked about this morning. We could talk

about various kinds of distracting thoughts that take us away from the present moment in one of those directions. We get entangled in some kind of unhappiness, and we lose touch with the basic purity of our nature.

And when we lose touch with that, the whole mass of suffering arises because we have forgotten how to contact that purity. We've lost touch with our innate nature.

So now we're in the territory of suffering, in the territory of confusion, in the territory of unhappiness. And in order to be free, we have to understand this side of things as well. We have to understand it clearly so that we're not trapped by it anymore.

So I want to talk about this aspect of mind that engages us in suffering. These hindrances are deeply conditioned tendencies of mind, and I was reminded of this this afternoon. I was sitting at a table in the kitchen where I'm staying and looking out the window into the woods. There was a tree that had fallen over and was leaning up at about a forty-five-degree angle, sticking about ten feet into the air.

I saw a big bird fly down to the ground and pick up what looked like a little snake about a foot long, then fly up and perch on top of this fallen tree. As it sat there—I could see it was a hawk—it trapped what looked like this snake under its claws. It would reach down and take a bite out of the snake with its beak, chew it for a while, and swallow it. Then it would lean its head down, take another bite, shake a piece off, and swallow it until the snake was all gone. Afterwards, it just sat on that fallen tree for about forty-five minutes in the sunshine, relaxing and enjoying this beautiful afternoon with a full stomach. I thought, that's just what we tend to do after a good meal.

But this really pointed up the depths of the conditioned tendencies of mind. In the Buddhist tradition, we talk about these tendencies as greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed is so closely connected with the desire for survival and food. If we don't have food, we don't live very long as an embodied being. At the same time, as in the animal realm, they need to eat other beings. So every animal wishes most deeply not to be eaten by another animal. That's a source of fear and aversion—we don't want to surrender our life to become somebody else's meal. On the basic animal level, that's the reality in that realm.

As animals ourselves, we've inherited all those responses. We've inherited this insecurity about bodily existence, this desire to continue, this fear of being terminated. Because we don't understand these forces clearly, because we can't see them with wisdom very clearly, they drive us, they compel us. These are the forces of greed, aversion, and

delusion that the Buddha talked about again and again as the roots of our suffering. These are the very forces in the mind that inevitably bring us back to suffering. Until they're understood, until they're released, we are going to suffer.

Greed is the tendency to reach out for the pleasant—the compulsive tendency to reach for the pleasant. Aversion is the conditioned tendency to push away what's unpleasant. Delusion is the cloud in the mind that doesn't see the operation of greed and aversion. So greed or aversion are always accompanied by delusion. Why? Because if we could see them, we wouldn't do it. Nobody wants to be greedy. Nobody wants to be aversive. Nobody wants to be dominated by fear or aggression. But because they operate unconsciously, we don't see it. And so we're taken over and compelled, driven by these forces.

In the most deeply conditioned sense, it is these age-old forces of greed, aversion, and delusion that bring us into suffering, bring us into confusion over and over.

Now there's another way that these manifest, especially in the retreat environment, and it has to do with a developmental and psychological process. As we have grown up, we have encountered painful situations many times in our life—from the time that we were just born, to being infants, to being children, to being teenagers and being adults. We've encountered painful situations that have brought up really difficult emotions: levels of fear or anxiety or betrayal or guilt or shame or hatred or wanting that we couldn't cope with, that overwhelmed our ability to understand.

Not being able to cope with them, being frightened by the strength of our emotions, at some time or another we've closed down on them because they were just too much for us at that young age. So we tried to find a way to escape from them, to push them down under and to put our minds somewhere else—often into thinking, again as Rodney said last night.

Over the course of a lifetime, we have stored up these unresolved emotions. They've settled in our muscles, in our tissues, they've formed contractions, and they've taken our mental energy to hold them. Through years of unconscious living, deluded living, we've become contracted, and in that contraction more armored, more defended, and less alive in our bodies and in our minds.

As awareness starts to penetrate the mind-body system through the practice of mindfulness, we start to uncover these layers of holding.

When sadness arises during this process, sometimes tears will come. That's absolutely natural and fine. Tears are simply a physical expression of the emotional release that's happening. The body has its own wisdom for processing these stored energies, and crying can be part of that natural healing process.

Now, the tricky part is the thoughts. When we're feeling sad, certain kinds of thoughts tend to arise. Sometimes they're memories of losses we've experienced. Sometimes they're thoughts about what's missing in our life, what we wish we had, what we've never had. Sometimes they're thoughts about how unfair life is, or how much pain there is in the world.

These thoughts aren't wrong, but we need to be skillful with them. If we get caught up in thinking about the sadness, we move away from the direct experience of it. We go into our heads and lose touch with what's actually happening in our body and heart in this moment.

So when thoughts arise, simply notice them. You might note "thinking" or "memory" or "story." Then gently return your attention to the direct experience—the sensations in your chest, the quality of the mood itself.

The key instruction here is: Stay close. Don't push the sadness away, and don't get lost in the thoughts about it. Rest right at the edge of the emotion itself. Let yourself feel it fully without drowning in stories about it.

Often what happens is that if we can stay present with the emotion in this way—connected to the body sensations, aware of the mental mood, noting the thoughts without getting caught in them—the emotion will naturally transform. It might intensify for a while, but then it begins to move and change. Sometimes it shifts into something else entirely. Sometimes it simply dissolves.

This is the paradox of emotions in meditation practice. The very thing we're afraid will overwhelm us, when we meet it with awareness and presence, often turns out to be quite manageable. It's our resistance to feeling it, our fear of being overwhelmed, that actually creates more suffering than the emotion itself.

The same approach applies to all the difficult emotions that arise in practice. With anger, you might feel heat and tension in your body, perhaps in your jaw or shoulders or belly. The storyline might be about how someone has wronged you, or how things should be different. With fear, there might be a tight, contracted feeling, perhaps a sense of shakiness or vulnerability. The story might be about some danger, real or imagined.

With each emotion, the practice is the same: Find where it lives in the body. Notice the particular quality of the mental state. See the thoughts that arise without getting lost in them. Stay present and allow the natural intelligence of awareness to do its work.

This takes courage. It takes a willingness to feel what we've been avoiding, sometimes for many years. But this is how we begin to free up all that energy that's been locked away in our bodies and minds. This is how we start to live more fully and authentically.

Now, a lot of thoughts may be coming and going around the sadness. It may be the belief, "Oh, I can't go into it, it's too much." It may be memories of specific losses, specific people, specific times in your life. As far as possible, just let the thoughts come and go. Don't get too involved in pursuing them. Notice that they're there—they'll have a certain flavor—but try not to get involved going down that track. So mostly go back and forth between the physical sensation and the mental tone or the mood of that emotion.

Now the attitude is really important. We're not trying to change anything in our awareness of the sadness. We're not trying to make it go away. We're not trying to make it get smaller. We're also not trying to open it up and make a project out of it. Because we can do that with emotions—emotions can become a long-term project in meditation. A lot of people come to meditation with the motivation to heal their emotional life. I did myself. But I found out there are some problems with healing as a motivation in meditation.

The first one is: how do you know when you're done? How do you know when you're done with healing? Do you just need to heal back to the level of a normal, neurotic person? And once you're normal again, can the healing stop and you can go on with your life?

Suzuki Roshi, a great Zen master, once opened a dharma talk like this. He said, "The difficulties you're experiencing now..." and he just stopped. Long pause. Everybody's attention was riveted on him. And then he continued: "The difficulties you're experiencing now will be with you for a very long time."

Now how do we hear that? That could be kind of depressing. "Jeez, I thought I was getting rid of this stuff." But the way he really intended it, and the way you can take it if you think about it, it's really liberating. It means that the way to freedom is not that we have to get rid of these emotions.

We all have the whole package. The whole human package includes sadness and fear and doubt and self-judgment and anger and disappointment and sorrow and blame and wanting and joy and happiness and compassion and love and calm and peace. We all know all of these things. So it's not about—in the beginning stages of the path, intermediate stages of the path, quite advanced stages of the path—it's not about getting rid of these things. According to the traditional teachings, none of these emotions go away until the third stage of enlightenment, which is a very high level of freedom. It's the stage before full liberation. So we accept the fact that these states of mind will be visiting us for a long time.

So what does healing mean? It doesn't mean that we get rid of them.

The second problem with healing as a motivation is it won't take us all the way. If that's our sole motivation for coming into dharma practice, it won't take us to liberation. Well, it can take us partway, but it won't take us all the way.

And there's a third problem with healing, and this is probably the most interesting from my point of view. If we think we need to heal, there's an underlying belief that we usually associate with that, and that is the belief that we're broken. "I have to heal" means there's something wrong with me as I am. That I'm broken. I've gone wrong in some way. And this is a crippling kind of view to take up if we really believe that we're broken.

And I don't understand the range of mind that's usually described as psychosis. I haven't gone into it. I haven't studied it. I don't know about that. But I will say for everybody in this room: you are not broken. You have not been broken. Short of psychosis, which I just don't know about, even the suffering that we are exposed to...

is a lawful suffering. It has its causes and conditions. It comes because of certain reasons. We don't understand them all—we may never understand them all—but it's not coming because there's something wrong with us. We are simply operating, developing, and unfolding along the natural laws of cause and effect, operating in this world, operating in this universe. We never got broken.

And because of that, we don't need to be put back together. So there is a lot of healing that happens in meditation, but that view is, in a way, an incomplete one. It's a noble motivation in coming to meditation, but it's not a complete one.

As these conditioned tendencies, as these accumulations come to mind and we touch them with mindfulness, we can find a lot of freedom in relation to them. As you practice with them, you'll discover this freedom little by little.

I want to suggest a mnemonic that, as far as I know, was invented by a colleague of ours, Michele McDonald-Smith, who teaches here at IMS. I've found it a really helpful reminder of how to work with difficult emotions. The mnemonic is RAIN—R-A-I-N—and it stands for recognition, acceptance, interest, and non-identification.

Let's say a difficult emotion is coming, like sadness. The first step is to recognize it and just say, "Oh, this is sadness." Naming it is very helpful. Even if you don't use noting throughout the day, in your sittings, in your walkings, in your in-between times, it's very helpful to use a soft note in connection with these emotions. There's something about getting the right name for what we're feeling that loosens the fixation of it. There's a way in which once we recognize it, awareness and wisdom hold it in a different way. So finding out what you're feeling is a very fruitful investigation. Come close to that mental state and see what the best name you can find for it is. Recognize it.

The second step is acceptance. This actually doesn't mean we have to do something special or something positive. It really means just that we drop our resistance to it. We drop the sense: "This shouldn't be happening. I don't want it here. When can it go away? It better be gone by tomorrow or I'm leaving the retreat. I really didn't come here to experience this in the first place. Something's going wrong with my meditation. I was peaceful yesterday and now I'm not." We drop all those judgments and just let ourselves feel directly the energy of sadness. We just open to it and accept it to the extent we can.

The third factor that really helps the acceptance is the quality of interest. If we can get curious about it—what does sadness feel like? How does it feel in the body? How does it feel in the mind? What kind of thoughts come when it's there? What does it make me feel about myself? How do I see the world when I'm in this place of sadness? Once we can get interested, that brings a wholesome quality to our relationship to it, and it perks up the whole situation.

And the last is non-identification. This means we don't take it as I or me or mine. We don't say it's my sadness. We don't say I'm sad. We just say sadness is present. It's just another of the pieces of the human package. It's arisen in this moment. It will last for a while. It will pass away. Just part of the changing weather.

It's this quality of passing that makes all the emotions safe to go into. If you open to any emotion, you'll find it'll be there for a while. It may not be pleasant, but in time it will go away. Is there any emotion that's lasted since this retreat started? Has anybody seen one that hasn't gone yet? They all come and they all go. And this is why we can basically trust them. It's why it's safe to open to these feelings. We can let them come, they'll last for a while, and on their own, without our trying to push them away, each one in its own time will go.

Because they're impermanent, they really can't hurt us. It was the fear of them that made us close down on them and store them in the body that has caused all the havoc. And to see a really kind of enlightened way of relating with emotions—half-enlightened, I should say—

Look at children. When children feel happy, they're completely happy. They dive fully into that experience of joy. When they feel scared, they're genuinely terrified. They don't hold anything back. If they're angry about something, they let you know with their whole being. Children have this fearless way of going completely into whatever emotion arises, and then perhaps five or ten minutes later, they're entirely out of it.

This is the kind of emotional fluency we can cultivate. What children don't possess, however, is the wisdom not to act unskillfully on their emotions. They do tend to spread their suffering around somewhat. We can learn not to spread it around while maintaining that same openness—being unafraid to go directly into the emotion and feel it one hundred percent.

When people discuss equanimity and the qualities that develop through meditation practice, sometimes they imagine that all emotions simply disappear. Some think this might not be such a bad thing, while others recoil at the thought. But from what I understand of the path thus far, this doesn't happen. We don't experience some kind of emotional lobotomy where all sources of pain are removed and we walk around like emotionless beings.

Rather, equanimity develops in relationship to emotions—we become okay with feeling the full range of them. The emotions no longer disturb us as much, just as they don't truly disturb children. Children can move right into their feelings and emerge again naturally. We're rediscovering that same quality—allowing ourselves to feel fully while trusting that the emotion will pass on its own.

As we touch the emotion of sadness deeply, opening to it as completely as possible, we hold no intention of changing it, making it disappear, or creating a project around releasing it. What's remarkable is that this complete acceptance returns us to the neighborhood of purity. It brings us back to ultimate truth because we've relaxed all our doing and strategizing. We've released all our concepts about the emotion and simply entered into this fully awake relationship with what is.

The purity doesn't deny the emotion. We discover this purity right in the heart of strong emotions. You might say the purity surrounds the emotion. This is truly miraculous—a miracle of practice. In ordinary daily life, we know only how to perpetuate

emotions and wait for them to run their course. But in practice, we find that in the middle of intense emotion, we can rediscover our innate purity of mind, which is naturally awake, peaceful, and friendly.

When we make this connection with our deepest nature, the emotion begins to dissolve into that purity. There's a great Indian teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj who taught in Bombay in the 1970s and 80s. He worked through dialogue. Once, a Westerner approached him saying, "I'm having difficulty with some pain." Maharaj replied, "You need to accept it." The Westerner protested, "But pain is unacceptable. I can't accept it." Maharaj asked, "Why not? Did you ever really try? Do try, and you will find in pain a joy that pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its hopes and fears returns you to your true nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

This is the beautiful mingling of ultimate truth and conventional truth. The conventional truth is that I, as a particular person with a specific history, accumulated disappointment that is now being touched by this force of purity. This story isn't untrue—there's genuine truth in this narrative. But freedom comes through a deeper dimension than the story reveals. This freedom emerges by moving beyond concepts to the ultimate layer beneath.

The ultimate truth asks: What's happening in this very moment? What occurs when awareness meets the experience of sadness right now? There are bodily sensations connected with the feeling. There's a mental tone of sadness, and thoughts arise and pass away. The breath, too, comes and goes.

Sounds are arising and passing. Other sensations in the body are coming and going. This is what's really happening in the moment. This, in a way, is the truth—the real truth of this moment. Not the story. This is the real truth of this moment.

And when we start to see in this way, we're starting to see a little bit of emptiness. We're starting to see without the fixed center of things, the owner, the self, the project of healing that's coagulated around the experience of sadness. This is very freeing. This is where the freedom lies in relationship to the sadness. It's not that the sadness has to go away; it's that it gets held by this purity of awareness, of steadiness, of friendliness, of acceptance.

This ultimate truth, which we talked about as our Buddha nature, is quite impersonal. It's pretty much the same for every one of us. But the conventional truth is quite personal. The reason my sadness got lodged there may have been because I lost something very precious when I was six years old and I was never allowed to cry about it fully at the time. That's a really personal story.

And the way that the practice unfolds often is this impersonal force of purity starts to expand and grow until it hits these personal pockets of holding. And as the personal is held by the impersonal, the personal gets released. And as it does that, a lot of the old holding and even the story and the personality get loosened up. And that's why when you see masters, meditation masters, there's very little sense of past for them.

You know, the Buddha didn't go out and teach once he was awakened and say, "What you want to know about me is I was born a prince in a kingdom in northern India, and I had a lot of fun when I was a kid, and my guardians taught me archery." That's not what the Buddha was interested in talking about. He talked about the way things are, the nature of things. But the personal is also significant.

Bringing the flower in tonight reminds me of the story you may have heard before of what's called the flower sermon, which was supposedly the start of the Zen tradition. And the story is that the Buddha held up a flower in front of a whole assembly of monks and nuns and practitioners, held up a flower and didn't say a word. And nobody got it except one person, who was Mahakashyapa. And Mahakashyapa got it and just acknowledged to the Buddha that he'd gotten it. And that was the end of the flower sermon and the start of the Zen tradition.

As soon as I heard that story, I knew I was going to have some trouble with Zen—which I think is why I ended up in Vipassana. But I think that teaching is really a pointer to the union of the conventional and the ultimate that is symbolized by the flower.

In one way, this flower is not different from any other flower. It's got a stem, it's got leaves, it's got petals, it's got stamen and pistils to propagate itself. There's the reproduction theme again. It's not different from any other flower. And yet, as you look at it—I think this is a carnation, it's not a rose—it's like a rose in a lot of ways, but it's not a rose. If you look at the beauty of this flower, it's very individual. It's really unique. And this personal uniqueness of its expression is what's called in tradition its suchness. But at the same time, you know that that suchness is underlain by its emptiness. Its individuality is just made up of different arrangements of common components.

So that's like that with each one of us. Someone is a rose, someone's a carnation, someone's a gardenia. We all have different fragrances and scents and individual beauties. In that way, the path, the unfolding is quite personal. But the components that we're all made up of are the same. Sadness, fear, joy, happiness, compassion, equanimity.

So it's not really quite right to say that we're the same person, because a rose isn't the same as a carnation. But it's also not quite right to say we're really different, because we're basically the same package, just little variations in the mix. So maybe the terms "same" and "different" don't apply between you and me. Maybe our relationship is in some other dimension than that. We're not the same, we're not different. This is not just idle philosophical mind play.

But when you really start to get the sense that we're not different, you get in touch with this poem by Rumi's master, who was a Sufi called Shams of Tabriz. Not many poems have come down from Rumi's teacher, but this is one:

I, you, he, she, we.
In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions.

In the garden of clear seeing, these are not true distinctions either. So the insight into the emptiness of things, the ultimate truth of things, takes away the barriers. It takes away the differences that concepts have created. And we understand that our basic nature, the nature of reality for you, is exactly the same as the nature of reality for me. But at the same time, we're different flowers. And there's an individuality that's also true, the level of conventional truth.

As we connect with this sadness and we reestablish the contact with purity, then it's really important not to lose our mindfulness. And this often happens. As people start to experience the purity, the mindfulness goes blank. And it's actually a lot easier to be mindful with difficulty than it is with ease. Because what happens is we start to think, "Oh, this is the way it's supposed to be. Now I'm back in purity. Oh, this is what's supposed to be happening." And then we take it for granted.

Instead of seeing, "Oh, this is the wholesome state of mind. This is mindfulness. This is peace. This is equanimity. This is ease." So as you touch these cycles of purity in your practice, it's really, really important to notice those states of mind just as much as you notice the difficult. Because if you don't notice that they're there, you're going to think your practice is all about the difficult.

In fact, these moments of peace are coming in many, many times during the day. All we have to do is wake up and notice them. But if we're not alert, if we're going to sleep because we take them for granted, we won't ever notice that they're there.

Also this idea, "this is the way things are supposed to be," is delusional. There is no way things are supposed to be. There's only the way things are. Things are the way they are because of past causes and conditions. There's no other way they could be. So this idea that there's some way they're supposed to be is a fiction. There is no way that things are supposed to be.

The Buddha's reference point was emptiness. It wasn't a concept of how things are supposed to be. Emptiness really means the understanding that nothing is there from the beginning. Nothing is there all the time. No state of mind is intrinsically and always present. So anything that appears is interesting. Anything that appears is different from emptiness, different from nothing there from the beginning.

So we notice the wholesome, we notice the positive, and we trust in that. And the more we can relax and trust in this positivity, the more we have the engine that carries the journey and can carry it all the way, all the way to liberation. Many beautiful unfoldings along the way. Healing happens. Concentration happens. Insight happens. Extraordinary openings. Joy and love come along the path. But the Buddha said, don't stop at any of those.

I just want to close with this quote from a sutta called The Simile of the Heartwood from the Majjhima Nikaya, that describes the Buddha's view of the purpose of this unfolding:

This holy life does not have gain, honor, and renown for its end. It doesn't have virtue for its end. It doesn't have concentration for its end. It doesn't have knowledge and vision for its end.

But it is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the purpose of this holy life, its end and its completion.

This unshakable deliverance of mind—this is what we're really after. Not the pleasant states along the way, not even the profound insights or the deep peace, but this complete freedom that cannot be touched by the changing conditions of life. This is liberation itself.

The path unfolds naturally when we understand this distinction. We can enjoy the jhanas, appreciate the insights, feel gratitude for the peace and clarity that come with practice. But we don't mistake these for the destination. They are like beautiful rest stops on a journey—wonderful to experience, but not where we're ultimately headed.

When we grasp after these intermediate experiences, when we try to possess them or make them permanent, we create suffering. But when we recognize them as part of the unfolding toward complete freedom, we can receive them with appreciation while remaining unattached.

This unshakable deliverance of mind is available to each of us. It's not reserved for special people or those with particular gifts. It's the natural result of following this path with patience, consistency, and understanding. The Buddha's teaching points directly to this possibility—not as something to believe in, but as something to discover for ourselves.

Let's just sit for a minute in the silence that points toward this freedom.

CHAPTER 247

Relating With Emotions; Plus Mindfulness, Consciousness And Awareness

Guy Armstrong · 1h04

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses two essential aspects of meditation practice. First, he explores how to skillfully relate with difficult emotions, drawing from both Vipassana and Dzogchen approaches. Armstrong discusses the purification process common in silent retreats, where stored karmic patterns surface and can be released through non-reactive awareness. He outlines three methods for working with emotions: resting in mind essence (Rigpa), mindful observation of the emotion itself, and applying antidotes when necessary. The second part examines the often-confusing relationships between mindfulness (sati), consciousness (viññāṇa), and awareness. Armstrong offers a creative analogy of sunlight pervading space to reconcile how consciousness can be impermanent (arising and passing with objects) while the underlying clarity of awareness remains continuous. This illuminating metaphor helps bridge Theravada and Dzogchen understandings of mind's nature. Throughout, Armstrong emphasizes that emotional purification is not peripheral but integral to realizing emptiness, as accumulated tensions in the subtle body create a sense of solid selfhood that must be released for deeper realization to unfold.*

There are so many topics to explore, so tonight I want to cover two things. I want to talk about relating with emotions, and then I want to discuss a question we've been putting off for a few nights regarding the relationship between mindfulness, consciousness, and awareness. So our evening will have two parts.

I want to read you something from a classical Dzogchen text about thoughts and emotions: "Without following thoughts, in the moment of their arising, relax naturally and rest in the state of mind itself. Without a doubt, thoughts will vanish spontaneously."

Has that been your experience? You just rest in the state of mind and thoughts spontaneously vanish? Not always. I would say probably for most of us, not usually is it that simple. But sometimes you can get the idea from these texts that it should be that simple. But if it doesn't happen like that for you, then what should you do?

A friend of mine, Carol Wilson, whom many of you know, was teaching in Burma last year. She was teaching with Steve Smith and also a Burmese teacher, Sayadaw Ulakana. It was a retreat for Westerners, taught by this mix of Western and Burmese teachers. Some Burmese were also sitting in—the translator and some assistants.

One of the Burmese meditators came up to Carol at the end of the retreat and said, "Wow, it's so interesting for us to hear you talk about how to work with these emotions, because our teachers never talk to us like that." As you probably know, Vipassana has very detailed instructions about how to relate with the experience of difficult emotions. This really isn't done in Asia—it's not done in any Asian tradition that I know of. I think it's a little bit the influence of Western psychology in Vipassana teaching.

"So we really appreciate hearing you talk in detail about how to work with these difficult emotions like anger. Because our teacher tells us, 'Oh, note it three times and it will go away. Note anger once, note anger twice, note anger three times and it will go away.'"

Carol said, "Well, that wouldn't work well for most Westerners. It just doesn't happen like that for Westerners."

And the Burmese meditator said, "Oh, but you see, our anger doesn't go away then either."

And Carol said, "Well, then what do you do?"

He said, "Well, we just say, 'Oh, well, never mind.'"

I think that's a beautiful tribute to the equanimity of the Burmese people. But with Westerners, we're usually not so happy to just say, "Oh, well, never mind." There's a lot of anger here. I'm burning up with it. Oh, well, never mind.

So even though in the practice of Dzogchen we are turning to the innate purity and abiding in that innate purity, other aspects of mind will also arise. So I want to talk a little bit about how to relate to them.

In Vipassana retreats, one of the most distinctive patterns that we see in the silent retreat practice is the purification process of difficult emotions. It follows a similar pattern: over the first several days of the retreat, people's minds will start to calm down and quiet, day by day. You see the slow deepening of the effect of the silence and sustained awareness. Then after a few days, people have often reached some new level of calm or peace and feel the meditation is going fairly well.

And then the very next day, there might be a big explosion. It doesn't happen like this for everybody, but it's a common enough pattern that we've seen it hundreds of times. Every Vipassana teacher has seen this hundreds of times with students. This big explosion could be something related to outside life situations. It could just be the arising of stored energies, memories, the accumulated karmic patterns. It can come from different sources.

But at that point, the meditator often feels that they've gone off track because everything was deepening quite nicely and then it got bombed. They feel like an explosion was thrown in the middle of their practice. The next couple of days might be very chaotic—lots of thought energy, no calm at all, lots of strong energy in the body, sometimes strong emotions accompanying it, no ability to focus or concentrate on even the simplest object. They feel their practice has fallen apart.

But at that point, hopefully they talk to a teacher, and the teacher always says, "No, this is just part of the process. Just stay with what's happening and don't be concerned about it." And then, sure enough, in another day or so, the calm will start to come back in. If the meditator can just stay non-reactive and untroubled by the chaos, then it all just settles back out.

And then the meditator goes to a deeper level of peacefulness and calm than they had been in before. This is part of the purification. There have been a number of questions about old karmic patterns coming up—when we experience them without reactivity, that depletes the karmic bank. And this is the obvious expression of that process within the context of the silent retreat.

So I was curious to see if, in doing Dzogchen practice, the same kind of thing would happen or not. Some years ago, I was practicing at Angela Center with Rinpoche. I was in the middle of doing my work meditation in the kitchen and still connecting with mind essence as I was doing it. Right in the middle of my kitchen job, something in my chest just loosened up and came up and out. It wasn't particularly painful, and it was coming out of a period of calm, so I trusted in it. But there was just some deep release. It didn't come with any memories or words particularly from my chest—it just rose into consciousness and passed out. Then I was left feeling much freer and lighter.

I happened to see Rinpoche a little bit later, and I told him about that. Then I told him how it had evolved. I said, "But the funny thing was, the next day I had all sorts of chaotic thoughts and feelings, and I couldn't focus really on rigpa. My meditation was just all over the map that particular day." I was very familiar with the pattern from Vipassana practice.

What was interesting to me is that his response was, "Yeah, that's exactly how it is. It's exactly how it is when these releases happen in doing rigpa practice—there's a great sense of openness, and then chaos tends to come in and fill the void." That's when I really trusted that this practice also does this deep work of purification of the emotional life, because I experienced it myself.

This kind of purification, I think, is an absolutely essential part of the meditative process, whether through Vipassana meditation or through Dzogchen meditation. Not only does it relieve suffering of old accumulations, but I've also come to feel that it's really necessary for the realization of emptiness—that one cannot possibly perceive the true extent of emptiness without releasing these old karmic accumulations.

Why is that? Because I think these karmic accumulations create a very strong sense of self or ego. They do this both through the body and through the mind. When we have a lot of these stored memories, pains, old hurts that are stored up in the body, number one, the body has layers of tension that make it uncomfortable. But we carry around the history with us through the body. Because those things have been stored and not released, the mind is always a little bit keeping a lid on the unruly bodily energy. So there's a sense of a little bit of tension between mind and body. It also gives more of a sense of solidity in the body because of the tension.

This is experienced, I think, in what Rinpoche has been calling the subtle body. This is a term that we don't use in Vipassana practice, so I just wanted to mention the way I understand the subtle body. The gross body is what doctors know from anatomy charts, what you see if you dissect a human body—that's the gross body. The subtle body, as I understand it, is the experience of the physical body through awareness. In other words, when you close your eyes and you just relax into your felt sense of the body sensations, I believe that's what's called the subtle body.

So in these felt sensations, we don't normally experience the length of the bones, for instance, because I don't think that there are nerves all along there. The subtle body is the way we experience the flow of energy as bodily sensations. Anyone who's meditated for a long time and paid close attention in this way will see there are lots of patterns in the subtle body—patterns of energy movement, repeated ways that we feel the same in different parts of the body again and again. When I was paying a lot of attention to the body, I felt I could have mapped out energy patterns that probably corresponded to acupuncture meridians or something like that. As the consciousness gets very subtly attuned, you can really feel a lot of detail in the energy in the body. And it also includes, of course, the channels and the winds that Rinpoche has talked about a number of times.

The subtle body is strongly affected by the accumulations—the stored tensions, memories, hurts, traumas, pains that we haven't allowed to come through our system. It gets all jammed up there. So first we feel this sense of self through the body, through its lack of flexibility and freedom and ease.

The second place is in the mind. When these accumulations are there, the mind responds in very habitual patterns because these underlying emotions are exerting a strong subconscious force. So the mind tends to respond in habitual and conditioned ways.

The combination of these two—the stuckness in the body and the habitual patterns in the mind—create a strong sense of personality. They make a sense that this is who we are because it's so repeatable. It seems so repeatable and predictable and ongoing, day by day, month by month, year by year. And so we get the sense this is who we are, that our personality gets stuck in that particular rut. Both these are expressions of being tied to the past.

We're tied to the past because we haven't yet learned how to release it.

So one of the big developments in meditation practice—whether awareness practice, mindfulness, or Rigpa—is that the awareness starts to penetrate these stored accumulations and bring them into consciousness. It's making the unconscious conscious. As it does that, if we can be with them without reactivity, they have the opportunity to move through and truly get released. Truly gone from the system, as though they had never been there to begin with.

When this happens, the mind becomes much more open. Every time one of these releases occurs, the mind regains a little bit of its original space. And with that space come the qualities of the third aspect of Rigpa. Remember that the first is empty essence. The second is nature clarity. The third is that the indivisible union of the two is unceasing compassionate activity.

When the mind gets released from its old habits, that's what opens the door for the third qualities to start flowing out. And when you see somebody like Rinpoche, you can really get a sense. The creativity, the playfulness, the groundedness, the confidence, the trust—all those qualities can flow out once the prison or the bondage of the old karmic patterns aren't confining us so much.

This came home to me in a retreat with Rinpoche some years ago, again at Angela Center. I'd had a lot of insights into what in our tradition, the Vipassana tradition, we call anatta, or not-self, over the years, but most of them had been out of very deep

states of samadhi, of concentration, and they'd been rather intense experiences where things had been changing, dissolving, arising and passing quite rapidly, so much so that I could see there was nothing fixed in the mind-body system.

In the middle of this retreat with Rinpoche, I just noticed that there was so much openness and so much space that there couldn't possibly have been a self within it. Couldn't possibly have been a self. It was all just way too open. I looked for something, and it was clear there was just nothing there. It's one aspect of emptiness. But I don't think this could have happened until a certain amount of that karmic purification had taken place. Because earlier in my meditation career, I looked in and there was stuff jammed up. There was a strong feeling of self or personality that was continuing.

So this experience was quite lovely. It felt freeing. It also felt kind of ordinary. It wasn't accompanied by particularly strong samadhi. It was just in a week-long retreat with a schedule just like this one. But for me it was a different flavor of anatta than I'd had before, yet it was just as meaningful. And that's the kind of openness that can come in the personality when it's not confined by the old patterns.

I should mention that in Tibetan practices, there are specific methods for releasing these old obscurations. The ngöndro, and particularly the preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism, are intended to work on this level. And one of the key figures in this is a Yidam, a deity known as Vajrasattva. This statue just to my right of Rinpoche's throne, your left, is a statue of Vajrasattva, the principal deity in the Dzogchen practices. There's also a thangka at the back of the room which depicts Vajrasattva. Usually during Rinpoche's retreats, he either gives instructions in Vajrasattva visualization and mantra practice, but this retreat, for whatever reason, he hasn't. So we haven't been working with it, but I just wanted, especially the Vipassana practitioners, to know that there are a number of tools in Tibetan practices that are specifically designed for purifying the obscurations.

I think it really is an important part. The emotional purification that goes on is not just a sideshow of the practice. It's a really integral and important part of the purification of heart and mind.

So how to work as the emotions come up, if they do come up? Rinpoche talked at the end this afternoon about a few different levels of approach, and I think it would be helpful to review those.

The first approach to take if you're doing Dzogchen practice is just to recognize mind essence even while the difficult emotion is there, and see what happens. Sometimes the thoughts will vanish. Sometimes the emotion will either dissolve or be accommodated

within the view so that the sense of conflict with it goes out. Maybe the whole grasping will go out at once, which is one of the possibilities he mentioned. I think he talked about the energy of anger remaining, but the hook of anger going out. So that's a possibility that the clinging really is undercut. Sometimes there's just a weakening of the force. There's still clearly clinging in it, but there's a weakening of the force.

But other times, as you turn to mind essence, if the emotion is really strong and the Rigpa is just not strong enough, you may not feel much impact or loosening or de-identification. The ego clinging in relation to the emotion may still be quite strong.

If that's the case and there's no sense of loosening of the grasping to it, then it's helpful to try a different approach. Rinpoche would call it shamatha with support. We would call it, in the Vipassana style, mindfulness of the emotion.

In Vipassana practice, we spend a lot of time talking about how to relate directly with the emotion that's coming. So to know it for what it is, to open to it without any sense of pushing away or aversion, and to feel it directly in the body and mind with no holding back. So it's not to analyze it, it's not to judge it, it's not to try to make it go away. The central point in this kind of mindfulness approach is to open completely to it and feel it completely just as it is.

So it's leaving it alone. It's not applying an antidote either. It's leaving it alone and letting it express its nature. And what we see when it expresses its nature is that its nature is impermanent. All these mind states that we've trapped out of fear, that we've held onto, all they ever wanted to do was to come out on the stage, dance and sing for a while, and then exit stage right. That's their only agenda.

But because of our fear, we never let them do that. They'd get up on the stage, and they'd give a few kicks. And we'd say, "Nope, I'm going to bring down the curtain on this one. I'm not comfortable with it." And that's how they got trapped. All we have to do to let them pass through is to give them the full stage.

So in a way, this is really what I meant when I talked about the approach of mindfulness. The liberation of the emotions is based in the object. It's not particularly about turning to mind essence, but we trust the emotion itself to live its life, do its thing, and then manifest its impermanence.

So in a way, you could say it's seeing the emptiness of the object. Impermanence is closely linked with emptiness. When we see that things come and go, we know that their nature is not permanent, is not fixed. So they are empty. So essentially, in the

approach of mindfulness, we are allowing the emotion to demonstrate its own emptiness. And then it's not our problem. We don't have to actually do anything with it, but let it come, express itself, and go.

The third approach is what Rinpoche mentioned as the antidote. And there are lots of these within the Vipassana tradition. He mentioned a few of the most common ones for greed, aversion, and delusion. But I just want to also mention—sometimes I hear from Vajrayana teachers that an antidote is the main approach of the Hinayana. And I just want to clarify that it's not the main approach for Vipassana practitioners. Mindfulness and seeing the emptiness of the emotion is the primary approach for Vipassana practitioners. Antidotes are applied only if that doesn't work.

So the main practices that we should apply are—I'm talking specifically to the Vipassana practitioners actually—first, to rest in mind essence and see if that will loosen the identification. This is beautiful if it works. Because one does get the sense, even though Rinpoche said this is a very advanced practice, of the thief entering the empty house. When you see the emptiness of self, there's nothing for the emotion to be in conflict with. There's nobody pushing against it. So even if it lingers for a little bit, it's just dancing in empty space, and there's no danger.

And the second one, mindfulness of emotion, is what you all are mostly familiar with. Both these approaches have a great strength, and I'd say a potential limitation.

I want to talk about why mindfulness of emotions is such a great strength. There's a Burmese story of a hunter who was a great and skilled hunter and knew how to trap all the animals and kill all the animals to provide food. And then one day, somebody came along and said, "Oh, yeah, there are many animals in the forest. I know you've gotten most of them. But you know, there's one really rare bird. And I don't think you've found that." And he described the bird to the hunter. And the hunter said, "No, I haven't."

I've never seen that bird, much less trapped it or shot it. Can you tell me where it is?

And the person said, "Well, it hangs out most of the time in that part of the forest. Go look for it there."

So the hunter knew the forest very well. He went and waited in that corner of the forest, waited a long time, very patiently. No rare bird. But he hung out there for a long time. Then he thought, "No, it's not there. I better go over to this other part of the forest. I'll wait there and see if it comes there."

So he hung out in this part of the forest, day after day, observing the clouds and the light and the other animals and the creatures who came, the way the trees changed with the light, dawn and nightfall. Not there either.

So he kept checking out all the different parts of the forest for this rare bird. Never did find it. But what he said when he finished the quest—when he gave up on the quest—was: "I never did find that bird, but you know, I came to know that forest really well, because I'd spent so much time in every single corner of it."

So the analogy is, the rare bird, you might say, is enlightenment. Maybe we'll get there. Maybe we'll find it. Maybe we won't. But as the hunter did, if we investigate every corner of the forest—which is this mind—in search of enlightenment, we get to know that forest really well.

That's one of the things I really appreciate about mindfulness with emotions. We really come to know very well what anger feels like, what desire feels like, what confusion, restlessness, dullness, pride, jealousy—and then loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, calm, concentration, and so forth. We come to know all the corners of the mind really, really well.

And there's something freeing in that. It may not be the ultimate freedom—may not be enlightenment—but we know the terrain so that, as Rinpoche has said, we don't have to be afraid of ourselves. We've investigated all those corners, all the dark, scary corners. We've been there. We've seen what they hold, and we don't have to worry about it anymore.

I think that's a strength of mindfulness of emotions.

There's a limitation to this practice. There can be, and it's that we may, in doing this, put too much emphasis on the emotion and think that the emotions are really the heart of meditation or even the heart of the release of suffering—that if we know all the emotions well enough, that will in itself be liberating. This is the danger in mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is always associated with objects, and we can get focused too much on the object and forget that the emphasis is in the awareness.

Particularly when the mindfulness is coupled with charged things like emotions, the tendency for that to happen is greater. So the meditator may develop a habit of ascribing more importance to the emotions than they actually contain and centering the practice around the emotions. That's only a potential danger.

The strength of the approach of mind essence is that it puts the emphasis in the right place, which is the ultimate nature of things. This is really the source of liberation. One of the things I think that comes from this directly is a lot of equanimity—a lot of equanimity, because it takes the focus away from the changing appearances. All the emotions are just kind of transient visitors. The refuge is awareness.

So this takes the spotlight off the transient visitors and puts it back into awareness, which really emphasizes the refuge of awareness, which is steady through all the arisings and passings. In a way, this is a sane emphasis. This is the right emphasis. This is really where freedom comes from—where equanimity comes from.

And as we can rest more and more and trust in the refuge of awareness, we don't care so much about the passing show. Emotions come and go. If we don't latch onto them, they're actually not problematic.

This approach puts us more in touch with that truth. But there's a possible limitation here also. And again, I say possible, not necessary. The reason is that this approach may not always be the one that will loosen the clinging in that moment. But because it's such an elegant approach, we may think it's the only good approach. Or we may think this is the best approach. Or we may think this approach has such a superior view that we won't condescend to use any of the other approaches because they're really kind of lower-class meditations. And so we develop a kind of intellectual superiority that ties us to one particular approach.

The best approach for you in a given moment is the one that will loosen ego clinging—not A, B, or C. And it may change. So I think it's really important to be open to looking at which technique is best right now. And so be willing to try them all, including "stupid shamatha" with a beer, if that's the one that really does it for you.

So I just really wanted to encourage you to give emotions proper respect. They are a really important part of this practice. And just learn to relate to them in a few different ways so that you feel free to choose the way that will free you best, that will work for you in that moment.

Any questions or comments so far?

Someone asked about using the antidote. Rinpoche gave the classical examples. If we're caught in desire—say it's sexual desire—a typical antidote to sexual desire is visualizing the body aging, dying, and then the corpse decaying. So you start to think: well, I may have what I want today, but in twenty years, what will it look like? In general, this is called contemplation of the unbeautiful aspects.

The typical antidote to anger is loving-kindness. So one can actually turn directly to a meditation of loving-kindness. And the typical antidote to delusion is wisdom—reflection on dharma points. I think Rinpoche mentioned the chain of dependent origination.

Another question: in the Sutta on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha doesn't talk about the subtle body. The subtle body is not a term that's used anywhere in Theravada literature, as far as I know. So I think it came out of the tantras. I don't think it's in Mahayana either. But I think it's implicitly there in some of its aspects when he talks about body sensations. Body sensations are basically the part of the subtle body that we can connect with directly.

I think generally the idea is that the subtle body only exists when consciousness is functioning within the gross body. So my understanding is that at death, the subtle body moves on or ends and arises again with the new birth—one or the other.

Someone asked about the possible drawback of the looking practice, whether it might encourage people to further repress emotions. No, I didn't say that, and I don't see that as a problem. Because if you really do connect with mind essence, you're not going to overlook appearances. You're not going to overlook emotions.

Another question about whether the subtle body is connected with the Vipassana technique of sweeping...

The question is whether the subtle body is connected with the Vipassana technique of sweeping, and definitely that is what is getting experienced through the sweeping practice. The question is why the sweeping practice isn't more integrated for us. I used to teach sweeping on Vipassana retreats, and it's a great technique for some people. For those who don't know, sweeping is the systematic scanning of the attention through the body, experiencing all the sensations that one encounters. But over time, I've just come to trust in the power of one particular technique and kind of following it through for most people. And the people who are interested in sweeping usually will go and find a Goenka retreat somewhere.

I think we clarified the question about whether Rinpoche said that karma was neither created nor exhausted in doing mindfulness practice. We worked through the question and clarified it to the extent that he agreed that that particular karmic pattern was getting depleted if it came up and was experienced without reactivity. So that particular pattern becomes depleted. In the Theravadan tradition, it's not considered that all karma gets depleted through mindfulness. But the Buddha does say that the Eightfold Path, which includes mindfulness—the way he describes it is, it's action that is

neither bright nor dark, leading to the end of karma. So it's pretty clear in the text that the Eightfold Path leads to the end of karma, but that's considered at the level of an arhat, that it's ended.

The question was, what version of Ngöndro does Rinpoche do? And I don't know the answer to that.

So, I want to move into part two of the talk. Have people still got a little energy? I want to talk about these terms mindfulness, consciousness, and awareness. And first I want to introduce why they became so interesting for me.

I think I mentioned the other night that rigpa kind of connects in two directions in the Vipassana system. Because it has the nature of cognizance, it connects with what is called consciousness in the Theravada system. Cognizance, consciousness—almost synonyms. Because its nature is unchanging, and it's beyond arising and ceasing, it also connects to the quality of nibbana. In the Theravadan system or the Pali suttas, there's only one unchanging Dhamma, and that is nibbana. So if the nature of mind is of this unchanging nature, then it also links to nibbana. So it links to consciousness on the one hand and nibbana on the other.

Now this is really confusing for Theravadan students, because the Buddha talked about consciousness as something that's impermanent. And I just want to emphasize why that is so.

Consciousness in the Pali suttas is considered to be the bare knowing of an object before any words come in. Just the ability to hold the sense datum. When you hear a sound, just the kind of musical tone of that sound as you receive it is being known in consciousness. Before you apply anything like, "that's a bell," much less "that's the end of the sitting, that's C sharp," or anything conceptual like that. Just the bare sound, completely physical experience—the knowing of that is the factor of consciousness.

And in the Pali suttas, it's taught that the consciousness arises with the object and passes away with the object. So there's currently hearing consciousness happening for us. But as the sound of the bell dies away and no other sound comes in, there's no new hearing consciousness arising. So the consciousness is considered to arise with the object and pass with the object. And that's how it's considered impermanent. And the term for this is vijñāna. Rinpoche has been talking about eight classes of vijñāna. In the Pali system, we have six. All the mind ones are just one consciousness.

So that's the term consciousness. Mindfulness we talked about is the factor—Rinpoche calls it alertness—of knowing our experience. A little intelligence is coming through. So we at least know hearing. There's the physical sound held by consciousness, and as the attention turns to it, we recognize, oh, that's hearing. It's arising at the ear door.

At least that much intelligence is happening—a kind of perception, recognition through the factor of mindfulness. So a little intelligence there. The consciousness doesn't have any intelligence. If you're not asleep and a sound happens, the consciousness will happen. But the mindfulness, not necessarily. For mindfulness, there has to be an awakeness, an alertness, attentiveness. So these are mindfulness and consciousness.

In the Pali suttas, there's no term that needs to be translated by awareness. You can translate the whole Pali canon and not use the term awareness. So let's hold onto awareness for a minute. And just say that the dilemma for somebody who's coming out of the Pali suttas is the concept that Rigpa, with its emptiness and its cognizance, is unceasing. Well, how can cognizance be unceasing when consciousness is coming and going? How can we reconcile those two?

In fact, if you take the Rigpa model to certain Asian teachers, especially in Burma and Sri Lanka, they will reject it flat out. You remember I told that story about asking Mingyur Rinpoche the difference between the Madhyamaka view and the Dzogchen view? He said, basically, the Madhyamaka people—the followers of Nagarjuna—think that the Dzogchen people are making something up that's not really there, which is essentially the cognizant nature as an enduring thing. But Mingyur Rinpoche said that they just don't quite understand it right the way we hold it.

This same dilemma will happen today many times, I think, as the Theravadan teachings and the Dzogchen teachings come into more and more contact. It became a subject of a lot of concern for me. Maybe nobody else cares philosophically, but I did.

It was interesting—Ajahn Sumedho was here teaching, I think it was two years ago now, and he talks very much from a Dzogchen point of view, even though he's in the Thai monastic scene. He has that same take on awareness as the ongoing refuge. And somebody asked him that question: "But the Buddha said consciousness is impermanent and comes and goes." And he basically said, "Yeah, that's true, but this works for me." He was totally unconcerned about the philosophical dilemma.

I just want to point out that's one approach that as practitioners you're welcome to take. That cuts through all the debates.

One way to resolve it is just to say the Rigpa model is a skillful means. If I turn to mind essence, I can always find some cognizance there. And whether it's really permanent or not, it works as a meditation technique. You bypass the philosophical dilemma. And I think that's absolutely honorable. So for those of you who would like, feel free to bypass the philosophical dilemma. But for me, that wasn't enough.

So let me finish this train of thought, and then I'll take questions.

I was teaching a class for senior Vipassana students a few years ago, and we were discussing this question. I couldn't figure out a way to explain it. I went home and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, I woke up, and the resolution came to me. This is the image that I want to share with you tonight.

In Tibetan texts, they often talk about the clarity aspect as sunlight pervading empty space. The emptiness aspect is like the space. The clarity aspect is like the sunlight. And that played a part, I'm sure, in my image.

But this is the image that came: Let's say you're out on the edge of the solar system and you're facing away from the sun. And don't worry about a space suit or helmet or goggles or anything. It's just naked awareness on the edge of the solar system. You're facing away from the sun. Let's say you're looking into a part of the solar system that doesn't have any stars. What do you see?

"Your shadow?"

That was indeed a good thought—a very good thought. This is not a trick question. What do you see? Exactly—it's totally black. But here's the key question: is it the color black that's coming into your eye, or is it simply the absence of light?

You're not seeing any light at all. Yet is there, in fact, light in front of you? The sunlight is pervading that empty space before you, but you're not seeing it.

Now suppose a meteor flashes from below, up in front of your eyes, then passes out above you. Do you see the meteor? Yes—in fact, you see it as a bright flash of light. That light is actually reflected sunlight, and it only comes to your eyes because an object has arisen that can reflect it.

So in this analogy, the sunlight pervading empty space is the nature clarity. The meteor is a phenomenon like a sound. The reflected light is the consciousness that illuminates that appearance. As soon as the meteor is out of sight, do you see any more light? Gone.

The sunlight pervading empty space is always there, but we don't know it until some phenomenon comes along that can reflect it. Then what's reflected is the phenomenon. The knowing of that comes and goes with the phenomenon, because that's the reflected clarity of the sunlight—that's the consciousness aspect.

In this model, consciousness comes and goes, but it's based on the ever-present clarity, which is otherwise invisible. Sometimes I add to this analogy that the sunlight pervading empty space is invisible, but sometimes the meditator can turn back, face the source, and see the light directly.

This is what the sunlight analogy captures beautifully. The light—which is neither a particle nor a wave, having a somewhat in-between existence without mass—is of that nature. There's no object involved. But it's only when the object comes that consciousness can arise, dependent on that underlying cognizance.

Exactly. Consciousness is turning on and off, although the sunlight—the underlying clarity—is always there. We become lost in the reflections of the clarity, you might say.

But how are you going to become aware of its pervasive nature if you don't turn around to see the source? All you would see are the reflections dependent on phenomena. I'm not saying you see anything visually, but you become aware of the awareness.

You become aware of it. I suppose the question could come up: where did that light come from? And then the deduction—it must be ever-present. But all analogies break down at some point, and this may be that point. But I think there is something about turning in the direction of the radiance that's kind of important.

"Right, and I think that's where the analogy breaks down. We've got a dualistic setup in the analogy from the beginning."

Lee raised another question: "I don't think I buy it. What do you mean by 20 years? I don't think so. That's a thing that exists. That's for a thing that exists. But because... it does not fit into either category of existing or not existing. Just like a light particle kind of doesn't have mass."

Again, this is where the analogy breaks down. But the understanding is, I'd say, also the same for nibbana. If you want to go to classical Theravadan view, nibbana also cannot be said to be an existent. And yet you can't say that it's not something. The Buddha clearly said there is this unborn, there is this unproduced, this unmade. Without it, no escape would be possible from what is produced and made. So I think it also transcends the categories of existence and non-existence. And I think the ground has that same ontological status.

Bill asked about the analogy: "I'd be interested in your comment that you said throughout, that the natural clarity recognizes its own emptiness, not the view of life, if I understand that."

Right, right. Again, this is where the analogy breaks down. Because, let's face it—anytime we use physical objects for the analogy, there's no sentience there. But any analogy will only go so far. So I can't put sentience into sunlight. Problem solved, then.

So the way I tend to use awareness now is through the sunlight analogy. The clarity aspect of sunlight pervading empty space is what I tend to call awareness. And you notice that it has within it both the functions of consciousness and also of mindfulness, of recognition. It's got enough wisdom that it recognizes.

So personally, I—and I think Joseph also—use awareness as a word that bridges mindfulness and consciousness. It includes both mindfulness and consciousness. And when you think about the way we use awareness in English, it has both those qualities. It's smart, but it also just keeps happening on its own. Like you don't have to force consciousness of hearing, you don't have to force awareness of hearing. But just like mindfulness has intelligence to know that's a sound, awareness has a sense of intelligence. So that's the way I tend to use it now.

Michael added a footnote: "The word that you're trying to say, like cognitive, literally means 'humanopathy.' So there's some analogy in that."

There is.

Yeah. Thank you for that comment. Could everybody hear that in the back? Yes, I appreciate the linguistic insight. I'm not throwing the analogy out just because it's not perfect—no analogy ever is. I just want us to return to the essence here.

For me, this sun and cloud metaphor beautifully explains how the underlying luminosity of awareness could be enduring while consciousness comes and goes. That's what I want us to take as the essence of the analogy—this understanding of the relationship between the changeless ground of awareness and the fluctuating movements of consciousness.

Jude, you had a question?

I haven't had a chance to explore this with Bhante Gunaratana yet. I actually tried to speak with him last month at the end of April when we were both in Massachusetts. We'd both been sitting in retreat there for some time. At the end of the scheduled re-

treat period, he wanted to continue sitting for a few more days, and so he declined the invitation to speak with a few of us who were hoping to engage with him about these questions. So I didn't get that opportunity.

But it's interesting to know about his perspective. I've heard he's quite open-minded—he's a Sri Lankan monk with a very receptive approach to these teachings. Yes, he is indeed. I understand he's teaching a retreat here in June, and also offering a daylong program. Our publicity director has more information about that if you're interested.

The website information is available as well. We should probably stop here for this evening.

This talk was given by Guy Armstrong at Spirit Rock Meditation Center on May 11, 2003. It is an offering of the Dharma Seat.

CHAPTER 248

Bodhisattva Path: Plus Rigpa & Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

Guy Armstrong shares his personal journey from Theravada practice focused on the arhat ideal to embracing the bodhisattva path through exposure to Shantideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra and Dzogchen teachings. He discusses how the aspiration of bodhicitta emerges from understanding anattā (not-self) and Buddha nature as the common thread connecting all beings. The second part examines four different Buddhist understandings of nibbāna: as mere cessation of the three poisons, as a transcendent state beyond sense consciousness, as awareness of the unconditioned (Thai Forest tradition), and as primordial awareness itself (Dzogchen). Drawing from Pali suttas including the analogy of unestablished consciousness as sunlight that doesn't land anywhere, Armstrong suggests the original teachings support views that include awareness as intrinsic to the unconditioned. He concludes by exploring how Rigpa practice becomes a path of 'imitating nibbāna' - repeatedly resting in our deepest unconditioned nature as best we can recognize it.

I wanted to talk about two topics tonight: the bodhisattva path and the question of rigpa and nirvana. In discussing the bodhisattva path, I want to speak from my own experience.

For twenty years I was involved exclusively in Theravada practice, where the ideal constantly emphasized is the arhat—the model of working for one's own liberation as quickly as possible. Part of the subtext often attached to this motivation is escaping this dreadful wheel of samsara as swiftly as we can. The arhat model, if taken slightly off course, has built into it an aversion to existence that can color one's approach to both practice and life.

Then I became interested in the Mahayana view of the path and picked up Shantideva's Bodhicaryavatara, which was first translated into English by Stephen Batchelor as "A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life." Reading through it, I found it quite inspiring, though it wasn't easy going. It's rather dense and contains considerable hellfire and brimstone, making it challenging. While I found it inspiring, I must admit it didn't touch me deeply at first.

The main impact was that it changed my marriage. Here I was practicing these grandiose visions of saving all beings, then returning to my relationship and having the same selfish arguments I'd been having for fifteen years. It suddenly dawned on me: if

I'm trying to free all beings from suffering, why do I continue inflicting suffering on the being closest to me? I began examining my self-centered desires in this context, which helped purify some of them.

Then I attended several retreats with Rinpoche in the early to mid-nineties. Something about being in retreat space with a quiet mind, doing chants several times daily—especially the bodhicitta chant and dedication of merit we've been doing—began shifting something in me. As you know, it ends: "May we liberate migrators from the ocean of existence with its stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death." Hearing this repeatedly as an important motivation within the retreat context started creating change.

During that same retreat, I began connecting more deeply with rigpa as my deepest nature of mind, realizing that this combination of emptiness and cognizance is not personal. It's not particularly Guy's deepest nature or Justine's deepest nature—this is the deepest nature of all sentient beings. I don't imagine the way it expresses in this mind-body system differs much from how it expresses in others.

I started seeing that the game of spiritual practice wasn't just about clearing obscurations from this particular parcel of awareness—it was about clearing obscurations from awareness wherever it was manifesting. Through the concept of Buddha nature, I had tapped into the common thread joining us all, or rather, that we are all expressions of. Seeing Buddha nature at this level broke down the distinction between self and other that I had maintained throughout my practice career.

This was a beautiful opening. I came to feel that the aspiration of bodhicitta was really the manifestation—or practice—of understanding egolessness. The teachings on anatta or not-self are basic to Theravada and are explored repeatedly. But this was a way of understanding their implications for practice and motivation. If there truly is no separate self, then each person's liberation is as important as anyone else's. This is one of the themes Shantideva emphasizes repeatedly: the equalizing of oneself with others.

This understanding began coming through meaningfully and started shifting my practice motivation. However, I've noticed that when I don't maintain that intention and reinforce it through conscious reflection, the bodhicitta aspiration falls away. I often find the arhat path looking very attractive again—just the concept of reaching the end as soon as possible.

This deeper connection revealed through Buddha nature insights reminded me of a poem by Rumi's teacher, Shams of Tabriz. While Rumi left hundreds, perhaps thousands of poems, his teacher didn't leave many behind. Coleman Barks says his teacher left at least this one poem: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

I think the teaching on Buddha nature points to the fact that in the garden of clear seeing, these are not true distinctions either. In some ways, the bodhicitta aspiration emerges from understanding the underlying unity we all share and is simply the manifestation of that insight.

Having opened to the bodhicitta aspiration through these teachings, we should recall that there are two aspects of bodhicitta: relative and ultimate. Ultimate bodhicitta is Buddha nature—something to be realized. Relative bodhicitta is the somewhat fabricated or conceptual aspiration we practice to develop over time.

something along the lines of practicing for our own realization in order to help all beings.

This has caused me some dilemmas along the way because there are two pieces to this relative bodhicitta: practicing for our own enlightenment, and helping all beings. Which comes first? Which is more important? In our life, we make choices, and different people make different choices. If we look at the Tibetan tradition, we can see different choices being made by leading teaching figures.

There's a stanza toward the end of Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life that the Dalai Lama is very fond of. He associates with it and quotes it again and again. I think it is his guiding principle: "For as long as space endures and as long as living beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world." To me, this is an aspiration of the kind of bodhisattva who will postpone their own liberation in order to stay and serve those who are not yet enlightened. This is one beautiful model—the notion that one stays behind until all sentient beings have become enlightened first.

But that's not the only model you find in the Tibetan tradition. One of the greatest Tibetan practitioners of all time is considered to be Milarepa, who attained Buddhahood in one lifetime. Milarepa went up into the mountains, meditated very arduously, and came to that ultimate liberation within one lifetime. He clearly did not postpone his own awakening.

As you play with the bodhisattva model, I think it's helpful to understand that there's no one right way to do it. The combination of your altruistic intention and your drive toward realization may play out differently than your neighbor's. Some people's altru-

istic intention is so strong they want to go into the inner city and do direct service work—and that can come out of a bodhisattva aspiration. Others may feel their bodhisattva intention falls more on the practice side, and they may go into retreat for twenty years, thirty years, or the rest of their life. That can be their expression.

Someone working in the inner city serving those in real need may look at the one in the cave and say, "Wow, that's really selfish. They really should be doing more to help the world because it's in such a dreadful state." Meanwhile, the one up in the cave meditating may look at the person doing direct service and say, "How can they really hope to help others when their own mind stream isn't purified yet? There are still obscurations and they'll just be spreading them because they're not purified. How can we help another until we've really gotten to the root of our own suffering?"

In these two attitudes, there could be judgment. What I want to say about that is I don't think any of us can judge another person's path. The Buddha said something similar when there was gossip going on between different monks about judging the practice of other monks. The Buddha came along and said, "How do you know?" How do you know where they're at in their attainment, what their motivation is, what their karma is, what their purification is? Only if you know that can you judge. He said, "I know that, so I can judge. But you don't know that, so you can't judge."

So really just a plea that as we look at the inclusion of bodhicitta in our practice, we be open to the fact that it manifests in many different ways. There is no one right model for it. The person practicing in the cave can be doing it out of very strong altruistic intention, and the person practicing in service may have a lot of ego around it. This is a plea for understanding and non-judgment, and also a message that each person's path unfolds differently. Don't take any model as the way you should be living. We will each be called to make choices between outer work and inner work, and to hold them both with this ultimate aspiration.

This leads nicely into the next question: What is the nature of realization? Another way to frame it is: What is the nature of the enlightened mind? I want to talk about it from the viewpoint of rigpa and the viewpoint of nirvana.

I'll start with a quote from a classic Dzogchen text called Self-Liberation:

"The self-originated primordial awareness has not been created by anything. Amazing. It does not experience birth, nor does there exist a cause for its death. Amazing."

In most of the Buddhist tradition, if something is uncreated, unborn, and undying, there's only one thing it can be—and that's nirvana.

So the question is: Is this basic awareness that we talked about last night the same as nirvana or not? Another way to frame this is: Is awareness an intrinsic part of the unconditioned or not?

As we explore this tonight, it may sound like an intellectual or philosophical pursuit, and I'll certainly quote some texts along the way. But what happens is that when your practice gets close to this territory, these questions take on real urgency and real meaning for practitioners. In this group, there are a number of people whose practice is in this ballpark, currently or has been. For some of us, these questions carry real urgency.

So I ask you to listen with an open mind. If it seems too philosophical right now, let it go. But for some people, these are questions of pressing importance.

One reason this matters is that in the Pali suttas, it's said that once one has realized the unconditioned and touched it directly, one has at most seven more lifetimes before full enlightenment. Basically, full enlightenment is guaranteed in at most seven more lifetimes. That's quite an insurance policy.

You can see why there might be ego clinging around this: "Wow, I had the ultimate experience where I wasn't there. I had it." There can be considerable ownership around these moments because of their promise and potential.

In this talk, I want to make a distinction that's somewhat technical but helpful for this group. As I understand it, when nirvana is used in Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings, it points to the end of the path—meaning Buddhahood. Connected with nirvana is the quality of omniscience. In Mahayana or Vajrayana, one doesn't speak of nirvana without associating it with the attainment of Buddhahood and omniscience.

In Theravadan teachings, we often use nirvana as a synonym for the unconditioned. Any realization of it by a practitioner at any stage along the journey is considered a realization of nirvana or the unconditioned. We use the terms synonymously. It doesn't just refer to the culmination of the path—it can be experienced along the way multiple times.

Tonight I want to use it primarily in this second sense, as a synonym for the unconditioned, which can be touched and encountered by practitioners at any stage of the journey.

Used in this sense, there are at least four different ways that nirvana is understood in the Buddhist tradition.

The first is that it has no reality in the realm of being. There's no state as such that we can touch called nirvana. Nirvana is simply understood as the cessation of greed, aversion, and delusion—the complete and total absence of the three poisons. Any moment in which those three are totally absent is considered a moment of nirvana, not a separate destination. It could happen eyes open or eyes closed. More to the point, there is no separate destination called nirvana. It's only a description of a state in which greed, aversion, and delusion are completely absent.

So it's a very purified state of mind, but it has no kind of being whatsoever. In philosophy, they say it has no ontological reality—ontology being the study of being. In this view, the ontological reality of nirvana is denied.

As I understand it, this is essentially the view of the Madhyamakas, the followers of Nagarjuna. Because they cut and cut and cut repeatedly, they also cut out any beingness around nirvana. It's also close to some Theravadan views, though I don't know any individuals who hold it personally. But I've heard it exists in the Theravadan schools.

Let me give an example to illustrate why this could be a reasonable point of view. As we've been introduced to the practice of Dzogchen, we've encountered something characterized by empty essence and natural cognizance. The shorthand for this is "empty knowing"—a descriptive phrase for the practice we've been doing: rest in empty knowing.

We talk about it as "empty knowing"—it's a verb, an activity. But what happens when we give the name Rigpa to that activity? When we make it a noun, the mind tends to take it as a thing.

Just by turning a verb into a noun, we tend to unconsciously ascribe an ontological reality to it. Similarly with nibbana—it could simply be the exhausting of greed, hatred, and delusion, but once we assign a noun to it, it can take on ontological reality. This represents the viewpoint of the first school on nibbana.

The second definition or understanding accords nibbana some ontological reality. It's considered neither to exist nor to not exist—beyond both existence and non-existence. Yet because its existence is not denied, it has some meaning in the realm of being. It's proper to call it a noun. The Buddha called it a dhamma, usually translated as "a thing."

In this view, nibbana is understood to be a state of cessation where the four mental aggregates cease. When one realizes nibbana, there is no feeling, no perception, no mental formations, and no consciousness. The body remains—the yogi's body does not

disappear when they enter nibbana. But because consciousness is not there, there is no experience of the body. The form is still present, yet the key characteristic is a state with no sense data and no consciousness, no awareness functioning.

This is the view of a number of schools in Burma and Sri Lanka, particularly those that take their direction from the Abhidhamma and the Visuddhimagga. While I don't know that this is explicitly claimed in the Abhidhamma, I believe it is pointed to in the Visuddhimagga. These two often go together—the Abhidhamma and Visuddhimagga people tend to hang out together.

There is the admission that there's some kind of dimension here that can be realized, that can be touched. But it's entirely separate from ordinary sense reality. The understanding is that if you have your eyes open and you're experiencing sense data, you can't touch this thing. It's somewhere else—a transcendent dimension that can't coexist with sense consciousness. When it is touched, all sense contact goes away and even consciousness goes away.

How does the yogi describe or experience or realize it? Basically, as one emerges from this temporary realization, some little trace of memory might carry over. In some way, one has a feeling of what happened the moment before, just some lingering aroma. That's as close as one can come to a description.

This is very much an altered state, and because it's such an empty state, words really can't come close to it. Words fail when we try to describe this state. It's often talked about as a state of cessation. When you hear the word "cessation" in Visuddhimagga terms, this is usually what's being pointed to, because the four mental aggregates have stopped.

The third understanding or description of nirvana becomes a little more liberal—each of these gets progressively more liberal. In this view, feeling, perception, and formations cease. These three mental aggregates are absent, and the five senses cease. There's no sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch present. But some consciousness may continue—some awareness may continue.

This is the way that enlightenment is commonly described in the Thai forest tradition. What is that awareness aware of? Different people describe it differently. Some say it's just aware of itself. Some say that there's just awareness. Some say that it's aware of the unconditioned. But they're all pointing to a state where basically the only element present is some kind of knowing and something unconditioned.

Ajahn Mahabua has been quite explicit about his experience of this. He's a Thai forest master who's still living, though quite old now. He was a student of Ajahn Man, one of the great Thai forest masters of the last hundred years. He ordained as a monk when he was relatively young, and he said that when he reached his tenth rains retreat —the three-month period where the monks don't go out, usually an intensified period of meditation—

He started to sit up all night. Every night during the rains retreat, he would sit all night long without moving. That's strong motivation. And he said that it was so painful, what he went through, his body was just wracked by pain going through this practice, that he lost his fear of death. Because he felt that nothing could ever again be as painful as what he had gone through, sitting up all night, every night.

And then he said that when he finished this practice, his mind was like a rock. That he had become so concentrated through his determination, his mind was absolutely immovable. Concentration was just steady, like a rock. And he said then he enjoyed that so much, the peace of it, he was stuck there for five years. Imagine if he'd had the pointing out instructions. But no Dzogchen masters.

So he said he started to realize after a while, his teacher helped him realize that he was stuck in that concentration. And then he turned to mindfulness and wisdom. He calls them a pair, *satipanya*—mindfulness, wisdom. And he said, at that point, things went easily because my concentration was fully prepared. Very prepared.

He said what he turned to was investigating four elements: desire and non-desire, suffering and ease. And he saw that these four states kept cycling. Desire, absence of desire. Suffering, ease. It just kept circling. So that he saw that none of them was it. Because they were all changing. So none of them was what he was looking for. And he said he was interested in those because he was ignorant of the mind's own nature.

That's a pointing out. I was ignorant of the mind's own nature.

So he said he let go of everything but mindfulness and wisdom. This is, in Thai Forest terms, this is a looking back at the mind's own nature—mindfulness and wisdom. And then he said that the mind's own nature became impartial and impassive, not tending to anything.

Isn't this an interesting pointing? When we turn to nature of mind, the instruction is don't fasten on any phenomena. It's another way of saying don't tend to anything. Stay in the mind's own nature. So that's what Mahabua did.

And he said, at that moment, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked. Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared at the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

When a Thai forest monk says that ignorance was eradicated, this is a declaration of arhantship. The uprooting of ignorance is the end of suffering, the attainment of arhantship. So he said the attainment of arhantship came when the pure mind appeared through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

So this is typical of the Thai forest tradition—the quality of awareness being central to the enlightenment process.

Then the fourth description, I would say, is basically the description we've been getting over these days of the unchanging nature of mind, as I read in that opening quote: "The self-originated primordial awareness that has not been created by anything, does not experience birth, and does not die."

One of the nice things about this view is that we can experience some aspect of this reality with eyes open, some aspect of this reality without a huge amount of concentration, some aspect of this reality with all the senses open and functioning and going about our daily life. But we understand that this nature is the deathless. So this is the fourth view.

So I got really interested in the disagreements between these schools and to see if I could reconcile them or come to my own understanding. And the answer I came up with is that I don't know. So that's the main opinion I hold at this point. I don't know. And I would love someday for a teacher to come along who's practiced in all these four ways in depth and can tell us from direct experience. So far I haven't met that person, so I don't know.

But I still got interested in the investigation. So another way to say it is: if awareness is an intrinsic part of the mind, then when an enlightened being dies, that awareness should somehow continue. If the awareness ends at death, then that's saying it's somehow not intrinsic. Or it doesn't fit this description of being beyond birth and death.

This would somehow arise with the body and die with the body. But if awareness is intrinsic, it should exist after death.

So I took a look at the texts that I have the most trust in, which are the Pali suttas, to see if I could find any clues, any guidance from them. And it's very interesting because the Buddha was often asked this question: what happens to the enlightened being after

death? Does that person exist? The Buddha said, "You can't say that." And they said, "Well, does the person not exist?" He said, "You can't say that. Do they both exist and not exist? You can't say that. Do they neither exist nor not exist? You can't say that." So he would not say in any of those four cases what happened.

But there are some other interesting clues. Clearly the physical aggregate is gone. Then what about consciousness? At one point in the text, he pretty much says that after an arhat dies, there's no consciousness. Well, that seems to seal the argument for at least description number one or two: no consciousness after death, therefore it's not an intrinsic part.

But that's not the end of the story, because in other passages, he says something different. There's a case where a bhikkhu was practicing very seriously during the Buddha's lifetime and attained what's called temporary liberation of mind. There are many ways to do that. It's a state where the mind is really released from the defilements temporarily. But every time he would touch it, he would also fall out of it. Touch it, be delivered, fall out of it, back to defilements. Touch it, fall out of it, back to defilements. And he got so discouraged by this that he said, "I can't do it. I'm going to take my life." And in the jargon of the suttas, it said that bhikkhu used the knife.

So the bhikkhu took his own life. And then the Buddha was talking with a group of other practitioners and said, "Bhikkhus, do you see that dark swirling cloud in the distance? That smoky mass that's moving through the air? That is Mara, searching for the consciousness of the bhikkhu who took his life, the bhikkhu Godika. But Mara is not going to find that consciousness, because that bhikkhu's consciousness is unestablished. The reason is that before he used the knife, the bhikkhu attained final liberation, and his consciousness is now unestablished."

This is very interesting terminology because the Buddha did not say the consciousness is gone. He said his consciousness is now unestablished. Then what does that mean?

There's another sutta where the Buddha describes what it means that a consciousness is unestablished, and this part I'd like to read to you from the text. This is an analogy for the consciousness that is unestablished:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a house with a peaked roof, with windows on the northern, southern, and eastern sides. When the sun rises and a beam of light enters through a window, where would it become established?"

And a bhikkhu replies, "On the western wall, venerable sir."

So sun rises in the east, comes through the window. Where does that sunlight become established? On the western wall.

And the Buddha says, "If there were no western wall, where would it become established?"

The bhikkhu says, "On the earth, venerable sir."

"And if there were no earth, where would it become established?"

"On the water, venerable sir."

If there were no water, where would it become established?

"It would not become established anywhere, venerable sir."

"So too, bhikkhus, if there is no nutriment for consciousness, consciousness does not become established there and come to growth. Where consciousness does not become established and come to growth, I say, that is without sorrow, anguish, and despair."

Does this analogy sound familiar? Sunlight not falling anywhere? You remembered —Samyutta Nikaya, Nidana 12, Sutta 64.

The analogy I shared last night about sunlight falling on a meteorite, sunlight pervading empty space and then encountering an object, actually came to me before I'd heard of this sutta. So there's the Buddha, and then there's Guy Armstrong. That's a joke. But I found it fascinating that unestablished consciousness, which describes the arhat after death, is compared to sunlight that doesn't land anywhere.

To me, not having found any passage more authoritative, this suggests the suttas support views three and four. That's basically my reading of the Pali Canon now—I'm more inclined to believe they support positions three and four rather than one and two.

This is why I mentioned in our first or second evening that although Buddhism has seen many splits over the centuries and millennia, I feel the original Pali texts are not in conflict with any of the schools—not with any of them. From a Dzogchen point of view, one can rely on these texts. From a Theravadan perspective, one can rely on these texts. From a Mahayana standpoint, one can rely on these texts.

The conflicts arise when later commentators, philosophers, and practitioners try to impose more interpretation than the Buddha apparently offered at that time. I found this very encouraging. This is the personal opinion I hold now. Everyone will probably form some opinion—this is the conclusion I've reached.

Someone asked me before tonight's talk if I'd ever simply asked Rinpoche about the relationship between rigpa and nirvana, and I did. I asked him in a retreat several years ago if they were the same thing.

Here the distinction becomes important. In Tibetan terminology, nirvana describes someone who has reached Buddhahood. Rinpoche took his amber mala and separated two beads to show me the string. "This little bit of string is like seeing rigpa," he said. "When all the beads are cleared off, you see the whole string—that's like seeing nirvana."

So nirvana is much greater. I think this refers to the factor of omniscience. "But the essence of nirvana and the essence of rigpa are the same," he continued. "Same string, but you're just not seeing the whole thing."

That is, as I understand it, the Dzogchen understanding. He went on to say, "We don't talk about nirvana for practitioners like here. We only talk about nirvana for Dzogchen yogis in mountain retreat, stabilized in rigpa night and day." It's a high standard.

I want to add something from personal experience and reflection. I believe—and I haven't verified this with Rinpoche, though it would be interesting to ask—that as our rigpa practice deepens and clarifies, as the view becomes purified and developed, at some point it's possible to touch that nirvanic nature so directly that you absolutely know you've encountered the unconditioned. No doubt remains: Is this conditioned? Unconditioned? Is awareness intrinsic or not? One knows one has touched something unconditioned and whether awareness is part of that.

This is my understanding, though I don't know with certainty. It's my intuition.

Once we recognize this connection between the pure state of awareness—call it rigpa or empty knowing—relatively free from the three poisons, we see it becomes the path. In Dzogchen terminology, they're very clear about ground, path, and fruition all being the same thing. I thought this was radical when I first heard it.

Then I discovered this line from the Samyutta Nikaya: "The Eightfold Path has the deathless as its ground and goal." It's the same statement.

The path is based on the ground and fruition. It's the same statement. And that ground is the deathless. The path has the deathless as its ground and goal.

So essentially what I understand we're doing as we're practicing the nature of mind is that we are putting ourselves in the unconditioned as best we're able. As close as each of us knows what the unconditioned nature is, we put our mind there over and over again and let it stay there as long as it will stay. And when it slips out, we put it there again as best we can.

So the whole path becomes essentially the imitation of nirvana, as best we can imitate it. We imitate nirvana in each new moment. And so however big or little a piece of nirvana is apparent to us, that's the nirvana we have for right now.

This is pointed to by a pamphlet from one of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, who wrote a little pamphlet called "Nibbana for Everyone." His whole purpose was to take it out of the abstract realm where it was only going to be accessible to one-tenth of one percent of all meditators, and make it really available for anyone who had the sincere interest through this process of looking into the nature, of knowing when the three poisons are weak, and the purity of the emptiness and the knowing together.

So that's pretty much what I wanted to talk about tonight. Are there any questions?

Ajahn Buddhadasa is also in the Thai forest tradition. It's very clear. He makes it absolutely explicit. He has a beautiful little book called "Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree," where he says that the real truth of things is emptiness, but because it has knowing, we call it satipaññā. So the equation of emptiness with satipaññā is very explicit for him.

And you'll find this throughout the Thai forest tradition. You can find it in Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mahabua, Ajahn Buddhadasa, and Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian is coming here, I think, at the end of this month. He's a living Thai forest master. And we were talking with him. He said the best way to practice mahasati, great awareness, great mindfulness, is to rest in the pure space of knowing.

And then somebody asked him, "Oh, but isn't that conditioned? Because it's consciousness. Isn't consciousness conditioned, impermanent?" And he said, "Well, consciousness actually has two aspects, one conditioned, one unconditioned." That's a nice way to see it too—that consciousness is kind of what links to the unconditioned, or awareness is the link between ordinary reality and the unconditioned. So he said it very explicitly, and you'll find that again and again in the Thai forest teachers.

I think it's the Burmese tradition that kind of pulls it out of this framework. The Burmese tradition holds the opposite view, and that's true. And again, influenced strongly by Abhidhamma and Visuddhimagga.

It could be a factor of what kind of practice people have done, whether they've done jhāna or not, might lead to different experiences. Certainly a possibility could be the instruction they've been given and what their teachers told them to expect. It's interesting because I think the spiritual model we've given, to some extent, will shape our experience. In other words, meditators will experience what teachers tell them to look for. And so it could be that effect also.

Now, one modern teacher had a really interesting interpretation of these different levels. Let's say Dzogchen practice is kind of realizing nirvana with eyes open. Thai forest tradition is realizing it with eyes closed, just pure awareness. And the Burmese style is experiencing it with no consciousness, but just the emptiness of it.

And he compared it to nirmāṇakāya, saṃbhogakāya, dharmakāya. Nirmāṇakāya being the realm of the manifest; Saṃbhogakāya being the luminous, immaterial nature, which is connected with cognizance; and Dharmakāya being the realm of the empty aspect of reality.

In reality, all three kāyas are united. But we can look at different aspects of reality through one or the other of these descriptions. So he was saying that the different traditions were touching nirvana through its three aspects of the three kāyas. That's an interesting way to look at it. Natural clarity either way.

The first approach I mentioned describes nirvana as a state where there's no particular being who has attained it—simply the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion.

The question concerns the use of the term *samadhi,* which seems to be employed in different ways across traditions. My understanding is that the meaning remains quite similar between Theravada and Tibetan systems. *Samadhi* is usually translated as concentration and represents one of the factors of the path. I believe it's also one of the *paramis* in the Mahayana list of perfections. It refers to that quality of mind capable of achieving single-pointedness, and through this, gaining stability and strength.

Samadhi is often closely associated with *shamatha* practice. The cultivation of *shamatha* develops the mental factor of *samadhi*. In the Theravada tradition, we often develop this quality to the refined levels called absorptions or *jhana*. But this represents just one end of the spectrum of *samadhi*.

When the Buddha summarized the Eightfold Path, he spoke of three essential components: *sila*, *samadhi*, and *paññ*a—ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. It's particularly interesting that when referring to the meditation portion, the word he chose was *samadhi*. In this context, *samadhi* becomes almost synonymous with meditation itself throughout the Buddhist tradition.

Regarding the rainbow body and its relationship to Dzogchen practice—I must speak from what I've read rather than direct experience. The teaching states that when a great Dzogchen practitioner reaches the culmination of practice, at the time of death their entire physical form dissolves into what's called rainbow body, a completely insubstantial form. Only their hair and fingernails remain behind. This is considered the definitive sign that a practitioner has reached the absolute pinnacle of what the practice offers.

Rinpoche mentioned today the story of the king who initiated the tantras—that king and his five hundred queens all attained rainbow body. The texts present this as the ultimate culmination of practice. Many stories attest to this achievement throughout history. Namkhai Norbu relates visiting the room of a great master who had passed away and finding only fingernails and hair remaining. This attainment is considered achievable today, with people still reaching this level. We should aim very high indeed.

When I described the second and third types of nirvana where consciousnesses are absent, you might wonder how a person could function if the senses aren't working. In both the Burmese and Thai traditions, the understanding is that the meditator enters this state for only a limited period, making direct contact with the unconditioned. This brief contact proves sufficient to uproot the defilements completely. The defilements leave the mind, then contact with the unconditioned ceases, consciousness and all senses return, and the practitioner continues functioning in the world—but now without any defilements remaining in the mind. Thankfully so!

An excellent point emerges about rainbow body still being part of the bodhisattva path, since a being can continue benefiting others from that *sambhogakaya* level. This is absolutely true and represents part of the magic, mystery, and wonder of Tibetan Buddhism.

Furthermore, as I understand it, once someone attains Buddhahood and the physical body dies, the imprint of that enlightened consciousness remains in the *dharmakaya* realm. From there, it becomes possible for what has been established in the *dharmakaya* to send forth emanations—rebirths in human or other forms that can continue benefiting beings in countless ways.

So even a fully enlightened Buddha can still, if you like, reappear to benefit beings. Great mysteries. I mean, it's mind-boggling.

A participant inquired about the bhikkhu who used the knife, asking whether consciousness was being used synonymously with awareness in that description. In the Pali texts, there's no word that gets translated as awareness—there's just consciousness.

But it is usually associated with objects. So I think the pointing here is that something continues, but because there are no objects to pick up on, it is unestablished. So we could use it as synonymous with awareness.

The question touches on whether the fourth foundation of mindfulness points to awareness. There's certainly a pointing to consciousness in the fourth foundation through the five aggregates. I can't remember how the six sense bases are worded exactly, but consciousness is one of the five aggregates pointed to. So mindfulness of consciousness is included in classical Theravadan teachings.

Another question came up about samadhi and its translation. At previous retreats, I've mentioned that there isn't really an accurate English translation of this word. The translation as "concentration" can be misleading because when we use concentration in English, we usually mean narrowing the attention down. "I want to concentrate on my reading. Don't distract me with that television noise." But samadhi doesn't have that exclusive connotation at all.

The sense is that the mind is concentrated in the sense of coming together. The mind's stuff is concentrated. The mind energy is concentrated by letting go of distraction. Distraction is what robs the mind of energy. When we let go of distraction, the mind regains its original strength and energy and stability. So it's concentrated in the sense of being unified, being joined. Unification of mind is the best translation I can think of.

Another way it's sometimes talked about is one-pointed. But again, you don't want to think of it as necessarily one-pointed in a narrow way. I like the way Ajahn Sumedho describes it. He's a Theravadan monk. He says that it's the one point that includes everything. That lends very well to our practice here. What's the one point that includes everything? The present moment. Empty knowing. So samadhi goes very well with that sense of empty knowing.

Just as a postscript: the more you develop the quality of samadhi through whatever practice you do—whether it develops through rigpa practice as you let go of distractions, where samadhi develops in a very natural and unforced way, or whether you do it through shamatha with single-pointed exclusive focus—you will find great benefit when you turn to mind essence. The stability that you've developed through the shamatha practice will be there when you touch the nature of mind, and it will sustain the rigpa longer.

Rinpoche has been expressing something very similar regarding both shamatha and Rigpa practice.

Let me take one final question. Bonnie?

"In the Dzogchen tradition, are shamatha and vipassana considered preliminary practices?"

I think shamatha is strongly encouraged. Traditionally, it was an absolute requirement to complete the formal preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism before receiving Dzogchen instruction. Students were also encouraged to develop proficiency in different styles of shamatha practice.

My understanding is that Dzogchen represents just one approach to vipassana—there are other methodologies for developing insight as well. Traditionally, meditators were expected to gain experience with a number of these approaches before being granted access to the quite secret teachings of Dzogchen.

This seems like a good place to conclude our exploration today. The integration of shamatha and Dzogchen practice offers a profound path for developing both the stability of mind and the recognition of our true nature. Whether we approach this through the gradual cultivation of single-pointed concentration or through the direct pointing-out instructions of Dzogchen, both methods support each other in revealing the luminous awareness that is always already present.

The key insight remains that stability of mind—however it develops—serves to sustain our recognition of Rigpa. When we touch the nature of mind with a foundation of shamatha, that recognition can endure with greater ease and naturalness. This is the beautiful marriage of method and wisdom, of concentration and awareness, that characterizes the most skillful approaches to awakening.

CHAPTER 249

Non-Dual Awareness: Bridging Theravāda and Vajrayāna Understanding

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *Guy Armstrong addresses one of the most contentious topics in Buddhist philosophy: non-dual awareness and its place within traditional Theravāda understanding. Drawing from the Kaccānagotta Sutta (SN 12.15) and the Nakhasikhā Sutta (SN 22.97), he demonstrates how the concept of non-duality is already present in the earliest Pali teachings, despite later Abhidhamma systematization that emphasized separate existence of consciousness and its objects.*
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> *Armstrong explores how consciousness and its object, while analytically distinguishable, are experientially one unified event—like a golden bowl that has both roundness and color as aspects of a single reality. He shows how this understanding bridges the apparent gap between classical Theravāda analysis of the eighteen dhātus and Dzogchen teachings on rigpa. The talk addresses the philosophical implications of dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda) and emptiness (suññatā), explaining how even the seeker, path, and goal exist only conventionally while sharing the same ultimate nature as a Buddha. Armstrong concludes with an overview of the four main Tibetan Buddhist schools, providing practical context for understanding different approaches to these profound teachings.*

In all the areas of integration of the Dzogchen view into the Vipassana world, I think there's one concept that strikes more fear into the heart of committed Theravādans than any other: the concept of non-duality. As soon as the non-dual teaching started to appear in the West, different Theravādan scholars sprang up to refute the view that non-duality could be a legitimate philosophical perspective in Buddhism.

I've been in some of these conversations myself. Recently, I had a conversation with a Pali scholar about non-duality. I have to say, it's taken me a while to figure out exactly what this word means—I don't know if you've really looked into it. It's used in many different senses in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna writings. In fact, in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, one of the Mahāyāna sūtras, there's a whole chapter on non-duality that goes into many of the dualities that are negated by the Mahāyāna view.

During our conversation, the scholar asked, "Well, non-duality doesn't mean they're trying to say that consciousness and its object are one, does it?" Well, unfortunately, that is what is meant. I want to talk about that a little bit and then see how that leads to the other aspects of non-duality.

This is a term that I've puzzled over considerably. You'll hear Rinpoche use it. You'll hear it in Vajrayāna teachings—the concept of a non-dual awareness. One obvious meaning is egolessness: that there's not a separate observer who's standing apart from experience and observing it. This is a view held within the Theravāda—essentially the view of anattā. The observer is not separate.

But in all the Pali texts, as I think we talked about the other night, consciousness is a dhātu, one of the eighteen dhātus or elements of the sense doors, that's separate from phenomena. So there's consciousness of sight, and that's different from the sight itself. The Theravādan view states that sense experience arises—called contact—when three things come together. In the case of the eye: a visible form, a working eye, and the factor of eye consciousness. These are considered to be three distinct things. When those happen, contact arises. That means we see one another, we see a tree or whatever. This is described in the suttas, the original words of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali suttas.

In the Abhidhamma, this concept got strengthened even further. Remember, the Abhidhamma is that piece of the Pali Canon that takes these original sutta concepts and systematizes them, laying them out in a very detailed and consistent map. In the Abhidhamma, things that are directly experienceable were given the name ultimate reality. Anything that's directly experienceable is called an ultimate, and things that aren't are called conventional.

Just as an example, "turkey" is a conventional reality. It's only a conventional designation for that creature. The actual experienceable aspects of turkey are the five aggregates or the six sense bases and their consciousnesses. Those are the discrete elements that make up turkey—or human being, for that matter. But the concept "human being" is a conceptual invention. You can't experience a human being directly. You actually experience their form, their consciousness, their mental formations, and so forth.

In the Abhidhamma, when it classified these things as ultimate reality, it gave them a kind of independent existence. In the literature, this is referred to as "own being" or svabhāva. It had an independent existence all of its own. The elements specifically that the Abhidhamma gave this independent existence to and called ultimate were: form, or matter (rūpa); the factors of mind—all the different mental elements that operate both emotionally and cognitively, including feeling and perception and attention, as well as

all the unwholesome emotions, the afflictive emotions of greed, envy, hatred, delusion, as well as the refined and sublime meditative states and qualities that Rinpoche was talking about today—compassion, faith, renunciation, loving-kindness, joy. These are all in a category called cetasikas, or mental factors.

The third of these ultimates in the usual realm is called citta, or consciousness—the thing that knows all the others. Those are in the realm of existence. The fourth ultimate reality is nibbāna.

Matter, mental factors, and consciousness—that's a pretty concise map. I mean, that's a good map for what exists.

But as the Abhidhamma view evolved over time, people really concretized these things until they acquired more importance than they should have. Particularly, this notion of their independent existence became too entrenched, and people lost track of the emptiness truth. Or you could say they lost track of the unifying truth that holds all existence together.

This was the very notion that Nagarjuna attacked in his central work that we've discussed several times: *Verses on the Fundamental Middle Way*. He showed that all these dhammas—all these different kinds of elements—are dependently arisen, except for nibbana. All the others are dependently arisen and therefore empty. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate that none of them actually has an independent existence. They all depend on other things.

So you could say that Nagarjuna's real motive in writing his central work was to refute the philosophical position that the Abhidhamma had come to occupy in early Buddhism. Remember, this is about 100 CE. The Abhidhamma view had become too concretized, too entrenched. Nagarjuna came along and basically destroyed it as a philosophical view because his logic was so impeccable. That really opened up the gates for emptiness—and also non-duality.

But I want to stress: it's not that this idea of emptiness is absent from the Pali suttas, the original teachings of the Buddha in Pali. I want to read a couple of passages that really draw this out.

This is from a sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Kacchinagotta Sutta. Someone named Kacchinagotta approaches the Buddha and asks, "What do you mean by right view?"—this being the first factor of the Eightfold Path. He's asking the Buddha to explain what constitutes right view.

And this is the Buddha's answer: "This world, Kacchinagotta, for the most part depends upon a duality—upon the notion of existence and the notion of non-existence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to this world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to this world."

Isn't that beautiful? If you see the arising correctly, you don't cling to the idea of non-existence. In other words, forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, thoughts do arise. There is not zero here. There is something. Because there is something, the notion of non-existence is not right—it's one extreme.

"But for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world." In other words, if we look closely at our experience in meditation, any object that we think exists—you can take that sound as an example—if we stay with it, we see its disappearance. And when we see its disappearance, we know the world doesn't have a solid or permanent or stable kind of existence. No sense phenomenon does.

So the Buddha continues: "'Everything exists,' Kacchinagotta—this is one extreme. 'Everything does not exist'—this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by the middle. With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be. With volitional formations as condition, consciousness comes to be..." And he goes into the chain of dependent origination. You can recognize this as the twelve links of dependent origination. "Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. But with remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of formations..." and so forth. "Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering."

So the key insight here is this: to hold the view that things really exist is wrong. And you can see this is where the world is caught up. If you go to the person on the street and say, "Does this world exist or not?" they'll say yes. If you say it doesn't, you're likely to get carted off somewhere and administered drugs. So in actual fact, the ordinary worldview is that this physical world is the ultimate reality—this is the ultimate reference point. And that is expressive of the view of solid existence.

But philosophers then came along and said, "No, no, nothing exists." But the Buddha said that's too far. So this is the whole idea of things being dependently arisen and existing in an empty way. You can't say they exist and you can't say they don't exist.

There's another way that this is expressed in another sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya that I really love. The Buddha, again, is denying this idea of permanence. He took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said, "Bhikkhus, there is not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same like eternity itself. If there was this much form that was permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, the living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned."

Isn't that interesting? Liberation would not be possible if there was even a speck of matter that was permanent and enduring. Why? Because the universe would get jammed up with existence and nothing could change enough for us to become liberated. So even the path and our liberation depends on emptiness, depends on nothing being fixed within us.

This is kind of a radical statement. I don't know if you've thought about the implications of this, but what does it do to the conventional idea of God? If you think of God as the old man up in the sky with the gray beard who is ever-existent and has created the rest of this, this makes a clear statement about that kind of understanding of God. So that's why it's said that the Dalai Lama has said that Buddhism is atheistic. It's atheistic in the sense of a permanent creator God having any possibility. So this is the statement in the suttas where the Buddha makes that claim. I find that really interesting.

This is Samyutta 22, Sutta 97, called "The Fingernail." The Blessed One took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said to the bhikkhus, "Because there is not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself. If there was this much form that was permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, the living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned." Basically it means it could not be found in this world. So the living of the holy life is only possible due to emptiness.

This really prefigures Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna's whole work is very much along these same lines. So I just want to really make clear that this idea of emptiness, of the mode of existence being between the extremes of solidly existing and not existing at all, is in the early texts from the very beginning. Later Mahayana philosophers drew this out and made it central in the teachings, but it was there from the very early days of the Pali suttas.

In the early days this was understood, but I think what happened is that the Abhidhamma somewhat got elevated over the years, and this kind of emptiness was a little bit lost track of. I think this still goes on today. One of the history books that I read said that in some schools, particularly in Burma and Sri Lanka today, the Abhidhamma is elevated above the suttas as an authoritative reference. I found that really interesting.

Again, I've said this before, but what's so beautiful about the Pali suttas is that they can go with all the different schools. They go with the Theravada, they go with the Mahayana, they go with the Vajrayana. And I haven't really found any contradictions from that base.

So let's take a look at this question again of the non-dual awareness and what this means. The suttas do talk about consciousness and its object as two things. But let's investigate that a little further. We talked about consciousness the other night, but let's look at it again.

As you're listening to this sound, the sound is an object in the physical world. It's one of the sense objects. But within you, as you're hearing, there's a hearing consciousness going on. That's a mental activity or function, because you're not dead. If you were a corpse, or if you were fast asleep, there wouldn't be hearing consciousness going on even though the sound was present. Is that clear? Or if you were deaf—if the ear wasn't working.

So consciousness is there along with the sound in every moment. The consciousness is what holds the sound, and that's what reveals the experience. So the question I want to ask is: Is that one experience or two? You're hearing the sound, right? As you pay attention to the sound, you know there's a physical thing there and there's consciousness. Is that one experience or two?

Let's assume the mind is clear, so we won't introduce defilement, ego, and all that. We're just looking at the bare level of sense consciousness. In hearing, how many objects do you hear? Does the majority vote for one? Any that vote for two?

I also experience it as one, and I want to reconcile that with the teachings. I take it as one experience, and I'll use this bowl to illustrate something. Is this bowl round or is it gold?

Good answer. We could make two statements about it, couldn't we? We could say the roundness is different from the goldness. That's true, isn't it? Roundness is one thing and color is another. But how many bowls are there? There's only one bowl.

So what I'd say is that in the hearing, there's only one experience, but we could pull out two different aspects of it. One's mental and one's physical. Just like with the bowl, there are two different aspects, but it's one unity. That's the way I understand it. In fact, it's the way I often talk about it in teaching Vipassana retreats—that sense experience is one experience, but has two aspects: a mental aspect and a physical aspect.

This is the way I understand awareness being non-dual, even in the classic Theravadan view of consciousness of an object. We don't even have to go to the Rigpa understanding of cognizance and emptiness. Just in the simple Theravadan view of consciousness and object, I actually experience it as a lack of duality. But it can be analyzed into two parts if you want to look that way.

This makes sense. It makes sense to talk about roundness and gold. It makes sense to talk about consciousness and sound, but originally they're not two things. So I encourage you to play with this in your practice when you're doing analytical practice—not when you're resting in the view. Just rest. But as you're looking into your experience, take a look and see if you can get a sense of how awareness and its contents are really one thing.

It's not like awareness is in our brain and the objects are out there and somehow they come together. Rather, awareness and the object are one event which has two aspects to it. I think this is part of the understanding of Rigpa. In the tradition, they often say that appearances and emptiness are inseparable. Awareness and emptiness are inseparable. In the same token, awareness and appearances are inseparable. This is really what's meant by cognizance—the unity of the awareness and its contents.

I think this is also, if you look into your experience, the experience pointed to by the Theravadan analysis. So I believe that the term non-dual awareness can be really comfortable for Vipassana practitioners and doesn't have to seem foreign or even all that obscure. It was strange to me for a long time.

Now, once we get into that level of non-duality—the non-dual awareness—other things fall out of that. Let's just do a short exercise. Think back to why you took up the spiritual path.

As you reflect on the origins of your spiritual journey, there was likely some degree of suffering that catalyzed your entry onto the path. Perhaps intellectual curiosity drew you initially, and the suffering revealed itself later. But at some point, if you're still engaged in this work, it's probably because of an encounter with suffering.

That suffering, for most of us, generated a desire or aspiration to be free—to reach a place in life beyond that suffering. This marked the beginning of our entry onto the path, which we have sustained over time, many of us for years, with great effort and diligence. Along the way, we have felt results, experienced changes in ourselves.

This narrative of the seeker entering upon the path, exerting effort over time, and realizing transformation is an integral part of spiritual life. Without that motivation and sense of progression, none of us would be here tonight. So bear this in mind.

Now I'd like to invite you into a moment of rigpa practice. You don't need to change your position. Simply, as you're sitting there, look back at the nature of mind. See the empty essence and the cognizant nature. Feel the openness of this moment.

Where is the seeker? Where is the one who has journeyed along the path for years? Where is the one who has changed, who has realized results? Can they be found?

Good. That's what I hoped you would discover.

In a manner of speaking, we could say that the seeker, the path, progress, and the end of suffering are all conventional truths. When we actually look for the seeker, the progress, and the path, they're not really there in any solid way. These are conventional truths.

If you examine the bare experience of this moment, there is no seeker, no path, no goal. This is stated explicitly in the Dzogchen teachings, which declare that there is no difference between Buddhas and ordinary beings on the level of ultimate nature. We share the same ultimate nature with the Buddha. The difference, the teachings say, is that the Buddha realizes this and we don't. But the ultimate nature itself is identical.

When we look back at this empty essence and luminous clarity, the Buddha sees this. We see this. This is the way things truly are. When we look in this way, we dissolve the duality between an ordinary being entering the path and a fully enlightened one. We dissolve the duality between the path and the goal. Ultimately, we dissolve the duality between samsara and nirvana.

These represent additional significances and meanings of the term non-duality. They emerge naturally from the implications of non-dual awareness and the absence of ego in the present moment.

Of course, this is on the level of ultimate seeing. On the level of conventional truth—and I appreciate how Gendun mentioned that the statues often appear with arms crossed, emphasizing the unity of conventional and ultimate truth, their inseparability—something beautiful occurs.

One aspect I love about the Buddhist path is that ultimate truth does not negate conventional truth. The conventional truth doesn't disappear. We understand that there is a seeker, there is a path, there is progress, there is movement toward the end of suffering on the conventional level. We honor and respect this through our practice, with our body, speech, and mind.

Simultaneously, we recognize on the ultimate level that our fundamental nature is identical to the Buddha's. On the level of ultimate nature, there is no distinction between Buddhas and beings, no distinction between path and goal, no distinction between samsara and nirvana.

This completes the first area I wanted to explore—some reflection on non-duality. What I find particularly meaningful is the genuine congruence between the Pali texts and the Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings on this matter. I don't believe this represents an area of conflict for us as practitioners.

We can pause here for some questions.

"I want to ask about your last point. In the moment of suffering, when the seeker arises, when there is teaching—at the moment of suffering when the seeker appears, then there is a seeker, right?"

Yes, it appears that way. And if we believe completely in that appearance, we tend to perpetuate the suffering.

When we examine this closely, we see that what gives rise to the sense of the seeker is some kind of clinging. What's actually there is grasping and some identification with it that creates the sense of a seeker and the sense of someone who is suffering. But when we look really closely, there's not actually a separate being there—there is grasping, yes, but no separate self.

At such moments there may be the activity of seeking. If there's grasping, there's some form of craving going on. So it would be accurate to say there's the activity of seeking rather than a seeker.

Someone asked about the distinctions between Hindu and Buddhist views, particularly where Vedanta fits into this understanding. The Advaita Vedanta view comes very close to the non-dual perspective found in Dzogchen. My sense is that there may be slightly more investment in the existent nature of the Self with a capital S in Advaita than there is in the quality of Rigpa—perhaps a bit more attribution of inherent beingness to the Self than to Rigpa. But the philosophies and practices are remarkably similar, and I wouldn't be surprised if Advaita developed alongside Mahayana Buddhism historically, as indeed it did. The Dharma may be one, but there is both Hindu non-duality and Buddhist non-duality.

A student shared that she had asked Rinpoche about the difficulty of staying in Rigpa when experiencing physical pain from illness, and he emphasized how important it is to practice this way to prepare for death, which can be a very painful time. Rinpoche has mentioned that he actually likes to practice when he's sick because he wants to discover whether his ability to rest in Rigpa is conditioned by the clarity of his five physical senses. When we're ill, our physical senses become dull, and he wants to ensure that the clarity of Rigpa isn't dependent on the clarity of the five senses in his practice and understanding. This is indeed an important point for practitioners to consider.

Now I'd like to shift our focus to Tibetan Buddhism itself. Having spent about ten years around the edges of these traditions, I've come to feel that you can't tell the players without a scorecard. There are numerous schools and sub-schools, countless different Rinpoches and teachings and deities. So I want to provide you with a simple overview that will help orient you within the landscape of Tibetan Buddhism.

But first, let me share some of the extraordinary stories that fill this tradition—tales of magic and mystery that seem almost incomprehensible. I want to tell you about the founding of the Kagyu lineage, which connects to the life story of Milarepa, one of Tibet's greatest yogis.

In the Kagyu lineage, but the founder was an Indian teacher named Tilopa. Tilopa was born in 988, about a hundred years before the signing of the Magna Carta, when Europe was a mess of chaos plunging into the Dark Ages. Actually, the Mahasiddhas of India were probably at their peak. Buddhism was flourishing in India around this time.

Tilopa was born in a Brahmin family but joined a monastery and took up the monastic Buddhist life when he was relatively young. But in the middle of his monastic life, he was visited by a vision. A dakini came and gave him an initiation or an empowerment and delivered this message: "Speak like a madman, leave the robes, and practice in secret."

He took it to heart—just from the vision of a dakini that appeared to him. So he left the monastery and went out to practice very raw ascetic methods. He became reviled for having cast aside his Brahman heritage and the monastic life. But he continued with these rather ascetic practices for over ten years, just wandering around. But he hadn't yet realized.

Then he decided to retire to a small hut in Bengal and just meditate. While he was living in this small hut in Bengal, he had another vision—this time of Vajradhara. Vajradhara is one of the deities in the Yidam practice. And Vajradhara communicated to Tilopa the essence of reality. At that moment, Tilopa became fully realized and began to teach. This was happening in India, so it hadn't gotten to Tibet yet.

Then a little bit later, Naropa came along. Naropa was born in 1016, so he's about thirty years younger than Tilopa. Naropa was born to a wealthy family, ordained, and became a great scholar. He really fell in love with studying and rose to the position of abbot of Nalanda University, which was the great Buddhist institution in northern India. He continued his course of study.

One day he was sitting out in the courtyard at Nalanda studying a text, just continuing the scholastic track. This old woman appeared next to him. The old woman had a dark blue complexion to her skin. Her eyes were red and really sunken. Her mouth was gaping and her teeth were all rotten. She was leaning on a cane.

She said, "Oh, what text are you studying?"

Of course, Naropa was very polite—she may have had bad breath too, but he didn't recoil. He told her the text that he was studying.

She said, "Do you understand that text?"

He said, "Yes, I understand the written words."

And she started laughing, very happy, joyful. "Oh, he understands the written words!"

Then Naropa wanted to please her even further, so he said, "I also understand the deeper meaning."

Then the old woman started crying. Tears just started rolling down her face. She just started weeping.

He said, "Why are you unhappy? I thought you would be happy that I understand the deeper meaning."

She said, "I was so happy when you told me the truth—that you understand the words. But then you lied. You lied and said you understand the deeper meaning, and you don't. You're just a scholar, and you haven't put these teachings into practice to realize them. You need to find my brother and get him to instruct you. That's my order to you."

And then she disappeared on the spot, vanished. He realized that she was a dakini.

So what do you do if you're the abbot of Nalanda and a strange-looking old woman comes and tells you you don't understand anything and then vanishes? Well, a lesser being would probably have said, "Oh, too much curry for lunch. I better go have a nap." But it's really a testament to Naropa that he didn't. He took her message as real.

So he went and announced to the monastic community that he was going to leave his post as abbot, give up his monk's robes, and wander looking for this brother whose location she never told him. Didn't tell him the name of her brother, didn't tell him the location. And so Naropa did it. All the other monks were saying, "You can't do this. You're going to be considered a fool. You've risen to such a place of eminence. You're the highest monk in this whole district. The patron is going to be extremely disappointed if you do this. He'll take away our grants." But Naropa had such conviction that he did it.

So he went off and wandered to the east. For years he was wandering in the forests, in the jungles, in the mountains, everywhere he could looking for this brother whose name he didn't know, whose location he didn't know. And he had many, many trials, many difficult situations. He didn't see any relevance to them. He thought they were all just obstacles, wastes of time, not learning anything. Later, of course, they all turned out to be really crucial dharma teachings. But he didn't see it at the time. He thought he was just wandering in bad fortune, and he didn't feel he was learning anything.

Finally, he became so despairing that he gave up hope. "I'm never going to learn anything. I'm never going to find a brother. I'm never going to become realized." And he decided to kill himself. Just at that moment, Tilopa appeared.

Tilopa was the "brother" that he had been instructed to find, although he didn't know the name. Tilopa appeared as a blue-black figure, cotton trousers and a topknot, big eyes shot with blood, red eyes. And Tilopa told him that he had actually been accompanying him all the way. He knew that Naropa was actually a practitioner of great capacity and that he shouldn't give up, that he was very capable of realizing the teachings.

So Naropa became Tilopa's disciple and practiced with him for twelve years, went through many, many hardships that were said to be the result of his past karma—physical suffering, emotional suffering, spiritual suffering—awful, for twelve years, not really realizing.

Finally, Naropa came to Tilopa. Tilopa said, "Okay, the time is ripe. I'm going to give you the final teaching, the final oral teaching." So he said, "But first you have to make an offering to me." Naropa said, "I don't have anything but my body." So he cut off his fingers and gave Tilopa his fingers and the blood from his fingers as his offering.

And then Tilopa said, "That'll do." And he picked up a dirty sandal and smacked Naropa in the face with it. At that moment, Naropa lost consciousness. But when he came back into consciousness, he realized. He saw the ultimate truth and his mind was liberated. From then on, he was a great mahasiddha who taught many, many people.

One of the people he taught was a Tibetan named Marpa. Marpa is the one who really brought the lineage into Tibet and established the Kagyu lineage. Marpa became the teacher, the root teacher of Milarepa. And that then is the line of descent for the rest of the Kagyu lineage. But it arose out of the mahasiddha lineage in India.

So these mahasiddhas are wild, wild people. And that wild energy and the mysterious, crazy, irrational, unconventional defying of social conventions—all those things pervade, particularly the Kagyu lineage and the Nyingma lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

And we can take a couple of questions. Annabelle?

Yes. I don't know whether he knew of the existence of Vajradhara, the deity, or not, but it came to him spontaneously in the vision and transmitted the teaching directly. Vajradhara is a very highly regarded deity in the Tibetan system.

As you receive this overview sheet, notice that across the top are the names of the four primary schools in Tibetan Buddhism. I put this together primarily based on one book that I've really appreciated—*Indestructible Truth* by Reginald Ray, a professor at Naropa University. We have two faculty members of Naropa here, actually. Would you want to raise your hands so people can find you if they have questions? Here we have the dean and a professor at Naropa.

This is truly a fantastic introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, the best overview I know of. It will be on the book list, highly recommended. Though not all the information came from this book—some is my own research, so any errors are mine.

I've placed the Nyingma school first because it was the earliest chronologically. Padmasambhava is the figure considered to have brought the first teachings into Tibet in the eighth century, so he appears here as the founder. The current lineage head, formerly Dudjom Rinpoche, is now Penor Rinpoche following Dudjom's passing. I did run this chart by both Gerardo and Sokdny Rinpoche to verify its accuracy.

Among the main historical teachers from the Nyingma lineage, you'll encounter Yeshe Tsogyal, who was Padmasambhava's consort; Longchenpa, sometimes called the Omniscient One, who lived in the fourteenth century and wrote many books now available in English translation; and Patrul Rinpoche, whom Rinpoche mentioned the other day as that wandering beggar who humbly referred to himself as "an old dog."

I've also listed some current teachers in the Nyingma lineage. Some of these figures could actually appear under Kagyu as well, as they're sometimes considered non-sectarian or Rime teachers. But I've placed them in the Nyingma category because they primarily teach Dzogchen as their main meditation practice. These are names you might encounter as you explore books and teachings from recent masters. A couple of Western teachers in the Nyingma lineage—Lama Surya Das and Sultrum Allione—are currently active.

Then I've included the central deities, important monasteries connected with this lineage, and the core teachings. In this lineage, Vajrasattva is truly central, as Gerardo explained this afternoon in the Ngondro practice.

Both the Kagyu and Nyingma schools are extremely practice-oriented. As Gerardo mentioned, if you enter these schools, they'll have you meditating very quickly. They also emphasize lay practitioners strongly, so many lamas in these two schools are married. Sokdny Rinpoche, as you know, is married, though his brother Mingyur Rinpoche is monastic. In these two lineages, you'll find both monks and lay people serving as primary teachers.

The two schools are very closely related in their view. The central meditation teaching within Kagyu is called Mahamudra, which includes a component that Kalu Rinpoche says is identical with Dzogchen—called Essence Mahamudra. There are several different Kagyu schools. Sokdny Rinpoche and his father actually belong to the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, but also hold Nyingma transmission, so they maintain both. The Kagyu and Nyingma schools overlap significantly and remain on very friendly terms.

The next school, the Gelug, represents a different approach entirely. I initially thought the Dalai Lama was the lineage head of the Gelug school, but Rinpoche corrected me—the Ganden Tripa, the head of Ganden Monastery, holds that position. Ganden is one of the most important Gelug monasteries. The Dalai Lama, however, is indeed a Gelugpa monk.

In the Gelugpa tradition, the emphasis remains firmly rooted in monasticism, which is why I include the Vinaya as one of their central teachings. In fact, Gerardo mentioned he couldn't think of a single Gelugpa Lama—a traditional Lama—who's married. Virtually all Gelugpa Lamas are monastics, reflecting their very strong emphasis on monastic life.

There's significant adherence to Mahayana teachings. They eventually engage with Tantra, but generally much later in their training. The emphasis falls heavily on Mahayana teachings, on bodhisattva vows, on bodhicitta. While these elements exist within the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions as well, they're more at the heart of the Gelug approach.

Stephen Batchelor shared that he trained in the Gelugpa tradition as a monk under Geshe Rabten for seven or eight years and never learned how to meditate. This is not atypical. In the Gelugpa tradition, you might go twenty years before they actually allow you to sit on a cushion and receive meditation instructions. Stephen felt he had to leave the Gelugpa tradition to learn meditation, which led him to Korea where he became a Zen monk.

There's tremendous emphasis in the Gelugpa tradition on study. Monasticism, study, strict adherence to the Vinaya—these are the defining characteristics. Actually, someone mentioned yesterday that they were with Lama Yeshe at one of his monasteries in England and they were meditating. They definitely have all the tantric practices and they engage with them, but primarily through visualization. Where the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions—with their lay lamas and married lamas—practice through both visualization and actual practice with a consort, the Gelugs maintain their celibate approach.

The Sakya lineage presents an interesting case. It's the least visible of the four schools in this country. None of us could think of any Western teachers from the Sakya lineage, and only Rinpoche could identify contemporary teachers within that tradition. I'm uncertain whether it's simply smaller in this country or just less prominent, but it remains alive and thriving.

I find it helpful when listening to Tibetan teachings to identify which school they originate from, because the flavor changes distinctly with each tradition. This was one of my motivations for covering these differences. As you begin exploring readings from this tradition, notice which school you're engaging with and observe their particular flavors.

Regarding Sakya's characteristics, Gerardo told me it resembles Geluk in emphasizing extensive study before meditation practice. And to answer the question about lineages—Lama Palden, who teaches locally, belongs to the Kagyu tradition.

A lama's consort in these traditions, if they're lay practitioners, is typically their wife. They often marry someone who shares their commitment to practice in that style. There are countless stories of solitary lay practitioners living remotely with consorts who are also dedicated practitioners.

There are also many accounts—I can't recall the specific book—of women Vajrayana practitioners who chose their consorts deliberately. These women lived in remote places and possessed profound spiritual power. The dynamic doesn't flow in just one direction.

"For example, how does the Dalai Lama have such elevated status?" Nancy asks. It's an excellent question. If the chart shows four schools on equal footing, how did the Dalai Lama attain such an exalted position? He serves as both the head of the government in exile and the spiritual head of all schools.

Politics. It was essentially political maneuvering. For many centuries, the Kagyus actually held political leadership in Tibet. Then an alliance between the Gelugs and the Mongolians—I believe it was with Genghis Khan—shifted the balance of power and elevated the first Dalai Lama to overall leadership. This happened during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama, long ago. Our current Dalai Lama is the Fourteenth.

Power struggles have persisted throughout Tibetan history because Tibet functioned as a theocracy. Tremendous wealth connected with the monasteries and their heads created ongoing conflicts for control of that wealth and power.

This brings us to recent controversies, like the recognition disputes. After the Sixteenth Karmapa died, two candidates were put forward as his reincarnation. The Dalai Lama designated one—the young man who recently escaped from Tibet and is now being trained in Dharamsala. Another candidate was favored by the Sharmapa. This represents an obvious power struggle, because whoever gains recognition as the Karmapa will wield enormous influence—monasteries, donations, students, visibility.

The Dalai Lama's endorsement carries tremendous weight, but supporters of the other candidate remain. Sometimes even the Tibetans themselves are uncertain. The majority of the time, however, the Dalai Lama's recognition proves decisive.

"What does the word tantra refer to?" Lee asks. I think Gerardo touched on this today, and I mentioned it the other night. The tantras are practices that take the awakened state as the basis for the path. All Vajrayana practices are considered tantric practices, with underlying texts called tantras. The practices Gerardo discussed—the ngöndro, visualization, and nature of mind practices—are all part of the tantric tradition.

Vajrayana tradition and encompass the profound methods of working with awakened awareness itself.

The word "tantra" itself carries deep meaning - it refers to the continuity or thread that weaves through all experience, connecting the relative and absolute dimensions of reality. In the context of Buddhist practice, tantra represents those teachings and methods that work directly with the nature of mind as it already is, rather than seeking to purify or transform it into something else.

A student inquired whether tantric practices exist in Buddhist schools other than Vajrayana. While tantra is indeed primarily synonymous with Vajrayana Buddhism, it does appear in the Japanese Shingon school, which is itself considered a form of Vajrayana. However, Shingon maintains only a portion of the full range of Vajrayana practices, primarily focusing on certain deity visualizations rather than the complete spectrum of tantric methods.

It's worth noting that tantra extends beyond the Buddhist context entirely - Hindu tantric traditions also exist, representing their own profound spiritual methodologies and understandings of the sacred dimensions of existence.

The exploration of these various approaches to awakening - whether through the gradual cultivation of the Sutrayana path or the direct recognition methods of the Vajrayana - reveals the extraordinary skillfulness of the Buddha's teaching. Each approach offers its own gateway to liberation, meeting practitioners wherever they are in their spiritual journey and providing the precise methods needed for their particular temperament and capacity.

What remains constant across all these traditions is the fundamental recognition that awakening is our birthright - not something foreign to be attained, but our very nature to be discovered and embodied in each moment of our lives.

CHAPTER 250

Integrating Vipassana & Dzogchen

Guy Armstrong · 48 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong shares his decade-long journey of integrating Vipassana meditation with Dzogchen teachings. Drawing from his background in the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition and Thai forest lineage, he explores how these two approaches complement each other beautifully. Armstrong explains that Vipassana excels at showing how the mind gets trapped through clinging and provides detailed tools for understanding mental formations, while Dzogchen offers precise guidance for recognizing intrinsic freedom available in each moment.*
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> *The talk addresses key concepts including the nature of non-clinging, the innate quality of mindfulness, and practical guidance for when the mind becomes calm in meditation. Armstrong emphasizes how Dzogchen teachings have illuminated aspects already present in the Pali suttas, particularly the effortless approach referenced in the Sutta Nipāta. He provides detailed instructions for combining both practices in formal meditation and daily life, while addressing common obstacles like doubt and the tendency to expect dramatic experiences when looking into the nature of mind.*
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> *This integration honors both the conventional truth of gradual development through effort and the ultimate truth of immediate access to awakened awareness, embodying what Armstrong calls "the gold standard" of complete dharma understanding.*

This evening I want to talk particularly about taking the practice home with us, and especially direct comments to Vipassana practitioners about integrating the two practices as you go home and continue with your meditation over many years.

It's interesting as people trickle in from the lobby for the talk this evening, noticing that the effect of ringing the bell did not have the same impact tonight as it did a couple of nights ago. This may bring home to us that the prospect of stabilizing in the view may be a little more formidable task than we had thought before we had a couple of hours of conversation. So welcome. This is a little taste of the world of reality that you'll be entering tomorrow and a little bit of the challenge that's involved in really integrating this practice into every moment of life.

I want to talk tonight about the way my own understanding has changed since I connected with these teachings about ten years ago. To put it in context for those of you who know the Vipassana scene, the dominant paradigm—really the only paradigm that

I had to go on at that time—was the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition out of Burma, along with a little of my experience as a monk with the Thai forest tradition. But the dominant paradigm in this scene was out of Burma, this style of mental noting where one would apply a soft label to the predominant experience of every moment and connect with that object firmly with mindfulness. The path was seen as one of gradually weakening the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion through this applied mindfulness and reaching successive stages of the realization of the unconditioned. In that process, some of the elements of bondage would be permanently uprooted. That was the background I was coming from and that most of our scene was in ten years ago when we first encountered these teachings.

I realize that over that time, as my understanding has shifted, that's also been true for a lot of the other teachers in our scene, as well as the IMS community on the East Coast, our sister center. As that has happened, these teachings have been sifting down into the way we've been presenting Vipassana and Dharma practice in general. To some extent, I think we take for granted today some of the central concepts that have actually been infiltrating Vipassana from the Dzogchen view.

Just to mention one example: I was having a conversation with someone this afternoon who said one of the things they thought was pretty unusual was the instruction to turn the awareness back on itself. The comment was that they'd heard that from a Vipassana teacher about ten years ago. But my suspicion is that instruction came either from the Dzogchen teachings or from the Advaita teachings ten years ago, because it wasn't in such common parlance back then. But it is now. We often say things like that on Vipassana retreats now—maybe not in the hall, but to individual yogis. So I think that the integration is starting to happen, and I think it has a long way to go. We will mature as a sangha and as teachers too, I hope.

One of the things that I've appreciated is that the exposure to these teachings has not weakened my faith in what we've been doing. And Rinpoche said something very similar this afternoon. He said, you don't have to change the practice that you've been doing, whether you're coming from Vipassana or Zen or any other Mahayana or aspect of Vajrayana practice—those practices are all still valid. I had some little concern that I would start to think that my practice was an inferior practice or that it wasn't quite up to par. Rather than that, it's actually strengthened my conviction that what we have been presenting through the Vipassana teachings over these years has been right on track. But what it has done is brought out some aspects that I've started to appreciate more than I had before.

Basically, I found that for myself, the two systems of the Vipassana practice and understanding and the Dzogchen practice and understanding are highly complementary. Each tends to fill in an area that the other doesn't. When we put them both together, we get a very beautiful and complete picture of a Dharma path. It's not the only Dharma path—obviously, Vajrayana has its own Dharma path that doesn't particularly rely on our style of Vipassana practice. So it's not necessary. But for me, the Dzogchen view and the Dzogchen practice completed an aspect of Vipassana that had been lacking from my understanding. I'm very, very grateful for that, and I intend to keep respecting it, honoring it, and practicing it for the rest of my life.

Very simply put, I appreciate Vipassana because it's very clear on how we get caught. It provides a really detailed view of the way that the mind can get trapped by clinging in all the different forms. And it gives us excellent tools for looking into those fixations closely enough that we really understand them. I think it's through looking closely to the body—the pain that develops in the body and the reactions of aversion that come out of that pain—that we learn how to release the quality of aversion to unpleasant experience. That's a huge step, a huge movement forward.

Most of the world, if experiencing pain, is stuck in the aversive reaction to it. Through exploring the body so thoroughly, we learn how to liberate that reaction of aversion to unpleasant bodily sensations. That's kind of Vipassana 101. Then moving more into the side of the mind, we become so familiar with all the different mind states that can come and obscure our innate clarity. We become really familiar with the movements of wanting, of grief and sadness, of fear, of self-judgment. All the different manifestations of the neurosis of our day come up and are seen so clearly. It's what we spend a lot of time talking about on Vipassana retreats.

I don't know if you remember that story of the Burmese hunter who was told that there was a rare bird that hung out in a part of the forest, and he was sent out to find the bird. Through looking for the bird, he explored the whole forest and got to know it in intimate detail.

He discovered that in the process of searching for that elusive bird, he had learned every tree, every stream, every path through the forest. Similarly, through our dedicated Vipassana practice, we really come to know the mind and its reactive possibilities so intimately that none of them can trick us anymore. We've seen all the different flowers that can bloom from the garden of craving, and we recognize each one through that careful, moment-to-moment attention to the mind.

To sustain this investigation, we need a foundation of stability. I deeply appreciate the shamatha base that most seasoned Vipassana practitioners develop, which becomes a tremendous asset when moving into Dzogchen practice. This understanding of the body, this familiarity with mental states, this knowing how not to get caught in any of them, along with the basic stability of attention—these are strengths our community has cultivated well.

What Dzogchen offers as a complement is a precise, elegant, and beautiful description of the intrinsic freedom that is right here, available in any moment. This was something that through the first twenty years of my Vipassana practice had not been clear to me. I still thought I had to keep observing objects, connecting with phenomena, slowly building mindfulness little by little. Someday, I imagined, I might have some kind of enlightenment experience and then I would know freedom.

These Dzogchen teachings opened the door to discovering where freedom actually lies—here and now. They showed me how to feel it, how to have it as part of my daily experience. This brought the goal of practice into the present moment, and my dharma practice took on a much greater flavor of contentment. I no longer felt I had to keep striving for something in the future; I could find fulfillment here and now. My practice began to embody the flavor of resting in a contented state.

I'm reminded of that poem by Sogyal Rinpoche where he says, "There's nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural place." This is a beautiful and liberating discovery along the path. When you find this, the path and the goal truly come together. You realize that resting in your natural place is also what furthers the unfolding. This is one of the dualities that resolves when you recognize this intrinsic freedom—when you rest in that freedom, it does the work of the path for you.

I find these two approaches very complementary and together quite complete and satisfying. I want to speak about integrating both the views and the practices. For me, integrating the practice came easily, but integrating the views has taken longer—about ten years.

The view in the Pali suttas is developmental. You start from delusion and defilement, work to build wholesome factors that counter unwholesome qualities of mind, and over time these wholesome factors grow strong enough that the mind gains momentum in a positive direction. All this positivity is viewed as the result of effort, beginning with mindfulness and leading to concentration and insight. The effort to move out of unwholesome states gains momentum and builds into the wholesome.

In this sutra understanding, we don't question concepts like effort, path, goal, progress over time, samsara being different from nirvana, enlightened beings being different from ordinary people, wholesome and unwholesome states. In this way, you could say the Pali suttas present a rather dualistic view of spirituality.

The Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions present the view from the other shore—speaking mostly from the awakened state, describing how things look from having reached the far bank. There's much less emphasis on developmental aspects in their philosophy.

What I greatly appreciate in Dzogchen teachings and Tibetan Buddhism generally is how they honor both sides of these views. The developmental aspect of progress over time, the perseverance that Rinpoche spoke of, with the path as conventional truth—the evolution of spiritual practice through effort. And then the ultimate truth, which is here now, accessible to everyone in this very moment.

The image of the deity with both arms crossed, emphasizing the indivisibility of the developmental and ultimate models, represents for me the height of dharma understanding. What's beautiful is that neither view denies the other. The idea of progress over time doesn't negate the intrinsic freedom to be found here and now. And the intrinsic freedom available in this moment doesn't deny the value of stabilization and practice to realize that freedom fully in each moment.

I feel this unity of conventional and ultimate truths is the gold standard by which any spiritual system can be evaluated. The union of Vipassana and Dzogchen embodies this perfectly.

But it's also a valuable lens through which to examine other systems that claim to emerge from a non-dual perspective. When you encounter non-dual teachings outside the Dzogchen framework, observe carefully: do they genuinely embrace the conventional truth, or do you sense that these teachings use the ultimate view to dismiss, negate, belittle, or even humiliate the conventional perspective? Effort becomes part of this equation. When non-dual teachings diminish the conventional view or dismiss the reality of progress, I consider this an incomplete system—one that fails to honor the unity of conventional and ultimate truth. This integration serves as an excellent standard for evaluation.

I'd like to share more about what I personally discovered and gained from these teachings. While the unity of conventional and ultimate truth forms the heart of this understanding, I want to explore how this principle manifests in practice. Dzogchen illuminates certain crucial aspects of Vipassana understanding—not necessarily introdu-

cing entirely new concepts, but bringing forward elements that haven't been emphasized in the tradition from which most of us emerged. These teachings place these elements at the very center, revealing their importance for transforming how we perceive reality, ourselves, and our practice.

The first illumination, which several practitioners have mentioned in personal conversations, concerns the central question in Dharma practice, highlighted through Rigpa meditation: are you clinging or not clinging? This inquiry reveals itself repeatedly in Rigpa practice. When fixation—clinging or grasping—is absent, we rest in the natural state of mind, in the nature of mind itself, in pure awareness. When fixation enters, we lose that natural ease. The entire path unfolds from moments of non-clinging, of non-grasping.

Sometimes my entire practice reduces to this single observation: Am I clinging or not? Is fixation occurring or not? This simplicity brings immediate benefit, because when grasping is present, suffering inevitably follows. This practice returns us continuously to the Four Noble Truths: Are you experiencing the second noble truth—suffering through craving—or resting in the third noble truth—freedom through letting go?

The second revelation concerned the innate quality of mindfulness. I had always understood mindfulness as the result of effort, something to be cultivated and sustained. But these teachings revealed mindfulness as an aspect of natural clarity—what Rinpoche called alertness. This knowing quality of our experience exists continuously when we simply allow it to be present. This understanding connects mindfulness to the unconditioned realm and provides profound reassurance and trust.

Another crucial insight involves how to practice when the mind becomes calm—a common dilemma for Vipassana practitioners. We encounter this situation frequently on retreat. A practitioner progresses through the usual fluctuations of practice, experiencing purification, moments of clarity, but generally finding practice quite unstable. This pattern often continues for the first several years of dedicated practice, through multiple retreats and ongoing daily practice—lots of ups and downs without much stability.

Then one day they arrive at the interview transformed: "I touched a level of peace I've never known before. The mind was simply empty, with very few thoughts arising. There was just tremendous spaciousness. I could rest there effortlessly, with objects naturally arising and passing away. What do I do now? Returning to the breath feels clunky. Continuing to note all the changing phenomena seems awkward when this vast peace fills me for the first time in my life."

We offer several instructions at this juncture: simply rest in the peace, focus on the stillness as an object of meditation, or open to sounds as a way of enhancing the spacious quality.

Continue meditating with the breath because it will deepen that sense of peace. But here we have an option that I feel really makes the most of the situation: take a look into the nature of mind and notice that its very essence is stillness or emptiness and its very nature is awareness, and rest there. This gives a very clear answer to that question.

Of all the techniques, I think that the Dzogchen view offers the best words for how to do this—how to do non-doing most skillfully. Because when you know how to do non-doing most skillfully, you can eliminate some of the unnecessary little doings, and it's easier to really stop doing. I found the instruction so precise, so helpful for really stopping the doing when the mind gets calm.

This non-doing is an important piece. I want to emphasize that Vipassana practice also leads to non-doing, but I just don't feel that our vocabulary is as refined as the vocabulary in the Dzogchen tradition. It was never presented to me in as refined a way, I'll say that.

I'd like to read this from the Sutta Nipata, part of the Pali Suttas. This is from the Buddha, and it changes the emphasis from a lot of his other teachings: "One insight is that effort is the basis of all suffering. The other insight is that by the complete cooling and cessation of effort, no more suffering is produced. Every form of suffering grows out of effort. Eradicate effort and no more suffering is produced. When all effort has been abandoned, there is the freedom of the effortless." This is from the Sutta Nipata, stanzas 743 to 745.

So these effortless teachings are there, right at the base of our lineage, but they're not always articulated quite that clearly.

I have a friend who I mentioned at the beginning of the retreat who did basically two years of intensive practice nonstop in Burma, sleeping one hour a night. Other than that, he was sitting and walking all day except for meals and showers, in silence. Obviously his practice got very, very deep. At one point, his teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, told him, "Okay, now what you need to do is stop doing this. Stop doing."

Up until then, the teacher had been stressing effort, effort, and more effort. He'd come in for an interview, report what was going on. Teacher would say, "That's okay, but try a little harder. Try harder." Come back the next time, report what was going on. "Okay, but try a little harder." And finally, he came in, reported, and the teacher said, "Stop doing. Stop making effort."

So it's there, but that message has been kind of hidden in our tradition.

Something else connected with this is the importance of relaxation, always stressed in the beginning of Dzogchen instructions: first relax, then open. I want to read this from a Christian contemplative perspective: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear." It has that same quality of relaxation—the less you reach for the ultimate, the more it will appear. Why? Because you are the ultimate. The reaching is a movement away from that nature. So the relaxation is a key piece.

Once you realize that relaxation is moving toward the ultimate, then it also answers the question of where to look for nibbana. This is also not spelled out so clearly in the teachings, and we just hope that someday, like a rare bird in the forest, it's just going to come and land on us—that nirvana is just going to appear. But the Dzogchen teachings really point out: follow awareness to its source. That's where you're likely to find nirvana.

The point of view is that there's another alternative to going through all these different path moments, four different stages of path moments which can seem very remote. There's the possibility of stabilizing in this innate freedom—another alternative, being able to live from a place of real freedom when we can stabilize in the view.

The Importance of Devotion

In the Vajrayana tradition, the relationship to the guru and the practice of guru yoga is central to the unfolding of the heart qualities. We learn love, devotion, and surrender through that openness. In our tradition, this is brought out through the practice of loving-kindness, and particularly loving-kindness with benefactors.

If in your practice of loving-kindness, where you send loving thoughts to different individuals, you pick a benefactor who is very wise, very compassionate, very realized, something remarkable happens. As you hold that person in your heart for eighteen or twenty hours a day, which is what our practice is, you start to have a kind of mind meld with them. Their innate wisdom starts to pervade you, and you realize that this is your nature, too. So I discovered that we actually have a devotional avenue, which is the practice of loving-kindness. And this is coming more and more into our retreats.

There's also devotion to the Buddha himself, which you hear in the monastic traditions. There is a lot of devotional practice—the lighting of candles, the incense, the bowing, the chants, and as Jim said, a lot of emphasis on appreciating the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. We've stripped most of that out from the practice here at Spirit Rock, and the Mahasi tradition has also stripped that out. So the monastics have had it, and we have chosen not to import it in most of the retreats at Spirit Rock.

These are the highlights of the flavors within Vipassana that I have learned to view differently, to hold differently, to appreciate more through the influence of this practice.

Integrating the Two Practices

I'd like to also talk about how to integrate the two practices in formal practice. I really appreciate what Rinpoche said this afternoon, which is that when you go home, feel free to continue with your old practice and just add this practice to it. So you don't have to change anything that you've been doing before, whether you're coming from a Zen background, other Vajrayana practices, or Vipassana. You can add this in as another element.

He also said something interesting once. There are not very many Tibetan teachers who have a great deal of respect for the Theravada and Vipassana practices. I don't know if this is news to you all—I'm sorry if it is, but it happens to be true. And Rinpoche is one of the few who do have respect for what we do, which I think is why he spent a lot of time with us and why he comes here.

In an interview at Tara Mandala, he actually said that he thought Vipassana was the best preliminary practice for Dzogchen compared to ngöndro. He felt Vipassana was a better preliminary practice than the ngöndro. After I'd read that interview, I asked him why. And he said, "Because Vipassana practitioners know really well how to meditate, so it's really easy for them to learn how not to meditate." So again, he really does appreciate what we do.

The two practices are very complementary. I have been combining them over the last ten years and have found it very helpful. But I want to say something first about conversations I've had with people on this retreat about their Dzogchen practice.

Trust Your Experience

My main advice, coming from perhaps fifty percent of the conversations I've had, is this: trust your experience when you look. When you do the technique of looking to see mind essence, trust in what you get. Because so many conversations have been about, "I don't think anything's happening for me. I don't think this is really it. Nothing's happening when I look. I've been doing it for all these days, and I'm not getting it."

And every time I'd talk with the person, they actually were getting it. But they hadn't realized they were getting it. Because, I think, we're expecting something special—some special experience, some fireworks, maybe neon lights, or the Buddha dropping by to announce, "This is it."

And it isn't like that. It's not meant to be like that. It's not a necessary sign of it happening. Really, most of the time, it is quite ordinary. I mentioned that sometimes when people really start looking and getting it, big releases happen. That does happen for some people. I was giving a talk at IMS, our sister center...

And I just dropped in toward the end of the talk on mindfulness the words "rest in awareness." Did I tell this before? Okay, I just dropped in the words "rest in awareness" as an alternative. One of the meditators started to go into convulsions because she, for the first time, dropped her effort. And when she dropped her effort, her body relaxed so much that there was just a huge energy release, just from hearing the words "rest in awareness."

This didn't happen, fortunately, to the rest of the retreat, but it's an exceptional case. But things like that can happen, but that's like one-tenth of one percent of the time. 99.9% of the time when we look, the experience is very ordinary. The difference between it and regular experience or regular meditation is mostly one of perception. It's not that the content changes so much, but we see it differently. And there's just a subtle shift in perception.

So I think the most reliable guide is the one that Rinpoche mentioned. There's a greater sense of openness. There's just some little kind of opening up, or sometimes it could be of more space. Something else that happens, sometimes things just get a little more vivid. They light up a little more.

Someone mentioned that in looking there was a sense of stopping. And that's actually part of what's intended because the practice we've received is actually only half of the Dzogchen meditation practices. It's the beginning half called trekcho, which means cutting through. And there's another half called tögal that we're not going to learn about this retreat. I've never learned about it. Rinpoche does not teach us, so forget about it. Advanced practice.

So the style of Dzogchen that we're doing is only half of the Dzogchen practice called trekcho. Tögal is the Tibetan word for crossing over. We're doing a practice called trekcho, which means cutting through. And essentially what is being cut through is ego-clinging, conceptual thought, however you want to formulate it.

So this sense of stopping is a piece of it. And take a look and see if when you do the looking, there isn't an element of stopping of other fixations. That's part of the intention. But it may not be so dramatic. It may be subtle. You sort of realize, oh, actually in forming the intention to look, I had unhooked from the train of thought. So something had already stopped a little. But just see if there isn't some little bit of stopping connected with looking and seeing.

So that's the subtlest thing to come to, is this sense of openness that's the revealer of emptiness. It's subtle, but just if you can get that little sense, oh, things open up. I can see the space that everything's held in. That's the emptiness aspect. That's the harder of the two to connect with.

Then the other half of it is the knowing. The knowing just means appearances are still happening. This is not subtle. It just means, oh, I'm still seeing, I'm hearing, I'm feeling body sensations, thoughts are going through, I have some emotion. That's all the knowing means.

It's not looking for a state of awareness that's apart from phenomena. You're not trying to divorce yourself from your ordinary experience and find some more refined transcendent state. It's just meeting phenomena clearly, knowing them clearly. It's so ordinary that it's easy to overlook.

But anyway, if you just get that little sense of openness, and then you realize you're still experiencing phenomena, then the knowing is there. That's all. That's all. Whatever form and flavor that takes for you, who knows if this is definitely rigpa or not definitely rigpa or not. That's not actually the key at this point. The key at this point is just to trust and believe that what you've got is the closest you can get to the ground. And so that becomes your basis.

That becomes the basis for your practice. And then you just trust that if you keep doing that, more and more of the ground will be revealed. That's really the heart of it.

And it's so ordinary that we may tend to overlook it. But as you do it again and again, you start to pick out what I'd call the common denominator of the experience. You start to see that there's a flavor that comes in over and over. Regardless of what your phenomenal world experience is, regardless of what emotions are there, or what you're

looking at, or what sounds are there, or whether you're moving fast or whether you're moving slow, there's this kind of common thread of openness and awareness that you just start to become more familiar with.

And then you start to gain more conviction—oh yeah, this is what they're talking about. And all you have to do then is rest in that as long as it stays.

It's a little bit like you're walking down the street and you smell a bakery. You're not at the bakery yet, but you've picked up the scent of it. So you just keep following the scent, and you know that if you just follow the scent, it leads you right to the bakery. And that's enough. So just keep following the scent, over and over and over.

The main obstacle that I've seen from the people I've talked to is doubt—just lack of certainty if this is it. And so the antidote is trust. Just trust that what you get when you look is your path. And follow it.

In integrating the two approaches, I'll talk about how I work in retreat and with my practice, how I work in daily life.

In retreat practice, I still spend the first period of time on a shamatha practice with support. What I'm doing these days is either loving-kindness practice, the practice of metta, or meditation on the breath—one or the other. I just finished a month-long retreat in April, a period of silent practice, and I actually spent the first two weeks doing shamatha with support. And then in the last two weeks, I opened up more to choiceless awareness and the Dzogchen practice.

One of the things that was very apparent when I put in that foundation of shamatha is that by the time I opened up to the Dzogchen, the mind was very stable and the response from looking was very strong. As the shamatha collects the mind energy, the response from looking and seeing becomes even more vivid, because the mind has become more powerful. But it's not necessary. Rinpoche said that a number of times—you don't have to have that base of shamatha. You can just start from looking and seeing. So this is not what everybody has to do. It's just what I like to do.

Another question that came up in talking with people was: what's the difference between shamatha without support and Rigpa? So I just wanted to touch on that briefly.

The key thing is that in shamatha without support, we're really focusing, connecting and sustaining with the objects that are arising. That's the point. We're really looking at the object part of the experience in each new moment. In the Rigpa practice, there's a knowing of appearances, but there's also an attention to the knowing, so that there's an understanding that the knowing is taking place and the knowing is empty. So we don't

fasten on objects out of any intention—although we will connect, the attention will move to different objects. But what we're mainly tuning into is the emptiness aspect and the knowing aspect.

In daily life, then, you can follow some combination of these two in a similar way. I often follow a similar process. If I don't have a lot of mental stability, I'll do some focus practice first and then I'll open up to the Dzogchen practice. So I might do my breath for the first thirty minutes of a sitting and open up to Dzogchen practice for the last thirty. If I feel I have a bit of mental stability when I sit down, I might go straight away into the Dzogchen practice. And if I really have no mental stability at all, I might just stay with awareness of the breath for the whole time, or whatever shamatha practice you choose.

But again, if you particularly feel drawn to go straight to the Dzogchen practice, that's okay too, whether you have mental stability or not. It's okay anytime. It will build its own stability of mind.

As you move into the more open kinds of attention, there's kind of a continuum—shamatha without support or what we'd call choiceless awareness. And I want to mention one other practice I've worked with that I like a lot. It is shamatha either with support or without support, but instead of focusing on the object, you focus on the consciousness of the object. So when we talked last night about the hearing of the sound, we mentioned that there are two aspects to it. There's the sound, which is physical. There's the consciousness of it, which is mental.

What if in your meditation practice you started to tune into the consciousness side of that unified experience? That becomes very interesting. There is knowing taking place. Can you intuit the knowing as you hear this sound? You know it's not happening to a corpse—you're knowing it. The sound is easy to pick up. Can you intuit the knowing that's going on?

A student shared that when she was eighteen, she was doing a lot of drawing. Instead of drawing objects, she started drawing the space around the objects. This reminded her of the instruction about not focusing on the object, but looking at what holds it, which is the knowing or the consciousness.

This approach is different from the Rigpa practice in that you're actually moving to and focusing on an aspect of your experience. You're making that the focus for the meditation, looking at the knowing in relation to one thing. You're definitely making the intention to connect and sustain with that one thing, but it moves in the direction of more open awareness.

You can do it with samatha with support—focusing on the breath for a whole hour. You can do it samatha without support. The emptiness doesn't come in right away, but the more you practice this way, the more you see that everything's an appearance in consciousness. The emptiness of phenomena really starts to show through, and it becomes a very light practice.

You can do it all day, in walking, in sitting, in work meditation, in eating. Whatever you're experiencing, you look at the knowing side in relation to that particular phenomenon. There's a samatha with support quality there—you're focusing. But you're looking from the knowing side. The emptiness starts to pervade more and more, and it brings about a lot of lightness in the practice.

Finally, there's the last step: having the attention be on the empty nature of mind, the empty knowing. If focusing on the consciousness of objects is a lightness, this is kind of a champagne practice. It's light and bubbly. It's delightful.

The last thing I wanted to say is that, as Rinpoche did, I encourage everyone to give plenty of opportunity for the formal practice to work its magic. This means putting ourselves in the situation—whether it's an hour a day or one retreat a year or a number of retreats a year—to really allow the path the time to do its work of transformation.

I think we're well set up in the Vipassana community for those kinds of retreats. We have a two-month retreat here every February that had over eighty people, either for one month or two months. This year, there's the three-month course at IMS in the fall. We have many opportunities for long practice.

One of the structural problems perhaps with Vajrayana practice right now is that there aren't so many opportunities for those intermediate-length retreats. Many seven-day retreats go on in the Tibetan community, and then there are people who go and do three-year retreats. In between those lengths, the options are more limited, though places like Rocky Mountain Shambhala Center do offer extended retreats.

But if those opportunities start to fill in within the Tibetan community, that would be very beneficial. I believe there are some emerging possibilities, and hopefully there will be more and more as time goes by.

I'd like to close with a quotation from Patrul Rinpoche that beautifully encapsulates this intersection point I believe is valuable for both Vipassana and Dzogchen practitioners. These are the pith instructions from Patrul Rinpoche:

Don't dwell on the past.
Don't invite the future.
Don't alter the innate wakefulness.
Don't fear phenomena.
Apart from that, there's not a damn thing.

Let me repeat these essential teachings:

Don't dwell on the past.
Don't invite the future.
Don't alter the innate wakefulness.
Don't fear phenomena.
Apart from that, there's not a damn thing.

These simple yet profound instructions point directly to the heart of practice, whether we approach it through the methodical awareness of Vipassana or the immediate recognition of Dzogchen. They remind us that our essential nature is already present, already awake, requiring neither addition nor subtraction—only the courage to rest in what is naturally here.

CHAPTER 251

Delighting in the Wholesome: The Power of Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · 53 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the transformative power of mindfulness (sati) as outlined in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). He explores how present-moment awareness serves as "the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief."*
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> *Armstrong skillfully addresses the challenges long-term retreatants face when confronting what he calls the "karmic tide" - the momentum of past actions and mental patterns that arise in meditation. He explains how mindfulness acts as a dam against this flood of thoughts and emotions rooted in our attachments and investments in work, relationships, and identity.*
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> *The talk emphasizes cultivating "warm attention" - a quality that merges metta (loving-kindness) with mindfulness, creating an intimate, non-analytical engagement with present-moment experience. Armstrong draws on forest tradition teachings and personal anecdotes to illustrate how consistent practice gradually weakens mental fetters, like sails rotting when exposed to the elements. He concludes by connecting individual liberation to universal compassion, referencing the conversion of King Aśoka and Śāntideva's bodhisattva vows, reminding practitioners that their inner work serves the welfare of all beings.*

The talk tonight is called Delighting in the Wholesome.

First I want to say what a pleasure it is to be here, to be able to drop into the retreat at this point, to be teaching with great colleagues and old friends, to share this unfolding that you are all doing. It's really an honor and I'm happy to be with you. I appreciate that it's not an easy thing to do, whether it's six weeks or three months. It requires a lot.

Coming back to IMS, I'm reminded of my early days here. I was on one of the early staffs. Thinking about my first retreat experience here—I did my first Vipassana retreat in 1976, and Joseph was one of my teachers. After that retreat, I was very inspired by the practice. In the time that I could, I went home, packed up my house, put all my belongings into storage, sublet my apartment, and moved to IMS as a yogi.

I did a six-month retreat when I came here, which started with a 30-day self-retreat. At that point, I'd only done one 10-day retreat. That 30-day self-retreat was one of the hardest experiences of my life. I can't believe, looking back, that I did such a stupid thing. But I got through it.

At the end of the retreat, we were going for exit interviews with Joseph, who was in what was the library at that time, what's now the downstairs office. I was sitting outside on a bench and met one of the fellow meditators who happened to be Rodney Smith. Many of you know him—he's a senior teacher here at IMS. I'd just been practicing for one month, but Rodney had been practicing for three or four. So to me, he was a super advanced meditator, God if you will, at that point.

I said in a very humble way to Rodney, "Please tell me, does it get any easier?"

Rodney's reply was, "As far as I know, no."

That was our experience at that time. I'm happy to report, after some years, it has gotten easier. So there is good news in the story.

But still, six weeks or three months, even for long-time meditators, can really take us to the limit of our capacities, can really take us to the edge of our patience, our tolerance, our faith in ourselves, our courage, our endurance. Most of us bump up against a wall somewhere, if not often, in a long retreat like this. So I want to acknowledge the incredible work that you're doing. I know that it's not always easy, even for veteran meditators.

I just talked with a good friend who came out of a long retreat this year. Before they started describing their experiences, they said, "You know, I want you to know this was no small thing. I sat for this number of months. It was no small thing for me." This friend has many years of meditation experience. They said, "I want you to know parts of it were hell." Then they smiled and shrugged. I just smiled with them because I know that sometimes it's like that, even for veteran meditators.

It reminded me of an article I read in the New Yorker not so long ago. I want to share a little bit of it with you. This is by an author named Ian Frazier:

"According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be, given everything

it must put up with. Nine out of ten of the respondents stated that they would give up completely if they only knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail. In a personal note in the afterward, researchers stated that statistically speaking, life is, quote, 'just too much,' and as yet they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through with it at all."

I hope you know this is a parody. I thought that this kind of applied to retreat practice as well—that we really don't understand how anyone gets through it at all. The difference is that here you've also given up the hope of something coming through in the mail, so it's even more difficult.

Whether you've been here practicing for one day or for six weeks, sometimes the question arises: what does this have to do with how hard life is? Is it just accentuating how hard life is? Sometimes in the middle of a retreat, we forget why we're here. Often when I start a retreat, I find the doubting mind comes up early on very strongly as I think about all the other things I could be doing with my time. And I wonder, what am I doing here?

So I wanted to talk this evening about the answer to that question in a very simple way—what it is that we're doing here, where it leads, and why we do it.

When the Buddha talked about the Eightfold Path, he talked about three factors related to meditation. I like to think of the Eightfold Path as his description of his awakened mind, but in terms that we can understand. So I like to think of these three meditation factors as very direct pointers to the qualities of an awakened mind. And these three factors are effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

Effort, as we relate to it here, is the willingness to come back again and again. Mindfulness is the quality of connecting with our experience in the moment. And concentration is that unification of mind that lets the mind be sustained in the present moment over a period of time.

I'd like to talk mostly this evening about the quality of mindfulness, the practice of mindfulness. I want to start by reading the end of the Satipatthana Sutta, the Sutta on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the key discourse from the Majjhima Nikaya where this practice is laid out. This is the very last paragraph of the Buddha's words:

"Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, and for the realization of nirvana, namely, the foundations of mindfulness."

That paragraph moves me every time I read it—that this simple practice of paying attention in the present moment is the direct path for the disappearance of pain and grief. Not just for the easing of pain and grief, for the disappearance of pain and grief. That's a very powerful statement. How does that work?

We might say that the very heart of the meditative path, the heart of the Buddhist path, is this quality of presence, of being oriented and abiding in the present moment. The sign on the casino wall says you must be present to win. It's true in the casino and it's true in the meditation hall. The Dalai Lama said, "The present moment is the only place that we can experience love."

When we dwell in the present, we avoid a whole host of problems because the present is so simple and is largely not a bad place to be.

Here's another quote from the Buddha: "Let not a person revive the past or on the future build their hopes, for the past has been left behind and the future has not been reached. Instead, with insight, let her see each presently arisen state. Let her know this and be sure of it, invincibly, unshakably. One who dwells thus ardently, unceasingly, by day, by night—it is she who has a very auspicious day."

So this quality of present moment orientation is a quality that lets us see things just the way they are, free from the haze of conceptions. This direct, non-verbal relation to reality lets us see things without choosing, or comparing, or evaluating, or judging, projecting, or interfering. It's such a naked relationship to what is, to reality. Nyanaponika Thera used the term "bare attention" because we aren't adding anything to this present moment experience.

We often say that what we're doing here is practicing the Dharma. I really like to think of it as practicing the truth—practicing being with the truth of things just the way they are, not the way we imagine them to be, want them to be, wish they were, remember them being once, hope they will be in the future—just the way they are exactly in this moment.

Reality is our teacher. Another word for reality is nature. Nature is our teacher, the nature of all things—the internal nature of mind and body, the outer nature of mind and body. My teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, liked that phrase a lot: "Let nature be your teacher." Nature is all around us. We are nature. All we need to do is wake up to nature the way it is, and it will reveal its truths to us.

So we see things freshly. Seeing things freshly, we may see things beyond preconceptions. There's a story of Picasso when he was still a young artist and not yet famous enough to be universally revered. Someone came to him and said, "I don't get this art

you're doing. Why don't you paint things that look like real things? That's the kind of art that I like." And Picasso said, "Well, what do you mean? What looks like a real thing?" The man pulled out something from his wallet and said, "Well, look, I want to show you a photograph."

This is something real. And he showed him the photograph—a picture of his wife. Picasso looked at it and said, "Is this what she looks like?" The man replied, "Yes," without thinking twice. Picasso said, "She's very small, isn't she? And also rather flat. This probably doesn't really look like your wife at all."

Sometimes in our meditation experience, we find things that don't look the way we think they should look. But instead of trusting our opinion, it's really better to trust our experience, to trust our direct knowledge of the way things are.

The Buddha said we make four fundamental errors in thinking the world is one way and finding out it's another. We think it's permanent when it's impermanent. We think that it's satisfactory when it's not. We think that it's self when it's not-self. And we think that it's all beautiful when some of it is not beautiful. These are the four errors that we see beyond when we come directly in touch with reality as it is.

So why is this important? I'd like to just ask you to try a little experiment. You don't have to do anything different or change your posture or even open your eyes. But I'd like you to just sit for a minute, simply being present, without any effort or any focus. And I'd like you to just notice how long you can sit like that before the mind starts to drift away from presence.

As it starts to drift away from presence, don't correct it. Let it drift for a bit. And now I'd like to ask you to correct the drift, if you've had any, and come back to presence. Connect again just with what's fresh and real. And whenever you're ready, you can just stop the exercise.

So I want you to just take a look at the quality of the experience from those two modes. Ask yourself, what was the experience like when I was just connecting with presence? Anybody notice any particular qualities?

Open, relaxed, ease, vibrancy or aliveness, soft, intimate, simple. What was it like once you let the drift go on for a little bit? What was the feeling of that experience? Tightens up, agitation, the peace being disturbed, things being stirred up.

You've seen this hundreds of times. I know each of you have seen this hundreds of times in your own practice. I just want to draw it out again as a little microcosm. In a way, this is the essence of the meditative learning—that when we can connect with the

present moment, we discover an openness, intimacy, ease, relaxation, softness, simplicity. And as the mind drifts away from that, we wander into these stirred up waters, agitation, unease, all the confusion that comes from the whirlwind of thoughts and feelings. I know this is not news to you, just a reminder.

So in one interview recently, I was talking to someone and the person said, "But the present moment is so pleasant. Why don't we just stay here?" I like that question. Not to think about or speculate about intellectually, but it sort of stops the mind, doesn't it? Asking a question like that can stop the whirlwind for a little bit. Why don't we just stay here in this present moment?

Looking at that question, I think there are a number of answers. One reason is just habit. We've developed the habit for a long, long time of going away, of enjoying the realm of thinking of past and future conceptualization. A lot of the meditative training is retraining that habit of mind so that over time there comes to be a preference, a clear preference from the gut, from the marrow, from the center of our being for presence as opposed to wandering, for simplicity as opposed to complexity.

But there's another reason, I think, for that drift that we experience.

When we retreat from the busy world and sit in meditation, we encounter what we might call the karmic tide of thoughts and feelings. We come into the meditation room and stop the body, but the mind doesn't necessarily stop because the mind has been cranked up over many, many years. When we sit, we experience this movement, this cranked-upness, really directly.

That movement of mind that's been cranked up has been generated by areas where we've invested our emotional energy—areas of life that we've cared about, that we're attached to, if you like that expression, where we put our energy with a certain desire for outcome, desire for result.

As we sit, often those areas of life where we've invested our thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears start to come back into consciousness. It may be around intimate relationship or the absence of it. It could be about family members who we're separated from. It could be about career or livelihood. It could be about money, success.

The investment in all those areas that we've lived out through our daily life—that investment is all part of karma. Karma is essentially action with a motivation, and where we've acted with that investment of energy, we have created our own karma, our own action from a motive. When we get quiet, we experience the momentum of that. It plays out again in our hearts and minds and bodies.

This is one important meaning of the equanimity phrase that you've probably all practiced with, which says, "All beings are heirs to their karma." This is one way we inherit our karma, right here on the cushion, as this tide is made up of our past actions.

The Buddha said, "By whatsoever a person has clung to, by that Mara will track them down." Mara is the mythological figure in the suttas who represents the obstacles to the deepening of the meditation. He's portrayed in the suttas as an actual being, an external figure, can also be understood as a force within our own mind. Whichever way you take it, the meaning is the same: by whatsoever a person has clung to, by that Mara will track them down.

Frankly, as silent retreatants, we are all sitting ducks for Mara. Mara's got a direct bead on us in our quietude. It was really interesting—I was sitting at the Forest Refuge for a month in April. It had just opened and there was a two-month period of teacher retreat. I settled in fine, and the month had its usual ups and downs. But in looking back, I sort of looked back on it at the end of the month, and I saw that I got caught three times in relation to outside life things. The first one was about work. The second one was about relationship. And the third one was about money. It's just like Mara had a checklist on me. "Okay, what are the big areas? Yeah, relationship, work, and money. Okay, I'm going to get him on each of these." So I had my sufferings around those during the retreat.

What we find when we sit is that we're kind of at the mercy of this tide to a large extent, especially in the beginning of practice. We don't have much choice about what comes into the mind. It just comes when it comes. Sometimes it's really pleasant. We might remember something really fun that we've done. We might think about a vacation we're planning. We might bring up a meta-subject, a person that touches us a lot. Sometimes it's not very much fun. Sometimes we remember old conversations, unfinished business, times we got angry, times we hurt other people, times other people hurt us. And it can be really painful. An incident like that comes in the middle of a silent retreat and it impacts us really strongly because we're so open.

Sometimes we invest again and we amplify the karma, we perpetuate it, we build it up again, because we dwell with our thoughts, we have more reactions of hope or fear, liking or disliking, and the karma keeps getting extended.

Someone asked a while ago in an interview, "Well, when these thoughts come up about outside life situations, shouldn't we follow them? Because these are important areas of our outside life. Shouldn't we follow them and use this time in retreat to sort those out?"

This is a good question. I wouldn't just dismiss this question. Outside life and retreat life are not two separate things. It's one life. But I think that the understanding for me is more like this.

Those issues will come up anyway, whether we want them or not, to some extent. When they come, the question that occurs to me is, how do they best get resolved? Is an issue like that best resolved through more thought, or is it resolved best through a quiet intuition? And over years and years of practice, I've come to have a lot of trust that outside issues, life issues in general, get solved best by a quiet intuition.

So the thoughts come, and I try to just let them be on the back burner. I don't try to engage them at all anymore. Sometimes they engage me, but I try not to engage them. And I trust that if there's an important issue there, it will come at the right time. The thoughts will die or pass at the right time. But if it's something ongoing, I let the silence take care of it. And I trust that grounding my being more and more deeply in the silence will develop the place where the intuition can come from, that can really be a creative solution. As I've just found for myself, when I think and think and think about life issues, it never seems to go anywhere. So I trust in that intuition, and I try as far as possible not to engage with those thoughts.

Well in retreat, of course, there's also the same karmic tide. It's not a different mind here and out there. It's the same mind. As retreat, especially a long retreat, starts to become our life, this is where we invest. This is where we start to have our preferences, the events of our days, and the things that we cling to or push away, the things that are hoped for, the things that are not hoped for.

So other questions start to go around. It's not so much after a while. It's not so much about work or relationship anymore. It's more about: was my sitting calm or was it agitated? Was my body comfortable or was it painful? Were my mind states today happy ones or suffering ones? Did I sit enough hours and did I walk enough hours? Was I deepening today or was I going backwards?

Now, these are not in themselves bad questions. As meditators, one of the skills you want to develop is the ability to understand the signs of your practice, particularly around factors like the hindrances and the seven factors of enlightenment or the five spiritual faculties—to understand when they're active and when they're absent, when wholesome states are present and when unwholesome states are present. So asking questions like this is not unskillful.

But as we get invested and this becomes our life, these questions get tinged and we lose the objectivity of dharma reflection and they come to be taken really personally. So rather than the clear dharma look of: how's the factor of mindfulness, how's the factor of energy, how's the factor of concentration, all the questions really start to hinge around one core question: Am I a good meditator? Or am I a terrible meditator? And that question has a deeper hook, which is: what does this mean about me? Am I an okay person? Or am I a really inadequate person? And that generates again the whole karmic tide. And we become attached to the results of meditation, sitting after sitting, day after day. And then these are the thoughts that preoccupy us. These are the thoughts that take us away from just the ability to connect simply and directly with what is.

The moment is so simple when we can come out of this karmic tide of investments in past and future. So this karmic tide is a big deal. It is what carries us away from the present moment. It does reveal our areas of holding, the areas of clinging—the very foundation of self or ego by what we've held on to. And it's a projective power of mind. It's a projection onto the present moment of something that's not intrinsically real. It's mind-made stuff. It's all stuff of thought and projection.

And then mindfulness, as we drop it into this situation, at first doesn't seem like anything. We're mindful for a few moments and it doesn't touch this stream of thinking and feeling, past and future. It doesn't seem to have any impact on the projections. That's really because at that point our mindfulness is like a baby or like a child and these projections are all grown up. We've been doing these projections for a lot of years and we generally don't take breaks from them. We've been doing them pretty non-stop for a lot of years. So they've built up a lot of power and the mindfulness can be fairly new.

But then we start to look. When we are able to connect with the present, when we are able to abide with reality, we discover that different feeling of ease, simplicity, calm, peace. And we start to realize that there is an opening that's happening.

And we realize that mindfulness has stopped that flood. It is the most effective way to stop that karmic tide. It's mindfulness that has done it. It's our connection to the present moment that has halted the advance of that karmic tide.

The Buddha said, actually, mindfulness can dam any flood. Any flood. He used a lot of images of water for our wave of thoughts and feelings. He talked about the tides of conceiving, the ocean of samsara, the flood, the influxes of the taints or asavas.

So every moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom where this karmic wave has been halted, and we connect with reality. And remember that reality is what we learn from. So it's really important in your practice to get in touch with this feeling of direct presentness, of peace—the peace that's found in that connection. The Buddha said that this peace is the highest happiness.

Please start to recognize when it's there so that you know when mindfulness is strong and you can feel the effect of it. This really is the path to the end of suffering. And all our practice is just about making that mindful space more and more of our life—more and more of your day, more of the sitting, more of the walking, more of the meals.

As we start to get familiar with that peace and ease, we find that there's a warm quality in that attention, in that mindfulness, that it starts to take on some of the tinge from our metta practice. It's not a cold, analytical, detached, scientific observation. It's a full engagement of your being with the present.

When the fullness of your being starts to come together through this factor of concentration, of unification of heart and mind, then your heart is all there with the present moment, as well as your head, your brain, your intelligence. And so the merging of metta and mindfulness is in this quality of connecting to the present with what we might call a warm attention—a warm attention in the present moment.

There's an image that I heard on NPR a few years ago that's just stuck in my mind as the sort of manifestation of this warm attention. You may remember that a few years ago, the Italian actor Roberto Benigni won the Academy Award for the picture *Life is Beautiful*. He got the Academy Award and he made an over-the-top acceptance speech, as Italian actors are meant to do.

Because of his fame at that point in time, he got to go to the White House and meet the president, who at that time was Bill Clinton. He entered the Oval Office to meet Clinton, and instead of slowly walking over, extending his hand and shaking hands, Benigni ran toward Clinton and leaped up into his arms. Clinton is a big guy, and so he was able to just catch Benigni's legs and hold him. There they were in this embrace where he was just holding Benigni by the legs, and Benigni had his legs and arms wrapped around Clinton's waist and chest. And Benigni said, "I'm so happy to meet you."

Clinton's Secret Service was freaking out on the other side of the room: "What is this guy doing to our president?" But that's always stuck in my mind as a really beautiful symbol of warm attention. Knee pain? I'm very happy to meet you.

So not only does mindfulness have a quality of being really vitalizing and connecting in the present moment, but it's also onward leading. It's not just good in itself, but it has a future. Its power builds. As you've been here over your six weeks, if you've been here that long, as you stay here over the next six weeks, you will feel the incredible power of mindfulness as it builds. It really changes our relationship to life, but it does it one moment at a time.

So we may not know it's doing it while it's happening. It's like when the leaves change. From one day to the next, the color isn't that dramatically different. But after two weeks, it's really different. And by November, it's really different.

The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, 'This will come to nothing.' By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." That's what we're doing moment after moment. We're filling that jar. And when that jar gets fuller and fuller, it has an incredible power. It can dam any flood. It doesn't matter how old the flood is. It doesn't matter how many years we've invested in that karmic tide.

Sometimes very clear. Sometimes angry, sometimes loving. Sometimes confused, sometimes seeing things distinctly. The whole range of the human experience probably came through you today.

The question we can ask ourselves is: which of these states am I watering? Which am I feeding? Which of these qualities, which of these states of heart and mind, am I investing my time in? Am I investing my interest in? Because the ones we invest in are the ones that grow stronger.

This is why the Buddha taught that we can choose our rebirth. We can actually choose what we become. Because the mind state we die in, the one we're most familiar with, the one we've watered the most—that's the one that has the momentum to carry us forward into the next moment, into the next breath, into the next day, into whatever comes after this life.

So we have tremendous power in this choice of what we water, what we cultivate. If we keep watering the states of aversion and greed and delusion, they get stronger and stronger. They become the karmic tide that sweeps us along. But if we water the states of loving-kindness, of wisdom, of mindfulness, of compassion—these are the ones that grow.

The practice is really this simple: noticing what's arising, and then making the choice about what to water. When anger arises, we can water the anger by thinking about why we have a right to be angry, by rehearsing our grievances, by building our case. Or we

can notice the anger with mindfulness, see it clearly, and choose to water the mindfulness instead. We can let the anger be there without feeding it, without giving it the fuel it needs to grow.

When fear arises, we can water the fear by spinning stories about everything that could go wrong, by catastrophizing, by letting our imagination run wild with worst-case scenarios. Or we can notice the fear with gentle awareness and choose to water the qualities that can hold fear with compassion—the mindfulness that sees fear as just another passing mental state, the loving-kindness that can embrace our frightened heart.

This isn't about suppressing anything or pushing anything away. It's about the very simple practice of choosing what to feed. Like drops filling a jar, each moment of mindfulness, each moment of choosing to water the wholesome qualities, adds to our capacity to meet whatever arises with wisdom and love.

Sometimes clear. That's the truth of things. That's the truth we see when we turn on the lens of mindfulness. Experience is always changing, and we don't have to look for a place to land because it will keep changing.

I just came a few days ago from California, and some of you may know—if you've been out in the world—that California had record highs a week ago. It was 92 degrees in San Francisco. Ninety-two degrees! It was pretty nice the first couple of days we were here, and when I saw the sun this morning, I thought, "Oh, this is the way New England fall is supposed to be. This is great. It ought to be like this."

That's a misleading thought, because it wasn't long before it started to cloud up and get colder. As long as I'm stuck on the idea that this is the way things ought to be, then I can't stand the change in weather. As long as we're stuck on the idea that sitting should always be calm, we can't stand the agitation. We think it's wrong because it's supposed to be different.

But mindfulness doesn't have any should-bes. Mindfulness isn't stuck on an ideal. Mindfulness is willing to learn from reality. How are things in this moment? Let me find my freedom in relation to that.

Our moods and all the changing experiences of meditation are just like the weather. If we have an idea it ought to be a certain way, we're going to suffer in the face of change. The refuge in this change is mindfulness itself—finding within ourselves that quality that can make clear connection to the moment, to reality, in whatever form it's expressing itself. This becomes a refuge beyond change: this clear knowing.

The word upekkhā, usually translated as equanimity, has the etymology of "looking on." So equanimity is about looking on without being so moved by the changing conditions of life. Mindfulness can be with any experience.

Ajahn Sumedho, the Thai forest monk of American descent, has a phrase I like a lot for relating to changing conditions. He says, "It's like this." Whatever experience he's having—it's like this. Desire is like this. Non-desire is like this. Ill will is like this. Metta is like this. Suffering is like this. Non-suffering is like this.

There's so much wisdom in this phrase because we all have both sides of these dualities—we'll all experience them during our time here. If we think one way is how it ought to be, then we'll suffer. But wisdom can see them both and understand them both. Suffering is like this. Freedom is like this.

In connecting with this truth again and again, we develop awareness that's less and less preferential, more and more open to things just the way they are.

I want to talk about concentration on another night, and I'm sure we'll talk about effort as the retreat goes on. Because it's the early days for some, midpoint for others, it's also a good time to talk about motivation and intention.

A student said in an interview a few months ago, "I came on this retreat because I'm concerned about how to respond to events in the world. But one doubt that arises for me is: Is this just a self-centered practice? Are we just doing this for ourselves?"

I wonder how each of you responds to that. You're all experienced meditators, and I have confidence you've answered this for yourselves already. So this is really just a reminder—as Steve mentioned last night—that we're doing this for the welfare of all beings. The freedom we hope to discover is not to be kept to ourselves, but to be shared and dedicated to the welfare of all beings.

There's a beautiful story of the conversion of King Ashoka. I don't know if you know this period of Indian history, but a couple of hundred years after the Buddha's death, Buddhism went through a golden age in India. This was about 250 BCE, 250 years before Christ.

And it was due to the conversion of a king who was a very ruthless and warlike ruler. He was standing on a battlefield after a victory his armies had won, surveying the bloody carnage of dead and injured bodies scattered across the field, and he was filled with remorse at the suffering he witnessed.

From one side, he saw a Buddhist monk walking through the dead bodies, through the carnage, crossing the battlefield. At that moment he was struck by the serenity of the monk—he could see the radiance, the peace and luminosity radiating from his face.

In that instant he reflected: "I have everything. I am the richest man in this country, and I am filled with remorse at what I have done. That monk has nothing, and he is radiant. What is going on here?"

Because of that encounter, he began to investigate the teachings of the Buddha. He became converted and completely transformed his kingdom. He stopped all wars and informed neighboring countries that he was no longer interested in invading them. He outlawed animal sacrifices throughout the land so that animals would be protected, and he distributed the wealth of the kingdom equitably so that everyone had enough to eat.

It became not only a golden age for people living there—who felt safe and prosperous universally—but he also became a great patron of the Dharma. There was a tremendous flowering of Buddhist schools and philosophies in that era, around 250 BCE. This was the impact of one person who had practiced to serenity. The influence of one monk walking across a field at the right moment opened up this vast transformation in society.

So I hope that part of your aspiration, as Steve spoke about last night, is returning to your life and being that one monk, that one nun for somebody. We never know where our ripples will reach. We never know who will be touched by whatever degree of freedom, compassion, or love we have cultivated.

I think it's important to remember this in our intention as we practice—that we are not practicing solely for ourselves, but there is a whole world out there that truly needs what you are developing, what you are bringing to fruition.

I want to close with a quotation from Shantideva, a ninth-century master in India. This is something I carry with me when I travel—a small traveling altar made by a member of the Spirit Rock Sangha. It contains a photograph of the Dalai Lama in the center and this quotation from Shantideva on the sides. The Dalai Lama says he is deeply moved by the teachings of Shantideva, so I would like to close with a reading from this passage, which is very close to the Dalai Lama's heart.

"May I be a guard for those who are protectorless, a guide for those who journey on the road. For those who wish to go across the water, may I be a boat, a raft, a bridge. May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall, and a lamp for those who long for light. For those who need a resting place, a bed. For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

Like the great earth and the other elements, enduring as the sky itself endures, for the boundless multitude of living beings, may I be the ground and vessel of their life. Thus, for every single thing that lives, in number like the boundless reaches of the sky, may I be their sustenance and nourishment until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering."

Let's sit together for a moment in silence.

For every single thing that lives, in number like the boundless reaches of the sky, may I be their sustenance and nourishment until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering.

CHAPTER 252

Awakening Concentration

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of samādhi (concentration), one of the most important yet least understood aspects of Buddhist meditation. Drawing from the Buddha's own journey with his first two teachers who taught the formless attainments, Armstrong explains why concentration is emphasized throughout the suttas as the culminating factor of the Noble Eightfold Path and a key component of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment.*
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> *The talk clarifies that samādhi is better understood as "unification of mind" rather than exclusive focus, addressing common misconceptions about concentration practice. Armstrong discusses practical methods for developing samādhi, including breath counting techniques and the importance of wholehearted attention. He emphasizes that concentration develops naturally through sustained mindfulness and genuine interest in the meditation object, rather than through striving or craving for particular states.*
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> *Offering both encouragement and realistic expectations, Armstrong shares his own journey from weak concentration to stronger samādhi through dedicated long-term practice. The talk concludes with the Buddha's description of how purified concentration serves the ultimate purpose of liberating insight, making this essential factor accessible to both newcomers and experienced practitioners seeking to deepen their understanding of this crucial aspect of the path.*

The subject of the talk tonight is awakening concentration. I wanted to talk about this factor of concentration because it's a very important aspect of meditation practice, but I think it's one of the least understood. Certainly in my own practice it took me a long time to get a sense of what this actually was in my felt experience of Dharma practice. So I want to open up the topic tonight and explore various aspects of concentration.

Concentration has been part of our human experience, I think, as long as there has been human culture. Throughout recorded history in ancient cultures, and today in indigenous cultures, there have been people who have used the technology of concentration to participate in their society. In traditional cultures, these people were known as shamans—men and women who use techniques such as drumming, chanting, singing, and dancing to put themselves into some sort of altered state of mind. Through this altered state of mind, what might be considered a trance state, they were able to contact different energies, sometimes talked of as contacting the spirit world. By contacting

those energies they could bring them back and use them for healing, for good or for ill, or for magic. This ability to enter into other worlds through altered states is basically due to the power of concentration, a very old technology.

In the time of the Buddha, this technology had already been developed to a high degree in northern India. When the prince Gautama left his palace and embarked on his quest, he came to his first teacher. The teacher said, "I will teach you my Dhamma." The Buddha spent time with the teacher, learned to meditate, and attained the teacher's same level of accomplishment. He was invited to teach alongside him. The Buddha later described this as the teacher having pointed out to him the plane of nothingness. That was the highest meditative attainment that his teacher could offer him.

When Gautama went into that state, there was no suffering, there was great peace, and at that point he said, "I don't think this is what I'm looking for, because at some point one has to fall away from this attainment. It's not the nibbana, the final liberation that I'm looking for." So he left that teacher and went on and found another teacher.

This teacher taught him his Dhamma. The Buddha undertook it and practiced it, attained the same level of accomplishment as the teacher, and again was invited to teach as an equal. Again, Gautama declined, saying, "I don't think this is the nibbana that I'm looking for because with this also it will fall away at some point. We'll have to pass out of it." The second state that Gautama had been instructed in was a higher state than the first. It's called the plane of neither perception nor non-perception. As you can imagine, that's a subtle place. You're not perceiving and you're not not perceiving. That's pretty mystical. But even at this point, Gautama said, "It's characterized by impermanence. It's not what I'm searching for." So he left that teacher.

It's interesting that he records his journey. The Buddha later described his journey in these terms because we see that in northern India at that time, very high states of concentration were practiced and were taught. These are two of the most refined states of concentration available.

Even today, some of this attainment percolates through in our culture. If you look through collections of cartoons, or if you're a fan of New Yorker magazine, which I am, you'll see cartoons that highlight this. There are a lot of cartoons about gurus. Some emphasize more the wisdom aspect. Some emphasize more the concentration aspect. One that I'm especially fond of came from the New Yorker. It showed a guru on a mountaintop, presumably in the Himalayas, sitting outside a cave, dressed only in a loincloth, long white beard, typical image of the guru. Beside the guru was sitting a Western seeker, dressed in modern clothes, clean-shaven, probably just flown in a few days earlier. The Western seeker had obviously just asked the guru a question, and the cap-

tion of the cartoon is the reply to the question. It's the guru saying, "If I knew the meaning of life, do you think I'd be sitting in this cave in my underpants?" This is the wisdom teaching.

But you'll also see in cartoons the concentration aspect of this guru archetype. It's when you see the image of a yogi who's at some distance from worldly life, sitting, probably cross-legged, and wrapped up in a shawl, a meditation shawl. Eyes closed and a sense of being withdrawn from the world. Actually, there are many of these archetypes around our hall. In that archetype, if you tune in to the image that's being portrayed, you get a sense of stillness, a deep sense of stillness, as well as this indrawn quality.

Actually, this meditation hall has a flavor of this kind of stillness. You may not feel it now because you've been here for eight weeks or two weeks, but as someone who comes in from the outside, still involved in daily life, I feel it very tangibly when I come into the hall and sit here. There's a kind of stillness that one can just tap into. I think it's probably the collective vibes of almost thirty years of meditators soaking into the walls.

Some teachers transmit this quality directly. The person who has most impressed me in this way is Thich Nhat Hanh. I don't know if you've had the chance to experience him personally, but he used to come to Spirit Rock once every couple of years to lead an outdoor day of meditation on the land. A thousand people or fifteen hundred people would show up. We built a special platform for Thay to sit on. He would address the people through a sound system, the meditators seated in this kind of bowl-like amphitheater that the land naturally formed. He would give a dharma talk, offer meditation instructions, lead walking meditation. At one time, he led a walking meditation for a thousand people up to the other end of the property and back—it was a really impressive sight.

I sat at one of these day-longs and took in the dharma talk, the instructions, but what most impressed me was the quality of his being. I had never experienced anyone who was that still. The stillness just seemed to radiate from him—through the stillness of his body, through the refinement of his gestures, through the settledness in his voice. I was not the only one who felt it. It was as though, sitting up on that platform, he was casting a spell of concentration over the whole thousand-person audience. It was really something to feel.

I actually felt as I was listening to him—I don't know if this is true or not—I felt that he was so still because he had lost his fear of death. He struck me as someone who had seen so much and gone so deeply within himself, he was no longer moved by the fear of death. That was part of the source of his stillness.

Also within this indrawn stillness in the archetype of the meditator is a sense of bliss. There is a sense of contentment, fulfillment, and satisfaction. These are all aspects of concentration.

Some meditation paths are made up of concentration alone. The purpose, the fruit of the whole path is a state of concentration. This is not true of the Buddhist path, as you well know. The main purpose in the Buddhist path is liberating insight or wisdom. But it includes concentration as a key factor. In fact, it's very hard to overstate the importance of concentration within the Buddhist teachings.

As I've been reading the suttas over the last several years, I've kept coming upon the emphasis on concentration again and again and again. It just pops out at you as you read the Buddha's words. Concentration is the last factor in the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is presented as a sequential development—the first factor leading to the second, the second leading to the third, and so forth. Concentration is the final factor, which means that it's in some way a culmination of the path. Then, of course, it leads back into the first factor, which is wisdom. So it becomes a cycle, but it's considered an advanced development.

When the Buddha summarized the Eightfold Path and described it to other people, he described it in three parts. We often talk about this as the foundation of ethics, called sila, the foundation of meditation, and the third part, the foundation of wisdom, or paññā. But when the Buddha described the path, he described it as sila, samadhi, and paññā. For the meditation section of the path, he used the word samadhi.

We often think of ourselves as the mindfulness club. There's a whole outer movement called mindfulness-based stress reduction based on the principles of our meditation practice. So we generally tend to think that when it comes to meditation, the heart of what we do is mindfulness. And there are good reasons to think that—the Satipatthana Sutta, for one. So why didn't the Buddha say, "Sila, sati, paññā," describing the path? But he chose to emphasize samadhi—sila, samadhi, paññā. Concentration is very significant.

Concentration is also in the seven factors of enlightenment. It's the next to last factor. That is also a sequence, so it's a high factor in that list. And it's one of the five spiritual faculties.

For those who are into lists, I want to be exhaustive here and mention the list of the iddhipadas. This is often translated as the basis of spiritual power. The Buddha was asked, how does one progress along the path? What are the engines that develop power

along the path? And he named basically four factors, which you may have heard of before: zeal, energy, purity of mind, and investigation. This is normally how the iddhipadas, the bases of power, are talked about.

What is often not talked about is that in the suttas, every single one of these factors is paired with concentration in the Buddha's description. So it's zeal with concentration, energy with concentration, purity of mind with concentration, and investigation with concentration. Concentration is being pointed to as the foundation of the development of spiritual power. What that spiritual power gets directed to, we can talk about later. But concentration is the very base of it.

With all this emphasis on concentration in the words of the Buddha, I started to get curious why it doesn't come up that often as a topic for Dharma talks. Just reflect back on all the retreats you've ever been to. How many Dharma talks have you heard on the topic of concentration? I had never given one until a year ago myself, and I hardly remember ever listening to one.

So I got curious. Why is it that we hardly ever talk about concentration, even though it's so central? Well, I realized one reason might be we don't know anything about it. But another reason that occurred to me is that we're a little bit nervous to talk about it because it's such a powerful factor of mind. When you hear it described, it's very easy to generate gaining ideas or a kind of wanting mind around the attributes of concentration.

I was reluctant to give a talk on concentration at first, but having done it, I think it has been helpful for people, so I'm doing it again in this retreat. I think it's worth the risk because you all are committed meditators, dedicated to understanding. If there's any group who's going to be able to hold this with some balance, I hope it's you. So I'll be listening out for things that are said tomorrow in interviews with your teachers. If I hear too many reports, I may not give it again, but I hope that you will hold it with a sense of balance and recognize that concentration is a factor that develops slowly over the path, just as mindfulness does, and not be impatient about its development.

I want to say one other thing about concentration. I'll be describing in this talk how to develop stronger concentration, what some of the attributes and benefits are, and some people may become interested in pursuing it. But it may also not be so appropriate for other people to pursue as a special project. In particular, I feel if your work at this time is healing—healing from trauma, healing from deep wounds, healing from childhood relationship difficulties—it's not necessary to make a special project of concentration. If you simply stay with the ground that you're involved in now, which is

primarily sensations and emotions, that will be enough concentration for the healing work. Don't feel you have to make a special effort in this other direction. What you're doing now is just fine.

So what is concentration? Concentration is the English translation of the Pali term samadhi, but the first thing I have to say is it's not a very good translation. In fact, I think it's a little bit misleading. There's no word in English that adequately translates the word samadhi. It's interesting that that's so. You know how the Eskimos have like a dozen words for snow because they're so intimately acquainted with all the different varieties of snow? What does it mean when in a whole culture there is no word for an important mental state? In fact, I don't know of any European language that has a word for samadhi. What that means is that European culture doesn't understand, doesn't know, doesn't experience this quality directly. They don't have a word for it. It hasn't been perceived accurately.

So that's why as meditators, I think it takes a long time to get a handle on what this factor actually is, how it feels in our practice. It took me a long time to figure out how it was different from mindfulness. It was hard for me to tease those two apart. So that's part of what I want to talk about tonight. What is this thing?

The reason that the word concentration is misleading is that in English, concentration refers to how we focus our attention. We say something like, "I'm trying to pay attention to my book. Please don't distract me with the television." So we're saying that the attention needs to be exclusive and any other phenomena are a distraction, an interruption, something to be avoided. The term samadhi doesn't have any of this connotation of an exclusive attention. That's simply not there in the term samadhi. In English, we're misled into thinking of it in this way.

You can have a very wide open focus of attention and have a great deal of samadhi. You can have a situation where there is no exclusive attention, there's no primary object, and the samadhi can be strong. A better translation—in fact the best translation I can think of for samadhi—is unification of mind. The Buddha himself described it in this way. The mind being unified is what samadhi is about. What does it mean to unify the mind?

When we unify the mind, we reclaim the power that has been dissipated through sending attention off in all different directions—into past and future, into liking and disliking, wanting and not wanting, judging and evaluating. All these movements that take the mind out of its natural relationship to the present are giving away its inherent power, leading to distractedness and fragmentation.

When we reclaim that power through non-distractedness, the mind becomes unified. It becomes concentrated in a way. I like to think of it as being concentrated the way frozen orange juice is concentrated. Have you ever tasted a spoonful of frozen orange juice directly? It's really strong, isn't it? What has happened is that all the excess, all the dross has been squeezed out—the thin water, maybe the pulp, everything that's not essential has been removed, and what's left in that condensation is a very strong kind of essence.

In the same way, when the mind gets unified, it becomes strong. It reclaims all that power we had been giving away. In that strength of mind, one of the first things you feel is stability. For once, the mind is able to stay on the chosen object because in reclaiming its power, it has found its stability. There's a quality of strength and firmness and steadiness that's the first thing you feel with concentration.

This sense of unification also brings peacefulness because we're no longer in conflict with past or future. We're all together in the present and there's no necessary conflict. Other synonyms that describe this state are undistracted, collected, composed, whole, and wholehearted.

I especially like this concept of being wholehearted. This is a really good practice direction. Can we do everything we do in a truly wholehearted way? Can you be with the breath wholeheartedly? Can you be with a step wholeheartedly? Can you be with your work wholeheartedly? And if you're going to think, can you even think wholeheartedly?

Sometimes we try to sneak a little thought in and pretend it's not happening. "No, I didn't do that. I'm with the breath. In, out, in, out..." while thinking about the future. That's what leads to the dissipation of energy. If you're going to think, think wholeheartedly. That means think with your whole heart and mind and body. Bring that same quality into each breath, into each step. That's what brings the mind into unity. That's what collects all that dispersed energy.

So the first important characteristic of concentration is this stability, or you could say a tranquility that comes into the mind. The corollary of that, what flows from that, is the ability to stay attentive to the present moment for some period of time. This stability then leads in the direction of the mind's being unmovable, unshakable, and imperturbable. That's why concentration precedes equanimity in the factors of enlightenment. The state of stability leads into conditions, paves the way for the quality of equanimity.

The stillness that develops from concentration and equanimity is very close to Nibbana, very close to the deathless. There are very few factors that the Buddha described as happening between equanimity and the deathless. It's almost as if this is as close as language takes us to Nibbana—this quality of stillness and equanimity. That's why the factor of concentration is so helpful.

If you feel in life that you're a victim to the forces around you, if you feel that you're being pushed and tugged and forced around by either the events of daily life or your own inner movements of mind, samadhi is the counterpart, the antidote to that. If there's a feeling that life is too much, that meditation practice is too much, that your own mind is too much, samadhi is the factor that gives a steady rudder in the middle of that and lets us move through meditation and through life with a greater sense of groundedness and stability and the inner strength to handle the changes that come.

It's very helpful in meditation practice to get to know the factor of concentration when it's present. How can we recognize it? The first thing to look for is that sense of stability that lets you sustain your attention in the present moment. Start to notice this when it's present. Recognize that this is an aspect of concentration. If you're with a number of breaths in a row, if you're with sounds for an extended period of time, if you're with a body sensation and the mind is not becoming distracted, those are all instances of growing concentration.

There's an exercise that I often do when I sit retreats to develop this quality a little more strongly. I'll mention it to you in case you feel like trying it out. It's a way of counting the breaths—a very classic concentration practice. The way that I tend to do it is to combine it with the noting practice and use a number in place of the touch point. So I'll say something like, "Rise, fall, ten. Rise, fall, nine."

And count downwards to one. Or it could equally be in, out. Doing it backwards from ten makes it a little less likely that you go on autopilot, but you can still go on autopilot, so be careful of that.

Then the rules of the game are: if you miss a breath, you don't get to count another number. You have to go back to ten and start again. In fact, the rule is—the way that I play the game—you have to experience a piece of the in-breath or the out-breath before you can say the next number. If you miss either of them, you go back to the start. But if you can stay with ten breaths in a row and get down to one, then you start again at ten.

If you want to be competitive, you can see how many groups of ten you can put together. I would sometimes count this with my fingers because I got curious. So I would do the ten to one just in my mind, but when I got to a set of ten, I would move a finger apart. Then I would count how many groups of ten I put together.

This is a way of both strengthening your concentration—because you'll find that the counting will let you know pretty quickly when you start to wander. It's a good feedback mechanism. It's also a way of measuring your concentration. So you can try this once or twice a day if you just want to check out where your concentration is at right now. It will be a metric of that.

Don't get judgmental with yourself, please. Use it as an impersonal and objective measurement. Don't beat yourself up about it. It is just what it is. It's not going to change overnight. This is just a way to tell you where it's at.

Another metric is when thoughts come along and you get distracted—how long are you away for? Because as concentration deepens, you will be away for less time when you go away. So it's another thing to look at. Am I away for one breath, three breaths, half a minute, a minute, ten minutes, fifteen minutes? Another way to measure it.

But these two ways—how long we're in the present, how long we're away—are just measurements. They don't give you the actual flavor of concentration. These are like thermometers. If you're melting chocolate and you want to make fudge, you have to stick a candy thermometer in the chocolate so you know when the temperature is right. The little red liquid goes up and hits 350 degrees, and then you know to start working with it. The little red liquid is not the heat itself—it's just a measurement of the heat.

The counting is not the concentration itself. It's just a measurement of the concentration. What you really want to get to know is: how does the concentration feel just in the present moment? What does that feel like?

As you start to measure it and then check into your inner state, you'll get familiar with the sense of stability, of peacefulness, of strength, of firmness of mind that's present. Then you can recognize the samadhi from that. It's very helpful to start to notice when samadhi is present and when it's not.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, under the third foundation of mindfulness, which is citta or mind, the Buddha singled out concentration as one of the states of mind to be aware of. It's a short section. The Third Foundation doesn't list a lot of things to look for. But concentration is one of the states the Buddha said to be aware of. He said the practitioner understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind.

Along with concentration, it's also helpful to monitor your levels of mindfulness and energy. When I'm in retreat, I try to keep an eye on all three of these most of the time. So if somebody just dropped in and said, "How's your mindfulness, how's your energy, how's your concentration?" I could tell them because I would have been tuning into that.

If you look at these three factors, they're really shorthand for the seven factors of enlightenment. Mindfulness is the balancing factor. Energy represents the three arousing factors—it's a placeholder for investigation, energy, and rapture. And then concentration is the representative of the three tranquilizing factors, which are tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

So by staying in touch with just these three, you're really getting a look at the span of the factors of enlightenment and the balance of the arousing and the pacifying factors within that grouping. You'll start to notice that when these three factors are all strong—mindfulness, energy, and concentration—your sitting will feel a certain way. Actually, it feels pretty darn good.

These are the times that you tend to be clear, connected with the present moment, stable, alert, awake, fresh, connecting. The mindfulness is just kind of there moment after moment.

On the other hand, when these three factors dip down and are low, you'll feel the other end of the meditation spectrum. This is when we feel tired, scattered, vulnerable. It's a time when thoughts easily carry us away. It's a time when the hindrances may be really active and we don't feel we can do anything to corral them or keep the mind in the present. The mind's all over the place.

As you start to pay attention to how these factors go over the course of a day, a week, a whole retreat, you'll start to see they all go through their own ups and downs, quite independent of where you're putting your effort. Quite independent.

Concentration, for instance, manifests its nature of impermanence quite a lot. You may have noticed this. You'll come in and one sitting will be really collected, really still, stable. You'll go out for walking meditation. You'll really be with your walking, but you'll come back in and everything has changed. A lot of thoughts, a lot of emotions, a lot of images, kind of wild energy in the body. It may not be that you did anything wrong at all. Your effort may have been quite steady and on track, but it could just be that concentration has gone through part of its cycle. It's exhausted that lifespan. It's fading away. Then the next aspect of experience comes up, which is more scattered.

So in seeing these factors, the way they do their own lives, their own dances, we learn not to take the changes so personally. It may not be that we did anything wrong at all. It's not our fault. But it's simply the factors coming into fruition, stabilizing for a while, and then passing away.

As we track the changes over time, it gives us more confidence it's not that we did anything wrong. Then we notice, okay, energy's low, concentration's low. Do I give up? That's not going to help. Blame myself, get down on myself, get discouraged? That's not going to bring them back together. Just be steady with the effort. Be patient and be steady with the effort, and then you'll see they'll come back together again. Again, not because you made a super effort this time. Just the steadiness of your effort allowed them to collect again.

So in many ways, with these factors, we're along for the ride. A lot of the meditation journey is being along for the ride, and the factors are out of our control. We make our best effort, moment after moment, but then sit back and enjoy the ride. Just show up, and that's the trip.

So how does concentration develop? Basically, it develops through sustaining our mindfulness. The factors in the Eightfold Path related to meditation are right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. Right effort leads to right mindfulness, right mindfulness leads to right concentration. If we can be wholehearted in our mindfulness, the concentration will develop. So that's why the basic instruction is give full attention to one thing at a time. And as you're mindful with that, the concentration will grow.

There's a Korean Zen teacher named Seung Sahn who made this a very central part of his teaching. He said, do one thing at a time. When you sit, just sit. When you walk, just walk. One thing at a time. He was teaching at a center in Providence, his main center. He was eating breakfast there one day. A student walked into the dining room, and you may have heard this story, but Seung Sahn was eating his breakfast and reading a newspaper. The student was shocked. He came up to the teacher and said, "But teacher, you said to just do one thing at a time, and here you are eating your breakfast and reading a newspaper. How can you do this?" He said, "Yeah, do one thing at a time. When you eat and read, just eat and read."

So whatever you do, be wholehearted. One of the key factors in sustaining attention actually is interest.

When you are interested in what you're paying attention to, the mind naturally comes together around that. That's why if you can develop an interest in the breath or in sounds or in your walking, it will really help strengthen the mindfulness and the concentration.

In that sense, there's nothing different you need to do in what you're already doing. The practice that you're already carrying out of vipassana will develop concentration. There's not some special thing that you have to do differently.

There is one suggestion I'd make. A lot of you at this point in the retreat are working with an open attention where you let the attention move from object to object depending on what's predominant. This can bring a great feeling of ease and relaxation and naturalness to the meditation. But sometimes in that open attention, we neglect a little bit the effort of connecting and sustaining in each new moment. It's really the connecting and sustaining to each new arising that makes the mindfulness really crisp and serves to deepen the concentration.

So as you practice with open attention, the downside can be that you get a little bit too relaxed in that openness. And the connecting and sustaining stop being really crisp. In that, you're kind of missing an opportunity to keep deepening the mindfulness and concentration. So just an encouragement with the open attention particularly—re-energize your commitment to connecting and sustaining with each new arising that comes.

Sometimes, of course, the concentration is going to go away. It'll be going along, it'll be strong, it'll collapse due to various factors, then there's often a very strong desire to get it back. And you can be in the grip of that craving, not even recognizing it, thinking that you're making an effort for a wholesome state of mind, but what's actually happening is that you're striving to have that concentrated state back because it felt so good. This is still craving, even if it's in a wholesome direction. And sometimes we'll try really hard at that point to get the concentration back.

But we may be forgetting one part of the teachings, and that is the proximate cause of concentration. In the texts it says the proximate cause of concentration is not strong effort or undying effort or courageous effort or heroic effort. The proximate cause of concentration is happiness. Isn't that interesting? What brings the mind together? Happiness, contentment, acceptance. It's such a beautiful understanding when you start to see that, because it lets the mind simply settle into its own nature with a sense of relaxation.

So this quality of relaxation is also really key to deepening concentration. The striving, straining, grasping, craving movement is antithetical to concentration.

This came really clear to me in one period of retreat. I was here at IMS, practicing metta for six weeks. For those who are interested, we teach loving-kindness as a way of developing concentration. I'd been in retreat for about ten days and the practice had been deepening. I was feeling calmer and collecting around the phrases. The phrases were getting steadier. Everything seemed to be going okay.

Then something came in from outside and disturbed the flow, disturbed my concentration. I got thrown off. It passed, and I tried to regroup and return to the concentration that I'd had, and it wasn't coming about. So I tried harder. "I've got to get back to that concentration. It felt so good. It was going so well." It wasn't coming back. I tried even harder.

It was about three days into this period of struggle that I went to see Joseph, who was one of my teachers then, and I described the situation. "It seemed to be going along well. Something happened. It fell apart. I can't get back to that concentrated place. Try as hard as I can, I can't get it back. What's wrong? What's going on?"

Joseph just looked at me with a little smile and said, "Guy, we don't do this practice for ourselves. We do it for the other."

And just then, all the craving unhooked. And I saw that I had just been involved in a selfish pursuit to get back to what felt good. And I'd completely lost touch with the fact that the metta practice is about caring for somebody else—or for ourselves, too, but caring for somebody else.

I went back to the simplicity of caring for others, and very shortly everything fell back into place. What it taught me is that my attention had to be innocent—innocent of any ulterior motive. When the ulterior motive was basically selfish, the metta practice did not work for concentration. And of course there wasn't metta there either; there was frustration. When the original intention got reawakened—this practice is about caring for people—then the mind came back together.

In our vipassana practice, the analogy is mindfulness of the object for the object's sake. If we're trying to use the breath to get ourselves into some great feeling state of mind and body, that's selfish intent, and that won't allow the mind to collect in this contentment and ease. But if we can discover that there's a real genuine interest in the object itself, then the mindfulness grows off that. Then the attention is really there in an unforced way, and the concentration can deepen very nicely.

So we need to bring to our vipassana practice an interest in the breath for the sake of the breath, walking for the sake of the walking, a sound for the sake of the sound—not for what I'm going to get out of it. That short-circuits the process. Remember that the

sequence has to be interest leading to mindfulness and mindfulness leading to concentration. If you try to go directly to concentration, you'll tie yourself up in a knot. So come back to that original intention of connecting with what is. Find that innocence, and everything will collect around that.

Something else I knew as a yogi but see really clearly as a teacher is that there's huge variation from person to person in ability for concentration or aptitude for concentration. It's a little bit like athletic ability in sports. Some of us have it, some of us don't.

My particular sport obsession is tennis. In that game, I love to watch people like Pete Sampras and Venus and Serena Williams play, because they are, on the male and female sides, the most talented athletes that I've been able to see in the last ten years. Their movements have grace, power, coordination, and a speed that is just native to them. You see other players who practice maybe twice as hard, work a lot harder, and never reach the same level of skill as Sampras or the Williams sisters.

This is a little bit the way it is with concentration. Some people have a really natural ability for this quality. Some don't.

One of the people who I've met who does is a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jemnian. Ajahn Jemnian has a monastery in the south of Thailand near Krabi. He's about sixty-five years old now. He comes to Spirit Rock once a year and teaches in California for a week or two at a time.

One time he recounted his life story to us. He was brought up in a Buddhist household. His parents went regularly to the temple, to the wat, so he was surrounded by the Dharma from an early age. Well, one day when he was about four years old, he sat down on the floor of his house, cross-legged. He closed his eyes, and he went into a trance. His parents talked to him, and he didn't respond. They shook him, and he didn't respond. They shouted at him, and he didn't respond. He was gone.

So his parents naturally were a little bit concerned. What do you do if your four-year-old child sits down and just goes away? They called in the village monk and said, "Our child is in some strange state. Can you help us figure out what's going on? Can you bring him back?"

The monk came over and looked at the young boy, made his determination. He said, "Oh, nothing to worry about. He's gone into an absorption state. You should be very proud of him. Don't worry." And the monk left.

Sure enough, the next day, after twenty-four hours, Ajahn Jemnian popped his eyes open, came back, started moving, walking about, bright-eyed, full of energy. He was absolutely fine. He had just fallen spontaneously into a deep state of absorption.

The village monk recognized that this kid was something special. He had a prodigy on his hands. So from a very early age, Ajahn Jemnian was trained in Buddhist meditation, but also, because this was in Thailand sixty-five years ago, in shamanic practices, because concentration is the doorway to those powers. He received both trainings as he was growing up, and he still lives in both worlds.

He's a very advanced master of both Vipassana and loving kindness. He's done a great deal of metta and has a really joyful expression and energy. He also still works as a shaman.

I was sitting, hearing his teachings one day at Spirit Rock. He'd been talking up in the front of the hall for an hour or so. And he looked out at a woman in the audience and he pointed to her and he said, "Do you have a stomach ache right now?" And she said, "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do." Ajahn Jimnian also has psychic powers.

So he said, "Come up to the front, please. I have some medicine for you." And he unwrapped his robe to reveal this great vest that he wears. He wears this vest that is stocked with every imaginable item of paraphernalia that a wandering monk could need. It's got Buddhist images. It's got amulets. It's got trinkets. It's got his pens and pads of paper. It's got potions and lotions. It's got his business card. It's got photographs of him that he hands out.

In one pocket of the vest, he had a little bottle of white liquid. So the woman came up to the front and he gave her the bottle of liquid and he said, "Please, please drink this." So she went back to her seat and drank the liquid. About twenty minutes later, as he continued his teachings, he said, "How's your stomach now?" She said, "It's absolutely fine. The pain went completely away."

This is Ajahn Jimnian's magic—Dharma magic and shamanic magic both. He was a meditation prodigy from a very early age based on his strength in concentration.

I, on the other hand, was at the other end of the spectrum. Concentration did not come easily to me at all. Very weak in the early years of my practice in concentration. In fact, I look back at all the friends that I grew up with in the Dharma, and I think that I probably had the weakest concentration of all the people that I knew then, all my Dharma buddies. Mine was the weakest.

I wasn't really aware of how deficient I was in this for quite a long time, and ignorance is bliss in that way. I trundled along quite happily, but at some point I started to realize that my friends were having experiences that I wasn't, and I got kind of interested.

So a little over ten years ago, I just decided I wanted to strengthen the factor of concentration in my own practice. I started coming to IMS in the nineties and doing six-week periods of retreat during the three-month course, oriented to developing stronger concentration. Here we mostly teach it through the Brahma Viharas, first with metta and then with others if people are interested.

I did a number of these retreats in the nineties and it made a significant shift in my concentration level. It really did. It made a quantum leap in that. So I know that if it worked for me, it can work for any of you.

But the other moral of the story I want to pass on is that it took a number of years for that to happen. Making a real improvement in your concentration is not something that's going to happen in the next sitting. It's not something that's going to happen in the next week. It may not be something that's going to happen in the rest of this retreat.

But if you really take it up as a direction for yourself in practice and you apply yourself to it over, let's say, the next five years—both in retreat practice, aiming to cultivate this quality more, and in your daily life, taking practices that emphasize this nature more—you will see a significant shift in your level of concentration.

But I want to emphasize that it's a long-term process so that you don't think that it's something that should happen overnight. And so not to get involved in too much gaining idea about it. It takes a lot of patience, a lot of dedication and effort, but it is well worth the work.

So I highly recommend it for those of you who are drawn in that direction. It really can be developed, and from it we gain all these benefits of inner strength, stability, greater calm, greater sense of abiding in the present moment, and a deeper relaxation really throughout our being. It really calms all the faculties of our human nature. This calming of the faculties is one of the great gifts of concentration.

But in the teachings of the Buddha, it's considered the secondary purpose of concentration. The primary purpose in the Buddha's teachings was for deepening insight. As the mind becomes steadier and calmer and stiller, it becomes more able to see things as they are. And it's seeing things as they are that frees us.

Imagine if you were on a merry-go-round, which is what many sittings feel like for the unconcentrated mind, and you're whirling around and around. You're on a horse, a carousel, going around and around at a pretty good rate of speed. One of your friends has picked up a newspaper and comes over to the merry-go-round and stands by the side of it and holds up this newspaper. You whiz by, but you're going by too fast to read the headlines. So you can't tell what the newspaper says.

But the merry-go-round slows down. Your ticket time is up. You come to rest in front of the newspaper your friend is holding. Ah, then you can read the headlines. And the headlines say: everything changes. The cause of suffering is clinging. The way to release is to let go. That's the freedom. You see that clearly as the mind calms down. So from this place of deep stillness can come the insights that really liberate us from our clinging and from our suffering.

I want to close with a short statement from the Buddha. This is from the Majjhima Nikāya, from the section where he was describing his own enlightenment experience and what happened to him that night under the Bodhi tree. The word "taints" that is used in this passage is another of the lists in Buddhism. It's more or less synonymous with the defilements. So you can think of it as another expression of the defilements.

"When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the destruction of the taints. I directly knew as it actually is: this is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taints. I directly knew: birth is destroyed. The holy life has been lived. What had to be done has been done. There is no more coming to any state of being."

Let's just sit together for a minute, please.

CHAPTER 253

The Power of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines whether insight practice alone is sufficient for liberation, or if the cultivation of mettā (loving-kindness) is essential for complete spiritual development. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and exploring the four brahmavihāras, Armstrong presents five transformative aspects of mettā practice: how it softens and tenderizes the heart, purifies difficult emotions through acceptance rather than aversion, develops samādhi (concentration), connects us to all living beings, and brings profound happiness into our lives. He addresses common skepticism among vipassanā practitioners about mettā appearing "contrived" compared to the elegant simplicity of mindfulness practice, explaining how both practices ultimately converge in "warm attention." Through personal stories, teachings from the Dalai Lama, and references to contemplative traditions, Armstrong demonstrates how mettā transforms ill-will into goodwill, creates healing relationships with difficult emotions, and reveals our fundamental interconnectedness with all beings. This talk offers practical guidance for integrating loving-kindness practice with insight meditation for a complete path to liberation.*

The talk tonight is called The Power of Metta, or Is Insight Enough?

I wanted to start with the opening of a poem by one of my favorite romantic poets of the last century, E.E. Cummings. This is a poem called "Since Feeling is First":

Since feeling is first, who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you.

The poem goes on, but I think that's enough. Since feeling is first—feeling is first in a really important way in the Dharma. The Dharma is not about an intellectual understanding, a conceptual take or philosophy. The Dharma is really about the truth of suffering and the truth of freedom. These are feeling elements. This is the way we feel about life. Practice is to bring us out, as the Buddha said in the Satipatthana Sutta, to bring us out of feelings of sorrow, grief, lamentation, and distress.

I feel that the Brahma-vihāra practices are an incredible jewel within our Theravadan tradition. The scope of the four Brahmavihāras, their completeness in describing the life of the heart, is not found anywhere else in any other religious tradition that I'm aware of—not even in other Buddhist traditions. So I want to talk tonight about

the first, the foundation, which is the practice of loving-kindness, and what a contribution it can make, especially in the feeling realm, as we deepen our practice on the way to liberation.

I want particularly to talk about five ways in which we feel the benefits of the practice of loving-kindness, and by extension, the other Brahma-vihāras as well.

The first thing that we see in mettā practice is that it makes the heart softer—you could say more tender. In that tenderizing, it makes the heart more responsive to life. The second thing it does is that it purifies the heart, taking the goop of the hindrances and the defilements and finding a way to bring more purity into that area. The third thing it does is that it develops concentration, which as we've talked about is a strongly wholesome quality in itself. The fourth is that it connects us to all of life, to all living beings. And the fifth is that it can bring an incredible amount of happiness into our lives and into our practice.

So I want to talk about all five of these aspects of the mettā practice. First I'll talk about the softening or tenderizing of the heart and whether mettā practice is actually necessary for this.

In our tradition, vipassanā is the wisdom practice. It's through vipassanā that we see things the way they are. And the Buddha said it's seeing things the way they are that frees the mind. So this is our foundation for the whole journey. We say in our tradition that we do loving-kindness practice in the context of vipassanā practice. We acknowledge that vipassanā practice is foremost because it has the ability to completely liberate. Mettā is seen as a supportive practice in this context.

So the question arises: is vipassanā practice sufficient in itself? Will it be the case necessarily that as we journey through insight to the final goal, the heart will open all by itself of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity?

One of my teachers felt that this was true, and he summarized it by saying that love is the child of freedom. Love is the child of freedom. It's a beautiful image because as the heart gets unburdened, it's more easily able to move into love or compassion. So I believe that for some people, that may be enough. Simply the journey to freedom will unlock the doors of love and compassion.

But I believe that it depends a bit on personality temperament. For myself, who am inclined to the cerebral, I found that vipassanā practice alone wasn't doing everything that I had come into spiritual life looking for. So for me, the adjunct of the Brahma-vihāras, and especially mettā, was very helpful to bring out the direct development of the heart qualities. I'll talk a little more about that as we go along.

Also over the years I've observed the unfolding of practice for people that I've worked with. I've also looked closely at people who are very well established in practice —teachers, renowned teachers of vipassanā. What I see from my observation is that there are people who journey quite far along the track of insight and yet don't have a corresponding opening of the heart or development of loving-kindness. I've met teachers who seem to have that particular mixture of qualities in their being.

I don't believe that they're suffering particularly. So for them, that combination of vipassanā alone may have been just fine. But it wasn't everything that I was looking for in Dharma practice. In a way, I could say that their teaching didn't touch me so deeply because I was looking for that other side. I was looking for that heart side to be an equally important and integral part of my Dharma practice.

But this is a very personal thing. It did not seem like the teachers were suffering. From their side, that was probably a complete practice for them. A friend of mine commented about one of these teachers. The comment was that the teacher's mettā was like distant starlight. It was palpable, but it was a bit faint.

I'll talk about some other teachers as we go whose mettā was stronger than that.

I've been practicing for the last several years also with a Tibetan teacher, a young Tibetan teacher named Sogyal Rinpoche, who's from the Nyingma school and teaches Dzogchen practice. At the end of Tibetan retreats, because they emphasize the heart qualities very strongly, they like to give heart advice to the students as they're departing —sort of a pithy statement that you can take with you, carry back into your daily life.

At the end of the retreat with Sogyal Rinpoche one time, he gave us a piece of parting heart advice. He said, "When you go back into your daily life, I want you to remember three things. First, be normal." He said, "Don't go back and be really weird and flaky because there are already too many strange people in spiritual life. And if you go back and act like that, people are going to think that that's what Buddhism is about. And they're not going to be interested. It's going to turn them off." So he said, "Be normal."

"And be wise. Don't mess up your life. Take care with yourself. Make good choices. Be kind to people. Don't mess up. Live wisely."

And the third thing he said: "When you go back, be juicy. Be juicy. That's the way that people can really tell that something's happened in your Dharma practice. When you go back and there's brightness in your eyes, there's moisture in your eyes, and there's warmth in your heart, then people will really know that something has happened for you."

So juice, which is an old technical Buddhist term, is kind of a summary for all these qualities of heart—such as happiness, contentment, joy, devotion, compassion, faith, trust, kindness, humor. All these things are summarized by the quality of juice. The ten kinds of juice—you've heard that list, haven't you?

One of the features of these qualities is that they really make life sweeter. These are the things that bring into life our experience of the richness and the delight in being alive, in appreciating this precious human birth that we've attained, in appreciating the path, in appreciating the Dharma, in appreciating the Sangha. Not only do they make our life sweeter, they open us up to be touched by life so that we have an immediate heart openness or heart receptivity to receive all that life brings us. And finally, they let us touch other beings in life.

And I think it's this third piece that I particularly want to focus on when we talk about the role of metta.

If your practice includes this aspiration of bodhicitta, which I think Joseph has talked about during this retreat—that we practice in order to help others come out of their suffering, we deepen our own understanding as the best way of helping other beings to come through their suffering—then I believe these heart qualities are one of the best ways of transmitting or carrying out that work. This is really the way that the Dharma can express itself and bring others into the path.

So I believe that if your aspiration inclines to the bodhisattva aspiration, that you're clearly practicing not for yourself alone, but you're on the big boat that wants to gather a lot of beings to the path, these heart qualities make a huge contribution.

I'm very grateful that in our tradition we have specific practices that further the development of the heart, that open up these juicy qualities for us. In our tradition, loving-kindness is the primary practice. It's the foundation. In Mahayana Buddhism, as is found in Tibet, China, Japan, compassion has become the primary heart practice. But I feel that this is just a slight variation in emphasis. So I hope you don't feel that you need to go out from this retreat and argue with the Mahayana practitioners about which is more important. They're so close to identical. They are both just the spirit of caring.

The Dalai Lama said, "Compassion is just basic human warmth." That's all he means by it—basic human warmth. That's also what loving-kindness is. So I don't see a conflict here. They're so close together.

These seeds of caring are there in everyone, absolutely everyone. Trungpa Rinpoche wrote about this in a book called Training the Mind. I want to read a little bit. This is a bit of an extended passage, so please settle back:

"It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for compassion. Why?"

Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate.

A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would really like to be tough. We would like to come on strong, but there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere, so we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. Such a relief.

So this sore spot is an opening to caring. It's the point at which we are able to let the world touch us. It's there no matter how much armoring has grown up. For everyone, there is this place of accessibility where we're not always strong and tough, but there's a sensitivity that can be developed.

Then Trungpa Rinpoche goes on: "There is also an inner wound called Tathagata Garbha or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and to communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore."

So these beautiful qualities really are the opening into bodhisattva fever—this extending of the caring from our open heart to the world's open heart.

There are many beautiful aspects of the loving-kindness practice, but I have to be honest and say that often Vipassana practitioners have some skepticism about metta practice. People who have gotten used to Vipassana practice sometimes have such an appreciation for its purity that metta starts to seem a little bit contrived.

You know, Vipassana is so elegant. It's so clean. It's so unimpeachable. It's impeccable. Just aware of what is. Nothing extra. Wow, it's so elegant. And then along comes this metta practice where we make these kind of hokey, prayer-sounding affirmation things. This doesn't seem elegant at all. Did this come out of the New Age? I can't believe the Buddha actually taught this.

As someone said in an interview, "Vipassana is letting go of everything. Metta is bringing something in. Isn't this contradictory?"

Actually, it's not. The very way that the Buddha defined right effort was in terms of abandoning the unwholesome and developing the wholesome. So there's a clear indication that the cultivation and development and growth of wholesome states of mind are exactly in line with right effort. That's what we're doing with the loving-kindness practice.

But they are different practices, as I'm sure you've experienced over these weeks and months. They are different practices. Hopefully, in our maturation of Dharma practice, they come back and converge. And where they can converge is in a warm attention—that the mindfulness of Vipassana becomes not cold and detached and scientific, but permeated with this care and warmth and connectedness of the loving-kindness practice so that the two blend together as we develop them both.

Sometimes people complain that metta is diluted: "This is really a fuzzy practice. You say, 'may I be happy?' But there is no I. What are you talking about?"

So for Vipassana purists, I want to offer a way to say the metta phrases that is really in line with the Abhidhamma. Here's the metta phrase. If you like, you can say it this way: "In this ever-changing stream... In this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena conventionally designated as Paul... May the state of happiness arise ever more frequently."

This works just fine.

If you like this phrase, feel free to use it in your meditation. If you simply prefer the phrase, "may Paul be happy," stick with that. It's a lot simpler.

It's extraordinary when we meet somebody who's really developed these heart qualities. The person alive today who really comes to mind for me again and again is His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. He consciously has developed these practices. It didn't just happen by accident that his heart is the way it is.

Someone came up to him at a conference—it was a pan-religious conference—and asked him, "What is your religion?" I don't think they'd been paying very close attention to the program. The Dalai Lama said, "My religion is kindness."

He said this again when we had a meeting with him a couple of years ago at Spirit Rock, a meeting with His Holiness and about 225 Buddhist teachers, both Western and Asian. We got to spend a couple of days with him. In the course of it, he said to us, who were all card-carrying Buddhists, "I'm not interested in propagating Buddhism. I'm interested in propagating human values." That's really what touches him—the welfare of people, creatures, the environment. That's what moves him.

People feel this when they come in contact with him. As a visiting head of state, he was on Spirit Rock land for a couple of days. The State Department had to provide security for his visit because he is the head of the government in exile. Before he came, someone from the State Department called my wife, Sally, who's a horse person, and asked, "Do you know where we can rent some horses while the Dalai Lama is visiting? Because we want to put sharpshooters with rifles up on top of the Spirit Rock Hills. We'll send them up there on horseback."

This was the level of security that they intended to provide. Fortunately, they couldn't find any horses, so that didn't happen. But they did, every day, make all of us—all 225 of us—pass through metal detectors before we could go up and meet with His Holiness. Even the people who had been staying in the residence halls had to vacate their rooms at 7 in the morning. The State Department security agents went through with bomb-sniffing dogs to see if there were any explosives tucked away under our zafus.

Then we all had to walk through these metal detectors, which were staffed by the State Department security people. These were heavy-duty security people. They were not the bouncers you see at concerts. They were very, very professional people. They carried a gun on one hip, a nightstick on the other, and a walkie-talkie clipped to their back. You did not want to joke with them. They were heavier duty than the airport guys.

I had to wait one morning while we were getting in and just chatted with them. They had been under some very serious assignments in the past. They had guarded people like Yasser Arafat when he came to this country, the Israeli prime minister, other heads of state. They were not to be messed with. They were real professionals.

At the end of the conference, all these security people got together and asked if they could have their photograph taken with His Holiness. Because they felt something from him. They were also touched by him. And of course he obliged.

He has this beautiful childlike heart that can just make contact on that basic level of caring about someone else. He once was musing about his own fame. He said, "I don't know why people like me so much. I don't think I'm anything special. The only thing that I try to practice is when I meet someone, I try to consider them as more important than myself. I think that's why people love me."

Amazing attitude.

Of course, this quality of love is part of our nature. We've all known love, certainly in our childhood, and mostly at different times in our life.

For me, a lot of the appeal of spiritual life and spiritual practice has been to access the state of love more regularly and to be able to live in that place more of the time. That's really what motivated me in spiritual life. In a way, I feel that pull—it's sort of like the heart is pulling us home. The heart wants to find its resting place, its place of openness and fullness.

From this point of view of how natural love is, the metta practice can seem kind of contrived. And it is a lot of work at first for something that's so natural. Ultimately, it's not something we have to fabricate. But because it's become obscured, we do have to fabricate it a little bit at first. That's what the phrases do—they tend to evoke this quality. But it's clearly part of our deepest nature.

One of the most loving people I've ever known was my grandmother. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890. She was not highly educated. She was married to my grandfather, who was one of the most aversive personalities that I've ever met, and she maintained this sweetness of temperament all through her life, right to the end.

I remember when we would go visit them—I was a kid—we'd walk into her kitchen, she'd greet us and give us a big hug, and then she would put her lips down in the hollow of our necks and kind of nuzzle around in there and tell us that she was stealing our sugar. She said, "You kids are so sweet, I'm going to steal your sugar." And she'd just kiss us. She had had no Buddhist training and had not even done psychotherapy. So this love really is intrinsic. You can trust in it.

But because it's gotten obscured, we need to make a little bit of effort and incline the mind in that direction. The effort lifts some of the obscurations and then lets it shine through again. So this is the area of tenderizing or softening the heart.

The second area I wanted to talk about is the work of purification that metta accomplishes. The first area we look at is how it changes our intention in a given moment. The practice of loving kindness, as you've been doing it, the other brahmaviharas, is a simple practice of seeing another person and wishing them well. Seeing yourself and wishing yourself well. That's basically it. That's all that's there.

Whether the other person gets happy or well or not isn't in your control. So in our practice we don't worry too much about the result. It's not focused on whether the person actually gets happy. We can't control that. The focus is on our intention in doing the practice.

So you connect with someone, you have the wish, "I hope you're happy." That's the important piece. That sincere wish. Sometimes people say, "Well, I can wish them happiness, but I know they won't always be happy, so this flies in the face of impermanence." Yeah, that's true, but your wish is sincere. Your wish for them to be always happy is sincere. Whether it can be accomplished or not depends on them, but the sincerity of the wish can be true. So that's where we focus on this intention. This is the core of the practice.

As you do the metta practice, a skillful way to do it is to call up the person and let yourself just feel for a moment a nonverbal sense of caring. This is the heart of it. This is what will drive the engine of the metta practice. If you say the phrase and there's really no caring from your side, the practice doesn't go very far. But if you feel this little spark of caring—it's like looking in their eyes and just whispering, "I hope you're well"—and then you say the phrase that expresses that, that's what will make the practice grow. That's really the seed of it.

It seems like such a little thing, but this is the seed that everything else comes from. All the warmth and fire and deepening that can come from loving kindness all comes from this little seed. Because it's a seed, your only job really is planting that seed moment after moment. You can't control when the plant grows up. It's just like if you want to grow tomatoes in the summer.

You put the seed in the ground at a certain depth, prepare the soil in a particular way, and then water it faithfully. You cannot make that tomato plant grow. When it pokes up out of the ground, it looks so tiny and fragile. If you try to take hold of it and force its growth, you'll only rip it up. Only nature can make that plant flourish. Your job as the gardener is simply to plant the seed and tend it with care.

It's the same way in metta practice. Your job is only to plant the seeds of these moments of caring. Then you must trust the dharma, trust nature itself to grow that tender beginning into the full flowering of loving kindness. And it will do exactly that—such is the nature of things.

As the Buddha said, "Do not disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." I mentioned this quote earlier in a talk about mindfulness. In vipassana practice, it's the moments of mindfulness that fill the jar. In metta practice, it's the moments of sincere caring that gradually accumulate. These seemingly small moments can grow into a very strong state of mind.

We usually begin by directing loving kindness toward ourselves. Traditionally, this is done because the self is supposed to be the easiest person to love. You've all felt that, right? Not always. Often for us, the self proves to be the most difficult target of our loving intentions.

The self becomes most difficult because turning loving thoughts inward brings up all the ways we don't feel so great about ourselves. Sometimes when we direct metta toward ourselves, we remember all the unskillful things we've done, all the ways we haven't been loving, all the ways we wish we had been kinder. Sometimes it feels like we're doing something wrong. "I'm inclining my mind toward metta and I'm getting all this self-judgment and remorse and guilt. Something's gone off here."

But that's not true. It's actually the case that metta is doing the work of purification by bringing to light all that accumulated residue that has been hidden—all the difficult material we've been carrying but that hasn't fully entered consciousness. The only way to purify these patterns is to bring them into the light of awareness and learn to relate to them differently. This is one of metta practice's most powerful effects.

Metta practice aims straight for the heart. It goes right in and pulls out whatever's there. If there's pain stored there, that's what it draws forth. If there's joy, it brings that out too. I think of it like a magnet—metta is like a magnet with a really strong positive pole. As we begin saying the phrases, it's like running that magnet up the center of our being. Everything of the opposite charge gets drawn out toward it.

So metta will pull this material up into consciousness. That's why metta practice is not always bliss and light and love and peace. You can hit some very bumpy terrain in metta because of this purification force. But the good thing is that these feelings then become available to be experienced consciously, and we learn a new relationship to them.

It's not that they simply disappear through metta practice. Rather, it's as though we begin to hold them—the shame and guilt and fear, the anxiety, the cravings, the self-judgment—within the greater space of loving kindness. It's this holding them with loving kindness that accomplishes the purification, not their immediate disappearance. They don't vanish instantly, but we create an entirely different relationship to them. The purification happens through changing our fundamental orientation from one of aversion to one of acceptance, or even at times friendliness, toward these difficult states of mind.

The feeling of this process is somewhat different, for me anyway, than the way vipassana works with these same challenging states. My main hindrance over many years of practice has been fear—that's been my predominant difficult tendency of mind. Vipassana practice made a huge difference in how I experienced fear. Over the years, fear kept getting smaller and smaller through vipassana practice, through the growth of qualities like non-identification, spaciousness, equanimity, and the direct seeing of impermanence. All these insights took tremendous power away from fear.

But when my mind would tip in a certain direction, it would still tip toward fear. The same basic conditioning, the same fundamental patterning remained there.

I noticed that after doing a lot of metta practice—I did a few six-week retreats of Brahma Viharas here—that started to change. Often when my mind would tip, it would tip into metta instead of fear. It's as though the loving kindness actually replaced the fear conditioning. It gave a different destination for the mind to go to.

The difficult person is also a great source of learning in purification. I did one metta retreat where there was someone else on the retreat with whom I had had a hard time the year before. We'd had some interpersonal conflict. I was doing metta practice, I started to get quite sensitive, quite still, and then every time that person would go by, I'd start reviewing all the things that had happened that year, and my mind would get really churned up. I'd get really angry again.

So here I am, deep into loving-kindness practice, and I'm spinning out in these fits of anger for thirty minutes, forty-five minutes. I just couldn't bring it back. I was obsessing about this relationship. So I thought, "Well, I have heard of doing metta for the difficult person." Somebody suggested that. But no, that's too hokey. I don't want to have to pretend I like this person. But I was running out of options. Nothing else was working, so I thought, "Okay, I'll try it."

So I started to send loving kindness to them, and I found I actually could wish them well. I could sincerely hold them and think, "I hope you're happy." That wasn't too hard a stretch.

Then something began to dawn on me. The way that anger is usually referred to in the old texts, it's more accurately translated as ill will. This is more accurate translation from the suttas of the mind state they're talking about. And I started to tune into this quality of ill will and realized that when I was angry at the person, I was feeling ill will.

When you think about ill will, what it really means is "I want them to hurt." It's the opposite of goodwill, which is "I want them to be happy." If you look closely at anger, the common garden variety of anger, you'll find within it this piece of ill will. We want someone else to hurt. This is just a step away from cruelty. Cruelty is the enjoyment of somebody else's hurting.

As a good meditator and a good Buddhist, I couldn't be comfortable with the idea of myself as a cruel person. When I looked at anger, I saw I was actually just one step away from cruelty in wanting someone else to suffer. That didn't sit so well with me. It's easy from a Western psychological viewpoint to kind of justify why we should be angry at somebody. But when we actually look at the property of ill will, from a Buddhist point of view, that's pretty hard to justify.

So I became motivated to transform that ill will into goodwill. And that's exactly what the metta practice does. It converts ill will to goodwill. And that's as far as you have to go. And I started to notice that when goodwill was present, the ill will could not arise. The anger could not arise.

I also saw that I still didn't have to like the person. That actually didn't change. But I no longer wished them to suffer, and I could easily turn to goodwill for them. Once I found that out, then every time the anger started to come up, I would turn to metta, and it would just dissolve it. It became a really great refuge for me.

So we see that as this quality of metta grows in us—the quality of friendliness, of affection, of liking—it has a tremendous unifying force in the mind. Aversion pushes people apart. It breaks us apart. When we're averse to our own being, we become fragmented. Love is what unifies. Affection is what pulls together. It's the gravitational pull in the emotional life.

So as the quality of loving kindness develops and all these impure things are brought into the light of day, we start seeing we don't have to feel so badly about our difficult areas—these qualities of fear or anxiety or shame or craving or aversion or self-judgment or sadness. They're held in the light of that friendly eye. They become much, much more acceptable. And we don't have to make them go away.

We just hold them in a different relationship. This is really healing. This is what lets us integrate those fragments that we've cast off, that we've disowned.

I want to read a poem which I know a lot of you already know, but it says it so well that I want to share it again. It's called "St. Francis and the Sow" by Galway Kinnell:

The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers from within of self-blessing, though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing. As St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow and told her in words and in touch, blessings of earth on the sow. And the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout, all the way through the fodder and slops, to the spiritual curl of the tail, from the hard spikiness spiked out from the spine, down through the great broken heart, to the sheer blue milken dreaminess, spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths, sucking and blowing beneath them, the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Loving kindness can bring in this sense of self-appreciation, of self-acceptance, of seeing ourself in the context of nature, beautiful creation within nature.

The third of the aspects of metta practice I wanted to mention is concentration. We've talked a lot about concentration on this retreat. This is actually not a bad time in the retreat to remember about concentration. Anybody notice the effect of the last couple of days on your concentration? Thanksgiving is usually deadly to concentration. In the interviews today, a number of people reported, "Wow, that was really a bump. Great food, but it was really a bump in my practice."

So at this point, now that Thanksgiving is over, it's actually a good time to renew our vigor for concentration, to renew that kind of determination to really hold the retreat container very well. There's a temptation as the energy rises to perhaps talk to one another, to be a little more relaxed in one's mindfulness. We still have quite a long time in the retreat to go, and there will be integration time at the end. You don't need to do the integration now. So a really good time, the day after Thanksgiving, to rededicate to this focus of attention and the noble silence, to really hold the container of the retreat well until integration begins.

Metta practice is a very powerful concentration practice. The phrases serve as the object around which the mind collects. We often use it to teach concentration to the level, as I mentioned, of jhanas. Concentration unifies the mind. Metta unifies the mind. That's why these two together are a really powerful combination. The loving-kindness brings the mind together so it doesn't want to stray. As the concentration makes the mind more powerful, the phrases have more impact and the feelings of love come out more strongly. So both of these really reinforce each other.

There's this amazing writing from a Russian Orthodox saint from the 19th century whose name was Theophan the Recluse. Theophan means "face of God" – it's kind of a nice name. And I want to read this. It could have been written by someone who was doing metta as a concentration practice:

For so long as the mind remains in the head, where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there. This concentration of all human life in one place is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of future warmth. This sensation grows into warm feeling and concentrates the attention upon itself. And so it comes about that whereas in the initial stages the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will, in due course, this attention, by its own vigor, gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth then holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting one another and must remain inseparable, because dispersion of attention cools the warmth, and diminishing warmth weakens attention.

This beautiful union of concentration and loving kindness, felt in the heart center, felt in a bodily way, could be a description of our practice.

The fourth aspect of loving kindness is that it opens our practice out to all of life. We can use our Vipassana practice in a way that is quite self-centered. It's not meant that way, but it can happen that way. We start from my pain, my problems, my neuroses, and then we move on to my path, my progress, my freedom, my liberation. It can all be done in quite a self-centered way.

This is from Shantideva, a 9th century Indian teacher: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy."

And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy. It is amazing when we can open up to letting our happiness be defined by the happiness of others. The Dalai Lama says this is really a good bet because your odds of success go up by six billion to one. This is the direction of the loving-kindness practice.

The neutral person is really our turning point. The neutral person stands for all the countless beings that we don't know. It's said that metta is like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without discriminating. It has this universal quality. This is one aspect of its boundlessness—that it doesn't pick and choose who it cares for, but it cares for all beings.

Sometimes it's hard to connect with that sense of universality because we have prejudices. We have people we like and people we don't. But the Buddha said a very interesting thing in the Samyutta Nikaya. He said, given that samsara has no discoverable beginning—that this round of births that we've all been on has no apparent beginning—think if that was true. Just as your eyes scan around the hall this evening, think if everyone here had been at some time in the past your mother or father or sister or brother or son or daughter. How would that affect your level of concern for them?

Well, it might depend on your family of origin. I don't want to go too far with this one. But it may be that we're closer than we imagine ourselves to be.

The neutral person actually for some people becomes a kind of secret love. I was teaching a daylong in California on metta, and somebody came up to me and said, "You know, I was practicing with my neutral person being the cashier at the supermarket where I go, and I developed this real love for the person. I went to check out and I got really nervous—it's my neutral person!" It's amazing how strongly we can care for people that we really haven't met or don't know. It's quite mind-boggling.

One of the breakthroughs of insight with the neutral person is we start to see that whoever it is, we all have the same deep wishes. Our deepest aspirations are really all the same. We all want to be safe. We want to be happy. We want to be healthy. We want to live easily and take care of ourselves in the world. As you feel into the depth of this connection, you start to realize that we're basically the same organism. We have the same body shape, the same package of emotions, the same kinds of thoughts. There are distinctions, but I wonder how real they are.

I'm sure you all know Rumi, the medieval poet. His teacher was a fellow named Shams. Shams did not leave behind many poems, but this is one poem that is said to have been written by Shams, the teacher of Rumi:

I, you, he, she, we.
In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions.

What Shams is pointing to is that insight that sees our unity behind all the apparent differences. There are many apparent differences. We have differences in personality, in age, in gender, in race, in class, in fortune, and so forth. But when one from a spiritual level sees through all those distinctions, there's this underlying unity where we are basically the same being. That's what the metta practice can open us up to see—this universal connection with all life.

Finally, metta can lead to a great deal of happiness. I like to think about Ajahn Jumnian as an exemplar of this approach. He said he hasn't had anger in twenty-five years, and I have to say, every time I've seen him, he seems happy. He'll come to Spirit Rock to teach. He's there for about a week, and we often offer to take him out other places. We say, "Would you like to go into San Francisco today or see the Golden Gate Bridge, do some touring?"

And he says, "If you'd like to take me to San Francisco, that's okay. I'd be happy doing that. But is there anybody who'd like to hear the Dharma? If there are people who'd like to hear the Dharma, I'm happy to teach the Dharma. If nobody comes who wants to hear the Dharma, I'm happy to just sit there in the meditation hall. I'll be happy whatever you want me to do."

And he's really like that. He has this really joyful energy. He's done a lot of metta practice and taught a lot of metta practice.

He doesn't know much English, but he has one phrase that he conveys in English. It's the union of vipassana and metta, the essence of his teaching. He'll touch space and say, "Empty, empty." This is the wisdom of vipassana. "Empty, empty." And then he'll say, "Happy, happy. Empty, empty, happy, happy." That's his Dharma transmission.

You can get a sense of some of this happiness from the meditation on the benefactor. If you pick a benefactor who's wise and free and joyful, you'll find that as you connect with them, you start to soak up those qualities. You start to feel their being osmosing into yours. This is why we recommend picking someone for the benefactor who is a strong figure.

In one tradition within Buddhism, there's a practice called union with the teacher. The effect is similar—by hanging out in a meditative way with the teacher, one starts to realize that the teacher's mind and one's own mind, the student's mind, are really essentially one and the same nature. This same understanding can come from our meditation on the benefactor. If we choose someone who embodies those qualities of wisdom and compassion, we start to feel it resonating in our heart. And we couldn't feel that resonance if we didn't already have wisdom and compassion within us.

As the happiness of loving-kindness grows, it brings with it a real sense of contentment. And of course that also helps the settling of concentration, because when loving-kindness is present in a strong way, we just have the sense we can rest in it. There's no more sublime state of being. So we can rest. There's a sense of having come home.

One Tibetan poem says, "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face." This is the feeling of coming home to loving-kindness. The Buddha talked about it as a deliverance of mind, a liberation of mind.

And we start to see the union of vipassana and metta. Vipassana reveals this great, vast emptiness, the insubstantiality of all things extending infinitely. When we first hear about it, it can sound like a cold and lonely kind of void to hang out in. It's not very appealing.

But as metta practice develops, that whole space opened up by vipassana can get pervaded with the warmth of loving-kindness. And then all of a sudden, this vast space of awareness becomes a really inviting place to open to, a really inviting place to hang out in, something that we can trust in and surrender to because it has the emptiness of the Dharma and the warmth of loving-kindness.

As we start to get the intuition of that union, we really see that this is our true nature—this empty space that has the quality of awareness and also the warmth of loving-kindness. When we start to see that that's the way things basically are, we start to see our own nature is basically good, is really good. That's really what offsets the sense of insufficiency or self-judgment. We trust more and more in our own basic goodness.

I want to close this evening with a prayer of Mother Teresa's. It's a little bit off the point, but it is in the metta family, and I really like it. Do you know that part of the metta phrase that says, "May I be free from inner and outer harm"? The outer harm is pretty clear—we don't want to be assaulted or have an accident happen to us, be injured. The inner harm is sometimes not so clear. So this is Mother Teresa's expression, as I read it, of a metta aspiration of being free from inner harm:

"Deliver me, O Jesus, from the desire to be loved, from the desire to be extolled, from the desire to be honored, from the desire to be praised, from the desire to be preferred, from the desire to be consulted, from the desire to be approved, from the desire to be popular. Deliver me from the fear of being humiliated, from the fear of being despised, from the fear of suffering rebukes, from the fear of being slandered, from the fear of being forgotten, from the fear of being wronged, from the fear of being ridiculed, from the fear of being suspected."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

CHAPTER 254

Mettā: Purity And Purification

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the two complementary aspects of mettā (loving-kindness) practice: purity and purification. Drawing from retreat observations, he explains how sincere practice alternates between experiencing pure states of love, compassion, and joy, and directly encountering obstacles like aversion, self-judgment, anger, and fear that require purification.*
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> *Armstrong focuses particularly on aversion as one of the three unwholesome roots (greed, aversion, delusion) that Buddhist practice aims to eliminate. He offers practical guidance for working with self-judgment through receiving mettā, transforming anger by recognizing ill-will and cultivating goodwill, and using loving-kindness as protection against fear. Throughout, he emphasizes that obstacles aren't problems to eliminate but opportunities for transformation when held in the space of mettā.*
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> *The talk also explores samādhi (concentration) as the second quality developed in mettā practice, describing how the mind's unification in the present moment naturally supports the heart's opening. Armstrong concludes with reflections on the Mettā Sutta, showing how concentration, loving-kindness, and wisdom work together to establish the "sublime abiding" of boundless love for all beings.*

After the round of interviews today, when we went down to lunch, teachers were talking about how the retreat was going. What we all observed today is that you are really cooking—an old Buddhist technical term. At this point in the retreat, the momentum of your practice is really clear, because almost everyone who came in to see me today had something interesting going on, sometimes many interesting things. This was a sign that the practice had become deeply engaged, quite a shift from a few days ago.

At the start of the retreat—I don't know what each of your individual experiences was—but there was a lot of doubt among the people I talked to. What is this practice? Where is it going? Why am I saying these phrases? What's going to happen? At this early stage of the retreat, one really wonders if the practice is going to lift off, achieve that critical mass for takeoff.

This reminded me of a story from a teacher who brought it up on a retreat because we were talking about the subject of faith. He was a calculus teacher in college and had offered a course in beginning calculus. One woman student came up to him on the first day and said, "I'm thinking about taking your class, but I don't know if it will help me or not."

He asked, "What do you want to do?"

She replied, "I'm studying civil engineering and I need some tools that will solve this kind of problem."

He said, "Oh, well, this course will do it for you."

"How do I know that?" she asked.

"I'm telling you, if you take the course, you'll learn the tools to solve that kind of problem."

"But I don't know that for myself," she said. "Therefore, I'm not going to take the course." And she dropped it.

If all of you had said that on the first day, the room would be empty. But I'm glad that you had enough faith to continue.

This was at a retreat actually taught by a Tibetan Lama. When he heard this story, he said, "Good story, but bad ending. Like European movie." So here you all are in an American movie—good story, good ending. It's happening for you all, and I really appreciate that.

I work out at the gym when I'm home, two or three times a week if I can. When I first started going to this gym, there are some pretty hardcore bodybuilders who go there, and I feel quite dwarfed in comparison. I go really just to keep healthy and maintain some muscle tone, but there are some guys there who've been developing their muscles for years. When I first went, I was really impressed by them. I thought, "Wow, that's really something. I don't know if I want to look like that, but I'm impressed that they do."

As time went on, I started to realize that the amount of muscle one had wasn't really the important thing. Because what happens when you build a certain amount of muscle at the gym? You add another weight, and then it gets hard again. Have you noticed that? Just when you get good at one level, you add another weight, and it gets hard again. So in a real sense, you never make any progress.

It's like koan practice, if you've ever encountered that in the Zen tradition. I did a little bit of koan practice with a really great Zen master named Sasaki Roshi. As soon as I solved one koan, he just gave me another one, and then I was back in confusion again. So I never had a sense of making any progress.

What I came to appreciate at the gym is not how many weights somebody can do, but the sincerity of their effort. People come into the gym who are a little out of shape and not very strong, and they don't do many weights, but if they're really putting their hearts into it, then they really work out their whole system. The important thing is not how many weights you can lift, but the quality of your effort. And that really comes from your heart.

That's what I've been appreciating in the interviews today—the fruits of people's effort are really coming through. All the groundwork that you've done in these first four days of practice, I really see paying off.

In our approach to loving-kindness practice, I hope you know that there are two different kinds of good results that happen. One kind of good result that happens from this practice is the presence of mettā.

The other kind of good result that happens is the absence of metta—or you might say, the obstacles to metta. Generally, as you continue in a sincere way, you will get one of these two results. You will either get the blossoming of loving-kindness, or you'll directly encounter those states of mind and heart that are obstructing the development of metta.

Whichever one happens—and actually for most people it's both, an alternation—both of these aspects are really important for our practice and our growth. They work hand in hand together. I think a way to think about them helpfully is that they are the cycles in our practice of purity on the one hand and purification on the other.

As we deepen and contact these pure states of mind—love, compassion and joy—this gives us the faith and confidence that we have these beautiful qualities within ourselves. Not only that we have them, but we're starting to manifest them. We're starting to feel them come alive in our lives. And there's a great source of confidence that we can do this work.

Then the second part of the cycle is purification, when we encounter the difficult aspects of our hearts and minds. These are the states like sadness or longing or fear or resentment. These are so important to find because by and large in our daily life they've

been buried. They've been operating, but they've been operating at a repressed level. And because we haven't been able to touch them directly, we haven't been able to release them or free ourselves from their underlying activity.

So as long as we're not able to contact these difficult forces of the mind, they govern our lives. They've been driving us in different ways as long as they've been unconscious. Now that they're in the light of awareness and the light of metta, there's a possibility of transforming them. So these are actually the seeds of our greatest freedom. These are the things whose appearance is really going to transform our life and our practice as we learn to relate with them.

Because metta practice goes right for the heart, the feeling level, the feeling nature of our emotional life comes center stage and is even intensified with the turning of the mind to metta. And because we have on the one hand the purity of love and compassion and joy, and on the other the difficult states of sadness and fear and so on, it's almost like in metta retreat, sometimes we don't find very much equilibrium. Sometimes we're in heaven and sometimes we're in hell.

So the metta retreat often has much more of this alternation of heavenly states and hellish states than a vipassana retreat, where you might find more of an equanimity and kind of a cruising level. So don't be surprised by those strong fluctuations in emotion that can come from the metta practice. It's just part and parcel of this approach. It doesn't mean anything is going wrong. It means that the work is happening. You are happening.

This work of purification has a specific meaning in Buddhism. It means to free the mind from the forces of greed, aversion, and confusion—the three roots of the unwholesome in our experience and in our actions. It is the work of Dharma practice to reduce and eventually eliminate these three forces from our hearts and minds. And that's part of the work that we're involved in here.

Earlier this year, I was preparing a talk on this theme of purification. I was at another center in Massachusetts, sitting at the kitchen table in the apartment where I was staying and looking out the window into the woods that surrounded it. As I was looking out there, a hawk swooped down in this wooded area. It was late winter, so there were no leaves on the trees. Everything was bare. So I could see the hawk flying through the trees and then making a plunge into the leaves on the ground, picking up a snake in its claws.

Then the hawk took the snake and settled on a fallen tree that was resting at an angle, up about seven or eight feet. Sitting in my house, I could almost watch him at eye level. The hawk pinned the snake to the fallen tree and with his beak reached down and tore off pieces of flesh. As I was watching and thinking about the topic of purification, the hawk was ripping the snake apart and eating it bite by bite.

This is life for many creatures on the planet. The snake didn't want to die. The snake's deepest wish was for its own safety and happiness and health and ease. It was tremendously afraid, I imagine, of its death. But the hawk didn't want to die either. The hawk had a strong craving for continued existence, fueled by this fear of perishing and a quest for survival. And the collision of those two was not a totally happy picture.

We also have these deeply conditioned habits because our past is from that realm of animal life. So we have this deeply conditioned quest for survival, this deep fear of elimination and of physical pain.

This is the kind of conditioning that exists in our minds, and the depth of it is what makes it so challenging to purify. These are essentially the sources of craving and fear in our hearts and minds. You can sense, I hope, how deeply they penetrate from that image. This is very difficult work—the overall work of purification. It's absolutely no wonder that we still have these forces of desire and fear very much alive in us.

Tonight, I want to talk first about the purification aspect of our practice, and then spend more time toward the end on the aspect of purity. As I discuss purification, I'll focus on one particular factor: aversion. Among the three primary forces—greed, aversion, and delusion—aversion comes up very often in the retreat situation and is central for many people's practice.

Aversion is a term that encompasses a wide range of mental states. It is the basic experience of negativity or disliking, but manifests through states like anger, resentment, irritation, impatience, and frustration. It also includes fear, anxiety, nervousness, despair, depression, sorrow, and grief. All of these are different aspects of aversion or negativity.

In the texts, metta is presented by the Buddha as the antidote to aversion. So if you can connect to any of these states of mind—any hits out there? There are a few in here—then metta is the medicine for that state of mind. It is the antidote for all these different forms of aversion because it is essentially the opposite of negativity. It's the friendly, warm, welcoming attitude of mind.

One form of negativity that often arises in retreat is self-judgment. As we're alone and lack the company of friends and the reinforcement that social contact brings, we often find ourselves getting in touch with fears about our own being. We encounter a sense of inadequacy—that somehow we're not quite good enough. And because of that not being good enough, we're not really lovable. No one will love us because we're not worthy of being loved. We're not quite good enough to merit being loved.

This was brought up when the Dalai Lama visited the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. It was in the late seventies; the center was just a couple of years old—I think it was three years old at that point. We hadn't really straightened out our relationships with the townspeople very well at all. There were rumors going around that at IMS we held orgies at midnight where we danced around a fire naked. The townies, the boys, would love to drive up the driveway with their horns blaring and shout curses at us in the middle of the night.

But the Dalai Lama came to visit us in 1979. He wasn't as famous then as he is now—he wasn't quite the international figure that he was—but he was still a fairly big deal. The State Department was not providing security for him at that time, so the local chief of police got to provide security for him. This established us in the eyes of the local chief of police. Wow, a foreign dignitary is coming to my town, and I get to run the siren while I drive him up to the center. All of a sudden, we were in with at least part of the townspeople.

The Dalai Lama visited the three-month course toward its end. After he talked, he took questions from the meditators. One young man who was on the retreat raised his hand and said, "I don't feel good about myself. I just have this underlying feeling that I'm not worthy. Can you speak to that? Can you tell me how to work with it?"

The Dalai Lama came back with a very strong answer. He said, "You are wrong." I mean, he's the Bodhisattva of compassion. Most of the time he strokes people. But he said, "You are wrong. That is just not right. Every being that is born is a beautiful addition of creation, a beautiful expression of nature—even animals. Look around here: the deer, the birds, the turkeys, the worms on the pavement. They're all these beautiful expressions of the life of nature. How much more so a human being who has the capacity that you have for kindness and wisdom?"

Each one of you is a very beautiful and precious being. To think that you are unworthy is absolutely wrong and unfounded. And yet we often have this feeling, don't we? We often feel we're not quite good enough.

The metta practice is such a great antidote to this because as we start to connect with that sense of liking and friendliness in our heart, that sense of warmth, we really start to verify our own goodness. It may not be there all the time. It may just be flickering on some of the time. But when we feel it, we know what a beautiful thing it is and what a gift it is to the world.

The world really needs this quality of friendliness. And as it comes alive in our heart, we start to realize this is an important contribution. This is something worthwhile in me that maybe I can learn to bring out into life and into the world. And we start to get a conviction there's something good that's happening inside. And that's a strong antidote to this feeling of not being good enough.

One of the other ways that we can work with the practice to reinforce this lovability —because love really is in the eye of the beholder—is to work with the sending of metta to yourself. Now, I don't know if you've thought about this, but when you send metta to yourself, you're actually playing two roles in that drama. You're the sender and you're the receiver at the same time.

Most of us, I think, find it a lot easier to be the sender. I don't know if you've noticed that. It's kind of easy to give, isn't it? It's often difficult to receive because receiving can trigger that feeling, "I'm not worthy of receiving this gift."

So in the sending of metta to yourself, see if you can feel into being the receiver of the metta—not just being the sender, but what it feels like to receive. One of the ways that you can accentuate this, and something we recommend that you play with: imagine as you're receiving the metta phrases that your dearest friends and family members are seated in a half circle in front of you. All the people you'd really like to hang out with—only people that you want to be there get in that circle. And they're sending the metta phrases to you. The metta phrases are coming out of their hearts to you, and you can be purely in receiving mode and feel what it feels like to receive their love from the people you know do care about you.

Another way that it's fun to play with the metta with this self-judging is to start to listen to the comments of the judge: "You always mess up. You never get it right. Nobody's ever going to really be crazy about you." And you start to notice that this judge kind of has a personality. Not a very warm and fuzzy personality either, but a definite personality.

So you don't have to do a lot of looking through the past to see, "Is this my second-grade teacher? Is this my mother? Is it my father?" You don't have to do that. But what if you were to give a personality to that judge? What if you were to kind of make a funny

character out of the judge and give it a name and give it a face and sort of make a person out of it? Who does that judge seem like they are? If they were a cartoon character, who would they be?

One person that I made this suggestion to decided that his judge was Darth Vader. And then every time the judging comment would come in, he'd say, "Hi, Darth. Thanks very much for the suggestion," and go back to the metta practice. But another thing that's very effective to do is send metta to Darth because Darth really needs it. As you tune in, you probably recognize Darth is not a very happy character. Darth could use some metta. So if you make a character out of that judge, direct the metta and see what happens. See what happens to the tone of those judging comments.

Two other things that are helpful in the metta practice in working with this tendency to judge. One is feeling the goodness in ourselves, and you can also reflect on the qualities that you like in yourself or reflect on good things that you've done in the past just to get in touch with the intention, the wholesome motivation behind those actions. So you'll know that kindness is something that you do from time to time from that good intention. You'll feel that goodness in yourself.

And one final thing that can be really helpful is to send metta to yourself as a child. Imagine yourself at a time in your life when you can get in touch with your innocence. It might be four or five, eight or ten, teenage years when you felt that vulnerability and awkwardness. And even have a sense that you can hold that child and be the adult maybe that that child didn't have. And you can give that child the love and caring and affirmation and visibility. You can see what that child had that perhaps no one else at that time was able to see and reflect to you. This can be really healing, and it can really open up the channel of caring for yourself.

Another form of aversion that often arises strongly during metta practice is anger. This might seem contradictory, but sometimes that's precisely what gets evoked.

This came home to me powerfully during a long metta retreat I attended a few years ago. I had been navigating a difficult relationship that year, and as the retreat progressed, I found myself becoming quite quiet and concentrated, feeling genuine metta arising. But then thoughts of this challenging relationship would surface, and I'd begin what Sylvia aptly called "the road to indignation"—traveling down that familiar path, reliving all the reasons my anger seemed justified.

I would spiral into this anger for thirty minutes at a time, and of course it was extremely painful. As we become more sensitive through loving-kindness practice and through stillness, when these difficult emotions arise, they hit much harder. I was truly

suffering from this anger, and I think it was only this suffering that finally motivated me to let go. This is why experiencing anger directly during a metta retreat isn't necessarily problematic—it allows us to feel its full impact. We may wish for the other person to suffer, but in that very moment, we ourselves are the ones truly suffering.

I wasn't able to release this anger easily, but I had heard that one could try sending metta to the difficult person. My initial reaction was skeptical—this seemed somewhat contrived. I thought I would have to pretend to like them, and I didn't want to engage in that kind of pretense. But I was desperate, so I decided to try.

I began to reflect on the Pali term vyāpāda, which is sometimes translated simply as "anger." However, the most accurate translation is "ill-will"—the direct opposite of goodwill, which is synonymous with metta. Goodwill means "I want you to do well," while ill-will means "I don't want you to do well. I want you to do badly. I actually want you to hurt."

When I examined my anger closely, I could see this component of ill-will clearly present. From a Western psychological perspective, I could somewhat rationalize being angry at someone. But when I faced the fact that I actually wanted them to suffer, I realized this was dangerously close to cruelty. Cruelty means we take pleasure in someone else's suffering, but wanting someone to suffer is merely one step away from that cruelty.

I couldn't live with seeing myself as a cruel person. I had been able to accept the idea of myself as an angry person, but I couldn't accept the idea of myself as cruel. This recognition powerfully motivated me to examine this aspect of ill-will and to transform it. I simply didn't want to continue down this path.

So I began sending the same metta phrases to this difficult person. After some time, I discovered I could reluctantly wish them well. It didn't come easily or immediately, but with practice, I found I could genuinely wish for their wellbeing. It didn't require that they suffer.

When I was able to feel even a small amount of genuine well-wishing, the ill-will completely disappeared. It was blocked entirely, because we cannot simultaneously wish someone well and wish them ill. The moment I could send even a little metta to this difficult person and feel some goodwill, it stopped the ill-will completely. The anger simply ran out of fuel—it calmed down and essentially ended.

It would resurface again, perhaps the next day or two days later, and I would return to the phrases. I'd cultivate some goodwill, and the ill-will would dissipate once more. This was a profound lesson for me, and I offer it as one skillful approach for working with anger when it arises.

I encourage you to examine your own suffering when anger is present. Look deeply into this element of ill-will, and explore whether there's a possibility of wishing well instead, observing what effect this might have.

It was during this same period of practice that something else occurred that truly awakened me and touched me deeply. Sylvia had spoken about "the road to indignation," and I began to understand where this road ultimately leads.

I was starting to get angry again with my difficult person when suddenly an image arose spontaneously in my mind. I didn't ask for it. I hadn't been trying to create anything. It simply appeared and materialized like an image in a dream.

The vision showed a dark road crossing a barren plain at night, with a tree growing by the roadside. The tree had lost all its leaves, and the wind was howling through its bare branches. If you think of the Legend of Sleepy Hollow and the Headless Horseman, you'll understand the atmosphere of this image. It was cold, barren, dark, desolate, and scary—a very lonely place.

Somehow I intuited that this was the road of anger, the picture representing the road of indignation. Then, without intending it, on the other side of my visual field, I began to notice a yellow light. As I turned my attention to it, it became a sun—a bright sun in the sky. Below it appeared a green earth, and on this earth were seated monks and nuns in meditation posture. One figure was central and seemed like a Buddha image. Flying through the air were beings that looked like Thai art depictions of devas—seated figures traveling through space. The whole scene was bathed in warm yellow sunlight.

The intuition came clearly: this was the destination of metta. The contrast could not have been more vivid—the destination of anger dark, lonely, desolate, barren, and scary; the destination of metta filled with good spiritual friends, warmth, wisdom, and light.

It frightened me. This was such a strong message from my own unconscious about the choices I make. Until that point, I'd had an attitude that I could indulge my anger without consequence. I thought it was okay to be angry, that it wouldn't hurt anyone if I just let my mind run wild for a while. But then I saw there are consequences—consequences for my own heart. Running toward anger leads to one destination; following the path of loving kindness leads to another.

This vision deeply motivated me to make my most sincere effort in the direction of loving kindness.

Authentic spiritual traditions also understand the fruits of anger. The Dalai Lama tells a story of meeting a Tibetan monk in India who had managed to escape from Tibet. The Dalai Lama had known this monk only briefly before 1959, the year he himself escaped Tibet after ten years of Chinese occupation. The monk had then been imprisoned—probably during the Cultural Revolution—for twenty years. His crime was being a monk.

When he finally escaped to India and met with the Dalai Lama, His Holiness asked how his time had been. The monk replied that he had been in danger while in prison. The Dalai Lama said he understood completely—the monk had been tortured and could have been killed at any time.

"Yes, that's true," the monk replied, "but that's not really what I meant. I was in danger of feeling angry at my prison guards."

The Dalai Lama said that after hearing this, his estimation of this monk rose considerably. This is amazing practice—to be concerned about harboring anger toward one's guards and tormentors. This exemplifies the possibility inherent in developing the heart of loving kindness. It's graduate-level work, but it represents what's truly possible for us.

The last form of aversion I want to explore is fear.

Sylvia, I think, mentioned that this practice of loving kindness was originally taught as a protection practice. The story in the commentaries tells of the Buddha instructing a group of monks to sit in a forest grove at night for their meditation. Obediently, they went out together, took their seats among the trees, and began to practice. But they quickly became frightened and ran back to the Buddha, saying, "We can't meditate there. It's too scary. It's dark, and the tree spirits were coming out, making terrible sounds—and worse than that, making really awful smells."

The Buddha responded, "I'm going to give you a protection that you can take back into the forest, and it's the only protection you'll need. I want you to do the practice of loving kindness. Direct loving thoughts all around you to all beings that are anywhere near."

The monks returned to the same grove and began directing thoughts of loving kindness. When they reported back to the Buddha a few days later, everything had changed. "The tree spirits got really friendly to us," they said. "They started doing everything they could to support our practice, and it became a wonderful place to meditate."

What I find fascinating in this story is its kernel of truth: when we change the orientation of the heart to loving kindness, the whole world around us takes on a warmer feeling. It may not have changed externally, but it feels so different to us.

I was teaching a month-long retreat here a couple of years ago, and one participant had to leave halfway through to travel across the country for a family funeral. She was already quite sensitive after two weeks of practice and nervous about this abrupt transition back into the world with no integration time. I suggested that whenever she was around groups of people—in airport lines, waiting lounges, on the plane itself—she practice the loving-kindness phrases continuously.

When she returned three days later, she reported it had been a fantastic practice. She had started to feel nervous, alien, alone, and isolated. But as soon as she began the loving kindness practice, she felt connected to all the people around her, recognizing that their wishes too were for safety, happiness, and health. "It made the whole trip easy," she said.

Fear has been one of my greatest hindrances—probably my greatest single hindrance through years of dharma practice. I spent countless hours on the cushion with vipassana practice, learning to relate to fear, and gained tremendously from that work. I learned to be with fear with some equanimity, to let it arise without being afraid of the fear itself. The whole experience of fear became increasingly workable. I developed qualities of acceptance, spaciousness, and non-identification with it. But in my personality and character, when my mind would go out of balance, it would still tip toward fear.

Then, after many years of this practice, I did a long metta retreat and noticed something remarkable. Although vipassana practice had steadily weakened my fear over the years—making it smaller and smaller—the basic conditioning was still there, the fundamental tendency of mind unchanged. But after some time with metta practice, a new conditioning could step in. When my mind would tend in some direction, it would often move toward metta instead of fear. It gave my mind another place to go.

I found that metta could actually establish new conditioning to replace the conditioning of fear. Vipassana practice tends to reduce our conditioning by helping us step back from it with spaciousness, but it doesn't necessarily put different conditioning in its place. The Brahma Viharas, however, can actually transform the heart so it moves strongly into love, compassion, and joy. This is a great gift.

So loving-kindness practice serves as a terrific antidote for fear—a profound contribution to working with this obstacle. With all these hindrances, it's helpful to understand that we don't have to attack the obstacle directly. We don't need to push anything out. That would be the very antithesis of metta.

Metta is a welcoming, friendly, accepting kind of energy toward whatever is there. So as you're doing the metaphors and connecting with that sense of caring, if one of these obstacles comes up—judgment, anger, fear, sadness, longing, any of these things—recognize that it's there. This is part of touching into the heart center after each phrase. See what emotion is present. Sometimes it will be metta, sometimes it won't. Sometimes it will be one of the obstacles.

Notice if that's there, but continue to connect with the caring and the person and the phrases. Then what happens is these obstacles start to get held in the space of metta. You don't have to make them go away. You don't even have to change them very much. But as they get held in your growing feeling of friendliness and warmth and acceptance, they get included in that.

It's kind of like Sylvia was talking about last night—how your neighbor's habits that irritated you in the beginning of the retreat start to seem cute by the third day. You know, the way somebody clatters their silverware when they're eating in the dining hall. The same thing happens with these difficult states of mind. They start to seem like old friends, a little bit more like old friends.

You just have the sense that you're including this part of yourself. It's not an easy part. It's not the most fun part, but it's a real part. You're including that difficult part of yourself within the metta, and it all just becomes more and more okay. It's okay that those visitors are there. You don't have to make them go away. The more we open to them and accept like that, the more the steam goes out of their sails. They thrive on resistance. The more we open to them, the more they can just relax also. As we relax, they relax. This is really the transformation of those difficult states—through openness, through acceptance, and through non-resistance. That allows them also to relax.

So I wanted to talk also about the growing purity in the practice. Sally said this morning that we're really developing two qualities here strongly. One is metta, the other is concentration. We've talked a lot about the metta, so I don't want to focus on that for the rest of this talk. I want to talk about the other property, which is that of concentration. Sylvia started to talk about it last night when she talked about the influence of this quality of rapture—a kind of joyful interest that comes in practice and how it offsets the tendency of aversion. So I want to talk more about the factor of concentration in practice and the benefits that it brings.

What is it? What is concentration? It took me a long time to figure this out in my practice. I heard the word talked about, but I didn't have a sense of what it meant. This factor is kind of in our consciousness, but it's not very much in our culture. It's an archetypal thing. All these images in the West of yogis on mountaintops in Asia pop up in cartoons all the time. The fact that they pop up in cartoons means that they're deep within our psyche somewhere because they're such a recurrent image.

Some of the cartoons emphasize the wisdom aspect of these gurus on the mountaintops, and I'm going to steal some of Sylvia's material to tell you about one of these cartoons, which she has authorized me to share. We're always trying to borrow, beg, or steal each other's material, so it's a great gift.

There's a cartoon with a guru up on the mountaintop. It's a man with a long beard, just wrapped in a loincloth, sitting at the entrance to a cave with big Himalayan peaks behind him. In front of him is seated this Western person, looks like a Western person dressed in conventional street clothes, sitting cross-legged in front of the guru. The caption is the guru speaking. This is the wisdom transmission. The guru is saying, "If I knew the wisdom of life, do you think I'd be sitting in my underpants in this cave?" That's the wisdom tradition.

So the other cartoons that you see are the concentration tradition. In those, the image is the guru wrapped up in a shawl with the eyes closed and the body perfectly still. You get the sense that the consciousness is very withdrawn into his or her being. This is a strong archetypal image too.

And this image shows basically the manifestation of concentration, or the Pali term is samadhi.

There are three essential qualities we notice in this image. First is its inward nature. The shawl represents that being wrapped up and drawn within, that cocooning. Second is the stillness of the body. Something ceases moving in concentration. Third is the bliss-

ful nature. There's a sense that this yogi has found a source of peace and contentment that comes from their own mind. The phrase "happiness comes from within" is really validated in this image of samadhi or concentration.

Samadhi is the state when the mind has come together and become collected. It's this unification that gives it its blissful nature. It also gives it its strength, and that's what develops the stillness. Most of the time, we're giving away this innate strength and contentment by shooting the mind out to the past and future, looking at things with longing or regret, going over and over our worries, our fears, and our hopes. We give away this innate purity.

Much of the purpose of a meditation object is to give a new focus to the mind so that the attention can collect around that object in the present moment and stop this futile wandering into past and future, into hope and fear. This is exactly what the metaphors do. They give an object that hopefully is fairly interesting and has some intrinsic appeal that the mind can collect around. As it does, you start to feel the calming that comes from the diminishing of hope and fear.

The more you collect around those phrases and the person, the more you come into the present moment. The more you come fully into the present moment, the more your whole being gets united, back the way it was when we were kids. Children live so fully in the present, and that's why they're so whole. That's why they're so well integrated. With that kind of integration, they have a trust in themselves where they can flow through strong emotions without getting so concerned about it. You don't see children worrying when they go from laughter to tears. They just pass through the tears and then they're back into laughter again a little bit later. That's the wholeness of heart that comes from the unified mind.

As the attention collects around the object, it's as though there's a merging of our consciousness with the object. This merging is very close to the feeling of metta. You know how love is a kind of merging energy. We want to be united with the love object. Concentration has that same effect. There's a merging of the attention with the object when it is of interest.

In that merging, there's a little bit of a death. There's a death of this person and personality that are based in past and future. So sometimes there's a little bit of fear in concentration. It's like, if I really give myself to the phrases and the person and the feeling of metta, what's going to be left of me? What's going to be left of my personal history, my past, and my future plans? So there can be a little bit of resistance to this concentration even though it's a very wholesome state and very deeply satisfying when we give ourselves to it.

Rumi had a poem that expresses this beautifully. He said, "The way of love is not some subtle argument. The way there is devastation. Birds make great sky circles of their freedom. How do they learn it? They fall. And falling, they're given wings."

In our meditation practice, we are encouraged to fall into our object. Let go of past and future. Let go of personality worries and let your attention fall completely into the person, the phrases and the feeling in the heart. Falling, you're going to be given wings. You're going to discover that concentration and the metta that comes with it will hold you up, that it's really all you need.

Many people come into metta practice with the intention of opening the heart, and that's really all that people are interested in. I'll often be teaching a vipassana retreat and talking about some of the Buddha's teachings on impermanence and selflessness. People will tell me in an interview or sometimes in a question, "I'm not interested in your philosophy. I'm just here to open my heart. Come on, just keep it simple."

The problem is—and this is what I discovered in my life as a young adult—I could contact love quite easily when I was in my late teens and early twenties, but I couldn't stabilize there. I could touch it, but it wasn't repeatable or predictable or sustainable.

So I would fall into these states of love—and I don't just mean romantic love, but really love of nature and life, the cosmos. I would fall into them, and I'd also fall out of them every time. I didn't know how to get it back or how to sustain it.

Through doing Dharma practice, what I've come to believe is that it's very hard to stabilize love without two other factors. The first and really most important is wisdom. We have to have the understanding primarily of non-clinging. That's the only way the heart can stay unburdened—by learning not to cling to the past. When the heart is unburdened, it's more able to love.

But the second factor that really strongly supports that stabilization is samadhi. Because when concentration is firm and the mind isn't wavering, we're not pulled by hope and fear and all the obstacles. When we're really fully in the moment, we rediscover that native capacity, that childlike capacity for opening. There's nothing else we really have to add but the intention for it and the stabilization.

So all the rest of Dharma practice—the wisdom practices of Vipassana, the concentration factor—strongly support this opening into metta.

Start to get familiar in your practice with how concentration feels. The sign of it is that you're able to sustain the phrases and close connection with the phrases for a little bit of time. In the beginning, it might just be thirty seconds. You might just have this

feeling: "I really connected with phrase after phrase with no gaps for thirty seconds." And that had a certain feeling. And then as it goes on, it'll be a minute and five minutes. I was talking with someone today who said that in a good sitting today, they'd been able to sustain the phrases for an hour. That's fantastic.

Start to notice when this comes in what your experience is like. What does it feel like when the mind is in that concentrated place where you're able to stay connected to the present moment? Is it painful? Generally not. Generally, it's a really sweet place. Because there's a steadiness of mind, and because of the steady mind, it's not being pulled through hope and fear, there's a sense that we can relax. There's a sense of being able to feel the body relax in those moments.

Tune into that and notice that. As the body relaxes, the mind can have the sense of relaxing into the body, of actually dropping into the body. It's as though one of the dualities that we've kept—of mind as something separate from body, trying to control, manipulate, change—that duality starts to fade and the mind and body come together. Again, a deepening of the unification.

There was one image that came to me as I was doing a period of concentration practice and feeling this settling—and it'll give away my age, but I want to share it because some of you may have seen it too. It's a television commercial from the 1950s. Do you all remember the commercials for Prell shampoo? Some of you? Okay, this is black and white television in my day, but you knew that Prell was a certain color. Prell was green. So there'd be the bottle of the shampoo on the commercial, and then they'd drop something in at the top. Anybody remember what they dropped? Yeah, they'd drop a pearl. A lot of my generation here.

And that pearl would ever so slowly travel down the length of the bottle of Prell and then get to the bottom. And the slowness of its voyage was proof that Prell shampoo was thick and lustrous and good for your hair. You could just feel the viscosity of the shampoo by how slowly the pearl was dropping down.

That is an image for the mind settling into the body in the relaxation of concentration. So you can remember this as the Prell Sutra. This sense of the mind settling easily into the body, the body in a state of deep relaxation, brings a lot of contentment with it. It's a very satisfying experience.

To whatever degree you experience it, start to tune into that contentment. There's a peacefulness when the concentration is present. There's an ease. There's a lack of problem in that.

And then start to notice what happens when you're not so connected with the phrases. What happens when the mind starts getting distracted again to past and future, to things we like and things we don't like? What does that feel like? It's not so peaceful. It's kind of stirred up and jangly and has sharp edges.

These are the hindrances that Sally talked about a couple of nights ago—the forces of desire, aversion, dullness, restlessness, and doubt. Concentration, as it strengthens and deepens, has the power to block off the hindrances. It stops the operations of the hindrances.

For a meditator, you can feel that the hindrances are the things that disturb our peace of mind moment after moment. In fact, in every moment when we're not fully in the present, take a look and see if this isn't so. Unless we're unified in the present moment with our experience, the hindrances are operating in that kind of jangly way. Concentration lets us out of that bondage to the hindrances.

The Buddha compared this process of coming out of the hindrances to five different experiences. When these five hindrances have been abandoned in oneself, one sees that as freedom from debt, health after a long illness, released from prison, freedom from slavery, and a land of safety. That's how important the absence of the hindrances is—like getting out of prison, like being freed from slavery, like being returned to health.

This is a beautiful quality in and of itself, but that's not the end of the benefit of concentration. The most important reason that we develop concentration in Dharma practice is to steady the mind so that we can see into the nature of things more and more clearly. It's seeing into the nature of things with clarity that the Buddha said brings liberation, brings the insight that finally frees the heart.

Concentration in itself is a beautiful place, but it's impermanent. It can decay just as it was built up by factors and circumstances. It will decay in the absence of those factors and circumstances. A lasting peace and a lasting freedom is only possible through deep insight into the nature of things and the nature of the unconditioned.

So concentration, although it can be developed to these depths of absorption called jhanas—providing seclusion from the hindrances and a great sense of well-being and contentment—is not the final step on the journey. The final step is to take that base of steadiness of mind and direct it toward understanding of the nature of life and existence. From that, the freedom, the lasting freedom, can spring.

When these two go together—the stability of concentration, the flowering of metta, supported by insight—then we get a sense of this beautiful abiding that the Buddha talked about in the Metta Sutta. I'll close with a short quote from that:

"So with a boundless heart, one should cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies and downward to the depths, outward and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill will. Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding."

Let's just sit together for a minute, please.

CHAPTER 255

Healing and Freedom

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *Guy Armstrong examines two primary motivations that bring people to dharma practice: the aspiration to heal from life's wounds and restore wholeness, and the deeper aim for complete liberation as the Buddha discovered. Drawing on his personal journey with fear as a primary hindrance, Armstrong illustrates how the healing phase involves working skillfully with difficult emotions through mindful acceptance of their bodily sensations, mental qualities, and thought patterns. He discusses how this phase, while valid and necessary, naturally evolves toward the deeper motivation of ultimate freedom.*
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> *The talk explores the relationship between psychological healing and spiritual liberation, noting that while the practice instructions remain the same, our attitudes and understanding deepen. Armstrong addresses common challenges in the healing phase, including strong preferences for certain mind states, attachment to positive experiences, and the agenda to "fix" ourselves. He emphasizes that true acceptance of difficult emotions—being willing for them to remain indefinitely—paradoxically leads to their dissolution.*
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> *The teaching culminates in exploring the transition from healing to liberation, where practice becomes less about changing our experience and more about meeting whatever arises with mindfulness and acceptance. Armstrong references the Buddha's teaching on finding the "heartwood" of spiritual life, suggesting that while healing, virtue, concentration, and insight are valuable, the ultimate goal is the unshakable deliverance of mind that constitutes true liberation.*

James talked a couple of nights ago about this factor of intention in our practice, which is so central to directing us, and I want to carry on from that theme and explore it a little further tonight. I hope I don't repeat a lot of the things he said. I wasn't here to hear his talk, and most of all, I hope I don't end up arguing with him, which sometimes happens, but trust you'll hold it in a big mind.

I was working out at the gym where I work out in Fairfax a few years ago. I'm not, as I've mentioned, a dedicated bodybuilding kind of guy. I just like to stay in reasonably good shape. But one day I was in there and one of the guys who worked regularly at the gym at that time was also there. His name was Lance.

Lance was built. There was a photo of him up at the front of the gym when he had competed at a Mr. America contest. He really had the physique, right there with all the well-known Schwarzeneggers and so on. Every once in a while, he'd come along and give me a tip on how to do the machines or the weights or something and put an arm on his shoulder. It was like touching a stack of bricks. He was so solid. So he was kind of an inspiration to us all in the gym and also a little bit foreboding.

But one day I was in there and there were two young teenage guys working out next to me who were even scrawnier than I am because they haven't aged and put on the little belly yet. I heard them talking and they were talking about Lance in kind of odd tones, describing his abilities. They said, "Did you see Lance the other day? He pressed 515 pounds."

I could see their eyes lighting up like, that is really fantastic. And what I got from that is that they both aspired to be able to do that too. I didn't really. That was way out of my league. I was happy just in the very minor leagues that I was in. But they aspired to that. What I picked up from that is that their trajectory in their weightlifting career was probably going to be a lot higher than mine ever was.

Because what we aspire to becomes a kind of guidepost that we align and direct our practice to. So that was kind of inspiring for me, just to touch into the fact that one can aspire greatly in any discipline, whether it's weights or mastery of a language or a skill like meditation, and that the higher we set our aim, that will influence our whole trajectory as we carry out our career in that.

When I look at the aims that people have coming into dharma practice, I see basically two main aims that people come in with. One is an aim to heal from all the hurts and troubles that life has brought our way and to become whole again, to restore a sense of wholeness, calm, peace, openness of heart, however you'd like to describe it. A kind of balance, coming to a happy balance in life.

The other motivation that I see people come with is the aspiration to be liberated, to be completely free in the same way that the Buddha discovered he could be completely free.

One of my teachers put this kind of succinctly. He said, the dharma does both these things. He said, "First it makes us healthy and then it makes us free."

In the talk tonight, I want to talk about basically these two parts of dharma practice: the part that makes us healthy or heals us and the part that makes us free. I want to start off by saying that I think both of these are really good motivations in practice. They're both valid and noble reasons to be here and to be doing the work that you're doing.

They also constitute, to my mind, to some degree phases in our practice, that we often tend to move from one—the healing or healthy phase—into the other, the phase of aspiration for liberation. The motivations and therefore some of the accompanying attitudes are different in these two phases. So I want to explore what those differences are like.

I want to talk first about using the dharma practice for healing. I think a lot of people come into meditation because they're unhappy. I think this is very, very widespread and very appropriate. When I first came into meditation, this was my motivation. I would have been hard pressed to say exactly what was the problem in life. I remember sort of scratching my head at different times. I was in my early twenties and I thought, what's the problem here?

At one point, I had a friend whose name was True Light. This will give you a sense of the circles I moved in in those years. I had a friend named True Light. We shared many altered states together. At one point, I shared with her that I really wasn't very happy at this point in my life. She said, "Okay, just come into the moment. What are you unhappy about right now?"

And her question really stopped me. I had to say, I don't know. I really couldn't put my finger on what the unhappiness was. I just knew that I hadn't been happy for a long time, and I wasn't happy about that.

This is often the situation when we're young and first come into some kind of spiritual life, some spiritual way of looking at things. There may just be a pervasive sense that life doesn't feel quite right, that we've lost some connection we knew before.

As we start to practice and investigate our experience as the meditation instructions direct, we come to see that the suffering was around particular states of mind that were frequent visitors—unpleasant, uncomfortable visitors. As I started to look into my experience, I found that I had a lot of fear and anxiety. That was the main reason I couldn't feel happy, contented, open, loving, spacious, and connected with life.

But for other people, the particulars will differ. For some, it might be grief or unworthiness or self-judgment, a sense of disappointment. It might be desire, wanting, or insufficiency. It could be anger that disconnects us from other people. Or maybe we just notice our heart's closed and we want to be able to open it. We remember how it felt when we were younger. We've lost something.

These emotions, this closeness of difficult emotions, may have their roots in many different areas. It could be childhood conditioning, could be trauma—either recent or old. Could just be a sense of dissatisfaction with life. But the main thing is that when this is our motivation, when our suffering is around emotions and emotions become the center of our focus, we believe the root and core cause lies in these difficult emotions. They're the ground, the basis, the source of the suffering.

So that's where we tend to focus our practice. We concentrate on the emotions, and at least that's how we conceive of our practice—thinking about focusing on emotions. In fact, there may be a lot of other things going on as we practice, but that's where our conscious interest and intention lies. And then our motivation for practice becomes clearer: we want to find a way to be free in relation to these difficult, painful emotions. We may use the breath to get in touch with them, but the breath is just a tool. Awareness of breath is just a tool.

I should mention that some people don't particularly go through this phase, so this may not be relevant to a number of you here. I ask you to listen from a kind of disinterested place. Many people also come into Dharma practice from a place of pretty good balance and a high degree of contentment. The emotional pain may not be apparent in the beginning, although it usually becomes apparent later on, and then that becomes what keeps us in practice.

I know people who've started practice out of intellectual curiosity. What's this teaching about? Impermanence, selflessness, unsatisfactoriness, the natural mind, Buddha nature, liberation, enlightenment. What's this about? This sounds kind of interesting. They explore from that avenue and then find that emotions actually do play a role.

At this stage, I want to examine some of the attitudes present in this stage of healing. We're really relating to meditation, to the Dharma, as a form of psychotherapy. We could go to therapy training, we could go to many different schools, or we could go to the Buddhist Spirit Rock School of Meditation Therapy—we just end up here for some reason. Whether it's Western psychotherapy or meditation, both seek to alleviate the pain of human existence, and in this stage, the pain of emotional suffering. So meditation is really seen as just another therapy tool at this point.

I checked out a few therapies when I was in my twenties. When I did my first retreat, I became hooked because I felt that of the things I'd sampled—which was a narrow spectrum—this was the one that had the power to go to any level of the mind where the suffering was happening. I felt that in my first retreat. Wherever the source of the conflict, the bind, the attachment, the knot lay in my psyche, I felt this practice had the power to go to that depth. And being able to go to that depth had the potential to release it.

From the very first retreat, I had complete trust in that, and my confidence never wavered. That trust was a great support through years of ups and downs and years of difficulty in practicing.

Some of the views we encounter as we come into Buddhist meditation we find are different than some therapeutic views. The tools are obviously different, but the views may be different also, the assumptions. One of the things we see in Dharma practice is that we don't need to care so much about the past.

I don't know if this has been made clear in the talks, but it's very much our understanding that for the most part, the past isn't really that central to what we're doing here. Obviously, it has influenced us a great deal. It has totally influenced the way the present moment arises. But in our learning to free ourselves, even on this psychological level, we don't need to go back and revive the memories of the past to find that freedom. We simply trust that if we learn how to relate to the emotions as they arise here and now, that will be enough learning to free us.

So there's not the purposeful aim to send the attention back into the past, uncover some seeming source of the suffering and understand that source. We just trust that if the difficulties are arising in the present moment, we can understand it in the here and now.

The other difference in view is that we don't actually have to work all the emotions out. I think sometimes in Western psychological models, we think that we have to get one emotion, trace it back to its causes, and then kind of work it all the way through in the future so that we've really dissolved it at the root. In meditation practice, I talked the other night about how this factor of samadhi allows us to suspend the hindrances. When samadhi is cultivated to a certain depth, the hindrances just don't arise. They don't have room to come in.

In traditional Asian models of meditation development, this is basically the root. You work with a meditation subject until concentration is at such a level that the difficult emotions aren't arising anymore. Whether it's greed or fear or anger or sloth and tor-

por or restlessness, they're simply not arising. It's not that they've been eliminated from the system. But you've reached a meditative state of poise that doesn't allow them to enter. From that meditative state of poise, you deepen the faculty of insight to such a level that the afflictive emotions can be uprooted. In the traditional Asian model, there's not very much work at all on the psychological level of coming to terms with different emotions.

The other thing that we see that's different in meditation is that the purification of the mind and heart comes through a completely different angle—not through working out the negative, but in bringing up the positive. As we develop day by day the strength of mindfulness, it brings in its wake all the beautiful qualities of mind: faith, tranquility, investigation and interest, devotion, wisdom, concentration, loving-kindness and compassion. So a strong offset to the negative tendencies of mind—the hindrances, the difficult emotions—are all the beautiful qualities that are developing purely through the meditation model without particularly working on any of the negative. These positive factors are great allies, not only in learning to relate with the difficult, but just in purifying and strengthening the mind all on their own.

One of the attitudes that we see if we come with the motivation of healing in meditation is that we actually have an agenda. You've probably heard us say many times, "Be with your experience without struggle and without an agenda." But if we're coming with a motivation of healing what's painful, there's usually a strong agenda at work—sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious. The agenda is something like this: I have to change the way I feel. I have to change the way these emotions are arising. I have to change the way I am. We basically feel I have to change myself—something's wrong with the way I am, and I have to put it right.

So in this approach from healing, there is a basic kind of non-acceptance of the way things are, a non-acceptance of what is. Something's gone wrong, we have to put it right. This may be a conscious view that we take up and we could just say to somebody, "Yeah, I believe something's wrong and I've got to fix it." It may be an unconscious view, but it's kind of part and parcel of the domain of healing.

This agenda then looks to replace the difficult emotions with more positive states. It could be conceived of as love or happiness or calm or peace or contentment, however you think of it. But often in this agenda, we'll focus on one particular emotion or one area of emotion that we consider the biggest problem. For some it might be wanting, for some it might be fear, for some it might be anger, for some it might be grief, some it might be unworthiness. We focus on that and we think, "That's it. If I can just take care of that, then everything else will be cool."

You may know this line from the Third Zen Patriarch: "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences." How does that coincide, how does that coexist with the healing agenda? It doesn't actually coexist very well because with the healing agenda we have really strong preferences. We have preferences for these kinds of mind states and not for these kinds of mind states. We really want to change them.

As the positive mind states start to come in, because of this strong preference, we easily get attached to the positive mind states. For one reason, because we may not have had them for quite a while. We may have been wanting them for a long time and missing them. So when they come, we tend to hang on. Second, because they indicate that the agenda is working. This becomes the indicator of progress or success, that the healing is actually taking place. So it becomes a validator of the work that we're doing.

And it's very painful when these pass, because we're back again in that really unsatisfactory state of affairs, which is the suffering emotions. And we never know when they'll come back again. In the beginning, they're very tentative. They just appear briefly, and they don't have a lot of stability. And we're not sure when they'll come again.

Also at this stage of the practice, we may not be very interested in the teachings of the Buddha. Even if there's kind of an intellectual interest, it may not go very deep.

And we hear teachings like about not-self—there's no self—and we think, oh yeah, give me a break, you know, then who's suffering? We hear teachings on dependent origination and the twelve links of the chain of becoming. We hear talks about concentration and we think, it's all really kind of theoretical. It's like we've joined some university book club, and they're off in some kind of cultish intellectual pursuit.

I've heard many people say, either in questions in the hall or in interviews, "I just came here to open my heart. I'm not interested in all of this Buddhist philosophy." And there's actually another word that wants to go on the end of "Buddhist philosophy," but I don't want to say it right here. All this Buddhist philosophy stuff.

Of course these teachings on not-self, on dependent origination and concentration, these really are the avenues to liberation. But because they don't have much emotional content or much emotional juice, they don't seem to be relevant to the work we're involved in. "I want to open my heart. Don't give me this intellectual stuff."

The problem is that the opening of the heart, as I've experienced it, is only temporary if it's not supported by other factors. When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I had a lot of access to love. And I don't just mean relationship love or sexual love, but I had a lot of openness to life and a lot of love of nature and of being and of the

creative arts, people, love of life, really. But it wasn't very stable. It would come and then it would go, and I wouldn't know how to get it back. When I lost that really loving connection to life, I'd get depressed, I'd get despondent, and I didn't know how to find it again.

So I think that the openness and connecting to life, which is what the opening of the heart is about, can't really be stabilized unless it's supported by other factors. And in Buddhism, there are two main factors that support this. The first and most important is wisdom, and it's primarily the wisdom of not clinging. It's clinging that closes the heart. It's clinging that shuts us off in many different forms—clinging to the past, some different expression of clinging to the way things were, clinging to what was. So the wisdom of seeing when we're clinging and how to release it is the central thing. And the second thing that supports that stability of the opening of the heart is samadhi. Samadhi gives the mind a strength, a firmness, and a steadiness that it can withstand the pushes and pulls both of life and of the inner states of the hindrances.

There's another factor that's really important to understand in this healing phase. Jack Engler is a friend of ours who's a long-time Vipassana practitioner, student of Munindraji and Dipama from the India days, and a psychologist who's a professor at Harvard. He has a line that kind of sums up this phase of the practice. He said, "It's really important, before you become nobody, that you be somebody." In other words, we need to develop a healthy sense of self before we can really let go of the sense of self.

So a lot of what this phase of practice is about is coming to stabilize in the positive qualities—in the openness of the heart, in access to happiness and contentment and peace and self-regard. And as those become more and more stable, we start to get a good sense of ourself, replacing the sense of ourself as fragmented or unhappy or broken. Then, from that place, there's the possibility of letting go of self.

I want to talk a little bit about this healing phase in a more personal way, and I want to talk about how my practice evolved with fear, because it was my main hindrance for a number of years in the early years of my practice. It came up a lot for me. Fear is one of our deepest conditionings. Sally mentioned it, I think, the other night, talking about the Third Foundation. It comes up often in interviews. It's a painful state of mind.

Fear has the effect of closing our world in. You can feel that the heart of fear is this contraction in our being—we feel that something really unpleasant is about to happen. There's a sense of impending doom, and it brings with it a darkness that clouds our life, that clouds our time here. It's as though—I remember saying at one point when I was

under this influence—I couldn't really touch the sunshine anymore, because I had closed off in some way to it. When fear is present, it really blocks our flowering. It prevents the unfolding of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind.

There's a line that I really like from a science fiction novel from the sixties. I don't know if any of you read Dune by Frank Herbert. It was quite a trip at the time. One of his lines in there—part of the training that the people were undergoing in this culture, which was something of a wisdom culture—was the line, "Fear is the great mind killer." Fear is the great mind killer. When it's present, it really stifles our creativity and our blossoming.

So coming into practice, this was quite strong in my early years, and I realized I had to come to an understanding of it. It became my dominant experience at times. I listened to my teachers talk about working with the emotions, working with the difficult emotions, and I realized I need to investigate what is this thing called fear. So I actually regarded it as a great opportunity when it came up.

Not the first time it came up, but after a while, because it gave me a chance to investigate. This is actually a teaching device used in places, especially in Asia. Ajahn Chah's teacher was a very fierce man named Ajahn Mun. In a way, he kind of re-established the Thai forest tradition in the early part of the last century. He taught Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mahabua, and a number of other great forest masters of the second half of the century.

Ajahn Mun used to instruct his monks to go off and sit in the forest in areas where they knew tigers to be on the loose. There were a lot of tigers a hundred years ago in the forests of Thailand. They were still really wild—this was before they were all logged. So he would instruct the monks to go sit out there. The monk would go wandering around through the forest, looking for a good place to sit and walk. Sometimes they would come upon a pile of bones of previous inhabitants of the area. There'd be a pile of bones, the begging bowl of the monk, and some scattered robes. And that's where they were encouraged to practice.

That could bring up some fear. But it was considered a good thing because this was a chief hindrance. And if you had the opportunity to practice with it, you might be able to become free of it.

So eventually I came to really appreciate the times when fear came up in my meditation and I could investigate it. It comes up in daily life for us, of course, but often we're so distracted, there are so many things going on, it's hard to connect clearly. Here, when there's nothing else to do, it can be the only thing really happening. And that's a tremendous opportunity to feel into it really clearly.

So I started to look into it, and it manifests in three ways. As far as I know, it manifests in three ways. It manifests in the body. It manifests as a mental state or tone or mood or color. And it manifests through thoughts—certain kinds of thoughts come with fear when fear is present. I looked at it again and again and I couldn't find anything else but these three parts to it. So I started to work on getting comfortable with each of these three aspects.

First I grounded my attention in the body. This is generally the advice for working with strong emotions. I'm going to go through this cycle with fear, but I hope you'll see the extension to any other states of mind that are difficult. Ground the attention in the body.

When I came into my body, I found that what was happening was a sense of shakiness. Fear made my body light and trembling, and it wasn't a pleasant feeling. There was a contraction in the stomach. I would sometimes have sweat under my arms. I would feel too light and ungrounded, like I couldn't put a foot down anywhere. And sometimes my breathing would get really shallow.

So I kept investigating. And sooner or later I came to see that's about all that fear was in the body. It was just this trembling and lightness and contraction. And so I had to ask myself, can I accept this the way it is? And eventually I said, yeah. I mean, not the first time that fear arose, not the second time. But after being with it a number of times, it wasn't a big deal. It was just sensations. So I could open to it on the bodily level.

Then I started to look: well, what's the mood in the mind? What's the mental state? What's that tone or color of fear? And I started to try to feel into that. It's a different color than sadness or happiness or joy or anger. So what is that color? The closest I could get was a kind of wanting to escape. It was like a wanting to move away, wanting to flee. That was what I could pick up as the color in the mind.

And I thought, well, can I come to terms with that? Can I open and accept that part of fear?

And I found that I could.

Then I looked at the thoughts. What kind of thoughts come with fear? Scary thoughts. In fact, I think Sally read something from Krishnamurti the other evening that basically said it's thoughts and the proliferation of them projecting into the future that create fear, that stimulate fear. We might think of something awful that we don't want to have happen. "Oh, I'm going to have to leave the retreat and go home and deal with this work situation." And we get scared in the moment. He summed this all up, Krishnamurti, with this really nice phrase: thought breeds fear. Thought breeds fear. Thought breeds most other suffering too, if you look at it closely.

The way these thoughts work is a little bit like the story of the Chinese artist who was painting a big scroll painting. With bold strokes, he painted a leaping tiger—a beautiful evocation of the tiger. He stepped back from the scroll and looked at the tiger and got scared. "Oh my God, a tiger!" This is the way our thoughts work. We project something fantastic that hasn't happened into the future and then we get scared by the projection.

At one point in my practice, I started to tune into the unreality of that fearful projection. I happened to be in England doing a period of practice at the retreat center before Gaia House was established. It was called East Farmhouse, in Wiltshire. I was practicing there in the summer, and if you've ever been to England in the summer, you know how beautiful the experience can be. Everything's in flower. The English are great gardeners, so there are lots of flowers. The bird life is really rich. The sun doesn't set in midsummer until ten o'clock or so at night. It stays light until eleven. And there can be this really beautiful softness that settles over the landscape around nightfall, around dusk.

So I was out doing standing meditation in the back garden of the retreat center, standing next to a flowering fruit tree—I think it was an apple tree. The scent of the flowers was faint but present in the air. The birds were chirping all around as it was getting darker. This softness was settling on the whole landscape. I was doing standing meditation with my eyes closed, and I was in a fear space, going "fear, fear" and noting it.

Then I just opened my eyes, and I felt this incredibly beautiful, light, soft, warm, birdsong-filled evening of English twilight. I had to laugh because the thought came up: "Yeah, it's a really scary place, isn't it?" The fear was so out of sync with the moment. And that's the way fear usually is. We can be all churned up inside with our eyes closed, sitting in this beautiful hall. Then we might open them for a minute and get a reality check. There's no problem. There's nothing wrong with the moment. It's absolutely safe. Most moments are like that. But when the mind state is active, we can't tune into that. We can't feel that. We're swept into the imaginary environment.

So I could accept the bodily experience, I could accept the mood of fear, and I could accept the thoughts—the projective fantasy of fear. That was it. There was nothing else there. Once I'd come to terms with those three things, I'd come to terms with fear. This sounds like a boast, but it's simple and it's true.

The essence of pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful.

This wisdom from the Indian teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj cuts to the heart of our relationship with experience. When a questioner protested, "But pain is not acceptable," Maharaj simply asked, "Why not? Did you ever try? Do try, and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does."

He continues: "This personal self, by its very nature, is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self, with its desires and fears, enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

This work of acceptance is really the key with difficult emotions. It's basically what frees us. We have to dig deep to find that openness of heart with these emotions. It doesn't come easily. Who would think that you can accept fear or grief or sadness or wanting just as it is? Because initially we resist them and we fear them. But we can. We can accept them.

You've got to be a little careful here, because if you accept it in order to make it go away, it knows the difference and it won't go away. Because that's just aversion. So it won't be tricked. You have to genuinely open up and accept.

One way to do this—Sally might have mentioned this—just a skillful means to see if you've got real acceptance, is to ask yourself the question: would it be okay if this emotion was here the rest of my life? Would that be okay? When you come to the point that you can say yes to that, then there's real acceptance happening.

And that is possible. I came into contact with fear over and over and over again, so many times, working with acceptance repeatedly, that I came to that point. I had so much equanimity with fear that I really didn't care if it was there or wasn't there. I really didn't. It didn't make a bit of difference to me. If it wanted to arise in a moment, that was fine.

If it wanted to go away, that was fine. I really didn't care either way. And at that point, fear had lost some kind of hold over me. It wasn't because I'd worked out the source of it. I never saw any memories connected with fear being present. There may have been many things in my life that scared me, but memories never came up with my fears. So it wasn't about working through any particular old thing. Just by relating to the emotion itself, it kind of took the power out. It took the charge out of it.

It doesn't mean I don't still get scared or wouldn't get scared. If I found out tomorrow that Sally was really ill or that I was diagnosed with some illness or our house was swept away in this flood, I'd get scared. But I feel that I have the tools to work with it, and I don't feel afraid to feel the fear anymore.

So that creates a lot of space, not having that fear of the difficult states. It creates a lot of space, a lot of trust and a lot of confidence that we know how to work with the states that come into our mind. We know how to work with the most difficult emotions that come and we've learned something about how to release them. We release them through paying full attention and through opening and accepting.

What starts to happen as we do that, as awareness touches the difficult emotion again and again and again, is kind of like the energy starts going out of the emotion and into the awareness. The awareness gets stronger and as it does that, the emotion gets weaker. We take its power and we put it into mindfulness or awareness.

So after some period of practicing to work on this difficult state of fear, some shifts started to happen. I remember one retreat—it was in the early years of my practice, but I'd touched what I felt was a real depth in my meditation. I felt that I'd come to some kind of depth of really seeing the end of suffering, the temporary end of suffering. I was very excited about it.

I went to see my teachers, and all of them kind of minimized my insight. They did not validate it at all. They all kind of said, "No, it's not what you think, not that important." One of my teachers I remember said to me, "You know, you're not very deep. So-and-so"—who happened to be a really good friend of mine who was on the same retreat with me—"so-and-so is much deeper than you are." I said, "Oh, thanks very much."

Nonetheless, the quality of teaching was not as high then as now. Nonetheless, I had a lot of confidence in my insight. What happened was that having come to the end of that strain of suffering, it's not that it didn't arise again, but I'd come to the end of it once. I knew I could do it again. Conceptually, I'd solved the problem. I'd solved the problem of my emotional suffering. And then the motivation fell away from my practice for a while because I'd done what I'd come into practice to do.

So that was kind of interesting. My motivation went away and it took a while for it to come back. I had to find a different reason to practice, and it did come back.

Then again, some years later—this is kind of another transition point—I was a monk and I was practicing at Wat Suan Mok in Southern Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery. I remember the afternoon, the actual afternoon that this happened. I was sitting out on my front porch, and it was really hot. Thailand in the retreat season is really hot. I was just wearing basically a singlet and my lower monk's robe, but sweat was just pouring down my abdomen. Mosquitoes were all around, but I kept a mosquito coil lit beside me so that it would keep the mosquitoes away. But that has a really foul smell, a really chemical smell, as you probably know.

So I was sitting there, and there was tension in my body. I wasn't completely comfortable. I had some restlessness in the mind, and a state would come in here or there that wasn't so pleasant. But I suddenly woke up and asked the question: What am I waiting for for happiness? What am I waiting on to be content with things the way they are? Am I waiting till there's no more heat? Am I waiting till there are no more mosquitoes? Am I waiting till there's absolutely no discomfort in the body? Am I waiting till there's not a twitch of movement of mind states in the mind?

I thought, if I'm waiting for that, I'm basically waiting for Arahantship, and that's a long way away. I thought, would it be possible to be content in this moment with some unpleasant conditions still here? And I saw that was absolutely possible and that was absolutely what needed to happen. That became the theme for my practice direction for a while—finding contentment just with what was, even though it wasn't perfect, finding contentment before I found perfection.

And then I realized that some of my assumptions and attitudes about practice from the healing phase of my work didn't fit so well anymore, and that I was going to have to make some shifts in the way that I understood things. I started to realize that there are three curious things about healing as a primary motivation in practice.

The first thing is that it's incomplete. It's not a motivation that can carry us all the way, because the healing can end but we may not be at the end of the path—the end of the Buddhist path at any rate. So it's not a motivation that takes us all the way in spiritual life.

The second thing that was interesting is: how do you know when the healing work is over? Is it when the mind state doesn't appear anymore? I don't think that's realistic. How do you know when to quit the healing work? I'm not just asking this as a rhetorical question. I'm really pointing here to when does a motivation have to fall away?

When does a motivation no longer concern us, grab us, interest us, cause us to do anything in practice? Because as I mentioned before, involved with healing is a kind of basic non-acceptance of what is.

"The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences," Suzuki Roshi said this at the start of one dharma talk. "The difficulties you're experiencing now..." And then he just stopped. He just gave a long pause. The audience was hanging on the edge of their seats—oh, he's going to tell us how to release them or whatever. And then he finished the sentence: "The difficulties you're experiencing now will be with you for a long time."

Now, originally, if you weren't a practitioner, this could be kind of discouraging. But what he's pointing to is that unhooking of a desire to make things different—that really our practice doesn't depend on making these things go away. These difficult states of mind will be around for a while, but they don't have to block a deep sense of contentment and even a relative sense of freedom. So can we at some point—it's up to each person when that's appropriate—let go of the concern that we still have some afflictive emotions? They'll be around a while.

The third thing is that with healing as a motivation comes some kind of belief that we're broken, that something is fundamentally wrong with us. And I really question this. I really question if fundamentally we are broken. I think it may be possible for a human being to become broken through something like psychosis—I don't know, I don't know enough about that field to know one way or another—but that might be possible. But all of us are not in that situation, and I don't think that any of us are broken.

Broken would mean that something had gone wrong with the universe, something had gone wrong with life, as we're a part of life. And I think that, as Sylvia said the other night, the one thing that's not broken is the lawfulness of suffering. On the level that we all are at, the lawfulness of suffering and freedom all comes from causes and conditions that have brought us to this point in an entirely lawful way. Our suffering or lack of it is entirely due to previous causes and conditions.

I talked about arguing with other teachers. I gave a little bit of this talk a year ago and I made a statement in the dharma talk that we're not broken. Sylvia wasn't there for that talk and she came on the next night and made a statement in her dharma talk: "We're all broken." This caused a few mind movements, but at least we agreed that we were all either one way or the other.

So as we move out of this phase of healing and into a new phase, our motivation has to find a new focus. And for me, it became the focus to be really free—to be ultimately free, finally free, the same kind of freedom that the Buddha had discovered. And in some ways it was like starting over again. It was having a new direction or a new aim. But in other ways it wasn't at all.

Because the interesting thing is our aim may change, and with that some of our views and our attitudes and our beliefs, but one thing that doesn't change is the practice. And I find this so interesting—that whether you're practicing for healing or whether you're practicing for full liberation, the instructions are the same. I think there's a profound truth in that.

I'm going to say it just briefly now and I may come back to it in a later talk. I don't want to spend a lot of time with it. I think the profound truth is that what is freeing us is our unconditioned nature, our Buddha nature that is alive and well in each one of us. Mindfulness practice is simply a way of activating that inner nature—mindfulness wisdom, if you want to think of it like that, this combination that they're always conjoined.

As we activate that nature, that's what does the work. That's what's really at the forefront. And all the healing work that goes on and all the unraveling, all the disentangling is just because this Buddha nature is stepping more and more into the foreground. And it just, in order to do that, it releases everything that's held along the way.

All the places that self has formed a knot through emotions, through views, through various kinds of clinging, all of those eventually get highlighted and released through the power of mindfulness and wisdom. So it happens on a psychological level, it happens on the level of views, it happens on the level of dependent origination and moments of craving. All those different kinds of clinging just get released in this one unitary movement to freedom.

But our attitude does shift with it. In the beginning of practice, when our interest was on disentangling particular emotions, we did have strong preferences. We really wanted this emotion and not that emotion. And when they came, we were really attached to them. This kind of agenda starts to really weaken. And we start to see it as kind of a curious habit of mind.

Somebody said to me at the start of this retreat, something I thought was really wise and really profound. They said, "You know, I don't care what happens in this retreat. I know that the result will be wholesome when I come out at the end of the retreat. So I don't care what happens along the way." This is kind of the pith statement of this intention toward freedom.

Sharon Salzberg put it in a way that kind of shocked me in one Dharma talk. She said, "It doesn't matter what's happening to you." That's a strong statement, isn't it? It doesn't matter what's happening to you. What matters is, can you meet it with mindfulness and acceptance? Because all the happenings, guess what? They come and go. None of them last. But the mindfulness being strengthened is the key to liberation. That's that Buddha nature coming front and center and sweeping its way to the foreground, sweeping away the clingings.

It doesn't matter what's happening. Our practice is really just about different levels of holding getting exposed and then dissolved, exposed and then dissolved, and feeling the greater space that happens with each step in that series.

Upandita Sayadaw, a great Burmese teacher, put it even more directly. Someone came in and was complaining about being uncomfortable in the body as they were sitting and having difficult mental states. And he said, "What, you want different objects to note?" This is the same message. It doesn't really matter what's happening. What matters is can we really be present for it? And as we do, then we find that the mindfulness and wisdom together start to unfold themselves and start to take us on this really unitary movement to greater and greater freedom.

And the Buddha said that mindfulness is a path that goes in one direction only, to the ending of pain and suffering, to the ending of all distress, to liberation, to nibbana. If, when it's appropriate, we put our eye on that end, that goal, everything else will just follow from that—all the clarifying of the emotions, all the growth of the beautiful states of loving-kindness and wisdom and faith and devotion, contentment, happiness and joy, all will come out of aiming in that direction and letting our nature just keep moving us there.

And according to the Buddha, this is the proper aim for spiritual life. He said some people come to spiritual life because they'll acquire gain, honor, and renown in it. This is true. You can see this in spiritual life these days. There are a lot of bestsellers of spiritual books these days. You can get gain, honor, and renown from that. But he said this is like somebody who goes in search of the heartwood of a tree to build a great house or a great temple and comes away with just twigs and leaves and is satisfied with that.

He said you can also develop virtue along the spiritual path. Some people become satisfied just with developing virtue and becoming a kind person. He said that's like somebody looking for heartwood who stops at the outer bark of the tree. But if you're not satisfied there, you continue and you develop concentration, this great sense of har-

mony and peace and ease of relaxing into one's own nature. He said you can get satisfied and stop there. That's like somebody who peels away the outer bark and takes the inner bark, still searching for heartwood.

He said, but someone can go further. Not satisfied with concentration, they develop knowledge and vision, insight, true insight into the way things are. He said, this is like getting to the sapwood. But if they stop there and they haven't taken the last step, they haven't completed the path.

Someone who is still not satisfied but continues discovers this state of true liberation —a kind of liberation that can't be changed, can't be taken away, can't ever fall into suffering anymore. The Buddha said that is the one who has found the heartwood.

"So this holy life, friends, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end."

This is the invitation before us—not to settle for the outer manifestations of spiritual life, however beautiful they may be, but to continue deepening until we reach that which cannot be shaken, that which is truly free. The heartwood of liberation awaits those who are willing to go all the way.

Let's just sit for a minute together in the silence that holds all of this.

CHAPTER 256

Brahmavihāras and the Vicissitudes of Life

Guy Armstrong · 53 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong reflects on the four brahmavihāras—mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity)—as transformative practices for responding wisely to life's inevitable changes. Drawing inspiration from the remarkable presence of Dipa Ma, a revered Bengali meditation master, Armstrong illustrates how sustained practice can cultivate an unshakeable foundation of peace and love.

The talk explores how the Buddha identified eight universal conditions that affect all beings: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, success and failure. Rather than responding with the usual patterns of elation or depression, the brahmavihāras offer an awakened heart's response to these vicissitudes. Armstrong discusses compassion as "the trembling of the open heart in response to suffering," sharing stories of transformation including Emperor Aśoka's conversion after witnessing battlefield carnage. He presents muditā as appreciative joy that can double our happiness through sharing others' joy, while upekkhā provides the balanced awareness that can hold all experiences with wisdom.

Weaving together teachings with poetry from Mary Oliver, Rumi, and Naomi Shihab Nye, Armstrong demonstrates how these practices cultivate not just individual peace but a spirit of inclusion that recognizes our fundamental interconnectedness. The talk concludes with reflections on how insight into anattā (not-self) provides the deepest foundation for equanimity, pointing toward the ultimate freedom that awaits discovery.

I wanted to talk tonight about the Brahmaviharas. It's a funny thing in a metta retreat—you know, in a vipassana retreat, we talk about all these different topics. But if somebody from the outside comes in and asks what are you talking about tonight, we say, "Metta." And if they ask what we're talking about the next night, "Metta." It doesn't vary very much on these retreats. So tonight I'll talk about the Brahmaviharas.

The person I was thinking about as I was getting ready for this talk is an Indian woman, an Eastern Indian woman from Bengal named Dīpamā. I know a number of you have heard of her. It's really interesting—sometimes people just hear her name and have a very strong connection with her. Especially for women, she's a really inspiring figure because she's one of the strongest women teachers to come out of Asia in our lifetimes.

I particularly want to recommend, if you're interested, a book on her life and her teachings called *Knee Deep in Grace*. It's a beautiful book with accounts of her biography, teaching stories from her, and some great photos. A lot of people use it as a devotional piece on their altar.

She was one of the most amazing yogis and individuals that I've had the chance to spend time with. On her first trip to the States, I got to live with her for a month in a house in the country in Massachusetts. I was cooking and driving her places and helping to look after her in that time. She had an amazing stability of mind, an amazing amount of love, and amazing presence. Her love was, as far as I could tell, unshakable. And she was always just giving it out—in the form of smiles, hugs, and blessings. She would just bless everywhere she went. Even when she got on the plane to come to America, she blessed the plane before it took off from Calcutta.

I never saw her mind waver. I never saw it slide into anything other than peace and kindness. And this was not always easy because she had brought with her to the States her daughter, whose name was Dīpā. Dīpamā just means Dīpā's mother—that's where she got her name, named for her daughter. And she brought Dīpā's five-year-old son named Rishi. Now Rishi at that time was a bit of a hellion. He was full of uncontainable and irresistible energy.

So we would take them out shopping, for example. We'd go into the shopping mall because they wanted to buy sheets and blankets and things to take back to India. Well, Rishi would cut loose from the pack and go running down the aisle, pulling clothes off hangers and reaching up to touch everything. Things would be cascading out into the aisle in his wake. And then Dīpamā would run after him to track him down and bring him back. All the time she was running, her little white robes would be billowing out behind her, and she just always had a little smile on her face. I never saw her get angry or impatient or at all frustrated with Rishi. So I figured if she could do that with a five-year-old, she could do pretty well with adults, too.

Many people were struck by her presence of mind. She's been dead now for about ten years. At one retreat, people asked her, "What's in your mind? What's your experience like from the inside?" And she said, "There are only three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and metta." That's a pretty nice mind.

Meeting people like this is really inspiring because you get a sense of what's possible through practice. And I truly believe that people like Dīpamā get to be the way they are through practice. It's not an accident. I don't think it's because of their gene pool. I think

it's because of years—or she would actually say lifetimes—of devotion to practice. She said that she was alive at the time of the Buddha in a past life and could actually remember hearing discourses from the mouth of the Buddha.

This reminded me of a poem by Mary Oliver about Stanley Kunitz, who was a neighbor of hers legendary for his garden. I want to read a bit of this poem:

"I used to imagine him coming from the house like Merlin, strolling with important gestures through the garden where everything grows so thickly, where birds sing, little snakes lie on the boughs, thinking of nothing but their own good lives, where petals float upward, their colors exploding, and trees open their moist pages of thunder. It has happened every summer for years. But now I know more about the great wheel of growth and decay and rebirth, and know my vision for a falsehood. Now I see him coming from the house. I see him on his knees, cutting away the diseased, the superfluous, coaxing the new, knowing that the hour of fulfillment is buried in years of patience, yet willing to labor like that on the mortal wheel. Oh, what good it does the heart to know it isn't magic."

The hour of fulfillment is buried in years of patience. This is our work. One week doesn't get the whole garden built, and one week doesn't get a heart reconstructed either. But hours of patience can.

This is really all that lies between us and someone like Dipa Ma—just doing the work of cultivating these beautiful qualities. I'm very grateful that in our tradition, the Brahmavihāras are our avenue to that kind of heart. We have a path that can take us from here to there.

Along the way, as we develop metta and compassion, it opens up all these beautiful qualities of heart as byproducts—qualities like happiness and joy and devotion and humor, wonder, awe, reverence, and gratitude. All these things are evoked by the different elements of the Brahmavihāra practice. All of them come to flower in us. These are really the qualities that, for me, make life sweet, make life rich and inherently satisfying and joyful.

Rumi said, "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." So I'm very happy to see all of you have run toward the allure of love and happy that we've taken this trip together.

In thinking of going back either into the next stage of this retreat, or a vipassanā retreat, or going back into your daily life, what kinds of things can you take with you? I want to talk about that for just a minute.

First of all, I hope you have found some great tools to take with you. I hope the formal practices that we've done of all the Brahmavihāras as well as forgiveness are things that you've learned how to apply and work with and can take back into your daily life.

The second thing is no less important. It's really the spirit of loving-kindness—this ability to turn your attention anywhere and see that there's another human heart there that's also going through joys and sorrows and to have a sense of caring about that experience. This spirit, for me, has come alive over this week in our group here. I don't know how you felt it. Maybe sitting up front, I'm in a lucky position of getting to watch your faces brighten over the week, which they have. But I felt the temperature in the room kind of warm up over the week. I feel closer to you all, and I imagine you all feel closer to each other after this week.

That's the kind of spirit that you can help to find in the world or help to make in the world—a feeling of trust and openness. For us, I love this turning in the week when we come to the neutral person because that's really the person that opens the door to this. It's stepping beyond the people that we normally like and opening that caring to anyone and hopefully eventually to everyone.

Metta gets compared to, and I believe the word actually derives from, the word for rain in Pali, the ancient Indian language. Metta is said to be like a gentle rain that falls everywhere indiscriminately. It falls on the sidewalks, it falls on the roofs, it falls on the forest, it falls on the flower gardens—it falls everywhere. This is the indication of how our metta should be showered everywhere, indiscriminately falling like the gentle rain. This is the boundless or universal quality of it.

This inclination that we find we can develop can also be helped by some reflection. Here's one that the Buddha suggested we reflect on. This will only make sense if you can relate to the idea of rebirth that the Buddha talked about many times—that we are born over and over again. He said, given the countless lives that all of us have lived from time immemorial, it's not easy to find a being who at one point in those lifetimes has not been your mother, or your father, or your sister, or your brother, or your son, or your daughter.

What if that was true? What if looking around this room, everyone has been a blood kin of ours, a very close blood kin in another life? How would we feel about each other? It may depend how you feel about your family of origin, but nonetheless, I hope you see the potential. That could really change the way we look at people as we walk down the street.

This way of looking, this way of feeling opens our practice to all of life. It brings it all in into our meditation.

As we start to connect with people, we see that everybody basically wants the same things. Everybody wants to be happy and not to suffer. Everybody wants to be safe. Everybody wants their body to be supported well and to be well fed. Everyone wants to live with ease. This is true of non-human beings as much as of human beings.

And then we start to wonder, especially on the human level, are we really so different? We have different external packaging, somewhat, but if you look closely, it's just variations on a theme. Two eyes, a nose, two ears, a mouth, arms and legs, and then there are lots of variations on that in terms of height and size and skin color and color of eyes and things like that. It's just variations on the same theme.

And then you look inside, and yes, there are different personalities. We all have different personalities, but it's just, again, mixes of the same components. Everybody's got love and joy and warmth, and everybody's got greed and dislikes and confusion—just different balance. And you start to realize that we spend so much time thinking about the ways we're different, and we could easily spend just as much time thinking about the ways we're alike. There are just as many ways we're alike, but we just don't turn our attention to that.

This is not just an accident. This is the trick of ego. Every being that lives plays this game in order to become separate. This is how we become separate. We play this game. We fasten on certain characteristics and we say, "Well, I'm attractive, so I'm special. Or I'm not attractive, so I'm special. I'm creative, so I'm special. Or I'm not creative, so I'm special." The ego does this to separate ourselves out.

Metta and the Brahmaviharas undercut this tendency of ego towards separation and focus on bringing into clear relief everything that we share. That's what comes to the forefront through the Brahmaviharas. That's what comes into clear focus and what we can give more attention to. It's actually more skillful to give more attention to that. We've been so focused for so long on the separation, we've gotten blinded by it. And we think that's the fundamental truth of things. In fact, this unity is more fundamental and in a way is more real than the differences.

This is from Rumi's teacher, a man named Shams of Tabriz: "I, you, he, she, we—in the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." In the garden of the Brahmaviharas, also, these are not real distinctions.

So there are the tools that I hope you've found and will take home. There's the spirit of inclusion and non-separation of loving-kindness. The third thing is that I hope you've gotten a sense of the possibilities of the Brahmaviharas. What the Brahmaviharas really can show us is the way that an awakened heart can respond to life, and that capacity is within each one of us.

So as an example: loving-kindness sets the foundation of connection and caring. When suffering comes, there's the possibility of responding with compassion. When happiness comes, there's the possibility of responding with mudita. And when the heart rests, there's the possibility of holding all of that with balance, with equanimity. And I believe that each one of you has tasted all these flavors in this week and seen that possibility.

So I just want to point out that in the world at large, this is rare. This is not usually the way things go. So instead of the spirit of metta and inclusion, there's more often the sense of withdrawing and separation. When unhappy things happen in our life, we're more apt to respond by getting depressed or discouraged rather than feeling compassion for ourselves. When good things happen in our life, we're more apt to respond by getting kind of carried away in claiming them or owning them or using them to build ourselves up instead of simply enjoying them in the moment, knowing that they'll pass. Mudita recognizes that joys and sorrows come and go and really appreciates joy when it's there.

These changing conditions of life happen for everyone—for fully enlightened beings like the Buddha, for ordinary people like us. In fact, the Buddha said there are eight conditions that come and go in the world all the time that affect us: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, success and failure.

These alternate for everyone, enlightened or unenlightened. The normal person meeting gain, pleasure, praise, or success tends to get puffed up with thinking about it and owning it. The normal person confronted by the others tends to get depressed, downcast. The Buddha said both these responses lose track of impermanence, that the conditions are going to change.

A wiser response is compassion and mudita, and then the equanimity that can hold that change. So I just encourage you to reflect on this as a possibility that you felt this week. There are different ways to respond to life's conditions, and you now know what they are. Putting them in practice, that's the life's work.

But a life's work isn't wasted if that response comes through. You may have heard this story that someone asked a Zen master, "What's the purpose of a lifetime of dharma practice?" The Zen master said, "An appropriate response." That sounds trivial, but that's what it comes down to. If we can make an appropriate response in the moment, that's the culmination of a lifetime of practice. And then do that moment after moment.

So I would just want to fill in a little bit on the other three brahmaviharas that we didn't talk as much about as we talked about metta. Compassion is said to be the trembling of the open heart in response to suffering. So it's interesting that for compassion to come out, there has to be the contact with seeing suffering, our own or another's. It's said in our tradition that suffering is the proximate cause for compassion. It's the trigger that touches it off. Without suffering, no ground for compassion to arise.

But you look around the world, there is a lot of suffering. You look around the world, there's not as much compassion. So somewhere that link isn't happening. Why is that? I think it's because so often all of us have ways of defending ourselves against all the suffering in the world—our own suffering, the suffering of our friends, the suffering of the society, the suffering of the globe. It seems too much for us.

Starting with our personal suffering, we find ways to turn away from it, to avoid feeling it. We escape through sense pleasures. We escape through addictions, whether it's food, alcohol, drugs, sex, work, companionship, whatever. We find ways to go somewhere else when the suffering gets a little too close. Pick up some other source of pleasure. This blocks the connection of our heart with the suffering. And this is really where the problems start.

Freud said that neurosis is the refusal to suffer. So our core mix-up came because we couldn't open to the suffering that we encountered probably quite young in life—the absence of our mother or of our father, the breakdown of love, the feeling of not being connected or people not being there for us. And we turned away when we were really young into other forms.

So in getting back this connected heart, can we open to suffering without defending and without trying to move away from it? If so, that's really what ignites compassion for us. As we do that, we find we can let the heart get big enough to hold the pain. That's really what's happening with the development of compassion. The heart is just growing until it can wrap around a bigger amount of pain and be equanimous with it. That's why the equanimity is such an important factor in the overall development of the brahmaviharas.

Opening to suffering can really change us if we let it. It can transform our relationship. There's a story about the most famous Buddhist ruler in all of Indian history. His name was Asoka. He was a very warlike king who lived about 200 years after the death of the Buddha. He amassed a great army and went around conquering all the neighboring kingdoms, taking over their land, taking their wealth, destroying their armies in the process. He had just conquered a neighboring kingdom and laid waste to the army. The battlefield was just a bloody mass of carnage and dead bodies and blood. He was standing on a hill looking over the scene of the battle where he had won. And he became depressed. He said, "This is so ugly. This is what my life has come to."

This was the result of the culmination of his career. And then, in the middle of the battlefield, there was a Buddhist monk who was walking slowly and mindfully, very present, with an inner glow that somehow communicated itself to Asoka. Even in the midst of all the carnage, there was equanimity and a kind of radiance in the monk's being.

Asoka said, "What is going on? I have everything. I have all these riches, all this land, all these palaces, all the gold I could want, and I'm miserable. Here's someone who has nothing and they're radiant. What's happening?"

So he turned to investigate the teachings of the Dharma, and he came to understand. He became totally transformed as a ruler. He foreswore violence and sent emissaries around to all the neighboring kingdoms telling them he would no longer make war on them. He started to realize the importance of caring for his people, so he began to distribute food equally around the kingdom so that there was no poverty.

It's very interesting. The Buddha, when he talked about ways to rule, said that the start of the decline of society is when some people become poor. That's the very beginning of a society's decline. For a society to be healthy, everyone needs not to be poor. Asoka put that into effect. He stopped animal sacrifices, which was a common custom in India of those days, out of mercy for the lives of the animals. This brought in a golden age of growth of the Dharma in India under the benevolence of his rule. He's always held up as an example of a truly enlightened and noble ruler. This was all touched off by his opening to the suffering that he saw on the battlefield.

This opening can change us. It's not to say that compassion is always easy. I once did a ten-day compassion retreat similar to the seven-day retreat that we've done in loving kindness. It was one of the most difficult retreats I've ever done because my face was just up against suffering all day long for ten days. I spent a lot of time with my suffering person, as you probably did with your first compassion meditation. I was just contact-

ing suffering hour after hour, day after day, for ten days in silence. It was the most difficult kind of practice I've ever done, but it really did sensitize me to the presence of suffering in my life and in others.

So it's not an easy practice, but there's also a kind of sweetness when it's true compassion. One of my teachers said, "Compassion is like the feeling at sunset. You come to the end of a beautiful day, the sun is going down, there's that warm golden light that starts to spread, and there's a little bit of sadness because the beautiful day is ending and the sun and the warmth are going away." That little bit of sadness is part of compassion because the heart's in touch with suffering. But there's also something sublime when the equanimity is there to support it—something sublime about it. This is the balance that you see in the statues of the Buddha and Quan Yin, where the equanimity is there to support the contact with the suffering.

The near enemy of compassion, where it slides into the unwholesome, is sometimes talked about as being pity. Sometimes it's talked about as being grief. The grief is in the sense that the heart's gotten overloaded by the suffering it's in contact with. It's too much to hold, so it gets pushed under. The equanimity is not strong enough to hold it, so the grief overwhelms us.

The pity is from a slightly different take. Pity comes from a place of looking down on the suffering. "Oh, their suffering—I'm glad that's not my problem," as though we're above the problem, or we're better off because we don't have that problem. That's the source of pity. Compassion sees as an equal.

There's a beautiful poem that expresses this sense that compassion is a recognition that we're all in the same boat. We're all subject to pain, emotional and physical. We're all suffering, subject to illness, aging, and death. There's a poem called "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet:

"Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Feel the future dissolve in a moment, like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go, so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness. Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive."

Before you know kindness is the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kind-

ness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

The phrase in this that really speaks to me is "until your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is the size of life. All life is subject to sorrow. All life is grounds for kindness, for caring.

The practice of mudita is the beautiful complement to the compassion practice, opening to what's joyful in the world. This is a really happy practice, really upbeat. How do we respond to happiness? There's kind of a double dose of it. A friend called me on the phone a while ago, and I asked her, "How are you?" Just immediately, she burst out, "I'm wonderful!" Her tone of voice just picked me up so much that without thinking I said, "I'm wonderful too." I hadn't even thought about saying that, but I felt it in that moment. We can just get off on other people's happiness. Then there are two happinesses, double what there was before.

The Dalai Lama said, "If you can be happy with others' happiness, then your odds for happiness go up by six billion to one." That's a really good bet. I'll take those odds.

Take a look and see every time throughout the day when happiness strikes you—it could be in someone else, it could be yourself. Just here in this simple setting, how many times have you felt happy seeing the deer or the turkeys or the baby swallows? Or the sun coming out when the fog has lifted, or having a warm shower when you get up in the morning, or feeling how comfortable the bed is at night when you get to lie down at the end of a long day. Sometimes nature is a great source of joy.

Shortly after I was ordained, I stopped in at Chiang Mai before going on to a forest monastery where I spent a three-month retreat. I was very alone. There was a teacher there, but he didn't speak English and I didn't speak Thai. So I was practicing intensively, as we have been this week, for three months. I didn't have any dharma talks. I didn't have any interviews. There wasn't anybody else there who spoke English that I could talk to regularly. It was really quite a period of aloneness. It tested my resolve.

But what really sustained me was the beauty of the nature. The monastery was set at the bottom of a gorge between two big cliffs with a river running through it. The monks' huts were on one side, the nuns' huts were on the other. Every hut was beautiful, and because I was a visitor, they gave me the most beautiful hut. It was right up the

river. I couldn't see another hut from my place. It was just an idyllic spot for practice, but also kind of lonely. So I had that contrast. The beautiful thing was that nature really was my support, providing access to joy at that time.

Sometimes we have to look for the mudita in the situation. A few years ago, Sally and I got an infestation of skunks under our house. We live in Woodacre, a country town as you can probably tell. The skunks burrowed under the walls and got underneath the house in the winter because they didn't want to be out in the rain. We found out later they started to make a house for themselves by pulling out the insulation of our furnace pipes and building this nice little warm nest. They found the furnace was a good place to hang out, trampolining on it in the middle of the night. They often seemed to choose about two in the morning to spray. I don't know why, but they would spray about two in the morning. We'd be sleeping, and all of a sudden, this aroma would come up into the bedroom—that thick, oily scent of skunk.

And it would just start permeating everything. So it was not a nice situation. But even then, I have to say, I could take a moment and appreciate the dry home they had found for the winter. So I could actually connect with a little bit of mudita for the skunks. That was before we trapped them and relocated them to the state park further down the road where more of their natural home was found.

Mudita is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy. The sense is like the strings of a sitar. If you know what a sitar looks like, there are seven big strings on top and then nineteen little strings on the bottom that you don't pluck very much. You may run a finger across them, but you pluck the big strings. The little strings vibrate when the frequency is the same, and that's what gives the sitar its richness of sound. They're called the sympathetic strings of the sitar. They vibrate when their frequency is in tune with one of the big strings that gets plucked.

This is the way sympathetic joy works. Your string vibrates with happiness and my string resonates when it's on the same frequency. Now in that understanding of sympathetic joy, some teachers say you need the big string to resonate first. You need somebody outside yourself. You can't resonate your own string. So they say you can't practice mudita toward yourself. This is the understanding in the Visuddhimagga, if any of you read that—it's an old fifth century text. But actually the Buddha never said this. He never said mudita shouldn't be directed to ourselves.

So another way to translate it is appreciative joy. I actually prefer this—appreciative joy. Then we can direct the mudita to ourselves and feel that first string vibrate. And for me, the vibration of that first string is gratitude. When we direct the mudita to ourselves and we appreciate all the things that are right in our life, what comes through is the feeling of gratitude. We just become aware of all the blessings that are in our life.

All of us have lots of blessings. All of us here have lots of blessings. I know all of us are struggling with some difficulties also—some smaller, some great. But we also have lots of blessings: the blessing to be generally fed, clothed, and sheltered; the blessing of having heard the Dharma; the blessing of responding to the Dharma, having the leisure time to practice the Dharma and cultivate the heart. These are great blessings that we all share.

When we tune into gratitude, it's a really lovely state of mind. I mean, if it couldn't be connected with mudita, then I think there should be a fifth Brahmavihara, which is gratitude, because it's such an elevated state of mind. When you think about it, when you're grateful, you appreciate all that you have, so you don't feel a need for more. You appreciate all that you have, so it takes you out of aversion. You're not discontent either. So it really forestalls both greed and aversion through the presence of gratitude.

One of our friends is a grandmother. She's quite a wise person and wanted to teach her granddaughter about this quality of gratitude. So she was talking to her granddaughter one Christmas day. The granddaughter was telling her about all the presents she'd gotten for Christmas, very excited. The girl was about six or seven at the time. And then her grandmother, this wise teacher, said, "Well, when you get lots of presents, do you feel thankful for what you have or do you want more?" And the little girl goes, "Oh, Nana, I'd like more."

The grandmother said, "Oh, that's too bad." And it kind of brought the little girl up short. She said, "Well, what do you mean by that?" And the grandmother said, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you feel content with what you've already got, that's a very good feeling? And when you want more, it doesn't feel as good inside." And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, you're right. You're right."

So this is not rocket science.

But we often forget the joy of contentment through gratitude. It's a really beautiful state. It's also, according to the Buddha, a rare state. The Buddha said three persons are rare in this world: one is a Buddha, and one is a person who's thankful and grateful.

At one retreat, I was going into the autumn in New England. The days were getting really short. The weather was turning cold. All the leaves had fallen off the trees. That gray New England, miserable rainy season was starting to set in. And I was starting to get kind of bummed out. I'd come from California. I noticed my mind going into this aversive mode: Oh, I don't want to sit with this. It's too gloomy. I can't handle it.

So to cut off the aversion, I decided to do a gratitude practice on that retreat. I made a list of all the things in my life I was grateful for. It filled up a whole page. Then every morning when I'd wake up, I'd read that list. There were twenty-five things on there, and it just picked me up at the start of every day. It changed my outlook on the day and got me through that winter season. This can be a really wonderful practice—the conscious cultivation of appreciation for all our blessings.

I have a good friend who's in the financial management world. You know how the stock market crashed in 2001 and 2002? These were not good years for financial managers, because nobody was making money and most of them were losing a lot of money for their clients. Their clients were not very happy that year, especially in 2002. She said clients were just railing at her for having lost their money. One client screamed at her, "You've ruined my life!"

So it was an intense year from a work situation. But she said, "You know what? This has been the happiest year of my life."

I said, "Are you kidding? Why?"

She said, "Because I've been practicing gratitude this year. And it's just cheered up every day of my year."

The last of the Brahma Viharas is equanimity, which we've mentioned a few times. It's really that balance of mind that can hold the ups and downs of life without being so disturbed by the changes.

The Dalai Lama is one of the most equanimous people I've ever met. I think I mentioned that he was in this hall teaching a few years ago with a group of Asian and Western teachers of Buddhism. The format—I don't think in the end this was the best format for us to use, but this is what we used—had different Western teachers presenting to him some of the topics and issues they were struggling with in growing the Dharma in the West, that their students were working with, that they were working with as teachers. Then they would ask the Dalai Lama to respond.

He'd get a few presentations and then be asked for a response. Sometimes he'd say a few words, sometimes he'd just bow to the person and not say much of anything. One time he was asked for a response and he said, "Oh, you know, nothing left up here. By the time the third person speaks, all the earlier thoughts are gone." He just laughed at himself.

But then one of the organizers asked him what I thought was a really direct and challenging question. It was the first time I'd heard the Dalai Lama being grilled in this way. This person said, "Your Holiness, a lot of us are concerned these days about the increasing popularity of Buddhism in the culture, with movies like Kundun and Richard Gere getting very famous. We're concerned that the Dharma is going to get watered down as it gets popularized in this culture. And you, Your Holiness, are the biggest popularizer of them all. What do you have to say about that?"

He was just quiet for a moment, reflecting. Then he answered, "Some people, you see, they call me a living Buddha. Other people, they call me the God King."

He said, "No, no, I am none of these. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk." He says this all the time. You may have heard him. And he really means it. "I'm just a simple Buddhist monk. But other people, they call me counter-revolutionary. They call me a wolf in monk's clothing. But you see, I look back at my own intention. And if my intention is sincere, then that's what's important. How I'm perceived is up to others. About that, I don't care."

He said that really emphatically. "I don't care." And I could tell he really meant it.

But here's someone in a great position of visibility, having praise and blame heaped on him all the time on a global scale. The fate of the Tibetan people is resting on his shoulders, almost alone. He is the only person in the world today who has a hope of saving the Tibetan culture within Tibet itself. And he hears stories all the time about people being tortured and killed in that country. And yet, he can still laugh and he can still hold himself lightly and with that kind of balance of mind—an extraordinary capacity, extraordinary.

So developing the equanimity practice involves this challenging phrase in the traditional sense using karma. We've offered some alternatives. I thought of one more alternative tonight. For those of you who just aren't down with that karma thing, here's another equanimity phrase that I like: "Everything arises according to past causes and conditions."

This almost everyone can agree on. We don't have to spell out what the causes and conditions are. Everything arises according to past causes and conditions. That way we can open ourselves to the unfolding the way it's happening, the way it's actually happening, without having to blame it or justify it or question it. And in that, the purpose is we surrender. The equanimity practice is designed to allow us to surrender to the law of nature and to surrender to the Dharma. And it takes the individual kind of control out of it.

Of course, when we can act in the world to improve things, we do that. But when we're simply sitting quietly, can we come back to peace by taking out the individual struggle? And this is where the equanimity leads us.

Sometimes we think that the world is so crazy and complicated today, nobody could have had to deal with a world like this before. But the world was very crazy at the time of the Buddha also. You can read it in the history as it's recorded in these ancient texts.

The Buddha's first royal patron was a king named Bimbisara. He was very taken with the Buddha's teachings. He became a sponsor, gave the community a wonderful grove to spend their rains retreats in, provided them with meals and shelter, offered lots of great things to the Buddha and the community over many years. As his son grew up—who was a prince, his name was Ajatasattu—the prince got very envious to rule the kingdom. And so he started plotting to kill his father.

The father got wind of this and abdicated the throne to his son out of care, out of love for his son. He said, "You want to be ruler? The kingdom is yours." But the son wasn't satisfied. He put his father in a tower, first of all, but then found out his mother was feeding him, bringing him food illicitly. And so he killed his father.

And this is the kingdom the Buddha was living in. A jealous son kills the father who has been the Buddha's main royal supporter for all his years of community life. That's pretty crazy politics.

So what would you do if you're the Buddha in a situation like that? Finally, the son came to him for teachings, and the Buddha gave him Dharma teachings. The son converted and then really regretted the deeds that he had done. So he was able to have an impact, but it took tremendous equanimity just to stay steady through that kind of change of fortune that affected the whole kingdom.

It's said actually that if the son had not killed his father,

When he received the teachings from the Buddha, he could have become enlightened. But because of the heavy weight of the transgression of killing his father, his heart couldn't open to the truth. And so he didn't gain that insight.

The development of equanimity through the Brahmaviharas is a wonderful gift of the practice. But when you think about how the Buddha stayed equanimous, how the Dalai Lama stays equanimous, there's another level happening as well—the level of insight. This is the real profound source of equanimity in our tradition. I just want to allude to it. This really fits more in the terrain of insight than the terrain of loving kindness, but of course, loving kindness opens the heart to insight. So it's not inappropriate to mention it now.

Enlightened people know a secret—one that mostly we don't. The secret is that in the middle of this bundle of suffering, there is no self who's getting impacted by that suffering. This is the teaching of the doctrine of not-self, or *anatta*, as it's called in the Pali.

There are only the body sensations, the emotions, the thoughts, the sense impressions, and the knowing of them. That's all a human being is. There is no little person in there who's being tormented by these things. The awakened ones say that when we actually see for ourselves the direct truth of this, it kind of takes the sting out of life. There's still pain, there's still pleasure, but seeing this takes the sting and some fundamental kind of fear out of life.

Jack Kornfield was visiting Sri Lanka in the early years shortly after he'd been a monk. He met with an old monk who was very jolly, very cheerful, living very simply in a hut with a simple bed. Jack went in to see him. The monk was sitting on his bed and asked, "What do you understand the essential message of the teachings to be?" And the monk just laughed and said, "No self, no problem. No self, no problem."

This is the secret that waits for us to discover—the freedom of knowing that takes away some big piece of the suffering of life. That's why it says in the *Visuddhimagga* that the awakened ones understand there is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. There is no one in there who's getting tormented by this suffering. The suffering is misunderstanding, essentially.

This is really the union of wisdom and compassion. The compassion that holds the suffering, but the wisdom to see nothing has fundamentally gone wrong. There's just a misunderstanding taking place. Nothing fundamentally has ever gone wrong. We are all fundamentally still safe. And that secret is just waiting for each of us to discover, to free our hearts even more.

This is the real source of the balance of equanimity and compassion in the Buddha, in Quan Yin, in the bodhisattvas, in all the awakened beings. This is the potential of equanimity.

I'd like to close tonight with another expression of the Brahmaviharas from the Tibetan tradition. They also speak of these states, calling them the four immeasurables because all these states are considered to be boundless. They open our hearts up in a boundless way to all of life. What I appreciate about this expression from the Tibetan tradition is that it emphasizes the karmic nature of the path—that the path unfolds under the operation of the law of karma, that wholesome intentions lead to wholesome results.

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.
May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.
May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.
May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Let's just sit for a minute, please.

CHAPTER 257

Anicca: A Characteristic of Existence

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of anicca (impermanence), the first of the Buddha's three characteristics of existence. Drawing on teachings from the Samyutta Nikāya and classical Buddhist texts, he examines impermanence on three levels: cosmic (the temporary nature of even stars and planets), personal (the changes within a human lifetime), and momentary (the moment-to-moment dissolution of all sense experiences). Armstrong shares personal retreat stories from Burma and insights from modern psychology research to illustrate how our resistance to seeing impermanence creates suffering. He explains how the Buddha defined the totality of experience through the six sense doors - eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind with their respective objects - and demonstrates how each realm is constantly dissolving. The talk addresses why we cling despite knowing intellectually that everything changes, touching on the illusion (vipalasa) that prevents clear seeing. Armstrong concludes by connecting anicca to the other characteristics of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness) and anattā (not-self), showing how understanding impermanence at the deepest level through vipassanā meditation leads to the peace of letting go and points toward nibbāna.

If we look at the world from some perspective—either historically from the perspective of time or worldwide through many human cultures from the perspective of space—what we see is a great whirlwind of human activity and beings driven by many unconscious forces in the psyche, resulting in some happiness and also a lot of unhappiness for ourselves and for those we interact with. This is driven by stirrings within the human heart and mind, resulting in societal upheavals and cataclysms of revolution and the brutalities of war. If you survey the whole of human history, you don't see a great deal of inner peace on a global scale, on a historical scale.

Why is that?

The Buddha said it's because of the force of ignorance in every human mind. This force of ignorance leads us not to see clearly, and this not seeing clearly leads us into the tangle of self with all the complications of greed, aversion, and confusion that follow from it.

Steve described a few nights ago how our practice of mindfulness leads us into the investigation of our present moment experience in a way that can reveal to us the true nature of existence and lead to these liberating insights in the area known as vipassana or seeing clearly the way things really are.

As we start to see the actual individual characteristics of a phenomenon like the breath, we start to see the actual individual characteristics of a body sensation or a sound or an emotion, we start to understand the composition of the whole universe. Seeing one breath can be seeing the nature of the whole world. This clear seeing, this detailed, precise seeing is the ground from which insight arises.

The Buddha said that there are three key areas that we need to investigate and understand as we start to see the nature of things. These are sometimes described as the three characteristics that apply to all existing things. It's these three characteristics of existence that I want to talk about tonight.

The first is the quality of impermanence. In Pali, the word is anicca. The second is the quality of unsatisfactoriness. In Pali, the word is dukkha. And the third is the quality of not-self or selflessness. In Pali, the word is anatta.

What's curious is that in each of our minds there is a bias against seeing the truth of these things. The Buddha called that bias vipallasa or illusion. Because we are inherently biased against seeing these things, we have to work hard to be able to see them clearly and for that understanding to settle in us.

Our built-in bias leads us to believe and leads us to perceive existence as having the three contrary characteristics: permanence, the capability for lasting happiness, and the presence of a self through the whole world of phenomena.

So let's start by talking a little bit about impermanence. I don't think it's news to anybody here that everything changes. I think you've probably heard this many times before. And because everything changes, we all know that we shouldn't cling. I'm not telling you anything new.

But for some reason, we all still do cling, don't we? It's very curious how we know we shouldn't cling, and yet we still do.

I was comforted by a comment of Ajahn Chah's that Ajahn Amaro relayed. Ajahn Chah was the Thai meditation master who was Jack Kornfield's first teacher. Jack calls him one of the wisest, probably the wisest man he'd met in his life. And Ajahn Chah said that, in his view, eighty percent of spiritual life was knowing that we're clinging and not being able to stop.

You ever run into that on your meditation cushion? The body's a knot of tension. The mind is racing. There's a slight hint there might be some clinging somewhere in this experience. But we just don't know how to release it.

So most of us are probably at that level where we know there is clinging happening and sometimes, maybe eighty percent of the time, it's hard to release. I'm glad Ajahn Chah said that. It made me feel a lot better.

But what this means—when we know we're clinging but we don't know how to release—is that somehow the understanding of impermanence has only penetrated partway into our beings. We know it with our mind. We may know it a little deeper in our gut, but it's like it hasn't gotten into the marrow of our bones yet. It hasn't penetrated all the way. Because if it did, we would know, as the Buddha said, nothing is worth clinging to. Nothing is worth holding onto in the light of impermanence.

But unfortunately, we have this innate resistance to seeing the truth of impermanence. Why? Because it threatens the ego. The ego is the strategy of self that we've constructed to manage the world and our relationship with the world. It is undermined by the truth of impermanence, so we all have blinkers on that prevent us from seeing it, that lead us to want to see permanence.

So I offer these remarks on impermanence tonight just hoping to make a little dent in that barrier we all have against seeing the truth of things. I think that with all three of these characteristics, we need to hear them again and again and again. And each time we hear, they go a little bit deeper.

I think Steve, tomorrow night, is going to talk more on the characteristic of dukkha, so I won't go so deeply into that this evening. I want to go particularly into impermanence and also touch on anatta, not-self, tonight.

We can think of the truth of impermanence on at least three levels, probably more. We can think of it on a cosmic scale, the scale of one human life, and the scale of our momentary experience. I want to talk a little about all three of these.

Living as a human being with just the perspective of fifty or sixty or seventy years or twenty years, we come to think some things are everlasting. We might think that the earth is everlasting, the sun and the sky and the rains and the oceans and the rivers. When you read Native American poetry and literature, that's the implication. There's one line I particularly like from Native American tradition: "The old men say, only the earth endures." This is true from a certain perspective.

But from a scientific perspective, we now know that even the earth isn't permanent. It wasn't always here—I think it's about four and a half billion years old by latest estimates. We also know that someday it won't be here anymore. In another few billion years, the sun will burn out, and in its burning out, its flame will engulf the earth and burn it to a crisp. So even the earth and the sun are temporary. Even space may be temporary. With the collapse of all matter into the Big Bang, even space might be a temporary creation. So even on a cosmic scale, we can see everything that seems solid is subject to passing.

In the span of one human life, we can also see the effects of impermanence. This is an area that I would call the realm of reflective insight. The Buddha encouraged us to reflect again and again and again on the truth of impermanence. And seeing it in the course of one life is something that's easy to do through reflection. He said doing this undermines the game of ego, the game of the self, the strategy of greed, aversion, and delusion.

We tend not to do a lot of reflection in these kinds of retreats. We encourage you to carry on this reflection at home. And when I say reflection, what I mean is the purposeful application of thinking to dharma topics for greater understanding. So it's using thought, but in a way that furthers our insight, our dharma insight. We suggest during retreats like this that you devote your time just to the moment-to-moment development of mindfulness. But when you go home, we hope you'll make this reflective practice a part of your daily life.

So we look at our human life in this Western culture, the Western paradise as we know it, and we see that the message of our culture is about acquiring and always about more. You see this through the TV ads, which are kind of the underbelly of the culture: more money, bigger house, newer car. Now it's better body, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine. The body that you'd like to order can be yours for a price.

All of us here have seen the limitations of this belief, of this—I would almost say religious view—enough to have left it somewhat behind and looked for something else. So we come to a spiritual path, into spiritual life. And we start to understand that real happiness doesn't come from material things, can't come from material things because of this factor of impermanence. So we look in a new direction. We look in the direction of meditation. We start to understand that real happiness comes from a purified heart. When our human heart is free of the forces of greed, aversion, and confusion, then there is true peace. Then there is true happiness. We get an inkling and greater and greater confidence this is the real road to happiness and peace.

But as we work to develop the path and develop those wholesome qualities, we find that we still bring in some of the same mindset of acquisition and holding as in the material culture. So we come into a retreat, we start developing mindfulness, some concentration builds, and we have a peaceful sitting. And we think, "Wow, this is great. This is what I came on retreat for. Now I've got the groove." And then we go out for the next walking period. "I can't wait to get back in the meditation room." And we walk and we come back in. What happened to the peace? Maybe gone.

And often the loss of that peace and concentration is much more discouraging than a drop in our savings account or a dent in our new car, because we've developed the same kind of desire and attachment around the fruits of spiritual practice. So in many ways, the events of spiritual life can come to occupy the same place in our mind as the objects of the material world—just a more refined kind of object.

There was a fascinating article in the New York Times about a year ago called "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." Some researchers at Harvard and other universities started to explore the connection between what humans wanted that would bring them happiness and what actually happened to them when they got those things. They also studied what happened when people got the things they really didn't want and how both scenarios unfolded over time.

What they found was really interesting. They discovered that by and large, as people, we are very poor predictors of what will bring us happiness or unhappiness, and to what degree. They were focusing mostly on outer things—that was the interest level of their subjects. When people got the new BMW that they craved, they were happier, but for a short time, and then it faded. In fact, they were less happy than they expected to be, and that lower level of happiness wore off more quickly than they expected.

So the good thing that came into their life—this desired object—didn't bring as much happiness as expected, and the happiness didn't last as long. But on the other side of things, they found that events people didn't want to have happen also had less of a negative effect than people had expected. They didn't get as low as they thought they would, and they rebounded more quickly than anticipated.

To sum it up the way the reporter described it: on average, bad events proved less intense and more transient than test participants predicted. Good events also proved less intense and briefer as well.

This has great implications for us as meditators. Things generally don't make us as happy as we expect they will—even the new car or the new relationship, the new line of work, newfound wealth. But also, the things we're afraid of in life generally don't

impact us for as long or as deeply as we fear they might. Even the loss of a relationship, the loss of a job, the death of a family member—people are generally surprised at their ability to rebound from those kinds of events.

What this really says is we don't know how, as people, to account for impermanence properly. We don't know how to plan for change, either positively or negatively.

What's interesting in this article is that the key researcher mentioned was kind of ambivalent about these findings. Because what does this point to? We make too much of a fuss about things. Why do we make so much fuss about the ups and downs of our life? In a lot of cases, they just don't matter that much.

So this researcher, a Harvard professor, said, "Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience, and it is unlikely that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist tells them they should."

And what did the Buddha have to say about hope and fear? I think he said abandoning them was a pretty good idea. That's really what living in the moment is all about. That's what these conclusions are pointing to.

Then the researcher spoke personally: "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations. I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in this sense."

Those egos are tenacious beings, aren't they? Let's hold on to our hopes and fears—it's the juice of life!

What this points to is a willingness to trust more and more in the sense of equanimity as we ride through the ups and downs of retreat life, as we ride through the ups and downs of our daily life. Trust that we will be able to weather the storms that come and that we will be able to stay balanced through the good times also—not to get too head over heels in either direction.

One of the things that we often see on retreat is that when the concentration goes and we fall into one of the storms that come frequently on retreat, we tend to get really upset by the fact that the storm is there. The storm itself may be unpleasant, but it causes what you might call a crisis in confidence in us. We feel we've gone off track—that we're not a good meditator any longer, that maybe we've given up our effort, we've forgotten how to do the practice, we're not good enough, we're not sincere enough, or we've lost the thread and it's never going to come back.

Have you had any of these thoughts in the middle of storms? I have them all the time.

In a way, what we do is take a current moment's experience and project it indefinitely into the future. It's always going to be like this.

This happened to me in Burma. I was recently there sitting for a six-week retreat. I ordained when I was there, which is why my hair is so short—this is about two months' growth, so it's coming back, but slowly. I got there probably at the worst time of year that I could have picked. I arrived in Burma at the very height of the monsoon, and it was in one of the rainiest areas of Asia that I've ever been to. I've been through three or four monsoons in Asia, and Steve and I were talking about what the monsoons are like where we have been.

Usually there will be sun in the morning, and then in the afternoon the sky will just open up and bucket rain, dumping perhaps two inches in an hour before passing through to sunshine again. That's the sort of monsoon I was used to, and I don't mind that.

But this monastery was positioned on the edge of the Andaman Sea, just east of India. The monsoons were blowing right off the sea and slamming into the low mountains where the monastery was located, with no buffer whatsoever. When I arrived, it was truly the height of the monsoon season. For the first three weeks, it rained probably fifteen hours a day. I saw the sun twice in those three weeks as I was adjusting to being in the robes, in a new society, new culture, new food, new teacher, new practice.

With all of that, I confess I found the rain a little gloomy. I was sitting in my kuti feeling very gloomy and thinking, "It's going to be like this for another six weeks. How am I going to stand it? I don't think I can take it." I got more depressed thinking about how gloomy it was going to be than I was just being gloomy in the first place. I weighed myself down with that sense that it's going to be like this forever. Six weeks seems like forever when you're in retreat. It was about three weeks before I could really believe that it was ever going to get sunny again.

But I had brought along a photograph of the Dalai Lama that I keep on my altar, a photograph that Sally gave me. I turned to the Dalai Lama, for whom I have tremendous devotional energy, and said, "Your Holiness, can you give me some good advice?" I heard this voice spoken in his kind of Tibetan-Indian accent saying, "Hmm, stay optimistic, cheerful, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." It came through just like that. Those were the words I heard: stay optimistic, confident, and cheerful.

I really tried to take that advice to heart. Even though it was raining outside, I tried to find that place that was optimistic and confident and cheerful. Sometimes I could do it, sometimes I couldn't. Sometimes I could follow the advice, sometimes I couldn't. But

it became clear to me that what I really needed to weather this storm was confidence—confidence that there was going to be another side to it, that I was going to come through and that it was going to be okay again, as it had been okay before the storm.

When those storms come in meditation—when the delightful sitting goes away and the thoughts and emotions get chaotic or depressing or gloomy—I suggest you remember that aspect of confidence. As Kamala spoke about the other night, it's really the quality of faith that we need. If we can have that faith in ourselves, that we can come through this storm, then we really can stay cheerful in the middle of it. We can truly not be bothered by the thoughts, by the emotions, by the worries that come, because we know they too will pass. This is really the heart of equanimity. The basis of our equanimity is this quality of faith, one of the key qualities that develops with spiritual practice. But we have to go through those ups and downs many times before we can really trust that this is just a temporary phase and we'll come out the other side.

Another way we tend to ignore or deny impermanence is through the concept of "getting it all together." One day I'm going to get it all together, whether in life or meditation practice. It's not all together now, but I just have to work a little harder and get all the pieces in place at one time. Then my relationship will be in a good space, I'll be enjoying my work, my body will be fine, that old knee problem will have healed, I'll have enough money, my parents are still doing okay, my kids are not dealing drugs anymore. At one moment, everything will be okay in my life.

But have you ever known many people for whom that's true? It seems like one thing or another is always slipping out of balance. The relationship comes into a really good place, and the job gets screwed up. Or the money comes together, but then the parent's health starts to deteriorate. Joseph Goldstein has this wonderful phrase he suggests we bring to meditation as well as to life: "If it's not one thing, it's another." And it really seems true.

In meditation also, do you ever find yourself wondering when your retreat experience is going to all come together? In my early days, I thought surely if I sit a six-week retreat or a three-month retreat, it will all come together. At some point, all these body disturbances and wandering mind and annoying, afflictive emotions will be figured out and put aside, and I'll really be able to just cruise—to float, really—on this plateau of mindfulness and concentration and equanimity and peace, day after day. That's what my retreat should be like.

I haven't gotten it all together yet. I think we're lucky if we get a day like that.

where all those factors come together and last for 24 hours. That is wonderful if you have a whole day like that. But generally what's happening is that because the factors are not under our control, they have their own lives.

We make our moderate effort, mindfulness starts to build, and out of that concentration builds. When concentration is strong and energy is good, then there's a feeling of peace and alertness. But any of those factors can start to decay. Beyond our control, they can start to decay. Doing the best we can, making our good, steady effort all the way through, the meditation may still fall apart. Other energies may come in—bodily pain, distracting thoughts, restlessness, anything.

Can we be patient with that? Can we realize that we don't have to get it all together on this long, long plateau for insight to develop? Sometimes the best insights come in that falling apart phase. Where else are we going to learn equanimity? When everything's going right in our life, we tend to get attached to the pleasant circumstances and then we actually don't learn very much. It's really when things get shaken up a little bit and we get tested that we tend to learn more. So insight tends to develop to some degree out of difficulty, out of the difficulty of change.

In this way, in spiritual life, you may hear it said that a good situation is not a good situation for spiritual insight. And a difficult situation is a good situation for spiritual insight, for developing equanimity, strength, confidence, faith, understanding.

Another major way, of course, that we deny impermanence is in our relationship to death. Again, the ego has a strong investment in not seeing the truth of our death. Freud said that our entire human neurosis was rooted in our denial of death. So there's a strong force there not letting us see it.

Someone posed a question to a wise person in the Vedas, ancient Indian literature that goes back about 3,000 years in time that predates the Buddha: "What is the greatest miracle on this earth?" And the wise person responded, "The greatest miracle is that every human is surrounded by those dying around him or herself, but doesn't believe that he or she will die."

This is pretty amazing, isn't it? Most of us haven't quite integrated the reality of our own death.

This understanding was actually one of the experiences that prompted the Buddha to begin his quest. It's said that he took a ride into the neighboring village and saw an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. These jarred him so much that he resolved to find a way beyond aging, illness, and death. The fourth person that he saw was a renunciate pursuing a life of spiritual inquiry, and he decided to follow that example.

I want to read one thing that the Buddha said about this understanding that dawned on him: "An uninstructed person seeing a corpse feels repelled and disgusted. But I reflected that I too will die and come to be a corpse someday. So it is not befitting for me to be repelled and disgusted by a corpse. Seeing this, the pride that I took in life, in being alive, entirely vanished." He went on to say that there is also a pride in being young and there's a pride in being healthy. He said he gave up all of these at the start of his quest, realizing that they were all impermanent and bound to pass.

We usually feel death as a threat of some kind, probably the ultimate kind of threat. It certainly is a threat to the ego, the sense of permanent self that we've invested in. But it's interesting—the Buddha said that it's not necessary that human beings fear death. He said some beings do fear death, other beings don't fear death.

He said that we will fear death if, number one, we are greatly attached to sense pleasures and we want to have more pleasant sense experience. Number two, if we're greatly attached to this body, if we love it and delight in it and pamper it and are very attached to it. Third, someone who has done harm to others and has neglected to do virtuous actions fears death, because that person doesn't know what the effect of those unvirtuous actions will be after dying. And the fourth person who fears death is one who does not have faith in the Dhamma, in the truth of things.

So conversely, the Buddha said that it's not necessary to fear death, as long as there is not a great attachment to pleasant sense experiences, a great attachment or delight in this body, one has not neglected virtuous actions and one has not done many harmful actions. In the classical terms, this would be one who has observed sila or morality, virtuous actions to others, and one who has practiced dana or generosity, the doing of charitable actions to others. And finally, the fourth condition is one who has faith in the Dhamma can die without fear of dying.

The Buddha felt that this reflection on death was a very helpful reflection for all his followers, not just for monks and nuns. He had one set of reflections that he encouraged the monks and nuns to do. But here's a set that he encouraged for everybody, lay people as well as monks and nuns.

The Buddha encouraged us to carry five daily reflections in our minds. These fundamental contemplations remind us of our true nature:

I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging.

I am of the nature to become sick. I have not gone beyond illness.

I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death.

At death, I will be separated from all that is dear and beloved to me.

And finally, I am the owner of my actions—my karma. All that I do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

These five reflections were meant for everyone—lay people as well as monastics. Among them, the contemplation of death holds special power and usefulness for all practitioners.

This brings us to the third dimension of impermanence we must explore: the momentary, instant-by-instant nature of impermanence. Here we enter the realm of meditative insight, where simple reflection no longer suffices. This understanding can only emerge through sustained mindfulness that leads to quietude, concentration, and penetrating insight into the nature of our experience.

Within this moment-to-moment impermanence, we begin to see that change occurs far more rapidly than most people realize. Modern quantum mechanics reveals that electrons pulse on and off continuously—the very fabric of atoms lacks stability. An electron remains essentially unlocatable, described as a probability graph of charge distribution. While we rarely experience reality this way in ordinary consciousness, meditation can reveal the extraordinarily rapid changes occurring moment to moment.

I recall a wonderful presentation by the Dalai Lama that Sally and I attended at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View. It was summertime, and the amphitheater held thousands of people in seats, with many more stretched across the grassy bowl-shaped lawn overlooking the stage. Monks and nuns from various Buddhist traditions flanked the Dalai Lama—Tibetan monastics in bright red robes on one side, Theravadan monks and nuns in brown and yellow on the other, along with Zen practitioners in gray and black, and Korean monastics in brown. The stage presented a colorful array of Buddhist traditions.

Behind the Dalai Lama hung an enormous painting of the Potala Palace—his former residence in Lhasa—depicted at twilight with the last rays of sunset illuminating its walls. It created the beautiful illusion of seeing the Dalai Lama where he belonged, teaching dharma before the Potala. The grassy slope and peaceful atmosphere made it feel like a Buddhist Woodstock—without the drugs, everything wonderfully clean and clear.

The Dalai Lama taught on emptiness that day, and his words proved as transformative as any substance. In exploring impermanence, he emphasized a crucial point: solid objects don't simply persist for a while before suddenly disappearing. Rather, what we perceive as solid objects are actually dissolving and reappearing moment by moment—

pulsing on and off, existence itself flickering in and out of being. This understanding aligns perfectly with quantum physics and emerges from the direct insight of yogis who have developed sufficient concentration and clarity of seeing.

In our practice tradition, we must learn to observe our experience with such precision that this momentary dissolution becomes directly apparent. But what exactly is dissolving? What can we actually see and know to be in constant flux?

To answer this question, we must examine the fundamental nature of human experience itself.

This is from the Samyutta Nikaya. In this translation, it's called the Sutta on Totality.

"Monks," the Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully to it, and I will speak. I will teach you the totality of life."

That's a gutsy thing to say, isn't it? Who would have the nerve to teach the totality of life? Not Einstein, not Marx, not Freud. The Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of life."

"What, monks, is totality? It is just the eye with the objects of sight, the ear with the objects of hearing, the nose with the objects of smell, the body with the objects of touch, and the mind with the objects of cognition. This, monks, is called totality."

In the mind and its objects, primarily we're talking about states of mind—the emotions, moods, and refined meditative states that Sally talked about both in her talk last night and also this morning in the instruction—as well as thoughts. This is primarily what's being pointed to in the objects of mind.

So from our experience: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, emotions, and thoughts. Is there anything else? Anything else significant in your experience? Is the Buddha leaving anything out in this description of totality?

Isn't it amazing how simple it is? It's such a simple description of life and yet it's so comprehensive. Nothing is left out. We have these six classes of experience—the five physical senses and then mind objects, primarily thoughts and states of mind. That's all there is.

Now, of those six areas in your experience, which are solid? Which are not dissolving?

What about a thought? Does a thought last very long? Not generally. It sort of comes and then it's gone, doesn't it?

What about a sound? It's got a little bit of a decay, but if you listen closely, there's a little bit of modulation. It's kind of changing, being reborn, changing, dying away.

What about body sensations—these objects of touch, the sensations within our body? Are these solid? Look closely in your experience, even as you sit right now. Feel the pressure of your seat on the cushion. Is it one unchanging feeling? Or is it kind of pulsing and throbbing and getting stronger and weaker moment by moment? If you look closely at any body sensation, you'll see that minute change taking place. There's nothing solid within the experience of the body.

Emotions. Has any emotion lasted all day yet? Probably not. Emotions generally don't last so long. And even then, they're kind of being reinforced, aren't they, by your thoughts? Coming and going, waning, getting rebuilt.

What about sights? Opening your eyes and looking around the room at these white walls—that looks pretty solid, doesn't it? Sight is one of the hardest senses to see impermanence in. The light changes, that's right. It looks very different now than it did two hours ago, than it did in the morning.

And even if you want to get more granular than that, remember how sight is generated. Particles of light called photons, many, many per second, fall on a wall, are reflected and bounce into our eye where they strike the retina. It's really a stream of photons that are falling on the retina, triggering signals of electricity through the optic nerve into the brain where somehow, miraculously, consciousness of seeing is created. Stop that stream of photons for one split second, the sight goes away. So this sight, which seems so solid, is actually pulsing on and off many, many times a second, triggered by the impact of these many, many, many photons.

Even this kind of seeing is accessible to yogis. I cannot say that millions of times a second a photon strikes, but the lack of solidity of sight is accessible to yogic insight. So we can verify from our direct experience the statement of the Dalai Lama that everything in our experience is dissolving moment after moment, not lasting more than a part of a second.

And then we have to ask: what is there to cling to? When we see impermanence at this level, we know clinging is not a good idea. But when we see it at this level, we really know there's nothing there to cling to.

The Buddha said nothing should be clung to because it leads to suffering. When we see on this level, we start to see there is nothing to cling to because it's all in the process of fading away, of dissolving.

The Buddha compared it to someone being swept away on the current of a river, someone who had fallen into a fast-running river and was being swept downstream. As the person went downstream, they wanted to gain a steady hold by grabbing onto things on the bank. So they would reach out, but every time they reached, they could only grab hold of a strand of grass, and it came away in their hand. Then they would go a little further and reach out on the other side to grab a clump of grass, but it just pulled out.

This is the state that we're all in with clinging. We hold on to things, but even as we hold, they're becoming unsolid. They're coming unstuck.

The Buddha had an attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life, his cousin named Ananda, who was a very gentle and lovely person. He looked after all the Buddha's needs over that time really dutifully. At one point he asked the Buddha, "What do you mean by the world?" The word for world in Pali is loka. And the Buddha made a pun in reply. He said, "It disintegrates."

The word for disintegrate in Pali is paloka. "It palokas, therefore it is called the world or loka." Why do you call it the world? What do you mean by the world? It disintegrates, therefore it is called the world.

So this world of our six senses is constantly disintegrating, constantly dissolving.

When the yogi touches this kind of insight and this kind of realization in practice, it's usually a little unsettling. I don't know if you can get that flavor or sense of it, but it's as though the ground goes out from underneath one's feet. Because in fact, one realizes that what we take to be the ground—solid and supportive—is only the sensation of hardness. It's just another touch coming through our bodily sense, which is changing all the time. So there really is no ground.

This is the area of insight that the understanding of impermanence opens up for us through practice that is not available to ordinary daily reflection. This kind of insight where we get the truth of impermanence in our marrow is accessible only through meditative deepening.

In the second of the characteristics the Buddha talked about—the area of dukkha or unsatisfactoriness, often translated as suffering—we begin to see that the world cannot give us lasting satisfaction through the six senses because of this dissolving nature. There is nothing there to hang on to. So the impermanence and the unsatisfactoriness are very closely related. When we try to hang on to something that's in the process of dissolving, we won't be satisfied.

This is from Suzuki Roshi: "Without accepting the fact that everything changes, we cannot find perfect composure. But unfortunately, although it is true, it is difficult for us to accept it. Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is our non-acceptance of this truth. The teaching of the cause of suffering and the teaching that everything changes are two sides of one coin."

The third of the characteristics that I mentioned earlier was this teaching about not-self. This is actually one of the most difficult teachings of the Buddha to understand. So we have about five minutes left to cover it. That's probably about right.

I want to say before I make a few remarks about it that you shouldn't aim to understand this topic in one evening anyway, even if it was talked about for an hour. Rather, I have found that this message, this understanding, has come very slowly and very gradually over years of practice. I feel I'm still uncovering new angles to this insight, and that as I do, it continues to expand the area of freedom in my life. For me, this has been one of the central areas for greater freedom within all my dharma practice—understanding this message of anatta or not-self.

To really understand the message of not-self, I think we have to start by understanding what the Buddha meant by self. Or another way to say it is to understand what each of us means when we say "I" or "me," because there are some assumptions hidden in those two words—"I" or "me"—that we normally don't pull out and look at or question. But we really have to pull them out and become conscious of them, or we'll never understand what it means to deny the self through this concept of not-self.

So, what is implicit within our idea of a self or an "I" or a "me"?

One central aspect of our concept of self is that there exists a constant, ongoing entity—here, there, and everywhere throughout time. In some fundamental way, I have been the same entity from the moment I was born until this very day. All the experiences that have unfolded through all my years have happened to me—the same person. This represents the first characteristic of selfhood that we unconsciously accept: one continuous person or entity has moved through all these different experiences of life.

The second aspect inherent in this notion is that this "I" has somehow remained independent of all the experiences that have occurred. That I have been like a small, unchanging core wrapped within this fabric of bodily experience, sight experience, sound experience, emotional experience, and thought experience—all of it impinging upon me. All the different senses are impinging upon some unchanging center within me that truly is me. Everything is happening to me. In some ways, I am a kind of observer of it all, remaining fundamentally unchanged through all these different experiences.

When you combine these elements—constant, ongoing, independent observer—this entity cannot be found. It simply cannot be found, not within this sphere of sense experiences, not within the human realm of experience. There is no entity that matches this description.

This points to one of the important directions in our meditation practice, and I hope you will take it seriously: to look hard for that kind of entity. Only after looking earnestly for it and not finding it will you be convinced that it's not there. Something that satisfies these criteria—being the same since you were born, being independent of your experience while your experience happens to it—simply can't be found. But we each need to look hard enough until we know this for ourselves.

William James said something revealing: "When I look for the self, all I can find is a tickle in the back of my throat." Perhaps that's all any of us can find.

What the Buddha taught is that these sense experiences are not that self. A sight is not that self. A sound is not. A touch is not. A smell is not. A taste is not. An emotion is not. And a thought is not. What's left? Not much.

Interestingly, he didn't actually say there is no self. What he said is that all these experiences we can touch through meditation—those are not self. Those are not this thing called self. Those are not "I" or "me."

When we start to look carefully, we see that this sense of "I" or "me" comes strongly sometimes, especially when we become wound up about something or invested in something, while at other times it is quite weak. Take a look at your experience in one of those moments where there's a lot of calm and spaciousness. How strong is the "I" then? It's not very strong.

What we discover is that this sense of "I" or "me" gets constructed—it grows large and becomes small. When you look again more closely, you'll see that when it's strong, it's because there's holding on to something. There's clinging. The sense of "I" is directly proportional to the strength of clinging. It is nothing else. As the clinging relaxes, you can start to feel the freedom when the sense of "I" is weak or even absent. This becomes a fantastic doorway to peace and happiness.

Once, after a talk like this, during the question period the following morning, someone in the hall raised their hand and asked me: "All this teaching about impermanence that you discussed last night—is this just some bitter pill that I have to swallow? It's not very encouraging."

It's not a bitter pill. It's simply the way things are. It's challenging to accept because we have a bias against seeing it clearly. But it's not intrinsically a problem once we adapt our worldview to accommodate this truth.

The reason impermanence is emphasized so strongly in Dharma practice is that the more we see it, the less we tend to hold on. All the teachings on impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self point us toward not holding on so tightly to our experience—neither to the highs nor to the lows.

As we develop greater and greater capacity to let go, more and more peace comes. As Ajahn Chah said, if you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace.

This complete peace is the doorway to Nibbana—that state which is beyond change, beyond unsatisfactoriness, beyond the limitations of sense experience. This is the real goal of our Dharma practice, and it provides the greatest liberation and freedom for our hearts.

It is in the interest of discovering Nibbana, the direct realization of the unconditioned, that the Buddha encouraged us to let go through the investigation of anicca, dukkha, and anatta—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

Let us pause now and reflect on these words from the Diamond Sutra: "Thus shall you think of all this fleeting world: like a star at dawn, like a bubble in a stream, a flickering lamp, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a mirage, and a dream."

In contemplating the three characteristics, we discover not a philosophy of despair, but a pathway to profound peace. Each moment of recognizing impermanence becomes an invitation to soften our grip. Each acknowledgment of unsatisfactoriness becomes a step toward contentment that doesn't depend on conditions. Each glimpse of not-self becomes a doorway to the vast freedom that is our birthright.

This is the gift of the Buddha's teaching—not to burden us with difficult truths, but to liberate us through clear seeing. When we truly understand that holding on brings suffering and letting go brings peace, the choice becomes obvious. The path becomes not a struggle against reality, but a gentle alignment with the way things actually are.

CHAPTER 258

Impermanence

Guy Armstrong · 59 min

> *In this comprehensive exploration of anicca (impermanence), Guy Armstrong examines one of the tilakkhana (three characteristics) that the Buddha identified as fundamental to all conditioned existence. Drawing from his recent ordination experience in Burma during monsoon season, Armstrong illustrates how we resist seeing impermanence even in our spiritual practice, wanting lasting happiness from meditation states just as we do from material acquisitions.*
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> *The talk unfolds impermanence across three timeframes: cosmic (the Big Bang to universal dissolution), personal (aging, death, and the changes of a human lifetime), and meditative (moment-to-moment arising and passing of phenomena). Armstrong references recent psychological research showing how poorly humans predict the duration and intensity of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences, echoing the Buddha's teaching that we create unnecessary suffering through our misperceptions.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes how meditative insight reveals the rapid, momentary nature of all sensory and mental phenomena—nothing is solid or graspable. This direct seeing naturally leads to equanimity and non-clinging, potentially opening the mind to touch the unconditioned (nibbana) that lies beyond change. Armstrong concludes with the Tibetan saying about practice: "In the beginning nothing comes, in the middle nothing stays, in the end nothing goes."*

Sally talked last night about wise attention and how we can use it in our practice to clear up the misperceptions of things that we often fall into perceiving. I think it's interesting how that issue also relates to the question that was asked in the hall this morning: why is it important to pay attention to the details of the breath if what we really want to do is clear up things in our daily life to live with more wisdom and compassion? I want to talk about both of those aspects tonight.

In the broad scope of things, as Sally said, we pay attention to the breath in order to learn to pay attention. We find that this paying attention steadies the mind and reduces the amount of wayward thinking that comes in. As the mind gets steady, it's able to see more clearly the way things really are, to perceive things the way that they truly are. This is the realm of insight, and it's the area that the Buddha said led to the greatest freedom.

There's a direct connection between seeing the way the breath is and seeing the way the whole world is. You could say that if you train yourself to see the nature of one breath very clearly, then you see the nature of the whole world. There's really no difference between this piece of nature and that whole piece of nature out there.

So then the question comes in: what is it that's important to see about the breath or about the world? What should we be looking at? Or another way to say it is: what is the nature of the breath and what is the nature of the world?

When the Buddha answered this question, he pointed to what he called the three characteristics of everything that exists. He said these are the things that would be helpful to see, and they are: first, that all conditioned things are impermanent.

In letting that statement in, we need to stop and ask: what is a conditioned thing that the Buddha is saying is impermanent? A conditioned thing is anything that arises based on prior conditions. For instance, our bodies are here because at some point our parents joined and a sperm met an egg and the body was nourished in the womb and came out and received food and air and water. So this body is here because of prior conditions.

This building is here because of prior conditions. The trees grew in a forest. The cement came out of the earth. The light fixtures were manufactured by somebody else. Is there anything you can look at in the world that wasn't previously something else? Probably not. This whole thing we call earth came out of dust that collected around the star that we call the sun.

So all conditioned things means everything that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands, smell and taste. It also refers to the inner life, because when you look at the thoughts you have, they all came out of past causes and conditions, and the emotions we have all come because we're alive and human and contacting the world. All conditioned things means everything that we know. Everything we know is impermanent.

He also said all conditioned things are unsatisfactory. Why is that? All conditioned things are unsatisfactory—you might say ultimately unsatisfying—because if something came out of a prior condition and cause, it itself is going to be a subsequent condition for a later arising. And in that, it's going to decay. Everything that came into being is also going to be of the nature to pass away. In its passing away, it means there's no lasting happiness from it. So all conditioned things are ultimately not going to satisfy us, and that means everything that we see with our eyes and that touches our mind.

The third one was a little different. He said all things are not self. He didn't say all conditioned things. He said all things. So what's the difference between conditioned things and all things? In the teachings of the Buddha, there is one element, one Dhamma, he would say, that is a thing that's not a conditioned thing, and that is the unconditioned thing. The unconditioned thing the Buddha called nibbana. That is not impermanent, it's not unsatisfactory, but it is not self. We'll talk more about that later.

Tonight I want to focus on the first of these three characteristics, the nature of impermanence. All conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and all things are not self.

Sometimes this is considered a key teaching of Buddhism, but really, if you put the label Buddhism on it, it makes it sound like a sect or a religious cult or something like that. But really, what the Buddha said is that these three things are true whether or not a Buddha says they are. Whether or not a Buddha arises in this world to say these three things, it's still the way things are. That's why Buddhism is really not—I don't consider it a religion so much as a teaching about the nature of things, just the way things are, free of sectarian observations or bias.

One of the difficulties about the three characteristics is that we have a built-in bias already against seeing them. That's why they're so hard to understand and why the teaching of the Buddha is in effect revolutionary, because the perception of these three qualities goes against the mainstream culture of any time and age, not just our current one, but any time and age. And it's because we as human beings want to find a lasting happiness.

We want the world to offer us the stability of lasting peace and satisfaction. I think we're born out of that longing. I don't think we would be here in this current incarnation if we didn't have that desire very strongly. So I believe from the time we come out of the womb, we're looking for the world to provide us with lasting happiness.

And the problem is that it can't.

That's why spiritual training is helpful. When we want the world to be one way and it's another way, we're going to suffer. So the training is: can we see the world the way it is, and then can we live in harmony with the way it is?

This seeing of the way things are is freeing in itself. To see impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self is deeply freeing for the heart. But it's not the end of the road for freedom, because these particular insights change the mind in such a way that it

opens to go beyond conditioned things altogether and to touch that deepest truth of the unconditioned, of nibbana. It's said that the direct touch or direct realization of the unconditioned does the complete work of freeing the mind.

I want to talk particularly about impermanence tonight—about how it frees our mind in a relative sense, and then how it opens the mind to the deeper truth of what is beyond change, what's beyond impermanence.

In looking at change or impermanence, I want to discuss it on three time scales, because the teaching is true for all scales of time. We'll look at it in terms of the cosmic timeframe, in the timeframe of one human life, and then as a ground of meditative insight—how it's true on a moment-to-moment basis and how we can see that.

On the cosmic scale, from a naive point of view, we tend to think of the earth and sky and sun and moon and stars as eternal. Certainly for all the generations of humans, they have appeared that way. In native cultures, they're spoken of in that way. There's a Native American poem that says, "The old men say, the earth alone endures. You spoke truly. You were right."

This is a deep view in the history of humanity. It's only really in the last hundred years that Western science has come to say, "Maybe that's not the way things are." With the theory of the Big Bang, maybe there was a moment when no matter existed at all, some twelve billion years ago. Then all matter came out of that nothing of the Big Bang.

The Earth is about four billion years old, and at some time in the future will not exist anymore. It's said that the sun will burn out, and in its burning up, the heat from it will turn this place to a crisp. So you don't want to be around for that. Finish your work before then. That's a few billion years, but it would be a good time to be in another realm.

Even space may be temporary. There's actually been a debate within the Buddhist tradition: Is space conditioned or unconditioned? That's something scholars have debated for years. But from the Western scientific point of view, even space arose out of the Big Bang and will collapse again if contraction happens into another Big Bang. So we'll see. I'm curious about that myself, but that's what they say.

On a cosmic scale, we can see change on a very vast scale in very vast times. Nothing physical is permanent.

But more interesting to us is the measure of one human life. Within one human life, how do we see impermanence, and how do we refuse to see impermanence? How do we turn away from that understanding?

The message of our culture, the Western paradise as we know it, seems to be that lasting happiness is possible through acquiring. We've seen this again and again: more money, bigger house, newer car, fancier clothes, better body. The options for better bodies are getting incredible now through surgical procedures. You can almost order the body you want. And when they get into tampering with DNA, you might be able to do that in the cells of the embryo. I hope not. But that might be possible—order the body that your parents want for you.

We've all seen that this is a limited kind of satisfaction. It is a kind of satisfaction—let's be real about that. The satisfaction of material things is real, but it's transitory and not so deep.

But it is real. Seeing the limitation of this material satisfaction, we come into spiritual life wanting to discover if there's a possibility of lasting happiness through this territory, through this domain. And we start to understand the source of real happiness—that genuine happiness in life comes from a heart that has been purified. When the heart is pure, happiness is simply a natural result.

In the Buddha's teachings, the pure heart means the heart that has been freed, at least to some extent if not totally, from the forces of wanting, of disliking, and of confusion. Regardless of our material possessions or lack thereof, when the heart is free of these forces, there is deep peace and contentment. We don't need to look outside the heart for that.

But what's interesting is that as we train in this direction of peace and contentment and freedom from wanting and disliking, there are many ups and downs along the way. We come to understand the beauty of freedom, the beauty of peace, the beauty of concentration as we encounter those states through our Dharma practice. Then the acquiring mind, which is a deeply conditioned tendency, tends to get focused on those spiritual acquisitions rather than material ones. But the same kind of gaining mind can come into play.

So we become really pleased when peace appears, when concentration appears, when ease and relaxation come into our sitting, when we're able to be in the present moment for a stretch of time and the body relaxes and we let go of the burden of worries or hoping. Then as we continue to watch, that state of peace falls away, as it will with time. And there can be a strong reaction to that loss, even greater than if our savings account had dropped or somebody had put a dent in our new car. It can be much more alarming.

So even in retreat, we go through the same kind of cycle of wanting, of holding, and suffering when they disappear as we do with events in daily life.

There was a fascinating article a little over a year ago in the New York Times that reported on research being done at Harvard and other universities by psychologists. The title of the article—you'll appreciate this—was "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." The researchers looked at what happened when we got the things we want in life and what happened when we got the things we didn't want in life, tracking people's experience over time.

The basic conclusion is that we are not very good at predicting whether things are going to make us happy or for how long they're going to make us happy. They examined many different cases—things like a new car, a new job, the right relationship, winning the lottery, becoming wealthy—all those things we want in the outer world, and tracked people's happiness quotient over time.

They found, as we might expect, that getting a new BMW brought a temporary spike in happiness, but not as much as people had expected. And that happiness tended to decay, disappearing more quickly than people had anticipated. So the basic lesson is that the good things that happened in the outer realm didn't make people as happy as they thought they would, or for as long as they thought they would.

They also looked at the difficulties—loss of job, loss of relationship, loss of loved ones through death. And they found the same kind of effect: these losses and disappointments made people unhappy, but not to the degree they'd thought, not as unhappy as they'd expected. People proved resilient, coming back from these losses faster than they'd anticipated.

In other words, we don't know as humans how to predict impermanence in our lives, how to account for it, or what its effect on us is going to be. What was interesting is that the main researcher, Daniel Gilbert from Harvard, was ambivalent about his own conclusions. They basically point out that we make too much drama about everything. As Sally was saying last night, we think we're going to get really high about the ups and really crash with the lows. And it doesn't happen as much as we think.

This researcher said: "Hope and fear are enduring features of the human experience, and it is unlikely that people are going to abandon them anytime soon just because some psychologist tells them they should." The Buddha actually told people to abandon hope and fear and that it was a pretty good thing, but the psychologist was mixed in his message. He continued: "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations. I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense."

This is the bias of the ego—it doesn't want to see the effect of change, wants to hold onto the prospect of lasting happiness. And with that comes the converse: the fear of lasting unhappiness. Because of course, where this study points is toward putting our trust in equanimity—that we're going to be okay through all the ups and downs, that they're not going to affect us as much as we think, that we're going to smoothly sail through those difficulties in some way.

I think it's really interesting to look at this in retreat life as well. We go through the same ups and downs—the development of peace and finding that relative freedom, the ease of concentration and relaxation. And then what happens when we lose it? We often go through a strong reaction to that loss.

Often when concentration goes, it's accompanied by a surge of hindrances—a storm of emotions, agitation, lots of thought energy, lots of agitation in the body. This itself is somewhat unpleasant. But what's even worse are the conclusions we draw from it. I don't know if you've had enough days yet to start going through this cycle, but usually when we hit that downslope, we get really worried: "I've lost it."

I was just getting settled into the meditation. I was just learning how to do it. I had that sitting that was really still and now it's gone. Where is it? What did I do wrong? Am I not a good meditator anymore? How am I going to get it back? Is it ever going to come back? I'm never going to get it back. The rest of the retreat is going to be full of hindrances and agitation. I've really blown it. I may as well leave now. It's never going to come together again.

So in this moment of difficulty, what we can tend really easily to do is take a moment of experience that we find unpleasant—in this case—and project it forever into the future. The whole two months is going to be like this, or the whole month is going to be like this.

I remember when I was a kid, I had measles when I was five years old. I was laid up in bed for a few days, and my mother would bring me the only food I wanted to eat, which was boiled hot dogs with a dab of ketchup. It was my diet to get through the measles for some reason. But I remember she'd also bring a mirror so I could see how my recovery was going. Basically what I remember is that it wasn't going. I'd look at my face in the mirror every day and I'd see the same number of red spots on my face. I was totally convinced they were never going to go away. I knew that those red spots were going to be with me the rest of my life, however long that was.

I still bring the same attitude into my meditation. I saw it recently when I went to Burma. I mentioned the other night that I got to go this past summer and ordained for six weeks. I ordained with a very wonderful monk, a Burmese teacher named Paok Sayadaw. I hope he might be able to come during our retreat and talk to us. I've invited him because he's going to be in Northern California in late February, and I hope he'll be able to come here. He's seventy years old. He's been in robes since he was ten. He's a really kind-hearted man with a lot of loving-kindness and very deep practice, as you can imagine for somebody who spent the last sixty years sitting mostly in remote places.

So I went because I wanted to learn a special style of practice that he teaches on the breath. He teaches a very focused and potentially deep style of concentration practice. I wasn't able to get anywhere near the depth that he was capable of teaching, but nonetheless, I found it very helpful for my concentration and my practice.

But I made one mistake in going to Burma. I arrived at the height of the monsoon. I knew I was going into a rains retreat. Sylvia talked about how February is often our rains retreat. I knew it was a rains retreat, but I've been through a number of rains in Asia, and normally they don't bother me. Sunny in the morning, two inches of rain in the afternoon, and it clears up again. That I don't mind.

But when I got to the monastery, it rained for about the next three weeks solid. So I watched the white mold grow on my belt and my leather suitcase handles, and I smelled the smell of that mildew arising in my hut every day a little stronger. I noticed how it took three days for my robes to dry when I needed to wash them out. And I'm a kind of California guy at this point and I love the sunshine. So I found the atmosphere very gloomy. It was just really difficult for me to adjust to the rain. I got very low.

And at the same time, I was adjusting to being in the robes. I came to the monastery on Tuesday afternoon after a ten-hour bus ride that covered two hundred miles. If you can imagine that, it was brutal. Came to the monastery about six p.m. and was ordained by one p.m. the next day. And adjusting to the climate, the diet, the robes, the teacher and the new practice and the new place all at once while it was raining nonstop.

So I got kind of low in those first few weeks. It was a little more than I had bargained for. And I was convinced that it was going to be like that for the whole six weeks I was there. I was convinced it was going to keep raining.

I was never going to see the sun again. I was going to stay in this depressive mood the whole time, and nothing was going to change. I really believed it without examining it. Six weeks is a long time. If you're here for a month, that can feel like a long time. And

two months can feel like forever. Once you get into retreat, it's hard to see beyond the end of two months. So six weeks felt like almost forever. I couldn't see beyond the end of it.

At one point when I was feeling really low, I had a photograph with me of the Dalai Lama—a photo I keep on my altar that Sally gave me, with a very compassionate look on his face. So I turned to the Dalai Lama and said, "Your Holiness, do you have any advice for me? I could really use some good advice."

Immediately came his reply in his accented English, his sort of Indian English. He said, "Yes. Stay optimistic and cheerful and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." And that was all he had to say. A positive attitude is the best support.

So I really tried to work with those teachings. It's possible to put yourself in that optimistic and confident frame of mind at times. Then there were other times when it was not possible to put myself in that optimistic and cheerful frame of mind, and I just had to go through it.

That was almost the most interesting part—going through the difficult time when I didn't feel optimistic or cheerful or confident. Because I had to find out that I could bear those feelings too. That I could bear feeling low and not even imagining a light at the end of that tunnel. And I could keep doing my practice and keep showing up for my meals and interviews and keep putting one foot in front of another in my walking and just bear it.

What grows as I did that—what grew for me and I know what grows for you—is faith. The quality that James talked about the other night as the first of the five spiritual faculties is this quality of faith or trust or confidence that we can weather those storms too. However dark it looks, we can bear it. And then the miracle of impermanence is that it always turns around. If you keep looking, if you keep practicing, if you keep noticing the breath, noticing your step, opening to what is in each moment, those storms always pass in meditation.

So I found that. I found that equanimity could grow, that I could be in that low place and bear it, and also that it would turn around. And then the next time, the sun came out for a while, my spirits lifted, the practice got much easier. You notice that? The practice gets easier when the sun is out. We've been so lucky at the start of this retreat. I keep telling myself, "It's not going to last. It's not going to last. It's not going to last," but I really enjoy it while it's here.

And then the rains would come again, and I'd feel low again. But this time I had more equanimity. I knew that I could come through and come out the other side.

So we learn this trust in impermanence—that our current state, whatever it is, however you want to describe it, isn't going to be with us forever. In fact, that's really why it's safe to open to the emotions. When Howie talked about the hindrances we encounter on retreat and the next morning encouraged us to really feel into them, that is a safe practice.

It doesn't feel that way at first. Sometimes on retreat the strongest and most intense parts of our psyche come forward and we find ourselves in some intense state of fear or sadness or anger or longing. We don't feel we can trust it at first. We don't feel we necessarily have the courage to go into it. But as we start to trust and start to open, we find that it's okay because when we do, they all will also pass.

At first, we fight with them. It's like, "How can I get rid of this thing the quickest possible?" Because we really don't want to feel them. But we see something really interesting, and this is kind of a judo move—that when we resist something,

that emotion, we strengthen it. The force of our resistance goes directly into the strength of the emotion and actually sustains it. As long as it comes and we're resisting, pushing against, not wanting, hoping it will go away, bargaining with it, strategizing how to get rid of it, we're actually clinging to it. We've taken hold of it to make it go away, and that will sustain it.

So the judo move is we open with acceptance, and we find then you don't have to do anything to make it go. Its nature is to go. Its nature is to come and its nature is also to go. All you have to do is feel it and then watch it come, watch it go.

The same thing, of course, is true for all the beautiful states that come. The first time I experienced a lot of happiness on retreat, I thought, "Wow, it's going to be so much fun to live my life from this place." I thought of all the people I wanted to talk to and all the things I wanted to do when I was so joyful. And of course, it took about one day before that also evaporated. The energy of that flowered and then passed away.

This is from Rilke. It's a book I really love of his poems called *The Book of Hours*, subtitled in this translation "Love Poems to God." What's beautiful about this translation is it's done by two Buddhists—Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy—so it feels like it's in the family.

This poem is set imagining that as we are created, each of us is given a little pep talk by God before being launched into life. So this is the conversation God has with us before we're sent into existence:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now give me your hand.

"Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. No feeling is final. Just keep going." This is the safety of seeing impermanence—how all these things are just visitors to us.

One of the other ways we frequently experience impermanence in a human lifespan is through the phenomenon of aging. It really started to hit me in my early twenties when I looked back at the changes in my body and mind over my late teenage years. I realized this was going on in me, completely out of my control—the body was just doing its thing, whatever process it was. I was acutely aware of my parents, who were then about my current age, being in the same process, but for them it meant their death was closer. So it was very poignant to me.

But sometimes the aging process is beautiful. Howie was saying it's really hard for him now to go away and teach because he has a seventeen-month-old daughter. What's so wrenching, he said, is being away from her. She just happens to be, as her parents will confess, the smartest and most beautiful child in the world—there's a special catch in this case. But what's hard about leaving is that she changes so fast. That miracle of growth and aging and growing up is happening in her so clearly, and he doesn't want to miss a single day of the change.

But then, as we get older, the news of aging is not quite as cheery on first glance. Although actually, there is a lot of beauty in getting older, as I know many of you know. I have a friend who's in her mid to late seventies who tells me she's never been as happy as she is now. This is basically my experience also in my mid-fifties—I get happier every decade. I didn't expect that when I was younger, but I think it's really true for many of us in aging. It's a great gift.

But physically, it's a different story. Perhaps we once looked beautiful or handsome, and that's simply not happening anymore. I had a friend who was losing his hair—he's quite bald now. He said it was really difficult when he washed his face because when he got to his forehead, he didn't know where to stop.

When I was about thirty-five, I started getting gray hair. It came on quite quickly, actually. At one point, Sally and I were at a dharma talk in England. We'd been chatting, I got up and walked away, and somebody said to her, "Who was that man?" She said,

"What man are you talking about?" He said, "That man sitting next to you, that middle-aged man." I was thirty-five. She had the kindness to tell me this story—which I've used many times since—so that I could work with my self-image. I thought, well, thirty-five could be halfway to seventy. I could be gone by seventy. I guess that's middle age. Dealing with aging early on.

One thing many of us complain about as we get older is losing our memory. I see this happening too. Things aren't as easy to bring to mind—words, telephone numbers, people's names, directions. They don't come as quickly as they used to. Most of us bewail this and complain to each other about it. But I have one friend who's actually a dharma teacher who just laughs about it. He said, "Yeah, I can't remember anything anymore, but you know what? It makes life so much simpler." I really appreciate that spirit.

Then practice brings its own changes. We come into practice with one idea of ourselves, one image of our personality or who we are. As we open, that changes. I spoke a little about this the first night, and Sylvia touched on it in her talk on the Four Noble Truths—how as we open to the suffering we encounter, there's an unlayering process that happens. We contact these old habit patterns of personality, patterns of mind and heart, and as we touch them and bring them into awareness, we have the possibility to release them.

When that happens, experientially it feels like there's much more space in the mind, and the body relaxes to a deeper level. In many ways, I think it's fair to say that the whole of our dharma practice is about unlayering this old holding—the accumulation of many years of hurt, emotion, patterns, holding in the muscles, different emotions and tensions, memories. Some would say it goes back not just one lifetime but many lifetimes, the karmic accumulations of perhaps lifetimes of living.

As these things come up to be experienced, they are not easy. When we talk about the hindrances that arise in practice, it's helpful to remember this is an integral part of what we're doing here. It's not accidental. It doesn't mean we've gone off track, that we're doing anything wrong, that we're sloppy meditators, that there's something wrong with us for having hindrances. This is the inevitable uncovering and shedding of old habits and old accumulations. It's really clearing the way for new life, new perspective, for the heart of metta and compassion and clarity and wisdom to be born. This is a beautiful part of the process.

But in the middle of it, it can seem relentless. One teacher described spiritual practice as a relentless process of letting go—letting go, letting go. We're called to do this over and over again at deeper and deeper levels of ourselves. When we see that we're

letting go of the past, we're letting go of who we used to be, letting go of memories, definitions, self-image. In a way, then we understand what Krishnamurti meant when he said that living rightly is dying. Living is dying.

As we let go of the accumulation of the past, that stuff can be truly gone. But its gone-ness, its total gone-ness, can open the way for a really new and fresh experience of life.

Of course, death isn't just happening in spiritual terms around us. There's an interesting passage from the Mahabharata, an Indian epic, where a wise person is asked, "What's the most miraculous thing on this earth?"

And the wise person replies, "The most miraculous thing is that all of us humans see death happening all around us and don't believe it will happen to us."

This is another aspect of the ego's bias—not wanting to see that death has personal implications. It's a powerful reminder of impermanence, maybe the most powerful. Freud believed that our whole human neurosis was built out of our refusal to acknowledge our own death, to really get deeply the fact that we will die at some point.

So calling this truth to mind is classically, in the Buddhist tradition, a very powerful motivation for spiritual practice. It was one of the Buddha's heavenly messengers, as James mentioned the other night. The Buddha saw a corpse and was awakened to that reality. As he reflected on it later, he said this: "An uninstructed person seeing a corpse feels repelled and disgusted, but I reflected that I too will die and come to be a corpse someday. So it is not befitting for me to be repelled and disgusted by a corpse. Seeing this, the pride I took in life entirely vanished." He said the same thing in relation to aging and to illness—that he lost the pride of youth and he lost the pride of health.

There's a little bit of the teaching that Sally was pointing to in describing the exhibited body worlds—some of the message that can come from seeing corpses standing next to a human body that used to be alive.

Carlos Castaneda was once asked in a kind of social dinner club setting, "How can I bring more spirituality into my life? I'm looking for something kind of uplifting and pleasant." And he said, "As you go through your day, reflect that every person you meet that day will be dead in 100 years or less. That will turn you onto a spiritual track very quickly."

We usually feel death as a threat. In some ways it's the ultimate threat to the ego—the end of ego, the end of what we take ourselves to be. But actually the Buddha said that we don't have to fear death. It's not necessary to fear death. He said a person fears death under certain conditions: if we're greatly attached to sense pleasures, greatly at-

tached to this body, if we've done harmful things in our life and we've neglected to do helpful things in the area of morality and generosity, and if one does not have faith in the Dhamma, in the teachings or in the truth.

He said, but on the other hand, one who fulfills these four conditions doesn't fear death: one who is not greatly attached to sense pleasures, not greatly attached to the body, who has not done great harm, has done good things, and has faith in the Dhamma. Well, it's still a high bar. It's not going to be easy to reach, but it's possible. That might be humanly possible—not to fear death. That would be amazing.

So the Buddha recommended, because we have this built-in block to seeing the truth of death, to reflect on it daily. He recommended five daily reflections along these lines. I'll just read them and let you take them in:

I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging.
I am of the nature to become sick. I have not gone beyond illness.
I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death.
At death, I will be separated from all that is dear and beloved to me.
I am the owner of my actions—my karma. All that I do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

So these are a number of ways that in our daily life, as we move through the month or two months of the retreat, we can touch on the truth of impermanence: that states come and go, that we have the equanimity to weather them, that nothing in the emotional realm will last, to reflect on our own passing, to reflect on the process of aging.

The Buddha said, "When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all ignorance and it eliminates the conceit 'I am'—the false belief in self." So this is powerful medicine: eliminating ignorance, eliminating the conceit "I am."

But there's another layer, another level to see impermanence at that's not just part of daily reflection or daily life, that really requires the development of meditative insight that, as far as I know, is not accessible any other way. My feeling is that as we reflect on the aspects of impermanence as it plays out over a human life, it will penetrate to a certain depth in our understanding of life, our relation to life. But I'm not sure that it always gets deeply into the marrow.

As the Buddha enunciated the fullness of developing the perception of impermanence, he also added some other pieces to what that perception involves. And that's what I want to talk about now.

As the attention collects through mindfulness—just through paying attention to what is in the present moment—and the mind gets steady in the quality of concentration, we start to have the mental power to see the world, to see our experience of the world in a new way, a way that we probably haven't seen before.

The fact is that impermanence is taking place in a much more rapid way than we normally think of it as. You probably know the teaching of quantum mechanics, where the scientists understood that matter is not solid, but composed of protons, neutrons, and electrons, which are all in the constant process of flux, actually appearing and disappearing and reappearing.

That an electron is not a solid particle whose position can be found, but rather its relationship to the atom is more like a smear of charge or a probability graph of where it might be. You can't get a hold of an electron. So the scientists found this out, but they didn't integrate it into their understanding. Most scientists still run around thinking the world is just as solid as before.

Through Dharma practice, we can really touch the truth of that lack of solidity.

A few of us went down a couple of years ago to hear teachings from the Dalai Lama. He was teaching at Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View, south of San Francisco. It was a really beautiful setting. He was up on a high throne on the stage, and he talked about that throne. He said, "It's not about being a big person. It's about delivering high teachings," which was sweet. It wasn't personal, this throne business.

Behind him, where the speaker set would have been for the Grateful Dead—those floor-to-ceiling racks of speakers—was instead a canvas with a painting of the Potala, the palace in Lhasa where the Dalai Lama used to live, where he grew up, which was considered his personal residence, a thousand-room palace. It was painted at twilight, as sunset colors were reflecting on the windows, with a kind of mauve tone to it. It was beautiful.

On the left of the stage were maybe eighty Tibetan monks, all in their bright red robes. On the right side of the stage were Tibetan nuns, Theravadan monks in their brown robes, Theravadan nuns, Vietnamese Zen monks and nuns. The whole stage was full of Buddhist monastics.

He was teaching on emptiness and the Heart Sutra, which I find really inspiring. In this teaching on emptiness, he said that if you really want to understand how people are caught—because you want to help them come out of suffering—you need to understand all the ways that they're caught. He said one of the ways is in not seeing impermanence clearly.

He said, "Don't imagine that it's just that something goes along that people are holding on to, that we're holding on to something. It goes along and it's really stable and then all of a sudden it changes and goes away. It's not like that." He said, "Things are dissolving all along the way. Constant state of flux. They were never solid in the first place."

Our meditation can bring us into that level of seeing.

I can just invite you right now: take a look at the sensations in your body, wherever you feel sensations in your body. Maybe the touch point, the contact of the sitting bones with the cushion. Is there something solid there? Or can you feel that changing? Can you feel the fluctuations of the pulsation, the vibration of the current of energy arising at your sitting bones?

As your hands are coming into contact with your body or with each other, is that a solid sensation or is it changing a little bit in each moment? Can you feel the pulse and the vibration, the kind of on-off quality of that?

As we tune into these subtle sensations of the body, we discover there's nothing solid in it. And similarly, we can investigate all the other domains of the senses. Sounds which come and go, smells which are so ethereal, tastes which are so transitory. Sight is the hardest—that takes a little more reflection. We'll talk about that another time. Emotions, none of them lasting. Thoughts, just momentary.

By paying close attention, we refine our seeing that this transitory nature of every aspect of experience is inescapable. We just turn the attention there and we see the change. This requires a certain degree of presence and a certain base of concentration before it becomes so obvious.

This is the beauty of paying that detailed attention because we start to see that there is nothing solid in the whole of physical nature. There is nothing solid in the whole of mental phenomena. That we get in our marrow because we've seen it directly for ourselves. There's no point in holding when we see the dissolving happening in each moment that we turn and look.

In fact, in a way, we come to find out there was never an object there in the first place. There are no objects. There is only this transitory process of momentary phenomena arising and passing at the five physical senses and at the sense door of the mind.

Our concepts make them stable. We give concepts like woman and man and chair and floor and wall and sky and tree and earth. But when we look at each of those concepts, we see the concept is stable, and that misleads us into thinking the world is stable, but it's not. When we look underneath the concept to our actual experience, we find nothing is stable.

Everything is in the moment-to-moment process of change, of coming into existence and passing out, coming into existence and passing out.

This is from Rumi: "Think of how phenomena come trooping out of the desert of non-existence into this materiality. Morning and night, they arrive in a long line and take over from each other, saying, 'It's my turn now, get out.' This place of phenomena is a wide exchange of highways with everything going all sorts of different ways. We seem to be sitting still, but we're actually moving. And the fantasies of phenomena are sliding through us like ideas through curtains. Nothing is fixed. We're so much lighter than we think we are."

As we open up this meditative eye, the Dhamma vision, we start to see that the world isn't the way we took it to be. It's always just coming, going, coming, going, coming and going. It's more like a verb than a noun. And when you see it as a verb, you know you can't hold on. You can't hold on to action. It's changing too quickly.

Then the process of meditation becomes that of just settling back and knowing this changing flow of phenomena, knowing the changing stream with less and less inclination to grasp, because we see there is nothing that can be held onto. And as we rest more and more, this equanimity develops of it being okay that it's like this, of a sense of resting as the stream is going, a sense of deep peace, of coming into harmony with the way things truly are, not denying change, but also not being confused or entangled in it through clinging.

It's from this deep kind of peace that there's the possibility then of opening to what is not affected by change, to opening to what's beyond change—the unconditioned, nibbana, that which has been here from the beginning, is present now, will ever be here in the future.

This is also from Rumi: "Be with those who mix with God as honey blends with milk and say, 'Anything that comes and goes, rises and sets, is not what I love most. Live in the one who created the prophets.'" This is Buddha nature. Live in the one who created the Buddha, if you like. "Otherwise, you'll be like a fire left from a caravan, burning out alone beside the road."

So the Tibetans say about practice, our Dharma practice: In the beginning, nothing comes. All the teaching seems so remote and theoretical, and these beautiful states of wisdom and clarity and peace and metta seem so remote, so difficult. In the beginning, nothing comes.

In the middle, nothing stays. There's just the shifting nature of phenomena arising and passing, arising and passing very, very rapidly at times. But this is also just a stage.

Because in the end, nothing goes. Nothing goes. Everything has its existence within this background of peace, the unchanging nature of the unconditioned, the great space of equanimity and awareness in which, as one Zen scripture says, nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess.

Let's just sit for a minute. In the beginning nothing comes, in the middle nothing stays, and in the end nothing goes.

CHAPTER 259

Mettā: Its Near & Far Enemies

Guy Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this comprehensive exploration of mettā (loving-kindness) practice, Guy Armstrong draws from both personal experience and Buddhist psychology to illuminate the obstacles that prevent the heart from opening fully. He examines the 'near enemy' of mettā—attachment disguised as love—and the 'far enemy' of aversion, including anger, fear, and self-judgment that commonly arise during practice.*
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> *Armstrong offers practical guidance for working with the four brahmaviharas (divine abodes): mettā, karuṇā (compassion), muditā (sympathetic joy), and upekkhā (equanimity). He provides detailed instructions for deepening loving-kindness meditation through a four-step process: connecting with the recipient, feeling genuine care, sending the phrase with that feeling, and resting in the heart center.*
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> *The talk addresses common challenges Western practitioners face, including self-criticism and 'wounded love,' while offering skillful means for transforming difficult emotions through compassion practice and mindfulness. Drawing wisdom from teachers like Nisargadatta Maharaj and the Dalai Lama, Armstrong demonstrates how sincere intention plants seeds of wholesomeness that naturally develop into boundless love and wisdom when supported by non-attachment.*

The subject of tonight's talk is metta and its near and far enemies.

I grew up in the center of the country, in a little town called Webster Groves, Missouri, which is a suburb of St. Louis. It's so middle America that the year after I graduated from high school, NBC came into town and made a documentary called "16 in Webster Groves" to show what was happening in middle America. That's how quintessentially suburban it was.

But curiously enough, at the age of 16, in Webster Groves, I bought my first book on Buddhism. This was 1964, not a time when there were many books on Buddhism available. I have no idea why I bought it. Looking back, I have no idea why. But going through my bookshelf tonight, I found it, and it brought back some memories. It's called *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts, with a printing date of 1962, though I bought it in 1964. It's been with me all these years.

This was the first book that awakened me to a different possibility of looking at life than the Christian mythology I'd been brought up with, which didn't settle very well with me. I actually became an agnostic also at age 16, reading Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth*. So this was quite a revelation to me.

Thinking back about my interest in Buddhism, I got into extensive reading in college. I wasn't majoring in religious studies at all, but I became interested and read the books I could find, which then were largely about Zen—Watts and D.T. Suzuki. I was really inspired by the descriptions of the Buddha's peace and that unshakable calm, and especially how he had gone beyond the fear of dying. I thought it was so amazing that it was possible for a human being not to be afraid of death, because it seemed so scary to me at the time. So I was very inspired by all that.

But when I actually think about the fuel for my spiritual journey, it came from a somewhat different direction. In my late teens and early twenties, I started to open up to some very strong experiences of love. They came into my consciousness with a mystical flavor because there was a strong feeling of oneness connected with them. This could happen through interacting with people, through being in nature, or through exposure to art or music. But this whole new way of relating to the world started to dawn on me about that time.

The thing that was difficult was that those experiences weren't at all stable for me. I would sometimes enter them and they'd be wonderful, then I'd come out and have no idea why they'd happened or how to make them happen again or why they went away. When they were there, they were so fulfilling that the rest of my life seemed shallow by comparison. Then they started to come less and less frequently, and it produced a lot of despair in me because I'd seen what I really wanted in life—what was really satisfying—and it was slipping away.

So I really think, as I look back on my motivation for this path, it was to rediscover that access to love. That's what's been guiding me all along. Rumi puts it this way: "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." I didn't want to walk a road where nothing lived. I really wanted that to be alive for me.

But what I didn't understand is that openness to love and the heart space couldn't survive without the support of wisdom. In the Buddhist tradition, this wisdom is particularly about non-identification with self and non-clinging—not holding onto anything. When the mind is in a state of not holding to anything in the world, then it has the

steadiness and the openness to touch that which is greater than our individual personality. This took me a long time to understand: that love had to be supported with wisdom or it couldn't be stable.

One of my favorite dharma writers—really speakers, but I know him through transcriptions of his talks—is a Vedanta teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj who wrote a book called *I Am That*, which I highly recommend if you haven't encountered it. Ajahn Sumedho, who was just here, was also really influenced by that book and says he considers Advaita another branch of Buddhism. I kind of like that thought too.

Maharaj put it this way: "Love tells me I am everything. Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows." There we have that fullness in the union of love, and we have the emptiness of non-attachment, of not-self. The two of them together make up the fullness of spiritual life.

In our tradition, vipassana is the doorway to that non-clinging, the non-attachment, the doorway to emptiness, releasing the mind from all its holding, all its burdens, all its clinging. But the counterpart for us is that metta practice is our avenue to that openness of heart and the doorway to love and feelings of union.

Now, I find it quite interesting that the Buddha talked about it as a feeling between beings. Metta or loving-kindness is always described as our approach to other people or other beings. The deer, the lizards, the bluebirds are also included in that feeling of metta.

So I think this is a very interesting skillful means. Why? Because people are always available. We are social beings. We all know people. We all have experienced love with people. So that channel is there for everyone. Not everyone lives close to nature. Not everyone is in touch with beautiful art, transformative art or music. But everyone is in touch with the love of human beings.

So I believe the Buddha chose this path as a way to open the heart. But as it gets open through this human dimension, it also is transformed and opens in that way to the whole world. So I feel that this quality of loving-kindness toward others is just a pathway to this general state of love, this deep part of our nature.

It's extraordinary when you meet somebody who's developed that quality so highly. And for me, the Dalai Lama always exemplifies that capability. He was here in this room, I think it was three years ago. We had a meeting with about 200 Buddhist teachers, mostly Western, but also Asian teachers who are teaching in the West today. And he spent a couple of days with us and engaged in dialogue and was just his natural, amazing self.

One of the things he said at that meeting is, "I'm not interested in propagating Buddhism. I'm interested in propagating human values." And this is really the way I think he approaches everyone he meets. He believes regardless of religion, the human values of care and kindness can transform the world and take away the suffering that we cause one another.

So it was interesting to see his effect on the security guards who were here. Because he's a head of state in exile, the U.S. State Department has to provide security for him when he travels in this country. Every morning, the buildings, the residence halls, had to be vacated. Teachers were staying in them. They had to go out and come back in through metal detectors. Because, you know, we are dangerous people. We often pack guns and explosives.

So they had to check us out, and we all walked through these metal detectors that were staffed by the State Department security guards. These people are another level up from the Transportation Security Administration, whoever it is that you run into at airports. These were heavy-duty guys. They'd have a nightstick on one hip and a pistol on the other and a walkie-talkie radio on their back, and you didn't mess with them. They'd been providing security for Yasser Arafat and Golda Meir and people like that. So you didn't mess with these guys.

But at the end of the two days of the conference, they all asked if they could have their picture taken with the Dalai Lama. And of course he obliged. So somewhere there's this photo of the Dalai Lama and these about eight security guards in their white tops and their nightsticks and pistols. It's quite beautiful how he just reaches out and touches, makes that human connection with people.

So overall, the four Brahmaviharas really give us a complete way to address one another, address the situation in our own life from the heart's point of view, and the good and bad fortune that we meet in life. In our tradition, we use metta as the foundation. Metta is that general openness of the heart that just looks at another and wants for their well-being. It's just sort of looking in another's eyes and going, "I hope you're happy. I hope you're well." So recognizing there's a consciousness in there that feels pleasure and feels pain and sort of going, "I hope things are going well in there for you." That's the foundation.

Now in the Tibetan tradition, you'll hear compassion talked about as the foundation, but don't think that these two are too far apart. I hope you got that sense today as James led the meditation in compassion. The Dalai Lama says compassion is just basic human warmth. That's the same thing we could say about metta, basic human warmth.

So when this basic human warmth turns to somebody who's in suffering, the flavor that comes through is compassion. And when it just rests with a general condition, not knowing if you're happy or unhappy, the flavor is metta. If it finds there's unhappiness, it gets just transformed. It just changes flavor into compassion. So that's the open heart that touches suffering. On the other hand, if someone is happy, then the open heart responds with its own happiness. There's a joy when somebody else is also happy.

Somebody else's happiness, if our heart is open, lights us up too. We just resonate. That's why it's sometimes called sympathetic joy.

And then the fourth of the Brahma Viharas is equanimity. That's what gives the mind the steadiness not to be so moved by the changing conditions of life. We'll talk a little more about this later. But if we fixate on the result of the phrase—we say "may you be happy" to the benefactor, but the benefactor isn't happy—we could feel like, oh, it's not working or I failed. The equanimity lets us support the loving kindness by saying, "that's okay. Everything changes. People go through ups and downs. My mind can still be balanced even if there's unhappiness there."

So these four together give us a way to meet the joys and sorrows of our life and of the lives of other people.

So what supports the development of this open heart? What leads us into this quality of love that's an integral part of our human nature?

It's funny how many analogies there are in spiritual life to gardening. I bet a lot of you have reflected on this. When Sally and I first got together—it was twenty years ago, a little over twenty years ago in England—we were living in this Dharma community which we had started up at the invitation of this very rich philanthropist who was living in Devon. He offered us the top floor of his house, which was this incredible Georgian mansion that was perched up on a hill that overlooked agricultural land—just open rolling green hills around a broad U-bend of the River Dart, about five miles above Dartmouth where it flowed into the English Channel. It was just an incredible spot.

But we'd both been Dharma bums for a few years at that time, and we had no money. We weren't going to get rich living there because to support ourselves in this community, we worked as this philanthropist's gardeners. And he paid us the princely sum of one pound eighty an hour to grow his vegetables and tend the other gardens. So there we were making about twenty-five pounds a week. What's that? Probably about forty dollars a week. That was our wage and we got free rent.

But we were in this Dharma community and we were doing a lot of gardening, and I just kept thinking all the time: this is just like Dharma practice. You cultivate the good soil, you put good compost in, you make it rich with these beautiful qualities, you pull out the weeds, you uproot what's unwholesome, you tend it every day, you take care of it with love, you're very attentive.

So our metta practice is also like a gardening exercise. What we're doing in saying these phrases is really planting seeds in every moment. And the seed that we're planting is a wholesome intention. We can't change the heart overnight, but we can change it one moment at a time by planting these little seeds again and again in it.

Really, the essence of the practice that we're doing is the sincerity that you bring to that wish. Every time you wish "may you be safe, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be at ease," the sincerity that you put in that wish is the seed of that wholesome intention. It's your ability to care just in that moment that starts to change the heart.

This is interesting. I think it's a very modest approach. We start with what's real, what's accessible, what we can actually influence just in one moment. And just in that moment, we turn the heart to caring. That's the essence of metta—the spirit of caring. And when we do that over and over and over, little by little we change the direction of the heart.

Somebody mentioned today that when they came and sat down, they started to see how the mind was filled with critical thoughts. And it would run in those tracks. They said, "Oh, that's a habitual tendency of mine to run in critical thinking." But every period that went by, they saw how the metta was starting to just turn that a little bit in a different direction. And that's what these little seeds of intention do. They're not dramatic, but they start to make a shift in the stream of our conditioning.

We can't determine when these little seeds are going to sprout into a big plant—the big plant of strong love or sense of union or anything like that. But we know that that's the direction that they're heading in. And just like if you are planting tomatoes for your summer garden, you put the seed in the right kind of soil at the right kind of depth, and you give it the right kind of sunlight and the right kind of watering—that's all you can do. You can't tell that tomato plant when to come up from the earth.

In fact, if you try to pull it, you break it. And so just like with metta, if you try to force any feeling to be strong, you'll break it. Too much pressure. The heart doesn't respond very well to being squeezed.

But if you just trust it, because this process is just as natural as the sunlight and the rain falling on the seed that's in the right kind of soil, the heart will start to open from these seeds because these are good seeds. You just don't get bad plants from good seeds if the conditions are there. So we learn to trust.

We just have this faith that by coming back to this caring—I hope you're well, I hope you're happy—again and again, the seeds are being planted and they will grow up in time. Nature will determine when. But that's all we have to do. As gardeners, all we have to do is plant the seeds. The Dharma takes care of the rest.

So don't worry if it's not there immediately. Don't worry if it feels like nothing's happening for a while. Just keep trusting in nature and know that the seeds are ripe.

The essence of metta is meaning it—meaning that I hope you're well, meaning that I hope you're healthy and are at ease. If we say the phrase like a mantra, just letting the words go by, it doesn't do it. It's not just the words, it's our giving the words that meaning that makes the practice work.

In a way, if you take a look at what's really happening in a moment where you say the phrase and you mean it, you are being metta in that moment. And you've kind of pulled that, just a little bit of metta, out of nowhere. How did you know how to do that? There's no technique that can make you sincere. But if you find in yourself that sincerity, that's how you strengthen that quality.

This is a general principle in Buddhist practice. If you want to develop any quality of heart and mind in the teachings of the Buddha, you do it not by starting out over here somewhere else. You do it by just putting yourself in that mind state. So if you want to develop the quality of metta, you locate that within yourself. Oh, all I have to do is care. Then I've got the feeling of metta here and now. If you want to develop the quality of compassion, you look on suffering and you just care.

I don't know where that comes from. I mean, I could tell you a word. It comes from your Buddha nature. But that doesn't necessarily mean anything. I could just say it comes from fairyland or neverland. Doesn't really matter. But what's important is that you know that it's there and you start to get better and better at calling it out when you want to.

In vipassana, the equivalent to this is our mindfulness practice. We develop this faculty of learning to pay attention and see clearly in each new moment. And as we do that, it gets easier and easier to see clearly in each new moment.

The practice, as it's said in the tradition, these practices are onward leading. It's not just that there's something beautiful happening in the moment, though there is. That sincere caring is really a beautiful quality. That clear attention is a beautiful quality. But it's also an onward leading quality, which means that as we give ourselves to it again and again, it builds a momentum in us. And at some point, the Buddha said that momentum is unstoppable. It's irreversible. It carries us to awakening. It carries us to liberation.

So really our work as practitioners is just to keep putting ourselves in those little slices of awakened mind and heart over and over and over. And that builds the momentum that takes us all the way to liberation.

The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, 'This will come to nothing.' By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." So little by little, you're just putting those raindrops in the jar. And little by little, the jar fills up.

I want to talk a bit about how to use the technique of the metta practice to kind of draw out the spirit of caring. So I want to get a little bit technical about the instructions.

It's sort of a refinement of the instruction that I encourage you to play with if it appeals to you. It's not something anybody has to do—it's something I found helpful, and maybe you will too.

When I do the metta phrases in my own practice, I go through four steps with them. The first step is that I connect with the person I'm sending to. Let's say the benefactor. So I'll get a real sense of the benefactor. For me, it works well to do it with an image, so I'll see the image of the benefactor before I say a word. For you, the image may not work so well. So it could be saying the name or just remembering your time with them—whatever works to kind of bring the person alive.

Because there's a real difference between saying a phrase like "May you live with ease" just sort of into the ether as a general kind of wish of goodwill, and saying it really directly to somebody. Like I'm looking at Shelly and I think, "Shelly, I want you to be well." That's a really different flavor. So as you say your phrase to the benefactor, let the benefactor be there so you know it's really for them. So that's the first thing—connect with the person.

The second thing then is to take a moment in the silence to feel whatever you feel for them. And hopefully you care for them. You have affection for them. You like them. There's something sweet there about looking on them. So wordlessly, you just let yourself feel whatever you feel—affection, love, care, interest, concern, whatever it is—just feel that. That's the second step.

The third step then is to let the phrase go out to them carrying that thing that you feel, this expression of affection or care. So you have the sense that the phrase is emanating from you, going toward the person, and it's carrying that feeling that you felt the moment before. "May you be safe from harm."

Fourth step: come back and connect to the heart center. This is not an esoteric, mystical experience. This is just whatever you feel in the center of your chest. The area behind the breastbone. There is supposed to be a chakra there. Don't worry about the chakra—whether it's there or open or closed or filled with light or you're breathing through it. We're just talking about this area behind the breastbone in the center of the chest that we often call the heart center. Come back and rest there.

Feel the physical sensation and also feel whatever emotion you're feeling right then. Could be a feeling of metta. Could be a feeling of affection. Could be a feeling of frustration. Could be a feeling of resentment—you remembered something that the benefactor said that wasn't so helpful. Could be not very much feeling at all. There's no particular feeling there right now. That's fine too.

So we're touching into the feeling level, and the value of that is as the metta feelings grow, that's where you'll connect with them. And so you want to make the metta feeling, whether it's present or absent, not something you care too much about. But when it's present, that's where you want to feel it.

Also, you can take some time there to kind of rest. Sometimes people say, "Oh, this practice is too heady. There are too many words. My brain's getting clogged up. I want to just take a vipassana break." Anybody take a vipassana break today? You probably never wanted to practice vipassana so dearly as when the brain's clogged up with metta phrases.

So here's a way to take a few seconds of vipassana break. You come into the center of the chest, you feel the sensation, you feel the emotion, and you can just rest there for a second, two seconds, and in that, reconnect with the silence. This whole process of the four steps is held in this vast silence. And that's a way that the brain doesn't have to feel clogged up with all the words.

It's really a way to bring in some relief.

So just to review the four steps, if you want to play with it: connect with your person, feel that moment of whatever you feel for them, let the phrase go out to them expressing that feeling, and then come into the heart center and rest and feel whatever the echo of that phrase is, the effect is. This is the way we're actually shaping the heart.

Nisargadatta Maharaj had something to say about this too. He says, "Your own will is the backbone of your destiny." Will is a synonym for intention. It might even be the same word in Sanskrit. And the person he's in dialogue with, the questioner says, "Oh, surely karma has interfered with that." And Maharaj said, "Karma shapes the circumstances, but the attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character."

This is quite a revelation. We actually have the ability to shape our character. And the Brahmaviharas, as well as mindfulness, are a very strong way to do that.

So what obstructs the metta? Why is it with all our good intention—and I know all of you have had hundreds of these moments of good intention over the last couple of days—that our patterns are so difficult to dislodge? They're so tenacious. What are the patterns that block the unfolding of that caring heart?

With every Brahmavihara, James may have talked about this this afternoon, there are two qualities that are associated called the near and far enemy. The near enemy is the quality that looks like it, feels like it, smells like it, but isn't, and is actually kind of an unwholesome imposter masquerading as the true Brahmavihara. The far enemy is the opposite.

So with loving kindness, the opposite of love is hatred. So the far enemy is aversion. The near enemy is said to be affection that has attachment with it. So we see something beautiful. There's this quality like metta, which is kind of a union. There's a warm feeling of union with a person or a thing that's beautiful. But if there's clinging in the air, the clinging actually blocks the metta.

How can you tell which is there? This is an interesting thing to investigate. One of the ways we see this affection with attachment come in is in conditional love. And this may be in friendships, it may be in intimate relationships, but it's the attitude that wants something back from the person. There's an "I'll love you if you'll love me" condition on it.

With a benefactor, we might see this in relating to the benefactor if we feel, "Oh, I have a good connection with a benefactor, but somebody else is actually closer to them." If it's a teacher, you think, "Well, they've got a student they like better than they like me." Or if it's a parent, you think, "Yeah, but I wasn't the favorite daughter in the family." And any kind of that comparing nature will take away some of the openness that we come to the person with.

There's this tendency you hear again and again in pop music where this attached love comes through. The archetypal song in pop music love would go something like, "I want you, I need you, I love you, and I'll kill you if I can't have you." This killing part is not quite metta.

And it's also the reason that we often don't use the word love so often when we talk about metta, because in our culture it's gotten mixed up with this romantic love or this attached love.

So how do we tell the difference? When the attachment is there, one thing that happens is the metta isn't universal, but it's just extended to a few people. There are a few people who get within our circle of caring, and basically everybody else can drop dead because who cares? But metta has a universal flavor that it extends to all beings, to everyone.

The other piece is that if you look at this attached love closely and you see what's really going on, it's not so much concerned about the other's welfare, which really is what metta is about. It's more concerned about my welfare. So we often say in romantic love there's a strong element of narcissism in it, especially in the whole falling in love thing. What really is happening in falling in love is we love the feeling of love and the other person engenders that for us. But generally that's not an altruistic love. That's not a selfless kind of love. We're not in that intimate relationship to be a bodhisattva to our partner generally. We're in it because we're getting high from the experience, the initial experience in that rush of romantic love.

So I believe there is a lot of metta in romantic relationships, but just start to tune into the parts, the moments that come when the mind is not in a metta frame, but is more in a needing frame, a desiring frame.

The far enemy of loving kindness is aversion or disliking or negativity. This comes up a lot in doing metta practice.

If you've been noticing it over these couple of days, you might think something's gone wrong. You know, I came here to feel metta and all of a sudden I'm feeling sad or I'm feeling jealous or I'm feeling angry with people. "Wow, I've really missed the boat." Not at all.

It's as though when we turn our intention to caring and to love, then that brings out all the things that don't align with it. Someone said this in an interview yesterday or today, that just as I turn my wish to happiness for myself, what comes to my mind are all the ways I'm not happy. This is a natural part of the process, and it's actually a valuable part of the process. It is a difficult part, but it's really natural.

We begin the process with ourselves because in some way the self has to be the foundation for love for others. Again, this is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Of all the affections, the love of oneself comes first. Your love of the world is the reflection of your love of yourself. A yogi is a person whose goodwill is aligned with wisdom."

So we develop this love for ourselves first, but it doesn't necessarily flow that easily. And in fact, for most Westerners, I think it's the most difficult because it does bring up the ways that we don't feel quite happy or loving toward ourselves. It can bring up self-judgment, self-doubt, self-dislike, can bring up all the recollections of things we've done wrong.

The first time I did a long retreat, I was plagued by these memories of all the worst things that I'd done in my life. These visions just kept coming again and again. And I finally had to write them down to get them a little bit out of my head. And I made a list of the ten worst things I ever did.

One of them that really stuck—I can still feel it—was going on a trip with my father. My father was a great hunter and fisherman. He grew up in the outdoors from the time he was a kid and loved hunting and fishing. I think one of his great disappointments in me as a son is that I didn't connect to that. But I tried.

So I remember one winter morning, we were living in St. Louis, and we got up about 3:30 in the morning. We drove for about an hour to the banks of the Missouri River. It was dead of winter, so it was freezing cold. It was dark. And he had a little rowboat there with an outboard engine on it, and we motored over to this island in the middle of the Missouri. It was freezing cold. We had hand warmers and we were all bundled up. And then we walked for about forty-five minutes to his duck blind, which was on a little pond in the middle of this island. And we just waited there for dawn to come up because you can't start shooting until dawn.

As dawn was approaching and we could start to see some light, there was a songbird singing on a branch not very far away. And my father said, "Why don't you take some target practice?" I was about fifteen years old at the time, and I didn't really listen to myself. I didn't know how to listen to myself. I said, "Oh, dad thinks that's a good thing to do." So I took my shotgun and I pointed at this songbird and I pulled the trigger. And that bird was just gone. A shotgun blast at close range with a songbird doesn't leave very much.

And so that memory came back when I started to meditate. I hadn't thought of it for years. And then living with the precepts, the vow not to kill living beings, this came up for me. And I felt terrible about it. And there wasn't anything I could do about it. There was no way I could get any of that out. But I just had to live with that.

So it played out really strongly in my mind for quite a few days on the retreat, and I just had to keep opening and feeling bad about it. It was also a really instructive learning because I started to see the difference between feeling guilty and feeling remorseful. When things come to mind that we wish we hadn't done, it's actually wholesome to feel remorse about that. If we don't feel remorse, our heart's dead, or our moral sense is gone, one or the other. So feeling remorse is a sign that we're still healthy, and we need to feel that remorse and the grief and the sadness. And then if we can repair it, we should. But sometimes it's beyond repair.

But that's different than guilt because guilt takes that feeling of remorse and lays self-judgment on top of it. And we can just beat ourselves with self-judgment for a long time, and it doesn't help. Self-judgment does not help the heart to open. It doesn't help the heart to feel compassion and it doesn't help the heart to care. Remorse does.

Remorse can put us more deeply in touch with how fragile life is, how sensitive every being around us is, and how much care we need to go through this life and not cause more suffering than is already here. That's a really arduous thing to do—to go through life without adding to the suffering that's already on the planet. Remorse is a good guide in that teaching. Guilt is not so helpful.

So tomorrow we'll do a couple of things related to forgiveness because forgiveness is really helpful to deal with a sense of remorse. We'll do a guided meditation on forgiveness tomorrow afternoon, and James will give a talk tomorrow evening. It's a really important piece. Forgiveness is so essential to be able to open the heart where there's been either guilt or resentment—asking for forgiveness and extending forgiveness. So we'll focus on that quite a bit tomorrow.

Sometimes we don't know exactly what we've done or why we feel judgmental of ourselves, but we can just feel a strong self-critical nature. This culture is expert at that. I don't know how we got into that, but American culture is very good at generating this critical mind.

Sogyal Rinpoche, who I think Sally mentioned the other night—a young Tibetan teacher who is good at working with Westerners—spent the last year in the States to get his green card and had a lot of contact with Westerners. And toward the end of that year, he said, "Oh, I realized something. Westerners have a hurt that Tibetan people don't." And he called it wounded love.

He said, "We have a lot of faults in Tibetan people, Tibetan culture. We have pride, we have envy, we have jealousy, we have anger—we have all those things. But we don't have this wounded love that comes out of a self-critical nature." And so he said that he felt that the practice of loving-kindness was really important for Westerners as a way to heal this self-judgmental attitude.

When I had first ordained in Thailand, I was traveling to practice in a monastery up north near Chiang Mai. And my preceptor, an older Thai monk, asked me to stay at one of his branch monasteries in Chiang Mai for a few days to break up my journey. So I did. I got to Chiang Mai and was well-received at the monastery.

And there was another Western monk practicing there who I hung out with and found him to be a really great guy. He would meditate during the morning. He'd been in robes for a long time, probably twelve, thirteen years at that point. He'd meditate in the morning, and then he'd receive visitors in the afternoon. And Thai people would come to see him. It was mostly Thai people. They'd talk to him about their meditation practice. They'd talk to him about their family problems, about what their children were doing, about their work situation. He spoke fluent Thai. And they'd just talk about their life with him. And he had a lot of metta. Just greeted people with a lot of warmth and acceptance. I really liked him a lot.

We went on alms round the next morning. And we went out—he was a senior monk, I was behind him, and then there were these two samaneras, young novice monks, trailing us. And I thought, why are they coming? They don't usually go on alms round. But I just went along for the ride.

So we go down his usual route. People are just lining up to put things in his bowl. And he had a very big bowl—not quite this big, but kind of close. And the bowl kind of matched his girth. He was also very well fed by the Thai people. So we get out on his alms route, and they're just putting lots of great plastic bags in his bowl. And I can tell people really love him. And so his bowl fills up, my bowl fills up, and then we duck into an alley.

And they go, "What's going on? We need to keep going or go back to the monastery."

In the alley, the samaneras open their robes, and they've got big plastic bags hanging off their left shoulder. So we take all the food out of our bowls, put them in their plastic bags. They cover up. Our bowls are empty. We go down the street, and we fill up again. And we did that another time.

So then we go back to the monastery with these huge plastic bags and two bowls full of food. We take what we want and feed a lot of other people—the samaneras, the nuns, and finally the dogs. Everybody got fed from the love that this Western monk engendered from the Thai people that he was close to. So much metta, and he was well-loved in return.

But as we got to talking, he told me something that I found really striking. He said it wasn't always like this. "Actually, I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred. Nine years." And yet the change was so apparent. His metta was so strong. He had really done that transformative work of the heart, both through mindfulness and loving-kindness practice.

These are really the first two hindrances that you'll encounter as you do the metta practice. The quality of attachment to your people, especially as we move on to the friend, which we'll do shortly, possibly with the benefactor also. Start to notice when that comes in—the quality of desiring in relationship, wanting something back.

The second one: all these different flavors of negativity or aversion. Anger is another one that can come up strongly. As you hang out with a friend or a benefactor, you may remember something they did that wasn't so helpful, that was hurtful. And these old feelings of resentment can easily surface. Anger can be very strong.

Or you may be with someone who has actually scared you, and fear will come up. You're afraid you're going to be hurt again by this person. So all these different forms of negativity will come into your metta practice.

How to work with them? If they're not too strong, the suggestion is just continue with your metta phrases and the intention. If you can still feel the intention to care, keep doing that. Recognize this other feeling. "Oh, there's fear there. There's anger. There's self-judgment." Just let it be there in the background.

What happens then is it kind of gets brought into the metta as well. As you fill up with metta, these feelings start to get included in the metta, and then they're not so humiliating. When they first come, they're really kind of embarrassing. "I'm doing metta, but I'm feeling angry? This doesn't feel right. I must be doing something wrong." You know, I'm embarrassed about this.

But as you keep doing them, you just see they're a natural part of our human makeup, and the metta flavor just starts to include them as something okay. They're all acceptable. They're all part of every one of us, so no big deal. Metta brings in that accepting quality.

If the feeling's a little stronger, you won't be able to turn to the intention of caring. Strong fear, strong anger, strong self-judgment will actually block any arising of metta or caring. So there's no point then in doing the phrases. If there's no caring, no point.

To stay within the Brahma-vihara family, what can be really skillful then is to turn to compassion. As James directed this afternoon, this is a way to hold the difficult state very directly, touch it with your intention and your meditation, and use one of the phrases that you worked with this afternoon: "May I be free from this suffering. May I be free from this anger."

May I be free from this fear. Or another phrase I find helpful is: may I hold this aversion with compassion. May I hold this negativity with compassion. Whatever phrase resonates with you for compassion practice—keep working with that and notice if the compassion brings a different quality into your relationship with these difficult states.

What compassion generally brings is a way to hold these experiences. It's not about making them disappear. The purpose of metta or compassion is never to eliminate these states, but to discover a new way of relating to them that can include them, because they are part of us. You don't want to reject anything that's a natural part of your human experience.

Both metta and compassion offer skillful ways to hold these difficult energies in a transformed relationship.

The third approach, if compassion doesn't feel quite right or isn't working for you, is to turn to mindfulness practice—provided that's part of your meditation background. Some of you may not have experience with mindfulness of emotions and mind states, and that's perfectly fine. In that case, work with metta and compassion, which are excellent tools.

If you do have vipassana training, then open with mindfulness to what you're feeling. Remember what this means: feel it directly in the body. Don't judge it, don't evaluate it, don't try to make it disappear. Simply pay mindful attention. Open up and surrender to the experience. Let it be felt fully in the body and as a mental state, as a mood.

When you open to difficult emotions this way for some time, you'll generally find that the feeling begins to wash through. You're releasing the clamps, essentially saying, "Okay, go ahead and manifest. Let me feel you completely." The emotion rises, and to some extent, with time, it naturally releases. It weakens.

When it weakens, check if the intention for metta can return, then go back to the metta phrases and the intention of caring. This is the general guideline for working with these difficult energies, whether desire or aversion.

Three other hindrances arise frequently in retreat. Most of you know how to work with these, so I'll mention them briefly.

The first is sleepiness. This comes on very strongly on days one and two. Two people told me they had the sleepiest day of their lives yesterday—and probably more than two felt that way.

With sleepiness, the antidote is energy. Do anything to increase your physical energy: sit up straighter, open your eyes, take several deep breaths. During the next walking period, walk briskly. If you're feeling very sleepy in the meditation hall, stand up. I love seeing people standing during meditation—it shows they're working skillfully with sleepiness.

If you've arrived sleep-deprived, catch up with a nap. Take a walking period and rest. I didn't really say that—consider it a secret oral transmission.

The next hindrance is sleepiness's opposite: restlessness. Sleepiness reflects insufficient energy; restlessness means too much energy. Often the early days of retreat become a pendulum swing between sleepiness and restlessness, never pausing in that middle ground of calm alertness.

With restless energy—racing thoughts, physical agitation, a mind spinning at a hundred miles per hour where you can't even reach one phrase, or if you do, you can't get to the second because there's too much else happening—the antidote is calm.

Focus on the sense of relaxation when possible.

Make the mind really spacious and wide, and maybe have a sense that as you say the phrase, you're going to relax on an exhalation. "May you be safe from harm." And just let it settle all the way through the body.

As you go for a walk, maybe have a sense of relaxing and being really easy in your walking. Don't let yourself feel caged up or bound up with that restless energy.

The last hindrance is doubt. Doubt is a lack of trust in the practice, a lack of trust in yourself, a lack of trust in the teachings, a lack of trust in the teachers. Any of these things can manifest as doubt. It kind of crystallizes in the phrase, "What am I doing here?" which is very frequent also in the first days of retreat. I have it almost every retreat. At least now I recognize it. When it's there, I know that's just the sign of doubt. It doesn't mean anything real. It just means you're tripping out a little bit with skepticism.

One effective response to doubt is to reflect on all the value you've gotten from your dharma practice. Any meditation practice that you've done—reflect on the changes it's brought to your life. That's the real source of faith, which is the antidote to doubt. Reflect on why you came to this retreat, that there's a really noble value that you're following in this opening of the heart and the opening to wisdom. This is actually probably more important than most of the worldly activities that we get enmeshed in—the emails and the work assignments and so forth.

Please also talk to your teacher. If doubts are arising about whether this is of value or how to work with it, please talk to one of us, and we'll provide reflections based on our faith, which tends to be fairly strong at this point. That can be helpful.

Most important thing is to recognize if any of these hindrances are present, to know that they're there.

As we open more and more to the qualities of loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, we find that we start to get connected to life in a really broad way. The mindfulness practice can be a little bit self-centered, but the brahmaviharas open us out in a really boundless way to the extent of life. We can't stay alone.

Then we start to resonate with this phrase of Shantideva, an eighth-century teacher in India: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

Opening up to this beauty of altruistic caring.

The Dalai Lama was interviewed once by Oprah Winfrey for her magazine. The interview came out in August of 2001. In the course of the interview, she asked His Holiness—this is a question I like to ask all my guests—"What do you know for sure from your own experience?" And the Dalai Lama replied, "One thing I know for sure is that compassion and caring are the best way to be happy. It genuinely works."

Let's just sit for a minute, please.

"Whatever joy there is in this world all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

CHAPTER 260

An Appropriate Response

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong reflects on how meditation practice prepares us for life's uncertainties through developing appropriate responses rooted in the Brahmavihāras (divine abodes). Drawing from the teaching that "the value of a lifetime of practice is an appropriate response," he explores how mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity) offer wisdom-based alternatives to our habitual reactions of anger, despair, or overwhelm when facing difficulty, and clinging when experiencing pleasure.*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes that both mettā and vipassanā practices lead toward liberation, describing mettā as "ceto-vimutti" (deliverance of mind). He shares how developed loving-kindness creates a state where unwholesome mental states cannot intrude, offering a composed freedom where thought, image, and emotion align in wholesome ways. The talk weaves together personal anecdotes, stories of the Dalai Lama's responses to suffering, and examples of great compassionate beings like King Aśoka, illustrating how these heart qualities can transform both personal experience and social action. Armstrong concludes with the Tibetan version of the four immeasurables, showing how these practices cultivate our "inner potential" for responding to an unpredictable world with wisdom and love.*

I wanted to start this evening by mentioning that a good friend of ours, someone known to many of you, was ordained today as a monk in Burma. Robert Cusick, who has been a manager here on many occasions, received ordination on his sixtieth birthday. In fact, looking over to that side of the room ten days ago, you would have expected to see Robert about where Mary is sitting today.

He was ordained with his teacher, whom he loves deeply, named Pao Sayadaw. When he left, he had the intention that he may be ordaining for the rest of his life. So Robert Cusick is no longer. His new name is Sunyata Gowesika, meaning "a seeker of emptiness." We wish him well. May he find emptiness and make it his home.

As you seek your own emptiness and prepare to go back into your daily life or continue into another retreat, I want to reflect on what you will take with you from this experience.

The first thing that comes to mind is that I hope you will carry the spirit of metta from here back into the world, because the world needs it. Primarily because it will make you happy, but also because we hope to create here at Spirit Rock a culture of loving kindness and generosity, a spirit of metta and dana, so that when people walk into the meditation hall or through the gates, they begin to feel that atmosphere immediately. That can be a seed for taking back into the world. I hope everybody felt that this week.

I've also reflected that life is really unpredictable and changeable. Basically, at any given moment, anything can happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime. This was starkly apparent last December 26th when the tsunami hit without warning. A good friend of ours was on the beach in South India, actually doing qigong, when this huge wave came up and knocked him over. As he was being washed out to sea, he managed to catch hold of a tree trunk, then climbed up on a concrete wall and held on as another big wave came in and out. He survived by hanging on to that tree. But it was terrifying. That was one place where non-clinging would not have been appropriate and would not have resulted in liberation.

Just a week ago, hundreds of people were on their way to work in London when bombs went off in the subway and on buses. Out of nowhere, lives were changed forever—people injured or killed, their families and loved ones devastated. These things come without warning. A simple visit to a doctor can bring a terminal diagnosis. You never know when this might be any of our fate.

Someone once asked a Zen master, "What's the value of a lifetime of practice?" The Zen master replied, "An appropriate response."

When I first heard that story, I thought it was rather wimpy. I was quite disappointed because Zen masters are supposed to say much stronger things. They're supposed to say something like, "After a lifetime of practice, you can run me through with a sword and I won't blink an eye." That's the kind of statement I was looking for. "An appropriate response" sounds very humble.

But the more I've reflected on that statement, the more I feel it embraces the whole of our life and practice. Because what is practice other than finding the appropriate response to this present moment, again and again? That is the challenge practice presents, and that is where we establish these qualities of heart and mind: openness, mindfulness, wisdom, loving kindness, compassion. It's all about how we respond in this new moment.

I think one of the great gifts the Brahma Viharas offer us is a powerful set of tools for how to respond. It's not that through our meditation we stop difficulties from entering our lives. Even the Buddha couldn't do that. People tried to kill him. They sicced an enraged elephant on him in a narrow alleyway. He was poisoned. He faced a schism in the Sangha and a revolt by the bhikkhus. His name was tarnished, his reputation spread as that of a criminal and evil person. He had to deal with all of this difficulty too.

But having these tools means we don't have to feel like passive victims of what happens. We have ways to work with situations, ways to respond that help the mind deal with what's happening. I think this is very empowering.

It basically takes us out of a role of passivity and into a role of activity with wisdom.

So normally in life, I think for most of us, when something painful happens, we tend to get sad or we get angry. When something good happens, we tend to get elated and self-satisfied. And the Buddha said both these responses, both these extremes are not really based in wisdom because they ignore the truth of impermanence, that whatever that condition was, it's eventually going to pass. And in the end, he said, equanimity is a wiser response.

But the Brahmaviharas show us kind of a roadmap of what's possible for the human heart. And I'd say even more exactly, what's possible for the awakened heart. We start with this foundation of loving-kindness, this generalized caring mindset for everyone. And the world will certainly do many things to test that. The events of the larger society, the actions of political leaders, the actions of our own family members. It's going to be testing our ability to stay open again and again.

But I think what the Brahmaviharas say is just because the world is crazy, it doesn't mean that we have to be crazy, and that there's the possibility of staying sane and responding in a sane way, even as the world goes through all of its madness.

So when we start from the foundation of an open heart, from loving-kindness, when suffering arises, there's the possibility not of overwhelm or grief or despair or anger. There's the possibility of compassion—not something that comes easily or very quickly, but as we develop that practice, as we incline the mind in that way, it comes more and more easily and naturally.

When delightful things happen to us, there's the possibility not to cling and get kind of tripped out about them, but to meet them with an appreciative joy. We can appreciate, but we also understand the impermanence of the situation. And when there's nothing particular happening, when the heart can just rest, equanimity can hold all the ups and downs of life.

These are our possibilities, as Sally was pointing to last night.

On the subject of equanimity, somebody asked in a note after we did that meditation yesterday, "Well, what about the role of activism in the world? When we say that we accept this moment just as it is, we accept things just as they are, does that mean there's no role for social change, for righting injustices?"

Not at all.

Just as in our own meditation practice, what we really start to look at, what we focus on is how we respond to what is. The same principle applies in the world. In that first moment of the arising of something difficult—a pain, a grief, a loss, a fear—we can't change that arising. In Sylvia's words, the present moment could not possibly be any different than the way it is with all its complexity. But we have the choice then of how we meet that moment, which creates the next moment of the world.

So in our meditation practice, we put a lot of emphasis on responding to this arising, not with conflict, not with greed, not with aversion, because that destroys our peace and plunges us more into suffering. But learning the responses of mindfulness, of patience, of acceptance, of openness, of wisdom, of being willing to learn, and trying again and again to restore the heart to balance—then the action can be appropriate.

Same thing in the world. If our partner gets angry at us, if we see the desecration of the environment, if we see oppression of people, of cultures, of whole countries—can we stay somewhat composed within ourselves, accepting what is? And if so, I think that can be a wiser base for action than being all stirred up inside and reacting simply with anger, hatred, frustration, blame, and so on. So I think the same principle applies to action in the world as action in our meditation. Right action can come from a place of balance.

Sylvia talked about this retreat—I don't know if you remember because it was years ago now—but she started by talking about the Four Noble Truths and the crux of our whole practice being about suffering and the release from suffering. I want to kind of bring that context back because I think that it's important to hold our loving-kindness practice in that broader container and talk about how metta and mindfulness both work toward that container.

You know, usually vipassana is presented as our path to freedom, the wisdom path that liberates. And it's said that it can lead to a degree of freedom that is unshakable, complete, permanent, the very end of suffering. But this isn't often talked about, but in the texts, in the discourses of the Buddha, metta is also described as a deliverance of mind, or it could be translated as a deliverance of heart. And the word that's used, ceto-

vimutti, translated as deliverance of mind, contains the word vimutti, which really means liberation—that the mind is actually liberated when it is in this very, very developed state of loving-kindness.

So I want just to look back on our time here and see if we can all get a flavor of when our own hearts have been in that place of liberation over the course of this week. It's not a permanent liberation, it's not an unshakable liberation, but nonetheless, the word applied is liberation.

So I want to ask you to reflect back on a time when the three main pieces of your metta practice were sort of all clicking. And the three main pieces are your connection to the person, the phrase was with you, and the feeling—some feeling of metta, of caring, of warmth was there. So just turn in your mind back to some of the sittings or walkings during this week when all three of those experiences kind of came together. And perhaps you were able to sustain it for a little while. Thirty seconds, sixty seconds. What was that experience like?

"Anybody, what was the tone, what was the feeling like of that? Yes."

"The word that comes to mind for me is bliss."

Bliss, yes, thank you. It was what Sylvia was talking about with me the other night when she said we can finally open to wisdom. So openness, wisdom.

How else did it feel? Getting what you're wanting—satisfying, fulfilling, happy. What else?

Peaceful. Yes, the struggle goes out, doesn't it? The conflict goes out. What else?

Deep. There's a profound quality in the mind that has arrived at that kind of place. It's not an ordinary state.

Clear. Yes, you can see things as they are.

Warm and collected. That combines the metta quality and also the collected mind of composure. Denise?

Gratitude and joy. Yes, lovely.

All of you, I trust, have experienced something of this during the week. I want you to appreciate that this is not an ordinary state of mind. This is a very beautiful and noble way to be. It's not something that comes upon most people in their everyday life. It's something you put in a lot of work toward, and I hope you are happy about the fruits.

When you all respond, you are basically describing different aspects of the awakened heart and mind. The peace, the clarity, the bliss, the composure, the openness, the joy, the happiness—these are different aspects of being free. Freedom has a lot of different flavors.

In looking at that experience, I want to point out one thing that's extraordinary about it. When you have the connection to a person, it may take up the field of images—often it's through an image, at least sensing the presence. When the phrases are going, your thoughts are occupied and other thoughts don't come in. Disturbing thoughts don't really intrude. And when the metta feeling is there, disturbing emotions don't really come in. While you're feeling that metta, the accompanying mood is happiness, joy, peace, composure—not anger, guilt, remorse, desire, fear.

See what came together in that moment. The images were stable. The thoughts were of your choosing and wholesome. And the feeling was that beautiful feeling of metta. In that moment you had basically put together thought, image, and emotion from your practice, and it was at that time under your control.

What else is there in the mind? That's it. If you look at mental events, it's basically thought, image, and emotion. And at that time you had put them all together into this total package that was satisfying, fulfilling, and free. Free because the unwholesome states couldn't intrude. It wasn't just an accidental moment. It was actually composed in that way.

This is why the developed state of metta is a kind of liberation. We step out of suffering in a very composed way at that time. Now you know how to do that. It doesn't mean you can do it every time. Still we're grateful and fortunate when they come together like that. Sometimes we just have the phrases. Sometimes we just have the image. Sometimes we just have the feeling. But you know that at times you've experienced that degree of freedom and completeness. That's an extraordinary thing.

This mind that is imbued with loving kindness doesn't tend to harm. It doesn't tend to harm ourselves, and it doesn't tend to harm others. This is a beautiful contribution to the world. People are safe when we're in a space of loving-kindness. We give that safety to the world.

The Buddha talked about this as an act of generosity—that the very ability to be in the world without harming others is an act of great generosity. Beings feel safe and protected in that space. So it's always interesting to wonder: what's the possibility? How far can that non-harming be developed?

I've just finished reading this quite charming little book about the Dalai Lama called *The Wisdom of Forgiveness*. A reporter hangs out with him and travels with him for a couple of months, then writes up the Dalai Lama's life in a more intimate way than we usually get to hear.

At one point, he had seen the Dalai Lama do this confession that Buddhist monks do every two weeks. Every two weeks they sit down with another bhikkhu and confess the ways they've transgressed the rules in the past two weeks. So the reporter asked him, "Did you also make confessions?" And the Dalai Lama said, "Of course I did."

The reporter said, "What did you confess?"

The Dalai Lama said, "Eating biscuits in the evening. As a Buddhist monk, I'm not supposed to eat anything after my midday meal."

Wouldn't that be nice—to live for two weeks and that was your greatest transgression? That's a really non-harming mind.

I also mentioned the other night that Oprah interviewed His Holiness in 2001, and the interview appeared in O Magazine. This book has a little longer account of the interview. The hour-long interview began well. Oprah started by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect. Hmm. Okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

Oprah continued, "And that's it? In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued: "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life—to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators—even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind—I don't lag too far behind."

That's the Dalai Lama, and then here's us. I figure the only thing that separates us is about sixteen lifetimes of practice, so we're getting there.

It's also said that the mind that's imbued with loving kindness can't easily be harmed. It doesn't harm others, but it's also said it's not easily harmed, because when anger is directed at a mind filled with loving kindness, it doesn't stick. It's said that a mind filled with loving kindness is so spacious that it's like throwing a bucket of paint through space—it doesn't adhere anywhere in the space. So it's not so easy to be harmed with this mind of loving kindness.

We start practicing vipassana practice. Perhaps we start practicing metta and then we take up vipassana, and they seem like they're really different tracks. They seem like they're going in opposite directions. One's very receptive, present-moment oriented. One's very active, focusing on one particular quality of mind. We may think: what do these two have to do with each other?

But I really trust—and I believe from experience—that they come together in us in what I would call a foundation of character that is about having a warm attention. I think what we're trying to develop is a way of being present that's suffused with the warm quality of loving kindness.

Not a way of being present that's just a cold, clinical, detached, scientific observation, but one that's really warm toward the arisings of life, inviting, welcoming, receptive.

Ajahn Jamin is a Thai monk who teaches here, and he's an extraordinary being. He has practiced both Vipassana and loving-kindness to great depth. One of the things he says is that he hasn't had anger in 25 years. When you're around him, he has this joyful quality, and you really can't tell if the absence of anger came from his Vipassana practice and deep insight, or if it came from his metta practice and the openness of his heart. The two have merged in him.

He has one teaching. He doesn't teach in English—he teaches in Thai with a translator—but he has one English teaching that transmits his message. He'll touch the air in front of him and say, "Empty, empty," and then, "Happy, happy. Empty, empty, happy,

happy." That's the whole transmission of his being: this union of emptiness where the mind isn't clouded with preoccupations about past or future, and the natural joy that comes from that.

We could say that Vipassana practice opens up spaciousness inside us, revealing the great openness that is our basic nature. Our fundamental nature is open—not jammed up or caught or stuck or clung or obstructed. This great openness is what insight practice reveals.

As we develop the heart, that openness takes on not a cold, vacant, absent, blank quality, but the warmth of loving kindness. This becomes a beautiful place to dwell. That's why these states are called the divine abidings—the Brahma Viharas. The emptiness brings peace; the metta brings that sense of warmth and invitation.

One person who came for an interview today was talking about discovering this combination through this week's practice. I'm sure he wouldn't mind my sharing—he began the week rather skeptical. In early interviews, he expressed a partiality toward Vipassana practice and some doubt about metta. Today he said, "Wow, I've had such great experiences with the metta and the composure of mind that comes from it. I realize it's just another way home."

The Dalai Lama put it beautifully: "Emptiness makes things soft. Compassion gives them a new shape." That's an unusual way to think of emptiness, but it does soften things. When you realize the world isn't as rigid or fixed or solid as you once thought, your eyes relax and everything can go a little blurry. Emptiness makes it soft; compassion gives it a new shape—or let's say a color or texture—and that's that warmth. When the Dalai Lama says compassion, we would say metta; they're more or less interchangeable.

Let's talk about the qualities of compassion and appreciative joy for a bit. I think compassion became central in the Mahayana tradition because of its affinity with the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths, the Buddha's core teaching, are all about suffering and the end of suffering, and compassion relates so closely to suffering. That's why it became so important.

In the Theravada tradition, we view compassion and mudita as complementary—one relating to difficulty, one relating to pleasure—with metta as the envelope that includes them both. It's a slightly different emphasis, that's all.

I think it's a very big question, one I hope won't be answered intellectually but through our own investigation: How do we relate to all the suffering we experience? The suffering in our lives, the suffering in the lives of people we know, the suffering we hear about in the world and read about in the news. How do we relate? Another way of asking: What is our response to that suffering?

I did ten days of compassion practice on one long Brahma Vihara retreat. As you've done seven days of metta practice, I did ten days of intensive compassion, repeating compassion phrases all day long to a range of individuals. I also did ten days of mudita and ten days of equanimity. I found compassion the hardest of all four Brahma Viharas because I was touching into suffering all day, every day. With metta, I could be upbeat about people.

With the mudita, I got very happy about people, and the equanimity was just cooling out. But the compassion required me to keep touching suffering over and over and over again, and there was no escape for ten days. I found that difficult.

Freud, in constructing his theories of the human psyche, said that human neurosis is the refusal to suffer. That all our distortions of personality come from our unwillingness to experience directly and accept our own suffering. That's a really powerful statement. It might be true.

So I started to look at the ways that habitually I tend to relate to suffering. I see that it's not an easy thing to be with, and so I've developed a number of defense mechanisms. I might avoid it. I might deny it. I might try to fix it—this is a common male response. If you read the Mars and Venus material, the women are there to empathize, while the men want to go in with "Oh, you got a problem? Let me tell you how to get rid of that." This comes from our own discomfort with just being with the suffering.

We assign blame: "Oh, well, somebody did that to me. It's somebody else's fault." Or judge it: "I'm wrong for having this suffering," or "Someone else is wrong for having their suffering." We make up stories about it: "Well, that's what happens when you do this," or "It's your karma," or something like that. And getting angry—these are all ways we defend against just experiencing the basic fact of suffering.

Suffering is the proximate cause of compassion. So in order for compassion to wake up in us, we have to be willing to feel the suffering without turning away or defending against it. This is an interesting place to look: How do we respond when we're in the presence of suffering?

When the heart is open and can just be with it without moving into any of these defense mechanisms, compassion is the natural response. It's the natural response of the heart—it's not artificial, it's natural. And as we develop that ability, what happens is—this is the way it feels—the heart has to get bigger in order to hold it. So compassion is actually a great practice for making the heart grow.

I see this through my own meditation practice again and again. The more I'm able to open to my own difficulty with real acceptance—not pushing away, but real acceptance—the more I'm able to open to other people's suffering and the suffering that's in the world. Opening to suffering can change us if we let it. This power of compassion is really transformative.

Again, I feel like a kindergartner in working with this stuff. There was a Tibetan lama in the nineteenth century named Patrul Rinpoche. One day every year in the middle of summer, he would be doing his retreat out in the wilderness in some area of Tibet. In summer, the forests are blooming and the grasses are up, and of course there's lots of wildlife that comes out during the summer. So one day every summer, he would take off all his clothes and go out into the woods and lie down in the forest, staying there all day to let the insects feed on him. He would walk back into the retreat hut or monastery at night with his eyes all puffed up, big red welts all over his body, itching and in pain, could hardly see. That was his compassion for the beings who needed food that day.

That's a little beyond me.

My practice of compassion isn't there yet, but I like to reflect that this is a human potential that someone has achieved. Someone is out there.

There's another beautiful story about a king in India who lived a couple of hundred years after the Buddha—King Asoka. He was one of the greatest kings that ever lived, but he started off as a very violent ruler. He inherited the kingdom from his father and had expansionist aims, so he went around conquering neighboring kingdoms with his strong army, taking over much of India.

One day after a certain battle, he was standing above the battlefield looking down at the carnage—dead bodies everywhere, wounded people with arrows and spears, in various states of being cut up and mutilated. As he was looking over this scene, suddenly his heart responded to it. Not his conquering mind, but something deeper. He thought, "What am I doing?"

As he contemplated this and felt the horror of it, he saw a monk walking across the battlefield—just a Buddhist monk traveling from one part of the country to another who happened to cross the scene. He said the monk was so composed and peaceful, even radiant in the midst of this horrible scene, that his mind shifted within him. He went to seek teachings and converted to Buddhism.

He renounced any warring ambitions. He sent envoys to all the neighboring kingdoms saying, "I'm not going to try and conquer any longer. I'm giving up this tendency of acquisition." He outlawed animal sacrifices within the kingdom, which was a common Hindu practice at the time, and turned mostly to vegetarianism in his own kitchen. He also made it standard policy throughout the kingdom to distribute food, essentially ending poverty within his reign.

This aligns with a teaching you'll read in the Buddha's suttas. When asked what makes a society go bad, the Buddha said it begins when there is poverty in the land. It's the duty of a ruler to ensure that poverty does not happen, because when poverty grows, people in need will turn to crime to satisfy their needs.

Asoka ushered in a golden age, not only for India but also for Buddhism, because he became a devoted patron of the religion. Buddhism came to great flowering under his leadership, all because of this opening of compassion and the sight of a different way to approach life.

I think it's helpful to remember that compassion isn't a state of suffering. When we're in touch with suffering and we ourselves fall into suffering, that's considered a near enemy. Sometimes it's described as grief—I'd describe it as overwhelm. We get overwhelmed by the amount of suffering we're in touch with, and that is a state of suffering. But true compassion can hold that suffering because it's supported by equanimity and doesn't tip into the near enemy.

Another way the near enemy shows up is described as pity. Pity is when we're in communication with someone who's suffering, and we feel ourselves by nature above it, better than that, beyond that. It's like, "Oh, you're so unfortunate that you're suffering, but I'm in a great place—I'm not suffering, and it's intrinsically because I'm a better person." That kind of looking down on suffering is called pity in this tradition, and it's also a near enemy of compassion.

The way to cut through pity—not so much with equanimity—is by realizing we could be in the same boat if circumstances were just turned a little bit.

There's a lovely poem by Naomi Shihab Nye that expresses this. It's called "Kindness":

"Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you—how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, 'It is I you have been looking for,' and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend."

"You catch the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is everybody, every being. That's the scope for compassion.

When things get really overwhelming in the world, it seems to me compassion is the safest place to land. I feel this every time our country goes to war. I can get roused about that like a lot of us can.

can get upset and blaming, but somehow it never seems to do any good for me or the people I talk to. And a safer resting point for me feels to be compassion. I look at the suffering of the people who are in the war, I look at the suffering of the people who are perpetrating the war, who are the victims as well, and compassion is appropriate all around.

The next of the Brahmaviharas is mudita, sometimes translated as sympathetic joy. I actually like the translation appreciative joy. This can be a very happy practice, and I hope you felt some of that in doing the mudita practice—the response of the heart to happiness and taking joy in somebody else's happiness.

I got a call from a friend a while ago and just said, "How are you?" The friend said, "I'm wonderful." Just as she said that, my heart picked up, and without thinking about it, I said, "I'm wonderful too." Of course, part of it is because I was wonderful because

she was wonderful. This is the flavor of mudita, and it's a double hit of happiness. There's the other person's happiness, which is great, and then there's our happiness in response, which is also wonderful. So it's happiness squared.

The happiness doesn't necessarily have to be what makes us happy. Last fall, when the Boston Red Sox were playing in the World Series, one of the cooks on staff here was a guy from Boston, and he wore his Red Sox jacket every day for a month. Then especially after they won for the first time in eighty-six years, he was so happy. I just got a high off of his high.

Sally is a horse lover. When we bought this land, we inherited an old quarter horse named Bob—a good name for an old quarter horse who used to work this land when it was leased for cattle ranching. Bob had herded cattle all up and down these hills. When we bought the property, he was probably twenty-five and was put out to pasture in that front pasture where you see the horses today. Bob's no longer here.

Sally, because of an affinity for horses, sort of took over Bob's care. In winter mornings, she would go down at seven or eight to feed him, and she'd have to break through the ice in the horse trough and tromp through the mud and the muck in that field to bring him his hay and his grain. Every time she'd go out, she'd dress up in her wellingtons and her worst clothes, and she'd come back mucked up. I'd think, "Oh, what a drag." But it didn't seem like it was a drag for her because she actually loved Bob, even though he was a cantankerous, old, hard-to-catch, uncooperative, independent, rebellious spirit.

So it may not be what makes us happy, but it may be what makes somebody else happy. And that's the important thing. But it also is sort of a doorway into our own happiness.

I think about in an environment like this, there are so many moments every day that bring out that kind of happiness. You walk out in the morning and see the first sunlight on the hills. You watch a deer go by with the babies that still have the spots on them. You walk into the dining room at lunch and see that incredible spread, that visual feast and the olfactory feast that the cooks have laid out. Then there's always the wonderful feeling of lying down in bed at night after a day of retreat practice. I don't know if there's anything that matches it. It feels so good. So appreciating all our delights through the day.

The term mudita is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy, and that's because sometimes our happiness arises in sympathy with others. But under that translation, sometimes we're advised not to focus on our own joy because it's only supposed to be about resonating with others. But I like to call it appreciative joy so that you can also appreciate when your joy arises.

When you start to focus on the arising of your joy, part of the flavor that comes through is gratitude. This is a word that I heard a lot today. People were expressing their appreciation for the practice, for what they've learned in this week, for the support that the silence has given them. Gratitude is such a beautiful state to be aware of and even to cultivate. It's beautiful because it avoids the swings of desire and aversion. When you're feeling grateful, you're not in aversion because you're appreciative of what you've got, but you're also not necessarily wanting a lot more because you're appreciating what you've got. So it's really a place of contentment and rest.

Practicing in Burma last summer as a monk, I had the opportunity every day to feel that gratitude. Burma is one of the poorest countries in the world. I don't know how far down the list it is, but it's way down the list. The military dictatorship has ruined the economy. People are really poor. Yet a friend asked me to take some money to give to the monastery as a gift, and I thought it would be nice to offer some meals.

When I arrived at the start of the rains retreat—the traditional three-month retreat during the rainy season—I went to the monastery office before ordaining and said, "I want to offer this money, and I'd like to buy at least one or maybe two lunches. I'd like to feed the whole monastery." The monastery at that time housed 750 people: about 400 monks and a couple hundred nuns.

"I'd like to feed the whole monastery lunch with this donation from a friend in the U.S.," I told them. They replied, "Oh, I'm sorry. All the lunches are already paid for for the next three months." Mostly it was Burmese people who so appreciated the opportunity to support practitioners that they had lined up to offer meals. This wasn't a small amount—I think a lunch cost something like $350 or $400, and they were all spoken for through the entire three-month retreat.

Every day when I'd go down and see these huge piles of food with the donor's name written on a whiteboard above the tables, I'd feel this incredible debt of appreciation. The only way I could repay it was by being a good monk and practicing well. It was really a beautiful part of each day.

If you feel drawn to cultivate this quality of gratitude, I really encourage it. During one retreat, I decided to practice with it specifically. At the start of the retreat, I took out a sheet of paper and wrote down everything in my life I was grateful for. Then every morning when I got up, I read that first thing—before I went out of the room, before I sat, before I did anything. I'd read my gratitude phrases, and it started me off in such a positive way, with such a positive attitude toward the day.

We were discussing gratitude in a senior student class that Sally and I led, and one of the men had developed a beautiful practice with a friend. Every night before bed, he and his friend would email each other one thing they were grateful for that day. He really enjoyed it, and it spread through the class—several other people started doing it too. I think Sylvia was doing that for a while. Still are? Good practice? Lovely practice indeed.

This is a wonderful way into gratitude practice and the cultivation of joy.

These, then, are the possible responses of the awakened heart—the liberated heart, the peaceful heart—to all the changing circumstances of life. Metta is our general approach. Can we approach the whole world with that spirit of trust and openness that we develop here? When difficulties arise, can we think about turning to compassion instead of anger, blame, or despair? And when the happiness of the world presents itself, can we really tune into it and let our hearts light up?

All of this becomes more and more possible as equanimity of mind—the balance of mind—develops and allows us not to feel so disturbed or threatened by life's changes.

I want to return at the end to this question of appropriate response. The Zen master's reply that the value of a lifetime of practice is an appropriate response. The Dalai Lama is usually quite good at appropriate response, so I want to read you a bit more of that interview with Oprah as it continues.

The Dalai Lama had been talking about his meditation practice when Oprah asked, "Would you encourage the rest of the world to meditate?"

"Stupid question," the Dalai Lama replied immediately and unexpectedly. He's nothing if not honest. Oprah's face froze. There was stunned silence in the hotel room. One thought crossed everyone's mind: this was probably the first time anyone had ever said this to Oprah's face.

The Dalai Lama grew thoughtful. "Should people meditate? I think so," he said after a pause. "It is worthwhile for the world to look more inward. We are not doing enough here. I'm not saying that people should be religious-minded. What I'm saying is we should focus more on our inner potential."

"Oh, I believe that," Oprah said, visibly relaxing. "That's why I asked the stupid question."

Everyone in the room cracked up.

"I wanted you to say it, but I certainly believe that." So that was a very gracious response from Oprah to the Dalai Lama's bluntness. I appreciate both of them as appropriate responses.

We should focus more on our inner potential. And I think that's what you all have dedicated this week to. I really appreciate your hard work. And just to say that I believe strongly that this path operates on laws of nature just as fixed as the law of gravity. As you apply yourself to the path and to these good intentions of the Brahmaviharas and presence and wisdom, that will bear beautiful fruit in your life.

I want to close with a reading from the Tibetan version of the four Brahmaviharas. They're called the four immeasurables in that tradition because they're boundless states of mind. So these are the expressions of the Brahmaviharas in Tibetan practice:

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.

May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Let's just sit for a moment.

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

CHAPTER 261

The Five Aggregates

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) as taught by the Buddha - form (rūpa), feeling tone (vedanā), perception (saññā), volitional formations (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa). Drawing primarily from the 'Mass of Foam' sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, Armstrong demonstrates how this framework serves as a direct pointer to anattā (not-self) by revealing the empty, insubstantial nature of all experience. He skillfully weaves together practical meditation insights with profound philosophical understanding, explaining how each aggregate functions in our moment-to-moment experience while emphasizing their fundamentally transient and ownerless nature. The talk illuminates how seeing through the aggregates dissolves the fiction of a separate self, leading to the profound realization that 'there is suffering, but there is no one who suffers.' Armstrong concludes by connecting this wisdom to compassion, showing how understanding emptiness (suññatā) naturally opens the heart while maintaining equanimity - the perfect balance embodied by bodhisattvas like Kuan Yin who can hear all the world's cries without being overwhelmed.

The subject of tonight's talk is the five aggregates. The Buddha taught all about suffering and freedom. In a couple of nights, Steve will give a talk on dependent origination, which will trace the origin of suffering in excruciating detail, and also, therefore, the way of freedom.

The beginning of the chain of suffering is this factor in the mind of ignorance—in Pali, avijja. This basically means that we suffer because we don't see things the way they are. We don't see the world the way it is. We don't see ourselves the way we are. We suffer because we live to some extent in an illusion.

The Buddha said, "In whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that." Or as one of my teachers put it even more strikingly, "Everything you think is wrong." That's sort of a wake-up call, isn't it? Everything you think is wrong. You've probably seen that bumper sticker: "Don't believe your thoughts." This is why.

But this is hard to keep in mind. We might have an insight into this, but it's hard to keep reminding ourselves because we want to understand the way things work. We have a deep-rooted need for security, and part of that security is telling ourselves the

way things work: the world is like this, that person is like that, I'm like this, and here's how things work. That's the source of clinging to views. We cling to views because we really want to know things are predictable.

This is from Rumi: "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." Does it ever strike you like that in the middle of one of these long days? What am I supposed to be doing here?

One way to investigate this sense of reality and illusion is to explore the question, "What is this mind-body process?" Who am I? Or what am I? This looking directly at the nature of our experience is really the heart of what investigation is about.

Usually when we look at ourselves or somebody else, we see a person. This is common sense. It's conventional understanding. It's a very reasonable thing to think. And yet, the Buddha said that this is not indicative of one who is skillful in investigation.

He says, if you were a skilled butcher and you were cutting up the carcass of a cow, as you cut it up—and you'd done thousands of carcasses before like this—you would not say, "chop, chop, cow, cow, cow." You would say "rump, sirloin, tenderloin, ribs," right? And when you put it out on the market, that's what you would say. You wouldn't say "cow, cow, cow."

So he said, in the same way, one who has really investigated this mind-body process doesn't just look at it and say, "Oh, human being." That's too crude a label. One who has looked at it closely has more refined knowledge than that.

When a Buddha looked at a being, I don't believe that he saw just a person. I think he saw in one of two ways. One way is a way that we've talked about a lot, which basically has to do with seeing our experience as the six sense bases—six internal and external sense bases. So the phenomena of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects, and the corresponding sense organs that receive those things. This is one way to describe the world of human experience. This maps really nicely into our meditation experience because we often are connecting with sounds or sensations or sights or tastes, thoughts, emotions.

But there's another teaching device that the Buddha used—and I would say even more frequently as a pointer to wisdom, to understanding what we truly are—and that is the five aggregates.

As we tune into this way of seeing ourselves, we essentially tune into the way the Buddha sees us and we tune into the enlightened mind. The reason that the five aggregates is a powerful description of our human experience is it's a way of seeing without

ego. When we start to see without ego, we take out this false sense of self that we normally tag this experience with. So seeing along the lines of the five aggregates helps us to see without ego. It's really a direct pointer to anatta, to seeing the truth of not-self.

This model of the five aggregates takes a while to get used to, just like the concept of not-self takes a while to get used to. So tonight, if you're hearing about it for the first time or second time or third time, don't expect to have a radical transformation in your understanding. But as you hang out with these concepts over months and years, it really does start to change the way we see things.

Speaking personally, there has been a lot of freedom for me in seeing along these lines. The extent of identification being released has been really striking for me through this understanding. It's not just an intellectual exercise—it has a direct impact in our experience. Be patient and let the concepts take a while to sink in.

This term "aggregate" is a translation from the Pali word *khanda*. The Sanskrit word is *skandha*, which you may have also heard. "Aggregate" sounds very technical, like you're paving a road somewhere. The Pali word is not that technical—it just means heap or bundle. If somebody was carrying a heap of sticks on their back, that would be called a *khanda*. So "aggregate" is a little more technical than I like. We could say components—the components of a human being. But actually the translation I like best is "kinds of stuff." The five aggregates are really just five kinds of stuff that make us up. It's that kind of colloquial.

The five aggregates are material form (or we could just say form), feeling tone (our old friend vedanā), perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. All five of these are present in every moment of experience. This is why it's a nice map to understand. The six sense bases may be present or absent in terms of the sense phenomena—there may or may not be a sound, there may or may not be a thought. But there are always these five aggregates in every moment of experience, so we can always connect to this model.

The first is material form. The Pali word is *rūpa*. I want to go through the five step by step and lay out what they are, and then we'll talk about them as they appear in a sutta.

Rūpa, or form, is sometimes translated as body, but its meaning is wider than that. It's all matter, all material form. This is from the Buddha: "Any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate."

So it means all matter. It includes the body, but it doesn't stop at the body's boundary, which is an important point. We're not limiting the five aggregates in any way by the boundary of the body. It's both the body and beyond.

The most obvious meaning is sights—this is the way we probably most predominantly experience the world of matter. So sometimes *rūpa* is used to mean sights, but it also includes all the ways matter interacts. Sounds, tastes, touch sensations, smells are also part of *rūpa*. When the bell is struck and a sound arises, that sound is the form aggregate, part of *rūpa*.

The sutta that I want to read from a couple of times tonight is found in the Saṃyutta Nikāya. It's called "A Mass of Foam." I'll just read the first part of it:

"On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great mass of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be empty, hollow, and void of essence. For what essence could there be in a lump of foam?

'So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be empty, hollow, void of essence. For what essence could there be in form?'"

We'll come back to this later.

The second aggregate is our old friend feeling tone—in Pali, *vedanā*. As you know, because we've talked about it quite a lot, this is the quality that every sense experience has of having a component of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

We've talked about *vedanā* a lot, and actually it's great because I hear it in your interview reports frequently. People are really working with this quality of *vedanā* in skillful ways and noticing it often. The reason it's so important, of course, is that it's on the basis of feeling tone that the kilesas spring into action. We develop greed for the pleasant, aversion for the unpleasant, and to the neutral we tend to react with delusion—we don't see it clearly.

So with the sound...

Generally, that's a kind of pleasant feeling tone. We tend to like the sound of the bell. The pleasant quality has to do with the response of our minds. It could be different from person to person. So vedana is considered a mental aggregate. And yet it's not in the sound itself, but it's in the experience—in our experience, the way we hear the sound. So it's kind of integral in there with our hearing of the sound. But it is conditioned, so what some people experience as pleasant, others could experience as unpleasant.

I like this story from a 7-Eleven store, I think in Southern California, which was having problems with people driving up into the parking lot and dealing drugs outside the store. So they decided to find an unusual solution to the problem. They started playing Mantovani music over the loudspeakers in the parking lot. Now, Mantovani was one of my mother's favorites, so I grew up listening. For those of you who don't know it, it's kind of muzak-y, syrupy strings doing rather emotional melodies. And as they started playing this music through the loudspeakers into the parking lot, the drug dealers hated it. My mother quite liked it. But the drug dealers didn't, so they vacated the premises, and that's how they cleaned up the parking lot with Mantovani. I have a feeling if we played it here, the hall would also clear out fairly quickly.

The third of the aggregates is called perception. The Pali word is saññā. And in common English usage, we often use perception to mean the bare sense experience. We might say the sound itself is our perception. But in the way we use it in dharma language, it has a little bit different and a little more subtle sense. It really has to do with recognition or memory. So it's the way that we categorize the experiences that we have.

If your eyes are open at this moment and you're looking around the room, you are probably recognizing things like woman, shawl, cushion, bench, man, zabuton, wall, lamp, door, etc. The recognition of those different elements is the factor of perception in action. Really, if you take another step back with your eyes open, you realize that all there is in the world of sight is just form and color. That's all the visual field is made up of. It's just different patches of form and color. But we've learned how to interpret what those patches are. Now, mostly because we've been doing this for so long, we've forgotten that there's a learned element here. And we think that it's just an aspect of reality. But that's not necessarily true.

Oliver Sacks, the doctor, had a patient who had been blind from a very early age. He had lived a few years with sight and then had gone blind, and a procedure, a medical procedure, was now available to cure his blindness. So Sacks was there when the bandages were unwrapped after the surgery, along with the surgeon, some members of the man's family, and everybody was waiting to see if the operation was a success or not.

So they gently peeled off the bandages from the patient's eyes. "No cry of 'I can see!' burst from Virgil's lips. He seemed to be staring blankly, bewildered, without focusing at the surgeon who stood before him, still holding the bandages. Only when the surgeon spoke, saying, 'Well?' did a look of recognition cross Virgil's face. Virgil told me later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. Then out of the blur came a voice that said, 'Well?' Then and only then, he said, did he finally realize that this chaos of light and shadow was a face, and indeed the face of his surgeon."

The story goes on—this is from "An Anthropologist on Mars"—the story goes on to say that Virgil's eyesight came back intact, but the circuits in his brain that learned to perceive never really came back together. And he found the visual world constantly overwhelming and confusing, and he was actually much better off with his eyes closed. So he never did regain that ease of perception that we all do so automatically.

So perception is a very powerful and underappreciated part of our relationship to the world. It's how we place the world into familiar categories and therefore how we organize it and then can relate to it. And as we see the world, so we relate back to it. Perceptions are not always reliable.

I remember one fall I was doing walking meditation down below the annex. I was walking down that walkway that goes to the tennis courts. I was almost down to the tennis courts. And I started to hear a marching band.

And it sounded like drums and some bugles were coming down Pleasant Street, moving slowly in our direction. I stopped and thought, "That's really strange. Why would there be a marching band coming down Pleasant Street in front of IMS?" I kept listening to what I was certain were drums and bugles.

Then, continuing to listen, I suddenly realized it was a garden cart with those big bicycle tires being rolled down the gravel path behind me. I had heard it as a band. So my perception was of a band, when in fact it was a garden cart.

Perceptions aren't always trustworthy. Yet many insights come from accurate perception. For instance, when we first start to realize impermanence, we're generally not seeing different things. We may be sitting and seeing the same old sensations, sounds, thoughts, mental states, images we always see. But suddenly—who knows where it comes from—we perceive the impermanence of the passing show. The same show it's always been, but all of a sudden the perception of impermanence is clear.

The objects may not change, but we see them in a new way. We see the pattern differently.

Sometimes we don't see things the way they are because of a label. This is a big teaching technique in some traditions. For instance, this thing is usually considered to be a bell. But if you saw it in a different context, could I convince you that it was a monk's bowl? A good-sized monk's bowl, but quite possibly. Could I convince you that it was a planter or a pot—an expensive one, but a very nice planter? Or could I convince you that it was actually a chapeau for a Russian doll that was statue-sized and fit on the head something like this? Maybe.

When we get caught in the labels, we have a hard time seeing the thing for exactly the way it is—what in Buddhism is called its thusness or its suchness—because the label blocks it out. Zen makes much of this distinction and tries to get people to see through the labels and concepts.

As a Zen master once said, holding up a striker: "What is this? If you call it a striker, I will hit you. But if you say it's not a striker, I will also hit you. What is it?" I didn't do a lot of Zen practice because I had a feeling I was going to get hit frequently—which was, in fact, my experience in the little bit of Zen practice I did.

This is often the basis of koans. There's a story that comes from this. In the late seventies, two great masters happened to be in Boston at the same time: Seungsahn Sunim, a well-known Korean Zen teacher, and Kalu Rinpoche, one of the greatest Tibetan lamas of the last fifty years. People thought it would be fascinating to bring these two supposedly highly enlightened masters together and see what came of their meeting.

They met in a friend's house in Cambridge, with others observing. Speaking through translators, Seungsahn thought he would get right into dialogue in his Zen style. He picked up an orange they were being served, held it out to Kalu Rinpoche and asked, "What is this?"

Kalu was already fairly old at the time, so he just sat back with his sweet smile, doing his mala beads and reciting mantras. He looked at Seungsahn, looked at the orange, and kept doing his beads with that sweet smile.

This wasn't quick enough for Seungsahn, so he held the orange out again: "What is this?"

Rinpoche turned to his translator and asked, "Don't they have oranges in his country?"

Sometimes it's better if spiritual traditions never meet.

Perception is a great subject for investigation—noticing what you're perceiving and how you're making it fit into categories. Now, when we hear this bell, we recognize it quite easily not just as the bell, but as the specific bell that ends the meditation sitting. That's our perception: bell, end of sitting.

The fourth of the aggregates, the third mental aggregate, is called volitional formations. The Pali term is *sankhara*. This refers primarily to thoughts, emotions, states of mind, mental objects in general. Intentions are included.

For our purposes in meditation, we can focus mostly on mental objects. These are, to some extent, the fabrications of mind. The word sankhara means something that has been put together. These include mind states and thoughts, which get brought up, fabricated and projected, created, formed.

This category includes the beautiful and sublime states like the Brahma-viharas, love and compassion. It includes the really intense and difficult states of mind—fear and anguish, desire. It includes the very refined meditative states of the factors of enlightenment. All the different colorings of mind states from subtle to gross are included in this category of sankharas.

Sometimes the translation here is "karmic formations," which indicates the strong habitual patterning that these formations are subject to, as well as the fact that there is some degree of volition or intention that underlies them. We haven't talked about this in a lot of detail, but as Joseph spoke about volition or intention as the seed of karma the other evening, I hope you get a sense that these wholesome and unwholesome states that come through the mind then form the karmic seed for wholesome or unwholesome consequences in our life.

For example, when we hear the bell, because it's usually at the end of a sitting, we may then feel a sense of ease or relaxation. That's a sankhara. The thought might come at that time: "Oh, I could sit forever." That's also a sankhara. These are the responses to the form and the perception of the sound of the bell.

The last of the aggregates is called consciousness. The Pali word is vijnana. This is the quality we referred to a lot during the retreat as knowing. Just that bare holding of our sense data is the function of consciousness or vijnana—the simple knowing of a moment of sense experience at any of the six sense doors.

So it's consciousness that knows the sound. It knows the pleasant feeling tone. It knows the recognition of that as a bell. It knows the sense of ease in the mind. It recognizes or holds the thought that arises: "Oh, I could sit forever." All are held by consciousness.

All five of these kinds of "stuff" are always present in a moment of waking experience. This is the basic outline.

Now, I thought this was a funny list for a long time. Here you have fundamental things like the body and consciousness, and then you have these slightly abstruse things like perception and feeling tone. I thought, why are those singled out? It didn't quite make sense to me.

As I hung out with this list and did more reading, I found there were other ways to frame it. In the Abhidhamma classification of experience, there are just three categories, not five: rupa, cetasika or mental factors, and citta or consciousness. These five categories could be collapsed into three. If you just toss feeling and perception into sankharas, we could talk about rupa, sankhara, and vijnana. That would be equivalent to the Abhidhamma classification.

At another point in the suttas, the Buddha describes this combination of nama-rupa, which Steve will talk about in Dependent Origination. The nama part is the mental piece of nama-rupa. It includes feeling, perception, as well as volition, contact, and attention. These other three factors could also have been broken out of sankhara, and we could have eight aggregates.

So whether it's three or five or eight, basically it doesn't matter. I hope you get that. It really doesn't matter. The important thing is that every aspect of your experience can be lumped into one of these categories. Everything we experience can find a place in one of these five categories. So it's a workable list. It's a list that we can use to look at our experience, analyze it, and learn from it. That's the most important thing.

As the sutta continues, the Buddha compared these five aggregates to a magic show. So I want to talk about that a little bit. This is the primary sense of this sutta, of a mass of foam—that the aggregates are like a magic show. Why is this important?

I want to tell a little story about one of the great magicians of the last hundred years, who was Harry Houdini. Houdini had this amazing show where he would go outside, get tied up, completely wrapped up in ropes and chains, and then locks would be put on those chains and ropes. His hands would be bound behind him.

And thus tied up, he would be dropped into a box that was kind of like a coffin—dropped into a wooden box, and the lid would be hammered shut with nails. And then that box would be taken and tossed into a nearby river.

So he would do this in European cities. I don't know if he was tossed into the Danube or the Seine or what, but he would be tossed into these rivers, which are usually pretty cold water. And the trick was that he would eventually surface.

So people would be waiting by the side of the river as the current flowed and the water was cold and the box had sunk to the bottom and Houdini was nowhere in sight. And one minute goes by and two minutes go by and three minutes go by. No Houdini. Is he dead? Has he drowned? And then pop. He pops up alive and breathing out of the water.

Incredible. Magic. How did he get out of that contraption? Completely unbelievable. So just imagine yourself as a person there by the side of the river being blown away by this fantastic display. How could this have happened?

Well, the tricks are several. First of all, Houdini had practiced a long time so he could hold his breath underwater. That was the first trick. He could hold his breath for up to three minutes underwater. The second thing is he'd gotten very accustomed to holding his breath and staying under cold, icy waters. So it just didn't bother him mentally, and his body could take it. The third trick is that the rope tying his hands was tied not very tightly. So he was actually able quite easily to loosen his hands. The fourth trick was that he had inside his mouth tiny wrenches that he would pull out and pick the locks. He was an expert lock picker. That was actually his greatest skill.

So in the dark, in the middle of this icy water, he would pick these tiny wrenches out and he would start working the locks that were around the chains and ropes that were tying him in. And he would undo all the locks. And then he was still inside a box, and this is the final trick. One of the sides of the box was kind of a trick side. It was not nailed on tightly at all, and he could easily just push that side out. He didn't push out the top, which had been nailed shut. He pushed out this trick panel, and then he could swim to the surface.

Once you knew the trick, it sort of takes away the wonder of it. I mean, it's a great skill. It's a fantastic skill, but still, it's no longer magic. When you understand the way it's put together, it's not magic anymore. You're not deceived. You're not enchanted the way you were before.

So the Buddha said when we understand the way the aggregates work, we're not enchanted by them any longer. "Suppose, monks, a magician should hold a magic show at the four crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should see it, ponder over it, and reflect

on it with wise attention. Even as they see it, ponder over it, and reflect on it with wise attention, they would find it empty, they would find it hollow, they would find it void of essence. What essence, bhikkhus, could there be in a magic show?

"Even so, whatever form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness a bhikkhu sees, they see it, ponder over it, and reflect on it with wise attention. And even as they see it, ponder it, and reflect on it with wise attention, they would find it empty. They would find it hollow. They would find it void of essence. What essence could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness?"

And then he gives this little verse that kind of sums it up. To understand this verse, you need to understand that the trunk of a banana tree is hollow. A banana tree only grows once, and its trunk has no substance.

"Form is like a mass of foam, and feeling just an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations a banana tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick entire."

All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun—another name for the Buddha.

This is the sense of emptiness as it's talked about in both Pali suttas and Mahayana sutras. The greatest philosopher in the history of Buddhism is, of course, the Buddha. But the second greatest, I think, is an Indian philosopher around the first century A.D. named Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna wrote a treatise that was his exposition of the teaching of emptiness.

In one retreat I was doing, combining deep study with intensive sitting, I was working through this text by Nagarjuna. Different insights into emptiness kept arising, day after day, and the teaching began to penetrate very deeply, even entering my dreams.

One morning, just before waking, I had a dream where I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, looking at my entire body reflected back at me. As I stood there, I asked the question: "Why is emptiness important?" The answer came from the face in the mirror, which said, "Because it means that you don't exist."

Because it means that you don't exist.

This is the essence of emptiness. It means that we don't exist in the way that we normally think we do. Of course, the five aggregates are here—form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. But there is no self within them. There is no separate self who is the owner or experiencer of these aggregates.

What dissolves when we see this truth of anatta is the sense of a problem within the five aggregates, a problem that we have to solve. Because there's no longer a center of fear or desire.

Jack Kornfield was visiting an old monk in Sri Lanka. The monk was very happy, smiling and laughing as he sat up on his bed. Jack asked, "What's the secret of the Dharma in your words?" The monk laughed and said, "No self, no problem."

That's what dissolves. Emptiness is the taking out of this problematic self. This is the typical meaning of emptiness in the suttas. Most of the time, this word sunyata means empty of self—it's equivalent to anatta.

Then the Mahayana philosophers and writers took this sense of emptiness further, developing the understanding that's pointed to in this sutta: the sense of insubstantiality. The body being like a mass of foam, feelings like a bubble, perceptions like a mirage, and consciousness like a magic show—this recognition of the insubstantial nature of all experience.

We get caught because we don't see how insubstantial the whole world of our experience really is. Because we think it's more real or more solid than it actually is, we tend to hold on to it. So seeing emptiness becomes a great support for letting go, for not clinging, for recognizing that nothing is worth clinging to because it's all so light.

Our usual worldview, at least in the West, is really formed by nineteenth-century science. We consider this physical world to be the ultimate reality—our basis for truth and reality. We see this as the context of what happens: we're born into it, we're trapped in it while alive, and when we die, we go out of it while it continues as the ultimate frame of reference.

But this particular view—the scientific nineteenth-century worldview—ignores a key truth: that our experience of this world is all held in consciousness, this factor of vijnana. All we know of this world is the way it's held in consciousness. There is no "this world" on its own. There is only consciousness and the knowing of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch of the physical world.

What if the truth is that consciousness is more fundamental? I don't want to say definitively that it is, but what if that were the case? What if consciousness was more fundamental than physical matter, and the scientists had it backwards? Maybe there's a path to liberation in taking a look at consciousness.

We begin to explore all this through meditation, and often the first doorway that opens is the body. We start to feel the changing nature. We look closely at the body and see there's nothing but flux there. We investigate sounds and tastes and mind states and thoughts, and we see they too are just coming and going—very light, phantasmagorical.

We begin to understand the title of Milan Kundera's book: The Unbearable Lightness of Being. This quality of existence is so light, it's like a feather.

But there's one place where it's usually hard to see this kind of lightness or emptiness, and that's the world of sight. When we open our eyes, it looks really solid. It looks unchanging. It looks steady.

So let's use science to take a closer look at that experience.

We know from our science classes that we see because particles of light or photons are coming from some light source—right now it's the lamps. They're reflecting off the objects in this room, and those particles are striking our eye and touching the retina. As they touch the retina, they excite a nerve, the optic nerve that transmits a signal up into the brain. And somehow—and this is a total mystery, no idea how this happens—somehow the brain turns this into consciousness and a representation of the visual world. How that happens, nobody knows.

So we see that as we reflect on that, what we're thinking is a solid wall is actually being recreated moment after moment by these millions of photons landing on the retina, sending pulsations of nerve impulses up to the brain where it's being regenerated. The sight is being regenerated hundreds of times a second. This world that we think is solid visual objects is pulsing on and off, maybe hundreds of times a second.

When we stop to think in that way, we realize the wall isn't solid. It's just an appearance. And we don't actually know what is in the wall. We don't know what constitutes wall. All we know is this representation of it that we have through the eye organ that we call wall.

So we're not living in the real physical world, ever. We're living in a representation of reality that's constructed by our five senses and our brain and our human consciousness. That's what we live in. But we forget that. And we think, oh, that's the real physical world. That's a really solid thing. And it's not. We're living in a representation that hangs like a bubble in consciousness. It's much, much lighter than we think.

Sometimes we think, but it really is solid. I can touch it. It really is solid. But that's just the sensation of earth element. That's just the sensation through the touch of the fingertips with hardness, with solidity, with the earth element in matter. Only another sensation.

Sometimes we think that there's a floor, that there's actually a ground, because the earth is solid, the seat is solid, there's a ground below me. We forget that that ground that supports us is also held in consciousness. And consciousness has no ground. What's the ground that supports your consciousness? There's nothing there. This whole thing hangs like a bubble in the void. There is no ground.

So it can be helpful as we start to incorporate this way of looking to realize that we don't see objects, we see appearances. And these appearances are always held in consciousness, which is the lightest of all the aggregates. And that's why the Tibetans call this a magical display. It comes out of nowhere. It has no ground. And yet it has these amazing qualities of consistency and lawfulness, beauty. And that's why the Buddha compares consciousness to a magic show. It whips all this up out of what? I don't know. Nothing.

In that way, it's also like a dream. Our waking life is really like a dream. And when you think about this, is there any real difference between a moment in a dream and a moment in your waking life? You can reflect on that. Reflect on it as you dream.

Now why is that useful? Because if we're in a dream and we know that we're dreaming, do we cling? If we know that we're in a dream, do you have a sense, oh, the people are going to stay forever in my dream? When a monster comes, if you know you're dreaming, do you have to get afraid? No. But we take this dream much more seriously, more seriously than we ought to.

It's also compared, this world of appearances is also compared in the text to a mirage and to a rainbow. When you look at a rainbow in the sky, it looks like something's there, but it's just a play of light.

There's nothing solid there at all. One of my teachers, Sogyal Rinpoche, said it this way: everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. It is only an appearance. This is the sense of emptiness, the way that it's used particularly in this sutta and in the Mahayana suttas.

Emptiness does not mean a place where nothing's happening. It doesn't mean a blankness, a vacancy, an absence. It means more a sense of transparency, lack of substance, hollowness, transitoriness, openness. This is the way things are, whether we see it or not, in each moment.

In the Heart Sutra, it said: "While practicing deeply the pāramitā of wisdom, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was therefore saved from all suffering and distress." Classically, the insight into this truth has deep liberating potential. It is a key to not clinging, to not holding on.

So as you're here, continue to look really closely at your experience for this sense of transitoriness, insubstantiality, briefness, lack of solidity. All these conduce to not holding on.

If it's like this, where does suffering come from? The suffering comes, the Buddha said, because we tend to claim things as "I" or "mine." And particularly we form the view that "I am the body" or "the body is mine."

There's a quite poignant passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya where the Buddha's talking to Sāriputta, who is one of his chief disciples. He says to Sāriputta, "Oh, Sāriputta, whether I teach the Dhamma briefly or at length, those who understand it are hard to find."

If you've ever been a teacher, you kind of know the sense of that. It's hard to find people who understand what I'm trying to communicate. And there's a poignancy to the Buddha saying that.

Sāriputta replies, "Then, O blessed one, now is the time for it. Now is the time to teach the Dhamma in brief or at length. There will be those who will understand."

"Well then, Sāriputta, this is how the training should be done. Concerning this body with its consciousness, let there be no self-centered imaginings of 'I' and 'mine' and no such bias. With regard to external objects, let there be no self-centered imaginings of 'mine' and no such bias. We shall then abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom."

It's because we cling to the body as "I" or "mine" that the suffering comes in. The Buddha said many times, it's the fiction of the belief in "I" that causes our suffering, but all the time there isn't any "I" there. There's not an "I" to get rid of because it was never there in the first place. It's just mistaken perception.

One meditator put it like this. They said, "Suffering is just rope burn. Things are going through our hands very quickly and we're trying to hold on, but we can't. And so we get rope burn as they pass. That's all that suffering is."

This is from the Visuddhimagga: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true." There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. When we see this, this is the source of deep equanimity—the deepest kind of equanimity. There is suffering, but there is no one getting damaged by it because there's only the rope burn of friction.

Some of this came through to me during my time in Thailand. I was very privileged as a monk there to be able to see autopsies. I went into a hospital in the center of Bangkok and sat in the operating theater. First I stood next to one of the dead bodies. I was thirty-two years old at the time and I'd never been next to a dead body. I was able to stand next to this body which had been brought to the autopsy room.

Then I could sit in the operating theater and the coroner did a dissection of the body. This will be an R-rated talk because this is the three-month course. The first incision that the coroner made was from one ear over the top of the head down to the next ear. Then what he did was pull the scalp to the front and to the back and essentially peel the face away from the skull. That was my second contact with a dead body, was seeing the face come off. He sawed the top off the skull to take the brain out in order to weigh it. Then he continued to open up the chest cavity and the abdomen and pull those organs out.

So I watched one autopsy. I watched two autopsies. I think I watched three autopsies that morning. And then I walked back to go on with my life.

I walked back through a crowded park in central Bangkok, a big parade ground. People were walking by—young couples holding hands, dogs crossing the park, people waiting for buses, families hanging out together. Normal life was going on.

As I walked out and saw all this, all I could see were walking corpses. They were all walking corpses. I thought to myself, what do I mean by that, that I was seeing walking corpses? It's just the same body as I saw in the morgue, but these beings still have a brightness, a vitality that shines out through the eyes.

But this brightness shining out through the eyes—I saw really clearly—it doesn't have any past and any future. It's just a present moment brightness, an awakeness, an aliveness, a nowness. Because it has a capacity for memory, it can store up past and project into future and therefore create a sense of personality. But fundamentally, it was just bodies with this brightness. Bodies with this brightness.

We can see in this way through our meditation also. Try it. Look around sometime in the dining hall and imagine that what you're really seeing is bodies with the brightness of consciousness—bodies and consciousness. That's most fundamentally what we are.

When we see this way, we see that we're all in the same boat. We are basically just the same human form with minor variations in this consciousness, which opens us up to the world of senses, which then becomes the ground for all kinds of feelings to come through us. We have the whole human package of feelings.

So we make lots of distinctions about gender and age and race and culture and personality. These are valid distinctions, but they're very secondary to this truth that we are fundamentally just body and consciousness—the same organism, every one of us.

This is from Rumi's teacher, Shams of Tabriz: "You, me, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." Well, in the garden of vipassana, of clear seeing, these are also not true distinctions. We are one organism. We all face the same situation. We are essentially empty. There's no ground for this consciousness and this brightness.

When you start to see in this way, it's not a cold kind of vision, but it evokes a deep sense of compassion. I want to read a little bit from one of our senior students. When Sally and I were teaching in California, we had a class of senior students who'd been practicing some years, and we got into this theme. I asked people to report on their reflections. This is from one of the students in the class:

"This is spooky. I would look at everything like this Japanese lamp that I love, and I'd see that it's just an appearance. Where that took me is that we're all appearances. When I went from an object to say it's an appearance to a person and say they're an appearance, it made my hair stand on end. But it's true, and it makes you both more compassionate and more vulnerable. When I look at my friend Mary, I see that she's changing all the time. When you start thinking like this, you have to be more compassionate because we're all in the same boat and we're all so fragile."

This is really our human situation. We have this deep yearning for security and we're alive in this universe whose fundamental nature is empty, where there is no ground. This is our fundamental problem.

Quan Yin is the bodhisattva of compassion in the Chinese tradition who vowed to hear all the cries of the world. She tunes into the ten thousand sorrows and the ten thousand joys that we all experience, and she listens to all of those with her compassionate heart. She tunes into the suffering of the world.

But Quan Yin is not a beginning meditator. Quan Yin is a bodhisattva. She is a deeply realized being. She understands very well that there's suffering, but there's no one who suffers. That's the source of her equanimity.

And that's the source of this beautiful balance of wisdom and compassion that allows the Buddha to sit in tranquility and peace of mind, and still be open to knowing all the suffering that exists in the world. Through seeing emptiness, the heart becomes less burdened. We feel less weight of the solidity of the world, and out of this freedom comes compassion.

I want to close with a quotation that has been attributed to Kuan Yin that beautifully sums this up: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

Let's sit for a moment in silence.

Through compassion, she trembles with sympathy for all beings, but because her compassion is accompanied by wisdom, her heart remains undisturbed. This is the profound teaching of the bodhisattva path—to love fully while understanding deeply the empty nature of all phenomena. In this understanding lies both our greatest freedom and our most authentic capacity to serve.

CHAPTER 262

Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · 50 min

> *In this foundational dharma talk, Guy Armstrong explores the nature of sati (mindfulness) as the cornerstone of Buddhist meditation practice. Drawing from the Satipatthāna Sutta (MN 10), he defines mindfulness not merely as bare attention, but as "knowing what our experience is in the present moment." Armstrong provides practical instruction on the meditation techniques of vitakka and vicāra (connecting and sustaining attention), using accessible analogies like picking up a baked potato to illustrate right effort. He addresses common challenges in early retreat practice, including the relationship with thoughts and the cultivation of present-moment awareness. The talk emphasizes that liberation comes not from technical mastery of breathing, but from understanding how the mind creates and releases suffering. Armstrong concludes by pointing toward the deeper insights of anicca, dukkha, and anattā that arise from sustained mindfulness practice, referencing the Buddha's declaration that satipatthāna is "the direct path for the purification of beings... for the realization of nibbāna."*

So it was fun this afternoon to hear where everybody is from and just one little thing about them. I especially related to the people who were grooving on the weather and the sunshine down here, because I just came from Massachusetts a few weeks ago, and I was really struck also by the sunshine. It's delightful.

I wanted to share with you all, especially those from the states of Oregon and Washington and the province of B.C., that the reason it's so sunny here today is that the storm we were supposed to get hit the Pacific Northwest instead. That might not be exactly mudita, but it might let you feel a little more gratitude for being here.

The first day of a retreat is often one of the more difficult days in our lives. If you're feeling a little tired or sore or achy or frustrated, that's really par for the course, so not to worry. As James said, there's a detox thing going on, so it's kind of like detoxing and starting up at the gym on the same day. The muscles ache, and you come home sore, and you're really tired, and it does get better.

But I want you to listen to this quotation and see if you recognize the source. It's by a well-known spiritual teacher: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to suffering, and those who go through it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life, and those who find it are few."

Any idea who said this? Jesus. Yes, this is from the Gospels. It could just as well have been said by the Buddha. The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to true life and those who find it are few. So welcome to the hard gate.

On a day like this where it's not always so easy, it can be difficult to remember what we're doing here. If you're out there and you open your eyes and peek, it looks like everybody else in the room is a Buddha. When you open your eyes, people are, for the most part, still. Of course, if you keep them open for a while, then you see what's really happening. Other people are moving just as you are. But in a snapshot, it looks like a room full of Buddhas. And then we take a look around in the slow walking, and we really wonder where we are. What is going on?

Ajahn Chah was Jack Kornfield's first teacher, a wonderful monk from Thailand. The first time he came to lead a retreat in the United States was in 1979. He led a retreat at Insight Meditation Society, our sister center on the East Coast. He teaches a way of practice that's really a way of life. He likes people to come and make at least a five-year commitment to him. They live a simple life in the forest. They do their communal chores, their communal meetings, and they do some meditation. But it's not as intense and silent as it is here. So he thought this was kind of a funny form, but he did it because it was the West.

People were doing their very slow walking meditation out on the grass on the front lawn at IMS. He would go up to them and just say a word in Thai, and he'd give them this big smile. Then he'd move on to the next person, say a short phrase in Thai, and big smile. At the end of the day, someone asked his translator, "What was Ajahn Chah saying to us as he came around and talked to us?" He said, "Oh, Ajahn Chah was saying to each person, 'I hope you get well soon.'" It can kind of look like that in slow walking. So I hope you all get well soon.

Given that it can be a little unclear exactly why it is we're here, I wanted to talk tonight about the basics of our practice, really mostly as a way of reminding all of us of things that we already know. And really, it's kind of a sales pitch for the present moment. I just want to encourage you to come back as often as you can. That's really the purpose of the talk.

As the Dalai Lama said, the present moment is the only place that we can feel love. It's the only place that we really encounter life. So for that alone, it's very, very valuable. But this ability to stay in the present moment is not the way that our mind has been trained. It's not the way our culture thinks or grooms us. Rather, the opposite.

So one of the first insights that people tend to have in an insight meditation retreat is that their mind is out of control.

And this is a simple thing to see if you've been doing the practice for any time at all. But when you think about it, it's a little bit of a rare insight as the world goes. If you went up to the man or woman on the street and said, "Is your mind out of control?" how many people would immediately say, "Of course"? Not that many. So this is a useful insight to know. It's humbling.

There was a cartoon in the New Yorker not long ago that kind of summed this state up. It's really the human condition—the state that we live in most of the time. The cartoon was of a man working on his computer, apparently at his workplace. While he was working on his computer, he was thinking—the thought image over his head was of playing golf. The next frame showed the man out on the golf course, and the thought bubble above his head was being at home, making love to his partner. The third panel showed the man at home making love to his partner, and the thought bubble was being on his computer at work.

No matter where we are, it's never quite enough if we aren't really here, if we aren't really present. So the beauty of this training of our dharma practice is that it gives us an avenue to find our way into the present moment again and again and again. And out of that avenue, we find a whole world of richness, a whole treasure that we didn't see before.

It's a little bit like diving underwater and seeing that there's a whole world—if you have a mask and snorkel, there's a whole world of coral and fish that lives down there that we never knew about before. In our tradition, the avenue to these riches is mindfulness. Mindfulness.

It's kind of a curious word. It's a translation of the Pali word *sati*, which basically meant simply remembering before the Buddha put this new spin on it, which we call mindfulness. It's a pretty good translation because it doesn't mean a huge amount in English, so we can make it mean what the Buddha meant by it. So I wonder what that is.

Many of us have been practicing mindfulness for years, in some cases many years. Some of you have been practicing for twenty years or longer. And I've been practicing for at least twenty years when I asked myself the question, "What is mindfulness?" And I found that I actually didn't know. I couldn't come up with an answer that would satisfy me about what mindfulness was. So I invite you to just take a moment to reflect on that.

It's become a very common word, certainly in our circles, but even in the culture at large. Mindfulness is getting very broad play, partly because of all the mindfulness-based stress reduction activities that have gone on around the country. It's being incorporated by other religions who have had some contact with it and because of its secular language can take it up and incorporate it in their reflections and contemplations. And there's beginning to be a lot of scientific interest in this factor of mind.

About three weeks ago, I taught a retreat at IMS, this sister center, to a group of scientists who had gotten interested in meditation through their conferences with the Dalai Lama through an institute called the Mind & Life Institute. They had gotten inspired enough by the Dalai Lama that they wanted to take it to the next level to make their understanding practical instead of just theoretical. So we had ninety scientists sitting for a week at IMS with all their intelligence, learnedness, education, and critical faculties. Most of them had not meditated a lot before. Most of them had not done a week's retreat.

So for the first three days, I was really uncertain how it was going to go. The questions in the hall sometimes were quite pointed. When you get intelligent people of a skeptical frame of mind looking at what you do with your mind when you're with the breath, well, that can raise some questions. But it was really wonderful to see because about three days in, there was a whole sea change in the atmosphere, and most of the people started really connecting very well with the practice and starting to feel the benefit of it.

By the end of the retreat, almost everybody had made a strong connection to the dharma, and it was really beautiful to see. We thought this could be a really interesting kind of launch pad. Just to give you an example, one of the scientists on that retreat is about to receive a twenty-five million dollar grant to study mindfulness and its effects and is on the verge of hiring a Spirit Rock teacher for two years to oversee the project from a meditative point of view.

Really, the studies are just beginning to come out to establish scientifically what most of us know experientially—that mindfulness has tremendous health benefits, certainly mentally and also physically. And as these studies are done and these findings come out, I think the health benefits are going to become so compelling that this is going to become even more of a mainstream activity. More and more people will get the benefit, even if it's done in a very secular way. So I think there's some really exciting potential here.

But what is this quality that's so powerful, so potentially transformative, and yet when we start to feel our way into the meditation, so kind of elusive? What is this factor of mindfulness? It's sometimes been described as the quality of bare attention. And this captures an important component of it.

Mindfulness is the quality of connection with our present moment experience. It's definitely grounded in the present moment. The bare part points to an aspect of what's absent from mindfulness—that is, any kind of conceptual overlay. Mindfulness is the ability to connect with our present moment experience without the barriers of judgment, comparison, evaluation, insufficiency, projection, or looking for something other. It's a clear seeing of what is.

It's called bare because it means we don't add anything extra. It's just the bare experience, and our attention is really fully with that. In Tibetan Buddhism, they have a term that's even a little more striking—they call it naked awareness. Tibetans always take things a step further, you've probably noticed that. But it's the same quality, this unadorned quality of being with the experience.

But I think there's more to mindfulness than just bare attention. I think my cat has a lot of bare attention. She is very much with her present moment experience, and I don't think there's a lot of thought going on on top of it most of the time. So is that mindfulness? Is a baby mindful, because it is so present moment oriented before the ego develops and the thoughts start wandering into past and future? I would say not. And I would say the cat is not either. What they have is a beautiful quality of presence, but I don't think it's mindfulness.

The extra quality that's needed to turn it into mindfulness is this—and I would say that this is a reasonable working definition of mindfulness. It may not have the whole picture, but it's a good way to approach it. I want to suggest that mindfulness is knowing what our experience is in the present moment. It's the knowing of the experience that is the important piece.

We find this stated quite clearly in a text of the Buddha's called the Satipatthana Sutta. This is really one of the key texts, probably the key text to meditation practice in our tradition. It comes from a part of the Pali Canon called the Majjhima Nikaya, the middle-length discourses. Every time the Buddha is giving instructions in this sutta on how to be mindful, he basically says it the same way.

I'll read you some examples: "Breathing in long, he knows 'I breathe in long.' Or breathing out long, he knows 'I breathe out long.' Breathing in short, she understands 'I breathe in short.' Or breathing out short, she understands 'I breathe out short.' When

walking, he understands 'I am walking.' When standing, he understands 'I am standing.' When feeling a pleasant feeling, she knows 'I am feeling a pleasant feeling.' When feeling an unpleasant feeling, she knows 'I am feeling an unpleasant feeling.'"

So it's this quality of knowing what our experience is as it's happening that is really, I think, the heart of mindfulness. As you start to relate with that factor, you'll see that in a moment of contact with your experience, sometimes this mental factor is present and sometimes it's not. I want to submit that it's this knowing that's the transformative property in our practice.

It's like a culture in yogurt, the acidophilus. You take milk and you add a little bit of acidophilus culture to it, and then it starts to replicate itself through all that milk. It changes the flavor and the usefulness of the milk into yogurt. In the same way, when we drop this mindfulness into our experience, it starts to act like that transformative culture. Little by little, it spreads itself through all of our experience—first through our formal practice, then into our informal practice, into our full daily life, until it touches it all with this flavor of knowing and understanding that brings with it the flavor of the Dharma.

There are two levels of this knowing that I think it's helpful to be familiar with. There's a kind of simple level that's almost a conceptual level, and then there's a more detailed knowing that Carol referred to this morning in the walking instructions. Let's say on the simple level, when we breathe in, we're instructed by the Buddha to know "I'm breathing in." When we breathe out, we're instructed to know "I'm breathing out." So this is a level of mindfulness.

If you simply know "I'm breathing in" and you simply know "I'm breathing out," mindfulness is being established and the strength of this quality starts to work. But there's another level below that.

When Carol was talking about paying attention to a step, she was giving us the instruction to look and see what the sensations were that really made up that contact of the foot with the floor—feelings of hardness or softness, coolness or warmth, tingling or pressure, weight or heaviness. This is a more detailed level of knowing that we can also apply to the breath as well as to walking.

So start to see that your practice can happen on either of these levels. Both of them are good. Even if you just know, "I'm taking a step. I'm taking a step," that's good. That's mindfulness. The practice will go from there.

But as your mindfulness gets more subtle, as it gets more connected to your experience, you'll see that it also starts to reveal the details of what that experience of a step or a breath is like. And as you pay more attention, you'll start to see more and more detail.

It's not that we have to be super detail freaks about our practice. And it's not that the person who sees the most details goes to heaven first or gets enlightened first. The beauty in seeing detail is that it arouses interest. And so as you let your attention really sink into the experience and you see how rich the experience is, you tend to get interested in it. And as you get interested, the strength of that is that it holds your attention there more naturally. Not so much effort is required to be with something that you're really interested in. So this is some of the advantage of connecting strongly on this level of the sense data, the richness of the sense data.

This ability is really enhanced by two factors that we'll talk about probably over and over in this retreat. I want to introduce them tonight and make sure that we come back to them again and again. These are the factors of connecting and sustaining. They're an important part of meditation technique. They're the foundations of concentration. The Pali terms are vitaka and vichara. And for those of you who are a little familiar with this, they're the first two of the five factors of mind that make up the first jhana, a state of strong concentrated absorption. But very practically, they are the ways that we can start to deepen the mindfulness and activate the property of concentration.

So these are very practical instructions to connect and sustain. Let's talk about them in relationship to the breath.

The idea is as an in-breath begins, we want to use that in-breath beginning as a prompt to connect our attention to the experience in our body of breathing in. So that's the sense of connect or vitaka. It's also translated as aiming. So as soon as the in-breath starts, that's your invitation. Aim your attention. Aim it and connect—more or less synonymous—with the experience, your direct experience of an in-breath. So for some of you it'll mean aiming at the belly, for some at the abdomen, for some at the nose, some may be experiencing it in the whole body. The start of the in-breath is your invitation to connect.

Then the instruction is to sustain the attention there with the in-breath just for a half-breath. This is an important point. Sometimes as we start meditating with the breath we think, "I've got to be with every breath for the whole hour." And we soon find we can't do that. And then we think, "Well, maybe I just need to be with every breath for half an hour." And we find we can't do that. So we get a little more modest. "Well, I'm going to be with every breath for the next five minutes, and I'm really going to stay

right on top of it so I won't miss any." And then we sort of start leaning heavily, and we think, "I've got to make this last. I've got it. I won't let it go away." And all of a sudden, we're getting really tight, because we're trying to make the sustaining last longer than it wants to, or longer than is realistic.

So what's realistic for us? Half a breath. Half a breath is the right length of time to sustain. Sayadaw U Pandita—a true meditation master, a Burmese master who's taught a number of us—said that you basically won't be able to sustain, truly sustain for more than two breaths.

Don't bother trying to sustain longer than this natural rhythm allows. You'll just tie yourself up in knots if you attempt to force a longer duration. So play with this approach and see if it's helpful for you.

The idea is that we aim at the start of an in-breath and sustain the attention just for the beginning of that in-breath. When the out-breath begins, we aim again, connecting to the start of the out-breath and sustaining for just that half-breath duration. In this way, we're renewing our intention with every half-breath, renewing our intention to be present.

It would be wonderful if we could sit down at the beginning of a meditation period, declare our intention to be present for the entire session, and have it happen automatically. But it mostly won't work like that. However, if you renew your intention again and again throughout the period, you'll find yourself resting in the present much more frequently.

I really encourage you to work with these two concepts of vitakka and vicara—this rhythm of aiming and sustaining. Another way that the sustaining aspect, vicara, is sometimes translated is "rubbing." This offers a particularly intimate way of understanding the practice. As you sustain your attention on the out-breath, for example, cultivate the sense that your awareness is gently rubbing against the sensations of the breath. This creates an intimate relationship between your awareness and the phenomenon of breathing.

There's one way to be with the breath where you're observing from a distance—where there's a fixed sense that the observer is located in the center of the head, somewhere behind the eyes, while the breath is way down in the abdomen. From this perspective, you're looking at the breath from quite a remove. That's one way to meditate, and it's not necessarily wrong.

But there's a gentler, softer, and more immediate approach. In this method, you cultivate the sense that awareness is located right with the object—in this case, with the breath sensations themselves. All you need to do is gently rub those sensations with awareness, and mindfulness will naturally arise from that contact.

I mentioned that when we try to sustain for too long, we can create tension through excessive effort. The opposite extreme involves sitting down, making an intention only at the beginning of the meditation, and then adopting a completely passive attitude: "Okay, it's in your hands, Buddha. I'm going to relax here, and if you choose to connect me with the breath, I'll be available." This is rather like a laid-back California approach to meditation.

While this attitude has a certain appeal, many breaths can pass without much real connection. You might enjoy pleasant fantasies and emerge from the sitting feeling that it was fairly agreeable, but recognize that you didn't actually connect with the breath very much. This represents being a little too relaxed.

On that end of the spectrum, it's helpful to increase the effort. Renew your intention more frequently, and apply slightly more firmness to the contact between attention and object.

There's a wonderful analogy for finding the right degree of contact—really a metaphor for right effort. Picture picking up a baked potato with your fork. We can all relate to this experience. You have this delicious baked potato, perhaps sliced and covered with butter, sour cream, cheese, and other toppings. At some point, you want to pierce it with your fork and bring it to your mouth.

If you strike the potato too forcefully, it can splinter into pieces, making it impossible to pick up. This represents applying too much effort to the meditation object. But if you don't use enough force, the fork will simply bounce off without piercing the potato's flesh at all, and again, you can't pick it up.

You must find the right balance—firm enough to pierce cleanly, but not so forceful that you destroy what you're trying to hold. This same principle applies to connecting your attention with the chosen object, whether breath or another focus. You want to make firm enough contact that it truly connects and can be sustained, but not such a forceful connection that you're pressing, leaning, or creating tension in a way that actually pushes the object away.

Somewhere between being completely laid back and being overly aggressive, you'll discover the right balance of effort. This understanding will guide you in both the connecting and sustaining aspects of practice.

I encourage you to play with this balance. The only way we learn about right effort is through trial and error. Don't be afraid to sometimes be a little too active and at other times a little too relaxed. It's precisely through exploring these extremes that we discover where the middle way lies.

Continue to evaluate how this meditation unfolds. Now often, especially at the end of a sitting, we find ourselves slipping into evaluation: "Oh, this was a good sitting" or "This was a bad sitting." Just remember that a good sitting doesn't necessarily mean a pleasant sitting—these aren't synonymous.

A good sitting, in terms of developing mindfulness, is measured by how present you were with your experience. It's not about whether your experience was pleasant while you were spaced out thinking about something else. Even if you spent most of an hour present with pain in your knee, if you were truly there—that, in our terms, is a good sitting.

What matters is the degree of your connection with your experience and the quality of mindfulness you brought to it, not whether the experience itself was particularly pleasant or unpleasant.

As James mentioned, we can become discouraged, especially in the early days, about being absent for long periods or not staying with many breaths in a row. We judge ourselves harshly for this. Of course, if you look closely, you know you shouldn't. In these early days of retreat, if you're present with two breaths at a time, that's a genuinely good start. At this point in the retreat, two breaths is wonderful.

Sometimes you'll feel frustrated: "Oh, I could only stay with two breaths." But ask yourself—what's the right number of breaths to be present with that would be good enough? What's the magic number that constitutes success? Is it four? Five? Six? Ten?

We simply don't know, yet we judge ourselves about it. Then we drift away—maybe for five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes—and we return with harsh self-criticism: "Oh, what a terrible meditator I am. I'm never going to get this. I'm away so much. What an awful practitioner."

But what's the acceptable length of time to be away? Two minutes? Five minutes? Eight minutes? We don't know that either, do we? Yet we still judge.

So at this point in the retreat, try not to rely on arbitrary standards. Instead, as James suggested, when you wake up from distraction, appreciate that moment of wakefulness. It's like a gift—a spontaneous gift. We can't control when it happens, but it does change over time. The more we connect with the present moment, the more the mind becomes reconditioned, retrained to naturally rest in the present.

Our aspiration is to abide more and more in the present. As the *Satipatthana Sutta* teaches: "contemplating body in body"—meaning feeling the experience of the body directly. "The practitioner abides fully mindful." *Abides*. This is actually possible. It comes when it comes—we can't force it through effort alone. But over time, we discover we're present more and more often. This naturally emerges from our willingness to return when we have the choice.

Another pattern that can arise, as James pointed out, is that when we return from distraction, we feel we've done something wrong and need to make up for it somehow. Have you ever wished there was a little rosary you could use to do penance after being away for a while? As if saying a certain number of "Hail Buddhas" could clean the slate and let us start fresh?

But in fact, you don't need to do any penance. We can simply begin again. There's no need to retrace our steps: "Where did I go astray? What thoughts took me away? Where did that thought lead?"

We don't have to walk back the ladder of thinking to see where it diverged. We can simply drop it and start fresh. The moment is always fresh. Always remember it's fine to just start over, start new. Don't carry judgment, frustration, or discouragement. Simply begin again, noticing this next moment. It's always available.

Now I want to talk about our relationship with thoughts, because this is a big part of our meditation in the early days especially. The thoughts come in and they're really seductive, aren't they? They offer so much color and drama in a situation that intrinsically doesn't have a lot. We're sitting here, it's calm. Not much going on externally. Maybe there's a little boredom coming in. And thoughts offer this fantastic channel of amusement—entertainment and escape.

Especially as we get a little bit still, the thoughts get a lot more interesting. There's this quality called vipassana brilliance—as we settle down, the thoughts really wake up. I think it's true that the place of meditation and the place of creativity are very close. It's a quiet place that lets the subconscious do its work.

So how do we relate to those particularly alluring thoughts that come? Because they seem to offer so much promise. It might be the promise of creativity: "Oh, this is going to solve the problem I've been working on at the workplace," or "Now I know what I really want to paint when I get home in front of my canvas." Or we think about the problems in our lives. Problems are really seductive—relationship problems, child-raising problems, money problems, housing problems. "I could spend some time there and maybe I could solve some of them."

I want to share with you one of the mantras I've learned from one of my teachers, Joseph Goldstein, in relation to thoughts. He has this phrase that's good to remember: In the context of meditation, nothing is worth thinking about. This doesn't mean the topic of emptiness—it means nothing's worth thinking about. And this is really true. In the furtherance of mindfulness, thoughts don't really have a great deal to offer.

If you look closely at most of what goes through the mind, there's not much substance there. It's mostly things we've thought many times before, coming up again and again. So we start to have confidence that the problems of our life, the suffering in our life, are not going to be solved by thinking. We start to trust that the solution is going to come from a different level than we think about the problem on.

I really encourage you to reflect on this over the course of the retreat and see if it's true—that the real shifts in our relationship to work, to partners, to money, to all the situations of our daily life don't come so much through thinking over and over, but come from a deeper shift in us that changes our relationship to them in some more fundamental way. More openness, more acceptance, more caring, less reactivity, less anger. These kinds of shifts don't happen as a result of thinking. They come out of silence. They come out of the depth of our contact with the moment, with life. And they come from our intuition.

This place of stillness, creativity, meditation, contact with the present—these are all the ground that insight comes from. Insight both into our personal life, our psychology, as well as insight into the nature of things, the realm of impersonal truths about existence. I think it's from this level that our lives can deeply change and our relationship to the problems in our life and our suffering can deeply shift.

So I really encourage you to reflect on and trust in the power of your intuition. It's a much more potent force than rationality for really making a change in life. This is a quotation from Albert Einstein: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We've created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift."

Meditation is one way we can really restore that balance. I think it's a very powerful way to reactivate our intuitions, really bring them into our life as a stable, ongoing source of wisdom and understanding. The stillness of mindfulness brings us that channel to access that intuitive place much more reliably over time.

At first, this quality of mindfulness doesn't seem like such a big deal. If I know I'm having a breath, it doesn't seem like it's going to have that much impact. But as we do it, moment after moment after moment, it builds up to a tremendous power. Part of that power is to find this stillness that's out of the flood of thinking—the memories, the fantasies, the future imaginings, the anxieties, the regrets, the remorse, the fears. All that wave of thought activity and all the emotions that get stirred up with it can start to settle just through this moment-to-moment contact.

The way the Buddha expressed this was to say that mindfulness can dam any flood. Mindfulness can stop any flood. When I think about all the changes I've experienced through about thirty years of meditation now, this is one of the most striking as I look at my actual experience. The force of thoughts is so much weaker than it was when I started meditating. It's not that I don't think anymore, but they are not so overpowering. The place of peace and stillness is usually not very far away at all. Usually, most of the time, it's really quite accessible.

This kind of access to peace and this foundation of calm creates a sense of well-being and a lot more space in life, so that we're able to accommodate the bumps that come and hopefully have enough clarity and balance to continue to make wise choices when those bumps come.

One other comment I wanted to make: sometimes the breath can be quite hard to find, and you may feel frustrated in your inability to be with it because maybe the mind has gotten dull, or on the other extreme, maybe the mind's gotten really active. In both those cases, it can be very hard to even find the breath, much less sustain the attention on it. You might think, "Oh, there's no way to be mindful now. I've lost my object. I can't really be present."

If that happens, remember that there is another option than the breath to which you can pay attention. In that case, back up just a step and ask yourself, "Well, what's really going on in my experience?" It's a way of stepping back and taking a broader view of what's going on. In that broader view, just ask, "What's happening now?" Maybe you'll see the mind is dull. Maybe you'll see there's sleepiness or fatigue in the body. Maybe you'll see that there's restlessness or that the mind is very agitated, lots of thoughts and lots of emotions.

Knowing that is also mindfulness. In this moment, my experience is sleepiness, dullness, restlessness, agitation. It doesn't have the fine detail of mindfulness of sensations, but it's also knowing our experience. So when the fine detail isn't available, back up and be with the broad picture. "Oh, this is what's happening now. This is my experience." And the mindfulness will continue to develop.

Because fundamentally—I hope you know, I hope all of you know, you've all done retreats before—mindfulness is not about breathing. Liberation is not just about the breath. Sometimes people who've been meditating for a while get the idea that if they were good Vipassana practitioners, good mindfulness practitioners, they'd be with the breath all the time. When they're not, when they have to be with a body pain or thoughts or some mood, it's because they've really failed and wandered away from where they really should be, which is the breath. This is really a misunderstanding, and I hope that you don't share it.

The point—and I think Carol said this this morning—is not about the breath, it's about awareness. We can find that awareness with any aspect of our experience. We start with the breath because it's fairly neutral and it's mostly accessible for most people, so it's a convenient object to begin with just to develop this quality of presence. But we want to then take it and open it up to all of our experience. We'll do that over the next several days—to other body sensations, to emotions, to thoughts, to feeling tone, to intention—because finally, release from suffering doesn't come from being a good breather. It comes from understanding the mind.

We really want to understand how our minds take us into suffering and how we can release that suffering that's created by the mind. So in the big picture, we want to develop this keen-looking mind, this close moment-to-moment attention, sharpen it on simple objects like breath and body, but we want to include more and more the activities of mind because that's truly where we get caught and that's where we can get released. Without making that pointing to mind, we can just be stuck in some technical feat of meditation that may not release us in the way that we're looking for.

As we open up over the days to come, I hope you'll really understand and appreciate that practice is central, not a distraction from what is central. As we start to expand, as we start to look more closely at the breath and all the other phenomena, we want to really understand the characteristics of what we're experiencing. The quality of rubbing or sustaining does this to a certain extent. As you rub your awareness on whatever phenomenon you're experiencing—the breath, the sensation, an emotion—you will automatically start to pick up the qualities of that experience.

In a sensation, you'll know its qualities of being hot or cold or rough or smooth, hard or soft. As you start to get into emotions, you'll understand the difference between irritation, impatience, anger, hatred, ill will. By rubbing the awareness against those states again and again, you'll understand the distinction between loving-kindness and compassion.

So the individual characteristics will become clear to you, but you'll also start to see the impersonal characteristics—you might say the universal characteristics of all these phenomena. You'll start to see their natures of arising and passing, their natures of disintegration, their natures of insubstantiality, of uncontrollability, of unreliability, of there being no owner or no center to all this experience.

The doorway to this kind of seeing is just from this close moment-to-moment attention to the various phenomena in our experience. And it's that rubbing of the awareness with our direct experience that is the ground for insight—the insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, that themselves are just the doorway to the opening to the unconditioned, to nibbana. And that contact is said to be the most deeply liberating of all.

And that's why the Buddha closed the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness with this statement: "Friends, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, and for the realization of nirvana—namely, the establishment of mindfulness."

When we come to the end of a talk, we like to just sit for maybe a minute in silence together just to let the words settle. So please, we'll just sit comfortably for a few moments now.

This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nirvana—namely, the establishment of mindfulness.

CHAPTER 263

Concentration

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of concentration (samādhi) as a crucial factor in Buddhist practice. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and the traditional structure of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, he explains how samādhi represents the unification of mind rather than narrow focus. Armstrong discusses the development of the five jhānic factors—vitakka (initial application), vicāra (sustained application), pīti (rapture), sukha (happiness), and ekaggatā (one-pointedness)—and their role in countering the hindrances.

The talk covers practical aspects of developing concentration through sustained mindfulness, the importance of wholehearted presence, and various techniques including breath counting and walking meditation. Armstrong addresses common obstacles like discursive thinking and the hindrances, emphasizing that the proximate cause of concentration is happiness arising from acceptance of the present moment. He describes the progression through the jhānas and formless attainments, explaining how these deep states of absorption serve as the foundation for profound insight and the realization of nibbāna. The teaching emphasizes that while concentration feels pleasant in itself, its primary value lies in creating the stability needed for liberating wisdom.

James talked last night on the factor of happiness in our life and our practice. Tonight I want to talk about one of the factors that is most direct in leading to conditioned kinds of happiness and that sets the stage for the highest kind of happiness—the factor of mind that we call concentration. I'll talk tonight about what this factor is, how we experience it, how it develops, what obstructs its development, and some of the deeper facets of its development, including the jhanas.

Concentration has been part of human experience for as long as there have been cultures, as far as I know. When you read of the most ancient cultures that we know of on the planet, they've all had these people called shamans who used their mental powers to access different realms, to provide healing, to get in touch with the animal world and spirits. They accessed these powers through techniques like drumming and dancing and chanting, all of which provide a strong focus for concentration.

At the time that the Bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama left home to go start on his spiritual quest, he first contacted two teachers in northern India. These two teachers led him to very deep states of concentration. So we know that some very sophisticated

kinds of practices were available 2,500 years ago when the Bodhisattva started his quest. He left these teachers because he didn't feel that they brought the final solution to the question of suffering that he was looking for. The states of concentration that he entered with them would always have to pass away. He would have to come out and be confronted again with the situation of aging, illness, and death. So he continued his quest and thankfully found the kind of liberation that he passed on to us. Nonetheless, these very deep states of concentration were being taught 2,500 years ago in India.

Even today, I think there's something in our mindset about this concept, even growing up in the West. One of the ways you see it is that there are lots of cartoons about gurus, particularly gurus on mountaintops in the Himalayas. There was this one cartoon that I quite liked from the New Yorker. It showed obviously a guru in the high Himalayas who had a long white beard and dressed in just a loincloth, sitting on this little platform in front of a cave with the high peaks of the Himalayas rising behind him. Seated in front of him was a Westerner, a relatively young Westerner dressed in clothes like yours and mine, who had obviously just made this arduous trek up to the mountaintop to talk to the guru and ask a profound question. So the caption of the cartoon is the guru's reply, where the guru simply says, "If I knew the meaning of life, do you think I'd be sitting here in this cave in my underpants?"

Some of these cartoons stress the wisdom aspect, and I would put this in that category. Other cartoons stress the concentration aspect of spiritual life. In this, the archetypal image is of the yogi who is secluded from the world, wrapped up in a meditation shawl with their eyes closed and downcast. That image conveys a strong impression to us.

In fact, you may feel that archetypal image every time you walk in this hall at the start of a sitting. You come in early in the morning and there are probably already people sitting here whose image is very similar to that archetypal image of the guru. As you tune into the qualities, I want to draw out some of the qualities that are in that image.

The first is the quality of stillness. The body of such a being is not moving. This is a feeling that you can often contact walking into this hall. I think this hall has something of a quality of stillness, whether people are in it or not. It is a factor that is manifested by certain spiritual teachers. The person who particularly comes to mind around this is Thich Nhat Hanh.

Before we built this meditation hall and the residences, we used to have Thich Nhat Hanh come and lead a daylong at Spirit Rock about once every two years. This hillside was open at that time—just a grassy hillside. So we would put a platform for him on the

other side of the creek down there, and the audience would spread out sitting on the ground on this grassy hillside up here. In the middle of the day one year, there were about a thousand people who came to these events. He led everybody on a walking meditation down the walk, which now goes past the residences, across the stream, up the hill, and back to the meadows in the back, which will eventually be the site of a hermitage here at Spirit Rock.

We have a photo of Thich Nhat Hanh leading hundreds of people in walking meditation back to the back of the property. But what I particularly remember about his presence was the degree of stillness that he manifested in speaking, in moving. Everything came from a place of deep, deep stillness in him. He had so much power in that stillness that it affected everyone who listened to him and saw him. A thousand people on the hillside were calmed by this one man's presence. I actually felt he was casting a samadhi spell over the whole hillside through his own stillness. This is one aspect of that yogi in the shawl image.

Another aspect of it is the quality of the attention and the focus being inward, being drawn within. There is a sense that the yogi in secluding herself or himself from the world has left behind the things of the world and is going within to find the richness that the mind contains, potentially, all within itself. So there's a sense of going within to find hidden riches and treasure.

Finally, the other impression that one gets from the image is a sense of bliss—that in this turning inward and connecting with the riches of the mind, there is a sense of deep satisfaction, deeper than the passing sense pleasures of the world can offer, a deep sense of contentment and fulfillment.

These are all aspects of the quality of concentration.

In the Buddha's teaching, it's hard to overstate how important this factor of concentration is. It is the last factor in the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path is presented as a sequential development, so samadhi is considered the ultimate unfolding of the Eightfold Path. Of course, it then wraps around and lays the basis for wisdom or right view, right attitude as expressed in the first two, but is nonetheless the outcome of the development of the whole path in that sense.

As we practice vipassana, all of our practice is based on the development of mindfulness, as expressed in the Satipatthana Sutta, among others. We could be known—perhaps we should be known—truly as the mindfulness school of Buddhism. This is really our foundation.

But it's very interesting. Even though we consider mindfulness the heart of our practice, when the Buddha summed up the Eightfold Path, he didn't call it conduct, mindfulness, and wisdom. He called it conduct, concentration, and wisdom. The formulation in Pali is sila, samadhi, and panna—the three main divisions of the Eightfold Path. Not mindfulness, but concentration. You can see that in his estimation, mindfulness is simply a tool to develop the quality of concentration, which to some degree is higher along the path of further development from mindfulness.

Concentration is also listed in the seven factors of enlightenment. It's included in the five spiritual faculties. And it's part of the iddipadas—this list of the four bases of spiritual power. Not only mundane powers, but supramundane powers that develop during practice. Concentration is associated with each of the four. So it's a very important factor in the teachings, and I think that generally in the West we have been slow to convey its real importance. It's been somewhat underrated for years as we've brought these teachings into the West.

So what is concentration? It's the usual translation of the Pali word samadhi. In the Eightfold Path, this factor is called samma-samadhi. It's usually translated in English as concentration. It's not actually a very good translation, and in some ways it's quite misleading for Westerners.

Now, I'm not going to toss that word out because it's so universal. I think we should go ahead and use it. But it's important to understand why it's not a good translation of the word samadhi. Unfortunately, there's no word in English that is an accurate translation of the word samadhi. This in itself is an interesting situation. When we have a culture that does not have a word for a central quality of mind, it says something about our culture. By and large, we don't know what this word means. And to be honest, it took me years to figure out what it meant in my own experience.

You know how the Eskimos have seventeen words for snow? When you get familiar as a culture with a factor, it has lots of expressions. And samadhi does not in any European language that I know of.

So why is the word concentration misleading? In concentration in English, the meaning is about attention. When you think about it, it's about where you put your attention. And specifically, it refers to a narrow focus of attention. "I want to concentrate on my homework. Don't bother me with the children or the TV or the stereo or whatever." So the idea is our attention is narrowly focused and we want to exclude everything else.

First of all, samadhi is not primarily about attention. The second thing is that samadhi does not have an exclusive connotation. This gets a little tricky, as I'll go into later, because in some ways we can develop samadhi with a narrow focus, but we don't have to. And that will become clearer as I go along. But basically because samadhi does not have this sense of exclusive or narrow attention, you can have a great deal of samadhi when the attention is wide, wide open. There can be a very expansive attention that's open to sounds, the arising of all phenomena. Samadhi can be present and you're not having a narrow focus of attention.

The best translation for samadhi, although it's a little cumbersome, is unification of mind. Samadhi is the state of mind that has come together, that has collected itself. What happens when we collect the mind is we find that it is actually a very powerful organ.

In our daily life, we lose touch with this native quality of the mind. Sally mentioned this poem of Wordsworth's the other night, where he says, "The world is too much with us. Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." This is a description of our ordinary mind, running to the past, running to the future—fantasies, recollections, imaginations, regret, blame, confusion. Our ordinary mind is all over the map. And as we jump all over the map, we're giving away our native power.

With samadhi, we start to reduce those wanderings. And in that reduction, we collect it into the present moment, usually around a chosen meditation object. And in that collecting, the mind regains its native power. So the first hallmark of the mind that has achieved this kind of unification is that it's strong.

It's in that strength that the mind becomes steady, firm, unyielding, and stable. And this is not the firmness or steadiness of hardness. We can try to make our mind that way by contracting, but rather this unification can happen in a very soft and receptive way.

This unification also brings peace because we've reduced the mind's wanderings. Some other synonyms that bring out different aspects of samadhi are undistracted, collected, composed, and wholehearted. These are all different qualities within concentration.

As the mind gets brought back together, the two most important things you notice are that it's able to maintain its contact with the present moment for extended periods of time—there's this connection with presence that is more than just fleeting—and secondly, there is a sense of tranquility, peacefulness, or settledness that comes.

This leads to the quality of the mind becoming unmoving, unshakable, and imperturbable. This is why in the factors of enlightenment, concentration is the factor immediately before equanimity, and equanimity is the last of the factors. Concentration in its stillness and strength sets the stage for the mind that isn't moved by pleasure and pain, that isn't swayed by changing circumstances.

It's said to be from that unmoving quality that the mind is able to open to the unconditioned, to the direct realization and knowledge of nibbana. In a way, the stillness sets the stage for the immovability, which is the closest mimicking of nibbana that we know in mundane terms.

How do we know when concentration is present? It's very helpful to start recognizing it as we encounter it in our meditation practice. Know that it's a quality that has a wide range—it's not either present or absent, but present to differing degrees all the time.

One of the simplest measures, though not perfect, is to know how long your attention can remain in the present in a more or less unbroken way. This is a crude measure of concentration, but it's a way to get a handle on it and to start knowing when it's there. In the practice we've been doing for the last several days, one way to recognize it would be to know when you are in contact with a number of breaths in a row.

Now, the presence of thought does not mean that concentration has gone away. It's only a loss of concentration if you let yourself get distracted and carried away by the content of thoughts, particularly several in a row. But if a thought arises and is seen clearly with a return to the breath in the present moment, that's not a distraction—that's clear mindfulness. It's when the content goes on over several thoughts and we lose contact with the present that concentration has been interrupted.

One exercise whereby you can start to gauge your own level of concentration is the exercise of counting in relation to the breath. I think James talked about this on the first day of the retreat at the afternoon sit, giving instructions on how to use the counting.

Just to review briefly, one way to do it is to count each breath starting at ten and counting downward to one. The reason to count down is so that it doesn't go on autopilot so easily. If we count up, we can automatically say one, two, three, but we're not really present.

So you might notice an in-breath, an out-breath, and then note ten. An in-breath, an out-breath, and note nine. And so on down to one.

The rules of this particular game are that if you miss a whole breath, you don't get to say the number, and then you have to start again at ten. But if you get any part of a breath—we play by easy rules here—you get to say the number.

So see where you get to. Can you go from ten down to one and be with some part of every breath? If you can, then see if you can do it again and maybe get twenty breaths in a row. It's not easy—twenty breaths in a row is not easy, I have to warn you. But just see where you're at and don't get too high an expectation.

I did this practice a lot when I was in Burma, and I would count the groups of ten on my fingers. As my fingers were sitting on my thighs, I would mark off the groups of ten. Often, if I'm using this technique, I'll try to get up to one hundred breaths before I open up into a choiceless kind of practice or become aware of other things.

This is the technique of counting breaths. It's just one measure of concentration, but it will put you in the ballpark. Then you can notice the variation—some sittings you may get to two breaths.

Other sittings you may get to ten. And then you'll notice it relatively. Oh, that was good. Really, this sort of staying in the moment over time is just a measure of concentration. It's like the thermometer that you stick in chocolate when you're melting it for fudge. It measures the heat. It's not itself the heat, because you don't need time to tell you if the mind is concentrated. Once you get to recognize the feeling of it, the mind-body experience, the felt sense, you'll know when you're concentrated in just a moment. You can just take a look in a moment and know, yes, the quality of concentration is high or not.

So it's very helpful if you can start to notice in your practice where the level of concentration is at. As it says in the Satipatthana Sutta, this is under the third foundation of citta or mind: "The practitioner understands concentrated mind as concentrated mind and unconcentrated mind as unconcentrated mind." This is a direct instruction from the discourse on mindfulness.

In fact, I'd say it's very helpful if you sort of continually monitor this factor and the factor of mindfulness, and one other factor—energy. So if you keep your eye on how's my mindfulness, how's my concentration, and how's my energy, this turns out to be quite insightful. Because in a way, these three stand for the different factors of enlightenment.

What we're really about in developing our meditation practice is strengthening or feeding—as Carol used the word the other night—we're feeding the factors of enlightenment and we're starving the hindrances. In a broad view, that's the purpose of medita-

tion practice. And that's the way the journey to liberation takes place: we're feeding the factors of enlightenment. So you want to find out how fat they're getting. And the way you do that is you notice where's mindfulness, where's energy, and where's concentration. Because these three stand for the whole range of factors.

In the factors of enlightenment, mindfulness is the kicking off factor. It's the one that starts the others growing. And it's also the balancing factor, the one that keeps them all in balance. Energy stands for the three arousing factors. The first three factors of enlightenment are arousing, the last three are pacifying. Energy stands for the arousing factors which are investigation, energy, and rapture. Concentration stands for the last three which are pacifying: tranquility, concentration, and equanimity.

Now you'll start to see that when mindfulness, energy and concentration are all strong, you have a certain kind of experience in meditation. It's not that there's one state only that goes with that—there are many different ways that you can experience reality when these factors are high—but they share certain qualities. There will be a sense of clarity, there will be a sense of ease, and there will be a sense of not being taken over by thought. Because of that steadiness of concentration, thoughts come and go, but you aren't swept away with them.

On the other hand, when all these factors are low, then you have a state where the mind is either very agitated, scattered, restless, or else it's dull and there's not much connection. And then because of the lowness of the factors, you're easily swept away by thoughts, and then all the disturbing emotions that thoughts lead us into and subject us to.

Now what's very interesting about starting to watch these three—mindfulness, energy, concentration—is that you see they will always manifest their own impermanence. Try as hard as we might, we will never arrive at a cozy plateau where all these factors just kind of stay there and we cruise for the rest of the retreat. If you were waiting for that to happen, I'm sorry. These factors are always going to be going through change and manifesting impermanence. Even if your effort stays pretty steady, these factors kind of have their own lifespans and will come and go.

So where's the beauty in that? The beauty is you don't have to take the changes so personally. Concentration might be really strong in one sit. You go out to walk, you're quite inspired, you're connected, you put in good effort, you come back again, you can't wait to get back into that state. Oh, it was so delicious. It was so peaceful. I can tell it's gonna be even stronger next sit. And then you sit down and it's totally shot, and there's all this turmoil of thoughts and emotions and the mind is active and where did it go? What did I do wrong?

You didn't necessarily do anything wrong. It could just be the decay of that factor of concentration.

So as you watch these things go through their changes, you learn not to take it so personally. We're observing, we're making a moderate effort, and the factors build up, come together, have a great experience, and then decay. And then we're in the whirlwind for a while.

Out of that whirlwind, we can get really frustrated and think, "I've done it wrong. I've got to figure out what I was doing right before. Maybe it was the T-shirt I was wearing that morning. Or I'd had just the right amount of oatmeal and then no more. That was the thing that did it." We can get just as superstitious as athletes about these little tricks.

But you start to see that even if our effort is steady, these factors come and go. So then we don't worry about it so much. Because we've watched them fall apart, we also have confidence that they will come back together. Our steady effort at mindfulness is what pulls them back together again. And then we have one of those peak experiences where mindfulness, energy, and concentration are all strong—there's clarity and some ease and some stability.

So just be patient. Just be patient and keep your effort moderate. When you get into the difficult time, don't feel like you've got to do everything in your power and you've got to put it back together. Because you can't put it back together. Mindfulness can put it back together. And you just have to be steady in your effort toward mindfulness.

How does concentration develop? Basically, it is through sustained mindfulness. It is through the accumulation of enough moments, one after another, of presence and attention to what's happening that gives rise to this factor of concentration. So the key is: do one thing at a time and be wholehearted in it.

You see, as you give yourself wholeheartedly to the moment, you're manifesting samadhi. You're putting the mind in that place of wholeness and unification, and then it can build on itself. It has a foundation to grow from. So that wholeheartedness is a key part of mindfulness.

That's why the Korean Zen teacher Soen Sunim put a lot of emphasis on this teaching. He said, "When you sit, just sit. When you walk, just walk. When you eat, just eat. Be whole in everything that you do." He was the master for years and lived at the Providence, Rhode Island Zen Center.

One of the students came down in the morning for breakfast and saw the Zen master sitting there eating his breakfast and reading a newspaper. The student was very disillusioned and said, "But Master, you told us just do one thing at a time, and here you are eating your breakfast and reading a newspaper. How is that helpful?" He said, "And when you eat and read, just eat and read. Nothing else."

One of the other things you get from this wholeheartedness—and I think James mentioned this last night—is that interest is really important in bringing the mind together. Interest is really a support for concentration. Because when you're interested in something, what happens? All your energy goes there.

When that big check arrives from the contract that you just carried out, wow, there's a lot of interest in seeing that. When there's a new person in the Sangha who looks sort of like they're catching your eye, the interest is really there. So when the breath has that same kind of appeal, that interest really holds you there. It can happen. It can be really beautiful.

In order to strengthen concentration, you don't have to do anything different from your present practice. I want to make that really clear. Your present practice in these sustained attempts at mindfulness automatically will give rise to concentration. It will happen directly. So don't feel like you have to change anything. The whole idea is to aim and sustain moment after moment, and concentration will develop.

So what to do when it goes away? Because it will—it will go away. This is where the kind of moderate effort is important, because very often we can get tied up in knots trying to get the concentration back. It goes away and you remember how sweet it was, and you'll do anything to get it back. It's like the one thing that makes this whole experience worthwhile is being in the present moment and being peaceful. Otherwise, it's not really a vacation here. So you may try really hard.

How do I get concentrated? Oh, I've got to really pump it on the breath. I've got to really force it. And that will do it. More effort. That's what's needed. More effort. And so you put a lot of effort in, but it's not really about the breath. It's about feeling good again. It's about getting back to that concentration. And then, strange to say, it doesn't happen. And you find yourself getting more frustrated, and then, oh, I guess it's more effort. And then you just get tighter, and you tie yourself up into a bigger knot.

So in doing this, we forget one key thing about concentration. And it's a very wonderful lesson to learn. The proximate cause of concentration is happiness. Happiness. So what's the source of that happiness? The source of that happiness is our real acceptance of the present moment just the way it is. And you'll start to see this is the avenue to peace and therefore concentration.

So we have to come back into the moment and kind of take it just as it is, just on its own terms, not trying to make it something different or to try to find some personal gain out of it. It's that gaining and striving mind that blocks our access to peace, blocks our access to concentration. And this is part of the right attitude that Carol was talking about. How can we approach the present moment with the right attitude? It's to take it just the way it is. So then the mind can really settle into the way things are. And then the peace happens and then the concentration becomes stronger.

So anytime you're in conflict with the present moment, wanting it to be something different than what it is, not liking it the way it is or looking for something else instead, that will block the peace and the concentration from developing.

This came through to me really strongly when I was doing loving-kindness practice at IMS a few years ago. And I had gotten pretty settled in in the first week of doing the loving-kindness practice intensively. And it is a concentration practice. And the concentration was starting to develop and it felt quite good and the metta was coming through.

And then something external happened that threw off my balance. I lost my connection, my mind got stirred up, and when that passed, I settled back into doing the phrases of loving kindness and my mind wouldn't collect again. And I got very frustrated because I really like that concentration aspect. So I tried harder and I pushed on the phrases and I said them faster and I tried to force some metta to come, and none of it worked.

And then at that point, I had an interview with my teacher, who was Joseph Goldstein, and I went in and told him about the situation. I said, "Joseph, I just can't get back to that concentration. I'm really frustrated." He said, "Guy, the metta practice isn't for ourselves. It's for the other." Bingo.

And then this light went off. I was corrupting the practice. I wasn't caring about the other person. I was just using them as an object so I could feel good. So how much metta is in that? There was zero. So what Joseph was telling me is, look, you've got to go back and care about the other person. "You mean the concentration comes out of the caring?" "Yeah."

So I went back, I gave up my quest, I just got back to simply caring about the other person as I was sending the metta, and then all of a sudden the concentration was back again.

So the same thing with the breath. If you want to use an in-breath just as a springboard to feeling good and getting concentrated, it won't get there. You have to be seriously interested in the breath for the breath's sake. And so what it really requires is this real innocence. No ulterior motives, but just really being interested in the present moment for the sake of the present moment. Being interested in the breath just for the sake of the breath. Or a sensation, or a sound, or an emotion, or a thought. Not to get anything out of it, but just to see it the way it is.

Then the concentration will unfold.

When I was a yogi, I think I knew this, but I see it even more clearly as a teacher, that we all have really different aptitudes in the area of concentration. It's like athletic ability. I'm a tennis fan, and the people that I really enjoy watching are the ones who have this natural athletic ability. So on the men's side, I was a huge fan for years of Pete Sampras, who has this kind of just grace and power and speed and fluidity around the court. And on the women's side of the game, the Williams sisters really have these qualities too. This is natural athleticism that is so fun to watch.

Well, in meditation also, some of us have a natural aptitude for this quality, especially of concentration. And one of those people with this aptitude is a Thai master named Ajahn Jumnian. I don't know how many of you have met Ajahn Jumnian, but he comes to Spirit Rock every year, usually in May, and he is a trip. He has this incredible energy that's one of the byproducts of concentration. He has a lot of joy. And when you listen to him teach, you can just feel the radiation of his energy and his happiness.

So when Ajahn Jumnian was four years old, his parents were both practicing Buddhists in Thailand and I'm sure went regularly to the temples to visit and offer dana. And Ajahn Jumnian had no doubt seen other people meditating. So one day, at the age of four, he sat down on the floor of his house, cross-legged, he closed his eyes, and he went away. And he didn't come out.

And so his parents sort of tapped him and knocked on the door and shook him and called his name. No response. He just sat there, not moving, not responding, somewhere else. So they got worried. So they went to get the local priest and said, "Please, can you come help with our son? He's gone. I don't know what's happened to him. I don't know if he's going to come back."

So the priest comes around and looks at him and says, "Oh, he's just in a state of samadhi. There's nothing to worry about. Just let him be and he'll come back when he's ready."

So sure enough, about 24 hours later, Ajahn Jumnian's eyes popped open and he got up and moved around and he was quite fine and bright and eager and very happy. So at this point, his parents knew they had a prodigy on their hands. So they started training him from the age of four. They took him to the local Buddhist teacher, and they took him to the local shaman, because concentration is the base of the shamanic path. So Ajahn Jumnian, from a very early age, got training in both these streams, and he still has both these talents. It's very interesting.

One day he was teaching a daylong at the lower hall. And in the middle of the daylong, he pointed to one woman who was sitting about halfway back and he said, "How are you feeling?"

And she said, "Well, now that you mentioned it, my stomach is really upset."

And so he said, "Oh, okay, I have something for you." And he opened up this big vest that he has that he carries around with all sorts of trinkets and amulets and potions and lotions. And he took out this bottle of white fluid and he said, "Here, drink this." And he gave her the bottle and she drank it. And he kept on teaching. He came back about 20 minutes later. "How are you now?"

She said, "I'm totally fine."

Powers of mind also come from samadhi. Very interesting.

But my point is, some people have a natural ability in this direction. Some people don't. I was not one of those who did. And I remember being on a retreat at IMS early on. We closed the center down, and the staff were sitting together. Carol was there also at that time. This was about 1979. And we were sitting in a circle. There were only about 10 or 12 of us at this point. And I happened to open my eyes in the middle of a sitting, and I looked at a friend who was sitting nearby. And she was in a posture that was kind of like she was absorbed in some divine communion with some higher realm that I hadn't even a clue about in my practice.

And sympathetic appreciation was not the first mind state that came to my mind. I thought, what am I doing here? She had that capability and I really didn't.

So I had to work really hard at this factor of concentration and I've put in months and months of practice doing particular concentration techniques. And over the years, I've gotten up to a middling level of concentration, but not an exalted level of concentration.

So I want to just recommend for those of you for whom it comes naturally and easily, it's a wonderful quality to enhance and develop. For those of you for whom it doesn't come so easily, it's also a wonderful quality to develop, and it absolutely can be developed. It's really just a question of putting in the time and commitment to bring it out. And it's a very helpful quality, as I'll talk about more.

What blocks concentration are primarily two things. Discursive thinking. And by that I mean not just the passing thought that you can see clearly and let go, but when you get off on a train of thinking. And you kind of jump on that train and you ride it for a while. That's what I mean by this phrase, discursive thinking. You follow a train of thought for a while.

So one thought arising and seen and returned to the present object, your chosen object, not a problem. The thought can be seen clearly as just another arising. Mindfulness is intact. Thoughts are not problems. Our getting lost in the content of thought, however, is a loss of mindfulness and therefore interrupts the development of concentration.

The other thing that disrupts it basically are the hindrances that Howie talked about a few nights ago. When we don't see the hindrance clearly, it takes us on a ride of its own creation. We get lost in the projection of the storyline of what we want or what we don't like or all the restlessness or doubt that comes. When we can turn and see the hindrance directly, we see desire as desire, we see aversion as aversion. Again, mindfulness is established and it can continue to develop the concentration. But hindrances typically lead us astray and we lose, ordinarily, some concentration to them.

So these are what impede it. So now I want to talk in the remainder of the talk about deepening concentration and why we care about it. Why should we care about developing this factor of the path, this factor of samadhi?

The most important reason is to develop concentration as a base for stronger and deeper insight. Yes, concentration feels good in and of itself, but in and of itself it's limited. It doesn't have the power for the complete freedom of mind that the Buddha was looking for, which is why he left his concentration teachers. So similarly for us, the most valuable aspect of concentration is that from its foundation, we really have the ability to develop insight much more strongly and clearly.

The reason for that is concentration in bringing the mind to tranquility wears away or takes away temporarily the forces of greed and aversion that move the mind and keep us agitated. When the mind is under the sway of likes and dislikes, wanting and not wanting, it doesn't see clearly. When those are stilled, the mind sees more clearly. So this is the first and most important factor of concentration. The contribution of it is that it lets us see clearly and insight comes from that.

But secondarily, in and of itself, it makes a great contribution to our sense of ourselves, not only on retreat but in daily life. Concentration brings a tremendous sense of well-being and ease. The access to it is through relaxation, and in its wake come peace and stability. So the concentrated mind becomes the foundation for living in the world with a real sense of inner peace.

This is from the Dalai Lama: "Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility." Samadhi is the doorway to that sense of inner peace. And I actually don't know any way to get there other than the development of samadhi. Insight also delivers it. But again, we need a certain base of samadhi in order to have deep insight.

You often hear talk today of certain practices being concentration practices and other practices being insight practices. In the tradition, these are called the directions or the paths of samatha, or serenity as it's often translated, and vipassana, or insight. And these are often presented to us as dichotomies or opposites. You know, which are you doing? Are you doing a samatha practice or are you doing a vipassana practice?

As far as I know, the Buddha never talked about samatha practices as distinct from vipassana practices. But as I read the suttas, the sense that comes across to me is that as we practice mindfulness, we generate samatha, or serenity, and we generate vipassana, or insight. Both unfold from the practice of mindfulness.

Both are described in the suttas in this way. But the fact is that later practitioners and later commentaries do present certain practices which more strongly develop the quality of samatha or tranquility. And it's these same practices that strengthen more directly the factor of concentration or samadhi.

So the Visuddhimagga, which is a 6th century text from Sri Lanka, lists 40 different objects of meditation that are particularly recommended for developing concentration. These include visual images called kasinas, which are disks or representations of colors or elements; meditation on corpses in various stages of decay; recollections of the three gems—that is the refuges—or the contemplation on death; mindfulness of breath; and the Brahmaviharas.

In our styles of teaching here at Spirit Rock, we primarily teach this strong development of concentration either through the Brahmaviharas or through mindfulness of breathing. These are the two routes that we most often recommend. For people who have done a lot of Vipassana practice in the past and who want to take a month or six weeks to explore concentration in a little more depth, we often will work with you on those practices through the interviews. We tend not to give the instructions up front, but there are people here who are doing metta practice or breath practice regularly, particularly for the development of concentration and the strengthening of concentration. And that's something that we offer when someone has done a certain amount of Vipassana practice in the past.

But concentration will develop naturally in doing your practice as you're doing it. And I want to mention some ways in doing standard Vipassana practice that you can strengthen that factor.

One way is to continue to place an ongoing emphasis on your primary anchor, which may be the breath, could be body sensations, could be sounds. But the one that you keep coming back to again and again, keep making that a primary object for yourself. That will strengthen the quality of concentration.

Use the technique in being with the breath of noting or counting, because both of these help keep the mind from wandering off.

Use the walking periods for formal walking. This is highly recommended as it provides that continuity of mindfulness from the sitting to the walking and back again.

In the informal practice times—meals, work meditation, around your room, showering, and so forth—use continuous noting. Note what activity you're with: eating, lifting, chewing, or if you're brushing your teeth, reaching, touching, lifting, squeezing, brushing, and so on. That continuous noting also keeps you anchored in the present. We might talk more about this in the instructions soon.

Slow down throughout the day. The calming of the body will help to calm the mind.

Guard the sense doors. You don't have to look around for entertainment every time someone passes you by. You don't need to know who that is. Rather, try and keep that focus on your chosen meditation object.

When you sit, have an emphasis on keeping the body still and unmoving. Again, the stillness of body will contribute to stillness of mind.

Once you settle in, if sitting 45 minutes or an hour is comfortable, extend your periods of sitting. Sometimes that will let the mind and body settle to a deeper extent than they had been able to in a shorter sitting.

Be really moderate with your food. Overeating makes you drowsy and you lose that sharpness.

Be moderate in your sleep. As the retreat goes on, people's sleep needs often go down. Don't sleep more than you really need. Don't wake up in the morning, feel refreshed, and then roll over for another dose, but have a thought that you just want to sleep the minimal hours that you really need. As your sleep needs reduce, you can expand your hours of formal practice and basically take the schedule as a starting point and then expand your hours of practice beyond that according to what is comfortable for you.

Now these sound rigorous, and it can be challenging to practice in this way, but don't get the sense that this is like an extraordinary thing to do. This is how all of us were taught, and this is how all of us practiced based on the teachings that we got at that time. So it is really recommended as your standard mode once you settle into a long retreat, if you're able to.

As concentration deepens, the first thing that one encounters are these five jhanic factors, which Howie talked about, and I think James mentioned also last night. Vitakka is connecting, which we've talked about a lot. Vicara is sustaining. We've talked about both of those quite a bit in being with the breath. The third one is piti, often translated as rapture. To me, that's a little bit of an exuberant translation. Sometimes—I'd say most of the time—piti doesn't come with a lot of affect. Piti is simply the kind of pleasure that we have when we connect with the meditation object in an ongoing way. And when piti is strong, it has an impact in the body.

The bodily energy starts to increase as a result of piti, and we may feel that in different ways. It can be goosebumps on the skin, or a sense of jolt of energy that passes through quite quickly, or waves of energy that pass through us like showers, or what's called all-pervading rapture where it more or less fills the body.

The fourth factor is sukha, translated as happiness or comfort, or the translation I like is contentment. Sukha is one of the factors that has the most affect to it. There's usually a sweet and pleasant quality to sukha that is quite fulfilling and therefore lets the mind settle into that quality of contentment. That's where the riches start to be unfolded, and then the mind likes to settle within those riches. This is really the base of deep contentment.

And ekagata—as the mind settles within itself, it becomes really collected, and that's that sense of one-pointedness. Now, one-pointedness suggests a narrow focus of attention, and this is a way to develop samadhi. You can collect the mind around a narrow focus like the breath. When I practiced in Burma a year ago, my teacher told me to focus on the breath as experienced just above the upper lip in an area about the width of a fingertip. That was my focus for six weeks. I came to him and I said, "I've got really strong body pain in a sitting today. Should I pay attention to that?" He said, "No, stay here." That was the only object that I was given. So that does generate strong samadhi.

But another way to generate the one-pointedness is just to collect the mind around whatever is arising. This is called momentary or khanika samadhi. So the mind, the attention is with a sound for a moment. Connect and sustain. The next moment with a sensation in the knee. Connect and sustain. Then a thought. Then an in-breath. Then an emotion. Then another sound. It's moving, but in each moment there's a fullness of attention. So the mindfulness is steady, even though the attention is moving. This will also develop samadhi in this form called khanika or momentary samadhi.

So we don't need to understand the one-pointedness or ekagata as being about a narrow focus. The mind can collect around a broad range of phenomena. Ajahn Sumedho has a really nice way of explaining this. He says that ekagata is the one point that includes everything. So what's the one point that includes everything? How about the present moment? Now. Now is the one point that includes everything. So when the mind collects in the present moment, however wide that is, that is also ekagata.

As the jhanic factors become stronger, they offset the hindrances. This is a wonderful experience. We don't realize how frequently and really incessantly the hindrances are tormenting us until they stop. And when the mind moves into this state where the hindrances are temporarily suspended, it feels just great. It's called access concentration or neighborhood concentration because it's getting close to the jhanas. The Pali word is upacara samadhi.

The Buddha said that for one who has encountered this, when these five hindrances have been abandoned in oneself temporarily, one sees that as freedom from debt, health after a long illness, release from prison, freedom from slavery, and a land of safety. These are very strong comparisons—release from prison and freedom from slavery. This is what it's like to have an extended period without the hindrances being present. This is the ripening of the jhanic factors.

As they continue to become stronger, they culminate in what's called the absorption of the first jhana. And in the first jhana, the mind collects so strongly in itself that it becomes temporarily very stable and unshakable. The hindrances are way left behind, and all the factors have come together in a balanced way that is very strengthening and to a certain degree deeply satisfying.

So we do have people in these month-long retreats who are encountering and practicing the jhanas. This is not something that is done only by monks from 2,500 years ago.

This is happening for people today in this meditation hall on this retreat. But it is basically a retreat practice. Learning the jhanas, in our opinion, takes about a month of dedication to see if there is currently the ability to access them. Some people will be able to, some people may not. That's okay. But anytime you undertake a period of concentration practice, you will still be strengthening the factor of samadhi.

The first jhana has all five of the factors in balance. The Buddha described it like this: rapture and happiness drench, steep, fill, and pervade the body so that there is no part of the body unpervaded by rapture and happiness.

In the second jhana, because the attention then becomes so effortless, the factors of connecting and sustaining actually fall away. They're not needed. We don't need to make the effort to connect and sustain because the mind is naturally so present, so connected. So in the second jhana, there's a refining of the experience, and the second jhana is characterized only by rapture, happiness, and equanimity.

But still in the second jhana, the quality of rapture, this bodily energy, can feel quite intense, so intense that it can have an aspect of not being pleasurable, being a little too stirred up. So the third jhana, there's a falling away of the element of piti or rapture, and the only two factors present are happiness and one-pointedness. Sukha and ekaggata. And it is at this level that the Buddha said, this is a sublime abiding. The third and fourth jhanas are said to be a sublime abiding.

In the fourth jhana, even the factor of happiness drops away. And that jhana is only characterized by the presence of one-pointedness and this deep sense of equanimity.

Above these very deep states of absorption are four other levels called the formless attainments. The mind of infinite space—opening up from the fourth jhana, one opens up to the expansiveness of the experience. The sense of the body has generally fallen away at this point. And one just becomes aware that space is unbounded.

After being with that, one is lifted into the fifth jhana where one starts to tune in: space is unbounded, but there is a knowing of it. And this is called the plane of infinite consciousness. And then that, in its greater refinement, goes to the sixth jhana, which is called the plane of nothingness. One sees that the consciousness is illuminating nothing. There is nothing there. And the seventh jhana is considered even transcending the perception of nothingness. It's a plane of neither perception nor non-perception—almost too subtle to describe or imagine.

So these are the fruits of concentration, then laying the development for that insight that can see beyond all conditioned phenomena for the direct realization of nirvana and the process of enlightenment.

Let's end on that note. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 264

The History of Buddhism in India - Part 1

Guy Armstrong · 44 min

In this illuminating dharma talk, Guy Armstrong begins a comprehensive exploration of Buddhism's historical development in India, from the Buddha's parinibbāna (circa 463 BCE) to the emergence of Dzogchen teachings (8th century CE). Drawing from his own journey between Vipassanā and Dzogchen practice, Armstrong addresses the philosophical questions that arise when encountering different Buddhist traditions.

The talk traces the early centuries after the Buddha's death, beginning with the First Council where Ānanda recited the suttas from memory, through the oral transmission period lasting 400 years. Armstrong examines the first major split around 100 years after the Buddha's death between the Mahāsaṅgikas and the Sthaviras (predecessors to modern Theravāda), exploring disputes over monastic conduct and scriptural authority that continue to resonate today.

The discussion covers the development of the Abhidhamma as Buddhism's "third basket," the influential Sarvāstivādin school's innovations including emphasis on the pāramīs, and King Asoka's pivotal role in Buddhism's spread. Armstrong concludes with the preservation of the Pāli Canon in Sri Lanka and the emergence of Mahāyāna as a mystical response to systematic Abhidhamma teachings, setting the stage for understanding how different Buddhist traditions share common roots while developing distinct approaches to liberation.

I had been practicing for about fifteen years in the Vipassana lineage and was very familiar with the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and mindfulness of breathing and body. Then I showed up on this Dzogchen retreat, and within two days I was chanting hundred-syllable mantras for golden-hued deities who had been primordially enlightened beyond space and time. I found myself trying to figure out: what is going on here? What am I doing? Is this the same religion? Is it the same philosophy at all? And what sense could I make of the relationship between these two approaches? It brought up a lot of questions for me.

One of the key questions was this notion that Rinpoche was explaining—that the ground is the inseparable union of emptiness and cognizance, meaning that awareness is somehow connected with what is unconditioned. This was not a teaching I had heard in fifteen years of Theravada practice. Where did that come from? Was it true or wasn't

it? Many well-known Theravadan teachers were saying, absolutely not true. The realization of the unconditioned comes with no consciousness, no cognizance present whatsoever. And if there's a trace of cognizance there, it's not the real thing.

What was the connection between the Rigpa practice that Rinpoche was teaching and the mindfulness quality that I had been developing all along, rooted in the four foundations of mindfulness from the Theravada? What was the connection to the deities and the mantras and the mandalas and that whole cosmology that Tibetan Buddhism opened up?

These questions really occupied my interest for a long time, and I had to search deeply within my own experience, talk to many different teachers, and read extensively until I felt I had come to a resolution that felt comfortable for me. I found many points of overlap and some points of potential conflict that took me a while to sort through.

Also, as you'll be finding if you're new to this practice, as Rinpoche unfolds it over the next few days, the practice of Rigpa is a subtle practice—one of the most subtle practices I've come across. It was hard for me to find my footing in that kind of very spacious territory. Again, it took me a while to feel I had my feet on the non-ground, or the groundless ground, that Dzogchen is based upon.

And yet I found these teachings opened up a whole new dimension of my understanding and my practice. They were very valuable for me. Many other Vipassana practitioners have felt the same thing. It's out of this shared experience and a love for these teachings that we've invited Rinpoche to come to Spirit Rock. This is actually the third time he has taught here.

The basic motivation on the part of Spirit Rock as an organization is to be able to share these teachings with the Vipassana community that makes their spiritual home here. Of course, at the same time, Rinpoche has many students of his own in the Bay Area, and we also wanted to open the doors for all of you to come and join us. So we have this rather mixed audience for this week, which is part of what makes it an interesting week. Some people come strictly from a Theravadan background, some from a Vajrayana background, some with a mix. So there's a wide range, and I hope to say something meaningful to everyone in the course of the week. But if I don't, I apologize.

My particular interest really is in helping new practitioners, especially from the Vipassana lineage, be able to make a quick and helpful relationship with the Dzogchen teachings. That's the main reason I'm here and the main role that I want to fulfill in

these evening talks—to save you some of the struggles that I went through as I was making my wavering way over a number of years into these teachings. I want to do that on both a theoretical level and a practice level.

Tonight, because Rinpoche is keeping his talks mostly on the conceptual level at the beginning, I'm also going to be on the conceptual level. A couple of days later, as we get into more of the experiential pointings of the Rigpa practice, my talks will also move in a more experiential direction.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is a little bit of the relationship of all the Buddhist practices. When Rinpoche and I were first talking about bringing this retreat to Spirit Rock, we thought, what are we going to call it? We ended up calling it a Dzogchen retreat, which I think is the most honest advertisement. But at one point, we thought of calling it "the Dzogchen view of Vipassana and the Vipassana view of Dzogchen retreat," because I think both traditions have something to offer one another. But we settled for simplicity, which I think was helpful.

In addition to all the questions that were raised in terms of the way the teachings differed, I also felt a lot of overlap as I listened to Rinpoche, and I hope you heard that today. From the Theravadan end of things, there was quite a bit of talk about suffering and ignorance, attachment, clinging, impermanence—all those staples, the three poisons, karma, which are solidly within the Theravadan lineage. There were also elements in his teaching that were more particularly Mahayana: the emphasis on compassion, bodhicitta, and the emphasis on emptiness are more commonly associated with the Mahayana strain. And then as he started to get into a description of Dzogpa Chenpo with ground, path, and fruition, we start to move really into the realm of the Vajrayana teachings.

As I started listening to Rinpoche those years ago, I realized that between the Four Noble Truths and Dzogpa Chenpo, a few other things had happened in between. So what I'd like to do over these next two nights is talk about what happened in between. I'm going to title this "A Short History of Buddhism in India: From Parinirvana to Dzogchen." Basically, what took place between the death of the Buddha, which is around 463 BCE, and the development of these more advanced practices.

and the emergence of Dzogchen, which is placed around the 8th century CE in India.

Now a couple of notes on time frames. The common way of talking about historical time in Western cultures is B.C. and A.D., which is based on the life of Christ. Being Buddhists, we don't necessarily want that to be our milestone, so the scholarly way of talking about it is using the term C.E. to stand for Common Era, though it still starts at

year zero of the Christian calendar. So typically I'll use CE for the centuries and dates that we're familiar with. We're currently in 2006 of the Common Era, and BCE means before the Common Era. It's simply de-Christianizing the same calendar that we're currently using.

If we were in Thailand right now, we would be in the year 2549, because that follows the Buddhist era. So really, it would be wonderful as Buddhists to speak in terms of the year 2549, but it would be difficult to relate it to all the other history you know, so I won't do that.

As we explore what happened in India from the early teachings to the Mahayana and the emergence of the Vajrayana, one of the most fascinating aspects is the variety of questions that emerged as the schools split. The splitting of the schools took place not so much by geography, but primarily around philosophical questions. These are the same sorts of philosophical questions that we encounter when we try to blend the classical teachings of the Buddha with the Vajrayana teachings. So as you listen to different streams within the Buddhist tradition, these are questions that may naturally arise for you to contemplate. As we explore the unfolding of this history, I think you'll begin to see the origin of these discussions and questions.

The second thing to mention is that I'm going to be presenting the findings and research of scholars—primarily Western scholars, but also some Asian scholars—who trace the evolution of Buddhism through these different schools in a chronological sequence. You may hear from different Asian teachers that all these teachings were spoken by the historical Buddha, but to different audiences. The research of Western scholars suggests otherwise. I don't want to particularly enter into an argument about that. It's really up to you to decide what your own view is. But I'll simply be presenting the way that Western scholars, for the most part, have outlined it based on their historical research, which is generally quite unbiased.

The reason I'm staying focused on India is because Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism share a common foundation, which is Indian Buddhism. When Buddhism migrated further east to China, particularly, and later to Japan and Korea, it transformed completely into Chan and then Zen and took on a very different flavor. In some ways, if you've ever tried, it's difficult to have a philosophical discussion with a Zen master, because they'll hit you with a stick or something equivalent. But the common thread between Theravadins and Tibetans is that we're all willing to discuss how conceptual mind can understand these teachings. Whereas in the Zen tradition, they will often cut short and disallow dialogue about conventional understanding. This goes

back to the nature of Indian Buddhism. India is a very philosophically inclined culture, and that has influenced both the Theravadin school and the Tibetan school. So we, in a way, share a common outlook on the role of the conceptual mind.

One of the other things that arise when one addresses a mixed audience and also talks about different traditions is that there may well be differences in views and opinions. And sometimes friendships diverge on the basis of different views and opinions. You may have noticed that with others of your friends. So I hope that we find the great spaciousness of mind that holds all the different views and opinions while still maintaining the underlying spirit of loving-kindness and friendship.

This is from an early Buddhist text from the Sutta Nipata. This is the Buddha speaking:

"This I do now declare. After investigation, there is nothing among all doctrines that such a one as I would embrace. Seeing misery in philosophical views, without adopting any of them, searching for truth, I discovered inner peace. For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions wander about in the world annoying people."

So with that as a preface, in the spirit of loving-kindness and amity, I want to talk about this unfolding of the history of Buddhism.

The early form of Buddhism we could call classical Buddhism, we could call it Pali Buddhism, or we could call it Nikaya Buddhism, because the teachings have come down to us in the form of Pali language texts and collected into gatherings called the Nikayas. So all of these terms can be used synonymously. It could also just be called early Buddhism. So I'll use one of these terms to refer to that early stage.

This early school of Buddhism is considered to have been alive in an unbroken form and transmitted from teacher to disciple since the death of the Buddha over 2,500 years ago. For about 400 years in India, again according to scholars, this was the only form of Buddhism available. There was nothing but Nikaya Buddhism for about 400 years after the death of the Buddha.

And of course, it's also the foundation for the Mahayana. The Mahayana arose in groups who were already steeped in the classical teachings. The Mahayana flourished for hundreds of years, and the Vajrayana arose based on people who were deeply grounded in the Mahayana. So when we listen to Vajrayana teachings, we have to realize they're layered on top of the Mahayana, which is layered on top of the classical teachings. So the classical teachings really are the foundation for all the later schools.

In fact, the Dalai Lama has often said that what unites all Buddhists is our agreement on the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. In a way, we can think of this as our common foundation: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way leading to the end of suffering.

It's interesting that even when you encounter Mahayana texts that attempt to refute some of the classical teachings, they use the same language. When you listen to the Heart Sutra, for example, what it does is negate the five aggregates, dependent origination, and the Four Noble Truths—which are the very cornerstones of Theravadan teaching. You can imagine, as a practitioner reciting the Heart Sutra every day, you're hearing these basic teachings over and over. In many Zen temples, the Heart Sutra is recited before every meal, so you're constantly hearing about the aggregates, the chain of dependent origination, the Four Noble Truths—letting them really sink into your bones as you go through the ups and downs of intensive meditation practice. Then you hear them negated, and the mind has to make another philosophical turn to understand that. But all these concepts and teachings are living with you all the time in that setting.

After the Buddha died, for about a hundred years, the community lived in considerable harmony. But think realistically—what happens when a charismatic founder dies? If you look back at other spiritual movements, what tends to happen is the followers understand things differently. Disciple A has a different take than disciple B, who differs from disciple C. Eventually they go their separate ways because they want to carve out their own understanding.

A lot of this history is lost, of course. Scholars are still trying to put the pieces together, and how much is lost is unanswerable—but it's a huge amount. One interesting thing about the Tibetan tradition is that it's very literate. Once Buddhism became established in Tibet, detailed records were kept of lineages, teachers, and written teachings. But the Theravadan lineage is just the opposite. For whatever reason, we are not a very literate tradition.

Let me test this with those of you who've had contact with Theravadan Buddhism. Can you name three famous Theravadans who lived after the time of the Buddha and before, say, 1900?

Buddhaghosa. There it ends, right? One literary figure in the whole lineage for 2,500 years. That's pretty astounding. I'll mention a couple of others as we go through, but notice that the Theravadan lineage has been very practice-oriented and not very philosophically oriented. That's just the way it is. If I asked you for Tibetan figures from that same period, you could probably come up with a dozen easily.

So the first hundred years in India were quite harmonious. The followers all got along together, and there was just one school. But let me back up a little. After the death of the Buddha, the first council was called among all the fully enlightened beings who were alive at the time. There were said to be 499 of them, along with the Buddha's attendant from his last 25 years—another bhikkhu named Ananda.

Ananda had followed the Buddha around for the last quarter-century of his life and listened to all his dharma talks. Anytime he missed a teaching, he would ask someone later to repeat what had been said, and he had a fantastic memory. So he was brought to this gathering of 499 arhats, but Ananda was only a stream-enterer—the first stage of enlightenment. He felt very ashamed and embarrassed and didn't know if he should really join the circle.

He thought, "I'd better try really hard. I've got one night before the council meets. Maybe I can become fully enlightened before morning and join them as an arhat." So he practiced intensively all night long—sitting and walking, sitting and walking—but didn't get there. Just before dawn, he gave up. "I can't make it. I'm just going to relax a little bit." As he laid down for a brief rest, thinking "I just can't do it," and just before his head hit the pillow—full enlightenment.

This says something about the value of relaxation in our practice. May it be so for someone here.

So Ananda came to the First Council and recited from memory all the suttas he could remember, then instructed other people in their memorization. These teachings filled about twenty volumes in the first Pali Text Society edition—in romanized text, all recited by one individual. They weren't written down at the time, likely because the technology of writing wasn't available. They were passed on purely as an oral tradition.

Different schools and different monasteries and nunneries were charged with reciting and memorizing different portions of this entire twenty-volume set. In this way, the oral tradition was handed down for about four hundred years. For the first hundred years, everything remained unified—everybody was still practicing together.

But in the western part of India, around what we now know as Delhi, rumors began to arrive about some rebellious monks on the east coast, perhaps around Calcutta. All of this was happening in the Ganges Valley. These monks were reportedly doing scandalous things—they had started handling gold and silver, which was strictly outlawed in the Vinaya, the code of discipline that was also recited after the Buddha's death. Monks were forbidden to touch money. Yet these monks declared it acceptable to use gold and silver, which greatly upset their western counterparts.

The other troubling development was that these monks began to doubt the authority of the Buddha's discourses as they had been collected. "We don't think that's the whole truth," they said. "We trust our own experience as well. We won't rely solely on the authority of those texts, even if they were the word of the Buddha."

This caused a fundamental split between the westerners, who held to the authority of the suttas—the original discourses—and this new group in the east. A second council was called one hundred years after the Buddha's death to see if they could reconcile their differences, but they could not.

The first great schism occurred at that point. The group that split off called themselves the Mahasangikas, which simply means "great assembly"—there must have been quite a few of them on the east coast, this fringe group. The group that remained faithful to the established form of teachings called themselves the Sthaviravadins, which means "elders." In Pali, Sthavira becomes Theravada. This was likely the true origin of the Theravada school as it continues to this day.

These kinds of questions arise today as well. What is the true source of spiritual authority? Is it our own personal experience? Is it a revered text passed down from a great teacher? Is it the word of your particular teacher? When is it safe to debate such matters? What can get you expelled from a community? One very orthodox Theravada practitioner, when I mentioned the value of Dzogchen teachings, said to me, "But that's corrupting the true teachings. That will lead to the decline of the true Dhamma in time." Divisions happen on the basis of views like these.

The next phase in Buddhism's evolution was the development of the Abhidhamma. The Abhidhamma is considered the third basket in the Theravada canon, the Pali canon. The first basket contains the Buddha's discourses, the second contains the Vinaya—the monks' and nuns' code of discipline. The third basket is the Abhidhamma.

The Abhidhamma represents a very analytical approach designed to systematize all the lists the Buddha taught—the five hindrances, the five aggregates, the six sense bases, the Four Noble Truths—collecting them together in one place to create a coherent philosophical system. It's fascinating that this development occurred, because it probably didn't happen during the Buddha's lifetime. The Buddha taught skillful means for the sole purpose of liberating beings. After his death, philosophical questions arose: How can we complete this as a comprehensive system? How can we demonstrate to outsiders the coherence and consistency of our school of thought?

The Abhidhamma apparently began forming not long after the Buddha's death. There were certainly traces of it by about one hundred years later. But the form we have today—another seven volumes—didn't emerge, scholars say, until about three hundred years after the Buddha's death.

Now, if you ask an orthodox Theravadin about the Abhidhamma's origin, he'll tell you it was taught by the Buddha himself. They have an elaborate story to explain this. They say it was too extensive to have been taught in one human setting, yet it had to be delivered in one sitting. So what happened was this: during one rains retreat—you know the Buddha established himself each rainy season so the monks and nuns wouldn't trample the crops—during one particular rainy season, the Buddha went up to Tushita heaven and delivered the Abhidhamma over three months to his mother, who was dwelling in Tushita heaven. In the heaven realm, they explain, one could sit for three months without moving.

Do you believe it? Perhaps not. But the story continues: they say he simultaneously transmitted his psychic body back to earth during the same rains retreat and delivered the Abhidhamma teachings to Sariputta.

So that is how Orthodox Theravadans explain the origin of the Abhidhamma as coming from the mouth of the Buddha.

Scholars, however, say that this is not true. They contend that the Abhidhamma in its current form was only assembled three hundred years later, and they have ways to track its origins with some confidence. We'll see this theme emerge again later, because many later teachings, according to scholars, were developed by anonymous authors and attributed to the Buddha to give them greater credibility. We'll return to this important point.

So the Abhidhamma took its current form about three hundred years after the death of the Buddha.

Another significant inflection point occurred around the year 250 BCE, about two hundred years after the Buddha's passing. At this time, a king named Asoka had come to the throne in northern India. Asoka is one of the most famous kings in both Indian history and Buddhist history.

Initially, he was a warlike, violent conqueror. He had conquered all the neighboring chiefdoms and kingdoms, creating a vast territory under his rule. It's said that after one particularly devastating battle, he stood looking down at the carnage—all the dead soldiers from both his army and the opposing forces—and was stricken with profound guilt that his own ambition had caused such massive death.

In the midst of surveying the battlefield's remnants, he saw a Buddhist monk walking slowly through the bodies. The monk displayed such composure and radiance that something shifted within Asoka. He wondered: "How is it that this monk, who has nothing, is more equanimous and radiant than I, who have everything material?"

It's said that at that moment, his heart turned. He soon thereafter converted to Buddhism and completely transformed his kingdom. He renounced war, sending messages to all neighboring kingdoms that his days of conquest were finished. He wanted to live in peace and harmony. He distributed food and wealth liberally throughout his realm so that people felt secure and confident.

This actually represents one of the few teachings of the Buddha on how an effective government should be organized. The Buddha said that poverty should not exist in a dharmic environment. Asoka began outlawing many forms of animal sacrifice that continued under the Vedic rules followed by the Brahmins. A real sense of peacefulness pervaded his kingdom.

Moreover, he became a great patron of the Dharma, supporting many monasteries and nunneries. The Dharma flourished greatly under Asoka's rule.

Asoka himself convened the Third Council around 250 BCE, likely as a way to bring the Sangha together. However, the result was another split, giving rise to an important school called the Sarvastivadins.

The Sarvastivadins were puzzled by a philosophical question that the Buddha had left unanswered, which Rinpoche alluded to earlier today: Where do karmic effects live? When you perform an action arising from a motivation—whether wholesome or unwholesome—it's said to have a karmic impact that stretches into the future. But how is that effect carried forward? The action, once completed, is done. Whatever mind state was present during the action is impermanent and passes away. Your body moves forward and changes. The other person moves forward and changes. How does karma transmit itself forward?

The Sarvastivadins made the first recorded attempt to answer this question. Their solution seems somewhat risky to me: they decided that past, present, and future all really exist now. The past has never truly gone away, and the future is already here. This was a very radical philosophical stance, but it was their way of addressing the question. They argued that past actions actually still live on, and this is how the past is able to reach in and touch the present.

One of the other innovations from the Sarvastivadins was their emphasis on the paramis. The paramis became a great force in the Mahayana tradition. The Sarvastivadins, who were still within the field of classical Buddhism, were the first to bring them forth and really emphasize them. They're hardly mentioned at all as a list in the Pali Canon—appearing perhaps once, and not from the mouth of the Buddha, but in another volume.

The Mahayana brought the six paramis to the forefront, and Shantideva's guide to the Bodhisattva's way of life crystallized a whole series of teachings around the paramis as a path to enlightenment.

The Sarvastavadins were incredibly influential for several reasons. They tended to migrate to the north and west of India, and their texts and canon were all in Sanskrit. They had their own Abhidharma in Sanskrit as well. As Buddhism spread—and by the way, almost all of Asia was Buddhist at one point or another—it's incredible to look back at the reach of the Buddhist teachings.

Starting in India, Buddhism soon spread to Pakistan, which is said to have been the home of Padmasambhava, who took the Dzogchen teachings into Tibet. It spread into Afghanistan—you probably remember that it was only a few years ago the Taliban knocked down those huge standing Buddhas that had been there for thousands of years. From Afghanistan and Pakistan, it spread into Nepal, where it remains alive today. It traveled into Tibet and China via the Silk Route, which went through Kashmir and then up over the north of Nepal into Tibet. From there it entered China, and later Japan and Korea, transforming into Chan and Zen. Buddhism also spread from India to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, down through Indonesia. Essentially all of Asia at certain times was mostly Buddhist.

It's amazing to see this historical reach, and today it's mostly dying. Buddhism is mostly on the decline in Asia. Either communism has gotten it, or what communism hasn't gotten, capitalism is getting. So it's sad from that perspective. We all need to practice hard and hope that it stays alive here.

The Sarvastavadins planted themselves in the northwest and west of India, and therefore it was their teachings that migrated on the Silk Route into Tibet and later China. So it was actually the Sarvastavadan Sanskrit canon that ended up in Tibet, not the Pali Canon. Tibet generally does not have the Pali Canon—it has only survived through being kept alive in Sri Lanka.

What Tibetans know about the early schools, they draw from the Sarvastavadan Canon, which eventually made it into translated Tibetan form. Particularly, they tend to associate the Theravadan schools, which they now call Hinayana, with the Abhidhamma. So a lot of the Tibetans' understanding of what Theravadan practice is about is based on their reading of a Sanskrit Abhidhamma from about 2,000 years ago. There doesn't seem to have been much contact since then. I often find that what Tibetan teachers say about Theravadans doesn't mesh with my experience of what's actually going on in our practice here or in our practice in Asia where we learned it. So I always take it with a grain of salt, and you might want to as well.

The entire Sarvastavadan canon was not preserved in the long run—I don't know whether it fell apart first in India or on the Silk Route—but it is only preserved in part. The only canon that survived in its entirety is the Pali canon, which went down to Sri Lanka first.

Then came another interesting split. The Sarvastavadins were deeply invested in the Abhidhamma—they had modified it from the Pali version, so it was different but had a similar spirit. Another group split off from the Sarvastavadins called the Sautrantikas. The Sautrantikas said, "You're putting way too much emphasis on the Abhidhamma and this analytical definition of how moments of experience arise one after another. You're giving it far too much weight, and in doing so, you're losing the spirit of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha's teachings have a magnificent, uplifting, expansive, very broad view of spiritual life. The Abhidhamma, because it's so detailed and systematized, takes the heart out of the Buddha's teachings. It's too dry. Considered as a complete system, it doesn't have the juice that the original teachings had."

So the Sautrantikas said, "That's not the essence of the Dharma. You've lost something of the heart of the Dharma. You're relying too much on technicalities. We're going to go back and ground ourselves in the original teachings of the suttas"—or sutras in Sanskrit.

This was another split. The Sautrantikas split off from the Sarvastavadins sometime by the 2nd century of the Common Era. This represents another kind of dispute that is felt today in the Buddhist world between groups that tend to rely on the Abhidhamma as the ultimate authority and those who rely on the classical teachings of the Buddha as final authority.

And for example, when I went to Burma to practice about a year and a half ago, I met one Abhidhamma teacher who told me, "Oh, well, in Burma we regard the Vinaya as the teaching on sīla. We regard the Suttapitaka as the teaching on samādhi, or you could say samatha. And we regard the Abhidhamma as the teaching on paññā, or wis-

dom." So in their view, the Abhidhamma was the highest of the three books. Of course, we tend to regard the suttas as the source for samādhi and paññā, both. And I trust in the spirit of the suttas more than I do the spirit of the Abhidhamma.

So the next interesting development was King Asoka, in his love of the Dharma, sent missionaries out in many different directions. Most of them didn't really eventually take root. They may have made a temporary inroad, but in the long run they disappeared from the face of Indian Buddhism. But one missionary had a profound effect that lasts to the current day, and that was King Asoka's son, whose name was Mahinda. He sent Mahinda to the island of Sri Lanka.

Mahinda there established a great monastery. It was there about 150 years later that the texts—all the suttas and the vinaya and the abhidhamma—were first written down. Mahinda went to Sri Lanka about 240 BCE, and around another 150 years later, the texts were first written down. They were written down on leaves. Apparently that was the best writing technology that was available at the time.

The amazing thing is that Buddhism was more or less wiped off the face of India. I'll talk about this more tomorrow night, but due to Muslim invasions from the West, Buddhism in India was almost completely obliterated and the texts were destroyed. But the invasion did not reach Sri Lanka, and the Pali texts that were written down 400 years after the death of the Buddha have survived to the present day.

It's quite incredible when you think about it. The twenty-some volumes of words that were spoken 2,500 years ago have come down in a somewhat authentic form. I don't know how authentic, but somewhat authentic because they still liberate people and they're so consistent. In this unbroken and relatively uncorrupted way. It's just mind-boggling to think of the generations of practitioners and scribes and scholars who have done the work to make that available to us today. And now most of that canon is available in pretty well-translated English, pretty readable English today.

So this is the only source for an entire canon from any of the schools of early Buddhism—the Pali texts that were taken to Sri Lanka. Why was it written down in Pali? Scholars are not quite sure. They think either Pali is very close to the language that the Buddha spoke, which was probably Magadhi, but they can't be 100% sure of that. Or one scholar suggested that Pali was the language that Mahinda's mother spoke, and that's why he wrote it down in Pali. But one or another, that's what the text came down in.

It's a near neighbor of Sanskrit, but it's not as elegant as Sanskrit. People who know Sanskrit and then go learn Pali say it's like speaking Sanskrit with marbles in your mouth. So the really elegant language of the Buddhist text was Sanskrit. And some of that has come down, but not very much of it.

So we're up to about 100 BCE. And this is just around the time when the Mahayana starts to arise in India. The origins of the Mahayana are not clear at all. Some scholars say that it originated with groups of lay people. Some scholars say that it originated in the south of India. But the real origins of it are unclear from a scholarly point of view.

One thing that does seem apparent is that it was something of a backlash to the Abhidhamma—to the overly structured, systematic, dry, detailed explanations of the Abhidhamma. And the Mahayana sought to restore the mystic side and the inspiration to Buddhism.

So I think that's where we'll stop tonight, the advent of the Mahayana. Tomorrow we'll talk about the growth of the Mahayana, the arising of the Vajrayana.

CHAPTER 265

The History of Buddhism in India - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · 1h04

> *In this comprehensive historical survey, Guy Armstrong traces the evolution of Buddhism from the 18 early schools to its eventual disappearance from India. He explores the emergence of Mahāyāna around 100 BCE, with its emphasis on the Bodhisattva path and the pāramīs, contrasting the humanness of the Buddha in Pāli suttas with his cosmic portrayal in Mahāyāna literature. The talk examines the Prajñāpāramitā literature and the sectarian tensions that arose, including the pejorative terms Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna.*
>
> *Armstrong provides detailed analysis of Nāgārjuna's revolutionary Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (circa 100 CE), describing how this master philosopher systematically demonstrated emptiness not only of phenomena but of the Buddha's teachings themselves, leading to the paradoxical insight that saṃsāra and nibbāna are indistinguishable. He discusses the subsequent Yogācāra (Cittamātra) school's contributions, including Buddha-nature (tathāgatagarbha), the three kāyas, and the ālaya-vijñāna.*
>
> *The presentation concludes with the development of Vajrayāna practices, their tantric origins, and the transmission of Dzogchen teachings through Garab Dorje to Padmasambhava. Armstrong traces Buddhism's decline in India through Muslim invasions until its virtual disappearance by the 12th century, noting its modern revival through the Tibetan diaspora.*

Tonight I want to continue the history of Buddhism in India that I started last evening. In yesterday's story, we had reached the point about 400 years after the death of the Buddha where there had been significant splintering among the schools of early Buddhism. History relates that there were eighteen different schools formed in these four centuries—the splintering was that great. Of those eighteen schools, only one has survived to today, and that is the Theravada, which traces its lineage back to the very early days of the Sthaviras. All the other schools were basically lost as Buddhism continued to evolve.

Around 100 BCE, the first intimations of the Mahayana came into evidence. You are probably very familiar with the difference in emphasis that the Mahayana offered to the classical teachings. They placed great emphasis on the Bodhisattva path and the paramis as the main foundation for development of the Bodhisattva path. The other primary emphasis was on the concept of emptiness.

The Mahayana claimed that it was a new kind of revelation of emptiness. In the original teachings in the Pali, or rather the Nikayas, there had been pointings to the emptiness of self through the doctrine of anatta, or not-self, but there had not been a clear pointing to the emptiness of objects, the lack of solidity, the lack of inherent existence in the phenomenal world.

In fact, you do find pointings to this in the early texts. In the Pali texts, there's one particularly striking sutta called "A Lump of Foam," in which the whole material world is compared to a mass of foam floating on a river. Other parts of our experience are compared to mirages and juggler's tricks or magic tricks. But these passages are rare, and the emphasis in the early teachings was certainly not on the emptiness of the phenomenal world—it was much more on the emptiness of self.

The qualities of the paramis were discussed in the Nikayas, but they weren't assembled as a list and put together as a primary vehicle to awakening or particularly to Buddhahood. Of course, the concept of the Bodhisattva was in the early texts because the first Bodhisattva in that era was Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha. He talked about his journey over lifetimes.

There are many stories recorded after his death, one of which recounted what is supposedly the moment at which he decided to become a Buddha—the moment at which the bodhisattva aspiration was awakened in that being. It's said that he was an ascetic named Sumedha, who was practicing very diligently and close to full awakening. He caught a glimpse of a Buddha of his era who was called the Buddha Dipankara. He was so impressed by the Buddha's bearing and his majesty and the vision of compassion that he was manifesting in bringing the teaching to an era that didn't have the message of liberation that Sumedha gave up his aspiration to become enlightened and aspired instead to become a Buddha in a future era.

It's said that Dipankara recognized that wish in Sumedha's mind at that moment and validated that he would indeed become a Buddha in some future time. Sumedha went away and meditated: "How can I become a Buddha? What is the path?" He came up with the list—in Theravadan language—of ten paramis and then set out to practice those over something like four aeons in innumerable kalpas to become Siddhartha Gautama, who awakened in our time as the Buddha.

It's interesting, isn't it, that having practiced the path of the Bodhisattva, there is no record in the Nikayas—at any rate, in the early suttas—of the Buddha promoting that as a path to any of his followers. The same path he himself had taken, yet no record of that

being promoted or offered or suggested as a path for his followers to take up themselves. That's curious. I don't know why. Perhaps that kind of aspiration, he felt, had to come from deep within one's own volition.

At any rate, when the Mahayana philosophy came along, this was the first recorded instance of the Bodhisattva path being promoted as a general guideline for all dedicated practitioners. This was something really new. But otherwise, many of the elements of the Mahayana can be found in the Pali Canon, just with different emphases. There's not so much that's totally new.

When I speak about the Mahayana, I'm going to quote extensively from Edward Conze. Conze was a British scholar of the last century who did most of the main translations of key Mahayana texts. He's very familiar with the Mahayana and has also studied extensively the earlier schools, with a very good understanding of the history of Buddhism. What Conze says is that the Mahayana placed new emphasis on commonly accepted traditional material—new emphasis, and some of the terminology was definitely new.

The first Mahayana texts that really surfaced were the texts called the Sutras on the Prajnaparamita. These came into evidence somewhere between around 100 BCE and 50 CE—in about a 150-year span, the Prajnaparamita texts were coming into evidence.

Prajna means wisdom in Sanskrit. Paramita means perfection. So the quality of Prajnaparamita means the quality of wisdom that's brought into perfection, or it's sometimes translated as transcendent wisdom. This feature of the mind, transcendent wisdom, is represented in the iconography as a female. There's a statue on the back altar which is the female icon of Prajnaparamita. She is female because she is considered to be the mother of the Buddhas. Buddhas are born by perfecting the quality of prajna or wisdom. This factor of mind which lies within all of us is the factor that gives birth to all the Buddhas.

That's why she is sometimes called the mother of the Buddhas.

The Prajnaparamita Sutras focus almost exclusively on this quality of wisdom in its transcendent aspect. They are essentially statement after statement about this factor of mind which, in their interpretation, has an ultimate quality. As Rinpoche has been describing the ground over the last couple of days—that facet of Buddha nature which is at the basis of our minds—Prajnaparamita is an aspect of that ground. So the sutras point again and again to the transcendent and undying nature of Prajnaparamita, the ultimate nature.

This is from Conze: "The lengthy writings on transcendent wisdom are one long declamation in praise of the Absolute. Everybody knows, of course, that nothing can usefully be said about the absolute. This had prompted the Theravadans to keep silent, or at least nearly silent about it. The Mahayanists, on the other hand, consider everything that might reasonably be said about the absolute and then expressly reject it as untrue and inadequate."

I like the flavor of this. It's quite true. The Theravadans had kept nearly silent about the nature of the Absolute. When you read the Pali Suttas, very little is said about Nibbana, the actual experience of the unconditioned. It's mostly described in negative terms—called the unborn, the undying, the unceasing, the unchanging, the unconditioned. But rarely is it described in anything like positive terms.

I don't think that's because the Buddha was unfamiliar with its qualities. But why did he choose to keep so silent about it? My speculation is that you see this through a lot of his teachings—he uses negative description again and again as a way of expressing teachings that is incontrovertible. No one can argue with a negative expression. Moreover, it's impossible to make a concrete goal out of a negative expression. So in a way, his reluctance to speak in any sort of flowery language about the great mental and heart qualities of the unconditioned acted as a way to keep people from grasping after it and possibly imitating it.

There's this famous story in the Pali texts where the Buddha was walking through a forest with a group of his monks. One of the monks asked a question about some abstruse philosophical doctrine. The Buddha said, "I've chosen not to talk about that." The Buddha picked up a handful of leaves off the forest floor. He said, "Which do you think is greater, O monks, the number of leaves in my hand or the number of leaves on all the trees in this forest?" And the monks were no dummies. They said, "Venerable sir, of course the number of leaves in the forest is far greater than the number of leaves in your hand." He said, "Just so. What I have revealed to you is like this handful of leaves compared to all that the Tathagata knows. The mind of the Tathagata is omniscient and knows many, many things. What I have revealed to you is only this handful of leaves. But this handful of leaves, which I have shared with you, is enough for you to become liberated, to walk the path to freedom."

So that explains a little of why the Buddha was so reticent to talk about these other topics.

The Mahayanists were not, and they haven't stopped talking since. Quite thankfully, actually, because I believe that the Mahayana emphasis on these transcendent qualities was an attempt to correct some of the dryness that had crept into the early schools of

Buddhism based on the importance of the Abhidhamma. I think that the schools had gotten too dry and technical and had lost some of the living spark of awakening. That's my guess, and some of the scholars hint at this too.

So the Mahayanists found a way to re-inject that creative vitality into the Buddhist lineage. I find that very inspiring. I love to read these sutras today for their pointing to the magnificent possibilities of the human heart and mind that they come back to again and again and again. I think it really orients our practice in the right direction and the right spirit. I think it was very, very important.

You can also see that as the Mahayana points to the Absolute, which cannot be touched or changed, it provides a striking counterpoint to the developmental model of the early Nikaya teachings. The early Nikaya teachings are all about development from a state of suffering and ignorance through the purification of heart and mind through meditation practice to reach the unstained state of purity. The Mahayanists come in at the unstained state of purity and say fundamentally, "This is all that is."

So there's been a tension and continues to be a tension really throughout spiritual life, through all denominations, between those who look at the pure aspect of our nature—the natural great perfection of the world the way it is—and those who look at the suffering that exists and wish to move out of the suffering and the defilements that cause it toward that purity. There's a tension that exists between the Mahayanists and the Theravadans that exists today in many different schools, and it's the heart of the paradox within true spiritual life.

We talked last night about the Heart Sutra, how it restates the teaching on the five aggregates, dependent origination, and the four noble truths, and then negates every one of them. This is the difference between the ultimate view, which recognizes innate purity, and the conventional view, which is development as progress over time from defilement to purity.

The Heart Sutra is one of the body of Prajnaparamita texts. There are a number of them extant today, and the Heart Sutra is one. So this quality of paradox comes into the Buddhist tradition around this time, and you can see how as this migrated into Zen, they built a dynasty on paradox. Every time a question came up, you couldn't answer it rightly because if you spoke from the conventional view, you'd be hit; if you spoke from the ultimate view, you'd be hit. Your answer had to combine both.

There are, of course, great differences between the expression of the Mahayana and the expression of the Theravada.

In this vast cosmic presentation, such a Buddha will not have a backache. Such a Buddha will not be unable to resolve a quarrel between mere mortals. This is the flavor of the Buddha in the Mahayana sutras—a movement from the human dimension into a very vast cosmological dimension in which the Buddha becomes an archetype, so perfected that he is really removed from the human realm, even from the discomfort of backaches.

One of the other qualities that emerged with the Mahayana sutras—and again, I'm going to quote Conze, so you know this didn't come from me—was an increasing spirit of sectarianism. Another characteristic, as the Mahayana sutras evolved, was this growing sectarian tendency.

This is quite interesting, because one might think that as spiritual teachings develop and mature, they would become more inclusive and embracing. Yet what we see in the evolution of the Mahayana literature is actually the opposite—a growing emphasis on distinguishing the Mahayana path as superior to what they called the Hinayana, or "lesser vehicle." This sectarian quality became woven into the very fabric of many Mahayana texts, creating a kind of spiritual hierarchy that placed the bodhisattva ideal above the arhat ideal of the early teachings.

The irony is profound: here are teachings about universal compassion and the liberation of all beings, yet they're presented in a way that subtly—or sometimes not so subtly—denigrates other approaches to awakening. It's as if the very impulse toward the ultimate and the absolute began to create a kind of spiritual pride, a sense that "our way" is not just different, but inherently superior.

This tension between inclusion and exclusion, between the universal and the particular, runs through much of religious history. Even as the Mahayana proclaimed the emptiness of all phenomena and the interconnectedness of all beings, it simultaneously created new forms of spiritual division. The very teachings that pointed toward the dissolution of all boundaries ended up creating new ones.

And you will find this as you read through the Prajnaparamita Sutras. The early Mahayana Sutras, and the Heart Sutra is no exception, start to cast aspersions on some of the central figures in the Nikaya schools of Buddhism.

The main victim, the chief butt of all the jokes, becomes Sariputta. Sariputta was one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha in the Pali texts, on a par with Moggallana. These were his two main disciples. Moggallana was said to be very advanced in psychic powers, therefore the power of concentration, which gives rise to psychic powers. Sariputta was the most developed of all the disciples in wisdom, in paññā.

But Sariputta's name became associated with the Abhidhamma. I don't know if this is true or not. We don't know historically if Sariputta did have a hand in creating the Abhidhamma, but his name has become linked to it. So as the early Mahayanas wanted to push back against the formalism of the Abhidhamma, they chose Sariputta as their whipping boy. So he who was formerly foremost among all the Buddha's disciples in wisdom becomes the object of scorn in the Prajnaparamita, in the teachings on wisdom sutras.

In these sutras, Sariputta has to get lectured to because he believes that things exist substantially. That's the crime of which he is accused. Things exist substantially. So he has to be lectured to, to be corrected of that deviant view. And this is the criticism that is launched of the later Abhidhamma, that it's too substantialist and that it reifies these phenomena called Dhammas, which it said were the irreducible units of experience. We'll come back to this later.

So, who lectures Sariputta? In the Heart Sutra, and I think other Prajnaparamita sutras too, the lecturing is handed out by Subhuti. Subhuti is also a figure from the Nikaya canons, but he is the disciple of the Buddha who is foremost in loving-kindness. So as the Mahayana elevated the quality of compassion and put it at the center, Subhuti is the ideal spokesperson because he represents the four immeasurable states, the Brahma-viharas—loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. It is the centrality of compassion for the Mahayana that makes Subhuti the ideal spokesperson to Sariputta.

Also, the sort of pejorative terms emerged around this time. Originally, when the Mahayana came into existence, their name for their school, as it was forming as a new school, was the Bodhisattvayana. This was really the new spirit—that we could all become bodhisattvas. The name for the existing schools was Sravaka Yana. Sravaka means listener. It's a word that the Buddha himself used of his Sangha in the time that he was alive because his disciples were hearing the Dharma through listening to him. So in the Pali you hear the term Sawakasangha, the listener Sangha. This is a term that they were quite comfortable with as applied to themselves.

So we have the early Mahayana as the Bodhisattvayana. We have the classical group as the Sravakayana. Those are not yet pejorative. But very soon thereafter, the term Sravakayana got transformed into Hinayana, which means lesser school, and the Bodhisattvayana got elevated into the term Mahayana, which means the great vehicle. And so those are the terms that have really persisted as defined by the Mahayana.

Just so everybody knows, Theravadans don't particularly appreciate being called Hinayanists. We don't mind the Theravadan term, which means way of the elders. Hinayana doesn't rest so comfortably with us. But of course, the classical schools

couldn't resist from name-calling either. So they had a name back for the Mahayanas, which was Vaitulika. Vaitulika means illusionist. I think it's probably because the Mahayanas seemed to be positing this quality of Prajnaparamita as an expression of innate purity that the Buddha himself had not described in that way. So they were called illusionists.

Now, the next very interesting development around this period of time, and it made a great impact on the Mahayana, was the emergence of a person I consider the greatest philosopher in the history of Buddhism after the Buddha himself. That was an Indian teacher named Nagarjuna.

Nagarjuna came in somewhere around 100 CE. The details of his life are not known. The exact time that he lived is not known. Even some of the works that are attributed to him were not necessarily written by him. This comment came from a book written by Stephen Batchelor who translated Nagarjuna's central work and had done a lot of research on his life. But the one work that is attributed to him that we can feel confident he did write was called Mula Madhyamaka Karika. And this means verses on the fundamental middle way. Stephen's book translates it as root verses on the middle way.

This is an incredibly brilliant work. It's hard to describe what an unbelievable piece of writing it is, written close to two thousand years ago. It's been compared in modern times to the work of the philosopher Wittgenstein, but preceded him by about two thousand years.

The Sanskrit form has survived and been translated into numerous languages—Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese—and several good English translations now exist. I find it a mind-blowing work. I believe Nagarjuna's purpose in writing it was precisely to blow our minds—to stop our conceptual thought processes entirely. In this cessation of conceptualization, he seeks to open us to the direct experience of emptiness. I believe that's why he wrote it, and I find that this is exactly how it functions when I read it.

His method involves taking the factor of emptiness and demonstrating it repeatedly, anywhere the reader might be inclined to find a resting point, a secure foothold, a solid place to take a stand. He begins with the usual Buddhist descriptors—the six sense bases, internal and external, the aggregates—and reveals the emptiness of each of these dhammas. The first part of the book clearly refutes the Abhidhamma's tendency to reify these dhammas, these existents as substantial things.

After dismantling these foundational concepts, you might think, "Okay, I can handle this. This is the essential meaning of the lack of solidity within the created world, but I still have the path. I still have the Buddha's teachings to rest upon." Then Nagarjuna does something extraordinarily original: he applies the concept of emptiness to all of the Buddha's teachings themselves.

He applies it to the Four Noble Truths, to dependent origination, even to awakening and nirvana. As you progress through the book's twenty-seven chapters, each one pulls another rug from beneath your feet. By the end, the mind literally has nowhere to take a stand. This is the freedom from view that truly opens us to the experience of emptiness.

The Buddha taught the emptiness of the phenomenal world, but he didn't teach the emptiness of his own teachings. Why would he? Until you had taken refuge, he wouldn't want that rug pulled from underneath you. But once you have committed, there's a tendency to solidify a view around that to which you've committed. This is the rug that Nagarjuna wants to pull away.

His writings are intended for a sophisticated audience—those who have already taken refuge and committed themselves to the path. This becomes a way of opening beyond adherence to any particular view.

Let me share some of the pith statements from Nagarjuna's work. "Emptiness stops conceptual proliferation." When you realize immediately the truth of emptiness, your mind stops wandering. This itself places you in a state of non-clinging to view. If the mind stops wandering, it naturally and completely rests in the present moment.

Another quotation: "That to which language refers is denied." Look around this room at the things language refers to—woman, man, floor, ceiling, painting, statue. What would it mean to deny all of that? Nagarjuna points to the fact that none of these conventional realities exist independently, substantially, or solidly. This is what Rinpoche indicated yesterday when he spoke of even pure perception of phenomena containing an element of illusion. We need to see through the illusion to the lack of solidity.

Here's another: "The unborn and unceasing nature of reality is comparable to nirvana." We normally take reality to be the physical world, characterized by impermanence—arising and passing. But Nagarjuna says the true nature of reality is unborn and unceasing, and because of this, it resembles nirvana, the unconditioned.

How can this be? When you remove the solid, objective nature of things, there's a way of seeing in which no objects ever come into being. There are only momentary flashings of sense experience, not lasting long enough to be considered objects at any sense door. When one sees like this, one perceives that no objects are arising and passing. Therefore, reality is unborn and unceasing—like the unconditioned.

This opens the door to what I consider the strongest statement in the entire work: "Samsara does not have the slightest distinction from nirvana. Nirvana does not have the slightest distinction from samsara."

Once one reaches this unified understanding that samsara and nirvana are one, this marks the beginning of non-duality. When we dissolve the duality between samsara and nirvana, we dissolve the distinction between path and goal, between ordinary beings and enlightened beings, and naturally between subject and object. This lays the groundwork for the later developments in Buddhist philosophy we'll explore next.

But before we leave Nagarjuna, I want to mention something I find quite fascinating. The Mahayanists have claimed Nagarjuna for many centuries because his teachings are such direct pointings to emptiness. Yet the intriguing thing is that all his vocabulary comes from Nikaya Buddhism. The only references he quotes are to early suttas. All his terminology is completely compatible with early Buddhism, and there is not a single mention of the concept of bodhisattva.

So was Nagarjuna a Theravadan, or was he a Mahayanist? I don't know. But what's starting to happen is that the Theravadans are beginning to reclaim him as one of their own, because there is nothing in his language that is out of step with Theravadan understanding.

Nagarjuna laid the foundation for understanding the non-dual. It took some time for a new school to emerge which synthesized the Mahayana teachings with this new school that Nagarjuna had created, called the Madhyamaka school—the middle way school. The group that accomplished this synthesis was the Yogacara school.

The Yogacarins are extraordinarily influential in the history of Buddhist philosophy, though they're often not known by that name. They had several names. Yogacara itself is not very evocative—it simply means "the conduct of union." But the name that better captures their philosophy is Chittamatra, which means "mind-only." So the Yogacarins are also called the mind-only school.

You hear this flavor in Rinpoche's teachings when he speaks of everything proceeding from the mind—even how we perceive objects of the external world depends on having this particular kind of mind with this particular karma.

The Yogacarins were the ones who developed the concept of Buddha nature. Buddha nature is this intrinsic sense of purity. Rinpoche has been describing it as the ground—the union of emptiness and cognizance and compassionate, unceasing activity. But Buddha nature is not actually found in the Mahayana Sutras. This term does not appear in any of the Prajnaparamita texts or other earlier works. It's a very key concept in Buddhism, but it's a later development.

Buddha nature is our English translation of a Sanskrit term that actually means something slightly different. The Sanskrit is Tathagatagarbha. Tathagata is another name for the Buddha. Garbha means womb. So what this is actually called is "the womb of the Buddhas"—very similar to Prajnaparamita. Buddha nature is called the womb of the Buddhas because it is that element from which all awakened beings and all Buddhas spring forth.

The other key doctrine that the Yogacarins introduced was what's called the three kayas. We've read about these in the chant, and I think Rinpoche will discuss them further—the dharmakaya, the sambhogakaya, and the nirmanakaya. These correspond to empty essence, natural clarity, and manifest compassion. These are three aspects that together make up a unity, which is the Tathagatagarbha, the Buddha nature. But the three kayas were first articulated this way in Chittamatra philosophy.

They were also the school that developed the alaya philosophy—the eighth consciousness, the storehouse of karmic imprints or the karmic bank that Rinpoche has discussed. Remember, the Sarvastivadins tried to answer the question of where karmic imprints reside by saying that past, present and future all still exist in the present. The Yogacarins answered that same question with the concept of the storehouse consciousness, or alaya vijnana.

It was also the Yogacarins who coined the term "the third turning of the wheel." They said the first turning of the wheel was the original teaching at the Deer Park of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The second turning of the wheel were the Prajnaparamita Sutras. And the third turning of the wheel were their own teachings on Buddha nature, the three kayas, and so forth.

The Chittamatrins claimed that all these were taught by the historical Buddha, but scholars understand it differently. Scholars say that these teachings evolved in India at different stages—400 years of the classical teachings, then the emergence of the Mahayana. The Chittamatrins arose around 200 to 300 CE, just a few hundred years after the arising of the Mahayana.

So whether you want to say they were all taught by the Buddha or whether you want to understand them as stages of unfolding, these represent three distinct stages of Buddhist philosophy that remain alive today and are profoundly important. It's very helpful to understand what each contributed: the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, the emptiness teachings, and the teachings on Buddha nature.

The Chittamatra view then became the foundation for what migrated into Tibet and became Dzogchen, and also what developed in China as Chan and later Huayan, migrating to Japan as Zen.

The influence of the Chittamatrans peaked around the 4th century. After that, their influence and popularity didn't grow any further. But what I find even more fascinating is that Buddhist philosophy stopped developing after the Chittamatrans. There have been no important developments in Buddhist philosophy since about 500 to 600 CE. That's 1,500 years ago. It's basically been the same since then. This doesn't mean the practices have remained static, but the philosophical foundations have stayed consistent.

The Chittamatrans and the Madhyamakas have some differences of opinion because Nagarjuna's approach was to cut away everything. Wherever you took a stand, he would cut it away, cut it away, cut it away. The Chittamatrans came and postulated this quality called Buddha nature. Well, the Madhyamakas simply wanted to cut, cut, cut that away too. This kind of debate continues today in Tibetan schools.

Let me share a story that illustrates this ongoing philosophical discussion. Mingyur Rinpoche is the younger brother of Sogyal Rinpoche and was visiting Marin for the first time a few years ago. Marianne kindly asked if Sally and I would like to take Mingyur Rinpoche out for an afternoon of touring Marin. We thought it would be wonderful to spend time with him. Perhaps he'd be interested in seeing some of the natural beauty of the county.

So we got in a car with him and Tashi-la, who many of you know. Tashi-la often travels with Sogyal Rinpoche and has helped assist and teach on these retreats many times. Tashi speaks good English. There were four of us in the car, and we thought we would take him to Mount Tamalpais, which is the highest point in Marin County at about 2,400 feet. You get a great view of San Francisco, the ocean, and the shoreline all the way down almost to Santa Cruz. We thought he'd be really impressed.

As we're driving, I'm trying to make polite conversation because I hadn't met the Rinpoche before. So I asked him through Tashi, who was translating, "How do you find the West?" It was his first trip to America. He said, "Square and clean." End of response. And it is. If you come from Kathmandu or India, where he lives, it is very square and clean. That was his impression of the West.

I waited a while and thought I'd better try again to make conversation. I said, "Do you think that Tibetans tend to be happier than Westerners?" He said, "Yes." End of conversation. We drove in silence for a while.

We got to the top of Mount Tam and decided to walk around the peak. There's a path that takes about twenty minutes to circumambulate, and we started to walk it. It was quite silent. I thought, well, I'd like to find a way to connect with him. He's such an esteemed teacher and an incredible yogi. Mingyur Rinpoche had completed two three-year retreats by the time he was nineteen years old.

So I decided to try a different approach. As we were walking around, I asked Tashi to put this question to him: "What's the difference between the Madhyamaka view and the Dzogchen view?" Mingyur Rinpoche's eyes lit up. He said, "Ah! The first thing you have to understand is there are eighteen different kinds of emptiness."

He kept talking, and the first thing he did was plop right down on the path. Now, the path is only wide enough for two people to walk side by side. Mingyur Rinpoche plops right down on the path. So of course, the other three of us also plop down. He talks very excitedly for about five to ten minutes about the differences in these two views.

He summed it up by saying that the Madhyamakas believe that the Dzogchenpas believe something really exists, but "we don't really believe that. It's just a misunderstanding." And that was the end of our conversation.

We picked up and walked again.

So this kind of tension—that the Madhyamakas cut everything away and are only left with emptiness, and the Chittamatrans posit this notion of Buddha nature in the three kayas—that tension still exists today in the Tibetan world. It is also the same kind of tension that will exist between an orthodox Theravadan looking at the view of Dzogchen.

I've had this discussion with many Orthodox Theravadans. I related one of them yesterday who was not inclined to accept the view of Dzogchen. I said, "But this stuff really works." And that didn't sway him.

This is where I think the interesting point about the controversies comes together. The Yogacharans were aware that they were stirring up controversy in the way they presented the Dharma. And what I think is beautiful is they didn't care. Because what they said is, "What does the theory matter anyway? It all dissolves when you come into emptiness. So what helps you come into emptiness?" That's what they cared about.

I think that's a beautiful guideline for us. What helps you come into the state of emptiness? Many different skillful means may help. We don't need to argue about the arcane philosophical points of their existence or non-existence.

Similarly, I think with Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan getting along in the world today, there are a lot of opportunities for potential philosophical conflict. But that's a good thing also, because all these schools have different styles and different personalities gravitate to the different styles. That's a good thing because there are more options for each of us.

Actually, one of the riffs I've heard along this theme is that in the West, the artists gravitate to Tibetan, the carpenters gravitate to Zen, and the psychotherapists gravitate to Vipassana. So there's a school for everybody.

Conze said that the real difference between the Theravadans and the Mahayanins is that the Theravadans tend to be rationalists and the Mahayanins tend to be mystics. But he elaborated it a little further. He went on to say, "But the difference is really between the rational mysticism of Mahayana and the mystically tinged rationalism of Theravada." So it's not so opposed. Again, it's just a different emphasis. Both of the schools have both aspects.

Conze went on: "The two schools had much common ground in the middle ranges of the path where the renunciates strove for emancipation in a quite rational and businesslike manner." I love that quote—the renunciate striving for emancipation in a rational and businesslike manner.

Again, when we come down to practice, the philosophical differences fall away. And we realize that as we put our heart and soul and body into our practice, we're all heading in the same direction. In one of the suttas of the Pali Canon, the Buddha says, "All the Dhammas have one taste, just like the ocean has one taste, which is the taste of salt. All the Dhammas have one taste, which is the taste of liberation."

A couple of other small points. I've reached the end of most of the philosophy part, but the bodhisattva tradition is still alive in Theravadan countries. There are bodhisattva practitioners today in Burma, which generally is a pretty orthodox Theravadan country. What they have done in order to be able to live lifetime after lifetime is they

have renounced their entry into the first stage of enlightenment. In the Theravadan view, once one attains the first stage of enlightenment called stream entry, one is destined for Arahantship within seven lifetimes. So these practitioners renounce the entry into the stream—as they renounce the realization of nibbana—in order that their rebirths will continue for a long, long time while they're developing all the paramis. This tradition exists also in Theravadan countries.

Another curiosity I came across in my reading is that there was a school in early Sri Lanka called the Mahayana Theravadins. I think this is beautiful because—personal opinion—this is the way that the Dharma is evolving here at Spirit Rock. I think that there's a commitment here to Theravadan practice because it's so simple and down to earth and immediately applicable for people. But the philosophy or the spirit that is accompanying it here has more of a Mahayana flavor than a strict Theravadan flavor. So I think this combination is going to be useful in the West.

The next stage of development was the Vajrayana. The Vajrayana, interestingly enough, according to the histories that I read—including by Tibetan authors—did not represent a new departure philosophically. It rested on the philosophy of all the earlier schools: the Chittamatra, the Mahayana, the Theravada. But what it was was a whole new bag of tricks—a whole new range of meditation techniques that could work on, as one of my friends put it, the technology of consciousness. And the variety, the creativity, the refinement of the Vajrayana methods are amazing, unparalleled in the history of spiritual life that I know of. There's such an incredible range of teachings and practices and options within that tradition.

The term vajrayana, as I understand it—and now I'm not speaking as any kind of expert, I'm just sharing what I've found in my studies—the term vajrayana is more or less synonymous with tantra, as understood in the Buddhist sense. The earliest tantras developed in Hindu practices, so they were borrowed and then elaborated upon originally from the Hindus. So I want to talk a little bit about how they came into being.

This is probably around the 5th or 6th century C.E., when the cult of Shiva was starting to grow. Shiva had been a fertility god in the Indus Valley for a long time, but his influence had lessened because of the Brahmanical influence founded in the Vedas. The earlier fertility gods were more or less put aside. But because of the influence of Buddhism and the rise of Buddhist teachings, the Brahmanical tradition started to decline, and that allowed this earlier fertility cult of Shiva to spring back up.

As adepts began to relate to Shiva, they started to perform sacred dances. In these sacred dances, they would channel the energy, trying to identify their consciousness with the qualities of Shiva or of his consort—particularly Kali. Once they felt they had

channeled that energy and put their mind state into the mind state of the god or goddess, they would carry out their sacred dances so that these dances sprang from a divine origin within the practitioners. This started to become widely popular in northern India.

Then some groups began getting another idea about the god and his consort. They decided: if there's a God and his consort and we're in that divine place, what would it feel like actually to have that sexual union taking place? So these practitioners went off in secret and began to have ritual intercourse when both parties had put their minds into the frame of the god or goddess, practicing the union in intercourse of those two beings.

This practice altogether—both the dances and the ritual sexual practices—became known as deva yoga, or union with the god. This was how Buddhist practitioners first developed this concept, according to the history books. Originally it was done as visualization because the practitioners weren't dancing so much, but they could visualize. They would start to visualize different deities, borrowing some from the list of bodhisattvas and some attributes from the Hindu pantheon.

But as the practices of tantra grew in Buddhism, some of the lay practitioners also began enacting ritual intercourse. They would take the tantric visualizations and carry them out in living form. This practice started to spread.

Imagine what the monks thought about this. This was going on alongside well-established monastic communities completely committed to celibacy. You can imagine as well as I—there's not a record of what was actually said, but you can imagine.

Even the monastic communities adopted the visualizations. The visualizations have come down and are practiced today, even by the Reformed sect, the Gelug order within Tibet, of whom the Dalai Lama is the titular head. Those monks also carry out the visualization part. As far as I know, the celibate monks within the Gelug order do not carry out any actual reenactment of the union of deity and consort. But in other lineages—Nyingma and Kagyu, for example, which Rinpoche mentioned today—practitioners do both the visualization and the actual union with the consort in physical form. These practices are still alive and practiced in the world today.

Around the 6th century, different levels of tantra had emerged that worked on different energies within the subtle body, which Rinpoche was talking about today. In time, in the lineage from which Dzogchen came, there came to be six levels of Tantra, of which the highest was Dzogchen, also called Ati Yoga, peak yoga.

The first records of the Dzogchen teachings in India show it emerging about the 6th century AD. The best history I've found on this topic comes from a Western scholar who's a well-known Tibetan translator and practitioner named John Reynolds, in a book called Golden Letters, which is very interesting.

The Dzogchen practice was originally transmitted from Samantabhadra, who is the ultimate Dharmakaya aspect of Buddhahood beyond conception of the finite intellect, being without limitation and all-pervading like infinite space—the archetypal essence of mind that has never departed from the ground. Samantabhadra transmitted the essence of Dzogchen in a mind transmission without words to another pure being named Vajrasattva.

Vajrasattva is the being represented in this statue on the altar, a symbol of purity and intrinsic awakening. Vajrasattva transmitted it to a human being named Garab Dorje, who was the first human holder of the Dzogchen teachings around the 6th century. Garab Dorje has a famous teaching called "The Three Words That Strike the Vital Point," which Rinpoche often talks about in these retreats and may well in the next few days.

Then Garab Dorje passed it on to a few disciples who transmitted it to Padmasambhava, Vairochana, and Vimalamitra. These were the Indian teachers who carried it into Tibet. The Dzogchen teachings were said to come into Tibet in about the 8th century, and the name Padmasambhava is particularly linked with the Dzogchen lineage as it's carried out through the Nyingma school.

This takes us up into the 8th century. In India in the 8th century, Buddhism was on the decline.

By the 8th century in India, Buddhism was beginning its decline while Hinduism experienced a resurgence. Buddhism would survive in its homeland for only a few more centuries, as around this time, Muslim invasions began from the west and northwest. Turkish Muslim forces entered the subcontinent, and from historical accounts, they pursued what can only be described as a scorched earth policy toward other religious traditions.

These invaders first established their dominance in the western and northwestern regions, systematically destroying monasteries and nunneries while burning countless sacred texts. They then advanced steadily eastward across the subcontinent. By the 12th century, they had conquered the entire upper Ganges Valley, and at that point, Buddhism was essentially eradicated from its birthplace.

The great monasteries lay in ruins. Renowned centers of learning like Nalanda University were completely destroyed. Countless precious texts and teachings vanished forever in the flames—we can only imagine the magnitude of wisdom that was lost during this dark period. From the 12th century until roughly the last century, Buddhism remained virtually non-existent in India.

Remarkably, one of the most significant revivals of Buddhism in India today comes through the Tibetan diaspora. The tragic displacement of Tibetan refugees has brought an unexpected blessing to the world—the reestablishment of Buddhist teachings in the very land where they first flourished. Among all the places experiencing a Buddhist renaissance, India may be the most remarkable.

This brings our historical journey to the present day. Tomorrow, we'll shift our focus to the practical aspects of meditation, diving into the actual methods and techniques. But I wanted to establish this historical foundation first, as it will help illuminate the philosophical principles we'll explore over the coming days as we delve into the meditation practice itself.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

CHAPTER 266

Practicing Rigpa - Part 1

Guy Armstrong · 54 min

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong offers practical guidance on the Dzogchen practice of rigpa following pointing-out instructions given during retreat. He explains that rigpa practice represents the trekchö (cutting through) aspect of Dzogchen - one half of the complete system alongside the more esoteric tögal practice. Armstrong discusses the subtle nature of this practice, comparing it to traditional kasina meditations and emphasizing the importance of faith (saddhā) and trust in approaching such refined objects of meditation.*
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> *The talk explores the four-step technique of 'look, see, rest, liberate' and the necessity of dropping effort between the looking and seeing phases. Armstrong addresses common challenges practitioners face, particularly doubt and the need to recognize the union of emptiness (śūnyatā) and cognizance as the fundamental nature of mind. He provides practical advice on investigating emptiness through three avenues: the space analogy, the emptiness of self (anattā), and the emptiness of objects.*
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> *Drawing connections between Dzogchen and Theravāda approaches, Armstrong discusses how this practice takes awakened mind as the vehicle for the path, contrasting it with gradual purification models. He concludes with practical guidance on eyes-open meditation and managing energy levels during practice, emphasizing that whatever glimpse of the view one receives should be trusted as the foundation for further development.*

This evening I'd like to talk about specifics of the practice that we were introduced to today. Today was quite a special day in the retreat and perhaps in the history of some of your relationship to the Dzogchen lineage because today Rinpoche gave what are called the pointing out instructions.

I'm just curious, for how many people here was this the first time that you've received the pointing out instructions in Dzogchen? Quite a number. This marks a real turning point in your relationship to the practice and the tradition because it is your formal introduction to the view. And until there's a formal introduction to the view, there's not necessarily a clear understanding of the path, because the path and the view are closely related. I'll come back to that a little later. But this really gives you the experiential basis for all your future practice in this technique, in this part of the Dzogchen instructions.

Just one thing to clarify here. Some people who don't know the Dzogchen practice well might assume that the practice we learned today of rigpa is synonymous with Dzogchen practice. But actually it's just half of Dzogchen practice. What we learned today is a technique called trekchö, which literally means cutting through. The idea is that by recognizing the nature of mind one cuts through conceptual proliferation or grasping.

But there's another whole half to Dzogchen practice overall called tögal, which Rinpoche is not going to teach on this retreat, which is very esoteric, and he won't even answer questions about. So just be aware that the practice that we're doing here is the half of Dzogchen practice called trekchö.

It's actually not easy to get these instructions. Rinpoche will not give them except in a week-long retreat. Many other Dzogchen masters will not give them except in a retreat setting and to practitioners who have completed some degree of preliminary practice, perhaps the ngöndro, perhaps other practices. In Tibet, it used to take years of preliminary practice before a teacher would offer the instructions that Rinpoche gave us today. So we're really fortunate to be able to receive them without such a high prerequisite requirement.

Rinpoche's father, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, was kind of a pioneer in this style. When one would meet with Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, he would basically ask, are you Buddhist and are you committed? And if you met those two requirements, then he would offer you the pointing out. It was considered very generous. But it helped a lot of people. So I think that through the family lineage, Tsoknyi Rinpoche is also inspired to offer them in that way. We're very fortunate to be able to receive them now.

In a way, there's an initiation aspect to what happened for you today. It allows you access to information, teachings, and texts that you might not have had before. This is one text that a number of you are very familiar with, called The Flight of the Garuda. It's from a Dzogchen master from the 1800s named Lama Shabkar. This is from the very first page of the book, from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "It is the opinion of myself and Dudjom Rinpoche that texts such as these should only be shared with people who have received the pointing out transmission from a qualified master."

You have now received the pointing out instruction from a qualified master in the Nyingma lineage. So this opens the possibility for you to receive teachings and read texts that weren't previously available to you. It's a good day.

I want to talk about some of the specifics of doing this practice, but before I do, I just want to say, in my opinion, it is a hard practice because it's such a subtle practice. The more subtle the objects get in meditation, the more difficult it is to know if we're doing it properly or not.

I have a good friend who's also a vipassana teacher named Steve Armstrong. In the 1980s, he spent five years in Burma as a monk and practiced very diligently. I actually don't know of any practitioners in our tradition—Westerners who practiced more diligently than Steve did. At one point, I think he did almost two straight years of intensive practice, quite rigorous intensive practice. So at the peak of his effort, he was sleeping just one hour a night. The rest of the day was sitting and walking, sitting and walking. He said of this time in his practice that he would fall asleep at night, or probably early in the morning, truth to tell, with a thought in his mind. And when he woke up in the morning, the thought would complete itself. That's how little his mind had wandered away during the hour of sleep that he got.

Well, when he was in this cycle of deep practice, he went through a series of concentration shamatha practices that led to the absorptions. And after his teacher had trained him in that through a preliminary means, his teacher recommended that he learn that access through what are called the kasinas.

Kasinas are traditional meditation objects found in the Pali suttas and the Visuddhimagga—essentially representations of elements or colored discs. One might meditate on white kasina or red kasina, yellow kasina, earth kasina. Steve was instructed to meditate on blue kasina, but he didn't have a physical disc to generate the image. His instruction was simply: meditate on blue. That was it. Twenty hours a day, meditate on blue.

This is a subtle object, because you don't necessarily have anything in your field of experience to call up that image. When you close your eyes, you're supposed to see blue, fix it in your mind, and develop one-pointed concentration on that color. That's a hard practice. But in my opinion, the nature of mind is more subtle than the color blue. I say this not to discourage you—I don't want to discourage you—but to give you an appreciation for the challenge that this kind of practice represents. It's not an easy thing to get one's arms around in the beginning. But as Rinpoche says, as we continue to connect again and again, it becomes very, very easy and simple. It's something that really grows over time. It's also, as Rinpoche mentioned, very, very natural.

This is a quote from Suzuki Roshi, who was a great master in the lineage of Soto Zen. Soto Zen is a different practice than Dzogchen, but I think the understanding is somewhat similar. Suzuki Roshi said: "Strictly speaking, for a human being, there is no other

practice than this. There is really no other practice than this." This can apply to a range of practices, but I feel that our Dzogchen practice, as we're learning it here, has that quality too.

Remember that Rinpoche mentioned a day or two ago that Dzogchen doesn't just mean a meditation technique. Fundamentally, it is more than that. The term Dzogchenpo means the great completion, or it's sometimes translated as the great perfection. This is a statement about the nature of things—a pointing to the perfect way that things already are. Every spiritual tradition has this pointing to the perfection in the order of everything, but I feel that the Dzogchenpa way of explaining it is a particularly elegant way to describe it.

So why is this important? It means that all we need to do in meditation is rest in the way things are, because the way things are is fundamentally complete, perfect, and all right already. It's not about changing anything about the way things are. It's recognizing that intrinsic perfection, connecting, and then resting there.

This is the deepest part of each of our minds. It is not missing from the mind of any human being, or in fact, any sentient being. There was a great quote from Huang Po, a Zen master from long ago, who said that even frogs and all wriggling things are possessed of this Buddha nature. Naturally, each one of us is possessed of this nature of perfection.

The meditation practice is just an encouragement to drop any other activity and rest in that dimension—that dimension which is really the foundation of everything. This is a quote from a Tibetan teacher named Dudjom Lingpa, in a book whose title I appreciate as much as anything about it: Buddhahood Without Meditation. Isn't that appealing? Wouldn't you love to reach Buddhahood without meditation?

This is just a portion of the quote. He said that this practice "takes the fundamental nature of reality as the unsurpassable ultimate refuge." Let me read that again: Our practice takes the fundamental nature of reality as the unsurpassable ultimate refuge. What could be safer? What could be more reliable? What could we better put our trust in? Or our faith?

This word faith in Pali is saddha. In Sanskrit, it's shraddha.

So in Pali, it's saddha, and in Sanskrit, it's shraddha. The etymological origin of that word is "to place one's heart upon." The source of our faith is what we can really place our heart upon. So this practice is a direct pointing to that which we can really place our heart upon, really rest in—something that will always hold us and always be there for us.

Of course, it's important to understand the meaning of the word "reality" in a Buddhist context, because it's different than the Western scientific context. If you ask somebody on the street, "What is reality?" they'll point to physical reality—the earth, the trees, the sky. That's physical reality, and in the Western view, that's the ultimate reality.

If you think about it, this is true. This is what Westerners assume is the ultimate truth of things: that matter came first in the universe out of the Big Bang, and then matter did different things, and eventually some of it collected, and then some water formed, and then chemicals got struck by lightning, and then there was conscious life. That's the Western view. And the Western view is that we take birth in this physical world and only then do we exist. So it's here and enduring. We come into it and we're part of the reality for a while, but when we die, we're out of it. And really, we don't necessarily continue. That's kind of the Western scientific worldview. So it takes the physical world as reality and ultimate reality.

But what's missing, of course, is the element of consciousness. The physical world is only an appearance in our consciousness. So in Buddhism, reality means our human experience. That's what we're looking at. That's the field we're looking at—our human experience.

So I think that this is largely a practice of faith and trust. Ajahn Sumedho is a great teacher in the Theravadan tradition. He's an American monk who lives in England. He was teaching here a few years ago, and he said, "I think the main problem with Western meditators is not that they don't try hard enough. They try plenty hard. The problem is they don't trust enough." He said, "We don't trust ourselves enough. We don't trust our experience in meditation and in life." The sense of self-doubt or self-judgment is so strong that we don't validate our experience. We criticize it too easily. And then in that way, we kind of pull the rug out from under our own faith and trust.

So this path that was unfolded today is a profound path. Of it, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche said, "The way to be enlightened is to train in recognizing mind essence and stabilize in the recognition. This is the very way to be enlightened—to train in recognizing mind essence and stabilize in the recognition."

This is very different from the Theravadan model that underlies Vipassana, where you're supposed to have four different moments of enlightenment, where the mind comes into nibbana at different depths, and each time different fetters are uprooted. And when all the fetters are uprooted, then the mind has become purified. So there are clearly different experiences along the way.

But Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche is saying that we can become enlightened through recognizing mind essence and learning to stabilize in it. Now think about that. That's a very appealing prospect. It means that the way is pretty clear for us. It means that there don't necessarily have to be these very unusual kinds of altered experiences, although some of them undoubtedly would come. But it's another model of a way to be free.

And in this model, the freedom comes at the start of the journey. When we connect with mind essence, nature of mind, rigpa, we're connecting with something in us that's already free. And then we're learning to be there more and more of the time.

In fact, this is a quote from Reginald Ray, who's a Western teacher of Tibetan Buddhism. He said, "The tantras in general, the Vajrayana path, takes awakened mind as the vehicle for the path." That's a beautiful concept.

As I mentioned the other day, in the Theravadan we start off looking at the defilements and mustering as many wholesome forces as we can to transform them. But in the tantras of the Vajrayana, the very basis for the path is the awakened mind. Now, what do you do when you're not awakened yet? You imitate it as best you can.

In my opinion, that's essentially what our practice of Rigpa is—our attempt to discover the awakened mind right now and then rest in it.

I want to share some of my own experiences and perceptions in the development of this practice. But before I do, I must offer a significant disclaimer. I'm not a Dzogchen teacher. I'm a Vipassana teacher. I'm not qualified to be a Dzogchen teacher, nor am I authorized to be one. I don't ever plan to become a Dzogchen teacher. However, from early on, when I would sit these retreats with Rinpoche, he encouraged me to share from my experience during the evening sessions when I was a yogi.

So please take this not as any authoritative pronouncement, but simply as sharing from a fellow practitioner. If you find it helpful, wonderful. If you don't find it helpful, you're welcome to discard it. If I say something incorrect, I hope you'll forgive me, because this is not my area of authority or expertise. I'm simply trying to clarify some of the things I've learned along the way.

What I heard Rinpoche say today is that he was introducing to us a new technique for practice that goes beyond shamatha, beyond shamatha without support, and beyond vipassana—the practice of look, see, rest, and liberate. Of these four, the practice of "look," he explained, is clearly a technique. It's clearly fabricated. It involves effort, will, and concept—all those elements that Rigpa ultimately transcends are present in this first step of looking.

What's particularly interesting—and I think he mentioned this as well—is that "look, see, rest, liberate" is about as far as technique goes in this practice. Vipassana yogis, how many breath practices have you received over the years? Twelve? Twenty? Two dozen? That's not even including practices with the body, sounds, and so many other techniques within vipassana. Within this approach, there's essentially one. So you'll be hearing a great deal about it.

Some friends and I went to see Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche in Kathmandu a little over ten years ago, toward the end of his life. I'm very glad we made that journey because he was such a special teacher. We met him at his monastery at that time, Nagi Gompa, outside of Kathmandu. He gave us the Dzogchen teachings and pointing-out instructions over several days of visits—meeting with him for a few hours at a time.

At some point during our time together, he said, "When you come to me for teachings, I'm going to be like a field mouse. You know, when a field mouse runs across the field and makes a sound, it only knows one sound to make, and that is 'squeak.' Every time you see the field mouse, it's always 'squeak, squeak.' So when you come to me, I'm only going to be making one sound." His "squeak" was: recognize mind essence. That was the sole instruction, given over and over again.

You encounter long Dzogchen texts, and they're a bit like the Prajnaparamita Sutras—they find many, many creative ways to say the same thing and point you back to the same direction. But it's this central direction, again and again.

So the "look" is fabricated. Rinpoche offered three ways today to practice the look, and as I remind you of what those were, I'm going to turn off the microphone because this should not be recorded. I'll simply project my voice a bit more. If anyone is listening to the recording, know that there will be some moments of silence.

[Brief pause for unrecorded instruction]

The first pointing-out instruction involved recognition of what's gone. Another was the sense of dropping, letting go and dropping while exhaling. And the third was the hand disappearing up the sleeve. These are all somewhat evocative approaches.

Tomorrow evening I'm going to offer many more different ways to practice "look." You can be creative in how you approach the looking. I'll go through that comprehensive list tomorrow night rather than getting into it now, as it's quite extensive.

But I feel that the more different ways you have to look, the greater potential you'll have to find one that suits you. I find that I'll use one technique for a while and it'll be very evocative, very juicy. I'll apply it and the seeing will be strong - the result of the looking will be strong. But as I keep using it over and over, I use up its magic power a little bit. Then I look again and nothing happens, and I think, "Oh, I'll try another one."

So I'll try another technique and use that for a while, and then it gets juicy again. I'll use that, but then I'll use it up. Then I'll probably go back to the first one, or if I want, I'll go to another one. I usually have about three different ways to do the looking, and I'll just vary them depending on which one is most effective.

One of the things I heard in the group interview today, and I think in here also, is that different individuals found different techniques useful for themselves. For some people, the dropping was useful. For other people, Tsoknyi Rinpoche's method was useful. For others, the third approach was useful. So it's good to have a range so that you can try different things and see what's working for you.

We do this bit of looking in whatever technique we want to use, and the next step is to see. Somewhere in between the look and the see, something has to happen - the effort has to fall away. This doesn't always happen so naturally. As Rinpoche mentioned, if there's hope and fear around it, that'll constitute a form of effort that will block the clear seeing. He used that analogy of trying to create some space by putting something in between the fingers, but then you have to get rid of the something that was in between. That's the effort or the fabrication.

In other retreats, what he said is that between look and see, we need to have a little miracle - the dropping of effort. There's no way to make that happen. But what really helps that little miracle to happen is relaxation and trust. So every time you approach the looking, check that there's that sense of relaxation, and look and see if you're willing to trust. Trust in this case basically means once you look, take what you get. Take what you get as being what you see.

It's very easy in the early stages of doing this practice to get really worried: "Did I get it? Didn't I get it? Did I get the real thing? Did I get the fake thing? Is this an ordinary experience or is this something really extraordinary that I'm looking for? I just don't know what this rigpa stuff is all about." These questions are natural when we start a new meditation practice. I found them when I started vipassana. I found them when I started metta practice. I found them when I started this practice.

But there's a word in our tradition for these kinds of questions when they really bind us up - doubt. It's one of the five hindrances that the Buddha pointed to. The antidote to doubt is faith. When doubt is uppermost in your mind, dominating your mind, it blocks you from actually putting your full conviction into your effort, because you don't know that it will lead anywhere. But you need to proceed as though you are sure it's going to lead somewhere.

Sharon Salzberg went to practice loving-kindness meditation intensively for the first time with Sayadaw U Pandita, a Burmese master in Rangoon. At the start of her session, in one of the early interviews, he asked her, "Are you confident you can do this practice?" What do you say to your teacher at that point? If you say yes, you risk looking a little arrogant, don't you? But if you say no, that indicates some vacillation. I think Sharon said something like, "I think so." And U Pandita said, "You should always be really confident. When you start a new practice, you should always be extremely confident."

That gives you the best chance of success with the practice.

Please recognize that when these kinds of questions arise, if they undermine your confidence, this is the hindrance of doubt. Try to recognize it as doubt. Try to let it go. Try to reestablish your trust and reapply the technique.

Sometimes doubt comes from really good questions. Someone mentioned today in a group interview: "This cognizant quality that is being talked about as the ground—ongoing and unborn and unceasing—I was taught that consciousness is impermanent. It's one of the five aggregates, and all the aggregates are impermanent. So how can this knowing be a lasting quality?"

This is a really good question. This is the question that drove me crazy for a few years until I resolved it to my satisfaction. I'm going to explain that in a few more nights, but I don't want to do it tonight. It's good to let this question challenge you for a while, because it's when we investigate these questions that really mean something to us that we gain our own conviction in our practice. You arrive at your own truth to answer and resolve these kinds of questions. So this is a very good question, and it's an important one to contemplate.

But I want to give a temporary answer to this. Ajahn Sumedho was teaching here a few years ago, and he teaches a Theravadan practice which puts the emphasis on this same quality of awareness as the undying—the empty awareness as the undying. So I

raised the same question to Ajahn Sumedho. I said, "You're talking about awareness as the undying, but in the texts, it always talks about consciousness as impermanent. How do you reconcile those two?"

He said, "I don't know." He said, "What I know is that this really worked for me." And that's what I would encourage you to try—this concept that you can always tune into the quality of awareness, that the quality of awareness is ever-present.

That feels true, doesn't it? Because it takes a very subtle awareness in order to see the appearing and disappearing of consciousness. It takes a lot of concentration and a lot of mindfulness to be able to see that. So our ordinary experience is, yes, it really feels like awareness is ongoing. So let yourself connect with that feeling.

We're not saying it's the ultimate truth right now. We'll clarify that maybe in a few days. But we're saying there's a real benefit to trusting in this feeling. Because if nothing else, it gives us a refuge from all the flux of impermanence that's going on around us. Phenomena are coming and going. Thoughts are coming and going. Emotions are coming and going. Grasping is coming and going. Here's something that's not touched by that. Awareness is always present. So at least use that as a temporary refuge while we clarify the philosophy in a few more days and see if it's not helpful as a skillful means.

When you look, the next step is to see, and then it's important to trust what comes when you see. This is a very important point. Rinpoche was demonstrating this today with the palm pilot and the napkin. You won't find these in the ancient texts, but it's a great analogy. So I want to review again these two aspects because he covered it a couple of days ago.

The palm pilot represents the ground. Recall that the ground has three components which are inseparable: the essence, which is empty; the nature, which is cognizance; and the capacity, which is said to be unconfined.

Now this third one he hasn't talked about much. There's more description of all these in *Carefree Dignity*, which is a transcript of talks from a retreat several years earlier. In those retreats, because the sangha was newer, Rinpoche was giving more detailed descriptions of these basic components of the teachings. So this is a wonderful reference book to have. It has a lot of the material that he will cover in this retreat, explained in a little bit more detail.

If you read about capacity in *Carefree Dignity*, it basically explains it as the mind's ability to flower with beautiful qualities. Sometimes it's talked about as the mind's ability to be ceaselessly responsive. It's sometimes described as unceasing compassionate activity. This means that when we are

resting in the union of essence and nature, which is emptiness and cognizance, that frees the heart in such a way that compassion or wisdom or loving kindness or patience, any of the beautiful qualities can easily flower.

So the capacity when we know the nature and the essence combined is unlimited, this capacity of the mind. That's the way it's described in Carefree Dignity. The capacity is something that is a little more subtle, I think, to intuit. So what I'm going to suggest is that as you play around with the aspects of ground, you look particularly for the first two. Look particularly and make sure you understand clearly the essence, which is empty, and the nature, which is cognizance. Once you have a really good intuitive sense of these two, I think the capacity will be more obvious.

When I first started looking in this way, I would look, and then I was supposed to see, let's just take it as a simple form, emptiness and awareness conjoined, inseparable, indivisible. I hadn't really done the reflection on emptiness that Rinpoche has talked about as being the Vipassana piece of their training. So I got to this quality of emptiness and I was kind of lost. What am I supposed to see when I see emptiness? I didn't get it. Awareness I could get, right? I'm not a bump on a log. Things are happening. I'm not asleep. Right, I got the awareness part. But I didn't get the emptiness for a while.

So I had to do lots of reflection. When I would turn and see, I had to examine, what does emptiness mean? Now as soon as you start examining and reflecting, you're not in rigpa. So I had to give it up at times while I clarified these questions. And you may need to also. If you look and you're not sure what emptiness means in your experience, even though then it's not doing rigpa, I encourage you to investigate until you find out. Maybe it means we do a little vipassana practice on the way to doing true rigpa practice. But until each of us has a real clear sense of what emptiness is and what cognizance is, in a very familiar way, we won't really recognize mind essence.

We need to get to the stage where we've touched these things with our understanding, our intellectual understanding, enough times that when it's there in our experience, we recognize it like an old friend. When you're getting to know somebody for the first time, say somebody's name is Linda. And the first time you meet, you're introduced, this is Linda. And the next time you see Linda, that name may not pop immediately to mind. And you don't know her very well. So you have to remind yourself, oh, that's Linda. I met her a week ago. She works at such and such a place. And the third time you meet her, maybe her name pops to mind immediately, but you don't quite remember all the personality. And then little by little, after seeing Linda a lot of times,

when she walks into view, your heart kind of comes out with a recognition and you don't have to say anything. You don't have to say her name or where you met her or all the things you've done together or any of that. It's just you know her.

This is the kind of familiarity we need to get with the union of emptiness and cognizance. We need to touch it enough times and know it intellectually so that soon when we start touching it, we don't have to think at all. We just recognize, oh, that's it. Then the concepts can really go out of C. C doesn't then have to be conceptual.

So, what does emptiness mean in our experience? I would suggest three avenues of investigation if you find you need to investigate to find out what this means for you. One is the analogy that's often used in Dzogchen practice, which is that analogy of awareness or cognizance or the nature of mind as being like vast space. So in that analogy, you get the sense that the vastness of space includes everything. It includes the sun and the moon and the stars and the planet Earth and people and frogs and raindrops. That's all within the vastness of space. Yet it doesn't make space any smaller. It doesn't take away from the nature of space that it has those contents.

So in the same way, our awareness contains all those things. Just as space is empty, and that's the only way it could contain all those things, our awareness is similarly empty. Or it couldn't contain all the arisings of the phenomenal world. So there's a sense that within our awareness, nothing is stuck. Nothing is kind of there from the beginning that never goes out. No thing, no solid thing is there from the beginning. This analogy with space is a good way to get a sense of emptiness.

Now, within that emptiness, there are two other avenues to explore. As I mentioned, I think, in the talk, maybe it was the Mahayana talk,

The understanding of emptiness needs to include two essential aspects. The first is the emptiness of self—what we call anatta in the Theravada teachings or anatman in Sanskrit. This is the absence of any enduring center within this stream of mental and physical phenomena. The second aspect is the emptiness of objects, which points to the insubstantial nature of the phenomenal world. Even though things appear solid, like this wood, they're not truly solid in the way we imagine.

If you haven't explored the emptiness of objects extensively, let me suggest that sounds and body sensations are usually the easiest gateways to first glimpse this emptiness, due to their obviously transitory nature. You can directly perceive that the body is merely a flux of vibrations, and sounds pass through awareness very quickly. The most challenging sense doors through which to recognize emptiness are sight and touch.

Just to offer one small pointer about sight: recall that your visual experience of this room occurs because light particles—photons—strike the retina at the back of your eye. This triggers nerve impulses through the optic nerve that travel to the brain and stimulate certain regions there. That brain activity generates the visual image we perceive before us. We're not actually seeing the wall or the thangka directly. We're seeing a representation our brain has created from the light reflected off those objects. Who knows what's really there? I don't.

This entire world that we inhabit, move through, and feel so familiar with—to which we've assigned countless names—is merely a generation of our nervous system, our sense doors, and our human consciousness. And yet we take it as solid and real. That's the fundamental illusion.

You can explore the sense of touch in a similar way. This table is not truly solid. It is only the experience—the touch sensation of hardness. That's all it is. But even this touch sensation of hardness comes and goes.

You need to become familiar with these pathways to emptiness through all three aspects: recognizing that the nature of mind is like an empty sky, understanding that there is no abiding self within the mind-body process, and seeing that all phenomenal appearances are insubstantial.

Once you've explored these dimensions, what you want to recognize is that awareness and this emptiness are not two separate things. This is one unity. Rinpoche used to ask in his retreats, "What do we mean by mind?" And he would answer, "Mind is that which knows." He meant knowing first at the bare level of sense data. Knowing becomes more sophisticated, but at its foundation it's simply the capacity to register light, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

This mind—this knowing capacity—is what is like empty space, like an empty sky. But unlike space, it possesses this quality of cognizance. Space doesn't have this quality. The space right here is not connected to a nervous system and brain that generate sense impressions. This mind somehow is.

So it's crucial to see that this is one thing. Mind is one thing—or we could say the nature of mind is one thing—but it's not an ordinary kind of thing. It's not the sort of thing that can be grasped or located anywhere in space, because it creates space and time. It's the very context within which space and time arise.

It cannot be grasped in the way ordinary objects are grasped, but what Rinpoche has been pointing to is that it can know itself. Because of its cognizant nature, it is self-knowing. It knows itself as cognizance and emptiness. These are the two aspects we want to recognize clearly.

But remain aware that it's just one thing, not two separate things. It's like this bowl—is it round or is it gold? The answer is yes. It's one thing with two aspects that can be distinguished.

The nature of mind is like that. It's just one thing. There aren't two minds running around, one of which is empty and the other of which is knowing. There's only one mind, and it has these two aspects. That's what we need to become familiar with.

Remember that really it has three aspects. If we say two, that's just shorthand as we're learning. Really, it has three, but in the near term, just focus on the first two. This is the ground—the union of empty essence, natural clarity, and compassionate capacity.

When we drop effort and look toward the nature of mind, toward awareness itself, what comes back, if we're clear, is the view. There's the conceptual view and the non-conceptual view. The conceptual view is the understanding that the nature of mind is these three aspects. The non-conceptual view is your direct experience of this unity. When you look and see that nature, that's the view.

Now, we're not fully enlightened, so we don't see the whole ground. This is the napkin covering the palm pilot. We all have napkins over our palm pilots right now. So even when we try hard to look, we don't see the whole ground. We just see that first edge of it. That edge of the ground is our own experience of the view. That's as much of the view as we get today when we do the looking as best we can. Given our background, our temperament, our paramis, our unfolding up to this point, we get this little bit of the ground. That is the view for us. And that's okay. Just trust in that.

Whatever experience you had when you were told to look, when Rinpoche guided you in the looking, go with that. Trust in that. Put your chips on that. Because that's what's going to take you further into the ground.

The beautiful thing about the practice is that the view develops over time. It's not that the view you reach today is the view that will be with you forever. More and more of the ground gets exposed as the obscurations thin. So the view is an evolving element in practice. Even though non-conceptually it's these three things, the degree to which we actually see it and feel it and know it opens up over the course of our practice.

So don't worry if it seems weak today or if you're not quite sure you see all three aspects or you're not even sure if that's it. Take what you get. Trust in that and it will evolve. It will evolve. This meditation works just like gravity works. When the apple is ripe, it falls from the tree. That's a natural law. As you turn to the ground, whatever bit of it you can see, it purifies the obscurations. And that means the view opens up more and more as you practice.

The last thing I want to say, really practical tip, is about eyes open versus eyes closed. This is a good time for all practitioners, especially Vipassana practitioners, to start working more with opening the eyes. I know this is risky business. Because when we open our eyes as Vipassana practitioners, we risk losing our inner peace. But really, we don't want inner peace to be tied to closed eyes, do we? Because when we go back into the world, we want to be able to have inner peace with eyes open. So this is a good laboratory for exploring inner peace with eyes open.

In doing the Rigpa practice, Rinpoche recommended today to do it with eyes open. What happened for me when I started opening my eyes in doing this practice was I got a big jolt of energy. With my eyes closed, I was much calmer. I felt so good. Then I'd open my eyes and my body would tense up and I'd feel like I was overwhelmed by too much energy.

Rinpoche is not dogmatic on this point. If you feel that you need to calm down a little bit, that the energy is too much, it's okay to close your eyes for a while. It's okay to go back to shamatha with support, shamatha without support, breath meditation, choiceless attention, connect with objects again.

That's perfectly fine. When you feel a little more calm, open your eyes and try the look, see, rest practice again. Feel free to go back and forth between these approaches—Rinpoche emphasized this flexibility today.

You can also experiment with where you place your gaze as you open your eyes. We discussed this in the interview group this afternoon: lowering the gaze brings the energy down a little. If you're feeling tired and want to pick up the energy, raise the gaze somewhat. Play with this as a variable in how much energy you're introducing.

There's a famous statue of Padmasambhava, the founder of the Dzogchen lineage in Tibet, which shows his gaze positioned very high—well above horizontal—with his eyes wide open, almost popping out of the statue. This is considered an excellent gaze for Dzogchen practice. But we may not be ready yet for that amount of energy, so you can approach it gradually.

The beauty of this practice lies in its adaptability. You're not locked into any rigid approach. Instead, you can skillfully work with your energy, your state of mind, and your capacity in each moment. This intelligent flexibility is itself part of the wisdom of Dzogchen—learning to read the conditions of your practice and respond appropriately, always in service of discovering and resting in the natural state of awareness itself.

CHAPTER 267

Practicing Rigpa - Part 2

Guy Armstrong · 46 min

> *In this second talk on Rigpa practice, Guy Armstrong addresses the crucial relationship between meditation and difficult emotions, emphasizing that encountering challenging mental states is an integral part of deepening practice. Drawing from "The Flight of the Garuda," he explains how emotions can actually facilitate the recognition of Dharmakāya (emptiness aspect of mind), countering the common misconception that emotions obstruct spiritual development.*
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> *Armstrong introduces the RAIN technique (Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identify) as a skillful method for working with difficult emotions before returning to rest in mind essence. He then presents various techniques for the 'looking' step in Rigpa practice, including 'aware of awareness,' questioning 'who is looking?', and the traditional syllable 'phet.' The talk addresses common pitfalls such as identifying with the observer, projecting awareness outside the body, or trying to prolong the Rigpa state through effort.*
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> *The teaching concludes with profound verses from "The Flight of the Garuda" describing mind's nature as "vivid as a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive." Armstrong's integration of Dzogchen and Vipassanā perspectives offers practitioners both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for recognizing the groundless, empty cognizance that is our fundamental nature.*

Tonight I'd like to talk about more aspects of working with the Rigpa practice as we've been doing over the last couple of days. The first thing I want to explore is the relationship with emotions, particularly difficult emotions.

Today, for the first time in the retreat, people started to share with me about some difficult emotions that were arising. I was quite happy to hear this, because I was getting worried that the retreat wasn't working. Unless it engages some difficult aspect of the mind, I don't feel that it's going deeply enough. One of the most observable characteristics of a proper retreat, in my view, is that it reaches down and brings us to some kind of edge, where we have to find new tools to relate with that edge. This seemed to start happening today, at least for some people, and so I was encouraged.

So what do we do in this practice when working with difficult emotions as they arise? This is from *The Flight of the Garuda*: "Without following thoughts, relax naturally and rest in the state of mind itself. Without a doubt, thoughts will vanish spontaneously."

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It doesn't always work like that in practice.

This reminds me of a friend who was teaching a retreat in Burma for Westerners alongside a Burmese Sayadaw. It's something that happens every year in January—a couple of our friends go over and teach. It's a unique opportunity to hear Western teachers side-by-side with Burmese teachers, all in the Vipassana lineage.

Because it's in a Burmese monastery, there are translators around and people who help support the monastery. A number of them come to hear the Dharma talks. So one of the Burmese gentlemen came up to my friend after the retreat and said, "You know, I really enjoyed listening to your Dharma talks while I was on this retreat, because you described so eloquently how to work with anger, how to work with fear, how to work with judgment. It's very helpful. Our teachers don't talk to us about these things."

So my friend said, "Well, what do they tell you to do?"

The Burmese man said, "Well, the Sayadaw says, when anger arises, note it three times and it will go away."

My friend said, "That wouldn't work for Westerners."

He said, "It doesn't work for us either."

She then asked, "What do you do then?"

And he said, "Oh, well then we say, 'Oh, never mind.'"

Which is kind of beautiful. There's a kind of underlying equanimity in that response. The emotion's there. I applied what was supposed to be the antidote. It didn't go away. Oh, well, never mind. There's a great deal of acceptance underlying that.

With Rigpa practice also, we may have the intention to turn to Rigpa and see what the liberating influence will be, or if, as it's sometimes said in this tradition, the thought or the emotion will liberate itself. But that may not always happen.

We can feel discouraged at this point that emotions are coming and perhaps coming strongly. We may feel at times that they block our access to Rigpa or block our development. So I also wanted to read this from *The Flight of the Garuda*: "It is said in the teachings and life stories of the masters of the past, 'the more emotions and thoughts, the more Dharmakaya.' You should know that this is how it is."

The more emotions and thoughts, the more Dharmakaya. Dharmakaya refers to the emptiness aspect of mind. So they're saying that even if you struggle a lot in the beginning, that's what opens the door for the depth of Dharmakaya later.

So don't be concerned if emotions are coming. It's an integral part of what we're doing here and leads to the deepening of the practice. I've seen this time and time again in Vipassana retreats.

I remember very clearly the first Dzogchen retreat where something like this happened to me. We were a few days into the retreat, four or five days into a nine-day retreat up in Santa Rosa. I was doing my yogi job in the kitchen, washing pots or potatoes or something. I was by a sink.

I was trying to apply the Rigpa practice consistently and touch into the empty awareness, doing it fairly regularly. As I was there at the sink and practicing, I felt this kind of wave of energy start to come up. It hit my chest and made a kind of explosion there.

And it didn't have a lot of emotion with it, but it was just as though some bubble had come up and burst. Rinpoche talked today about the burp—it was a little bit just like this energy coming up from somewhere, coming up and then passing right through me.

Leading up to that moment, my mind had been quite calm and still. Then this energy arose, passed through, and it felt like a big release. There wasn't much emotion attached to it, just this sense of something substantial being let go.

For about the next day and a half, my mind was a complete whirlwind—racing into past and future, caught up in thoughts and plans, greed and aversion. I couldn't settle it, not through connecting with mind essence, not through sustaining mindfulness. The mind was just stirred up.

But having witnessed this pattern countless times, I really wasn't worried. I knew from Vipassana practice that this is simply part of the purification process that happens. When the heart and mind settle to a new level of peace and contentment, it opens the door for whatever else might be stored down there. You may have exhausted the karmic storehouse, but just on the slight chance that you haven't...

What opens the door to the karmic bank is this state of peace and calm. Why? Because the heart feels safe to release what it's been holding.

Sylvia Borstein, who is a good friend and frequent co-teacher, puts it like this: When they want to launch from Cape Kennedy, they don't launch when the sky is cloudy. They launch the spacecraft when the sky is clear.

Similarly, the heart wants to unload its burden when the skies are clear. So when the mind settles into some new level of peace, contentment, and happiness, then the heart says, "Okay, now you can hold this too." That's when the purification begins to come through.

When it comes through and we can be with it with that really accepting attitude—which Rinpoche exemplified with "hug and kiss"—when we don't resist it but really allow it into our awareness, it's that contact, that friendly contact, that allows it to arise and then pass out. That is the delete button for the karmic bank.

One of the beauties of intensive retreats is that they allow the mind to settle enough for this cycle to take place. I like to call this the cycle of purity—the increasing calm and peace—and purification—the release of the difficult stored contents of the heart and mind.

Practicing with that wave of energy and agitation that had been triggered in that retreat, I knew not to interfere with it very much. I knew not to worry about it, not to try to make it go away. So for a couple of days, I was simply in a whirlwind, and that was okay. That's just the way the mind was. After a couple of days, it settled again to a deeper level of peace because there was no longer so much underlying agitation in the mind or body.

These are the cycles that happen in retreat, and the opportunity is there for us to learn to relate to these difficult emotions in a wise way.

So what should we do when they come? There are really two approaches. I'd like to read again from The Flight of the Garuda, Song 13, to illustrate this:

"For beginners, when emotional thought states arise too powerfully, it is beneficial first to analyze and then to rest. These are the oral instructions, so keep them in your heart."

I take this as encouragement first to practice what you could call shamatha, or what you could call mindfulness, with the emotion directly. After doing that for a while, then to rest. In a way, I take this as an encouragement first to do what we would call Vipassana practice. After you've done that for a while—after you've hugged and kissed—then you can rest because some of the charge is out.

In the way that we teach, we have a little formula for how to relate skillfully with an emotion. It's an acronym called RAIN, and it stands for four steps in relating to a difficult emotion using mindfulness.

The first is to recognize it. The second is to accept it. The third is to become interested in it, or investigate—this is the analytical piece. And the N is non-identify: Recognize, accept, be interested, non-identify.

Recognize means we know this emotion for what it is. Accept means we just open ourselves up and feel it completely. A good place to do that is in the body. If you feel a strong emotion, it's going to have an impact in the body somewhere.

Rinpoche has spoken extensively about the connection between the subtle body and our moods and emotions, noting how every emotional state manifests somewhere in our physical form. When you feel a strong emotion arising, allow your attention to settle where you sense it most powerfully in the body and ground yourself there. This grounding creates a bridge of connection—you'll feel the interplay between body and emotion flowing back and forth, each informing the other.

The third step is to become interested. This is our analytical piece, approached as part of that hug and kiss attitude—meeting our experience with genuine curiosity rather than resistance. What is fear, really? What is anger? How does this particular emotion express itself through the body and mind? What kinds of thought patterns does it generate? Here, we're not following the storyline or content of thoughts, but simply observing their patterns and textures.

Finally, we practice non-identification. We don't claim these emotions as "I" or "mine." This anger is not my personality; it's not who I am. I don't become "an angry person" simply because anger is present in this moment. We don't even need to say "my anger"—we need not own it at all. Instead, we recognize emotions as passing clouds: anger arises, persists for a while, and naturally dissolves away.

These steps allow us to cultivate wisdom and awareness around whatever emotions arise. We're making direct, intimate contact with these states while developing the capacity to hold them within mindfulness. Once we've established this spacious relationship with our emotional experience, we can return our attention to mind essence and

perhaps find the rest that the Garuda song points toward. The sequence is clear: first analyze, relate, and become intimate with what's arising. Open to it with friendliness. Then see if this creates sufficient space for recognizing mind essence.

This completes what I wanted to share about relating with emotions. Remember that emotional work is an integral part of this practice. You now have two different approaches available—experiment with both and discover which serves you best in different situations.

The second topic I want to explore tonight concerns various techniques for that crucial first step of looking. Rinpoche mentioned again this morning Tolku Urgyen Rinpoche's four-step method: look, see, rest, and liberate. He's also shared three or four different ways to approach the initial looking. As I mentioned yesterday, having a range of techniques proves invaluable. Different methods resonate with different practitioners, and even for the same person, different approaches work at different times. So explore them all and discover which ones create the strongest connection for you.

Rinpoche has already introduced Tolku Urgyen's way of looking, the instruction to "drop" or "let go," and the image of the hand withdrawing into the sleeve. Let me offer some additional techniques.

One approach that often resonates with Western practitioners is "aware of awareness." Essentially, this involves shifting attention away from fixation on objects toward recognizing the knowing mind itself—the very awareness that perceives. This phrase serves as a doorway, helping practitioners make that crucial turn inward. When you're ready, simply drop in this phrase rather than using any visual image or the word "drop," and follow wherever it leads you.

Another technique Rinpoche has mentioned—though perhaps not specifically in this context—involves drawing the eyes toward the back of the head. You cultivate the sensation that your eyes are naturally gravitating backward into the skull, creating that essential sense of pulling away from external fixation.

One subtle form of ego-clinging that commonly arises in the early stages of this practice deserves particular attention. As you settle into that open, empty awareness, there often remains a sense that someone is still looking. A participant mentioned this very issue in today's interview group—the persistent feeling of an observer, a watcher, someone who looks through the eyes and receives visual impressions, hears sounds, and so forth.

This is extra. The sense of "I am the looker, I am the watcher" is something extra. What's actually going on is an identification with the factor of cognizance. Cognizance is happening, but the ego is coming in and laying claim to it. "Oh, that's me. I'm not the body. I'm not the external phenomena. I'm not the thoughts and emotions. Oh, I see what I really am. I really am the one who's looking. I'm the observer."

In a way, this is not a bad intermediate step for the ego to take. Because normally what it's doing is running around and claiming sense impressions as "me" or "mine." It'll claim body, thoughts, and emotions as "me." It'll claim outer things as "mine." And either grab to bring forward or push away. So stepping to awareness can cut through that. If you say "I am awareness," then all this other stuff is just coming and going within you, and you don't have to get involved with it. Awareness doesn't get involved with its contents.

So identifying with awareness has an advantage, but it's not clear-seeing. As an intermediate step or strategy, that's okay. And as a phase of rigpa practice, don't worry about that. Don't worry if that comes in. But there is still a level of unclarity in that the "I" hasn't been seen through because, let's face it, awareness isn't yours or mine. It's not individual. Awareness is just awareness. It's part of Buddha nature, so it's common to all of us. So the "I" is extra.

If you'd like to play around with looking at the "I," then here's another way to look: drop in a question like "Who is watching?" or "Who is looking?" If it feels like it's the thinker, then you could say "Who is thinking?" and see if that takes the emptiness a little bit further. See if that cuts through the identification just a little more.

Another way to say this is "looking at the looker." These two are almost synonymous. Who is looking? Or look at the looker. Or look at the thinker. Now hopefully when you do that—you go to look at the looker—what should you find? Nothing. Nothing. And then you're back in emptiness. You're back at a slightly more complete level of emptiness.

Just a few more. This is a phrase that Joseph Goldstein came up with and shared with me. I don't think he'd mind my sharing it. The phrase is "mind of no clinging." Mind of no clinging. So when you're ready to apply a technique to look, just say that phrase. Drop that phrase in and see what happens. The "mind" part connects with awareness. The "no clinging" part helps cut through fixation or grasping, so it opens up emptiness.

Here's one from the tradition: "Relax and rest loosely." This is from the Dzogchen tradition. Relax and rest loosely. I used this phrase a lot at one point in my practice and I found it really helpful because it's useful independent of conditions. If the mind is

peaceful, you say "relax and rest loosely" and you're sort of there. If the mind's agitated and thoughts are up and emotions are up, you say "relax and rest loosely," and it sort of lets you disentangle a bit from it. So you can use it either way—if the mind's calm, if the mind's stirred up.

Another technique that Rinpoche mentioned briefly today is the syllable *phat*. This is a very traditional method in Dzogchen practice, meant to be applied especially when the yogi's mind is really preoccupied in thoughts. When conceptual thoughts are running and running and you can't find a way to step out of them, it's recommended to say *phat* in a very loud voice. If you're practicing somewhere in the wilderness, you can really shout it. It's said to cut through the chain of thoughts.

I was sitting in retreat one time with a different Dzogchen teacher, and he liked to have his class use the exclamation *phat* in a group format. We would be sitting all together, and the teacher would instruct us: "When I count to three, everybody shout at the top of your lungs, *phat*." The hall would be very still during our sitting meditation, and he would say, "One, two, three." And everybody would shout as loud as they could: "*Phat*!" The hall would just vibrate. It cut through a lot of conceptual thinking and was very effective.

One of my friends came to the retreat a day late and hadn't heard the initial instruction. She was sitting during an afternoon session when the teacher went, "One, two, three," and the whole room just erupted in "*Phat*!" I was sitting next to her and could hear her do this little whimper—she almost levitated off her zafu because she was so shocked. But I'm sure it cut through her conceptualization too.

If you're sitting in a meditation hall, you could try just saying it to yourself, imagining you're saying it in a very loud voice. *Phat*—but don't actually shout it.

Someone asked today whether there always has to be this conscious technique applied to do the looking. Does it always have to be like that? Isn't that a subtle form of grasping, a form of effort and will? What Rinpoche said was that you only do that when you've fallen into distraction, and that means grasping is already present. So one more little bit of effort doesn't really matter.

What I've noticed is that over time, the tools to do the looking get more and more subtle. You just get used to this turning and connecting with mind essence over and over. At first, the tools I used were pretty big, but then over time they could get subtler and subtler because it didn't need much of a nudge to get back to that place. Finally,

what I mostly do now is just a very subtle intention to see again. You could just call it the intention to look or the intention to see, and then I'm back. Over time, see if the movement of turning can get lighter.

Someone asked in a retreat once: "In my experience, different techniques lead to different experiences"—and you'll probably find this is somewhat true. Different methods of looking will lead to slightly different effects in the mind and body. They asked, "Which one is right?" The way I understand it is that when different techniques give different experiences, what you want to look for is the common denominator. Look at what they share. What they share over time will converge. All these techniques will converge on authentic rigpa over time. You can just feel free to use whichever ones strike your interest or seem effective for you. Try different ones at different times.

The next question is: what happens when we look? As I mentioned last night, I had a lot of questions in the beginning about whether what I saw was really rigpa or not. I went to Rinpoche with many questions trying to figure this out. I was basically asking him to confirm my experience: "Is it like this? Is it like that? Is this it?"

Is that it?" And he always refused to confirm my experience, just as he has here, because ultimately we have to figure it out for ourselves. He can't tell.

But some of the questions I used to hear were things like, "Oh, when I do the looking technique, I get a buzzing in my ears. Is that Rigpa?" Or "My body tingles. Is that what Rigpa really is?" You've probably heard similar questions and found your own.

The thing is that no particular phenomenon is Rigpa, because Rigpa is empty cognizance. It doesn't have a color or shape or form because it can go with anything. This is what Rinpoche meant when he said this afternoon that it's "a state beyond states." Another way of saying it is you can't really say that it's a state of mind, because it's more like a container for states of mind or a perspective on states of mind—that which holds states of mind.

So it can go with any state of mind. It can go with a buzzing in the ears or silence in the ears. It can go with a body that's light or heavy. Understanding this helped me not look to repeat an experience, because the outcome isn't supposed to be one particular way. There's no way to describe a particular state that's supposed to happen when you look. This let me know I didn't need to hang on to one memory that seemed to work, because the next time it might be different depending on what the state of my mind and body was at that point.

It's like clear water that doesn't have any flavor of its own, but you can add any flavor to it. It can go with anything, so it can reveal anything. If the mind is happy or sad or calm or agitated, Rigpa can be with all of that. It takes on the coloring of whatever the state of mind itself is.

Something else people often report when starting this practice—and I think Rinpoche alluded to this today—is feeling like a lot of energy is coming up as they turn and look or drop. "Is that Rigpa?" In that case, I'd say it's kind of a sign of letting go. It's probably the dropping that has released some of the holding. You know, that dead drop that he was talking about? Sometimes that will release things we've been holding for a while, and so strong energies can come up when we learn better how to let go. Those energies can come whether we're in Rigpa or not, because they're mostly a sign of the letting go.

So again, I'd say it might be a sign that Rigpa is happening, but it's not the thing itself. Over time, as more and more of the held energies get released, when one turns and looks, there's not so much of anything that comes up because there's been a release of what's been held, and there's not an infinite supply of stuff that has to be released. So the experience gets calmer and more ordinary.

The last thing I want to talk about are some near relatives of Rigpa. As we turn to Rigpa, there are often other states that come in that aren't Rigpa but that we might think are Rigpa in the beginning. Don't worry that these things come in—these are not bad things. As you continue to practice, your own understanding will clarify what's exactly Rigpa and what's not. These are just some of the things I went through in the clarification of the view.

One is having a line of subconscious chatter going on and not recognizing it as distraction or as chatter. Thoughts can come and go—if they're seen clearly, it's not a problem. But there can be this line of ongoing chatter, commentary, past, future, that I wasn't really aware of. When there's an ongoing chain, that's moved into discursive thinking, and that takes away a bit from the Rigpa. If that happens, you can turn, if you'd like, just turn the attention to the thoughts for a little while, which is a form of samatha or vipassana. Become aware of those and that will often take some of the frequency out of them. In other words, incorporate them into the awareness.

Another thing I fell into was, once I had looked and seen, then trying to prolong the Rigpa—trying to make it last longer. This is kind of a virtue in mindfulness practice. The first two factors of concentration, as we practice it, are connecting with the object and sustaining the attention on the object. So we're taught that it's wholesome to sustain

that attention. But with Rigpa, it's not the right thing to do. If we are in the seeing and then we move into the resting, but we try to make it last longer, we've fallen into fabrication and effort again.

This points to a subtle kind of effort that infiltrates our practice—one we may not notice and that we actually think is wholesome. I used to say something like, "just stay in Rigpa as long as you can," but that's completely the wrong way to express it. A much better way to say it is, "let it stay as long as it stays."

We're not actually involved with how long it stays. That depends on the current strength of Rigpa and our past practice—the accumulated force of our practice determines how long it remains. That's why Rinpoche has said repeatedly, "Don't worry about length, aim for short periods many times."

When he says short periods, he doesn't mean short sitting periods. He doesn't mean come in, sit for five minutes, then go out to walk, come back in for five minutes, go out to walk again. Sit for forty-five minutes—that's fine. But each time you go into Rigpa, don't worry if it doesn't stay long. Let it be a short experience, but let it be a really clear experience. Aim to have that recognition many times within, say, a forty-five minute sitting.

Don't mind how many times you look. When you've looked, seen, rested, and then failed to liberate—meaning distraction has come back in—don't hesitate to apply the technique of looking again. Do that many times, and don't worry how long it lasts.

Another thing I used to do was project that Rigpa was in front of me. Because there's talk of openness, spaciousness, emptiness, I'd project it out in front to get away from what didn't feel spacious—which was tension in my body. I'd look for it to be out there. But in doing that, I was trying to leave behind the body, and that's not helpful.

So check to see if you've taken the body with you when you move into Rigpa. Just take a look back and see if it's come along for the journey, or if you have an idea that Rigpa should only be in front and be a kind of disembodied experience. Then take a look at how Rinpoche sits when he's meditating or when he's teaching. It's not very different. He's very in his body—very grounded, very connected.

Once I got the idea that the body should come with me into Rigpa, then I made another kind of false move, because I had such a strong habit from Vipassana practice of mindfulness of body. So then I practiced what I might call "Rigpa of body"—which is a contradiction in terms. This is not the right way to do it.

But I felt very centered, very grounded. What I thought was Rigpa sustained itself for a long time, and I thought, "Wow, this is so easy now." But what I was actually doing was feeling my body. At that point there was a smooth, harmonious energy arising in the body that I was mistaking for ongoing empty awareness. But I'd actually localized it and fastened it onto an object.

So take a look at this relationship between space and body as you practice, and realize that Rigpa needs to encompass both. It does encompass both.

Because we use this word "empty" and "open" so much, Rigpa often gets identified with space and this quality of mind we call spaciousness. Once in retreat, somebody asked Rinpoche, "Is this practice basically about spaciousness?" You might think about how you would answer that.

Rinpoche's answer was, "No, spaciousness is not the key point. The key point is groundlessness."

Groundlessness, or emptiness. So sometimes the focus may be small. I think someone mentioned when they were working on their computer, or if you're doing your yogi job, the focus may come in. It may not be as panoramic as it is in the meditation hall, but that can be very natural. You can be with Rigpa even when the focus is naturally a little more narrow.

So the key point is groundlessness—which basically means emptiness, the insubstantiality of things.

Another place where I became caught was attributing a ground to my seat. I don't know if you've ever considered this, but the body does rest on something solid. Here, we're not using "ground" in the sense of ground, path, and fruition. We're using ground to mean solid—the antithesis of emptiness, the opposite of emptiness.

So emptiness and groundlessness are synonymous. What we take for ground is usually what we stand on or what we sit on, because that's what supports us physically and what we rest into. But this creates a false sense that there is some ultimate kind of ground—that the earth is an ultimate kind of ground. But it's not. It's not a ground for consciousness or cognizance. Cognizance doesn't have any ground. Cognizance doesn't have an up or a down. It doesn't have a bottom, and there's nothing that it rests on.

So it helped me to uncover another level of groundlessness when I looked at the hardness under my seat as just another sensation. Does that make sense? We don't associate rigpa just with space. We don't associate it just with the body.

Another trap I fell into was imagining that awareness was a separate destination apart from phenomena. Some of the phrasing leads us in this direction. There's this phrase often used in the tradition: "Rest in awareness"—as though awareness is its own destination.

For me, this seemed to be happening kind of out in front. I'd be sitting there and think, "Oh, that's awareness"—something stable, steady, ongoing, with nothing else there. That must be the empty awareness being pointed to. But there's another teaching in the tradition which says that three things are indivisible: emptiness, awareness, and phenomena.

So it's not accurate to think that you're going to find awareness someplace where there aren't phenomena. Awareness and phenomena are also inseparable. We really only know awareness through its illuminating of phenomena—at least in the beginning, until there's real depth in the knowing of rigpa.

I realized that what I was imagining was "awareness by itself" was actually the knowing of physical space. Just become aware that physical space is another object that can be known. You can pay attention to it right now in this room. Think about the space between us.

Ajahn Sumedho said that for a period he was interested in the analogy between nirvana and space, so he did a lot of meditation on physical space. When he would talk to somebody—similar to a comment someone made yesterday about the gaze of the eyes—instead of focusing on the person or becoming aware of the person's body, he would become aware of the space between them and around them. So become aware that space is another phenomenon that can be known through consciousness.

Someone said toward the end of one retreat, "I've really enjoyed your teachings, Rinpoche, and I realize that for me the practice comes down to just being. That's what I've gotten out of this week—just being. And that's how I'm doing it."

Just being is good, but does it always have wisdom in it? Aren't babies pretty good at just being? Aren't cats and dogs pretty good at just being? But would we necessarily say that they were in rigpa? Not necessarily. So remember that the wisdom element is a really important component—this knowing of the empty cognizance.

I think that's all I wanted to talk about tonight. I'll close with another reading from *Flight of the Garuda*, translated by Stephen Batchelor. He hasn't done the whole book, but he's done little bits of it:

"Now come up close and listen. When you look carefully, you won't find the merest speck of real mind you can put your finger on and say, 'This is it.' And not finding anything is an incredible find."

Friends, to start with, mind doesn't emerge from anything. It's primordially empty. It isn't anywhere. It has no shape or color. In the beginning, mind is not created by causes and finally not destroyed by external conditions. It neither grows nor gets stuck. It's not empty or full. Infusing peace and pain alike, it shows no preference. Ceaselessly, it reveals itself as everything, so you can't say, "here it is." Not being fixed as something, it's beyond presence and absence. It neither comes nor goes, gets born nor dies.

Mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal—intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive. Stripped bare of samsaric error, mind itself is surely and always Buddha.

Let me read this one more time:

Now come up close and listen. When you look carefully, you won't find the merest speck of real mind you can put your finger on and say, "this is it." And not finding anything is an incredible find.

Friends, to start with, mind doesn't emerge from anything. It's primordially empty. There's nothing there to hold on to. In the beginning, mind itself is not created by causes, and finally, not destroyed by external conditions. It neither grows nor gets stuck. It's not empty or full. Infusing peace and pain alike, it shows no preference. Ceaselessly it reveals itself as everything, so you can't say, "here it is." Not being fixed as something, it's beyond presence and absence. It neither comes nor goes, gets born nor dies.

Mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal—intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive. Stripped bare of samsaric error, mind itself is surely and always Buddha.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 268

Rigpa Consciousness and Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · 1h14

> *Guy Armstrong presents a thoughtful exploration of how Dzogchen teachings on Rigpa relate to classical Theravāda understandings of consciousness and nibbāna. Drawing from his background in both traditions, he examines the apparent contradiction between consciousness as impermanent (one of the five khandhas) and Rigpa's cognizance as unchanging. Through a illuminating analogy of sunlight pervading empty space, Armstrong proposes a model where temporary consciousness arises from an unchanging base of natural clarity.*
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> *The talk systematically examines four different Buddhist understandings of nibbāna: as merely the cessation of defilements without ontological reality; as complete cessation including consciousness; as cessation with consciousness remaining to know the unconditioned; and as realization possible with all senses functioning. Armstrong discusses the ten fetters (saṃyojana) and four stages of enlightenment, referencing teachings from the Thai Forest Tradition including Ajahn Mahā Boowa's account of his realization.*
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> *This dharma talk offers valuable perspective for practitioners interested in understanding how different Buddhist philosophical frameworks can complement rather than contradict each other, particularly regarding the nature of awareness and liberation.*

Rigpa Consciousness and Nirvāna

When I first encountered these teachings, they provoked a lot of reflection in me. Coming from a Theravadan background and encountering this entirely different dharma model, I found that some points were very consistent and fit well together, while others didn't seem to bear much relationship to each other.

In particular, this concept of rigpa became very intriguing to me. Because of its nature of cognizance, it connects in the direction of mindfulness. I trust you've gotten a sense of that—the cognizance is what knows experience. In vipassana practice, it's mindfulness that plays this role of knowing our experience.

In the other direction, because rigpa doesn't arise or pass—at least the ground doesn't arise and pass, and rigpa is the view of the ground—it also connects to that which is beyond change. In the Pali Canon, the classical teachings of the Buddha, there's only one dhamma that is beyond change. I'm sure you know what that is: the unconditioned, nibbāna in Pali or nirvāna in Sanskrit.

So here we have this piece called rigpa, which on one end of the Theravadan model connects to mindfulness, our basic practice, and on the other end connects to the unconditioned of nirvāna. That's curious, isn't it?

There's one quotation in the texts that points to something similar to this. A questioner came to the Buddha and said, "You've talked about these five physical senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Where do these five physical senses come together? What's the locus, the container or meeting point of the five senses?"

The Buddha said, "The mind."

The questioner thought for a minute and said, "Okay, what's the locus for the mind? What's the container greater than the mind?"

The Buddha said, "Mindfulness."

The man thought for a minute and said, "Well, what's the locus for mindfulness? Where does that come together?"

The Buddha said, "Liberation. Liberation is the locus for mindfulness."

The questioner thought for another minute and said, "What's the locus of liberation?"

The Buddha said, "Nirvāna. Nirvāna, the unconditioned. That which is not subject to coming or going."

The man thought for a moment and said, "What's the locus of nibbāna?"

And the Buddha said, "This is going too far." He refused to answer—one of the few occasions of humor in the Pali Canon.

I hope you get the sense of this connection: the physical senses, the mind, mindfulness, liberation, and nibbāna, each sort of bigger than the one before.

Well, either way you take it, toward mindfulness or toward nirvāna, there are points of controversy between some Theravadan understanding and the Dzogchen understanding.

In the Theravadan understanding, as you go in the direction of contact with objects, mindfulness comes and goes, but even more fundamentally, consciousness comes and goes and is considered impermanent. It's one of the five aggregates. All the aggregates

are impermanent, so consciousness is impermanent. Rigpa and the cognizance of rigpa is considered to be stable, ongoing, not subject to change. How do we figure that one out?

And if you go in the other direction, where there's some correlation between rigpa and nirvāna, in some classical understandings, nirvāna doesn't have an element of cognizance to it. We'll get to that later, but typically it's presented as without consciousness in many schools of Theravada. So how does that fit together?

These questions became very interesting for me. More than interesting, they really gripped me. I spent a lot of time trying to understand not only how the languages fit together, but what was true. Really, which one was true? Checking against my experience and other people's experience and reading the texts, which one was I going to believe? What was I going to adopt for myself?

Now, for some of you, this may sound just like philosophical speculation and not very important. But I know there are people here whose practice gets into these realms.

of nibbana, for whom that is not just philosophical talk, but a living actuality, and other people who want to understand the relation of that to the consciousness that meets each moment.

So, at least for some, I know that this is a question of some urgency. Why? One reason is that in the Theravadan understanding, when one has a direct realization of or experience of the unconditioned, that constitutes stream entry. Once one has attained the stage of stream entry, final liberation in terms of arahantship is assured. It says in the text that it will take place in no more than seven lifetimes. And the Buddha makes statements like, once one has attained stream entry, the amount of suffering left in all of one's future lives is very small compared to that which has been undergone before.

So, although this can just be another source for ego clinging—have I or haven't I? You know the dilemma? Have I attained the ultimate state where I didn't exist? These can just be credentials along the way. They can also be very deeply felt issues of concern and things that I feel it's important to resolve within ourselves.

Ajahn Sumedho was practicing—he's told this story publicly, so he won't mind it being shared again—with Ajahn Chah in the early years when he was a bhikkhu in Thailand. Ajahn Chah was his teacher, great enlightened master. He had had an experience and wondered if it was stream entry. So he went to Ajahn Chah to ask. It's kind of a big deal if that happens in your practice career. So he described the experience to Ajahn Chah and asked him to tell him whether it was or wasn't stream entry. And Ajahn Chah replied, "How should I know? I wasn't there."

Which is great. And I think it's the same suggestion as Rinpoche refusing to endorse Rigpa or non-Rigpa for people. So in the end, the only final authority can be our own. But how do we come to make that kind of evaluation? How do we know whether we've deeply touched, accurately touched something that is beyond change?

Because it's said that the actual contact with this element, this unconditioned element, is what allows the bondages in the mind—called fetters in the Theravadan—to be uprooted. Not just temporarily suspended but taken out for good. And in our tradition they are considered to be ten of these sources of bondage and suffering, each of which gets uprooted at a later stage in the development by this contact with the unconditioned element. Because this unconditioned element of nirvana is so free in its nature, it is so completely unbound, that the direct contact, realization of it, experience of it, communicates that quality of unbinding to our individual minds and releases the bondage.

So I want to approach it in both directions—the direction of consciousness on the one hand and nirvana on the other—and talk about how Rigpa is related to each of those.

To do that, I first want to talk about what consciousness is in the classical understanding. I don't think it's different than the Tibetan understanding of the first six consciousnesses, but let's go into it a bit.

Consciousness is the fifth of the five aggregates. They are form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. The body and the physical world and the sense experiences are all part of form. So the whole physical world and sight, sound, smell, taste, touches are all in the first aggregate. The other four are all parts of the mind. When you say mind in Theravadan, in the biggest sense it's these four mental aggregates put together. But they could all be combined down to—three of them could be combined into one. Feeling and perception can also be considered as mental formations. So really we could say that mental formations form the first part of the mind. These are mind states, both emotions, moods, refined states of mind like concentration, tranquility, and so on. All come under the category of mental formations. And then the fifth aggregate is this one of consciousness. The Pali is viññāṇa, the Sanskrit is vijñāna.

So what does consciousness mean? Consciousness is that part of the mind that has the barest experience of sense data. For instance, as your eyes are open and you're looking out and you're seeing patches just of form and color, before you recognize it as patterns like man, chair, woman, carpet, bell, just that knowing of the different shapes and forms that are in front of the eye is said to be visual consciousness. Or when that sound reaches you, just the bare knowing of the sound is said to be hearing consciousness.

This kind of consciousness takes place very automatically if our senses are working and we're awake. If we were a corpse or if our senses weren't working, we wouldn't have this consciousness. But because we're awake and our senses are working and something happens, we all have this consciousness. It comes very automatically. We don't have to do anything about it.

And in fact, you can't stop it. If I tell you not to hear that sound, you don't have any choice. So consciousness functions quite automatically.

Consciousness refers to just the simplest knowing before any concepts come in—before you even think "that's a bell," or even before you think "that's a sound," before there's any categorizing at all. There's the bare physical experience, completely non-conceptual. Consciousness is the mental part of that.

So there's the sound, but somewhere you're knowing it, right? You're not a bump on a log. If you were a bump on a log, you wouldn't be knowing it. But you're not a bump on a log, so you are knowing it. That's what it means to be a conscious being or a sentient being. Consciousness is that part of the mind, that functioning of the mind, that is knowing the sound.

There are said to be six kinds of consciousness in Theravada: the five physical senses plus the mind door. So the mind is knowing thoughts, emotions, intentions, feeling tone, perceptions. I think what happens in Theravada is that we combine the sixth and seventh consciousness that the Tibetans talk about into the sixth. What they talk about as sixth and seventh is all just sixth for us. And we don't have an eighth—just sixth.

Sometimes it's helpful to know this, because if you try to find this thing called consciousness, it's kind of unfindable. You can find all the other aggregates—you can find body, feeling, perception, moods, emotions, and thoughts. But try to find consciousness and it's like the eye trying to see itself, because consciousness is what's doing the experiencing. So how is that going to experience itself?

Rinpoche talks about a non-dual kind of knowing, but this is more particular—this is the knowing of an object in Theravada. So what I want to suggest is the best way to think of consciousness, maybe, is as a verb. It's really about knowing. So don't worry if you can't find a thing called consciousness, but if you can just get in touch that the quality of knowing is happening in your experience—this bare sense knowing—that's consciousness happening.

Now, this is one level of knowing. In Theravada, as in Tibetan, there are different levels of knowing. In our meditation practice, the next level up of knowing is called mindfulness.

Mindfulness, in our tradition, is defined as knowing what our experience is in each moment. If you read the Satipatthana Sutta, it says when the practitioner breathes in, he or she knows "I'm breathing in." When the practitioner breathes out, he or she knows "I'm breathing out." When they breathe in long, they know "I'm breathing in long." When they breathe in short, they know "I'm breathing in short." When the mind is influenced by attraction, it recognizes "attraction is present in me." When it's not influenced by attraction, it recognizes "attraction is not present in me."

So mindfulness is all about knowing what our experience is in this moment. That's a little bit higher level of knowing. In the beginning, it's somewhat conceptual. It takes concept to know "I'm breathing in," "I'm breathing out," "I'm experiencing greed or aversion or sadness or happiness," whatever. So mindfulness is a little bit of intelligent knowing.

Consciousness doesn't take any intelligence. You can't turn it on, you can't turn it off—it's just happening. Mindfulness takes some intelligence, and that's why it's the opening of wisdom.

I think if you look at rigpa also—it might be interesting to ask Rinpoche this—you'll also see two levels of what could be called cognizance. There's the cognizance of the bare sense field that's coming in. It's clarity or cognizance that shows us that. It's also cognizance that knows the nature of emptiness and cognizance combined. So that's a little bit higher level of knowing. It takes wisdom to know that. It doesn't take a lot of wisdom just to know sense data.

That cognizance functions automatically. It takes wisdom to know the union of emptiness and cognizance. So that kind of knowing is also present in Rigpa.

But there's another word we use frequently in dharma discussions—both in Tibetan and Theravada contexts—and that word is awareness. What I found really interesting is that there is no Pali word that needs to be translated as awareness. The entirety of the Buddha's classical teachings can be translated without using the term awareness. Consciousness and mindfulness are the only two translations you really need. For the Pali aficionados, there's one other term—sampajanya—usually translated as clear comprehension, but sometimes translated as full awareness, though it's not necessary. Clear comprehension works fine.

So what do we do with this term awareness, which is so prominently used in the description of Rigpa? I want to return to that question.

But let me say one more thing about consciousness to illustrate the dilemma. It's said to rise with the arising of the sense element. When the bell is struck, hearing consciousness arises, and as the bell fades away, hearing consciousness fades away. This knowing rises with an object and passes with an object.

Someone once asked the Buddha, "Is this the same consciousness that travels to the next birth?" And the Buddha said, "Definitely not. You've misunderstood me." So it's really clear that the aggregate of consciousness is impermanent, arising and passing.

Yet the cognizance of Rigpa is considered to be lasting, not subject to birth or death. So which is true? Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?

You remember when I told the story a few nights ago of asking Mingyur Rinpoche what the difference was between the Madhyamaka view and the Dzogchen view? He said that the Madhyamakas consider that the Dzogchenpas believe in something that doesn't exist. This is the nub of that controversy.

The Madhyamakas would say that the Dzogchenpas believe in the ongoing nature of cognizance when in fact consciousness arises and passes. They would say that's the nub of the confusion or mistake. You'll also find this view in orthodox Theravadan circles. If you try to describe the practice of Rigpa to a very orthodox Theravadan teacher—I'm thinking of Burma especially—they will say, "No, that's wrong view. That's wrong understanding."

You remember also that I asked Ajahn Sumedho about this dilemma. His response was, "I don't know the answer to that, but this idea works for me."

So for those of you who aren't very philosophically inclined and who don't really care about this question, you're welcome to drop it. You can use the notion of Rigpa as skillful means, or you can believe it. Either way.

[A student asks about where the sense of self arises in this model]

The question was, where does the notion of self arise in this level of cognizing? It comes in at an even higher level because it rests on fixation and a form of grasping. There's been some conceptualizing of the object and a singling out of the object and then a latching onto it. So it's even a higher level of concept than mindfulness that just knows what something is. There's been development of some relationship with it as being attractive or unattractive, so the feeling tone is also important.

It arises in the Theravadan model from a mix of a bunch of the aggregates together. And that stickiness isn't seen clearly—the way they function together isn't seen clearly. And that's what creates the mistaken notion of self.

But for those of you who care about these things, how can we resolve it? I was teaching this to a group of senior students a few years ago and couldn't get across the way I was thinking about it or the way I had resolved it for myself. I found myself really turning the question over repeatedly.

That night I went to sleep and woke up in the middle of the night with this image that came to me. This image solved it for me, and this is what I want to share with you. You can consider it a kind of thought experiment, if you like.

When I studied physics in college, we were told that we could prove physical theorems in three ways. One is by physical principles. One is by mathematical proof, tested experimentally in the laboratory. And the third was called a thought experiment, or Gedanken experiment. If you can think it through and there are no inconsistencies, it's valid. So this is a Gedanken experiment.

I want you to imagine something. Picture yourself way out at the edge of the solar system with your back to the sun. Hypothetically, let's say you don't worry about a space suit or getting air—you're just out there, small. And let's say further that you're facing into a part of the sky that doesn't have any stars. So it's just hypothetical: edge of the solar system, looking out from the sun, sky doesn't have any stars where you're looking.

So what do you see? Black, right? You see black, don't you? Is it the black of the color black, or is it the black that's the absence of any light? It's the black that's the absence of any light, right? There's no light coming to the eye, so the eye sees black.

Now, is that space in front of you actually free of light? Or does it have light? Your back is to the sun. The sun's radiating. It's full of light, isn't it? It's pervaded by light, but we don't see it. So it looks black.

Now, let's suppose that a meteor flashes up from below and flies in front of your eyes. Do you see it? What's it like? Light. There's a big flash of light, isn't there? And then it goes and it's dark again, right?

I want to suggest that this is an analogy for the relationship between the unconditioned and consciousness. The analogy is that the sunlight pervading the empty space—the ever-present sunlight—is like the unconditioned nature. But we don't usually see it. When an object, a phenomenal arising, comes into that field, it gets illuminated by the unconditioned nature. And that flash, which is only temporary, is consciousness.

Does that make sense? When you're looking out into the sky with your back to the sun, you see black, but that black is actually pervaded with light. There are photons passing through there streaming from the sun, but we don't notice it. As soon as an object passes in front of us like a meteorite, there's a bright flash of light that reaches our eyes and seeing takes place.

The analogy is that the sunlight pervading the empty space is like the unconditioned nature—it's ever-present. But the flash of seeing that happens when the object comes into the field is consciousness. It's illuminated just temporarily, just momentarily, by the unconditioned, the ever-present nature. But that flashing goes away when the object goes.

"I thought I heard Rinpoche say in response to a question yesterday that actually Buddha nature, the unconditioned, is permanent, and that rigpa is a little bit different, but it is this union of consciousness and Buddha nature. So it's more like what you're describing. When you're saying that rigpa is coming in, I'm a little confused because I thought he said something different. He said it was perception."

Yeah, he said Rigpa is the perception of the ground or a piece of the ground and that comes and goes. So in that sense it's true. But Rigpa is often described in the texts as that which is beyond change. Sometimes the vocabulary is not so clear between Rigpa and Buddha nature. So I could also say Buddha nature throughout this talk. It's pointing to our current word for an unchanging nature. We can substitute Buddha nature and it will work just as well.

This sunlight pervading empty space concept actually occurs in some Tibetan texts. The solar system part doesn't because they didn't have the solar system back then, and the meteorite doesn't. But I had heard that sunlight pervading empty space was used, and that's part of what allowed this image to form. It's actually a classical analogy for the unconditioned nature.

Think about light particles—they don't have any mass. That's one of the curious things about light: it has energy, but it has no weight. And it's everywhere, if you're near a sun.

Someone mentioned dark retreat and how you experience lights even in total darkness. Yes, you experience light. In meditation with eyes closed, we experience a lot of light also. It tends to be a sign of concentration. These inner lights do come in meditation, but it doesn't need sense input. This analogy doesn't require physical light. The physical light is just an analogy for the clarity of mind, and the flashing is just an analogy for the cognizance of objects.

So it could be all inner objects. It could be cognizing an emotion. We don't know it until the natural clarity or cognizance shines on it. That's what illuminates it. It's not physical light that I'm relating to in our experience, but the cognizance of our nature. Light is just a good analogy for that cognizance. Sometimes the word used for this cognizance feature of our nature is clarity or luminosity—it's almost built in.

The term "clear light" that's used in Buddhism relates to this. Sometimes it's talked about as the clear light of the void. I'm not sure whether that's an accurate translation because that term came in a long time ago, and I'm uncertain whether the Tibetans would talk about it that way today. I tend to think that clear light is a slightly imprecise translation of luminosity or clarity, but I'm not an authority on that. It certainly has the sense of unconditioned clarity of our nature.

Here's where the analogy breaks down a little bit, because these things are occurring in physical space.

Here's where the analogy breaks down a little bit, because these things are occurring in physical space. I'm combining the outer phenomena with the consciousness of the individual who's watching. In the real situation, that sunlight pervading empty space is within each of us. It's an integral part of our minds. In fact, to say it's within isn't quite right because it's both within and without.

Here's what I want to suggest: when a phenomenon arises—let's say at one of the five senses—the ground for us to know that is already present within us as this unconditioned clarity. But no phenomenon takes place, no consciousness takes place, no sense experience takes place until that unconditioned clarity meets with a physical phenomenon, which is the sound. In the analogy, the sunlight is the inherent clarity of the mind, but in order for it to be effective or function for us as sentient beings, it needs an object to reflect it. We don't see it. We're not aware of it until an object reflects it back, bounces off of it.

The comment was made that rigpa's not preoccupied with that, and you're absolutely right. If this whole discussion doesn't interest you and isn't necessary, you can drop it.

I guess my experience of vipassana over the years was that I was very confused about the idea of the unconditioned. It really had my knickers in a twist. I had deep experience and understanding, but there was some thorny knot that didn't get untangled there, and that's what drew me to this. In my experience, what's useful about perception theory is that there can be knowing without a knower. I'm not looking at all the details of that, but intuitively, I can at least conceptually grasp that and have a brief experience of that kind of groundlessness, non-positioning. That somehow makes sense, whereas I always felt like I had to annihilate myself.

I can appreciate that because it's very hard to get any kind of conceptual model on what the unconditioned is in the Theravadan view because it's so little talked about. In the later part of the talk, when we get into the nirvana piece, that's actually what I want to go into—there are four different ways of looking at nirvana. I want to unfold those, and whether it comes with knowing or not is an integral part of that question. So we'll get there.

Let me continue a little bit longer before we open up for questions. There are many questions on this topic, and there's some material I want to cover first.

This is the model that for me resolved the dilemma because it illustrated consciousness as being temporary but arising out of a base that was unchanging—a base of cognizance that was unchanging. If you really want to mess the analogy up a little more, you can think—and I'm not going to take questions on this statement; this is just for play—imagine that perhaps the way to perceive the unconditioned nature directly is to turn back to face the source. That's all I'm going to say about that.

Where does awareness come in? In the Tibetan tradition, this aspect of natural clarity, which is not subject to arising and passing—illustrated by the sunlight in the analogy—is often called primordial awareness. Primordial because it's been there from the very beginning and it's not subject to birth and death. I think it could be helpful to capitalize the P and the A in that description, just so you remember that it's an aspect of the unconditioned. It's not an awareness of changing objects, but it's been there forever in this view—forever.

Do you see how this model of consciousness has an element that's conditioned because it depends on the object being present, but it also has an element which is unconditioned, which is a reflection of that underlying luminosity? I was interested to hear when Ajahn Jumnian came one time, someone asked him, "Is consciousness conditioned or unconditioned?" His answer was, "It has both aspects. It has a conditioned aspect and it has an unconditioned aspect." You'll find that the Thai forest tradition is very much in line with this view and this analogy. They're right there.

The other question is, as was asked a minute ago, how does this connect with the unconditioned or nirvana? That's what I'd like to talk about next.

I'll start with a quote from the book I mentioned the other night, Self-Liberation, translated by John Reynolds: "This self-originated primordial awareness has not been created by anything."

Amazing! It does not experience birth, nor does there exist a cause for its death. Amazing!

This makes it clear that the primordial awareness is not subject to coming or going, not subject to birth or death. As I said, in the Theravadan canon, there's only one dhamma, there's only one element that fits that description, and that is nirvana.

So the question is: is awareness an integral part of nirvana or not?

As we get into the territory of nirvana, I want to make one distinction here. When the Tibetans talk about nirvana, as I understand it, they talk about it to mean the mind state of a fully enlightened Buddha. That mind state is characterized by a quality of omniscience that can know anything it turns its attention to.

When the Theravadans talk about nibbana—same word—they use it in two ways. One is the mind state of an arahant who has become fully enlightened where all the defilements have been released, but who may not have omniscience, generally does not have omniscience. It's a liberated mind in either case.

But the other way that nibbana is used is as a synonym for the unconditioned element itself. So we often say that one can realize nibbana, or one does realize nibbana at the stage of stream entry. There's a direct experience or realization of this unconditioned element so that one knows what that is from firsthand experience. So just get the sense that they're a little bit different.

I'll talk about primarily the second sense of the unconditioned element. What is the unconditioned element? How is it understood in different Buddhist traditions? How is that experience described? Because people here—I know meditators here who have had a range of experiences that come close to these descriptions.

The first view is that nibbana has no ontological reality at all. Let me just say what I mean by that. Ontology is the study of being, existence, whether things exist or not. Ontological reality means something has some form of existence. So this term nibbana could or could not have some form of existence.

This school of thought says that nibbana is not a separate place or object at all or element, but it is only the state of mind which is free of greed, aversion, and confusion. Can you appreciate that understanding? It's not a destination. It's not something that is a separate dimension of our reality. It's just a normal state of mind where greed, aversion, and delusion have been completely uprooted, never to arise again. Nothing metaphysical about it at all, nothing transcendent. I mean, it's a very exalted state of mind, but it's not beyond the five senses.

Now, I think that this view is somewhat close to the view of the Madhyamaka school, Nagarjuna's school, who kept cutting out any postulates of existence. I don't know this for a fact, but that's my suspicion.

I also want to relate it to the term rigpa and just raise a point. We talked about rigpa as empty cognizance, or we could say it as a verb: empty cognizing, because we really only know cognizing by its activity, don't we? So when we talk about it as a verb—empty knowing—but then we give it a name, rigpa, it turns it into a noun. Once we've turned a verb into a noun, we tend to ascribe an ontological reality to it. But is it necessarily there?

This is also what's pointed to even by some of the Dzogchen texts which say you can't find it. Remember that section from Shabkar that I read last night? "Look for mind and it isn't to be found. It has no form or color." But I don't want to make a big deal of this. This is just more a kind of interesting question. I actually think—well, I'll get to my opinion later. It's not so important right now.

Here's the second description of the unconditioned element. This is the view of many orthodox Theravadan schools, and I'll ascribe it particularly to the view of the Visuddhimagga, a 6th century text which is very influential in Burma and Sri Lanka, and particularly associated with the school of Mahasi Sayadaw.

So in this view, nibbana has an ontological reality. It exists to some degree. It doesn't exist like ordinary things exist. It exists on another kind of level, a more subtle level—just the way that light exists in a lighter way than mass exists. But it nonetheless has some ontological reality.

And here's a description of it from the Pali Canon. This is from the Samyutta Nikaya.

Bhikkhus, that sphere should be realized where the eye stops and the perception of form fades away. That sphere should be realized where the ear stops and the perception of sound fades, where the nose stops and the perception of odor fades, where the

tongue stops and the perception of flavor fades, where the body stops and the perception of tactile sensation fades, where the mind stops and the perception of ideas and phenomena fade. That sphere should be realized.

It's clear that this is talking about the unconditioned. This is a pointer you'll find many places in the Pali Canon to a quality of mind, or you could call it a state called cessation. There are different interpretations of what constitutes cessation, but one way of describing the unconditioned is as a state of cessation.

This was echoed also by a Zen master—I think it was Dogen—who talked about enlightenment as being the dropping off of body and mind.

So it's very clear from the descriptions in these teaching lineages that this is an experience that meditators have. It is, in their view, the goal of meditation practice because it is the contact with this dimension that does the uprooting of the fetters, the forms of bondage. But their description of it is that all five senses are suspended and even consciousness is suspended. So one way of saying it, if you want to say it accurately, is that the four mental aggregates go away, at least for a moment or a few moments.

People who experience this in their meditation practice describe it as a gap. There is knowing, knowing, knowing. And the next thing they know, there's been some interval of time and they start knowing again. But they know that there's been an interval of time. But there is no memory of what happened in that interval of time. Maybe if they're really acute, they can get right on the far edge of that gap coming out of it. They get a little bit of a whiff of a memory of an aroma that existed there. And so they have some little sense of that unconditioned peace and stillness, maybe. But sometimes they come out of the gap and they don't have any memory at all.

In some schools, this is considered an enlightenment experience. In the Theravadan model, there are four levels of enlightenment, so this is not full enlightenment in the Tibetan sense. But it could be an experience of stream entry.

In this state, even consciousness goes away. So there is no direct knowing of this state for the meditator. It's very much an altered state of mind. It's a very unlikely state to happen in daily life. It usually requires a lot of concentration and a lot of mindfulness and a lot of equanimity for the mind to have that experience. So you could say in many ways this is a classical description of enlightenment from an orthodox Theravadan point of view in some schools: that the cessation is of all four mental ag-

gregates. The physical aggregate, of course, is still there. The body doesn't go away. But because consciousness isn't there, there's no experience of the body. So experience just stops for a while. And that is when it's said that the mind opens to the unconditioned.

Now, there's another description that you find in the Theravadan tradition which still has a quality of cessation to it. But in this view, consciousness doesn't cease. So the other three mental aggregates do. Feeling, perception, and mental formations are absent, but consciousness is still present. And in this view, what consciousness takes as its object is the deathless element. There's a direct realization of nibbana, of the unconditioned, in this view. This is commonly the way it's described in the Thai forest tradition.

There's a great story of a teacher who was a contemporary of Ajahn Chah named Ajahn Mahabua. I think he's 93 years old now. He's still teaching in Thailand, but he is old. He was a very, very dedicated practitioner. When he came into, I think it was about his tenth rains retreat—that means the three-month period when the monks don't move around and they usually do more retreat—he'd been a monk for ten years at that time. He decided to make a vow to sit up all night without moving. Every night of the rains retreat. So that's what he did. Every night he'd just sit up in meditation all night long. He said the pain was unbelievable. But he was very determined and he stuck to it. He said that after he did that he lost his fear of death because he knew no pain from dying could be worse than the pain he'd experienced from this period of practice.

These old masters didn't have chicken hearts. They really went for it wholeheartedly.

He said that after that intense period, his concentration was unshakable. "From that point on, I kept making progress until my mind was like rock. In other words, I was skilled enough in the solidity and stability of my concentration that the mind was like a slab of rock. It couldn't be easily affected by anything at all."

Then came an interesting development: "I was stuck on that concentration for five full years." He loved the stillness so much that he didn't want to give it up and didn't think to look for anything greater, anything beyond that stillness because it was so unmoving. Then he realized that he was stuck. It only took him five years to recognize this!

At that point, he realized what he needed to use was what in that tradition is called *satipaññā*—mindfulness wisdom. It's very similar in its nature to rigpa. It's the combination of cognizance and wisdom.

"At that point, things went easily because my concentration was fully prepared," he said. He began by turning this wisdom way of looking onto four factors: desire and nondesire, suffering and ease. These are basically the four parts of the Four Noble Truths.

So he was investigating the Four Noble Truths non-stop. And then he saw that they were all subject to change. Desire and non-desire kept alternating. Suffering and ease kept alternating. So he decided that wasn't the place to look.

"At that point, I let go of everything else but mindfulness and wisdom. They became impartial and impassive and the mind didn't tend to anything." And then here's the quote of this special moment:

"At that moment, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked. Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared at the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom."

When he describes the pure mind, it is this faculty of mindfulness and wisdom combined—the faculty of knowing and intelligence, which is very much like rigpa. So this is a description that meets very well with the Tibetan understanding.

The *satipañña* he turned on itself.

Here's another reference from the Buddha's words from the Pali Canon: "Consciousness without feature, without end, luminous all around." Sound familiar? "Here water, earth, fire and wind have no footing. Here long and short, coarse and fine, fair and foul, name and form are all brought to an end. With the stopping of consciousness, each is here brought to an end."

So this is another style of cessation. There's cessation of all the sense activities. There's cessation of thought formation, even of the possibility of thought formation. But consciousness remains, and the only thing it's conscious of is the undying, the absolute, unmoving stillness of the unconditioned.

That's the third of these four models of nirvana. That quote was from Digha Nikaya, Sutta 11.

The fourth of these models is that the realization of the unconditioned can take place in a state where all the senses are functioning, but where the poisons—greed, aversion, and confusion—have ceased. So the cessation is of any kind of grasping or misunderstanding, any degree of ignorance or grasping. Everything else is functioning, but there's a clear perception of the deathless. This is more like the view of Dzogchen.

You can also find references in the Pali Canon that support certainly number three, where consciousness is present with the unconditioned.

One interesting way to find out whether awareness is permanent is to ask: what happens when a fully enlightened being dies? Is there any consciousness that continues, or is there not?

Well, it's a little controversial in this room. He said the wisdom stream continues. And I said, "You mean as a specific, particular individual?" He said yes. And he looked and he said, "You're free. You're free to manifest." So, and then he said, "Buddha nature is not alone. Not one big thing. Everyone has their own specific thing." Interesting.

The comment was that what Rinpoche said when the question was asked this afternoon was that you're free—the consciousness does continue, but it's a wisdom mind stream only. And it's not that it merges back into a universal blob of mind, but the mind stream stays individual. And if you want, you can manifest again, meaning presumably take birth or manifest on wordless planes.

Interesting. So in the Pali, that is what I thought from the Tibetan point of view too. In the Pali suttas, this question gets touched on when you ask the question: what happens when an arhat dies?

There's this interesting passage where somebody is very close to liberation, but they can't quite get there. So they're practicing, practicing, practicing. This bhikkhu's name is Godhika. He gets close to liberation, has a temporary liberation, but then falls back into samsara, suffering. Practices, practices, practices, achieves temporary liberation, falls back into samsara and does this a number of times.

Because he's unable to sustain his liberation, he gets discouraged and commits suicide. The euphemism in the canon for committing suicide is that Bhikkhu Godhika used the knife and took his life. He was just practicing out on a mountaintop somewhere on his own.

Then the other bhikkhus came to the Buddha and said, "But Godhika used the knife. Isn't that really bad for him?" Because you know in Buddhism, one isn't supposed to take one's own life. It's still killing a human being, and so it goes against the precepts.

And the Buddha looked with his psychic vision and he said, "No worries. Because just before Godhika died, he attained arahantship. So he was released." Just before the moment of death, even though he had used the knife already.

Then he said, "Did you see near where Godhika was staying—did you see a black cloud swirling around there?" He said that was Mara searching for the consciousness of Godhika. Mara is the one who comes and tempts practitioners away. He was trying to

find the consciousness so that he could drag that practitioner, drag their spirit back to a lower realm or away from practice or away from the liberating Dharma or something like that, so he wouldn't be reborn in a good place.

But the Buddha said, "Mara was unable to find Godhika's consciousness. Because he had attained arahantship, his consciousness was unestablished."

So the Buddha didn't say that his consciousness didn't exist anymore. He said that that dead Arahant's consciousness was unestablished.

And there's another great passage that illustrates what unestablished means. And this is what I want to finish with.

Buddha said, "Suppose you have a building and it has an eastern window and of course, four walls. So the sunlight comes in through the eastern window. Where does it land? On the western wall." And sunlight lands on the western wall.

And the Buddha said, "What if there were no western wall there? Where would the sunlight land?" And they said, "On the earth."

"What if there was no earth there, but there was water? Where would it land?" He said, "On the water."

Finally he said, "What if there was no water or earth there?"

Where would it land? And at that point he said it would be unestablished. The sunlight would be unestablished. Sunlight in empty space? Remind you of anything?

So finally tonight I want to describe one meeting I had with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, whom Sogyal Rinpoche has mentioned a few times. Nyoshul Khenpo was a teacher of Sogyal Rinpoche and his picture is on the altar if you haven't looked yet. There are photos on this side of Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, our Rinpoche's father. You might like to take a look.

One year, Sogyal Rinpoche had not been able to come to America and I was missing having contact with him, so I went over to Kathmandu. I spent a few weeks there and would go up to his monastery for teachings and practice in the shrine room. I practiced in my hotel and had some contact with him over a couple of weeks, which was a very wonderful experience.

Then one day, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was in town and staying at Rinpoche's monastery outside of Swayambhu. Rinpoche asked, "Would you like to meet Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche?" I said, "Well, I have some dana to offer him." A friend of mine had heard that he was staying there. He was a teacher of hers and she said, "Would you offer Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche some dana on my behalf?"

I said, "I don't need to meet him. I'll just give you the dana and you can offer it to him coming from my friend." Sogyal looked at me like, are you crazy? I just said, "I don't need to meet him." I thought, you know, met one rinpoche.

But then I reconsidered. I said to Sogyal Rinpoche, "You know, I really would like to meet Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. It would be great if I could go in and present the dana." So he arranged it for me.

I'd heard so many things about this great teacher, great bodhisattva. I was quite nervous going in to meet him. Also, I'd been meditating for a couple of weeks, so I was pretty open at that point.

I went in and we had just a little chit-chat. I was introduced and he was there with his wife who looked after him. Then there came the moment for me to present the offering. I went up and bowed three times prostrate on the ground, then held out the offering to him. He took it and then I looked up into his eyes.

As I said, I was a little nervous. Looking into his eyes was an experience that I will never forget. As I looked into his eyes, he seemed to go into his meditative state. He was a highly accomplished Dzogchen practitioner—he passed away a few years later. His eyes seemed to just widen a little bit, and his gaze was really in the distance. All movement in his mind ended. There was some kind of cessation that happened.

As I looked into his eyes, I felt like I was looking into nirvana. I felt if I had just been able to look into them a little longer, something might have happened. It was so still looking into his eyes that it wasn't right to say that his mind was still. It more felt like there was no mind there to be still or not. There was just an absence of possibility of movement.

In that gaze, I felt so exposed, I got even more nervous. I felt like he was just looking right into the middle of me and seeing my anxiety. At that point, I sort of came out of that little spell, said goodbye, made my bows again, and left. But that gave me the transmission experience.

And the last fetter to be uprooted is ignorance, which is ignorance of the Four Noble Truths and the nature of reality.

So that's the traditional Theravadan understanding of the stages of enlightenment and what gets eliminated at each level. What's particularly interesting to me is that restlessness is considered one of the final fetters. When we experience that fidgeting or mental agitation during meditation, we might dismiss it as a minor irritation. But in this framework, the complete elimination of restlessness is actually a mark of the highest realization.

The progression makes sense when you consider it deeply. The earlier stages address our fundamental relationship to existence itself—our doubts about the path, our belief in a solid self, our attachment to external rituals for purification. Then we work with the grosser forms of attraction and aversion. The later stages address increasingly subtle forms of clinging—to refined spiritual experiences, to any sense of being someone who achieves something, and finally to any remaining ignorance about the true nature of things.

This systematic approach appeals to the analytical mind, but I think it's important to remember that these descriptions are pointing toward something that ultimately transcends conceptual understanding. Whether we frame awakening in terms of the elimination of fetters, the recognition of our primordial nature, or the direct seeing of emptiness, we're always using provisional language to point toward what cannot be fully captured in words.

What matters most is finding the approach that resonates with your temperament and circumstances, then practicing with wholehearted dedication. The various traditions offer different maps, but the territory they're pointing toward is the same fundamental freedom from suffering.

All right, let's take our break here.

All conceiving of self is gone. And the final one is ignorance. Ignorance is completely plucked out of the mind. And at that time, the mind is purified completely of any unwholesome states—greed, aversion, and ignorance.

That's a good place to end. Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 269

Taking the Practice Home

Guy Armstrong · 55 min

In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses the essential challenge of maintaining contemplative practice when returning to ordinary life after retreat. He emphasizes that high motivation is crucial for remembering to cultivate awareness throughout the day, sharing the example of Minya Rinpoche's practice of turning to mind-nature 100 times daily. Armstrong discusses the unique suitability of Rigpa practice for daily life, noting its immediacy compared to mindfulness practices that require different objects in different situations.

The talk covers practical recommendations including two hours of daily formal practice when possible, the minimum commitment of simply assuming meditation posture once daily, and the importance of annual silent retreats. Armstrong explores four essential areas of practice competency: choiceless attention (Vipassana), loving-kindness cultivation, samatha concentration including jhāna practice, and non-dual understanding through Dzogchen or Mahamudra.

A significant portion addresses the philosophical sophistication of Dzogchen and Mahamudra teachings, particularly their integration of ultimate truth (the non-dual ground of Rigpa) with conventional developmental practice. Armstrong explains how both perspectives are necessary - the non-dual expressing wisdom that understands emptiness, while the developmental path expresses compassion. He concludes with practical advice for integrating diverse practices and trusting one's own experience as the authentic vehicle for realizing the nature of mind.

Sometimes just a little bit of conversation, half an hour or forty-five minutes, can really get the thought train going again. It can be hard to settle, and the prospect of stabilizing the attention in rigpa starts to seem a little more ambitious than it was before. But tomorrow we'll get the bigger challenge: taking the practice back into our daily life. So that's what I want to talk about tonight.

I think one of the big questions that comes up is around a feature I want to illustrate by a story. I work out at a gym regularly when I'm in town. That may not be apparent from my physique, but I do it just to try to stay healthy, although I've never been into body sculpting particularly.

While I was working out at the gym, there were these two teenage guys who came in. A lot of young men at the gym, and some of them are very, very buff. It seems to be a thing among this generation to look really good. So they were working out, and I was working out on a set of weights near them and I overheard their conversation.

They were scrawnier than I am. I mean, I've put on weight since I was an adolescent. They were more like me when I was an adolescent. But they were supporting each other and spotting each other and really putting a lot of effort into what they were doing.

There was a guy at the gym working there named Lance. Lance was formerly a competitor in the Mr. America contest, and there was a photo of him when he was at his peak of development. He really looked like one of those Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alikes in his peak, really muscled all over, oiled and everything.

These two kids were talking about him. They said, "Wow, did you see Lance the other day in here? He was on the press and he was pressing 515 pounds." I mean, that's extraordinary. I can probably press at my peak like 135 or something. They were watching Lance press 515 pounds and they were totally in awe that that was possible for him.

That's what I tuned into in their discussion: how impressed they were at Lance's level of development. The fact that that's what they aspired to was going to condition their effort. They were going to make the kind of effort that would lead in that direction, even if they never got to a Mr. America contest. They saw that that's where their training could go, and they aimed there. Whether they reached it or not, that's really what inspired them and motivated them to put in a lot more effort than I was putting in.

So I think this question of aim and motivation is really central when we talk about taking the practice back into daily life. Maybe even more than it is when we're actually on a retreat and we don't have so much else to do. Because if our aim is high, that will really fuel the right kind of effort on our part. We could even say the right balance between effort and non-effort on our part. But it will inspire what we do when we get home, when we leave here.

Just as an example, Rinpoche the other day mentioned his brother, Minya Rinpoche, who carries a mala around and makes sure that he turns to the nature of mind a hundred times a day when he's in a daily life situation.

So, for those of you who just went through maybe a little bit of conversation and then tea, any idea how many times you turned? Were you noticing anything?

"I did," Leslie replied. "I stopped counting at a certain point because I had to wash dishes. But it was 108. I only did a short period of time, really. I did the break to silence, though."

Excellent. Gold star. 108 times.

I couldn't really do it while talking. She mentioned it's difficult to do while talking, which I think is true. It's easier to do while listening, so you can start to develop the practice first while listening.

Even in this supportive setting, I'm sure you got a sense of how easy it is for the mind to wander. Even when we've just come out of doing formal practice, it's hard to remember to tune back in to that factor. Are we checking in? So the motivation in daily life needs to be high so that we have this interest in continually checking: Where is nature of mind? Am I in touch with mind essence? Am I in touch with emptiness?

Because mala beads look a little bit odd in daily life in the West, some friends of mine gave Joseph Goldstein—who's a colleague and longtime teacher of mine—a more Western artifact to do the same thing. It's a counter that you use like when you're counting people through a turnstile. You can slip it in your pocket, and every time you turn back to nature of mind, you click it once. At the end of the day, there's your counter.

I think we should probably buy a bunch of these for the bookstore. Office Max has them for about fifteen dollars.

The good thing about rigpa practice is that it's really well suited for daily life. I've been working with it for a number of years, and I've worked with mindfulness for a number of years. They're both excellent. But there's something about rigpa that's more immediate in any situation. It doesn't matter what you're doing. With mindfulness, we can find objects also, but the objects keep changing. If you're sitting, it's one thing. If you're walking, it's another. If you're working at a desk, it might be another. With rigpa, it's just one practice: look and notice the nature of mind. And it works very well in daily situations.

I hope you've been experimenting with this during your time here, because its practice is very well suited for taking back into daily life. The trouble is we have to remember. As someone said, it's not hard to be aware—what's hard is to remember to be aware. This is really true. But as we develop that, the counter can be a very good reminder. You think, "What's that thing in my pocket?" and it will remind you to turn and notice.

Please try to fill in your daily activity with this practice. Also, in your daily life, there really is no substitute for formal practice. There's no substitute for putting your seat on a cushion and just devoting yourself one hundred percent to meditation—or non-meditation, as the case may be—because the intention is not divided in that time, or is not meant to be divided.

Of course, our intentions go in countless directions, but we maintain one primary intention: to notice. With that wholeheartedness, it becomes much easier to cultivate awareness when we transition from formal practice into our daily lives.

How much should we practice? I was recently reading Rinpoche's book, *Carefree Dignity*, and found it quite interesting that he recommends two hours a day. This aligns with what we would suggest at the end of a Vipassana retreat, if you can manage it.

When I first connected with meditation practice in my twenties, I was single without family obligations, so I could maintain this schedule. I practiced my two hours daily quite religiously for many years—some years even three hours a day. It becomes more challenging as life grows more complex. Many of you are beyond your twenties now, with family responsibilities and other obligations that make such commitment more difficult.

See what's possible for you. Perhaps thirty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes before bed. Maybe forty minutes in the morning and that's it. Do what you can. Every moment helps—none will be wasted.

I often speak with people at retreat's end who have heard this advice many times. They say, "Yes, it sounds wonderful, but I simply can't do it. I lack the discipline for a steady daily practice." When they ask what I suggest, we have one final approach for such situations.

Make a vow that once daily you will assume the meditation posture. There's no excuse not to, because there's no time commitment—not forty minutes or an hour. Simply commit to reaching your cushion before your altar and sitting down once each day. If it's not a suitable moment, you can rise after a minute or five. But I suspect that most times you sit, you'll discover how good it feels and want to remain longer.

The challenge lies in shifting mindset—moving from busyness and the seeming urgency of our tasks into releasing that entire chain of obligations. That's the difficult part. If you can make this shift—and there's no reason you cannot—you'll find yourself in place, and likely you'll stay awhile. This is the vow to take if daily routine proves challenging.

I also strongly encourage everyone to continue silent meditation retreats. There's no substitute for the deepening that emerges through silence and continuous attention. When you examine the great masters of this lineage, you see this pattern clearly.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche's biography was recently published as *Blazing Splendor*—a truly wonderful book. Born in old Tibet, he shares stories of the masters he knew as a young practitioner. They're extraordinary accounts that genuinely capture the magical flavor of Tibet. In the preface, one author noted that Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche had spent half his adult life in retreat. That's what authentic realization requires.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, head of the Nyingma lineage along with Dudjom Rinpoche when both were alive, spent twenty-two years in retreat beginning around age thirteen. He left home at thirteen with tremendous motivation for retreat, embarking on years of solitary practice through his teenage years and beyond.

Compared to such dedication, one week yearly might not seem too demanding. I suggest aiming for at least a week of silent retreat annually. If you connect with this practice and find it beneficial, aim for a month. If a week deepens understanding, a month deepens it immeasurably.

Consider this honestly: we spend the first three days of any retreat simply arriving. Only after three days does practice begin to deepen. Then today—when did you start thinking about going home? Probably quite early this morning. So perhaps two days of this retreat found you truly settled. This is my estimation, but it serves as a useful guideline.

In a month-long retreat, subtracting three days at the beginning and perhaps two at the end, you have twenty-five days of settled practice.

The deepening simply continues, making longer retreats highly recommended.

Yesterday someone expressed enthusiasm: "I really do love this Dzogchen practice. Where can I go to do a month-long retreat in this style?" I know that Lama Surya Das offers a month-long Dzogchen retreat on the East Coast each summer. But our primary connection is with Sogyal Rinpoche, and there are other wonderful Dzogchen teachers available.

However, in my experience, most teachers require that you have completed—or at least begun with a firm commitment to complete—the ngöndro, the preliminary practices Gerardo mentioned earlier. These may take four or five years to complete, creating a very high bar for entrance. Sogyal Rinpoche is quite rare in his generosity, offering these teachings to people who haven't completed such prerequisites.

The reality is that there simply aren't many open month-long Dzogchen retreats available. When I asked both Gerardo and Rinpoche about this today at lunch, they both just shrugged.

One option I've pursued—which I mentioned in an earlier talk—was traveling to Kathmandu to practice near Rinpoche's monastery. He now has twenty single rooms for Westerners, so you can actually stay at his monastery. When he's in town, you can meet with him periodically for interviews. This is actually one of the better situations if you want ongoing guidance in this practice. It's difficult to find a qualified guide you can be near for extended periods, especially since the great teachers travel constantly because everyone wants them to come and teach. It's challenging.

For Vipassana practitioners, please don't think, "I'm only going to practice under a qualified Dzogchen master, or I won't practice at all." A month of samatha practice is far more valuable than zero time spent in Dzogchen practice. Please continue using the facilities at Spirit Rock, IMS, and other centers to deepen your practice.

Rinpoche has spoken about—and I would also outline, especially for Vipassana practitioners—four main areas of practice that you should aim to develop some competency in during your lifetime.

First is basic Vipassana practice characterized by choiceless attention, enabling you to be mindful and fully present with any phenomenon arising at any sense door without losing awareness.

Second is developing familiarity with loving-kindness through intensive practice. We offer seven-day and month-long loving-kindness retreats for this purpose.

Third is some degree of samatha practice to discover whether you have the capacity for jhana practice and entering absorptions. This can be accomplished through loving-kindness practice in long retreats or through breath meditation, probably in month-long retreats.

Finally, now that you've had this introduction, some integration of a non-dual perspective. I personally believe Dzogchen or Mahamudra are the finest approaches available. While there are other forms like Advaita, I deeply appreciate the elegance and philosophical foundations of Dzogchen and Mahamudra. I believe they're unparalleled in the entire spiritual universe of non-dual teachings.

What I most appreciate about their understanding is that while they honor the non-dual—the ultimate pointing to ultimate truth, always accessible here and now, not requiring passage through time but available in any moment as you open to the truth of

the ground, or rigpa—this is the heart of Dzogchen teaching. Simultaneously, it rests on a foundation that is a developmental path, acknowledging effort and progress over time toward the goal of liberation.

This combination of ultimate truth of the ground and development over time representing the conventional understanding of spiritual practice—the union of these two—is the height of dharma wisdom. Any path that doesn't embrace both is incomplete.

In Zen, they say that once someone achieves satori, they must wait ten years before teaching. This decade allows the practitioner to integrate understanding of the ultimate level with understanding of the conventional level. Until one has fully integrated and merged these two understandings so they're no longer in conflict, one's spirituality isn't mature enough to instruct others in this view.

Some non-dual teachings cling to the non-dual and use it as a platform to discredit the dual—to dismiss notions of development, progress, practice, time, and refinement. But true understanding of the non-dual does not deny dualistic truth. The conventional and ultimate live alongside each other and need each other. Denying either means missing something essential.

It could be said that the dualistic vision of progress over time from defilement to liberation is the expression of compassion. The non-dual is the expression of emptiness—the wisdom that understands emptiness. Emptiness without compassion is cold, while compassion without emptiness remains entangled in samsara.

So we need both. The systems of Dzogchen and Mahamudra, in my view, are the most philosophically sophisticated at explaining that mutual dependence. Because of this, they offer very satisfying views. All the relative practices are encouraged, as you've heard Rinpoche discuss—the development of faith and devotion, the development of love and compassion, the development of shamatha. All these practices form an integral part of the foundation that prepares one for realizing the ground, realizing the ultimate.

For Vipassana practitioners, any cultivation we do in these four main areas is invaluable: the wisdom of relating to all phenomena, the development of the heart through loving-kindness, the deepening of concentration through shamatha practice, and the non-dual understanding of touching the ultimate. All these are areas we each need to develop significantly. None of us have reached the peak of any of these four areas, so any time you spend developing any of them is time really well spent in your maturation as a dharma practitioner.

Which practice calls to you at any given moment depends entirely on your own discernment. Look into your own heart and explore two essential questions. First: What do I really feel drawn by and inspired by? What's pulling my heart? Listen deeply, for different practices will call to you at different times. Second: What does my heart and mind really need at this point? Where is my practice strong? Where is it lacking? As you examine your current life situation, what are the strengths and weaknesses in your mental-emotional makeup right now? What style of practice would best balance these or cultivate what is underdeveloped?

This is primarily something you can discover for yourself, though having a conversation with a teacher to gain their perspective can be invaluable.

You don't need to wait for a month-long Dzogchen retreat to arrive in your area. There's tremendous valuable work to be done in the meantime. If possible, please connect with a local sitting group. The support of like-minded practitioners is invaluable.

Dharma practice goes against the mainstream of this society—the Buddha said this himself. We are swimming against the current. Most of society moves in the direction of acquisition: having more possessions, money, status, reputation. It's always about more, more, more. Dharma practice flows in the opposite direction—toward renunciation, letting go, giving away, becoming less, realizing emptiness.

Without the support of people who share this understanding, it becomes difficult not to get caught up in the acquisition mindset. It's challenging to live in the world without being influenced by worldly values. Contact with like-minded practitioners helps keep our sights clear, keeping us aimed in the right direction.

So please, if you can, connect with a sitting group near you. I know Choknyi Norbu Rinpoche has a group in the Bay Area—Larry Garcia is a contact point. There's a Dzogchen lama in Casadero, near Sebastopol. There's a Mahamudra group in Petaluma with Peter Barth. As most of you know, there are many Vipassana groups throughout the Bay Area and the country. Please try to connect with like-minded people and maintain your orientation toward dharma values.

Now I want to discuss some specific understandings from this retreat that may differ from other practices you've encountered. If you've practiced traditions other than Dzogchen or Mahamudra, some of these emphases will be new.

The concept of Buddha nature—not merely as philosophy, but as direct experience—can transform your practice completely. Someone mentioned to me recently that this gave them an entirely new basis for feeling held and supported. To know that reality isn't limited to the five senses, or even the five senses plus mind, thought, and emotion, but that there's something deeper holding all of this—this changes everything.

Theoretical knowledge of Buddha nature is one thing, but experiential knowledge penetrates far deeper. Being able to touch this in rigpa practice provides a new foundation for faith in life itself. And it's precisely this faith that gives us the capacity to surrender.

It's to surrender into the flow of the Dharma, to let go of egocentric vision and intentions.

Another thing that this practice highlights is the centrality of grasping. After doing the Rigpa practice for a while in my first retreat, I started to notice that what I was turning to again and again wasn't physical phenomena—sound, sight, smell, taste, touch. It wasn't so much moods and emotions. What I was noticing was whether the mind was in a state of grasping or whether it was in a state of freedom.

This is the heart of the Dharma. This is the pointing of the Four Noble Truths: grasping, its cause which is craving, the release from grasping, and the path to it, which is wisdom. So one way to look at this practice is to notice if grasping is present. If it is, the ego is present. Ego and grasping are synonymous. Then notice what happens when you can release. And then there's the dropping into the seeing of Rigpa, and the freedom in that.

Don't get too idealistic about letting go of grasping and think that it should happen easily. Ajahn Chah, who was a great teacher in the Theravadan tradition, said that 70 to 80% of spiritual life is knowing that you're grasping and not being able to let go. So if you feel that moment when you're thinking, "Oh, why can't it happen? Why isn't Rigpa today like it was yesterday?" and you can't just release and be there—know that you're in good company.

Just one little tip: if you find yourself straining toward Rigpa, trying to recreate that experience with your body leaning forward, wanting that experience you had yesterday—of course that will block it. It might be simpler to go back to a simpler practice just to calm the mind for a few minutes. Go to the breath or body, even close your eyes if you like, and just feel a little bit calmer. That might release the grasping, and then when you feel that release, turn to mind nature again.

One of the beauties of this approach is the introduction to non-doing. I think it's a very elegant way to present non-doing, giving it great philosophical support. If you walked up to someone on the street and told them to stop doing, they wouldn't have a clue how to go about it. Even meditators who have practiced for years might not quite know how to approach it. But through this presentation, as you get close to non-doing—and "close" means the mind's oscillations have slowed down quite a bit, not swinging so much into past and future, which means some degree of shamatha is present—you're ready to move into non-doing. This really gives you a very elegant way to do it.

So it suits very well that still time in practice. But it's also important to know that it also tells you when to make an effort. Non-doing is great and non-effort is beautiful when practice is effortless. But this teaching also says when we need to make an effort, and that's when we're in what Rinpoche calls post-meditation, which means that we've fallen out of Rigpa and have gone into distraction or some form of grasping. Then we need to apply effort again, and the effort is just to look. But still, it's a practice of non-effort that also highlights the importance of effort when needed.

Where is effort not needed? When we're in Rigpa. Because any effort within that, as you've been discovering, will just disturb it, including the effort to prolong. So we start to learn this trust and surrender in the meditative state itself. When it's there, we accept it and we don't try to make it last longer than it is. It's really just a way of opening without clinging to that meditative state that comes.

This is really supported, or you could say enabled, by the factor of relaxation. So again, it's a critical component of this whole path. As you start your sitting, as you continue to turn and look, just continue to plant the seed of relaxation in the mind and the body. That's really what enables the Rigpa to open up. It opens up from a place of being relaxed and trusting.

This is a quote from a Christian contemplative named Angelus Silesius: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear." Could have been a Rigpa practitioner. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear.

Rinpoche's teachings also highlighted for me the importance of devotion. I was a very non-devotional practitioner when I encountered Rinpoche for the first time. I wasn't quite anti-devotional, but nothing in devotion had touched me before. And with him it sort of came alive for me.

Also in those early years we did a lot of Vajrasattva chanting. It's a very beautiful mantra, and the image is very striking too. That became a doorway for me. And then I discovered a doorway within our tradition, which is the loving-kindness practice.

Rinpoche separates out faith and devotion from love and compassion, but there's one particular component of the metta practice I want to mention, and that is loving-kindness directed to the benefactor—which for me has always been a spiritual teacher. As I would do loving-kindness for the benefactor from a concentrated and meditative state of mind, I found that there was a fusing of our natures.

I haven't done guru yoga, so I can't say it's the same thing that happens in the Vajrayana practice, the Tibetan practice of guru yoga, but it was definitely happening for me in the metta practice for the benefactor. This melding of the benefactor's wisdom mind and my mind took place very strongly in that loving-kindness practice.

Someone in an interview mentioned that they like the idea of devotion but don't particularly feel it for any one individual and asked if it was possible to be devoted to the Dharma. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Some of you know the story of James Baraz, who was starting a course with Ram Dass. This was in the mid to late seventies. Ram Dass, of course, is a bhakti. James was coming out of having practiced with Joseph and in the insight mold.

And Ram Dass said, "I don't know if you're going to be enough of a bhakti for me. What do you love? Do you love God?"

"I can't quite say that."

"Do you love Jesus?"

That didn't quite work.

"Krishna?"

"Not really there."

"Well," Ram Dass said, "what about the Dharma? Do you love the Dharma?"

James said, "Yeah, I love the Dharma."

Ram Dass said, "Okay, say it with meaning. I love you, Dharma."

And then Ram Dass said it back to him. "And you're not getting enough feeling in it. Say it again. I love you, Dharma. No, say it some more. It's not quite strong enough yet."

He made James keep saying it until tears started coming out of his eyes, out of his love for the Dharma. So that was his bhakti relationship.

But even before James Baraz, there was the Buddha. In a section of the Pali Canon, the Buddha says after his enlightenment, he was looking around for someone to be devoted to. He said, "I surveyed all the ascetics and Brahmins and wanderers and practitioners of the era, and if there had been someone more developed than me in concentration, I would have lived honoring and respecting them and lived in dependence on them. I would have taken refuge in them and been devoted to them. But I couldn't find anyone.

"I looked to see if there was anyone more developed than I in virtue, in wisdom, in their degree of liberation. And I couldn't find anyone. So there was no one for me to live in that devotional relationship with. So I decided to live honoring, respecting, and in dependence on the Dhamma." That became his devotional focus.

I really appreciate the pointing through the Dzogchen practice of where to look for the unconditioned. This had been a big mystery for many years in my practice. I was always told that it was beyond the six senses, but I had no idea where to look because I didn't know what was beyond the six senses. And to know that it's in the realm of awareness, that's the direction to look in, is a very big clue. It's a big clue.

So that's a great refuge, even to know the direction of the unconditioned.

These are some of the key points that have shifted in my view and understanding of practice through my encounter with these teachings. They've enriched my practice tremendously, and I hope they're among the things you'll be able to take home and continue to develop and work with.

Now, in terms of how to integrate diverse practices—because most of you had some spiritual practice before coming here—the great thing about Dzogchen practice is that it integrates really well with other practices. I think Gerardo may have spoken this afternoon about combining it with visualization.

Early on in retreats, Rinpoche used to describe his tradition's standard format for a practice period. He said it would typically begin with taking refuge—the chants we've done—and acknowledgment of bodhicitta to set the intention for the period. Then it might move into visualization, visualizing a yidam with its mantra. At some point—and I think this is what Gerardo discussed—you dissolve that image into the nature of mind, into emptiness, recognizing that the image is fabricated. After that dissolving, one rests in the nature of mind with the energy of that former practice. Finally, at the conclusion of the sitting, one dedicates the merit.

Throughout all of Rinpoche's teachings I've heard, this has always been presented as one piece alongside other practices. He's very open about recommending that we combine it with our vipassana or samatha practice.

The way I like to think about integration follows very much how we entered this retreat: starting with samatha with support—a simple object like the breath—then moving to samatha without support, basically opening up the field of attention. At that point, with some prior stability, we move into the rigpa practice.

For vipassana practitioners, I think the spectrum of practices that this new approach offers is very complete. We can start with a simple object like the breath to develop stability of attention, move into slightly more expanded attention with an intermediate field like the body, and combine both—stability of attention with understanding of the nature of things through the three characteristics as seen through the body. Then we open further, with greater stability, into the choiceless attention that relates equally with all phenomena. This practice adds one more step in that open direction.

As the stability of mind grows, that becomes an excellent platform for opening into rigpa. So for vipassana practitioners, you can think of it as the fourth step in a spectrum: breath to body to choiceless attention to rigpa practice.

One thing you'll definitely notice—and I'm sure many of you sensed this during the retreat—is how, as your samadhi deepens, the vividness of rigpa becomes much stronger. As you progressed through these days, several people mentioned to me that they weren't feeling much effect early on from the looking, but as the retreat continued and there was greater stability of mind, greater concentration, rigpa really became more evident—easier to connect with and more vivid.

While this may not have been everyone's experience, it has generally been mine that as samadhi strengthens, rigpa really awakens.

On the other side of the spectrum, to prepare you for what might come, as you return home from this retreat, you may find that rigpa is very alive for you immediately after. This was my experience. Then, as I remained in daily life longer and my samadhi gradually decayed—which it will—the vividness of rigpa became less pronounced. The immediate recognition of it became much harder over time.

Be prepared that this might happen. When it did for me, not getting much response from the looking, I returned to vipassana practices. Of course, Rinpoche would probably still recommend continuing with the looking. So experiment with all your practices. See what works for you. Be pragmatic.

I want to touch on one point. Earlier in the retreat, someone asked whether Rinpoche thought people with vipassana practice could open in a significant and deep way to rigpa practice. There was an interview with him in the Tara Mandala newsletter, probably close to ten years ago now, in the late nineties when he was teaching a Dzogchen retreat at that center in Colorado founded by Tsultrim Allione.

In that newsletter, he was asked whether he thought vipassana practice was good preparation for Dzogchen practice. He said he considered it excellent preparation. When the interviewer asked why, his reply was that vipassana meditators know very well how to meditate—they've learned technique really well. So when they come to Dzogchen, they pick up very quickly how not to meditate.

That's an interesting observation. In my experience, Rinpoche doesn't believe there's any prejudice against us as vipassana practitioners, but rather that our background can work very much to our benefit.

The last thing I want to emphasize about what to take home is this factor of trusting your own experience, which I discussed a few nights ago. Whatever you discover when you turn and look, really trust that as your vehicle in rigpa practice and development of the view. Whether it represents the deepest view or the final view or meets some standard of view doesn't matter so much. It's what's closest to your mind right now, and that's what to follow.

It's like if you're walking down the street in a neighborhood and you catch the smell of fresh bread really strongly in the air somewhere, you know that a bakery is not far away. And so if you're looking for the bakery, you can just follow that smell of the fresh bread. It will lead you to the bakery.

So as you turn and look, whatever you get is like the aroma of Rigpa. If it's not the authentic thing, it's the aroma of it. And as you follow that, it will lead you to the deeper experience, the authentic Rigpa, the direct realization—whatever you want to call it, it will lead you there. And again, a few people have expressed how they've seen what I would call development of the view take place even during this retreat. So the important thing is to have confidence in that and follow it.

If you smell the bread but you walk the other direction, you won't reach the bakery. So really have confidence and follow that. That's your view.

I think I just want to close by reading a quotation from the chant book that I don't think we've done yet. It's called "The Four Dharmas of Gampopa" on page three. I think we'll chant it at the sitting tonight. But it really kind of sums up the whole of our endeavor:

Grant your blessing so that concepts turn to Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that Dharma turns into the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path's confusion is dispelled.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

A good one to take with you.

So we have time for just two or three questions maybe. You all have listened to a lot of talk today, so I'll give you an early night.

Someone at the very back asked: "What is Mahamudra?"

Mahamudra is this teaching of Dzogchen. Did you all pick up the little sheets on the overview of Tibetan Buddhism? They were out in the foyer—they are out in the foyer. They have a translation from "Flight of the Garuda" on one side and an overview of Tibetan Buddhism on the other.

The teachings we've been receiving are from the school called the Nyingma, the ancient school. And Dzogchen is integral to that lineage. Mahamudra is something of a practice and philosophy equivalent to the Kagyu school. It's slightly different in that I think it has a little more developmental aspect, but in the non-dual understanding, they're very, very close.

Another question: "Where would you put Ajahn Sumedho's sound of silence in this?"

The question is about Ajahn Sumedho's Sound of Silence. He's a Vipassana teacher who uses this sound—you know, the ringing in the ears that's a kind of steady background noise—uses it as a meditation object in doing Vipassana. I personally put that in the field of sound, in the sense base of sound. So I regard it as using one form of sound. Now, through that, he uses it and accesses emptiness. But as a meditation technique, I would put it in the sense door of sound.

"The experience that I'm having is, you know, when these windows are open and you can hear the stream out here? Since he told me about that, I feel like I have been infected with it. I wake up hearing it. I go to sleep hearing it. I hear it all the time. It's like in the background all the time. It's like I can't not notice it. And so I'm trying not to let it drive me crazy. I swear I hear it all the time. I do wake up hearing it and I go to sleep hearing it."

It could be a useful object. When sounds get to have that irritating quality, it's good to kind of surrender for a while and make them a clear object of mindfulness so that we drop the resistance to them.

And then having opened to them enough, maybe we can take our attention somewhere else. Either that or earplugs.

A question about jhana practices: why do jhana practices if they don't lead to liberation? Saying that they don't lead to liberation isn't quite the right way to express it. It's more accurate to say that one does not achieve liberation within the jhanas themselves. Most people would understand it this way, although there are some passages in the Pali texts that suggest the jhanas can be used to develop insight as well.

Generally, the understanding is that the mind is too absorbed for insight to really flower in those states, and I would agree with that perspective. The main reason for developing the jhanas is to deepen our level of samadhi. Samadhi is one of the factors of the Eightfold Path—it has to do with the unification of mind that makes the mind strong and stable. A strong, stable mind is the best platform for insight, and it's the wisdom that comes through insight that truly liberates us. So the jhanas create a stronger platform for insight and wisdom to arise.

I had a discussion with Rinpoche at the start of the retreat about the jhanas, and he asked me the same question: why practice them? When I explained that it was primarily to develop the platform for insight, he said, "Oh, it's just the same in our system. That's why shamatha practices are undertaken in our system as well."

A question about inquiring into emptiness on the conceptual level so that we actually recognize emptiness: I mentioned in a talk the other night that there's value in conceptual investigation into the quality of emptiness. For practical application, especially in daily life, I suggested three avenues. One was the analogy of the mind as being like vast space. You can do a meditation based on that—when you sit in your daily life, simply have the sense of the mind as being like vast space with all objects arising and passing within it. This unfolds in the direction of emptiness.

Emptiness of self is equivalent to the Theravadan concept of anatta, or not-self. This is difficult to really grasp in daily life—to me, that's more of a retreat understanding. But the emptiness of objects is quite accessible in daily life. This might mean reading some books that explore this topic. Nagarjuna is a wonderful way in, and you can start by simply reflecting on the readings.

It's all about deconstructing the solidity of the five senses especially. I mentioned one way to deconstruct the sense of sight in that same talk. Go through each of the five senses and see how they can be deconstructed to reveal their insubstantial nature. This will give you a good sense of the insubstantiality of the physical world. Thoughts and

emotions—perhaps that's more of a retreat practice as well—but be aware that the same kind of flimsiness or mere appearance quality can be found in thoughts and emotions too.

This is something you can truly work with in daily life, and it will bear fruit. It's one of those things that you investigate for a while on the conceptual level, and then at some point in meditation the experience comes and you recognize that's what the texts were pointing to.

This is a good place to stop.

CHAPTER 270

Working with Difficult Mind States: The Third Foundation of Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong addresses the inevitable difficulties that arise in meditation practice and life, focusing on the third foundation of mindfulness from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) - cittānupassanā or mindfulness of mind states. Drawing from the Abhidhamma's classification of 52 mental factors, he explores how to work skillfully with five common difficult emotions: desire, aversion, self-judgment, sadness, and fear.*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes that liberation comes not from eliminating these states but from understanding their structure - the mental quality, bodily sensations, and underlying storylines that sustain them. He introduces the RAIN technique (Recognition, Acceptance, Interest, Non-identification) as a practical method for transforming moments of suffering into moments of awakening. Through personal anecdotes and teachings from masters like the Dalai Lama and Pema Chödrön, he demonstrates how investigating our emotional patterns with mindfulness can lead to genuine freedom.*
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> *The talk concludes with Gampopa's Four Blessings, emphasizing how confusion itself can dawn as wisdom when met with proper understanding and acceptance.*

We're coming to the close of the third day of the retreat now, and the feeling in the interview groups today was definitely more one of people settling and arriving, starting to find their rhythm with the retreat. But of course things are never totally easy on retreat, nor are they easy in life. One of the main pointings of the Buddha is to that difficulty.

This is an article from a recent New Yorker magazine that confirms some of that: "According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Years of tests, experiments, and complex computer simulations now provide solid statistical evidence in support of old folk sayings that described life as 'a veil of sorrows,' 'a woeful trial,' and 'a kick in the teeth.' Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that life is actually worse than most living things can stand. Human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be, given

everything it must put up with. In a personal note in the afterward, researchers stated that, statistically speaking, life is 'just too much.' And as yet, they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through it at all."

So at least you're getting through it. You can be happy for that. You're probably in the top one percent of people. An experience like this really does bring the difficulties of living to light and may make us reflect on the difficulties in our outer life. But particularly in retreat, for me, it gets really simple. There are basically three things that are difficult: bodily discomfort; all the ways that the mind doesn't do what I want it to do in terms of meditation—doesn't stay with the object, and I get frustrated when it goes away; and third, the ways that we find pain in the mind itself—painful emotions and states of mind.

That's really what I'd like to talk about tonight: how do we work with the difficulties that come into the mind in terms of our emotions and moods, a major source of pain and difficulty on retreat and in daily life.

When I started practice, I was very keen on the idea of enlightenment. I thought that what enlightenment was going to do was get rid of all these ways in which my mind caused me trouble—the loneliness, the insecurity, the fear, the sadness and so on. I thought that some meditation moment would come along and just pluck them all out. And then afterwards it would be really easy.

I have a different view of enlightenment now. I don't think it works quite that way. Now my understanding is that in order to become enlightened, we have to solve the problem of these states of mind before we can become enlightened. So I think of this as working to understand and resolve these troublesome qualities of mind independent of enlightenment. This is actually doable. The enlightenment thing where they all get plucked up and ended—I'm not so sure about the nearness of that, for myself at least. But I do know that it's really possible to work directly in relating to these difficult states of mind and find a great deal of freedom in relation to them.

I think of this as the process of becoming enlightened before enlightenment. Because if we can learn to work with every state of mind that comes into our experience and not feel bound up in suffering in relation to it, then we have essentially solved a great deal of the problem of living. We will have opened up so much space and freedom that life will be completely transformed. And this is possible for each one of us.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing. There's a lot of encouragement to do this and meditation gives us the method."

In the context of retreat, if you carry on long enough, you will experience, as you have in life, a very, very big range of states of mind. I invite you to think about, over your whole adult life, the most sublime moments that you've known. Just cast your mind back and reflect on what some of those have been—in nature or in relationship, in love, through art. And then also, I'd invite you to reflect on the most difficult and painful states of mind that you've known—states of depression or despair, strong fear or rage, loneliness.

Through that reflection we get an idea of the range that is within this human mind, within each human mind. We have the capability to develop in very beautiful and sublime ways. The mind also has the capability of creating for us tremendous suffering and agony. Most of us have known quite a wide range of these experiences in our life.

What we find happens as we get older is that the mind develops a real fear of going into some of those corners. It seems to me that children don't have so much of that fear when they come into the world, that they're born with a curiosity and a basic trust in life, and whatever happens in the emotional realm, they have the ability to go into and feel without holding back. As we get older, we hold back more and more. But it's possible through this exploration to go into, as Pema Chödrön says, every nook and cranny and feel what's there, open ourselves to it again. When we can do that, we gain a lot of confidence.

Because until we have explored the mind in that way, we get afraid of some parts of it and seal ourselves off from a certain range of our experience. In doing that, we constrict the mind and contain it too much. So we gain a lot of confidence when we can open and relate to any experience that comes along on the level of our mind.

As we expand our capabilities, the mind starts to have fewer and fewer edges, less and less boundary. We can move into more and more of those areas without worry, without holding back. And as one of my teachers said, in the mind of the Buddha, there are no more edges. There is nowhere the mind of the Buddha can't go and find a sense of openness and ease.

In Buddhist psychology, the Abhidhamma core text lists fifty-two states of mind that it says are core factors within us that, when combined in different ways, make up the whole range of our human experience. Some of these are very beautiful states—love and compassion, wisdom, generosity, renunciation, peace, equanimity, mindfulness. Some of them are difficult and painful states—anger and hatred, despair, anxiety, grief, confusion, sorrow. Some are neutral qualities, not particularly wholesome or unwholesome.

As we open up to explore these states, our attitude needs to be one not of trying to get rid of them, because that may not happen for a very long time. And I think that it can't happen as long as we are still living in fear of them and want to hold them away. But what we can do is become more and more comfortable with the presence of these qualities.

This is again from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is at times and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

So tonight, I want to look at some of this range of states of mind to show how we get trapped in suffering and then how we can find freedom in relation to them.

In the classical Buddhist teachings, this is called the third foundation of mindfulness. The range of the third foundation, the area of it, is called citta. This is a Pali word that is sometimes translated as heart, sometimes translated as mind. A good translation for citta is psyche, because it includes both emotional qualities and thought processes, cognitive qualities.

Just a word on the vocabulary that I'll use. I'll often use the words emotions, moods, and states of mind. All of these are included in citta, this area of meditation which Rodney introduced us to this morning in the instructions.

Emotions are things we feel fairly strongly—joy and happiness, fear, anxiety. I use moods to cover more or less the same range as emotions, but sometimes moods are a little more subtle, not as strongly felt, maybe not as evident, maybe a little more pervasive. We might say that I had a mood of nostalgia looking at some old photos, something like that—not quite as punchy, but still present.

And then states of mind includes emotions, includes moods, but it also refers to the refined meditative states that develop as we practice—qualities like mindfulness, peace, concentration, equanimity, mental energy. These are included in the overall category of states of mind as well. We wouldn't really call these qualities emotions, but we can learn to notice when they're present or when they're absent.

Some of these emotions and states of mind are wholesome and positive. Some are negative and difficult and painful. I don't want to talk too much about the positive ones for now—we'll talk more as we go through the retreat. But just to say a couple of things.

One is what I'm sure you know: not to cling to the positive states of mind. They're attractive, they're pleasant. The tendency is to make them want to last, but when we cling to them, we kill them. There's a beautiful poem from William Blake:

"He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy,
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise."

So if we grasp these states, the very grasping kills the joy or the beauty of them.

But the other important thing to say about positive states of mind is that we often tend to take them for granted and not notice them or really appreciate them. I noticed in myself when I was meditating—if a state of contentment or happiness came along in my early years, I'd go, "Ah, that's what it's supposed to be like." And I didn't stop and reflect, "That's a really positive state." I could see that underneath that, there was this expectation: I should be feeling happy, I should be feeling content. Therefore, when that happened, I didn't make anything of it because it matched my expectation. This expectation is the ego's project.

The ego creates this expectation that we should always feel good, that happiness is our natural birthright. But this isn't seeing things as they truly are. Our mindfulness practice invites us to perceive what's actually present—not what we expect to be there, but simply what is.

When we carry expectations, we introduce bias into our awareness. We become partial, wanting experience to unfold in a particular way. But the Buddha's way of seeing is free from such bias. We could say the bias is zero, or emptiness itself.

With this unbiased awareness, when a pleasant state arises, we can recognize it clearly as pleasant. We appreciate it fully, understanding it as wholesome—a fruit of our practice, a result of the virtue and goodness we've cultivated. We take time to feel genuine gratitude for its presence. And when it naturally passes, we can open ourselves completely to whatever arises next.

This practice of noticing and appreciating wholesome states actually becomes part of the conditions for their return. As we acknowledge and value these positive mind states, they tend to arise more frequently and regularly in our experience.

When working with more challenging emotions—those painful states of mind that create difficulty—two elements are essential.

First, we need a fundamental attitude shift. We must move away from resistance, from the belief that difficult emotions shouldn't be happening, from judging them as wrong and trying to push them away. Instead, we cultivate a quality of allowing. As Rodney mentioned in his morning instructions: relax, observe, and allow.

Second, we need deeper understanding. When we begin to see how these mind states are actually constructed—the mechanisms through which they arise and operate—we're no longer so easily overwhelmed by them. What we truly understand, we can allow without being so deeply troubled. Through careful observation of how emotions are manufactured, sustained, and eventually released, we begin to comprehend the workings of our own minds. And to the degree we understand this process, we're no longer enslaved by it.

The first step in learning from these potentially liberating states of mind is knowing what's present when it's present. We must recognize what emotions are arising as they arise. This isn't always straightforward. As someone asked this morning, it's not always easy to identify what we're feeling with certainty.

Sometimes thoughts provide clues, sometimes bodily sensations point the way. You might find yourself wondering tentatively, "Sadness?" with a question mark, allowing your identification to remain provisional. This uncertainty is perfectly acceptable. This entire exploration will gradually teach you to recognize your emotions as they occur, leading to increasingly clear perception through sustained practice.

This reminds me of an experience from my own retreat here. I was participating in a three-month course, about two weeks in, feeling fairly settled and mindful. When the bell rang ending a sitting period, I rose to begin walking meditation. For those two

weeks, I had been walking in the same location every period—down by the parking lot on that grassy area below. I had actually begun wearing a path in the grass from my consistent practice there.

I stepped out the back door, maintaining careful awareness of lifting, moving, and placing with each step. I felt completely present, thoroughly mindful. But when I looked down at my familiar walking path, I discovered someone else occupying it.

I continued lifting, moving, placing, but thoughts began arising: "What are they doing there? Don't they realize that's my walking path?" Lifting, moving, placing. "I've been walking here every hour for two weeks. They must know it's mine." Lifting, moving, placing. "Did I cut in front of them at breakfast this morning? Are they playing mind games with me?" Lifting, moving, placing. "They're not very developed. If they were more aware, they would have noticed this was my walking space." Lifting, moving, placing.

I walked down near that person, maintaining my mindful steps, and found another spot on the grass that proved equally suitable for walking meditation. The rest of the period proceeded without difficulty.

About thirty minutes into the walking period, a thought suddenly arose: "Oh, I'm angry." I had been continuing the blaming story all along, and it took me half an hour of being completely immersed in it to recognize what was actually happening. I had been so identified with the anger while thinking I was being mindful that I couldn't see the main thing that was occurring.

This is how some of these hindering forces work. They sneak up on us like low-flying aircraft, zooming in below our radar. They take root because we get caught in the story. As long as I was telling myself I was right and this person was wrong, and believing it completely, I couldn't really relate to or even see the mental state itself.

This brings to mind Rodney's statement: "Do I want to be righteous or do I want to be free?" Well, at that point, I wanted to be righteous. But as soon as I could name it as anger, I could start to relate to it. I brought it into the field of mindfulness.

This is a crucial step in working with difficult emotions. These emotions try to turn our attention elsewhere—in this case, onto the object of my upset, the person I was angry with. As long as I follow that pointer, I'm lost. But if I can turn the pointer back around to myself and ask, "What am I feeling?" and look directly at the anger, then it becomes workable.

The first step in working with these hindering forces in the mind is to know them for what they are. This means, if you can, naming them. When we don't name them, we're in their grip, and they become a filter through which we look at the whole world. Everything takes on that color.

Once we've named the emotion, the next step is to feel it directly. Our understanding comes into play when we let our awareness connect directly with the experience of that emotion—feeling it in the mind, feeling it in the body.

Tonight I want to talk particularly about five states of mind that I see arising again and again in my life and in the lives of meditators, both in retreat and out of retreat: desire, aversion or anger, self-judgment, sadness, and fear. These are very common states in our lives and retreats. They're oppressive when we don't know how to work with them. They're burdensome and the source of much human suffering.

With each of these states, I want to suggest that there are three areas we need to examine to get a complete view of these emotions.

The first is what I would call the mind factor or the mood—the mental state itself. Each emotion has a particular coloring in the mind, a basic flavor that distinguishes it. Fear feels different from happiness; sadness feels different from compassion. There's a mental tone, a color, a mood in the mind that is the primary characteristic of its existence.

The second aspect is the bodily experience. Whenever one of these emotions is strong, it will also be felt in the body. Look and see where in the body it's expressing itself. If it's fear, there might be a strong contraction in the abdomen. If it's happiness, there might be a light, bubbly energy in the chest rising up.

The third element is the thought or thoughts that accompany the emotion. All difficult mind states will have some kind of thought going along with them. Sometimes the thought triggers the mind state, but then the mind state will also trigger more thoughts. With difficult mind states, there will be some underlying belief—what I would call a storyline. It's usually an unconscious assumption that sustains the emotion. If you take away the storyline, the emotion collapses.

Once you examine the mental quality or color in the mind, the experience in the body, and the thought—especially the storyline—then you have the whole package of that emotion. When we start to understand how these influence each other, how the thoughts support the emotion, we start not to be so deceived by them. We begin to un-

derstand their impact on us, and it's really the understanding that frees us. We simply need to observe them and learn from them, and that understanding is transformative. They don't have to be gotten rid of.

As a brief side note, I don't believe that wholesome states of mind need a storyline for their existence. Metta, compassion, joy, love, equanimity can be spontaneous. I don't think they need the influence of thought. By contrast, the negative states, I believe, do.

Let's examine some of these in more detail. Desire is the first I mentioned—a really common experience in life and in retreat. It's reaching out for some pleasant experience in the future, this wanting something pleasant to happen.

On retreat, we often feel desire as a longing for people we're missing, places we'd like to be, certain foods or drinks or activities that aren't available to us here. As you begin to observe how it feels when desire arises, you'll notice it has a distinctly bittersweet quality. On one hand, the mind conjures images of something pleasant—we think about a friend or partner or a place we've enjoyed being, and this has a positive, uplifting tone to it. It's pleasurable.

But simultaneously, there's a frustrating quality, a gap, because we don't have it now. The desire force essentially says, "I want that now." And there's always a gap because what we desire is precisely what's not here. Notice this: we never want what we already have. Have you ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? Not unless it gets injured. So desire always carries this bittersweet lack of fulfillment.

You may notice that when there's a little boredom or physical discomfort in meditation, the mind often turns to a pleasant fantasy to try to fill that space, as though we want to suck on something pleasurable in that moment. But that pleasurableness is never truly satisfying because of the gap of not having it.

Carol and I were teaching a retreat in Italy a few years ago, which was a wonderful experience. The Italians seemed to be very much as we imagine them—warm, talkative. Silence wasn't held in quite the same way it is here. We had to modify certain aspects of the culture for our retreat. It was held at a Catholic convent that was simply rented for the retreat. We had to put in a special request to the kitchen not to place carafes of wine on the lunch tables, because that's what they would normally have done. Right outside the dining room, there was a Nespresso machine, and after meals people were feeding it coins.

I found the Italian yogis to be very forthcoming about their emotions—quite in touch with how they felt and not shy about sharing this with us. A couple of days into the retreat, I had an interview with a young man, a very nice fellow who was having trouble

settling into the retreat. When I asked what was happening, he explained that this was August, their holiday month. A group of his friends were going to the Caribbean and had invited him to join them on vacation. So he'd had a choice: he could go to the Caribbean on vacation with warm waters and golden sandy beaches, or he could come to the meditation retreat.

When I asked why he came here, he said, "Because all the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

I could immediately see what was happening. The storyline here was that if he'd been in the Caribbean, he would be happy. If he had what he wanted, he would be happy. But because he didn't have it, he couldn't be.

This is generally how the storyline with desire works: there's an unconscious belief that "if I had that, I would be happy now." Examine whether this is true in your experience. There's this belief that the thing we want will make us happy in this moment, and not having it, we lack that happiness.

The very force of desire brings with it a sense of frustration. It blinds us to looking at the present moment, which is usually fine in and of itself. So I asked him, "What if you looked at the present moment without comparing it to Caribbean beaches? Maybe it would be okay."

He went off to meditate, and when he returned a couple of days later, he'd gotten right into the retreat. When we can let go of the wanting and see the present moment for what it is, often it's not problematic. But the very force of desire makes it seem unfulfilling or troublesome.

As we begin to settle into the retreat, the desire force often shifts into the area of the retreat itself. You may find yourself no longer thinking so much of home, but thinking about your last retreat or a pleasant sitting from earlier in this retreat. The force of desire then becomes "I want to feel that pleasant sitting again, that pleasant state of mind, that stillness, that concentration."

This can be just as much a barrier as desire for something pleasurable in the senses, because it can block our openness to this moment.

As I began to pay closer attention, I noticed something curious happening in my body. When desire was present, there was a distinct quality of leaning forward—a subtle but persistent tension that indicated I was trying to manufacture a particular meditation experience. I was attempting to make stillness happen, to force concentration, to conjure mindfulness through sheer effort.

I started tuning into this slight forward-leaning tension as a reliable indicator that desire was present, even when I couldn't immediately identify what I was wanting. This physical signature became a valuable teacher. If you notice this quality of leaning forward in your own practice, it might be worth investigating. Check whether you're trying to recreate some particular experience from an earlier sit or previous retreat.

The release from this pattern lies in the willingness to settle back into what's actually here. Just this moment, exactly as it is.

A friend of mine belongs to what Buddhist psychology calls the "greed type"—a personality configuration characterized by frequent mind moments of wanting and desire. He's developed a simple but powerful inquiry for working with these states. When desires arise, he asks himself: "Is there anything truly lacking in the present moment?"

Often, when we honestly investigate, we discover there isn't. It's simply the force of desire itself that creates the sense of insufficiency.

On the other side of this spectrum lies aversion—the force of not liking or pushing away our experience. This is our general term for negativity, but it manifests in countless forms: ill will, anger, hatred, impatience, frustration, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, depression, despair, resistance, blame, resentment, and many others. Sound familiar? In retreat, most people encounter quite a range of these mind states.

When aversion occupies the mind, notice how it feels. There's a distinct resistive quality, and the body often contracts strongly. This physical tightening is the signature of resistance—not wanting what's happening, so we armor ourselves against it. The storyline of aversion is fundamentally: "I can't be happy because this is happening." Some particular unpleasant experience is present, therefore happiness is impossible. As this narrative takes hold and we believe it, a negative tone pervades the mind, coloring our entire experience.

The Buddha once walked through a forest with some monks until they came to a clearing. As they stood there, a jackal ran into the open space, paused briefly, then darted into the hollow of a fallen tree trunk where it lay down. Moments later, it emerged and rested in the shade, only to jump up again and disappear back into the forest.

"Monks," the Buddha said, "did you see that jackal? Standing in the clearing, it wasn't content. Lying in the tree hollow, it wasn't content. Resting in the shade, it wasn't content. It blamed its suffering on standing, on lying, on walking. It blamed its suffering on the clearing, on the tree hollow, on the underbrush. But the problem wasn't with any of these places or postures. That jackal had mange."

This illustrates the nature of aversion perfectly. It takes over the mind, making everything unsatisfactory. Nothing is quite good enough. The inquiry that serves aversive types well is: "Is there anything truly wrong with the present moment?"

One of aversion's primary manifestations is anger, as I discovered during my walking meditation. Anger's characteristic storyline runs: "You're wrong and I'm right." This sense of righteousness is integral to anger's structure. Each time we replay those blaming thoughts, the anger intensifies—we're adding fuel to the fire. The physical sensation of anger is typically contracted and burning. When you're truly enraged, you understand why red symbolizes anger; the body literally feels ablaze.

Now, it's possible that our angry thoughts about wrongdoing contain some validity. Perhaps someone did act unskillfully or unethically. But to understand anger completely, we must examine the suffering we carry when we harbor it.

The Dalai Lama tells a story about receiving a visit from a monk he had known in Tibet before fleeing the Chinese occupation in 1959.

This monk had stayed behind and had been imprisoned for a number of years and had finally gotten out of prison and escaped to India. The Dalai Lama received him and asked about his time there. The monk said, "Well, I felt that I had been in danger very often."

The Dalai Lama said, "Well, I can understand that. Do you mean you were in danger of being tortured?"

The monk said, "Oh, well, yes, I was tortured. But what I really mean is I was in danger of becoming angry. That would have been far more serious."

I find the Tibetan monks and nuns incredibly inspiring in their ability to maintain that balance of mind in the midst of really painful situations. The Dalai Lama said afterwards that before, when he lived in Tibet, he had thought this monk was rather ordinary. But now he had to reevaluate his opinion of him because he saw he was quite an advanced practitioner.

As we get angry, the important place to tune in again is what does it feel like in our mind and body, and to feel that quality of suffering that's in anger. I found that I was really only able to let go of anger by tuning into the suffering that it was bringing me. That's what encouraged me to let go of it again and again, and I've gotten better at it as I've practiced more with it.

It's said in the tradition that becoming angry is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick. It doesn't happen. It's also compared to picking up a hot coal to throw at somebody, but we get burned first.

When anger gets directed toward ourselves, it turns into self-judgment. This often comes up on retreat as we start with comparing mind to compare ourselves to others who are here. If you ever open your eyes in the middle of a meditation period, it looks like everybody else is a Buddha. The hall looks so still, and you just think, "Wow, they're having such good meditations. I wish my meditation was like that. I must be the only one here whose mind is all over the place." And of course, it's not true. If somebody looked at you, they'd probably think you were a Buddha. But we often tend to bring up these comparing thoughts when we're in the middle of retreat.

Then the comparing thoughts get a little off-center, a little irrational. I was talking with a student who is a therapist. She was talking about this comparing mind. One of her clients had left her and decided to terminate the therapy sessions. Her first thought was, "I understand that I wasn't the right fit for that person." That was a rational thought and completely acceptable for her. But then the next thought was, "I don't have enough compassion for him." Actually, "I'm not a very warm person," is what it turned into. And then it turned into, "I've actually never loved anyone and no one's ever loved me." By that time, the thought was this huge burden.

Start to notice when these judging or comparing thoughts come that there may be a grain of rational truth in them, but then we tend to blow them up in a way that they're not true anymore. It's the falsehood and the slight belief in the falsehood that really weighs on us.

When we're judging ourselves, the storyline in that is something like, "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not lovable. I'm not good enough to be loved or to deserve to be loved." It's some underlying fear like that. When we believe in that, we kind of crumple in on ourselves. We don't feel we can really come out because we feel what's inside is not very worthy.

This feeling of worthlessness seems to be really widespread in our culture. It seems like an epidemic in the West these days. The Dalai Lama was meeting with a group of Western Buddhist teachers a few years ago in Dharamsala. There were about twenty teachers meeting with His Holiness over a few days. They were asking for his advice on how to work with this problem, and he said, "I don't understand what you mean." The translator went back and forth a number of times and the Dalai Lama couldn't get what this problem was even about, because he said, in Tibet, they don't have this problem.

Finally he went around to each of those twenty Buddhist teachers and he said, "Have you felt this? Do you understand this? Have you felt this?" Every one of them said yes, they had. And yet, from his knowledge, it was not there in Tibetan culture at all. So this is something as Westerners we often have to work with, and it can become stronger.

It can become self-hatred or self-loathing.

Shortly after I ordained in Thailand, many years ago now, I was traveling to practice at a forest center in the countryside near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. My preceptor, the elder monk who had ordained me, asked me to stop at one of his branch monasteries in the town of Chiang Mai. "It'll be interesting for you to stay there," he said. "It'll break your journey, and you can get to know this other Western monk who's there."

So I stopped there for a few nights and spent time with this Western monk who'd been in robes for about twelve or thirteen years at that point. I came to like him tremendously. He was a big fellow with a big laugh and what I thought was a very big heart—extraordinarily warm-hearted.

The first day I was there, we went out on alms round together, as monks do each morning. He had the biggest begging bowl I've ever seen, with a stomach girth to match it. His bowl was literally probably bigger than this bell. He walked ahead because he was senior, I walked behind him, and then two novice monks followed us. I wondered why the novice monks were coming, since they don't usually participate in alms round, but I kept quiet and followed along.

We walked down the street into a neighborhood where he was very well known. He was beloved in the community because he was such a warm person who received many visitors, counseling people on their practice, their lives, their children. People genuinely loved him in the community.

Lay people lined up on the street as we approached to offer him food. Because I was there, I received food as well. We filled up his bowl fairly quickly, filled up mine, and I thought we'd simply walk back to the monastery. But he slipped down an alley, and the two novice monks came forward, opening their robes to reveal large plastic bags hanging from their shoulders. We took the little plastic bags of food—which is how people offer it—out of our bowls and filled up the novices' plastic bags. They folded up their robes, our bowls were empty, and we hit the streets again.

We filled up again, then filled up the novices again, collected more, and finally took everything back to the monastery. We fed ourselves, we fed other monks, we fed numerous novices and nuns, and finally we fed the temple dogs—all basically from the love and appreciation those people had for this Western monk. He was so well-liked in the community.

I thought to myself, "Wow, he must have had a very fortunate upbringing and pleasant experiences. He's such a warm person."

As we were spending time together and talking, he said to me, "You know, I had to work a lot with this problem of self-hatred. It took me the first nine years in robes to work through my self-hatred."

I was amazed because he radiated so much metta, so much loving-kindness and warmth. But it hadn't been easy for him.

Another difficult state to work with is sadness. I often encounter this in the silence and solitude of retreats. Sometimes we hold back from opening to that sadness or touching it. There's often an underlying fear: "If I open to it, it will take me over and never go away. I could drown in that sadness and never surface again."

The storyline or unconscious belief with sadness is something like: "I can't be happy because I've lost something—a relationship, a part of my life, a way I used to feel, some situation. I can't be happy because of that loss." So we hold back from being able to feel it.

But as long as we keep the sadness at a distance, it's perpetuated. The way that any of these states can be released as chronic states of mind is for us to open to them, so they can pass through.

The reason it's safe to open to all of these states is that they are impermanent, like every other conditioned phenomenon. Everything that arises is also of the nature to pass away—one of the central teachings of the Buddha. Emotions are also impermanent; they're just waiting to manifest.

Much of what it feels like to me is that these feelings we've held back and haven't opened to—all they want to do is come onto center stage, tell their story or sing their song or dance their dance, have us really hear them, and then they'll exit stage left. But as long as we can't give them that space and truly listen to their story, they keep expressing their frustration. It's like a child who has a story to tell, and we won't give them the space to be heard. Then they won't stop talking.

The last of the mind states I wanted to touch on is fear. This can be a powerful one and was for me the strongest hindrance I had to work with in the early years of my meditation practice. But it was therefore also one of the greatest sources of learning for me.

It was just part of my conditioning when I came to practice. There was a certain layer of fear in my mind that I had to work through, so sometimes it would arise quite strongly during retreat. This isn't the experience for everyone—I simply had a particular conditioning toward fear that not everyone shares.

At times, I would be completely gripped by this fear for extended periods. Though I understood the instructions to go into it and feel it fully, and I would follow this guidance again and again, the transformation came slowly. Over years of touching into it, the fear gradually began to diminish, becoming smaller and smaller.

One of the particular difficulties with fear is that when it arises, we're usually more afraid of the fear itself. We feel afraid when it comes, and then the very presence of that fear frightens us even more, creating an escalating cycle. What we need to cultivate is the willingness to simply open and feel it as it is.

For me, the way in was through bodily sensations. When fear arose, I would feel the contraction in my stomach, the fluttery sensations in my chest, perhaps some perspiration under my arms. I would ask myself: Are these sensations bearable? Can I stand this aspect of fear's manifestation? The answer was always that they were indeed bearable—I could tolerate these physical expressions.

Then I would examine the mental quality of fear itself—that particular tone of wanting to move away from experience. Is this bearable too? And I would find that yes, I could bear that as well.

The storyline that accompanies fear is quite simple: this moment is bearable, but the next moment won't be. It's a projection into the future that tends to capture us. Again, when we return to the present moment, we can undercut that narrative completely.

After making this effort to open to fear repeatedly—many, many times over an extended period—it eventually became much easier for me to work with. At a certain point in my practice, I reached such a level of equanimity with fear that I honestly didn't care whether it arose or not. If fear came, that was fine. If it remained, that was also fine. If it departed, that too was perfectly acceptable.

When I reached that level of equanimity with fear, I felt I had solved its fundamental challenge. This doesn't mean fear hasn't arisen again since then or that it doesn't make me uncomfortable when it does. But I now know absolutely how to work with it, how to open to it—at least within the range of experiences I've encountered so far. There could certainly be something even more intense that might test my equanimity, but I feel confident I understand the way to work.

The real key in understanding how to approach all these different states is to trust that they are workable. We have within us the capacity to understand them and to accept them exactly as they are. It's this trust, combined with the willingness to touch into them directly, that transforms our experience and truly gives us freedom from their grip.

Originally, I thought the way to transform these states would be to eliminate them entirely and replace them with awakened states. I believed that's what had to happen. But what I discovered is that I could wake up in the middle of those very states. Right in the midst of desire, sadness, or fear, I could bring forth an awakened quality of mind. I could bring mindfulness, interest, curiosity, and intimate awareness to whatever was arising. That's what began to transform the entire experience.

I'd like to offer you a simple acronym for approaching these difficult mind states in an awakened way. It was developed by a colleague of ours, and the acronym is RAIN—R-A-I-N—representing four essential steps.

The R stands for Recognition. The first step in relating skillfully with any of these states is to recognize what we're actually feeling. This is crucial because accurate perception of the emotion creates space around it in some important way. When we can clearly identify—oh, this is anger, or this is fear, or this is unhappiness—it unsticks the experience and creates some breathing room.

If you're uncertain about what you're experiencing, name it with a question mark. Make your best approximation. Over time, this recognition will become increasingly clear and effortless.

The A stands for acceptance. Some people prefer the word allowing. It essentially means not that you have to actively do something, but that you stop resisting. We drop our tendency to push the experience away and simply allow it to be as it is.

This is profoundly challenging. With states that are difficult to bear, this acceptance won't come the first time, or perhaps even the second or third. But if you move in that direction again and again, that acceptance will gradually emerge.

There's a way to discern whether you've truly accepted a state: ask yourself, "Would it be okay with me if this state lasted the rest of my life?" If the answer is no, then deeper acceptance is possible. With my fear, I eventually reached that place where I could genuinely answer yes to that question. That's when I felt my equanimity with the fear was adequately developed. Acceptance is truly a key turning point.

The I stands for interest or investigation. When we can become genuinely interested in a difficult experience, it completely shifts our relationship to it. Interest energizes us, gives us confidence, and expresses our willingness to learn. This curiosity opens our mind.

We begin to explore: When anger is present, where do I feel it in my body? What's that sensation like? Is it burning? Is it contraction? How far does it extend through my body? What kinds of thoughts arise when I'm angry? Do I feel blaming? If I'm blaming someone else for being wrong, how does that make me feel? This investigation opens the wisdom, the learning, the understanding of how these states actually function.

The final letter, N, stands for non-identification. This means removing the "I" or "my"—taking out the sense of self or ownership of the emotion. When we notice anger, we might typically say, "That's my anger," or "I'm really angry." Instead, we can simply observe: "Anger is present." Just note "anger." The "I" and "my" are extra additions that aren't needed and generally add layers of confusion and burden. Try experiencing these states without claiming them as "I" or "mine."

Carol has mentioned a beautiful phrase from Ajahn Sumedho: "Wanting is like this," or "Anger is like this." This simple phrase actually encapsulates all four points of the RAIN practice.

Consider the phrase "Anger is like this." The word "anger" represents recognition—naming the experience for what it is. The word "is" expresses allowing—this is what's true in this moment, what we need to open to and accept. "Like this" invites investigation: What is anger actually like? Let me feel it, see it, observe it. Notice that in this phrase—"Anger is like this"—there's no "I" or "my," so we also have non-identification.

Either approach can cultivate this awakened relationship to difficult states. This awakening begins to release and transform their hold on us. When we see these experiences in this way, we discover that we're transforming moments of suffering into moments of awakening. We bring forth the awakened qualities of mindfulness, energy, investigation, confidence, friendliness, allowing, acceptance.

Moment after moment, we learn to transform our suffering into awakening. In that transformation, we discover freedom. We find this freedom not by trying to eliminate these states—which frankly doesn't work ninety-eight percent of the time—but by coming into full awareness right in the midst of these difficulties.

So I want to close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition—The Four Blessings of Gampopa. Gampopa was a disciple of Milarepa, a great yogi in Tibet. These are expressed as a supplication or a prayer. You can think of this prayer as being offered to the universe, to the Dharma, to the teacher, to the Buddha, to whoever you would like.

These are the four prayers or blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's just sit for a moment together, please.

Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma, so that my practice becomes the path, so that the path clarifies confusion, so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 271

The Practice of Joy and Gratitude

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive teaching on mudita, the third of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes), exploring how appreciative joy and gratitude form essential elements of Buddhist practice. Drawing from his own retreat experiences in Burma and Thailand, Armstrong demonstrates how joy serves not merely as a pleasant state but as a crucial factor supporting concentration and liberating insight.*
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> *The talk examines multiple levels of happiness available to practitioners: the happiness of sense pleasures, the bliss of blamelessness through ethical conduct (sīla), the peace found in concentration, and the joy discovered through appreciating beauty in nature and relationships. Armstrong references the Upanisa Sutta's teaching on transcendent dependent origination, showing how gladness (pāmojja) leads to rapture (pīti), then tranquility, happiness (sukha), concentration (samādhi), and finally liberating wisdom.*
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> *Through personal anecdotes and teachings from the Dalai Lama, Armstrong illustrates how mudita practice involves both celebrating others' happiness and cultivating gratitude for our own blessings. He emphasizes how this practice counters the mind's tendency toward negativity, offering the practical instruction "may your happiness and good fortune continue" as a way to develop sympathetic joy. The teaching concludes by positioning joy as an accelerating factor toward the Buddha's ultimate goal: "the unshakable deliverance of mind."*

The talk tonight is on practicing joy and gratitude.

Someone once asked a Zen master, "What's the purpose of a lifetime of practice?" And the Zen master answered, "An appropriate response."

When I first heard that quotation, I was very disappointed, because I thought Zen masters were supposed to be a lot more dramatic than that. This seemed to me kind of a wimpy response. I thought the purpose of a lifetime of Zen practice was so that when you were close to dying, you could sit in the full lotus, spontaneously compose a beautiful haiku, and then pass out. And that would be the measure of a real Zen master. So this "appropriate response"—I thought that's a little weak.

But the more I thought about it, the more I thought that is a great answer. Because what it means is that moment after moment, when we meet the changing conditions of life, the right thing comes out of our hearts and minds and actions. And it takes a lifetime of practice in order to be able to make that possible. So I thought this was really a pretty wise and practical answer for us to think about.

In our tradition, there's a roadmap that shows the appropriate response for us to the changing conditions of life. This roadmap is called the Brahmaviharas—the divine abidings, which include metta, which we've been practicing, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity as the other three.

So I want to explain a little about how that roadmap works. We've been practicing metta, which cultivates this quality of openheartedness and caring. We practice it with ourselves, we practice it with others, so that eventually when we encounter someone, we can tune into how is life for you. I hope things are well for you. I hope your body is well. I hope your heart is well. I hope there's happiness in your life. We can develop this as a habit so that our heart approaches new people with this friendly wish, the wish for their welfare.

Then when that open heart, which is connected to people's well-being, meets someone who's suffering, the natural response that comes out of it is compassion. Compassion can be defined as the trembling of the open heart in response to suffering.

When that open heart meets someone who is having a lot of happiness in their life, then the natural response to that is called appreciative joy, the third of the Brahmaviharas. So their happiness becomes contagious when our heart is open and their happiness picks us up. This is the quality that I want to talk about primarily tonight, this quality of appreciative joy which is known in Pali as mudita.

The fourth of the Brahmaviharas is equanimity and its function is to support the other three so that the mind can stay in balance as it encounters the whole range of joys and sorrows in our life and in the lives of everyone we meet and as we hear about the events of the world. Without equanimity, our mind can collapse with the grief of the world, or it can get too exuberant, can get overexcited with transitory happiness. So equanimity keeps our mind steady as we see all the variations of joy and sorrow that can come.

Together, these show us a way that the awakened heart can relate to the world and give us a roadmap of a clear mind and clear heart's way of responding to the changes in life.

I want to focus particularly on this third quality of appreciative joy or mudita. I won't talk a lot about the practice tonight. I want to focus on the spirit of this quality. Of all the Brahmaviharas, this has the potential for being the happiest. It can become a very upbeat practice because it focuses on happiness. It arises due to happiness. And in cultivating it, we tune the mind into happiness, the happiness that already exists. It can be in our life. It can be in someone else's life.

I was calling a friend whom I hadn't talked to for a while on the phone, somebody who lives on the other side of the country. And she answered the phone and I said, "How are you?" And without a moment's hesitation, she said, "I'm wonderful." And hearing the happiness in her voice, without a moment's thought, I said back, "I'm wonderful too." And that's kind of the flavor of this appreciative joy. Her happiness triggered my happiness.

So with the practice of this appreciative joy, you have a double hit of happiness. The other person's happiness can ignite your happiness. And then they combine.

Sometimes it's called sympathetic joy because we resonate in sympathy with someone. I like this term. It reminds me of the sitar, the Indian musical instrument. If you've ever seen a sitar up close, it's got—the model I had, had seven main strings which are running across large frets down the neck. And then underneath that there are twelve what are called sympathetic strings. They're smaller. These sympathetic strings resonate when a frequency of one of the plucked strings, the top strings, is close to it.

Then it harmonizes with it. It's triggered by it. And it's these sympathetic strings that give all those rich, singing, metallic overtones to the sound of the sitar. These are called sympathetic strings because they resonate in sympathy with the main strings. And that's what this experience of appreciative joy or sympathetic joy is like. When we feel the resonance of happiness and our heart is open, we can resonate with it. And it strikes that happiness in us.

The Dalai Lama said this is a really good practice to become familiar with, because if you can be happy with somebody else's happiness, your chances of happiness go up by six billion to one. Those are good odds.

This is from Shantideva, who was a teacher and writer in India about the 8th century A.D.: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

So there is a long tradition of this kind of practice and this approach as a way to our own happiness. It's a very helpful thing to develop as part of your overall meditation practice, just as the loving-kindness practice is that we've been doing. You discover that joy is actually an integral part of the Buddhist path, an essential part. I'll talk more later in this talk about exactly how that works.

But sometimes Buddhism is portrayed as focusing so much on suffering that you think the Buddha has forgotten about joy. In fact, that's just not true. There are many words in the Buddha's language that point to this factor and the role that it plays in the overall path.

This practice of turning the mind to joy can be very helpful. It comes under what the Buddha talked about as the four right efforts. One of the right efforts that he pointed to was keeping the mind in a positive or wholesome state of being. The development of joy is one of the ways to carry out that right effort.

I think there's also a real thirst in our culture today, maybe in our whole world today, for the presence of this quality in our lives. It seems to be something that's lacking in the modern world, something that we long for and that the world itself really needs. It needs this quality of joy for us to feel good about the work that we're doing, the family that we're in, the way we're living. It changes everything.

A friend of ours has been offering classes in the Bay Area on developing this factor of joy. I think he's in about his third or fourth class series now. Each one of them has lasted about six months. The last time he offered the series in the fall, he had some people present teaching the classes in Berkeley. He had some people sign up by email. In all, he had 450 people signed up for the course. This time around, he has 685. And the people who are doing it say that they really love it, that it is making a real difference in their life.

The most important element in this practice is to notice the qualities of contentment and joy and happiness when they arise. As we get familiar with them, then the mind knows them better and knows how to go there and knows how to access them more and more easily. So the first instruction is really just to notice joy when it comes.

And then if you are interested in carrying on the practice of mudita, which is another practice just like metta, you can develop it as a way of bringing that noticing in more and more regularly. And this is a very helpful thing to do too, because in a way, this paying particular attention to the appearance of happiness is a way just to offset the mind's normal inclination, which is to dwell on the negative.

So often, if you look at the content of your thoughts as you're sitting in meditation, they will focus on what's difficult in life: regret or resentment about the past, hope and fear about the future. So often our thoughts go between those areas, and those have the tendency to make us feel burdened and weighted and foster the perception of difficulty and pain in our life. So this deliberate noticing of happiness is a way to correct that balance.

As I said in my first talk, in the mind of the Buddha, there is no bias toward the negative. The mind of the Buddha is as interested and as open to what's beautiful and positive as it is to what's difficult. So we want to find that balance in our own minds also. And the practice of joy can be a very good way to do that.

This is a quotation from the Buddha: "What one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind." So we develop our own habits of mind. We wear grooves in our mind based upon our habitual thought patterns. If they habitually run to the negative, then what naturally comes up is the negative. If they run to the positive, then what comes up is the positive.

The effect of the practice of turning the mind to happiness can be quite striking. Toward the end of the fall last year, Carol and I taught a weekend here on the practice of mudita, appreciative joy. Part of the reason I wanted to do it was that I hadn't taught it before as a whole retreat, and I thought it'd be interesting to see what happened.

Now, a two-day retreat—if you think back to the first two days you were here—I sort of think of as just time enough to get through a little bit of sleepiness. But people came just for those two days. Because their time was short, I think they really dove in.

At the end of that weekend, we asked the group: What was your experience like? How was it practicing this way for two days? I remember one woman said to the group that after these two days of practice, she felt happier than she had felt in years—just after two days of reminding ourselves of happiness. I was quite taken by the effects of that weekend on the people who were practicing.

Since that time, I've been doing quite a lot of this practice in my own meditation, and I've noticed that my mind just naturally now turns more and more to what is positive, to what is happy in my experience and in others' experience.

If you're interested in playing with this practice a little bit, there's a phrase for mudita just the way there is for metta. The phrase we often recommend is simply: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." As you connect with a friend or a benefact-

or, you just bring to mind the things that are going well in their life, and the phrase you send them is: "May your happiness and good fortune continue." This keeps the mind turning back to these positive things in their life or in your life.

This quality of mudita—joy or happiness—can be a great ally when things get difficult. A couple of years ago, I went to Burma to practice with a meditation master there whom I'd heard of and was very interested in his technique. He's a concentration master and a vipassana master. I spent six weeks at his monastery. His name is Pauk Sayadaw, and he's in the southeast of Burma.

While I was there, it was the start of the annual rains retreat when many Burmese people take robes and enter into a three-month practice period. I asked him if I could perhaps take robes also, and he allowed me to do that. So I ordained for the second time as a monk at the beginning of that six-week practice period, and I approached it with tremendous enthusiasm and eagerness. Ever since I had been a monk twenty-some years ago in Thailand, I'd had a wish to take robes again. I had the opportunity and did so. I was very happy to be ordained and to start practicing.

Then very soon in my time there, I encountered a lot of difficulties, particularly with the external situation. The day I started was basically the start of the monsoon season in that part of Burma. Here I was wearing the robes again for the first time in twenty-some years, and I'd sort of forgotten how to tie them. If you don't know how to tie your robes, they fall off one shoulder or the other. I'd be going down to the food-serving hall, holding my umbrella in one hand and my bowl in the other. I'd fill my bowl and then walk back to my hut—my kuti—with the umbrella in one hand and the full bowl in the other, the robe sliding off my shoulder, mud spattering around my feet, and the Burmese laypeople standing by, watching how this new Western monk was going to cope with their culture and the customs of being ordained there. That was one of my challenges.

Another challenge was that the schedule was more demanding than I was used to. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half; the longest sitting was two hours. That was a stretch for me. I was used to hour-long sittings the way we do here, so being told to sit for an hour and a half was not easy. There was a fair amount of body pain that I was experiencing.

I had interviews with the teacher every day in which I had to report how long I was able to stay with the breath continuously, so I was being checked in a very precise and quantitative way. To reach the teacher's cottage, I had to go out again with my umbrella, through the rain, and walk up a very big hill to his cottage. All of these things were starting to weigh on me.

Then there was the food. In the monastery, for me it was one meal a day—all vegetarian, which I really appreciated because I'd been a vegetarian for many years and was grateful to find a monastery with vegetarian food. But it was quite simple: basically white rice and stir-fried vegetables for one meal a day. There's only so much white rice and stir-fried vegetables I could eat at my one meal. Although I enjoyed the taste of the food, I found myself gradually getting thinner and thinner. In the course of six weeks, I ended up losing about half a pound a day while I was there.

All this was going on, and the rain just kept coming down, bucketing down, because the monsoon winds were blowing off the Indian Ocean and slamming into the southeast coast of Burma. We were getting about three inches of rain a day, and it continued for about two weeks without any letup.

I was starting to wonder why I had gone there. I imagine you can relate to that feeling and question.

One day I was feeling particularly discouraged. I'd carried with me, for inspiration—because I love him—a photograph of the Dalai Lama, and it was sitting on my little altar in my cottage. I turned to this picture of His Holiness and said, "Your Holiness, I'm in a hard place right now. Do you have any advice for me?"

And quite amazingly, immediately, his voice came into my head with his lovely Indian-accented English. And he said, "Remain cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support."

That was all he said. So I had to take that as my meditation instruction: remain optimistic, cheerful, and confident. But how to do that? I found that if I could remember what being cheerful felt like, I could sometimes put myself into that frame of mind. And when I did, it brightened things up tremendously. Sometimes I couldn't access that feeling, and then I would just work with the breath. But when I could find that place in me that knows the quality of cheerfulness and confidence, it was tremendously helpful.

Looking at the Dalai Lama, you see an incredibly happy person. He's someone I often reflect upon when I want to be reminded of what that quality is. He's been meeting over the last ten years with groups of scientists through the Mind and Life Institute, bringing together understandings from Buddhism and the neurosciences, the discoveries they're making in studying the brain and how it operates.

During one of these meetings in Dharamsala, about twenty scientists were visiting His Holiness at his home. In a break in the proceedings, one of the Western scientists went up and, making casual conversation, asked him, "Your Holiness, what was the happiest time in your life?"

That's a very interesting question to ask someone who is a refugee in exile from his homeland, someone who has been in exile now for almost fifty years. I expected the Dalai Lama would say something like, "Oh, it was when I was living in the Potala Palace, installed as the Dalai Lama, when all the people in Tibet were able to support the practice of the Dharma." Or perhaps, "Oh, it was when I was a small child living with my family in a small village in eastern Tibet."

But he didn't say either of those things. When asked about the happiest time in his life, he said, "I think right now."

That's so beautiful because he doesn't get lost in nostalgia. Here and now—that's the place for happiness. This practice of turning the mind to joy helps us discover that happiness can be alive here and now for us. Just as the metta meditation is a meditation on happiness, on the sources and causes of happiness, so is the mudita practice. As we tune to what's happy in our life and others' lives, we start understanding what makes for happiness.

In the Buddha's teachings, there are several different levels of happiness possible to us. One is the happiness of sense pleasures. As lay people, we have access to a wide range of pleasurable experiences, particularly of the five physical senses. We can have pleasant food, pleasant sounds through music and recordings, pleasant sights through many media or works of art, pleasant touch through massage or sexuality, pleasant tastes and drinks. All the options in the lay life are open to us.

If we start to look at our experience, we find that having something pleasurable at one of the senses does pick us up. It is a kind of happiness. An important part of the Buddha's teaching is that it's temporary, often quite brief, and the satisfaction it can bring is limited. But it is a real kind of happiness.

You can see how a world that doesn't understand the happiness of meditation and the inner journey becomes very fixated on these kinds of happiness—how the happiness of sense pleasures becomes, in a way, the be-all and end-all. The quest for more money to buy more of them becomes a driving force in most cultures. And of course, one of the big areas of pleasure, especially for men, is the area of sexuality.

When I started to reflect on this, I noticed that I have a very different relationship to sexuality now than I did when I was in my twenties. Looking back to my life then, as a young man, I can see that in some ways I was kind of obsessed with sexuality—every day there was something important going on in my mind on that topic, thinking about it, feeling into it, seeking it, seeking for that satisfaction. In a way, it kind of dominated me back then.

For me, one of the great pleasures about growing up and growing up in the Dharma is that that force has become much less powerful. Part of it is simply to do with age, and I think part of it is to do with greater understanding. Now when I feel into the area of sexuality, there's much more spaciousness and a much greater sense of relief that the urgency is not so pressing. It almost feels like coming out of a fever—no longer being so captivated by the compelling nature of that wanting. Because when I was younger, especially in my twenties, the compelling nature of that wanting led me to do really stupid things.

It led me to do things that hurt other people and that then ended up hurting myself.

And it was just a great blessing to come into the Dharma and hear about the precepts—to understand that one needed to have right conduct around sexuality which was non-harming. As soon as I heard that and understood that and started to practice that, a lot of the harm went out of my sexual relationships. But nonetheless, the fever was still quite strong.

What I see looking back now is that I didn't quite understand its source or its roots. Really, as I see it now, it is this deep and pervasive biological urge. I'll speak particularly for men because I know that area better—this force that was strong, compelling, dominating. But when I was under its influence so strongly, I couldn't see the universal quality of it. I thought it was my personal choice. I thought I had a personal interest in this area, like I was discovering it for myself and like nobody else knew about it. It wasn't quite like that, but I took it very individually.

Now, looking back, I can just see: wow, that's a big movement through at least the male half of the species in order for the species to propagate itself. And I was simply at the effect of it for all those years, not really understanding the conditioned nature, but very enthralled by it. So now I can understand better the huge force of conditioning that was just living through me as a male human—just a movement that goes through all of us as men.

I wish I could speak on sexuality for women, but I don't understand it yet. So I'm still learning in that area, and I'll wait for Carol to solve that one.

At any rate, it's just to acknowledge the power that this has and the power that sense pleasures in general have. The Buddha referred to this many, many times, and often when he used the word sense pleasures in his discourses, this is really code language for sexuality. He pointed to this as the strongest sort of force that at least men were

subject to. And I think as a layperson thinking about making the move into a monastic life, for men it's the biggest single area of renunciation, the biggest single area that makes it difficult to commit to a monastic life for the whole of one's life.

Then in addition to these major sense pleasures, there are just the simple pleasures that we can experience every day. And I really encourage you while you're on retreat here to start to tune into these because there are generally many, many moments of these that unfold over the course of every day.

The simple thing like the joy of waking up and being able to have a hot shower. It feels so good just to wake up into that warmth and encompassing nature. To come down to the dining room in the morning and have a warm cup of tea if you're feeling cold and warm your hands around that warm mug. To wake up and be able to see the beauty of what the snowstorm left—the ice on all the trees and on every pine needle out there. Seeing the blue sky after so many days of rain. I wasn't sure it was going to come back, but it came back again.

And then that wonderful feeling—one of the most delicious moments of every retreat day—lying down to go to sleep. Sometimes I wait for that moment many, many hours. And then it comes: lie down. The only trouble is it's so short, because often on retreat I lie down, I have about two minutes of consciousness, and the next thing I know my alarm's going off for the morning and it's time to start again. The Groundhog Day scenario: it's six o'clock, it's time to go again. The day happens over and over.

And because we're in a renunciate kind of lifestyle here, and our lives are so simple, all these pleasures get heightened. The Buddha talked about this too. He said that robes, alms food, a hut, and a straw seat will seem rich and luxurious to one who has renounced. I really find that true here. Some of my favorite meals in all my life have been a simple tea here with fruit, some peanuts, and a cup of tea. I just remember how rich the taste of an orange has been at times when I've been so present with it.

One of the other areas of happiness that the Buddha talked about quite a bit is the happiness of having wholesome conduct—of what's called virtue. When we're careful with our interactions with one another, we're mindful of the precepts, we don't harm other people, we don't harm other beings, we can look back on our conduct and feel really good about the way we've lived, even if it's for a period of time. We can feel that we've really related to the world in a way that hasn't harmed other beings.

In a way, what we're doing when we're practicing with this non-harming is we're giving others the gift of fearlessness. Not killing, not harming, not stealing, not lying, not engaging in sexual misconduct. The Buddha said there are many pleasures in lay

life, but they don't add up to one-sixteenth of this, which he called the greatest pleasure in lay life. He said it is the bliss of blamelessness—the joy of knowing that we haven't been harming others. A great delight.

Again, the Dalai Lama is pretty amazing in this way. A few years ago, Oprah Winfrey did an interview with him. This seems a little bit of an unlikely pairing, but I really appreciate how Oprah has brought so many wholesome ideas and very spiritual people into the mainstream through her TV show and through her magazine. This is an interview for her magazine, O.

So she started off by asking the Dalai Lama a personal question. She said, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

And this was his reply: "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said.

"An insect," Oprah repeated, processing this unexpected answer. "Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued with characteristic honesty: "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued: "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life. That's a great life to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama explained, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in mountain retreat, I don't lag too far behind."

So that's the bliss of blamelessness carried to a beautiful, beautiful quality.

Another reliable source of joy is nature. We're so fortunate in a situation like this to be surrounded by it—just to be able to walk outside, open our eyes, and feel that delight, that beauty.

Shortly after I was ordained in Thailand the first time I was a monk, I went to practice at a remote monastery about forty miles outside of Chiang Mai, right out in the countryside. It was a small monastery and quite isolated. I did a three-month retreat there, and the conditions were not easy. There was a teacher, but he didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Thai. So for my three months of practice, which was as intensive as this retreat, maybe a little more intensive, I didn't have any dharma talks and I didn't have any interviews. I was very much on my own. There was nobody there that I could have a conversation with, that I could feel free to speak English with.

The teacher would come up and check on me from time to time. Sometimes he'd bring visitors up to see the Western monk and watch him meditate. I usually would be meditating when they came up. So the Ajahn and the visitor would look in through the windows of my kuti, and I'd be just sitting there quietly, and I could hear my Ajahn go, "Dee, dee," which means "good, good," meaning, "Oh, he's meditating. That's good. He's not wasting his time."

But as I say, it was quite isolated. And I think what really sustained me in that situation was the beauty of the nature.

This monastery was laid out along a river that ran through a deep mountain gorge. The women's kutis—the nuns—were on one side of the river and the monks' kutis were on the other. The Thai people are so generous and hospitable, they gave me the best kuti in the monastery. It was the one furthest upstream and quite separated from all the others. So I was at the base of this canyon with a river running right by my kuti, well protected from any interference, very much on my own.

But because it was so isolated, the nourishment that I got, the support I got, really was from the beauty of the nature—the cliffs, the trees, the stream. And there was one mango tree that I would walk underneath as I went to the front of the monastery for my meals. I was there in mango season, so the ripe mangoes were falling off the tree onto the path, filling the air with that beautiful smell.

Unfortunately, the monks' discipline is that we cannot pick up food that has fallen as fruit from a tree. The only food that bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are allowed to take is that which is handed to them by another person. So while all these mangoes were falling on the ground and I was smelling that delightful fragrance, I couldn't touch them. I couldn't taste them. But I could enjoy the smell and remember how good they were.

This access to nature is always an inspiration to practice. Somebody who's very good at expressing that, of course, is the poet Mary Oliver. This is the opening of one of her recent poems called "Messenger":

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast, there the blue plums,
here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old?
Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young and still not half perfect?
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.

So that can be our work too.

Sitting still and learning to be astonished with the nature within and the nature without.

One of the other great sources of joy in meditation practice is the joy of peace—of stillness, of concentration. These states come to us spontaneously in our practice where we feel the mind really collecting into the present moment, where we feel that full and complete attention to just what is in this moment. This is such a gift.

As you start to experience that more, as it opens up to you, begin to explore the qualities of this state of mind—the concentrated, very present mind. One of the things that is most striking is the absence of the afflictive emotions or the hindrances, if you're familiar with that terminology. For some period of time, these constant movements of wanting and not wanting, of hope and fear, of regret and resentment, have just stopped with that fullness of attention in this moment.

When those hindrances aren't arising, there's an incredible joy in that release. The Buddha said that being even momentarily free of these forces is like how someone feels after they've been released from prison or after they've regained health after a long illness. There's a very deep relief and joy in that process.

The Buddha actually described peace as the highest happiness. Peace is the highest happiness. That's a radical notion, because if that's true, then we can't attain our highest happiness by going out and rushing about to make all kinds of outer things happen. But our highest happiness opens when we look within and release ourselves from the forces of wanting and not wanting. This letting go, he said, is the root to the highest kind of happiness that we can know.

I'll say that for me personally, one of the things that awakened my passion and deepening interest in the Dharma was discovering peace from the retreat experience and feeling how every retreat I did, I seemed to touch a new level, a new depth in the quality of the peace. And then that inspired me to come back for more and more and keep touching that depth of peacefulness.

These are ways that we can tune into the joy in our own life. The practice also is about tuning into the joy in the lives of others. So it's delightful to take a friend, think about the things that are going well in their life, and then just say that phrase: "May your happiness and good fortune continue."

Recently, one of our good friends, who's also a Dharma teacher, kind of reached a milestone with his son. His son is twenty years old and just attended his first month-long meditation retreat. I don't know how that would feel to you, but for our friend, it was kind of like the crowning reward of twenty years of child raising—to be able to introduce his son to the Dharma in such a committed way and have his son appreciate it so deeply. As a Dharma parent, I can't think of anything I would want more for my child than to have that blessing, especially at the age of twenty. So he was rapturous for the whole month that his son was sitting.

Another beautiful practice is extending that appreciation to all beings. This is kind of a challenge, but a very illuminating undertaking. Sometimes you get hits of the widespread nature of joy. Sometimes we just don't open our eyes to it. You notice how often you turn your mind to all the suffering that's in the world? How often do you turn your mind to all the joy that's in the world? Usually we turn that way much less often. But I believe that it's just as prevalent as the suffering when we learn to tune into it.

Sometimes the internet reveals these things. Somebody sent me a link to a video on YouTube that was called "Free Hugs." Have you seen this video? So Free Hugs started in a shopping mall in Sydney, Australia, with this one young guy who just got the idea, and he made a sign. It was about three feet by three feet, and it just had handwritten big letters that said "Free Hugs."

So he went down to a shopping mall and he held up this sign: Free Hugs. And first people would walk by and go, "What? Is this guy crazy? Or is he some kind of creep that you don't really want to get too close to because he might be a little bit weird?" But eventually some people started to break through the barrier and the suspicion, and they went up and they just hugged him. And then they'd come away smiling. And then more people saw that happening, so they went up and hugged him and would come away smiling. And pretty soon all these people were coming up and getting free hugs.

So this started to gain some momentum. It was happening a lot. He'd go back to the shopping mall, and they started to make a video of all the people who were coming to get these free hugs. And they posted that on an Australian site. And then this Australian rock group decided to dedicate one of their songs to this experience. So they put his video to music and edited it further and posted this music video, which is now up on YouTube and has had 1.6 million views as of about a month ago.

So when you get back, go to YouTube, look up Free Hugs, and you'll get a hit of real mudita. It's just so fun to see all these people in a shopping mall being surprised at the possibility they could hug somebody they don't know, and it just tickles them.

And now it's spread. People are offering free hugs in Japan, Israel, Europe, and all over the world. It's a beautiful example of mudita for all beings.

What I discovered when I began practicing loving-kindness for a truly wide range of beings is that everyone I could think of had some happiness in their life. I don't want to make an absolute pronouncement that every human being has happiness—I don't know that to be universally true. But all the people I could bring to mind had some measure of joy or contentment.

I had this observation confirmed during a metta retreat I was teaching at Spirit Rock. One participant was from Manchester, England. If you know Manchester, it's probably not among the world's happiest places—one of those northern industrial cities with old urban architecture, gloomy weather, cold and rainy. You get the picture.

Her work there involved helping women seeking political refuge in England, generally from developing countries. Reflect for a moment on what this means. These were women who had gained asylum in Britain because they faced threats of murder, assault, or violence if they remained in their home countries. They had to leave everything familiar—their homeland, culture, warm climate, family, friends, religion—for their very survival, transplanting themselves to this cold, gray, rainy northern industrial town. Imagine that adjustment.

She told me the most remarkable thing about working with these women was their level of cheerfulness. Despite everything they'd endured and lost, they possessed such resilient spirits, such optimism and courage. I think about this whenever I consider how happiness appears in the most unexpected places.

When we begin to encounter the areas of happiness in our own lives, gratitude often arises naturally. And gratitude is a truly beautiful quality of heart and mind. When this quality is present and we appreciate what already exists in our life, it's a wonderful place to dwell.

Notice how gratitude counteracts both wanting and aversion. We're not greedy for our life to be different because we appreciate the riches already present, so it offsets desire. We're also not resisting our circumstances because we're appreciating the blessings we have, so it offsets aversion. Instead, we recognize and cherish the positive aspects of our experience.

A wise friend of mine, a grandmother, once called her seven-year-old granddaughter on Christmas Day. The child was bubbling with excitement about all the presents she'd received. The grandmother asked, "When you get lots of presents, does that make you thankful or do you want more?"

"Oh, Nana, I want more!" the little girl replied.

"Oh, that's too bad," her grandmother said gently.

The child paused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, it feels good? And when you're wanting more, it doesn't feel as good?"

The little girl stopped completely. "Oh, Nana, you're right."

This is such a beautiful and simple teaching about gratitude. All of us have countless things to be grateful for if we turn our minds in that direction.

A friend of mine worked in refugee camps in Thailand, receiving Cambodians fleeing the killing fields after so many had died in their country. He was working with Thai teachers to train these refugees for emigration to other countries—many came to the United States, and there's now quite a large Hmong population in Fresno, California, many of whom came through these very camps.

Among the refugees was a young Hmong girl from a village in the hills. As part of her training—which included learning for the first time how to use money, operate a washing machine, read a bus schedule, and understand what a toaster was—she was asked: "What are the most important things in life?"

Her answer was immediate: "The most important things in life are fire, rice, and water."

This is profoundly worth reflecting upon, because if we couldn't take those things for granted, they would be the most important things in our lives too. But we have all these necessities in such abundance that we easily forget much of the world doesn't. We have as much food as we want. Here, on this cold and perhaps windy night, we sit warm and dry inside.

If we became sick, each of us would have access to pretty good health care. So many people in the world lack adequate food, adequate shelter, adequate clothing, and adequate medicine. These the Buddha called the requisites of human life. For the most part, we have all these.

In addition, all of us enjoy what the Tibetans call a precious human birth. This means a birth that, beyond these basic requisites, has some other qualities. It basically means we have the ability to awaken, or you could say to come to the true end of suffering. Each of us has that possibility.

We've heard about it as a possibility, we've understood it to some extent, and so that is within our reach. That is very rare. We're born as human beings. Our minds and bodies work reasonably well. We're at a time when there are authentic teachings still alive on the earth of how to walk the path to come to the end of suffering. This is not always true in every period upon the earth, but somehow all of us have met up with these teachings in an authentic way and understood authentic instructions on how to walk that path and how to practice for the very end of suffering, should we want to do that.

In addition, you and I have the leisure time to spend some time carrying out these teachings. When you look across the whole population of six billion people on the earth, it's a fairly small percentage that have all those conditions that make up the precious birth that we have.

Some people at this point in the retreat start to mention this feeling of gratitude. Someone mentioned it today and said, "But in an approach where there's not considered to be a God, who do you offer this gratitude to?" And personally, I feel it toward the Dharma. I feel so grateful to have had the teachings in my life.

When I reflect back on what my life was before I knew about these teachings, it was a lot of confusion because suffering and happiness seemed to happen in this really random way. I knew I wanted to be happy, but I had no idea how to make that possible. It was just a time of bewilderment and kind of groping in the dark for something. And to know for ourselves the way to happiness—for me, it's been an incredible gift, the best gift in my life.

So I said that I would talk a little about how this quality of joy fits into the path. Let me finish by describing the progression. This is described in more detail if you're interested in a text in one of the books of the Buddha's teachings called the Upanisa Sutta. This teaching is sometimes called Transcendent Dependent Origination, but it's not as forbidding as the title.

One of the early qualities is this quality of gladness that we were talking about—when just in a moment you tune into an aspect of your experience that awakens this kind of delight, the delight of the warm shower or the warm cup of tea or the beautiful sight of nature. You let that fill your heart. You take time to feel the gladness of mind that that brings.

Then as you bring that quality of gladness into the meditation, you find that there starts to be a delight in your connection to the meditation subject. Whether that's breath or body or sounds, there's a delight in being with that. This is called, in the Pali word, pīti.

This delight starts to calm our mind because in some ways this level of delight and interest is what we've been looking for. So the mind starts to settle a little bit, comes to peace out of that sense of delight and engagement.

Then this peaceful and engaged feeling leads to a new level of happiness. The Pali term here is sukha. This is a happiness that's not so much dependent on outer conditions, but we've in a way found it within ourselves in this combination of peacefulness and interest in our experience.

So a contentment starts to grow in us that's not dependent on outer conditions. This is a wonderful thing to discover. As one of my teachers said, it was in this phase of practice that he truly learned that happiness comes from within. Because we feel how clearly its source is inner, not related to outer events at all. It's sort of like the happiness of coming home or being at home.

Then as that tranquil contentment settles, the mind is just able to collect very deeply because it's no longer pulled out to externals. It's not searching for this and that. The restless groping for satisfaction stops temporarily, and the mind collects in this deep state of concentration.

And from this deep state of concentration, then there is the opening, the potential for the opening into liberating understanding. It's the insight, the wisdom, that truly liberates.

So the role that joy plays is the kind of awakening of the delight. Then it mellows through tranquility, settles into our being, into deep contentment, but doesn't stop there. One of the things the Buddha said is that he reminded himself all along his practice career not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind. This in itself is a radical pointing—not to settle just for wholesome states of mind, but to continue to let that wholesomeness deepen into concentration and then allow the liberating insight truly to free the mind into that deepest kind of security, which is the knowledge, as the Buddha said, "Suffering can never return to this mind."

Can you imagine what that would feel like? To know that there was no possibility any longer of suffering ever arising again. This is considered to be the fullness of freedom.

As the Buddha said in the simile of the heartwood, it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end. Joy is an incredibly important accelerating factor toward that end.

I'll close with a reflection from Rumi: "Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

It is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end.

CHAPTER 272

The Benefits of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · 53 min

In this dharma talk from a mettā retreat, Guy Armstrong addresses the challenges and profound benefits of loving-kindness meditation. Drawing on the traditional framework of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes) - mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity) - he explains how mettā practice transforms our hearts and minds through five key developments.

Armstrong discusses how mettā makes the heart more responsive and "juicy," purifies mental states by replacing negativity with wholesome intentions, develops concentration through sustained focus on the phrases, connects us to all living beings through recognizing our fundamental sameness, and cultivates lasting happiness. He emphasizes that mettā is not mere positive thinking but a systematic cultivation of our innate capacity for love through sincere intention and repetition.

The talk includes inspiring stories of transformation, references to teachers like the Dalai Lama and Ajahn Jimnian, and practical guidance on working with the traditional phrases: "May I be safe, may I be happy, may I be healthy, may I live with ease." Armstrong addresses common difficulties practitioners face, explaining how mettā practice naturally brings up memories and emotions for healing, while establishing a foundation of self-love that extends naturally to others.

We come to the end of the first day of the metta retreat together, and I'm happy to see—really happy—that most of you are still here, because beginnings of retreats are always difficult, and metta retreats even more so. This really came out in the interview groups this afternoon. This is hard work. You know, you have to keep cranking out those phrases. It's kind of like trying to get an old Model T to start, and you just have to keep cranking and cranking. At first, it doesn't catch automatically, and it really takes a lot of work.

A number of people in the groups were talking about how tiring it was. Somebody said that she was suffering from "phrases fatigue," and she said, "All I want to do is sit quietly." You may have felt that today. Some people ask, "Can I take a vipassana break, please?" I think vipassana never looks so inviting as in the middle of an early day of a metta retreat.

If you need to take a vipassana break and sit quietly to regain your energy, it's fine to do that on the early days. But it is amazing that people are already really starting to engage with the practice. Despite all the difficulties and the mind swinging between extreme sleepiness and extreme restlessness in the early days, people are working and already connecting well with the practice. Anushka was sitting in on one of the groups this afternoon, and she just said, "It's amazing how sincerely people are doing this practice without a lot of reward as yet." The reward will come later, but I want to appreciate the sincerity of your work today.

Just in case there are any doubts about whether this really works or how it works, in tonight's talk I want to discuss what the metta practice does for us and how it does it—the mechanics of how repeating these phrases over and over again can actually transform our hearts and minds.

Rumi, the great poet from Persia, said, "One who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." I'm really happy that we all are running toward the allure of love, because for me it has always been one of the most motivating aspects of the spiritual path.

When I was in my early twenties, I developed a lot of access to love, but I didn't know how to stabilize it. It came and went seemingly at random, and it was tremendously satisfying—some of the most satisfying experiences I'd had in my life—but I didn't know how to access it with any regularity. For me, a lot of the pull of the whole spiritual path was trying to find out how to make that access to love more enduring and more ongoing. In our tradition, the metta practice is one of the key ways to do that, one of the most central ways.

I want to talk tonight about five benefits of the metta practice, how it affects us and shapes us. The first is that it makes the heart more responsive, or you could say more tender. We allow life to touch us more, and then we're also more able to touch life. It purifies the heart—that is, it cleans it, scrubs it, brightens it up and makes it shine. It develops this quality of concentration, which I think we've mentioned once or twice today. It connects us to the whole breadth of life and really all living things in a very unique way. And it has the possibility of bringing a lot of happiness. These are the five developments that I want to cover this evening.

First, let me talk about the way it makes the heart more responsive, makes it more alive to life.

The main practice that we do here at Spirit Rock is called Insight Meditation or vipassana. It uses the tool of mindfulness primarily in a clear relationship with what's happening in the present moment. We think of vipassana as our wisdom practice. Wisdom is ultimately what liberates the heart and mind. So for us, we do the loving-kindness practice in the context of the wisdom practice of vipassana. Nonetheless, metta has some really unique qualities to add to our spiritual development.

I was sitting a retreat with a Tibetan teacher. At the end of retreats, often in Tibetan practice, when the student is about to go away, the teacher gives a few words of heart advice—pith instructions that the student is meant to take away and live by. At the end of our retreat, the teacher offered us these words of heart advice.

He said, "When you go back into the world, remember three things. First, I want you to be natural. Just be a good-natured, down-to-earth, easy-going person. Don't go back and act like you're on some weird spiritual trip, because if you do that, you'll go into the world, people will think that's what Buddhism is about, and they won't want to take part. So be natural."

The second thing he said is be wise. He said, take care of yourself, take care of the people around you, make good choices in your life.

And the third thing he said is, when you go back, be juicy. And he used that when he would talk about the eyes welling up with moisture when they were touched by beauty or compassion. When you go back to your life, be juicy.

This is an ancient Buddhist technical term. I want you to understand this term, juice. It refers to a whole range of feelings that are sometimes called the devotional end of practice. So it's qualities like love, reverence, joy, devotion, compassion, humor, faith, trust, kindness, humility, awe—this range of our possible emotions is what we call technically juice.

The metta practice in our tradition is the direct avenue to cultivating this juicy quality in life. Because if you think about it, these are the range of qualities that make life sweet, that make life really enjoyable. They're also the qualities I think that touch other people and perhaps awaken in them an interest in spiritual life.

When you think about the teachers who have touched you over the course of your spiritual path, take a look and see if some of these qualities of love and compassion and joy and humor aren't the ones that sort of caught your interest and made you want to have a little bit of what that person had. So these are the qualities by which we can touch the world also.

Alice Walker, the noted author and novelist who wrote The Color Purple, said, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." The metta practice is the direct way in our tradition that we bring this about. And to me, it's amazing and beautiful that there are specific practices that lead in this direction. When I was young, I had no idea that there were practices that I could do that could cultivate my openness to love. I thought it was just random. And in the technology of the Buddhist teachings, there are definitely these qualities and they work.

To put it in its context, metta is one of four qualities that are called the Brahma-viharas. Brahma means divine or heavenly. Vihara means home or resting place. So these qualities are called the divine abodes. And the four are metta, or loving-kindness; compassion, or karuna; joy, or mudita; and equanimity, or upekkha.

You'll notice these are the names that we gave to the four residence buildings when we built the retreat center. We thought about calling them the Four Noble Truths, but we didn't think you'd want to stay in suffering and craving, so we decided this is a little more appealing than that.

The four of these really work together with metta as the foundation. Metta is the quality that opens our heart in a very general kind of way. We use these four phrases because they lead us into a very interesting reflection, investigation, and then ultimately analysis of what makes for human happiness.

When you contemplate, as you will do over the next five days, what's involved in an authentic sense of well-being, of welfare for yourself and all those that you bring in to the metta, I think you'll see that every living being wants to be safe. We look at the situation in Iraq now and imagine what it would be like to try to live a daily life where you and your family had no guarantee of surviving from the morning until the evening every day of your life. It's really not possible to feel a sense of secure happiness in an environment where we're not at least physically safe.

Then mental happiness—you know, we know what it's like when mental happiness isn't there, when we're plunged into anger or depression, despair, anxiety, and we lose touch with that ability to touch the feeling of uplift of mental happiness. And we know what happens when our health isn't available, when the body energy is low, when there's a lot of pain in the body. It really saps our ability to have the energy to be uplifted, to be happy.

The fourth of the phrases is sometimes a little bit cryptic, this living with ease. What does it mean to live with ease? Really the sense here in the traditional phrase you'll see in the translation this evening is to take care of yourself happily. It means that you can

provide for yourself, your family, your responsibilities through your work in the external world. So it means that your livelihood and your relationships go well and smoothly. That's the intent of the fourth and final phrase.

And you see that when all of these come together in a human life, this is what really makes for a sense of happiness, a sense of peace, contentment, and settledness. It's when these four are available. Now obviously there are ways to practice to do without one or another of them, but when the four come together, we're lucky, we're fortunate.

Reflecting on this for ourselves and then for other people who we'll bring in trains us to see the world through the eyes of caring. It's like with each being that we bring to mind, we go, how is it for you? How is your safety, your happiness, and your health, and your ease? How's it going? It trains us to see the world through the eyes of others, and that's a big part of what awakens this tender heart.

We're always thinking about—I know what my life's like now. What is it for you? Because we recognize in each being there's another whole universe of feeling and joys and sorrows. And we want that to go well as we start to tune in to the possibility.

The way this transforms people was brought home to me recently in a really kind of sweet story.

Someone who practices here frequently and has joined us for the month-long retreats in February was recently attending a retreat on the East Coast. You know how at meal cleanup you scrape your leftovers into the compost bin by the dishwashing station? This retreat center had a similar setup, but there was a sign that read: "Please don't put any staples from tea bags in the compost because the compost is going to feed pigs."

When my friend saw this sign, he wondered where those pigs were ultimately going. He happens to be a committed vegan, motivated by deep concern for the welfare of animals—creatures who have no voice of their own, cannot speak for themselves, and enjoy almost no rights in our culture.

So he approached the cooks and asked, "The compost goes to the pigs, but what happens to the pigs afterward?" He explained that if they were being raised for slaughter, he didn't want the retreat center to be part of that chain. It didn't feel congruent with Buddhist values to participate in that process.

The cook admitted she didn't know what happened to the pigs but promised to find out. She called the neighbor who regularly collected the compost and asked about the pigs' fate.

The neighbor replied with quite an interesting story. He explained that the pigs had indeed been destined for slaughter. Last December, they had taken them to the slaughterhouse, expecting they would be processed within a day or two. But the day after they dropped off the pigs, the slaughterhouse burned to the ground.

Is that karmic or what?

The neighbor continued: his daughters had been distraught because they had spent so much time with these pigs since they were young, and the thought of them dying painfully in the fire was devastating. Assuming the worst had happened, he checked with the farmer.

To his surprise, the farmer revealed that the pigs had actually escaped the slaughterhouse and were running wild in the surrounding woods. Initially, they feared the pigs were lost—surviving a Massachusetts winter is no easy feat for creatures unaccustomed to such conditions.

So the neighbor took his daughters in the truck and drove to the site of the burned slaughterhouse. They searched the woods and found both pigs alive. They brought them home, and now they're being raised as beloved pets—his daughters are completely smitten with them. The compost scraps from the retreat center now nourish these pet pigs, whose names, incidentally, are Thelma and Louise.

What a beautiful story emerging from someone whose heart had been awakened partly through loving-kindness practice to care deeply about animal welfare. Who knows what karmic forces that compost set in motion to liberate those two pigs.

The other three brahmaviharas naturally grow from this foundation of an open heart. As we attune to the lived experience of beings—ourselves and others—we begin recognizing different primary experiences.

When life becomes difficult and we encounter suffering, the open heart looking upon that suffering transforms metta into compassion. That's the essence of compassion—the open heart witnessing suffering, whether our own or another's.

Metta and compassion are intimately connected. Don't be misled by the different terminology. Some Buddhist schools, including Tibetan and Zen traditions, emphasize compassion as primary. In our tradition, we prioritize metta, but they're very closely related. The Dalai Lama describes compassion as basic human warmth, which is precisely what we're cultivating here.

When the open heart observes a being experiencing happiness and joy, the response is what we call appreciative joy or sympathetic joy—we feel happy witnessing their happiness. This constitutes the third brahmavihara.

When the open heart can simply rest, it abides in equanimity—that balance of mind not easily disturbed by life's changing faces of pleasure and pain. Equanimity supports the other three practices, as we'll explore further.

As we delve into metta practice, some people from a vipassana background sometimes have philosophical concerns. Vipassana is so elegant, so impeccable—just aware of what is. It's absolutely clean. Metta can seem a bit too New Age, perhaps like Hallmark greeting cards or affirmations. What is this about?

I wanted to address this perspective. One of the Buddha's primary instructions regarding right effort is to cultivate wholesome qualities of mind. In metta practice, and all the brahmaviharas, we're directly cultivating very wholesome mental qualities. This perfectly aligns with what the Buddha described as right effort.

Some people find metta practice sounds deluded: "May I be happy?" But you told me on the last retreat there was no self. You also said happiness was impermanent, yet now I'm constantly wishing for it. Isn't this contradictory?

For the vipassana purists in the audience, I have a phrase you might prefer as your metta. You can use this if you like: "In this ever-changing stream of mental and physical phenomena, conventionally designated as James, may the mind-state of happiness arise on an ever more frequent basis."

If you prefer that formulation, feel free to use it. Or if you simply want to say, "May you be happy, James," that works perfectly well too.

They mean the same thing.

But it is extraordinary when we meet somebody who has developed their heart in this way. Mostly, I think, growing up in this culture, I didn't have any idea of what kind of development was possible for the human heart. And then when we meet people who have done this work for many years or possibly lifetimes, it's mind-blowing.

The person I always reflect on when I think about this possibility is the Dalai Lama. As James said, he often says that his religion is kindness, and he really practices it. I think he's practiced it for a long time. Oprah Winfrey did an interview with the Dalai Lama for her magazine O, and I really appreciate Oprah for bringing a wide range of

beautiful teachings into a mainstream audience. That's something she's done really brilliantly. She uses a lot of the teachers from our community—Sharon Salzberg has been in O, Jack, Joseph Goldstein. A lot of our teachers appear there.

So she was interviewing the Dalai Lama for an article. The interview began when Oprah asked the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

And that's it. Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, looking out the window. She fell silent. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued, "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life—to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

That's an amazing heart. And of course, all that separates us from that is about seventeen lifetimes of practice. We're on our way.

Of course, the only reason that the loving-kindness practice works for us is that this quality of metta is part of our nature. It's an intrinsic part of us. It's not something we have to fabricate—it's already there in each of us, and it's just a matter of inclining our mind and bringing it forward.

One of the most loving people in my life was my grandmother. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890, and there was not a strong Buddhist presence in North Carolina in 1890. She grew up without the benefit of these teachings or psychotherapy, and yet she managed to have one of the most loving hearts that I've

ever known, even though she was married to my grandfather, who was a particularly ornery character. So this is a natural quality in us, and we're trying to remind ourselves of it and incline our mind in that direction.

What you'll see as the practice goes on is that the phrase is just a skillful means to help us incline the mind that way. The way Buddhist practices all work is if you want to develop quality X, you put yourself in quality X. There's no quality Y that's needed to get to quality X. You put yourself in quality X. So if you want to be mindful and in the present, you come into the present. If you want to develop the quality of loving-kindness, you put yourself in loving-kindness as best you can in this moment. And the phrases are there, the image is there, the person is there to help evoke that feeling as far as possible.

This putting ourselves there over and over is really what carries out the second benefit of loving-kindness, which is the quality of purification or cleaning the heart. Sharda alluded to this last night. Instead of being lost in some mind states of ill will, judgment, or criticism, or craving, we substitute the metta phrases and the metta inclination for those. And so moment by moment, the mind is brought out of its habitual patterns of negativity, which bring suffering to us, and those patterns are replaced by the inclination of loving-kindness. So in a way, it's really simple.

The heart of the practice is profoundly simple: can you see yourself and sincerely wish yourself well? Can you see another and sincerely wish that other person well? There's no way to manufacture the sincere part of this. Simply saying the phrase alone doesn't accomplish it. What transforms the heart is saying the phrase and meaning it—bringing as much real caring to that moment as you can.

The metta phrases aren't used like a mantra practice. Mantra practices are wonderful; they have a beautifully calming effect on the mind and body, quieting the mind and leading us into stillness and relaxation. The metta phrases aren't meant to be used in that way. It's not just the repetition of the phrase that accomplishes the work—it's the sincere caring that we bring to the phrase that is the real engine of this practice.

When we can bring up a person or ourselves and really care, even if it's just a little bit of caring, that's what begins to transform the heart. What we're taking hold of—and Sharda mentioned this in her opening—is the factor of intention. We are inclining our minds in that direction of caring, and intention is the powerful transforming element of dharma practice. Whether it's intending to be in the present moment through mindfulness or intending to be caring through the practice of loving-kindness, intention is the lever that begins to shift our life.

The very simple way of thinking of each phrase is that it's like saying to yourself or somebody else, "I hope you're happy." That's all it is—"I hope you're happy." Try to say it with some meaning, and everything flows from that. It's this simple intention that generates the power of loving-kindness. When we offer it moment after moment after moment, hour after hour and day after day, that power begins to build.

Those of you who have sat vipassana retreats will recognize this pattern from the cultivation of mindfulness. We pay attention to the present moment, moment after moment, and it develops incredible momentum as we sustain it. Here, that momentum is generated simply by the intention of caring or well-wishing. That takes the place of the intention of mindfulness in vipassana practice.

You can think of every one of these phrases as like planting a seed—a seed of intention. Our job is that we are the farmers. We plant the seeds and we take care of them with continuity, with patience, with diligence. But we're not the ones who can make the seeds sprout, and we're not the ones who can make the seeds grow into flourishing plants. That's nature. So our job is only to plant the seed of this simple caring. When it grows up and flowers into loving-kindness, that's the work of nature—or you could say the dharma.

As you plant the seeds, let the planting be enough. Plant with all your wholehearted intention, but you don't have to try to manufacture the plant. Take what comes in its own time. Different feelings of metta will arise over these days for you. Trust in that—trust that the planting is enough, that you don't need to make the plant emerge from the soil. The dharma will take care of that. When metta arises is not up to us exactly. We plant the seeds, and then the strengthening of it is accomplished by the dharma.

So what should we look for? What are the signs of this flowering of metta? We've used the word love often as we've been discussing this. In some ways that may be a little too exalted for us—the word love aims really high. There's a transcendent, selfless, merging quality in it. Sometimes metta will manifest in that flavor, but that's a peak experience. It's not the way it's going to appear most of the time.

A step down from that is the way I mostly think of metta—similar to what James shared last night: friendship. Simply having a friendly attitude toward what meets us. That's metta. That's enough. That attitude is more accessible moment by moment, and that attitude can carry us through much of life.

I invite you to think back over all the moments of today. Were there any moments that weren't met with friendliness? When the body ached, when there was noise in the building, when someone wasn't moving through the line properly, when your cushion disappeared after you'd left the hall...

These kind actions reflect something in our heart that we want to love and nourish. When we connect with these moments of goodness, the phrase "may I be happy" begins to feel appropriate and natural. We recognize that this good heart deserves happiness.

Another approach is to reflect on your own deep intentions. Even when we make mistakes, even when we fall short of our ideals, most of us carry fundamental intentions to be helpful, to be kind, to not cause harm. These intentions themselves are beautiful and worthy of love. When we touch this place of good intention within ourselves, metta arises naturally.

Sometimes I suggest people think of themselves as a small child. Can you remember being five or six years old? That innocent, open, curious being—that's still part of who you are. When we see ourselves with this tenderness, the way we might look at any small child, loving kindness flows easily.

The Tibetans have a beautiful practice where they imagine that they have been the beloved child of countless mothers throughout countless lifetimes. They reflect on all the care and tenderness they've received. This creates a sense of being fundamentally loveable, worthy of kindness and care.

You might also reflect on your own struggles and difficulties with compassion. We've all experienced loss, disappointment, physical pain, emotional confusion. When we see our own suffering clearly, often a natural response of tenderness arises. We wouldn't wish this pain on anyone, including ourselves.

However you connect with your own basic goodness, spend some time there. Let it become real. Let yourself feel worthy of love and care. This isn't about inflating the ego or becoming self-absorbed. This is about recognizing the truth of your own good heart and allowing that recognition to flower into genuine self-love.

From this foundation of self-love, everything else becomes possible. We can't give what we don't have. If we're harsh and critical with ourselves, if we're constantly judging our own thoughts and actions, then that's what we'll offer to others. But when we establish a baseline of kindness toward ourselves, we create the conditions for that kindness to radiate outward naturally.

You think about those and you reflect on what was my intention in doing that? And in coming to the intention, you get in touch with that quality of caring. You were caring about somebody. And that's the seed of metta.

So in touch with your own goodness, then directing the phrases to yourself. But even so, loving kindness for ourselves can bring up a lot of different memories and a lot of different feelings. Someone was commenting in a group today that it brought up memories of times when they themselves had acted in ways that weren't so kind. That's one of the common things that happens.

It's like as we turn to kindness and recognize it as a value, then what comes from the other side is, oh, but what about this? And a voice of memory that brings up all the times we weren't so kind. Or we think about safety, and we remember times in our life that we didn't feel safe, that people hurt us or harmed us.

So these feelings will come. In doing metta practice, it's almost like we do a life review. We're kind of looking at our life now through new lenses. It's kind of like somebody puts on these metta glasses and says, who are you now? As you see the world through the eyes of loving kindness, what do you see? And part of it is we look at our own life through the eyes of loving kindness and we see times it wasn't there in our life —maybe from outside or maybe from inside. So there's a kind of reevaluation that takes place because of this practice. This is an integral part of what metta does.

When these memories come, don't think you've gone off the track. It's part of what happens. But also you don't have to make a project out of fixing them. Because what's beautiful is that as the metta grows, it holds the memories in its own friendliness. And that provides all the transformation or you could say the healing that's needed. So don't think you have to go out and fix them. Though we will in a couple of days talk about a practice of forgiveness that can help with this process. But basically trust in the metta to hold these memories and change them.

As we get in touch with our own difficulties, this then becomes a doorway to the further development of love and compassion. It's kind of interesting how that happens. You know, sometimes if life is too easy, we don't develop very much. And it's when we run into a little bit of obstacle that we sort of wake up and grow.

I'm sure you know of the Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi who's been under house arrest for most of the last fourteen years. The Burmese military dictatorship let her out for part of a year at one point, but she was generating too much interest among the people of Burma. And so they put her back under house arrest and basically

she can't go out and no one can see her. She's a very committed Buddhist practitioner because Burma is a very strong Buddhist country. And in fact, she's had practice interviews with some of the teachers that some of us have practiced with.

It's a very interesting situation for them because they can't directly talk about politics with her, because the house is probably bugged, and anything that they say could get them in as much trouble as she is in, so they have to talk in very careful ways. But she's gotten detailed instructions on the practice of loving-kindness, as we're doing it here, because she's been taught by some of the teachers that we learned this practice from.

And here's what she said about loving-kindness: "When I compared notes with my colleagues in the democracy movement in Burma who have suffered long terms of imprisonment, we found that an enhanced appreciation of metta was a common experience. We had known and felt both the effects of loving kindness and the unwholesomeness of nature's lacking in loving kindness." The loving kindness has become a really integral part of her practice and she extends that practice to the military leadership.

So as the metta develops, one of the things we notice about love is that it has this tremendous integrating energy. Love unifies. It pulls people together. It pulls couples together. It pulls nations together, could pull a whole planet together. And it pulls our psyche together. When love comes into being in our psyche, parts of ourselves that we pushed away and rejected become able to be held, embraced, and accepted. So love has this wonderful quality of putting us back together.

I don't know if you've experienced this in your Vipassana practice, but it has the effect of taking us apart. That's very interesting. You know, we look at the six sense bases or the five aggregates and it takes us into our constituent elements. And then love kind of puts all that back together.

And that's a way we can appreciate this famous quote again from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who said that love tells me I'm everything and wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows. This is the flow of our metta and vipassana practice. Vipassana shows us that we're nothing. Loving kindness shows us that we hold everything. And this is very healing. This really does put our hearts back together.

There's this beautiful poem from Galway Kinnell called "St. Francis and the Sow." He says, "Sometimes it is necessary to re-teach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing." This is what the loving kindness practice is doing for us. It's re-teaching us our own loveliness because we discover that quality, the beautiful quality of metta within our own hearts.

The third of the powers of loving kindness is the development of concentration. This practice develops two qualities primarily: one is loving kindness and the other is concentration. By coming back to the phrases again and again, we're providing a single focus for the attention, and that unifies the mind. It collects the mind around the phrases. So start to investigate in your practice: what does it feel like when the mind collects around the phrases? What does it feel like when the phrases can go for a few repetitions and they're uninterrupted by other distracting thoughts? This is the factor of concentration coming into play. Begin to investigate what it feels like in your body, what it feels like in your mind when that happens. We'll talk about this more as the retreat goes on, but you can start to explore this already.

The fourth development through loving kindness is connection. Loving kindness practice connects us to all of life. With our vipassana practice, it can open this way—it ought to open this way—but sometimes it can become a little self-enclosed where we focus on my pain, my suffering, my mindfulness, my awakening, my liberation. But metta practice can't let us stay in that narrow view. It has to open us out to the rest of life.

This is from Shantideva, an eighth-century Indian teacher: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy." So loving kindness is where we practice this wanting others to be happy, and we find out there's a tremendous joy in that connection to life.

One of the insights we come to—I think Sharda might have mentioned this too—is we find that we're all very much the same organism. We have all these distinctions that society is based around: gender, age, race, language, culture, religion. But if you look at it, we're all basically a human being with two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two arms, and two legs. We have the same package of emotions. We have the same vulnerability to the sufferings of life. We are basically the same being that's been poured into different vessels. All the distinctions are real because each of them conditions us in a different way—it's not to deny the reality—but when you look more deeply, they're superficial and they don't change that underlying sameness that we all share, the brightness of the light that shines out through each pair of eyes.

So metta reconnects us to that truth. I'd say this is maybe the deepest insight from the brahmavihara practices. They make us realize that very deeply we're more than just connected—we share the same heart.

Both James and Sharda, I think it was in the late 80s or early 90s, traveled to India and had a number of wonderful meetings with an Indian teacher named Poonjaji, sometimes called Papaji, who a number of the teachers in our circle also went to visit

and learned a lot from. And this is a beautiful quote from Poonjaji about this underlying unity. He was asked one time about bringing peace into the world and he says, "As long as there are two, there will be war." And what he meant was as long as there are two in our minds, there will be war. And so the real way through conflict is seeing our deep connection, our deep unity.

Finally, I'd just like to talk a little bit about the happiness that comes from loving kindness practice. One of the happiest people I know is a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jimnien who usually comes to Spirit Rock every spring. Unfortunately, this year he had some intestinal difficulty. He had to have surgery and he wasn't able to make the trip. But he is a joyful presence. He's about sixty-five or so years old and has done meditation from the time he was four. He was kind of a prodigy. He was trained in both vipassana and loving kindness practice, and he has the energy and the joy and the friendliness that comes from deep, deep cultivation of loving kindness.

One of the transmissions he offers in his limited English captures the beautiful union of his vipassana and metta understanding. He touches the space around him and says simply, "Empty, empty." Then he touches it again and declares, "Happy, happy, empty, empty, happy, happy." This is his transmission—the profound recognition that emptiness and happiness are not separate, but intimately connected.

When he teaches at Spirit Rock in either the lower or upper hall, someone might ask him what he'd like to do that day. "Would you like to go to San Francisco or visit the ocean?" His response is always the same: "Are there people who'd like to hear the Dharma? If there are people who'd like to hear the Dharma, I'd really be happy to share the Dharma. But if there's nobody who wants to hear the Dharma, I'm happy to go to San Francisco or the ocean. Whatever you would like, I'm always happy."

He tells us that he hasn't experienced anger in twenty-five years. When you meet him, this extraordinary claim becomes completely believable. His very presence radiates the truth of this statement.

As loving-kindness begins to open in our hearts and we feel it as an integral part of ourselves, we recognize it as our own true nature. This recognition brings a deeply reassuring sense that fundamentally, perhaps we're okay after all. Perhaps all the self-judgment we've piled upon ourselves was simply mistaken.

When we can touch this loving heart, we know that goodness is alive within us. This knowledge completely undercuts any sense of inadequacy, failure, or self-criticism. This is one of the great benefits of loving-kindness practice—it brings a sense of inner completeness that we can settle into with confidence.

We no longer need to search for satisfaction outside ourselves. Instead, we feel this loving-kindness as a refuge within us, a place where the mind can drop and rest. Over time, this becomes more and more the natural place where we abide. This is why these qualities are called the *brahmavihara*—the divine abidings or divine abodes.

As one teacher beautifully expressed it: "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face." This is the feeling of loving-kindness.

Oprah concluded her interview with the Dalai Lama by posing this question from her magazine column: "In *O*, I do a feature called 'What I Know for Sure.' So I'd like to ask you—what do you know for sure? The one thing on which you have no doubt."

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate in his response: "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For a happy life and a happy world, there is no doubt."

Let's sit together for a moment in silence, holding these words: Compassion or metta is the best source of happiness—for a happy life and a happy world.

Thank you for your attention and for your practice.

CHAPTER 273

Mudita: Practicing Joy and Gratitude

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of mudita, the third of the four Brahmavihāras (divine abodes). Drawing from his own retreat experiences and the Buddha's teachings, Armstrong explains how mudita—sympathetic or appreciative joy—represents the awakened heart's response to encountering happiness in the world. He discusses how this practice feeds on happiness itself, creating a "double hit" of joy when we resonate with others' good fortune, much like the sympathetic strings of a sitar. Armstrong explores various forms of happiness available to practitioners: sense pleasures, the joy of ethical conduct (the "bliss of blamelessness"), the beauty of nature, and the peace of concentration. He addresses mudita's far enemy (envy) and near enemy (comparing mind), while emphasizing how the practice naturally leads to gratitude when directed toward ourselves. The talk concludes with mudita's crucial role in the Buddha's path to liberation, as described in the Discourse on the Links, where joy serves as an essential foundation leading from faith through concentration to final liberation—what the Buddha called "the unshakable deliverance of mind."*

This talk was given to a group of people sitting in silence during a meditation retreat. It is intended for a mind that is quiet and attentive. We invite you to enter into your own mini retreat by sitting quietly and listening wholeheartedly. The teachings you're about to receive were freely offered. If you would like to make a donation to support their continuation, please visit us at dharmaseed.org.

I'm going to start by retelling one of the stories that Sharda told last night. It's a little bit of a cardinal sin among teachers, but I'll do it anyway because it's such a good story. She mentioned that there was a Zen master who was asked about the value of practice. In the version that I heard, the Zen master was asked, "What's the value of a lifetime of practice?" His response was: "Appropriate response."

When I first heard that reply, I thought that was really wimpy for a Zen master. I thought that sounded like something a Vipassana teacher might say, but that a Zen master should be much more of a warrior and say something like: "After a lifetime of practice, a Zen master is able to sit up in full lotus while dying with a perfectly straight back and compose a spontaneous haiku summing up their life's understanding." That's what I was expecting. So this "appropriate response"... I don't know.

But the more I thought about this answer, the more I appreciated it. What it says is we have to have that wakefulness in every single moment. It means that every single moment, life is presenting us with changing conditions and new situations, and we have to have the right response to meet that moment. There's no formula for that. Only the awakeness of—you could say—wisdom or awareness can bring that about. As I thought about it, this is really a beautiful way to describe the fruit of our practice.

For me, the Brahmaviharas have provided one of the best roadmaps of what constitutes an appropriate response to life. They, together with the near and far enemies, give us a whole terminology for understanding the way the heart relates to these changing conditions of life. The Brahmaviharas themselves represent the awakened response. The near and far enemies represent the not-so-awakened responses.

When you think about it, in general, the heart is open and tuning into the well-being of others—that's loving kindness. When it encounters suffering, the awakened heart responds with compassion. When it encounters happiness, the awakened heart responds with sympathetic joy. And when it's not particularly being tested, it can hold all the joys and sorrows in the beautiful balance of equanimity—the practice you did this afternoon.

The near and far enemies map out how we fall into less than awakened responses to the same changing conditions of life, the joys and sorrows. I'll touch on a couple of those as we go. Overall, I think they provide really good groundwork for evaluating our response moment after moment. It's pretty complete.

This evening, I want to talk particularly about the response of joy—appreciative joy or sympathetic joy—that's pointed to by the quality of mudita, the practice we did yesterday afternoon. As I mentioned, this has the potential for being the happiest practice among the Brahmaviharas, and in fact, the happiest practice that I know of, because it feeds on happiness. It is about happiness meeting happiness.

Just a simple example: I got a phone call from a friend I hadn't spoken to for a while. I picked up the phone, happy to hear from her, and said, "How are you?" Immediately, with a great deal of enthusiasm, she said, "I'm wonderful!" And without even thinking, sort of triggered by her voice and tone, I said, "I'm wonderful too!" I didn't even wait for her to ask me. That was the impact of mudita. I just got infused and enthused from her energy, and that's what came out of me.

So it's this beautiful double hit of happiness. It's sometimes called sympathetic joy because we resonate in sympathy with another. If you know the instrument the sitar, it's got seven main strings on top that you pluck, and then seven smaller strings under-

neath that are usually not plucked. Those are called the sympathetic strings. When you pluck a frequency, the strings underneath that are tuned to that resonate, and they give that rich, metallic, jangly sound that the sitar has. It's like our heart has these sympathetic strings and resonates to the happiness around us.

The Dalai Lama said that if you can be happy because of another's happiness, your odds for happiness go up by six billion to one. That's a lot better than Vegas—put your chips down, this is the bet to make. It's very helpful to cultivate this as part of your practice. Joy is a really integral part of the spiritual path.

I'll talk toward the end about how this fits into the whole Buddhist unfolding toward liberation. Joy is an integral component of the move to liberation. As you develop it, you'll see that the emphasis on joy keeps the mind inclining to what's skillful and what's wholesome. It keeps the mind in a positive and helpful state. In this way, it embodies two of the four right efforts, which are to bring about and then maintain skillful qualities of mind.

James is becoming known as the joy guru in our scene because he's been leading a class for the last couple of years in Berkeley called Awakening Joy. It was really out of generosity that he let me give the joy talk in this retreat because he's starting to own the topic. He's getting a little bit of a copyright on the subject matter, so I'm happy he let me share in it tonight.

James's class started off modestly—maybe a hundred or so the first time around—and each iteration through word of mouth and people getting tremendous benefit, it's steadily grown. So in the current class series, between people who come to Berkeley and are there in person and those participating by email, the number registered is up to 685, I think. And it's probably going to be even bigger in future, but I'll let him tell you about that.

The fact that so many people have responded to this teaching is really a sign that there's a thirst in our community of practitioners for this element. Maybe we spent too much time talking about the Four Noble Truths, suffering and craving over the years, and people want to hear a different tune now. But there is this large welling of interest and appreciation for being able to find ways to bring these qualities more to life in our daily life as well as in our retreat practice.

A big part of this bringing to life is noticing them when they're there. It's funny, but I noticed in the early days of my practice, I would consistently overlook beautiful qualities of mind because when they came, I thought, "Well, this is what I've been expecting all along. Why did you take so long in getting here?"

When you think about it, it really lines up with ego's project. We use ego to refer to this small sense of self, false sense of separate self that's based on self-centered interests. Ego's project is: things should always be happy, things should never be unhappy, not even to the slightest degree. That's the project that ego is about creating. Somehow, it believes that it can do it. Those assumptions crumple under the early days of retreat, usually. Nonetheless, it strives to maintain this fiction.

And so when happy states come, ego goes, "Yeah, that's what I was about to create." So ego is gratified, thinks its work is done, and it goes to sleep. It may only wake up again when things get difficult. The ouch kind of wakes us up and makes us realize something else is going on. So it's very important to notice.

You see, the Buddha wasn't biased in this way. He wasn't biased toward wholesome states of mind or unwholesome states of mind. His bias was on emptiness, or you could say zero. So when a wholesome state came, he recognized, "That's wholesome. That's on the positive side of the meter, helpful for spiritual practice and awakening." When a painful state came, he recognized, "That's not so skillful or helpful. That's on the difficult side of the spectrum." But he always kept his mind in the middle so he could clearly see one or the other.

We need to develop this skill also so that when wholesome states come, when the beautiful states come, we really know: this is loving-kindness. This is contentment. This is joy. The more we recognize them, feel them in the body and in the mind, the more we learn the way back to them. And so the more possible it is that they will visit again. We become familiar and on good terms with them.

As the Buddha put it, "What one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind." So as we turn the mind in this direction, these beautiful states come to visit more often.

I was really struck by the power of mudita last fall. I'd taught a long retreat on the east coast and then after that retreat, I stayed on and with two of my friends taught a weekend retreat—silent retreat—on this theme of mudita practice. A lot of the people who came had never practiced mudita before, and I'd never taught it intensively before. Part of the reason I did it is I wanted to learn about it.

So people were just there for two days, from Friday night to Sunday evening. You know what the first two days of a retreat are like. The first day is all sleepiness, so that's difficult. And the last day, as you probably noticed, starts to be about going home. So you're not much present on the first and last day, and I didn't have many expectations for the weekend, because it was a first day and a last day.

But very curiously, people really applied themselves and got tremendous benefit from just two days of practice with this. At the end of the retreat, we just asked in the hall like this, "What was your experience of these two days?" One woman raised her hand and said, "This is the happiest that I've felt in years based on these two days of practice."

Since that retreat, I started practicing mudita a lot in my daily life, and I noticed that it made a real difference—that my mind started to focus on the beautiful and uplifting qualities of life.

So one evening I sat in front of his photograph and I told him my troubles. I said, "Your Holiness, I'm really struggling here. The conditions are difficult, I'm homesick, and my spirits are quite low. What should I do?"

And as I sat there looking at his photograph, I could almost hear his response. I could imagine him saying, with that characteristic laugh of his, "Well, you have a choice. You can focus on all the difficulties and be miserable, or you can focus on what an extraordinary opportunity this is and be joyful."

And I realized he was absolutely right. Here I was, sitting in a monastery in Burma that very few Westerners ever get to visit, studying with a master teacher, ordained as a monk in the tradition that goes back to the Buddha himself. I was receiving teachings that have been passed down for twenty-five hundred years. What an incredible privilege this was!

So I started practicing mudita more intentionally. I began to focus on my good fortune rather than my difficulties. I felt appreciative joy for the opportunity to be there, for the teachings I was receiving, for the ancient tradition I was participating in. And when I shifted my attention in this way, my whole experience transformed.

The rain didn't stop. The bugs didn't leave. My robes continued to slip. But my relationship to all of this changed completely. Instead of seeing obstacles, I began to see the richness of the experience. The sound of rain on the roof became soothing rather than depressing. The bugs became fascinating creatures to observe. Even struggling with my robes became part of the authentic monastic experience.

This is the power of mudita - it can completely transform our experience by shifting where we place our attention. When we focus on what's difficult and challenging, that's what fills our mind. But when we consciously direct our attention toward what's beautiful, fortunate, and worthy of appreciation, that becomes our reality instead.

So the practice isn't about denying difficulties or pretending everything is wonderful when it's not. It's about recognizing that we have a choice in where we focus our attention, and that this choice has profound consequences for how we experience our lives.

So I turned to the Dalai Lama photograph and spoke directly to him. "I'm having a hard time," I said. "Do you have any advice for me?"

Immediately, he replied. His voice came through in that peculiar Indian-accented English that he had. "Hmm, yes," he said. "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then the transmission ended.

It was a very clear message, and because it had come from such a good source, I took it as a practice instruction. For the next period of time, I often worked at keeping my mind cheerful, optimistic, and confident—if I could even remember what cheerful felt like, which wasn't so easy. When I could bring these qualities to mind, it made a real shift in the way I was relating to the situation.

The fact is that this cheerfulness, this optimism, this confidence exists in each of us if we can only remember it. Sometimes I could bring it up simply by thinking of it, by turning my mind toward it. When I did, it transformed how I felt in those difficult conditions.

This capacity becomes a tremendous refuge as we develop it. We discover that we can turn our mind to these uplifting qualities, and the mind learns more and more how to go there, how to touch them and bring them alive in the present moment.

The Dalai Lama, of course, is a pretty happy person himself, as you probably know. A friend told me a story about a gathering of scientists that took place in Dharamsala, where he lives. It was sponsored by the Mind and Life Institute—every year, a group of scientists meets with His Holiness to discuss the intersection between Buddhism and science. In recent years, they've been focusing on neuroscience, with fascinating research emerging from that collaboration.

During a tea break between the formal sessions, there was a chance for informal conversation. One of the scientists approached the Dalai Lama with a personal question: "Your Holiness, what was the happiest time of your life?"

It was such an intriguing question to pose to the Dalai Lama, given his varied life. You might think of his childhood, growing up with his parents in a small village in the Tibetan countryside—a very idyllic lifestyle. Or perhaps after he was recognized and brought to Lhasa, installed as the Dalai Lama, living in the Potala while Tibetan Buddhism was still vibrantly alive and flourishing, being tutored and learning deeply.

I was hanging on the edge of my seat for the answer—the happiest period of the Dalai Lama's life. Without any hesitation, my friend said, he answered: "Hmm, I think right now."

That's the right answer. That's absolutely the right answer.

As we cultivate the quality of mudita, we begin to tune into happiness in our life and in the lives of others. We start to become familiar with the different kinds of happiness that are available to us.

One happiness available to us as laypeople is the happiness of sense pleasures—pleasant experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. This encompasses good food and pleasant music, enjoyable drinks and sensuality, movies and the arts, sculpture and painting. All of these form the basis of pleasurable experiences through the five senses.

This is part of our life. As laypeople, the Buddha referred to this reality over and over again. In choosing this life, we open ourselves to pleasant experiences on these levels. If we wanted to cut ourselves off from sense pleasures, we might as well live the life of a renunciate, because in the renunciate life, one deliberately does not seek out pleasures of the physical senses in order to turn the attention more completely inward.

But as laypeople, we are open to the pleasures of the senses. Take a look and see if these experiences don't have an uplifting quality in your life. In spiritual circles, we often dismiss sense pleasures because the truth is that the pleasures of meditation and Dharma practice, of realization, are greater than sense pleasures and more reliable. But this does not negate the happiness that comes from the pleasures of the senses.

Please notice in your life the uplift that pleasurable activities bring into your hearts and minds. This is one of the things we can enjoy. We learn that they're temporary and we learn their happiness is limited, but the happiness nonetheless is real.

Here on retreat, our sense pleasures are much simpler, but they're still present. You know—waking up in the morning when it's a little cool in the residence halls and maybe your window's been open all night, but there's a hot shower waiting for you. Or rolling down the hill for breakfast when it's been raining and it's a little damp and chilly, and there's a hot cup of tea for you. Going down the hill at lunchtime to discover this beautiful meal we had today with all kinds of spices and great flavors.

And then one of the greatest pleasures in retreat life for me was lying down at the end of the day. That was sometimes the moment I looked forward to all day long.

There were days like that. I just couldn't wait to lie down at the end of the day. And the only thing that was really disappointing was how short it lasted. Because I'd be really tired, I'd fall asleep like that, and the next thing I knew I was waking up to start all over again the next morning. But that's a delightful feeling, lying down at the end of a good day of work.

As you get into this lifestyle, this really simple lifestyle, you may have noticed that the senses get even more awake. Simple pleasures bring a lot of delight. Some of my favorite meals on retreats have just been the taste of an orange or a cup of tea after days in retreat, because it tastes so rich. The Buddha mentioned this too. He said that robes, alms food, a hut, and a straw seat will seem rich and luxurious to one who has renounced. I'm appreciating how our senses really wake up in this setting and we're much more open here.

It goes more deeply. Another kind of happiness that we start to tune into is the happiness of good conduct. When we live a life according to the precepts that we talked about at the beginning of the retreat, we enjoy what the Buddha called the bliss of blamelessness. You come in to meditate and you find you don't have as many regrets about your actions as you once did at an earlier time in your life.

James mentioned the list of his ten most awful mistakes. I also had a list in my early retreat. I only aimed for ten, but I filled ten quite easily and went through a lot of remorse about those. As the years go by, and I've worked consciously to practice with non-harming, that list is more remote, a lot shorter. And when I come to sit, there's an easier settling now than there used to be. The Buddha said that of the blessings of the lay life, the bliss of blamelessness is the greatest—to have a good feeling about the way we've acted toward others.

There's the joy of nature. After I ordained as a monk the first time in Thailand, I went to practice in a monastery that was in the north, outside of Chiang Mai. It was right out in the country. It was a beautiful spot. The monastery was set at the base of a river gorge. There was this river running through it and tall hills on both sides, cliffs on both sides. The nuns' kutis were on one side of the river and the monks' kutis were on the other. So no dilly-dallying, for sure.

The Thai people being so hospitable gave me the best hut on the property, which was the one most upstream. From it, I couldn't see or hear any other people. So it was a very beautiful setting, very isolated, very quiet and private.

But there were challenges in that environment. I was there for three months to practice. There was a teacher, but the teacher didn't speak English and I didn't speak Thai. So we had no way to communicate. For three months of intensive practice, I didn't have any interviews and I didn't have any dharma talks. It really was quite self-reliant. The teacher would occasionally come up to bring visitors up to my kuti, and usually I'd be meditating, which was good. They'd stand outside my hut and look in through the windows, and the teacher would see me meditating, and all I'd hear, or all I could understand him saying was, "Dee, dee," which means "good, good" in Thai. So I felt grateful I was meditating at that point in time. But that was about all the confirmation I got around my practice.

What really sustained me and kept my spirits good during that time was the beauty of the nature that I was in. Every day, seeing the sun climb over one of those cliffs and flood the gorge with sunshine, and at the end of the day disappear, and the constant sound of the stream outside my hut. There was also a beautiful mango tree growing near my house. It was mango season, so the ripe mangoes were falling on the ground and that beautiful perfume. Unfortunately, I couldn't eat them. As a monk, you're only allowed to take what a human being has put into your hands. So I couldn't even collect the fallen mangoes, but they smelled great. It was poignant for me too.

Here the nature is so available. I've been in a number of meditation spots around the world and I don't think I've ever been in one that has the combination of architectural beauty and natural beauty that this place has. It makes it a very special place to practice. Of course between the two I would always pick the natural over the architectural. So you can open so wonderfully to the nature around here—the golden hills, the vivid blue sky, those white clouds, the deer who seem so less afraid here than they are anywhere else that I run into them.

This is a poem by Mary Oliver called "The Sun":

Have you ever seen anything in your life more wonderful than the way the sun every evening, relaxed and easy, floats toward the horizon and into the clouds or the hills or the rumpled sea and is gone? And how it slides again out of the blackness every morning on the other side of the world like a red flower streaming upward on its heavenly oils. And have you ever felt for anything such wild love? Do you think there is anywhere in any language a word billowing enough for the pleasure that fills you as the sun reaches out, as it warms you, as you stand there empty-handed? Or have you too turned from this world? Or have you too gone crazy for power, for things?

Here we really have the time, the chance, just to be with nature, just to open to it. And this opening is augmented by another of the joys that comes from retreat: the joy of concentration or stillness. I trust that each of you has found this to some degree during your days here—times when the mind settles just a little from its usual whirl, when you can drop into your heart and feel that metta connection with yourself or another.

These different levels of peace were the hook that kept me coming back on retreat. I'd touch a level that I'd never touched in my daily life. I'd go, "Wow, that is so amazing. If that's possible, I wonder what else is possible." So I'd go back again and see. Then I found an even deeper level of peace. And I would come back again to see what else was possible.

The Buddha said that these levels of peace—basically the delight of them—is that the hindrances have fallen away. The mind is not stirred by liking and disliking, by pushing and pulling. He said being released from the hindrances like this is like being let out of prison after a long term in a cell. It's really a wonderful, joyful feeling.

In the mudita practice, we come again and again to appreciate the joy in a friend's life. When I started doing my practice of mudita over the winter, a good friend was in a five-month retreat on the East Coast—someone for whom retreat is the happiest activity in their life. So as I was sitting in meditation and doing mudita, I would think about them sitting in meditation on the other side of the country, being so fulfilled in their activity, and that would just pick me up. Finding a friend who has something wonderful going on is a great support for joy arising in our own heart.

And then we open to mudita for all beings. This can be quite a trip. I came across a video on YouTube that many of you may have seen, called "Free Hugs." What happened was this guy in Australia got the idea to go into a shopping mall in Sydney with a big sign on which he had written in capital letters: "FREE HUGS." He stood in the middle of the shopping mall and just held the sign up. How much nerve would it take to do something like that? That's not something I would think of doing offhand.

A local rock group got inspired by this and wrote a song and made a music video based on this concept of free hugs. That's what's on YouTube now. In the video, you see many people walking by who look at this guy like he's kind of crazy. "What is this guy doing? Is he a weirdo? Is he a sicko? Something really strange is going on here." They don't want to get too close. They walk around so they don't get near him.

Then some brave souls take the plunge. They take it at face value and go up and hug him, and they laugh afterwards. Because honestly, the idea of hugging a stranger in a shopping mall is kind of weird, isn't it? It really is weird. But once one person starts and takes the plunge, other people come up and do it, and the energy becomes contagious. Pretty soon people are laughing and smiling. There are guys skateboarding by and running into him on their boards, and you just feel the contagious joy of it all.

This movement has taken off and spread. Now there are free hug videos from Japan and Israel and Europe—it's all over the world. There's this international movement now. You don't have to be a shopper in Sydney anymore to have free hugs.

One of the things I like to reflect on—as we talked about a little the other day—is that virtually every human being, whatever their circumstances, whatever their condition, has some happiness in their life. This exploration is very rewarding: checking this out and seeing if it's true with your friends, even the ones who are going through a hard time.

See if there's not something that lifts their heart at different points in their routine, in their days, in their weeks.

I had a vivid example of this on a metta retreat a few years ago. There was a practitioner on the retreat from Manchester, England. Manchester is not one of the happiest cities on the face of the earth—one of those northern industrial cities where the weather is bad, the winters are brutally cold, and the architecture is old and gray.

Yet she was a lovely person, and her job in Manchester was helping to transition refugees who had come from third world countries to England. These refugees had fled their homelands to escape imprisonment, torture, or death—primarily because of their political or social views. Here were women from the third world, mostly warm countries, who had been forced to leave their culture, their families, their familiar lives, and move to this cold gray northern city to adapt to a completely foreign existence. This woman was helping them transition into that new life.

I asked her, "Could you find some mudita in their lives? Could you find joy in their experience?"

"Absolutely," she replied. "That was one of the most amazing things about these women. Their spirits were so resilient. Even in the midst of all the difficulties they were dealing with, they maintained this remarkably optimistic and positive outlook as they created their new lives there."

Reflecting on that sometimes makes me feel a little humble. When I find myself grumbling about not getting enough protein at tea time, I think, "Wow. Things could be a lot tougher than that."

So as you practice mudita, remember you want to tune into what makes the other person happy, not necessarily what would make you happy.

When we first bought the land here at Spirit Rock in 1987, we inherited an old horse who had been a quarter horse on this property, rounding up cattle and running up and down these hills for years. The land had been leased for cattle before we owned it. The previous owner didn't want to take him, so we did. You know where the horse field is now—he lived there for about the first fifteen years that we owned the place. He died about five years ago. His name was Bob. Bob the Quarter Horse.

My wife is a horse person, so she took on the care of looking after him. At that time, there was no other horse in that field—just old Bob, literally out to pasture. She would come down every morning to make sure he had feed and water and was healthy.

In the winter, the horse trough where he got his water would freeze over on cold mornings, so she'd have to break through the ice. Sometimes when it was so wet in winter that the ground would never dry, he'd get abscesses in his foot, and she'd have to lift his foot and soak it in a bucket of hot water with Epsom salts. Getting a horse to stand still while you lift their hind leg into a bucket with Epsom salts is not the easiest maneuver. Sally did it happily every day because she loves horses.

It would not have been my cup of tea. But I could appreciate her connection to nature and to horses while she did that.

A few years later, we had skunks who came into the crawl space underneath our house. It was winter, and they were looking for a dry place to shelter. They particularly enjoyed bouncing up and down on our furnace at about two in the morning—the sound would reverberate through the aluminum casing. Other evenings, around three in the morning, we'd be awakened by this rich, musky smell drifting up through our bedroom, and we'd know the skunks were down there.

Mudita was not exactly my initial response, but I was able to appreciate the fact that they were warm and dry until we could manage to move them on to more natural habitats.

The far enemy of mudita is envy. This occurs when we look at somebody else's happiness and our heart doesn't go into uplift. When I went into the Peace Corps shortly after college, I broke up with my girlfriend in order to go. I was in Malaysia teaching, and a few months after I'd arrived, I got a letter from my best friend telling me that he and my ex-girlfriend had gotten together and were in a relationship.

Joy was not the first emotion that I felt on that occasion.

Similarly, sometimes when we hear reports of friends who are doing really well, it may be difficult to feel that quality of joy for them. Maybe a friend buys a house and we haven't yet been able to do that. Or somebody gets a promotion at work or some kind of recognition that we might have liked to have ourselves. It may not be so easy to feel mudita for a colleague in such circumstances.

Because of this, some teachers say that mudita is the hardest of the brahmaviharas to practice—as though with somebody getting more happiness, there's not enough left over for us. It's like there's a finite pool, and if they get that much...

We don't have enough. But actually what I think is going on underneath that is some kind of comparing mind. If somebody is doing really well, we take that as meaning, oh, they're a better person—or maybe they're better than I am. So instead of simply observing that they're experiencing more good fortune in one area of their life, we frame it as a hierarchical situation: it must mean they're better than I am. But that assumption is simply mistaken. You cannot compare two people based on just one quality.

This same mechanism operates in the near enemy to compassion. The near enemy to compassion is pity. If you consider what pity actually is, it's a way of looking down on somebody. It's like saying, "I'm sorry things are going hard for you, but I don't have that problem." We use it as a way to distance ourselves from the other person, which gives us a sense of superiority based on the fact that things are going better in our life than in theirs.

When we view joy and sorrow through this lens, we can use the comparing mind to position ourselves either up or down. But as the Buddha said, these comparisons are deluded. This is precisely why these are called the enemies of the brahma-vihara states.

As we turn the practice of mudita toward ourselves, what really emerges, in my experience, is the quality of gratitude. Gratitude is a truly beautiful state where we appreciate our own blessings because, first, it doesn't encourage wanting—we become aware of how many gifts we already have. And second, it doesn't encourage disliking because we recognize the abundance that is there. So it's a very skillful state of mind that deflects both desire and aversion.

A friend of ours is a wise teacher and also a grandmother. One Christmas day, she called up her granddaughter, who was probably about five or six at the time, and asked, "Did you get a lot of presents today?" The granddaughter said, "Yeah, it was great!" And the grandmother asked, "Well, when you get lots of presents, does it make you thankful for what you have, or do you want more?" The little girl replied, "Oh, Nana, I want more!" And the grandmother simply said, "Oh, that's too bad."

The little girl was listening and caught something in her tone. She said, "Well, what do you mean?" So the grandmother explained, "Haven't you noticed that when you want more, it doesn't feel so good? And when you're happy with what you've got, it feels really good?" The little girl paused and said, "Oh, Nana, you're right!"

This is a beautifully simple teaching on gratitude. It feels good when we can find that place where we appreciate all the blessings we have. And all of us here have so many things to be grateful for.

A friend of mine worked in a refugee camp in Thailand. He was training teachers who were educating refugees coming from Laos and Cambodia because of the wars, often from the hill tribes of those countries, as they prepared for relocation to the United States. Coming from a very simple hill tribe life, they had to learn things like how to use money, what coins were, how a toaster worked, what a washing machine was, how to read a bus schedule. They were learning these basic Western skills in the camps.

As part of his discussions with people in the camp, my friend once asked a teenage girl, "What are the most important things in life for you?" She replied, "The most important things in life are fire, rice, and water."

Those would be the most important things for us too, if we didn't have them. But because they are so readily available to us, we tend to take them for granted. If we just step back and consider all the human beings on the planet who don't have adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medicine, we begin to realize how fortunate we are that all of us in this room were well-fed today. Most of us, I suspect, have reasonable access to healthcare if we're ill. Probably most of us have a roof over our heads to go home to. These are all basic blessings that I think most of us enjoy.

And beyond this, we also possess something that Tibetans, from a Buddhist perspective, call a precious human birth. This refers to the circumstances and situations that have allowed us to be where we are today. We were born at a time when the teachings of liberation were available, when there were people practicing the authentic teachings

of liberation, when there were people sharing them, when our minds were clear enough to open to and appreciate those teachings, and when we have the leisure time to practice toward our own liberation.

When you consider this constellation of circumstances, there are not many people on the planet who have all of these conditions aligned. So there are many, many blessings for every one of us in this hall.

Toward the end of a retreat, gratitude is something that gets mentioned frequently. I heard it several times in the interviews today. I encourage you to turn your mind toward gratitude as it arises over these days. Let that feeling grow within you.

One of the people here tonight started a very beautiful practice of gratitude.

Started it and reported it to a class that we were all doing and then it sort of spread from there and now a number of people have picked it up. And that is at the end of each day, would email one or two things that he was grateful about to a buddy, his gratitude buddy. And the gratitude buddy would do the same. So that at the end of every day, there would be this practice before going to bed, emailing to your buddy one or two things you were grateful for that day, and do it as a daily practice. And so that helps to just turn the mind regularly to the things that we appreciate in our life.

On one retreat, I made a list, because my mind was getting a little bit aversive, I made a list of all the things I was grateful for in my life because I wanted to offset that aversion. So I just took half an hour and just wrote down on one page of paper line after line of the things that I appreciated in my life. And they just kept coming and coming. The more I reflected on it, the more of them came out. And then during that retreat, I'd pick that paper up and read it every morning. And that would kind of set the tone for my day. It's a wonderful thing to do to focus on this quality of gratitude.

One of the things I often feel grateful for, and I know a lot of you do too, is gratitude that this path exists. Grateful that there is a clear way to move from suffering to freedom, and all we need to do is walk it, that the instructions are there. And in thinking about gratefulness, how did you get turned on to this path? Have you ever thought about that? What led you into practice, spiritual life at all? Not necessarily this Buddhist path, but a spiritual path, a spiritual life. Think about the people who kind of helped nudge you that way.

It may seem kind of like chance. Wow, it was just an accident. I saw a sign in the health food store for a meditation class. Or one of my good friends had had an experience and suggested that I come along and check it out. It may seem kind of random.

And in fact, you may know people from a very similar background to you, similar growing up or education or work or something like that, similar temperament, who never found their way into a path. How does that happen?

I don't think it's just random. You know, I think this is part of the movement of what in an earlier age we might have called fate or destiny. But from a Buddhist point of view, I think we could call karma. There's something in our past actions that has predisposed us all in this direction.

This is from the Chippewa Native American tradition: Sometimes I go around pitying myself while all the time I'm being carried across the vast sky by great winds.

We don't know the great winds that are taking care of our lives. We don't know the combination of forces that have brought us here. But we can trust that those forces are at work. And use that as part of our faith and confidence.

Then I want to just close by describing the role of joy in the overall path to liberation. The Buddha described this in a discourse called the Discourse on the Links in the Samyutta Nikaya. He said that difficulty in life leads to our questioning, which leads to faith, and that faith leads to joy. That's an interesting connection, isn't it? That suffering is a link that brings us into joy. As we start to question, we start to get a sense that the path exists. That is a joyful place.

Then this joy starts to bring our interest into the present moment. As the present moment gets inviting and rich, the mind collects in this level of interest and alertness called piti in Pali or rapture in English. And this is another quality that increases the sense of delight, so much so that we learn that we can start to trust in that. And it settles down some of the wandering of the mind.

And this quality of delight in the dharma leads to tranquilizing of our mind and body. And as the tranquilizing happens in mind and body, we come to a different level of a kind of delight called happiness. The Pali word is sukha. Another word is contentment. I like this word sukha because it sounds kind of like sugar. And sukha is a very sweet state of mind.

So this joyful interest has risen into energy, then pacified through tranquility and settled out into this deep state of contentment called sukha or happiness. And in this state of sukha or happiness, the mind starts to find its contentment from within itself. When joy was arising, the mind tended to find its happiness outside. It'd be through the beauty of nature,

the faith in the three gems, beauty of beings, qualities of heart. But as it settles into us, the mind finds its peace within itself, finds its contentment in itself and no longer has to reach out, looking outside itself.

That collects the mind to a yet deeper level of what's called concentration, a state of deep stillness, relaxation, ease, peacefulness inside. And as the mind gets so stilled and peaceful in that way, and then it investigates the nature of the mind and body and of life, then from that place, the liberating insights can come through. And from the liberating insights, the heart is freed.

So joy plays a role in a few different places along this path—an energizing role in the beginning of waking us up, tuning us into the beauty of life, collecting the attention in the moment, and then settling out into this deep contentment from which insight arises. As we progress on the path, these qualities all come more and more alive for us, qualities of joy and contentment, and we feel that we're living life from a much richer, more satisfied, more heartfelt, happier place.

The Buddha said something really interesting about this growth of happiness in the path. He said one of the things that he never lost sight of in his whole practice career was not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind. I was kind of shocked when I first heard that, because when I began practice, if I could have found consistent wholesome states of mind, I would have been really happy.

The Buddha said, don't settle just for wholesome states of mind, but use the wholesome states of mind as the foundation for the heart's liberation. Because more is possible. Further development is possible. The complete end of suffering is possible for us.

And he expressed this most clearly in another discourse called The Simile of the Heartwood, where he said that the goal of this holy life is not virtue or fame or the peace of concentration or even insight. But he said it is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end.

This is what our Vipassana practice is aiming for. This is what our metta practice is contributing to. Nothing less than the full liberation of our hearts and minds.

Let's just sit together for a moment in silence, please.

It is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end.

CHAPTER 274

The Five Aggregates Are Empty

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

> *In this profound dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (pañca-khandha) as a direct path to understanding emptiness and liberation from suffering. Drawing from the Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta (SN 22.95), "A Mass of Foam," Armstrong explains how the Buddha compared each aggregate to insubstantial phenomena: form like foam, feeling like bubbles, perception like a mirage, formations like a hollow banana tree, and consciousness like a magic show.*
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> *The talk systematically explores each of the five khandhas: rūpa (material form), vedanā (feeling tone), saññā (perception), saṅkhāra (mental formations), and viññāṇa (consciousness). Armstrong demonstrates how this analytical framework reveals the absence of any permanent self or "I" within our experience, challenging our ordinary perception of solid, separate existence.*
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> *Through vivid personal anecdotes and practical examples, Armstrong illustrates how deep investigation of the aggregates leads to the liberating insight that phenomena are empty of inherent existence—appearing solid but actually insubstantial, like a magical display. He connects this understanding to the Heart Sutra's teaching that perceiving the emptiness of the five aggregates saves us from suffering. This teaching offers both intellectual understanding and practical guidance for meditation, showing how wisdom (paññā) arises through direct investigation of our moment-to-moment experience.*

The Five Aggregates Are Empty

The Buddha said many times that he only taught for one purpose: to understand suffering and the end of suffering. All of his teachings were directed to that end, and I hope we can hold tonight's talk in that spirit. The Buddha didn't construct philosophies in order to have intellectual debates with people. Tonight's teaching is meant to be useful in the direction of leading us out of suffering. Because it may get a little technical at points, I hope you will hold it in that spirit, which basically means take what seems useful from it and leave behind what doesn't. You don't have to argue with the Buddha. If you don't agree, you can just leave his thoughts to one side. Take what is useful and leave the rest.

In one of his key teachings called Dependent Origination, the Buddha traced the origin of our suffering back to this condition in the mind called ignorance. He said that because of not understanding things the way they really are—which is the factor of ignorance—we crave. And then craving becomes the direct result of suffering. He expressed their relationship in this way: "Obstructed by ignorance and driven by craving, beings have been wandering in this samsara since beginningless time."

Tonight's talk is going to touch on both these topics of ignorance and craving. Basically, we suffer because we don't understand things the way they really are, and we live in some degree of delusion. The Buddha expressed this in a very pithy way at one point when he said of us as uninstructed beings: "In whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that." One of my teachers put it in a slightly more direct way. He said, "Everything you think is wrong."

So that's what we're going to explore tonight. And that's why this quality of don't-know mind, which was mentioned in the questions this morning, is so helpful. We often think, because of clinging to views—a tendency that we all have—we often think that we know the way things are, and we forget that we don't yet know everything. So it's helpful to remind ourselves that we don't yet know everything. I like this line from a Rumi poem: "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." This is a good spirit in which to approach our meditation.

Wisdom is the faculty that leads us to see clearly the way things truly are. The unfolding of this faculty and the insights that it brings are really the heart of what our meditation is about. So we're encouraged to investigate our experience in this very direct and penetrating way to find out how things really are. We need to keep a fresh and open attitude as we look, understanding that we don't yet know everything, and that's part of the reason for our bondage.

One of the questions for investigation that was also mentioned this morning in the question period was this basic question that can be phrased in a few different ways: Who am I? What am I? The form that I particularly like is: What is this? What is this—meaning the totality of our human experience. What is it really that's going on here? How does it hang together? How does it work? This is really what our practice is leading us to investigate.

Typically, in our current state, when we look at ourselves or someone else, we see a person. But one of our ancient texts, the Visuddhimagga, said this is a very uninformed way to view other beings. They said it's as though a skilled butcher was carving up the carcass of a cow. And in carving it up into different slices of meat, the butcher was saying, "cow, cow, cow," when in fact the butcher carves it up and says, "tenderloin, rump,

sirloin, ribs," and like that. So this text says that a person who says "person" is similarly uninformed, and that one who has directly investigated with some depth this mind-body process would not say "person" any longer.

So what would one say? When the Buddha looked at a human being, he saw in one of two ways—at least he described in one of two ways. The first is in terms of the six senses. Let me read you an excerpt from one of the suttas:

"Bhikkhus"—bhikkhu means monk, but it also means anybody who's undertaking serious practice, so all of us for this week come under this heading of bhikkhu —"Bhikkhus, what is the totality of life? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of life."

That's pretty bold, isn't it? I don't recall Marx doing that, Freud doing that, or Einstein doing that.

So here's the Buddha on the totality of life: "It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and touches, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of life would not be speaking of something they knew about."

This is a profound description, isn't it? It encompasses the six senses and their objects, mapping beautifully onto our human experience and our meditation practice. We've been doing extensive exploration of the senses and their corresponding objects. The Buddha used this model primarily to instruct people in cutting through craving.

For cutting through ignorance, he more often employed the model of the five aggregates. This offers another way to describe the totality of our experience, but sliced differently. As we tune into this framework of the five aggregates, we begin to see the world, see human beings, see our own experience the way the Buddha saw. Understanding and seeing in this way leads toward a liberated mind because it provides a way of perceiving that does not include the I, the ego, or the false sense of self as part of the description. It is a non-ego-centered way of viewing our life.

Though this talk may sound philosophical and intellectual, I want to share that my own investigation and reflections along these lines have been one of the largest sources of freedom in my meditation practice. This is something I've worked with extensively and that has had a profound effect in my life.

The five aggregates—the Pali term we're translating as aggregate is *khandha*. Many of you may know it by the Sanskrit term, which is *skandha*. It's simply a common word in Pali and ancient Indian languages meaning heap or bundle. Nothing esoteric or spiritual about it. If you went out to collect twigs for firewood and gathered them up, you'd call that a *khandha* of twigs or firewood. It means a bundle, a collection, a gathering.

When I hear the word "aggregate," it sounds rather technical to me—something that would be hard to wrap my mind around, requiring long contemplation before understanding. It reminds me of road-building material. The word "components" might be better, though even that feels somewhat technical. The translation I prefer is "kinds of stuff." These are the five kinds of stuff that make up human experience.

To name them: form (or material form), feeling (sometimes called feeling tone to be more specific), perception, mental formations (sometimes just formations), and consciousness.

Let me describe each briefly. Material form translates the Pali word *rupa*. Sometimes *rupa* is translated as body, but that's incomplete—it's much broader. For instance, this statue behind me is sometimes called a Buddha *rupa*, like the body or form of the Buddha. But *rupa* as it applies to our experience encompasses the whole of physical nature. Sometimes it's described as materiality, the realm of matter, or material form. I'll mostly use the short word "form," but understand what we're pointing to.

Here's the Buddha's definition: "Any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—this is the material form aggregate." It's all of physical nature, including this body, but *rupa* doesn't divide the physical world into "this" and "everything else." It simply sees all matter as part of the material form aggregate. Notice the phrase "internal or external"—in this categorization, there's no division into this particular part of the physical world we call "my body" and another part we might call "your body." It's all simply part of form.

Beyond sights, *rupa* includes other kinds of interaction among physical matter—sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. All fall under the aggregate of form. I find it interesting that we take this body for granted as perhaps the most important object in the universe. We've been very close to it for a long time, yet the way we know it is primarily through sight and touch. Of course, we can also smell it, taste it, and sometimes hear it, though most of those experiences aren't particularly pleasant. Nonetheless, they're available to us. But primarily, this thing we call body—which we take so for granted and cherish so deeply—we know because we've seen it and touched it. These are the two main avenues to knowing this form we hold so dear.

I'll use sound as an example throughout the evening to illustrate the other aggregates.

When you hear the sound now, that is an example of form or rupa, and we'll come back to that again with the other aggregates.

So I'd like to read from a sutta in an ancient book of the Buddha's called the Samyutta Nikaya. This teaching is called "A Mass of Foam," where he describes the nature of the aggregates.

This is the opening of the sutta:

"On one occasion, the Blessed One—which is another name for the Buddha—was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There, the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great mass of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mass of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is—whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?'"

The next of the five aggregates is called feeling, or more often I might say feeling tone. The Pali word is vedanā, and the term feeling here is not used as a synonym for emotion. It's a particular quality of every sense experience we have which has a nature of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in this element called feeling tone.

So when you experience a sensation in the body, a sound that reaches the ear, a sight that you see, an emotion or a thought, each of these will have a feeling tone associated with them which may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. This quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither is what's referred to by feeling tone or vedanā. It accompanies every type of sense experience.

Interestingly, the feeling tone is said to be a mental phenomenon, and all the other four aggregates are mental in nature.

When you hear the sound of the bell—that's a nice tone. Most of us would experience that as pleasant. Now, especially because it comes at the end of a sitting, it becomes really pleasant. So that's a little bit conditioned. Some of our reception of phe-

nomena as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither is conditional. That's a way of saying it's not intrinsic to the object itself, but it's our mind's relationship to it that creates it. And that's why vedanā is considered a mental quality or factor and not physical.

I'll give you an example of this. There was a 7-Eleven down in Southern California that was having problems with young people hanging around outside in the parking lot and dealing drugs. They were not a particularly welcoming crowd to the customers that the 7-Eleven wanted to draw in, so they were wondering how they could get them to move off their parking lot to somewhere else to do their drug dealing. They tried asking them politely and it didn't work. They tried other forms of harassment, and they didn't work.

So the idea they had was to play some music. The music they chose was Mantovani. Now, my mother brought me up playing Mantovani. You may know the swelling strings often applied to sentimental movie soundtracks. This was the nature of Mantovani's recordings, and she liked it very much. The drug dealers didn't. And so as they cranked up the volume on the Mantovani, the drug dealers found somewhere else to do their business. It was very successful.

So what my mother found as pleasant feeling tone, the drug dealers found as very unpleasant. So this is a mental phenomenon that happens with every sense experience that we encounter.

The third of the aggregates, the second mental aggregate after feeling tone, is called perception. The Pali word is saññā. In Buddhism, this word may be used a little differently than it is in Western language. It's been so long since I've looked at it outside of Buddhist context, I'm not entirely sure. But I have some sense that in Western language, or maybe even Western philosophy, perception will refer to a datum of sense experience. So we might talk about the perception of that sound as being the sound itself.

In Buddhism, the term is used differently, and this is pretty universal across all the schools of Buddhism that I know. The term saññā is almost always translated as perception, but the meaning of it is more like recognition. So that when we hear a sound, we recognize it as a sound—and in fact, the sound of a bell. When a friend walks up to us and we recognize them as being our friend, we know their name—that is a moment of recognition that is called perception.

As you look around the room right now, you may be seeing things as I do, which is perceiving in the space in front of us objects like women, chairs, men, cushions, floor, ceiling, fans, lights. These are acts of perception. Another way to say it is classification

or categorization—taking what is essentially just a smear of form and shape and color and organizing it into categories that we recognize and know, which we then call objects.

Now, we've been doing this for so long and it's so habituated that we normally are not even aware that this is taking place. Sometimes, but rarely, we come upon something that we can't perceive and then we realize, oh, the brain is stuck here. I was in a monastery in Burma...

It was the first night I was visiting, and it was a very large monastery. They were feeding about 800 people a day out of the kitchen. I'd come in toward the evening, and they offered me some food, bringing me into the kitchen.

When I walked into this big kitchen with its stone floor, there was a mound of something sitting there. All I could tell was that it was green and it was a mound. Beyond that, I could not place it in any category I knew. I didn't know if it was vegetable or mineral. I presumed it wasn't a living animal, though they have some big frogs over there, so you never know.

I looked at it for a while and finally had to ask somebody, "What is that?" It turned out to be some kind of pea or bean that the laypeople had been shelling to prepare for the next day's lunch, stacking them up in this big pile. But I couldn't tell. I couldn't recognize the peas or beans, couldn't see the shapes of the individual ones. I realized then that my perception had stopped at this point.

Sometimes we don't necessarily perceive things accurately. I was doing a long retreat here one fall, walking meditation down the hill from the meditation hall on the grassy area. As I walked very slowly back and forth, quite present, I started to hear this marching band coming up Pleasant Street. That stopped me. I just stopped and listened, thinking, "Why would a marching brass band be coming up toward IMS in the middle of autumn?" I sat and listened—I could definitely hear drums and brass instruments, and couldn't think what else would be making that sound. It kept getting louder and louder, just as though it was approaching.

Finally I turned around, and one of the staff members was wheeling a garden cart with big bicycle tires down the gravel path. It was the garden cart bouncing, the tires bouncing up and down on the gravel that was making all the sounds I was hearing as a brass band. My perception was not right. It wasn't a brass band.

That wasn't really problematic—I could simply turn around and see it. But the Buddha said where it becomes problematic is that we perceive things as being permanent that in fact are going to change. We perceive things as being a self that in fact don't have a self. Because of these misperceptions, we suffer. We'll talk more about that as we go.

It may be hard to remember a time when we couldn't perceive the world the way we do now. We forget that it's a learned activity. Many of you understand this much better than I do, but there's an interesting story that Oliver Sacks tells about working with a patient who was an adult who had lost his vision as an infant and then had it restored as an adult man through surgery.

When they took the bandages off, everybody thought the patient would exclaim, "Wow, how great to see again!" In fact, he had no idea what he was seeing. After some time of the patient waking up and looking blankly out at what Sacks called "an unimaginable tangle," the surgeon finally spoke to him. Only at that point did he realize that the white blur in front of his eyes must be his surgeon's face, because he recognized the voice. The man never really learned to perceive well again because the circuits couldn't be trained so easily as an adult.

This act of perception—recognizing categories—is very important. It goes on quite automatically, yet it is a central factor in our functioning and in our insight. So when this sound comes, we recognize that it is a bell. We recognize that it is a bell to end the sitting. That's the act of perception taking place.

The fourth of the aggregates, the third of the mental aggregates after feeling tone and perception, is the category called mental formations, sometimes called volitional formations. The Pali term is *sankhara*. This refers to the whole range of thoughts and emotions that are created in the mind, as well as the more subtle mind states generated from meditation.

A thought is a formation. A reaction of anger or desire or fear or doubt is considered a mental formation. The beautiful emotions that Susan talked about last night—love, compassion, and joy—are mental formations. The refined or more subtle meditative states of tranquility, concentration, equanimity are also considered mental formations. These are all conditioned factors that may be present or can also be absent in any given moment of experience. This is the whole realm of moods, emotions, thoughts, and states of mind that are part of our experience.

For instance, when we hear the bell at the end of a sitting, there are usually a couple of volitional formations that happen after perception. The perception is: it's the bell that ends the sitting. Often the volitional formation that follows is relief—"Oh boy, the sitting's over." Then there's often a sense of ease in the mind and the thought, "Wow, I could sit forever now."

You notice how much easier it gets after that bell rings?

So these are volitional formations accompanying the sound of the bell, the perception of the bell. The last of the mental aggregates is consciousness. This is the feature that Joseph described in his talk on the opening night—this knowing quality of mind. The Pali term is vijñāna. Consciousness is that which, in Buddhist understanding, receives, you could say holds, knows every sense impression. So it's consciousness that is knowing a sound, knowing a sensation, knowing a thought.

In the example of the bell, it is consciousness that has held the sound—which is the form aggregate—that knows the feeling tone, which is pleasant, that registers and holds the perception of bell, and that also knows the sense of ease or the thought, "I could sit forever." So consciousness is there with each of the other aggregates.

The understanding in the teachings of the Buddha is that each of these experiences arises together with consciousness. So it's not that consciousness is there waiting, and then an independent thing comes up and is known. Rather, the understanding is that the sound and the knowing come together, arise together as one unified experience which has two aspects. In this case, the sound is one aspect, the knowing of the sound is another.

So these are the five kinds of stuff that make up our experience in this model: form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. According to the Buddha, this is a complete set. That is, every aspect of our experience can be put in one of these five categories.

Now, why is that interesting? Or why is it liberating? I think the answer is that there is not a need for an I, for a self, either as a separate category or within one of these categories. There are only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. When one has examined the mind-body process closely enough and found that this is all that constitutes experience, then one knows from direct contemplation, direct realization, that there is no other thing called "I" to be found anywhere.

So there's no central self, no ongoing entity at the center of all this to whom it's happening, who is experiencing it all, or who owns any of it. There are only form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. We'll come back to this a little later.

Later in the sutta, the Buddha compares this production of the five aggregates to a magic show. What he's saying is that we have been enchanted by a magic show, and that's what creates our clinging to life. But once we understand how the magic show is put together, we aren't tricked anymore.

It's interesting to reflect on this in terms of magic. I was reading a book not long ago about Harry Houdini and how he managed his amazing escapes. I don't know if you've heard his story or seen people do things like this, but Houdini became very famous—I think it was in the teens or twenties of the past century—by these feats of escape. He would let himself be completely tied up. His hands would be bound. Chains would be wrapped around his body, locked with big metal locks. He would then be bundled up and put into a wooden box. The side of the box that was open would be nailed shut, and then the box would be tossed into a river where, of course, it would sink to the bottom. And then, amazingly, a few minutes later, Houdini would swim to the surface, to the acclaim of the viewers and the media and everyone else.

It seemed like magic, but in fact, every element of it was a clever device. Magic tricks are always much more interesting when you don't know the trick, but I'm going to spoil it for you and tell you the tricks.

The first trick is that the person who tied his hands bound them very loosely so he could wriggle his hands free. Even though it looked like they'd been tied well, he could wriggle his hands free. The second trick is that within his mouth, he had a bunch of tiny picks and wrenches. As soon as his hands were free, he could reach into his mouth, get the picks, and undo the locks that were holding the chains together. He was a very talented lock picker. He could do this in the dark, in cold water. Once the locks were off and he'd disentangled all the chains and the ropes that were binding him, he was still in a wooden box, but one side of the box was a false side. It was nailed on only very lightly, so all he had to do was kick it out.

But this whole procedure took about three minutes. So imagine you're on the bottom of a riverbed, there's water rushing over you, and you're under there for three minutes. The very first thing Houdini had to learn was how to hold his breath. He could hold his breath for a full three minutes underwater in a cold river. And then all that was left was for him to swim to the surface and be acclaimed and showered with riches.

So that's a magic trick. If you had known it, then all the individual steps were cool, but it was no longer magical.

The Buddha said it is the same with us in this magic show: "Suppose, bhikkhus, that a magician should hold a magic show at a crossroads, and a keen-sighted person should inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it. It would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial."

What substance, monks, could there be in a magic show? Even so, whatever form, feeling, perception, formations, or consciousness a person inspects, ponders, and carefully investigates, it would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance could there be in form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness?

Form is like a mass of foam, and feeling just an airy bubble. Perception is like a mirage and formations like a banana tree. I didn't get this one at first. If you know banana trees, the trunk is hollow. And as soon as the bananas have flowered once, the trunk never grows back again. So it's a hollow tree, unlike most trees that we know. Formations like a banana tree. Consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun, another name for the Buddha.

So here there's a pointing to the emptiness, the hollowness, the void, insubstantial nature of all five aggregates. This is a lot to take in all at once and requires some reflection.

During one period of retreat, I decided I wanted to study and look into this quality of emptiness. So I read a book by a wonderful Buddhist author named Nagarjuna. This book was written around 100 to 150 CE. Nagarjuna, for my money, is the greatest Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha. His key book called Root Verses on the Middle Way has been translated into English in several good translations, so it's easy to find translation and commentary on this work.

I was doing quite a lot of formal practice of sitting and walking, and I was also reading this book, which is quite dense and philosophical. It was starting to get under my skin, and I was starting to see what Nagarjuna was pointing to. He has a way of everywhere you want to take a resting point on some ground, of cutting that out from under you. It's really a fascinating book.

One evening I actually had a dream about Nagarjuna, though it was about the book more than about him as a person. In the dream, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, looking at my image in the mirror, and I asked the question, "Why is emptiness important?" And curiously, it was the image in the mirror that replied. The image in the mirror said, "Because it means you don't exist." End of dream.

That was a great message because, of course, it doesn't mean that form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness don't exist. It means that the owner of those, the bearer of those, the one who has the burden of the aggregates, doesn't exist in that way. There is no self that has to carry this burden. And when the self goes out of the experience of the aggregates, they're felt as much lighter. This doesn't happen in a continuous way, but it happens from time to time and there is a great sense of lightening up when that happens.

Jack Kornfield tells a story where he was in Sri Lanka visiting this old monk—I think he was a patriarch of one of the schools at that time. Visiting the old monk in his bedroom, the monk said, "I hear you teach something about this in America. What's your understanding of Buddhism?"

Jack said, "Oh, my understanding, my deepest understanding is within this whole mind-body process, there is no abiding self."

The old monk just laughed and laughed, and he said, "No self, no problem. No self, no problem." That was his understanding.

But for the most part, we don't quite see things in this way. We have this sticky sense of self that comes in. We don't see the magical nature of the display of the aggregates. How can we tune into that insubstantial quality that the Buddha is pointing to in this discourse?

Partly, I think our culture works against us. Western culture is founded on a pretty materialistic worldview. If I can speak for what I think is the common twentieth or even twenty-first century worldview, I think it's something like this: Physical matter is the ultimate truth of things. It's the ultimate basis for everything else. It is the source of all that arises. It is various chemical combinations that lead to physical matter forming into life, and it is life formed from physical matter that gives rise to consciousness.

When we see in this way that the physical reality is the ultimate reality, then we feel that we have only existed since we've come into this world, that the world is the first thing, and when we die, we go out of the world and it continues. This is only one way of looking. It is, I think, the common Western materialistic way, but it is only one way of looking.

Other Indian schools of philosophy view consciousness as the ultimate reality, the primary stuff of the universe. From that point of view, they see world systems as one of the arisings in consciousness, but with consciousness being more fundamental than matter.

And so appearances arise just like dream images within consciousness.

The Buddha himself took a kind of middle way between these two worldviews. In his teachings, he said that consciousness and matter depended on one another. He compared them to two stalks of twigs that were leaning up against each other. He said, if you take away one, the other will fall over also. That is, if you take away matter, consciousness will fall apart. But if you take away consciousness, matter will fall away.

In our Western materialist view, we tend to forget that to some extent this appearance of the world depends on consciousness. When we take matter as the fundamental reality, we forget that link. So what if we bring that back in a little bit?

A big part of the insight and investigation that comes in practice is the understanding of this transitory nature of our experience. One of the ways that it often first starts to open up to people is in the investigation of form through the direct experience of the body.

When I came into meditation, I thought of the body as something solid. My idea of it was shaped by the anatomy books I'd read. I sort of knew where the organs were and where the bones were, and I really thought that's what the body was as ultimate reality. In meditation, I was encouraged to take a direct look at the experience of the body from within, and what I found there was not solid, but rather everywhere I turned my attention, I encountered change.

The sensations weren't solid when I looked at them closely, but they were more characterized by pulsation, vibration, movement—on, off, weaker, stronger, more painful, less painful. Everywhere I would put my attention, I was only getting a changing sensation. That started to loosen up the idea of solidity that I had had about the body.

We also, of course, are encouraged to explore the other senses. So sounds happen so fast that that's usually an easy area to see this insubstantial nature. Thoughts, as Joseph was describing this morning, just pop up out of nowhere, gone in a few moments. Where was it? When we look at it closely, there's very little weight in a thought.

Emotions can be very strong and compelling, yet if you're asked to meditate directly on them, turn your attention directly to them and be mindful of them, sometimes they just evaporate, just like a cloud when the sunlight shines on it. Tastes and smells also quite light.

But for me, the sense store that was most impenetrable was the sense of sight. I would look out at a setting like this—everything looked unchanging. It looked really solid. So the reflection that I went through was to just inquire a little bit how this sight has gotten created in this consciousness.

And of course, it's just simple kind of seventh grade science. We know that for a sight to appear, there has to be light reflected off the object, traveling to the eye, millions of photons every second, impinging on the retina, stimulating a signal that travels through the optic nerve up to the brain, stimulates a certain region, and then through some really magical process, sight appears.

That sight that we are seeing now is dependent on the millions of photons impacting the retina every second. If those photons stopped coming, the sight would cease, would fall away. So we recognize when we reflect in that way that this sight that seems so solid is actually being regenerated many times a second by the electrical activity of our nervous system and the translation of the brain into consciousness. Very mysterious process, this last step, but something like that seems to be going on. So this sense, too, is insubstantial.

Something else that I used to reflect on and play with: If I asked you the color of this book, I don't think it's a real secret. Most people would say this book is blue. But I started to ask myself, where is blue? Because as you also know from science, this appears blue because the blue is getting bounced back to your eyes. And the book is actually absorbing all the other colors, but the blue is being reflected. So really, when you think about it, if you think about the book itself, it's everything but blue, because the blue is what's coming back at you. So where is blue? It's not really in the book, is it? It's just in consciousness.

So this became really interesting for me because I started to realize that what I had taken to be the real world and the ultimate reality wasn't in the way that I was used to thinking about it. Again, I'm sure you all have reflected on this also, but we tend to forget that it's like this. What we see is just a representation of the world that comes in through our senses and then gets created by some interplay between our nervous system and our brains to come out as consciousness. We're not in touch with what's independent of our senses and nervous systems. It's only a representation of the world filtered through our own system.

But we tend to forget that, and we tend to give it a solidity and an ultimate reality, when in fact it's only held, as you might say, a bubble in consciousness. Even the sense of ground that we so take for granted is

Even the sense of ground that we so take for granted—if you think about that—is only the sensation of hardness underneath our feet or our cushion. But that sense of hardness is also held in consciousness. So although this room has a ground, which is the earth or the floor, consciousness doesn't have a ground. In consciousness, there's nothing underneath that sense of hardness. There's just space.

When we start to see the world in this way, there's some language that can help remind us. And I like to play with the idea, instead of calling things objects of the world, rather to call them appearances. We live in a world of appearances, but we can't actually know what the reality of those objects are independent of our own senses. So we live in a world of appearances, and that's why the Tibetans have this really lovely phrase. They call this a magical display. And this is exactly the same thing that the Buddha is pointing to in calling consciousness a magic show.

How is this created? I don't know. It has its own laws. The physical laws, the chemical laws, the biological laws all still apply. And yet we don't quite know what they apply to. So we have this magical display of appearances that is sometimes compared to a dream.

And really, this is an interesting thing to reflect on, too. Is there any real difference between a moment of experience in a dream and a moment of experience in waking life? The Tibetans have explored this really thoroughly through dream yoga. And they say in meditating, sometimes they get confused. They're in a dream and they don't know if they're in a dream or in waking life. So they say there's a way to find out, the way to check. You pick up a book, you open it to a page, and you read a passage. You close the book up, you put it down, you wait a moment, you pick it up again, you turn to the same page, and you read the same passage. If it reads the same, it's real life. If it reads differently, it's a dream. Just in case you need to know. But that's how close together these experiences are. Accomplished meditators cannot tell the difference sometimes.

So one of my Tibetan teachers put it this way. He said it all has "rangdröl"—and that means no substantial or solid existence. It's all just flickers of our nervous system creating a representation of something. That's why it's also compared, as the Buddha did, to a mirage or a bubble.

The sense of emptiness which lacks the center of I is the way the Buddha usually used the term emptiness in his teachings—the lack of central self. But this insubstantial nature that we're talking about now more has to do with the emptiness of phenomena. Sometimes called emptiness, another word for it is transparency or insubstantiality or openness.

That this is a potent insight is pointed to from the Heart Sutra. If you know the Heart Sutra, near the start of it is this lovely little sentence: "While practicing deeply the paramita of wisdom"—that means the quality or development of wisdom—"the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara perceived that all five aggregates are empty and was saved from all suffering and distress." So this perception is pointed to in one of the most ancient texts as being the direct avenue to liberation.

So one way that we can understand emptiness is by seeing this insubstantial, transitory quality of phenomena. Why is that so helpful? Because when we understand how fragile and how insubstantial it is, we're less likely to cling. When we understand it completely, we don't cling anymore. But because we forget and we think it's solid again, we cling again. And the other aspect is this absence of self within the whole show.

This is a key misunderstanding. And a simple way to think of it is the way we identify with the body as either being I or mine. This again is from the Buddha. He's talking to one of his chief disciples, Sariputta: "It's hard to find people who can understand this teaching. Those who understand it are hard to find." It's kind of plaintive, isn't it? Those of you who are professors and teachers probably know this feeling.

And Sariputta, who's a great student, replies, "Then, O blessed one, now is the time for it. Now is the time to teach the Dhamma in brief or at length. There will be those who will understand."

So the Buddha continues, "Well then, Sariputta, this is how the training should be done. Concerning this body with its consciousness, let there be no self-centered imaginings of I and mine and no such bias."

With regard to external objects, let there be no self-centered imaginings of mine and no such bias. We shall then abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom.

This came clear to me at one point in my practice. I was a monk in Thailand, and as a monk, I had the privilege of seeing autopsies. I know some of you are physicians and have had this opportunity many times. I was thirty-two years old and had never been next to a dead body before. I walked into the autopsy theater and immediately stood next to the body of a young woman who had been recently fished out of a canal. She became the first subject for the autopsy that took place.

So I took a seat in the theater and watched. Because you are all scientists, I'll share the unvarnished version of this. The first thing the coroner did was make an incision from one ear over the top of the skull and through the scalp to the other ear. Having

made that incision, he pulled down the two pieces of skin that were exposed and in doing so peeled the skin away from the face. Never having seen a dead body before, this was shocking. It was powerful.

Then he took a saw—and in Thailand it was a hand saw—and sawed off the top part of the skull in order to remove it and expose the brain. He went through and opened up the chest cavity and took out the internal organs and weighed them. I then sat through two other autopsies that were performed in a similar way.

Then I walked outside, going back to the monastery. The hospital was near a big parade ground, the central parade ground in Bangkok, where I had to catch my bus. So I walked out—and I was very altered. But I walked out into this sunny day, and I was just watching the people walk across the parade ground. There were mothers with their children. There were couples holding hands. There were old women coming from the market with their shopping carts, all walking by in the sunshine.

I was there in a very present way. And what I said to myself was—all I could see were walking corpses. Everyone looked like the same thing I had just seen on the autopsy table, but they were animated. And then I later thought to myself, what do I mean by a walking corpse? The way I was seeing it was there was just a body, but this body carried a brightness that shined out through the eyes. And that brightness was very alive, was very vital, animating the body.

But that brightness was completely of the present moment. It didn't have any past and it didn't have any future. It was only here now. But because of this peculiar capacity of memory, our thought processes can construct an imaginary past and project it forward into an imaginary future and lose track of this completely present moment experience that is all that we are.

When I saw in that way, I also saw how insubstantial everybody's life was, including my own. All I had was this moment and this very transitory body. So although it sounds like this opening to emptiness might be a cold or clinical vision, what I found for me is that it was very moving. Because I saw that we're all in this same predicament. We're looking for some kind of security. We're craving something to rely on in this world that is only a flickering image constructed by our nervous systems, in a momentary existence where we don't know what's going to happen in the next moment.

And the only way to find peace or freedom in this situation is to let go, is not to cling. And it's so hard to learn to do. And this is our common universal human condition.

In the Buddhist tradition, Kuan Yin is said to be the bodhisattva of compassion. It's said that she hears all the cries of the world, the cries of sorrow and the cries of joy, and is always available for us to call on for her support and her understanding. But you know, Kuan Yin is not a beginning meditator. She's a bodhisattva. So her compassion is very strong, but her wisdom is also very strong. She understands that there is suffering but there is no one who suffers. And so in her understanding and her compassion, she balances this open heart and this imperturbable composure.

I'll just close with this line that is sometimes attributed to her: "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?"

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

CHAPTER 275

Sutta Study Class: The Honeyball Sutta (part 2)

Guy Armstrong · 1h12

> *In this second part of his study of the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18), Guy Armstrong delves deeply into the Buddha's teaching on mental proliferation (papañca) and its relationship to suffering. The talk examines Mahākaccāna's detailed exposition of how sense contact leads through feeling and perception to thinking, and eventually to the problematic process of mental proliferation that 'besets' us with perceptions about past, future, and present.*
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> *Armstrong explains the three types of papañca: craving (taṇhā), conceit (māna), and views (diṭṭhi), showing how they create suffering through our identification with experience as 'this is mine, this I am, this is myself.' He connects this teaching to dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) and explores practical applications for meditation, emphasizing the importance of recognizing when proliferation begins and choosing not to 'get on that train.' The discussion includes references to the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the famous Bāhiya teaching about experiencing sense contacts without constructing a sense of self around them. Armstrong concludes by highlighting the Buddha's eighth thought of a great person: taking delight in non-proliferation (nipapañca) rather than in the endless spinning of conceptual thought.*

In examining paragraph 13, we find the bhikkhus expressing their trust in Mahākaccāna's wisdom. They acknowledge that while the Blessed One "knowing knows, seeing sees," and is indeed the Tathāgata himself, they had missed their opportunity to request clarification when the Buddha first spoke. Since the Venerable Mahākaccāna is praised by the teacher and esteemed by his wise companions in the holy life, and since he possesses the capability to expound the detailed meaning of what the Blessed One summarized without elaboration, they request that he explain it without finding it troublesome.

Mahākaccāna accepts their request, saying, "Then listen, friends, and attend closely to what I shall say." The bhikkhus reply, "Yes, friend," and the venerable Mahākaccāna begins his exposition.

In paragraph 15, Mahākaccāna restates the Buddha's summary teaching: "Friends, the Blessed One rose from his seat and went into his dwelling after giving a summary in brief, without expounding the detailed meaning—that is, as to the source through which perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person. If nothing is

found there to delight in, welcome, and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust... Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder. I understand the detailed meaning of this summary to be as follows."

Now we arrive at paragraph 16, which contains the most crucial teaching of the entire sutta. Mahākaccāna begins his detailed analysis: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye."

This sequence bears striking resemblance to the beginning of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda). Mahākaccāna describes the sense base of seeing, where the eye serves as the internal sense base and visual forms constitute the external sense base. When eye consciousness is also present, seeing occurs. This convergence of the three—sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness—creates what is called contact (phassa).

Contact represents the meeting point where these three elements come together at the sense door. This process occurs continuously through all six sense doors: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. We are constantly receiving streams of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and feelings—a continuous bombardment of sensory experience that forms the foundation of our perceptual world.

No, it's what I would call a sense datum. It's the raw data before perception in Buddhist terms. When the bell is struck, that sound is the sense datum—it has both consciousness and the sound wrapped together. That's contact.

All of human experience consists of these sense contacts coming at us through the six sense doors. The consciousness is the knowing of it. You can feel that as a mental event—it's the knowing of that bare phenomenon. The object—the sound—is what's being known.

It's just one experience. You don't think, "Let me gather the consciousness from back here and send it out to meet that object." It doesn't happen like that. It's the object and the knowing together.

So it's one experience, but you can look at the knowing side or you can look at the sense object side. If this sound were in a room with a corpse, the corpse wouldn't have consciousness, so the sense object would be there, but the sense consciousness wouldn't, and there wouldn't be an experience of hearing. But because we're alive, we have the consciousness and we have the object, so we can hear.

There's one experience—hearing—but there are two aspects we can examine. We can look at our knowing of it, because we're sentient beings knowing all the time in this bare sense data way. Or we can look at the quality of the sound—we could say that's E flat or whatever note it is. That sound has a certain quality and timbre. But it's one experience, two aspects.

How can one experience have two aspects? Is this bowl round or is it gold? There's only one bowl, but I can either look at the roundness or I can look at the color. Same with sense experience—just one experience, but I can look at the knowing side, which is happening only because I'm a sentient being. That sentience is consciousness that can receive and know it. And then there's the sound. Many different sounds exist in the world. They have their own qualities and properties. They arise together.

So the meeting of the three is contact. It's happening to us all the time. And when there's contact, there's feeling. This is straight out of dependent origination—the six sense bases, contact, and then the next step is feeling.

Feeling is very specific here. The word is vedanā in Pali. It's not emotion. It's a quality in every sense contact of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Actually, "neither" is the way it's described, but as shorthand we say neutral.

Every sense contact either has a quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant—which we sometimes shorten as neutral. Those are the three choices. It's happening at six sense doors, so you could say there are eighteen possible feelings. But for now, we'll just say three feelings.

Why is feeling so important in the chain of dependent origination? Why is it such a central link, Flavia?

"Because it can lead to craving."

Yes, it leads to craving. How so? Describe how that happens with the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

Yeah, so craving in its aspects of greed, aversion, and delusion is activated through these reactions to the three kinds of feeling. Pleasant feeling tends to stimulate wanting. Unpleasant feeling tends to stimulate aversion. Neutral feeling tends to provoke ignorance. Why? Because we're not interested in it. It doesn't feed the underlying craving, so we tune out.

Is that a strict causal condition? Does every pleasant feeling trigger greed? What makes the difference? When mindfulness is there, we don't react. If it's there and strong, we can be with pleasant feeling but not react with greed. Similarly for aversion, similarly for ignorance.

"Is the mental proliferation of thoughts, images and all that also considered what comes in through the mind-sense door?"

It is. Mental thoughts and emotions, all the meditative states of mind are considered objects of the mind-sense door, even if originally triggered by something like a bell. So it doesn't have to be just originating in the mind to be considered the mind's sense door.

You know, walk down the street, see a beautiful new car. Desire arises based on pleasant contact. The desire is a thing of the mind. Think about, "Oh, I really like that color of Prius. I wonder where the Toyota dealer is located in San Rafael." That's mind-door stuff, even though it's related to an external object.

Even the feeling—let's call it feeling tone so that we're really clear it's vedana, pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—the feeling tone is a mind-door object. It's not intrinsic in the object itself. So this sound could be experienced as pleasant, but some people might experience it as unpleasant because of past associations, conditioning or whatever. So the sound is one thing. The feeling tone is almost a verb—how are you feeling that tone, that sound arriving? And it's based on our individual natures and conditioning and habits and likes and dislikes. So even the feeling is a mental event.

"I'm just thinking so many times you wake up and you're way down the path of the mental event and you can't even remember what the sense trigger was that originated that thought."

Yes. And the good thing is from a point of view of meditation you don't need to. I mean, sometimes it's fun when your mind's a little still and you find yourself two minutes into a big fantasy to trace each step back and realize where it got started and how we leapfrogged from one to another, but you don't need to do that.

From the point of view of meditation, we don't have to unravel that tangle. That's a temptation, especially from a Western psychological point of view—you want to unravel the tangle and get back to the source, but we don't need to. In meditation, we can just drop the tangle. Just come back to the present moment. What's happening now? Just disengage from the tangle altogether.

So here we're in dependent origination. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. Now, this is interesting because in dependent origination, there is no element of perception. But people often ask as they start to investigate their experience and they see the importance of perception, where does it fit into dependent origination? And what's being hinted at or alluded to here is it follows feeling.

Now, I don't remember the Buddha saying that except in this sutta where he confirms later. The perception seems to follow feeling in this outline. So we feel something—there's an impingement, we feel it, and then we notice it.

And then we perceive it by memory. So you know, this seems reasonable. What one feels, that one perceives. Remember, perceiving is not intrinsically problematic. It's this classification thing that goes on, and it's okay.

What one perceives, that one thinks about. Now something is starting to happen here that's a little more active. Notice the very first part of this sequence is totally involuntary. There's contact, which is consciousness. Consciousness is not volitional, and the eye is not volitional, and the object is not volitional. Contact is happening. That's not because we're willing it. And when there's contact, there's feeling. It's based on our past conditioning, but you don't have to think about how to feel something. You just know you like it, or you don't like it, or it's neutral. Not volitional either, really.

Then what one feels that one perceives—this also happens pretty automatically. "Oh, I know, that's a friend. That's someone I don't know. That's a car. That's a salesperson in a store." That happens automatically. Not much will has come in yet.

Now, what one perceives, that one thinks about. So we're starting to get volitional. We're starting to get active. And once we start thinking, we're engaging more of our emotional energy in it. For instance, why do we choose to think about some things and not think about others? Ah, because some things strike us with more charge. Those are the things we tend to fix on and then think about. We don't think about everything we perceive. How much time have you spent thinking about this water pitcher this afternoon, even though you've been perceiving it for quite a while?

So once we start thinking about something, there's starting to be a little investment of emotional energy there. But then it goes on. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. So this is the word papañca. There's actually a verb, papañceti. He proliferates, she proliferates is papañceti. So that's what's being used here. We're mentally proliferating.

Now, is thinking about something inherently problematic? You can think about something and it can be safe, right? So thinking is not inherently a problem. If I look at this, I think, "Oh, I'm really appreciative Sean left me a pitcher of water, and when I need it, I can pour it and drink it in this class." Useful. A thought can be useful.

What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. Are we getting into danger? Yeah. So the leap from thinking, which can be controlled—we can approach thinking in a controlled way if mindfulness is strong. We can think clearly. We can think calmly. We can drop it when the need for it is over. But now we're into proliferating. And this is where the process starts to get out of our control.

Proliferating kind of means we've lost charge of the thought stream and it's running away with itself based on emotions, past associations, conditioning, underlying tendencies, and all of that stuff. With what one has mentally proliferated...

As the source, perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.

Now we're in trouble. Because at first, it was a pretty organic process—consciousness and objects, things being known, contact occurring, contact bringing feeling and perception. That's all normal. The Buddha experiences this very same process.

Then what one perceives, one thinks about. If there's abundant mindfulness, we can keep that steady. Such thinking can be appropriate, measured, calm, reasonable.

Then we get into proliferating. The focus is still on our activity—we're proliferating. But what we know is also happening is we're losing control. Proliferation usually comes from a loss of control, or let's say a loss of choice about the thought process.

The next step is crucial: we're no longer in control; we're actually at effect. So the focus shifts—not from our own activity or our own volition, but to what besets a person. Now all the proliferation we've engaged in comes back on us like a burden. We've stirred up all these old associations and hopes and fears and regrets and worries and future anxiety. Now it's as though they achieve a life of their own and they're attacking us. They're besetting us.

It's as though the artist painted the tiger and the tiger came to life and ate them. This is what we do with our imagination.

Take anything you've been worried about lately. Can you see—and I have my own things too, I'm not exempting myself from this—can we see that the thought about that situation doesn't have to be frightening? Because it's just a thought. We may be sitting quite safely in our own home, warm, comfortable with friends or family, quite safe. Yet the thought makes us afraid.

So you get a stream of these thoughts coming, each one making us afraid, worried, regretful, ashamed, embarrassed. And then we become the victim of that proliferation.

What Mahākaccāna is pointing to, which the Buddha will confirm, is that proliferation sets off a kind of chain reaction where these thoughts and feelings have a life of their own. And then we become the victim of them.

"In the sequence, does the troublesome thinking begin or arise once following the sensation?"

It's quite possible to have a clear, rational, non-problematic thought about a sensation, even a painful one. I could have a painful sensation in my knee, and I just go, "That's a painful sensation. I'm not going to keep sitting here if it gets a little bit stronger. I'm going to change my posture," and then I drop it.

But if I start to proliferate: "Oh man, I had a friend who sat through a knee pain and it actually injured his ACL where he had had surgery, and I saw him walking around on crutches for the last three days of the retreat, and then I think they had to take him to the hospital. I can't go to the hospital now because I have a big piece of work coming up. If I let this go another minute, I'm probably going to be bound to..." That's where it spins out of reality into imagination. And that's where it becomes problematic.

So you notice that thinking can be related just to the present moment, the way things are—seeing things the way they are. That's a pain. It's happening in the right knee. I may have an old skiing injury there. I should be a little careful of it.

But then these proliferations beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye. All of a sudden it's exploding into past and future. And when we get entangled in past and future, then we're really at risk. Because past and future aren't real. Past and future are only thoughts in the moment. But if we don't see them clearly as thoughts, we take them as real, and they become burdensome.

So it's the proliferation that sets that up. We get lost in past and future. Most people live their lives lost in past and future. As meditators, we step out of that whirlwind from time to time. But to be honest, we live much of our lives in past and future as well.

Sanity is being in the present, seeing a thought arise, seeing it persist, seeing it pass away. That's what the Buddha said was so wonderful and marvelous about his experience.

So, as meditators, we really have our work cut out for us. It is to establish a sane relationship to thinking. And the first step in that is to start to understand this phenomenon of papañca. To be able to recognize it when it happens, know how it's different from useful thought, and to see how it stirs things up that then land on us as problems.

"Sometimes what you just described actually occurs in my thinking process," one student shared. "But sometimes it doesn't, and I have to step back and then I just say 'stop' because I can't reach a place of calmness to be able to let go. So I say into my mind, stop. Just stop. And that sometimes works, sometimes doesn't. But it allows me to then take a breath because it gets, like you said, entangled."

That's very skillful. And it takes quite a bit of meditative background to be able to do that. This is what we sometimes call the sword of discriminating wisdom. When you see that a thought is going and it's starting to go out of control in a way that's not helpful, you recognize this is not going to be helpful. This pattern of thinking is leading me down a road that I'm pretty familiar with, and I know where it goes. It goes into fear or regret or hope or desire, something that isn't going to be helpful. And you say, "Stop it." Sometimes we can do that and it will work, just as you're describing.

That's a very skillful thing to do—just cut it. The sword of wisdom in the Tibetan, actually the Mahayana tradition, is represented by the bodhisattva Manjushri. You'll see him holding that flaming sword. That's one of the functions—that sword is to cut delusion. And one of the forms of delusion is papañca. So when we can see that and we can just stop it, that's very skillful.

Now, can that be misapplied? Yes, because sometimes our thoughts are going and we just think, "I'd rather be calm. I wish I was concentrated in this sitting. Let me see if I can just suppress that thought energy." That doesn't help. That just bottles it up. So when we can see with wisdom that it's not going in a useful direction and we can just cut it, that can be good. But beware of suppressing feelings with it. You want to cut the chain of thought, but you don't want to suppress feelings or emotions that are there.

This is an area that we really want to become very familiar with in our practice. When is the spinning out starting to happen?

I want to read you some of the other words that have been used to translate this word, papañca. Papañca was not well understood when these teachings started coming to the West into English. Early translators looked at it and they didn't know what the heck the Buddha meant by it because it doesn't appear in that many suttas. I mentioned some suttas on the handout—you'll see a short list at the bottom of other suttas where this is described. Actually, you could add to that; there's one more I just found out in the Sutta Nipata, section 5.30, I think it is.

He doesn't give a clear definition of the word anywhere. So translators had to look at all the places it was used and use their intuition about what is being pointed to here. And I feel pretty comfortable now with the rendering as conceptual proliferation or mental proliferation. But I'll give you some of the other translations that were used and some are still being used today: expansion, diffuseness, spreading out, complication, objectification, diversification, fixation, and obsession.

I think conceptual proliferation touches on all of these translations quite well—it captures what's being pointed to. But I want to pull out one other translation to examine more closely: objectification. This is actually the word that Thanissaro Bhikkhu now uses for papañca.

What he's pointing to, I think, is this function that language has of making solid objects out of transitory phenomena. You know how when you examine your direct experience through meditation, you see that everything is just a momentary arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing. There's nothing—when you're seeing from that space—that could even be called a solid thing. That's one of the key meditative insights into impermanence: everything's dissolving moment by moment.

What concepts do is fix that momentary flow and reify it, making it look like there's something solid there. Think about the name of your best friend. I bet you have a very good image of what your friend is supposed to be like. Even though you might have seen them in a bunch of different situations and different emotions, I bet you have some kind of solid image of what that person is like. So we take this changing flow and we concretize it, we try to fix it. If we don't understand what we're doing, the blind use of language obscures the transitory nature of things.

So that's another way that papañca gets us into trouble. It creates substance where there isn't any in our experience. This is a universal problem with language—not just a Buddhist problem. But papañca contributes to it, and that's why I think Thanissaro likes this word objectification.

Let me read you Bhikkhu Bodhi's description of this. He says, "The Pali word papañca suggests mental fabrication, obsessive mental constructions, and deluded conceptualization."

Did that give a sense of the weight? I'll read that again: "Papañca suggests mental fabrication, obsessive mental construction, and deluded conceptualization."

The mental fabrication we've been talking about, the obsessive nature of it we've focused on, the fact that it's all constructed—thoughts of past and future are all constructed, they're not here now, they're not real, but we construct them through imagination—and deluded conceptualization. We'll get to this a little further along, but as we expand our time into past and future, generally what comes along is the thought, "I have been existing from the past through the present and will exist into the future."

So we give the self a continuity that it doesn't have. The self isn't continuous. We're all just bundles of changing mental and physical phenomena. But we construct the view that self is continuing from past through the present into the future.

Let's read the second part of verse 16, and then I want to go back and talk in a little more detail about papañca.

"Dependent on the ear and sound... dependent on the nose and odors, dependent on the tongue and flavors, dependent on the body and tangible, dependent on the mind and mind-objects, mind-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present mind objects cognizable to the mind."

This is basically just taking the same formula that we went through for eye and forms and eye consciousness and applying it equally to the other five senses. So we're covering all six sense bases and showing that they operate in the same way—that we can proliferate about all of them, and then those proliferations come back to beset us, leading to suffering.

So let's talk in a little more detail about papañca. It's said that there are three varieties of papañca. This comes from the commentaries—it's not explicit in the suttas, but it seems like a good list. The three kinds of papañca are papañca based on craving, on conceit, and on views. The Pali is taṇhā-papañca, māna-papañca, and diṭṭhi-papañca.

When you think about this, I think you can see all three of these in your experience.

I certainly can. Craving papancha manifests when I think about what I want in the future. Where am I going to get that new Prius? When am I going to have the money to buy it? This desire force is one example. Fear and anger can also operate in the same way as forms of craving. These strong emotional components lead us into past and future with tremendous intensity and burden, carrying great weight. That's the force of craving.

Mana is where self-judgment enters and the comparing mind takes hold. I'm not good enough. I'm not lovable enough. I'm not going to be good at this job. I'm not going to find a partner. I'm not worthy of a promotion or a raise. I won't find work because I don't know enough. I don't have skills. All these judging thoughts represent one side, while the opposite manifests as pride. I'm much better than they are. I should be getting the raise. Why are they getting promoted when I'm not? That's the pride side. Even claiming that we're equal, in Buddhist understanding, is also conceit. We're still comparing ourselves, trying to find solid ground.

If we look at the motivation underlying mana comparison, it's an attempt to find some ground where we can establish ourselves. Perhaps I'm not as good as that person, but at least I'm this far below them. They look solid and I'm here, so I must be solid too. Or that person's there and I know I'm better than them. We're trying to find some solid ground for self to rest on in the middle of all this insecure impermanence.

Ditthi manifests when we disagree with people. During the campaign—I bet everybody's so glad we're out of the 2012 election season, I certainly am—all the different views you'd hear from right and left, the far right and far left, across that whole spectrum. Everyone was so sure their view was right, with so much heat and passion about it. I spent some hours on the meditation cushion entertaining some of my political views at that time, so I know it's happening in the world. We feel really strongly about those views. We genuinely feel my view is right and their view is wrong, and we can get very heated about this.

I have friends who used to like finding people from the opposition party to try convincing them why their view was wrong. Two different people during the last season who were on the opposite end of the spectrum from me wanted to take me aside and convince me why their view was right. I wouldn't engage because I think that's fruitless, but it was very interesting.

This attachment to views manifests in the political world, in the dharma world—I believe this, you believe that, or if you're a Christian or a Muslim, you're not even on my map. We see it in relationships. We have a view of what our partner should be doing to live up to our ideal of what our partner should be doing. They have a view about

us as well, the same thing, or in relation to our parents or friends. They shouldn't have done that to me. They should have done this instead. We can get quite heated in our relationship to them based on those views, and they're only views. The other person in the exchange will have a different view.

These are the things we spin out about: things we want or don't want, ways we judge or compare ourselves, and views and opinions. When you examine what proliferation consists of, I think this is a pretty comprehensive list.

Again, as a matter of self-knowledge, it's really helpful for us to start taking a closer look at our papancha—first knowing when we're proliferating, then seeing what's the content, what's the fuel, and seeing if it falls into one of these three categories, because very often it does. I haven't identified my own papancha as being anything other than these three. Maybe there is some I haven't yet identified, but it's a pretty good list.

This is interesting because although it's not explicit in the suttas, there are references to it. There's this very good sutta in the Majjhima on the five aggregates, which is Majjhima 109. In this sutta, the Buddha is explaining to the bhikkhus...

This is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself.

So seeing with wisdom undercuts the papañca tendencies of craving, conceit, and views. Seeing with proper wisdom, not claiming as I or mine is freeing.

A student raised an important question about this teaching: "This concept of non-self has challenged me for a long time. When I look at adolescent and childhood development in my work, it's so important for children, particularly those from challenging environments, to develop a healthy sense of self. You wouldn't want to undermine that. This idea of moving towards what we're discussing here comes from wisdom - wisdom that arrives because I've developed a sense of self. Hopefully it's a positive sense of self. By arriving at that positive sense of self, it gives me the opportunity to work on letting go of that self. But I don't think you can do this until you've done that. Am I completely off base here?"

This is an excellent observation, and I agree completely. Growing up, there's no way to escape developing a sense of self - there's simply no way around it. And there are healthy senses of who we are and damaging senses of who we are. Our whole educational system - from family through schools through universities - should be constructed around giving people a very healthy sense of self.

How is this communicated? Through the fundamental message: I value you because I love you. Not because you're smart, not because you're pretty, not because you're good at sports, not because you got good grades - but because you exist, because you're here. This unconditional love and acceptance forms the foundation of healthy self-development.

This fundamental truth is elegantly illustrated when the conditions cease to exist. When there is no eye, no form and no eye-consciousness, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of contact. When there is no manifestation of contact, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of feeling. When there is no manifestation of feeling, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of perception. When there is no manifestation of perception, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of thinking. When there is no manifestation of thinking, it is impossible to point out the manifestation of besettement by perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation.

This passage reveals the profound simplicity of dependent origination working in reverse. When any link in the chain is absent, the entire proliferation of mental activity simply cannot arise. It's like removing the foundation stone from an arch—without it, the whole structure cannot stand.

The same principle applies to all the sense doors. When there is no ear and no sound and no ear-consciousness, when there is no nose and no odor and no nose-consciousness, when there is no tongue and no flavor and no tongue-consciousness, when there is no body and no tangible and no body-consciousness, when there is no mind and no mind-object and no mind-consciousness—in each case, it becomes impossible for that familiar cascade of mental elaboration to manifest.

This isn't merely a philosophical point. It points to something we can actually experience in meditation. There are moments when the sense of contact becomes so subtle that the usual chain reaction simply doesn't fire. The mind settles into a profound quiet where perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation have no ground to arise upon.

What we discover is that our suffering isn't inevitable. It depends on conditions, and when those conditions are absent, suffering simply cannot manifest. This recognition can bring tremendous relief and hope to our practice. We begin to see that the very mechanism that creates our entanglement also contains the seeds of our liberation.

And let's finish up 18.

When there is no ear, no sound, and no ear consciousness... This continues for all six sense doors.

Sound a little nihilistic?

Let me say a little bit first. So this is one of those passages that one comes to in the suttas and one reads it and goes, "What on earth is being pointed to here?" It's really quite cryptic, isn't it, at best?

So I want to suggest it's not clear exactly what's being meant by this passage, but if I look at it in the context of the other things that I've read, what I suspect is being pointed to is the condition of the fully enlightened one not taking birth again.

When one is fully liberated according to the Theravadan view, the five aggregates don't reappear, as it's often said. Or more commonly, there is no further birth, there is no next life. Generally, as long as the mind is not fully liberated, when we die, there is some forward momentum from the kilesas, from the asavas, whatever you want to call it—some form of greed, aversion, delusion, some form of craving that's going forward that causes a birth to take place and a new being to arise that carries some of the karma of that past life. That's a traditional Theravadan understanding of rebirth.

I think what's being pointed to here is the ending of that samsaric journey. When one is fully enlightened, as it's said, birth is destroyed. Or as the Buddha uttered after his enlightenment, "House builder you are seen, you will build no house again."

So I think that's what's being pointed to—the no manifestation of contact.

"Do you think it's pointing to emptiness too, like the Heart Sutra? It seems very similar."

It's funny, it sounds a lot like the Heart Sutra, doesn't it? Almost lifted from it.

Another way that it might be understood, and I think this could be similar to the Heart Sutra, is if there is absolutely no clinging or dependency, then one is in a state of... When there's no clinging, there is emptiness. So it could be pointing to that.

My sense, in the context of all the other suttas in the Pali Canon, is it's more likely pointing to what's called nibbana without residue. That means one has attained final nibbana and then passed away. There's no residue in the sense there are no five aggregates continuing. That's my guess, but I don't know.

"Yes, Susan?"

"I think what I wanted to ask is, would the Buddha advise us to stop window shopping? What it sort of spoke to me was that if I couldn't control the papañca, I could go back and control the contact. Or, like, I had more options. Is that okay? I mean, obviously that's not ideal, but if I keep getting on the same train, maybe I need to not walk in the station."

Very good. I think that's the heart of the sutta. If we don't want to go down that ride that the proliferation takes us on, don't step on board a thought. I think that is the practice instruction from this sutta.

So final nibbana might solve the problem completely. Short of that, we get to figure out when papañca is starting and whether we want to go down that road or not. That's the practical lesson for our meditation. Don't hop on that papañca train. Absolutely.

So I want to skip—I want to finish the narrative and then come back and have a few more dharma points, but I want to skip a couple of paragraphs. What are we up to? We're up to 19. I'm going to let you read 19 and 20 on your own. They're kind of interesting, but basically they went and got the Buddha. And they said, "This is what Mahakaccana said when we asked him to explain it in detail. Is that correct?"

And so let's read number 21.

"Mahakaccana is wise because Mahakaccana has great wisdom. If you had asked me the meaning of this, I would have explained it to you in the same way that Mahakaccana has explained it. Such is the meaning of this, and so you should remember it."

So this is the Buddha putting his seal of approval on this discourse, and therefore the tradition holds this text with equal weight as though the Buddha had said it. Whether this is an actual event—that the Buddha actually did come out and say those words—or whether it's a rhetorical device that the editors put in to say "this is authentic Dhamma," I really don't know. But within the tradition, this validates this teaching as the equivalent of having been delivered by the Buddha. We're meant to have as much faith in this text as if the Buddha had said it through his own mouth.

Then let's finish with verse 22. The Venerable Ananda said to the Blessed One, "Venerable Sir, just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness came upon a honey ball, wherever he would taste it, he would find a sweet, delectable flavor. So too, Venerable Sir, any able-minded bhikkhu, whenever he might scrutinize with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the Dhamma, would find satisfaction and delight. Venerable Sir, what is the name of this discourse on the Dhamma?" "As to that Ananda, you may re-

member this discourse on the Dhamma as the Honeyball Discourse." That is what the Blessed One said. The Venerable Ananda was satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.

So that is why this is called the Honey Ball Sutta—it was Ananda's invention. This term "honey ball," Bhikkhu Bodhi says, can be a mixture of honey and flour and ghee and molasses. So it's not just honey, but something you could really take and eat. Sounds like a gulab jamun or something, doesn't it? An Indian sweet. So this is a very sweet sutta that we've explored together today.

The gist of it is just what Susan said: for us to start becoming aware of proliferation and not get on the train. I want to pull out a couple of other sutta references that bring this point home clearly and strongly.

This is one of the suttas on the handout—Sutta Nipata 4.14. A questioner comes to the Buddha: "I asked the kinsman of the sun"—this is just one of the names he was called by—"the great seer, about seclusion and the state of peace. Seeing in what way is one unbound, clinging to nothing in the world?" This is a great question: How should we see that we're unbound, not caught in bondage, clinging to nothing in the world?

And this is the Buddha's reply: "They should put an entire stop to the root of objectification classifications: 'I am the thinker.'" This is Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation. But what is being translated by "objectification classifications" is papañca plus saṅkhā. So you could say "notions born of proliferation." They should put an entire stop to the root of notions of proliferation based on "I am the thinker."

"I am the thinker" is an interpretation of the phrase "I am." The fundamental conceit is "I am." Thanissaro Bhikkhu is interpreting its meaning as "I'm the thinker." To me that's a little limited—I think "I am" has a bigger sense than that. But his understanding is that "I am the thinker."

This is Thanissaro Bhikkhu's explanation: "The perception 'I am the thinker' lies at the root of these classifications in that it reads into the immediate present a set of distinctions—being and not being, thinker and thought, identity, non-identity—that then can proliferate into mental and physical conflict. The conceit inherent in this perception thus forms a fetter on the mind. To become unbound, one must learn to examine these distinctions, which we all take for granted, to see that they are simply assumptions that are not inherent in experience and that we would be better off to be able to drop them."

We'd be better off. So it's dropping basically the distinction of duality. This reminds me very much of the Bahiya Sutta in the Udana.

Remember that story? There's this teacher living in the south of India who believes he's fully enlightened. He has many students, considerable support, and complete confidence in his realization. But then a deva—a heavenly being, rather like an angel—visits him.

When he asks the deva whether he's enlightened, that question itself should have been telling. The deva responds clearly: "You're not enlightened. You're not even on a path to enlightenment. You haven't even started on the path yet."

Deflated, the teacher asks if anyone truly is enlightened. The deva tells him about a recluse named Gautama, known as the Buddha, who wanders in northern India, and provides directions to find him.

Bahiya immediately abandons everything and sets out on foot to meet the Buddha. When he reaches the town where the Buddha is staying, the monks tell him the Buddha has gone on alms round. So Bahiya goes into town and finds a being with a magnificent face, great posture, and radiant presence. This must be him.

Approaching respectfully, Bahiya says, "Venerable sir, you must be the one known as the Buddha. Will you give me your teaching in brief? Please—I see you're on your alms round."

The Buddha replies, "I can't do it right now. I'm on my alms round."

But Bahiya persists: "Life is short. Who knows how long you will live or I will live? Please give me your teaching in brief."

Again the Buddha says, "I can't do it right now. I'm on my alms round."

So Bahiya asks a third time. And as you may know, the third time always works. The Buddha gives him his teaching in brief:

"This is how you should train, Bahiya. In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. In the sensed, let there be just the sensed. In the cognized, let there be just the cognized. Then there will be no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. Then you will be neither here nor there nor in between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

He's saying: don't make a you on the basis of your sense experience. Don't build a you in relation to experience.

When Bahiya heard this teaching, he awakened. He was obviously someone with tremendous paramis—spiritual qualities and development—who simply needed this precise pointing for his mind to release and become liberated.

An hour later, walking through a field where a mother cow was protecting her calf, he ventured too close. The cow gored him and he died on the spot. His urgent message to the Buddha—"Please teach me in brief, for we don't know how long you or I will be here"—proved prophetic.

But he got the teaching, he was freed. He was liberated. But this is the same pointing that Thanissara Bhikkhu is offering. Don't imagine "I am the thinker" or "I am the hearer" or "I am the seer." In the seen, let there be just the seen. In the heard, let there be just the heard. Take the "I" out of it.

I wanted to share one other sutta passage with you—another kind of beautiful story. Anuruddha was another great disciple of the Buddha who became enlightened over the course of practice. He had gone away to practice on his own in one part of the country, while the Buddha was staying elsewhere. As he was practicing, he had a reflection. He said that his reflection was "seven thoughts of a practitioner." They had to do with—he phrases them as "this Dhamma is for"—and I think he means this Dhamma is realizable for, or this Dhamma is realized by.

So I'll read you the seven:

"This Dhamma is for one with few desires, not for one with strong desires. This Dhamma is for one who is content, not for one who is discontent. This Dhamma is for one who resorts to solitude, not for one who delights in company. This Dhamma is for one who is energetic, not for one who is lazy. This Dhamma is for one with mindfulness established, not for one who is muddle-minded. This Dhamma is for one who is concentrated, not for one who is unconcentrated. This Dhamma is for one who is wise, not for one who is unwise."

The Buddha was living on the other side of the country, but he read Anuruddha's mind. He immediately projected what's called the mind-made body—you read about this in Don Juan also; it's one of the psychic powers in that shamanic tradition. He could generate a body that looked like his and immediately appeared next to Anuruddha to visit with him.

The Buddha said, "Anuruddha, those are seven good thoughts, but there's one more you should add to that list." That eighth one is: "This Dhamma is for one who delights in non-proliferation, who takes delight in non-proliferation, not for one who delights in

proliferation, who takes delight in proliferation." The word is *papañca*. So this Dhamma is for one who takes delight in non-*papañca*—the Pali is *nipapañca*—not for one who delights in *papañca*.

He said, "Now you have these. These are called the eight thoughts of a great person about the Dhamma."

I think this is the invitation in our meditation: Do we delight in spinning out in thoughts, manufacturing thoughts for which we have great creative ability? We could keep going forever. People come on a three-month course thinking, "I'm going to think all my thoughts in the first month, and then I'll be fed up with thinking." But it doesn't work like that. Deep into the three-month course, we're still thinking thoughts—plenty of them, no end of thoughts.

What do we delight in? Do we delight in the thinking of thoughts? There is an attraction to thinking, there's no doubt about it. Or do we delight in *nipapañca*, in non-proliferation?

Start to feel in your meditation what is the quality when you're not spinning out in a lot of conceptual thought. What does that feel like? At the very least, there is a great quality of peace, ease, spaciousness, relaxation, settledness, avenue to concentration, presence. All those things are there.

As we take delight in that, as we develop a taste for that, it comes really to be our heart's preference. When that's established as our heart's preference, it's much easier not to get on that train. Because we know where the train leads—to being beset with all the confusion and disturbance and worry and hope and fear that *papañca* stirs up. We develop a preference for staying settled in the peace, the quiet, the concentration of non-proliferation.

So I think that's the message of this sutta. I'll just leave you with one question: Is there a problem in life, in your life, if you don't think about it? Or are all problems constructed by thinking they're a problem?

That was the study for today.

Thank you for your attention and for staying with us throughout this exploration.

Any last questions before we finish?

Yes?

Student offers observation: It seems like the suttas and the Buddha's words are, in fact—a lot of them are very direct pointings to how to hold the mind in meditation. And I think this is one of those. Then there are a lot of teachings about conduct also that aren't so much of that nature, but tell us how to behave helpfully in the world. But a lot of them are really direct pointers to how to hold the mind—the quality of mind, the nature of mind.

Yes, exactly. Thank you for that observation.

Administrative note from Sean: If people don't wish to take their honey ball handouts with them, they can put them on the back table so we can redistribute them rather than recycling. If you don't want to take your paper... I'm sorry we don't have an actual honey ball to offer.

Thank you all for coming. It's been wonderful to explore this teaching together with everyone. Thanks for your participation and for your listening.

CHAPTER 276

Sutta Study Class: The Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (part 1)

Guy Armstrong · 1h30

> *In this opening session of a sutta study series, Guy Armstrong introduces the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18) from Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Majjhima Nikāya. The discourse begins with an encounter between the Buddha and his uncle Daṇḍapāni at Kapilavatthu, where the Buddha declares he teaches in such a way as to not quarrel with anyone in the world. Armstrong explores the crucial concept of papañca (mental proliferation) - the mind's tendency to spin out uncontrollably through thinking, creating perceptions and notions that lead to suffering.*
>
> *The talk examines how saññā (perception) differs from mere sense contact, functioning as a recognition and categorizing faculty that brings along past associations and conditioning. Armstrong discusses the seven anusaya (underlying tendencies): lust, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, desire for being, and ignorance - deeply conditioned mental habits that remain dormant until triggered. The teaching emphasizes how clinging to views and craving leads to disputes, quarrels, and social conflict, with the Buddha advocating for inner peace through non-attachment to philosophical positions.*
>
> *This systematic study offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners insights into early Buddhist psychology and the practical relevance of these ancient teachings for understanding how mental proliferation creates suffering in daily life.*

My name is Guy Armstrong. I'm one of the teachers here at Spirit Rock, and I appreciate you all coming out this afternoon when there's a 49ers playoff game in progress. I know it might have been divided loyalties, but the Buddha is winning in this case, so I appreciate that. And I also appreciate your interest in taking a look back at the original texts. These texts are a little dense, sometimes hard to penetrate, sometimes a little confusing, and take some effort to get in and find the meaning in them. So I appreciate people coming out and making that effort.

What we'll be doing over the next six months is offering one of these afternoons every month. It's on a dāna basis, which means Spirit Rock isn't collecting a fee for you to be here. The teachers who are doing the series are not being paid. And so to the ex-

tent that you find the class helpful and wish to express your appreciation, there will be the opportunity to offer a donation or dāna at the end of the afternoon, and as always, it's gratefully received on behalf of the Center and on behalf of the teachers as well.

We have a few teachers in the series over these six months. I'm going to begin, then Richard Shankman is coming in, James Baraz, and Temple Smith. I think those are the four of us who will be covering these six months. I can't promise that there will be a sequence to the teachings. Each of us is going to do our own thing, but I think you'll find them all interesting, and all these people have a lot of familiarity with the text, so I think it will be a good foundation for us to begin with.

Our text for today is taken from the Majjhima Nikāya, which literally means middle-length collection. I'm using a translation from Bhikkhu Bodhi from around 1995 when he published this whole collection as The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha. I just wrote a review for Inquiring Mind of his new book, which is the translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya. This book, now called Numerical Discourses of the Buddha, has just come out. And so there will be a review of it in the next Inquiring Mind.

As I was writing and thinking about Bhikkhu Bodhi's contributions to Dharma in the West, I came to feel that this book, the Majjhima, was a revolutionary work for serious students of Vipassanā and Theravāda because it was the first time that the whole collection of a Nikāya had come out in a readable translation with an excellent introduction and good notes and indexes. There are five Nikāyas in the Sutta collections, and this was the first time that a full translation of a Nikāya was available. So we have in this book a way for those who want to kind of self-guide themselves into the study of the Buddha's original words. If you were going to start with any one volume in looking at the suttas, this is the one I'd recommend.

I'm picking one sutta today from this collection for us to look at, which is called the Honey Ball. That's sutta number 18. There are 152 discourses or suttas in this whole collection, and we're looking today at number 18. In Pāli, it's the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta. It's only at the very end that we find out why it's called the Honey Ball, so you have to stick around for the afternoon to find that out.

I think it's a really fascinating and important discourse, but it's one that we haven't spent much time talking about as Spirit Rock teachers. So some of it may be new. I know you're going to be familiar with some of the key concepts because you've heard the term papañca a lot, I bet. But the way that it's explained here, I find really interesting and insightful. And there are some other threads, other suttas that we'll pick up that highlight the profound significance of the term papañca and the way it affects our human lives.

I'd like to start with a little bit of an experiential reflection and ask that we all just step back a moment and with a broad view of Dharma, take a look at the question: How does suffering arise in our lives? You might say, what are the things that lead us into suffering? Where are the difficult areas of our life? What is it by our own activities that lead us into suffering? And of course this is the central question of the Buddha's teachings. We want to understand what leads to suffering and then how to release it, how to become free.

When I ask that question, I'm sure you're not at a total loss for answers. What are some of the things that you see in your own life that lead to suffering?

"Wanting things to be different from the way they are."

That sounds a lot like one of the noble truths. That's a very nice formulation of the second noble truth, which is craving. Wanting things to be different than the way they are. Sometimes that expresses itself in desire terms: I want to get something pleasant. Sometimes it expresses itself in aversive terms: I want to push away something threatening or unpleasant. But in any case, we're always trying to manipulate our experience to milk it for something a little bit better. And that's the operation of craving. How does this activity reflect itself in your experience?

This preference of wanting things to be one way and not wanting them to be another way—how do you notice it comes through in your direct experience of living? How do you see it happening in you? What's the mechanism?

Anxiety. Sadness. Habitual patterns of thought and action. And in action, can we include emotion? Thinking, feeling, acting. Emotion is also karmic, sort of volitional. So anxiety and sadness are two expressions of this. The more general formulation is habitual tendencies and ways of thinking, acting, and feeling.

Does that formulation pretty well cover it? It's quite comprehensive, isn't it? Under these habitual patterns, we could include desire and fear and anger and regret and all kinds of other particular expressions. But it's these habitual tendencies of thinking, feeling, and acting that get us into trouble.

In the realm of acting—what we might call the realm of sila, of ethical conduct in the Buddha's teachings—we're more or less covered by the five precepts. If we clean up our lives in terms of the five precepts—not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not abusing drugs and intoxicants—we've covered the purification, you might say, or the cleaning up of the conduct of speech and body.

Then, a lot of emphasis in meditation—this is where we go next—is put on working with emotions. We start talking about the five hindrances and then open up beyond that to look at the full range of emotions that people feel: sadness and grief and anger and desire and frustration and self-judgment and loneliness, embarrassment, regret, all of those. We work with those emotions one by one to become comfortable with them.

Now, the area of thinking—why is thinking a problem? I mean, we can all relate to the distress of these difficult emotions, right? This is one of the hardest things to bear in life. Life has physical pain and life has emotional pain. That is a lot of our dukkha. What's the problem with thinking?

We make it worse.

We make it worse. How? How does thinking make things worse?

Dwelling in a mind state which is not helpful.

Yes. Thinking helps us dwell in a mind state which is not helpful. It takes hold of some situation that causes an emotion and then dwells on it, meaning we go over and over and over. As we dwell, what's happening to the mind state or the emotion? We blow it up, don't we? So thinking gets us involved in multiplying the emotional pain.

If I have an interaction with you and you do something that offends me and I feel some annoyance at the time, once your words stop, who's harming me if I'm getting upset? It's just me, isn't it? Your words have stopped. Any unskillful action from your side has ceased. It's my own thinking about and dwelling on that past situation that causes the harm again and again, that causes the suffering.

This realm of thinking is intimately connected with the difficult emotions. If we didn't dwell on the difficult emotions, what would happen to them? They'd arise and they'd pass away. But by dwelling on the situation, on the people, on the episode, on the emotion itself, we fixate on it and we keep blowing it up. So this area of thinking becomes really crucial if we want to step out of the suffering that we create in our lives.

Do you feel in control of your thinking?

For seconds at a time.

A second at a time? When the mind is steady in meditation, do you feel more secure from thoughts?

More aware.

More aware. Being able to pause. Yes. When you're mindful of your thoughts, can they impact you as strongly?

No. This was pointed to in a really fascinating sutta. I'm just going to digress for a moment. It's in the Majjhima, number 123, called "The Wonderful and Marvelous."

In this sutta, the Buddha describes—or is said to describe, though I actually don't believe a lot of this—his birth, where he descended from a heaven realm. Coming out of his mother's womb, it's said that he stood up as soon as he was delivered, took eight steps and declared, "This will be my last birth." I have a lot of general trust in the suttas, but I don't have trust in stories like that.

So he's describing the wonderful and marvelous qualities of a Buddha—his life and his understanding. He gets to the very end, talking to his attendant Ananda, and says: "That being so, Ananda, remember this too is a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata. Here, Ananda, for the Tathagata, feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Perceptions are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear. Thoughts are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear."

So in the middle of all this miraculous material attributed to his life, he adds: "I know my thoughts, I know my feelings, I know my perceptions as they arise, as they persist, and as they pass away." If we set this as our goal as meditators and achieve it, we would be well down the road to freedom, to liberation. This is a wonderful aspiration for us. If we can bring mindfulness to the arising of our thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, we will discover a huge amount of inner freedom.

That's really the theme of this sutta—to start taking a close look at this habit of thinking that we've developed without much attention, without much mindfulness, and to strongly encourage making wiser choices in relation to our thoughts. That's the background and territory where this sutta is leading, pointing to some of the potential for freedom that can come.

All right, let's begin. I'd like us to read through the sutta paragraph by paragraph out loud. If you don't want to read, just say "pass" and we'll go to the next person. Max, could we begin with you? Since it's short, could you read the first two paragraphs?

"Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living in the Sakyan country at Kapilavatthu in Nigrodha's park. Then when it was morning, the Blessed One dressed and, taking his bowl and outer robe, went into Kapilavatthu for alms. When he

had wandered for alms in Kapilavatthu and had returned from his alms round after his meal, he went to the Great Wood for the day's abiding, and entering the Great Wood, sat down at the root of a bilva sapling for the day's abiding."

Thank you. This describes a fairly typical day in the life of the Buddha. He wakes up, gets dressed in his robes, wanders for the morning meal of alms food, then comes back and simply abides. Why not, when your mind is really peaceful? He doesn't need television, DVDs, or even the New York Times and a latte. He just sits at the base of a tree, present, available for people to visit with him, as we'll see happens next.

Let me say something about the setting here. How many of you have been to some of the Buddhist holy sites in India? I thought there were a few. This is set in Kapilavatthu. Anyone been there? I think you were, Maggie. This is where the Buddha grew up—not his birthplace, which is Lumbini, but where he grew up. It's not far from Lumbini, but Lumbini is in Nepal and this is just across the border in India.

If you go to Kapilavatthu today, there's nothing there—empty farmland by and large. I don't know where the Great Wood would have been because there aren't many trees left in that part of northern India. But you can see some remnants of where monasteries were erected at the time of the Buddha. This is basically his homeland.

The clan who lived here were called the Sakyans. The Buddha was a Sakyan—that was his tribe or clan, his affiliation. His father was the head clansperson. Sometimes it's put out that his father was the king, but the king was actually in a different area. They paid obeisance to King Pasenadi, who was further west. So his father wasn't a king, but his father was a well-off, well-to-do chief of this clan. The Buddha grew up in very comfortable surroundings, and you'll see how comfortable in another passage.

This is Nigrodha's Park—not a place of huge significance in the suttas, but there are a couple of little stories about it. It's a park that was given to the Buddha in the first year after his enlightenment, presumably by a wealthy landowner. It is the site where Mahapajapati first asked the Buddha for ordination.

You know how he established the Bhikkhu Sangha? He didn't establish a Sangha—an ordained Sangha—for women. Then his stepmother, his aunt who had raised him because his mother had died, named Mahapajapati, came and said, "There are a group of us women who would like to follow you also. Please ordain us." And the Buddha said no. She asked three times and he still said no. That was at Nigrodha's Park in Kapilavatthu. Again, the family connection. You'll see a lot of these Sakyan people are related—close family ties.

Then he left and went to another town called Vesali, which he also spent a lot of time at. She followed him there, along with a few of the other women who wanted to be ordained, caught up with him, and Ananda interceded, so the story goes, and convinced the Buddha to ordain women. So he set up full ordination for bhikkhunis shortly after he had turned it down, fairly early in the life of the teachings. That's why we had the bhikkhuni order for a thousand or more years until it died out in India and Southeast Asia. Now it's coming back, which is wonderful. So that was the site at Nigrodha's Park.

So he's just hanging out in the Great Wood. He's sitting, and section three describes this next little encounter.

Dandapani—this may not have been his given name. This may be something of a nickname. It means "stick in hand." So he's leaning on what was said to be a golden stick or cane, although he was actually quite young. It gives the impression that he's a little pretentious. You have to be wealthy to have a gold stick. He didn't need it for walking, but he liked to brandish it, like a dandy. So his name, Dandapani—he's kind of a dandy. That's the trip with him.

Now, in the vernacular of the day, just coming up to a renunciate and saying, "What do you assert? What do you proclaim?" is not a very friendly way to get started. Usually they say they exchange courteous and amiable talk, and then the person sits to one side. So Dandapani is still presumably standing, leaning on his cane. "What do you teach?" He's coming across a little arrogant. He's fairly young, so he doesn't have the stature of an elder. And he's kind of spoiling for a fight.

If you know about Indian religious circles of this time, there were a lot of different sects with a lot of different views and they loved to argue. So it's kind of like, "What do you teach? And I'm going to tell you what I think." That's the way he's provoking the Buddha.

Now interestingly enough, he is the Buddha's uncle on his mother's side.

He is a brother to Maya, who was the Buddha's mother, and also a brother to Mahapajapati, who became the first ordained woman. Nonetheless—or perhaps uncles can be a little more assertive than anyone else—he's not particularly friendly in this approach.

So let's see how the Buddha reacts. Here comes this somewhat dandyish fellow who wants to argue with him. He asks, "So what do you teach?" He's just spoiling for a fight. And the Buddha responds, "Friend, I assert and proclaim my teaching in such a way that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world, with its gods, its Maras, and its Brahmas, in this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its princes and its people,

in such a way that perceptions no more underlie that brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures, without perplexity, shorn of worry, free from craving for any kind of being."

It's quite clever, isn't it? He doesn't answer directly. Instead, he picks up on the energy and responds to it. "I proclaim such a teaching that I do not argue with anyone in the world."

You'll notice that many of the Buddha's discourses are delivered to one person specifically. He might have said something very different if someone had approached him respectfully. In many situations, he's looking for the one person in the crowd who can understand his message to the deepest level possible. He may talk past a number of people there, and the whole teaching may be oriented to that one person who, we're told, got it in the course of that discourse.

Sometimes we want to take these exchanges in the discourses and say, "Well, this is the Buddha's teaching" or "This is the central truth he was pointing to." But many of them are very situational. This is one that's very situational. "I teach in such a way as to not argue" is not the central crux or the most profound center of the Buddha's teaching. But it was the teaching for Dandapani on that day.

Let's pull out a key teaching here: "A teaching such that perceptions no more underlie that brahmin"—here brahmin is being used not as a caste, which it was at the time, but in its more basic meaning of holy person. "Perceptions no more underlie that holy person who abides detached from sensual pleasures without perplexity, shorn of worry, free from craving for being."

This basically refers to someone whose heart is liberated. They're not drawn to sense pleasures and they're not invested in becoming something great. They're free, in other words. But what's key here is "perceptions no more underlie them." This is a subtle point, but it's the heart of the sutta. Perceptions don't underlie one whose mind is liberated.

So we have to stop and ask: what does this word perception mean in the Buddhist language? In Western psychology and philosophy, perception is sense datum—the registering of a sound in our experience. But in the Buddhist language, it's something different. That registering is called contact.

In Buddhist understanding, the impinging of sense data on us through sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts and feelings is called contact. We're always contacting the world through these six senses. The word for contact is phassa. We'll meet it later on.

The word being translated as perception is saññā—a key term. Perception or saññā means the recognition of a sense datum. So hearing the sound pre-verbally, that's contact. But when your attention turns toward it and you recognize "that's the meditation gong," that's perception.

This labeling faculty, the naming, the categorizing—which is based on memory—is perception. You wouldn't know to call something a meditation gong unless you'd met one before. It's a mental activity. Animals have this quality too. When you open a can of dog food at 5 p.m., your puppy knows what that is, doesn't she? She comes bounding over because she recognizes that sound.

So perception is a part of the normal functioning of mind. It's not in any way wrong or to be gotten rid of. Sometimes people think, "Oh, I was sitting in meditation, I heard the sound and I immediately thought 'footsteps.' I shouldn't do that. I should just stay with the bare experience of hearing." But actually this perceiving faculty is one that goes on all the time. Our minds simply organize that way.

I'm sure it has something to do with survival. Millions of years ago we had to recognize what might eat us or what we might eat—very handy for survival. It's an integral part of us. We don't need to worry about it. We don't need to turn it off. So don't worry that it comes in with some verbiage overlaying your basic sense experience. It's not a problem. Words are the way we meet the world. That's okay.

If perception is wrong or inaccurate, then it can create problems, but the fact of perceiving is not a problem. This faculty of saññā takes our experience and categorizes it. As you look around the room, you are categorizing and seeing women, men, chairs, tankas, Buddha, Kuan Yin, bell, and so forth. We may not be verbalizing it, but our mind is organizing all the time. If we stuck with the bare sense data, all we would see is form and color—turquoise blob, brown blob, blonde blob. But we do more than that. We interact with that form and color and we give it names. That's okay.

This is the quality of perception. It's a recognition. It does more than just put things in a category—it brings along all the associations that we have with that sense object based on our past experience. As I entered the room, I saw people that I knew, and I perceived them as people I had known before and had warm feelings for. When you go home and meet friends or family, you often have many, many years of associations with those people, both pleasant and difficult.

When we walk out to the parking lot, we'll see a range of cars out there. When I go out to the parking lot and see a Prius, I think, "Oh, beautiful. I love Priuses. I don't have one, but if I had to buy a car, that's probably what I would buy." And if I go into town somewhere and see somebody driving a Humvee—great apologies if there's somebody like that today—I think, "I don't like that car so much because it uses a lot of gas."

We have all kinds of associations with the things we perceive, and they're very deeply conditioned. If you've ever tried to change the dynamics in an intimate relationship, you know how fixed some of those patterns of perceiving are. We perceive our partner in a certain way. We perceive our child in a certain way. They perceive us in the same way. Not so easy to undo those associations.

As soon as we connect with the world, which is really just arising fresh in each moment—there's something very unspoiled about the reality of the present moment—we have this quality of perception and it pulls along a bunch of the past and past associations. It mixes into our mind in a way that we can easily get entangled.

What is being pointed to here is that for someone who is free, they're not bound by their perceptions. Perceptions don't underlie them. So often we construct ourselves on our perceptions of our role, of our personal history, of our relationships, of our status, of our car, our home, our wealth, or whatever. We overlay on the basics of what we have contact with all sorts of interpretations that come automatically based on those old associations. All of that is part of perception. That meaning comes with a perception. That's why perception can be quite entangling. Can be, but doesn't have to be.

This little piece right here that is the reply to Dandapani in a way lays out the gist of the sutta and what's going to be explained in more detail.

So let's see how Dandapani responds to that teaching.

[Question from participant about pure perception versus elaboration]

So it's really helpful what you're saying, but I'm thinking of experiences when there was a moment of just hearing the bell that momentarily was not elaborated and how freeing that moment was. So it seems to me that there's still—it can be useful to see that overlay, not to make it a problem, but to see that there's pure perception, sound, awareness, and then there's mental elaboration that names and identifies it and associates to it.

Yes, thank you. I think that's very true. There are times when the little verbal overlay on sense datum either doesn't come in or comes in very weakly, very faintly, and there's a greater feeling of spaciousness as a result. Just being able to stay close to the bare sense data gives a greater feeling of inner peace, spaciousness, presence. When it happens like that, it's a good sign of meditation developing.

But I wouldn't want to hold that up as the way meditation should go. The most important thing is if it's like that, you notice it's like that. If you hear the sound and then the thought arises "bell," that's okay too. But you know the difference. You don't think that the sound is the bell. You understand that "bell" is a conceptual overlay that you're putting on the sound. So if you see the sound as a sound and the perception as a perception, then you're clear.

So let's see how Dandapani responds to this opening teaching.

When this was said, Dandapani the Sakyan shook his head, wagged his tongue, and raised his eyebrows until his forehead was puckered in three lines. Then he departed, leaning on his stick.

We have to value these small moments of humor in the suttas because they don't come all that often. But this is a good one. What do you read of his reaction? What's going on at his feeling level? It's kind of cryptic, right? What do you suspect?

[Responses: Lack of comprehension... skeptical... grumpy...]

Yeah, and then he goes away. So he's kind of uncomprehending, confused, frustrated, annoyed, and then he just stalks off—which is not a bad outcome from the Buddha's point of view. He doesn't have to get into a dispute. We kind of knew Dandapani was a little bit ill-tempered when he arrived, and this sort of confirms it.

So he walks off, and then let's see where the story goes next.

Then when it was evening, the Blessed One rose from meditation and went to Nagrodhas Park, where he sat down on the seat made ready for him and told the bhikkhus what had taken place. Then a certain bhikkhu asked the Blessed One, "But, venerable sir, how does the Blessed One assert and proclaim his teaching in such a way that he does not quarrel with anyone in the world, with its gods, its Maras, and its Brahmas, in this generation with its recluses and Brahmins, its princes and its people? And, venerable sir, how is it that perceptions no more underlie the Blessed One, that Brahmin who abides detached from sensual pleasures, without perplexity, shorn of worry, free from craving for any kind of being?"

So in this passage, it just describes the Buddha going back to Nagrodhas Park where he's actually living. That's where his hut would have been and where other bhikkhus are staying also. As he often does, he relates the events of the day as a teaching story for the people who are still there around the monastery, and then they question him about it.

This introduces one of the other common traits of the suttas, which is repetition. We heard the dialogue, didn't we? We read that once, but we're going to read it again. You'll find that many of the key passages get repeated once, twice, sometimes many times.

I think there are a couple of reasons for this. The repetition does bring them home more deeply. So I would encourage you when a repetition comes, don't just get frustrated and skip it.

So let me read this again, because this is really the heart of what the Buddha is pointing to in this teaching.

As to the source through which perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation beset a person—if nothing is found there to delight in, welcome, and hold to—this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, of the underlying tendency to aversion, of the underlying tendency to views, of the underlying tendency to doubt, of the underlying tendency to conceit, of the underlying tendency to desire for being, of the underlying tendency to ignorance. This is the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malicious words, and false speech. Here these evil, unwholesome states cease without remainder.

There's a tremendous amount packed into this paragraph. This is quite dense, so we want to slow down and take time with this.

First, notice that the Buddha has changed his language slightly from the opening. It's not just perceptions anymore. Now it's "perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation." The Pali word here is actually a phrase—three words strung together. This is truly the heart of the sutta.

The key word is *papañca*, which is being translated as "mental proliferation." This entire teaching is really about the theme of *papañca*—the tendency of the mind to spin out in an uncontrolled way with thinking. Someone mentioned earlier that we dwell on our thoughts, running the same thoughts over and over again, somewhat out of control. This is the thrust of *papañca*. It's like thinking has gone amok, running away with us. When it does that, it can wander into all kinds of pleasant and unpleasant territory, finding its way into everything.

Let's look at the terminology more carefully. We have "perceptions and notions"—*saññā* and *saṅkhā*. So the phrase is *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*: perceptions and notions born of mental proliferation. *Saññā* is the word for perception, which we know well. The word for "notions" is *saṅkhā*.

As we spin out through our thinking, we see things in our life that we react to through our memories or projections. We think things based on those proliferations.

And then those disturb us. They beset us. They trouble us. Like the person who thinks about a tiger and then gets afraid of the tiger. This is what we're doing with our thought all the time. So papañca-saññā-saṅkhā is this whole fabrication through the wandering mind of all kinds of conceptual imaginings that lead us into difficulty. This is a key phrase that we'll come back to again.

Then, how do we relate to these? When these perceptions and notions that we've been proliferating about come into contact with us, how do we relate? Do we delight in them, welcome them, and hold on to them? This is that quality of fixating.

You're rummaging through the memory storehouse and you remember something that happened last week with a friend or a colleague. How do you relate to that memory? Do you let it come and let it go? As the Buddha said, he could see his perceptions, feelings and thoughts arise, persist and pass away. Or do we delight, welcome and hold on to that memory?

Some plan about the future occurs to us: "I could go for a vacation in Costa Rica this winter. Wow." Now, do I let that thought come, see it as a thought, or do I fixate on it and take hold of it and start planning? "Am I going to use Kayak or Expedia for my airfare? Do I have to rent a car or do I stay in a resort where I don't need to go anywhere?" And then we can spin out about that for a while.

So as these thoughts and perceptions come out of proliferating, do we fixate on them, hold on out of some kind of emotional investment, or not? What's recommended? Let it go. Let it come, let it go. Of course, some of them we may need to do our work effectively, to take care of ourselves and our families, but those are relatively few in the whole number that we cling to unnecessarily.

If we delight and hold on, we are not ending these underlying tendencies. This is an important list—one of the other lists that we don't talk about a lot, but it's actually very central. These are called the anusaya. It means underlying tendency. There are seven of them, which he lists here: lust, aversion, views, doubt, conceit, desire for being, and ignorance.

Have you heard some of these before? The Buddha focused on unwholesome states of mind and wholesome states of mind, and he made different lists of each of them. What are some of the lists of the unwholesome states? Five hindrances. The poisons or root causes. The fetters—ten fetters to keep us bound. Vipallāsas, perversions of understanding. The taints, the āsavas—that's a big one. There are a number of these lists, used in different contexts.

The anusaya are in some ways a very fundamental layer of the mind. The taints, or āsavas, also have this very fundamental nature. You might say the most deeply conditioned tendencies of mind are in the taints, and they reappear here. Lust is basically the desire for pleasant experience. Aversion or resistance is disliking. These are so fundamental to the mind—basically two of the poisons and two of the hindrances.

The underlying tendency to views. Views are one of the four types of clinging. Buddha said there are four things, four ways we cling. One of them is views. So we'll get into views more as we go through this sutta.

Of the underlying tendency to doubt. This includes perplexity, uncertainty, particularly about the path.

Of the underlying tendency to conceit, desire for being, and ignorance. Though conceit is this quality of comparing ourselves. It's basically considering ourselves to be something. But once we're something, we compare—are we better than, worse than, equal to other people? So the judging mind, that takes us to be something.

One of the most deep-rooted tendencies that only is uprooted at full liberation is the tendency to desire for being. How did we get here? How did we get in this body? The Buddha said it was because there was a desire to be. Why are we afraid of dying? That's a gut fear, isn't it? Quite independent of the pain, you might be assured that your death was going to be painless, and yet there would often be fear connected with that. Why is that? Desire for being. We want to exist. Most things that take birth want to exist. Everything that I know of that is born wants to exist.

And the tendency to ignorance. Ignorance is not understanding things the way they are, believing that there's a self when there isn't one.

So these seven things are very deeply conditioned habits of the mind. I find it so interesting, this translation, "underlying tendency." I think this is probably a faithful translation. People felt when Freud came along that he invented the unconscious—that he was the first one to notice that there were things going on under the surface. But this word anusaya has been around for 2600 years.

As I see it, this is kind of the level of what we might call the unconscious, because these things are sort of lying dormant in us until something happens to trigger them. But because we have these tendencies, these inclinations, we're not safe. Any of them can be triggered at any moment. And then they come through as a suffering state. So this is the realm of the anusaya. They're dormant tendencies that are in all of us until they're worked out. All of them can be purified. All of them can be released. But it's not easy, not quick.

And then it gets into a very interesting section. It goes from the underlying tendencies to "This is the end of resorting to rods and weapons of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recriminations, malicious words and false speech." In other words, this is where the underlying tendencies lead—to this whole area of dispute.

It's interesting, we don't talk about this a lot in the West. I don't hear us talking about it a lot, but the Buddha talked about it a lot. What creates disputes for people? I think this is really important because it shows the breadth of his interest in teaching. He was looking upon society, looking upon life as it was at that time, and he saw one of the great sources of suffering were people arguing with one another, quarreling, entering into disputes, and then taking up rods and weapons and actually coming to blows.

This hasn't exactly stopped today. But we tend to, as Buddhists, leave that to civil society. We're more focused on how can we cultivate heart of loving kindness? But in the broader society, this is a really important question. He has a lot of teachings on why disputes arise and what's the cause. So I'd just like to read you a few. They're in suttas other than these.

This analysis of what causes arguments generally runs on two tracks. One is views and the other is craving.

So in the society at his time, where there was so much religious debate, there was a lot of argument about views. You can see this in the academic world today. I don't know if you ever peek into the academic world, but there are some very nasty fights that go on because one person's theory is different from another person's theory. And what difference does it make? But they get very upset. Buddhists can do that too. So these are good admonishments, cautionary words for us as Buddhists.

Views are one key way that disputes, arguments, hurt feelings, grudges, and insults come about. Another one is craving—I want something and I don't want you to have it. You can see that in the conquest of land, in the pursuit of money, in all kinds of criminal activity.

I want to read some of these passages because I think they're quite illuminating, quite wise. This is from the Samyutta Nikaya, spoken by the Buddha: "I do not dispute with the world. Rather, it is the world that disputes with me. A proponent of the Dhamma does not dispute with anyone in the world."

Now that's not to say you can't sit down with a good friend and have a discussion where you take differing views of what a passage means or how you apply it in your life. That can be a healthy discussion. But when he says dispute, in this context it means argument where there's a real sense of conflict and somebody's coming away feeling like they won, somebody else feeling like they lost. So there's suffering involved in this situation.

"I do not dispute with the world. It is the world that disputes with me." And in another place he mentioned something like this, he said it's because one who sees the truth knows it and they don't have to argue about it. You can kind of see that, can't you? If we get into an argument, there's usually a little insecurity underneath because we aren't resting in real knowing. We're resting in some kind of belief. This is a very interesting thing to look at.

In the Sutta Nipata: "The sage does not get involved in any dispute that has arisen." I think he means emotionally involved because he was actually asked to mediate disputes. It happened toward the end of his life. There were some water rights that became the source of a war between two neighboring clans up north, and he did help mediate that.

Again from the Sutta Nipata: "Desisting from all theories, the wise one does not enter into dispute in the world." Desisting from all theories. So when we're talking Dharma with someone, are we talking from our personal experience and something that we know and feel confident in, or are we attaching to a theory that we think is the way things are and we want to argue with somebody who holds a different theory? The Buddha says, "Desisting from all theories."

And then I love this passage, also from the Sutta Nipata: "This I do now declare. After investigation, there is nothing among all the doctrines that such a one as I would embrace." That's a strong statement. "This I do now declare. After investigation, there is nothing among all the doctrines that such a one as I would embrace. Seeing misery in philosophical views, without adopting any of them, I discovered inner peace."

Isn't this interesting? We're not in Dharma practice to make up a theory, even if it's the best theory in the world. "I have a theory, there is no self. And I think this will free you if you take it up." "But I feel like I have a self." "No, you don't have a self. I know you don't have a self."

In all his understanding, he didn't come up with one thing that he would cling to as a doctrine that should be believed, that he would try to defend against all comers and say, "This is my philosophical view." "Seeing misery in philosophical views, without adopting any of them, I discovered inner peace."

That's our mission—to find inner peace.

It's not to develop philosophical views or cling to them. For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by wisdom, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions wander about the world annoying people.

It's true, isn't it?

So I always look for this in Dhamma discussions and teachings and in teachers. Is there a general sense of metta in the discussion? Or is there a fixed holding, a rigid holding on to a view that will create conflict? I think that's a very helpful way to look at views.

So even though there's something in Buddhism called right view, that shouldn't be clung to either. Because right view is more a way of seeing than it is a philosophical doctrine.

That's one way we get into disputes: by holding on to views. The other way is basically this force of desire. Again in the Sutta Nipata, quarrels and disputes come from having preferences, from holding things dear. We hold on to the things that we treasure —whether it's our reputation, our money, our home. Once we stake out "this is mine" and hold that and cherish it, then we'll come into conflict.

In another section in the Anguttara, the roots of dispute are said to be if someone is angry and revengeful, contemptuous and domineering, envious and avaricious, deceitful and fraudulent, has ill intent or wrong views, or clings tenaciously to one's own views. This covers a lot of ground.

There's a passage in the Anguttara that is interesting because it shows the progression. "I will teach you nine things rooted in craving. And what are the nine things rooted in craving?" This is a step-by-step building, one step on the next.

In dependence on craving there is seeking. In dependence on seeking there is gain. In dependence on gain there is judgment. In dependence on judgment there is desire. In dependence on desire there is attachment. In dependence on attachment, there is possessiveness. In dependence on possessiveness, there is miserliness. In dependence on miserliness, there is safeguarding. With safeguarding as the foundation, originate the taking up of rods and weapons, quarrels and disputes.

It's a step-by-step analysis of how we form a relationship with something and turn it into possession, and that becomes the ground for argument.

This is quite a dense paragraph, this paragraph eight. Let's continue with a couple more paragraphs.

"That is what the Blessed One said. Having said this, the Sublime One arose from His seat and went into His dwelling. Then, soon after the Blessed One had gone, the bhikkhus considered, 'Now, friends, the Blessed One has risen from His seat and gone into this dwelling, after giving us instruction in brief, without expounding the detail and meaning. Now, who will expound this detail?' Then they considered, 'The Venerable Mahakaccana is praised by the teacher and esteemed by his wise companions of the holy life. He is capable of expounding the detailed meaning. Suppose we went to him and asked him the meaning of this.'"

You'll often see this in the suttas. The Buddha will say something that's a little cryptic, and then they'll go to some senior monk or nun—because nuns also get questions in this way and answer, and there are suttas in the Majjhima delivered by nuns as well. Then they will give a detailed explanation. Mahakaccana was said to be the monk who was most skilled at giving in detail the meaning that the Buddha had explained in brief.

"The Venerable Mahakaccana replied, 'Friends, it is as though a man needing heartwood, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, thought that heartwood was to be sought among the branches and leaves of a great tree standing possessed of heartwood after he had passed over the root and the trunk. And so it is with you, venerable sirs, that you think that I should be asked about the meaning of this after you passed the Blessed One by when you were face to face with the teacher. For knowing, the Blessed One knows. Seeing, He sees. He is vision.'"

He is knowledge. He is the Dhamma. He is the Holy One. He is the Sayer, the Proclaimer, the Elucidator of Meaning, the Giver of the Deathless, the Lord of the Dhamma, the Tathagata. That was the time when you should have asked the Blessed One the meaning. As he told you, so you should have remembered it.

It's a little bit of a scolding, isn't it? And he's right. They should have asked the Buddha. So Mahakaccana, though he's a senior monk, is very deferential to the Buddha in this passage and goes into several lines of praise for the Buddha.

This is one of the things you'll find in the canon from time to time—these words of praise for the Buddha, for the Dhamma, for the Sangha. These are wonderful sources for reflection. That's why I included that extra page in your handout, the one that starts with "preliminary homage." These are traditional chants in praise of the Buddha that are chanted frequently in monasteries and have been handed down for many years. In many cases, the words come from the suttas themselves.

I thought it might pick up our energy a little if we did some chanting at this point in the afternoon. The way this is structured, I borrowed from the Abhayagiri monks' chanting book. The phrase in parentheses is usually chanted solo by the person leading, and then all the other phrases are chanted in unison. We'll do first the Pali, then the English. The English is a translation of the Pali in both cases, so you'll get a sense of the meaning.

I brought this in because I want you to get a sense that there's a devotional quality that comes through the suttas—a quality that is part of monastic life that we don't often include at Spirit Rock events. Some people resonate strongly with it and love it as part of practice. Others resist it, perhaps recovering from other religious traditions, and don't want anything to do with it. So I offer it in this light way to see if it's something you might enjoy.

We'll chant the preliminary homage three times in both Pali and English. When there's a mark above a syllable, you chant that on a higher tone. When there's a mark below, on a lower tone. When there's no mark, it's on a middle tone.

[Chanting of Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa and English translation follows]

[Chanting of Buddha recollection in Pali and English follows]

If you were living in a monastery, you might chant this a couple of times a day. It does a few things: it tends to pick up the energy, it puts a nice melody in your head—not very stirring, not like Tchaikovsky's Fifth that's going to rouse the emotions, but pretty mellow. And it reminds you of the beautiful qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It's nice to have these images and words accompanying us as we practice.

The qualities of the Buddha that are pointed to here are blessed, pure, and enlightened.

And it's said that these stand for the three key qualities of the Buddha. The blessed stands for compassion because he is able to offer blessings to people out of his love and compassion. The pure stands for his purity—that is, the mind that has been freed of greed, aversion, and delusion. The perfectly enlightened one refers to his wisdom, that he is awakened by developing penetrating insight. It's the insight that liberates.

So these three qualities of compassion, purity of heart, and wisdom are summed up in this one line. And as we reflect on that, it can remind us what we're practicing for. I'm sure you can see these qualities in teachers that you connect to strongly, that you admire.

The Spirit Rock staff is going to be doing a retreat this week. Dana is going to be leading—Dana is our staff dharma teacher. The theme of the retreat is Brightening the Mind. It's a wonderful thing to take into daily life.

One of the ways to brighten the mind is to reflect on the qualities of the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. If this seems a little too idolatrous or worshipful, think about the qualities of a teacher that you love. By reflecting on those qualities, you can inspire yourself anytime that you feel the mind needs brightening. It's really a wonderful exercise.

Why don't we take a break here? You've been very patient. And suttas are hard work—listening for over an hour is a lot of hard work already. So let's take a ten-minute break. I'll ring a bell, and then we'll come back together.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 277

Sutta Study Class Series: Majjhima Nikāya; All the Taints, Part 2 of 2

Guy Armstrong · 1h07

In this second part of his study of the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), Guy Armstrong explores the Buddha's teaching on abandoning the three āsavas (taints) through seven different methods. He focuses particularly on wise attention (yoniso manasikāra) versus unwise attention (ayoniso manasikāra) as fundamental to spiritual development. Armstrong explains how ignorance is the most fundamental of the three āsavas and how suffering results in either bewilderment or search. The talk covers the Buddha's teaching that the hindrances are all fed by unwise attention, using practical examples to illustrate how we can get caught in patterns of giving attention to the "sign of the beautiful" or "sign of the unattractive." He examines the different philosophical views that arise from unwise attention and explains how the noble disciple practices wise attention to the Four Noble Truths, leading to the abandonment of the first three fetters at stream entry. The discussion includes practical guidance on restraining the sense faculties and the importance of not grasping at the signs and features of sense objects while remaining present and aware.

Let's continue with a little more on ignorance before moving forward. We're only at the second or third paragraph of the sutta, so we need to accelerate our pace.

I want to share a few thoughts about ignorance. This quality of restlessness in the mind is not random or superficial—it's a deeply rooted tendency that manifests both ignorance and suffering. The Buddha offered a profound insight when he said that suffering results in either bewilderment or search. Most of the world experiences both: bewilderment and searching, though typically searching through sense pleasures for an end to unhappiness.

As we become wiser, we begin searching through spiritual paths. There's often an intermediate stage of searching through philosophical views, which proves ineffective. Many people search through the intellect to construct philosophical frameworks, but this doesn't resolve the fundamental problem, so they continue searching and arguing. However, once we learn to search through meditation and discover inner peace, that path yields genuine resolution.

This bewilderment forms part of the confusion of ignorance that has lain dormant. Ignorance is the most fundamental of the three āsavas. Its position at the beginning of dependent origination suggests this—it's the starting point of the wheel. Majjhima Nikāya 9 offers this illuminating passage: "With the arising of ignorance, there is the arising of the taints." This places ignorance in a more fundamental position than either sense pleasure or becoming. Though that same sutta also states, "With the arising of the taints, there is the arising of ignorance"—showing that taints and ignorance mutually influence each other—ignorance remains more fundamental than either sense pleasures or becoming.

Now we're ready to move into the third paragraph on the destruction of the taints. We return to that crucial sentence: "The destruction of the taints is for one who knows and sees, not for one who does not know and see." Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention.

These represent two of the most essential concepts, not only in this sutta but in the Buddha's entire teaching—concepts that we as Western teachers haven't emphasized sufficiently. These are central ideas that Ajahn Sucitto explored deeply during our recent retreat, drawing out their fundamental importance. Wise attention and unwise attention constitute the heart of the path. They serve as the counterpoint to ignorance, initiating the entire process in a wholesome direction even before mindfulness, or alongside mindfulness.

Let's examine these two terms carefully. The Pali phrase being translated is yoniso manasikāra. Manasikāra means attention, and in the Pali texts, it encompasses both meanings familiar to us in English. First, it refers to the focus of our consciousness—how we naturally shift our attention from one object to another as we survey our environment. Manasikāra also indicates where our focus lands momentarily, always changing. During a meditation session, attention might rest on an in-breath for one moment, then shift to a mental state, then to a sound, then to a passing thought, then to another bodily sensation.

The attention is always moving and highlighting different aspects of experience. That's one meaning of manasikara in Pali. The other meaning is more like: what are we interested in? What do we give attention to in a broader way in our life? Like when a small child comes up who has a cut on their thumb—you want to give attention to that, to take care of the child's wound. That's just a natural thing to do. So we could call that giving attention over a sustained period of time. Even though if we look closely, our actual momentary focus will shift from the sight of the child, to what we're going to say,

to thinking about where the band-aids are, to coming back to touch the finger, and so forth. So it has both this narrow meaning—momentary focus—and the broader meaning of what do we care about and give our energy to.

Now this word yoniso is interesting, because it's being translated here as "wise," but the original meaning, as I understand it, is like a yoni. And in Indian language—I think both Pali and Sanskrit—yoni is the female organ, and it could be translated as "womb." So I've heard this explained two different ways.

One is that this reference to the womb means caring—a kind of attention that embraces, holds, nourishes, nurtures, cares for. That's one meaning I've heard explained of yoniso by a Pali scholar. The other meaning I've heard explained—and this is Bhikkhu Bodhi's interpretation—is that it means "source." Like the womb is a source, but it's source as in: where does everything come from? Let's get to the point. This is the way Ajahn Suchito explained it. Let's get to the point with this.

So an investigation or a kind of attention that gets to the point about something. The way that Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it is careful, thorough, deliberate—that kind of meaning. And attention doesn't just mean, in the narrow sense, simply noticing what's there. But in the sense of yoniso, it means more like examination, reflection, consideration, deliberation.

In the way that Bhikkhu Bodhi explains it—and this seems to fit well—it really means letting our interest and attention settle and come to understand what's going on. Get to the point of it all. So I'm going to explain it from that perspective.

As it says in paragraph three, when one attends unwisely—without a lot of consideration, without being careful in one's looking—unarisen taints arise and arisen taints increase.

Let me give you an example of this unwise attention. I was at the gym a couple of days ago, and they have a lot of magazines on the rack, so you can pick them up and read them while you're on an exercise machine. There was this one magazine—I don't know if it was People or Us, but it was in that range—and the headline was, "Kate and Kim Due Same Day!" with an exclamation point. At first I wondered who they were talking about, but then I realized, because I read enough headlines, it's Kate Middleton and Kim Kardashian. They're both pregnant, and they're pointing to the fact their babies are due on the same day, and that's a big deal.

I thought: this is really unwise attention. Whatever journalist spent enough time on that to figure it out, make a headline of it, and put it on the cover of a national magazine—that is unwise attention. The unarisen taints arise and the arisen taints increase.

So think about how much time we spend on things that aren't of any spiritual import—that aren't for our development, that don't actually benefit our mind. All the gossip that's on the web, on televisions, all the gossip about our friends and our neighbors, the curiosity we have about other people's lives.

And then think about even the things that are important in our own lives. Let's take things like our children, or our partners, or our parents, or our jobs, or our bank accounts. These are important things, but how much of the time do we dwell on them in ways that make the taints increase? With worry, with anxiety, with regret, with longing, with desire, with frustration, with irritation.

So this sutta is calling on us to look at where we put our mental energy and how we're relating to the things we relate with. Wise attention is not just about what's a useful thing to connect with in our life. It's really about how we're connecting with it. How am I relating? We want to relate in ways that will help develop our minds, our minds and hearts.

And not in ways that will erode our minds and hearts. The taints erode our hearts, while developing wholesome qualities feeds, nourishes, strengthens, and grows our minds and hearts. The Buddha says when one attends wisely, unarisen taints do not arise and arisen taints are abandoned. That means the mind comes into a wholesome place.

So one of the reflections for a meditator is: where am I putting my attention? This is not just on the cushion, which is important, but also in our daily life. Where am I putting my attention, and am I doing it in a wise or unwise way?

We want to put our attention on things like our children and parents and partners and family members and our bank accounts and our jobs and so on. Those are important parts of life. But we don't want to do it in a way that we're stoking our anxieties, fears, regrets, self-recrimination, blame, guilt, hostility, and so on. So this is a strong calling—something that we can take as a daily life practice for a very long time. Where am I placing my attention? And how am I using my attention?

Because where we put our attention, we energize that part. That part of our life gets more cared for. It can either entangle us or it can open us to wisdom. So how are we relating to those important parts of life that have captured our attention? And how many places are we putting our attention that are not really benefiting us or anyone else? Like whether Kate and Kim are due on the same day or not.

This is a very, very big area, this whole quality of wise attention. Bhikkhu Bodhi says something like—or I think this is from one of the commentaries—unwise attention is the basis for the whole round of existence. And we can see that. Our energy goes out in unskillful ways and enmeshes us with the things we relate to in life, and out of that craving gets amplified and that becomes the ground for more attachment.

On the other hand, wise attention is really the key to liberation because when we start considering things closely with this wise attention, then we start understanding how suffering comes to be and how suffering gets released. That's really the point of wise attention. How do we harm ourselves? How do we free ourselves?

The Buddha pointed to the importance of wise attention. He was talking about the factor of right view, which is the first factor of the Eightfold Path, in many ways the most important, most liberating factor of the Eightfold Path. He said there are two key factors that cause right view to grow. One is a spiritual friend, hearing from another the way things are. The second is wise attention—two key factors for the bringing about of right view.

And then there are several suttas where the Buddha talks about how wise attention is what gives rise to the seven factors of enlightenment. And the seven factors of enlightenment are what carry one to liberation. So you could say in a way it's really the foundation of the path—what we give our attention to and how we give it.

Something else that I hadn't realized until quite late in my practice because nobody ever said it to me, but it's clearly said in the suttas: the hindrances are all fed by unwise attention. Without unwise attention, the hindrances would just shrivel.

Here's an example. This is from the Samyutta Nikaya, number 46, Sutta 2: "What is the nutriment for sensual desire? Frequently giving unwise attention to the sign of a beautiful object." Think about that. What is the nutriment for sensual desire? Frequently giving unwise attention to the sign of a beautiful object.

It doesn't say giving attention to a beautiful object because it could be that a handsome man or a really attractive woman is someone that it's appropriate to give attention to. It says frequently giving attention to the sign that is the beautiful, that which is

seen as beautiful in that person, physically attractive. Frequently giving attention to the physical attractiveness of someone is what makes it problematic. So the language here is so precise and so accurate, and we can see that.

It could be a new car. You go into a showroom, you're looking for a new car, and the Mercedes dealer is right next to the Honda dealer. And you thought you were going to come away with a Civic, but you've just looked at the C-Class Mercedes and you think, "Wow, that was so beautiful." And you go home and you keep thinking about it.

You keep thinking about how beautiful it is, and you start to feel the craving force arise. "I've got to have it," you think. Then you take out too large a loan, can't pay your heating bill for the winter, and face all those complications that come from giving too much attention to the sign of the beautiful object.

"Can you go over that distinction again between the sign and the object?" someone asks.

"The sign and the object? Right." The word here is *nimitta*, which is also used in the development of *samadhi*, but it's more general than just a *samadhi* usage. The sign of an object is its distinguishing characteristic that you zero in on.

You could meet someone and the sign they present to you—the thing you pick up on—is their wealth. You could meet someone and the sign you zero in on is their beauty. Or it could be their anger, in an off-putting way. So you focus on one particular sign about the object. It's a feature that jumps out at you, and then you frequently give attention to just that aspect. You don't see the person in their entirety. You forget the whole of it.

It's like looking at the Mercedes. If you viewed it as a whole, you'd have the impression of how much it's going to cost and what your annual budget actually is. You'd say, "It's beautiful, but it just doesn't fit." But you zero in on that one aspect and dwell on it again and again. That's what creates the hindrance.

"Is that aspect chosen to feed the ego? I mean, I choose the thing that pleases me most about that, instead of encountering the thing itself. Is there some ego behind that?"

"Yeah, there are our own biases. When we're giving a lot of attention to one sign and it's being driven by desire, there are personal biases and the self is taking root in those biases. When the grasping has happened and there's wanting, wanting, wanting, we're establishing self. There's a new becoming. The person who wants the Mercedes—the self is being born again. So there's definitely ego involved."

"What if one just appreciated the beauty of the Mercedes?"

"That's fine. Then it's totally clear. There's no hindrance at work. You could even have joy for the craftsmanship. You could take a test drive and say, 'Wow, this steers so well. I really appreciate the way they did the dashboard.' It's a beautiful thing, and I don't need it."

So let me read the next hindrance. After sense desire comes the second hindrance: aversion, or ill will.

The sutta continues: "What is the nutriment for aversion? Frequently giving unwise attention to the sign of an unattractive object."

You know somebody who's an angry person, and that's really what strikes you. You look at them and see "angry, angry," then you go home and think about that. "That person is so angry. How could they say that to me?"

Why would they do that? This kind of mental rehearsal may initially seem skillful—after all, we're trying to understand the situation. But it's the way we give attention to it over and over that builds up the aversion.

Let me share a simple example from my own experience. I was once in a meditation retreat, and I went out for my walking meditation only to find somebody in my walking path. I got very annoyed and started thinking, "Why are they in my walking path? They shouldn't be there. It's wrong of them. They should have noticed I was walking. They should have walked somewhere else and let me walk where I've been walking every time."

I kept telling myself this story, and the more I told it, the more annoyed I became at this person. As long as I was telling myself the story, I was giving unwise attention to the sign of the unattractive—the person in my path. I couldn't get free of it.

What releases us from this kind of situation is beginning to give wise attention to the experience of the moment, which is anger. In general, the hindrance tends to take us into unwise attention toward the object. Mindfulness brings us into wise attention with the emotion or the hindrance itself, and that's what can free us.

As long as we keep giving unwise attention and dwelling on the problem, we're stuck. As soon as we can turn the mindfulness to give wise attention to what we're feeling—ah, that's the way out. It may not happen immediately, but that's the way forward.

A student asks: "In other words, you bring wise attention to the unwise attention?"

I would prefer to say you bring wise attention to the hindrance itself. The hindrance is leading us to give unwise attention to the object. The wise attention needs to come to the hindrance. We feel that the hindrance is coming from the object. If I have aversion to somebody, I feel that aversion is coming from them instead of from me. So how do we turn that around?

It's simply a matter of turning the mindfulness to the aversion in oneself. Realize the aversion is here. It's something not related to that object, which is just doing what it is as it's being, even though I wish it would change. That's something I can't control. So we just allow it to be and watch our reaction to it. Being in touch with our own feelings is the most important thing.

Sometimes, of course, the person really is doing something that's not right. Consider the Tibetan monks who have been imprisoned and tortured—they know their guards are doing something truly wrong. But if they dwell on how bad it is, what the guards are doing, they'll get caught up in anger or fear. So they simply watch themselves, taking responsibility for their own heart and their own reactions.

This is something really helpful to remember about the hindrances: they are always rooted in unwise attention. If you can bring wise attention into the situation, you start to move out of the hindrance. You shrivel the hindrance when you bring wise attention to it.

This definition of wise and unwise attention is very similar to the definition of right effort—it's like one half of right effort. The definition of right effort is that arisen unwholesome states you let go of, and you guard against the arising of unarisen unwholesome states. So it's that half of right effort in relation to the taints.

The other half of right effort involves developing wholesome states and maintaining them once they have arisen.

Let us now turn to the fourth section of our readings. We have learned that there are taints that should be abandoned by seeing, by restraining, by using, by enduring, by avoiding, by removing, and by developing. The remainder of this sutta will guide us through these different approaches to working with the taints.

Let us begin with paragraph five, which addresses the first method.

"What taints, bhikkhus, should be abandoned by seeing? Here, bhikkhus, an untaught ordinary person who has no regard for noble ones and is unskilled and undisciplined in their dhamma, who has no regard for true men and is unskilled and undis-

ciplined in their dhamma, does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention and he does not attend to those things fit for attention."

This passage echoes what we discussed regarding wise attention and unwise attention. When we attend to something and the taints increase, that attention is unfit. When we attend and the taints decrease, that attention is fit. The teaching here expresses essentially the same principle, which we will explore further in paragraph six.

I want to note something significant about the opening phrase: "taints should be abandoned by seeing." Here, "seeing" translates the Pali word *dassana*. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi—and I believe he is correct—this represents a technical usage of *dassana* in the Pali texts, specifically meaning stream entry, the first stage of enlightenment. As we progress through the sutta, we will understand why he makes this connection.

In the Pali tradition, *dassana* carries this specialized meaning of seeing the unconditioned. A practitioner engages in continuous practice, developing insight and vipassana as the mind becomes increasingly clear and the factors of enlightenment mature. At a certain point, there occurs what is considered a breakthrough to the Dhamma—a direct breakthrough to the unconditioned. In this moment, one knows directly and personally the nature of the unconditioned, which marks the attainment of stream entry.

We will discover why this interpretation proves accurate as we continue. For now, let me simply point out the distinction: when "seeing" appeared earlier in paragraph three, it referred to the ordinary knowing and seeing of wise and unwise attention available to practitioners on the path. But here, it refers specifically to the achievement of the first stage of enlightenment.

Now, what constitutes things unfit for attention?

"What are the things unfit for attention that he attends to? They are things such that when he attends to them, the unarisen taint of sensual desire arises in him, and the arisen taint of sensual desire increases. The unarisen taint of being arises in him, and the arisen taint of being increases. The unarisen taint of ignorance arises in him, and the arisen taint of ignorance increases. These are the things unfit for attention that he attends to.

"And what are the things fit for attention that he does not attend to? They are things such that when he attends to them, the unarisen taint of sensual desire does not arise in him, and the arisen taint of sensual desire is abandoned."

The unarisen taint of being does not arise in him, and the arisen taint of being is abandoned. The unarisen taint of ignorance does not arise in him, and the arisen taint of ignorance is abandoned. These are the things fit for attention that he does not attend to.

By attending to things unfit for attention and by not attending to things fit for attention, the Buddha is talking about the person who has not been trained and is just letting the mind go in its habitual direction. So basically the taint of sensual desire is arising and not decreasing. This can happen if we turn our attention to those things that are the five chords of sense pleasure. The unarisen taint of becoming arises and the arisen taint increases. How can this be? If we turn our mind to what we want to become in the future with a sense of strong ego around that. And with ignorance we engage in seeing permanence, lasting happiness and self or attractiveness where they are not present. We give our energy to seeing, validating the vipallasas.

I want to go back to paragraph five for a moment. This phrase "untaught ordinary person" is common in the suttas. It appears over and over. Bhikkhu Bodhi says he now has a preferred translation for this, which is "uninstructed worldling"—someone who has not been exposed to the Dhamma. So a worldly person living by worldly values. The Pali word is puthujjana. You often will hear this in Dharma circles. People talk about "those puthujjanas."

Craving for existence is where the desire and craving come in—you're craving for existence. Craving for sense pleasures is a little different. We were talking about it during the break: someone who is the CEO of a company and every time he walks by, everybody smiles and bows and sort of grovels. He gets an ego reinforcement for that because he's really somebody. That's a kind of craving for existence. And that could be different than, say, the sensualist who really enjoys good food, good drink, massages. That person is more driven by craving for sense pleasure. The desire for being someone is under the second taint.

This other phrase, "true men," Bhikkhu Bodhi now translates as "superior persons"—gender neutral. And it also recognizes that this is someone who has followed the way of the Dhamma, developed their inner qualities more. So he's basically saying that the uninstructed worldling doesn't know what to pay attention to or how to pay attention, and on account of that, the taints arise and the arisen ones increase.

Giving attention to what we want to become in the future becomes unwise attention when there's a big sense of self around it. But if we're just planning—what do I need to learn in order to have a livelihood that will support myself and my family—that's all

very sensible. But if we think, "I'm going to be a big important person" and get a lot of ego thrill out of that, then it's moving into unwise attention. Planning for our future support can be done very wisely. It's a good thing.

Let's see in paragraph seven how one attends unwisely:

"This is how he attends unwisely: 'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past?

How was I in the past? Having been what, did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?

Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present: Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?

These questions have an almost comedic quality, like little Gertrude Stein – "What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become?" The repetitive, circular nature of this thinking reveals how the mind can become trapped in endless loops of self-inquiry.

So this is how one attends unwisely. Now these questions may sound somewhat formal and removed from our actual experience when we sit in meditation. But when we examine these patterns more closely, we recognize that much of what we do is indeed mull over the past and future.

Especially this inquiry: "How was I in the past?" We constantly examine our actions. Was I skillful? Was I unskillful? Should I have said that to that person? Should I not have said that? We look at the past often with regret and sadness – that's how the hindrances arise. We look at the future and think: What shall I do? How shall I do it? "I have to give a presentation next week to my manager – how shall I do that? What shall I be? Will I be anxious when I do that?"

If the past generates regret and sadness, future perplexity creates hope and fear. This process is mostly unconscious. It's not as if we deliberately decide to think this way – it's being driven by these underlying taints.

One student shared that after retiring a couple of months earlier, this passage made her laugh because it captured her entire inner dialogue. "I should embroider it on something," she said. It's remarkably true – our minds do go in these loops.

All this preoccupation with past and future reveals where our minds spend most of their time, even on the meditation cushion. And as the text indicates, it's all about "I" – about me and evaluating ourselves, judging ourselves. We're often trying to find a reference point: Am I okay? Am I not okay? If I compare myself to this other person, perhaps I'll get a sense of where I stand.

This provides an excellent checklist to observe in meditation – not just on the cushion, but when washing dishes or going about daily activities.

One of the comments I've read is that what really removes this kind of perplexity is seeing dependent origination. When we start to understand dependent origination, we realize it's not so much about the solid I, but about understanding the causes and effects that lead things to unfold. Then we don't have to worry so much about trying to control every little piece of it—it's going to happen based on causes and conditions.

Let's take a look at number eight. This one is for philosophy majors, but let's go ahead and go through it.

"When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him. The view 'self exists for me' arises in him as true and established. Or the view 'no self exists for me' arises in him as true and established. Or the view 'I perceive self with self' arises in him as true and established. Or the view 'I perceive not-self with self' arises in him as true and established. Or the view 'I perceive self with not-self' arises in him as true and established. Or else he has some such view as this: 'It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions. But this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.' This speculative view is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. He is not freed from suffering, I say."

To make sense of this—because otherwise it sounds too theoretical—let's go through these different views briefly.

"Self exists for me." This is considered the eternalist view—there is a self and it's ongoing.

"No self exists for me." This is not the Buddha's doctrine of anatta. The Buddhist doctrine of anatta never says "no self exists." It says "this dhamma is not self, this dhamma is not self, this dhamma is not self"—but it never says "no self exists." This view is what was called the annihilationist view in Indian philosophy at that time—there's really no self.

The next three are about "I perceive self with self," "I perceive not-self with self," "I perceive self with not-self." These recognize that there are two aspects to us—let's say simply consciousness and body. We might take both of those as being self, so the consciousness perceives the body and both of those are me. Or "I perceive not-self with self"—the consciousness is the self, but the body is not-self. Or "I perceive self with not-self"—the body is the self and the consciousness is not-self. Those are the different combinations.

This last view basically just says, "I am a self. Let's get on with it."

Of course, the Buddha doesn't land in any of those views. This paragraph is about having a view about things—a fixed view. What the Buddha describes is not a philosophical view, but rather the way to see things in order to liberate ourselves.

He says the way to see things to liberate ourselves is not to take the body as self, or feelings as self, or perception, or emotions, or consciousness - not to claim any of them as "I" or "my."

"Not to identify with anything?" someone asks.

Yes, not to identify with anything. That's the path that will lead to liberation, to seeing clearly. But to say "there is no self" - that's a view, and then there's actually, if you take a stance like that, there's somebody there doing it. So he doesn't take a stance on it. He's just telling us how to practice to see more clearly.

Let's move quickly through paragraphs nine, ten, and eleven, because I think you'll see these quite clearly.

Because a well-taught noble disciple who has regard for noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their dharma, who has regard for true persons and is skilled and disciplined in their dharma, understands what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he does not attend to those things unfit for attention, and he attends to those things fit for attention.

This is simply the other side of the paragraph about what the untaught ordinary person attends to. Here's what a skillful person does.

Paragraph ten describes what are the things unfit for attention that he does not attend to: "They are things such that when he attends to them, the unarisen taint of sensual desire arises in him, and the arisen taint of sensual desire increases." There's an ellipsis here where you understand that he's going through also what happens with the taint of being and so forth. "These are the things unfit for attention that he does not attend to."

"And what are the things fit for attention that he attends to? They are things such that when he attends to them, the unarisen taint of sensual desire does not arise in him, and the arisen taint of sensual desire is abandoned. These are the things fit for attention that he attends to. By not attending to things unfit for attention, and by attending to things fit for attention, unarisen taints do not arise in him, and arisen taints are abandoned."

This is still just the opposite of what the uninstructed worldling does.

And paragraph eleven: "He attends wisely: 'This is suffering.' He attends wisely: 'This is the origin of suffering.' He attends wisely: 'This is the cessation of suffering.' He attends wisely: 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.' When he attends wisely in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: personality view, doubt, and adherence to rules and observances. These are called the taints that should be abandoned by seeing."

This is quite a potent paragraph. What's this list he's attending to? The Four Noble Truths. He's seeing suffering, its origin, its cessation, the way leading to its cessation. So he is wisely attending to the Four Noble Truths, which is the undoing of ignorance. Ignorance is not seeing the Four Noble Truths. As wisdom is developed, it sees the Four Noble Truths. This is the point of the path.

When he attends wisely in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him. What does this mark? When these three fetters are abandoned - yes, stream entry. These are the first three of the ten fetters, and these are the three that are abandoned at stream entry. That's why it says "these are the taints that should be abandoned by seeing." That's how you know that the seeing here refers to that first moment of seeing Nibbana - seeing enlightenment - because the stream enterer has understood the cessation of suffering firsthand for the first time.

It hasn't fully released that person, but one has seen how it can happen. One has no doubt any longer that it can happen. One has walked the path and knows that the path leads to letting go of craving entirely, experiencing the unconditioned. And so doubt is eliminated because one knows for oneself the truth of the third noble truth—the end of craving—and that one has walked the path to reach it.

And personality view—Bhikkhu Bodhi says that what he likes to say now is identity view. This is basically identifying with any of the five aggregates: taking body as self, taking perceptions, feelings, mental formations, consciousness as self. One recognizes none of those constitute an enduring self because one has stepped out of them altogether. In seeing the unconditioned, one realizes that all the conditioned aspects are simply coming and going.

There's this very nice phrase that's repeated over and over in the suttas. It's not in this one, but it recurs again and again: "The spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in them. All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation." That's the indication of stream entry. That's the stock phrase that indicates stream entry. I'll say it again: "The spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in them. All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation."

So first there's the vision of the Dhamma. This is Dhamma with a capital D—the clear seeing of the Dhamma. Dhamma is often a synonym for the unconditioned, for the ultimate truth. And then, all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation. So one is seeing clearly that all conditioned things have the nature to come and go. This Dhamma is the only thing that does not have the nature to come and go. So one realizes there's no basis for identification that could endure more than momentarily.

Of course, ignorance comes back in and one forgets and one will attach again, but one has seen. So stream entry is really being described as getting a first real convincing flavor of these things. It's described as the first glimpse of the unconditioned. And it usually doesn't last long. For most people, it doesn't have the power to uproot all the fetters. The Buddha's enlightenment uprooted all the fetters with one insight. But for most people, it's more gradual than that. So the first contact, the first realization of the unconditioned uproots these three fetters.

The third fetter, adherence to rules and observances, has two senses that I know of. One is that the Buddha was teaching at a time when Brahminical culture was the religious establishment of the day. There were many texts about the rituals one had to perform, or that the priestly caste had to perform, to carry out that work of purification. And the Buddha basically said, "Sorry, rituals don't do it. Rituals will never purify one. That is not a way that the heart and mind get purified."

And the observances here—one could say that certain external practices alone could do it. There were many ascetic practitioners in the Buddha's time who thought that the way to purity was negating the body. They would spend winters in the Himalayas with no clothes. They would practice in the blazing sun and be very, very hot. They would go without water or without clothing. They would stand on one leg for hours and hours and thought that torturing the body would release the soul. The Buddha said, "No, that doesn't do it either."

So one has understood through the path that one has walked, and what's required to open the Dhamma eye—the vision of the Dhamma—that it won't be done through rituals and it can't be done through external practices. It's only a development of the mind that will lead to that, specifically the seven factors of awakening.

"Can I ask about that—by not holding on to any fixed view? I mean, this is rules and observances, but even on the path, if you hold on to any view, that will prevent you from release."

Yes, at some point one does have to let go of all the fixed views. The simile of the raft—the Buddha talked about how even Dhamma views are for the purpose of crossing over and not for the purpose of hanging on to. He says when one has crossed over, one lets go even of Dhamma views. Yes, eventually.

So these are called the taints that should be abandoned by seeing, and this seeing is meant to be insight into the unconditioned. Now, the word "taints" here is being used to describe these three fetters. So I would say that the word "taints" in this instance is being used rather loosely. Personality view is not normally considered a taint.

There are only three taints in the suttas: sense pleasures, becoming, and ignorance. So here the term is being used more loosely to describe unwholesome qualities of mind. We should understand that the definition is being expanded at this point. That's perfectly acceptable. These three fetters are all expressions, in some way or another, of sense desire, desire for becoming, and ignorance.

The three fetters mentioned here are different forms of the classical taints. I think we can move on to the next section, which I'd like to spend more time exploring: "Taints to be Abandoned by Restraining."

This passage describes how a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, abides with the eye faculty restrained. While taints, vexation, and fever might arise in one who abides with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no taints, vexation, or fever in one who abides with the eye faculty restrained. The same applies to all six faculties: ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. These are called the taints that should be abandoned by restraining.

This relates to the earlier paragraph about objects unfit for attention, though I want to make an important distinction again. It's not that there are specific objects one shouldn't give attention to—it's that there are objects one shouldn't give attention to unwisely.

What does it mean to dwell with the eye faculty restrained? We often speak of "guarding the sense doors," especially on retreat. This doesn't mean closing your eyes or avoiding all sensory contact. It doesn't mean refusing to see a beautiful sunset, hear a bird's song, or look at an attractive person. Rather, it means that when your eye is functioning, you attend closely to the mind that's receiving that impression.

This becomes clearer in another passage from Majjhima 39: "Bhikkhus, you should train thus: We will guard the doors of our sense faculties. On seeing a form with the eye, we will not grasp at its signs and features." Here, "sign" refers to the nimitta we discussed earlier—the main characteristic that jumps out at you. "Features" are the secondary qualities you notice. "We will not grasp at its signs and features. Since, if we left the eye faculty unguarded, evil unwholesome states of covetousness and grief might invade us, we will practice the way of its restraint. We will guard the eye faculty. We will undertake the restraint of the eye faculty."

This same principle applies to all six faculties, including the mind door. We watch whether covetousness and grief arise around any of the sense doors, not getting carried away even with mental objects that appear in consciousness.

That's called guarding the senses. It's not about putting blinkers on and refusing to see anything. Rather, it's about attending very closely to the mind's reaction when experiencing things through the sense doors.

If you see a violent movie, you immediately recognize that the mind will not have a wholesome reaction—it will be disturbed. In that case, you might say, "I'll watch the birds, but I won't go to this movie." You can work skillfully with the objects themselves.

There is another list of taints that are abandoned by avoiding. If you know that certain sights will be unhelpful, you simply avoid those places. If you know that certain people will be unhelpful, you avoid those people. The texts mention avoiding bad companions—so-called friends who want to lead you down an unskillful path. This generally applies to appealing things that might lead to attachment.

Here's another way of describing this practice, from Samyutta 46.6: "Having seen an agreeable form with the eye, a bhikkhu does not long for it, or become excited by it, or generate lust for it. His body is steady and his mind is steady, inwardly well composed

and well liberated. But having seen a disagreeable form with the eye, he is not dismayed by it, not daunted, not dejected, without ill will. His body is steady and his mind is steady, inwardly well composed and well liberated."

These are simply two different ways of describing how to guard the sense faculties. Whether seeing agreeable or disagreeable forms, one doesn't let them invade the mind and remain there.

"Suppose we encounter an object that we have strong aversion to, and there's intense emotion. Do we just be present with that, or is this instruction asking us to actually rein it in?"

This instruction is indeed more than just being present to what's happening. Basically, the teaching here is don't get carried away in reactivity. But sometimes one doesn't have a choice about becoming reactive. When reactivity does arise, I would say the instruction is to attend wisely to the reactive formation in oneself, rather than attending unwisely to the signs and features of the objects that provoked it. That would be wise attention in such cases.

"I'm curious about the word 'fever'—does it refer to something physiological or something else?"

I interpret it as psychological fever, but it's difficult to know definitively. You would use your own practice to determine what creates stability and equanimity.

The remainder of the sutta is fairly self-explanatory. It covers taints to be abandoned by using, by enduring, by avoiding, by removing, and by developing. In the section on developing, it essentially lists the enlightenment factors. When we develop the enlightenment factors, unwholesome states do not arise.

Regarding removal: "What taint should be abandoned by removing? An arisen thought of sensual desire, an arisen thought of ill will, an arisen thought of cruelty. He does not tolerate arisen unwholesome states."

He abandons them, removes them. So these are the three unwholesome motivations —desire, ill will, and cruelty are the three wrong intentions. As far as possible, if one has a thought like that, one doesn't dwell on it, one lets it go. Sometimes the mind is compulsive and can't let go, but the instruction is to try to let go. And if one can't let go, then one tries to be wisely attentive to it as far as possible. That's the best we can do—to be mindful. But the encouragement is to let go if we can.

So it's really abandonment. A synonym for abandon is let go. Think of it as let go. And a synonym for let go sometimes is let be, if we can't let it go. Sometimes let go means make it go away, and that has too much of an aversive push. So then we need to say let it be.

Let us wrap up our class here. May your wise attention and careful consideration of these themes recommended by the text be helpful for your own practice, for the removal and decreasing of unwholesome states. May that help everyone you come in contact with and everyone they come in contact with, so that our work together today be dedicated for the welfare and happiness of all beings everywhere.

Thank you all for coming. I enjoyed being with you and enjoyed our dialogue.

CHAPTER 278

Sutta Study Class Series: Majjhima Nikāya; All the Taints, Part 1 of 2

Guy Armstrong · 1h02

In this comprehensive study of the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), Guy Armstrong examines one of the most fundamental teachings on the mental forces that perpetuate suffering. The sutta addresses the three āsavas (taints or effluents): kāmāsava (taint of sense desire), bhavāsava (taint of becoming/existence), and avijjāsava (taint of ignorance). Armstrong provides detailed etymology of the word āsava, explaining why various translators render it as taints, cankers, influxes, or effluents, and distinguishes these fundamental mental forces from other Buddhist lists like the hindrances or three poisons.

The talk explores how sense desire operates through the five cords of sensual pleasure, examining our cultural and economic investment in gratifying sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. The discussion of bhavāsava reveals our deep craving for existence and becoming, both on a life-to-life level and moment-to-moment as we grasp for identity and meaning. The exploration of avijjāsava (ignorance) goes beyond conceptual misunderstanding to reveal the fundamental misperception of the Four Noble Truths and three characteristics, introducing the four vipalāsas (distortions) that turn reality upside down in our perception.

This first part establishes the foundation for understanding these deep-rooted mental patterns, setting up practical methods for their restraint and eventual destruction through wise attention and the cultivation of insight. The teaching emphasizes how these taints operate continuously, creating the web of suffering that binds us to saṃsāra.

So good afternoon, everyone. My name's Guy Armstrong. I'm one of the teachers here at Spirit Rock, and I'll be with you this afternoon for Sutta Study of Majjhima Nikāya No. 2. I appreciate all of you turning up on a sunny weekend afternoon. Not only is it a sunny weekend afternoon, it's Father's Day, so it may have been a sacrifice. I appreciate everybody coming here to study the Dhamma.

I hope you have a copy of the handout which is on the table as you came in—the copy of Sutta number two from the Majjhima. By virtue of where it's placed in the Majjhima, we can assume that this is a fairly important discourse. And because it's titled "All the Taints," it's got quite a comprehensive significance. As we get into it, I think you'll see there's a lot here.

The title in Pali is *Sabbāsava Sutta*, which means discourse on all what are being translated as the taints—discourse on all the *āsavas*. The word for all is *sabba*. You might have heard something like the chant "*Sabbe sattā sukhī hontu*"—*sabba* means all, and the word *āsava* is being translated here as taint.

So before we get into the gist of the sutta, let's talk about this word *āsava*. It's a very important word in the teachings in the suttas, and the way it's being translated as taint is not quite satisfactory, so let's look at the etymology. Just to remove the curiosity factor, the *āsavas* are three in number in this sutta: the *āsava* of sense desire, the *āsava* of being, and the *āsava* of ignorance. We'll get to the significance of those three and how they play out.

The word itself is difficult to translate into English satisfactorily. The word *sava* means flow, and the long *ā* in front of it means either in or out—you can't tell from just the word whether it's meant to be in or out. So it either means something flowing in or it means something flowing out, and different translators will take it in different ways. But in any case, it means flows. In the human mind and heart, it means mental qualities that are coming into our experience. So you could say they're flowing into the mind, or you can say because the mind includes them as potentials, when they arise they're flowing out of the mind.

Some translators would take this *ā* to mean in, and they might translate it as inflows or influxes. Last time I heard Bhikkhu Bodhi speak, I think he likes the word influxes now. But at this time, which was almost twenty years ago, he was calling them taints. The translators who like the word *ā* to mean out might call them outflows, or I really like Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation "effluent," because of the resonance with sewage systems. Because these flows are not beautiful—these are impurities of the mind and heart, taints as they're described here.

One of the earliest translators, I think Bhikkhunāṇamoli, used the word taint. Another translator translated it as cankers. So you get the sense these are not flattering descriptions of what's in the mind.

Of course, the Buddha had lots of different lists. This is one of the lists. He had lots of different lists for the unbeautiful qualities in the mind. What are some others that you're familiar with? The hindrances is a set. The three poisons. Defilements, more or less synonymous with the three poisons. The fetters. Underlying tendencies. Another list.

Each of these lists has a different context or connotation. The hindrances are especially the ones that arise when we turn our attention to meditation. We come into the present moment and develop the quality of mindfulness. The five hindrances are the forces that come to oppose that. The defilements—the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion—are usually used around the quality of action. It can be action of mind, action of speech, action of body. So they're the influences on action. They're described as the roots of the unwholesome. And because of their relation to action, they're closely tied to karma, and they have an ethical component to them.

So this list of the taints—what is this about?

This is the list I think that tries to address the most fundamental deep urges in the heart and mind that give rise to our bondage and suffering. In some ways here the Buddha is pointing to the most fundamental forces that are within us and that lead us into difficulty.

Here's one place where the Buddha describes the taints, from Majjhima 36. He says, "These qualities defile, bring renewal of being, give trouble. They give trouble. Ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, aging, and death."

So these are such fundamental forces that we can assume they're operating most of the time in us. Sometimes more actively, sometimes in a more underlying way, but they're there most of the time. So we want to give close attention to what all of these things are. And this sutta gives us some practical ways of understanding how to deal with them. That's the beauty of it. The Buddha isn't just going to point us to sources of suffering in the sutta. He's also going to tell us how we can work with these forces.

Let's take a look at the first paragraphs. As we've done before, I like to have people read these sections as we go around.

"Thus I have heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was living at Savatthi in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's park. There he addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Bhikkhus.' 'Venerable Sir,' they replied. The Blessed One said this:"

This is a setting that we've visited before in this series. Savatthi was home to one of the kings, King Pasenadi, and it was in Kosala. It was one of the areas the Buddha frequented a lot. He spent something like twenty-five rains retreats in Savatthi. Anathapindika is the rich merchant who was a benefactor and donated the land of Jeta's Grove that became one of his principal dwelling places. You can go today and visit this place in northern India in the town of Shravasti, as it's called in Sanskrit, and walk where the

Buddha is said to have walked, sit where the Buddha is said to have sat. The "Thus have I heard" indicates that it's Ananda who's reciting the sutta, his attendant for many years.

"Bhikkhus, I shall teach you a discourse on the restraint of all the taints. Listen and attend closely to what I shall say." "Yes, Venerable Sir," the bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

So we start off and he announces that he's going to teach this sutta on the restraint of the taints. When one is restraining something, the image is like a wild horse that wants to pull every which direction, and one puts some reins on that horse in order to bring it onto a useful and workable track. So you can think of this as reigning in, controlling, managing these forces that are within us all so that the wildness eventually becomes tamed. This is an image the Buddha uses a lot in the discourses—of taming the mind or taming individuals. And what we need to be tamed from are the forces of these taints, these asavas.

This is the introduction. And then in the very next paragraph, it moves to a different topic:

"Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of taints is for one who knows and sees, not for one who does not know and see. And for one who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention. When one attends unwisely, unarisen taints arise and arisen taints increase. When one attends wisely, unarisen taints do not arise and the arisen taints are abandoned."

So in the first paragraph, he says we're going to learn how to restrain the taints. And in this second paragraph, there's a different emphasis, which is the destruction of the taints. You can understand this as a developmental process. When we begin in practice, we need to restrain the taints in order to let the mind come to some degree of calm and peace. But eventually, as the mind becomes more developed, more peaceful, and is on the track where the enlightenment factors are being brought into maturity, then in the fullness of that, the path leads to the destruction of these qualities. So for one who is fully freed, fully enlightened, these qualities no longer arise in the mind. They are destroyed as part of the process of the path.

And when you read in the sutta that someone has realized the destruction of the taints, that's a synonym for full enlightenment. This term appears frequently—the Pali is āsavakkhaya, meaning destruction of taints. This represents the fruition, the goal, the very aim of the Buddha's teachings: that one comes to the destruction of these forces.

Now, there's a very important element in this paragraph about how we progress, but before we explore that, I want to spend more time examining what these three taints are that we're going to look at restraining and eventually uprooting.

The first is the taint of sense desire or sense pleasures—in Pali, kāmāsava. This is the taint of sensuality, referring to the way our minds gravitate toward what's pleasurable. We'll return to explore this more deeply, but that introduces it.

The second is bhavāsava, translated here as the taint of being, though what it really means is desire for existence. When Bhikkhu Bodhi explains it, he describes it as the craving for existence. Bhava means being or existence, so the shorthand is the taint of being. You could also translate it as becoming—wanting to be something—or understand it as the craving for existence.

The third āsava is ignorance—the Pali term avijjā. Combined with taint, it's avijjāsava. In Sanskrit, it's avidyā.

Is this the same as the unwholesome root of delusion? It's very similar—you could say it's more or less synonymous with delusion, though they're used in slightly different contexts. Delusion appears in the three poisons as an immediate quality of mind that leads us to act in particular ways, while ignorance is seen as an underlying quality that turns the whole process astray.

Where else are you familiar with this term avijjā or ignorance? From what other list do you know it? It's the first link in dependent origination. This really points to its primacy in the unfolding of the entire chain of suffering.

Let's examine each of these three in more detail so we understand where the sutta is directing us.

Kāmāsava, the taint of sense desire, is essentially craving for agreeable contact. This term "sense desire" usually refers to the five physical senses, not typically the sense door of the mind, though it can include that as well. Generally, it encompasses what the Buddha describes as the five cords of sensual pleasure: pleasant sight, pleasant sound, pleasant smell, pleasant taste, and pleasant touch.

I like to think about this in economic terms. Where there's significant interest, there's substantial money involved. Take pleasant sights—what industries can you think of that are founded on gratifying our sense of sight? Media, advertising, clothing, cosmetics, movies. All of these are designed to provide human beings pleasant visual experiences, and we spend billions of dollars annually gratifying this sense of sight in myriad ways.

Pleasant sounds follow the same pattern.

Music—the entire music industry, both live and recorded. Think of all the symphony halls, all the rock concerts, all the CDs and MP3s in the world. These exist solely to gratify that sense of beautiful hearing contact.

Moving to smell—some food industries serve this purpose, but primarily we see perfume and cosmetics. These industries exist purely for smell, nothing else. Deodorants, air fresheners—Febreze has made considerable money from our need for pleasant smells. Incense, soaps. Yes, soaps serve other functions, but the scent element is embedded in there for marketing reasons. You receive an advertising brochure in a magazine and it's scented for various purposes. This represents a substantial industry.

For taste, we have the entire food industry. Not necessarily for nutritional value, but purely for taste. Chocolate comes to mind immediately. The whole food industry—restaurants, food stores, what we prepare at home. Not to mention wine, fruit juices, soda pop. Soda pop has virtually no nutritional value, yet represents a billion-dollar industry. Wine, alcohol, spirits—these constitute a huge industry with vast amounts of money invested.

Of course, food is necessary for survival, so to some extent this is natural. But we could all eat tofu and brown rice every day and adequately address our survival needs. However, that wouldn't satisfy our taste desires. So billions upon billions of dollars go into providing delicious tastes.

Finally, touch—bodily sensations. What industries serve this? Clothing, for comfort and texture beyond mere warmth. Massage therapy. The sex industry, which is much larger than commonly acknowledged because much operates as an underground economy. Prostitution, pornography—this represents perhaps the biggest industry for touch. Though I'm uncertain how it compares to the massage industry, it's certainly substantial.

Notice how these industries interconnect—pornography serves both sight and touch, demonstrating how our sense desires often overlap and reinforce one another.

The Buddha actually addressed this possibility quite directly. He described different types of people who encounter meditative states, and one category he identified were those who become what we might call "jhana junkies" - practitioners who discover these pleasant concentrated states and then just want to keep returning to them without progressing further.

The Buddha's perspective was that while these states are indeed wholesome and beneficial, they're not the ultimate goal. They're more like a rest stop on a long journey - a wonderful place to pause and refresh yourself, but not where you want to set up permanent residence.

What makes the difference is understanding the purpose of these states. The jhanas and other pleasant meditative experiences serve multiple functions on the spiritual path. They provide the mind with a taste of what's possible when we're not caught up in the usual cycles of craving and aversion. They offer deep rest and restoration. And importantly, they give us a stable platform from which to develop insight into the nature of experience itself.

But if we stop there - if we just keep cycling back to pleasant states without cultivating wisdom - we're missing the deeper transformation that meditation can offer. It's a bit like someone who discovers they love the feeling of being physically fit, so they spend all their time admiring themselves in the mirror rather than actually engaging with life from that place of fitness.

The Buddha taught that true freedom comes not from finding a pleasant place to hide, but from understanding the fundamental nature of all experiences - pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. This understanding, or insight, is what leads to the kind of peace that doesn't depend on maintaining any particular state of consciousness.

So while jhana addiction is certainly possible, the Buddha would say it represents an incomplete understanding of the path. The real invitation is to use these states as stepping stones toward greater wisdom and freedom.

Well, number one, he wouldn't say it's a bad thing. Because when the mind is in a jhana state, one of the terms is that it's secluded from the hindrances. So one is dwelling in quite a wholesome place. One hasn't done unskillful things to get there. One hasn't robbed a grocery store to get the money to pay for a heroin fix, for example. One has had to develop moment-to-moment attention and mindfulness, connection to the body in order to reach that state. So one has employed wholesome means to get there and one has arrived at a wholesome place. And so that is a good thing.

Now if one stops one's practice there, that's unfortunate because one has the foundation to go further with insight, but stopping there I don't see as a bad outcome. One has samatha, one doesn't have vipassana—one has samatha. One hasn't uprooted the kilesas or the asavas, but one has suspended the hindrances temporarily.

It also just seems impossible. I mean, my experience of impermanence is that you get there and you think, oh, I'll just hang out here. And you may think that, but... you know, I don't worry about it because I don't see this as a real possibility.

You're absolutely right. What turns these samatha experiences into vipassana is the reflection on impermanence. When one exits—as one has to—from a jhana state, one reflects on the impermanent nature of that state, and that very reflection leads one to see the dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of that conditioned state, and therefore to spark the urge to become free from dukkha altogether. That is the way it's supposed to work. The truth is that it works that way for most people. Most people can't hang out in the jhana states for very long at a time.

There's a funny story that Ajahn Jumnian tells. And the other point is the jhana states don't uproot the hindrances or kilesas or asavas—they just suspend them. So he had a nun whom he had trained who was very good at concentration. One of the higher stages of concentration, one can sit for seven days at a time without coming out, without needing to eat, without needing to move. And this nun that he had trained was able to do that. She could enter, with a resolve, one of the higher jhanas, stay in meditation posture for seven days, and then come out. She had to give herself the resolve to exit before she went in, or she might not have come out. So going in, one says, "May I abide here for seven days," and then at the end comes out.

And then he said she would go around the monastery complaining about what all the people were doing because her aversion hadn't really been touched by this experience. She'd gone into this very pleasant space for seven days. She came out and resumed her aversive habits of mind because they hadn't been either understood or uprooted or restrained, we might say.

So whenever jhanas are taught, teachers usually point to this risk that one gets too fascinated by the pleasure of the jhana. But in actual practice, most people that I know of move through that and see the limitation and are more interested in the vipassana or the insight practice that follows. So I haven't seen too many people in our circle get caught up in that, but it's a possibility.

But I do appreciate you bringing this other word, addiction, because this is a relationship that does develop to the five types of sense pleasure. And you could say in small ways, we're all addicted to those sense pleasures. I mean, most of us are. I am. When I go on a retreat, I miss the comforts of my home. I miss the food that I want. I miss the couch that I like to sit on. I miss my books or music. You know, I miss things. So to me that's a sign I'm going through a little bit of withdrawal when I go on retreat. That's a little bit of a sign of some addiction.

And then some people get very addicted, build their whole lives around a drug that makes them feel good, or money and the different things that it can buy, or sex, or people looking up to them if they're in a position of power—there's some gratification there. So addiction accompanies—is one of the real risks of these five kinds of sense pleasure.

So let me read some passages from the suttas that deal with the Buddha's advice, because this is an area that is an important part of the training, an important part of the practice. "The eye delights in forms, takes delight in forms, rejoices in forms. That has been tamed by the Tathagata, guarded, protected, and restrained. And he teaches the Dhamma for its restraint." So we'll come to some more passages later. But the Buddha teaches a lot about how we live in the world with our five senses open and we don't get caught in the things of the world through attachment.

Because this is the source of our bondage. One of the sources is we get caught in our enmeshment and attachment to the five kinds of sense pleasure. So how do we guard against that? We'll return to this question later in this sutta.

The second taint is the taint of being - *bhavasava* - which Bhikkhu Bodhi glosses as a craving for existence. Just consider how widespread this is. How many people do you know who don't care whether they live or die? Honestly, people who are engaged in the activity of living. I know when people are starting to die, they will surrender and say, "I'm ready to go." And there are people who develop a hatred for life or a fear of life and want to commit suicide to end it. But for people who are engaged in life, do you know any who don't have a desire to keep going? It's pretty rare.

Most people who are engaged in life don't want to die. You see this very clearly in the animal realm. Animals do not want to die. This force in us, exactly like the animal realm, is a craving to continue to exist. According to the Buddha, this is part of the mental urges that lead us after death to take another birth.

I may have mentioned this in an earlier class, but on my first three-month retreat, someone I got to know told me she went up to Joseph Goldstein, who was the teacher, and grabbed him in the hallway very urgently, saying, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean here on this retreat or here at all in this life?" She said, "Why are we here at all?" And Joseph said, "Well, it's because you wanted to see and hear and smell and taste and touch."

This mixes with the first taint. We want these pleasant experiences of the five senses, and in order to have them, we have to be in a body. Notice the five sense doors are physical. If we aren't in a body, we can't have these five pleasant kinds of contact. So

this deep craving for existence goes along with this craving for sense contact and sense pleasures. When we think about letting go - really letting go - part of what we would let go of is contact with the world. That's a very, very deep renunciation. Very hard to do.

A student asked: "This craving for existence - which I assume could be the next moment as well as your whole life, this craving to be born into the next moment, not being here - this is something you can observe. When you see that happening unconsciously, the one who's watching that... we could say maybe we have the ego that wants to be reborn. Then you can see that happening and relax with it."

Yes. This craving for what we call renewed becoming happens not only on a life-to-life level, but moment-to-moment. The way we establish the self in each new moment is by taking hold of something. Every time we take hold of something, we establish ourselves in relationship to it. There is a craving for that - to take a view, to take a stand, to be an owner of, to be in relation to. By grasping, we get born over and over again in the course of a day.

You can see that craving come: "I want to be something. I want to become something. I'm going to do..." This is sometimes called becoming. Even though it can appear as an act of wanting to do something, it's actually wanting to be the doer.

You can see this happening moment by moment, and if you can relax - what relaxing really means is stop grasping - then that relaxes the becoming. We're taking a new birth in the very act of taking hold of something. We are becoming again, coming into the now again through grasping.

But it is basically future-oriented. We want to become something in that way.

"I don't quite understand how this fits into the five taints, but it seems to me that a lot of our obsessing and craving and clinging is around relationship, around love, longing for love, arguing with people in our minds, and just always grasping to get people to love us so that we feel appreciated. How does that fit into the five taints?"

The question is about how our desire for relationship and connectedness fits into the taints. I want to make two sides of this. On one side, there's a natural and healthy interest in connectedness that comes out of metta and compassion. I think there's a wise way that we connect that's not related to the taints.

But there's also what we might call a neurotic or insecure way that we relate that is based on this taint of craving for becoming. I feel it in my own experience as wanting to be affirmed as somebody, or as somebody who's important to someone else. When I feel that insecurity and that need, someone else can provide that by recognizing me, by affirming me, by stating that I'm valuable and important.

"Yes, exactly. And you can go into a mental whirlwind around that."

"Yes, especially if it's not provided."

So what is this really? It's wanting to be. Wanting to be born in some way. Wanting to take a birth as someone who is important, valued, esteemed.

One of the difficulties of retreat is that we give up those contacts. We're not having those affirmations, the strokes, throughout the day. And so on retreat, we often start to feel the inadequacy, the vulnerability, the not being loved, the lack of self-esteem. It's one of the things that comes out strongly when we're in silence. That shows what we're looking for in social interaction that are driven by need.

So that's the taint of becoming, wanting to be. Psychologically, it seems to be about wanting to be something solid, trying to find some solid ground in this world which is impermanent, selfless, empty. On some level, we've intuited that emptiness. Early on, we've intuited that impermanence and emptiness.

When I was a teenager and somebody told me that the way out of my insecurity was just to be myself, I didn't know what myself was. That just threw me into more emptiness. I couldn't find myself. That wasn't helpful at all for me. It exposed the emptiness that I was trying to get away from in the first place.

I think we've all intuited that. And so we're looking for a form of self, a form of self-identity to fill that up. This is all part of the craving for existence. In its deepest form, it keeps us being born again and again—being born, dying, being born, dying, over and over.

The third taint is in some ways the most interesting: the taint of ignorance, avijjāsava. This is that fundamental force forming the first link of dependent origination. This is not ignorance of facts. It's not a conceptual kind of ignorance. It's not about not knowing who the president of Iran is now. Did you notice that there was a new election and the most moderate candidate got elected with a majority of the vote? Very interesting.

But it's not about knowing facts in the world—what's the population of the world right now, what's coming with global warming. It's not about knowing facts. It's not even about knowing Buddhist facts. It's about not deeply understanding the way things are.

The simplest definition is not understanding the Four Noble Truths. This is expressed in the suttas a few times as the very definition of ignorance—not understanding the Four Noble Truths.

Well, is there anybody here who doesn't understand the Four Noble Truths? We've all studied them, right?

There's a truth of suffering, the cause is craving, the end of it is the end of craving, and the way to it is the Eightfold Path. We all know that, right? We all understand that.

Well, knowing it intellectually and really looking at it are different things. That's what is being pointed to with this fact of ignorance. We may even know it conceptually very well. We might be able to explain it to people and teach it, but we keep getting deceived by dukkha, don't we? We don't see the truth of impermanence, so we think that things may offer a lasting happiness, so we keep taking them up.

The only reason we keep holding on is we think something's going to provide a lasting security in a changing world. So as long as we're keeping on grasping, we haven't really understood the Four Noble Truths. It hasn't penetrated deeply enough. So that's why we need to examine these truths over and over and over in all aspects of our experience so that we see them again and again everywhere we turn.

Another way to understand ignorance is not seeing the three characteristics. Again, we don't see the impermanence, so we miss the dukkha. Not understanding the full nature of impermanence, we think that we continue. We think there's a self here that continues over time. This is an important association between the self and time.

It's not obvious that the concept of "I" implies time, but it does. If it didn't, why would you worry about your own death? You would say, "I'm not going to be there." Woody Allen had this great line. He said, "I don't mind about death, I just don't wanna be there when it happens." If you understand self in the right way, you won't be there when it happens. Another you will be there, but this you won't be there, so why worry about it? But it's not that simple, of course. We think the "I" extends over time, so we think it is this "I" that will die.

So not understanding the three characteristics is synonymous with not understanding the cause of suffering and the release from suffering. We don't understand impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and the truth of not-self. These tie in with a nice little teaching that doesn't show up in a lot of places, but it's a very intriguing teaching that can be developed further than we've brought it out so far in the West, called the Four Vipallāsa. The reference is Aṅguttara 4, Sutta 49, because there are four of these things.

The Buddha said these are four distortions of perception, thought, and view. This is not just happening on one level. We see something wrongly and then that turns into a thought about it. We dwell on it with thought—that's a second level. And then we turn those thoughts into a view—that's the third level which solidifies it. So vipallāsa has all three of these levels.

The word itself has been translated as distortion or illusion or hallucination. The literal meaning, the etymology of the word, is to turn upside down. We've turned things upside down in the way we see reality. And we do this in four different ways.

I mention this because it's another way of thinking about ignorance, very close to what we've already talked about. These four distortions are that we see something as permanent, which is impermanent. Part of what this is doing is making explicit the other side of the three characteristics. We see something as satisfactory or lasting happiness, which is unsatisfactory. We see something as self, which is not-self.

The fourth is quite interesting. We see something as attractive, which is actually not attractive. Or you could say we see something as beautiful, which is actually not beautiful. This one is mostly used for sense pleasures. We think sense pleasures are the best route to happiness. An uninstructed person will see sense pleasures as the surest route to happiness, really sometimes the only route to happiness. But when looked at with wisdom...

we see that the other side of that is disappointment, unhappiness, and then craving for more. The cycle of addiction is a really good pointer to the true dynamic of sense pleasures.

The way I look at them now as a lay person, because lay people are not told to stay away from sense pleasures entirely—we have sense pleasures in our lives—is that it's not to become fixated on them. It's to continue to understand the ways in which they're unsatisfactory. Then I think we'll have a healthy relationship to them.

"Would the first step be to recognize the pleasure in experience and label it as this pleasurable experience?"

Yes. And that will allow some freedom. As far as recognizing the unsatisfactory nature, that's another step of watching, observing.

You could say something more about that. The Buddha, when he talked about sense pleasures, often talked about them in terms of three things: gratification, danger, and escape. The gratification acknowledges the pleasure that's there. The danger acknowledges the risk—basically, if we become addicted to them and think we need them for our well-being, then we're going to be very unhappy. And the escape is not to hold on, not to cling to them.

Sense pleasures come the Buddha's way and come even to renunciates. They often get good accommodations, good meals, fine clothes. As a monk, you can even get fascinated by your robes—the quality of the cloth, the dye job, how even the color is, how appealing the color is.

When I was a monk in Burma, the last time I was ordained, toward the start of the rains retreat, a layperson came and offered to the monastery a set of robes for every monk out of very fine cotton that was dyed almost purple. It was almost like the sweaters that you all are wearing today. When all the monks put on their purple robes together, we were really sharp. We all lined up for alms food, and you could have just saluted that band. It was very lovely.

So even in the renunciate life, one can become attached to the sense pleasures that one has. It's just really to keep an eye on the pleasure of it and the limitation of it.

These vipallāsas point out the danger of seeing things as permanent, as sources of lasting happiness, as self, and as attractive. When we see the danger in sense pleasures, they lose some of their allure. It's not that we shouldn't enjoy them, can't enjoy them, don't enjoy them. They don't have to make us bound if we are wise in our relationship to them.

This is a poem that follows at the end of this sutta from the Aṅguttara on the vipallāsas:

"Beings resort to wrong views. Their minds deranged, their perceptions twisted. Such people are bound by the yoke of Māra and do not reach security from bondage. Beings continue in saṃsāra, going to birth and death. Having heard the Dhamma, wise people regain their sanity. By the acquisition of right view, they overcome all suffering."

"Beings resort to wrong views"—that's pointing to the way the vipallāsas go from a perception to a thought to a view or a belief. And then the Buddha describes such people as having their minds deranged. That's strong language. Our minds have been put off track, turned upside down by not understanding.

One way to think about sense pleasures is to compare them to the promise of the path. The path can give true lasting happiness and peace. Seen from that vantage point, sense pleasures are like a consolation prize. If you don't develop the qualities of the path and find real happiness, then there are these sense pleasures to keep us gratified along the way. Of course, that's what our Western society offers people—it offers food and drink and media and music and television to provide the consolation prize to true deep spiritual happiness.

Ignorance, as we mentioned earlier, is a synonym for delusion, or the Pali word for delusion is moha. But ignorance is often considered to be something more fundamental or the more fundamental side of the force of delusion. With ignorance, we often get the idea that it's just something sort of dimming our view a little bit—that we're just not quite seeing things right, but we're just a little bit off.

But it's more sinister than that. Ignorance weaves a web that is constantly misleading us. It's not just like a dimming of the light. It is sending us in a completely wrong direction, and it's doing it more or less all the time. You notice how when you try to sit in meditation and think, "Oh, I should just sit and be at peace..."

The body's at peace. Why can't the mind be at peace? But the mind runs on with ten million different kinds of concern. Those concerns are our ignorance weaving its web again and again, saying you need to be worried about this, don't forget about that, keep an eye on this. And they have a way of establishing the self and all of its concerns again and again. These messages that thoughts are putting out beguile us and lead us away from the promise of the path, but we just take it for granted.

We simply say, "Oh, that's what the mind does." And we don't see that it's an active force that's taking us away from the Dhamma, away from the possibility of freedom. I gave a talk on this that's up on Dharma Seed. If you're interested in this aspect, I think it's called "Impulses Come from Ignorance." If you go to my page and search for "impulses" and "ignorance," that talk should come up.

If you remember the chain of dependent origination, *avijjā*, ignorance, is the first link. Do you remember the second link? Mental formation, *saṅkhāra*. That refers to this busy, active nature of thoughts and emotions that takes us out of the present moment

and leads us astray. So the way it's said in the Pali is *avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā*—ignorance gives rise to conditioned impulses, karmic impulses. It's weaving this web all the time.

That's why it's very striking when we step out of ignorance briefly. It's rare that we step out of ignorance, but if we step out briefly, there's a shock when it comes back in and that motor starts up again. All the engine of self-concern starts up again. It's like falling out of heaven into earthly life again.

So this restlessness that's in the mind that we encounter when we try to meditate is a potent force. Even though it's just one of the five hindrances and sits right next to sleepiness and doesn't look like that big a deal, restlessness does not go away until full liberation. It's one of the last fetters.

**Student*: I have a question related to that. Can you speak a little bit about the physical aspect of that? Because deep in meditation I think I can feel that very subtle stress. Sometimes I even feel how it's holding me or preventing me from completely relaxing.

**Teacher*: Yes, a question about the physical side of restlessness. I think what's happened, especially being in the West today, everything is so fast-paced. There's so much stimulation in our life that we go through years and the body can't take it all in. The body is vibrating at a higher rate than is healthy, in the West especially.

If you go to Asian countries or more traditional indigenous cultures, you'll feel people are slower and they have their feet on the ground. Their bodies just don't vibrate. They talk more slowly. The bodies don't vibrate at as high a rate.

This energy that comes up in Western culture so much—we still have to function. We can't let it be like that all the time because it makes too much movement in the mind. That's where tension comes into the body, I think. We want to control that strong energy, so we tense, and then we can do our job. But we come to retreat, we start to relax a little, and then we find the body is still wound up. It takes quite a bit of time in meditation for the body to lose some of that wound-up energy.

When we talk about *samatha*, which is often translated as serenity, there are *samatha* and *vipassanā* effects of meditation. The serenity that needs to come in is both of the mind—that the mind slows down—but also that the body becomes more serene by letting go of some of that stored-up overstimulated energy.

Student: What I also think I feel sometimes during meditation is this place somewhere deep inside me that I think is ignorance, that's kind of looking for something. Maybe a little more fundamental than that stress you talked about—it's a little bit of vigilance.

Teacher: It's like we've looked for what can possibly threaten, what could harm us. It's an animal survival mechanism that we're always on the lookout for danger. In meditation, at some point, I think we all come upon that vigilant part of personality that's looking for "Is anything going to threaten?" And that does prevent us from relaxing.

But if we just open to that and feel that, wisdom—wisdom is very important here—can start to see, "Oh, that's not necessary." And it can let that relax also. That's something one has to go through in calming the mind, another layer.

Student: Thank you.

So we've been sitting for a little over an hour and a quarter, and I think this might be a nice time for a break. I think we'll end at four today. I've found in doing these classes that it's hard to keep our attention on the suttas for more than about two and a half hours.

So I think we'll probably plan to end about four o'clock. I think it said on the schedule four-thirty, but I found that's a little too long. So let's have a fifteen-minute break now, and we'll come back for one more hour.

CHAPTER 279

Deepening in Emptiness

Guy Armstrong · 1h06

Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of emptiness (suññatā) as the central thread running through the entire Buddhist path. Drawing from the Cūḷasuññata Sutta (MN 121) and insights from Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, he examines both the emptiness of self (anattā) and the emptiness of phenomena. The talk investigates how our meditation practice naturally moves from getting caught in mental proliferation (papañca) - driven by craving (taṇhā), views (diṭṭhi), and conceit (māna) - toward seeing the insubstantial nature of all conditioned phenomena (saṅkhāra-dukkha). Armstrong explains how understanding impermanence gradually wears away the gravitational pull of self-clinging, even as deeply conditioned volitional formations (saṅkhāra) may persist. He guides two meditations: first examining the self-centered nature of our thinking patterns, then exploring a practice of 'abiding in emptiness' through awareness of boundless space. This intermediate teaching is particularly valuable for practitioners who have glimpsed the truth of not-self yet still experience the arising of habitual reactive patterns, offering both understanding and practical tools for continued liberation.

This talk was given at Insight Meditation South Bay. For more information and a schedule of our events, visit the Insight Meditation South Bay website at www.imsb.org. For information about online programs, visit the Bodhi Courses website at www.bodhicourses.org. Bodhi is spelled B-O-D-H-I.

Our topic for tonight is titled "Unfolding in Emptiness," or you could also call this "Emptying"—either one as you like. We're going to do a quick overview of some of the facets of the unfolding of emptiness through our dharma path. We could talk all night and probably a whole weekend just on this topic, but we're going to condense it and hit some of the high points.

We're going to offer two guided meditations: one at the beginning, followed by a dharma talk, and then another guided meditation toward the end. In the last part of the evening, I want to allow plenty of time for comments, questions, and discussion for you all to join in.

I should mention that I'm not used to teaching at night in this room—I'm in my office. I'm not quite sure how the lighting will be. I've got as many lights on as I can find, but if we have to call the game on account of darkness, well, that's just one of the things that happens in the springtime. At least you can hear me if it gets dark.

Let's begin with a meditation. Please sit as you would for your own meditations. Sit comfortably in a relaxed way, but also feel an uprightness in your body so that the spine is reasonably straight. Feel some erectness through the upper part of the body, which brings in a sense of alertness and energy. At the same time, you can let your weight drop into the sitting base. Know that the earth holds you and supports you, and you can rest there.

If you feel comfortable in your sitting posture, you can let your eyes gently close. If you're not comfortable having your eyes closed, you're welcome to keep them open.

Take as your first meditation focus the body in the sitting posture. Have the sense that your awareness pervades the whole body, that you could direct your attention anywhere in the body and feel sensations or an absence of sensation in that part of the body. You can check through the head, the shoulders and arms, the back, the chest and belly, the hips, and the legs. Awareness is found throughout the body. You can notice either sensation or a lack of it anywhere you'd like to direct the attention.

Sometimes we like to take the whole body posture as an anchor or a focus in mindfulness practice. See if we can take in the whole body posture with one look. We may not get it all, and that's fine, but have a sense that the awareness can spread out a bit and take in a good part of the body in sitting. Rest with your attention to some degree on the whole body posture.

As you're connecting with the body in sitting, begin to notice what happens when you breathe. Every time you breathe in, certain sensations arise in the body. Every time you breathe out, other sensations happen. Maintain this overall awareness of the body in sitting and just feel the sensations that come from breathing in and breathing out. You don't have to try to alter the breath to make it long or short or deep or shallow. Just breathe naturally and feel the sensations that come.

From time to time, you may lose touch with the sensations of breathing because the attention may get captured by a thought or a train of thoughts. This is natural, as you know, and can happen often in meditation practice. The attention may go into a thought for a few seconds, or a quarter of a minute, or a few minutes. But at some point, the attention will return to the present moment, and again, you can feel the body and breathing.

Normally in vipassana instructions, we simply say: when the attention returns to the present moment, just notice that a thought was there, don't judge it, and let the attention return to feel the body and breath. But in this meditation, I want to ask you to do a little bit of investigation with the thought that you've just noticed.

You've returned to the present moment; a thought has just taken place, or perhaps a train of thinking. I'd like to ask you to take a quick look at the content of that thought to see what it was about. Once you've noticed the content and have a sense of what it was about, then return the attention to the body and breath.

Please practice in this way for the next several minutes, feeling the breath in the whole body. When you notice that a thought has taken the attention for a while, just investigate to find: what was that thought about?

For the last couple of minutes of the sitting, I'll ask you to reflect a little bit. Having noticed the content of a number of thoughts, I want you to investigate one more thing: Was there a common thread to those thoughts? Any common theme that you might identify that those thoughts share?

Take just a minute to review the thoughts you noticed and see if anything links them together.

The meditation bell has rung, so you can open your eyes and return to the group. I'll pick up the dharma talk now, coming back to the questions I asked you to investigate, but first I want to open with the theme of the evening.

We're talking about unfolding and emptiness. We should explore what this word means. The basic meaning of emptiness, which many of you already know, is that everything in our experience is not solid or substantial, even though it might appear that way. This applies to the events of our inner experience as well as the objects of the world in our outer experience.

This sounds simple, but there are actually many assumptions embedded in this statement, and the full unpacking of its implications can take quite a bit of practice.

Something to say very clearly upfront is that emptiness in the Buddhist context is not a blank or a vacancy or a nothingness or nihilism. It's not leading to despair or an emotional state of deadness. It's not any of those things with negative connotations. I think the word is provocative for us and sort of forces us to ask, "What is the Buddha talking about here?" But I think it was probably provocative in his day as well, maybe even more so because there were so many philosophical systems floating around that tried to explain through concepts the way the world worked.

It's a term that makes us sit up and question, that makes us wonder a little bit. But please throw out the idea that it's going to lead somewhere depressing, because that's not where we're headed.

Emptiness, when understood in our experience, is an insight that enriches life. So much so that people say the understanding of emptiness really leads them to feel the fullness of the life they have. I think that's a good way to hold it: emptiness leads into a feeling of fullness.

The aim is for us to free our hearts and minds. It's not about some intellectual theory or a grand philosophical notion. It's a very practical tool designed for us to free ourselves.

This was brought home to me when I was watching a DVD I've had for a while—a series of teachings that the Dalai Lama gave in Tucson a few years back on a chapter in Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, specifically the chapter on wisdom. He started off by remarking that he'd been in Tucson thirteen years prior to the current visit where the filming was being done. That was a nice way to reconnect with this audience because he probably met a number of them before.

Then he said, "Yes, since thirteen years ago, oh, I haven't made much progress." And everybody laughed because you don't think that the Dalai Lama needs to make much progress. But he still practices in a very dedicated way and is still committed to his own full awakening. It was wonderful to hear his humility and lightness around that.

But then he went on to say that what little progress he had made came from a deepening understanding of his bodhisattva vow and further insights into emptiness. That's the Dalai Lama—over the past thirteen years, more insights into emptiness. He's still learning and growing and developing from this area.

We're not going to get it all in one night or in one retreat, but it's a very rich and full teaching. In fact, one of the things I want to say tonight, and the reason I titled the talk the way I did, is that the entire path we're on can be understood as a deepening in emptiness. When we understand it correctly, it is emptiness that takes us from the beginning to the middle to the end—to liberation. Even nibbana is described as the supreme emptiness. So it is a thread that we can follow all along the course of our own journey of awakening.

There are two primary meanings within the whole Buddhist tradition of the term, and these can be summed up as emptiness of self and the emptiness of sense phenomena.

This is where I want to come back to the first meditation we did this evening. When you looked at the thoughts that came and took you away from the present moment, briefly or for a while, did you find a common theme? We don't really have time right

now to hear your reports on that, but what I find when I look closely at my thoughts in this way is that the thoughts that take me away are all about me. They're all about myself in one form or another. They're about I, me, and mine.

Those are the thoughts that grab me. Those are the thoughts that claim my attention. And those are thoughts around areas where I've invested energy in my life—things that I care about because I have some self-interest about them. They show different facets. It could be about my work, my relationship, my health, my family, my finances, my friends. But they are all areas that are near and dear to me. That's what takes me away from the present moment.

I don't find myself waking up in the middle of a long string of thoughts about how to solve the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. That's not what's grabbing me. It's self-centered thinking and the emotions that go along with that. In this way, you come to see that the self is kind of like the North Star of our life—that point in the heaven that everything else revolves around. This North Star is central to the way we think and feel and view ourselves and life and the world.

The next thing that's interesting to look at, although we didn't get into this investigation this evening, is: did any of the thoughts go on for a while? Sometimes in meditation, there'll be a thought and you're just gone for a few seconds and then right back in the present moment—body, breath, sounds, whatever. But sometimes a train comes along that seems very interesting. We hop on the train, go down the tracks, and it could be half a minute, a minute, even fifteen minutes before we come back and notice, "Oh, here's the body and here's breath."

These long thought excursions have a special name in the Buddha's teachings. They are called proliferations. You get the sense of how one builds upon the next, builds upon the next, and you're off on a long journey of mental proliferation. The Pali term for this is quite good: papañca. It has that kind of punchy quality to it. Papañca means proliferation.

The commentaries—the Buddha didn't say this, but the commentaries—identify three primary forces that drive proliferation. It's very interesting to start tuning into these forces as well that lead us on these thought trains, to see if they line up with this traditional explanation. It's said that the thought trains are driven in three ways: by craving, by views, and by conceit. In Pali, this is tanhā, diṭṭhi, and māna. Māna, or conceit, is not as commonly spoken of, but it basically means the belief "I am," or the sense "I am." Māna is the deep tendency of mind to try to locate ourselves somehow, somewhere.

So see if your thoughts could be summed up—I like to sum these up as "I want," "I think," and "I am." Things I want in the world, views and opinions that I hold that kind of define me, or "I am" in relation to someone or something else. This is often our role in society, in our family, or in our work. I want, I think, I am. This is a lot of what makes up our proliferations. They're all just different expressions of self.

So what's the problem? Well, as you know, these selfing thoughts can lead into a lot of suffering. They're often bound up with reactive emotions of greed or aversion or confusion. These are the forces that drive us. These are the expressions of tanhā, of craving, really.

This is again from the Dalai Lama: "One of the most important insights in Buddhism comes from what is known as the understanding of emptiness. At its heart is the deep recognition that there is a fundamental disparity between the way we perceive the world, including our own experience in it, and the way things actually are."

This is sobering. The disparity between the way we perceive the world and the actuality of the world—in this gap is where suffering is born. So the whole point of our meditation practice, the whole point of insight meditation, is for us to see things the way they actually are. This is the meaning of vipassanā, because it said that

When we see things the way they are, we come to peace. We come to freedom and we live with wisdom. This is why we meditate. So emptiness is a pointer to that gap between how we think things are and the way things actually are.

You probably know that for many years of his life—the last twenty-five years of his life—the Buddha was attended by his cousin Ananda, who was one of the sweetest figures in the whole Pali Canon. He cared very much for the Buddha and took great care of all the visitors who came to see him. Because they spent so much time together, Ananda had the chance to ask all the dharma questions that he wanted.

So at one point he came to the Buddha and said, "Blessed one, it is said empty is the world, empty is the world. What does this mean?"

And the Buddha replied, "The world is empty because it's empty of a self or what belongs to a self. The world is empty of a self."

That's a challenging statement. There's no basis in reality for this belief in self. But wait—that's our North Star. Everything in life revolves around self, and you're telling me there's no basis for it?

This is really the same as the Buddha's teaching on not-self, or anatta, which I'm sure you've heard in many dharma talks before. In this first part, emptiness of self is equivalent to the teaching on not-self, or anatta.

But if that's the case, what does the Buddha mean by "the world"? What is empty of self? This is important to clarify.

This is described in a discourse called the Discourse on Totality, where the Buddha says, "Bhikkhus"—which means for us practitioners; we're all bhikkhus if we're sincere in practice—"what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality of things. It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. Anyone who said they were going to describe anything beyond this as the totality of things would not be speaking of something they knew about."

So what the Buddha is describing here is our own direct experience of the six senses: the five physical senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—and the mind door, mind objects, which are basically thoughts and emotions, states of mind. This is the totality of things.

This is quite a lovely statement, especially from a great spiritual teacher, because we're not pointing to some abstract notion or some remote ideal like union with Brahma. The Buddha is directing us to look at our immediate experience. This is really what sets the stage for our meditation practice, for mindfulness practice, because mindfulness is to become aware of our direct experience of these six kinds of sense happenings. As Joseph Goldstein likes to say, there are only ever six things going on.

So this is the field that we need to get really familiar with, become free in. As we explore these six kinds of sense happenings with our mindful attention, one of the things we ask early on is: are these things permanent or impermanent? Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind objects. Have any of them ever lasted for you? No. They're all impermanent.

What's missing from this list? The self. There's no self in this description of our experience. And what do we understand as an assumption about the self? There are several hidden assumptions, and I won't go into all of them tonight—I do talk about them in the book—but one of the key ones is continuity. We think the self is ongoing, in some way has been the same since we were in grade school up until today, and will be the same until we die. But none of the facets of our experience at the senses meet that criterion. And that's how we know something's off in our concept of the self.

Well, how do we know that we have this assumption of continuity? Because we're worried about dying. We think it is this self that is going to meet death one day. If we thought someone else was dying, we wouldn't be as worried. But we think "I'm going to die" and therefore we worry.

So vipassana practice or mindfulness practice in the Eightfold Path takes this view of totality—the six senses—as our field of practice. We develop skill in paying attention to all these things as they arise and as they pass away, as they arise and as they pass away. So immediately,

We are coming out of the field of mental proliferation and into the reality of sense experience. This is a big deal. We're retraining the mind not to get lost in the broad, expansive fields of papañca. We are training the mind to stick with the reality of the six senses. Instead of going into the field of papañca where we increase "I want," "I think," "I am"—where the self just proliferates—we come into reality, and that selfing gets starved. We don't give it the attention we had been giving it that feeds the sense of self.

Not only that, but when we start to examine the nature of these sense appearances, we find something else that's interesting.

A few years ago, I was down in your neck of the woods and the Dalai Lama was giving a series of talks at Shoreline Amphitheater. I don't know if any of you were there, but it was a lovely occasion. It might have been in May because it was sunny, but not baking hot. He was up on the big stage up front. If you know the amphitheater, there are lots of rows of seats in a semicircle and then a big grassy lawn, so you could either sit in a chair or go back and put a blanket out on the lawn. The big speakers that normally would be used to blast the Grateful Dead back in those days were full of the Dalai Lama's voice. It was just a delightful setting to listen to him.

He was talking on the Heart Sutra, which is all about emptiness—one of the key texts in the Mahayana. The theme he was on was dukkha and how we get led into suffering. He explained there are three kinds of dukkha, and this comes straight out of the Pali Canon.

There's dukkha-dukkha, which is the straightforward form of suffering—painful experience of body and mind. There's vipariṇāma-dukkha, which is the pain of alternation. That means something goes along that's pleasant for a while, but then it changes. It alternates and becomes neutral or unpleasant. In any case, we lose the pleasure of it.

And then he said there's the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena, which is called saṅkhāra-dukkha. There he explained the problem is not simply that impermanence means something goes on for a while and then changes or goes away. When we

look into the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena, what we see is that every appearance at a sense door is arising and vanishing, arising and vanishing, moment after moment after moment. This takes us into the field of the emptiness of phenomena.

All the phenomena that the Buddha described as being in reality, as being in totality, none of them last more than momentarily. This is something that we discover through our practice of vipassana, through insight meditation, as the concentration deepens. This is seen quite clearly.

So in a way, this aspect of saṅkhāra-dukkha explains the difference between just seeing impermanence and seeing emptiness. When we recognize impermanence, we know that nothing is really going to last forever. But some things seem like they last quite a long time—like the smell of the new car we've had for three months already, or a new relationship that we're really quite into might last three months.

But saṅkhāra-dukkha shows that nothing is lasting in a substantial way for more than a moment. So both seeing into impermanence and seeing into emptiness are taught for the same reason: to persuade us not to hang on. Because if we're hanging on to the pleasant, it's going to hurt when it goes. Impermanence says it's going to change. What emptiness shows in saṅkhāra-dukkha is there's nothing solid there to hang on to in the first place.

Every appearance is truly insubstantial and therefore ungraspable. In many cases, all that we can hang on to is a memory to which we've given a name. We call it "a good meditation" or "my partner" or something. Once we've given it a name, then we can hang on to the name and the memory. But the thing itself keeps changing as we look at it.

So as we see into impermanence, it does wear away the sense of self. It reduces clinging, and clinging is what gives rise to a sense of self. The Buddha put it this way: "When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sense desire, it eliminates all ignorance, and it uproots all conceit of 'I am.'" This is a powerful statement about seeing impermanence, one of the three characteristics. It leads to a very full experience of the Dhamma.

So as we come into the present moment, we're more in touch with reality. Selfing is getting starved.

So the self starts to be reduced just through our normal mindfulness practice. We are more in touch with reality. There is less giving rise to papañca of "I want, I think, I am." And we are less inclined to cling because we see that nothing is substantial enough to cling to. All these things go on in our practice.

Of course, these insights take quite some time. They take years to develop and come to fruition, but they do come. And so the self exerts less—I would say—gravitational pull.

The gravitational pull of the self is basically felt as a contraction. The self is trying to hold on, to solidify, to cling to, to bring things in. And in that there's a narrowing, there's a narrowing of focus to the desired objects, to draw them in and hold onto them. And that shrinks our being somewhat.

As we let go, there's a widening that happens. There's a relaxation in the body and a greater ease. And with that, the mind sort of spreads more outward. There's an opening, there's a widening. And then at some times, the self can even temporarily go away.

You might know this poem by Li Po, the Chinese poet:

"The birds have vanished down the sky
Now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains."

So these moments come in meditation when the self temporarily just isn't present, may not be present at all for a period of time in our meditation or in nature perhaps. There may even be an awakening, an awakening to our deepest nature.

Do either of those things always uproot the self formations completely? No. The selfing activities are deeply conditioned and they don't stop so easily, even though they've been seen through, even though we've understood there's no actual self there.

This is from a Korean Zen teacher named Seongcheol: "Although one has awakened to one's deepest nature, the beginningless habit energies are extremely difficult to remove suddenly. And so one must continue to cultivate while relying on this awakening. Through this gradual permeation, one's endeavors reach completion. Hence, it is called gradual cultivation."

So what Seongcheol is pointing to here is a kind of intermediate stage on the path, isn't it? We've reached some understandings. We've seen through the self. There may even have been a partial awakening. And yet the activities of the self are still going on. We can see them. We know that they're not leading in the right direction—they're just more "I want, I think, I am"—but they're compulsive. We can't stop them so easily.

So at this point, we might want to start reflecting on these patterns that I would call our personality. We'd say our personality consists of our habitual ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting. This is how we come to know somebody. We observe them, we notice how they tell us how they think and feel, we observe how they speak and act, and we see ourselves in the same way. We know well how we think and feel, and we can observe our speech and actions.

So we get a sense of our personality shaped in a certain way. Each person has their own kind of unique combination of mental traits that lead to these actions. It's consistent to some extent, right? You kind of know your friend is going to be a certain way. You kind of know you're going to be a certain way, reacting to different circumstances, but it's within some variety, within certain bounds.

There's a consistency to personality, even as we understand there's no self there. There's no solid core at the middle. If there were, we couldn't be liberated. We couldn't be free.

That solid core would get stuck and would block the true liberation, the uprooting of all ignorance, the ending of the conceit "I am." There's no solid core. So the personality is really malleable.

And yet, as we observe even from this partly awakened place, we see the same habit patterns repeating again and again and again. This can be frustrating. We've seen the emptiness of self, we've seen the emptiness of phenomena, and yet the grasping continues. If we look more closely, the habits of greed continue, the habits of aversion continue, the habits of fear continue, or the habits of confusion. We all have different varieties of these, but they are all variations on the theme of the defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion.

These patterns are volitional. They are not just random. They are built on things that we want, on views, on sense of self. We have generated these patterns ourselves. They are volitionally formed. As the Buddha says, "Whatever a person frequently thinks or ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind." So we could call these our volitional formations. It's a synonym for our personality.

Interestingly enough, "volitional formations" is the name the translators give to the fourth aggregate, which is sankhara—states of mind that are put together from these impulses, greed, aversion, and delusion. We start to understand that this is a deeply conditioned part of our approach to the world, a deeply conditioned way that we see ourselves and others.

We may have come into meditation practice hoping that there would be a quick resolution, a speedy resolution of this desire force or this angry force or this fearful force or this confusion that leads us into suffering. But it's not so quick. Even with understanding, as we do, it's not so quick.

At this stage, we really need to trust that the dharma is doing its work. Sometimes in this stage, people see, "Oh, I still have the same conditioned responses to things. I still get anxious. I still get frightened. I still have so much wanting or ambition or craving for control or something like that. Am I not going anywhere? Is the path really not helping?"

But the path is helping. The path is working, because one of the things that I can almost guarantee is happening is that the intensity of those conditioned reactions is decreasing. And perhaps even the frequency with which they come is decreasing. But sometimes we don't step back and take a look at that. We just see, "Oh, I still have anxiety. The anxiety isn't going away. Oh, the practice isn't working. It's never going to lead to freedom."

This is where we have to renew our trust in the dharma. We have to trust the process.

Nagarjuna was a brilliant author around 100 to 150 of the common era, one of the early teachers in the school that later became the Mahayana. His central work is all about emptiness. It's called "Root Verses on the Middle Way," available in a number of English translations. It's really a wonderful book to deepen one's understanding of emptiness. If the Buddha was the king of emptiness, Nagarjuna is the prince in our tradition. He's a very interesting lineage to study.

One of the things Nagarjuna says is that emptiness stops papañca. Emptiness stops papañca. So the more we penetrate the truth of emptiness, both on the level of self and on the level of phenomena, it undercuts this tendency to run off into "I want, I think, I am." It cuts through and can eventually halt that string of papañca that gets us involved in so much selfing and the attendant suffering.

We have to trust in that. The Buddha put it this way: when a carpenter looks at the handle of their ax,

They see the impression of their fingers and thumb, but they don't know how much of the ax handle has been worn away today, so much yesterday, so much earlier. But when it has worn away, the knowledge occurs to them that it has worn away. So we

don't know how much of the ax handle is still to go or how much has been worn away from yesterday or the day before, but we do know that it is wearing away. And this is what we have to trust in.

Basically what is happening is that emptiness and our attention—giving ourselves to the present moment, starving those self-generating papañca patterns—is wearing away the confusion, the kilesas, the greed, and the aversion. All those karmic patterns, we call them karmic patterns because they spring from our own volition. Volition, as you probably know, is at the heart of karma. It is whether our intention in an action is wholesome or unwholesome that determines the weight, in the Buddha's view, of that experience, of that action.

So mindfulness is constantly cutting through our karmic formations. And that's why Nagarjuna went on to say, "Karma is not abandoned by letting go, but by meditation." So we don't just decide, "I'm going to let go of this volitional pattern. I'm going to get rid of this karmic pattern and formation." It doesn't work that way. Karma is abandoned by seeing it clearly in meditation and not buying into it. This is the way.

Now, mindfulness practice will go there, but I want to suggest another meditation that lends itself, I think, really well for this stage of the unfolding and emptiness. One has seen through the reality of self. One has seen the insubstantiality of sense appearances. One doesn't want to go on clinging, and yet the habits still keep arising. So let's explore a meditation that the Buddha might call "abiding in emptiness." This is based on a discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya, number 121, the lesser discourse on emptiness. Let's see how it fits and if it's something that appeals to you.

So again, please take a comfortable meditation posture. We'll just do this for about ten minutes, and then this will be the last part of the evening before we open up to discussion, questions, comments.

So again, please sit comfortably. Be relaxed and upright. Let your eyes gently close.

Once again, feel the body in sitting. Notice that the body is really filled with awareness. Wherever you turn your attention, you can find yourself in the body—from the top of the head, through the abdomen, into the sitting base and legs. Awareness can move to any of those points that you choose and notice what's there.

For one thing, we notice that there's a distance, a felt sense of distance between the top of the head and the feet. The body is a physical object located in space, and we can feel a gap, a space between the top of the head and the feet. So we feel the sense of space within the body. We can also feel a distance between the right arm and the left arm—another sense of space.

As we let the attention move through the whole body, we see the whole body is located in space and that there's distance between all the different parts of it. We can feel that this is not imaginary. This is the felt sense of the body.

Now, as you explore this distance within the body from the top to bottom, from right to left, is the whole of the outline of the body jammed full of sensations? Or are there areas in the body where no sensations are apparent or felt? Is every cubic millimeter of the body chock full of sensation? Or do you actually find space within the body? We might say between the sensations, even within the sensations. Can you notice some empty space within the body?

So you have a sense of the space within the body. And now, can you also get a sense of the space around the body? Perhaps where your skin is exposed, you feel the coolness of the air or the warmth of the air. Air around the body, space around the body.

If you'd like, you can open your eyes momentarily, take in the space in the room, and then close your eyes again and see if that sense of space stays a little bit—space around the body.

So there's space within the body and space around the body. Are these two really different spaces, or is there one space that you can feel holding the body, containing the body, as well as within the body?

Can you get a sense of that one space that you feel both inside and beyond the body? Let yourself notice now that space, that one space. Bring your attention to it and investigate a little bit.

Does that space have an edge or a boundary? Or does it feel like it might go on and on? Well, if you're in a room, you might feel, "Oh, it stops at the wall." But if you were to open a window, then you might well have a sense, "Oh, that space keeps going on." Or a door—"Oh, that space keeps going on."

If a door or window was open, would it really affect your felt sense of that space? Could it be that your felt sense of space really doesn't have an edge or a boundary? Could we say that you may be able to perceive a space that is boundless?

In any case, I invite you to put your attention on that perception of space, however wide it seems to you, and make that the focus for your mindfulness. Let your focus be on that space for the remainder of this sitting—the last couple of minutes. And then notice: how does it feel to have the attention on that perception of space? What is that like for you as a meditation focus?

That was the meditation bell signaling the end of that guided meditation. I just want to say that this is adapted from that discourse, Majjhima 121 that I mentioned—the lesser discourse on emptiness that the Buddha gave.

I find this perception of space a very helpful focus because when I focus on the whole body, that can be very pleasant. But the body still has painful aspects and pleasurable aspects, which can easily lead to being involved in liking and disliking. When I move the attention to space, it doesn't have those pleasurable and painful aspects. And so I find that the mind is able to rest the attention there with greater equanimity. And yet there is a clear focus for the attention to land on.

One more wrinkle, which we don't have time to go into tonight: you can inquire what is knowing that space and then put your attention on the knowing element. This offers some of the same beauty as the meditation on space, but that's for another exploration.

That's really what I wanted to cover in the talk and the meditation this evening. Thank you for listening.

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